

Miller calls for unity in the Senate, hints at leadership changes

Senate president may punish those involved in failed coup last month

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Likening the recently fractious state Senate to a family that has weathered a spat, Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller called for unity yesterday as he announced the formation of a few new committees in a pre-session meeting with fellow Senate Democrats.

But Miller's unannounced changes in Senate leadership and committee responsibility were the coming session's first hint that he plans to punish those who supported an abortive coup against his presidency last month.

Outwardly, leftover tensions from that coup were smoothed over as the Senate's Democratic caucus unanimously nominated him to be president, a position he has held since 1987. Because Democrats outnumber Republicans 34-13 in the Senate, his election is assured when the full chamber convenes today.

Seconding Miller's nomination was Sen. Thomas L. Bromwell, who tried — and quickly failed — to rally enough votes last month to unseat Miller. "Mike Miller is my friend," Bromwell said.

For his part, Miller praised Bromwell's "many talents and skills." After the meeting, however, Miller said he would mete out some measure of discipline to those who had tried to oust him. "There will be some changes," he said.

Senators said they expected Miller to announce today that Sen. Gloria G. Lawlah would lose her position as chairwoman of the public safety and transportation subcommittee, part of the powerful Budget and Taxation Committee. Sen. Ulysses Currie, a fellow Prince George's Democrat, has been tapped to replace her.

Lawlah was seen as a Bromwell ally. Some insiders say Miller was particularly miffed by Lawlah's support of Bromwell because Miller had helped her survive a primary challenge in 1998.

Senators said they expect legislation regarding health care and the state lottery, Maryland's third-largest revenue source, to be taken away from the Finance Committee, which Bromwell heads.

By cutting back on the committee's jurisdiction, Miller potentially dents Bromwell's formidable political fund-raising base. The Senate Finance chairman has traditionally enjoyed strong financial support from the various interests that appear before the committee.

"The official news from Miller yesterday was the formation of three new committees: on substance abuse, redistricting and gaming. These groups are intended to offer guidance to the full Senate but will not hear bills or propose legislation.

He also announced the creation of a new, more organized Democratic caucus structure. Until now, Senate leaders met and made decisions, often leaving out rank and file members.

In two committee re-assignments, Miller said Sen. Perry Sfikas of Baltimore will move from Economic and Environmental Affairs to Judicial Proceedings