

Tunisian president rejects foreign election observers

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TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied on Thursday said he opposes the presence of foreign election observers, as the country gears up for a referendum and legislative polls later this year.

"We are not an occupied country to send observers to," he said during a swearing-in ceremony for members of a new elections authority.

Saied in July last year sacked the government and suspended parliament, prompting fears for democratic gains a decade after Tunisia's revolution which sparked the Arab Spring uprisings.

He has since taken control of the judiciary and on April 22 gave himself powers to name three out of seven members of the electoral commission, including its chief.

The US State Department said it was deeply concerned by Saied's decision to "unilaterally restructure" the body.

On Monday, Saied appointed Farouk Bouasker as its head, replacing Nabil Baffoun, a vocal critic of Saied's power grab.

Tunisians are set to vote on constitutional reforms on July 25 and elect a new parliament on December 17. Saied's critics say he wants to create a tame electoral commission ahead of those ballots.

His moves initially won widespread support from Tunisians fed up with the crisis-gripped political system, but his opponents accuse him of trying to restore autocracy in the North African country.



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[UN envoy for Yemen concludes visit to Aden](#)

Thu, 2022-05-12 19:10

RIYADH: The UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, concluded a two-day visit to Aden on Wednesday.

During his visit, Grundberg met with the President of the Presidential Leadership Council, Rashad Al-Alimi, Yemeni Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, and Vice President of the Presidential Leadership Council, Tareq Saleh.

The UN envoy reviewed the status of the truce and the benefits it has delivered so far to Yemeni civilians, particularly the significant reduction

in civilian casualties.

He also discussed ways to overcome challenges, especially with regards to opening roads in Taiz and other governorates and resuming commercial flights from Sanaa airport.

“The parties need to move swiftly in implementing all elements of the truce in parallel to reduce the impact of the war on civilians and facilitate the freedom of movement of people and goods. I urge them to work constructively and demonstrate their commitment in all its humanitarian elements,” Grundberg said.

“I will continue my active support to Yemeni parties to identify solutions, increase confidence, and build on the truce to move towards a comprehensive and sustainable political solution that meets the legitimate aspirations of Yemeni women and men,” he added.



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Lebanese poll hopefuls 'buying their way to power' with cash bribes

Author:

Wed, 2022-05-11 21:46

BEIRUT: With Lebanon's crucial parliamentary elections on Sunday expected to go down to the wire, candidates and party supporters have been accused of trying to buy their way to victory by offering cash bribes to undecided voters.

A Shiite voter in Beirut's second constituency told Arab News that he had been offered \$300 if he and his family agreed to vote for a particular businessman.

The man, who asked to be identified only as Mohammed, said: "Supporters campaigning for their parties call me every day to ask who I will be voting for. I have no idea how they got my number. Some offer ration cards, others money, to either vote for them, or even boycott the elections or cast a blank ballot."

Mohammed, who has no links with the Amal Movement or Hezbollah, said he is unlikely to vote. "All the parties in power had the opportunity to fulfill their promises, but they have left their people mired in their misery. We will not re-elect them."

Electoral bribery has long been a problem in Lebanon, despite laws banning the practice, but has become more widespread and visible with the collapse of the national currency and decline in living conditions.

Now, if rumors from the money exchange black market are to be believed, the exchange rate will drop ahead of the elections as parties attempt to buy votes using US currency.

One money changer, who declined to be named, told Arab News: "Electoral spending is expected to rise during the next few days as parties attempt to buy the largest number of votes, through direct bribes."

People in Beirut have reported that money changers have been stopping passers-by in the street to ask if they want to exchange their dollars.

Many believe the election result will depend on undecided voters or those desperate for money, who will end up voting for the highest bidder.

Lebanese electoral law states: "During the period of the electoral campaign, the provision of services or the payment of funds including the obligations and expenses of candidates shall be prohibited."

Nadim Abdelmalak, head of Lebanon's supervisory commission for elections, said recently: "The commission has not received any complaint from any party regarding electoral bribery."

However, according to the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections, rapidly worsening living conditions are reinforcing the presence of bribery, especially with about 80 percent of the population facing poverty as a result of the country's economic crisis.

The unemployment rate is also approaching 40 percent amid a record collapse of the national currency against the dollar, while a freeze on bank withdrawals and the withholding of depositors' funds are also threatening household budgets.

Ihab, a cab driver and voter in the Beirut's second district, said that "he doesn't mind receiving help from any electoral list."

Many electoral lists offered gas and food vouchers. "They even offered to pay the generator bills and they are now offering to rent my car to transport voters for payment in dollars. I agreed, but I will not vote for anyone."

LADE said that it had evidence of candidates distributing baby milk in the north of Lebanon, while others have donated solar panels to light roads.

Samer, a voter in the Zahle district, said that "as the electoral battle in the region heats up, the bribes will double and this will manifest on the election day. Those voting in the morning will be less bribed than those voting in the afternoon."

Bribery appears commonplace in the electoral districts where competition is fierce, especially Beirut I, Beirut II, Zahle, Keserwan, Jbeil, Batroun, Koura, Bsharri, Zgharta and Chouf Aley.

However, the contest seems less heated in regions controlled by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement.

Mayssa, from the Baalbek-Hermel district, said: "A group from Hezbollah visited our home in the southern suburbs of Beirut and asked about the number of voters in the family. They assured us that transport will be available from Beirut to the district. They didn't offer anything else."

With fuel prices at crippling levels, most parties are offering voters in remote areas gas vouchers to cover their driving costs to polling stations.

The cost of refueling a car often exceeds 500,000 Lebanese pounds (\$300), which means voters in isolated villages can face a \$600 bill to drive back and forth to vote.

Salam, who works in a Beirut hotel, said: "Hezbollah is confident that they will win the elections. That is why they are not urging us to vote for them, although I am reluctant to vote because I no longer believe in anyone."



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Sunni preachers in 'vote to save Lebanon' plea UN chief urges free, transparent elections in Lebanon May 15

[Israeli minister pledges full probe into killing of reporter](#)

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Associated Press

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Wed, 2022-05-11 21:22

JERUSALEM: Israel's defense minister promised a thorough investigation of the killing of Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh on Wednesday and asked that Palestinian officials hand over the bullet that killed her.

Benny Gantz told reporters that Israel has been in touch with US and Palestinian officials, and said all parts of the investigation would be made public.

While the military initially suggested Abu Akleh might have been killed by stray fire from Palestinians, while she was covering an Israel raid in the West Bank, Gantz was more cautious Wednesday evening. "We are trying to figure out exactly what happened...I don't have final conclusions." "I am very sorry for what happened," Gantz told reporters. "Currently we do not know what was the direct cause of Shireen's death. We are very decisive to have a full-scale investigation of this process, and we hope to get Palestinian cooperation on this issue. Without the report of the pathological findings and the forensic findings, it would be very hard for us to find out what happened on the ground." "We investigated all the troops that were part of the operation," he added. "So far, we don't have any final conclusion."



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Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh shot dead in West Bank, channel blames Israeli troops
Jordanian journalists stage sit-in after Al-Jazeera journalist killed in Jenin

British man found with ancient shards in Iraq to stand trial

Author:

By SAMYA KULLAB | AP

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Wed, 2022-05-11 17:33

BAGHDAD: A British national accused by Iraq of collecting small archaeological fragments will be tried next week on charges potentially punishable by death, his Baghdad lawyer said Wednesday.

Retired geologist Jim Fitton, 66, was arrested in March at the Baghdad airport after Iraqi customs officials found him in possession of pottery fragments taken from an ancient site in southern Iraq. A German citizen accompanying him was also charged, but details of his case have not been made public.

Fitton will stand trial before Iraq's Felony Court this Sunday, his lawyer, Thair Soud, told The Associated Press.

The charges against him are based on Iraq's opaque antiquities laws and are punishable by death. However, Fitton's legal team and a British official following the case have said they believe this outcome will be unlikely. During the trial, Soud will have to prove to a panel of judges that Fitton did not harbor any criminal intent when he picked up shards of pottery found strewn across the desert landscape during a tourism expedition to Eridu, an ancient Mesopotamian site in what is now Dhi Qar province. In total, 12 fragments of pottery and other shards were found in Fitton's possession by Iraqi authorities.

Soud had drafted a proposal under Iraqi law to have the case closed before a trial takes place on the grounds that it could harm Iraq's national interests. Tourism is a nascent industry in the country, but the government introduced visas on arrival last year to encourage international visitors to come and tour its many archaeological sites.

Fitton's family has petitioned the British Foreign Office to assist Soud in submitting his proposal to Iraq's public prosecutor, garnering over 100,000 signatures. Fitton missed his daughter Leila Fitton's wedding in Malaysia, which took place last Sunday. She said she was "heartbroken" by his absence. Concerns grew shortly after Fitton's arrest when Shiite militia groups published posts on social media that included his passport details and accused the British government of attempting to intervene with Iraqi judicial procedures.



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