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World's richest man buying Twitter: what about free speech?

Following negotiations with 11 board members of Twitter, Elon Musk reached an agreement to buy the company for \$44 billion on Monday, April 25. The deal, one of the largest-ever leveraged buyouts of a publicly-traded company, comes less than two weeks after Musk filed an initial bid of \$54.20 per share with the Securities and Exchange Commission on April 14. This was a 38 per cent premium over Twitter's closing stock price on the last trading day before Musk disclosed his 9 per cent stake in the company, which had already made him the largest single shareholder of the company.

Despite initially adopting a "poison pill" defence against Musk's unsolicited bid after Musk rejected an offer to join the board, Twitter's board began seriously evaluating the proposal after Musk lined up \$46.5 billion for the transaction and threatened to take his offer directly to the shareholders. With the completion of the transaction, Twitter will become privately held, and stockholders will receive \$54.20 in cash for each share of Twitter's common stock.

Earlier, Musk had referred to himself as a "free speech absolutist," implying that he seeks to unlock the social media network's "extraordinary potential," and has said he will eliminate parts of Twitter's content moderation regulations protecting against hate speech, incitement to violence, and targeted harassment, among others.

Musk has also stated his wish to make Twitter's algorithm more transparent by adding an edit button and, as of recent, has announced the probable charging of a 'slight' fee for commercial/government users in a bid to push up Twitter revenue; the site is expected to remain free for casual users.

Questions are being asked about what will happen now that arguably the internet's most influential platform has come under the control of one of the world's wealthiest people – many are afraid that lesser moderation will lead to further incitement and hate speech. In contrast, supporters of Musk's takeover have pointed out that other platforms controlled mainly by billionaires, such as Wall Street Journal (Jeff Bezos) and Meta (Mark Zuckerberg) doing just, well, fine.

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Ukraine war enters protracted phase; Russian war crimes shock the world

After more than two months since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia has yet to gain control of any major cities, with its advance being halted in many areas and the war entering into a protracted phase. Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, but by early April, its soldiers had withdrawn from the capital Kyiv and surrounding areas, heading for Belarus and western Russia. Ukrainian forces then counter-attacked, retaking substantial territories around the city and pushing all the way to their northern borders with Belarus and western Russia.

Since then, Russia has refocused its efforts on gaining control of Ukraine's east and south. Fighting is particularly violent in the east around Izyum, with the Russians making little progress. Additionally, strong Ukrainian defences in the Donbas region are holding.

Although Russian forces made swift advances in the south at first, with the primary goal of establishing a land corridor between Crimea and territories controlled by Russian-backed rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk,

Russian advances were significantly hampered by heavy opposition from Ukrainian soldiers around Mykolaiv in the west and Mariupol in the east. Despite the Russian offensive since the beginning of the war, Russian forces still do not entirely control the city of Mariupol - the last vestiges of resistance are concentrated in the Azovstal steel plant, and efforts to rescue civilians trapped in the Mariupol factory continue.

In the meantime, the UN Refugee Agency reported that more than 5 million Ukrainians have fled as refugees across country borders and 7.7 million remain displaced inside the country. During the war, a primary concern was the issue of war crimes, particularly in the aftermath of the Russian retreat from Bucha and other districts surrounding Kyiv. The Bucha massacre has been documented as being among the more horrific war crimes perpetrated by the Russian army against civilians, with claims of 280 bodies being buried in mass graves.

The Kremlin has denied such claims, repeatedly saying that the numerous reports of indiscriminate killings, mass graves, disappearances and looting are “fake” and part of a “planned media campaign.”

The war has also exposed the vulnerability of the Russian military. Ukrainian forces have successfully run offensives against the Russian troops with the help of a range of weapons provided as Western military aid for the Ukrainians, chief amongst them anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems. A notable military casualty of the war was the 510-crew Russian military flagship, the Moskva, considered the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the most powerful warship in the Black Sea. Ukrainian military officials said the Moskva was struck by two Ukrainian-made Neptune missiles, after which it eventually sunk.

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Imran Khan ousted in Pakistan: conspiracy, mismanagement or a blow for democracy?

Imran Khan’s tenure as the Prime Minister of Pakistan was abruptly cut short following a parliamentary vote of no-confidence over allegations of poor governance, including economic mismanagement and mishandling of Pakistan’s foreign policy. The vote went through after more than a dozen defectors from Khan’s own political party, the PTI, voted against him.

Despite being blocked earlier by the Deputy Speaker of parliament, the no-confidence vote went ahead after the intervention of the Supreme Court, which ruled the blocking unconstitutional. Soon after, Shehbaz Sharif, leader of the PLM-N party, was elected as the Prime Minister until the next general elections in 2023.

In the meantime, Khan’s supporters organised widespread protests in major Pakistani cities such as Lahore and Peshawar, while Khan claimed that his ousting resulted from a US-led “foreign conspiracy,” a claim denied by the US State Department. Experts have noted that the precariousness of the situation lies in the lack of popular participation in Khan’s removal and the abysmal track record of Pakistan’s military establishment with regard to engineering political outcomes – issues which both threaten to absolve Khan of

any real issues of mismanagement and bad governance during his time in government and also derail the political process in its path towards democracy and good governance in Pakistan.



In the meantime, the new PM of Pakistan has his work cut out for him – the country faces enormous debt, soaring inflation and a worsening energy crisis. Sharif has already visited Saudi Arabia to secure its support regarding a \$3 billion economic support package and an extension of oil support to Islamabad to ease its energy crisis.

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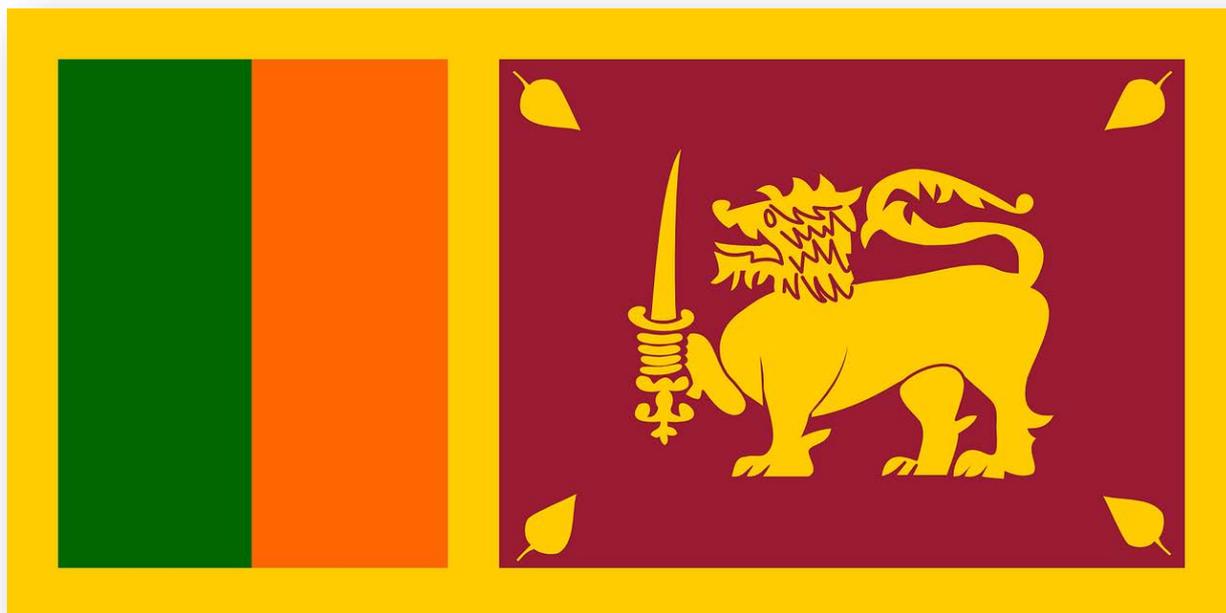
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Sri Lanka's worst economic crisis since independence – how did it come this far?

Sri Lanka faces a doomsday scenario in light of a debt-fueled economic crisis that has severely threatened the country's ability to provide food, fuel and other essentials and repay massive foreign debts. This came on the back of the official announcement that it had defaulted on its \$51 billion external debt after running out of foreign exchange to import desperately needed goods – the latest announcement from the finance ministry is that the total foreign reserves have dropped even below \$50 million.

As the country holds talks with the IMF about possible rescue programs, including a rapid financing instrument needed to urgently resolve shortages of essential goods, the spectre of repayment of \$7 billion this year looms on the horizon; it is scheduled to pay back \$25 billion in foreign loans by 2026. In the meantime, ongoing protests demanding the resignations of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and his younger brother, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, have been ongoing for more than a month.



This continues from earlier street protests against shortages of fuel, power, food and medicine. For months now, Sri Lankans have been forced to wait in long lines to buy fuel, cooking gas, food, and medicine, mostly imported. Hard currency shortages have also hampered the import of raw inputs for industry, raising inflation to 18.7% in March. Tax cuts and the COVID-19 outbreak have meant that the country's tourism-dependent economy has been hard hit, exposing the government's debt-fueled spending, all while the country's foreign currency reserves have slumped more than two-thirds in the past two years.

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Macron gets re-elected as far-right Le Pen gains a greater share of the vote

Emmanuel Macron was re-elected last month after winning against his rival, far-right candidate Marine Le Pen in the presidential runoffs. The centrist Macron won 58.54 per cent of the vote against Le Pen's 41.46 per cent. This is the second time Macron has faced Le Pen and won again, although Le Pen's performance was better than the previous election in 2017, where Macron had won over 66 per cent of the vote. However, voting turnout in this election was 72 per cent, the lowest in a presidential election runoff since 1969.

The presidential election will be followed by the legislative election, which will take place on June 12, 2022, with runoffs on June 19, to elect the 577 members of the National Assembly, the French Parliament's lower house. In order to ensure a ruling majority in the forthcoming election, Emmanuel Macron's centrist party, La République en Marche, announced that it was changing its name to Renaissance, a rebranding attempt to

secure a parliamentary majority against competition from a new alliance of left-wing parties led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally, the latter seeking to increase its small number of seats.

Long divided left-wing parties, the Socialists, the Greens and the Communist Party, joined hands to form a new coalition with the France Unbowed Party of hard-left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who had been placed third in the presidential election in April after garnering 22 per cent of the popular vote and had just about failed to make it to the runoffs.

Macron's re-election was largely welcomed across Europe and the Western world, as his win was seen as a guarantor of the continuity of pro-EU policies. However, it is essential to note that analysts have speculated that many had voted for Macron to counter the far-right rather than support his political positions. Moreover, vitriolic anti-Islamic narratives played centre stage in this election – one of Le Pen's election promises was that her party would ban wearing Muslim headscarves in public, while another far-right candidate, Eric Zemmour, had called on Muslims in France to renounce the practice of their religion.

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Fresh attacks against Muslims in Modi's India

Ramadan, a traditional month of fasting for Muslims worldwide, is often observed with gusto in India, which is home to a large Muslim minority population. However, Muslim lives have become increasingly precarious under the far-right BJP rule, with matters going downhill over the past several years. This year, during the Hindu festival of Ram Navmi, which fell on the first ten days of the month-long Ramadan, mobs of Hindu nationalists marched through several Indian states, shouting anti-Muslim chants and vandalising Muslim homes and property.

The majority of the violence on April 10 took place in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, when Hindus commemorated the birth of Ram, one of the Hindu religion's most revered deities. On Indian social media, dozens of viral videos showed Hindu men wearing saffron scarves – and, in some cases, holding weapons and swords — stopping their motorcycles in Muslim districts, playing provocative songs loaded with threats of genocide outside homes and mosques, and chanting hateful slogans.

On some occasions, Muslim youth took matters into their own hands and threw stones at the incensed mobs, resulting in retaliatory attacks on Muslim property. Police have also been criticised for their inaction and idle standby, initially allowing violence to occur before stepping in and arresting predominantly Muslim residents.

Despite registering FIRs against Muslims, police have been accused of failing to file complaints from Muslim citizens leading to further arrests in the Muslim minority community. Some of the worst riotings were reported from the BJP-ruled district of Khargone in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, where a mosque and at least 10 houses were set on fire and more than 24 people, including a police officer, were injured. On the same day, the local administration bulldozed at least 16 houses and 29 shops – belonging to those accused of throwing stones at Ram Navmi processions – in five localities of the district.

The latest uptick in attacks comes in light of a host of anti-Muslim laws in Karnataka, where right-wing Hindus have called for a boycott of Muslim vendors and businesses, and Muslim women have been barred

from wearing headscarves at numerous colleges in the state. The state government is now considering prohibiting mosques from using loudspeakers to broadcast the Azan.

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Turkish courts transfer Jamal Khashoggi case to Saudi Arabia in rapprochement move

After almost three years, a Turkish court decided to transfer the now famous case surrounding the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi to Saudi judicial authorities after being asked by a Turkish prosecutor on March 31 to finalise proceedings for the transfer. Khashoggi's case had been filed in Istanbul with the help of his fiancée Hatice Cengiz after the journalist disappeared, and was allegedly killed and dismembered, after entering the Saudi Consulate in the Turkish capital on October 2, 2018.

The prosecutor argued that because the 26 Saudi nationals charged in the case are not on Turkish soil, no testimony could be taken from them, and neither could they be arrested, due to which the matter would remain inconclusive.

With this transfer, the Turkish courts have effectively halted the legal proceedings of the trial of 26 Saudi suspects over Khashoggi's murder. The transfer was later followed by Turkish President Erdogan's two-day visit to the Saudi kingdom and is seen as part of a broader regional rapprochement by Turkey with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Relations had become tense between Turkey and Saudi Arabia after the 2018 Khashoggi murder, with Erdogan then blaming the highest echelons of the kingdom as being involved in the murder and Saudi Arabia then following suit with a crippling boycott on Turkish exports to the kingdom. Regional experts such as Azzam Tamimi have opined that while it is understandable that Turkish policymakers wanted to reconcile differences with Arab regimes over its former pro-Arab Spring stance, the judicial precedent created through the transfer of the Khashoggi case would likely embolden autocratic regimes to seek out and come after dissidents living for the safety of their lives in Turkey.

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