

Netanyahu has slight edge

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to have fended off a strong challenge from the country’s opposition leader in parliamentary elections Tuesday, emerging from an acrimonious campaign in a slightly better position to form Israel’s next government.

But with the sides nearly evenly divided, a victory by Netanyahu’s Likud Party still was not guaranteed. His chief rival, Isaac Herzog of the Zionist Union, said he would make “every effort” to form a government, and an upstart centrist party led by a former Netanyahu ally-turned-rival was set to be the kingmaker. The country now heads into weeks of negotiations over the makeup of the next coalition.

Both Netanyahu and Herzog will now compete for a chance to form a coalition that commands a majority in the 120-seat parliament, a daunting task in Israel’s fractured political landscape. Netanyahu appeared to have a better chance of cobbling together a government with right-wing and religious parties. Herzog would have to appeal to more ideologically diverse parties.

Either will likely need the support of Moshe Kahlon, whose new Kulanu party captured nine or 10 seats. Kahlon, whose campaign focused almost entirely on bread-and-butter economic issues, has thus far refused to take sides.

The election was widely seen as a referendum on Netanyahu, who has governed the country for the past six years, and recent opinion polls had given Herzog a slight lead.

As the results were announced on the nation’s three major TV stations, celebrations erupted at Likud’s campaign headquarters in Tel Aviv.

In a statement released on Twitter, Netanyahu said that “against all odds” Likud had won a “great victory.”

“This is a great victory. It’s almost a miracle,” Likud lawmaker Ofir Akunis told The Associated Press. “For months, everybody attacked the Likud. And today is a beautiful day for the Likud. It sends a message that the people of Israel will decide for themselves.”

Netanyahu focused his campaign



Zionist Union party supporters react at the first exit polls at the party's election headquarters in Tel Aviv, Israel, Tuesday.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks to the media during a press conference at the defense ministry in Tel Aviv, Israel.

on security issues, while his opponents portrayed him as out of touch and instead focused on the country’s high cost of living and soaring housing prices.

Early Wednesday, Herzog addressed his supporters, saying that he had already begun efforts to court potential coalition partners. In a nod to Kahlon, he said he was committed to forming a “real social reconciliation government.”

Netanyahu’s return to power would likely spell trouble for Mideast peace efforts and could further escalate tensions with the United States.

Netanyahu, who already has a tenuous relationship with President Barack Obama, took a sharp turn to the right in

the final days of the campaign, staking out a series of hard-line positions that will put him at odds with the international community.

In a dramatic policy reversal, he said he now opposes the creation of a Palestinian state — a key policy goal of the White House and the international community. The Palestinians, fed up after years of deadlock with Netanyahu, are now likely to press ahead with their attempts to bring war crimes charges against Israel in the International Criminal Court.

“We call upon the international community to support our efforts to join the international treaties and our effort in the ICC,” said Saeb Erekat, a top Palestinian official.

“What Netanyahu is doing and stating are war crimes and if the international community wants peace it should make Netanyahu accountable for his acts,” Erekat said. He said the Palestinian leadership will meet Thursday to discuss its next steps.

Official results from Tuesday’s election won’t be known for several days.

Two exit polls on Israeli TV showed Likud and the Zionist Union deadlocked with 27 seats each, and a third gave Likud a slight lead of 28-27. That breakdown could change as final results pour in.

BRIEFLY

Parades, parties as St. Patrick’s Day dyes the world green

NEW YORK (AP) — Global celebrations of the Emerald Isle’s patron saint culminated in parades and celebrations in Dublin, New York and scores of other cities Tuesday.

Irish President Michael Higgins attended Mass at St. Mary’s Pro-Cathedral in Dublin, where Catholic Archbishop Diarmuid Martin blessed sprigs of shamrock in the traditional start to Ireland’s national holiday.

Hundreds of thousands of Dubliners and tourists lined the nearby route of the Dublin parade, the culmination of a four-day festival featuring music and dance performances, pub crawls, cultural tours and street arcades. Face-painted dancers, eccentrically themed floats and U.S. marching bands snaked their way down O’Connell Street across the River Liffey to St. Patrick’s Cathedral a mile away.

A man dressed as St. Patrick — but donning sunglasses and dispensing smart-aleck comments to the crowd, along with playful thumps from his club-like crozier — led the way.

Later Tuesday, Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny is guest of honor at the White House following weekend visits to Georgia and Texas. Almost his entire Cabinet has spent the past week traveling worldwide promoting Ireland’s tourism, culture and strong rebound from a crippling 2008 banking crisis.

Activists accuse Syrian military of poison gas attack

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian activists and the Western-backed opposition accused the government Tuesday of carrying out a chlorine gas attack against a rebel-held town that killed at least six people and left dozens, including children, choking and gasping for breath.

The purported use of poison gas on the town of Sarmin in northwestern Idlib province is the first alleged chemical attack since the U.N. Security Council approved a U.S.-drafted resolution this month that condemns the use of toxic chemicals such as chlorine in Syria. That measure also threatens military action in case of further violations.

But any such action would require the consent of the Security Council,

which remains deeply divided over Syria’s civil war. The U.S. and its allies support the opposition, while Russia backs Syrian President Bashar Assad — and Moscow has used its veto on several occasions to shield its ally.

The attack took place late Monday, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Local Coordination Committees activist collective. The two activist groups said that six people were killed and dozens more suffered from severe breathing difficulties.

A Syrian military official in Damascus denied any government role in the attack and blamed it on rebels.

Iranians express optimism over nuclear agreement

LAUSANNE, Switzerland (AP) — A senior Iranian official suggested Tuesday that Iran is nearing a preliminary deal with the U.S and five world powers that would lead to a breakthrough eluding them for more than a decade — a formal pact limiting Tehran’s ability to make an atomic weapon while easing punitive economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

The United States was less upbeat, with officials saying the sides had made progress but still had a ways to go in eliminating differences over what Iran had to do for a gradual end to sanctions.

“There’s no doubt they have made substantial progress over the past year,” said White House spokesman Josh Earnest. “Reaching an agreement is at best 50-50.”

The sides face two deadlines: an end-of-March date for a preliminary deal, and a June deadline for a comprehensive agreement that fills in the blanks.

A comprehensive agreement that the U.S. says would stretch the time Iran would need to make a bomb from a few months to a year has been a top foreign policy objective of the Obama administration. Even a deal by deadline will not end the Iran nuclear controversy, however.

Officials for both sides have said that the talks are making headway on limiting Iranian nuclear activities that could be retooled to make weapons. In exchange, the West would progressively lift economic and political sanctions.

GOP offers \$3.8T budget that boosts defense, cuts elsewhere

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans launched a boldly conservative 10-year budget plan on Tuesday that would favor the Pentagon, partially privatize Medicare and rely on deep cuts in other social programs to help wipe out deficits at the end of a decade.

A little more than four months after winning their largest majority in 70 years, Republicans promised an overhaul of the federal tax code and called for repeal of two of the top legislative achievements of President Barack Obama’s tenure in office. Those are the health care law known by his name and a measure enacted to crack down on Wall Street after the economy’s near-collapse in 2008.

Republicans said their balanced-budget promise came with no tax increases, though the fine print assumes the expiration of about \$900 billion in breaks for business research and development and other items.

“The new normal of slow economic growth and low expectations is unacceptable. We know we can do



In this Jan. 13, 2015, file photo, Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., center, flanked by Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., left, and Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington.

better,” the House Budget Committee, chaired by Rep. Tom Price of Georgia, said in a report accompanying the proposal.

It promised “greater prosperity, opportunity, security and freedom” if enacted.

Projected spending for the budget year that begins on Oct. 1 was \$3.8 trillion, rising to \$5 trillion in 2025.

Obama countered Republican claims instantly. He said the GOP prescrip-

tion “is a failure to invest in education, infrastructure and national defense — all the things we need to grow, to create jobs, to stay at the forefront of innovation and to keep our country safe.”

The president’s own budget calls for about \$2 trillion over 10 years in higher taxes on corporations, wealthy individuals and smokers of all income levels as part of a plan to increase spending and give tax breaks to the middle class.

California ramps up water restrictions

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California residents have to turn off their sprinklers, and restaurants won’t give customers water unless they ask under new drought regulations approved Tuesday.

The State Water Resources Control Board has extended and expanded restrictions on water use as California enters its fourth year of drought, and winter ends without significant storms or snowfall to replenish reservoirs.

The drought’s effects are rippling across the state, hurting wildlife and forcing farmers to leave fields unplanted. So far this winter, wildfires are burning through nearly four times as many acres as usual. The state fire-fighting agency reports that the dry conditions are forcing it to maintain its highest-ever level of seasonal firefighters straight through the winter.

Amid this backdrop, environmental advocates are calling on the state water board to find even more aggressive ways to slash water use, such as rationing, enforcing plumbing upgrades

and going after corporate landscapes.

“The board could and should do more,” said Kate Poole, a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The state agency has conceded its actions so far have been focused on the easier ways to immediately cut down urban water use. It voted Tuesday to extend statewide outdoor water limits imposed in July, barring washing driveways, decorative fountains without recirculating pumps and sprinklers that spray pavement.

New rules will require local water departments to restrict the number of days residents can water their lawns. If they don’t, residents must follow a state limit of twice a week. Homeowners are also barred from using sprinklers on days when it rains and for the next two days after.

Golf course owners objected to limiting days they can water grass, telling the board Tuesday that the regulation would threaten their ability to keep attractive landscapes, which they say

are already water-efficient.

The regulations also mandate common business conservation practices statewide. Restaurants can’t offer water unless customers ask, and hotels and motels must offer guests an opportunity to decline fresh towels and sheets at hotels.

It’s up to local water departments to enforce these rules, which are expected to take effect later this spring. They can fine offenders \$500 per violation.

The water board also decided Tuesday it will start tracking how agencies enforce the regulations, including the number of citations and warning letters issued.

The Associated Press found wide disparities in enforcement, from Los Angeles issuing just two \$200 fines in a service area of nearly 4 million people to Santa Cruz levying more than \$1.6 million in water waste penalties.

Meanwhile, residents have been falling short of Brown’s call to slash water consumption by 20 percent when he declared a drought emergency early last year.

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Avoid Bathroom Dangers - CONCLUDED

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 3:30 PM

Dangers exist all around your home, and unless safety precautions are in place, you leave yourself in danger. Aside from the kitchen, the bathroom is one of the most dangerous rooms in your home. Recognizing these dangers, and making some common sense decisions, will go a long way in protecting you and your family.

Learn the 411 on Medicare Coverage

TUESDAY, MARCH 24, 3:30 PM

Medicare is a government-sponsored program that people over the age of 65 and those who meet their special criteria turn to for their social insurance. This program provides health insurance, normally to seniors. Come and learn more about what it covers and what it does not.

Durable Medical Equipment Can Keep You Independent

TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 3:30PM

Durable medical equipment is any medical equipment used in the home to aid in a better quality of living. It is a benefit included through most insurance. In some cases, certain Medicare benefits may pay for them.

For more information or to RSVP, call us at (541) 276-1987 or visit us today!

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