

'People vs GMA forever'

By MICHAEL PUNONGBAYAN and DELON PORCALLA

Groups opposed to Charter change (Cha-cha) made another show of force yesterday and their message rang loud and clear: enough of President Arroyo after 2010.

Thousands of people turned up for the interfaith rally in Makati City yesterday despite a police blockade that kept protesters from the provinces at bay, organizers said. Police said the crowd peaked at around 5:30 p.m.

In Manila, another anti-Cha-cha rally was held at the Liwasang Bonifacio.

Protesters from different political groups took turns lambasting administration lawmakers for insisting on changing the Constitution to allow a term extension for President Arroyo. Crowds chanting

"Cha-cha ni Gloria ibasura!" punctuated the speeches.

Some streamers declared: "No to Gloria forever constitution."

Senators Mar Roxas II, Loren Legarda, Francis Escudero, Panfilo Lacson and Jambay Madrigal joined the anti-Charter change rally in Makati along with former Senate president Franklin Drilon and former vice president Teofisto Guingona Jr.

"Ang rehimeng ito ang pinakamasama (This regime is the worst)," a statement from the

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Former Senior Government Officials (PSGO) read.

PSGO comprises 80 former ranking officials who have denounced corruption in the Arroyo administration.

Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay said his constituents are determined to fight efforts to prolong Mrs. Arroyo's stay in power through Charter change.

He also denounced attempts by forces loyal to the administration to discourage people from joining the rally by circulating rumors of a terror plot.

"*Kasama 'yan sa trabaho ng pambansal* (That's part of deception)," he said.

Security was tight at the rally venue around the Ninoy Aquino monument at the corner of Ayala Ave. and Paseo de Roxas.

National Capital Region Police Office (NCR-PO) chief Leopoldo Bataoil and Makati City Police chief, Senior Superintendent Gilbert Cruz watched the event from the upper floors of the Philippine Stock Exchange building.

In Manila Mayor Alfredo Lim told rallyists at the Liwasang Bonifacio that the administration should "face the consequences" of its stubborn effort to extend Mrs. Arroyo's term through Charter change.

"Isn't there a global economic crisis today? They said the Cha-cha is to allow the investors to invest more in the country. But who would even invest now that even in their own country,

they are having a difficult time? Who would invest in our country between now and 2010?" he said.

"It is not true that this is for economic policies. This is just a smoke screen. What they are actually after is for term extension," he said.

Businessmen vs Cha-cha

Businessmen, meanwhile, expressed support for the inter-faith rally. "The reason for the rally is valid. I think a lot of Filipinos are really concerned about these issues," Sergio Ortiz-Luis, Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) chairman said in a telephone interview.

"This is a welcome political exercise as long as there is no untoward incident," Ortiz-Luis added. "This (changing the Constitution) is a very polarizing activity," Edgardo Lacson, PCCI president said.

According to Lacson, local businessmen are not against changing the Constitution. However, he said it would be more beneficial to the country if moves to alter the highest law of the land would wait until Mrs. Arroyo steps down from office.

"We are not against changing the Constitution but the timing is so bad. It is like shooting ourselves in the foot," Lacson noted.

"If they are successful in amending the Constitution then I do not know what will happen because people are really expecting a change in leadership," Makati Business Club executive director Alberto Lim said.

"It has been so low to begin with. We are not getting our fair share of investments," Lim said of foreign investments. "Hopefully the change in leadership in 2010 will reverse the situation."

Senate usurps SC task?

The Senate may have usurped the function of the Supreme Court when it issued a resolution declaring as unconstitutional the convening of a constituent assembly in preparation for Charter change.

"*SC na ba ngayon ang Senate? Hindi lang based ang opinion natin kung hindi wrong mistake pa.* (Is the Senate now the SC? Their opinion is not only biased, it's also 'wrong mistake.')

They have wronged the House and committed a legal mistake by such declaration," Nueva Ecija Rep. Edno Josen, an independent, said.

Speaker Prospero Nograles, who is also a lawyer like Josen, agreed. "I think the proper forum to declare it (con-ass) not constitutional is the SC, not the Senate. But I respect their opinion as they should respect the opinion of the House."

Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte, who is pushing for the convening of a con-ass, made the same observation.

"I don't think the Senate can declare an act of Congress unconstitutional. The SC is the one empowered to do so. The senators cannot pre-emptively vote the SC will decide on whether we should vote jointly or separately," he argued.

"Ours is not a unilateral act. Ours calls for the convening of all members of Congress. They are contesting a resolution which has not even been filed yet. Let them bring it to the SC and it will be dismissed," Villafuerte, president of the pro-administration *Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino* (Kampi), said.

"Congress cannot declare a move by either House unconstitutional. Only the SC can, the senators are becoming more brilliant than the law itself," Manila Rep. Bienvenido Abante said.

But opposition lawmakers Satur Ocampo and Teddy Casio see nothing wrong with the Senate resolution.

"That resolution of the Senate was anticipated and it's being unanimous effectively checks the move in the House to go it alone as con-ass," Ocampo said.

Casio, for his part, said the Senate resolution "will trigger a showdown that the House can't win." Nograles stressed that congressmen are still willing to listen to the arguments raised by the senators.

"I have deep respect for all the senators and we will listen carefully to their advice," he said.

"The Senate has expressed its collective sense on Cha-cha, and once we receive that resolution officially, we shall enter it in the House records and refer it to the committee on constitutional amendments to form part of the debates on Charter change," Nograles said.

"The work here is done through the committees and the plenary. As Speaker, I will follow the decision of the committees and the plenary session," he said.

He pointed out that it would be difficult for

Kampi or any group in the House to obtain the signatures or votes of 197 members for the convening of a House-only con-ass.

"An indication of that difficulty is the fact that I have not collected more than 165 signatures on my Resolution 737," he added.

The Nograles resolution seeks to amend Article XII Sections 2 and 3 of the Constitution to allow foreign ownership of lands here.

The measure is now with the constitutional amendments committee.

According to Majority Leader Arthur Defensor, Resolution 737 would go through the usual process of legislation.

No Kampi, Lakas rift

There can never be a rift between the two leading pro-administration parties in the House of Representatives because they have never merged in the first place, according to Prospero Pichay, a Lakas-CMD stalwart who now chairs the Local Water Utilities Administration.

Pichay, a former Surigao del Sur congressman, was reacting to Sorsogon Rep. Jose Solis' pronouncement that the issue of Charter change has driven a wedge between Lakas and Kampi in Congress. Solis is with Kampi.

"There is no marriage, so there is no rift," Pichay told **THE STAR**. "Lakas and Kampi are two different parties," he said.

Solis earlier blamed the House leadership's conflicting positions on Cha-cha for what he called the widening rift between Lakas and Kampi.

Solis and many other administration congressmen want a constituent assembly route to cha-cha even without the participation of the Senate, while Speaker Nograles of Lakas said he is open to constitutional convention mode of amending the Constitution.

Kampi is actively campaigning for con-ass.

Solis claimed that a Kampi sponsored resolution on Cha-cha has already attracted at least 173 signatures, both from Lakas and Kampi lawmakers.

Pichay downplayed the reported rift and said it's the people who will eventually decide on the Cha-cha issue. — With Jess Diaz, Cecille Suerte Felipe, Sandy Arzmeta, Elisa Osorio, Rainier Allan Ronda, Mayen Jaymalin and Perseus Echeminda



Military personnel keep watch along Ayala Avenue in Makati during the rally against Charter change yesterday.

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