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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

GMA signs P11.3-billion budget for automation...

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to safeguard the true will of the Filipino electorate," he said.

"With full automation, we look forward to the holding of 2010 elections as a landmark democratic exercise that will bring about greater political stability and harmony."

When asked why the signing was done quietly, Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said Mrs. Arroyo is only being true to her promise to the public that she would sign the bill funding as soon as it reaches her desk.

"What's important is that the President delivers on her promises, in this case, the automation of our elections," Remonde said.

He said the Palace received the enrolled copy of the bill that Congress approved earlier this month.

He added the modernization of the elections is one of the major legacies the administration wants to leave behind.

The process to decide who will supply the machines will begin on Friday, March 28 election officials said. Six companies, including several foreign groups, have expressed interest.

Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno, Arroyo's election strategist, said the automation of elections

would mean that candidates would have to file nominations earlier than usual.

"They will have to file their certificates of candidacy by late November this year to allow the elections commission to print their names in the ballots," Puno said. Previously, nominations were due only four months before elections.

Meanwhile, Sen. Francis Escudero called on the Comelec to make sure safeguards are in place to prevent automated cheating in the 2010 elections.

"After nine long years of maladministration, our country cannot afford to have a failure of elections next year. If that happens, our people will completely lose faith in the electoral process," said Escudero, who chairs the Senate's Committee on Electoral Reforms and the Oversight Committee on the Automated Electoral System.

Escudero was among those who voted against the P11.3-billion supplemental budget.

He said that during the hearings, the Comelec failed to answer basic questions on how it would implement the poll automation project.

Escudero also asked how the Comelec would deal with the expected long list of candidates from the presidential to the city and municipal councils and the possibility that voters would commit mistakes in filling up the ballot.

Escudero said the Senate oversight committee would now focus and closely monitor the way the Comelec would spend the funds and implement the unprecedented plan to hold the country's first fully automated election.

Meanwhile, Sen. Richard Gordon has called on first-time voters to think carefully before selecting the country's next president because the country's future depends on the outcome of next year's elections.

Gordon told senior students of School of the Holy Spirit in Quezon City who will vote for the first time in 2010 that they would have to vote responsibly if they want to change the country's bleak future.

"A leader must know how to tap the people's spirit and make you do

something better than what you are currently doing. You do not just pick anybody from thin air, you do not just get anybody because she or he is nice," Gordon told the students in a forum.

He also told them that they should demand debates from candidates so they can get to know and scrutinize the candidates' qualifications objectively.

Meanwhile, to minimize electoral fraud in next year's elections, Comelec is mulling advance voting in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) next year.

According to Comelec chairman Jose Melo, they might hold the election in ARMM on April 20 instead of May 10 next year.

"Personally, I am in favor of it so that the concentration of our security forces and the election administration would be focused on the ARMM. If that would be the case, there might be less shenanigans there," Melo said.

ARMM has been tagged as the "cheating capital" of the Philippines, owing to the alleged electoral fraud there in the 2004 local and national elections and in the 2007 mid-term polls.

The Comelec is now drafting a calendar of activities for the 2010 polls but it has not promulgated a resolution effecting such changes.

But Comelec commissioner Elias Yusoph disagrees with the plan.

Yusoph, who hails from Marawi City, noted that advancing the election in ARMM would be against the Omnibus Election Code.

"We still have to amend the law. The law provides that the elections must be held simultaneously, nationwide," Yusoph added.

Comelec commissioner Nicodemo Ferrer said that some ARMM officials are opposed to the plan, because that is tantamount to discriminating against the region.

"They don't like that because that would be like (officially) marking (ARMM) as an area where cheating occurs," Ferrer added.

The Comelec is now studying the areas in ARMM that have the potential to be election hot spots in next year's elections. ■

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