

Dissension in local GOP####testing unity and strength

By Richard Borreca

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One of the reasons for the Hawaii Democratic Party's continued success is its ability to vigorously debate, scheme and fight amongst its own members.

This differs from the local Republican Party, which merely devours its young.

Democrats possess the ability to wade into a primary battle, gouge and eyeball their fellow Democrats and then launch into a serious talk about party unity for the general election. This is an ability that must be taught at a young age.

Already we have two federal races with multi-candidate Democratic primaries: former Mayor Mufi Hannemann, City Councilwoman Tulsi Gabbard and Esther Kiaaina in Hawaii Congressional District 2, while U.S. Rep. Mazie Hirono and former U.S. Rep. Ed Case are running to succeed U.S. Sen. Daniel Akaka.

In contrast, the GOP appears perilously close to an internal collapse as the battle over leadership has intensified into a demand that the party chairman step down. Late reports on Friday indicated that Jonah Kaauwai might give in.

The faction that came into politics with former Gov. Linda Lingle last week circulated a memo savaging Kaauwai, saying the way things are now, they cannot win next year.

"The reality is given the present state of affairs, we are simply not prepared to win or even compete," said an influential group of eight of the GOP's executive committee.

Among those signing off on the critical email were Marcia Klompus, Miriam Hellreich, Brennon Morioka and state Rep. Gene Ward. Hellreich is national committee woman and Morioka is national committeeman. The memo said that Lingle and former U.S. Rep. Charles Djou and the eight-member GOP House caucus "have stated their loss of confidence in the chair and have openly asked Jonah to step down."

Kaauwai, who used to be an assistant to former Lt. Gov. James "Duke" Aiona, has a counter-argument. He insists that the Lingle group wants to use the party to help just a few candidates, namely Lingle and Djou, while he is dedicated to opening up the entire GOP.

"Under past leadership we focused on a few elite candidates, sacrificing our principles, legislative candidates and the grassroots base of our party," said Kaauwai in an emailed response to the charges against him.

"The Hawaiian Republican Party, under my guidance, has had qualified candidates running in almost every elected office in the state. That is how you build a party, not by centering on one or two candidates," Kaauwai added.

Early in a political career, getting into a party slap fest probably doesn't damage you too much; you may even learn something about who are your real friends and enemies.

The late Patsy T. Mink, for instance, ran against Daniel K. Inouye in 1959 for Hawaii's first congressional seat. She lost, but came back to win when Hawaii gained another congressional seat. Moreover, Mink learned not to take her cues from the state Democratic Party and went on to become an inspirational national Democratic leader.

For Lingle and Djou, just the opposite is true: If they can't nail down the trouble within the party without more bloodshed, both their candidacies are in peril. Interestingly, one of the ways to do that would be to mend fences and endorse Kaauwai as the GOP candidate for the 2nd Congressional District. That would bring new meaning to the phrase "party unity."