House okays automation budget

MANILA—The House of Representatives approved on third and final reading last March 2 the proposed P11.3-billion supplemental budget for the automation of the combined presidential, congressional and local elections in May next year.

Before taking the final vote on the budget bill, congressmen dropped the provision that the use of the funds would be contingent upon the passage by Congress of a special election law amending Republic Act 9369 or the Poll Automation Law.

Several House members had proposed changes in the law that would allow for manual voting for certain elective officials, including congressmen.

The provision, authored by Cebu Rep. Pablo Garcia, was rewritten to prescribe that the release of the automation budget would be in "strict compliance" with RA 9369, which mandates the computerization of elections.

However, in the ensuing debate among Garcia, Rep. Edcel Lagman of Albay and Rep. Didagen Dilangalen of Maguindanao, it was not clear whether the so-called hybrid election—a combination of automation and manual voting—was dropped.

Responding to questions from his colleagues, Garcia said the Commission on Elections (Comelec) is authorized to enforce the Poll Computerization Law.

"I don't suppose that the Comelec will defy the very law that it is supposed to implement," he said.

Pressed by Lagman to categorically state whether RA 9369 permits "manual voting, manual counting and manual preparation of election returns and other forms," Garcia replied: "The law speaks for itself. I can provide you a copy of the law."

Accusing his colleague of being "circuitous" in his answers, Lagman declared: "Let me say for the information of the Comelec and the public that RA 9369 authorizes manual voting, manual counting and manual preparation of official accountable forms such as election returns."

Dilangalen protested Lagman's declaration, saying, "The law provides for pure automation, not manual."

Voting for automation, opposition Rep. Rufus Rodriguez of Cagayan de Oro City said he hopes that the notorious *dagdagbawas* (vote padding/shaving) operation would become a thing of the past with poll computerization.

Nueva Ecija Rep. Edno Joson, an independent, voted against the automation budget bill.

"The people have lost their confidence in the Comelec, and confidence lost cannot be easily regained," he said.

"For me, it's garbage in, garbage out. If we can't trust the people in the Comelec, how can we trust their machines?" Joson asked.

Another opposition congressman, Salvador Escudero III of Sorsogon, said he hoped the proposed poll automation system would be superior to the ingenuity of the Filipino to go around the law.

Rep. Roilo Golez of Parañaque, another member of the opposition bloc, clarified that he is not against automation but warned the Comelec that automation could be an instrument for "mass cheating."

"This could happen with the tampering of the main server," he said.

He suggested that a paper trail should be generated at the precinct, municipal, city, provincial, and national levels so that the counting of votes could be monitored and would be transparent.

Not sincere

Earlier, Comelec Chairman Jose Melo said that pro-hybrid congressmen seemed to not be sincere in supporting the computerization of the 2010 elections.

"It seems like they really want manual. But they cannot be open about it because they are under pressure from the public," Melo said in Filipino in an interview.

But Makati Rep. Teodoro Locsin Jr., chairman of the House committee on suffrage and electoral reform, has another theory.

Locsin said many congressmen want "hybrid" elections in May next year because they are planning to cheat.

Melo said the hybrid system was just being used by some congressmen as an excuse to make it appear that they are also for automation although in actuality they are not.

Even the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) and the National Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel) have questioned the motives of pro-hybrid congressmen, as they believe that manual elections are easier to manipulate.

Poll automation is priority

Deputy Presidential Spokesman Lorelei Fajardo reiterated that poll automation is a priority of the Arroyo administration and Comelec officials.

"President Arroyo is for clean, honest and peaceful elections and she has already certified as very urgent the proposed supplemental budget," Fajardo told a news briefing.

Locsin said there is nothing wrong with the law on election automation that the previous Congress had passed.

He said if automation fails or if next year's elections are dirty and chaotic, "it's our fault, not Comelec's."

Deputy Majority Leader Neptali Gonzales II said many House members have concerns about safeguards against cheating that the manual system provides.

Over the weekend, Nograles indicated that the House would insist on a hybrid system for next year's combined presidential, congressional and local elections.

While Nograles cited "fear of the unknown" as the reason for congressmen to insist on having the congressional-local election done manually, Rep. Teodoro Casiño of the party-list group Bayan Muna said it is "fear of modern technology."

He said the apprehensions are coming both from those who want clean elections and who want to protect their votes, and those who are inclined to cheat.

The House, along with the Senate, is set to go on a month-long vacation on March 4.

Explain automation

Meanwhile, Sen. Francis Escudero asked the Comelec to explain in detail to the public how it would undertake the automation of the 2010 elections as the country could not afford another mistake like Mega Pacific Corp. (MPC) fiasco.

The P1.3-billion poll computerization deal with MPC was nullified by the Supreme Court (SC) for lack of public bidding but the Office of Ombudsman subsequently cleared Comelec officials of any liability for approving the project.

Escudero said in the case of MPC, the government had not yet recovered the P1.3 billion that was spent by the Comelec for the computerization deal even if the contract was scrapped by the SC. The machines of MPC have not been used at all and the Comelec has had to pay for their storage.

Escudero said the poll body should clearly elaborate on how it would spend the P11.3 billion for the computerization of the coming 2010 polls.

Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) president Jaro, Iloilo Archbishop Angel Lagdameo reminded people to be discerning of aspiring political candidates in 2010 elections.

"We are reminding the people to be sensitive, discern and examine the track record of these candidates. This is one way for us to have a part in campaigning and choosing the next deserving leaders of our country," Lagdameo said. *(Philstar.com)*

Charter change moving slowly but surely at House

by JESS DIAZ
Philstar.com

MANILA—The Charter change (Cha-cha) train is chugging along slowly but surely at the House of Representatives while the nation is preparing for next year's election of President Arroyo's successor.

Last week, the House decided to include Speaker Prospero Nograles' Resolution 737 in the "business for the day" portion of its Order of Business, the document that lists measures the chamber tackles in its sessions.

This means that the chamber's leadership could call the resolution for plenary debates any time beginning today since it is already part of the "business for the day."

In the measure, Nograles proposes to amend the Constitution's economic provisions to relax foreign ownership of domestic businesses, including those that the Charter limits to Filipino citizens such as media entities.

The Speaker's proposal aims to entice more foreigners to invest in the country. The House committee on constitutional amendments has endorsed its approval.

According to Nograles, his resolution would take the legislative process route, which means that after the House approves it, it would be sent to the Senate for its own action.

It would be dead if the Senate rejects it. If it gets the Senate's green light, it would be submitted to the people in a plebiscite for ratification. It would take effect if the people approve it.

This process seems to be acceptable to senators since it involves them.

However, there is a parallel proposal in the House that aims to bypass the Senate. It is contained in a still-to-be-filed resolution that calls on Congress to convene as a constituent assembly (con-ass) to propose constitutional changes.

Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte, president of President Arroyo's Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi) party, is the principal author of the Cha-cha via con-ass resolution.

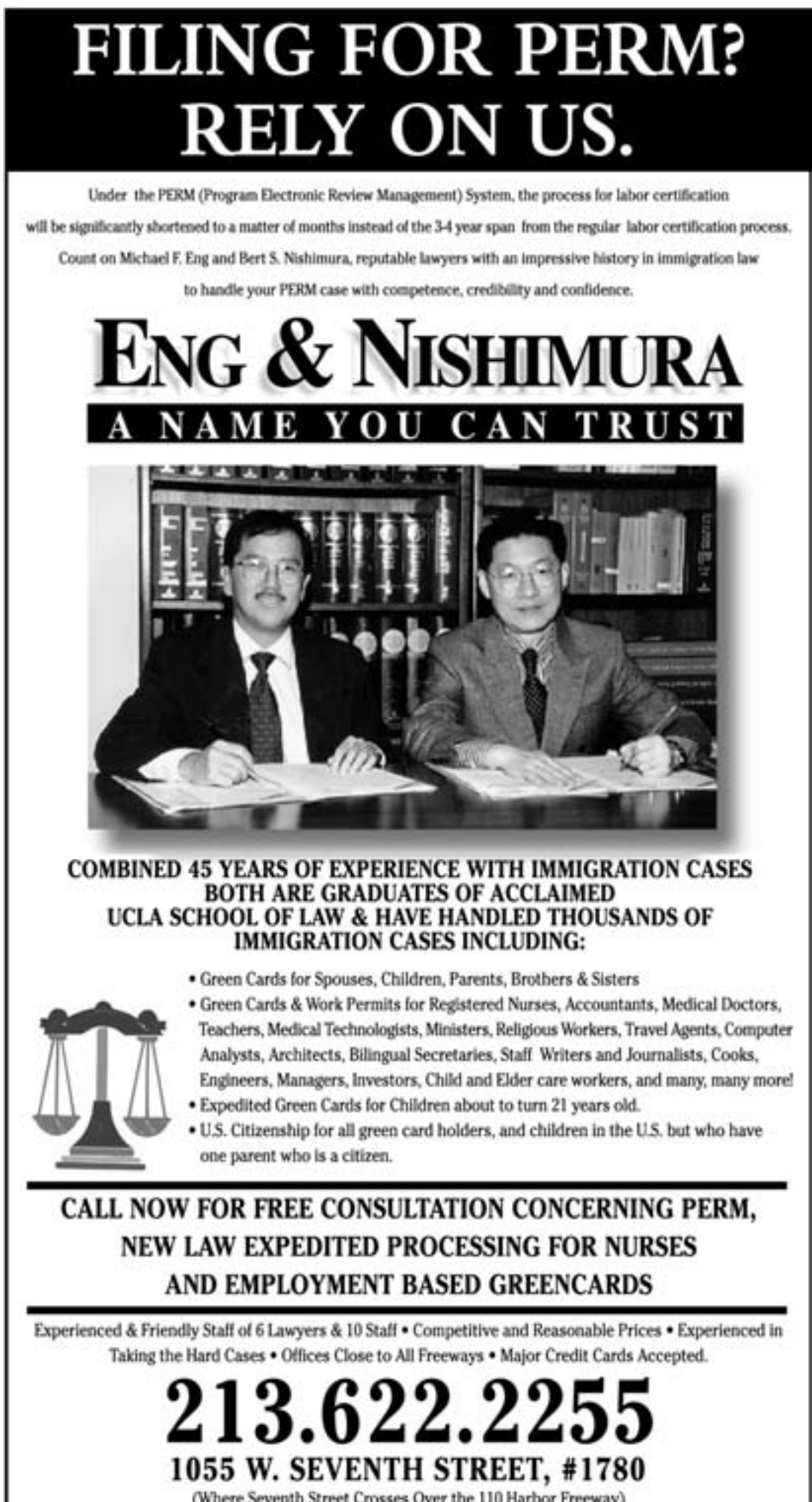
Until last week, Villafuerte, along with presidential son and Pampanga Rep. Juan Miguel Arroyo and Leyte Rep. Martin Romualdez, was leading the campaign to have House members sign the resolution.

By the Kampi president's count, he, Arroyo and Romualdez had gathered 165 to 170 signatures.

They had since passed the signature-gathering job to Nograles and Mindoro Occidental Rep. Amelita Villarosa, who, together with Romualdez, are Mrs. Arroyo's favorite companions among her House allies in her travels abroad.

Nograles and Villarosa, one of six deputy speakers of the House, have collected an additional 10 signatures.

Villafuerte and Kampi have targeted 197 signatures to file the resolution and bypass senators on Cha-cha. That number represents three-fourths of the combined membership of the Senate and the House, the vote requirement the Constitution prescribes for any Charter amendment.

Nograles is thus grudgingly pushing for two parallel Cha-cha routes.

But while his Resolution 737 proposes specific amendments, Cha-cha via con-ass could subject the entire Constitution to revision, including the provisions on term limits for President Arroyo and other elective officials.