

Enrile-Pimentel word war over Villar probe

by CHRISTINE AVENDAÑO
Inquirer.net

A HEATED exchange on the Senate floor last May 25 between Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile and Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr. led to an early adjournment of the chamber, wasting one of six sessions left before Congress adjourns *sine die* on June 5.

The exchange, which lasted for almost two hours, had the two Senate leaders trading barbs and calling each other names over the way the Senate committee of the whole was handling the ethics case against the absent Sen. Manuel Villar Jr.

Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri ended the exchange shortly before 6pm by announcing the session's adjournment.

Zubiri told reporters later that he sought the adjournment to prevent more "heated debates," a number of other senators having signified their wish to express their "feelings" over the dispute.

But he said "the word war is over" because Enrile and Pimentel had "released their pent-up anger."

Gunslinger

Enrile delivered a privilege speech denouncing Pimentel as a "coward," a "hypocrite," a "spoiled brat" and a "traitor."

He denied having challenged Pimentel to a "shooting war," saying: "The senator from Cagayan de Oro said he is not a gunslinger, implying that I am a gunslinger because I have called on him to end his hypocrisy and duplicity."

"Assuming that in his perception, I am a gunslinger, which I am not, I will not waste a bullet on him. A bullet is too expensive for a coward."

Enrile assailed Pimentel for making references to martial law, and insisted that the proceedings on Villar's ethics case were being conducted according to parliamentary rules.

"Perhaps, what the senator from Cagayan de Oro meant as martial law was the fact that he failed to have his way. Over the years, he was so used to have his

way in the Senate because very few dared tangle with him. That was why he developed some sort of intellectual arrogance that he now displays," Enrile said.

Personal attack

Enrile said Pimentel personally attacked him by accusing him of "unabashed display of dictatorial tendencies" in the latter's petition for certiorari at the Supreme Court.

He said Pimentel was acting, not as "an impartial member of the committee," but as a lawyer for Villar:

"As senator-lawyer for respondent Manny Villar, his goal is to prevent a full hearing of the ethics case ... *Huwag na tayong maglokokhan* (Let us not fool ourselves)."

He said the "bottom line" was that the minority bloc "wants desperately to prevent the submission of evidence against respondent Manuel Villar."

Enrile offered to resign as chair of the Senate committee of the whole and said he would nominate Pimentel for the post.

"Or perhaps the senator from Cagayan de Oro and his co-petitioners who have accused me of being a dictator would like to nominate someone else?" he said.

'Truth hurts'

Pimentel immediately took the floor to deny that his actions were a personal attack on "Mr. Enrile."

He took issue with Enrile's branding him a coward, pointing out that a coward was "someone who runs away."

"As Mr. Enrile knows—he ordered my arrest four times—did I run away?" Pimentel said in reference to his detention during the Marcos dictatorship, when the Senate president was the defense minister.

He said he was not a hypocrite and accused Enrile of being a "bigger hypocrite" in "faking" the ambush that led to the imposition of martial law in September 1972.

Pimentel also denied Enrile's assertion that he was lawyering for Villar, and said the Senate president was a "prosecutor and judge," which, he stressed, were "incompatible positions."

"You know, Mr. Enrile, what hurts is the truth. What hurts is when we say Mr. Enrile is acting like a martinet, a dictator and a proletarian despot in the running of the affairs of the committee. And that is the truth," Pimentel said.

He said the truth was hurting Enrile because the latter was running for reelection, and "people will be reminded of the tragedies that occurred in their lives during the martial law years, during which he was the principal executor."

'Let history be the judge'

The session was suspended after Pimentel's speech, and Sen. Edgardo Angara was seen speaking separately with the protagonists.

Enrile then strode out of the session hall, telling reporters that he had to meet some people in his office.

The session resumed an hour



Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile

later, with Enrile taking the floor again to "thank" Pimentel for "his remarks about my past."

He said he "appreciated Pimentel's having 'uttered those things in my presence.'"

"Let history be the judge for what I did over the years," Enrile said.

He said he had been able to move around and "sleep soundly" at night "because what I did during those years was to serve our country and the people, and I have not oppressed anyone or caused injury to anyone." ■

SAYS SPOKESMAN

Lakas-Kampi a 'challenge' to opposition

by THEA ALBERTO
Inquirer.net

THE upcoming merger of two administration parties is a threat to the opposition and will serve as a "challenge" for it to consolidate its ranks, a spokesman for the United Opposition said.

"We have no illusions it will be easy but if the opposition can agree that if we do unite, then we can get the best scenario," lawyer Adel Tamano said during the weekly Ferdinandina Forum on Wednesday.

The Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi), the party founded by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, will seal its merger with the Lakas Christian Muslim Democrats on Thursday.

Many members of the opposition personalities have expressed interest in running for president in 2010, including Senators Panfilo Lacson, Manuel Roxas II, Francis Escudero, and Loren Legarda, and Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay, who is also UNO president.

Former president Joseph

Estrada had said that he would seek the presidency again if the opposition failed to field a sole candidate. But this was questioned by his critics, citing provisions in the Constitution that a president could not seek "any reelection."

Tamano said Estrada running again for president remained as the opposition's best option because of the former leader's mass appeal.

Estrada, who was ousted by a military-backed popular revolt in January 2001, was convicted of plunder in September 2007, but was pardoned by Arroyo a month later.

Arroyo was Estrada's former vice president, who took over the presidency after the latter's fall from power. ■

House starts debate on Right of Reply Bill

by DELON PORCALLA
Philstar.com

THE House of Representatives began last May 25 its debate on the right of reply bill that aims to compel media entities to give persons maligned in newspapers, radio or TV a chance to defend themselves by providing them space and airtime.

Manila Rep. Bienvenido Abante, chairman of the House committee on public information, clarified that House Bill 3306 "does not in any manner take away, nor curtail, one's right to express his beliefs, but simply mandates him to give the person the opportunity to reply."

In his sponsorship speech, the administration lawmaker cited as basis the Philippine justice

system, which, like the rest of the world, presumes every accused person as innocent until proven guilty.

"Even a person who is formally charged in a court of law with a capital offense has the fundamental right to be presumed innocent until the contrary is proven with evidence of guilt beyond reasonable doubt and the right to adduce evidence to prove his innocence."

He said the chamber merely wanted to "impress and remind our friends who are media practitioners that justice and fairness dictate that while they have the freedom to comment, it should also be their corresponding obligation to publish or air the reply."

To deprive government officials of the right to rebut the defamatory articles, Abante pointed out, "would be worse than sentencing a person to suffer the penalty of death without due process because a person's honor and dignity is as important as his very life."

Abante believes "democracy is ill-served if the public cannot determine whether the information

they are receiving is accurate," citing sometimes erroneous reports in the media, which, he said, is taken as "gospel truth" by many.

"This bill simply aims to provide immediate, speedy, practical and economical relief to a person charged or criticized through the media," the lawmaker added. The bill is up for second reading at the chamber.

Lawmakers approved last week a watered down version of the right of reply bill by removing the penalty of imprisonment for entities who may have offended public officials, either on TV, radio broadcast or published in newspapers.

The House public information committee approved House Bill 3306 removing the penalty of imprisonment for media outfits that will refuse to print, air, and/or post the reply of an "aggrieved" party who was "named and identified" in a previous news article.

The amended version of the bill will be the one to be sponsored and debated in the plenary.

It was sponsored by Representatives Monico Puentevella of Bacolod City, Abante, Orlando Fua

of Siquijor, Jeci Lapus of Tarlac, Irwin Tieng of party-list Buhay, Eduardo Zialcita of Parañaque and Speaker Prospero Nograles.

The amendments provide that the editor-in-chief and publisher of print media outfits, and the station manager and owners of radio/TV stations who "fails or refuses to receive" or publish or broadcast the reply or correction of the news item as mandated will be fined an amount of P10,000 for the first offense, P20,000 for the second and P30,000 for the third offense.

The measure struck down the original proposal of a P200,000 fine and imprisonment of not more than 30 days and the threat of closure for five-time offenders. It now provides that repeated violations be fined P50,000.

Puentevella earlier proposed that the penalty for fifth and repeated offenses be raised to P100,000 and suspension of franchise of broadcast or print medium outlet or station for 30 days.

The final version has also removed the provision which demands same space and air time

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Senate sets full-blown inquiry of Villar

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their evidence to this committee, so that their rights will be properly evaluated and defended," he said.

Madrigal's evidence includes 109 documents and exhibits. Her camp named at least 25 witnesses who would be called to testify.

According to Sen. Panfilo Lacson, Madrigal is prepared to submit 103 more documents and exhibits.

'Full faith and confidence'

The hearing began with Enrile reiterating his offer to resign as presiding officer. He asked to be "excused" from the post and for Senate President Pro Tempore Jingo Estrada to replace him.

But Sen. Manuel "Mar" Roxas II presented Enrile Senate Resolution No. 1095, which, he said, was signed by 14 senators expressing "our full faith and confidence in [Enrile's] leadership as Senate president and, in particular, as presiding officer of this committee of the whole."

"After canvassing our colleagues, the overwhelming consensus is that we want you to continue as presiding officer," Roxas told Enrile.

Roxas said that in the six hearings over which Enrile had presided, his "fairness, impartiality and willingness to listen" to the discussions and arguments were made clear.

The senators who signed the resolution were Roxas, Estrada, Lacson, Madrigal, Edgardo Angara, Lito Lapid, Francis Escudero, Rodolfo Biazon, Richard Gordon, Gregorio Honasan, Loren Legarda, Miriam Defensor-Santiago and Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri.

Enrile thanked the signatories, saying: "I appreciate your expression of support, and although I find [myself] in a very difficult position,

I will not shirk from my responsibilities, regardless of criticism and brickbats of others."

"In presiding over this hearing, I shall see to it that the rules are observed, justice is served and the law held and enforced against anybody."

To reporters, Pimentel shrugged off the resolution backing Enrile's leadership.

"*Sa kanilang pakulo lang 'yun* (It's their show)," Pimentel said, pointing out that after all, Enrile did not say that his resignation was irrevocable.

On the floor last May 26, Pimentel manifested the minority bloc's objection to the resolution.

"We're not supporting the resolution and not giving up either on our stand as defined in the Supreme Court petition," he said.

Revilla's complaint

But in a quick turn of events, Madrigal the complainant has become the respondent of another ethics complaint.

Former Cavite Rep. Gilbert Remulla went to the Senate Tuesday and filed a complaint against Madrigal for calling him a "corruption king of Cavite" and a "land grabber."

He said Madrigal had committed "unethical conduct" becoming a senator for using unparliamentary language and for disorderly behavior.

Remulla, who ran for reelection in 2007 and lost, is the spokesperson of the Nacionalista Party chaired by Villar.

He asked the committee on ethics to expel Madrigal or suspend her for a total of 60 days for using "vile language."

"The respondent uttered the defamatory remarks within the premises of the Senate, staining the reputation of the institution and giving the impression that

members of the hallowed body are as indecorous and as ill-mannered as she conducted herself to be," Remulla said.

On May 8, Madrigal was quoted by ABS-CBN as saying: "*Siya'y isang lintik na itik na talunan na manok ni Villar. Siya yung talunan.*"

Translating Madrigal's remarks, Remulla said he was labeled as "a blasted duckling with a penchant for electoral defeat, whom Villar bet on in the recent elections, [and] the king of electoral defeat."

In the same interview, Madrigal said Remulla would never win as a mayor or a municipal councilor "because he aligned himself with someone rotten and remained with someone rotten."

She also accused Remulla, along with Villar, of being a "land grabber" and "corruption king."

"It seems that all the land grabbers of the Philippines are already united," she said.

'Harassment by proxy'

Reacting to the complaint, Madrigal said that "as usual," Villar's allies were trying to get public attention.

"This is a harassment case filed by a proxy. I welcome this case as an opportunity for me to prove that he is indeed a land grabber. Unlike his master Senator Villar, I will submit to the jurisdiction of the Senate committee on ethics. Also, unlike his master, I am not afraid to face my peers," she said.

Madrigal said it was "unfortunate" that Remulla was allowing himself to be used by Villar, who, she said, "did not have the courage to personally file this case against me."

"If Senator Villar and his minions think that I will be afraid of their harassment, they are wrong," she said. ■

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