

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY KARMINA CONSTANTINO - ANC
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CONSTANTINO: Good afternoon Mr. Secretary; thanks for joining us today.

SEC. ROQUE: Good afternoon Karmina; and good afternoon, Philippines.

CONSTANTINO: All right. So give us a low down what happened last night. What can you confirmed to us—because there is no official confirmation yet coming from the Palace, what can you confirm to us as to what actually happened last night, Mr. Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: I'm so sorry Karmina, but my marching order is to leave the matter to the House leadership. This is an issue involving a co-equal branch of government and I was specifically instructed that whatever the agreement was reached last night, it should be the House Speaker who should be announcing it to the public.

CONSTANTINO: But if you say that it is a matter for the co-equal branch of government to resolve this, meaning the House of Representatives, why did the President even have to intervene in the speakership row?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, he intervened because he is the party chair of PDP-Laban and allied forces 'no and he facilitated an agreement of sorts between the two contenders. But that's really not a function of the President per se, he did it as party head.

CONSTANTINO: So, does that mean that it's not over yet?

SEC. ROQUE: Well... *[laughs]* I myself I'm surprised why there has not been any pronouncement from Congress. But it will be awkward if the announcement on the leadership of the House will come from the Palace 'no. It is not the business of the Palace to dictate who would be the leader should be and there was an agreement that Speaker Cayetano will do the announcement.

CONSTANTINO: Will do the announcement, but that agreement of the term sharing seems to be in peril still even with the intervention of the party president whose also the President. Because there is talk and you know about this, Congressman LRay Villafuerte has said that it's really up to the members of the House of Representatives to choose who their leader will be, even with the meeting that happened last night.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, if you look at the Constitution that is in fact the case 'no - It is the individual members of the House that will elect their leadership.

CONSTANTINO: So, if in case that happens, Mr. Secretary, will the President have to intervene once again like he did last night?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, what I did hear from the President's mouth himself was when we had a meeting with him in Davao. He said that he hopes that the two leaders will honor their agreement which he brokered. But if Congressman Lord Allan does not have the number, wala na akong magagawa 'no. That's verbatim from the President and beyond that, you know, I can't say anything else because I was given strict orders: Leave it to the House leadership to address the issue of their leadership.

CONSTANTINO: Tell me this then. What did the President have to say when there were movements to retain Alan Peter Cayetano as Speaker - that manifesto that was signed by over 200 Congressmen - Mr. Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, they had a private meeting yesterday and by private I mean, just the President, the two contenders and Senator Bong Go. So, I was not privy to it 'no.

And actually I made a decision with my staff that as Presidential Spokesperson we should really not interfere in this matter because the President, as I said earlier, was only interfering as party head. So we have kept our distance from the issue and I'm glad that the order was given that it is the House leadership that should address what has been agreed upon.

What I can only repeat and this was with the approval of the President is what he said when I met with him and he said that the agreement should be honored but if Congressman Lord Allan Velasco does not have the number, wala akong magagawa.

CONSTANTINO: Can you tell us though, Mr. Secretary, as to when that announcement from Speaker Cayetano will be made, did the President and the people that he met last night agree as much as to when that announcement should be made?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. I do not know when the Speaker intends to make the announcement. But I will follow up with him because, as I said—you are not the only one asking me, but it's very seldom do I get instructions from my principal and this is one of the rare opportunities when he said, 'let Speaker Cayetano address this issue.'

CONSTANTINO: Did you find that unusual? As you said, this is one of the rare times that he asked that of you. Did you find that quite unusual coming from the President?

SEC. ROQUE: Not really, because as a lawyer and as a professor of constitutional law, there are constitutional bounds that should be honored. And one of those of course is the separation of powers and the issue of leadership.

We know that in real politics, the party head influences the members of the Lower House. But we still have to honor the letter of what appears in our Constitution that the House of Representatives is a co-equal branch and they should be the one selecting their officials.

CONSTANTINO: Knowing what you know about the President, whether we are talking about him as a party president or President of the Republic. When he makes such decisions only because he pitied a person?

SEC. ROQUE: I know that the President values ‘palabra de honor’ and that’s a phrase that I have heard from his own. But I know that the President is also a seasoned politician. He knows that he can only endorse someone to a certain extent but if there really is a choice amongst them; you cannot do anything about it ‘no. I think after having spent 30 or so years as a politician, he knows the nature of politics itself ‘no.

So, I am just intrigued why the announcement has not been made, although for what I know, the announcement itself may be subject to conflicting interpretation ‘no. And that is why perhaps there is a delay in the announcement.

CONSTANTINO: Wouldn’t that then put the President as party president in a very precarious position, because there he went last night, trying to broker a deal, trying to sober things up between two members of the party and yet it seems like the debate isn’t over yet, it seems that you know, there is still some movement in so far as Speakership is concerned. How will the President take that, he doesn’t have sway anymore with these party members. What do you say about that?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, let’s just say—there were two meetings yesterday, he heard the party leaders first, then he had a private meeting with the contenders ‘no. As to exactly what was mentioned, there are only four people in the room who can actually validate what was agreed upon. And I’m also eagerly awaiting the announcement from the Speaker.

CONSTANTINO: Aren’t you concerned, Mr. Secretary, that this might put if it, let’s say, the situation evolves into that, that you know, the intervention was all for naught and it’s still going to be Speaker Cayetano? Aren’t you concerned that would put the President in a precarious situation that he doesn’t have influence anymore over the party?

SEC. ROQUE: As I’ve said, the President is a far more seasoned politician than any of them in the House right now and he must have his visions for:

1. Not announcing it himself;
2. For allowing Speaker Cayetano to do the announcement because he could not authorize Congressman Lord Allan to also make public what that agreement was, but that’s not the case, I understand.

CONSTANTINO: Whoever the next Speaker will be, Mr. Secretary, what are the expectations coming from the President as the country still reels from the pandemic?

SEC. ROQUE: That I'm authorized to answer. The bottomline is we cannot derail the budget. This budget is specifically crafted for the COVID-19 pandemic and under no circumstance could it be delayed. We've had already the painful experience where not too long ago the budget was not passed on time and we have to live with the reenacted budget for a couple of months.

That's something that we cannot afford because the COVID pandemic only happened now and if we were to have a reenacted budget from last year, it would not have any item in support of our anti-COVID response. So, that is primordial importance and that's what he has asked from our allies in the House of the Representatives. In fact, he says it's non-negotiable, the budget has to be passed on time.

CONSTANTINO: And this is going to be very important for the President, because with this budget goes the legacy that he will leave come 2022. We only have about a year and a half left in real politics time and what to do with the budget and how that will be translated post the pandemic. That's going to reflect on the kind of leadership and the kind of state the nation we'll be in, once the President leaves. Isn't he concerned—

SEC. ROQUE: Correct!

CONSTANTINO: —about, you know, how this budget is being taken hostage by this whole hustle for the Speakership, Mr. Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: That is correct. That is why I think whatever the decision of the House may be on the leadership, I think of what is stilled in the President's mind is who amongst the two contenders can really deliver the budget on time. I reiterate, this is a pandemic budget. Some politicians consider this as an important budget because this is the year before the elections and it is considered as an election's budget, but to the President, the election is not really material because he is not running for re-election. It is very, very important because of the pandemic response built in that proposed 2021 budget.

CONSTANTINO: Let's talk about Facebook. I know that you've talked about this, that he wasn't really threatening to ban, but what's the latest on that, on that talk as in the President's words with Facebook?

SEC. ROQUE: So far, no developments. But I understand there's now a new country head of Facebook. That's development 'no and I don't know if the country head will make initiatives to contact the Philippine government 'no.

But Karmina, this is not the first time that we have sought a dialogue with Facebook. About two years ago we also had some talks with the Asia-Pacific Management of Facebook complaining about the fact that they've chose fact checkers organizations - Rappler and Vera

Files - who are known to be very much against President Duterte. Unfortunately, nothing happened to our warning. They were still retained as the only fact checkers and this came to be.

And second point to highlight is One Facebook claims that the removal of the pro-government pages are due to inauthentic conduct, the reality is the effect is censorship because the messages are found in these pages were literally removed from the portal of Facebook.

CONSTANTINO: But that Hands Off Our Children advocacy group, that still has its own website running, so it still has a platform?

SEC. ROQUE: But not in Facebook 'no and we don't understand why the most popular social media page in the Philippines would remove an advocacy against the illegal recruitment of children as combatants, when this norm is one of the strongest norms at the international humanitarian law and under human rights.

CONSTANTINO: would you agree with some observations that no matter which side you're on, whether you're with the opposition or the government, that what is disturbing here is that someone is telling us what is inauthentic and what is not and therefore has that power—

SEC. ROQUE: That's the concern—

CONSTANTINO: Go ahead.

SEC. ROQUE: That's the concern of the President. Although he's not a techie, that's the basis of the objection of the President, who's going to say that conduct actually disrupts the free marketplace of ideas? In fact, the very fact, the very allegation that there are behaviors which are un-authenticated 'no or inauthentic 'no leaves the question of, what if that forms part also of symbolic speech? Isn't that precisely the very nature of advocacy and you can't tell us that it's only pro-government groups resorting to inauthentic behavior, because I know very well that whenever I'm criticized by the opposition, they also have inauthentic conduct to make sure that their messages or their criticisms of me are spread as widely as possible. So, in my mind, the best way really is to allow the free marketplace of ideas to abide. After all, people have the sufficient intelligence to discern what is believable from what is unreal.

CONSTANTINO: What is more disturbing to the President, Mr. Secretary, the fact that the FB page of Hands Off Our Children was taken down or that there were, as Vice President Leni Robredo pointed out, networks from China that were seen backing Duterte and trying to sway the upcoming national elections in favor of the possible presidential bid of his daughter, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio, isn't that interference as well in our local affairs?

SEC. ROQUE: We don't know for a fact if that is in fact the case because when they mentioned inauthentic conduct, we don't even know what that means 'no. So, to me, the President's concern is as a lawyer; as a politician, he has encouraged freedom of speech. He

has not filed libel case against anyone and it's important in a democracy that we maintain and protect this free marketplace of ideas. So, why would they take down pro-government comments or pages when in the first place, you know, this is no berth of opposition pages.

CONSTANTINO: If there is no plan to shutdown Facebook. What is the plan of the President as he "talks" to them?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I don't have to go beyond what the President said. He actually said, I don't know what I can do with Facebook, because as I've said, he's not a techie, he does not know the exact nature of Facebook. He does not know for instance that the only way perhaps to ban Facebook is to do as China is doing which is to build a giant firewall against allowing China which right now we do not have in the Philippines.

So, I'll leave it at that. He doesn't know what we can do, but he stressed that because you're allowed to operate in the Philippines, then he doesn't see why the government is not able to use that platform to send its messages as well.

CONSTANTINO: Okay. We'll gonna have to leave it at that.

Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque, thank you for your time. Thanks for joining us today.

SEC. ROQUE: Thank you Karmina and good afternoon.

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