

GMA, Erap get friendly at Cebu wedding

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo and former President Joseph Estrada shook hands and chatted amiably during a wedding in Cebu last Saturday, prompting Palace officials to wish that it would set the political tone in the months leading to the 2010 elections and encourage efforts for national reconciliation.

Mrs. Arroyo and Estrada were sponsors at the wedding of lawyer Ma. Esperanza Christina Codilla, the youngest daughter of Cebu Gov. Gwendolyn Garcia, and Liloan town Mayor Vincent Franco Frasco at the Cebu Metropolitan Cathedral that also brought together political opponents Vice President Noli de Castro and Sen. Loren Legarda.

Mrs. Arroyo assumed office in January 2001 after ousting Estrada in the country's second people power revolution. Estrada was detained and convicted for plunder by the Sandiganbayan in 2007 but the President pardoned him in October of that year.

At the start of the wedding, the President and Estrada shook hands and smiled at each other before going to their respective seats.

Mrs. Arroyo was escorted by De Castro while Estrada escorted Cebu philanthropist Mariquita

**S a l i m -
b a n g o n**,
ahead of
them, at the
beginning
of the cere-
mony.

Near the
end of the
Mass, when
main cele-
brant, Cebu
Archbishop

Ricardo Vidal, asked everyone to show each other the sign of peace, it was Estrada who took the initiative and "went out of his way" by approaching Mrs. Arroyo and offering his hand in a gesture of peace, said Press Secretary Cerge Remonde, who was present at the wedding.

The President graciously took Mr. Estrada's hand.

After the wedding, Mrs. Arroyo and Estrada went out of the church together with Estrada holding Mrs. Arroyo by her forearm and escorting her to her vehicle. Spectators applauded at the spectacle.

"It was a very beautiful sight to behold to see our two leaders like that," Remonde said. "The former president escorted the incumbent President and they had a conversation and they were very civil and polite to each other."

Remonde said he asked the President what their conversation was about and she told him that Estrada complimented her on her ability to speak Cebuano.

The former leader also inquired whether Mrs. Arroyo would join the reception at the Cebu International Convention Center but she said she would not in deference to the 10-day period of mourning she declared on the death of former President Corazon Aquino.

Instead, the President went to Canduman, Mandaue City to check the status of a bridge project there.

"This is what our country needs, political civility. Enough of the politics of hatred," Remonde said. "Now that the elections are nearing, I think it will be good for our country to have political—

not, necessarily reconciliation, political civility among our leaders."

Local officials said the meeting, though brief, should revive efforts at national reconciliation.

'GMA does not hold grudges'

Remonde said Mrs. Arroyo "does not hold grudges" even with opposition leaders, including Estrada, who occasionally attack her in public.

"She is always at peace and she is able to focus on the things that she needs to do despite all the unfair accusations against her... which is part of the burdens of leadership," he said.

Estrada, for his part, yesterday said there was nothing to reconcile about with Mrs. Arroyo because he has already forgiven all those who had wronged him in the past.

In a telephone interview with **The STAR**, Estrada said he escorted Mrs. Arroyo with a smile and as a "gentleman" and because they are both principal sponsors to the Church wedding of Frasco and Codilla.

"I have nothing to reconcile with her. I am a gentleman and I don't want to badmouth anyone, especially a woman. I don't have any bad things to say against any woman and she is a President," Estrada said.

"At halfway of the event, I also held her by the forearm. I have already forgiven all of those who have done me wrong, especially when I was still incarcerated," Estrada said.

Estrada also said they chatted briefly and "did not talk about other things." — **With Jose Rodol Clapano and Freeman**