

Rumors swirl over Erdogan's declining health after G20 hobble

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Thu, 2021-11-04 21:35

LONDON: Allies of the Turkish president have denied that his health is in decline after footage emerged online of him appearing to struggle to walk.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, 67, was filmed during Sunday's G20 Summit in Rome in which he appeared to be unsteady on his feet. The footage fueled speculation that Turkey's long-time ruler's health is in decline.

In the video, Erdogan is seen walking apparently unsteadily away after a photoshoot, before a number of guards rush to his aid and move a thin rope fence out of his path.

His allies have responded furiously to the rumors of his declining health, with his official spokesman Fahrettin Altun tweeting a video showing him walking normally at the G20 Summit.

Rumors of Erdogan having cancer, which he denied, have also proliferated over the years after he had growths – polyps – removed from his small intestines in 2011 and 2012.

Erdogan, sometimes dubbed the new “sultan” of Turkey, has dominated the country's politics for nearly two decades, first as prime minister in 2003 then as president in 2014.

But Turkey's declining economy and out-of-control currency inflation appear to be hurting his popularity.

In 2019, his party suffered several defeats in city mayoral elections, even after he had forced a re-run of the polling in Istanbul.



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[Turkey pact fuels fears of drone use in Ethiopia's spiraling civil war](#)

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Thu, 2021-11-04 21:26

LONDON: An alliance between Ankara and Addis Ababa is fueling concerns that Turkish drones will be used in Ethiopia's escalating civil war.

The military cooperation agreement was signed in August by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The terms of the deal have not yet been made public, but Reuters reported in October that Ethiopia had requested Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones, considered to be among the most effective munitions of their type in the world.

The conflict in Ethiopia recently entered a new phase after beginning over a year ago, when government forces recaptured the Tigrayan capital Mekelle from separatist Tigrayans.

Government troops were later expelled from Mekelle, and an offensive by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front was initiated beyond the state's borders, targeting Amhara and Afar provinces.

Recently, the TPLF announced that its new stated goal is to capture Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.

A UN report released on Wednesday concluded that all parties in the conflict had committed abuses, including war crimes.

The UN has also sounded the alarm over the humanitarian situation in Tigray and elsewhere in Ethiopia, saying only 10 percent of aid meant for the province was ever delivered.

While neither Anakara nor Addis Ababa have publicly commented on the deal, last month Ethiopia-based journalist Martin Plaut was reportedly handed a fragment from a Turkish-manufactured guided bomb used against Tigrayan forces.

It cannot be conclusively determined from where it was fired, but Western experts said the missile from which the fragment came can be used by the Turkish drones, The Guardian reported.

Alex de Waal, director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University, told the newspaper: "The fighting is already at an intense scale and ferocity, with perhaps 100,000 soldiers already dead on the Ethiopian side. Five million civilians are in need of food aid as a result of the conflict, and yet Addis is still shopping for drones and other arms."

Turkey's drones themselves are expected to increase the ferocity of the fighting in Ethiopia and could destabilize other parts of Africa, experts have said.

"What we are seeing is the consequences of the international community not wanting to deal with drone proliferation," Chris Coles, from UK-based NGO Drone Wars, told The Guardian.

"Drones are heating up conflicts in the region because pilotless munitions lower the threshold for war. A country might be condemned for supplying boots on the ground to intervene in a conflict, but there is far less complaint if instead they are supplying drones."

Global demand for the Turkish drones spiked worldwide after their decisive use by Azerbaijan last year in its short-lived war with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

They are manufactured by Baykar Makina, whose Chief Technology Officer Selcuk Bayraktar is married to Erdogan's younger daughter.



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Thu, 2021-11-04 03:42

JAKARTA: Indonesia's president was on Wednesday hoping talks in the UAE would help provide a crucial investment shot-in-the-arm toward driving forward

plans to relocate his country's capital from Jakarta to the island of Borneo. Joko Widodo wants the switch to take place in early 2024 and was pinning his hopes on gaining Emirati financial backing for the \$34 billion project during his discussions in Abu Dhabi, Indonesian Ambassador to the UAE Husin Bagis told Arab News.

The southeast Asian nation's leaders have for decades proposed moving the capital from overcrowded and polluted Jakarta, and in 2019 Widodo announced that the relocation of the country's administrative center to East Kalimantan province would finally take place over the following years.

Under the plans, most government offices would move to Borneo, along with parliament, military, and police headquarters, while Jakarta would remain the country's financial and commercial hub.

In September, the government submitted a bill to parliament for the relocation to take place in the first half of 2024. Initially, the groundbreaking was expected in early 2021, but was stalled by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

To attract foreign investors to the new city, Widodo established a steering committee consisting of global figures, including Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, who he was due to meet on Wednesday. Bagis said: "I expect talks about the new capital development project would be on the table during their bilateral."

Widodo recently said his visit to Abu Dhabi would focus on strengthening ties with the UAE, particularly in trade and investment.

Investment was crucial for the capital project as only a fifth of the cost was intended to come from the state budget, with the rest generated from private funding.

The area earmarked for the new capital, 1,300 km away from Jakarta, covers 256,142 hectares of forest, and straddles the districts of North Penajam Paser and Kutai Kartanegara, close to two developed cities – Samarinda, the provincial capital of East Kalimantan, and Balikpapan, an oil and coal mining town.

The relocation idea, originally floated by Indonesia's first president in the 1960s, was announced by Widodo as a vision to build a smart, sustainable, "forest city" where 75 percent of the area would be allocated to green spaces, in contrast with the heavily polluted, traffic gridlocked Jakarta. The move was also aimed at igniting economic growth in the eastern half of Indonesia, which is significantly less developed than the densely populated island of Java in the western part of the archipelago.

However, with Widodo pushing to inaugurate the new capital before the end of his second term in 2024, critics have become more vocal as the country continued to reel from COVID-19 pandemic recession.

Opposition lawmakers, such as Suryadi Jaya Purnama from the Prosperous Justice Party, recently warned they would object to the plans if the government did not first focus on public health and economic recovery.

Nirwono Joga, an urban planner from Trisakti University in Jakarta, said there was too little time to complete a comprehensive feasibility study that should be conducted over at least five years.

"The move in 2024 would just be symbolic but the new capital would not be a living and functioning city since it would require a much longer process.

"It would be the best legacy for the president to leave a well-prepared master plan for a future capital move instead of pushing for a symbolic move

amidst the pandemic, a limited budget, and hasty preparation,” he added.



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Thu, 2021-11-04 03:18

NASIRIYAH: For the first time in Iraq, a new breed of representatives is entering parliament, born from a civil society movement fed up with the corruption that has long tarnished politics.

Among the newcomers is pharmacist Alaa Al-Rikabi, 47, whose party Imtidad (Extension) emerged in the aftermath of the October 2019 protest movement

against the entrenched political elite.

Imtidad positions itself as the "opposition" to governments that have emerged through an informal ethno-sectarian quota system that has been in place since the US-led invasion of 2003, Rikabi told AFP.

Despite campaigning with extremely limited finances, the party secured nine of the 329 seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives in the October 10 election, according to preliminary results.

"I'm aware that our size in parliament will not allow us a lot of leeway" to push a political agenda, Ribaki said, stressing that his party instead aims to perform a watchdog role.

"We will not participate in any government set up on the basis of quotas, so that we will be able to hold leaders to account," Rikabi said in his home in Nasiriyah, a flashpoint of protests in Iraq's mainly Shiite south.

Overall, big political blocs retained their dominance in the election, which was marked by a record abstention rate.

The biggest winner was the Sadrist movement, led by firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr. It took 70 seats, according to the results that are expected to be finalized within a few weeks.

Behind the scenes, there have been discussions over the formation of blocs to create a parliamentary majority that would distribute the upcoming Cabinet posts.

But it is specifically against this system that the protest movement, and by extension Imtidad, was forged.

Imtidad is seeking its own alternative alliance to make its presence felt. With only nine seats, the party "will not be able to extend its influence in parliament", said Saleh Al-Alawi, a judge and a political scientist.

Rikabi pointed out that, "according to the constitution, we need at least 25 MPs to be able to question a minister".

To this end, he said, "we are trying to come to an understanding" to team up with other parties.

In particular, Imtidad has been in talks with a small Kurdish party, the New Generation Movement, which has similar leanings and also holds nine seats.

The unprecedented protest movement that broke out two years ago railed against the political class running the oil-rich but poverty-stricken country where youth unemployment is soaring.

The streets of Nasiriyah still bear witness to the anger, and posters of the "martyrs" adorn the walls, honoring many of the hundreds of activists who paid with their lives.

Factions of the Hashd Al-Shaabi – a paramilitary group integrated into the armed forces and represented by the pro-Iran Fatah (Conquest) Alliance in parliament – have faced accusations of targeting activists.

Hussein Ali, 28, said he has been in a wheelchair for two years since being shot in the back during a demonstration.

"I voted for Imtidad because I hope they can fight for the rights of the demonstrators," he said. "Ever since I was injured, I haven't received any compensation from the government."

Unlike many established Iraqi politicians, newcomers like Rikabi have little money and had to run low-cost campaigns.

Imtidad spent 4 million dinars (about \$2,700) for posters and events in the province of Dhi Qar, of which Nasiriyah is the capital – a fraction of the tens of millions often spent by larger parties.

In a bid to break with what he calls the “stereotype of the representative,” who is out of touch with voters and with reality, Rikabi drives his own car and does not have an office.

Others have been even more frugal, such as Mohammed Al-Anouz, who came to be known on social media for putting up his own campaign posters in the Shiite shrine city of Najaf.

For him, opposition is the only option, he told AFP.

“The big parties have contacted me to find out my position,” he said. “I will not form an alliance with the parties that have led the country in past years.

“It is they who got us into this situation where there are no public services and corruption reigns.”



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US envoy to Yemen Lenderking to travel to Middle East on Thursday

Thu, 2021-11-04 00:20

LONDON: US envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking will travel to the Middle East on Thursday to continue negotiations to reach an agreement to end the war in Yemen.

Lenderking will hold talks with Yemeni government officials and civil society representatives, senior regional government officials, and other international partners, the US State Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

“The special envoy and his team remain focused on the need for the Houthis to stop their offensive on Marib and repeated attacks against civilian areas, which are exacerbating the humanitarian crisis,” the statement said.

The Iran-backed Houthi militia have renewed their offensive to take control of Marib, one of the last remaining government strongholds, following a lull in September.

“Lenderking will also continue to stress the US government’s commitment to working with the international community to press the parties to implement critical economic reforms, secure regular imports and distribution of fuel, and resume commercial flights to Sanaa airport,” the State Department added.



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