Corruption Case Deals New York Governor Andrew Cuomo a Blow

Federal prosecutors charged his former top aide with participating in a bribery scheme

By ERICA ORDEN and JOSH DAWSEY
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New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, right, speaks at an event in Buffalo, N.Y., on Friday.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo suffered a serious political setback this week when federal prosecutors charged his former top aide and eight others connected to him with participating in a bribery scheme that exploited his administration for personal gain.

For Mr. Cuomo, a second-term Democrat, the episode is the biggest crisis since he took office in 2011, both because it involves loyalists whom he entrusted with
great authority and because it is directly tied to a signature economic-development program.

“There’s clearly damage to him personally and politically,” said Richard Brodsky, a Democrat and a former New York state assemblyman.

Preet Bharara, the U.S. attorney in Manhattan who brought the case, has described Albany as a “cauldron of corruption,” and his office has brought corruption charges against a dozen state lawmakers since 2009. The majority of those cases, including last year’s prosecutions of the leaders of both chambers of the Legislature, ended in convictions.

The charges this week mark the first time Mr. Bharara’s office has alleged criminal activity within Mr. Cuomo’s administration. The governor, who took office vowing to clean up Albany, wasn’t named in the case.

The charges center on one of Mr. Cuomo’s closest friends, Joseph Percoco, who for years served as a senior aide in the governor’s administration, was his two-time campaign manager, and was so close to the Cuomo family that the governor referred to him as “my father’s third son.”

Mr. Percoco is accused of accepting more than $315,000 in bribes. His attorney described the case as an “overreach of classic proportions” and said Mr. Percoco will plead not guilty.

On Friday, Mr. Cuomo said that “the allegations are truly, truly disappointing.” But he insisted the case would have no effect on his plans to run for re-election in 2018.

George Arzt, a New York-based political consultant, said the case will be a factor if Mr. Cuomo runs, but he suggested the governor could fend it off by committing himself to ethics changes. “He has two years to become a strong champion of ethics reform,” he said.

In recent years, Mr. Cuomo, once believed to have White House ambitions, has made few gestures in that direction and has kept his sights on his home state, including limiting his participation on the 2016 campaign trail.

Many political observers predicted the governor will try to distract from the charges.

“One of the great powers of the governor is you get to define the daily discourse,”
said Gerald Benjamin, a professor of politics at the State University of New York in New Paltz. “He will try to shift the focus.”

The allegations have emboldened many of Mr. Cuomo’s political foes.

Assemblyman Steve McLaughlin, a Republican and frequent critic of the governor, said he would call for Mr. Cuomo’s impeachment if evidence emerges that he knew about his former aide’s alleged crimes.

“He’s politically done,” Mr. McLaughlin said. “He’s out there flailing away today saying this isn’t going to change. This changes everything. He is so weakened.”

On Friday, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat who has an open feud with Mr. Cuomo, said, “It will take a long time to restore public faith.”

Many in New York political circles seized on the colorful details in the criminal complaint, specifically the allegations that Mr. Percoco and others used “ziti” as a code word for cash.

Bill Hyers, who managed Mr. de Blasio’s mayoral campaign, tweeted a photo Thursday of his dinner, featuring a heaping pile of pasta.

“Ordered Ziti and meatballs tonight,” Mr. Hyers wrote, capping the dispatch with a smiley face.

—Mike Vilensky contributed to this article.

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