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Bernier-Benta Gubernatorial Team Backs Out of Forum With Bryan and Roach; Cecile Benjamin 'Flabbergasted' at Withdrawal

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From left to right: Kent Bernier and Oakland Benta participate in a nurses protest in downtown Christiansted on Thurs. May 12, 2022. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

The Kent Bernier and Oakland Benta gubernatorial ticket challenging Governor Albert Bryan and Lt. Gov. Tregenza Roach in the August 6 Democratic Primary, backed out of a gubernatorial forum that was scheduled for Thursday, July 14, according to the V.I. Democratic Party, which expressed shock at the development.

The Bernier-Benta ticket has [long complained](#) that the Democratic Party has been favoring the incumbent governor, though the party has denied this claim and the Bernier-Benta team has not provided a statement explaining their reason for backing out.

The forum was scheduled to air on WTJX.

For its part, the Democratic Party said it has gone out of its way to accommodate Mr. Bernier and his running mate. "At every juncture, the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands has gone above and beyond to embrace and include the team of Bernier and Benta," reads a statement provided by the party Sunday night. "The Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands also sent Bernier and Benta the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands Pledge which was signed by every Democratic candidate, except Bernier and Benta, who did not acknowledge or respond to the pledge. The Democratic Candidates pledged that they will not endorse or support any non-Democratic Candidate vying for an office in the General Election on November 8, 2022 and attested that they will support the entire slate of Democratic Nominees selected in the Primary."

Cecile Benjamin, the V.I. Democratic Party state chair, expressed disappointment at the situation. "While we are flabbergasted at this sudden withdrawal, it is truly sad that in the Virgin Islands, we have gotten to a point where we can't have a spirited and intellectual conversation among our family of Democrats about the challenges, solutions, and opportunities that we face in the Territory; and it is unfortunate that we can't disagree without being disagreeable," he said.

WTJX had teamed up with the party to organize the forum, which the party said was part of an effort to ascertain that voters are informed. "Showing up for the Democratic Gubernatorial Forum says to Virgin Islanders: I respect you, I respect all voters, I respect the electoral process, and I respect my fellow Democrats. The election is all about the voters and not about the candidates. If you cannot and do not respect those you serve, you are not capable of serving," Mr. Benjamin said.

The party said Virgin Islands voters are "wholly" engaged in political campaign forums. "Given the last two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, and Irma and Maria, the back-to-back hurricanes in 2017, the gubernatorial forum is the perfect place to propose solutions, address all matters and candidates' performance," the party said. "Regretfully, Bernier and Benta won't share the stage with Bryan and Roach. The Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands provided the B&B team with a golden opportunity to present their views, messages, and alternate plans, but they turned it down."

Mr. Benjamin said that by backing out of the forum, Mr. Bernier and his running mate's plan to better the lives of Virgin Islanders remains a mystery. "What's the B&B plan, and what's their alternative to provide a better life for Virgin Islanders? Your guess is as good as mine," he said.