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The Dominican Factor

Group struggles with political growing pains

By Jordan Rau
ALBANY BUREAU CHIEF

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Second of three parts

On a humid evening in Washington Heights earlier this month, Adriano Espaillat paced the floor of a church basement converted for the night into the home of the political club he founded a decade ago on his way to becoming the first Dominican elected to a state Legislature anywhere in the country.

With a colorful background of campaign posters plastered over the church's other walls, the assemblyman, who has represented this neighborhood since 1996, briefed about 80 club members on the various candidates the club was supporting.

It was a typical meeting of the club but for one anomaly: the presence of a guest who had never before been welcome. Sitting quietly at the front table was Espaillat's archrival, Guillermo Linares, who in 1991 narrowly defeated Espaillat in a City Council primary to represent Washington Heights.

Since that election, these two top Dominican-American elected officials had been engaged in a feud considered fierce even by the rancorous standards of New York politics. Each recruited proteges to challenge the other's re-election, while their surrogates, groomed in their dueling Democratic clubs, vied for control of ground-level posts within the county Democratic organization.

"All these years we've been fighting him and he's been fighting us," said José Fernández, the current president of Espaillat's club. "This is the first time we're going to run a campaign together."

Linares and Espaillat herald their new cooperation - sealed by a deal in which Espaillat agreed to back Linares' bid for State Senate in return for Linares' support should Espaillat run for Manhattan borough president in two years - as evidence of the maturation of Dominicans in New York State politics. "There's going to be a unity that's going to be explosive," Linares, who was forced to retire from the City Council last year because of term limits, told Espaillat's club that night.

Yet New York's Dominican leaders are far from unified, even as Dominican residents realize that their burgeoning population has made them a force to be reckoned with in city and state politics. If anything, the fissures among the Dominican leadership are growing wider as they scramble to become power brokers for an ethnic group that has until recently been considered little more than an adjunct to the older Puerto Rican political establishment.

Other immigrant groups are likely to experience similar growing pains as they mature, making the current Dominican divisions a particularly valuable object lesson for the Mexicans, Ecuadorans and Salvadorans in the city and on Long Island.

While Linares and Espaillat consolidate their influence, a new generation of Dominican aspirants for higher office are bristling at their lack of opportunities. "By making those deals between the two without trying to bring Dominican leaders together, I think it doesn't show a level of inclusion," said Ydanis Rodríguez, who has run against the clubs' candidates for City Council.

Meanwhile, a number of prominent city Dominicans, including businessman Fernando Mateo, are aiding the creation of the first Latino Republican club in Washington Heights, which would

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be quite an accomplishment since Dominicans historically have been among the most loyal Democratic voters. (Eighty-one percent of Hispanics in the 72nd Assembly District are registered Democrats, one of the highest rates in the city.) Mateo is also spearheading one of the most aggressive Latino fund-raising efforts for Gov. George Pataki's re-election, raising by his own estimation \$400,000 so far.

"When there's only one airline the tickets are expensive, but when there's more than one there's competition and they have to make sure they do their best," said Ramón Tallaj, a Dominican physician who is helping to organize the new club.

At the same time that Democratic and Republican leaders are grasping for new influence, some of the most respected Dominican elders fret that the needs of regular Dominican immigrants and citizens, many of whom remain working-class, have been neglected in the quest for power.

"I think we have lost a lot," said Rafael Lantigua, a veteran Dominican activist who is professor of clinical medicine at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. "In the 1970s, we were very idealistic. The leadership was not there for themselves. At that point we were thinking about the people, how to improve the quality of life for Dominicans.

"Now the leadership's goal is to go after this position or that position," Lantigua said. "It's more selfish, more about ego. We have not been able to achieve a real agenda."

Over the past decade, the Dominican population more than doubled to more than 650,000 people, making it New York State's single largest immigrant group, according to the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at SUNY Albany. Although Puerto Ricans still outnumber other Latino groups and, as U.S. citizens by birth, are all entitled to vote, their population stagnated in the past decade while Dominicans accounted for half of New York's Latino growth.

And while Puerto Ricans are dispersing out of the city and to Long Island and other suburbs as they blend into the middle class, most of the state's Dominican population remains clustered in the Washington Heights and Inwood neighborhoods of upper Manhattan, making it a potentially cohesive political group. It is from there that Dominicans have had their greatest political successes, controlling two seats on the City Council and one in the Legislature.

It is widely anticipated that if U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-Harlem) were to retire he would be replaced by the first Dominican member of Congress. Dominican neighborhoods are expanding in parts of Brooklyn and Queens in numbers large enough to make them potent forces there.

Historically, Dominican churches avoided politics and the first political clubs were consumed by affairs back in the Dominican Republic. So the principal sources of political power in Washington Heights have been social service agencies. Because they depend on government support, these nonprofits are places of political sophistication, making them ideal training grounds for aspiring office holders and power brokers. Before running for City Council, Linares, for instance, helped found the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans.

The largest of the nonprofits is Alianza Dominicana, started by Lantigua, a doctor at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center. Exasperated by city hospital budget cuts that forced layoffs and long waiting lines for patients, in the early 1980s, Lantigua and a fellow Dominican, Moises Pérez, decided to set up a separate social service agency to help deal with problems in Washington Heights. In 1987, Alianza Dominicana was created to provide drug addiction treatment, child and day care services and youth development efforts.

But Alianza found it hard to get money from New York City and the state because, said Pérez, the group's executive director, much of the money had traditionally gone to established, predominantly "Anglo" community organizations.

In 1989, Lantigua and Pérez ramped up their political activism by backing the candidacy of David Dinkins, the Manhattan borough president seeking to become New York City's first black mayor. After Dinkins' election, Lantigua headed his transition team.

Soon, Alianza began winning more city grants, including \$1 million for a drug treatment program for mothers. The Dinkins administration also chose Alianza as one of 10 organizations to operate citizenship classes, English courses and youth recreation programs in schools from the afternoon until 10 p.m.

"With Dinkins, we were allowed to compete on a level playing field," Pérez said.

Rudolph Giuliani's 1993 defeat of Dinkins, however, showed the downside of their overt political activism. Suspecting that Alianza and other social service groups had aided Dinkins' campaign, the Giuliani administration's Department of Investigation spent weeks poring over Alianza's books.

While no illegalities were found, Alianza's city grant support was slashed in half, hobbling its programs. The group slowly rebuilt its relationship with the city, aided by grants from Pataki. Alianza received \$6.9 million last year from government support, underwriting 78 percent of Alianza's budget, according to the group's tax records.

But Alianza was not well known outside upper Manhattan until it became an outspoken advocate for the Dominicans whose relatives including, in some cases, entire families, were killed in November when American Airlines Flight 587 crashed in Queens on its way to Santo Domingo.

Lantigua and Pérez have demurred from seeking what Pérez calls "the incredible pull" of elective office. "I love politics, but the elected officials act not from a position of leadership, not from what needs to be done, but from a perspective of a need to be re-elected," Pérez said. "They're more into punishing any other sort of leadership that emerges, because they're so vulnerable."

"I have 300 employees," Pérez said. "There is not a single elected official who can say, 'I influenced 300 people.'"

Not surprisingly, such views grate office holders and their supporters. "When you live up there and you see these characters day after day, you're like, this is the leadership of the Dominican community?" said political consultant Luis Miranda Jr., a Puerto Rican who is Linares' campaign treasurer. "If Lantigua or Tallaj were to run tomorrow, they'll get 10 percent of the vote. The elected officials are the people who are tested day in and day out. They have a record you can look at."

But nonprofit leaders and elective officeholders are not the only routes Dominicans have taken to leadership. Consider Fernando Mateo, who built a carpet-laying business from scratch and then gained national renown for his creative efforts to stem crime.

In 1991, he started a trade school on Rikers Island for first-time nonviolent offenders. Two years later, he launched the Toys for Guns campaign, which provided a way for illegal gun owners to swap their weapons for toy store gift certificates without fear of arrest. In 1998, Mateo found his first more or less permanent advocacy perch as the unpaid president of the New York State Federation of Taxi Drivers, which was overwhelmed by a spate of murders of livery drivers.

Mateo emerged as not just creative but combative, using the threat of a mock funeral on City Hall's steps to wrangle \$5 million from a resistant Giuliani administration for bulletproof partitions in cabs. Pataki proved more receptive, Mateo said, and helped the livery drivers' families secure money through the state's victims fund to pay for funerals and support children. The governor also signed into law harsher punishments for people convicted of killing livery cab drivers.

As Pataki's re-election campaign neared, Mateo volunteered to organize Gran Fiesta Pataki, a \$500-a-head fund-raiser. On March 13, about 800 paying guests crammed into a Manhattan hotel ballroom and listened to three Dominican bands perform. Mateo said he is also helping raise money for John Faso, the GOP's candidate for state comptroller.

Other Dominican businessmen are also engaging in this avenue of political involvement. "We are coming into our own. We have actually grown in the political process," said Livio Sánchez, the owner of a Bronx construction company who organized a June fund-raiser for Pataki at his home in Westchester. "We are open to any political party, Democrat or Republican, as long as we get a piece of the pie. We are no longer the followers."

Mateo has already moved beyond New York State politics. He is about to launch a group called the National Hispanic Republican Forum, which will bring together GOP senators, mayors and other elected Republicans from around the country to talk about Latino topics. He is also starting up a nonprofit civil rights organization, Hispanics Across America, to fill what he sees as a void in studies about Latino culture, medical issues and the like.

Politics in Washington Heights are changing as well. This year, with Linares' candidacy, the neighborhood has a chance to elect the first Dominican to the State Senate, after lawmakers in Albany created a new district that takes into account their extensive population.

Linares' bid, however, has been far from unifying, because to win he must first defeat Sen. Eric Schneiderman, a Democrat whom the Republican leaders of the Senate lumped into the new 31st Senate District when they drew the boundaries to include the Upper West Side blocks where Schneiderman lives. Few people in Albany think that was an accident; Republican senators openly loathe Schneiderman for his obstructionist tactics and for aggressively assisting challengers to sitting GOP senators' re-elections two years ago.

The primary has not just divided prominent Dominicans, but also split the city's Democratic leadership, with many fearing the campaign will be a replay of last year's acrimonious, racially

charged mayoral primary. Earlier this year, an editorial in the Manhattan Times, which was founded by Luis Miranda, faulted Schneiderman for making "racist comments" when he insinuated that Linares' campaign was working in tandem with the GOP to get rid of him.

Linares insists that Washington Heights would best be served by someone from the neighborhood, and notes a decade of success on the City Council, where he opened new schools to relieve overcrowding and helped arrange for the first police precinct in the area. Linares has been endorsed by Dinkins, former mayoral candidate Fernando Ferrer and Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The unusual scenario of the Republican mayor interjecting in a Democratic primary has inflamed accusations of a tacit GOP-Linares alliance.

A number of noted Dominicans are supporting Schneiderman because of his progressive record on issues such as the minimum wage, which they say is more important than Linares' heritage. "It is an insult, it's racism to come to me and say I have to vote for someone because they are Latino," Lantigua said.

Roberto Lizardo, a school board president and past candidate, complains: "They want to be Democrats but also want to play under the table to work for Pataki or Bloomberg." Miranda says such grievances have "nothing to do with principle" but are motivated out of pique from failed office seekers.

The one thing shared by the prominent Dominicans, whether they are Democrat, Republican, elected or not, is an acknowledgment that all these power struggles have not benefited Washington Heights.

"If we were all united as one, if we didn't have so many things dividing us, if Adriano Espaillat, if Lantigua, if Moises, if Linares - including myself - would all come together for one agenda, it would be wonderful," Mateo said. "But unfortunately there are so many different agendas that it keeps us weak. And people play us that way."

NEXT: The future of Rochester

emerges.

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