

**A LONG-RUNNING FEUD BETWEEN DOMINICAN POLS HEATS UP**

# Heights Stakes

**BY ED MORALES**

**T**his summer, when you ask people in Washington Heights whom they're supporting for state assemblyman, they hesitate for a second, then ask, "Are Guillermo and Adriano fighting again?" The two most powerful Dominican politicians in New York, Guillermo Linares and Adriano Espaillat, have returned to their family feud, this time over 42-year-old Espaillat's bid to be reelected as state

rent control and stabilization. A local tenant advocate who once opposed him on this issue now concedes, "Espaillat recognized that he had a political liability in accepting that money from RSA. It was a stupid thing to do, and he's not going to do it again." But critics of the rent control deal say loopholes have driven rents up significantly in neighborhoods like the Upper West Side, with the fall-out squeezing Washington Heights.

Most neighborhood activists agree that Espaillat has had an impressive first term, at least in a political sense, forging alliances with Silver, Ramirez, and Denny Farrell. He is a vice-chair of the Black, Puerto Rican & Hispanic Caucus, which was renamed to include him. He is clearly in the centrist New Democrat mode, veering to the left or the right depending on the situation. Like Herman Badillo he believes in the need to explore charter schools, but says any such proposal "must include provisions that would prevent efforts to disman-



Incumbent Adriano Espaillat (center), flanked by Senate candidate Mark Green at the Dominican Day Parade two weeks ago

assemblyman in the 72nd district. The two first opposed each other for City Council in 1991, a race in which they were separated by less than 300 votes. This time, Linares is backing his longtime associate, district leader Isabel Evangelista, in her attempt to unseat the first-time assemblyman.

Last year, Linares and Espaillat fought to a draw, with Linares retaining his City Council seat despite a challenge from Espaillat-endorsed Roberto Lizardo, while Linares candidates lost district leader races to two Espaillat candidates—Miguel Martinez and Maria Morillo. Linares, hurt by criticism of his last-minute support for the Pathmark project in East Harlem, has also lost influence in the years since David Dinkins's departure. Potential allies like Charles Rangel, Freddie Ferrer, and Roberto Ramirez have committed to the Espaillat camp. Somewhat concerned perhaps, Linares is strongly attacking Espaillat's performance. "I have serious problems with the commitment I've seen from him so far," he told the *Voice*.

What's at stake in the battle between these two Dominican heavyweights is possibly a new district that might enable one of them to be the first Dominican in Congress.

Recent Supreme Court decisions regarding minority-majority districts cast some doubt on that happening, and Espaillat downplays it as his motivation, saying, "It's ridiculous to fight over a district that doesn't exist." But with Linares's mandatory departure from the City Council in the year 2000, tensions have increased.

The 72nd Assembly District, which is about 80 percent Latino and 50 percent Dominican, became a bastion of power for Dominicans when longtime Assemblyman John Murtaugh was defeated by Espaillat two years ago. In 1996 Espaillat reportedly accepted over \$23,000 in contributions from individuals with ties to the Rent Stabilization Association (RSA), a prolandlord group, a contribution that Evangelista and Linares still use to attack his candidacy. Taking a page from his confidant, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, Espaillat takes credit for "reaffirming tenants' rights" by supporting the extension of

the UFT? He favors a tough stance on crime in a neighborhood where police continually harass residents. Said one activist: "I wouldn't want to be a young Dominican kid in this neighborhood, hanging out on the street late at night." But Espaillat also voices outrage over questionable police actions such as in the Kevin Ceden case, as well as another incident in Washington Heights in which police were accused of beating a Dominican dentist.

Unfortunately for the low-profile Evangelista, 65, no one seems to take her candidacy seriously. She was not Linares's first choice—Victor Morisete-Romero, the 31-year-old head of the Community Association of Progressive Dominicans (ACDP), couldn't run because of residency requirements, according to some sources. "She is clearly a surrogate, part of Guillermo's effort to unseat me," said Espaillat.

The soft-spoken Evangelista is indignant about others dismissing her. An early member of ACDP, which Linares helped found, she has a 32-year history as an advocate for tenants' and immigrants' rights. "I'm not a person who has emerged out of nowhere," she said. "I'm running because we are lacking leadership on the state level."

Evangelista, who is supported by Chuck Schumer, former mayor Dinkins, and Stanley Michels, says that Espaillat has failed to protect tenant interests by selling out to landlord interests, and has not paid enough attention to overcrowding at George Washington, the neighborhood's only high school. Moreover, she is offended by Espaillat's willingness to be seen marching in the Dominican Day Parade with Pataki and Giuliani. "There has been in the last few years a problem with so-called Democrats, small-*d* Democrats. But they have no qualms about standing with the same Republicans that are trying to destroy our communities," said Evangelista. "What's at stake in this election is whether this community is going to be represented by someone who really cares about the community or someone who only responds to special interests and is only concerned with their own personal political growth." **M**

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