

# DATELINE PHILIPPINES

## GMA, Noli reiterate call for unity to protect RP from financial crisis

by PIA LEE-BRAGO, MARVIN SY  
Philstar.com

**P**RESIDENT Arroyo and Vice President Noli de Castro, at separate venues, reiterated their call for all sectors to set aside politics and unite in order to ensure that the Philippine economy and the Filipino people remain protected from the impact of the global financial crisis.

In a speech at the launching of the LPG conversion program for tricycles in Quezon City Dec. 21, the President noted that the Philippines has managed to escape recession even though two-thirds of the world have already sank into it.

She also cited the results of the latest Pulse Asia survey showing 70 percent of Filipinos do not believe that the Philippines is hopeless and that if given the opportunity to work overseas, they would still stay here.

"The surveys have shown that 70 percent of Filipinos view the future with full optimism," the President said in Filipino.

De Castro, on the other hand, led the 33rd National Prayer Breakfast with a prayer for the country not to be divided just to satisfy vested interests of political and financially ambitious leaders.

"That we may not needlessly squander our gains nor recklessly divide our people just to satisfy the parochial vested interests of the politically and financially ambitious. These are troubled, humbling times. My personal prayer is that these troubled, humbling times would make us better leaders and better persons; would make us a stronger nation," De Castro said at the prayer breakfast organized by the Philippine National Prayer Breakfast Foundation Inc. at the Manila Hotel on Wednesday.

Unlike the President, whose ratings have fallen steeply in

the surveys, De Castro has been receiving favorable ratings in surveys on presidential aspirants for 2010.

He said the results are seen as a continued trust and confidence in him.

De Castro said it is not yet the right time for him to respond to calls to declare his intention to run for president in the 2010 elections.

House Deputy Minority Leader Neptali Gonzales II has urged De Castro to announce now whether he is running for president or seeking reelection as vice president, and under what party.

The lawmaker said most Lakas members are likely to support De Castro if he would seek the presidency.

In January, De Castro said he would not want his performance in the government for the next two years to be seen as part of a campaign for the presidency, but he admitted his plan to join the 2010 presidential race.

As Vice President, Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council (HUDCC) chair and presidential adviser on overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), De Castro said his plans for 2010 might lend political color to the performance of his duties.

He said he has not given his commitment to join a particular political party but talks with parties are ongoing.

**Count blessings**  
The President, meanwhile,

emphasized that it is the duty of the government to help the people in dealing with the pressures of inflation and the weakening economies around the world.

"And during this troubled time, it is the role of government to help insulate the Filipino people from shocks and economic pressures," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She said all sectors, including the political opposition must work together to help the country and the people, especially at this time.

The President said the faithful should count their blessings and look towards the future with greater hope, confidence and optimism.

"Just like (Quezon City Mayor) Sonny Belmonte said, it is very surprising! The Philippine economy has an added kick for the last quarter and this added kick is that even though there is a global crisis, two-thirds of the globe are now in recession, but the Philippines is not," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"This is why the people should come together this Christmas time to celebrate faith and family," she added.

"Everyone must unite and set aside conflict and political differences and let us identify the positive things that we can do together to improve our lives," the President said.

"Let us welcome the New Year with a heart full of hope and trust in our abilities," she added. ■

## Estrada-Legarda teamup looms

by MICHAEL LIM UBAC  
Inquirer.net

**M**ANILA—Deposed president Joseph Estrada has reiterated his intention to again seek the presidency in 2010 if the leaders of the opposition fail to unite and field a single standard-bearer.

Estrada, who was convicted of plunder last year, insisted that he could still run for the post he lost in 2001 because his civil and political rights were "fully restored" when President Macapagal-Arroyo pardoned him.

"If the opposition will not unite, that will be my last option—I might run," he told reporters at a Christmas party on the night of December 19 hosted by his son, Sen. Jinggoy Estrada.

"I will unify the people," he said.

Estrada said it was possible he would pick Sen. Loren Legarda as his running mate "if I run."

He said Legarda had sufficient experience to be "a good vice president."

"She has brains and beauty," he said adding that his bosom friend, the late opposition presidential candidate Fernando Poe Jr., chose Legarda as running mate in 2004 because of her popularity and political experience.

(Poe and Legarda lost to President Macapagal-Arroyo and Vice President Noli de Castro in that election.)

Estrada also said the entire country, and not just the opposition, was highly polarized.

"I don't believe in [political parties]," he said. "I told the people they should not believe in parties because these are only good during elections. After the elections, [party members] will divide the [loot] among themselves, and the people are left out."

Estrada acknowledged the big number of presidential hopefuls in the opposition.

**Late in '09**

Asked when he would make up his mind on whether to gun for the presidency again, he

said: "Maybe the last quarter of next year."

Estrada observed that "all the candidates are going around the country feeling the pulse of the people."

He said the ideal setup was for Senators Legarda, Manuel Villar and Panfilo Lacson, known contenders for the No. 1 post, to choose among themselves who should become the opposition standard-bearer.

"If they're not rating [in the surveys] as No. 1 and 2, that's a waste of money, time and effort. They have to slide down to vice president," he said, adding:

"The most ideal is for the No. 1 and No. 2 [in the surveys to run for president] and for the No. 3 and No. 4 to slide down."

Estrada also said even Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay, who declared his interest in the presidency last month, could also choose to run for vice president.

On the other hand, everything is fluid at this point because surveys on presidential preferences are not so reliable at this stage, Estrada said.

"It's too early...The election is one-and-a-half years from now," he pointed out.

Told that Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez had said that he should not participate in politics anymore, Estrada said: "*E wala namang alam* (He doesn't know anything)."

Early last week, Legarda said she was thinking of running for president.

**Continuing Poe's fight**

Although she stopped short of declaring her run, she talked about her "passion and compassion for good management and honest governance," and "continuing the fight" begun by Poe.

"If and when I declare I am running for president," Legarda told the *Inquirer* in an interview at her office in the Senate, "it will be based on a platform and vision for our country—a vision of good governance, sustainable development, transparency and accountability to the people."

She added: "It is this passion and compassion that will eventually drive me to run for the highest post if and when I so decide and I so declare. And I will make such a decision at the proper time."

Sen. Francis Escudero is being bruited about as among the contenders for the No. 1 or No. 2 post.

An Escudero-Legarda or Legarda-Escudero ticket was suggested during the Christmas party of the Nationalist People's Coalition (NPC) at the Wack-Wack Golf and Country Club in Mandaluyong City on December 22.

On tangling with other aspirants for the presidency, Legarda said: "I can take on anyone. In the end, I only compete with myself, not with other people."

She said Poe supporters wanted her to "continue the fight."

"We waged a difficult but victorious campaign in 2004, but we were cheated with the use of government resources and massive fraud," Legarda said.

"And after FPJ (Poe) died in December 2004, I continued the fight single-handedly for three years in the Supreme Court until I ran for senator in 2007," she said.

**Possibilities**

A non-commissioned Pulse Asia survey on presidential preferences conducted on October 14-27 showed that if Estrada decided not to run, Legarda was at 21 percent, De Castro and Villar at 20 percent each, and Escudero at 17 percent.

If both Estrada and Escudero would not run, Legarda would win over De Castro, Villar and Sen. Mar Roxas, according to the survey.

Legarda's margin of victory would grow exponentially if Lacson chose not to seek the presidency: She got 37 percent compared to De Castro and Villar's 29 percent.

In short, only a united opposition would seal a Legarda victory at the polls. ■

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