

GMA: We're not out to scrap elections

By PAOLO ROMERO

TOKYO – President Arroyo broke her silence yesterday amid speculations that she is bent on prolonging her stay in power through the Charter change efforts of her allies in the House of Representatives.

Mrs. Arroyo said she was not moving “to scrap the elections” next year but stressed she believed the Constitution needs to be amended for political and economic reforms.

“We are not out to scrap the elections,” Mrs. Arroyo told reporters here when asked to comment on last week’s anti-Charter change rally in Makati City.

“What I have always said, and it was part of my campaign platform in 2004, is that the political system needs to be reformed,” the President told reporters here covering her working visit in Japan.

Mrs. Arroyo said the political and economic reforms she wished to implement would entirely depend on the efforts of her allies and “ultimately on the people of the Philippines.”

Mrs. Arroyo refused to entertain further questions on her political plans and on her possible successor in 2010.

“I don’t want to talk politics... but what I want to say is that we have a vision. We would like to see the Philippines on the verge of First World (status) in 20 years,” Mrs. Arroyo said.

She said the country badly needs investments in the economy, education and the environment, as well as in specific anti-poverty projects “so that we would have more people in the middle class and a dramatic reduction in poverty.”

“We also need to reform the political system. These are the things that I would like to see whoever the (new) leader may be,” Mrs. Arroyo said.

For her remaining months in office, Mrs. Arroyo said she would remain focused on improving the economy to leave a legacy of economic and political stability.

She said the situation in the country is very different from

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when she took office nine years ago.

"Our country is stronger and able to withstand the global economic shocks better now than we did in the 1997 crisis," she said.

"If you look at infrastructure now compared to the infrastructure then, we have a lot of new and modern infrastructure that will yield benefits for generations to come in the form of a more competitive national economy," Mrs. Arroyo said.

Gearing up

Back home, her allies in Congress led by Speaker Prospero Nograles said they are already gearing up for next year's elections.

"Maybe we should just concentrate on strengthening our new merged alliances in preparation for the (May 2010) elections," he said.

Nograles said the elections next year would definitely push through.

He issued the statement amid calls for Mrs. Arroyo to make clear her political plans in 2010, particularly on reports that she would be running as Pampanga representative.

Critics are also calling on Mrs. Arroyo to declare her motives in pushing for Charter change (Cha-cha) initiatives.

"I think the President's plans are private and what she will do next politically is personal and will be

something she and her own family will decide at the proper time," Nograles said.

Nograles earlier said speculations of Mrs. Arroyo running is proof enough that elections will be held next year.

"That rumor alone confirms that there will be elections in 2010," he said.

Nograles has since denied his administration colleagues were out to extend their terms, and pointed out that any changes in the 1987 Constitution, or a shift to a parliamentary or federalist form of government, would take place after Mrs. Arroyo steps down in June 2010.

"It will all happen if it will happen in the (next) 15th Congress," he said.

The best argument for term extensions, according to Nograles, is the stringent three-fourths vote requirement in amending the Constitution.

Senators, on the hand, do not believe Nograles' statement on amending the Constitution after the elections.

Senators Manuel Villar, Panfilo Lacson, Pia Cayetano and Aquilino Pimentel Jr. said Nograles only made it more confusing.

Villar cited as example the new announcement of Nograles that a shift to a parliamentary system of government through Cha-cha

would only be after the May 2010 elections and that the plebiscite would be held simultaneous with the polls.

Villar warned Nograles is misleading the people by his statements.

He said the confusing statements by Nograles and allies work best for the administration.

"The more confusing it is, the better for those with malicious intentions. This way, the people cannot prepare, including the opposition," Villar said.

He said it would be improper to hold elections under the presidential form of government and then shift to a parliamentary system afterwards because this would deny those who won the elections the opportunity to serve their respective mandates.

Villar also said the reported plans of Mrs. Arroyo to run as Pampanga representative under the prospect of having a parliamentary form of government in the future would be more dangerous if she is eventually elected as prime minister.

Villar said Mrs. Arroyo could not be clear in her plans before and after stepping down because her allies have plans to protect her from prosecution after her term ends in 2010.

Lacson, for his part, said the President was only posturing to avoid being branded as a political lame duck.

Cayetano and Pimentel also re-

jected the appeal of Mrs. Arroyo's deputies to respect the President's decision to stay silent on her political plans.

Cayetano said it was quite clear that Mrs. Arroyo was behind the House move for a constituent assembly (con-ass) to amend the Constitution without the concurrence of the Senate.

"Her silence only fuels further speculation that she is bent on holding on to power beyond 2010," he said.

Pimentel also stressed the need to find out what the President's real plans are to prevent her from extending her stay in power.

Walkout

Lacson said the senators have agreed to act more cautiously in the midst of the unfolding political events.

According to Lacson, his colleagues have expressed fears that they might be lured by their counterparts in the House to convene into a constituent assembly during the State of the Nation Address (SONA) of Mrs. Arroyo on July 27.

Lacson particularly mentioned his colleague Sen. Manuel "Lito" Lapid, on the possibility that he might be convinced by his "cabalen" President to attend the con-ass.

Lacson said Lapid's problem was that he would be displaced from politics in Pampanga if Mrs. Arroyo would seek a congressional seat in

place of her son, Rep. Juan Miguel Arroyo, who would in turn run for governor of the province.

"He told me he might only run for senator again... Remember, (con ass proponents) will have to deal with the Senate and not the individual senators. He (Lapid) knows that his presence there (in the con-ass) would mean nothing," he said.

Lacson said one or two senators attending would make the con-ass look ridiculous.

To make sure that no one among the senators would be lured into attending the con-ass, Lacson said Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile would make the symbolic gesture of walking out of the session hall after the SONA.

He said Enrile was firm on his stand to oppose Charter change by just sitting on it.

Anti Cha-cha advocates, on the other hand, are taking their fight into cyberspace, launching an "electronic rally" through the Internet.

Noli Benavent and Susan Ople, daughter of the late former senator Blas Ople, spearheaded the move by using the social networking site Facebook to gather 100,000 members to voice out their opposition against Cha-cha.

"We hope to gather more and target to have 100,000 members by July," Benavent said. "We are getting thousands of members every day." - With Aurea Calica, Delon Porcalla and Rainier Allan Ronda