

DATELINE PHILIPPINES

ENRILE IS RP'S NEW SENATE PRESIDENT

Villar: 'I am free'

by MAILAR AGER
Inquirer.net

FORMER Philippine Senate president Manuel Villar said he has no regrets over having to step down from his post after losing the support of the majority in the chamber.

In fact, Villar said he is now relieved at being liberated from the many responsibilities of the Senate presidency.

"Okey na okey ako dito [I'm really okay with this]. No feelings of regrets, talagang okey lang iyan [it really is okay]," he said over the ABS-CBN News Channel.

"At least now, I can say I am free and my movements are more unrestrained. I can now do many things I could not do when I was Senate president, so in a way, I also feel relieved. Right now, I feel I'm free so I am not really sad," he said.

Villar could not say why there was a move to oust him from his post, saying he would rather leave it to the people to judge.

He also refused to say the ouster move had to do with his declaration he is running for president in 2010.

"Nagkataon naman na biglang nagta-top tayo sa survey ay nangyari ito. Pero as I said earlier, hay-

aan na lang natin [It so happened that I topped the surveys when this happened. But as I said earlier, let's leave it at that]," he said.

"Ayoko namang pangunahan ang mga kasamahan natin. Maski na nasa kabilang partido ako, mananatili pa rin ang pag-galang ko sa kanila [I don't want to second guess our colleagues. Even if I am now with the other party, I maintain my respect for them," Villar said.

He said he is also confident his resignation would not affect his presidential bid.

"Sa tingin ko naman wala dahil ngayon magkakaroon na ako ng oras. Talaga namang malaking trabaho rin itong pagiging pangulo ng Senado at hindi ka masyadong makapagsalita dahil sa bumabalanse ka [I don't think so because now I have more time. Being Senate president is really very hard work and you cannot really speak because you have to balance things]," he said. ■



Former RP Senate President Manuel Villar Jr. delivers farewell speech last Nov. 17, 2008. Inquirer Photo by Jess Yuson

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Villar closes in on Noli in latest Pulse Asia survey

Ties Erap for no. 2

FILIPINOS still do not have a clear choice for the country's next President, but had the May 2010 presidential election been held last October, it would have been a five-way contest, according to the latest survey by Pulse Asia Inc.

The October 2008 *Ulat ng Bayan* survey found "practically the same percentages of Filipinos" supporting Vice President Noli de Castro (18 percent), former President Joseph "Erap" Estrada (17 percent), former Senate President Manuel Villar Jr. (17 percent) and Sen. Francis Escudero (15 percent) and Sen. Loren Legarda (13 percent).

The survey, conducted from Oct. 14 to Oct. 27, asked the question: "Of the people on this list, whom would you vote for as President of the Philippines if the elections of 2010 were held today and they were presidential candidates?"

"Filipinos' presidential preferences hardly changed between July and October 2008," Pulse Asia said in a statement released on November 17.

Since July, Estrada and Escudero gained a percentage point each (from 16 percent to 17 percent and from 14 percent to 15 percent, respectively), while Legarda lost a percentage point (from 14 percent to 13 percent).

Villar gains 5 points

Pulse Asia also noted that "mar-

ginal changes" may be observed in the overall voter preferences for Villar, who gained 5 percentage points (from 12 percent to 17 percent), and for De Castro, who lost 4 percentage points (from 22 percent to 18 percent), between July and October.

The release of the survey results came on the same day that Villar resigned as Senate President.

"A five-way race involving these individuals also emerges in the rest of Luzon, while in the Visayas, it is a three-way contest for the presidency among Vice President de Castro (22 percent), Senator Legarda (21 percent) and Senator Villar (18 percent)," Pulse Asia said.

In Metro Manila, Escudero led with 22 percent, while Estrada was "the clear choice" in Mindanao with 30 percent.

Across classes, those belonging to the poorest Class E also favored the deposed leader (27 percent), while in the Class ABC, Villar (19 percent) and Escudero (17 percent) shared the top spot.

De Castro (18 percent), Villar (18 percent) and Escudero (17 percent) were the preferred candidates of those in Class D.

Also on the list were Senators Panfilo Lacson (7 percent) and Manuel Roxas II (6 percent), Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay (1 percent), Metropolitan Manila Development Authority Chair Bayani Fernando (1 percent) and Bro. Eddie Villanueva of the Jesus is Lord Movement (1 percent).

The survey used face-to-face interviews, with a multistage probability sample of 1,200 adult Filipinos. It had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. (Inquirer.net)

Estrada hand in coup seen

But deposed leader denies ousting Villar

by JULIET LABOG-JAVELLANA & LEILA SALAVERRIA
Inquirer.net

JOSEPH "Erap" Estrada helped oust Manuel Villar as Senate president because he wants the latter out of the way of the opposition ticket in the 2010 presidential election.

This was disclosed to the Philippine Daily Inquirer by an administration senator.

Estrada denied any hand in the coup that saw Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile, an ally of both President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her deposed predecessor, taking the plump post from Villar.

"Erap sees that there are many candidates from the opposition. He wants Manny Villar out of the way because [the latter's] being Senate president gives him a competitive edge," said the senator who asked not to be named because of the sensitive nature of the subject.

The senator said Estrada, who was convicted of plunder and quickly pardoned by Ms Arroyo, played his hand through his son, Sen. Jinggoy Estrada, as well as senators harboring presidential or vice presidential ambitions.

"This is an opposition plot, and Erap is the master manipulator who played on their greed. I don't think there was money involved here; it was just preying on their ambitions," the senator said.

According to the senator, this was why Jinggoy Estrada, a close associate of Villar who had picked him to be Senate president pro tempore, joined the coup.

"Jinggoy will not move without any instruction from his father," the senator said.

Knows Enrile very well

Estrada "broached" the idea of unseating Villar to Enrile, who used to chair Estrada's Partido ng Masang Pilipino political party, the senator said. (Enrile resigned the chairmanship of the party in January 2007 but remains a member.)

"Erap knows Enrile very well," the senator said.

Per the senator's account, Sen. Edgardo Angara was also in on the plot to advance the candidacy of Sen. Loren Legarda, who, although

considered a "presidentiable," could end up as Estrada's running mate if the deposed President is allowed to run in 2010.

"This is very directly related to the 2010 presidential election," the senator said, adding that Senators Panfilo Lacson, Manuel "Mar" Roxas II, Francis Escudero and Richard Gordon all joined in because of their plan to seek higher office.

"Villar is a threat to them so they want him out," and the other senators joined the coup to bag choice committees, the senator said.

'Nagulat nga ako'

But on the phone with the Inquirer, Estrada denied having instigated the coup: "I don't know anything about that. I have no involvement in that."

He said he learned about the coup on Sunday night, November 16, from his son.

"Nagulat nga ako," he recalled, adding that his son did not seek his advice and he did not offer any. "Jinggoy is his own man."

According to Estrada, he backed his son's decision because Enrile is a member of his own party and "a man of vast experience, a senator for a long time, also a congressman, a secretary of defense and a lawyer, landl one of our legal luminaries."

Estrada said he was not worried that the Senate might lose its independence under Enrile because of the latter's closeness with Ms Arroyo.

"I believe that under his leadership, the Senate will remain independent. Some were saying that Manny (Villar) was an ally of GMA [Ms Arroyo], but I did not believe so," Estrada said.

Of Villar's ouster, Estrada said: "Sayang (It's a shame). He's also good in his leadership of the Senate, especially in the investigations like that of the National Broadband Network deal."

Reconciliation

As the then Speaker of the House, Villar transmitted to the Senate the articles of Estrada's im-

peachment.

When he was elected to the Senate, Villar sought out the deposed President for a reconciliation. In 2006, Jinggoy Estrada and his mother, Sen. Luisa Estrada, provided the swing votes that led to Villar's election as Senate president.

Former Senate President Franklin Drilon, who had a term-sharing arrangement with Villar, also did not think that the Monday coup was a Palace operation.

"I don't think Malacañang plotted it, but [as for] Malacañang [giving] its go-signal to its allies like Lito Lapid and Bong Revilla, I would not discount that," Drilon said on the phone.

Drilon said the chamber's independence rested not only on the Senate president but also on the committee chairs.

He said the Senate's independence under Enrile would be put to the test in the next few weeks, particularly on how it would handle the inquiries into the fertilizer fund scam and the scandal involving the "euro generals."

'Blessing in disguise'

Nueva Vizcaya Rep. Carlos Padilla, a colleague of Villar's in the Nacionalista Party, said the senators who took part in the coup might have done the latter a favor.

Padilla said Villar's fall from the Senate presidency had freed him of the responsibility of being neutral and maintaining balance in the chamber.

Now he can let his true self shine, and the party can reap the benefits, the congressman said.

"Maybe it could be a blessing in disguise for the Nacionalista Party because for all you know, the real Villar will emerge," Padilla told reporters.

"Sometimes—my honest observation—it seems he has inhibitions because of things that must be done, simply because he wanted to maintain the balance in the Senate and perhaps to maintain his position," Padilla said. ■

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