

DATELINE PHILIPPINES

Melo: All systems go for poll automation

by AUREA CALICA
Philstar.com



Comelec chairman Jose Melo

COMMISSION on Elections Chairman Jose Melo announced last Mar. 4 the full automation of next year's elections.

Speaking to reporters, Melo said the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee on Automated Election System has given the Comelec the go signal to start the process of bidding for the automated electoral machines.

"We really should move forward," he said. "They have given us the signal to go forward, start the ball rolling."

The terms of reference could be published by March 25 and that the media and the public could monitor the bidding to ensure that it would be transparent, Melo said.

The Senate convened as a committee of the whole to conduct a marathon hearing on the proposed P11.3-billion supplemental budget for next year's elections.

Senators want to question Melo and other Comelec officials before voting on the proposed supplemental budget.

The House of Representatives has already passed the supplemental budget.

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile said as a committee of the whole they could shorten the process of hearing and bring the proposal to the plenary for voting, and pass it on second and third reading.

President Arroyo has certified the bill as urgent so it could pass third reading without going through the three-day rule.

The Senate decided to convene as a committee of the whole despite objections from the minority and Sen. Francis Escudero.

The neophyte senator later received a tongue lashing from Sen. Edgardo Angara for taking too much time questioning Comelec officials.

Angara, chairman of the Senate committee on finance, agreed with his peers that Comelec officials should be questioned to get their assurance that the poll body would be able to carry out computerized elections effectively.

Escudero, legislative oversight committee chairman, questioned why Congress would give the

Comelec a "blank check" for the poll automation and why Angara already had a committee report on the matter even before they had started their deliberations.

The Comelec is to blame for preparing late for the automation when the law had been passed two years ago, he added.

Escudero wants to know what type of equipment the Comelec plans to acquire for next year's elections.

"They should also demonstrate the effectiveness of the machine they plan to buy at the next hearing," he said.

Escudero said the Comelec should undertake steps to cleanse the list of voters side by side with the automation, and ensure that all voters be covered by the biometric system.

"Efforts to automate the elections will be futile if the Comelec does not purge the voters' list," he said.

Escudero said if the poll body cannot cleanse the list of voters, the integrity of the elections would be questionable because flying voters can still cast their ballots.

"It's garbage in, garbage out," he said.

"That is what will happen if we are unable to cleanse the voters' list before we even automate. Maybe even those who are dead, those which are non-living, can vote. We might go from manual cheating to automated cheating."

Escudero cautioned the Comelec against repeating previous mistakes.

"Those behind the P1.3 billion Mega Pacific Corp. contract that was shot down by the Supreme Court are still operating and may even be guiding some of the clueless legal minds at the Comelec," he said.

"Even a partial computerization could leave certain areas of the country in a situation that could be manipulated. The Garci-operated exercise in Mindanao is

still fresh in our minds."

Escudero said he is uneasy about the way the machines would be operated by Comelec personnel.

"As a voter and a taxpayer, I have misgivings about their familiarity and expertise in operating the machines," he said.

"Do they know how to use these? If the system gets glitches along the way, will they be able to trouble shoot it without hampering the process? The system they want adopted is not yet tried and tested." ■

Rejected by CA, Mercado gets new job

by CHRISTINE AVENDAÑO
Inquirer.net

MALACAÑANG may have withdrawn its nomination of Orlando Mercado as ambassador to China but it has appointed the former senator to a new job, one that may again require him to face the powerful congressional Commission on Appointments.

According to Sen. Jinggoy Estrada, whose objection to Mercado's ambassadorial appointment was instrumental in his being bypassed twice by the CA, Malacañang has nominated Mercado as the country's Permanent Representative to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Estrada told reporters he was not happy with Mercado's new appointment and vowed to block the nomination if Mercado has the misfortune to have to face the CA again.

Estrada, who is Senate President Pro Tempore, has made it his mission to frustrate Mercado at every turn, serving notice to the commission that he still had many questions about Mercado's nomination, effectively blocking approval of the appointment. Op-

position to a nominee from just one CA member is enough to block an appointment.

Edsa II player

Mercado served as defense secretary to Estrada's father, the convicted plunderer ex-President Joseph Estrada. He was one of the first Estrada Cabinet members to withdraw support from the disgraced leader during the second EDSA II uprising that brought President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to power.

The younger Estrada said he believed Mercado's new appointment would give him the status of an ambassador. He vowed that Mercado would never be able to get through the CA as he would block the nomination.

A foreign affairs official said however that Mercado's new job

was that of a "special envoy" and would not require CA approval.

The official, who did not want to be identified, said the position was a newly created office that was agreed on by the 10 ASEAN leaders only last year. It is the first time that the Philippines will be naming a representative to ASEAN, the official said.

Co-terminus

"Strictly speaking, [Mercado] is not an ambassador and he is not required to go to the CA," the official said.

Mercado's new position will be co-terminus with the President's but the official said this does not preclude the President's appointing a new envoy even before her term ends in June 2010.

On Wednesday, March 4, Estrada successfully blocked the promotion of Brig. Gen. Jonathan Martir to major general.

Estrada told the commission that he wanted to question Martir on why a certain 2nd Lt. Raymundo was detained for distributing compact discs of his father.

But he said he was "still not ready to question" Martir Wednesday. The general was then deemed bypassed by the CA. ■

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