

Nograles is new Lakas president

By DELON PORCALLA

In what may seem like the beginning of the end for the Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats, President Arroyo gave the go-signal yesterday for the merger of the dominant party and the Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi), now the country's second largest political party.

The merger proposal coincided with the assumption of Speaker Prospero Nograles as Lakas-CMD president after Jose de Venecia Jr. resigned even before the party convention started.

Mrs. Arroyo is chair of Lakas and also the titular head of Kampi,

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which she formed in 1996 with former senator Vicente Sotto III, two years before she ran and won as vice president in 1998.

She assumed the presidency in January 2001 when Joseph Estrada was ousted.

In formally endorsing the Lakas-Kampi merger, she said they have now formed a political "colossus and a powerhouse" in time for the May 2010 presidential elections. Political observers say the ruling party is doomed in 2010, since the opposition has the advantage.

"Today, I endorse the merger of Lakas-CMD and Kampi," Mrs. Arroyo declared in a speech she delivered at the Lakas national directorate meeting at the Manila Hotel yesterday. "The combination will result in a powerhouse team.

"The merged parties will be like a colossus that brings to mind Mahathir," the President said, referring to former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad. "Let us work hard for the party's victory in 2010."

Nograles beneficiary again

Just like in the Feb. 4 speakership fight, Nograles took over the post that was left by his predecessor and immediately expressed his gratitude to his party-mates.

"Today, I accept humbly and with deep gratitude the presidency of Lakas-CMD. My friends in Lakas, I will need all your help as we move forward with the many challenges confronting our country," Nograles said.

"As the most dominant party in the country, we must strive to change this growing culture and replace it (with) workable programs and projects that are relevant to the needs of our people," he added.

With the help of his party-mates, Nograles said Lakas will be "re-engineered to align our priorities with the need to develop and maintain equality among all sectors of society including the poor, minorities and disadvantaged groups."

De Venecia was elected president emeritus of Lakas, a position which is almost similar to that of former President Fidel Ramos, who holds the position chairman emeritus. The duo, along with the late Raul Manglapus, formed Lakas in 1992.

'Kiss of death'

But De Venecia reiterated his opposition yesterday to the proposed merger and said it was

Mrs. Arroyo's fourth endorsement of the proposal since 1998 before he asked her to be his vice presidential running mate in the presidential election that year.

De Venecia, who was then Lakas candidate for president, lost to then Vice President Joseph Estrada.

Mrs. Arroyo won the vice presidency. Less than three years later, she took over from Estrada, who was forced from power in the wake of a corruption scandal.

The former speaker said the proposed merger between the two pro-administration parties would result in the death of Lakas.

He said Lakas should now chart its own course and avoid being associated with the President.

"Association with her is like a kiss of death. Her endorsement in 2010 would spell defeat," he said.

He added that since 1998, Mrs. Arroyo had always endorsed the proposed Lakas-Kampi merger whenever she faced political crises.

He recalled that before her endorsement yesterday, the last time the President supported the proposal was on July 8, 2005, when she was besieged with mounting calls for her resignation in the face of allegations of election fraud.

De Venecia was forced to resign after his colleagues threatened to expel him, and created the president emeritus post to appease him. De Venecia earlier said he will not step down and will fight it out up to the Supreme Court if he is removed as Lakas president.

But Ramos was able to convince him to relinquish his post, following pressures from Lakas colleagues. De Venecia was removed from the speakership after he and his son and namesake accused the First Family of alleged massive graft and corruption.

Raul Lambino, De Venecia's lawyer, said his client would remain an "ordinary member" of the party and would continue to be the "conscience of the party."

The meeting was attended by former President Ramos, now Lakas chairman emeritus; Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri, Nograles, Rep. Simeon Datumanong, Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez, Metro Manila Development Authority Chairman Bayani Fernando, Quezon City Mayor Feliciano Belmonte Jr. and other congressmen and local officials belonging to the party.

- With Jess Diaz