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# Insults Fly Between Democrats in New York Senate, Underscoring Rift

By LISA W. FODERARO MARCH 26, 2017

ALBANY — In the tense world of New York State politics, threaded with corruption charges and enigmatic alliances, the exchange rippled through the Legislature like a menacing current — and underscored the predicament Democrats find themselves in.

In mid-March, Senator Michael N. Gianaris, a Queens Democrat, accused a group of eight breakaway Democrats, who have partnered with the Senate Republicans, of being President Trump’s “New York Democrats” — “happy to eat the crumbs from the Republican dinner plate.”

One of those renegade lawmakers, Senator Marisol Alcantara, a Manhattan Democrat and a member of the Independent Democratic Conference, soon shot back at Mr. Gianaris, saying he was a product of Harvard and guilty of having “white privilege.” (Mr. Gianaris is Greek-American, while Ms. Alcantara emigrated from the Dominican Republic as a child.)

The exchange prompted a new round of hand-wringing over the deteriorating relations among Democrats in the Senate, who technically hold a majority but whose divisions have effectively given power to the Republicans. Observers say the vitriol, tinged with allegations about race and class, does not augur well for a reconciliation anytime soon.

“Race is an underlying factor and dynamic among the Democrats in the Senate,” said

Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at the State University of New York at New Paltz. “It’s always beneath the surface.”

The balance of power in the Senate is as confounding to insiders as outsiders. The Assembly and the executive branch, with Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo at the helm, are controlled by Democrats. But the Senate, historically led by Republicans, has the thinnest of margins. The 63-seat Senate now comprises 31 Republicans and 32 Democrats, including an empty seat that is likely to be filled by another Democrat this spring.

The eight breakaway Democrats who caucus with the Republicans are joined by Senator Simcha Felder of Brooklyn. A Democrat, he recently ran on the Republican line as well.

When Senator Jeffrey D. Klein, who represents parts of the Bronx and Westchester County, first broke from the mainstream Democrats to form the Independent Democratic Conference, there were four members, all of them white. It has since emerged as an independent faction in its own right. In recent months, the conference has grown more diverse as well; Ms. Alcantara successfully ran on the group’s line in the primary last year. Senator Jesse Hamilton of Brooklyn, who is black, joined the conference in the fall. And in January, Senator Jose R. Peralta of Queens, a first-generation Dominican-American, followed suit.

With President Trump’s victory prompting protests among liberal activists across the nation, renewed attention is being paid to the independent Democrats. Rallies and websites accuse them of betraying a liberal agenda by teaming with Republicans. That has put the Independent Democratic Conference on the defensive.

Ms. Alcantara said in an interview that she was infuriated when Mr. Gianaris implied that she and her colleagues supported Mr. Trump’s policies. In addition to accusing him of having white privilege, Ms. Alcantara asked in the Senate chamber how many times he had been the target of a racial slur.

In an interview, she said that mainstream Democrats in the Senate had in the past singled out her and her two minority colleagues in the conference as traitors. “He made very offensive statements,” she said, referring to Mr. Gianaris’s remarks

about “Trump Democrats.” “I don’t understand how Gianaris wants all of us to work together as a group when all he does is insult everyone in the I.D.C.”

For his part, Mr. Gianaris expressed frustration that, because of what he called the “collusion” with Republicans, his conference’s budget resolution never made it to the floor for debate. “Somehow today we are only left discussing the resolutions that the Republicans want us to hear,” he said in the chamber on March 15. “The Republicans are choosing which Democrats they want to hear from.”

After Ms. Alcantara’s comments, Mr. Gianaris fought back, saying that his parents were immigrants from Greece and that his father had the painful experience of watching his house burn at the hands of the Nazis.

In a phone interview, he defended his reference to “Trump Democrats,” saying, “I think they are worthy of that.” He also expressed resentment that a group of Democrats was preventing New York from being one of only a handful of states in the nation to have Democrats controlling the Legislature and executive branch.

“There is more at stake than the personal slurs that are being thrown around by them,” Mr. Gianaris said. “This is not about personalities. This is not about who sits with whom in the school cafeteria. It’s about making sure the state can stand as a progressive bulwark against the Trump administration.”

Professor Benjamin said the current dynamics in the Senate — while outwardly byzantine — made a certain political sense. For the past 15 years, dating to when David A. Paterson was elected leader of the Senate Democrats, that position has been held by a member of a minority group. (Mr. Paterson, who is black, went on to become governor, but has since retired from politics.)

After Mr. Klein reached a power-sharing deal with the Republicans in 2012, he enjoyed a leadership role that otherwise would have eluded him, Mr. Benjamin said. “Some Caucasian leaders saw themselves as blocked from leadership,” he said. “If, in order to be a leader, you must belong to a minority group as a practical matter, and you aspire to leadership, then that’s a factor.”

The mainstream Democrats, who are led by Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins of

Yonkers, who is black, say that members of the Independent Democratic Conference are motivated by a desire for bigger offices and chairmanships. But in an interview on Friday, Mr. Klein denied that was the impetus.

Instead, he said that he was tired of the “dysfunction and corruption” among Democrats and asserted that his conference had pulled Republicans to the left. And he dismissed the idea that the partnership had denied the Democrats a majority. “If we decided tomorrow to go back to the Senate Democrats, we’d still be at 31,” Mr. Klein said, citing the number of seats effectively held by Democrats, given Mr. Felder’s own relationship with Republicans.

The acrimony on display between Ms. Alcantara and Mr. Gianaris, he said, was the result of Mr. Gianaris’s “obsession” with the Independent Democratic Conference. “I stand by her comments,” he said. “She’s very passionate and very hardworking, and she has a story that she’s very proud of.”

But Ms. Stewart-Cousins lamented the distraction of the recent personal attacks. “This is a really serious time,” she said. “There is such uncertainty and fear, and a lot of people are expecting us to speak on the substance of issues. Everyone was surprised when it became more personal. That’s not the place or space for that.”

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