

I have never profited from my office – GMA

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo maintained yesterday that she has never and will never use her position for personal profit even as she strongly denied manipulating her statements of assets, liabilities and net worth (SALN) that showed her net worth doubling in the last eight years.

Her lawyer, Romulo Macalintal, said the President vehemently denied "any report or speculation alleging defect or her non-compliance with the law in filing her SALN."

A report from the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) said that based on her SALNs, Mrs. Arroyo's declared net worth more than doubled from P66.8 million in 2001 to P143.54 million in 2008, or bigger than the combined growth in declared wealth of her three immediate predecessors, including former President Joseph Estrada, who was convicted for plunder.

"The President reiterates

Turn to Page 6

I have never

From Page 1

that she has never used and will never use or take advantage of her position for personal profit as she had declared in her State of the Nation Address and as expected of her by the people," Macalintal told a news conference at the Palace that was also attended by First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo's lawyer, Ray Rondañan.

He said he spoke over the phone with the President who was in Ilocos Norte yesterday and received instruction that he speak for her on the matter. She did not sound upset, he said.

He said Mrs. Arroyo prepared and signed her SALN under oath to the best of her knowledge and in full compliance with the Constitution.

"She honestly believes that she has been very transparent on her assets and liabilities and she has nothing to hide," Macalintal said.

He said the report insinuating irregularities in the preparation of her SALN "is most unfair and uncalled for."

He said the report "would accuse the President's SALN as somewhat irregular just be-

cause she reported an amount bigger or higher than her predecessors."

"We do not know what standard used by the reporter in coming up with her analysis. It is as if that if you reported a big asset, this must be investigated; if small, it's okay and there should be no more investigation," Macalintal said.

He said Mrs. Arroyo is inviting anyone to question before the Office of the Ombudsman, where the SALNs are filed. "If he or she has evidence that the President violated or did not comply with the constitutional requirements in the filing of such disclosure documents,"

He said the President filed her SALNs in good faith and without any intention to deceive anyone.

"Those who alleged otherwise should come up with evidence to prove their uncalled for or self-serving accusations instead of being speculative or judgmental on the matter," he said.

Macalintal and Rondañan said if there were any vagueness in the SALNs, the Office of the Ombudsman should have already pointed out the matter to the First Couple.

Rondañan also criticized the article's use of the

term "token compliance" to describe the First Couple's handling of the requirements of the law.

"Under the law, there's no such thing as token compliance. Either you comply with the law, with the requirements or you don't comply. Either you're alive or dead," Rondañan said.

On the issue of the alleged non-disclosure of the First Couple's business in the stock market, he said the data is open and available in the records of the Philippine Stock Exchange.

"My feeling is that if the PCJ has any evidence, it would be better if they bring it out. Because the report is just full of insinuations," Rondañan said.

"It's a clear indication that democracy is in action in the Philippines and nobody is prevented from making this report but of course the President expects the report to have evidence and not based on speculations," Macalintal said.

A lot of explaining to do

Senators said the president has a lot of explaining to do regarding the allegations in the PCJ report.

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr.

said every public official should account for the wealth he has acquired as stated in the Constitution and the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act.

Sen. Manuel Roxas II said the Office of the Ombudsman should be the one to look into the accountability of a public official but it was unfortunate that the anti-graft body was sitting on many scandals involving the Arroyo government.

"Of course it will raise eyebrows and the people will wait for an explanation on how it happened because she has no other businesses that can be the source of (her additional wealth)," Roxas said.

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile said it would be wise to check the income taxes filed by Mrs. Arroyo.

Enrile said the figures must be justified. "I'm a lawyer, I know how to handle that," he said.

Roxas said if the President and her financial advisers would say she earned from her shares of stocks, it would be good to check the rates at the time she said she made money out of them.

Sen. Francis Escudero said he had not seen the SALNs of the President but that her salary was considerably low.

Moreover, he said, there is always conflict of interest when a president ventures into a business.

"There is also a worldwide crisis not only in the Philippines, so you wonder why her wealth grew much bigger considering ordinary interest rates, ordinary return on investments on any business that one gets into," Escudero said.

"I hope she will put that in her SALNs, the explanations of where her wealth came from and that she must be transparent along with the public officials," Escudero said.

Escudero said it's doubtful that the wealth had been acquired legally by the President and that her lawyers' defense should be examined in detail.

Confirmation

The United Opposition (UNO) said it is seriously concerned over reports of "exponential growth" in the wealth of President Arroyo and her family during her term, which exceeded the growth in the wealth of all three presidents before her, spokesman Ernesto Maceda said yesterday.

"The PCJ report confirms what people have long known. Arroyo has flouted the rules on accountability and transparency in government and has made a bad example for the million and a half other civil servants running the government," Maceda said.

"Now we know why she has made token compliance to the requirement of regularly stating a public official's assets. It's because she has much to hide. In her eight years in office, Arroyo's declared net worth more than doubled, from P66.8 million in 2001 to P143.54 million in 2008. The increase of P76.74 million represents a growth rate of 114 percent," Maceda said quoting the PCJ report.

Maceda said the PCJ report showed that the late President Corason C. Aquino's declared net worth grew by only 4.8 percent from 1989 to 1992.

He said, by comparison, Fidel V. Ramos' rose by 34.2 percent from 1992 to 1998, and Joseph 'Erap' Ejercito Estrada's, by 7.2 percent from 1998 to 1999.

If various allowances are thrown in, Mrs. Arroyo's monthly pay would total P100,000 at most or P1.2 million a year before tax. Yet even then, this represents only 10 percent of the P10.97-million average annual increase in Mrs. Arroyo's net worth since 2001.

The president's SALNs, however, offer few clues to explain the big difference, or whether she has other lawful sources of income.

PCJ said that since 2001, the president has apparently taken the path of "token compliance" instead of going for full disclosure in form and substance of her assets and liabilities, in accordance with the Constitution. As a result, her SALNs in the last eight years have been remarkably full of gaps in data.

Allies come to GMA's defense

Mrs. Arroyo's allies at the House of Representatives defended her from insinuations that she had enriched herself during her eight years in office.

Isabela Rep. Redolfo Albano III saw nothing wrong in Mrs. Arroyo's net worth since her wealth came from legitimate sources.

"Baka ngs interna lang ng pera natin sa bungalow kaya sa stocks, shares and other investments," he said.

"Critics are trying to throw everything because they have no more legitimate issues to raise. It is very clear that politics is behind everything."

Camiguin Rep. Pedro Romualdo said the report on Mrs. Arroyo's wealth is incomplete.

"It should have included details about the increase on President Arroyo's net worth," he said.

Romualdo said being an economist, Mrs. Arroyo had made some good significant investments that earned dividends.

"It seems that the battle among newspapers to boost its circulations is to report negative stories," he said.

"How about good news? What happened to the positive gains of this administration? Do these good stories and positive achievements of the administration have been given enough space and prominence?"

—With Aurea Calica, Jose Rodol Clapano, Delon Porcella, Jess Diaz