

GMA is Lakas bet in 2004

By JESS DIAZ

She's off and running, even if the elections are still two years away.

With her assumption of the position of Lakas national chairman, President Arroyo will be the party's standard bearer in the 2004 presidential elections, her political adviser announced yesterday.

"She will be our standard bearer and at the same time our top party leader," said Joey Rufino.

He said the guessing game now focuses on who will be Mrs. Arroyo's vice presidential running mate.

Her field of choice is wide and includes Senate President Franklin Drilon, Speaker Jose de Venecia Jr., Education Secretary Raul Roco and Trade Secretary Mar Roxas as well as Lakas Senators Rene Cayetano, Loren Legarda, Ramon Magsaysay Jr., Robert Barbers and Juan Flavio, Rufino said.

Rufino is the second official close to Mrs. Arroyo who has announced her intention to seek the presidency in 2004. The first was

Presidential Adviser for Special Concerns Norberto Gonzales, who reportedly got a dressing down from the President for his announcement about two weeks ago.

Mrs. Arroyo has been coy about her presidential plans, but she is widely believed to be casting a moist eye on 2004.

She did not win the presidency, but inherited it from former movie actor Joseph Estrada, who was ousted in a military-backed popular uprising in January last year amid a corruption scandal.

Rufino's announcement is certain to elicit criticism from the political opposition.

House Minority Leader Carlos Padilla

Turn to Page 6

GMA is Lakas bet

From Page 1

(LDP, Nueva Vizcaya) has criticized Palace officials for plunging the country into early politicking.

"Our focus should be solving the problems the nation is facing, including joblessness, and soaring electricity and water rates, not politics," Padilla has said.

The President took over the top Lakas position from De Venecia during a meeting of the ruling party's national directorate on Saturday night.

Rufino said De Venecia will serve as party co-chairman and chairman of its executive committee and will play a supporting role to the President.

Vice President Teofisto Guingona Jr. remains as its president and Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Heherson Alvarez kept his post as Lakas secretary general.

Former President Fidel Ramos, who was among the founders of Lakas, did not attend the national directorate meeting. He is reportedly in Singapore on a speaking engagement.

Rufino also said the erstwhile dormant Kabalikatan ng Mamamayang Pilipino (Kampi) will serve as a support group to

Lakas.

Kampi was the political party founded by Mrs. Arroyo with Sen. Vicente Sotto III in 1998 when she was still a senator. She had planned to run for president with Sotto as her running mate.

She later dropped her presidential bid, dumped Sotto and agreed to be the Lakas candidate for vice president with De Venecia as standard bearer. She won the vice presidential race.

Three weeks ago, Kampi resurrected itself and replaced its president, former Tarlac Gov. Margarita "Tingting" Cojuangco with businessman Dante Ang, Mrs. Arroyo's chief image builder and liaison with the Chinese community.

Shortly after assuming office, Ang announced that his party, which recognizes Mrs. Arroyo as its titular head, will embark on a nationwide recruitment and fund-raising campaign.

According to Rep. Rozzano Rufino Biazon (LDP, Muntinlupa), the announcement about the fund-raising drive is an invitation for businessmen to contribute election campaign funds to Mrs. Arroyo.