

Charter change pet issue of GMA since 2004

By JESUS LLANTO
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President Arroyo's recent statement that she is supporting a shift to federal form of government to ensure lasting peace in Mindanao revived the debate on Charter change—a process perceived by her critics as her way to stay in power beyond 2010.

Arroyo's interest in amending the Constitution, however, had started even before she ran for president but she became more vocal about it since she declared her candidacy in 2004.

Based on our research and on official statements of Malacañang culled from government Web sites, Arroyo made Charter change one of her key issues when she ran for president, mentioned it in three of her State of the Nation Addresses and had campaigned for amending the Constitution during the latter part of her term.

During the early years of her administration, Arroyo described the debate on Charter change as a distraction "from what we need to do to survive." Her attitude towards the issue, however, changed during the latter part of her administration.

On May 3, 2002, she said in a keynote speech at the First Philippine Political Parties Conference that before the shift to federal and parliamentary form of government, proposed federal states must achieve economic viability and political reforms must be implemented first.

Arroyo started to become more vocal about Charter change during her campaign for the presidency. Before she filed her certificate of candidacy, she announced that lobbying for a shift to a parliamentary and federal government is in her party's campaign platform. She told her supporters on Jan. 5, 2004: "We have made progress but we will need your support to get the job done for the fundamental change in our political system."

Arroyo consistently discussed the issue during her campaign sorties, particularly in the provinces.

Six months later, she made an official statement on charter reform. She said the process is "a strategic hope for change" and is "about getting the Philippines back in the world

map and putting the Filipino people on the road to peace and prosperity permanently."

The president said she would call the Legislative-Executive Advisory Council (LEDAC) and representatives of the people and different sectors to discuss the issue. She added that Charter change would result in more effective implementation of anti-poverty programs.

She said: "We have to take the opportunity within a reasonable time frame because this is a long, deliberate process that involves our future... If we place this in the backburner for too long, it could burn out and be lost forever."

'Start the great debate on charter change'

In the same year, Arroyo mentioned Charter change in her SONA and asked Congress to study the proposals to amend the Constitution. She said: "Once we have proved to our people that we have done what we can within the present structure of government, we can move on to changing the system to one that enhances our freedom and flexibility to do more. I expect that next year, Congress will start considering the resolutions for Charter change."

A few days after Arroyo appeared on national television to deliver her "I am sorry" speech, she asked members of her cabinet to resign. In a speech she delivered in Malacañang on July 7, 2005, she said she would not resign and would work with lawmakers and sectors advocating for amendments in the Constitution.

She said: "What I intend to do is work with legislators and civil groups who believe that changes in the Fundamental Law of the land are necessary in order to confront such basic issues as federalism, the character of our legislative process, reducing red tape in government processes, running for public office under a true party system and with less need to raise campaign funds, modernizing the economic provisions of our Constitution and so forth.

Arroyo gave a longer discussion of Charter change in her 2005 SONA. She started by saying that the present political system had become a stumbling block to the country's progress. She said: "The other message to send is that we will address the burden that the other Philippine story imposes.... I refer to the story of how our political system has now become a hindrance to our national progress.

Over the years, our political system has degenerated to the extent that it is difficult for anyone to make any headway yet keep his hands clean. To be sure, the system is still capable of achieving great reforms. But, by and large, our political system has betrayed its promise to each new generation of Filipinos, not a few of who are voting with their feet, going abroad and leaving that system behind.

Perhaps we politicians have done our best; but maybe our best is not enough, given the present system. Perhaps we have strained the present political system to its final limit. It is time to turn to the people, bring them into government — and change the way that government is done... The system clearly needs fundamental change, and the sooner the better. It's time to start the great debate on Charter change... the mode of Charter change is the exclusive prerogative of Congress. But a constituent assembly may well give our people the quickest reform."

Advocacy commission

Three weeks after her SONA, Arroyo ordered the creation of a consultative commission that would consult with various sectors and recommend changes in the Constitution. In January 2006, she ordered the establishment of a Charter change advocacy commission.

Arroyo identified Charter change — along with the economy and poverty — as one of the three fronts of struggle that her party, Lakas-NUCD, must face. In a meeting with her partymates on Jan. 15, 2006, she said: "We have three fronts of struggle. First the economy — we must sustain

our gains. Second, Charter change — we must achieve this by the middle of this year. Third is poverty — we must bring relief to the people battered by high oil prices and unemployment."

The ruling party, she said, must lead the campaign for people's support for the proposed constitutional change. She added: "I shall be at the helm of both the economy and pump priming program for social equity while Congress and the local governments shall push the pincer attack on Charter change, gathering force behind the mandate of the people."

Constitutional reform funds

Arroyo raised again the issue during the LEDAC meeting on May 16, 2006. She said: "Tough decisions are also in the offing as we take up proposals for Charter change. I trust and hope that each sincere thought shall pour out of this gathering with the paramount interest of the people in mind.

We need to talk about Charter change or the pace of the world could overwhelm us. The time is now, and I must stress this even if it invites controversy, because I'm aware that we are a gathering of statespersons despite our disagreements. We can only mold consensus from challenge and ferment in the marketplace of ideas."

In her 2006 SONA, Arroyo said that the country has enough fund for constitutional and electoral reforms from the fiscal savings.

'Great idea of Charter reform lives on'

When the Supreme Court junked the people's initiative (PI) petition on October 25, 2006 by a close vote of 8-7, Arroyo asked the people to support the decision of the court and praised the supporters of PI.

She said: "This is democracy in action and we must uphold it. I extol those who fought for the

people's initiative for their patriotism, perseverance and courage. The great idea of Charter reform lives on and we must keep the fire burning. This is about creating a modern, working Philippines; to leave behind the degenerated system that is holding the nation back and keeping it too poor and too divided."

"We have a vision of having the Philippines join the ranks of first world nations by 2020 and a modern, more cohesive and more accountable political structure is key to achieving that goal. We leave it now to the concerned institutions as to how we can keep the dreams of the people ascendant and heed the imperatives of change."

Before the year 2006 ended, Arroyo thanked her allies in Congress and said that Charter change would come at a right time.

She said: "I commend the decision of the House leadership as an act of statesmanship to unify not only the two chambers of the legislature but the whole nation around the issue of Charter change... Philippine democracy will always find the proper time and opportunity for Charter reform at a time when the people deem it ripe and needful, and in the manner they deem proper. The nation must consolidate now and I call upon all our institutions and sectors to stand as one for the country's future."