

'GMA cannot become transition president'

President Arroyo cannot act as transition president in case her successor is not proclaimed once her term expires at noon of June 30, 2010, according to the chairman of the House committee on revision of laws.

"There is no such official as a holdover president or hold-over vice president. The Constitution does not allow that. They have to step down once their term expires," Isabela Rep. Giorgidi Aggabao told a news forum over the weekend.

Aggabao's committee is considering a bill on succession to

the presidency to foreclose the possibility of a vacancy and ensure that there is a successor at any time "even when the entire leadership is decapitated by a terrorist attack."

The bill is authored by maverick Rep. Edno Josen of Nueva Ecija, who does not belong to any political party in the House.

Under Josen's proposal, if for any reason none of the three elective officials specified in the Constitution can succeed the president, the chief justice of the Supreme Court takes over as acting president until any of the constitutionally designated successors can assume the presidency.

The three constitutionally designated successors are the vice president, Senate president and Speaker of the House.

Josen said his bill is the answer to fears of no-elections in May 2010 Chairman Jose Melo of the Commission on Elections (Comelec) has expressed.

Aggabao said a law on succession "has become very important and very crucial and has acquired urgency in view of the real possibility of a failure of elections in May next year."

"The difficulties that the Comelec is encountering in implementing the automation program and the peace and order problem in Mindanao might bring about a failure of elections," he said.

He said a glitch in the automation process in one region or one province alone, where the number of votes could affect the election results, could result in such a failure.

If there is such failure, the Comelec will not be able to proclaim the winning candidates for president, vice president, senators, and congressmen, he said.

Thus, no one will succeed President Arroyo, Vice President Noli de Castro, the Senate president, if he is seeking reelection, and the Speaker, a situation that will create a leadership vacuum, he stressed.

Thus, there is a need to expand the list of possible successors to avert a leadership vacuum and a political crisis, he said.

The absence of a succession law could invite military adventurism, he said.

He said in the case of a Senate president seeking reelection, his term also ends on June 30, 2010.

There could be no problem if he is not seeking reelection and his term ends in 2013, he added.

Josen prefers the chief justice to take over as acting president because he is next in rank after the Speaker.

Thus, he said if there is a failure of election in May 2010, Chief Justice Reynato Puno assumes office as acting president until Mrs. Arroyo's successor is determined.

Aggabao said the list of successors should include other officials in addition to the chief justice.

He cited the case of the United States, where 17 officials are named to succeed the president in case of emergencies.

- Jess Diaz