Post of resident commissioner suddenly a hot item

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OF THE STAR STAFF

The post of resident commissioner, often regarded as a consolation prize for disappointed politicians, suddenly has become a keenly desired object of a spirited, and potentially disruptive competition within the Popular Democratic Party.

The three-way race features Arturo Morales Carrion, the prestigious historian and former University of Puerto Rico president; Dr. Luis Ramos Yordan, a surgeon and former Speaker of the House of Representatives; and Jose Arsenio Torres, a professor of political science and acerbic commentator on island political mores.

Morales Carrion entered the race late; on the deadline day for filing, Ramos Yordan, who filed well within the allotted period, had been more or less overtly campaigning for months. And Torres, the youngest of the trio, filed on the first day of the registration period.

Morales Carrion's observation that he had been "surprised" by Morales Carrion's last-minute entry since he, the educator, had given him "an eloquent and emotive endorsement," spoke of "mounting pressures" from PDP colleagues.

"These pressures," he insists, came from persons "in all walks of life"—professionals, educators and "common people." By way of illustrating the breadth of the movement to draft him, Morales Carrion noted that the first precinct to produce the required quota of sworn nominating petitions was Jayuya, a central mountain town remote from the halls of higher learning, and of high policy-making, that are Morales Carrion's accustomed beat.

March 31 is the cut-off date for submitting the 10,000 valid signatures required to qualify as a candidate for resident commissioner. The petitions must include a given minimum from 57 precincts, "one-half plus one" of the island's 113 election precincts. Unless Morales Carrion has an organization primed to collect signatures for him there is little chance he can qualify.

"I have created the organization to get the signatures," Morales Carrion said flatly in a Saturday interview.

Morales Carrion did not identify any of his petition collectors. However, one veteran PDP activist, Emilio Ortil, head of a movement called Renovation, Popular 80, has issued a bulletin announcing that "we are organizing brigades and in the collection of the 10,000 signatures that Dr. Morales Carrion needs to participate in the May 23 primary.

The bulletin lists three telephone numbers; one of these was answered by a taped voice identifying itself as that of Andres Rosario Bordonada. The two men, Ortil and Bordonada, figured in the sensational September 1975 incident which involved their alleged beating of Rep. Blas Rico, a PDP legislator from Caguas. The two men were both acquitted of charges of aggravated assault, which supposedly occurred after they allegedly kidnapped Bordonada from a party at the home of Rep. Severo Colberg. Even after the acquittal, Bordonada reiterated their charges against the two alleged aggressors.

This past Friday Colberg, now House Minority Leader, lent his office to Torres for a news conference. It was at this news conference that Torres expressed his puzzlement that Morales Carrion should now become a candidate.

Morales Carrion, interviewed by telephone Saturday, said he had given Torres an endorsement because he initially understood that Torres was a consensus candidate.

"I supported Jose Arsenio because I had the impression, which he gave me, that he had full party support. That consensus isn't there. He hasn't been able to file the needed signatures...."

Dr. Ramos Yordan, the third candidate for resident commissioner, also has several thousand signatures yet to file before complying with the 10,000 petition requirement. Ramos Yordan, relying on friendships he cultivated when he served as Speaker of the House from 1973-1976, has been pressing for support in labor and municipal circles.

Much of the support heard for Morales Carrion relates to his experience in Washington during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, services which culminated with his appointment as U.S. deputy assistant secretary of State for international American affairs and special assistant to the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS).

Morales Carrion's connection with Latin American affairs dates back to pre-World War II days, when he participated in a youth leadership cultural exchange program.

Professionally, the 66-year-old Morales Carrion made his mark early with the publication in book form of his trail blazing work "Puerto Rico and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean." The book was an outgrowth of his doctoral thesis for a Ph.D. degree from Columbia University.

Although he considers himself the best qualified for resident commissioner, Morales Carrion said he does not view his competitors as "adversaries.

"We have basically the same ideals. My real divergence of opinion is with (Baltasar) Cordova del Rio, the present commissioner."

Morales Carrion said he seeks the resident commissioner's post out of a sense of duty, convinced it is necessary to stop the Romero-led New Progressive Party.

"It is erratic, incoherent, bent not only on defeating the adversary but on destroying it."

After the strong showing here of PDP-backed Sen. Edward M. Kennedy in last Sunday's Democratic primary, Morales Carrion believes that beating the NPP will be easier.