

No Sunday pass for stalled Senate in test of power

After no progress on Saturday, governor calls lawmakers back today

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ALBANY -- Gov. David Paterson has called for a rare Sunday session of the state Senate after the fractured house again met separately.

Paterson's order for an evening session today comes after the Senate's Democratic conference met for three minutes and adjourned Saturday. After the Democratic conference left, the Republican-dominated coalition entered the chamber and met for three minutes.

With the Senate split 31-31, members are fighting for control. Paterson is trying to pressure them to meet to pass critical legislation.

His agenda for senators today is to approve several of his appointees and a bill that would prohibit discrimination in housing for victims of domestic abuse.

Meanwhile, leaders from both sides met behind closed doors, but apparently not together, to try to resolve the leadership dispute that has gridlocked the chamber since June 8. That's when the coalition in a parliamentary plot shocked the Democrats with enough votes to try to replace the Democratic conference.

Although a court refused to intervene, that vote is still disputed by the Democratic conference which won a majority in the November elections.

There was no comment from either side on progress. In the Legislature, the majority in control of either the Senate or Assembly has nearly absolute control over what bills are passed. Majority lawmakers also get substantial perks, leadership stipends and resources, and usually get showered with more campaign donations.

Paterson, welcoming back troops at the Fort Drum Army base, said Saturday that senators have violated the public's trust over "some silly political dispute."

Senators have said Paterson's orders for the session since the regular session ended a week ago are unconstitutional because he didn't call the Assembly back and the Senate can't act alone on anything, except confirming gubernatorial appointments. So Paterson filled Saturday's agenda with confirmations, with about a dozen awaiting action in the Senate gallery, and senators from both sides still refused to vote on them.

"If they are going to continue in this juvenile fighting with each other and not even passing bills they agree on ... I don't really know what else to do," Paterson said from the base. "But I am going to keep them there."