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Florida Official Criticized Amid Familiar Election Chaos

By DANA CANEDY

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla., Jan. 24 — A former fashion model now in charge of the Broward County elections office, Miriam M. Oliphant is used to being in the spotlight. What she had not counted on was being under a microscope after overseeing two troubled elections, running up a budget deficit and reviving memories of the 2000 election fiasco in Florida.

After Ms. Oliphant, 48, was elected supervisor of elections and took over in January 2001, she promised to restore confidence in the office. What followed instead were botched primary and general elections last fall, a nearly million-dollar budget deficit and an exodus of longtime employees.

The turmoil has left municipal and county officials with little confidence in Ms. Oliphant's ability ever to produce chaos-free elections in Broward County, home of lost ballots, missing voting machines and poll workers who close precincts early when they are too tired. Officials say they feared that the county was on track for more trouble when municipal elections were held in the coming weeks.

Things have become so bad that officials from one city say they have decided against putting several referendums before voters next month because they have so little confidence in the voting process. This week, the Broward County state attorney's office found a box of 100 absentee ballots from the September primary that had never been opened.

Meanwhile, the Broward County Commission refuses to appropriate \$2.4 million that Ms. Oliphant insists she needs to run the department and the elections until she provides more details about the budget deficit.

"I won't give her a dime," Lori Parrish, a county commissioner, said on Wednesday after a meeting with the board attended by Ms. Oliphant. "I mean, she's been there two and a half years and it doesn't seem to get better; it gets progressively worse."

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Ms. Oliphant, a Democrat, is not giving interviews, but she told the commissioners that the budget shortfall was caused by an increase in the number of precincts that required more poll workers and by new voting machines that required more staff training and voter education. In addition, her office paid in advance for services from some vendors who did not fulfill their contracts, she said.

Ken Leb, a liaison for the elections office, defended Ms. Oliphant, saying she inherited many of the problems. And some of her other defenders say racism is behind Ms. Oliphant's troubles with the commission, which has a white majority. Ms. Oliphant is African-American.

"We understand their desire to know the answers," Mr. Leb said of the commissioners, "but our time is better spent today getting prepared and conducting the current elections."

The controversy has generated so much local attention that Ms. Oliphant has replaced Katherine Harris of Bush recount fame as the most-talked-about elections official in the state.

"A couple of weeks ago, at a restaurant, she came on TV," said Alan Schreiber, Broward County's public defender and a former mentor and campaign fund-raiser for Ms. Oliphant. "The people wanted to bust the TV."

The criticism of Ms. Oliphant is such that her sister appeared on a local television show, her face hidden behind a newspaper, to defend her.

Even Gov. Jeb Bush has become involved. He recently called on some of the familiar figures from the 2000 election to lend their expertise to Ms. Oliphant. He enlisted Theresa LePore, the Palm Beach County supervisor of elections, blamed for the use of the butterfly ballot in the presidential election, to oversee a task force that will provide Ms. Oliphant's office with logistical and technical support.

Such measures have not satisfied many municipal and county officials, who had asked Mr. Bush to remove Ms. Oliphant from the position. While critical of her performance, the governor says he has no grounds to force her out.

"I don't think any of us trust her anymore," said Sue Gunzburger, another county commissioner, "but she won't resign."

A Broward County native with a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in education from Florida A&M University, Ms. Oliphant was a fashion model in her 20's, appearing in Ebony and Jet magazines.

She got her start in politics in the 1970's, working on Democratic





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political campaigns, including for the former governor Lawton Chiles. In 1991, Governor Chiles appointed her to her first political position, a vacant seat on the Broward School Board.

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County officials deny that race and politics are behind Ms. Oliphant's tarnished political image, but her supporters insist that she is the subject of a racist attack by political opponents.

"I don't think if a white person had that position, they would have reacted that way," said Angie Glass, a black community activist in Broward County and the organizer of a Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade. "I think they thought she had too much power."

In support of Ms. Oliphant, Ms. Glass rescinded the invitation to Mayor Diana Wasserman-Rubin of Broward County, who has called for Ms. Oliphant's ouster, to serve as grand marshal of the parade last Sunday and threatened to call off the event if she showed up.

Ms. Oliphant's critics dismiss claims of racism and insist she caused many of the problems by replacing experienced employees with political friends who knew little about running elections and wasted money on such things as office remodeling.

"The commission would have been just as strict had she been white," said Ilene Lieberman, the Broward County vice mayor. "She built an office four times the size of her predecessor, and it wasn't budgeted, so she took away from the budgeted expenses to do that. We gave her over \$300,000 a few months ago for computers. She didn't purchase computers with those funds."

According to a former Oliphant supporter, the battle over the elections office is dividing some communities here. "This is tarnishing race relations in our county," said Keith Clayborne, editor of The Broward Times, a 24,000-circulation African-American newspaper in nearby Coral Springs. "It's become an issue bigger than Miriam Oliphant. If you are white, you don't understand that the commission attacked Miriam Oliphant in a fairly vicious manner and it could have been done different. Blacks perceive that as an attack upon the black community."

But Mr. Clayborne said his support of Ms. Oliphant began to waiver after she was unprepared during the commission meeting this week to answer basic questions about her office's budget and operations. "I can't continue to support a quarterback who can't throw a pass," he said.

In Coral Springs, city officials said they had so little confidence in her office that they city called off a March referendum on updating the city charter and constitution. "I think the city commission's actions sends a clear message," said Michael Levinson, the Coral Springs city manager.

Mr. Leb, the elections office liaison, said that the department had no

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record of Coral Springs planning an election and that the criticism was simply political piling on.

Putting the current crisis behind her may be Ms. Oliphant's biggest challenge, said one elections expert.

"The public has to have faith in the process," said Doug Lewis, the executive director of the Election Center, a Houston-based association that advised Florida officials on the 2000 election. "And that's usually more important than the individual involved in the process."

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