Two Republican women could sink Trump’s US Supreme Court pick

WASHINGTON: The fate of Donald Trump’s US Supreme Court nominee increasingly appears to lie in the hands of two Republican senators, pro-choice moderates with a penchant for rebellion—and who have bucked the president before. But despite extraordinary pressure already heaped on Susan Collins and Lisa Murkowski by liberal groups, and Democrats who warn that confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh could spell disaster for women’s rights and health care, the pair have given little indication that they will reject him. With Trump’s Republicans clinging to a narrow 51-49 Senate majority, and Senator John McCain battling brain cancer and unlikely to vote, a single GOP defection could sink Kavanaugh if all Democrats unite against him. Collins, from Maine, and Alaska’s Murkowski are two genuine mavericks in the Republican Party, and all eyes have turned to them. Both voted against Trump’s effort to repeal the Obama-era Affordable Care Act, and they objected furiously to a move that would have stripped funding from women’s health organization Planned Parenthood. Now Democrats—who as the minority party have few options to block the Kavanaugh confirmation process—are desperate for their support once more. As they weigh what many see as one of the most consequential decisions of Trump’s presidency.

Kavanaugh, 53, has been picked to fill the vacancy left by retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy, who for years had been at the very center of the court, giving him a place of prominence among the nine justices. He was making the rounds on Capitol Hill Wednesday, paying courtesy calls to some of the senators who will decide his fate. A Kavanaugh confirmation would spell a significant shift to the right for the top judicial body, a move that has been in office. “She has tended to vote for the nominees, and I think it’s pretty likely she’ll do that again,” said professor Amy Fried, chair of the University of Maine’s Department of Political Science. Murkowski, for her part, has signaled that Kavanaugh is “hostile” to Roe v. Wade, the landmark 1973 decision that cemented the legality of abortions nationwide. And yet she is unlikely to press the issue directly with Kavanaugh. “I do not apply an ideological test to their personal views,” Collins told reporters Tuesday.

“I obviously want the opportunity to sit down with him one on one to get a better sense of his judicial philosophy,” said Kavanaugh. He has not openly expressed a position on abortion, and tradition suggests he will not during his upcoming confirmation hearing or in meetings with lawmakers. But Trump campaigned on a pledge to nominate anti-abortion judges to the Supreme Court, and all potential nominees on his short list were vetted by the pro-life conservative Federalist Society. Collins has backed all three conservative justices nominated by Republican presidents while she was in office. “She has tended to vote for the nominees, and I think it’s pretty likely she’ll do that again,” said professor Amy Fried, chair of the University of Maine’s Department of Political Science. Murkowski, for her part, has signaled that Kavanaugh is “hostile” to Roe v. Wade, the landmark 1973 decision that cemented the legality of abortions nationwide. And yet she is unlikely to press the issue directly with Kavanaugh. “I do not apply an ideological test to their personal views,” Collins told reporters Tuesday.

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Pro-independence family

A virtual unknown when he was elected president of the Spanish region of 7.5 million people, Puigdemont, who combs his hair in a shaggy Beatles-style mop, became the main enemy of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s conservative government. In Amer, the small mountainous village of 2,200 people where he grew up, and in Girona, where Puigdemont served as mayor from 2011 to 2016, he is recalled as a convinent separatist.”In Catalonia, many people become separatists in an allergic reaction to Madrid’s policies. Not him, he always had these convictions,” said Puigdemont’s friend Antoni Puigverd, a poet and journalist.

Puigdemont has never hidden his separatist tendencies, not even when he joined his predecessor Artur Mas’s CDC party in 1980 at a time when it merely wanted to negotiate greater autonomy for Catalonia—far from the idea of breaking away from Spain. His friend Salvador Clara, a leftwing secessionist councillor in Amer, added that Puigdemont had defended the independence of Catalonia “since he can remember.”

The dashed dreams of independent Catalonia

BARCELONA: He fled Spain in October without having accomplished his dream of converting Catalonia into an independent republic. But after more than eight months in self-exile, wanted by Spain, Carles Puigdemont could be coming home... to prison. A German court yesterday gave the green light for his extradition—separately with the two shortly after Kennedy’s resignation announcement. Democrats have launched a massive pressure campaign in Alaska and Maine. The group Demand Justice is conducting a reported $5 million push, while NARAL Pro-Choice America has taken out full-page ads in Maine newspapers highlighting the issue. Conservative groups are on the counterattack, with Judicial Crisis Network announcing a $1.4 million pro-Kavanaugh ad buy in three states that heavily backed Trump in 2016, and where Senate Democrats face tough re-election fights in November. —AFP

Toll from Nicaragua unrest hits 264

WASHINGTON: The known death toll from a four-month crackdown on anti-government protests in Nicaragua has risen to 264, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said Wednesday. “As recorded by the IACHR since the start of the repression against social protests, to date, 264 people have lost their lives and more than 1,800 have been injured,” the commission’s chief Paolo Abrax told reporters.

He was speaking at a meeting of the Organization of American States—of which the IACHR is part—about the situation in the violence-wrecked Central American country, where protesters are seeking the ouster of President Daniel Ortega. The rights body had previously given a toll of 212 dead, although local estimates recently put the toll at about 250. The influential Roman Catholic church has been mediating between Ortega’s government and the opposition to end the unrest, but the process has become bogged down amid continuing violence.

In the latest outburst, at least 14 people died in a weekend raid by a pro-government mob near the opposition bastion of Masaya, in the country’s southwest. The opposition is planning to crank up the pressure on Ortega starting on Thursday with an anti-government protest and general strike. Separately Wednesday, another human rights group charged the Nicaraguan army had been using military weapons against civilians in the crackdown against deadly unrest.

The Nicaraguan Pro-Human Rights Association (ANPDH) demanded that the armed forces investigate allegations that the military was overstepping in its use of grenade launchers and automatic weapons against civilian demonstrators. A former leftist guerrilla, Ortega will next week commemorate the 1979 popular uprising that brought him to power with an annual July 19 march due to start in Masaya. Once the hero of left-wing revolutionaries, Ortega is now widely viewed as an oppressor. Having lost a presidential vote in 1990, he was re-elected in 2007 but opponents have accused him—along with his wife Vice President Rosario Murillo—of establishing a dictatorship characterized by nepotism and brutal repression. —AFP