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The Presidential Musical Chairs Game

SACRAMENTO, CALIF., April 28 (PinoyGlobal) - With just a little over a year to the 2010 general elections, the presidential musical chairs game has started in earnest. And there are several games going all at once by groups called “political parties.”

To start with, these political parties are not ideological parties like what you would see in the United States and other countries. The Philippines’ political parties are just vehicles -- like the country’s unique colorful jeepneys -- where politicians can take a ride hoping that it would bring them to their destination. However, if the jeepney they’re riding in is too slow or is caught in a traffic jam, they can always alight and transfer to another jeepney.

Having said that, let’s take a look at what’s going on with the various presidential musical chairs games. Of course the biggest game is in President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s political parties -- KAMPI and LAKAS -- which will soon merge into one mega group. There are many ambitious participants but only one will be anointed. What would happen to those who would be eliminated? In Philippine politics, there are no gracious losers, only sore losers.

Last month, Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri, LAKAS secretary-general, said that five candidates were included on the party’s short list: Sen. Manny Villar (Nationalista Party), Sen. Loren Legarda (Nationalist People’s Coalition - NPC), Sen. Richard Gordon (independent), Vice-President Noli de Castro (independent), and Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro (formerly of NPC). Not included was Bayani Fernando who was the only presidential aspirant belonging to LAKAS. He was the first to officially declare his presiden-

tial candidacy; however, he was also the first casualty of the LAKAS musical chairs game. LAKAS de-listed him because he is not winnable. That only proves that “party loyalty” is not a factor. And that’s the reason why political turncoatism is prevalent in Philippine politics.

Among the five “presidentiables” on the LAKAS short list, the most popular is De Castro. In a survey by Pulse Asia last February, three of them were on the top five on the list: De Castro (19%), Villar (15%), and Legarda (12%). Gordon and Teodoro were not included in the Pulse Asia poll. The other two were: NPC’s Sen. Francis “Chiz” Escudero (17%) and former President Joseph “Erap” Estrada (16%).

Recently, LAKAS President and Speaker Prospero Nograles and KAMPI President and Congressman Luis Villafuerte resigned as leaders of their respective parties to make way for President Arroyo to act as interim president of both parties until their merger is finalized by July 2009.

The question is: Who will eventually be “anointed” as the LAKAS-KAMPI standard bearer? The conventional wisdom is that whoever Gloria wants will be the party’s candidate. But “winnability” would be a major factor. What good is a candidate if he or she couldn’t win? And right now, De Castro is the man to beat among the presidentiables. The fact that he is “independent” makes him ripe for the plucking. But would he dance with Gloria? You bet he would if that’s what it would take to get Gloria’s nod. But, what if Gloria dumps him? He can’t go to the opposition -- it’s too crowded already. Would he form his own party? The word is that if he distanced himself from Gloria, he would get the

support of some of the country's moneyed heavyweights.

The next question is: What would Teodoro do if he's not going to get Gloria's nod? Would he settle as De Castro's vice presidential running mate? Or would he go back to his uncle Danding Cojuangco's NPC -- like a prodigal son -- and become its standard bearer? In politics, everything is possible. And remember, blood is thicker than water.

I had an opportunity to talk to Teodoro in 2003 at the State Dinner at Malacanang Palace hosted by Gloria honoring then President George W. Bush during his state visit. I was seated next to him and we chatted for a while. A bar topnotcher in the Philippines and also a member of the New York state bar, Teodoro was residing in New York with his wife when his uncle Danding persuaded him to go back home and enter politics. He told me that he wasn't particularly interested in Philippine politics but in the end his uncle prevailed. In 1998, he ran for Congress and won. He became the leader of the NPC bloc in the House. In 2007, Gloria appointed him as Secretary of Defense. Recently, his resignation from NPC was announced; however, he claimed that he left NPC when he accepted the Defense portfolio. Makes one to wonder if he and Gloria had an "understanding" already at that time.

If Teodoro becomes the LAKAS-KAMPI presidential candidate, he might face Sen. Francis "Chiz" Escudero who is being eyed by NPC as its standard bearer. When asked if he would accept an offer to run as the administration's candidate, Escudero flatly rejected the notion saying that he belongs to the opposition.

How about the other "independent" presidentialiable, Dick Gordon? Although Gordon is on the LAKAS short list, he is not expected to associate himself with Gloria. If he does, he is a fool.

Yesterday, April 27, 2009, Gordon launched his presidential bid when he addressed 1,500 delegates of the Bagumbayan Movement at its grand launching and national convention at the Manila Hotel. Bagumbayan endorsed Gordon for President. It is expected that he would be Bagumbayan's standard bearer once it's recognized as a political party by the Commission on Elections.

And last but not the least is former President Estrada. Should he run for President, there is no clear indication yet if his power base is as formidable as when he first ran for President. Many people are saying that he is still popular with the masses -- his main base of support. If Estrada draws support from Gloria's electoral base thus weakening Gloria's candidate, Gloria might invoke her "power" to arrest Estrada and put him back in prison for violating the conditions of his presidential pardon. However, if Estrada draws support from the opposition's electoral base thus giving an advantage to Gloria's candidate, Gloria would probably just let him be the spoiler in the elections.

But the biggest potential spoiler of all would be Gloria herself. Should she decide to stay in power, in which a lot of people have been speculating about, she could declare martial law and stop the elections. In which case, all bets are off and Gloria in Excelcis Arroyo will rule forever in the "Enchanted Kingdom."