



Hong Kong to further ease coronavirus restrictions, bars to open until 2 a.m.

HONG KONG — Hong Kong will further ease COVID-19 restrictions, allowing bars to open until 2 a.m. and raising the number of diners permitted at a table to eight from four, as cases in the global financial hub continue to ease, leader Carrie Lam said on Tuesday.

Beaches and swimming pools would also cater to four more people at each table, Ms. Lam said at a regular news briefing.

The extended hours for bars, as well as the reopening of karaoke rooms and some other venues, would take effect from May 19.

Hong Kong health authorities reported 283 cases of COVID-19 on Monday, the first time the daily tally has dropped below 300 in nearly three months. The city has recorded more than 1.2 million infections and over 9,300 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

"The COVID number has dropped to three digits in mid-April and didn't

rebound, despite foot traffic increasing during two holidays," Ms. Lam said, adding that it was not right to prevent people from swimming when the weather was so good.

She said she hoped people could enjoy Mother's Day on Sunday as more family members could dine together.

Coronavirus restrictions have battered business in Hong Kong and helped fuel a net outflow of around 70,000 people in February and March, up from nearly 17,000 in December.

For some, the easing of restrictions may be too late as many businesses in the food and beverage industry have had to lay off staff as they struggle to pay rent in one of the world's most expensive property markets.

Life in the Chinese-ruled city is gradually returning to normal, with schools resuming face-to-face classes and many people back working from offices. — *Reuters*

US Supreme Court potential shock move on abortion sparks protests

WASHINGTON — Anti-abortion activists and pro-abortion supporters took to the streets of Washington on Tuesday after news that the US Supreme Court may overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling which legalized abortion nationwide.

A leaked initial draft majority opinion suggests the court has voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, Politico reported on Monday.

Reuters was not immediately able to confirm the authenticity of the draft opinion. The Supreme Court and the White House declined to comment.

Within hours of the news, anti-abortion activists chanting "hey, hey, ho, ho, Roe v. Wade has got to go" and abortion rights supporters shouting "abortion is healthcare" were facing off outside the court.

Abortion is one of the most divisive issues in US politics and has been for nearly a half century.

A 2021 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 59% of US adults believed it should be legal in all or most cases, while 39% thought it should be illegal in most or all cases.

"Roe was egregiously wrong from the start," conservative Justice Samuel Alito wrote in the draft opinion which is dated Feb. 10, according to Politico, which posted a copy online.

Based on Mr. Alito's opinion, the court would find that the Roe v. Wade decision that allowed abortions performed before a fetus

would be viable outside the womb — between 24 and 28 weeks of pregnancy — was wrongly decided because the US Constitution makes no specific mention of abortion rights.

"Abortion presents a profound moral question. The Constitution does not prohibit the citizens of each state from regulating or prohibiting abortion," Mr. Alito said, according to the leaked document.

The unprecedented leak sent shock waves through the United States, not least because the court prides itself on keeping its internal deliberations secret and leaks are extremely uncommon.

The news stunned abortion providers.

On Monday night, Andrea Gallegos, executive administrator at Tulsa Women's Clinic in Oklahoma, had just finished calling some 25 patients scheduled for abortions on Tuesday to tell them that their appointments would need to be canceled because of a soon to be enacted Oklahoma law modeled on a highly restrictive Texas abortion ban.

"I can't say that I'm surprised," she said.

"Now all these other conservative states like Oklahoma are passing the exact same legislation that Texas did, I have to say I became less optimistic and way more scared for what the future of Roe looks like."

CONSERVATIVE MAJORITY

The ruling would be the court's most

sweeping since former President Donald Trump succeeded in naming three justices to the court, cementing a 6-3 conservative majority.

"The Republican-appointed Justices' reported votes to overturn Roe v. Wade would go down as an abomination, one of the worst and most damaging decisions in modern history," said US House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer, both Democrats.

The news broke a little more than six months before the midterm elections that will determine if Democrats hold their razor-thin majorities in the US Congress for the next two years of President Joseph R. Biden's term in office.

The decision appeared based on an oral argument in December on Mississippi's bid to revive its ban on abortion starting at 15 weeks of pregnancy, a law blocked by lower courts.

The report said a court majority was inclined to uphold Mississippi's abortion ban and that there could be five votes to overturn Roe. An official ruling is expected sometime before the end of June.

Four of the other Republican-appointed justices — Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett — voted with Mr. Alito in the conference held among the justices, the report added.

After an initial vote among the justices following an oral argument, one is assigned the majority opinion and writes a draft. It is then circulated among the justices.

At times, in between the initial vote and the ruling being released, the vote alignment can change. A ruling is only final when it is published by the court.

The Roe v. Wade decision recognized that the right to personal privacy under the US Constitution protects a woman's ability to terminate her pregnancy.

Christian conservatives and many Republican officeholders have long sought to overturn it.

If Roe is overturned, abortion is likely to remain legal in liberal states. More than a dozen states currently have laws protecting abortion rights. Numerous Republican-led states have passed various abortion restrictions in defiance of the Roe precedent in recent years.

Republicans could try to enact a nationwide abortion ban, while Democrats could also seek to protect abortion rights at the national level.

Democrats said the draft opinion undermines the importance of this year's elections, in which they are seeking to maintain control of the House and Senate. Republican lawmakers criticized the leak, suggesting it was an attempt to inappropriately pressure the court into changing course. — *Reuters*

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