

Texas Gov. Rick Perry Could Face 99 Years in Prison for 'Abuse of Power'

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2016, said on Saturday an indictment against him for abuse of power was a political move that he intends to fight. Perry was indicted on Friday by a grand jury in Travis County, a Democratic stronghold in the heavily Republican state, on two counts of abuse of power and coercion over a funding veto he made last year that was seen as being intended to force a local prosecutor to resign. "This indictment amounts to nothing more than an abuse of power, and I cannot and I will not allow that to happen," Perry told reporters in Austin, Texas. He added he stood by the veto that led to charges being laid against him. A probe was launched last year after Perry vetoed \$7.5 million in funding for an integrity unit that is part of the Travis County district attorney's office. The veto was seen as hardball politics to force out county District Attorney Rosemary Lehmberg, a Democrat, after she pleaded guilty to drunken driving and remained in office. If convicted of the first-degree felony, Perry could be sentenced to between five and 99 years in jail while a conviction on the other charge can bring between two and 10 years in jail, a prosecutor said. Perry is expected to survive the court battle but the trial could drag on for months, casting a shadow over his campaign and scaring away major donations, said Mark Jones, a political science professor at Rice University in Houston. In the short run, Perry could use the legal battle to win support during Republican primaries by portraying himself as a staunch conservative being targeted in a politically motivated prosecution launched by Democrats, Jones said. "This comes as Perry was gaining traction due to the immigration issue that saw him rise from an also-ran to a

third-tier candidate in the Republican presidential race," Jones said. Republicans have long charged that they have been targeted by the Public Integrity Unit, run out of the Travis County prosecutor's office. The unit has investigated prominent Republicans including former U.S. House of Representatives Majority Leader Tom DeLay. After flaming out in the 2012 presidential race, Perry had been mounting a political comeback that gained him national attention for attacking President Barack Obama by saying he had not done enough to secure the border with Mexico. Perry, the longest-serving governor in the state's history and the first indicted in the state in about a century, was forced to exit the 2012 presidential race after gaffes including when he lost his train of thought during a debate and could not recall which government departments he wanted to abolish. He is not seeking re-election as governor and will step down next year.

Reporting by Jon Herskovitz; Additional reporting by Jonathan Allen in New York; Editing by Lisa Shumaker © 2014 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.