

GMA herself pushing for Senate-less con-ass, says lawmaker

Pressure from no less than President Arroyo herself made the House of Representatives approve the convening of a Senate-less constituent assembly to set the stage for Charter change, a senior House member revealed yesterday.

The lawmaker, who de-

clined to be named, disclosed that Mrs. Arroyo expressed her desire to Speaker Prospero Nograles to have House Resolution 1109 of Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte approved, and became angry when informed of its uncertain fate.

"But Madame President, I can't assure you of the numbers," the House leader told a red-faced and visibly upset Mrs. Arroyo.

Nograles had been consistent in his stand that the House could never ignore the Senate in proposing amendments to the 1987 Constitution.

Many lawmakers want Resolution 1109, which Villafuerte later disavowed, deliberated in the plenary, but only for the purpose of eventually killing it to demonstrate their recognition of the bicameral nature of Congress.

This was categorically stated by Nograles himself, House Majority Leader Arthur Defensor, Deputy Speaker for Visayas Pablo Garcia, Rep. Victor Ortega of the House committee on constitutional amendments, and Cebu Rep. Antonio Cuenco of the foreign affairs committee.

The Villafuerte resolution wanted the House to convene as a constituent assembly even without the participation of the

By DELON PORCALLA

Senate. He managed to gather around 175 signatures, but the entry of 32 more congressmen has increased the constitutional requirement to almost 200.

Defensor and Cuenco told newsmen they were just "signatories by accommodation."

"You know how accommodating congressmen are," Defensor told reporters earlier, implying that signature is one thing while vote is another.

Meanwhile, Deputy Speaker for Mindanao Simeon Datumanong and Camiguin Rep. Pedro Romualdo asked Charter change critics to stop maligning House members for passing HR 1109 and end allegations the Palace worked for its approval.

"We call on Cha-cha critics to exercise sobriety and fairness. Let's just await the SC ruling on HR 1109 and respect whatever the High Tribunal's decision will be," said Datumanong, a former justice secretary.

"These are not true," he said of the P20-million bribery allegations. "The Palace has

nothing to do with Cha-cha. There is no such offer of cash to lawmakers. The Priority Development Assistance Fund (pork) is an appropriation in the regular budget," he pointed out.

Romualdo, who heads the House committee on good government, asked critics to stop using HR 1109 to discredit the administration and paint a no-election scenario.

"No-e! is an overused black propaganda against the administration. No less than Comelec chairman

Jose Melo said Charter change cannot be a vehicle to postpone the 2010 elections," he said.

Trash

It was all "trash," said noted constitutionalist Fr. Joaquin Bernas, SJ, of the approval of HR 1109.

"All they said is, we will formulate amendments... so they haven't done anything yet. In other words, all they said is we will violate the Constitution," Bernas said in an interview with the Church-run Radio Veritas. "We will just wait for them to violate the Constitution."

"Congress is already a constituent assembly. So that even if today they want to propose amendments they can propose it now, pero dapat ipasa sa Senado. Pag hindi nila ipinasa sa Senado mahalatazala 'yon (but they should get it passed at the Senate. If they don't get Senate approval, it's useless)," he said.

He also advised critics of the Arroyo administration to refrain from taking the issue to the SC until an "actual controversy" crops up.

"There's nothing to bring to the Supreme Court at the moment. The Supreme Court is not a baby-sitter for confused public officers," Bernas said.

"At this point, there is nothing to bring up to the SC because there is no justiciable controversy for the SC to acquire jurisdiction," said Quizon Rep. Lorenzo Tañada III. "What the House did at this point is legal. What they will do after is (what) we should watch out for."

What P20M?

Malacañang laughed off yesterday allegations that President Arroyo had offered P20 million in additional pork allocations to congressmen to cement their support for con-ass.

"We don't know anything about the P20 million that they're talking about," deputy presidential spokesman An-

thony Golez said.

"The funny thing here is that they can say any figure to their delight but proving it is another story," Golez said at a news briefing.

Budget Secretary Rolando Andaya Jr. also denied the alleged bribe.

"I should know because I would be the one who would process the papers," Andaya said.

"We have no funds available for additional pork. Tinamang na tayo ag (we've been hit by) swine flu and we're having problems on the revenue side," Andaya said.

Another Cabinet official, Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno, in Iloilo said "that is very late in the game. There is no anymore Cha-cha."

Senators unite

Senators have set aside their political differences to form a united front against a Senate-less con-ass.

Emerging from an all-senators caucus, Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile said the Senate would defer any action on the House resolution and on the petition filed by lawyer Oliver Lozano before the Supreme Court. However, the Senate is preparing its legal defense or reply in case directed to by the SC.

Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri, Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr., Senate President Pro-Tempore Jinggoy Estrada, Manuel Roxas II, Gregorio Honasan, Noyon Aquino, Richard Gordon and Panfilo Lacson attended the meeting.

Once HR 1109 reaches the Senate, Enrile said it will have to pass through the regular process, starting at the committee level. — With Christina Mendez, Cecille Suerte Felipe, Paolo Romero, Ronilo Famonag, Dennis Carcamo, Michelle Zoleta