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Tension is high at final debate

Andrew Cuomo comes prepared for new attacks on HUD record ahead of decisive vote in attorney general's race

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NEW YORK -- In their final debate before Tuesday's primary, the three remaining Democratic candidates for attorney general argued over how to campaign and answer questions.

Before the skirmishes, front-runner Andrew Cuomo, 48, smiled broadly at winning the backing of the Rev. Al Sharpton. Sharpton's hard work for Democratic gubernatorial candidate H. Carl McCall, whom Cuomo challenged four years ago, failed to deliver enough African-American votes to oust Gov. George Pataki, but Cuomo's camp was clearly buoyed by the endorsement of the high-profile black politician.

Mark Green, 61, the city's former public advocate, continued to try to beat up Cuomo on his record as secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. But Cuomo brought out Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal to tear down one of Green's key premises.

In the debate, Cuomo blasted Green for continuing to mount negative attacks. And Sean Patrick Maloney, 40, who was a top aide to former President Bill Clinton and is a distant third in the race, said he feared for the future of the party as it tries to hold on to the attorney general post. Incumbent Eliot Spitzer did not seek re-election in order to run for governor.

The Democratic primary winner will face a formidable Republican, former Westchester County District Attorney Jeanine Pirro, 55, Maloney noted.

Green demanded Cuomo respond to criticisms by The New York Times about his mortgage lending program. He insisted Cuomo discuss a Village Voice report this week about his relationship with a "slumlord" sued by HUD. And he sought answers about the case filed by 13 attorneys general against HUD over pesticide use in public housing.

Cuomo declined to get into details, but called the stories "distortions."

The Voice piece focused on a housing company owned by Andrew Farkas, who hired Cuomo after he left HUD, paying him \$1.2 million over two years and then donating heavily to his AG campaign. Farkas' company was sued by HUD for allegedly skimming federal housing funds but settled the case by returning \$7.2 million to HUD.

The reporter who wrote the article, Wayne Barrett, who attended the debate, said the story was thoroughly researched and he had several discussions with Cuomo. "He would make various arguments, and then he'd retreat from them," Barrett said.

"Eliot Spitzer, The New York Times and the Village Voice have raised questions," Green said during the debate.

Cuomo, referring to his endorsement by Sharpton, talked about diversity and unity and suggested Green was being nasty. After the debate, he stood with Blumenthal, who had joined Spitzer and others to sue HUD over its use of pesticides.

Blumenthal endorsed Cuomo and said the suit had nothing to do with the Clinton administration or Cuomo.

"The violation of law pertained ... solely to the Bush Administration," Blumenthal said. Spitzer spokesman Darren Dopp agreed. But Green maintained the suit covers Cuomo and his successors at HUD.

"My opponent has been running for office for many, many, many years," Cuomo said, alluding to several contests Green has lost. He said that Green resorts to a hostile campaign strategy because he lacks ideas: "If you have a record, pound the record. If you have a vision, pound the

vision. If you have neither, pound the opponent."

Maloney presented himself as an independent alternative to the more well-known party stalwarts ahead of him in the polls and in fund-raising.

"Sometimes I think Mark and Andrew are two sides of the same coin," he said, stressing his view that status quo in Albany won't work. "The risk is that we win this election and don't change a thing."

After the debate, he said Green is right to press Cuomo about his record. "I think it's glib not to (answer)," he said.

When Sharpton endorsed Cuomo at a news conference, he stood beside Charlie King, who had been the only black candidate in the race before dropping out Tuesday. King had met with the Rev. Jesse Jackson, another newly minted Cuomo supporter.

✓ Green downplayed Sharpton's endorsement of Cuomo, pointing to his own New York Times endorsement.

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