

# Philippines: ARMM Elections and Reforms Plus

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## ARMM Election Postponement: A Political Set-up?

Few days from today, the Senate will either give its approval or disapproval to the postponement of the ARMM election constitutionally fixed on 8 August 2011.

The President (PNoy), has already convinced his partymates in the Senate including those who had been critical or against the reasons for the ARMM election postponement e.g. Sen. TJ Guingona to support the Malacañang position on the postponement. The Liberal Party senators in return promised the President to convince other senators to support such political move. They have at least ten (10) working days before they adjourned in the first week of June to convince and finalize the Senate position. It will be timed before the second State of the Nation (SONA) of PNoy to announce the selected political appointees for the ARMM that will serve until May 2013.

Months before today, the political allies and parties of PNoy headed by his political adviser have been going around Mindanao convincing and telling the people that PNoy would postpone the August 8, 2011 ARMM elections. Reasons given are: to give time for PNoy to institute reforms in the ARMM, to perform government auditing to the ARMM funds, to initiate political reforms so that powerful clans and warlords like the Ampatuans cannot control or influence the elections and to prepare the ARMM for the eventual peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The groups and political parties identified with PNoy's political adviser has even given some sort of criteria for the political appointees who will occupy the posts of ARMM Executive Department from Governor down to the Department Secretariat and also those who will be in the Legislative Assembly. And offers of appointments to the Executive and Legislative posts in the ARMM have convince not a few people to support and campaign for the August 8, 2011 ARMM election postponement.

## Tailor-Fit Criteria

Out of the criteria , one is very revealing or to whom will be the Presidential choice for the gubernatorial position. They said that the appointed governor will not be coming from the mainland Mindanao (eliminate those who are Maranaos and the Maguindanaos) and must not be part of big political clans and traditional politicians (eliminate big and traditional politicians in the island provinces of the ARMM). The position of the ARMM governor is tailored fit to a former Party-List representative who lost his gubernatorial bid in his island and a billiard buddy of PNoy. He is also identified as a close ally of the Political Adviser of the President.

The potential governor gets the nod of the Political Adviser of PNoy notwithstanding his almost dismal record as a Party-List representative, what he had done to the Party he represented, the issues of corruption he had been involved and worst his record in the House during the processes of the impeachment of GMA. Aside from the first impeachment of GMA, all the other impeachment

processes he made sure that he was absent as attested by PNoy's Political Adviser himself, such kind of position as ordinary people would understand was tantamount to not supporting the GMA impeachment.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned issues, through the active help of the Political Adviser, their favorite ARMM governor-to-be, has been advised to organize groups and movements to support his appointment especially from civil society to make an impression that he is not a traditional politician. He led in organizing a group, whose aim is to reform the ARMM. And he was also advised to get the support of the Chair of the MNLF and former ARMM Governor Nur Misuari. They (favorite governor-to-be and Misuari) have already signed a memorandum of agreement that assures the Misuari and his group will have a big and important role in the ARMM at least from August 2011 up to May 2013. It will be significant to note that there have been talks with the MNLF factions with the presence of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) representatives to involve the MNLF in whatever arrangement in the ARMM and the eventual results of the peace agreement with the government and the MILF.

It is very important to know about the abovementioned issues especially that the main reason for their moves for ARMM election is to reform ARMM and to prepare the people of ARMM in the synchronized elections in 2013.

### **Reforms to Whom and by Whom?**

So what reforms are they talking about? To install their appointed government in order to curb if not eliminate graft and corruption in the ARMM? To institute government audit and reforms in the ARMM during the term of appointed favorites? To ensure the likes of the Ampatuans will not influence the results of elections and the political reforms that PNoy wants to achieve? Can this appointed politician do something on the faction of the MNLF or specifically with Misuari? And can the temporary officials do something to make the MILF accept the political mainstreaming of the PNoy government?

In the campaigns initiated and launched by the proponents to postpone the ARMM election, they have been saying, that at present the people in the ARMM are not capable of voting their own candidates to the different positions in the ARMM. Therefore, for these anti-autonomy people, disguised as ARMM reformers, there is an urgent need to reform the ARMM now so that it will be ready for 2013 elections.

If the ARMM as an autonomous government is a failure now (has been a failure since the very beginning) who are to be blamed? And can we assure that it can be corrected in the next two years by the PNoy appointed officials?

Assuming based on the reason given by those who want to postpone the ARMM elections that reforms are needed now in the ARMM to prepare for elections after two years but one can always use such kind of reasoning to postpone the National Elections especially if the one sitting in power would want to extend his/her term or would want to put his/her favorite people in power. After all what is happening in the ARMM now is not much different from the situation in many places in the country. This is setting a very dangerous precedence. This is worse than the midnight appointments of GMA because in broad daylight the people in ARMM are made to swallow the people they did not vote to govern and make reforms for than by PNoy and his advisers. Besides, reforms and elections are not contradictory to each other. If the elections are made clean and honest then people can freely choose their candidates whom they think can best represent their interests and make reforms with and for them. This statement can be said anywhere in the country but more so in the ARMM because the Constitution says that specific date should be set for its elections.

What is contradictory is reforms and autocracy or dictatorial. No one can be so genius that he or she can make reforms for the people based on his/her interests and intentions in two years. Besides, we are talking of the ARMM where "A" stands for autonomy which any dictionary will say that autonomy means self-governing of people in specific area, be it political, economic and cultural. If something is wrong with the political leaders of the ARMM then we should study what are reasons for such failure because it will surely point out to the dictatorial understanding of the autonomy to the national leadership and their anointed ones in the regional leadership. So why punish the people? Why deprive them of their inherent right to govern through their chosen representatives?

From the abovementioned argument, it is very impossible to use the reforms for the ARMM to postpone election on August 8, 2011. Besides, one is not even sure of whose framework of reforms the proponents are talking about. And worst, the potential appointees are not known to be capable of instituting genuine reforms at least based on their track record.

What is left is the Ampatuan and the Peace factors.

Regarding the case of the Ampatuan, almost everybody knows in the ARMM that the Ampatuan have never left the political scene in the region specifically in the province of Maguindanao, the seat of the ARMM. Physically, the main personalities of the Ampatuan clan are in jail but they continue to govern many parts of the province by remote control aside from their wives and close relatives taking direct control of the different municipalities they had created. The most important issues here are that they have still the billions of pesos they have stolen from the government. This is still excluding several millions if not billions worth of jewelries and mansions they have kept away from those obvious ones that they have declared.

### **And the billions....**

These billions are performing miracles in their favor from their criminal cases (the principal suspects have not been arraigned to this day and that they even want their cases to be dismissed or at least they be brought to the private hospitals) and even in these places they strongly maintain their political influence and control of the province. Currently, we have not heard of any move from the government to examine the unexplained wealth of the Ampatuans and to recover them for the government. Right now, it is free for all. Hence, it is not surprising that different groups (political and military) have been looking, digging and killing each other for these hidden wealth and treasures. The government especially the AFP has a good advantage over the others because they can always reason out that they are in specific area digging for hidden and buried weapons. In the last few months, there has been news that hundreds of millions of pesos had been found. Were those amounts given back to the government? No one knows.

At this stage, it is very important to note that the monies and jewelries of the Ampatuan were moved out just before the declaration of Martial Law in the province of Maguindanao and Cotabato City after the November 23, 2009 massacre. This is a good lead to investigate the role of the GMA government in the Ampatuan case before, during and after November 23, 2009.

In their haste, the Ampatuans and their operators have to use even the banks to hide the billions of pesos and dollars they had stolen from the government. People they know with bank accounts had a surprise in their lives to find the millions which suddenly appeared in their accounts.

And because of the government's inaction, these amounts have been slowly recovered by the Ampatuans to be used for their purpose as to influence their cases and election are just some of them. Why is it that the government of PNoy not doing something about this? What is the banks' role in this highly criminal act?

Is this the reason why PNoy and his adviser would want to postpone the elections? Are they buying time to recover these billions of pesos and dollars and those very expensive imported jewelries? If they want to get back the monies and jewelries for the government, then it is very important that it will be transparent and the people should know.

### **And the guns...?**

As of this writing, we have not heard of the government's move to recover the guns of the Ampatuans? Why? Do PNoy and his advisers afraid to touch sensitivities here? Surely if serious actions have to be made regarding the recovery of the guns of Ampatuans, top tanking military officials will be implicated. The serial numbers of the guns and ammunitions of the Ampatuans are still readable and the sources easily identified. A new Division Commander has just taken his position but what happened to the efforts of the past Division Chief and his predecessor?

Urgent moves should be immediately done here because those guns are fast changing hands and we should avoid a day where the ordinary soldiers on the fields be felled by their own guns and ammunitions. If recovering these guns and ammunitions is one of the reasons for PNoy and his advisers in postponing the August 2011 election, then they will have surprise in their lives. There are already areas in Maguindanao and elsewhere that these guns have been displayed and those with monies can buy them - sky is the limit and politicians are not excluded from those who want to possess these guns.

### **And the Peace Agreement...**

Regarding the argument/reason that the postponement of ARMM elections will prepare the people of the region for the peace agreement which will eventually be reached between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

This kind of argument is assuming too so much that the MILF will certainly agree with the political framework of the Philippine government. And in case the MILF will not agree, should we again postpone the ARMM election? But in case they will agree with the political framework of the government, does this mean that the people of ARMM will automatically agree also?

The issue on the peace agreement should be grounded on the sincerity of both parties in direct consultation of the peoples of ARMM. This means not only the Moros but the Indigenous and Christian peoples as well. The failure of the ARMM project is precisely because the major peace stakeholders are always left out in the negotiating table and for the government only the revolutionary front is considered for accommodation and for the liberation front only their interests are given due attention, all the rest will be given attention after the signing of a peace agreement.

Any genuine and sustainable peace agreement can be reached if all the peoples or at least the broadest sections of peoples are considered and consulted in a free and democratic manner and not just to inform and update them of the process and the results. And this takes time, no external pressures can hasten or delay such a democratic process. Surely, the two years transition period of the PNoy government cannot fully prepare for such a sustainable endeavor.

### **BEST OPTION**

Pushing through with the ARMM election in August 8, 2011 and all the abovementioned issues among others be tackled by the candidates in a fair level playing fields will be the best political and constitutional move that PNoy and his adviser can do for the people in ARMM. It will be best if PNoy, his advisers and the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) will come full force to make sure

that this election will be fair, honest and clean.

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\* <http://mindanaonotebook.blogspot.com/2011/05/armm-elections-and-reforms-plus.html>