



US top court back for `potential blockbuster` session

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Washington: The [US Supreme Court](#) reopens Monday with a slate of hot-button cases, including freedom of speech in the Facebook era and a likely reprise on gay marriage.

"The tide of history seems to be extremely strong," said constitutional lawyer Tom Goldstein of the recent wave of hotly-anticipated, highly influential court decisions, including a slew of new ones in the 2014-2015 session.

From same-sex marriage to abortion rights to Barack Obama's signature health care reform law: "there are several high-profile cases in the pipeline that could potentially make their way to One First Street when the Court reconvenes after its summer recess," said experts Miguel Estrada and Ashley Boizelle, for the Cato Institute.

The top court has already indicated 33 cases it will consider in the coming session.

When the nine justices return, they will meet behind closed doors, after which they will announce the remainder of the cases for 2015, with the coming year a "potential blockbuster," said Doug Kendall, president of the Constitutional Accountability Center.

As soon as Tuesday, the court could announce whether it will put same-sex marriage back on its calendar.

With progressive justice Ruth Ginsburg, 81, dismissing speculation she might retire this year, the roster -- and the balance between conservatives and liberals on the bench -- is unlikely to shift. The nine justices -- none under the age of 50 and without a Facebook account among them -- will also take up the question of whether violent threats posted on social media could merit criminal charges.

A Pennsylvania man posted violent messages, including death threats against his ex-wife, written in the style of rap lyrics, but says he never intended to act on the threats.

The top court has already weighed in on new technology, including GPS and cell phones, and it is "very predisposed to protect the First Amendment and the free speech in modern media and the popular culture," said William Marshall, law professor at the University of North Carolina.

Hearings on that case are set for December 1.

The court is also deemed likely to side with the plaintiff in a case regarding religious freedom in prison, in one of the first cases to be heard, October 7.

A Muslim prisoner is demanding the right to maintain a beard half an inch (one-centimeter) long, as allowed in 40 US states. However, such beards are ruled illegal in Arkansas prisons, where authorities worry they could be used to hide drugs, weapons, or other contraband.

In another two cases, the top court will weigh in on the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches.

On November 3, the court will hear arguments over the sensitive issue of the status of Jerusalem, as it considers the constitutionality of a 2002 law that directs the State Department to give Israel as the country of birth in passports of Americans born in the contested city

The international community, including the United States, does not recognize Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem.

And, on November 4, the court will consider whether the US government has the right to fire a federal air marshal for revealing sensitive information to the media.

The justices must decide whether federal whistleblower protections protect the fired agent, who revealed that certain flights from Las Vegas wouldn't have air marshals on board -- information that put the passengers on those flights at risk, the government argues.

And finally, the three female justices on the court will be under a microscope as the court hears arguments on December 3 over alleged discrimination against a pregnant woman.

"Are you also going to be forced out of the job because you're pregnant?" asked lawyer Emily Martin.

"After contraception, there is pregnancy, this the next chapter in the women rights."