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► Caught in the political machine

In an average Student Government Association election at the U. of Alabama, students spend more than \$10,000 on their campaigns, candidates fall victim to violence and a secret political coalition, known as the Machine, usually wins each seat.

This year, however, someone went too far.

One of the candidates for student government president was attacked by an unknown assailant in January. It wasn't the first incident, but it prompted university President Roger Sayers to halt student government elections and strip the SGA of its powers.

Minda Riley, one of three SGA presidential candidates, had a cross burned in her yard last fall after she announced her intentions to run for SGA president. On Jan. 31, a week before the elections were scheduled, a man wearing a hose over his head and gloves allegedly broke into Riley's home and assaulted her.

"I was putting on my shoes.... My roommates had just left, and less than a minute later the door opened," she says. "I turned around and there he was."

The assailant threw her against the wall, hitting her in the face and cutting her with a small pocket knife, she says. He then grabbed her chin and pushed her face against the wall. "He told me 'If you fuck with the wrong people, you get fucked,'" Riley says. She fought back and the assailant fled.

Riley's campaign managers blamed the attacks on the Machine, an all-white underground political group made up of 27 sororities and fraternities that has dominated student government since the SGA's inception.

Only seven non-Machine endorsed candidates have been elected SGA president in more than 70 years. Riley, who is a member of a sorority in the Machine, was running without its endorsement, although she previously had been endorsed by the Machine for lower SGA positions. No member of the Machine would comment.

The day after Riley's attack, Sayers and the vice president for Student Affairs released statements promising "reform of student government on this campus" and a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of anyone involved in the incident.

Riley, and her supporters, including two past independent SGA presidential candidates, pleaded to no avail with Sayers to let the election continue. "It seems ludicrous to me to punish the entire student body because of what happened to me," Riley says. "I think it's a total threat to student autonomy." ■ Sean Kelley, *Crimson & White*, U. of Alabama