

International

Racism and redemption: Virginia 'blackface' row sparks a debate

Virginia governor caught up in a row

RICHMOND: Can a politician come back from revelations about racist behavior in their past? What if that behavior evoked the darkest chapters of American history, from slavery to segregation? That's a question the state of Virginia has been grappling with since last week when its governor, Ralph Northam, was caught up in a row over blackface: the caricaturing of African Americans by crude methods of skin darkening as a means of entertaining white people since the minstrel shows of the 1830s.

The 59-year-old has so far refused to resign after first admitting he appeared in a yearbook photograph showing a person in blackface and another wearing Ku Klux Klan robes, only to deny a day later that either individual was him. Northam's deputy has since become embroiled in a sexual misconduct row while the next official in succession for the top job has admitted to engaging in blackface in college too.

Virginians-and Americans as a whole-are now asking themselves how to weigh the transgressions from a public official's past against their record as a whole, and whether even an authentic apology can help regain voters' faith. For James "JJ" Minor, president of the Richmond chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the episode has brought to the fore the painful legacy of the state's past. "Black face is dehumanizing, it's evil," Minor, who is black, told AFP in an interview at the state capital's railway station in the Shockoe Bottom district, once home to a booming slave auction industry that featured in the film "12 Years a Slave."

'Old Dixie'

Sometimes known as the "Cradle of America," Virginia was home to four of the country's first five presidents. But it was also one of the most significant regions for the Atlantic slave trade, the main battleground of the mid-19th century Civil War that was fought over slavery, and later one of the states most resistant to the civil rights movement that brought an end to segregation. In 2017, the Virginia city of Charlottesville hosted an alt-right rally which saw a neo-Nazi ram his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one and wounding 28. The Northam episode has shown "that Sweet Old Dixie is still around,"

Minor, 44, said, using a nickname for the Southern states of the Confederate era.

The NAACP's position is for Northam to resign immediately, a stance shared by the state assembly's powerful Black Caucus. "The legacy of slavery, racism, and the Jim Crow era remains an albatross around the necks of African Americans," the lawmakers said in a statement. "We can no longer hide behind a facade of unity, we must fiercely and intentionally combat the hatred of the past that still lives today."

But a Washington Post-Schar School poll showed Virginians deadlocked on the issue with equal numbers for and against his resignation-and support for him staying in office higher among African Americans than among whites. Some like Reverend Dwayne Whitehead, the African American pastor of Richmond's World Overcomers Church, argue forcefully against punishing Northam for decades-old wrongdoings. "I'm not as devastated by blackface and neither will I hold a person accountable for what they did 35 years ago, when this election for him as governor was not based upon who he was 35 years ago," said the grey-suited 52-year-old.

"To do so, would violate any principles I have of faith that says a person cannot change," he told AFP. For Whitehead, the impulse to oust the governor stems from a bandwagon mentality, and weakens the Democratic Party at a time when racial violence has spiked nationwide-linked by critics to incendiary rhetoric and policies by Republican President Donald Trump. "I know that sometimes," Whitehead argued, "it's a case of 'I'm supposed to respond like this.' And this is what's expected of me."

'Different person'

The blackface controversy has exploded into a full blown crisis for Northam's Democratic Party after it emerged his deputy Justin Fairfax had been accused by two women of sexual misconduct, likely ruling him out of contention should his boss bow to calls to step down. The third-in-line to the governorship, Attorney General Mark Herring, has since preemptively announced he too wore brown makeup and a wig to imitate a rapper while in college in 1980. Jasmine Leeward, a spokeswoman for the New Virginia Majority



VIRGINIA: A local newspaper the Richmond Free Press, with a front page featuring top Virginia state officials embroiled in controversies, sits for sale in a newsstand near the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond, Virginia. — AFP

progressive advocacy group, said Herring's open admission of what appeared to be a "one time incident" and the "authenticity in his approach" left more room for forgiveness. On that basis, her organization wants the governor to resign but Herring to stay. "He has been a very articulate champion of some of the issues," the 25-year-old black woman said, citing work fighting for migrants from several Muslim countries when the Trump administration announced its travel ban. "It makes the case that he has made the effort to become a very different person."

Where Northam is widely seen as having failed was his reaction to the yearbook revelation: a confused sequence that saw him first admit, then deny, appearing in the photo, only to apologize instead for wearing blackface on another occasion while imitating the late Michael Jackson. Yet despite that, Reverend Whitehead said he continued to support him because of initiatives like a yearlong dialogue about racial justice, announced days before the blackface row. Northam has since told The Washington Post he plans to dedicate the rest of his term to the same cause. — AFP

News in brief

Journalist shot dead

MEXICO CITY: A Mexican radio journalist was shot dead Saturday in a restaurant in Tabasco state, east of the capital, the latest victim in what has become one of the world's deadliest countries for the press. Jesus Ramos Rodriguez was killed in the town of Emiliano Zapata, an official from the local prosecutor's office said. According to local media, Ramos had hosted a news bulletin for the 99.9 FM radio station for more than two decades. The El Universal daily quoted witnesses as saying his assailant got out of a car and headed straight towards him, shooting him more than eight times at point blank range. The killing comes weeks after a community radio station director was murdered in the northern state of Baja California Sur, in the first such case of 2019. Rafael Murua, who had received death threats for his work, was found dead in a ditch on January 20, after being reported missing. — AFP

Conjoined twins die

SANAA: Newborn Yemeni conjoined twins whose plight sparked a plea for urgent medical treatment overseas died in Sanaa Saturday, rebels in the blockaded capital said. Abdelhaleq and Abdelrahim were born outside Sanaa around two weeks ago and shared a kidney and a pair of legs but had separate hearts and lungs. The head of paediatrics at Sanaa's Al-Thawra hospital, Dr Faisal al-Babili, said his department lacked the facilities to treat or separate the newborn boys and appealed on Wednesday for help from abroad. Houthi rebels, who have been fighting the Saudi-backed government since 2014, blamed a Riyadh-led military coalition for the deaths after "refusing to open Sanaa airport to allow them to get treatment", according to the rebels' media statement on Saturday. The head of Saudi Arabia's King Salman Aid and Relief Centre, Abdullah Al-Rabeeah, said he had a team that was prepared to treat them. — AFP

Armed with new power, Democrats push for stricter US gun laws

NEW YORK: Democratic lawmakers are pushing stricter gun laws in statehouses across the country, emboldened by sweeping electoral victories in 2018 and confident that public opinion is on their side a year after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Last year's wins handed Democrats control of the governorship and legislature in several more states, including New Mexico, New York, Colorado, Maine and Nevada, and lawmakers are using their new power to draft or pass gun laws.

In Colorado, Tom Sullivan spent years urging lawmakers to tackle gun violence after his 27-year-old son, Alex, was killed in the 2012 movie theater shooting there. Now Sullivan is helping write those bills after winning a state Assembly seat, part of a Democratic wave in November that gave the party full control of Colorado's government for the first time in five years.

"People are standing up and having their voices heard," said Sullivan, who wears his son's leather jacket to the capitol. "Now they have to see me every single day." Polls show Americans favor tougher gun laws after decades of mass shootings, including the Feb. 14, 2018, massacre at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School that killed 17 students and staff members. But the political might of the National Rifle Association - and its deep coffers - made supporting gun restrictions a risky proposition for many officials.

That changed last year, when Democratic candidates ran on the issue of gun violence in unprecedented numbers. At the federal level, where Democrats captured the US House of Representatives after eight years of Republican control, nearly 80 percent of the 62 freshman Democrats elected in November included gun safety in their campaign platforms, a Reuters analysis found. That

far outstripped the proportion of candidates who did so in 2016. House Democrats have introduced a bill requiring criminal background checks for private and gun show firearm sales, closing what advocates call a deadly loophole in federal law.

But with Republicans, who typically oppose gun restrictions, still in control of the US Senate, the legislation's prospects appear dim. Republican US Senator Pat Toomey said a Democratic House could put pressure on the Senate to reconsider a bipartisan background checks measure he sponsored after the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, that killed 20 first-graders. The bill narrowly failed to get the 60 votes needed for passage. Now, he said, "there is a distinct possibility that we could have enough Republicans to get to 60, but that's still an open question."

Shift to states

National gun safety groups are more optimistic about making progress outside Washington, with nearly 20 states poised to take up gun safety bills this year, they said. Lawmakers are focusing on bills with widespread approval in public polling, including background checks, "red flag" bills that allow judges to confiscate guns from dangerous people and bans on domestic abusers owning guns. Several states passed similar laws last year, including some with Republican governors or legislatures, and advocates say they hope to draw Republican votes in numerous states this year.

Gun rights groups also are pursuing new state laws. South Dakota in January began allowing residents to carry concealed handguns with no permit, while other states are considering arming teachers. "We continue to defeat gun control legislation across the country while passing gun rights legislation," said NRA spokeswoman Jennifer Baker. So far this year, gun safety advocates have found success in several states while encountering roadblocks in others, including from some Democrats.

New York last month passed a red flag law, extended waiting periods and prohibited armed teachers in schools. In Nevada, where the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history occurred at a 2017 music festival in Las Vegas, Democratic leaders have vowed to implement the background checks approved by voters in a 2016 referendum. The state's former Republican attorney



WASHINGTON: Aalayah Eastmond, a survivor of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, testifies to the House Judiciary Committee in the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill. — AFP

general had refused to do so. "It's a high priority," said Jason Frierson, speaker of the state Assembly. "We have a new class of candidates who feel passionately about this issue."

In New Mexico, newly elected Democratic Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham has called for red flag, domestic abuser and background check bills. The Democratic-led legislature is expected to pass all three within weeks, said Speaker of the House Brian Egolf. Some Democratic lawmakers in Maine, which has a strong hunting culture, introduced a raft of measures including a large-capacity magazine ban, a background check bill and a red flag law. But newly elected Democratic Governor Janet Mills has said she opposes the background check bill after voters rejected a similar measure in 2016. Gun safety advocates privately concede they do not expect any of the major legislation to become law.

Perhaps no state better encapsulates the political volatility around guns than Colorado, which has both a deep tradition of gun ownership and a history of mass shootings, including the 1999 Columbine school massacre and the Aurora movie theater killings. In 2013, after the Aurora attack, the legislature passed background checks and a high-capacity ammunition magazine ban. — Reuters

Brexit: What will happen in British parliament on February 14?

LONDON: The British parliament is set to hold a debate on Brexit on Feb 14 but this is not a re-run of a vote last month on whether to approve the exit deal Prime Minister Theresa May's negotiated with the European Union. May is seeking changes to her deal with Brussels after it was rejected by a record majority in parliament on Jan 15. She has said she wants to bring a revised deal back to parliament for a vote "as soon as possible" but has not yet set a date for doing so. She has promised that, if she has not brought her deal back for a so-called "meaningful vote" by Feb 13, lawmakers will get to debate Brexit on Feb. 14. Below is what will happen on that day:

What will they debate?

May will make a statement to parliament on Feb. 13 updating lawmakers on her progress so far in seeking changes to her deal. The debate on Feb 14 will be on a motion-a proposal put forward for debate-about Brexit more generally. The previous similar debate on Jan. 29 was on a motion which simply asked lawmakers to agree that they had considered May's latest statement on the Brexit negotiations.

Can MPs propose changes?

Yes. As with the Jan 29 debate, lawmakers will be able to propose changes, known as amendments. It is likely that many amendments similar to those debated on Jan 29 will be proposed, including attempts to shift control of the process away from government and give parliament a chance to define Brexit. As with Jan. 29, if these are successful they could have a profound effect, giving lawmakers who want to block, delay or renegotiate Brexit a possible legal route to do so.

With the EU saying so far that they are not willing to reopen talks on the Withdrawal Agreement, other lawmakers are likely to propose alternatives to May's deal to gauge support for them and persuade the prime minister to change course by seeking closer EU ties or holding a second referendum. An attempt by Labor lawmaker Yvette Cooper and Conservative Nick Boles to give parliament the power to request a delay to Britain's March 29 exit was defeated by lawmakers on Jan. 29, but Boles said he would renew that effort on Feb 14 if a deal has not been passed by then. The government persuaded many lawmakers not to support that previous attempt by promising them that it would not be their last chance to seek to stop a "no-deal" departure from the EU as they would get to debate Brexit again on Feb 14. On Wednesday, a Conservative lawmaker involved in discussions with the government about changes to the deal said that if May could demonstrate that the EU was willing to renegotiate, she would buy herself some more time and avoid a potential flash-point in parliament on Feb 14.

Will there be votes?

The Speaker, John Bercow, will decide whether to select any of the amendments for a vote. Lawmakers will vote on each of the selected amendments one by one, before voting to give final approval to the wording of the motion itself. Before the debate begins, lawmakers will have to agree to



BRUSSELS: British Prime Minister Theresa May speaks to the press after a meeting with the President of the European Council at the European Council in Brussels. — AFP

the proposed timetable for the debate, currently just one day. If lawmakers believe that more than one day is needed, the votes could in theory be pushed into the following week.

Will it definitely go ahead?

If May succeeds in winning changes to her Brexit deal in the next few days she could bring it back for a debate and vote before Feb. 14, and this more general debate would not go ahead. However she is not expected to secure any changes before then. British media have reported a fresh vote on May's deal is most likely to happen in the week of Feb 25 at the earliest. The government will give parliament another chance to debate the issue by Feb. 27 using the same format described above, if a deal has not been agreed before then. — Reuters

Rich or penniless, Venezuelans flock to Madrid

MADRID: Fleeing the political, economic and humanitarian crisis in their country, Venezuelans have arrived in Spain in their thousands, some of them penniless, others so rich they are buying sumptuous flats. Fran Leal, 36, came to Spain from Maracay in northern Venezuela two months ago with his wife and two children. "Do you have a small suitcase? I'm going to Toledo, I've found a job," he asks as he enters the Casa Venezuela, an association that helps struggling Venezuelans in Madrid.

An electrician, he is going to the city south of Madrid to work illegally for six months. "I don't have a choice as I don't yet have ID papers and I have no more savings," he says, as the crisis in Venezuela deepens with opposition leader Juan Guaido's self-proclamation as interim president. Unlike Leal, Juan Leonardo Lopez has not found a job since he arrived three months ago. "Before the crisis, I wasn't a millionaire but I lived fine, I had a great car and everything I needed," he says at a Venezuelan opposition protest in Madrid. He says he saw children die of dehydration in the hospital in Maracay where he worked.

Spain's statistics agency says some 255,000 Venezuelans have settled in the country. But that figure is likely to be closer to 300,000 if illegal immigrants are taken into account, according to Tomas Paez, head of the Venezuelan Diaspora Observatory. Venezuelan asylum requests have nearly doubled in Spain over the year, with close to 20,000 in 2018, according to the interior ministry. — AFP