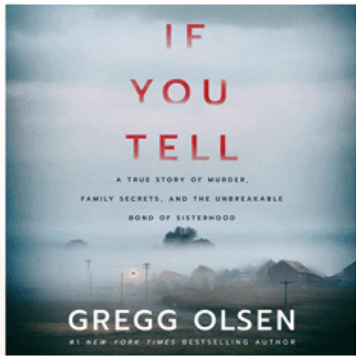




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Hialeah's most controversial race is at City Hall : A rematch between the mayor, a convicted felon, and his longtime rival is heating up the home of the famed horse track.

By MIKE CLARY

DEC. 1, 1994 | 12 AM



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

HIALEAH, Fla. — When Raul Martinez won his fourth mayoral election here in November, 1993, he ran as a convicted felon--suspended from office and facing a possible 10 years in federal prison for corruption and bribery. And he still won, by 273 votes.

Allowed to take office while his conviction was being appealed, the charismatic Martinez easily settled back into office and began, he says, "giving the city some direction, getting streets repaired, parks built, projects started." His conviction was overturned in February and, for a time at least, life in often-turbulent Hialeah seemed almost tranquil.

But last month, a state judge ordered Hialeah to hold another mayoral vote, saying that so many forged absentee ballots were cast in last year's contest that the results were void.

While Martinez was not faulted, Circuit Judge Sidney Shapiro found that the mayor's 2-to-1 advantage in absentee ballots may have come from the efforts of "overzealous" campaign workers at a retirement home, where many voters suffer from schizophrenia and drug addiction.

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So now Martinez, 45, and chief rival Nilo Juri are squared off again, in a vote set for Tuesday.

As usual in a political campaign here, there have been reports of vandalism, fistcuffs and even gunplay. This week a man towing a Martinez billboard past rival headquarters was charged with threatening a Juri supporter with a .38-caliber handgun.

But also as usual, Martinez--who prosecutors vow will be retried on federal corruption charges--is considered the favorite to win.

“The people of Hialeah are so naive,” said City Council member Isis Garcia, a Juri supporter. “They see palm trees going up, and they think he (Martinez) did it. It’s embarrassing.”

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There is no other city in Florida quite like Hialeah. Best known outside the state as the site of a lushly landscaped race track inhabited by thoroughbreds and flamingos, Hialeah is Florida’s fifth-largest city and its industrial heart. Many of the 203,000 residents work in an array of mid-sized factories making clothing, medical equipment and toilet paper, among other products.

Hialeah is not only Greater Miami’s blue-collar neighborhood, it is also the most thoroughly Latino. About 90% of the residents are Latino, chiefly Cuban, and Spanish is the predominant language of commerce. Both Martinez and Juri are Cuban-born.

Critics say the *cubania* of Hialeah contributes to the passion that colors local politics--and to Martinez’s woes. In 1991, he was found guilty of running the city as a criminal enterprise, extorting up to \$1 million in kickbacks from developers in exchange for zoning favors. While admitting mistakes, Martinez denies that he ever accepted any cash for his influence and says he has been targeted as a maverick Democrat in an area where most Cubans vote Republican.

“My first reaction (to the retrial c

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Juri, 45, a former state representative and clothing manufacturer, said: "Raul and his peo **SUBSCRIBE** 1 like
it was a Cuban city in the 1950s. This just cannot happen here."

With less than a month between Shapiro's order and Election Day, the pace of campaigning has been furious. Juri, shaking hands and bussing the cheeks of seamstresses in a garment factory earlier this week, waxed confident. Federal election monitors, the \$100,000 he has raised for his campaign and three union endorsements will enable him to end "the constant turmoil in Hialeah government," he predicted.

Meanwhile, Martinez, excusing himself from a steady stream of well-wishers who stop by his campaign headquarters, was equally optimistic. But he bemoaned the personal price his legal and electoral problems have exacted.

"It does take a toll," said Martinez, who won his first election, to the City Council, in 1978. "Physically and mentally, I'm tired. The agony is constant. I've been able to keep my sanity because I'm working so hard. I don't have time to sit in a corner and think about all the bad."

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Although he is paid \$75,000 a year as mayor, Martinez says he has hung onto a second job as general manager of a liquor store chain--a job he took last year while suspended from office--to pay his legal bills. "I got a ruling on that," he said. "It's legal."

Both candidates can count on cadres of fervent supporters, and this weekend's final rallies are sure to be impassioned, emotional affairs.

And Tuesday's vote is sure to be close.

Herman Echevarria, council president and acting mayor, said: "It's my hope that this election will be the final chapter in this issue, Martinez vs. Juri. The people of Hialeah want peace and harmony."

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But Echevarria, like most Hialeah voters, has a firm opinion on which way he'd like to see the battle end. "In the last election, both sides committed irregularities. Absentee ballots are an issue in every campaign," he admitted. "But Raul has been an outstanding administrator. He understands this government. He is a man of mission. I support him."

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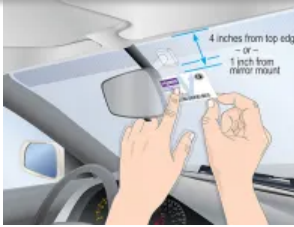
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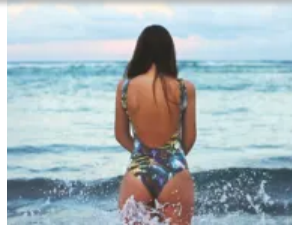
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