

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE

NEWS AND INFORMATION BUREAU

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE

BY PINKY WEBB – THE SOURCE, CNN PHILIPPINES

April 24, 2018 (9:02–9:30 A.M.)

WEBB: (Recording starts)... listen to it and I listen to it again. But of course there's stuff that needs to be clarified. But let's start with—

SEC. ROQUE: I like that. [Laughs] Let's start with that.

WEBB: Let's start with Boracay. Proclamation on the closure, executive order on the closure, order of a state of calamity, where are those, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: It's coming out of course 'no because the island is scheduled to be closed and we need of course the legal basis for the closure as well as the proclamation of state of calamity because otherwise it will take time 'no to comply with all rules of government procurements so we can fix Boracay and do what we need to do with Boracay 'no.

Substantially what we need to do is address the discharge of untreated water into the ocean and that's why priorities are given now to the drainage and the sewage line, as well as in the medium term - not covered by the six months period - the fact that there should be zero discharge already from Boracay 'no.

I mean, if we want to preserve Boracay as a pristine beach destination, you need to preserve the quality of its water and the only way to do that is to prevent the dumping of untreated water into the ocean.

WEBB: Which is obviously a long term solution; it should be initiated during the six months or maybe four months closure and subsequently the years after that.

SEC. ROQUE: Correct. But you know the six months is crucial because also you need a state or proclamation to fast track, see the procurement of the construction of the... you know, the drainage pipes and all the pipes that will lead to the water treatment facility and the selection of the water treatment facility as well.

WEBB: So the question is still when, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well the six months I think we can award all the contracts—

WEBB: No sorry, the proclamation or the EO and the state of calamity, sir. It's two days before the closure, people are looking for it.

SEC. ROQUE: Well don't worry. I mean, it can be issued today, tomorrow, it's no big deal 'no because I'm sure it's drafted already 'no. So it can be issued—

WEBB: What's taking it awhile sir?

SEC. ROQUE: It's not really awhile, it's just that—

WEBB: Its two days before, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, but people have been told that it will be closed. So it's no big deal. They know it will happen and it's just a formality that that will be issued 'no. It's just that, you know, perhaps it's because the President is in Davao right now, as you know. He's had to attend two engagements in Davao. And I'm sure he'll have to sign before leaving for Singapore, because Singapore is the first day that Boracay will be closed to tourists.

WEBB: So you don't think it's a big deal that there's still no proclamation order, executive order or a state of calamity?

SEC. ROQUE: No, because people know that it will come out anyway. So what's important is we gave advanced notice that it will happen.

WEBB: And everybody is there. But there's a point though that some are saying, sir, 'we need the declaration, number one for... it's an—it's a basis rather for agencies to expedite for example assistance to affected workers. Can you clarify that sir, with that—

SEC. ROQUE: No. The state of proclamation is only needed for purposes of fast tracking procurement. But government officials are already at it 'no. In fact we had a final inter-agency Cabinet level meeting 'no to spell out the different obligations of the different departments 'no. The DOLE and DSWD will be at the forefront of providing stop gap measures as far as loss of income is concerned; DENR of course will spearhead the master plan of rehabilitating the island; Tourism is already initiating the task of coordinating with airlines and ensuring the tourist will come back after the closure, things like that 'no.

So it's very clear, the demarcations of duties are very clear. I've never seen government as organized as I've actually seen them. Really ha! I've always been a critic of government that's why I know. But I was pleasantly surprised at the level of—

WEBB: So you can't be a critic of a government now, sir.

SEC. ROQUE: No. [Laughs] But that's why I've always like impressed by the work of government professionals 'no. I mean, these are the same way people also ha who manned PMS in the previous administration. So kudos to them 'no.

WEBB: The question though that there is of course—the President had already said there's two billion pesos in assistance for displaced workers, sir—

SEC. ROQUE: Yes.

WEBB: And we are looking at probably—I don't know the numbers are changing. Let's peg it at about 34,000 formal and informal sector. How much of the two million - if you know, sir - is already available now?

SEC. ROQUE: Well its available now, no problem 'no. But the problem is we are vetting whose going to be recipients because the President said 'I only want the people.'

WEBB: That's real.

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, the real workers to benefit 'no. Now, that should be easy because resorts themselves should have a list of their regular employees. Now we have to distinguish between those who have temporary jobs, who are there because they are vacationing and meanwhile they want to have a job to extend their vacation 'no. So of course well I'm going to give tax payers money to them. But to those who have been employed in Boracay for years as regular employees, those are the type of people that we want to help.

Now I made a suggestion actually in the final Cabinet meeting, it was favorably accepted by the body. And that is the possibility that while DOLE is still in the process of finalizing their vetting of who will actually get this 'no, perhaps employers should be encouraged and given credit if they were to be given... if the employers will to be given their 13th month pay. So that you know, meanwhile there's really no vacuum as far as their income is concern 'no.

But really what we're expecting is not all workers will leave, because there's so many job that will have to be done in Boracay that we estimate that not all 34,000—incidentally 34,000—

WEBB: But it's also matching, sir, hindi ba?

SEC. ROQUE: 34,000 is not an accurate figure, because that really is the total population already of the island. So you can't have, you know, 34,000 as regular employees and total population—

WEBB: No sir, I said formal and informal sector.

SEC. ROQUE: Yes that's right. But still—

WEBB: I think the formal is about 17,000—

SEC. ROQUE: Yeah it's really like half 'no, half of the figure 'no. So that's—you know—and not all of them will leave 'no, because there's so much job to be done as well 'no. I mean, resort owners themselves will have some work done on their places while—

WEBB: In fact they were saying they will rehabilitate, wala na rin silang magagawa they'll take their time—

SEC. ROQUE: Yeah, they'll take advantage and also others will be joining the rebuilding and the rehabilitation of Boracay, there's so much need now for construction workers 'no. And I'm sure many of the utility men in the hotels would also or could also work as construction workers.

WEBB: But Secretary, it does sound good but there's also this thing of matching. I mean we can always say... you can always say that there's so much job there that could be readily available but it's also matching the capability of the workers to the kind of job that will be available in Boracay?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, you know, I don't think excavation entails a lot and you are not talking of permanent, you know. We are only talking of four months, the target really is four months although the closure is for six months but we expect soft opening after four months.

WEBB: So what other suggestions? I know that you wanted some sort of a Boracay Press Corps and then the 9 to 5, sir, of the media in Boracay you wanted that quite extended to—

SEC. ROQUE: Well actually I suggested and again it was favorably received by the inter-agency but the final decision is theirs 'no. But I'm just happy that I was able to voice out concerns and that it was well received. Kasi sabi ko, 'Well hindi naman lahat ng media eh will be allowed. Like all beats they will have to be processed of accreditation. They will be a Boracay Press Corps 'no. And it is a Boracay Press Corps that will be given access to Boracay because as we know the news does not take a sleep anyway 'no.' So that was favorably acted upon 'no. I don't think they will be a problem there 'no. The other suggestion that I said is iyon na nga iyong i-advance iyong 13th month pay—

WEBB: Yeah, can we clarify that 'i-advance ang 13th month pay ng mga empleyado?'

SEC. ROQUE: Yes.

WEBB: Noong obviously of the employers, the employers should advance the 13th month pay. So that covers one month of their pay basically.

SEC. ROQUE: Oo, well ang crucial lang is while hindi pa tapos iyong vetting on whose going to get all the government assistance ay mayroong stop gap measure din iyong mga workers 'no. Pero ito voluntary naman ito sa employers and it will be recognized by the government if paid.

WEBB: How?

SEC. ROQUE: Well of course they will recognize it as already compliance to the 13th month pay 'no kasi 'di ba mandatory iyan. So come December they don't have to pay it.

WEBB: Oo pero at least malinaw iyon to them in the event that the employers do that is that, on the 13th month hindi na sila makakatanggap, ibibigay na, i-a-advance na iyon.

SEC. ROQUE: Well again this was a suggestion of which they favorably received. I don't know how they're actually going to implement it because I had to fly out to Davao and I left the meeting.

WEBB: No, but it's actually, it's a sound—I would say probably a sound suggestion because as you said the vetting process still continues two days before the closure, sir. So mayroon talagang mag—let's admitted it mayroon po talagang araw, linggo na walang trabaho iyong mga tao doon?

SEC. ROQUE: Well you know... the suggestion was not an original suggestion. In fact, the big resorts will be implementing it. So without government asking them, the big resorts that I know will be giving their persons... their employees one month pay 'no even if they're not working.

WEBB: Such as? Which resorts do you know sir? Are you at liberty to tell us?

SEC. ROQUE: Well I know, I can say, I know Henann Resort, the biggest, will do it 'no. So it was a suggestion that I got from Hennan 'no. It's out of sheer liberality of Hennan, you know, recognizing the value of their workforce. So I said why couldn't the other resort owners do the same thing? They've made so much money out of Boracay, this is a little act of liberality for people who have been loyal to the employers.

WEBB: Okay. But would government reward the employers who possibly will do this, sir, as an act of goodwill?

SEC. ROQUE: Well iyon na nga eh 'no, we already recognize it as 13th month pay.

WEBB: Hindi lang iyon, iyon sa 13th month pay, as over and above that?

SEC. ROQUE: I don't know what else we could do to recognize them, we should. Because this is something that came from their own initiative 'no, I just borrowed the idea of Hennan.
[Laughs]

WEBB: We'll be taking a short break. This is The Source on CNN Philippines. As the administration continues its crackdown on corruption, will there be more government officials fired? Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque will still be with us after the break.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WEBB: You're watching the Source on CNN Philippines. Our guest today, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque and he will tell us and give light on, you know, on certain topics that we will discuss today before his media briefing with the Malacañang Press Corps later.

SEC. ROQUE: Yes.

WEBB: Endo, let's talk about endo. Okay, I was watching you and you were saying, we know the President wants to keep his promise. It is, after all, his campaign promise. And then

subsequently after that, there was no EO that was going to be signed. Just for clarification, sir, what happened?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, you know, he has not turned his back on his campaign promise. From 200, the Department of Labor now has 500 labor inspectors, and they have cracked down on what is really prohibited which is 555 and cabo.

Now, we have to distinguish between what is prohibited by law, which is labor only contracting and contractualization. The difference is, 555 is when you have to sever or dismiss an employee on the 5th month so they will not become regular employees of the principal, thereby preventing or suppressing the right of security of tenure.

Now, on the other hand, you have what is known as service contractors who provide workers for other companies but there is an employer-employee relationship between the service contractor and the employee. Meaning, these people don't have to go at the end of five months, because after all they are regular employees of the service contractor. What the—

WEBB: These are like manpower companies.

SEC. ROQUE: Yeah, manpower companies. What the law prohibits are cabos. Cabos are fake manpower companies, because they don't have substantial capital. They exist only as a means of circumventing the right of security of tenure.

So if you are a company, a manpower provider with substantial capital and you provide all the minimum terms and conditions of employment required by the Labor Code, and hire these workers as your regular employees, that's not prohibited. That's contractualization but not the 555, not the cabo prohibited and promised by the President... which the President promised to end.

So the President has been going after cabo, has been going after 555 and that's why... you know, we know for a fact now that with the labor inspectors being doubled 'no, a lot of companies, a lot of cabos have now been closed. And that's why, recently the President again issued a directive to the DOLE to come up with the list of companies who might possibly be cabos within—I forgot how many days. I think 60 days 'no. So that within 60 days, these people could either comply or will be shut down.

WEBB: But the manpower resources – just for a little bit more enlightenment here, sir – do they treat their employees as regular employees or no?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, yes. That's the—

WEBB: Okay. So they have security of tenure?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, they have security of tenure. So that's not illegal. And that's why we have no problems with that. But you see, that's where the misunderstanding with some labor groups start because they feel that even that kind of an employment should not be allowed. But why

should not it be allowed? Number one, it's very clear in the Labor Code: For as long as they have substantial capital and they honor the security of tenure of the workers, then it is legal.

WEBB: So why the need for Congress to come in if you're saying that ayos na naman pala ito and, in fact, you are one of the authors to end contractualization?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. Well, we need to expand kasi the meaning of cabo. Iyong sa akin, I adopted the EU definition. If there is no counterpart in the labor market, then it will not be cabo. But if there is a counterpart and yet you resort to contractualization, then it will be still a cabo.

But if you adopt this definition, you read the law. Because remember, in our scheme of government, the Executive merely implements the law; it is the Congress that—

WEBB: Yeah, but you can have an executive order that can strictly implement an end to contractualization as well, sir, which is what the President wanted to do?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we have been implementing an end to cabo, 555. So if you want, we can have an EO restating what already exists in the Labor Code, why not 'no. If that's what they want, that would be no problem. But labor does not want that. They want to go beyond that.

WEBB: Beyond that. So would there be possibly some good news still on May 1, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: I think so naman. I think there will be something. Traditionally, government has to give something on May 1. [Laughs]

WEBB: All right. So the President and the Kuwaiti Ambassador meetings, sir, tell us more about that? I know you weren't there though.

SEC. ROQUE: I wasn't there. I was supposed to be—

WEBB: That was in Davao.

SEC. ROQUE: You know, I was supposed to be in Davao for some reason. But this—the fact that I accepted this engagement; it was one reason why I couldn't go.

WEBB: Thank you, sir.

SEC. ROQUE: I had to tell the President, “Sorry, I have to see Pinky Webb.” Anyway, but yes, they had a very productive meeting, I understand. And they were able to thresh out differences. There were some misunderstanding – it was not serious. I think they both affirmed that they don't want a repeat of what happened to our OFW, Joanna Demafelis, because it is not good for neither the Philippines nor Kuwait for another Demafelis to happen; and they agreed to move forward.

What they agreed upon is that they will honor, you know, minimum standards of treating our OFWs. They will respect our rights to protect our workers in Kuwait, and we will also respect

the sovereignty of Kuwait. Meaning, while we would want to protect our nationals, we will closely coordinate with Kuwait in coordinating with their nationals which is what we have been doing anyway. We have been coordinating with the police authorities in conducting rescue missions of our nationals. And I think this has just made, you know, our relationships stronger.

WEBB: Is that becoming a problem, the rescue mission of our kababayan in Kuwait?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, it shouldn't be 'no, except that, you know, there was this unnecessary aggravation caused by a video which was published or broadcasted by a television station. Of course, any which way you look at it, Kuwait could be offended because, you know, you have police authorities operating in their territory. Of course, the rationale is, we can't allow our nationals to be abused. But Kuwait is saying is, we don't countenance that either that's why we imposed the death penalty on the killers of Demafelis, to show by way of example that we will not tolerate this.

So I think there's an agreement reached that there will be closer cooperation in protecting our Philippine nationals, and we will move forward with the relationship.

WEBB: You talked about there were misunderstanding and differences during the meeting. What were those? What were sticky issues, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, just a misunderstanding arising perhaps from the video. But we've agreed to move on. Obviously, the fact that the video shows Philippine authorities operating in the territory of Kuwait would be offensive to the concept of sovereignty.

WEBB: So we shouldn't do that, is that what you're saying?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes, in the same way that we don't want foreign operatives to be operating in our territory. But I think it was not a too big an issue. We will move forward with our bilateral relationship with Kuwait. And I think the sending of workers, this issue might still be resolved soon.

WEBB: But not yet?

SEC. ROQUE: Not yet.

WEBB: But what about the MOA? Is it a memorandum of agreement, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. We are continuing negotiations. I think we are almost at the point when we can say we're there but not quite yet. There's one or two controversial issues—

WEBB: Which are?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, it was discussed but I think it was—the fact that they should be given one day off. We want it spelled out literally that it should be one day a week, whereas, they were

thinking it could be cumulative. You don't really have to have the one day per week, but you can cumulate it, for instance, if you want to go home to the Philippines 'no. So something like that.

WEBB: Four days in a month, eight days in two months.

SEC. ROQUE: Yeah, but that's not really a major issue.

WEBB: What was the second one?

SEC. ROQUE: The second one was - if I'm not mistaken - they want the food 'no. We want to specify that—

WEBB: Ayaw natin ng tira-tira?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, of course, not only that but we want to give the option to the ... our workers to be able to cook which they don't object to, provided of course there is no pork. Pero parang the misunderstanding there is, do we really have to say na kailangan pa silang magluto ng sarili nilang pagkain. Well, we're not admitting naman na hindi sila pinapakain ng different food from what the family eats.

WEBB: But what about the passport, is that an issue, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Hindi na. They've already agreed na it can be deposited with the Philippine embassy.

WEBB: Again, we will be taking another short break. Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque will still be with us.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WEBB: Sir, what happened to Ambassador Villa?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, he was just summoned by Kuwaiti authorities which usual resort when you want to clarify and likewise we summoned also the Kuwait Ambassador, he went to Davao 'no together with Secretary Cayetano and the rest of our Cabinet.

WEBB: Yung summoned... kasi I don't know how people will understand the word 'summoned.' It's got a negative connotation—

SEC. ROQUE: Well, in diplomatic parlance it's because you want the Ambassador to explain something, you know. So that's why he was summoned but I think what happened was—in return we also had to summon somehow also the Kuwait Ambassador to find out what's happening in Kuwait.

WEBB: Is the President still gonna visit—is he still gonna go to Kuwait?

SEC. ROQUE: He has not said that he will not ‘no; but so far he has kept on saying that I would want to go there to explain to them why we are insisting on the minimum terms and conditions of employment.

WEBB: So, will he or not?

SEC. ROQUE: I’m not sure right now, but I think he is tired already of travelling; the same way that I’m very tired already of travel—[Laughs]

WEBB: [Laughs] And you are only Spokesperson. How long has it been, sir, six months?

SEC. ROQUE: It’s only been five months going on six and already... on this trip on Singapore I was like thinking, oh wow do we get out of this—[Laughs]

WEBB: Sir, let’s talk about Singapore, because the President has a trip to Singapore. It’s suppose to be a lean team – sir, you’re part of the lean team - and it’s going to be a... not commercial flight.

SEC. ROQUE: We’re not chartering a flight, which is what we do usually and what heads of states do. So we’re going on our own, he goes on a private plane; I mean after all, he’s a head of state. Now I noticed though that in other multilateral conferences, ganoon ang ginagawa ng mga heads of states. I guess it’s also to save money. I guess it’s ‘bongga’ if you have your national carrier bring you there and wait for you. But you know the cost ‘no entailed by that ‘no, since PAL is now private, we have to pay PAL ‘no.

So now, it’s just going to be a very small plane for the President and everyone else—

WEBB: Like an 8-seater?

SEC. ROQUE: Yeah, yeah...

WEBB: Like an 8-seater for the President.

SEC. ROQUE: Yeah. I think it’s a 6 or 8-seater. I’m not sure ‘no, I have to count ‘no.

WEBB: But is that the plan from here on, sir, especially with short trips?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I think it’s because also it’s ASEAN, it’s multilateral, so it’s not bilateral. So we’re one of 10, and we’re not the host anymore. So parang, there’s no justification ‘no to spend so much resources. We’re just going because it’s the Leaders Meeting, we can’t be absent. But let’s face it, we will be there as a member of ASEAN full stop.

WEBB: Okay. I wanna bring this in, the President of course against Chief Justice on leave, Maria Lourdes Sereno; a group of lawyers asking the UN to look into this because this is an attack against the Judiciary. We know what the President has said, “From now on, you know, I

categorically say you are my enemy. You should get out of there.” Sir, could this really be an attack to the Judiciary?

SEC. ROQUE: You know, given the context by which the President said what he said, I don't think so. The President said what he said, because the CJ has been continuously saying he's been behind the impeachment. What is the reality? Thirteen of her own colleagues asked her to go on indefinite leave – that by itself is an administrative sanction. They imposed that sanction on her, because it became proven that she did not file the required Statement of Assets and Liabilities and Networth. And therefore, there is really an issue of integrity that might affect the Court if she did not go on forced leave.

So there's already a decision, a judgment made by her own colleagues in the Court for her to go on indefinite leave. So why should they blame the President now for attacking the Judiciary? Instead I would say it's the Judiciary acting on its own to discipline one of their own to protect the integrity of the Court, and not an attack of the Executive on the Judiciary.

Secondly, on the impeachment. The impeachment charges I'm sure will be filed, and inevitably it will be based on the evidence presented by her own colleagues again in the Court. So, where is the attack on the Judiciary when the impeachment—

WEBB: But you have a President saying, “Fast track that impeachment.”

SEC. ROQUE: Who cares, if the evidence is being provided by the very colleagues of the Chief Justice herself? You know, all the other matters that Gadon said will not be filed in the Articles of Impeachment. What will be filed are matters testified upon by the 5 Justices of the Supreme Court. So where is the attack on the Judiciary again here, when her own colleagues are the ones giving testimony in the impeachment?

So really, Chief Justice has to admit... she has to look at the mirror and what she will see in the mirror is the very person behind the impeachment. It's herself.

WEBB: That's it. We've run out of time, but we will continue very quickly on Facebook. I know Secretary Roque has to go, but there has been a question mula sa netizens, sir. About mayroon daw ba talagang masterplan?

Secretary Roque will answer that after—well, we need to go. But he'll answer that on Facebook. Thank you again, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque, always good to see you. Thank you for joining us here on The Source.

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