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Democrats Fear Snowball Effect

Warning signs as 2002 races loom

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New York Democrats yesterday said they feared that ethnic hostilities, which helped torpedo Mark Green's mayoral bid, could threaten their chances to unseat Gov. George Pataki in the gubernatorial election next year.

State Democratic Party leader Judith Hope said it was so crucial to avoid a potentially divisive primary that one of the two Democratic contenders — former federal Housing Secretary Andrew Cuomo or state Comptroller H. Carl McCall — should drop out.

"Clearly, there are deadly serious warning signs for the Democratic Party next year," as it tries to take back the governor's office, Hope told The Associated Press. "We must avoid a divisive primary.

"One of them has to get out, it's clear," she added.

Both candidates said yesterday that they did not intend to withdraw from the race.

But one Latino politician said minorities could become bitter if Cuomo, the 43-year-old son of former Gov. Mario Cuomo, blocks the bid by McCall, 66, to become the state's first black governor.

Assemb. Jose Rivera (D-Bronx) predicted further intraparty fights, much like the friction between Green, a white liberal Democrat, and black and Puerto Rican Party leaders who supported Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer in the Democratic mayoral primary.

"I have more of a feeling we're not going to tolerate the same behavior when it comes to the first African-American running for governor . . ." said Rivera, referring to charges that Green had condoned racially tinged campaigning against Ferrer.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Brooklyn) said he didn't think Hope was trying to force one candidate from the race.

"Her thought was that a primary spends money, and there is no time to heal," Silver said.

McCall campaign spokesman Richard Fife said McCall "is committed to his campaign for governor."

Cuomo said primaries can "make us stronger, not weaker" if they do not involve racially divisive tactics.

The concern about next year's race for governor arose as city Democrats continued to bicker and blame the victory of Republican Michael Bloomberg on the bitter primary battle between Green and Ferrer.

Mixed signals were being sent about what the party would need to do to recover from Green's embarrassing defeat in a city that is 5-1 Democratic.

Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields said the loss "would have far-reaching implications." She said the party officials will take a long, hard look at "what allowed this self-destruction."

"Like a family feud, everyone can walk around [the hard issues], but at some point you have to deal with it," Fields said.

Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-Queens) said the party was in good shape, winning key borough and City Council offices.

"Mark won the battle and lost the war; that's what happened here," Meeks said. "He was not able to motivate and hold the base vote . . . but we do have some items and issues that need to be resolved."

Meeks said the Council of Black Elected Democrats, whose members come from New York State, will meet in the near future to discuss the tactics used in the mayor race.

The Rev. Al Sharpton said yesterday at his Harlem headquarters that the party was at a crossroads and "in intensive care from self-inflicted wounds."

"The result of [the] election is a wake-up call . . .to the leadership of the Democratic Party," Sharpton said. "Clearly, we cannot ignore that people are not going to, in the same way in the past, respond when there has been blatant disregard and insensitivity, the racial hysteria that was demonstrated in the runoff."

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