



Prominent Democrats go after one of their own — Kurita

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Monday, July 14, 2008



KURITA



BARNES

Some prominent Tennessee Democrats are trying to throw Sen. Rosalind Kurita out of office in favor of Tim Barnes. *Photo Illustration by Bret Pelizzari*

Prominent Tennessee Democrats from former Gov. Ned McWherter to Sen. Thelma Harper are trying to throw out of office the Democratic state senator who helped Republicans win control of the body.

In one of the most intriguing primary election battles in the state, Sen. Rosalind Kurita (D-Clarksville) is trying to fend off an intra-party challenge from Tim Barnes, a Clarksville attorney. Whoever wins captures the Senate seat as there's no Republican opposition.

Many well-known members of the Democratic establishment in Tennessee want to help Barnes' cause.

That's because Kurita enraged Tennessee Democrats in 2007 when she unexpectedly crossed party lines and cast a key vote to help elect Republican Ron Ramsey Senate speaker and lieutenant governor, pulling the speaker's chair out from underneath 36-year veteran John Wilder.

After her vote, Ramsey appointed Kurita to the Speaker Pro Tem position, the Senate's No. 2 leadership spot.

As a result, Democrats want revenge. Wilder flew to Clarksville for an event for Barnes and contributed \$250 to his campaign.

In addition, Barnes' campaign has received the financial support of former Gov. McWherter (\$300 donation), his son Mike (\$1,000), House Speaker Jimmy Naifeh (\$200), Senate Democratic Leader Jim Kyle (\$250), Nashville Sen. Harper (\$125) and Memphis Sen. Beverly Marrero (\$100).

Barnes said the support from prominent Democrats is not surprising given Kurita's vote for Ramsey, which he described as being part of a "pattern" of Kurita's pursuit of "hidden" and "selfish" agendas.

"The Ramsey vote was merely a part of that," Barnes said. "To some people, it's a big part and to other people, it's just a small part.

"But I think that really this race has shaped up to be more of the comparison of the values between Rosalind Kurita and myself and who can be trusted and who is out for the constituents and who is out to pursue a self-serving agenda."

In response, Kurita maintained that she is "trying to help people" and that she has strong support in her district from people who appreciate her work.

Sen. Joe Haynes, the chairman of the Senate Democratic Caucus who is not campaigning against Kurita, said the prominent Democrats campaigning for Barnes are trying to remind Kurita of their disappointment in her vote.

"I understand their concerns about Sen. Kurita and why they're doing it," Haynes said. "I think they're trying to send a message."

Added Haynes: "I have tried to be conciliatory towards her. I would like to see her — if she is successful in being re-elected — to once again be a strong part of the caucus and rededicate herself to help us."

Kurita wasn't known as a shaky Democratic vote until she voted for Ramsey in January 2007.

That vote came after she failed to gain traction against Harold Ford Jr. in the 2006 U.S. Senate campaign for the Democratic Party's nomination and got little support from fellow Democrats in her annual quest to have more popularly elected positions in Tennessee.

Asked about the prominent Democrats campaigning against her, Kurita took the high road.

"I have no idea if that's true or accurate," Kurita said. "I certainly haven't seen them. But I have

seen lots and lots of my friends and my folks and I'm going to continue to work hard doing what I do."

For Barnes to defeat Kurita, he'll have to overcome a big monetary disadvantage.

For the quarter that ended June 30, Kurita had about \$205,000 in cash on hand after raising nearly \$23,000 from one fund-raiser. Barnes raised almost three times that amount — about \$63,000, he said — but had about \$40,000 on hand at the end of the second quarter.

Lotto Love?

During the waning days of the legislative session, Democrats received added motivation to go after Kurita when she sided with Republicans on reforming the state's lottery scholarship program, casting key vote after key vote that propelled the GOP-backed plan.

That Senate Republican-backed lottery scholarship plan included allocating about \$90 million for a program to develop more energy-efficient schools. Kurita is a longtime supporter of alternative fuels and energy efficiency.

"In my district, what's important is helping build schools in a way that can be energy-efficient, and of course I would support that," Kurita said, noting she represented one of the highest-growth areas of the state where school construction and funding is a priority.

Barnes said he's in favor of energy-efficient schools as well, but says he would have sided with a separate, Democratic-backed lottery scholarship proposal.

That Senate Democratic proposal wouldn't have funded the energy program but would have had more lottery dollars for HOPE scholarships.

"I am opposed to taking money that I feel like is earmarked for families trying to send their children to college," Barnes said.

Judicial jousting

In addition to the lottery, Kurita also riled fellow Democrats when she voted with the Republicans to deny Wilder's attempt to save a key cog of the Tennessee Plan, which is the state's method for selecting Supreme Court and appellate court judges.

Wilder considered the Tennessee Plan the signature piece of his 44-year legacy. But Senate Republicans, trying to force changes to the plan's parts, held up the renewal of a necessary piece — a nominating panel that submits potential judges and justices to the governor to choose among.

After the nominating panel's renewal stalled, Wilder tried to call the renewal legislation straight to the floor of the Senate, bypassing the committee system.

Kurita voted with all of the Republicans to deny Wilder's move.

Kurita said she considered the vote a "procedural" one and it shouldn't indicate how she stands on the Tennessee Plan. She wouldn't say specifically what her stance is, saying she's a nurse and not an attorney.

Barnes, an attorney, said he considered the Tennessee Plan a "great plan" and said the state should keep it.