

# GMA backs ARMM polls postponement

By PAOLO ROMERO

Elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) scheduled for next month are expected to be postponed after President Arroyo officially endorsed their deferment.

However, both the Commission on Elections (Comelec) and several senators said they preferred that the elections push through as scheduled on Aug. 11.

Palace officials said yesterday that the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and other stakeholders in Mindanao requested that the polls be deferred in order to move the peace process forward.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza announced in Maguindanao that at least three members of the House of Representatives will file a bill seeking the postponement of the polls.

However, Dureza and Presidential Adviser for the Peace Process Hermogenes Esperon Jr., in separate interviews, stressed that the Arroyo administration was not giving in to the MILF, but said the move would allow the forging of a peace pact at the soonest possible time.

"There are strategic developments in the peace process that need to be given a chance to succeed," Dureza said, adding that several administration lawmakers, including Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri, would be sponsoring the urgent bill once Congress starts session on July 28.

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The two Palace officials said the decision was reached after extensive consultations between Mrs. Arroyo and the Cabinet and the stakeholders, including local officials as well as the MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

"It's (deferment) a consensus reached by the Cabinet, the (negotiating) panels and stakeholders," Dureza said.

He said it would be up to Congress to determine when the elections would be held, adding that counterpart bills in the Senate and the House of Representatives would likely be priority legislation.

## Not giving in

The move came after the government and the MILF hurdled the most tedious and contentious part of the negotiations on ancestral domain. Both are now finalizing arrangements for the signing of a memorandum of agreement (MOA) on ancestral domain.

The consultations were extensive, officials said, and Mrs. Arroyo held lengthy meetings twice in two days in Cotabato to hasten the building of a consensus.

Esperon said government was not exactly bending backwards for the MILF since the deferment would "benefit the government, the people in Mindanao and the entire country."

"We are just giving the peace process the chance it needs to go forward at a faster pace. It is also an incentive to the MILF and the MNLF. The stakeholders proposed a postponement" and the government accommodated the request," Esperon told The STAR in a telephone interview.

He said the MILF, the MNLF and local officials said the

ARMM elections would be a "stumbling block" to the early resolution of the peace process.

Esperon explained that if the elections were held as scheduled on Aug. 11, the elected officials would get a three-year term.

But if the elections were postponed, the sitting ARMM officials would remain at their posts in holdover capacity until the polls are held after the signing of a final peace agreement with the MILF.

The results of the elections would then more or less conform to the provisions of the final peace pact.

Officials from both sides earlier said the MOA on ancestral domain would take up the extent and scope of the new autonomous Muslim homeland, tentatively called the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, that is envisioned to be larger than the ARMM.

Esperon said the postponement somehow spurred both sides to work faster on the peace process and showed the "sincerity and goodwill" on both sides.

He pointed out that the MILF acquiesced to the government position on ancestral domain that finally broke the seven-month deadlock in the negotiations.

## Give peace a chance

Dureza said key stakeholders in the peace process, among them local officials in ARMM, assured President Arroyo, "after a dialogue, that it is all right with them to have the elections postponed for the sake of peace."

He said Congressmen Pax Mangudadatu of Sultan Kudarat, Yusoph Jikiri of Sulu, and Nur Jaafar of Tawi-Tawi will immediately file the

bill when Congress resumes session next week.

The planned filing of the bill could be the government's answer to the request of the MILF to postpone the elections, fearing that the three-year term of elected regional officials can affect the implementation of any final peace accord both sides may possibly forge soon.

The MILF's chief negotiator, Mashaquer Iqbal, channeled the request to his government counterpart, Rodolfo Garcia, during their July 16 executive meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Dureza and Iqbal were reported to have resolved, through an executive session, the remaining issues on ancestral domain.

Talks are rife that the GRP and MILF panels are to sign a memorandum of agreement on ancestral domain when formal talks resume in October.

But all of the more than a hundred mayors and six provincial governors in the autonomous region earlier said they are against any postponement of the elections.

All local executives in the region - covering the cities of Lamitan and Marawi, the provinces of Sharif Kabunsuan, Maguindano, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi - belong to the Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats and are supporting the re-election bid of ARMM Gov. Datu Zaldy Ampatuan.

For his part, Speaker Prospero Nograles said he has called Mindanao congressmen and women to a caucus on Tuesday, a day after the President's State of the Nation Address (SONA), so that they can decide collectively whether to postpone the polls or not.

"As Lakas president, I shall defer to and consult our ARMM loyal allies, the Ampatuans. Should they advise

postponement, we will proceed up the Mindanao peace process, I shall personally fast-track the move to postpone," Nograles said.

## A little too late

But Commission on Elections (Comelec) Chairman Jose Melo said he wants the ARMM polls to push through.

"The decision to postpone is the Congress' call. But we have to remember that this election is not only for ARMM but for the entire country because it is part of the preparation for the 2010 election," the Comelec chair told The STAR.

He said everything is on schedule as far as the Aug. 11 polls are concerned.

"It's actually a little too late for Congress to act on this. Session will resume on July 28 while the ARMM election is scheduled on Aug. 11. I personally believe that the ARMM election must push through as planned because we have also spent a lot of money for this," he added.

The poll chief also blasted aside fears that the election would derail the peace process in the region.

He added that any arrangement made with incumbent ARMM officials is not yet contained in an agreement.

Ramon Casiple, executive director of the Consortium on Electoral Reform, concurred, saying there is still no formal agreement on the peace process.

Casiple reiterated that it is beyond President Arroyo's power to decide whether an election will push through or not.

## Can't dictate on Comelec

The proposal also faces rough sailing at the Senate as senators expressed belief that delaying the process until 2010 would reflect badly on

the country's sovereignty and democracy.

Senate Minority Aquilino Pimentel Jr., Majority Leader Francis Pangalinan, Senators Richard Gordon, Francis Escudero and Pia Cayetano all said only Congress could postpone an election and that the Comelec had already prepared for the exercise.

But Senators Zubiri and Panfilo Lacson said it was all right to postpone so that the government could attend to other more pressing needs in Mindanao.

Zubiri said the request of the MILF was to postpone the election but allow the holdover capacity of Ampatuan and the assembly.

"The plan is to move it until 2010 and to synchronize it with the national elections. President Arroyo consulted with the Ampatuans and they agreed if it would be for the greater good of Mindanao. Congress now should act quickly with legislation by Aug. 7 to amply prepare for the postponement," Zubiri said.

But senators plan to block the proposal. Pimentel said he opposes the idea of delaying elections because doing so could lengthen the terms of abusive public officials and deny better people a chance to serve the public.

"Congress has already set a date for the ARMM elections and only Congress can reset it. The Comelec is a constitutional and independent body, it can not be dictated upon," Gordon, chairman of the Senate committee on constitutional amendments and electoral reforms, said.

"It will send a very bad signal that we are taking elections lightly. She (President) can endorse it if she wants but I don't think the Senate will agree to it. The automated elections in ARMM will pave the way for clean, honest and

orderly elections in 2010 and beyond," Gordon said.

Pangalinan said postponing the ARMM polls would show a government that was inutile and lacking in political will.

He said the decision to call for postponement was ill advised. "It creates the perception that government is weak and incapable of getting things done and making things happen."

Cayetano said the proposal came too late in the day. She said, the elections were 20 days away and that preparations and campaigns were in full swing.

She said the government must respect the sanctity of elections and the people's right to choose their leaders.

## Successful 'mock polls'

Gordon even observed the mock polls conducted by the Comelec and was very happy that these were successful.

Melo said the mock election was "very successful" and "very accurate" although they failed to conduct it in Maguindano because of President Arroyo's North Cotabato visit.

He said the mock polls pushed through in Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Sulu and Sharif Kabunsuan.

The Comelec had used the optical mark reader (OMR) voting machines in these provinces while it had assigned the direct recording electronics (DRE) machines in Maguindano.

A total of 400 registered voters were randomly chosen to participate in the mock poll where Hollywood actor Pierce Brosnan won as ARMM governor and Canadian singer Celine Dion winning the vice gubernatorial slot. - With reports from John Felix Unson, Jose Rodel Clapano, Marvin Sy, Aurea Calica, Sheila Crisostomo, Delon Porcacia, AFP