

April–July 2015

INTERNATIONAL

Development

June 29—Top officials from 56 nations attend a ceremony in Beijing to mark the launch of the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which aims to finance development projects in the region. Although the US declined to join the new institution and lobbied others to stay out, Australia and Britain are among the American allies that have joined.

Migration

April 23—European Union leaders hold an emergency summit on a surge of migration across the Mediterranean, after about 800 people drown when a boat headed to Italy from Libya capsizes April 19. The leaders agree to increase maritime patrols and rescue operations, and to crack down on human traffickers. In 2014, the number of migrants arriving illegally in Europe nearly tripled, to 276,000, according to the EU border agency.

AFGHANISTAN

June 22—Seven Taliban militants launch a brazen attack on the parliament in Kabul. The assailants, who breach the main gate with a suicide car bomb but fail to penetrate the building, kill 2 civilians before they are slain.

July 29—The government says it has confirmed reports that the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Muhammad Omar, died in a hospital in Karachi, Pakistan, in April 2013. The Taliban had continued to issue statements in his name, though he had not been seen publicly since the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban regime and there had long been rumors of his demise.

CHINA

June 11—Zhou Yongkang, a former member of the Communist Party's 9-member ruling body, the Politburo Standing Committee, and the nation's former chief of domestic security, is sentenced to life in prison following a closed trial in which he was convicted of accepting bribes, revealing state secrets, and abusing power. He is the most powerful official felled by President Xi Jinping's campaign against corruption. Many observers say the crackdown has served to eliminate Xi's political rivals.

June 18—A Beijing-backed proposal to change how Hong Kong selects its top leader fails to win the necessary two-thirds majority of votes in the territory's Legislative Council. The proposal would have allowed for the direct election of the chief executive by all eligible voters starting in 2017—a longtime demand of pro-democracy groups—but the choice would have been limited to candidates screened by a committee dominated by Beijing loyalists. The plan sparked massive street demonstrations when it was floated in 2014.

BURUNDI

April 25—President Pierre Nkurunziza says he will run for a 3rd term despite a constitutional 2-term limit, sparking violent protests. A May 13 coup attempt led by an army general fails.

COLOMBIA

April 14—The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a Marxist rebel group, ambushes government troops, killing 11 soldiers and breaking a self-imposed truce. The ambush imperils peace talks that have lasted more than 2 years in an effort to end 5 decades of conflict.

July 25—President Juan Manuel Santos orders a reduction in aerial bombing against FARC in response to a new unilateral cease-fire begun by the rebels July 20.

CUBA

July 20—The US and Cuba officially restore diplomatic relations that were severed in 1961, each country reopening its embassy in the other's capital. Members of the Republican majority in the US Congress have vowed to do what they can to stymie the rapprochement by blocking a vote to confirm an ambassador, barring spending on the American embassy in Havana, and refusing to rescind the trade embargo on Cuba.

EGYPT

May 16—Mohamed Morsi, the ousted former president, is sentenced to death along with more than 100 other defendants. They were convicted on charges of breaking out of prison in 2011 during an uprising against then-President Hosni Mubarak.

FRANCE

June 23—WikiLeaks and French news outlets publish classified documents from the US National Security Agency (NSA), revealing that the NSA tapped the phones of President François Hollande and his 2 predecessors.

June 24—The parliament approves a new law, with strong support from across the political spectrum, allowing French intelligence services to tap phone and Internet communications and collect vast quantities of data from private Internet providers. The measure is part of the government's response to a January terrorist attack that targeted the Paris office of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

GREECE

July 5—More than 61% of voters heed the call of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to vote "no" in a referendum asking whether they will accept more austerity as part of another bailout of the bankrupt government by the European Union and the IMF.

July 15—The parliament votes at Tsipras's urging to accept austerity measures, including a sales tax increase and pension reforms, that in some respects are even more stringent than those in the proposal rejected by voters 10 days earlier. Tsipras gave in to the demands of Germany and other creditor nations at a July 12-13 summit meeting in exchange for a 3-year aid package of up to 86 billion euros, while failing to obtain the debt relief he sought.

July 20—Greek banks open for the 1st time since the end of June, though limits on cash withdrawals and transfers remain in effect.

IRAN

July 14—After 20 months of negotiations, Iran and 6 nations led by the US—the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany—announce an agreement to impose restrictions on Tehran's ability to develop nuclear weapons in exchange for lifting sanctions and conventional arms embargos. The accord requires Iran to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98% and submit to intrusive inspections, though its limits on nuclear fuel production will expire after 15 years. The deal faces strong opposition from Israel and many in the US Congress.

IRAQ

May 15—Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, located just 70 miles west of Baghdad, falls to the jihadist group Islamic State (ISIS). A wave of suicide truck-bomb attacks sends Iraqi government forces fleeing, leaving their weapons and vehicles behind.

June 10—The US says it will send 450 more military trainers to Iraq, adding to the 3,100 it has already deployed, in order to help Iraqi forces regain territory captured by ISIS.

IRELAND

May 23—In a referendum, voters approve the legalization of same-sex marriage. Although approval was expected, the 62-percent “yes” vote is a surprise.

ISRAEL

May 6—Minutes before a midnight deadline to form a new government, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the right-wing Likud Party, forms a coalition of 61 legislators from conservative and religious parties, the bare minimum needed for a majority in the 120-seat Knesset. Likud finished 1st in a March general election but won just 30 seats.

KENYA

April 2—Members of the Somali Islamist group Al Shabab attack Garissa University College in eastern Kenya, killing 148 people, mostly students. It is the country’s worst terrorist attack since the 1998 bombing of the US embassy, and the latest in a series of attacks by Al Shabab in Kenya in retaliation for a Kenyan military intervention against the group in Somalia. Christians are reportedly singled out for execution.

LIBERIA

May 9—One of the West African nations hardest hit by the Ebola epidemic in 2014 is free of the virus, says the World Health Organization. No new cases have been reported in Liberia and the incubation period since the last known case has passed. However, more cases appear in late June.

MEXICO

June 7—In national elections, the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party and its 2 allies slightly expand their majority in the lower house of Congress, despite growing discontent with President Enrique Peña Nieto over drug violence and corruption. Independent candidates, allowed to run for the 1st time, score several high-profile victories.

July 11—Mexico’s most notorious drug lord, Joaquín (El Chapo) Guzmán, escapes from a high security prison through a mile-long tunnel that opened directly into his cell.

NEPAL

April 25—An earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale kills more than 8,000 people, mostly in the densely populated Kathmandu valley.

POLAND

May 24—Andrzej Duda of the conservative Law and Justice party is elected president in a runoff, ousting the incumbent, Bronisław Komorowski, who had been favored to win reelection, given Poland’s strong economy. The presidency is mostly a ceremonial

post, but the surprise result, in favor of a party skeptical of the EU, could presage trouble for the centrist ruling party, Civic Platform, in upcoming parliamentary elections.

SAUDI ARABIA

May 22—A suicide bomber kills more than 20 people at a mosque in the eastern region of Qatif, part of Eastern province, where many in the restive Shia minority live. ISIS, which has long threatened to carry out attacks in Saudi Arabia but had not previously done so, takes credit for the bombing.

SOUTH AFRICA

April 21—Troops are deployed in Durban and Johannesburg to stop anti-immigrant violence.

TUNISIA

June 26—A Tunisian gunman kills 38 tourists, including 30 Britons, at Sousse, a Mediterranean beach resort, before he is shot dead by police. In March, terrorists targeted foreign tourists at a museum in Tunis, the capital, killing 22. ISIS claims responsibility for both attacks.

TURKEY

June 7—The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) loses its parliamentary majority in a general election, while the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democracy Party clears the 10% threshold for parliamentary seats. Support for the AKP drops from nearly 50% in 2011 to just under 41%, which could force the party to form a coalition government. The result will also make it difficult for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to push through constitutional changes that would shift executive powers to the presidency, which he made a focus of the campaign.

June 20—A suicide bomb attack on a cultural center in the town of Suruc, on the border with Syria, kills at least 32 people. ISIS later takes credit for the attack, which targeted a gathering of young volunteers who planned to help rebuild the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani, just across the border from Suruc, which Kurdish forces liberated from ISIS earlier this year. Kurdish protesters accuse the Turkish government of tacitly supporting ISIS.

July 23—The government agrees to let the US use 2 Turkish air bases for operations against ISIS in Syria and its own forces join the campaign against the jihadist group for the 1st time. The US and Turkey also agree to clear a buffer zone in Syria along the Turkish border. Meanwhile, Turkey launches airstrikes against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Iraq after PKK militants kill 2 Turkish police officers July 22, breaking a cease-fire.

UNITED KINGDOM

May 7—In a general election, the Conservative Party unexpectedly wins an outright majority of 331 seats in the 650-member Parliament with 37% of the vote. The Labour Party barely tops 30% of the vote, its worst showing since 1987. David Cameron will serve a 2nd term as prime minister, this time without needing to form a coalition government. ■

From *Current History*’s archives...

“The forces opposing democratization in China remain strong. Although the revolutionary elders who are determined to maintain the party’s Leninist structure are dying off quickly, a new conservative force—the elders’ sons and daughters, and the economic and technocratic bureaucrats—wants to maintain its positions and interests at all costs.”

Merle Goldman “Is Democracy Possible?” September 1995