

Actress, activist challenges Cuomo from left | Local News

Joe Mahoney CNHI State Reporter

ALBANY — Gov. Andrew Cuomo, already coping with fallout from corruption prosecutions of two former aides, learned Monday he will face a primary challenge from progressive actress Cynthia Nixon.

The Emmy-award winner, best known for playing "Miranda" in the HBO series "Sex and the City," is expected to seek both the Democratic and Working Families Party lines on the September ballot.

She has no track record as a government official but has endeared herself to some liberals for her advocacy for public schools.

Her candidacy announcement bashed Cuomo for "a string of indictments for corruption, his failure to fix the New York City subway and his support for a backroom deal which handed Republicans control of the state Senate."

In advance of her announcement, the Cuomo camp trotted out endorsements for the incumbent from two well-known gay men: British musician Elton John and U.S. Rep. Sean Maloney, D-Cold Spring.

Nixon, a lifelong New Yorker who is openly gay, showed no hesitation in taking thinly veiled shots at Cuomo in a video heralding her candidacy.

"We are sick of politicians who care more about headlines than they do about us," Nixon stated.

Nixon's pursuit of the governor's mansion is expected to exacerbate tensions between Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who, like the governor, is reputed to have ambitions to run for the White House.

The latter has praised Nixon as "a strong independent woman who makes her own decisions."

Nixon climbed into the governor's race on a day when a new Siena Poll showed that Cuomo's job approval rating has slumped eight points since January.

State GOP Chairman Ed Cox said the trend shows Cuomo is "in serious trouble."

The Cuomo campaign took no shots at Nixon, instead focusing on the incumbent's legislative successes on behalf of same-sex marriage, an increased minimum wage and stringent gun control laws.

"We look forward to building on that record as we continue to fight and deliver for

New York families," the Cuomo campaign said in a statement.

Meanwhile, two challengers to Cuomo have emerged from the Republican Party: Dutchess County Executive Marc Molinaro, scheduled to make his candidacy formal on April 2, and state Sen. John DeFrancisco, R-Syracuse.

Cuomo has been dogged in recent weeks by headlines relating to the bribery and corruption charges brought against Joseph Percoco, his campaign manager in both 2010 and 2014, whom Cuomo has likened to a brother.

Percoco was convicted last week of three felony charges relating to Cuomo administration economic-development projects.

"Since the Percoco convictions, Cuomo has been taking on water from both the left and the right," said Onondaga County Republican Chairman Tom Dadey.

He said Cuomo appears more vulnerable now than he has at any other point since taking over the statehouse in January 2011.

Molinaro alluded to the corruption issue with a tweet responding to Nixon's campaign launch: "We welcome @CynthiaNixon to the race and look forward to a healthy and honest conversation about how we restore the people's trust in the governor's office."

The Siena survey, completed before Nixon made her candidacy official, showed Cuomo leading her by 66 percent to 19 percent.

That is a similar margin to what was racked up by the governor's late father, three-term Gov. Mario Cuomo, in a 1994 primary against left-wing activist Lenora Fulani. While the elder Cuomo crushed Fulani that year, he was defeated in the general election by a little-known state lawmaker, Republican George Pataki, who went on to serve three terms in Albany.

Gerald Benjamin, a political-science professor at SUNY New Paltz, said Nixon could emerge as a major headache for Cuomo should she succeed in drawing the support of the union-backed Working Families Party.

Should that happen, a moderate Republican such as Molinaro could become a formidable threat in a three-way general election, Benjamin observed.

He said Cuomo has had little success in disciplining the left-leaning activists within his own party.

"Cuomo is sometimes respected, sometimes feared, but he is not loved," Benjamin said.

The Siena poll showed Molinaro and DeFrancisco are largely unknown to voters. The survey showed Cuomo beating both men — 57 percent to 29 percent for Molinaro and 57 percent to 28 percent for DeFrancisco.

Incumbents generally try to avoid primaries because the contests can cause them to spend down campaign funds they would prefer to reserve for general elections and

because they can move the candidate to the "party extremes," said Harvey Schantz, a professor of political science at SUNY Plattsburgh.

He also noted New York gubernatorial races often shape up as a referendum on the incumbent — meaning this year's contest could hinge on how voters weigh Cuomo's job performance over his two terms.

Michael Lawler, spokesman for DeFrancisco's campaign, said Cuomo should be held accountable for New York's relatively high outward migration of its population to other states and for stagnation in the upstate economy.

"No amount of lipstick is going to make this pig look better," Lawler said of Cuomo's record.

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