

DATELINE PHILIPPINES

Arroyo allies push Charter change

House plenary vote on Con-ass bid likely

by Gil C. CABACUNGAN JR.
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PRONOUNCEMENTS of the death of a move in the House of Representatives to amend the Constitution without the participation of the Senate may have been greatly exaggerated.

A majority of the lawmakers still support House Resolution No. 1109 and a plenary vote on the Charter change (Cha-cha) measure is likely in the next two weeks, according to Nueva Ecija Rep. Rodolfo Antonino.

Support for the convening of a constituent assembly (Con-ass) has hardly waned even with the withdrawal of Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte from the measure which he had initiated, Antonino said.

He said that bigger players, notably Speaker Prospero Nograles and presidential son, Pampanga Rep. Juan Miguel Arroyo, remained as solid backers of the move to adopt the parliamentary system.

Critics said the Charter change move was aimed at keeping President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in power. Her term expires next year.

Villafuerte, the author of HR 1109, announced on Friday, May 15, his withdrawal from the Con-ass initiative he had doggedly pursued since last year, saying there was not enough time to implement it.

But Villafuerte's pronouncement of the resolution's demise was described as premature by Ms. Arroyo's allies and the opposition who point out that HR 1109 was poised for final approval by the House committee on constitutional amendments on Tuesday.

179 signatures
"Congressman Villafuerte is just one of 179 solons who signed 1109. I believe we have enough solons to approve it at the committee level and at the plenary level," Antonino said.

The bill seeks to amend the Constitution by calling the two houses of Congress to a session and vote on changes jointly, citing a vague provision in the Charter.

With their superior number, Ms. Arroyo's House allies plan to bypass the Senate, which has vigorously opposed the measure. A challenge in the Supreme Court, which is also dominated by Ms. Arroyo's appointees, is expected.

Nograles' own Cha-cha bill, House Resolution No. 737, which seeks to lift foreign investment restrictions though legislative amendments to the Constitution, dubbed the "fourth mode," was set to resume floor deliberations this week.

Majority Leader Arthur Defensor said that plenary debates on HR 737 would resume this week after a two-week delay due to a lack of quorum as a large number of congressmen flew to Las Vegas to watch Filipino boxing idol Manny Pacquiao hammer Ricky Hatton of Britain.

HR 737 is on the agenda, Defensor said. "I don't know why they claim it is dead. It can only be dead if it fails to get the necessary vote for third and final reading ... This is unfinished business and we plan to address this soon."

Opposition on high alert
Congress is set to go on break on June 3, but Defensor expected lawmakers to choose which Charter change mode they prefer—HR 1109's Con-ass or HR 737's fourth mode—before the end of this month.

Even the opposition remains on high alert.
Quezon Rep. Lorenzo "Erin" Tañada III said that even if Villafuerte had withdrawn his signature, HR 1109 would continue because it has several other authors.

Antonino insisted in last week's

hearing that the committee approved HR 1109 as it was sure to be approved by the majority anyway and that it should be presented as an alternative to HR 737 in the plenary.

But La Union Rep. Victor Ortega, the committee chair, ruled

that HR 1109 go through one more hearing before a vote.

Bayan Muna party-list Rep. Satur Ocampo said the hearing on HR 1109 would give a clearer answer on what the committee would do with the Con-ass vote.

"We'll move to set it aside but we lack the numbers to back up our stand. If it gets to the plenary, 1109 will compete with 737," he said.

Palace backing
But whether Congress chooses HR 1109 or HR 737, Ocampo stressed that both Charter change bills were backed by the admin-

istration.

Ocampo said he was suspicious of Villafuerte's motives, noting his long-running feud with Nograles.

Villafuerte has been rumored to have initiated talks to unseat Nograles a few months ago for acting too slow on Charter change.

"Villafuerte might be playing with the strong popular stand versus Con-ass by withdrawing his sponsorship. In effect, this leaves Nograles to suffer the expected popular rejection over his pro-Cha-cha vote insistence," Ocampo said.

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