

Estrada predicts defection of Arroyo allies

by JEANNETTE ANDRADE
Inquirer.net

FORMER president Joseph Estrada predicted last April 13 a "mass defection" from the administration to the opposition fold in the months leading to the 2010 national and local election.

Speaking at the *Kapihan sa Manila* news forum, Estrada disclosed that more than 20 personalities—including Cabinet secretaries, congressmen, and senators—expressed interest in running for public office under the opposition slate, as early as January this year.

Estrada refused to disclose their names but he said Vice President Noli de Castro was not "yet" among them.

"In fairness to Kabayan IDE Castrol, he has not yet talked with us," he said.

De Castro has been consistently topping surveys on possible presidential candidates. He is also reportedly being eyed by the administration bloc as its standard bearer.

Asked what initial reasons the "defectors" have been giving, the former leader said smiling, "I cannot divulge their reasons right now."

Estrada assured that the opposition would look into the backgrounds of the prospective defectors to determine their



Former President Joseph Estrada

sincerity in supporting the pro-poor program of the opposition.

Former senator Ernesto Maceda expressed certainty that the administration would be fielding more than one candidate for the presidency. "I am 90 percent sure there will be more than one candidate. Other administration candidates will run since no one is rating that high [in the surveys]. It is possible that President Macapagal-Arroyo will bet on two horses."

He pointed out, however, that just as in the last elections, an endorsement by the President would be a "kiss of death" because administration candidates would be obligated to

defend her acts and decisions and would have to assure the continuity of her policies.

Estrada acknowledged that Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro would be the strongest administration bet, pointing out that "Vice President Noli de Castro has not shown any effort in declaring himself as a candidate for the administration."

He added, "We do not know yet his position if he will be running in the opposition side."

As for the moral force organized by Supreme Court Chief Justice Reynato Puno, he Estrada said, "I commend them for forming the group. But anybody can claim to be moral, even GMA [Arroyo]."

Should he decide to run to unite the opposition ranks, Estrada stressed that his legal team saw no legal obstacles for his candidacy. Under the Constitution, a president can only run for one term and cannot seek another term.

Estrada said the opposition would be meeting in June to decide on a sole presidential candidate for next year's elections. ■

CONGRESSMEN TO ERAP

Give other presidential bets a chance to serve RP

by DELON PORCALLA
Philstar.com

MANILA—Give others a chance.

This was the unsolicited advice of administration lawmakers to former President Joseph Estrada, who announced his senatorial ticket Monday, April 13 and warned warring factions within the opposition that he would run for president if they remain divided.

"Just allow others who are equally qualified to run (for president)," Manila Rep. Bienvenido Abante suggested, adding the deposed president should just stay on the sidelines and retire from politics in order to give others an opportunity to run the country.

"We have a deep pool of presidential candidates. He (Estrada) can be a king-maker like President Arroyo," he said.

He also reacted to Estrada's comment that he would not be vindictive to Mrs. Arroyo if he wins in 2010.

"Any statement coming from those who have presidential ambitions are political statements and thus should be treated with a grain of salt, if not humor," Abante, chairman of the House committee on public information, said.

As far as Reps. Emmylou Taliño-Mendoza of North Cotabato and Joseph Emilio Abaya of Cavite are concerned, the former actor—like his predecessors Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos—is no longer qualified to serve, even if his term was cut short in January 2001.

"It must first be stated that Joseph Estrada is no longer eligible for re-election as President as there is a constitutional

prohibition. So, as to not being vindictive if elected, it is simply wishful thinking," said Taliño-Mendoza.

Assuming that Estrada is eligible to run again for the highest post of the land, "his public disclosure of not being vindictive," according to the female legislator, "is calculated to gain sympathy and support."

"But, as a nation of laws and not of men, prosecution of offenders should depend on possible criminal liability and not on personalities or personal agenda," she added.

For his part, Abaya said that based on his "humble knowledge of the law," Estrada, his predecessors, and even Mrs. Arroyo "are prohibited from running."

He said that accountability of public officials is "not about non-vindictiveness" and that "the rule of law should prevail and should not be hinged on the character or inclinations of the president."

Borrowing a line from the moral force movement, Abaya said that transformational politics, not transactional, is needed in the country.

Estrada earlier said that if he is elected president next year, he would not influence the filing of criminal charges against Mrs. Arroyo and would leave it to the public to decide on what to do with her.

"It must be decided by the people. Unless charges are filed against her, I will not lift a finger to influence charges against her," Estrada said.

Mrs. Arroyo's administration has been dogged with a series of corruption scandals and she was even implicated, with her husband First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo, in the scrapped \$329-million national broadband network project with China's ZTE Corp.

Estrada, on the other hand, was ousted from the presidency through what he described as connivance among the business sector, political foes and religious leaders on Jan. 20, 2001.

He was charged with plunder and found guilty by a special court in September 2007, but was pardoned by Mrs. Arroyo a month later.

Poll officials, meanwhile, declined to comment on Estrada's announced plan to run for president in 2010.

"We don't want to express any opinion on that because we'll be ruling on that when the time comes. We don't want to express anything," Commission on Elections Chairman Jose Melo said at a press briefing with Comelec commissioners. Under the 1987 Constitution, a president is not allowed to seek re-election. But Estrada's camp said he is not covered by the ban because he was not able to finish his six-year term.

A Comelec official, who declined to be named, said an SC ruling has underpinned the ban on Estrada's running again for president.

"Based on the Supreme Court ruling, he resigned so although he was not able to finish his term, it was a full term," the official said. ■

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Noli still top choice of Lakas

MANILA—Vice President Noli de Castro is still the top choice for standard-bearer of the ruling Lakas party in next year's presidential polls, according to Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez.

Gonzalez revealed this as he

welcomed the imminent merger of his party with Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi)—both allies of President Arroyo—in preparation for the general elections next year.

He told reporters that officers of Lakas met two weeks ago and discussed plans for the 2010 polls.

During the meeting, four names surfaced as possible standard-bearer of their party: De Castro, Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro, Sen. Richard Gordon and Metropolitan Manila Development Authority Chair Bayani Fernando.

"Vice President Noli is in the forefront because of his standing in the surveys," he explained.

"But I'm not discounting Gilbert just because his name is not in the surveys yet, and that's because he announced his intention to run much later. Maybe in the next survey his name will be there already," he added.

As for the other two, he said Fernando is a "genuine Lakas member" but he was unsure of Gordon "because he was with the Nacionalista before."

A new political party, Bagong Bayan, was launched last April 14 in Quezon City to spearhead Gordon's presidential bid in 2010 if he decides to run, according to organizers.

Gonzalez stressed that the "winnability" of the candidate is a major criteria in their selection of standard-bearer.

He said the resignation of Speaker Prospero Nograles and Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte as respective heads of Lakas and Kampi could be an indicator that the ruling parties would join forces.

"That (resignation) is not yet the perfect solution but that's a good start for the merger," he told reporters in an interview.

Nograles and Villafuerte earlier said they are giving Lakas and Kampi officials 45 days to merge the two parties.

They said a merged Lakas-Kampi "will allow, if not compel, administration allies to field single electoral tickets at the local level, thus enabling them to work for the victory of national candidates with greater unity and focus."

Presidential Adviser for Political Affairs Gabriel Claudio said the two parties could fully merge in the next 45 days as officials from both camps, as well as the merger committee formed by President Arroyo, are busy "ironing out details."

These include the new name of the consolidated party and its new national leaders, the arbitration process for local candidates

as well as the by-laws.

"The objective is to immediately effect the merger. Hopefully, this would happen in the next 45 days," Claudio said.

He said the arbitration process is necessary so "we can determine in orderly and harmonious fashion our candidates for the provincial, city, and municipal levels."

He said the committee is also rushing to craft the new by-laws for submission to the Commission on Elections (Comelec).

Claudio said that while a new party would emerge, its traits would be the same as Lakas and Kampi "so it's not altogether a new entity."

"It is our hope and expectation that we inherit the status of Lakas as the dominant majority party," he said.

He said it was too early to tell what the impact of the merger would have on other parties.

It would be only after the merger that the party would tackle proposals to coalesce or ally with other parties, he said.

Claudio also dismissed the claim of former President Joseph Estrada that some Cabinet officials have approached him to join the opposition's list of candidates for 2010.

"I doubt very much if that is true. The good former president is entitled to his own propaganda," he said.

Toss-up between De Castro, Teodoro

Meanwhile, the continued silence of De Castro with regard to his party affiliation may ultimately benefit Teodoro, who may emerge as the Lakas standard-bearer in the May 2010 presidential elections.

De Castro has been playing coy on whether he intends to join the party of President Arroyo, under whose banner he ran and won in the May 2004 polls.

Isabela Rep. Rodolfo "Rodito" Albano III, stalwart of the country's second largest party Kampi, said the chances of Teodoro are good, especially if De Castro keeps mum.

"He has all the chances of becoming the administration's presidential bet. He could be the one especially if the allies of the President help him. Teodoro



Vice President Noli de Castro

is good, young and intelligent," Albano said in Filipino.

Lakas officials earlier confirmed that the party is choosing between Teodoro and De Castro as its standard-bearer.

Teodoro, a former congressman from Tarlac, holds the distinction of being the youngest secretary to occupy the defense portfolio. He is a lawyer by profession, having topped the Bar examination in 1989.

Teodoro's humility in openly seeking Mrs. Arroyo's endorsement and his incontrovertible qualities as a leader and as a person are being given much weight by party stalwarts.

"His showing in recent poll surveys may not be that good but the moment Teodoro is drafted by the ruling party, his ratings are certain to increase given the administration's political clout and its well-oiled machinery," said Albano.

In an earlier interview, Teodoro said he will only join the presidential race if endorsed by the President and drafted by the ruling party as its official bet. He said he would be willing to go through the selection process.

In a related development, Nograles said critics of the President cannot stop her from seeking another elective post next year for the simple reason that there is no constitutional prohibition.

The House leader clarified that Mrs. Arroyo is only barred from re-election. "She can still run in any elective post except for the presidency," said Nograles.

Former Senate president Franklin Drilon earlier disclosed that Mrs. Arroyo might seek a congressional post in Pampanga in preparation for her bid as the country's prime minister, in anticipation of a shift from presidential to parliamentary form of government. (Philstar.com)

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