Biden to pass torch to Harris in bittersweet convention farewell

AFP- US President Joe Biden will give a bittersweet farewell address at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on Monday, passing the torch to Kamala Harris as the party's nominee for November's election.

Less than a month after his stunning withdrawal and Harris's astonishing ascent, Biden can expect a hero's send-off from many of the same people who helped push him out due to concerns about his age.

The 81-year-old is expected to say that Harris – America's first female, Black and South Asian vice president – is the best person to finish the job he started of protecting American democracy from Republican rival Donald Trump.

Harris is set to briefly appear with her boss on stage for his primetime speech in a symbolic moment designed to show unity among Democrats over his succession.

One hangover from his time in office, however, is a huge planned protest in Chicago against the Biden-Harris administration's support for Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza.

Biden said on Sunday he felt "good, real good" about his speech, after spending the weekend at the Camp David presidential retreat in rural Maryland fine-tuning his address with top aides.

– Warm-up act –

Now a lame-duck single-term president, Biden will be all too aware that his legacy hinges on whether Harris can go on to

beat Trump – and that if she doesn't, many will blame him for clinging on so long.

First Lady Jill Biden, 73, a staunch defender of her husband who was with him throughout the final stages of his fateful decision on July 21, will also take to the stage in Chicago.

But there will undoubtedly be mixed emotions for the ageing president, who has watched Harris chase down Trump in the polls and enthuse voters in a way that he never managed during his time as candidate.

Biden now also finds himself as the warm-up act for Harris, who will give her headline speech on Thursday in a slot that just a few weeks ago would have been his.

He won't be hanging around for her big night, and is instead heading off immediately after his speech to start a six-day holiday in California while the conference continues without him.

Yet as he enters the final stretch of a five-decade political career, Biden will also be assured of a warm welcome from Democrats in Chicago.

"I'm nostalgic," said LaurieBeth Hager, a state representative from North Dakota in Chicago for the convention, hailing Biden as a "great president."

– 'Kleenexes packed' –

"I'll have Kleenexes packed along with me tomorrow, but I also am amazed at the courage, political courage it took for him to make this decision."

Biden is still remembered fondly by his party as the man who beat Donald Trump in 2020, and then guided America out of the trauma of the January 6, 2021 pro-Trump Capitol assault and the Covid pandemic.

And while Biden’s initial determination to stay in the race despite a disastrous debate performance against Trump in June smacked of pride, there is widespread gratitude for his eventual sacrifice.

Harris has managed to turn the White House race on its head since Biden stepped aside, reaching out to young, female and Black voters who had switched off from a battle between two elderly men.

Former president Trump, meanwhile, has been sent into a tailspin by what he calls the “coup” by Democrats.

Just over a month ago he seemed to be cruising to victory after escaping an assassination attempt, and then making a triumphant, ear-bandaged appearance at the Republican convention in Milwaukee.

But he has since struggled to recalibrate his campaign to deal with Harris, falling back instead on personal insults and rambling speeches despite appeals from top Republicans to focus.

While Democrats meet in Chicago, Trump will be crisscrossing the country, with rallies scheduled in the battleground states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, North Carolina and Arizona through the week.

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