

International

'We got this': American left galvanized by death of RBG

Thousands gather outside Supreme Court to honor late justice

WASHINGTON: The death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg sounded a warning for American progressives, thousands of whom-wracked with ever-deepening concern for the future-gathered Saturday outside the Supreme Court in Washington to honor the late justice. As evening fell with a sudden September chill, a constant stream of families and young people gathered for a second night-just 45 days from the US presidential election-to pay homage to the progressive icon, affectionately referred to as "RBG."

"Ruth, I didn't know you, but you affected my life in many ways," says one of many letters placed at the foot of the court building, among flowers, rainbow flags and Ginsburg bobblehead figurines. A choir gave a concert, singing John Lennon's "Imagine" among other songs, as mourners lit candles and organizations representing liberal causes such as Black Lives Matter, gun reform and pro-choice groups handed out shirts, signs and stickers.

"This marks a seismic shift in the course for justice for our generation and will have a permanent effect on the history of what Generation Z does," gun reform activist David Hogg, who survived the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018 said. Earlier, among the anonymous mourners,

Democratic vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris wended her way discreetly to the front of the crowd. "RBG was one of my pioneers, an icon, a fighter. She was a woman in every way," she told AFP, shielding herself from the crisp September day with a black hooded sweatshirt.

Harris's running mate and President Donald Trump's opponent, Joe Biden, has failed to drum up great enthusiasm among progressive voters, due to his centrist views and advanced age - 77.

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But Ginsburg's death, in an America already on edge, could well galvanize them to his side. Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren addressed mourners from a podium, telling them: "This fight has just begun." Wearing a rainbow headband, J Ford Huffman, a gay man in his 70s, urged Democratic voters to "use the mourning period to energize

ourselves" and make sure everyone votes on November 3.

The challenge will be to prevent the doyenne of the Supreme Court from being replaced with her ideological opposite, since Trump has pre-selected very conservative candidates. Ginsburg made her name in the 1970s by bringing down a series of laws that discriminated against women. Nominated to the country's highest court in 1993, she spent her 27-year tenure there defending the rights of the LGBT community and immigrants, establishing herself unequivocally as a champion of the American left.

'Vulnerable'

"Thank you for teaching us how to fight," Gina Eppolito wrote in chalk on the pavement outside the imposing white marble building in the US capital, a city known for its progressivism. The mother of two 11-year-olds, Eppolito said it was a "very big concern" of hers that rights acquired during her generation-particularly the right to abortion-might not be passed on to her children. With Ginsburg's death at age 87, the US Supreme Court could fall into the conservative camp for a long time.

"We are in an extremely vulnerable position," Eppolito said. Pam Crescenzo, 60, couldn't hold back tears as she spoke: "If the courts continue to tilt to the right,



WASHINGTON: People hold signs as they pay their respects to Ruth Bader Ginsburg near the US Supreme Court in Washington, DC yesterday. — AFP

it's really going to be a difficult time to be a woman in America." Crescenzo, who came with her wife, said it was thanks to RBG that they had been able to get married. To her right, a group of people read out a Hebrew prayer. Ginsburg was born to a Jewish family in New York and died on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, one of the most holy days in Judaism.

In a sign of the deep divisions in the United States, a man wearing a black

suit came to the court-to praise Trump. He was roundly booed away by the crowd. Many of the young people there also wanted to thank Ginsburg and to promise they would take up her fight. "We have a lot of work to do and a lot of fighting to do in the next 45 days," said Kiley Boland, 25, who clutched a book on Constitutional law under one arm. "It's on us now. She can rest; we got this." — AFP

Impunity, corruption rob trafficking victims of justice in Romania

BUCHAREST: "I want him to pay for everything I've suffered," says a short, frail 24-year-old Romanian who was forced into prostitution by a man who duped her. The man with whom she fell in love trafficked her in Romania and then to Austria before she managed to escape. "Once he hit me with a chair and almost killed me", another 31-year-old victim tells AFP, adding that the experience pushed her "to the brink of suicide". Both women are housed in a shelter for trafficking victims in northeastern Romania and are awaiting the start of proceedings against the men who passed them around.

But their wait may be in vain, given the impunity that many perpetrators seem to enjoy in Romania. On a national level, the number of alleged traffickers sent to court dropped from 400 in 2018 to 347 last year. AFP gained access to hundreds of pages of judicial documents and interviewed victims, prosecutors and lawyers in different regions. The drawbacks were apparent even in the high-profile "Tandarei" case, which spanned the UK and Romania.

In one of the largest child trafficking rings uncovered in Europe, more than 100 people were

convicted in the UK over an operation in which dozens of minors were forced to beg and steal. But in Romania all those charged were acquitted last year after an almost decade-long trial. The Romanian judges complained about the investigation led by the anti-mafia prosecutors' department (DIICOT), saying a lot of it was "accusations based on hearsay", while leads on alleged bribes paid to local police were not followed up.

'Untouchable' suspects

In its latest report about trafficking in Romania, the US State Department said "widespread complicity and the failure to incriminate officials hampered effective law enforcement". "Trafficking networks have vast sums of money which often allows them to buy impunity," Silvia Tabusca, director of the Center for Human Rights and Migration, told AFP. DIICOT prosecutors say that in some cases "officials from banks or town halls as well as police officers have offered protection" to trafficking rings.

Tabusca says there are sometimes also "suspicions of corruption" within the judicial system. In a rare interview to AFP, 70-year-old Constantin Dragusin - one of the accused ringleaders of the Tandarei gang - admitted that "if we could have offered money (to judges) to be acquitted we would have done it, even though we're not guilty". He says he decided against offering cash as he was convinced the judges in his case would act fairly. "I am no mobster. I have neither stolen nor recruited any children," he said.

He says he repeatedly asked prosecutors to



IASI, Romania: Two women are pictured on the courtyard of a center for the women victims of domestic violence and trafficking in the northern Romania region of Iasi county. — AFP

facilitate a meeting with the parents of the alleged victims, but this was turned down. The deputy director of the local child protection agency, Neulai Badea, told AFP he also asked for access to the alleged victims in the Tandarei case - but was likewise turned down. According to Tabusca, the upshot of the Tandarei acquittals is that "the influence of the suspects within the local community has increased. "They're are now perceived as untouchable," she says. — AFP

UK's Labor begins virtual bid to regain support

LONDON: Britain's main opposition Labor party goes online to try to reinvigorate grassroots support after years of bitter ideological infighting and stinging electoral failure. The three-day "Labour Connected" event, which replaces the annual conference cancelled because of coronavirus, is the first major gathering of members under new leader Keir Starmer. The former chief state prosecutor is trying to turn Labor around after its worst election showing since the 1930s in December.

His predecessor Jeremy Corbyn quit after his hard-left policies and lack of clarity over Brexit proved a turn-off for voters and sparked fierce internal feuding. Starmer has vowed to reunite the party to recapture the successes of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, who led Labor governments from 1997 to 2010. Since taking the helm in April, he has won plaudits for trying to win back Jewish members who left in droves because of anti-Semitism that Corbyn was accused of failing to tackle.

He has also seen a surge in popularity for his efforts to hold Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson to account for the government's response to the coronavirus outbreak. Yesterday, he promised to provide "new leadership for our party and for our country". He admitted there was "a mountain to climb" to win the next election scheduled for 2024 but "we have demonstrated our determination to listen, to change and to rebuild people's trust".

'Government incompetence'

Starmer again attacked Johnson over coronavirus, which has officially killed nearly 42,000 people in Britain - the worst toll in Europe. He said the priority beyond protecting key workers must be keeping schools open, as cases surge once again and officials are mired in criticism for a lack of virus testing. "This government's incompetence is holding Britain back," he said. Professor Simon



LONDON: Opposition Labour party leader Keir Starmer (2nd right) and his wife Victoria (left) arrive wearing protective face coverings, to attend a service marking the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Britain at Westminster Abbey in central London yesterday. — AFP

Usherwood at the University of Surrey said Starmer's forensic attacks on the government had so far helped unite his party and win over non-Labor voters.

"He's not particularly charismatic. His authority comes from looking like a competent person," he told AFP. But Professor Steven Fielding of the University of Nottingham warned many Corbyn supporters were still uneasy. "He's managed to unify the party only because he hasn't tackled any of the big issues in the party," he told AFP. As well as quelling dissent in its own ranks, Labor needs to tackle the skepticism of voters in its former "Red Wall" heartland in northern England, who backed the Conservatives over Brexit.

Their support helped give Johnson an 80-strong majority in the House of Commons and allowed him to break years of parliamentary deadlock to take Britain out of the European Union in January. Starmer opposed Brexit but has not focused on the issue, except again on the issue of competence, mocking Johnson for his vows to "get Brexit done" and to have an "oven-ready" divorce deal. Trade talks with the EU are moving painfully slowly towards a mid-October deadline, while the government has sparked outrage in Brussels by trying to unpick part of the Brexit agreement. — AFP

Polio vaccine in the crossfire of misinformation

LIBREVILLE: As scientists around the world rush to find a vaccine to stem the spread of Covid-19, another deadly disease, polio, has become the latest target of misinformation campaigns online. The World Health Organization (WHO) celebrated the announcement on August 25 that Africa had eradicated the wild poliovirus-a landmark in a decades-long fight against the crippling disease.

However, there still exists a version of the illness known as vaccine-derived polio, which occurs in rare incidents when the weakened virus in the vaccine mutates. It particularly affects countries with low immunization rates and poor sanitation, health experts say. Two days after the WHO's announcement, the UN confirmed that more than a dozen cases of vaccine-derived polio had sprung up in nine states across Sudan. The outbreak added further fuel to the already prolific spread of conspiracy theories pushing false claims about vaccination on social media.

'Gates-funded vaccine'

Conspiracy theory groups promptly reported the outbreak in articles decrying "one of the biggest public health scandals of the decade", singling out the WHO and billionaire Microsoft founder Bill Gates in their attacks. A misleading article blaming a "Gates-funded vaccine" for "causing" the outbreak has been shared more than 8,000 times in Facebook groups from the US and Canada to Colombia.

The claims have also been circulating in Europe, with a French version of the article shared in various groups in France and Belgium. But the article fails to mention that the cases involved people who had not been immunized themselves. Gates, whose eponymous foundation has ploughed billions of dollars into making vaccines against diseases like polio, malaria and HIV, is a regular target for fringe groups accusing him of benefiting from vaccination or even using them for harm. — AFP

Italy defies COVID-19 virus vote as far-right plots seismic change

ROME: Italians headed to the polls yesterday - to the alarm of coronavirus experts - for a referendum and regional elections that could weaken the government and radically reshape the political landscape. Just a week after a Herculean effort by schools to reopen in line with last-minute Covid-19 rules, classrooms across the country will be shut to pupils and transformed into ballot stations for the two-day vote.

A triumph for the far-right in this fiercely fought campaign would sound alarm bells in Brussels. It will be the first test for Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's centre-left coalition government since it imposed an economically crippling nationwide lockdown to fight the virus, which has killed almost 36,000 people.

The referendum, on slashing the number of members of parliament - from 630 to 400 in the lower house, and 315 to 200 in the upper house - is expected to pass, though there has been a late uptick in the number of prominent 'no' declarations. The cost-cutting reform is the brainchild of the co-governing Five Star Movement (M5S), but while its centre-left coalition Democratic Party (PD) partner and parties on the right are theoretically in favour, their support has been lacklustre at best.

Uncertain future

The regional battle is for governance of Campania, Liguria, Marche, Puglia, Tuscany, Valle d'Aosta and Veneto. The right-wing coalition is set to easily retake Veneto and Liguria, and it could also snatch Marche and Puglia from the left. But all eyes will be on Tuscany, a historic left-wing stronghold that might fall to Matteo Salvini's far-right League.

"If the left performs particularly poorly... Brussels will grow concerned," Berenberg economist Florian Hense told AFP. It will worry whether the national recovery plan Italy has to present to obtain grants or loans to aid its ailing economy after the coronavirus lockdown "will be ambitious enough, given the limited political capital of the coalition in Rome," he said. "And whether, whatever plan Italy comes up with, it will actually implement it given the uncertain future of the current coalition".

Concern over virus

The poll is going ahead despite warnings against opening polling stations while Covid-19 case numbers are on the rise. While Italy currently has fewer new cases than Britain, France or Spain, it is still recording more than 1,500 daily. "The country is in a state of emergency; it is utterly contradictory to be massing people together at polling stations, particularly in light of the trend in Europe," Professor Massimo Galli, infectious diseases chief at Milan's Sacco hospital, told AFP. He said previously that holding the elections now would be "madness". Some precautions have been taken however, with elderly and pregnant voters getting fast-track lanes to vote. With older people potentially put off voting by the health risks, the left has been organizing special transport. One in three of voters for the PD and League are over 65-years old, according to Italy's Corriere della Sera daily. Nearly 2,000 voters in isolation due to the coronavirus have also registered to have their votes collected, including former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. — AFP