

Supreme Court decision on abortion a bombshell for millions of American women

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WASHINGTON - In America's culture wars, the Supreme Court on Friday (June 24) ignited a bomb.

The [court's decision overturning Roe v Wade](#), 49 years after it legalised abortion in the United States, has turbocharged the political landscape ahead of November's critical mid-term elections.

And it had instant practical ramifications.

Since the court's decision in effect returned power to the states, within hours, more than a dozen Republican-ruled states had outlawed abortion.

Millions of American women now have no right to abortions - even if they are victims of rape or incest.

Those who live in "red" - that is, Republican - states would have to travel to a "blue" or Democrat state to get an abortion.

Many would not be able to afford that. The poor, and minorities - including and especially African American women - would be most affected.

By Friday evening, a crowd of protesters outside the Supreme Court in Washington DC had grown to more than 1,000. Many women sobbed as they spoke to journalists.

Earlier in the wake of the ruling, US President Joe Biden in a statement said: "Now with Roe gone, let's be very clear: The health and life of women of this nation are now at risk."

Democrat-ruled states doubled down.

"My daughters now have fewer rights than I have had my whole life," Michigan's Democrat Governor Gretchen Whitmer said. "I'm not willing to let this stand. I'll continue fighting like hell for the rights of my girls and for future generations of Michiganders."

New York Attorney-General Letitia James tweeted: "Make no mistake: While other states strip away the fundamental right to choose, New York will always be a safe haven for anyone seeking an abortion."

At odds with public opinion

The Supreme Court has a nine-member bench.

Roe v Wade was decided seven-to-two in 1973.

The decision to overturn it was decided five-to-four.

In a scathing dissent, three Justices— Stephen Breyer, Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan — wrote: "The Court reverses course today for one reason and one reason only: because the composition of this Court has changed. With sorrow — for this Court, but more, for the many millions of American women who have today lost a fundamental constitutional protection — we dissent."

The decision was tipped by judges appointed by former president Donald Trump, who lost no time in claiming credit.

"I delivered everything as promised, including nominating and getting three highly respected and strong constitutionalists confirmed to the United States Supreme Court," Mr Trump said in a statement.

In his own statement, President Biden uncharacteristically named Mr Trump.

"It was three justices named by one President - Donald Trump - who were the core of today's decision to upend the scales of justice and eliminate a fundamental right for women in this country," Mr Biden said.

"Make no mistake: This decision is the culmination of a deliberate effort over decades to upset the balance of our law," he added.

The decision is also at odds with majority opinion.

On Friday, the independent, non-partisan Pew Research Centre said it had done many surveys about abortion over the years, providing a lens into Americans' views on whether the procedure should be legal.

"In our most recent survey, 61 per cent of US adults say abortion should be legal all or most of the time, while 37 per cent say it should be illegal all or most of the time," it said.

This is "an earthquake in American politics, society, and culture", American studies professor Glenn Altschuler from Cornell University told The Straits Times.

"This will make our already profoundly polarised society substantially more polarised," he said.

"It will deepen the already deep divide between two Americas - a red and blue America, a rural and urban America, a rich and a poor America."

Legal analysts have warned that overturning Roe v Wade is a slippery slope.

Conservative Justice Clarence Thomas, in an opinion that was part of Friday's decision, pushed the court to revisit cases that have already been decided related to contraception and same-sex marriage.

Justice Thomas had "explicitly called to reconsider the right of marriage equality, the right of couples to make their choices on contraception", President Biden said. "This is an extreme and dangerous path the Court is now taking us on."

A vote in Congress could codify Roe v Wade - but Senate Democrats do not have the votes to do so.

President Biden lost no time in stressing that in November's crucial mid-terms, Roe vs Wade is "on the ballot".

"Personal freedoms are on the ballot," he said. "The right to privacy, liberty, equality, they're all on the ballot."

Thus far, with [high inflation](#) and Mr Biden's low popularity rating, the outlook for the Democrats in the mid-terms has been somewhat bleak.

Most analysts expect the party to lose its majority in the House, and possibly also in the Senate.

The Court's decision will galvanise women in particular to vote in larger than usual numbers - but whether that would be enough to affect the outcome remains an open question.

Certainly, analysts say, the US will see more emotional protests, and potentially political violence.

"The rights of women to a full and equal footing with men — politically, socially, economically — have been profoundly undermined; this is no exaggeration, whatever one's feelings about abortion" Marie Griffith, director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri said in a comment on the university's website.

Though many Americans hold nuanced views on the issue, all-or-nothing positions dominate the national debate, she wrote.

"At the moment" she concluded, "there is little reason to be anything but pessimistic."