

WORLD

Snap election favors Takaichi's coalition

Japan's high-stakes polls follow early dissolution and economic discontent

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Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's ruling coalition appeared to have secured a two-thirds majority in Sunday's lower house election, according to media estimates.

Voting began at 7 am and ended at 8 pm, with results being released throughout the evening and the final tally expected in the early hours of Monday. More than 1,200 candidates competed for 465 seats in the House of Representatives, the powerful lower chamber of parliament.

A total of 465 seats were at stake, with 233 required for a majority. Of these, 289 are filled through single-member districts, while the remaining 176 are allocated by proportional representation across 11 regional blocs.

Before the election, the ruling coalition held 232 seats in the lower house — 198 for Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party and 34 for the Japan Innovation Party. A gain of just one seat would give the bloc a majority, the minimum needed for Takaichi to remain in office at the special session of parliament to be convened after the election.

Although the term for lower house members is four years, Takaichi dissolved the chamber last month, only

about 15 months after the previous election.

Calling an election in February, when heavy snowfall is common in parts of the country and many school entrance exams are scheduled, is unusual. The 16-day period between the dissolution of parliament and election day is also the shortest in the postwar era.

The decision to call the snap election has drawn criticism, as it is expected to delay parliamentary passage of the initial budget for fiscal year 2026, which had originally been scheduled by the end of March, ahead of the April start of fiscal 2027.

Takaichi has said the coalition's goal is to secure a simple majority. Last month, she said she would resign as prime minister if the coalition failed to win a majority.

For the ruling bloc, 233 seats would secure a simple majority needed to pass legislation. With 243 seats, it would control half of the members of all parliamentary standing committees and all committee chair posts.

An "absolute stable majority" of 261 seats would give it control of all committees. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority in both houses.

However, even if the coalition secures a majority in the lower house, its minority status in the

upper chamber will remain unchanged.

The Liberal Democratic Party suffered defeats in both the 2024 lower house election and the July 2025 upper house election, leaving Takaichi's Cabinet, formed in October, as a minority government in both chambers.

Sunday's vote was the first general election for the new Centrist Reform Alliance of the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party and Komeito, a former coalition partner of the Liberal Democratic Party.

According to an NHK exit poll, the alliance is projected to win between 37 and 91 seats, a sharp drop from its pre-election total of 167 seats.

The anti-immigration Sanseito party was projected to have increased its seats from two to between five and 14, NHK said.

Rising prices

Takaichi, 64, has defied pessimists to be a hit with voters, especially young ones, but she will have to deliver on the economy.

"With prices rising like this, what matters most to me is what policies they'll adopt to deal with inflation," Chika Sakamoto, 50, told Agence France-Presse at a voting station in a snowy Tokyo on Sunday.

"Prices for just about everything are really going up, but incomes aren't rising much, so our disposable income is shrinking," she said.

Regarding worries about the public finances of Asia's No 2 economy, Takaichi followed up a \$135 billion stimulus package aimed at easing the pain of inflation — a big cause of voter discontent — with a campaign promise to suspend a consumption tax on food.

Japan's debt is more than twice the size of the entire economy, and in recent weeks, yields on long-dated bonds have hit record highs, causing jitters worldwide.

"Various parties are proposing policies like abolishing the consumption tax," voter Taku Sakamoto, 49, told AFP.

"While that might be fine for now, I'm very worried about whether such measures are truly responsible for the generations that come after us," he said.

"My biggest concern is not just the present, but what will become of Japan going forward."

Agencies contributed to this story.

A person rides past a board displaying posters of candidates for Japan's lower house election in Tokyo on Sunday. Heavy snowfall

blanketed many parts of the country on election day, including

Tokyo and other regions that rarely see winter snow. KAZUHIRO NOGI / AFP

gible to cast their ballots. First exit polls were expected around 8 pm.

UNITED STATES Protesters held in Minneapolis

Several dozen protesters were arrested on Saturday outside a federal building in Minneapolis, breaking up a protest marking the one-month anniversary of a Minnesota woman's death at the hands of an immigration officer. Renee Good was killed on Jan 7 as she was driving away from immigration officers in Minneapolis. Her death and that of another resident, Alex Pretti, just weeks later have stoked outrage nationwide over the US administration's immigration crackdown. Scores of protesters gathered across the street from the Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building around midday. The Hennepin County Sheriff's Office said the arrests began after the crowd started throwing chunks of ice and some property was damaged.

Washington Post CEO resigns after job cuts

Washington Post CEO and publisher Will Lewis said on Saturday he was stepping down, three days after the newspaper said it was laying off one-third of its staff members. Lewis announced his departure in an email to the newspaper's staff, saying that after two years of transformation, "now is the right time for me to step aside." The Post's chief financial officer, Jeff D'Onofrio, was appointed temporary publisher.

AGENCIES — XINHUA

He rejected US demands that Iran curb its missile program, calling it a defensive matter that is "never negotiable".

US President Donald Trump described the Oman talks as "very positive" aboard Air Force One en route to his resort in Florida, saying the two sides would meet again this week.

On Friday, Trump signed an executive order, threatening additional tariffs on countries that continue to trade with Iran.

Ding Long, a professor at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, said both Iran and the US appear to be pursuing a pressure-driven strategy to strengthen their military and economic leverage, enhance deterrence, accumulate bargaining chips, and improve their negotiating positions.

Both are adopting a hedging strategy in their negotiations, meaning that should talks break down, they can swiftly shift to military confrontation or even conflict," Ding said.

Sun Degang, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, said both sides remain deeply divided on a range of core issues, making it difficult for the negotiations to achieve meaningful or substantive progress.

The core US demands on Iran include prohibiting the development of nuclear weapons, ending uranium enrichment and the possession of enriched uranium, imposing limits on ballistic missile ranges, and halting support for so-called regional proxy forces, he said.

Iran has said it does not seek nuclear weapons and asserts its



Voters cast their ballot at a polling station in Bangkok on Sunday. SAKCHAI LALIT / AFP

Thailand votes amid political instability

By YANG WANLI in Bangkok
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Polls for Thailand's general election closed on Sunday after a smooth voting across the country. The elected lawmakers will vote in April to determine the country's next prime minister and government for the following four years amid a prolonged period of political instability.

Sunday's voting began at 8 am with about 52.9 million eligible voters, and more than 126,000 police officers were deployed to safeguard 99,538 polling stations. A total of 57 political parties have fielded candidates to contest the election, while 43 parties have nominated 93 prime ministerial candidates.

Under a mixed electoral system, voters cast two ballots, one for a constituency candidate and the other for a party-list member of parliament. There will be 400 MPs elected directly from constituencies on a winner-takes-all basis, while another 100 party-list seats are allocated proportionally based on nationwide votes.

All 500 MPs will vote to select the prime minister, with no Senate participation following the expiry of the transitional constitutional provision. A candidate must secure more than half of the House, or at least 251 votes.

In Bangkok — the most valuable battleground with 33 MPs representing about 5.4 million residents — about 97,000 poll officials were deployed. Narong Ruangsri, the capital's permanent secretary, said at a news conference on Sunday morning.

Several rounds of polls conducted

before the election day suggest the result will be a three-way contest among caretaker Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul's Bhumjaithai Party, the progressive People's Party, and Pheu Thai backed by the Shinawatra family.

The People's Party, under the leadership of 38-year-old Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, has garnered support from younger voters. It proposes transformative plans for Thailand's political and economic frameworks, including loans for small businesses, establishment of a national single-wage formula, and investment in agricultural sustainability.

Conversely, 59-year-old Anutin has pursued policies emphasizing economic recovery, disaster response and infrastructure development, such as the construction of border walls amid heightened disputes with Cambodia, reducing policy differentiation between parties.

"Thailand lacks a clear strategic position in the changing geopolitical landscape between major powers, risking reactive rather than proactive foreign policy," Pongkwan said.

She expressed concern about "anti-Cambodian sentiment" among Thai voters, which is expected to persist for 10 to 20 years, creating long-term obstacles for regional cooperation and integration.

Following Sunday's voting, the Election Commission will certify at least 95 percent of members of parliament within 60 days of polling day or by April 9. Parliament must then convene within 15 days to elect its speaker, followed by a vote for prime minister.

The formation of the cabinet takes two to four weeks. If procedures and coalition talks proceed smoothly, the country is expected to have a fully functioning new government by late May or June.

US, Iran still at odds despite 'positive' talks: Experts

By LIU JIANQIAO
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Deep-rooted differences over critical issues, particularly Iran's nuclear program and the scope of US sanctions, remain difficult to reconcile, leaving the prospects for future talks clouded by considerable uncertainty, experts say.

Iran's Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi said on Saturday that he expects a new round of talks with the United States to take place "soon", describing the meeting held a day earlier as a positive start while cautioning that rebuilding trust would take time.

Although both sides signaled a willingness to continue negotiations, the US has maintained military pressure on Iran while further tightening economic sanctions. In response, Tehran has stepped up its own military deterrence posture toward Washington.

Speaking to a forum in Tehran on Sunday, Araghchi said Washington's continuation of sanctions on Iran and its recent military deployments "raise doubts about the other party's seriousness and readiness to engage in genuine negotiations".

During the talks in Muscat, Oman, on Friday, Iran reiterated that it will not relinquish what it calls its inalienable right to enrich uranium and rejected curbs on its missile program.

In an interview with Al Jazeera aired on Saturday, Araghchi said Iran is open to an agreement that reassures the international community while preserving its enrichment activities.

He rejected US demands that Iran curb its missile program, calling it a defensive matter that is "never negotiable".

US President Donald Trump described the Oman talks as "very positive" aboard Air Force One en route to his resort in Florida, saying the two sides would meet again this week.

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Iran's Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi (center) departs for the site of the bilateral talks in Muscat, Oman, on Friday. XINHUA

inalienable right to pursue peaceful nuclear energy. In the current negotiations, Tehran has consistently insisted that discussions focus exclusively on nuclear issues and sanctions relief, rejecting the inclusion of its missile program and regional activities on the agenda. These contrasting positions highlight the substantial gap between the two sides, Sun said.

Meanwhile, Israel is closely monitoring the negotiations. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said on Saturday that he would travel to Washington to hold discussions with US officials. The office said Netanyahu maintains that any agreement must include restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile program and an end to its support for allied militant groups.

Ding said: "Israel is the party most reluctant to see a US-Iran agreement materialize. It will spare no effort to undermine, obstruct and delay the peace talks, and may resort to its old tactics, such as in June when it launched military strikes against Iran just as a deal seemed imminent."

Other countries in the Middle East are unwilling to see conflict erupt between the US and Iran, fearing it would undermine regional security and derail development efforts, he said.

"These countries are expected to continue playing a constructive role, seeking to help both parties move toward a mutual nonaggression understanding," he said.

Agencies contributed to this story.