

## **The parties at midterm**

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Our electoral campaigns, as in the States, start right after Labor Day. I mean the intensive media campaigns—the motorcades and the big rallies—because the ongoing struggle for power between and within the parties is a never-ending proposition. At the time of this writing, we are at the halfway point between the start of our last campaign and the start of the next campaign. How does it look?

Gov. Aníbal Acevedo has weathered the worst part of his four-year term. He has set the house in order, with considerable difficulties. With the fiscal problems behind him, he is working hard to get the economy moving again. The turnaround is coming along slowly, but we are moving in the right direction and by 2008 economic activity should have reached a level that will make the governor a solid candidate in the election.

The governor has more negatives now than he had in the 2004 election. He has had to make hard decisions on the revenue side that do not endear him to the middle class or to the lower income groups. But with regards to the most painful of these decisions, the sales tax, the Legislature shares political responsibility with him. The Legislature, however, will have an edge on the spin circuit due to the House's 5.5% sales tax initiative.

Primaries for the governorship will not happen in the Popular Democratic Party (PDP). It is an axiom widely accepted in the party that a sitting governor deserves a second chance, so nobody will be even thinking about challenging Gov. Acevedo. This is the foundation for islandwide party unity, a factor of considerable importance in any election.

As far as getting the house in order and the economy going is concerned, and in terms of party unity, I believe the governor will be well-positioned for his re-election campaign come 2008. One drawback, however, will be that he has not communicated a coherent political project, that is, a vision for his administration. This is not to say that he lacks this vision, because, for example, the initiative for the transformation of our economy into a knowledge economy is an important indicator of a good sense of direction. But a vision must integrate the economy, education, health and social policies, etc., along with status. It must be communicated so that it is understood and felt by the people at large. This he must get across by 2008.

The New Progressive Party (NPP) presents a different situation altogether. Former Gov. Pedro Rosselló and Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño are engaged in a bitter struggle for the party's nomination to the governorship in 2008. Rosselló is the president of the party, and as such has a stronghold on the

party's central organization but not on the local committees dominated by the mayors, a good part of which are with Fortuño.

Rosselló's strength lies in his institutional position, in the depth of his followers' support—in some cases verging on fanaticism—and in his ideological leadership. His vision, statehood, is much easier to communicate than the complex vision that a pro-Commonwealth candidate must articulate. Fortuño shares this vision, but he has not demonstrated the commitment, the tenacity, and the will to fight for the ideal that Rosselló has.

Fortuño's strength lies in the public's perception of him. He comes across as intelligent, well-intentioned, reasonable, likable, and above all, refreshing. He belongs to a new generation, the generation that is seizing the initiative in all walks of life in Puerto Rico. It is, therefore, natural and to be expected that he should be ahead in the polls today. This phenomenon is not new. We saw it with Hernán Padilla and with Victoria Muñoz. Both of them were sky-high in the polls at midterm, that is, at this point in time. Yet neither made it to the governorship.

On the negative side, Rosselló is laden with negatives. Fortuño thus far has accumulated few, so he is well-positioned to attract support beyond the NPP. The NPP will need this badly if they are to win the election. The real question is whether Rosselló or Fortuño will get to September 2008 with a united party behind them.

The NPP is headed for a primary election for the governorship. Primaries tend to be divisive. They can be more or less divisive depending on the attitudes of the candidates, the party leaders that support them, and their followers. The primary between Rosselló's and Pesquera's was not deeply divisive, but it did cost Rosselló some votes. The Rosselló-Fortuño primary, however, is shaping up in the emotional context of loyalty to the party's president and ideological leader or support for the candidate that a great number of the NPP leaders feel has the better chance to win the election against Acevedo.

At this point, no one can tell who will win the primary. If the sense of party loyalty and commitment to statehood prevails, it will be Rosselló. If the party's instinct for survival prevails, it will be Fortuño. Parties exist to win elections. When the ideological aspect prevails they dwindle, but in primaries it is the ideological grass roots that has the stronger motivation. Whoever wins, will have to unite the party in order to win the election.

There will not be too much time to do that if the primary is held at the time prescribed by law: March 2008. The law used to provide for these primaries to be held late in the year before the election. This gave the parties more time to heal the wounds brought on by primaries. In order to do that now the candidates must agree to hold an internal election in lieu of the primaries set by law. This will be the first test of the spirit of cooperation between Rosselló and Fortuño on the road toward the November elections in 2008. The jury is out as to how much cooperation there will be.

So, when we look at the parties' positioning at midterm to win the elections of 2008, we must conclude that the PDP and Gov. Acevedo have the better chance to prevail because a big uncertainty hovers over the question of party unity in the NPP. But, this is the view at midterm. In politics, two years is an awfully long time. The truth is that anything can happen, come November 2008.

