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HEADLINE: King 'dreamed this day would come,' says Steele;
Many have high hopes at inauguration of Md.'s first black lieutenant governor;
THE INAUGURATION OF ROBERT L. EHRLICH JR.

BYLINE: Tim Craig and Ivan Penn

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BODY:

Recalling the birthday of one of the nation's renowned civil rights leaders, Michael S. Steele became Maryland's first black lieutenant governor yesterday and vowed to become a leader for the state's under-represented communities.

After being sworn in by the state's first African-American chief judge of the Court of Appeals, Steele noted the symbolism of having his first day on the job occur on the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

"Forty years ago, Martin Luther King had a dream," Steele said in his inaugural address. "How fitting today we celebrate not only the inauguration of a new era, but the birthday of a man who dreamed this day would come."

The chief judge, Robert M. Bell, also noted the importance of sharing the stage with Steele, which he said demonstrated that once-formidable racial barriers have been broken.

"It shows a real opportunity has opened up in Maryland," said Bell, who was named the first black chief judge on the state's highest court in 1996.

All around the state capitol yesterday, African-Americans and public officials - including former rivals - said they have high hopes for Steele, who has promised to be the most active lieutenant governor in history.

"I think it is always a great opportunity to be the first," said departing Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, who held such a role herself as Maryland's first female lieutenant governor. "It gives you the opportunity to reach out to different constituencies and accomplish different goals."

But Townsend - who was widely regarded as the state's most active lieutenant governor - warns that Steele faces considerable risks in his new role. She said "a lot of people" will be watching Steele closely to see if he succeeds and distinguishes himself.

"I think there are high expectations," Townsend said. When asked if she thinks he will be a success, Townsend said: "We'll see."

King 'dreamed this day would come,' says Steele; Many have hig

Steele, 44, promises he will be an influential member of the new Republican administration, and Annapolis insiders expect him to yield considerable power.

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. has charged Steele with overseeing economic development and faith-based initiatives, two of the administration's priorities.

"He will be an equal partner from Day One," said Paul Ellington, Steele's deputy chief of staff.

Steele also hopes to become a leader in the black community by becoming its point man in the administration and chief advocate on issues of concern.

"Your voices will be noted and your concerns will be heard," Steele said during his address.

As a conservative Republican, Steele is hoping his role will lure more African-Americans in Maryland and across the country into the Republican Party.

Yesterday, several African-Americans who attended the inauguration said Steele is well on the way to achieving that goal.

"I've been a closet Republican all my life," said Abe Thomas, a nurse from Baltimore. "I think he will help a lot of us come out of the closet."

Steele was also praised yesterday by Jack Kemp, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the first Bush administration.

Kemp, who spoke at the inaugural, lauded Steele for adding diversity to Ehrlich's administration and the Republican Party.

"Bob Ehrlich and Michael Steele not only represent a metaphor for the party of Lincoln and Douglas, it represents a metaphor for America," said Kemp, an advocate of drawing more minorities into the Republican Party.

Steele, the former chairman of the Maryland Republican Party, spent yesterday surrounded by his family and close friends. Several of them said they are not surprised that Steele has ascended so quickly in Maryland politics.

"We're proud, but of course we always knew this would happen," said Steele's stepfather, John Turner.

Minutes after Steele took the oath of office in the Senate Chamber, several of the lieutenant governor's friends who witnessed the ceremony were already predicting that he would climb farther up the political ladder.

"This is just the beginning because I do expect great things from him," said Daphne G. Golding, who first met Steele when they attended the Johns Hopkins University in the late 1970s. "You know what, I am going to the White House, too. I think he will be governor or senator and then on his way."

Sun staff writer David Nitkin contributed to this article.

GRAPHIC: Photo(s), Chief Judge Robert M. Bell (left) congratulates Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele as his wife, Andrea, and son Drew look on.; DOUG KAPUSTIN : SUN STAFF

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