

# Arundel Judge to Head Md. District Court

*Rasin Will Be the First Woman to Oversee Forum for Many of State's Most Common Cases*

By Michael Abramowitz  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Maryland's vast District Court system, which handles more than 2 million cases annually and offers many residents their only exposure to the legal system, has a new chief for the first time in 25 years.

In one of his last acts before retiring next month, Chief Judge Robert C. Murphy of the Maryland Court of Appeals tapped Anne Arundel Administrative Judge Martha F. Rasin, 49, to succeed Robert F. Sweeney yesterday as chief judge of the District Court. Rasin is the first woman to oversee the court, which handles landlord-tenant disputes, traffic violations and many other everyday cases.

Sweeney has been running the District Court since its formation in 1971, and Murphy has headed the state's top appellate court since 1972. Their retirements, coupled with two vacancies on the Court of Special Appeals, have ushered in the most significant change in Maryland judicial leadership in a generation.

The transition could be felt down to the local level: Montgomery County State's Attorney Andrew L. Sonner is a finalist for one of the vacancies on the Court of Special Appeals, Maryland's second-highest court.

For months, the pending judicial shake-up has been the subject of intense speculation in Maryland's political community, spiced with reports of a behind-the-scenes struggle between the strong-willed Murphy and Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) over who would make the District Court selection.

While Glendening gets to fill vacancies on the bench, the Maryland Constitution gives the chief judge of the Court of Appeals the right to select

one of the 100 sitting District Court judges as chief judge. But Murphy said in an interview last week that Glendening at first sought to have some input into that decision as well, with an eye to naming a woman or a minority candidate.

"I don't think he fully appreciated—and his staff should have told him—that I do the appointing," said Murphy, who said he has met with Glendening several times to discuss the matter. "I think he felt that this judgeship was one he could use to diversify. . . . When he found out that he didn't do the appointing, he backed off."

Yesterday, the governor warmly embraced Murphy's selection of Rasin, a judge for the last seven years and, since October, administrative judge for the district that includes Anne Arundel County.

"Throughout her distinguished career, Judge Rasin has consistently demonstrated exceptional leadership abilities, a thorough understanding of the law and an outstanding record of public service," Glendening said in a statement. "Judge Rasin's appointment is also consistent with my administration's goal of creating an inclusive government at all levels."

At a news conference yesterday, Murphy played down Rasin's sex as a reason for the selection, saying he chose her primarily for her administrative and management skills and judicial experience. The post carries an administrative burden, overseeing roughly 1,200 employees and an annual District Court budget of \$74 million.

Rasin has a long pedigree in state legal and political circles, having served as an assistant to Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.) when he was president of the Maryland Senate in the 1970s. She attended law school at the University of Baltimore and worked as an associate in the Annapolis law firm of Bruce C. Bereano, the politically connected lobby-

ist. Her focus, however, was not lobbying but a general legal practice that included criminal defense, domestic cases, appeals and complex litigation.

Rasin said yesterday that she has only begun to absorb the impact of her appointment and that she expects only minor changes in the legacy left by Sweeney, widely credited with helping unify the state's old, occasionally corrupt assortment of local courts. "I have a lot to learn in the next few months," she said.

With Rasin's appointment, the legal and political community will turn its attention to the Court of Appeals, where Glendening now must fill the vacancy to be left next month by Murphy, who will reach the mandatory retirement age of 70. Five judges and a law professor have applied for that opening; the state's appellate judicial nominating commission soon will send Glendening a list of applicants it deems qualified.

In selecting a new chief judge, Glendening could select either one of those applicants or one of the six other members of the Court of Appeals. Lawyers and politicians say the leading candidates are believed to be Robert M. Bell, a judge on the court, and Alan M. Wilner, chief judge of the Court of Special Appeals.

Both judges are widely respected in the legal profession, but some insiders say Bell may have a leg up. He would be the first African American in that position, and his candidacy is being strongly promoted by many of the state's leading black politicians. Glendening has made it plain that he wants to expand the diversity of the court system.

"It's important that he select the most qualified person," said Sen. Decatur W. Trotter (D-Prince George's), a leading African American voice in the General Assembly. "From all indications we've seen in the community, that person is Judge Bell."