

International

With White House uncooperative on impeachment, what is next?

Trump loyalists see a hyper-partisan abuse of power

WASHINGTON: The White House's open defiance of the impeachment investigation has thrown the process into turmoil, with Donald Trump's loyalists and adversaries scrambling to carve a path forward in the battle over the American presidency. While some believe House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's effort to hold Trump accountable is a profile in constitutional courage, Trump loyalists see a hyper-partisan abuse of power.

Either way, the process is likely to provoke a "national nightmare," as constitutional scholar Cass Sunstein put it in his 2017 book "Impeachment: A Citizen's Guide." Will Democrats succeed in obtaining documents and testimony from key witnesses such as US diplomats, whose text messages show they helped coordinate efforts to pressure Ukraine into investigating Trump's political adversary Joe Biden? Or can Trump thwart the process and essentially block congressional oversight?

Historic firestorm?

Impeachment proceedings have been undertaken just three times before in America's 243-year history. Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton were impeached by the House of Representatives but survived Senate trials, while Richard Nixon, facing almost certain impeachment and conviction by the Senate, resigned in 1974. Today's crisis "is a historic showdown," Chris Edelson, an

assistant professor of government at American University said.

The focus of the current impeachment investigation - pressuring another country's leader to interfere in US elections - "is certainly a first," he said, decrying Trump's "brazen" effort with Ukraine. The White House and its defenders have seized on Pelosi's refusal to hold a floor vote to launch the inquiry, arguing the entire process is illegitimate. Law professor Frank Bowman at the University of Missouri disagrees. "Nothing in the House rules requires that a resolution be passed before the full House... can take steps to exercise impeachment power," Bowman wrote in a blog post.

Next steps?

Pelosi has not signaled her timeline for filing articles of impeachment, but lawmakers predict it could happen this year. Several House committees are gathering information as part of the probe, and while they have been blocked at multiple turns, Pelosi says there is a "growing body of evidence" that shows Trump abused his office.

As the process accelerates, Trump's administration is girding for war in the courts, and a case Tuesday in Washington related to special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation may prove instructive. In arguing to a judge that House requests for grand jury materials in the Mueller



WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump speaks during an executive order signing regarding federal regulations in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. —AFP

probe be denied, Justice Department lawyers pointed to Nixon's impeachment case and said courts should not have given Watergate grand jury data to Congress, The Washington Post reported.

Nixon went to the Supreme Court in his failed bid to prevent the release of incriminating White House tapes, so there is potential for the high

court to be drawn into today's impeachment fight. Trump said as much Wednesday: "It probably ends up being a big Supreme Court case," he told reporters. Democrats are mulling whether to engage in a protracted court battle, or wrap up their investigation with the evidence they have, add White House obstruction to articles of impeachment, and pull the trigger. —AFP

Democrat Biden calls for Trump's impeachment

WASHINGTON: Democratic White House hopeful Joe Biden called Wednesday for Donald Trump's impeachment, saying the president "betrayed" the United States, but Trump dug in, predicting that the Supreme Court would have to resolve the fight. "To preserve our constitution, our democracy, our basic integrity, he should be impeached," Biden told supporters at a rally in New Hampshire, adding his voice to that of other Democratic contenders. "He's shooting holes in the constitution, and we cannot let him get away with it," added Biden.

Meanwhile a poll by Fox News, a TV channel generally viewed as sympathetic to the president, showed that "a new high" of 51 percent of voters want Trump impeached and removed from office. Trump, however, gave no sign of buckling under pressure from the Democratic party probe into his alleged bid to damage Biden by strong-arming Ukraine to investigate the former vice president. Having threatened a constitutional crisis by refusing to cooperate with the congressional investigation, Trump predicted that the row would end up "being a big Supreme Court case." He told reporters in the White House that his Republican party was being "treated very badly." Democrats accuse Trump of stonewalling and obstruction. "No one is above the law, not even President Trump," the Democratic majority leader in the House, Steny Hoyer, said Wednesday.

Impeachment - campaign message

On Twitter, which Trump is using to bombard the public with conspiracy theories about a "deep state" aiming to eject him, the president argued that the whistleblower behind the impeachment case had been shown to be partisan and inaccurate. "The Whistleblower's facts have been so incorrect about my 'no pressure' conversation with the Ukrainian President, and now the conflict of interest and involvement with a Democrat Candidate, that he or she should be exposed and questioned," Trump tweeted.

In another tweet, Trump dismissed the impeachment process as a Democratic bid to influence the election, saying "their total focus is 2020, nothing more." But Trump, who broke with precedent by campaigning for reelection almost from the moment he took office in 2017, is himself pouncing on the impeachment as the new cornerstone of his 2020 effort. He and the Republican Party have pushed hard to raise funds off the back of their accusation of unfair treatment from the Democratic lower house in Congress.

And on Thursday and Friday, Trump will take that message to his core supporters when he holds campaign rallies in Minneapolis and in Louisiana. Even if the House impeaches Trump, it remains unlikely that the Republican-led Senate would convict him in the subsequent trial. However, Trump's already turbulent presidency would be forever associated with the impeachment.

Ukrainian phone call

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi formally launched the impeachment inquiry last month after revelations Trump pressured Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky in a July 25 phone call. In the call, Trump asked Zelensky to look into what the US leader said were corrupt business deals involving Biden. Democrats say that Trump tried to coerce Zelensky by holding back US military aid to Ukraine. Trump says there was no quid pro quo and that his only desire is to combat corruption. He subsequently said publicly he would also like China to investigate Biden, something critics say bolsters the allegation that Trump is seeking foreign help to discredit opponents. On Tuesday, the Trump administration blocked a potentially major witness, ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, from testifying before Congress. Democrats then slapped Sondland with a subpoena to appear on October 16. "The failure to produce this witness, the failure to produce these documents" was "additional strong evidence of obstruction," House Intelligence Committee chairman Adam Schiff said.

Later the same day, the White House announced in a lengthy legal statement that it rejected any cooperation with the Democrats at all. Lawmakers want to hear on Friday from another key witness: former US ambassador to Kiev Marie Yovanovitch, who is scheduled to appear before the House Intelligence Committee. US media has reported that Trump removed her from her post because she opposed his efforts to get Ukraine to investigate Biden. —AFP

The migrant caravans: Finding freedom and hardship in America

LOS ANGELES: A year to the day after crossing the US-Mexico border in May 2018, Luis Rodriguez, 20, writhed on a gurney in a Los Angeles emergency room with a kidney and bladder infection. He wasn't just in pain - he was worried. His asylum claim had not yet been approved. He had no work permit, though he'd been working seven days a week anyway.

Now he was seriously ill, and bills were mounting. When Rodriguez arrived in the United States, he had planned to finish his final year of high school, earn a university degree and then become a systems engineer. He'd always been studious and driven in El Salvador, the kid teachers commended. But here in the hospital, his goals seemed out of reach.

He felt alone in this country - but, he said he hadn't had much choice in leaving his own. Rodriguez is gay. He and his first love, Bryan Claros, were high school classmates, meeting secretly when they could on an isolated stretch of beach outside their hometown of La Libertad. One March night, four gang members surrounded them there, beat up Claros and threatened Rodriguez, both men told Reuters.

"Never show your faces here again," Rodriguez recalled them saying. A police detective's report on the incident, reviewed by Reuters, confirmed the outlines of their account, saying Rodriguez was the victim of "aggravated threats" by terrorist groups or gangs and that "it was recommended that he emigrate ... because these individuals who threaten people always act out the threats they make." —Reuters