

US Supreme Court kicks off potentially explosive session

AFP, Washington

Sexual minority rights, abortion, immigration and guns -- the Supreme Court convenes today to address an incendiary list of cases as the American political scene reaches fever pitch over efforts to impeach President Donald Trump.

The court's balance has shifted to the right under Trump, who appointed judges Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh in his first term, and who is now gearing up to fight for re-election next November.

The court kept a low profile during its 2018-2019 session after Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation descended into a mud-slinging battle over sexual assault allegations that he strenuously denies.

In its last term, the court "seemed to do everything it could to rise above the partisan rancor, to not be divided along partisan lines," David Cole, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said.

But Cole warned that "this term, it's going to be harder for the court -- they already have cases involving very hot-button, ideologically divided issues."

With election campaigning ramping up over the coming months, the court's rulings will be closely watched by rival political camps.

Conservatives are now seen in the majority among the nine judges after Kavanaugh's appointment, and liberals are on the defensive.

In the last election, Trump secured victory after wooing voters -- including evangelical Christians -- with promises to appoint right-wing judges who oppose abortion and defend the right to own guns.

Ethics, and politics -

The court will on Tuesday dive into the issue of whether it is legal to fire someone because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Trump's Republican administration argues that lawmakers in the past were not addressing gay rights when employment discrimination over "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin" was banned.

LGBTQ campaigners, who won a major victory in 2015 when the court guaranteed the right to gay marriage, are calling on judges to ensure gay and transgender people are covered by the discrimination ban.

What's the point of gay marriage if "you can get married on Saturday and fired on Monday?" ACLU lawyer Jay Kaplan asked ahead of the new session.

The court will also hear a challenge to a restrictive abortion law in Louisiana state -- another flashpoint issue.

The date has not yet been set for when the judges will examine the merits of the abortion law adopted in 2014 in Louisiana.

BCL activist

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morning. She then pushed the victim inside a room and locked it from outside.

Shangram, who was already in the room, then raped the victim and fled the scene. Hearing the victim scream, locals rushed to the spot and rescued her, the case statement added.

The victim was sent to Jashore General Hospital for medical tests, the OC said.

Meanwhile, all the family members of Shangram, including Mukta, went into hiding after the case was filed, said the OC, adding they were leaving no stone unturned to arrest all the accused.

2 SENT TO JAIL IN ANOTHER RAPE CASE

Meanwhile, a Gazipur court sent two youths to jail for their alleged involvement in raping two sisters and recording footage of the rape scene in the district's Sreepur upazila.

The accused are Abdur Razzak, 35, and Azizul Haque, 25, both residents of Sreepur's Noagoan village.

One of the two victims, with help of locals, filed a case with Sreepur Police Station on Saturday night, said Akhter Hossain, inspector (investigation) of Sreepur Police Station.

According to the case statement, the accused interrupted the victims when they were going to a local furniture shop on September 30.

They then took the girls to Razzak's house at gunpoint and raped them multiple times.

The accused recorded the rape scenes and threatened the victims to share the footage on social media if they shared their experience with anyone. They then released the victims. Later, discussing with locals, one of the victims went to police station and filed the case, added the case statement.

Police then conducted raids and arrested the accused, said the OC.

The victims were sent to Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Medical College Hospital for medical tests, he added.

Our Benapole and Gazipur correspondents contributed to this report



Children from the Harijan community being taught by a member of the online forum Gouripur Helpline in Gohata area of Mymensingh's Gouripur upazila. The forum was started by some 20 college students who have taken it upon themselves to provide pre-primary education to these often neglected children.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Caring for the not cared for

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had brought relief, he said.

Ten-year-old Rajon Banshur, who attends the classes, said, "I am happy that now I am attending classes with other children of my community."

Rupa Banshur, 8, said that now she could learn without any fear of being

isolated as all her classmates were from the same community.

Gouripur Upazila Nirbahi Officer Farhana Karim said she was aware of the initiative. "I had arranged text books for the children after Gouripur Helpline started the programme in February."

The Harijans are a kind of community who are under the sub-division of Sudra caste in Hindu society. The term "Harijan", meaning the "Children of God", was first used by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to the "Dalits" in 1932.

Fresh violence rocks HK

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"The anti-mask law just fuels our anger and more will people come on to the street," Lee, a university student wearing a blue mask, said yesterday, as he marched on Hong Kong island.

"We are not afraid of the new law, we will continue fighting. We will fight for righteousness. I put on the mask to tell the government that I'm not afraid of tyranny."

Pro-democracy lawmakers went to the High Court yesterday morning seeking an injunction against the mask ban, arguing the emergency powers bypassed the legislature and contravened the city's mini-constitution.

But a senior judge dismissed their case, reported AFP.

Authorities had braced for two major protests yesterday, fearing a recurrence of Friday night's violent protests which saw the Asian financial centre virtually shut down the next day.

Only hours after Hong Kong's embattled leader Carrie Lam invoked emergency powers last used more than 50 years ago, mask-wearing protesters took to the streets on Friday, setting subway stations on fire, smashing mainland China banks and clashing with police.

The rallies on Hong Kong island and across the harbour in Kowloon had been largely peaceful until police began to try and disperse the

crowds yesterday, saying they were participating in unlawful assemblies, blocking major roads, and ordered protesters to leave immediately.

Hong Kong's four months of protests have plunged the Chinese-ruled city into its worst political crisis in decades and pose the biggest popular challenge to Chinese President Xi Jinping since he came to power six years ago.

What started as opposition to a now-withdrawn extradition bill has swelled into a pro-democracy movement against what is seen as Beijing's increasing grip on the city, undermining its "one country, two systems" status promised when Britain handed Hong Kong back to China in 1997.

China dismisses the accusation, saying foreign governments, including Britain and the United States, have fanned anti-China sentiment.

Protesters yesterday chanted "Hong Kongers, revolt" and "Fight for freedom, stand with Hong Kong", as riot police monitored them from overhead walkways and footbridges, some taking photographs and filming the marchers.

Some roads clogged with protesters resembled a field of flowers, with thousands of colourful umbrellas. Umbrellas are a symbol of an earlier pro-democracy movement, but were being used yesterday simply to keep off the rain.

Protesters handed out face masks to encourage people to defy the ban. One masked protester carried a mask-wearing "Buzz Lightyear" doll from Walt Disney Co's "Toy Story" animation film, reported Reuters.

As the day wore on protesters started to target subway stations and China banks, just as they did on Friday, which forced the unprecedented closure of the city's metro railway.

A branch of China Construction Bank (Asia) near Prince Edward station was vandalised yesterday with "No China" sprayed on it's wall. Wan Chai station, closed with a neon sign saying serious vandalism, had a protester sheet draped over it which read: "this way to HELL".

Protesters set alight a blaze at the Mong Kok MTR station, with a placard nearby reading: "If we burn, you burn with us".

Friday night's "extreme violence" justified the use of emergency laws, Beijing-backed Lam said on Saturday, but the laws have sparked further violent protests.

The current "precarious situation", which endangered public safety, left no timely solution but the anti-mask law, Matthew Cheung, Hong Kong's chief secretary, wrote on his blog yesterday. He urged people to oppose violence ahead of grassroots district council elections set for November 24.

From 'best organiser' to pariah

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Afterwards, during the BNP-led four-party rule between 1991-96, he joined forces with Jubo League and was elected organising secretary of its Dhaka City (South) unit.

It was at this time when he developed a close bond with the then unit general secretary Nurunnabi Chowdhury Shaon.

According to Jubo League sources, this association led to Samrat's rise, resulting in his being elected the unit president through the council held on July 14, 2012.

Omar Faruk was also elected chairman of the youth front.

But as Samrat indulged in various forms of corruption, his indiscretions soon came to the notice of party higher-ups.

His name came into discussion last year after he demanded ransom from Anjuman Mofidul Islam (AMI), a voluntary organisation providing humanitarian services to the poor, for the construction of its headquarters at Kakrail.

Even the AL president received a complaint against Samrat for this, said sources.

According to them, on September 21, Sheikh Hasina expressed her annoyance over the matter and asked that the Jubo League unit be dissolved when leaders of the party and its front organisations went to see her off at the airport before her departure for the UN summit.

Jubo League chairman and General Secretary Harun-Or-Rashid were present there, they said.

But due to the "blessings" of the chairman and some senior leaders of the party, Samrat escaped Hasina's wrath.

The support he had from within the party was very evident.

The Jubo League unit office Samrat had set up in his own personal office at Kakrail remained surrounded by hundreds of activists from early morning to midnight every day.

During a visit there yesterday, digital posters of Samrat with the Jubo League chairman and general secretary were seen displayed at the entrance of the Bhuiyan Manson, the

office building.

Samrat used the fourth, seventh, eighth and top floor of the eight-storey building to carry out his activities.

Apart from using his office to carry out his business activities, Samrat also used it for organisational activities. It was also the place where he meted out punishment to those he didn't like or those who didn't follow his orders.

Besides controlling the capital's casino scene, Samrat himself was a regular gambler and used to travel to Singapore frequently for it.

His second wife Sharmin Chowdhury, while talking to reporters at her Mohakhali DOHS residence, yesterday claimed that gambling was the only addiction her husband had.

But perhaps Samrat's gambling extended beyond cards and tables, infiltrating his very politics and eventually leading to his spectacular fall.

Four fugitives

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In the CCTV footage of the incident, Minni was seen screaming and trying to save her husband from the attackers.

Police arrested Minni after a daylight interrogation on July 16. A court placed her on a five-day remand the following day. Three days later, a Barguna court recorded her statement under section 164.

On August 29, the High Court granted her bail on the conditions that she does not talk to the media and remain in her father's custody.

Police on September 1 pressed charges against Minni and 23 others for their alleged involvement in the murder.

The name of the prime accused Sabbir Hossain Nayan alias Nayan Bond was excluded from the charge sheet as he was killed in an alleged gunfight with police on July 2.

A Barguna court on September 18 accepted the charge sheet.

With the latest surrender of the four, nine are in jail while nine others are in the Jashore juvenile correction centre. Four remain absconding and two -- Minni and Arian Srabon -- are now on bail.

The camp is a densely-populated settlement of more than 40,000 people.

The residents had been experiencing frequent load shedding for the last 20 days.

They said different international agencies used to provide funds to the disaster management and relief ministry for paying the electricity bills.

But those organisations stopped the funding after they had been given national identity cards, said local Councillor Habibur Rahman Mizan on Saturday.

The Urdu-speaking people yesterday said they wanted a permanent solution to this.

"This can't go on like this. When something happens, police come and pick up the innocent ... Main culprits remain unpunished. We always live in fear," said a resident.

Some Urdu-speaking people alleged that local representatives and camp leaders were just playing with their fate.

The office of Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee was found closed yesterday.

"We are poor and uneducated. We do what our leaders say. But in the end, we face all the hurdles ... whenever anyone is arrested, his or her family has to bear all the costs to get him or her free. This has been going on for a long time," said

Anwar Ali, a resident of the camp, adding that although they got NID cards, there was no change in their lives.

The camp residents said they wanted rehabilitation, which could help solve their problems.

They also sought the prime minister's intervention.

Second Trump

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dozen US officials expressing concern that Trump was using the power of his office to solicit interference from a foreign country as he seeks re-election a second term in 2020.

It also alleged that Trump leveraged \$400 million in aid to secure a promise from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to investigate a Democratic rival, former Vice President Joe Biden, and his son Hunter Biden, who served as a director on a Ukrainian energy company.

"I can confirm that my firm and my team represent multiple whistleblowers in connection to the underlying August 12, 2019, disclosure to the Intelligence Community Inspector General," Andrew Bakaj, a second lawyer, said on Twitter.

Mark Zaid said on Twitter that the second whistleblower "also made a protected disclosure under the law and cannot be retaliated against." He told ABC News earlier the second official has been interviewed by the inspector general.

Confirmation of a second whistleblower followed stirrings of discontent within Trump's own Republican Party after he called on China on Friday to investigate Biden's son, who had business dealings in China.

Republican US Senators Mitt Romney, Ben Sasse and Susan Collins expressed concerns about Trump

reaching out to foreign countries to help him in his 2020 re-election bid.

However, other Republicans stood firmly in support of Trump yesterday, echoing the president's insistence that the call was not significant.

Trump railed against the "do-nothing" Democrats' impeachment on Twitter with a string of retweets from supporters, touting his high approval ratings among Republicans and reprising his criticism of Romney.

The telephone call with Zelenskyy, a summary of which was released by the White House, and the whistleblower complaint prompted House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi to launch an impeachment inquiry on September 24. She said Trump's attempts to solicit foreign interference jeopardised US election integrity and threatened national security.

Democrats said any finding that Trump withheld taxpayer money, already approved by Congress to help Ukraine, in exchange for a favour from Zelenkiy would strengthen the case against him.

Trump has maintained there was no "quid pro quo" in his request of the Ukrainian president, but text messages released by congressional committees leading the inquiry showed otherwise.

The committees released the texts involving Trump's Ukraine envoy, Kurt Volker, after he testified behind closed doors on Thursday.

Gambling

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reporters when Rab raided their Mohakhali DOHS residence yesterday afternoon, hours after Samrat was arrested in Cumilla.

Sharmin, the second wife of the alleged casino king, also claimed, "Samrat has no asset at all and he spent whatever he earned from gambling on the party."

"Times have changed. People do not participate in the party's programmes unless they are given money. So, he needed a lot of money and I think he got involved in the casino business and gambling for this reason," she said.

Replying to a query, Sharmin said her husband got involved in the casino business three to four years ago. She, however, "had no clear idea about it".

"Before that, he might have gotten money through business as contractor... Or maybe from his 'boro bhai' [influential seniors] within the party," she said.

Sharmin married Samrat 19 years ago and they had a son who is now living abroad.

Samrat, an open-heart surgery patient, did not live in their Mohakhali

70-yr-old

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"He told me ... the bike could help me get through my pain, and to rebuild," she said.

Saturday's race was a pinnacle achievement, no pun intended.

"It's a vertical climb, you go up and up and there's no rest," she told Reuters upon finishing the race.

Munoz, one of the race's founders, says she enjoys more low-key bike-riding with her six grandchildren, though admits she hopes the eldest, now approaching 18, will soon follow in her tracks.

Uneasy calm on surface

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injuries to his back and left eye.

"My entire body aches," said Akbar.

He said he went to his daughter's home to have lunch on Saturday.

"As soon as the raid began, I came out of the house, but was caught in the police truncheon charge. They beat me up inhumanly," said Akbar, asking how he could pull the rickshaw now.

Noticing this correspondent, a woman also went there with her 18-year-old mentally-challenged son, who had a bandage on his head.

"See, this is my son. His name is Prince. You can ask 10 people here. All will say he is mentally-challenged. Police didn't even spare him," said the woman with tears rolling down her cheeks.

Seven-year-old Junayed was seen with shotgun pellet injuries on his forehead and 10-year-old Shoyeb on his right hand.

Over 50 people, including 15 policemen, were injured in the clashes between the Geneva Camp residents and police. The Urdu-speaking people alleged that the police action in the camp was aided by some ruling party men.

Refuting all the allegations, Anisur Rahman, deputy commissioner (Tejgaon division) of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said, "We had been directed not to go after women and children. We took action against those involved in violence."

Anisur said seven people were arrested in two cases following the incident.

The residents did not pay electricity bills worth Tk 33 crore to Dhaka Power Distribution Company, the police official said.