Mauritius votes in close-fought election race

AFP – Mauritius began voting on Sunday in a close-fought election race that has been clouded by a wire-tapping scandal in a nation usually touted as one of Africa's most stable and prosperous democracies.
Campaigning has been tense, and police have been deployed at polling stations to ensure security, according to election commissioner Irfan Rahman, as media reports said concerns about electoral fraud were emerging.

The legislative poll in the Indian Ocean archipelago follows a historic agreement last month that saw Britain cede sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius following a long-running dispute.

But Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth's hopes of an easy re-election in the wake of the deal were dealt a blow when secretly recorded phone calls of politicians, diplomats and journalists began to be leaked online last month.

The former CEO of Mauritius Telecom and several other suspects have been arrested in the investigation into the leaks, which were released by an account called Missie Moustass (Mr Moustache), primarily on TikTok.

In response to the scandal, the authorities on November 1 announced a social media ban until after the election.

But an uproar from the opposition and local media forced an embarrassing about-turn within 24 hours.

The ban underscored fears that Mauritius' much-vaunted democracy and freedoms were slipping, with voters voicing concerns that economic and political stability will be preserved.

The battle for control of the 70-seat National Assembly is being played out between two main blocs – Jugnauth's Militant Socialist Movement and its allies and the Alliance of Change led by former prime minister Navin Ramgoolam.

"We are heading for a certain victory," Jugnauth said in an interview with media outlet l'Express on Friday.

"We will be at Government House on November 11," Ramgoolam countered at a press conference, calling for opposition parties to join forces against the MSM alliance.

Just over one million people are registered to vote in the 12th election since independence from Britain in 1968, with 340 polling stations open nationwide.

"Each step will be carried out in complete transparency," Rahman told reporters Saturday.

Rallies have been lively, with roads lined with colourful banners and posters of the various political parties.

Sixty-two seats are up for grabs, with the remaining eight allocated under what is dubbed the "best loser" system.

Polls opened at 7:00 am (0300 GMT) and close at 6:00 pm (1400 GMT). Results are expected on Monday.

The African Union sent a 30-member observer mission.

– Concerns on governance –

The majority Hindu nation of 1.3 million people has seen remarkable stability and growth since independence, building an economy based on tourism, financial services and manufacturing.

GDP growth was seven percent in 2023, but analysts say Mauritius needs to diversify its economy, while concerns about governance are growing.

“In the last five years, the institutions that were ensuring checks and balances have not been functioning and corruption has increased,” said democracy researcher Roukaya Kasenally.

She highlighted procurement scandals during the Covid-19 pandemic, harassment of opposition parties in parliament, and the use of police against political opponents.

Mauritius slipped last month from top spot to second place in the latest Ibrahim Index, which monitors governance across Africa.

“What guarantee do we have that our privacy and security will be protected in the future?” asked Sakina, a 35-year-old teacher who did not want to give her full name.

“Governance and the independence of the institutions are the main issues of these elections.”

– Rotating families –

Leadership of the island nation has rotated between just three families since independence.

Jugnauth, 62, inherited the premiership from his father when he died in 2017, before his alliance won at the 2019 election, securing 42 seats.

Ramgoolam, 77, is also the son of the country’s first leader.

The established politicians face a new challenge from the Linion Reform alliance, campaigning under the slogan “Neither Navin, Nor Pravind”.

It has criticised corruption, nepotism and called for greater transparency.

The Chagos deal was a major success for the government, even if Britain will retain a lease to keep a joint US military base on the island of Diego Garcia for an “initial” 99 years.

Jugnauth hailed it as the completion of the nation’s “decolonisation”.

But some have voiced concerns that president-elect Donald Trump’s approach to the US presence in the Indian Ocean might have repercussions for the agreement.

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