

Speaker: No GMA term extension

By DELON PORCALLA

Speaker Prospero Nograles changed his tune yesterday as he declared that President Arroyo would not extend her term beyond 2010.

Nograles earlier admitted in a TV interview that it was possible to extend the term of the President if her

allies succeed in amending the Constitution.

But senior House members have reiterated that efforts to rewrite the 1987 Charter would not extend the term of Mrs. Arroyo.

"We will not extend her (President Arroyo) term. Period," Nograles

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said, one of several administration lawmakers whose bill on constitutional amendments is being deliberated on by the House of Representatives.

This as Senators Miriam Defensor-Santiago and Loren Legarda rejected renewed moves to change the Constitution even if its proponents in the House use the global crisis as an excuse to amend restrictive economic provisions.

"My point is this, assuming the most innocent motive for Charter change (which) is to advance the Philippine economy by amending or revising our economic provision, will it immediately produce results so as help the Philippine economy next year which will already be impacted by the (world) financial economy?" Santiago said.

"There is no necessity; it will not be essential to our economy immediately and it will not be practical because the people do not like Cha-cha," Santiago said over radio dzBB.

Nograles filed a resolution that now has 163 signatures, aimed at lifting the prohibitive 60-40 constitutional requirement that only favors local investors, saying the provision bars foreign investors from coming over.

Nograles reiterated his stand that he himself is against the President's term extension

and the proposals to postpone the 2010 elections.

Another ally of Mrs. Arroyo, La Union Rep. Victor Ortega, head of the House committee on constitutional amendments, made the same assurances.

"We are not going to extend the term of office of public officials, including the President."

Palawan Rep. Antonio Alvarez, chairman of the House committee on trade and industry, said Mrs. Arroyo would step down as mandated by law, adding that critics should not make use of term-extension to berate her.

"I am against term extension for the President simply because she is against it. The President has become a collateral damage of this Charter change enterprise," he said.

"With the many problems she is facing, she certainly doesn't need this aggravation. Sadly, here is the case of a clueless dorm mother getting the blame for the actions of her boarders," he added.

Neophyte Rep. Elpidio Barzaga of Cavite said these anti-Charter change moves do not help any, especially at this point. He said there is a need for an "honest-to-goodness" review of the fundamental law of the land.

"Nograles' proposal covers only the liberalization of the

provisions to make the country competitive with other countries in attracting foreign investments, most especially if we consider the current global economic crisis," he said.

"And therefore the argument that it is intended to extend the term of GMA is certainly and totally misplaced," Barzaga stressed.

Mariquina Rep. Marcelino Teodoro described the efforts of anti-Cha-cha forces as "ill-motivated" and only promote divisiveness in the country.

"Jobs and investment opportunities are transnational in nature. We must be rational in facing up to the global economic challenges and do away with partisan or personality politics," Teodoro said.

Sen. Aquilino Pimentel Jr., who was retained as minority leader after the Nov. 17 change in Senate leadership, said the trashing of the fourth impeachment case against President Arroyo is "a portent of things to come" if the administration lawmakers would insist on amending the Constitution through joint voting of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Santiago also warned that amending the Constitution would only create "chaos" among the people.

Santiago appealed to the President and her allies for a "ceasefire" on Cha-cha moves.

The feisty senator noted

that there are several versions of Cha-cha at the House. The mere fact that there are several versions also indicates lack of unanimity among the President's allies on what and how Cha-cha should be administered.

"Why do we have to discuss even the mode of changing the Constitution? Why are we not talking on how to deal with the economy... I cannot see any way clear out of this and it will even raise a question before the Supreme Court," she said.

Legarda urged the administration and its allies to drop the move for Cha-cha and instead focus on strengthening the economy through a "fiscal stimulus package" in the face of the global financial crisis shaking up the world.

"Instead of throwing away hundreds of millions of pesos to efforts to amend the Constitution, which may only be futile because of rejection by the majority of the people, our government should devise a financial stimulus to boost agricultural productivity and help small businessmen to survive from the financial crisis," Legarda said.

She said that the holding of a constituent assembly or convention and later of a nationwide plebiscite to ratify the amendments "would cost hundreds of millions of pesos which should be better directed to the strengthening of the

national economy to prevent mass layoffs as well as the further spread of hunger among our people."

Pimentel said the administration wants the two chambers of Congress to vote jointly on amendments so that "its numerically superior allies in the House can railroad the approval of amendments that will enable President Arroyo to stay beyond 2010."

"What they did to the impeachment case by using their numerical superiority, they will also do on the proposed extension of terms," he said.

But the principal objective of the administration, Pimentel said, is to adopt a parliamentary system of government where the constitutional ban against the reelection of the incumbent president will be rendered inoperative.

This would enable Mrs. Arroyo to run for member of Parliament in Pampanga and subsequently for prime minister, he said.

He added that the insistence of administration congressmen for a joint voting is "patently unconstitutional, against parliamentary tradition, and simply illogical," even as he pointed out that the House has at present 229 congressmen, compared to only 23 senators.

'Put it in writing'

Caloocan Bishop Deogracias Iniguez, chairman of the Catholic Bishops' Conference

of the Philippines (CBCP) Committee on Public Affairs, said Mrs. Arroyo should come out with a manifesto signifying her intention to step down in 2010.

"I think that is one of the efforts that they can do, but that is not enough. Even if she writes it using her own blood, if she's not sincere with it then nothing will happen," Iniguez told reporters in an interview at the Bonifacio Monument in Balintawak where the multi-sectoral group Kilusang Makabansang Ekonomiya (KME) held their rally against Cha-cha yesterday.

Although it would be hard for the President to win back the trust of the people due to her low credibility, Iniguez stressed that coming out with such a manifesto might just be the first step to achieve that.

"The impediment or obstacle to that is her lack of credibility. That's why she should seriously make an extra effort to make herself credible," Iniguez said.

He cited the time when Mrs. Arroyo said she would not run in the 2004 presidential elections, but actually did.

"That can make a significant step. If she will change her ways that's very good, but it remains to be seen," Iniguez said.

—With Christina Mendez, Jose Rodel Clapano, Helen Flores, Paolo Romero