

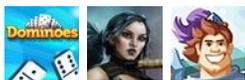
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Ex-N.Y. legislative leaders facing U.S. corruption trials

REUTERS By Joseph Ax November 1, 2015 1:12 PM



By Joseph Ax

NEW YORK (Reuters) - The former leaders of New York's two legislative chambers face simultaneous public corruption trials this month in a Manhattan federal courthouse, shining a spotlight on the sordid side of state politics.

Former New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, long one of the state's most powerful lawmakers, goes on trial this week on charges that he used his office to collect millions of dollars in kickbacks and bribes.

Dean Skelos, former Senate majority leader, faces his own criminal trial on Nov. 16. He is charged with taking official ac-



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Skeios, a Republican, wielded virtually absolute control in Albany over everything from the state budget to key legislation. That so-called "three men in a room" system, in which the holders of those three offices hash out deals in secret, has long troubled good government advocates.

Both men have resigned their leadership posts, though they remain in the legislature. They have denied the allegations, with Silver saying repeatedly that he will be vindicated at trial.

The trials are the highest-profile cases in a string of corruption scandals. More than 30 state lawmakers have either been indicted or forced from office in recent years.

U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara has cast the allegations as symptomatic of a "show-me-the-money culture" that had transformed New York's statehouse into "one of the most corrupt governments in the nation."

Those comments prompted a motion from Silver's lawyers to dismiss the indictment, arguing that Bharara had tainted potential jurors. U.S. District Judge Valerie Caproni said she was "troubled" by the remarks but allowed the case to proceed.

Susan Lerner, executive director of the good government group Common Cause of New York, said lawmakers have refused to consider meaningful ethics reforms despite continued scandals.

"It's a culture of entitlement that needs to be broken," she said.

Gerald Benjamin, a professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, said the legislature's popularity rating is so dismal that there is little downside for lawmakers to maintain the status quo.

"The institutional reputation is in the sewer, and can't go lower," he said.

Silver, who was arrested in January, faces seven counts tied to two alleged schemes.

First, prosecutors say Silver earned \$3 million for referring asbestos sufferers to a personal injury law firm despite doing no legal work on the cases. Those patients came from a doctor who secretly received \$500,000 in state money for research at Silver's direction, according to the government.

The doctor, Robert Taub, is a professor at Columbia University and founded a mesothelioma center affiliated with the school. Taub is expected to testify for the government at trial after agreeing to cooperate under a nonprosecution deal.

Following Silver's arrest, Columbia said it would dissolve the center and fire Taub, who has challenged his termination in a lawsuit.

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\$700,000 in kickbacks by steering real estate developers with business before the legislature to another law firm that specializes in challenging tax assessments.

One of the developers is Glenwood Management, which manages nearly 9,000 apartments in Manhattan and is a major campaign donor for New York politicians.

Glenwood also features prominently in the Skelos case, where the former Senate leader is accused of pressuring Glenwood to pay his son, Adam, in exchange for political support.

A subpoena served on Glenwood as part of the Silver probe ended up yielding crucial evidence against Skelos, court documents filed by prosecutors show.

A lawyer for Glenwood, which is not accused of wrongdoing, did not respond to a request for comment on Friday.

(Reporting by Joseph Ax; Editing by David Gregorio)

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