

As Minority Officials Are Caught Up in Scandals, Some See a Conspiracy

By THOMAS KAPLAN

The demise of José Peralta's campaign for Queens borough president was swift.

The first Dominican-American elected to the State Senate, Mr. Peralta was revealed last month as one of seven elected officials secretly recorded by a fellow legislator seeking leniency from federal prosecutors after she had been confronted with evidence of corruption.

He was not accused of any wrongdoing. But 12 days later, the Queens County Democratic Party passed him over and endorsed another candidate for borough president. Facing little chance of election, he decided to drop out of the race.

"The damage is done," said Senator Rubén Díaz Sr., a Bronx Democrat who was born and raised in Puerto Rico and who is the leader of the New York Hispanic Clergy Organization.

"We were hoping to have a Hispanic borough president in Queens," he added. "You see what happened? He has to pull out."

For nearly three months, New York's political world has been consumed by a procession of scandals, and minority communities have felt the bulk of the pain. Black legislators have been indicted in three new, unrelated corruption cases, and every lawmaker secretly recorded at the behest of prosecutors by the legislator, Shirley L. Huntley, now a former senator, was black or Hispanic.

"It's demoralizing," Mr. Díaz said. "It's like, 'When is this going to end?'"

The accusations of corruption have been particularly stinging for minority communities in part because they have already been upset over a loss of clout in the state capital.

An all-white coalition of Republicans and dissident Democrats controls the Senate. As recently as last week, the coalition accused the Democratic caucus of dysfunction, a charge that one senator, Ruth Hassell-Thompson of Mount Vernon, who was among those recorded by Ms. Huntley, once described as "code words for 'black folks in charge.'"

And in the legislative session that concluded last weekend, the two top priorities of minority lawmakers — cutting

down on low-level marijuana arrests resulting from police stops and providing tuition aid to undocumented immigrants — failed, after they were not considered in the Senate.

The frustration has boiled over in the aftermath of the corruption arrests, which have ensnared two of New York City's most prominent black politicians — Malcolm A. Smith of Queens and John L. Sampson of Brooklyn, Democrats who both are former leaders of the Senate Democrats — as well as a black assemblyman, Eric A. Stevenson, a Bronx Democrat.

In an interview, Assemblyman Stevenson, who was accused of taking cash in return for writing legislation, denied any wrongdoing and said he suspected

he was being singled out by the government. He said the series of allegations against elected officials made it seem as if "only black and Latino people are criminals."

He compared the situation to Cointelpro, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's counterintelligence program under J. Edgar Hoover that sought to discredit civil rights leaders like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"It would definitely have me question the motives of what's really behind all this, and really have me question the integrity of our own government, which is a sad thing to have to think," he said.

"Are they bringing an advanced Coin-

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telpro back into existence, or did it never leave, and they've constantly and always been using it?" he asked. "I thought that went out with the Malcolm X era, but I don't know what is going on."

On a Friday night in May, Senator James Sanders Jr., a Democrat from southeast Queens who defeated Ms. Huntley in a primary last year, decided to address the issue head on. Mr. Sanders, who is African-American, organized a debate at a community theater with a provocative title: "Attack on Black Leaders: Corruption or Conspiracy?"

"Are you really trying to stop corruption, or are you really trying to smear individuals?" asked Richard Washington, a lawyer and former prosecutor in the Manhattan district attorney's office, who described the arrests and investigations as a case of "political stop and frisk."

"And if you're trying to smear individuals, why are all those individuals people of color?" he asked. "It's a conspiracy."

The scandals have taken place in some of the state's neediest communities, according to an analysis by Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociologist at Queens College. Of the four Assembly districts with the highest percentage of residents in poverty, two are represented by legislators under indictment for corruption (William F. Boyland Jr., a Brooklyn Democrat, and Mr. Stevenson) and one is vacant (after making his own recordings for prosecutors, Nelson L. Castro, a Bronx Democrat, resigned in April as part of a deal to avoid prosecution for perjury).

The recent string of arrests has spanned jurisdictions; Mr. Smith is being prosecuted by the United States attorney in Manhattan, Preet Bharara, who is also prosecuting Mr. Stevenson. Mr. Sampson was charged by the United States attorney in Brooklyn, Loretta E. Lynch, who also prosecuted Ms. Huntley.

Defenders of the corruption cases point out that both prosecutors are members of minority groups — Mr. Bharara is Indian-American, and Ms. Lynch is black. They were also nominated by President Obama, and are part of a Justice Department overseen by Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr., both of whom are black.

"People have asked me directly, and that question is: Are we in fact targeting particular communities? Are we in fact looking to hold certain politicians to a high-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ULI SEIT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The United States attorney in Brooklyn, Loretta E. Lynch, top. Senator James Sanders Jr., a Democrat from Queens, above.

er standard than others?" Ms. Lynch said in a speech last month to a civic group in Marine Park, Brooklyn.

"The view that you should not steal someone else's money is not a higher standard," she added. "It should be everyone's standard. It's not an impossible goal to meet."

After her speech, Ms. Lynch said, "There certainly is no conspiracy to look at any particular group," but she said she understood how some people might feel as if they were being scrutinized more than others.

"We don't go around targeting people other than those against whom we have evidence," she said, "but I think that what happens is the atmosphere gets very toxic, for lack of a better word, and it does affect people."

Mr. Bharara, through a spokeswoman, dismissed the concern.

"The charging decisions we make in all of our cases are based exclusively on the facts and the law, and any suggestion to the contrary is absurd and insulting to the career prosecutors who bring these important cases," the spokeswoman, Ellen Davis, said. "The ethnic and racial back-

grounds of the defendants we have charged with public corruption crimes are as diverse as the public we are privileged to serve."

Many white New York politicians have been convicted of malfeasance. The list in recent years has included former Senators Nicholas A. Spano and Vin-

cent L. Leibell III, both Republicans, and Carl Kruger, a Democrat, as well as a former state comptroller, Alan G. Hevesi, a Democrat. A former Senate majority leader, Joseph L. Bruno, a Republican, is also facing a second trial on federal corruption charges, and a city councilman, Daniel J. Halloran III, a Republican, was charged as part of the case involving Mr. Smith.

"What's curious to me is I've never heard anybody ask how it affects a white community when it's the white electeds," said Jumaane D. Williams, a city councilman and a Brooklyn Democrat. But, he added, "I do think people look at elected officials of color twice as hard, and the blame is three times as much."

At the debate organized by Mr. Sanders, suspicion about the string of arrests and accusations was clear from the reactions of audience members, more than a few of whom were audibly supportive when the word "conspiracy" was invoked.

But others, like Terryll De Mendonca, the founder of a Queens nonprofit group called the Misunderstood Youth Development Center, said suggestions of a conspiracy amounted to an effort to make excuses.

"I feel as though we're not taking responsibility," Ms. De Mendonca said. "I feel as though we're blaming the media, we're blaming the police, we're blaming the white man — we're blaming everybody else except for ourselves." And Hettie V. Powell, a lawyer from Queens who is running for City Council, echoed that viewpoint, saying, "When you do something and you get caught, it's not a conspiracy."

Lottery Numbers

June 27, 2013

Midday New York Numbers
— 361; **Lucky Sum** — 10

Midday New York Win 4 —
5454; **Lucky Sum** — 18

New York Numbers — 372;
Lucky Sum — 12

New York Win 4 — 5281;
Lucky Sum — 16

New York Take 5 — 2, 13, 29,
36, 38

New York Pick 10 — 1, 15, 16,
18, 20, 31, 34, 41, 44, 47, 51, 60,
62, 64, 65, 67, 70, 71, 72, 74

New York Sweet Million — 1,
3, 9, 13, 23, 40

Midday New Jersey Pick 3 —
237

Midday New Jersey Pick 4 —
8054

New Jersey Pick 3 — 657

New Jersey Pick 4 — 0827

New Jersey Cash 5 — 4, 18, 30,
31, 33

New Jersey Pick-6 Lotto — 9,
14, 39, 43, 44, 45

Connecticut Midday 3 — 369

Connecticut Midday 4 — 6841

Connecticut Daily — 101

Connecticut Play 4 — 3636

Connecticut Cash 5 — 6, 13, 20,
23, 28

New England Lucky For Life
— 8, 13, 18, 28, 36; **Lucky Ball**
— 7