

GMA revokes EO 464

By MARVIN SY

After a meeting between government lawyers and Catholic bishops, President Arroyo revoked yesterday Executive Order 464, which had prohibited members of the executive branch from appearing without her permission before legislative inquiries.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), which called for the abolition of EO 464 last week, welcomed the news and thanked the President for a move that could allow the truth behind allegations of corruption in her administration to come out.

The beleaguered President, who has faced mounting calls to step down over the scandal, said she was revoking the order and encouraging her top advisers to testify in the public inquiry on the national broadband network (NBN) deal being conducted by the Senate.

She said members of the executive branch could not use another controversial issuance, Memorandum Circular 108, as an excuse for not attending congressional inquiries.

The announcement came after a meeting between the government's top lawyers and Catholic bishops at Discovery Suites in Ortigas Center in Pasig yesterday afternoon.

"Effective immediately, I am revoking (EO) 464. Executive officials may no longer

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invoke EO 464 to excuse non-attendance at legislative inquiries," Arroyo said in a statement.

"Executive officials are instructed to abide by the Constitution, existing laws and jurisprudence when invited to legislative inquiries," she said.

The decision of the President on EO 464 did not come as much of a surprise to critics of the administration but concerns were raised earlier that the lesser-known MC 108 would take its place.

Under MC 108, all officials from Cabinet rank down to the lowest employees of each department or agency must secure the consent of the President prior to appearing at a question hour of either chamber of Congress.

This circular came out after the Supreme Court rendered its ruling on EO 464 in the case of Senate vs. Ermita, which declared several of its provisions as unconstitutional.

The Senate, considering that the Supreme Court has already made a ruling on EO 464, denounced the issuance of MC 108.

Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye said that MC 108 was effectively revoked with the avocation of EO 464.

He explained that MC 108 was "a baby" that sprouted from EO 464 so its existence was dependent on the EO.

In effect, the officials summoned by the Senate to its hearings could no longer use either MC 108 or EO 464.

Sudden turnaround

The President's turnaround on the executive order — which she issued last year to stop officials from testifying in what she had said were useless legislative inquiries — paves the way for Commission on Higher Education Chairman Romulo Neri, a Cabinet member with key knowledge of the NBN deal with ZTE Corp. of China, to take the stand.

Neri, who once headed the economic planning ministry, could not be reached for comment.

Bunye said, "Whatever restrictions have been imposed by EO are likewise no longer existing."

He expressed belief the move would help reduce tension between the two branches of government and allow the nation to "move on."

"The President like anybody else is after truth. The President is after justice. The President listens to the people. It is in the best interest of everybody to heal our present conflict," Bunye said in a press briefing.

He said Mrs. Arroyo acted with the general interest in mind, adding the country faces more "serious problems es-

pecially in solving poverty, addressing the objective of growing the economy, creating more employment and lifting our people from poverty and improving quality of life of the average Filipino."

EO 464 was issued in September 2005 after National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales was ordered arrested by senators over his refusal to answer questions during an inquiry into a US lobby contract. Gonzales' blood pressure shot up and he almost suffered a heart attack owing to the intense grilling by the senators.

The Supreme Court in April 2006 struck down certain provisions of the EO upon a suit filed by the Senate but upheld other provisions as constitutional.

'More than meets the eye'

CBCP president and Jaro, Iloilo Archbishop Angel Lagdameo, who was reportedly not invited to the meeting attended by four or five bishops, said in an interview, "We are happy and grateful that our appeal has been heard by the chief executive. That is already the first step (in knowing the truth behind issues hounding her administration)."

But another prelate expressed skepticism on the real intention of the Palace in revoking the order as demanded by

the CBCP in a pastoral letter last week.

Lingayen-Dagupan Archbishop Oscar Cruz, a vocal critic of the Arroyo administration, said he smells "something fishy" in the latest Palace move.

"There must be something more than what appears because if Malacañang will really allow the officials concerned to speak the whole truth, it's like putting the gun (to) its head," Cruz stressed in an interview.

The archbishop, who earlier openly called for the President's resignation, further argued: "There are many ways to skin a cat so we should not clap our hands right away.

"It's impossible that there's no counter. Malacañang will lift it just like that with utter good will? That's just too hard to believe since the President says she wants to be here until 2010. Do you think she would allow all the truth to really come out? That is not rational," Cruz added.

Villar: Face-saving tactic

Meanwhile, Senate President Manuel Villar Jr. also ex-

pressed doubts that President Arroyo will ask her Cabinet members to attend Senate hearings, particularly on the NBN controversy.

"Malacañang should do more than revoke EO 464 to show its sincerity in promoting transparency and accountability in government. In the face of the abusive invocation of executive privilege, the cancellation of this EO is immaterial and irrelevant. In the first place, the Supreme Court already rendered this order inutile in the case Senate vs. Ermita," Villar said.

"The public must see through this face-saving tactic and remain vigilant and steadfast in our quest for the truth," he added.

The senators got wind of the news about the move to scrap the controversial executive order while they were in caucus and discussing their official stand on the Supreme Court's compromise offer regarding Neri's testifying at the Senate.

Senators Francis Escudero, Panfilo Lacson, Loren Legarda, Francis Pangilinan, Richard

Gordon and Juan Ponce Enrile welcomed the Palace move but urged the President and her Cabinet to attend the hearings in the spirit of transparency.

"It's clear that this should have been lifted even earlier. It's good that it has been lifted but the spirit why it was lifted should remain there," Sen. Manuel Roxas II said.

Administration Sen. Ramon Revilla Jr. said the Palace's move will strengthen the political institutions.

"The decision to lift EO 464 is a very welcome development. This will surely strengthen our political institutions and enhance transparency and accountability. It will also strengthen the principle of separation of powers and the system of check and balance," Revilla said.

"I laud President Arroyo for her decision to lift EO 464. I hope that this will result in the contentment of those who kept on demanding the president to revoke it. This is a giant step for unity and reconciliation and a time to move on," he said.

— Edu Punay, Paolo Romero, Christina Mendez, AFP