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Commentary

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The Fall of Sheldon Silver: A Silver Linings Playbook for Latinos?

By Angelo Falcón (January 25, 2015)

There is a bit of a history in New York of significant Latino political advancement coming on the heels of White elite scandal and divisions. The first major entrance of Puerto Ricans in New York City politics occurred in the 1961 with the fight between then Mayor Robert Wagner and political boss Carmine De Sapio that resulted, for one thing, in the beginning of Herman Badillo's citywide political career. Then there was there were the Mayor John Lindsay years with his election in 1965 and his Republican challenges to the then Democratic Party establishment that created new political openings for Puerto Ricans.. This was followed by the Stanley Simon and Stanley Friedman corruption scandals in 1987, under Mayor Ed Koch, that resulted in the premature political ascendancy of Fernando Ferrer as Bronx Borough President and eventually the first Puerto Rican leadership of the Bronx Democratic County Committee.



The arrest this past week of New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver on corruption charges may represent another political conjuncture that could affect in fundamental ways not only the state's politics but also the role of Latinos within it. This will depend on whether the charges against this near legendary Lower East Side political boss will stick and the

collateral political damage it would cause. It will also depend on the ability the 21 Latino state legislators, 15 of whom are in the State Assembly, to navigate what will no doubt be the ensuing messy Albany politics to their (and hopefully, the Latino community's) advantage.

As the speculation begins about who would replace the disgraced Assembly Speaker if he is convicted, it is interesting to note the lack of any Latino names being even mentioned as possibilities. There are plenty of White and Black Assembly members being talked about, such as Keith Wright, Joe Morelle, Denny Farrell, Jr., Carl Heastie, Joe Lentol and so on. The absence of Latino candidates for the job reflects the reality that none of the Latinos in the Assembly have stood out individually or collectively. While the secretive "three-men-in-the-room" culture of Albany politics has generally marginalized the members of the State Legislature, this has clearly been more the case with the Latino representatives. Outside of the outspokenness of State Senator

Ruben Diaz, Sr., whose extremely conservative positions on social issues place him outside of the mainstream of the majority of his Latino colleagues, making him an isolated and largely erratic voice, the rest of the state Latino delegation of elected officials appears like a herd of sheep offering themselves up for the proverbial political slaughter.

As the politics in Albany potentially opens up in disarray because of the vacuum a Sheldon Silver fall would create, how are Latinos positioned to strengthen their place in the state's political universe? Historically, the main leverage that Latinos have had in negotiating with the established political leadership in the city and state has been their control of the Bronx Democratic Party machine, also known officially as the Bronx Democratic County Committee. The Bronx is the only county in the state with a majority Latino population and whose party organization has had important Latino political leadership. Under the leadership of former Assemblyman Roberto Ramirez in 1996-2002 and Assemblyman José Rivera in 2002-2008, this has served as the power center of Puerto Rican/Latino politics in New York. However, in a coup largely engineered by the current Bronx Borough President, Ruben Diaz, Jr. and his father, the outspoken State Senator, Ruben Diaz, Sr., in cooperation with Black Bronx politicians in 2000, José Rivera was deposed as head of the county organization and replaced by the current chair, an African-American, Carl Heastie. While strengthening the power of the Diazes (Diaz Jr. was subsequently elected Bronx Borough President) and their allies in the borough, it also served to remove an important point of leverage for the Latino community not only in the Bronx but throughout the city and state. So, within the current potential chaos in the state's politics, Latinos find themselves at the disadvantage of not having a basic political party mechanism from which to negotiate from a position of strength.

The other potential leveraging mechanism Latino state legislators have is the Puerto Rican/Hispanic Task Force that coordinates the annual *Somos* Conferences. Currently headed by Brooklyn Assemblyman Felix Ortiz, the word is that Bronx Assemblyman Marcos Crespo is slated to become its new chair this year. However, as with the Assembly committees, this is a position appointed by whoever is Speaker and with Silver's current legal difficulties it is not clear when and if he will be appointing a successor to Ortiz. If Ortiz remains as chair, he is seen as a close ally of the indicted Speaker, which could further weaken his position. The vacuum this creates opens the way for a fight within the Latino delegation over who will be leading the Puerto Rican/Hispanic Task Force. With the Crespo succession up in the air, this potential mechanism for Latino negotiations in the currently fluids political situation in Albany appears compromised, at least for this crucial moment. The other two potential mechanisms that exist for some sort of Latino legislator's collective action are not viable alternatives: the Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic & Asian Legislative Caucus (primarily a Black vehicle) and the largely dysfunctional State Senate Puerto Rican and Latino Caucus

When one looks at the official State Assembly list of 37 leadership position in the last session, of all the names there are only two Latinos, both Puerto Rican and from the Bronx, José Rivera as Assistant Majority Whip and Carmen Arroyo as Majority Program Chair. This is in comparison to 6 Blacks and 29 Whites. This disparity in Latino representation in the Assembly's leadership (reflective of the marginal role Latinos play in the state Democratic Party), is yet another example of how the Latino community is at a disadvantage in

effectively being able to negotiate within the current political openings that will likely arise in the Assembly.

The vacuum created by the potential fall of Sheldon Silver highlights the marginal position of Latino state legislators in New York. If the legal case against Silver is strong and he reveals to the authorities the wrongdoings of his fellow legislators in exchange for leniency, it is not clear how many of Latinos could be caught in the net. It is also possible that Silver's history of corruption, if proven in the courts, could even involve Governor Andrew Cuomo by providing an answer finally as to why he so abruptly killed his Moreland Commission that was investigating corruption in the state. This would throw state politics into an even greater chaos.

These divisions among political elites in New York have at times created openings for Latinos to advance their position within the political system. In the current environment, the big question is whether the Latino state legislators will be in a position to benefit from this disarray in ways that empower the Latino community. Will a unifying figure emerge from the chaos? Will they form politically potent coalitions with other groups? Will they move beyond their individual personal agendas and begin acting more collectively? For any of this to happen, they will have to grow a pair and develop a more creative politically strategic sense. Hey, maybe they will finally surprise us all!

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