

GOP quick to exploit Rezko ties to Obama

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Echoes of the Antoin "Tony" Rezko verdict had barely faded in the courtroom Wednesday before Republicans began e-mailing.

"Today's verdict and Obama's friendship with Rezko raise serious questions about whether he has the judgment to serve as president," wrote Republican National Committee chairman Robert M. "Mike" Duncan.

Within three hours, the GOP National Committee was circulating a Web video titled "Obama's money man."

Obama issued a statement calling himself "saddened" by the verdict, but the newly crowned Democratic presidential nominee began to take steps months ago to distance himself from his friend and former fundraiser.

Since Rezko's 24-count federal corruption indictment in October 2006, Obama has given to charity about \$250,000 in campaign funds raised for him by Rezko.

The two have a relationship dating back more than 15 years. When Obama was still attending Harvard Law School, Rezko offered him a job, which Obama declined. When Obama moved back to Chicago and became a community organizer on the city's South Side, he performed a few hours of legal work for Rezko.

Barack and Michelle Obama socialized occasionally with Tony and Rita Rezko, and Rezko was an early contributor to Obama's 1996 state senate campaign. By 2004, when Obama sought a U.S. Senate seat, Rezko had become a major fundraiser.

In 2005, when Obama wanted to purchase a Hyde Park home, Rezko bought the adjoining vacant lot -- some have suggested to make the deal more affordable for the Obamas. Rezko later sold a portion of the lot to Obama, giving the senator and his family a larger side yard and enhanced privacy.

Rezko had not yet been indicted, but Obama later admitted that the arrangement and transaction, while legal, had been "boneheaded."

There never has been any suggestion that Obama might be charged with any wrongdoing in connection with Rezko, who was convicted Wednesday on 16 of the 24 counts.

Obama's name surfaced only infrequently during the trial. At one point, star prosecution witness Stuart Levine testified that Obama and his wife attended an April 2004 party Rezko hosted for Nadhmi Auchi, an Iraqi-born tycoon now living in London.

The testimony suggested that Rezko hoped to exploit the skyrocketing popularity of Obama, who recently had won the Democratic nomination for U.S. Senate from Illinois, to help persuade Auchi to invest in Rezko-owned property in Chicago's South Loop.

An Obama spokesman said the candidate did not recall attending the party.

While Republicans hope for traction on Obama's Rezko connection, some observers think that will enjoy limited success.

"There is some collateral damage because there is this association with Rezko and now Rezko is convicted; it's not just that somebody Obama dealt with has been indicted," said Kent Redfield, of the University of Illinois-Springfield.

"But nothing in this is directly related to Obama. There certainly, though, will be an effort by Republicans to define Obama as just another corrupt Chicago politician."

Democratic strategist Kitty Kurth said: "Tony Rezko was very interested in helping Tony Rezko. I don't see any broader implications. If I were putting on my strategist's hat, I would be far more worried about John McCain's relationship with (savings and loan scandal figure) Charles Keating than Barack Obama's with Tony Rezko."