

'GMA can run for lower position under new Charter'

By SHEILA CRISOSTOMO

Commission on Elections (Comelec) chairman Jose Melo yesterday said President Arroyo can run for any position but the presidency after her term expires, if and when the government shifts to a parliamentary form.

However, Melo said he does not see this happening right after Mrs. Arroyo steps down in 2010.

"She can do that but I think that will not happen after the 2010 (election)," he said.

Melo, once an associate justice of the Supreme Court, said he does not think the Constitution could be amended before the 2010 polls to effect a shift to a parliamentary system.

"In case that happens, it will have to be ratified and that takes time," he said.

Lawyer Romulo Macalintal, who served as Mrs. Arroyo's election lawyer in the 2004 presidential polls, said the President is unlikely to run next year.

He said elective officials could not have their terms extended even if the Charter is amended because they have been elected under the 1987 Constitution.

"I doubt if she'll run. I think after her term in 2010 she'll take a rest, write her memoirs and take care of her grandchildren," Macalintal said.

Talks about the President's desire to seek public office after her term expires had presidential son and Pampanga Rep. Juan Miguel Arroyo lashing at Pangasinan Rep. Jose de Venecia Jr. "The President has her official spokesman, and as far as I know, he's not JDV," he said.

Rep. Arroyo was commenting on De Venecia's statement that the President would run in Pampanga's second district and seek a House seat if her congressmen-allies' Charter change (Cha-cha) initiative fails to extend her term and shift the nation to the parliamentary system.

Mrs. Arroyo's son, who now represents that district, said the former speaker is engaging in "speculation" whenever he talks about the President's plans.

Responding to questions, he said he too would be speculating if he speaks about his mother's political intentions.

However, he said that if his mother decides to seek another elective office, "there's nothing wrong with that."

Reading the President's moves

Recent moves in the House by the President's allies to fast-track Cha-cha even while the nation is busy preparing for the May 2010 elections have prompted her critics to speculate on her political plans.

According to De Venecia, Cha-cha's principal objective is to extend the stay in office of Mrs. Arroyo and her allies. If that fails, he said the President would run in her son's Pampanga district.

Former Senate president Franklin Drilon has a different scenario.

According to Drilon, if Cha-cha fails before May next year, she would campaign hard for a president who could be her puppet and who would agree to Cha-cha after the elections to shift the government to the parliamentary system.

Mrs. Arroyo would then run in her district for membership in parliament and covet the post of prime minister.

The President has kept her critics and the whole nation guessing about her political intentions by not saying anything and by not stopping her House allies' Cha-cha drive.

Ill-conceived scheme

Meanwhile, senators believe that

there's a lot to be debated on the current provisions of the Constitution and members of the House would run out of time to do this given the scheduled general elections in 2010.

For one, Sen. Loren Legarda believes it will not be easy to amend the constitutional provision that would allow foreigners to own lands.

She said this act "is by itself contrary to the national interest."

Speaker Prospero Nograles said debates on Cha-cha would begin upon resumption of session on April 13 but only on the economic provisions.

But Legarda said aside from serving merely as an excuse to prolong the power of the administration and its allies after the May 2010 election, the proposed amendment to the economic provisions might also not be acceptable to many Filipinos.

"Once foreigners are allowed to purchase land, it will be even more difficult for most of our people to buy land for residence or farming because prices would shoot up. We will become mostly squatters in our own land. We would lose our national patrimony," Legarda said.

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr. also said Malacañang and its allies should stop riding on the proposal for a federal system of government to pursue their hidden agenda of amending the Constitution.

Pimentel said the administration plan would not succeed because Cha-cha had been overtaken by the 2010 elections.

"Even the Palace admits that the country is already in an election mode," he said.

He explained that the House alone cannot amend the Constitution and even if the issue is elevated to the Supreme Court, it is doubtful whether the justices, including Arroyo appointees, will render a decision that is patently unconstitutional and incite public indignation, if not an uprising.

Pimentel said no amount of denials by the administration could hide the fact that the obsession of President Arroyo to keep herself in power beyond 2010 was the underlying motive behind the frantic moves of administration congressmen to push for the approval of the Cha-cha resolution in the House.

He said he did not want the federalism proposal, of which he was the principal advocate, to be manipulated and taken advantage of by the administration for its dubious and self-serving purposes.

The senator from Mindanao said that although a majority of senators have expressed support for Joint Resolution No. 10, which called for the convening of Congress into a constituent assembly to adopt a federal government, he was willing to put the proposal in the backburner if only to foil an administration plan to use it as a jumping board for lifting the term limit of elective public officials, including Mrs. Arroyo.

He said the President and her legislative allies were actually interested in installing a unicameral parliamentary system of government where she was hoping to become prime minister.

Pimentel said they were so desperate at pursuing their fake version of Cha-cha that they have gone to the extent of devising a plan where the House would unilaterally amend the Charter in view of the refusal of the Senate to cooperate with their ill-conceived scheme.

- Jess Diaz, Aurea Calica