

POLITY

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ECOLOGY

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Big recipients 'unable' to reveal bond donor data

CONTEXT: Most of the large recipients of funding via electoral bonds, including the BJP, Congress, and Trinamool Congress have not shared any details about their donors, in submissions made to the Election Commission of India (EC) under the direction of the Supreme Court.

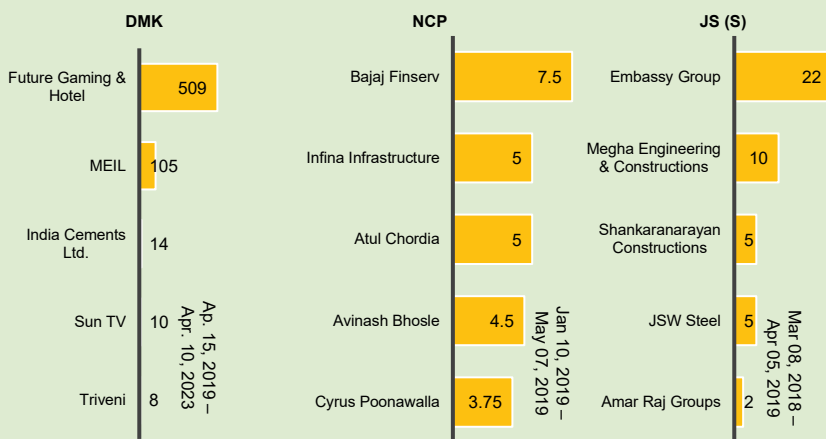
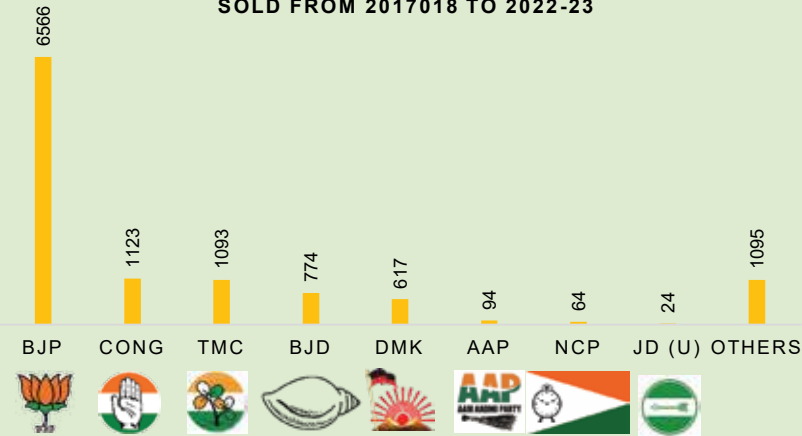


FIGURE: Bar chart representation of funds received in (₹ Cr.).

The EC published the data previously submitted to it by political parties in sealed covers under the top court's directions. Regional players like the Telugu Desam party, YSR Congress, Bharat Rashtra Samithi, and Biju Janata Dal also did not reveal their bond donors. Others, such as the Aam Aadmi Party, the Nationalist Congress Party, and the Janata Dal (United) only revealed donor names from the start of the electoral bond scheme in 2018 till May 2019. In some cases, only some of the donors' names were disclosed for bond sales till 2019.

TOTAL VALUE OF ELECTORAL BONDS SOLD FROM 2017/018 TO 2022-23



In fact, only a handful of parties have revealed their electoral bond donors' identities in their entirety; these parties include the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, and the Janata Dal (Secular).

The BJP, the largest recipient of electoral bonds cited rules framed under the electoral bonds scheme that the SC has struck down as unconstitutional, precluding parties from having to maintain donor details, and so it claimed that it had not maintained a record of these particulars. Other parties that did not supply donor details noted that the scheme was designed in such a way that they did not have ready access to donor information, as these were essentially bearer bonds. The details will only be available with the authorised bond issuer, the State Bank of India (SBI).

Some parties did not disclose poll bond donors

The Election Commission published a second set of data on electoral bonds purchased and redeemed by political parties prior to April 12, 2019.

April 12, 2019: The Supreme Court specifically directed political parties that benefited from the electoral bonds scheme to confidentially divulge the detailed particulars - detailed particulars of the donors as against the each bond; the amount of each such bond and the full particulars of the credit received against each bond, namely, the particulars of the bank account to which the amount has been credited and the date of each such credit of the donors as against each bond bought and encashed by parties from March 2018 to April 2019.

November 2, 2023: The Supreme Court had directed the EC to hand over the data on electoral bonds from before April 2019 after updating the information till September 30, 2023. The court had kept the information in its custody till the EC had sought it in an application last week. The court had returned the original documents to the EC along with a digitised version, which was published on Sunday.

February 15, 2024: the Supreme Court directed the State Bank of India to furnish to the EC all details of the electoral bonds purchased, and, as the case may, redeemed by political parties, including the date of purchase/redemption, name of the purchaser and the denomination of the electoral bond purchased.

The five-judge Bench primarily seek an explanation from the State Bank of India (SBI), the authorised bank under the scheme, regarding non-disclosure of the unique hidden alphanumeric serial numbers of each electoral bond, not included in the first tranche of data published by the EC on March 14. The first set of data received by the EC from SBI had covered bonds purchased and redeemed by parties from April 12, 2019 till February 15, 2024, the date on which the top court struck down the anonymous political funding scheme as unconstitutional. It has been submitted that SBI has not disclosed the alphanumeric numbers of the electoral bonds.

In-built security feature

The Union Ministry of Finance in the Supreme Court filed an affidavit date March 15, 2019 confirmed an in-built security feature "unique hidden alphanumeric serial number" to tack the contribution of poll bond to the political party. The unique numbers would identify which donor bought which poll bond and contributed to which political party.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Kerala to move SC on President withholding Bills

CONTEXT: Kerala will soon challenge before the Supreme Court the legality of President Droupadi Murmu withholding her assent to Kerala University Laws (Amendment No. 2) Bill 2022, University Law Amendment Bill, 2022, and the University Law Amendment Bill, 2021 from the seven Bills that were referred to her in November 2023.



BACKGROUND: Mohammed Arif Khan, the State Governor of Kerala reserved seven bills passed by the Kerala Legislature. Of the seven bills reserved for the President, assent was given to the Kerala Lok Ayukta (Amendment) Bill, 2022. The State Government filed a writ petition before the Supreme Court challenging the act of Governor referring bills to the President as their subject matters were confined to the State List of the Constitution and none of the Bills were in conflict with any Central legislation. Kerala contend the Bills did not belong to the special categories for which prior Presidential assent was required. Kerala would also state that the Bills, which followed the Ordinances cleared by the Governor, should not have been sent for Presidential assent. The State Government seek to issue a directive to the Governor to act on the Bills passed by the State Legislature.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The military's continuing hold over Pakistan

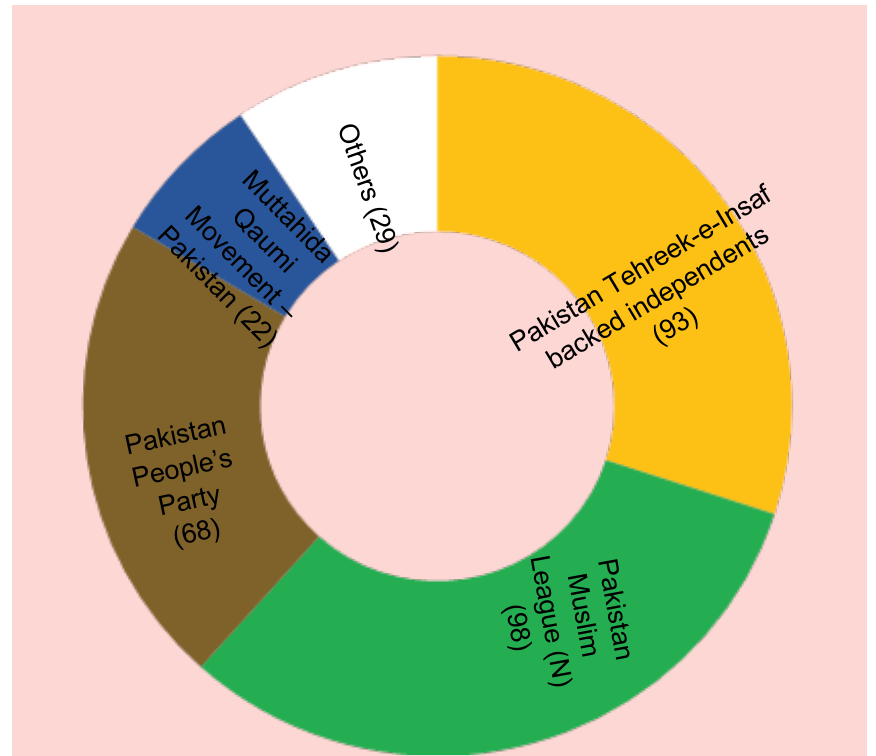
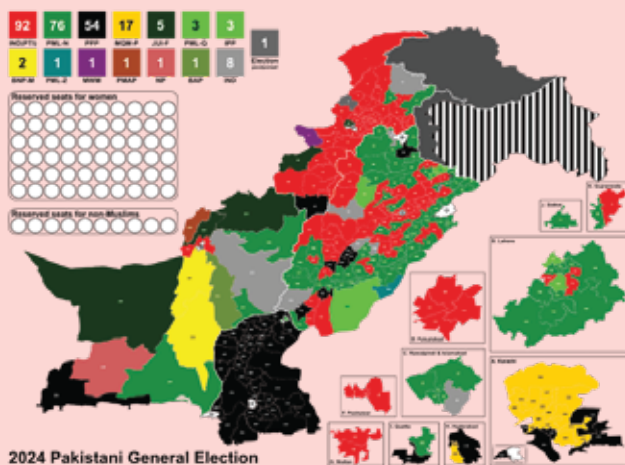


FIGURE: Pie chart representation of total seats represented by political parties in Lower House of the Pakistan Parliament.

Shehbaz Sharif was sworn in as the Prime Minister a coalition government of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) joined hands with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) for the second time.

The two parties may claim that they have taken this step to save Pakistan from instability; however, in reality, this is only poised to exacerbate the economic and political chaos. In the days ahead, the new government will have its task cut out to alleviate Pakistan's troubles while also pandering to the military's whims and fancies.

In Pakistan, it is a known secret that the military establishment interferes in the electoral process and selects the laadla (a derogatory term for the army-backed prime ministerial candidate). However, the brazenness with which the electoral manipulation has occurred this time has caused widespread anger among people against the army leadership. Allegations of rigging notwithstanding, the military appears to have achieved its intended objectives without caring much about the people's mandate. This is bound to have implications for not just domestic political stability but also for South Asia.

The military's interference

Pakistan's history is replete with instances of direct or indirect military interference in domestic politics, including four periods of martial law. This time, the independent candidates backed by Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) won the highest number of National Assembly seats. In 2018, Mr. Khan himself became the Prime Minister of Pakistan with the tacit support of the army.

The latest arrangement of selecting the prime minister also squarely benefits the military establishment. The election of Mr. Shehbaz Sharif over his elder brother, Nawaz Sharif will make it easier for the army to control the civilian government. Mr. Shehbaz Sharif shares good ties with important Western countries, in addition to China and Saudi Arabia. A Civilian Government in is vital for external financial support for Special Investment Facilitation

Council, the pet project of the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Syed Asim Munir. A fractured electoral mandate with no clear majority for any political party has given enough manoeuvring space to the army to put PML-N and PPP in a politically weak coalition. Considering the sad fate of previous governments in Pakistan, this new PML-N-PPP coalition is unlikely to last its five-year term. More importantly, this fractured mandate has already started an ugly power struggle among various parties. This political wrangling will help divert attention from the wrongdoings of the military establishment and put the spotlight on the political class and civilian institutions. A 'selected' and weak prime minister in office, General Munir may now plan to seek an extension in November 2025.

A loss for the people

After a favourable election outcome, the military establishment now feels more emboldened to tighten its grip on Pakistan's civilian and political institutions. Journalists, PTI supporters, human rights activists, and minority communities are increasingly being targeted by state security agencies. Regular internet shutdowns, excessive social media monitoring, and the banning of platforms such as X have become daily occurrences. In his second year as COAS, with a new coalition government in power, General Munir will assert more control over all spheres of governance. As the military establishment wins another political battle by disregarding the public mandate, the ultimate loss will be borne by the people.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

How were the new Election Commissioners selected?

CONTEXT: The President has appointed Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu, both retired IAS officers, as Election Commissioners (ECs) to fill up two vacancies in the three-member Election Commission of India.

What was the process before this?

Article 324 of the Constitution vests the "superintendence, direction and control of elections" in an Election Commission. It also says the EC shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may fix from time to time. This provision was subject to any law made in that behalf by Parliament. However, for nearly 40 years from the adoption of the Constitution, the EC only had a Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). It was not until October 1989 that it became a multi-member body. However, the appointment of two Election Commissioners was rescinded within a short time, that is on January 1, 1990.

Responsibilities of the Election Commission of India:

1. Supervise, direct and control
2. Elections to the President of India;
3. Elections to the Vice-President of India;
4. General Elections;
5. Assembly Elections;
6. Elections to Council of States;
7. Elections to the State Legislative Council

What makes the Election Commission of India independent?

- The President appoints the Chief Election Commissioner and 2 Election Commissioner(s) for an office term of 6 years or till he attains the age of 65 years, whichever is earlier*.
- All expenditures of the Election Commission of India, including salaries and emoluments of the Election Commissioners are made from the Consolidated Fund of India.
- The conditions of service, including salaries and emoluments of the Election Commissioners cannot be varied to his disadvantage after their appointment.
- The Chief Election Commissioner shall not be removed from his office except in like manner and on like grounds as a Judge of the Supreme Court.
- The President makes necessary staff available to the Election Commission of India to discharge of electoral functions.
- The Chief Election Commissioner submits resignation to the President of India.

Administrative role of Election Commission of India:

Conduct of free and fair elections:

- Delimitation of electoral constituencies.
- Preparation and periodical revision of electoral rolls.
- Conduct of elections.
- Enjoys powers to advise the President regarding conduct of elections in a state under President's Rule under Art. 356.
- Enjoys powers to advise the President and State Governor regarding matters related to the disqualifications of the MPs and MLAs / MLCs respectively.
- Enjoys quasi-judicial powers to grant recognition and allotment of election symbols to political parties.

A law was enacted in 1991 to fix the conditions of service of the CEC and the ECs, and amended in 1993. However, it did not provide for any appointment process. In the absence of any particular process being laid down by parliamentary law, the President has been appointing the CEC and ECs. The only known process is that the Law Ministry puts up a panel of names to the Prime Minister, who recommends the appointment of one of them as EC to the President. It had become a convention to appoint officials as ECs first and then, on the completion of the tenure of the CEC, the senior EC was elevated as CEC.

Salient features of the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Conditions of Service) Act, 1991:

- The Chief Election Commissioner or Election Commissioners shall hold office for a term of 6 years or age of 65 years, whichever is earlier.
- The Chief Election Commissioner or Election Commissioners are paid salary equal to the salary of a judge of the Supreme Court. On retirement they are entitled to a pension payable to a judge of the Supreme Court.
- All business of the Election Commission shall, as far as possible, be transacted unanimously. If the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners differ in opinion on any matter, such matter shall be decided according to the opinion of the majority.

What did the SC rule on the process?

A five-member Constitution Bench in Anoop Baranwal versus Union of India ruled that the intention of the Constitution makers regarding the power to appoint the CEC and other ECs was not meant to be give exclusively to the executive and that the power was to be exercised “subject to any law made by Parliament”. The court laid down an interim arrangement for the appointment to operate until Parliament made its own law. The court said the appointments should be made by a three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha (or the leader of the party that is largest in the Opposition) and the Chief Justice of India. It was in response to this that Parliament enacted the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 which received presidential assent and was notified late in December 2023.

How were the new ECs selected?



A Committee, headed by the Union Minister for Law and Justice and includes two officials of the rank of Secretary to the government shortlists 6 names for the post of Election Commissioners.



FIGURE: Schematic representation of the three-member Selection Committee, comprising Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, and the Leader of the Indian National Congress in the Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, as leader of the largest party in the Opposition

In terms of the new law, the two ECs were selected by a three-member Selection Committee, comprising Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, and the Leader of the Indian National Congress in the Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, as leader of the largest party in the Opposition. They were chosen out of a shortlisted panel of six names.

What is the criticism against the Act?

The foremost criticism from those who have challenged the new Act is that it has removed the CJI from the selection panel and has made a Union Minister a member instead. This gives the executive a two-one majority in the three-member committee. The government has argued that the Act does not really remove the CJI from the appointment process, as the inclusion of the CJI was only a stop-gap arrangement put in place until the enactment of a law. The Supreme Court has repeatedly rejected attempts to obtain a stay on the new Act. The petitioners have approached the court again against the

appointment of the two ECs. Their primary argument is that the Act violates the main principle in the Constitution Bench judgment — the need to free the appointment process from the executive.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

What is the HbA1C test and why is it used to check for diabetes?

CONTEXT: According to a nationwide study published in 2023, India is estimated to have 10.13 Cr. people with diabetes, and another 13.6 crore people who are pre-diabetic. This apart, over 35 % of Indians suffer from hypertension and nearly 40 % from abdominal obesity, both of which are risk factors for diabetes. India accounts for 17 % of all diabetes patients in the world.

Prevention and early detection are key to combat this non-communicable disease burden. Haemoglobin A1C (HbA1C) test, also known as the glycosylated haemoglobin or glycosylated haemoglobin test is a popular test used to diagnose pre-diabetes and diabetes (both type 1 and type 2) and to help manage diabetes.

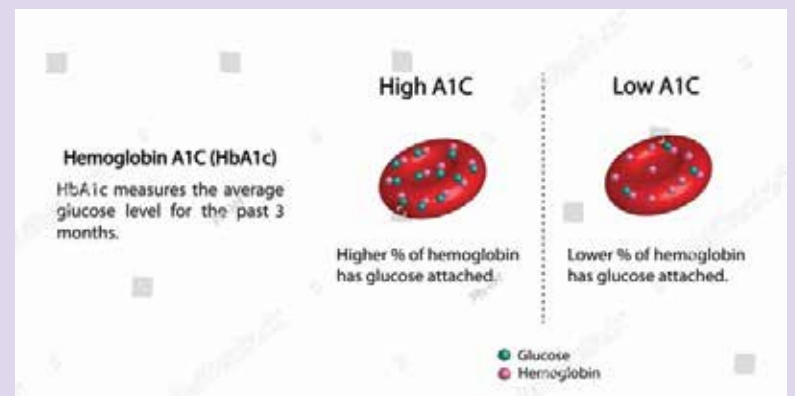
Who needs to take the test and when?

According to the Indian Council of Medical Research’s Guidelines for Management of Type 2 Diabetes (2018), all individuals older than 30 years should be screened for diabetes. Those with one or more risk factors including, among others, obesity, an increased waist circumference, a history of or being treated for hypertension, a history of heart disease, and a history of polycystic ovarian syndrome should be screened earlier. Retests should be conducted after three years in case of normal glucose tolerance. If a person is pre-diabetic, retests should be annual.

How does the test work?

Sugar, or glucose, that enters your bloodstream from the food attaches to the haemoglobin in your red blood cells. Haemoglobin is a protein that transports oxygen to all the cells of your body. The HbA1C test measures the percentage of your red blood cells that have sugar-coated haemoglobin.

The HbA1C levels are provided as either a percentage or in mmol/mol (which stands for millimoles per mole). A mole is a unit of measurement often used for chemical substances. Higher the percentage, higher your blood glucose levels are. An Hb1A1C below 5.7 % is considered normal; between 5.7 % and 6.4 % may indicate you are pre-diabetic; and 6.5 % or higher can indicate diabetes. In mmol/mol: below 42 corresponds to below 6.0 %; 42-47 mmol/mol to 6.0 to 6.4 %; and 48 mmol/mol to 6.5 % or over.



Test's results may change under certain conditions, including if a patient has kidney or liver failure, severe anaemia or a blood disorder such as thalassaemia; if they have a less common type of haemoglobin found in some populations; or are under certain medications including steroids, opiates or dapsone (a drug used to treat leprosy). They may even change if a person is in early or late pregnancy.

Generally, for those whose results indicate pre-diabetes or diabetes, doctors specify a goal to achieve specific HbA1C levels. But these vary from person to person and also depend on their age, health conditions, medications being taken, and other factors.

Why is the test used to check for diabetes?

HbA1c was first discovered in 1955, but elevated HbA1c levels in diabetes patients were not noted until 1968. Another eight years passed before HbA1c was correlated with blood glucose values in hospitalised patients with diabetes and was proposed for monitoring glycemia. The American Diabetes Association approved HbA1c as a diagnostic tool in 2009. In 2011, after an expert consultation with the World Health Organization (WHO), HbA1c could be used as a diagnostic test for diabetes.

How does the test differ from others?

While fasting and post-prandial (after a meal) or post-meal blood sugar tests give you blood sugar levels within a specific time frame, the HbA1C test reflects your average blood glucose levels over the last two to three months.

Also, while the traditional blood sugar tests may fluctuate depending on items in the person's latest meal and when they last consumed it, the HbA1C test is independent of these variables, making it more reliable. It can be taken irrespective of when the latest meal was consumed.

What are the test's limitations?

HbA1C test does not replace other tests and may be carried out alongside others, such as the traditional blood sugar tests to test for diabetes and pre-diabetes. It also does not replace regular blood-sugar testing at home, which a doctor may have recommended, as the blood sugar levels may spike and dip through the day or night, and the HbA1C test may not capture this.

HbA1C test remains one of the best to assess long-term control of diabetes in people known to have diabetes, it is not uniformly accepted as a diagnostic test by all global medical bodies because of its relatively low sensitivity arising from difficulties in assay standardisation. In other words, a doctor may recommend a glucose test alongside an HbA1C test to obtain a clearer picture when diagnosing a person. These include having conditions like thalassaemia, structural haemoglobin variants in the population, iron-deficiency anaemia (which is relatively high in India), and the use of certain drugs.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Marathon operation by Navy, IAF led to pirates' surrender

CONTEXT: The Indian Naval warship, INS Kolkata in a calibrated response in accordance with international laws disabled the ship's steering system and navigational aids, forcing the pirate ship to stop after the pirates shot down the drone.



The Navy conducted a 40-hour operation resulting in the surrender of 35 pirates and freeing of 17 crew members of the hijacked vessel. INS Kolkata undertook "precisely measured actions" while maintaining her position close to the pirate ship and also engaged in forceful negotiations, which resulted in the pirates surrendering and releasing the pirate ship MV Ruen and its original crew present onboard. An Indian Air Force (IAF) C-17 transport aircraft executed a precision airborne drop of two Combat Rubberised Raiding Craft (CRRC) boats flying 10 hours to an area 2,600 km away from the Indian coast.

Hijacked in December

The Malta-flagged merchant vessel Ruen was hijacked in December 2023 and had been under the control of Somali pirates. The seaworthiness of MV Ruen will be assessed on Sunday and the vessel, which is carrying approximately 37,800 tonnes of cargo worth over \$1 million, will be brought safely to India.

The Indian Navy as part of the maritime security operations has been carrying out extensive surveillance in the region, including monitoring of traffic in areas of interest. Based on the analysis of the surveillance information, the Indian Navy was able to track the movement of the pirate ship Ruen and directed INS Kolkata to intercept the ship approximately 260 nm east of Somalia. The anti-piracy operation 1,400 nm (2,600 km) from mainland India was augmented by the deployment of INS Subhadra on Saturday morning, and also by air-dropping of the Marine Commandos (MARCOS) by C-17 aircraft in the afternoon. Additionally, the pirate vessel was kept under surveillance by MQ-9A high-altitude long endurance remotely piloted aircraft and P8I maritime reconnaissance aircraft.



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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

EU and Egypt agree to a €7.4-billion deal on energy, migration

CONTEXT: EU chief Ursula Von der Layen and five European leaders visited cash-strapped Egypt on Sunday to announce a €7.4 billion financial package focussed on boosting energy trade and stemming irregular migrant flows to the 27-member bloc.



The deal will include billions in credit over coming years for highly indebted Egypt, and stepping up energy sales that could help Europe “move further away from Russian gas”. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was joined by the leaders of Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Greece and Italy, including three Mediterranean leaders — Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, her Greek counterpart Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Cyprus President Nikos Christodoulides met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ahead of the scheduled signing ceremony.

The Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership agreement includes five billion euros in loans over four years, 1.8 billion euros in investment and hundreds of millions for bilateral projects including on migration. Egypt, mired in a painful economic crisis, borders war-battered Libya and the centres of two ongoing conflicts — the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip and Sudan’s war between the regular armed forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

Haven for refugees

Egypt already hosts around nine million migrants and refugees, including four million Sudanese and 1.5 million Syrians. The deal includes steps to cooperate on “security, counter-terrorism cooperation and protection of borders, in particular the southern one” with Sudan. The agreement follows several controversial deals the EU has sealed in northern Africa — with Libya, Tunisia and Mauritania — to stem the flow of irregular migrants across the Mediterranean Sea.



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