



President approves "unity Gov't" to include rebels

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By Juliet Labog-Javellana
Inquirer News Service

BESIDES not running for election in 2004, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has approved the formation of a "unity government" that includes all opposition parties as well as communist and Muslim separatist rebel groups, House Speaker Jose de Venecia Jr. said Thursday.

De Venecia said the unity government would be formed in 45 days.

The President "is interested in healing the country and moving it forward," De Venecia said.

Asked if the President had any reservations about the composition of the unity government, he said: "She just wants an effective, all-embracing successful government because she will be its leader."

De Venecia added that he had obtained a commitment from ousted president Joseph Estrada for a "national reconciliation," and that in the next few days he would seek the consensus of political parties and religious, civil society and business leaders for a "no-politics, no-nonsense government of national unity."

De Venecia said he had asked the Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) party led by Senator Edgardo Angara, the Nationalist People's Coalition

led by businessman Eduardo Cojuangco, the National Democratic Front (NDF) headed by Communist Party leader Jose Maria Sison, and the Muslim separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) headed by Hashim Salamat to join a "unity government" where they will have a say in the administration until June 30, 2004, the end of Ms Macapagal's term of office.

These leaders could either join the Cabinet directly or nominate their representatives, De Venecia said. "If they or their representatives join the Cabinet, they will have a say in the policies of the government," he told the Inquirer in a phone interview.

If all this is achieved, the last 18 months of the Macapagal administration will be the "greatest period" of leadership, De Venecia said

He said the terms of the unity government would be discussed at a meeting of the ruling party Lakas-NUCD party on Jan. 8.

"We're reaching out to all major political parties, including groups of the Left, right and center and all outstanding elements of civil society to create a multi-party structure," said De Venecia, who co-chairs the Lakas party with President Macapagal.

"In the same way that we created the Sunshine coalition in the House, there will be a critical collaboration in the Senate and a coalition Cabinet," he said.

He said the idea was to "provide representation for the Left either in the Cabinet or in national agencies of government or a power-sharing arrangement in the House where they will be given committee chairmanships."

De Venecia said he had asked former NDF lawyer Romeo Capulong, who was in his house several days ago, to convey the message to Sison who is based in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

He said the draft of the final peace agreement with the NDF would be submitted to the Cabinet for approval this Friday.

De Venecia said that he had renewed ties with the MILF and that the government peace negotiators were working out a final peace agreement with the secessionist group for immediate signing.

"You sign the peace agreements and you immediately end 35 years of fighting," he said. "With this single stroke, you bring peace and order to the entire country."

"Let's see what happens," he said, "but we're moving forward because we are now completing the draft of the final peace agreement which will be approved by the Cabinet this week. It will be presented to the NDF as a basis for moving forward."

De Venecia said he had been conducting back-channel talks with Sison and NDF chief negotiator Luis Jalandoni in Utrecht.

De Venecia, who had proposed the unity government weeks before the

President announced that she was not running in the 2004 presidential election, said there would be "critical collaboration" in the Senate to ensure the passage of critical administration measures.

"We are considering the possibility of a modus vivendi in the Senate to pass critical legislation," he said, adding that the terms of this would be "defined by the leaders of the Senate."

Exactly how and who will be appointed to the "unity government" are still being ironed out, De Venecia said. "We are in a period of exploration and experimentation," he said.

He said he had met with Angara five times recently on the unity government. "We're inviting the LDP, the leading opposition party in the country, to be a co-founder of the unity government," he said.

The LDP withdrew at the last minute from the political summit of all political parties held in May last year, saying it did not want to be co-opted by the Macapagal administration to prop up the administration's waning popularity.

De Venecia said Angara was all for it, as were the leaders of NPC, the second biggest party in the House of Representatives.

Angara on Thursday denied reports that he had been offered a Cabinet post and was about to make a political crossover from the Senate to the executive branch of government.

Angara said he issued the clarification because of persistent reports that he would soon leave the Senate. "People voted me to the Senate and this is where I will serve," he said.

"On areas that can move the country and end the gridlock and paralysis in meaningful legislation, the LDP will fully cooperate and join a multi-party effort to pass important pieces of legislation," he said.

De Venecia said he had not spoken personally with Cojuangco, who heads the partly government-owned San Miguel Corp. But he said he had spoken with Cojuangco's his right-hand man in San Miguel, Ramon Ang, his nephew Tarlac Congressman Gilbert Teodoro, House Senior Deputy Leader Francis Escudero and other NPC leaders.

"They like the principle," he said.

The NPC, which has nearly 70 members in the House, provided a big chunk of votes for De Venecia in the election of the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Fewer than 30 of the 214 House members voted against him.

The Speaker said he had proposed to the NPC to "extend our coalition from the House to the Cabinet."

If Cojuangco agreed to the proposal, he could join the Cabinet, De Venecia said. "The way they (Cojuangco and Ang) turned San Miguel around, they will be a big help" in crafting economic policies, he said.

"In fairness to Danding Cojuangco, even during the term of President Ramos, he did not ask for anything" in return for his party's support, De Venecia said.

De Venecia also said Joseph Estrada called him up in the afternoon of Christmas Day, which was also De Venecia's birthday. "We had a long talk and he's supportive of a national reconciliation," he said.

Asked what concessions the government was prepared to give Estrada, he said that reconciliation would be "based on justice."

Administration personalities were seeking house arrest for Estrada before the Christmas holidays.

Estrada is kept in a military hospital suite while facing charges of economic plunder and other crimes.

Asked if Estrada's Partido ng Masang Pilipino party would also be invited to the Cabinet, De Venecia said, "All these things are possibilities that we should consider."

"Our approach must be inclusive, not exclusive," he said.

De Venecia said he had sent "exploratory" feelers to religious leaders as well. With a report from Cynthia D. Balana
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'Unity gov't' to pave way for peace talks, says Sison

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By Lira Dalangin

INQ7.net

ALTHOUGH cold to the idea of joining the government, communist rebels on Friday said President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's call for a "government of national unity" could pave the way for the resumption of the peace negotiations.

"As far as I know, the revolutionary forces allied within the NDFP (National Democratic Front of the Philippines) do not find any basis for joining a government under the current presidency. But they welcome the face value of Macapagal-Arroyo's announcement of her desire to concentrate on social and economic problems and to seek national unity," Communist Party of the Philippines founding chair Jose Maria Sison told INQ7.net in an e-mail message.

"President Macapagal-Arroyo and Speaker de Venecia might have all the good intentions in the world in putting forward the concept of a government of national unity. But I think that uniting revolutionary and reactionary forces is easier said than done, especially because they do

not have any common platform for asserting national independence against foreign domination," Sison added.

Sison said negotiators from the National Democratic Front, the communist umbrella organization in the Philippines, "see a glimmer of hope" the President is now "more inclined" to begin formal talks anew with her call for reconciliation with anti-administration factions and rebels groups, including the CPP and the Muslim separatist group, Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

"For the time being, they (NDF) wish her to demonstrate by deeds more resolve to resume the peace negotiations with the NDFP in accordance with The Hague Joint Declaration and without placing the NDFP negotiators, consultants, staffers and supporters under the duress of being designated as "terrorist" by the US and other imperialist powers," Sison added.

The communist leader said the Ms Macapagal should explain the agenda of the "unity government" through the peace negotiations.

Sison said several officials including Speaker Jose De Venecia, Senate majority floor leader Loren Legarda, government negotiating panel chairman Silvestre Bello III and former Agrarian Reform secretary Hernani Braganza have expressed intention to meet communist leaders in The Netherlands to hammer out details to jump-start the formal talks that have been stalled since last year.

Sison said an agreement on social and economic reforms, the second agenda in the peace talks, could be forged within six months if both panels resume formal talks soon.

The negotiations are aimed at ending the 34-year communist insurgency in the Philippines.

Sison and the New People's Army, the communist military wing, have been tagged foreign terrorist by the United States and European Union late last year.

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**Sison turns down 'unity' off
MILF wants formal proposal**

Posted:0:45 AM (Manila Time) | Jan. 04, 2003

By Delfin T. Mallari Jr. Christine O. Avendanno, , and Allan A. Nawal
Inquirer News Service

SELF-EXILED communist leader Jose Ma. Sison has turned down an invitation for the communist-led National Democratic Front (NDF) to join

a proposed "unity government."

"President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Speaker De Venecia might have all the good intentions in the world in putting forward the concept of a government of national unity. But I think that uniting revolutionary and reactionary forces is easier said than done, especially because they do not have any common platform for asserting national independence against foreign domination," Sison said in a statement from The Netherlands.

He nevertheless said that the spirit behind the initiative provided a "glimmer of hope" for the resumption of peace talks between the government and the Left.

Another rebel group invited by De Venecia to join the government did not reject the offer outright.

"We are not closing the possibility that the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) would participate in this unity government, which the President is envisioning. But her government should formalize its offer to (MILF) chair Salamat Hashim," Eid Kabalu, spokesperson of the Moro rebel group, said.

Kabalu said the MILF was willing to work with the government "to attain development and peace especially in Mindanao."

"If ever the formal invitation reaches us, then it would be studied by our Central Committee. We would like to know whether our participation in the unity government would definitely provide a lasting solution to the problems besetting the Bangsamoro and the native inhabitants of Mindanao," he said.

The formal invitation can help the rebel group determine if there is indeed a need for Hashim to sit in the unity government or for him to just send a representative, according to Kabalu.

A senator warned against inviting rebel groups to the Cabinet.

Sen. Rodolfo Biazon said including the CPP-NDF and MILF in the Cabinet should be "made within the bounds of the Constitution and other laws."

"We cannot have those who have run against our laws to be in the Cabinet," said Biazon, a former Armed Forces chief of staff.

He added in jest: "Who knows before we know it we might even have (as representatives) Abu Sayyaf in the Cabinet."

In rejecting De Venecia's offer, Sison said the remaining 18 months of Ms Macapagal's term "will not be enough for uniting the competing parties of the pro-US exploiting classes of big compradors and landlords."

"As far as I know, the revolutionary forces allied within the National Democratic Front do not find any basis for joining a government under the current presidency," said Sison, chief political consultant of the NDF.

But these forces "welcome the face value of (Ms) Macapagal's

announcement of her desire to concentrate on the social and economic problems and to seek national unity," he said. "They see a glimmer of hope that she is now more inclined than before to engage in peace negotiations with the NDF."

Bayan Muna Rep. Satur Ocampo also welcomed moves to form a unity government but he said the government would have to abandon its support for the United States' designation of the Communist Party of the Philippines along with its armed wing, the New People's Army, as a terrorist group.

"How can you invite an organization to join a unity government if you don't regard it well?" said Ocampo, who once served as NDF spokesperson. The government, he said, must make a "clear cut policy" on this.

In his statement, Sison said that "for the time being" the NDF hoped to see the President "demonstrate by deeds more resolve to resume the peace negotiations ... and without placing the NDF negotiators, consultants, staffers and supporters under duress of being designated as 'terrorists' by the US and other imperialist powers."

Also, he said, the government may use the peace negotiations to fully explain the concept of a "unity government" to the NDF as reportedly broached earlier by De Venecia to Romeo Capulong, former NDF lawyer and now a UN judge.

Sison said he welcomed suggestions that De Venecia, Senate Majority Leader Loren Legarda, government negotiating panel chair Silvestre Bello III and Agrarian Reform Secretary Hernani Braganza "visit us in The Netherlands in order to iron out kinks and pave the way for the formal talks . . . in Oslo, Norway."

It is "urgent" that the two sides tackle social and economic problems and forge a comprehensive agreement on social and economic reforms "within the next six months," he said.

"Thereafter, it becomes possible to negotiate political and constitutional reforms," he said.

For his part, Gregorio "Ka Roger" Rosal, CPP spokesperson, dismissed the proposed "unity government" as "nonsense loose talks and plain gimmickry" of the administration.

"The government wants to bait the opposition into silence by offering a power-sharing scheme. To give the semblance of sincerity, it wants the revolutionary movement to join the charade," Rosal told the Inquirer in a cellular phone interview.

Rosal said the revolutionary movement would not be enticed into joining the scheme. "Why would we, when nothing was ever mentioned in the report how the proposed unity government would address the basic roots of the problems confronting the Filipino people?" he asked. With a report from Volt Contreras in Manila

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