

After the resignation of 8 Cabinet members

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In the News

THE most fatal blow that has so far hit the presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has come not from the opposition but from within the heart of Mrs. Arroyo's Cabinet.

The resignation this morning of eight Cabinet members and two senior revenue officials took the political initiative out of Congress and raised the issue to a higher level. The question now is no longer just the president's probable involvement in electoral fraud. It has been elevated to Mrs. Arroyo's ability to govern, given the "cloud of doubt and mistrust" that hangs over her presidency.

By resigning, the Cabinet secretaries have outflanked Malacañang and Congress. They are pushing the path away from impeachment, which they believe would be long and costly, and toward resignation and a relatively quick and painless transition.

They are also fending off other options, such as former President Fidel Ramos's proposal for a constitutional assembly and a presidential election to be scheduled next year. At the same time, they are seizing the initiative from the opposition and stalling extraconstitutional moves toward "regime change."

Not that the president did not see the blow from her Cabinet coming. She did, and last night's statement was precisely a preemptive strike.

But Mrs. Arroyo herself, through her intransigence, brought the current crisis to a roiling boil. After all, the Cabinet secretaries who announced their resignation this morning did not make their intention secret.

When 12 members of the Cabinet met with the President in the evening of June 24, they already told her that the presidency was suffering from a crisis of credibility that required swift, surgical measures, among them, an admission of guilt and an apology for the conversations in the "Hello Garci" tapes; the banishment from political life of her husband, son and brother-in-law; the removal from government of appointees associated with the First Gentleman; and the implementation of reforms to shield the poor from the impact of higher taxes and skyrocketing oil prices.

During that meeting, the "doves" in the Cabinet even suggested that the President should consider all of them resigned so that she could have a free hand in reorganizing the government to rid it of the unsavory characters associated with Mr. Arroyo. Among those present at the meeting were Defense Secretary Avelino Cruz, Education Secretary Florencio Abad Jr., Trade Secretary Juan Santos, Finance Secretary Cesar Purisima, Social Welfare Secretary Corazon Soliman, Budget Secretary Emilia Boncodin, Labor Secretary Patricia Sto. Tomas, Science Secretary Estrella Alabastro, Energy Secretary Raphael Lotilla, presidential adviser on the peace process Teresita Deles and Communications Director Silvestre Afable. (Some of the "doves" like Sto. Tomas and Lotilla tendered their resignation today, but stopped short of calling for the president's resignation.)

In the June 24 meeting, the president was unyielding. "I'm not changing my stand on this," she told her secretaries. She said she was following the advice of her legal advisers, who were competent

and independent-minded. But she also promised to consider the demands.

On June 27, Mrs. Arroyo gave her famous “I am sorry” speech. Frustrated by what they thought was a half-hearted apology, the “doves” met with her again right after that announcement. It was, they said, a lengthy get-together that lasted from 9 p.m. to midnight.

After that, the Cabinet secretaries converged in the home of Defense Secretary Cruz, where they talked till 3 a.m. They were all deeply disappointed with what the President’s stubbornness and her sense that things were going back to normal when all of them thought the country was teetering on the brink.

Things came to a head in the executive session of the Cabinet that took place on Tuesday, July 5. The “doves” were shocked when the President said she regretted her June 27 apology. “She felt she got more flak than sympathy,” said one Cabinet secretary then. “She was in a way telling us, I didn’t get anything from apologizing.” The secretaries realized that the admission wasn’t done with contriteness nor did the president intend to come clean on the charges in the Garci tape.

For many among the “doves,” this was the last straw. It became very clear to most of them that the president put her political survival above everything else and that the next five years of her presidency would be consumed by the imperatives of her survival.

Not that they didn’t have an inkling of this already. The women Cabinet members, many of whom had been with Mrs. Arroyo since the start of her presidency, had already felt deep unease about the president’s leadership style and the way government programs were being compromised to advance Mrs. Arroyo’s personal political agenda.

The economic secretaries, meanwhile, were getting increasingly worried that their reform programs were being frustrated by the wheeling-dealing of the First Gentleman and his associates. The campaign against smuggling, for example, was being derailed by the apparent protection the “FG” and his men were giving to businesspeople believed to be associated with smuggling.

When the Supreme Court declared a temporary restraining order (TRO) on the implementation of the newly minted value-added-tax law on July 1, Purisima hit the roof. Although there was no proof that Malacanang had lobbied for the TRO, he was deeply suspicious. “VAT was a big issue that firmed up his resolve,” said someone close to the Cabinet.

When the President remained unyielding in their July 5 meeting, the “doves” decided it was useless for them to hang on. They intended to announce their resignation today and worked on consolidating their ranks.

“Our immediate concern is not poison politics or infirmities in the Constitution; the problem is the symbol of government has been compromised,” a close aide quoted one of the “doves” as saying. “If we don’t deal with this now, we will have even more problems. We’re just simply disturbed that reforms are discussed only in a crisis.”

On Wednesday, July 6, Abad and Purisima flew to Hong Kong to meet with Vice President Noli de Castro. They told him about the resignation plan. De Castro was supposedly surprised and asked for time to consult with his family and advisers.

Although the Liberal Party denies it, sources at the Nacionalista Party say that during that meeting, the two Cabinet secretaries also asked De Castro to name Senate President Franklin Drilon, an LP stalwart, as his vice president and concurrently also executive secretary. De Castro, however, was noncommittal. The NP is pushing for Sen. Manuel Villar to take on the vice presidency.

NP sources say that former President Corazon Aquino, who met with de Castro yesterday, also lobbied asked for Drilon. Mrs. Aquino also met with the president last night.

Malacanang sources say that many in the Palace believe that some of the “doves,” especially those connected with the Liberal Party, have a political agenda. They also say that the president is determined to hang on. She meant it when she said last night she’s not going to resign.

While the end game seems to have begun, the resignation option will not be viable unless the president concedes defeat and prepares for a graceful exit. For the moment, though, Malacanang is still far from the “graceful exit mode.” For now, Mrs. Arroyo is sticking to only one option: she is president and she will hang on.