

Pineda: GMA to file COC for Congress on Monday

By DING CERVANTES

SAN FERNANDO, Pampanga - The guessing game is over. President Arroyo will file on Monday her certificate of candidacy (COC) for

congresswoman representing Pampanga's second district.

This was disclosed in an interview with The STAR yesterday by provincial board

member Lilia Pineda, a close ally and friend of the President. Pineda said representatives will file the COC for Mrs.

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Arroyo, Presidential son Rep. Mike Arroyo is currently the province's second district representative.

Pineda herself is set to file today her COC for governor under the ruling Lakas-Kampi-CMD, with Vice Gov. Joséfer Galán as her running mate.

Earlier, the President's election lawyer Romeo Macalinal said in a text message that the President need not personally file her COC. "The filing of COC shall be at the provincial election supervisor of Pangasinana and cannot be done in Manila," Macalinal said, adding that there is "a strong clamor from leaders of the second district for her to run there."

Pineda said Mrs. Arroyo is expected to hear from the San Guillermo church in downtown Barangay San Nicolas in Labao on Monday while waiting for the filing of her COC by her representatives.

At Malacanan, yesterday, Macalinal said Mrs. Arroyo hinted at aiming for an elective post in her province.

The election lawyer said he asked Mrs. Arroyo about her political plans and she replied she was thinking of it because of the clamor from her province.

"I think based on her body language, she is considering it (aiming for an elective post) already," he said. "But because of the clamor, she said she is going to give it deeper consideration."

Press Secretary Crispin Romualde, meanwhile, said at a news briefing that Mrs. Arroyo will make

paper announcements on the matter soon. "I am aware of the strong clamor (for her to run) but cannot judge her body language if it's too loud for her to ignore," Romualde said. He said that if she decides to run, it would be to "serve the people, not protect herself," referring to suspicions that buying a congressional seat would make her immune from lawsuits that may arise after she steps down.

Mikey quitting politics?

Asked about Mikey's political plans after his stint in Congress, Pineda said there's "none." She said he has apparently given way to his mother's own congressional bid.

"It will be such a waste if the President withdraws from public service. She has the experience and has established connections abroad that can be used to benefit Pangasinana," she said.

Pineda declined to reveal when the President told her about her congressional plans. She also said that Mrs. Arroyo merely wanted to show her gratitude to her labors by her becoming a visitor to the province.

Pineda said the president, during her visits, has realized that there's much to be done for the province, especially for the second district.

"Because of the connections she has established even abroad, the President will be an asset not only to Pangasinana's second district but even to other districts in the province, or even Central Luzon," Pineda noted.

Pineda also said she has heard reports of the Liberal Party's invitation to former congressman Enrique Lingad to run against the President in the second district. But Lingad declined

to comment on the issue.

Prof. Randy David, a native of Pangasinana in the second district, earlier vowed to challenge Mrs. Arroyo if she runs in the second district, but has reportedly withdrawn his bid.

Unify Panganga

Pineda said she intends to ensure unity in Pangasinana in her decision to run again for governor. She accused Gov. Ed Pineda for causing graft and corruption but stressed it was under his administration that Pangasinana became fragmented.

"I credit among Ed (Pineda) 100 percent for removing graft and corruption. That credit is owed by him, but his administration was not able to do enough for the people because of disunity," she said.

"He put his trust only in one person," she said, referring to Pineda's provincial administrator Vivian Dico.

Pineda may still be Pineda's strongest foe in the gubernatorial race, although the pro- or leave said the LP his party has yet to come up with its official bid for the post of governor. Sen. Lito Lapid has withdrawn his gubernatorial bid in deference to Malacanan's request that he seek re-election instead.

Pineda's electoral protest against Pineda is up for resolution by the second division of the Comelec after several hearings as well as a record of gubernatorial votes cast in 2007.

Emesto Francisco, one of Pineda's counsels in the case, said he did not expect a fair ruling from the Comelec on the case.

"Based on the actions of Commissioner (Nicolomed) Ferrer from the start, I believe that

we will not get a fair ruling. I was going to sue with the process because we had no choice but I personally do not believe in its integrity," Francisco said in a text message.

"It seems to me that the objective of the whole thing is to cement Gov. Pineda," he said. Pineda said they hope to resolve the case next month.

In the 2007 gubernatorial race, Pineda ran under the administration of Kabataan ng Malayang Pilipino (Kompey) to challenge Pineda as an independent candidate, by 1,147 votes.

Speaker Prospero Nograles said President Arroyo's decision to seek a congressional seat was widely expected.

"She will make a decision and that was predictable. Going back to your roots," he said.

Nograles earlier gave Mrs. Arroyo unconditional advice: Don't run for a lower office, since you have made the people of your political country proud.

Those who have called for her resignation, including former President Fidel Ramos, have made a similar suggestion.

Militant party-list congressmen have claimed that the President would seek the speakership at the expense of her province (Luzon) with her allies to steer the nation to a parliamentary system, under which she could become prime minister.

Protection vs prosecution

Liberal Party standard-bearer Sen. Benigno Aquino III and his running mate Sen. Manuel Roxas II said Mrs. Arroyo, in her bid for a new elective post, apparently wants protection from prosecution.

Roxas said they would study whether they would field a candidate to run against Mrs. Arroyo in Pangasinana and that they would campaign hard in the province. Roxas expressed belief Aquino would win in Pangasinana, the home province of the President.

"I cannot understand (why she won't retreat). Former President Fidel Ramos told us when he asked (his wife) if she could serve one more term (Mrs. Mikey) Ramos told him, 'enough. It is very difficult to shoulder the problems of the country,'" Aquino said.

Roxas stressed the public must be vigilant about the plans of Mrs. Arroyo to make sure national interest would be protected as she would run while still in office and avoid those that she wants to become prime minister.

Relaxed security for supporters

Supporters of Mrs. Arroyo in Pangasinana have come out in the open - even at Malacanan grounds - to push her to run for a local position in the province.

"In Pangasinana, in spite of the various programs and services delivered by the national government, they are still not enough to achieve the full development of the province, hence, the Kapampangan voted the President to continuously serve even at the capacity of a congressman," the mayor said in a statement.

Malacanan even had to relax its security yesterday to accommodate supporters of the President who gathered right at the Palace grounds to show their support for Mrs. Arroyo. - With Paolo Romero, Ric Sagor, Marvin Si, Sheila Cristobana, Jess Diaz