

Rawlings in bitter power struggle

Fellow legislators describe 'obsession'

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Del. Howard P. Rawlings, the longtime chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, is at the center of a bitter State House dispute, accused by other African-American lawmakers of attempting to crown himself ruler of black Maryland.

In an unusual show of disharmony at the top ranks of the state's black power structure, some African-American legislators are airing a wide assortment of complaints about the West Baltimore Democrat.

One senator calls the strong-willed Rawlings "obsessed with power," while others object to his penchant for getting his name in the paper, often with the adjective "powerful" attached to it.

The sharpest attacks have come in response to Rawlings' push for a wide-ranging performance audit of Morgan State University — a move that some legislators contend showed disrespect for the state's most prominent black institution.

"The gentleman," Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden told the Senate on Monday night, "thinks he is the emperor of the African-American community for the entire state of Maryland."

The unhappiness spiraled into an unusually naked show of

retribution Thursday when Sen. Clarence M. Mitchell IV, an African-American from West Baltimore, helped kill a Rawlings-sponsored bill designed to crack down on the police use of racial profiling in traffic stops, an important item on the agenda of many black lawmakers.

"It just had a sponsor problem, that's all," McFadden said pointedly.

The racial profiling bill may yet win passage as legislation sponsored by someone besides Rawlings, although he and others fear the measure could die before the General Assembly adjourns Monday night.

Rawlings, a 22-year veteran of the House, seemed weary from the attacks yesterday. But he fired back at his critics, particularly Mitchell, the scion of a black political dynasty in Baltimore.

Point, counterpoint

"I think it's incredible that a person with the last name of Mitchell would act in such total disregard for the African-American community and its interests," Rawlings said. "I suspect his parents turned over in their grave."

Countered Mitchell: "I find that interesting that someone who has not been there [on important minority issues] would question my motivations on issues affecting the African-American community, when I've been there consistently."

Rawlings also defended his handling of Morgan State.

"I've been Morgan's strongest and most effective advocate," Rawlings said, taking the lion's share of credit for the state's commitment to build a \$44 million theater on campus. "It's because I have leverage as chairman that things like the \$44 million arts center happen."

Now in his ninth year as chairman of the House committee that controls the state budget, Rawlings has often been a lightning rod for contention.

He led the successful effort to give the state greater control of the Baltimore school system and has

pressed for major reform of Prince George's County schools — annoying some of his black colleagues in both jurisdictions in the process.

This year, Rawlings, 63, has made waves by pressuring some Democratic delegates to support the use of state funds to buy textbooks for private schools, threatening the legislators' pet building projects if they didn't comply. While some feelings were bruised, the funding was approved.

"The question is, 'Should I stop being successful?' " Rawlings said. "I'm not going to change. I work hard."

Dispute over Morgan State

This week's battle grew out of a dispute between Rawlings and other legislators over Morgan, the Northeast Baltimore campus and flagship among the state's four historically black colleges.

Rawlings, like his two biggest Senate critics — McFadden and Sen. Clarence W. Blount, the influential majority leader — graduated from Morgan.

Both Rawlings and Blount have dormitories named for them in honor of their legislative accomplishments and support for Morgan, although senators like to point out that Blount's building is nearly three times the size of Rawlings'.

Last summer, Rawlings initiated a performance audit of Morgan by legislative staffers. The examination was needed, he said, to ensure state funds were being spent effectively at a time when Morgan was seeking more autonomy.

Blount and other black legislators moved quickly to halt the audit, saying such an examination was unprecedented for a state campus.

"The legislature is supposed to

set the policy and provide the resources, not to micromanage," Blount told his Senate colleagues this week. "It's not a fix, it's a grab for power."

The dispute also surfaced during this year's budget negotiations, when Rawlings again pushed for an independent examination of Morgan. Black senators objected sharply, and Rawlings ultimately gave in. But the damage was done.

"He wants to be perceived as the Big Man on Campus," McFadden said. "But in our community, the overseer concept has been dead for many years. A black overseer is even worse."

Rawlings, a postal worker's son who grew up in a Baltimore housing project, said he wants to set standards for all state institutions, including Morgan.

His critics, he said, "are under the guise that black public institutions are sacrosanct and beyond scrutiny. That is not in their interests or the public interest."

Some observers suggest that the unhappiness with Rawlings is due in part to jealousy of his stature and style.

"He's in a powerful position to get his way, and some people just don't like it," said Del. Clarence Davis, a black Democrat from East Baltimore who has often clashed with Rawlings.

Blount, who often preaches harmony to his fellow senators, predicted continuing problems for Rawlings if he keeps asserting himself on issues such as Morgan.

"You can't keep bludgeoning through like the super dreadnought and always have to have your way," said Blount. "You can't go around throwing poison everywhere and think you're not going to get poison thrown back."

Sun staff writer Gady A. Epstein contributed to this article.