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District Court Dismisses Political Party Disclosure Lawsuit, Saying Local Election Law Dispute Belongs Elsewhere

Judge Timothy Savage dismissed the case without prejudice, finding the District Court lacks jurisdiction because plaintiffs sought interpretation of Virgin Islands campaign disclosure statutes rather than raising federal claims.

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A lawsuit seeking a court ruling on whether political parties in the Virgin Islands must file campaign disclosure reports with the Elections System of the Virgin Islands has been dismissed by the District Court for lack of jurisdiction, leaving the underlying question unresolved.

The civil complaint was filed in March by Shelley Moorehead, Collister Fahie and Lorelei Monsanto. Mr. Fahie and Ms. Monsanto were candidates for the Legislature during the 2024 election cycle, while Mr. Moorehead is pursuing candidacy for Delegate to Congress in the upcoming November election.

The plaintiffs argued that territorial political parties fall within the statutory definition of “political committee,” which they said would make them subject to reporting requirements under Title 18, Chapter 29 of the Virgin Islands Code.

Attorney General Gordon Rhea addressed the issue in an April legal opinion that was submitted to the court. Mr. Rhea argued that the disclosure requirements in Title 18 do not apply to political parties.

While acknowledging ambiguity in the law’s definition of “political committee,” Mr. Rhea noted that the relevant section refers separately to “political party” and “political committee.” He concluded that the Legislature intended the two terms to describe different types of entities.

“There is compelling evidence that the Legislature did not intend political parties to be considered ‘political committees’,” Mr. Rhea concluded.

After weeks of motion practice, however, District Court Judge Timothy Savage did not reach the substance of the dispute. Instead, on Tuesday, he dismissed the case for lack of jurisdiction.

Judge Savage said the plaintiffs were asking the court to interpret and enforce Virgin Islands statutes, rather than alleging violations of the U.S. Constitution or federal law. The District Court of the Virgin Islands does not have original jurisdiction over local matters, he noted.

“It was divested of that jurisdiction in 1991,” Judge Savage wrote.

The dismissal was without prejudice, meaning the plaintiffs are not barred from refileing the matter in a court with proper jurisdiction.

The ruling leaves unanswered the central question raised by the lawsuit: whether political parties in the Virgin Islands are legally required to submit campaign disclosure reports to the Elections System under the territory’s campaign finance statutes.