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Will Blagojevich's ouster spur change in Illinois?

By **MONICA DAVEY**, New York Times

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CHICAGO - The removal of Rod Blagojevich as governor of Illinois was cause for celebration among people who had come to view him as a state humiliation, an oddity and, most of all, a symbol of corruption.

Patrick Beaird, one state employee, for instance, said he took a cake to his office on Friday, the day after Blagojevich was ousted. "Blago is gone," the frosting read. And "It's Bleepin Golden," a reference to sentiments the federal authorities say they captured the former governor expressing about his chance to appoint someone to fill the Senate seat vacated by President Barack Obama.

Beaird, who works in the state Bureau of Communications and Computer Services, said he felt deeply disturbed by Blagojevich's troubles, but he acknowledged sadly, as many here do, that one man's departure is not likely to end this state's jarring pattern of corruption.

"That's the scary thing -- this is just the beginning," said state Rep. Jack Franks, a Democrat who served on the impeachment investigation committee. "We have an endemic culture of corruption that has seized our state. It's not a Democratic thing. It's not a Republican thing. I think everybody elsewhere would be surprised if you heard the words we have heard on the tapes of Blagojevich. But in Illinois, you wouldn't be surprised."

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While Blagojevich, a Democrat who served for six years, was the first governor in Illinois history to be impeached and removed, the state has a long history of corruption.

Four of the past eight governors have been accused of criminal wrongdoing, at least one for acts after they left office. Blagojevich has proclaimed his innocence to federal corruption charges that have yet to be drawn up in a formal indictment.

State lawmakers repeatedly expressed horror last week at accusations that Blagojevich had tried to benefit personally from state contracts, the selection of a new senator from Illinois and legislation he was being asked to sign.

But some experts say the state's meager restrictions on campaign donations and what many described as the mood in Chicago and Springfield, the state capital, among politicians, lobbyists, state contractors and others have made for a climate of dubious dealings.

State Sen. Dan Cronin, a Republican, said the seeming end of Blagojevich's political career should not mean that leaders here simply move on.

"How far does it go?" Cronin asked. "We've been here in Illinois. We've put up with a lot over the years. Is this a brand of business? Is this a culture? Does it stop with Rod Blagojevich? That's the question for us for the future of the state of Illinois. It's a way of doing business that he grew up in, and to what extent does that still permeate us?"

Walking the walk

Since Blagojevich's arrest on Dec. 9, the circumstances have spurred calls for reform to the state's political system. Patrick J. Quinn, the lieutenant governor who was sworn in as Blagojevich's successor on Thursday, appointed a commission to study ways to fix the system.

Many say the scope and brazenness of the acts Blagojevich is accused of -- and the national attention on those claims -- may at last bring change.

"This is the moment," said David Morrison, deputy director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. "There's a rush now to break with Blagojevich, but breaking with Blagojevich must not mean merely breaking with him but breaking with that culture. The attitude is endemic, and it's got to change. If they are sincere, they've got to walk the walk."

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