

# Party seeks to gain by loss

Calling him an opportunist, Democrats move to boot Sen. Pedro Espada from ranks

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ALBANY -- The state Democratic Party will take the unusual step of calling for the de-enrollment of scandal-plagued state Senate Majority Leader Pedro Espada Jr.

A source within the state party confirmed the plan to deliver a letter today to Bronx County Democratic Committee Chairman Jeffrey Dinowitz formally requesting a tribunal to seek Espada's ouster on the grounds that he has repeatedly used his membership to further his own ambitions, not the party's.

"Sen. Espada's decision to affiliate with the Democrats is the result of opportunism and personal gain, not a commitment to Democratic ideals," the letter says.

The state party's action -- first reported Monday in the New York Post -- comes almost a year to the day since the Senate coup crisis was brought to an end by Espada's return to the Democratic conference. The coup began when Espada and former Sen. Hiram Monserrate swung their support to Republican leader Dean Skelos. Monserrate relented days later, although Espada held out for more than a month.

His rise to majority leader, which came with hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of new staff and other perks, was widely perceived as a political payoff for his change of heart.

Since then, Espada has been buffeted by charges old and new, ranging from campaign finance law violations to allegations that his actual residence is in Mamaroneck, far from his Bronx district. Just after the coup, his son had to give up a \$120,000-per-year job with the Senate after it became clear that the hiring violated anti-nepotism laws.

Far more serious were charges contained in a civil suit filed in April by Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, who alleged that Espada had used his nonprofit Soundview HealthCare Network as a personal and political piggybank for himself and a circle of friends and relatives. Espada has denied those allegations, which are now the subject of a federal investigation, and accused Cuomo of targeting him for political gain.

Since officially announcing his run for governor in May, Cuomo has made it clear that he wants to bring an end to the sort of controversy and lack of party discipline that Espada has come to symbolize. The appointment of Cuomo ally Charlie King as the state party's executive director was a sign that the candidate was becoming more directly involved in shaping party strategy.

This isn't the first time Espada's Democratic enrollment has come under fire. The party tried to have him bounced in 2002, after he announced his plan to switch his enrollment to the GOP -- an action he never took. The resulting lawsuit made it to the Court of Appeals, where the final decision determined that while Espada's enrollment could not be challenged based on his legislative record, the party's county chair did indeed have the power, as described in state election law, to "determine that the voter is not in sympathy with the principles of such party

The letter to be delivered today cites that court decision, and is footnoted with media accounts of Espada's actions during the coup crisis. In accordance with state law, it will be signed by an enrolled member of the local party.

In addition to his role as Bronx County chairman, Dinowitz also serves in the state Assembly; his district office was closed Monday for the holiday.

Spokesmen for Espada and Senate Democratic Conference Leader John Sampson did not return requests for comment.