

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

'Arroyo behind charter change'

PAGE 1 ◀

"All these people crucifying this resolution must have first the decency to read the resolution. It hasn't even been filed yet," Mikey said, adding that the measure neither calls for scuttling next year's balloting nor extending the term of sitting elective officials.

Malacañang also scoffed at claims that the administration was bent on amending the Constitution ahead of the 2010 elections to pave the way for a parliamentary form of government.

Secretary Gabriel Claudio, presidential political adviser, said that Malacañang, which approved the P113-billion budget for poll automation on Monday, March 23, was all psyched up for the May 2010 elections.

Palace on election mode

Claudio said the Commission on Elections had gone "full blast" preparing for the first nationwide computerized elections, even as the administration coalition "is pursuing its selection process in earnest."

"The whole country, the administration included, is on election mode," he said.

"I can feel that they still need 20 votes to obtain the required 197 votes," De Venecia said, referring to the magic number which represents three-fourths of the combined Senate and House membership to effect any changes in the 1987 Constitution.

Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte has said the House could

push through Con-ass despite the Senate's strong objection if it could get 197 signatures.

Villafuerte disputes the contention that the Constitution provides a two-thirds vote of members of the House and the Senate, voting separately, was needed to call a Con-ass.

Hopeless proposition

De Venecia stressed that even the separate Cha-cha resolution filed by Speaker Prospero Nograles was only a "decoy," pointing out that limiting amendments to purely economic provisions was a "hopeless" proposition.

"The Nograles resolution is just a decoy and the Villafuerte resolution does not say anything, except to get the Supreme Court to rule favorably on a constituent assembly," De Venecia said.

Afraid of plunder cases

"They will buy her (Ms. Arroyo) immunity. They are afraid of the plunder cases to be filed against them. If the Cha-cha move has no go-signal from the President, will they get 177 votes?" De Venecia said.

He was referring to reported Palace efforts to keep Ms. Arroyo as transition president or prime minister if the move to abolish the presidential system to pave the way for parliamentary or federal system pushes through.

As of February, 180 congressmen had signed the Con-ass resolution, other Congress sources said.

Should the Con-ass bid succeed,

De Venecia said Congress could then push for a transition period that would extend the terms of all elected officials by one or two years after 2010 to allow the Con-ass to revise the Constitution.

Senators Alan Peter Cayetano and Francis Pangilinan called on Ms. Arroyo to break her silence on Con-ass. They said her unclear position was only fueling rumors that she really wanted to stay on as President beyond June 30, 2010.

Cayetano said that after years of "undeclared strong-arm rule, many still can't believe that she will simply leave in 2010 without a Plan A and C in place."

Cha-cha is Plan A

"Everyone knows that Cha-cha is Plan A, emergency rule is Plan B and support for a candidate or an opposition Trojan horse is Plan C," Cayetano said.

"They are playing with fire and making a costly mistake if they think they can ram Cha-cha down the throats of people already sick and tired of abuses and corruption in government," Pangilinan said.

He said administration officials were afraid they would lose their immunity after the 2010 elections and face "a string of nonbailable plunder cases and jail."

Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Q. Pimentel Jr. said that the off-and-on move of Malacañang and its allies to revive Cha-cha was an exercise in futility "because the means with which they are pushing for it is unconstitutional."

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile said there was no time for Charter change.

No time left

"It's difficult to go through that. We don't even know how it will be done. They are quarreling in the House if it will be treated like an ordinary bill or it will be separately done," Enrile said in an interview.

Even if Charter change proponents get the required number, it will face rough-sailing, he said.

"If they will disregard the Senate, it will have to go to the Supreme Court. They have to remember that we're a bicameral Congress. The House of Representatives is not the Congress of the Philippines, neither is the Senate," Enrile said.

Plebiscite needs funding

The Senate president said that funding a plebiscite to ratify the new Constitution also needed the support of the Senate because it would entail appropriation.

"If the plan is to bypass the Senate, then I will be the first to challenge it before the Supreme

Court," said Sen. Francis Escudero, who is the chair of the Senate committee on constitutional amendments and revision of laws.

"If by any chance it passes the Supreme Court, then I am sure that the people will reject it," Escudero added.

Bukidnon Rep. Teofisto Guingona III said that Ms Arroyo should come clean on the Con-ass by

asking her son to withdraw his support from the draft resolution to parry charges of "collusion" between mother and son.

"If they have the chutzpah to assume that they can violate the rules of the House, our laws and the Constitution so they can push for Con-ass, then they should at least have the guts to come out," Akbayan party-list Rep. Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel said.

Coron islet to be next...

PAGE 1 ◀

About 20 minutes by speedboat from Coron, the island will be a sure attraction for tourists. On the way, overhanging limestone cliffs are seen. Coron Reefs, a favorite site for divers, is also known for its diverse marine life.

12,000 jobs

As soon as the resort is completed, 3,000 people will be hired to work on the island, Ho said.

"We are expecting at least 12,000 people to acquire jobs directly and indirectly from this project," he said.

Ms Arroyo told a fisherman in the crowd, Joel Saclet, that on nearby Amanpulo, residents no longer fished but worked in the high-end resort.

"Is that what you are also expecting?" she asked.

Saclet replied "yes, ma'am."

"It's not only in the operation but as well as in the construction and a lot of the people around ... are expecting that as this island

resort is being built, roads will be constructed from the airport to the Marcella port," Ms Arroyo said.

2012 opening

Ho said the resort would open probably by 2012.

Based on Banyan's statistics, Palawan will benefit from the total tourists' spending of \$200 million per year.

"This is generally a big help for Coron," he said.

The company already has hotels in some of the world's most exclusive and popular holiday spots such as the Seychelles and Maldives.

It will develop the project, its first in the Philippines, together with Filipino businessman Salvador Zamora of Tranden Group.

Banyan Tree was founded by Ho, a former journalist, and his wife in 1994 and was one of the first resort chains to offer guests the seclusion of their own villa equipped with a private pool and a tropical spa. ■

Filipinos aboard ship spread love of reading

PAGE 1 ◀

is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's oldest—and still active—ocean-going passenger ship. It is operated by the non-profit charity organization Good Books for All.

"I joined because there is joy in serving God through goodwill missions, sometimes in places where people have not even heard of Jesus Christ or Christianity," Chua said.

"Sometimes, it just takes one hug or the time to listen to others to bring hope to them," he said.

An architecture graduate of La Consolacion College in Bacolod, Chua had previously worked for an international Christian drama ministry group in Australia before returning home. But the call to travel the world in the service of the Lord is in his blood, he said.

In January 2008, Chua boarded the Doulos and has since docked in 20 ports in eight countries.

Full-time volunteers

Most of the crewmembers have left their families and friends, committing two years of their lives to serve as full-time volunteers without any payment.

They raise their own funds for their expenses on board the ship. The rates are, however, adjusted based on the Gross National Product of their country, so those from the poor states pay less than those from the rich ones.

The Filipinos pay about \$290 a month, plus a yearly insurance, said Chua, a member of the Bacolod Trinity Christian Church. With the help of sponsors from his church and friends, Chua said he had been able to afford to stay on board the ship.

"I need funds every month to stay on board, but the Lord provides; I do not lack. Sometimes it is amazing where the help comes from," he said.

Learning cultures

Another Filipino, Floyd Bascones, 25, hails from Davao and used to be a television reporter for ABS-CBN.

Bascones said he joined for the experience and opportunity to know different cultures. "You learn a lot, and it builds your character," he said.

Bascones has visited nine countries in the 14 months that he has been on board the Doulos.

When the ship is docked at a port, Bascones said the crew would work five days a week on board, help a community for one day and enjoy a rest day. Since their stay usually takes three weeks in one destination, they are given full days to explore the place and absorb new cultures, he said.

Pat Tracey, the ship's captain, and Dr. Daniel Chae, managing director, thanked Bacolod Real Estate Development Corp. (Bredco) for waving half of the port fees during their stay in the city.

He said he hoped that the next visit would coincide with the Mass-Kara Festival in October.

Negros Occidental Gov. Isidro Zayco, who formally opened the Doulos book fair, cited the crew for coming to Bacolod to enhance the love of reading.

Vice Mayor Thaddy Sayson stressed the need to bring back the love

New America Media holds historic meeting with White House

PAGE 1 ◀

NAM and the White House are reviewing ways to better utilize the ethnic media to inform their communities about vital public policies.

Ms. Close noted that NAM will hold their 2009 National Ethnic Media Expo & Awards in Atlanta June 4-5, and will unveil a partnership with a key federal agency that will allow families and individuals in ethnic communities to receive important health-related alerts through ethnic media. "We are looking to expand the news and information that flows from the government and private entities to people living in ethnic communities," Ms. Close said. "Our Expo will help underscore the relevance of the ethnic media, and how it can be better utilized in the future."

Khalil Abdullah, NAM's national editor who attended the White House meeting with Ms. Close, said it's clear that NAM shares similar goals with the Obama administration.

"We live in an information age," Mr. Abdullah said. "It's crucial that ethnic communities receive important information in a language and format that they understand and can utilize to improve their safety, health or quality of life. We must ensure that ethnic communities, especially those that don't speak English, are not left behind and shut out from vital information." (NAM)

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