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Gov labeled madman and dictator -- by his own party

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FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. -- Dictator. Madman. Unruly child. Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich has been called all those and more -- and that's just by his fellow Democrats.

A series of policy defeats and bitter confrontations has driven Blagojevich's relationship with Illinois legislators to a new low.

He's suing the speaker of the Illinois House over the timing of legislative sessions. He's being sued himself for launching health care programs without legislative approval. He broke his promise never to raise general taxes, which had been the bedrock of his political career.

Coupled with federal investigators sniffing around his administration, the situation leaves the second-term governor with few allies and little political strength.

Furious lawmakers accuse him of ignoring the legislative branch to score political points, most recently by blindsiding them with a proposal to give senior citizens free rides on mass transit. Many saw that as an attempt to distract the public from his reversal on taxes.

"We criticize guys like Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, who run their countries like dictators. Well, this isn't any different," Sen. Martin Sandoval, D-Chicago, said in debate Thursday. "Today, we might as well just lock the doors up, forget about the legislative process and let Gov. Blagojevich write all our bills the way he wants them."

Some legislators are calling for constitutional amendments to limit his veto authority and give voters the power to recall him.

Blagojevich, however, attributes any problems to "natural tension between the legislative branch and the executive branch" and says lawmakers should focus on helping people instead of criticizing him.

"Keep your eye on the ball," he said Thursday. His office didn't respond to an interview request Friday afternoon.

A year ago, it looked like Blagojevich had reason for optimism.

He had just won re-election despite a federal investigation that had resulted in the indictment of one top fundraiser and a guilty plea from one of his appointees. Democrats had expanded their majorities in the Legislature. The first initiative of his new term -- raising the minimum wage -- sailed through.

Then everything fell apart.

Blagojevich proposed a universal health care program, a 23 percent expansion of education spending and costly aid to the state's ailing pension systems. To help pay for it all, he proposed privatizing the state lottery and raising business taxes by \$7 billion, by far the largest tax increase in Illinois history.

His grand plan landed with a monumental thud.

People from all points on the political spectrum found something to dislike, but Blagojevich refused to give up and insisted he was "on the side of the Lord." The result was months of stalemate and finger-pointing at the state Capitol.

The budget that was supposed to be finished by May 31 wasn't done until October. Some disputes from the spring legislative session lingered until this month.

Blagojevich watched the House reject his tax plan 107-0. He ordered special session after special session until lawmakers stopped showing up. Then he sued House Speaker Michael Madigan for not forcing lawmakers to attend and for holding sessions at times the governor hadn't requested.

The lawsuit prompted one exasperated lawmaker to question the governor's sanity. "We have a madman," Rep. Joe Lyons, D-Chicago, told reporters.

When legislators finally passed a budget, Blagojevich punished his opponents by vetoing the pork

projects they had requested while sparing the projects of his allies. In at least two cases, he cut half the money for a bridge project while approving the other half.

He decided to proceed with his health care expansion even though legislators hadn't approved the money. When he presented the rules for operating the new services, they were rejected by the legislative committee responsible for reviewing regulations. Blagojevich ignored the committee and began the expansion, triggering a lawsuit.

Blagojevich also infuriated lawmakers by accusing them of not working hard enough while he rarely showed up at the state Capitol. Eventually, he did start showing up but flew home to Chicago each night, costing taxpayers thousands of dollars per flight.

He faced a new round of ridicule for ordering lawmakers to Springfield to vote on an issue that he considered vital, then leaving town himself to attend a hockey game while the bill was defeated.

The latest clash between Blagojevich and the Legislature involved mass transit.

Negotiators have been working for years on a plan to pump money into Chicago-area bus and rail systems. They finally agreed on a small increase in sales taxes in the Chicago region, but Blagojevich threatened to veto the legislation in keeping with his history of opposing general taxes on individuals.

That triggered more rounds of panicked negotiation as officials searched for a funding alternative before the arrival of "doomsday" -- when cash-strapped transit systems would be forced to slash service, lay off 2,600 employees and raise fares.

In the end, no alternative could pass, so Blagojevich agreed to sign the tax increase, and the measure got just enough legislative support to pass. Then he stunned everyone by using his amendatory veto powers to rewrite the legislation so that senior citizens could ride for free.

That meant the measure had to go back to the Legislature once again, where the whole deal might fall apart -- just to approve an idea that Blagojevich could have brought up months earlier.

Rep. Jack Franks, D-Woodstock, compared Blagojevich to an unsupervised 3-year-old touching everything with messy, chocolate-smearing fingers -- "just gleefully running around making the biggest mess he possibly could and then leaving it for us to clean up."

Beneath all the insults and accusations lies the fact that Blagojevich and legislators will, in all likelihood, have to work together for three more years. Unless they get along better, those years will produce little for Illinois.

"The morale is as low as the distrust is high, and that makes it tough for us to operate," said Rep. John Fritchey, D-Chicago.

But Blagojevich doesn't show any sign of changing his approach.

"I'd be a governor that I wouldn't like," he said, "if I simply sat there afraid of the criticism."

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