

**Presidential Communications Operations Office  
NEWS AND INFORMATION BUREAU**

**INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE  
BY MARICHU VILLANUEVA - KAPIHAN SA MANILA BAY WITH MARICHU VILLANUEVA  
OCTOBER 19, 2021**

**VILLANUEVA:** Today, we are lucky to have finally as I have said a while ago that we have no less than the Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque and who needs no further introduction. And by the way, sir, I have also invited the Malacañang Press Corps to join us in our conversation today. So, if you would indulge them also later.

But I have prepared a set of questions for you and I would like to personally ask this on you. But before anything else, may I ask for your opening statement, if you have any, Secretary.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, magandang umaga, Ichu. Magandang umaga sa lahat ng mga nanunood sa atin. Magandang umaga sa ating mga kasamahan sa Malacañang Press Corps. Gaya ng aking sinabi po, Wednesdays are really media interview days. So, karangalan ko po na makasaama ko kayo dito sa Kapihan sa Manila Bay. Napakatagal ko na pong hindi nakapag-guest dito sa Kapihan na ito, mula pa noong namatay si—ito ba iyong dati kay Tintin?

**VILLANUEVA:** No.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Ah, hindi pa, iba pa ito.

**VILLANUEVA:** I was with the late Roy Simpuego.

**SEC. ROQUE:** I see. So, it's a privilege to be here and please let's get the questions now.

**VILLANUEVA:** Okay, sir. So, by the way by way of just praising or lauding your efforts, I had covered many Presidential Spokespersons and Press Secretaries in the past because I had covered Malacañang, since 1986 until 2005. So more or less, I have covered four Presidents or five Presidents up to GMA, except PNoy. So, I just learned from the Malacañang Press Corps that you have been doing a good job, because you try to present first the government views and the good news, not just the bad news and it's to your credit that you have survived the post, which is usually has a limited shelf life of three years. As Press Secretary Bunye once told us the normal shelf life of Press Secretaries and Spokespersons are usually two to three years only. But you have survived those years and I commend you for that effort.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Thank you, Ichu.

**VILLANUEVA:** Anyway, sir, on that note, you are the most visible among Cabinet members, because you are the Presidential Spokesperson and the most available one. But it has also the disadvantage of you being the most bashed Cabinet member. How, do you deal with it?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, you know, I have to walk the talk. I have long been an advocate of freedom of expression. So, I need to walk the talk. I need to accept the bashing as part of the free market place of ideas. At saka alam mo ako, I am not bothered by the bashing, because I know anyway that people have enough mental faculties to sift through the lies from the truth.

So sa akin, it goes with a life-long advocacy and kasama rin siyempre iyan sa trabaho as Presidential Spokesperson. Unfortunately those who love the President love him despite me and those who hate the President hate me even more.

**VILLANUEVA:** Taking off from your walk the talk. At one time, you were also bashed because they accused you of violating the quarantine measures, when you went outside to the Subic Ocean Park and to your business interest?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That was an absolute lie. That was already GCQ in my home province. And of course, when it's GCQ, you are allowed; it might even be MGCQ napakatagal na iyan eh. But I remember, it was June of last year. So, I think, it was the first day of MGCQ and that is why I decided in fact to go home to my province after a very long time.

And that's when incidentally, I went to the beach 'no. Alam mo iyong mga ganyang bashing, bakit ako maaapektuhan? Unang-una, alam ko naman na allowed na siya under the quarantine rules. Number two, tagaroon naman ako talaga at number three, wala naman akong hinahawa doon, dahil I was swimming with dolphins.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. But you got COVID recently and you got quarantined several times?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes, I got COVID, April a year later and it was moderate case of COVID. This was supposedly the second time I had it. But the first time, I think it was really a case of false positive. Because on the same day, I have myself tested in another laboratory and I tested negative except that Secretary Duque said, since you already announced it and you are Spokesperson for both the President and IATF. Again, you have to walk the talk and you have to go on 14-day isolation, which is what I did.

But it was really a waste of isolation time, because when I read my CT levels to my doctor, sabi talaga ng doctor ko, yes, you are positive, but CT level is so low that you will not really be able to infect anyone. But anyway, just to comply with the protocols, I isolated for 14 days. But the second time around, I was hospitalized for five days and it was a bad case.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes, unfortunately. And by way of joke, have your nasal and your mouth, your throat changed already because every time you meet the President, you have to undergo swab test, isn't it? When you go to the—

**SEC. ROQUE:** I know, my virgin nose is no longer virgin.

**VILLANUEVA:** So, every time you will get contact with the President, you have to go through the swab test like any other Cabinet members?

**SEC. ROQUE:** It's an average of twice a week. And in fact, well, it's part of my job to have access to the President. And if I want access then I will have to comply with the swab test. The requirement is you must have swab test results for 48 hours. Yes, 48 hours and that is why in a week's time, you really need a minimum of two, sometimes three.

**VILLANUEVA:** Did you go to Davao City last Monday or Sunday in order to attend the IATF meeting in Davao, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, remember the IATF meeting was a Monday and then in Davao. But Wednesday, we were supposed to have another one and it was cancelled and the last Talk to the People was kanina in Malacañang already.

Last Monday, we were there and alam mo, Ichu, I don't know if people are aware 'no, because the Talk to the People end so late. We also got home very late, it's a two hour flight from Davao, every Talk to the People, we end up arriving in Manila around 3 or 4 in the morning.

**VILLANUEVA:** Wow, oh yes, so it was really hardship for the job that you have right now with the COVID. When you were going around the country before the COVID and during the COVID, you were even accused at one time of campaigning, early campaigning for senatorial bid. Now, you have not even filed any... your Senate bid and I am just wondering, you, CabSec Nograles, Transport Secretary Tugade and Secretary Bello of Labor who were initially in the draft of PDP-Laban, suddenly found yourselves out of the Senate ticket of the President. How would you explain this, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, with me, it's very simple. I was clear that I will only run if and when Mayor Sara does run for president too. So, since, she did not, it wasn't an easy decision not to run. I have to stick to my word. Although, iyon na nga, I found out just recently that PRP has apparently asked someone to file by way of substitution and giving me the opportunity to run on or before November 15.

But I reiterate my position, since Mayor Sara is not running, I find it difficult to change my decision as well. Although, I will reveal for the first time that on the last day of filing, Mayor Sara called me and she in fact said that I should run. She was persuading me to run and I told her, ang hirap naman na tumakbo na hindi ko talaga alam kung sino man lang iyong ulo. How much ang ulo na I do not believe in.

Kaya—although she was persuading me na talagang go ahead and run. I said I will not. Although mayroon pa kaming unfinished business ni Mayor Sara, because I didn't say na we have to sit down and talk about what to do with her followers 'no. And we have not had this opportunity to discuss because right after the last day of filing she developed COVID together with the members of her family.

So, on that Monday that we went to Davao for Talk to the People, I intended really to visit her and talk to her. Kasi I really want to discuss the possibility of party building, para ma-absorb iyong mga supporters na feeling paano na ngayon sila, since Mayor Sarah did not run. But I still feel strongly na I will need to have that conversation with her to discuss how to deal with the supporters who until now are still hoping that she will run.

**VILLANUEVA:** By the way, sir. how is Mayor Sara and Congressman Polong, how are they now?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well no further contacts since the last day of filing. That was the last time that I was able to talk to her and then iyon na nga nagkaroon sila ng COVID. So wish her well by text and she thanked me and that was our last communication.

**VILLANUEVA:** PRP has a coalition agreement with Hukbong ng Pagbabago of Mayor Sara. So, there is really nothing to worry about the—and I found it odd that you used the word ulo, because later, the ulo that turns out to be Senator Bato Dela Rosa who is the ulo. So do we take it to mean that you are not personally—is not a preferred presidential candidate of yours?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, no one knew that Senator Bato would file for the position of the President, even I would not know and I am a Presidential Spokesperson. I only found out because Senator Tol called me up, ano ba ang nangyayari. Sabi ko, you tell me, hindi ko alam kung ano ang nangyayari, because I called up of a vigil already. We had planned a vigil, just in case Mayor Sara runs.

And I was ready to file my certificate of candidacy in case Mayor Sara files hers and there were in fact a couple of thousands of supporters of Mayor Sara. So, we were really hoping that she would show up and file. But at around 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, I got the call from Mayor Sara confirming that she is not running, she is in Davao and that I should file my certificate of candidacy for senator and I told her all the reasons why I will not. And that is when I got the call from Senator Tol and Senator Tol was asking me what's happening and I said, well I just got a call from Mayor Sara confirming that she is not running and then sabi ko, ikaw ano ang balita mo.

'Nandito ako sa Comelec.' Sabi ko ano ang ginagawa mo diyan? 'Sinasmahan si Bato, ano ang ginagawa ni Bato? Hindi ko nga maintindihan eh. *[Laughs]* Ano ang ginagawa mo diyan, sabihin mo nga sa akin ano ang gagawin ni Bato diyan and then, ayon, it hit me, kasi in my last conversation with Cusi, sabi niya mayroon pa ako siyempre isang ano diyan, contingency kung hindi tatakbo si Mayor Sara. Ano iyon? Malalaman mo, malalaman mo. So iyon pala iyon.

**VILLANUEVA:** So, do you take it to mean that Bato is not your preferred, okay. Because you have saying that, it's only Mayor Sara as far as you are concerned. So, do we take it also to mean that you're no longer connected with the PDP Laban and you will soon swear in with the PRP?

**SEC. ROQUE:** No, Marichu, let me correct you. I was never part of the PDP-Laban.

**VILLANUEVA:** Ah okay.

**SEC. ROQUE:** I was with PRP. So when I decided in 2019 to file my certificate of candidacy. Only to withdraw, because I had a heart attack, I decided that I should join a non-traditional party, especially one founded and one's headed by person whom I had so much respect for among others. Because I inherited a teaching load in UP, the Constitutional Law and International Law. So, I said, if I am going to be a trapo, it will have to be at least a party which is non-traditional. So, even—since, 2019, I was always with PRP.

**VILLANUEVA:** So, if you were eventually complete your journey to run for the Senate, because as you said because of the heart problems that you had before when you quit the last time. What would you do differently in order to win this time?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I have to tell you the truth 'no. It's a lot more difficult to run this time around. Now, about the time of filing for instance, I had so much more campaign contributions already in 2019. There's hardly any money that came in this time around. I think it's because times are really hard up and the traditional campaign donor are unable to give any contribution. And that is actually now part of reality; you cannot run if you do not have the money. And unlike 2019, I have no money. Before, if you remember in 2019, I had so many commercials as early as November 'no.

**VILLANUEVA:** And you have clients, oo.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yeah, in the Manny Pacquiao fight, I had no less than 14 commercials, for a Manny Pacquiao boxing fight alone. But now, wala, it's completely dry and that is why parang... well I am not surprised that the incumbents can afford to run. They have cash flows, but for those who are not incumbents, I don't know where they will get the amount of money needed to run and win a seat for the Senate.

**VILLANUEVA:** Of being part of the PRP and now Hugpong, you would get the party backing for your—the coalition backing for your Senate bid. So who would possibly replace you? Do you have any nominees in your mind as Presidential Spokesperson, to become the next Presidential Spokesperson of President Duterte?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, If I were to think about a successor, I will be confirming that I am running and which I have answered. *[Laughs]*

**VILLANUEVA:** You have until November 15. *[Laughs]*

**SEC. ROQUE:** And I tell you if I do file by November 15, I have no idea who the President will appoint to succeed me. Because as you know, it was only me and Sal Panelo who took on the

job and of course Ernie Abella who himself is now a candidate for President. So I have absolutely no idea who can succeed me. I had someone in mind, but the person declined.

**VILLANUEVA:** But what will be your advice to your successor as Presidential Spokesperson should that come, should that time comes?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Number one, be thankful that you have less than a year in the job.

**VILLANUEVA:** Seven months, actually.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Be thankful that there's election and that there will be many spokespersons speaking not just a presidential spokesperson because the heat will not be on you. And therefore, number three is, it will not be as bad as I had experienced the position.

**VILLANUEVA:** And how about the possible successor as IATF official spokesperson, similarly what will be your advice to him or her?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I will probably advise him to focus on becoming presidential spokesperson and leave the spokesperson of the IATF chore to the DOH.

**VILLANUEVA:** In the past, it was Secretary Karlo Nograles who was acting as the spokesperson of the IATF. Do you think it will be good for him to resume his job?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, as I earlier said—

**VILLANUEVA:** Because he did not run, si Karlo?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I think the best spokesperson for IATF should be someone from the DOH.

**VILLANUEVA:** Okay. Speaking of the IATF, I noticed that the Metro Manila Council this time adopted their own resolutions and in fact, it's taking effect today, allowing minors to go outside under the guardian or the parents and only essential travels.

Do you think this is some sort of a declaration of war with the DOH because the DOH told them you had nothing to do with the alert level system so don't complain that we have not consulted you? Is this an indication of intramurals right now at the IATF because MMDA is a part of the IATF?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I don't think so because from the very beginning, minors were not allowed to go out except for essentials and except for employment purposes, if they have jobs. So they have not changed the rule. And the reason being, we have only started the process of vaccinating the youth 'no. So I don't think there has been any major change at least on the basis of what I have read was said by Mayor Olivarez.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. But in the past, the President reversed them. Do you think the President will reverse them again because not all minors have only gone through the vaccination and there's no face-to-face classes yet and they went ahead with this resolution?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I'm not sure about the resolution you're talking about. I'm judging only... I'm giving an opinion on the basis of what Mayor Olivarez said.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yeah, and Benhur Abalos, Chairman of MMDA.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Mayor Olivarez only restated what is already the rule, that as a general rule, the children should stay home except when they have to go and get necessities and when it's related to employment, if and when they are in fact working.

So iyon pa rin naman ang rule. Unless, between now and, of course, it's 10 A.M. 'no, between last night and today, they issued another resolution that I am not aware of. Pero wala naman akong nakita sa briefing ko na may ganoong inisyu na bagong policy ang Metro Manila mayors; it's a reiteration of what already exists.

**VILLANUEVA:** Okay. As a spokesperson to the President and official spokesperson of the IATF, you think your belligerent stand is added fuel to the raging dispute between the President and Malacañang and the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Certainly not. That belligerency will be there as a matter of course and as a matter of fact. You know, as a professor of constitutional law, I refer to it as auto-limitation. You know, we're dealing with co-equal branches of government but they have to restrain themselves whenever they test the limits and bounds of constitutional boundaries. And in this case, of course, when the President said the police should not enforce the orders of contempt issued by the Senate, that was, of course, the application of my theory of auto-limitation because had the Senate persisted, then who will in fact arrest and detain individuals 'no for contempt when the police are under the Executive branch of government. Because of this auto-limitation, I think the current set-up, in fact, will work 'no because there has to be resort to restrain 'no amongst co-equal branches of government. And I think, we just witnessed that because the Senate President rightfully said that he will not insist that individuals who will not appear in the hearings will be detained by way of contempt.

**VILLANUEVA:** Incidentally, sir, President Duterte last night – yes, the Talk to the People – addressed again the ongoing verbal—ongoing verbal war with Senate Blue Ribbon Committee and Senator Gordon. And last night, he warned against threats issued by the ... to all Cabinet secretaries who won't appear in the Pharmally inquiry. Are we seeing specter of reenacted budget for 2022, an election year, amid the pandemic?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I don't think so. Let's talk about Brass Politics. It's not to the welfare of re-electionists, congressmen and senators, to have a reelected budget. Let's face it, they have personal stakes in that budget and they will have to pass it because they need the resources,

all the resources that they can get for the elections; and I want you to read between the lines. So the first people who would want to see it passed will be the senators given that there's quite a number of them either running for reelection or running for higher office.

And secondly, of course, there's public opinion. I don't think Congress can take adverse public opinion if they resort to politicking as an excuse not to pass a COVID-related budget. Of course, we're relying on the budget for next year also to deal with the ongoing pandemic; and if they are not able to pass it on time, the fault will lie in Congress 'no and not on the President. So I think, again, because of my theory of auto-limitation, they will do everything to pass it.

**VILLANUEVA:** With the onset of the election campaign, do we expect that politics will be added to the science and data that the IATF consider in its policy recommendation to the President especially on the anti-COVID response and issues?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, alam ninyo, in fairness 'no, I've worked with the IATF for almost two years now, all the experts are simply that – experts and scientists – and they are divorced completely from politics. I'm talking about public health specialists, epidemiologists, the people to whom the IATF listens to 'no. They're insulated from politics. They are absolutely professionals. Although sometimes, very narrow minded 'no because some medical professionals insist on lockdown as the ultimate solution, ignoring the fact that lockdowns, of course, can give rise to hunger problems. And I think hunger and poverty should be important considerations whenever we talk about public health.

**VILLANUEVA:** Okay. There are three administration senators right now – Senator Bato, Senator Tolentino and Senator Bong Go. Is Malacañang frustrated that these three senators are unable to take up the cudgels for the President effectively?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, let's say that they simply don't have the numbers. Of course, it was a 12-0 the last elections, but I think one thing that the President now realizes is it's not enough that you allow them to share the stage with you come election time. You really need to ensure that these individuals that he endorsed will really support the administration. And that's I think a belated realization that the President now has, that he should have made sure that the people that backed during the 2016 elections will really standby him. I think he has learned from that mistake and that's why from all indications 'no, he has formed the completely different ticket. And so far, there hasn't been any reelectionists included in the ticket.

**VILLANUEVA:** If you are to succeed in your Senate bid, along with other administration bets, how do you intend to perform your job as a senator who ran under PRP and not under PDP Laban?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, I opted to run under PRP because I also value my independence. Remember, this is not the first time I will be joining Congress. And in the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress, I was in fact deputy minority floor leader. So it was added fact that as deputy minority floor leader, I ended up being the author of the most important social pieces of legislation enacted during

the time of the Duterte administration which includes Universal Health Care, Free Lunch for Malnourished Children, Free Irrigation, as well as Free Wi-Fi.

But I've always been an independent. As deputy minority floor leader, I felt it was my duty to scrutinize many of the bills being sponsored by the administration including the death penalty bill and the bill lowering the age of criminal liability 'no; and I voted "no" to both bills 'no which I thought was expected of a deputy minority floor leader.

Now, that's why in my decision to run for the Senate as early as 2019 and even now, I took the view that it is better to be part of an independent party and not really the administration party because I value my independence.

**VILLANUEVA:** Incidentally, I know this is close to your heart, being a human rights lawyer in the past, the DOJ released today the copies of the reports on the 52 drug cases that went through their scrutiny and the penalties ranging from dismissal from the service to one month suspension and reprimand only, and filing of criminal complaints against some of the policemen concerned. So how will impact now on your arguments on the ...that President Duterte had nothing to do with all these reported EJKs?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Number one, I commend the DOJ because it shows that the state is fulfilling its obligation to protect and promote the right to life because the state obligation whenever there is a violation of the right to life is to accord the victims domestic remedy, an effective domestic remedy. And this can be done through the filing of cases to ensure that guilty individuals will be prosecuted and punished for their acts.

Number two, I don't think it says anything about the culpability of the President because in the 52 cases, there has not been an instance where there has been a determination that the President ordered the killing or that the President did not do anything to punish those who committed criminal acts. On the contrary, the filing of the cases against these individuals prove that the President is discharged of his obligation as chief implementer of the law because he has caused the filing of cases against them.

**VILLANUEVA:** So the Philippine representative to the United Nations even presented our, your, I mean, the Philippine government's report on the EJK cases. So do we take it to mean that this would at least help President Duterte after his presidency, after his term, to clear his name?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, you know, the element, the most important element of culpability by reason of command responsibility is that a person knew that crimes were being committed and did not do anything to prevent these crimes from being committed or did not do anything to investigate and punish the perpetrators thereof. I think these findings of the DOJ will belie all claims that the President is responsible under the principle of command responsibility because on the contrary, it proves that the Philippine state has in fact investigated and prosecuted individuals for these extralegal killings.

**VILLANUEVA:** Let me entertain a question here from Tina Panganiban Perez of GMA 7, our friend Tina. Hello, Tina!

**SEC. ROQUE:** Hello, Tina. She is also my friend.

**VILLANUEVA:** The Department of Justice released the 52 cases review, hoping witnesses and those with personal information will come forward. Will you protect, will you extend them assistance like witness protection program and other help or kind of assistance to protect them?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That's the call of the DOJ because we have allotted public funds to run and implement the witness protect program. So, yes, they can be accorded protection if there is a need for this protection.

**VILLANUEVA:** The DOJ also noted many inconsistencies in the claims of the involved policemen and the circumstances that happened. Any reaction po, asked by Tina.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Again, I can only commend the DOJ for this conclusion because this proves that the President has not been remiss in his obligation to investigate perpetrators of these crimes.

**VILLANUEVA:** Okay. The last question of Tina: Has the Secretary decided on running in next year's election? There are news, rumors that he will be substituting someone. And he confirmed that already. In fact, I have the name of that guy, not unless you want to share it with you because I have checked it myself. I asked my reporter to check who is that other PRP candidate. Can you disclose it, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I do not know the name of the person, that's the truth. *[laughs]*

**VILLANNUEVA:** Pina-research ko na sa aking reporter. Let me get to his name na never heard person but is this a mockery? Hindi na iyon ang—Is this a mockery of our elections when you have somebody else place holders 'di ba placeholders hindi ba? Senator Bato is even complaining, "Don't call me placeholder, I will really run."

**SEC. ROQUE:** I don't think it's a mockery because it's allowed by the law. Now of course, the first to complain are senators 'no, then they should repeal the law. I mean, that's the only reason why you run for the Senate, right? To formulate laws. Obviously, if they disagree with the policy that they themselves formulated, they have no business being there.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Yes. And there are other amendments, on the Omnibus Election Code, iyong mga early campaign. I don't recall what is the stand of President Duterte on that but does he have a stand on that early campaign or—I don't remember being anything taken a stand on that?

**SEC. ROQUE:** You know, the President was once a member of Congress long time ago but he did not like the role of a policymaker and he has opted instead to focus on becoming part of the Executive either in a local government unit or now as President 'no. So, I don't think he has paid too much attention to premature campaigning 'no because as I said he did not like the role of a policymaker.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Anyway, out of the blue we suddenly found DAR Secretary John Castriciones being a senate candidate and it was a surprise. Has the President appointed already his replacement and for those other officers in the Executive who are running, have they resigned also?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I think he has appointed a replacement for Sal Panelo as Presidential Legal Counsel - former Undersecretary Quitana. And then I think there is now a replacement for the GM of the MMDA because the GM of MMDA, GM Jojo has also filed his certificate of candidacy for Congress. But other than those, I have not seen an further appointment papers.

Alam mo naman, Ichu sa tagal mo ring nag-cover sa Malacañang, the SOP is pagdating sa appointments unless we get the written appointment we will announce. So, sometimes we're the last to announce but that's really been cast in stone already in the Palace, the paper has to be in our possession before we can announce it.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Yes. May tanong pa si Tina na about sa Subic, doon sa RT-PCR test. [Ano iyong sabi ni Tina?] Reaction on the findings that the RT-PCR test results by the Red Cross Subic Lab on 48 employees of AC Medical Center in Subic Free Port was valid and unreliable. The President ordered an investigation on this. What would make the President look like a liar here or muckraking politician?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I think the Red Cross press release on this was half-baked, it did not indicate that actually what the—[Anong tawag doon?] RITM did was to analyze the data coming from the Philippine Red Cross and the data coming from another laboratory that had a contrary conclusion.

Initially, PRC said it was positive, the second laboratory said it's negative. And when it's presented to us, I found it strange because the finding of the RITM was both findings were scientific and accurate. So, my question to the RITM Director was: How can you have two results and how can you say that both are in fact accurate?

So, sabi nila, it's actually a very long and very technical explanation but I took note of this fact that you cannot have the same body declaring the two contrary and opposite results are both accurate, it's either positive or negative. And I felt strongly about it because, again as I said 'no, the first time I tested positive for COVID I have myself tested on the exact same day and it turned out to be negative.

And then I have myself tested consecutively everyday just to get negative results but because I have already declared that I'm positive, Secretary Duque felt strongly that I should go on isolation which I did but I was positive that that was an instance of a false positive 'no.

Now, let's just say that it's not fair that the Red Cross released only one side of the finding of the RITM. The RITM also said that the subsequent test results which had the opposite results were also accurate. And I don't know how to reconcile the fact that one can be positive and negative and RITM said pareho silang tama.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Ang hirap nga noon. So, whose finding will prevail? Are you going to recognize—

**SEC. ROQUE:** Kaya nga hindi namin in-announce pero obviously PRC wanted to vindicate itself and released the results of the study conducted by RITM. But I think it's only fair that they acknowledge that RITM also said that the subsequent test which yielded negative results were also accurate.

**VILLANNUEVA:** I also remembered the President citing the case of the 200 PSG men who had false positive findings, it is Red Cross also, sir?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yes! That's also being investigated now by the RITM.

**VILLANNUEVA:** So, it's not yet complete? The RITM—

**SEC. ROQUE:** It's not yet complete. Now, kung maintindihan ko iyong sinabi ng RITM Director, kasi ako iyong nagtanong eh. Sabi ko, 'ma'am, kung pupuwede na dalawa lang ang possibility at sinasabi mo dalawang resulta na magkaiba ay are both accurate.' Sabi niya, 'it had something to do with the lapse of time between the first and the second test 'no.'

Pero sabi ko, 'ma'am, ako talagang na-COVID din ako and noong second time na talagang COVID ako,' it took me 30 days to test negative and the reason why I have to have consistent test after the initial two weeks even if I had a medical certificate after two weeks eh hindi na ako infectious was it's a requirement of Malacañang so I could attend the meetings with the President. So, it took me a whole month before I could attend again the meetings of the President.

Because the machine, the PCR machine is so sensitive na maski iyong mga remnants na wala na, na patay na, nade-detect pa rin at nagpo-positive pa rin. So, ang tanong ko nga doon sa Director ng RITM, 'ma'am, from my personal experience hindi pupuwede na a matter of days, ang dami-daming tao from positive naging negative kaagad.' Kasi mayroon talagang remnants iyan; so, hindi ko talaga maintindihan kung ano iyong finding na iyon.

**VILLANNUEVA:** And I also recall the President mentioning about the Department of Finance employees who had similar experience with the Red Cross.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Correct! In fact, the exact same. It was Secretary—I will tell you the truth ‘no—Secretary Dominguez told me when I announced in my press briefing that I tested positive kaya doon ako isolated sa room ko, nag-conduct pa rin ng press briefing, siya ang tumawag, ‘Magpa-test ka kaagad dahil kami iyan din ang nangyari sa amin.’ So, nagpa-test ako kaagad sa private laboratory and negative nga ang resulta.

**VILLANNUEVA:** So, you had Red Cross swab testing din pala?

**SEC. ROQUE:** No, no, no. In fairness, it wasn’t Red Cross that swabbed me first, it was a public hospital that swabbed me and yielded positive result and then I went to a private lab and it became a negative result.

It all has to do with the CT count level kasi mayroong CT count level na below a certain level hindi ka naman infectious even if you’re positive pero kapag above a certain level that’s when you become infectious but because of the sensitivity of the machine, talagang magpo-positive ka even of the CT level does not make you infectious.

**VILLANNUEVA:** So, the DOF case is not Red Cross but just a simple case of—

**SEC. ROQUE:** No, no. I think DOF was also Red Cross. Mine is the first time around was not Red Cross.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Okay. I have a question here from Twitter, from my friend in Twitter, former diplomat Moira Gallaga. She’s asking, Secretary: What’s your view about the chances of the Administration’s candidate especially if Mayor Sara decides not to run for national office? Also, does this Administration party consider the presence of multiple candidates an advantage for their candidates or will it favor the opposition?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I’m still spokesperson. *[laughs]* Wait a while, if I leave ask me again. But I’m still spokesperson and I think that the advantage of being an Administration candidate is you have the entire Administration behind you. And I think this was shown in the case of Mar Roxas ‘no whom we all knew was not popular from the very beginning but managed to finish second after President Duterte.

Had he not been an Administration, he would have finished fourth. So, imagine all the governors, mayors, being thankful for the projects that they had supporting the Administration candidate whether or not he’s popular the fact that – number one – there is a pandemic now which make command votes even more important for the success of a candidate. You cannot discount that even if Senator Bato is now lagging in the polls that he would find himself number one soon.

**VILLANNUEVA:** But how can you differentiate your position as Presidential Spokesperson in what questions to reply to especially election-related questions if within the next six months the President himself will be joining the campaign?

**SEC. ROQUE:** That's why I said I cannot give a view other than from the point of view of a Presidential Spokesperson. So, I'm saying that the Administration candidates will still have a very strong chance because they have the Administration behind them, the entire machinery of government behind them.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Okay. Let me just go back to last Saturday yata when the President went to Marawi and spoke before there and he mentioned about "sacks of money." Do we take it to mean that these sacks of money will be political party funds or siyempre we cannot discount the possibility of public funds going to this campaign?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I don't think that's what he meant. It's simply a reality that when you run for the Administration, it is easier to raise funds for the Administration candidates although, Ichu as I said earlier, that was not my experience in 2021, certainly not.

**VILLANNUEVA:** 2019, you mean?

**SEC. ROQUE:** 2019, yes. Well—No, no. In 2019, I knew the virtues of being Administration candidate because it was rather easy to raise funds but in this year of pandemic it don't think it mattered. *[laughs]* But I think what the President was referring to was the fact that normally under normal times, it's easier to raise funds for Administration candidates.

**VILLANNUEVA:** *[Natanong na ito sa Facebook natin]* Anyway, I just would like to proceed on you saying that ngayon walo lang yata ang Administration candidate, mayroon pang four that remains to be filled. Have you had any idea who will the PDP—I mean, with the Administration campaign, the Administration will campaign for the PDP-Laban being the ruling party/Administration party, do we take it to mean that the PDP-Laban will also have guest candidates like the rest of other Presidential bets?

**SEC. ROQUE:** No, I can't answer that because I'm not spokesman for PDP-Laban. But I think it's obvious that none of the parties can actually complete a 12-man senatorial slate. None! And that's why inevitably there will be common candidates to be adopted not just by PDP-Laban but by the different political parties as well.

**VILLANNUEVA:** But there are no prohibitions coming from Malacañang for the incumbent ones against—being perceived as using public funds in support of the Administration candidates? Are there guidelines?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Public funds are prohibited to be spent for partisan purposes. So, what are the guarantees? Number one, it's the law. Number two, Comelec will enforce this prohibition and that is why at the start of the election period even public infrastructure projects stop because

you can't implement public projects 'no in a way that would benefit incumbent officials responsible for the projects.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Although the President has already declared he is retiring from politics; in fact, he withdrew his vice presidential bid. But there are persistent speculations, even rumors that he may eventually run as Davao City Mayor in place of Mayor Sara who will likely run for the presidency. Do you have that kind of rumors—I mean, inkling talks with the President, “O, Mr. President, there are such talks, how do you respond to this?”

**SEC. ROQUE:** I would say that's a personal aspiration that I have. I'm praying for that—

**VILLANNUEVA:** Sara to run.

**SEC. ROQUE:** —it will happen. I don't think it will happen anymore. I think Mayor Sara has really said and concluded this is it, I will run only for the position of Mayor.

**VILLANNUEVA:** How about the President?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, if the daughter is running for Mayor, how can he run against the daughter? I think that's another impossibility.

**VILLANNUEVA:** But they may change his mind and kaya lang—ah hindi he can substitute/swap with Bong Go, Senator Bong Go.

**SEC. ROQUE:** I think when he said he's done with politics; it's an absolute assurance that he will no longer seek the post of vice president.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Okay. In the IATF meetings, Senator Bong Go has been the most visible Cabinet cum Senator and it's just really a surprise by—I'm not—it's really surprising but because he's a SAP, Special Assistant to the President that he sits at the IATF meeting. Will the President even consider asking more senators to sit in the IATF just to really get through with the senators in his ongoing feud on the Pharmally case? Open up the door...

**SEC. ROQUE:** Oo. Ichu, let me correct you 'no. Senator Bong Go has never attended an IATF meeting. The IATF meetings are always secret and they're attended by members of the Cabinet.

**VILLANNUEVA:** With the President... with the President 'di ba he always sits at the—

**SEC. ROQUE:** What we've witnessed are the Talk to the People attended by some members of the IATF – but that is not an IATF meeting. So if you notice, there's always just Secretary Duque, Año, Galvez, Lorenzana and myself.

**VILLANNUEVA:** Oo, yes...

**SEC. ROQUE:** So there's only always 5 members of the IATF in the Talk to the People which underscores the fact that it is not an IATF meeting because IATF meeting has more than 30 members. And if you refer to it as IATF members, I can assure you the Cabinet secretaries comprising the IATF will be protesting eh 'no, howling and protesting 'no because that's not an IATF meeting. So it's a Talk to the People with some members of the IATF asked to report on accomplishments made by their respective line agencies 'no – and that is where Secretary Go attends as an observer 'no.

So if your question is: should other senators be invited to observe? Well, my answer is everyone's invited to observe because it is publicly broadcasted.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. But at least he can participate because he is the Senate Committee on Health and Demography Committee so he has some—even the President asked him, “*Senator Bong Go, anything you want to add?*” At least there's some semblance of he being present in that important Talk to the People of the President.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, Ichu, most of the time he's quiet.

**VILLANUEVA:** [Laughs] Even at the Senate he's so quiet.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Yeah. You can count with your fingers the time that he had an intervention to this Talk to the People 'no. But when he did, it was because as you said, he's Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health.

**VILLANUEVA:** Uhum. So, are we going to continue to hear from President every Talk to the People, his rants and responses to the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I hope so because it has made my job easier. If you noticed from 3 times a week, I reduced my press briefings to twice a week because I would be superfluous to conduct 3 briefings a week when the President has a Talk to the People twice a week 'no. So whenever there's only one Talk to the People then I resume my 3 press briefings in a week's time 'no. But when there's 2 Talk to the People, I only have 2 press briefings as well.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. Your job as a Presidential Spokesperson is really some kind of a messy, messy job to say the least because every time the President speaks you have to clarify, you have to explain. How does it make your job more difficult?

**SEC. ROQUE:** It doesn't quite frankly because I never alter what the President says. Good or bad, it remains but I try to put it in context, I try to refine what the President meant but it is an absolutely no-no for me to alter what the President says. He will not take it sitting down.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. And being the most—I think he’s no longer entertaining questions from the reporters. If I may take up the cudgels for to the Malacañang Press Corps, what would make the President meet again with the reporters, to the Malacañang Press Corps?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, maybe the end of the pandemic ‘no because there have been occasion where the media were allowed to ask him questions and these were public events ‘no usually undertaken outdoors. So it’s really just the pandemic and the fact that the PSG is trying to protect the President who is a senior person ‘no and prone to COVID.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. Will he be taking a booster shot? Because I think the World Health Organization has given already some sort of a... allowing—US FDA allowing third shots for those with Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well so far I have not heard of any talk to about the third shot ‘no and we’re still focused on increasing the total vaccination rate in the country which is at 30% ‘no, although Metro Manila nga has reached 80%.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. And the Manila Mayor was even bragging that the City of Manila has is 100% beyond the vaccination rate, more than the herd immunity because they even vaccinate outside residents of Manila. Is that a good sign, the things are being looking better especially come Christmas period?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I’m not sure if that’s actually the case in Manila because Manila as you know is the most populous city in Metro Manila. What I know that is the case in the smaller cities of Metro Manila including San Juan, Pateros and Mandaluyong ‘no, that they have reached in excess of 100%, meaning that they have vaccinated in and those working in their cities ‘no and not just residents ‘no and that they have offered the services of their vaccinators and their vaccines to vaccinate ‘no residents of the adjoining provinces of Rizal, Cavite, Laguna and Batangas.

**VILLANUEVA:** By the way, sir, how true or is there really semblance of reality that in the President mentioned in the past that he is now ready to go to the United States if invited because they had been very supportive of the vaccination in terms of the COVAX donated Pfizer, Moderna, J and J. Will that really come into reality, the US visit of President Duterte?

**SEC. ROQUE:** You know I cannot comment because the visit is dependent on an invitation and I don’t think I should not speculate whether or not the United States will invite him.

**VILLANUEVA:** Anyway on the other side of the fence, the usual China-US relations. The President is again—has been planning again—accused of being China friendly and even has Tsinoy businessman friend like the Pharmally... Michael Yang being asked to be deported in the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee. Will there be any executive intervention to protect foreign businessmen from getting the signals that if you do business—hanky panky business in the Philippines, you better be prepared like Michael Yang to have a President backing you?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well I think in the case of Michael Yang, nothing has been proven ‘no... nothing criminal has been proven by the Senate and that’s because the Senate simply does not have the authority to declare anything as having been criminal ‘no. But let me repeat what has been declared by the Chairman of the COA: There has not been any overpricing; and number two, there has not been any violation of laws because it was Congress itself including the senators questioning this Pharmally deal, that gave the President the power to purchase all these pandemic-related supplies under the most expeditious manner possible ‘no doing away with the regular biddings.

So when you have a declaration that there is no overprice and there is no breach of bidding laws, I don’t see what the Senate has proven thus far ‘no. And because there is nothing been—no illegal things that have been proven as of yet, I don’t see how Michael Yang could benefit from his closeness ‘no when he did not breach any laws so far.

**VILLANUEVA:** And taking off from the President’s statements in the past and even last Monday, the Senate now even cited in contempt and issued a warrant of arrest against Dargani, the Dargani siblings on the Pharmally president and treasurer. And before that, they have also put under arrest, at the Senate arrest and President warned against issuing warrants of arrest—detaining any member of the Cabinet and now there is an order on the BI and as we know, the Bureau of Immigration as under the Executive Branch and the PNP and AFP under the Commander-In-Chief. So, is this pushing too far a constitutional crisis in this kind of intramurals between the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee and the President?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I go back to my theory. I have to write this theory down for a law journal, the Theory of Auto-Limitation. Note that the President has said that he will prohibit the police from implementing a contempt order against a member of the Cabinet but he has not said that the police should not comply with any other contempt orders that the Senate may issue prompting the detention of private individuals – that’s auto-limitation because I think the President knows that he should not test the boundaries of constitutional limitations ‘no.

He recognizes that under normal circumstance, the Senate pursuant to established jurisprudence ‘no has the power to cite individuals for contempt and detain them with no further legal remedies. But he has made an exception for his alter egos because the Supreme Court has also said that Cabinet members when they are forbidden by the President to appear should not be detained for complying with the order of their superior, the President. So it’s my theory of auto-limitation at work.

**VILLANUEVA:** And the BI, an executive branch of the government... the Senate is asking the BI to deport I think Michael Yang. How would the BI be able to comply if there is such kind of presidential sentiments?

**SEC. ROQUE:** The Senate per se does not have the power to deport.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes and they are asking the BI to do it.

**SEC. ROQUE:** It is in fact an executive function and the Senate cannot order the executive to perform a purely executive act – that would be violative of the separation of powers and the concept of equality of powers.

**VILLANUEVA:** And going back to you that kind of argument, the President last night said he is in fact asking the Ombudsman to enforce and implement their finding of the COA against Senator Dick Gordon on the pork barrel that allegedly went to his Red Cross. So can—

**SEC. ROQUE:** Correct because it is the Ombudsman's mandate under the Constitution to initiate investigations and to file information before the Sandiganbayan against the highest officials of the land 'no. In fact an existing memorandum of agreement, the DOJ can conduct preliminary examination also, investigation but subject to review of the Ombudsman 'no.

So ultimately the issue of culpability lies with the Ombudsman and not with the Senate. And that is why the Supreme Court has said that where the Ombudsman has taken cognizance of matter being investigated by the Senate, the Senate should desist all and any further proceedings. That's [unclear]...

**VILLANUEVA:** But in that case that it is the President telling publicly the Ombudsman to go ahead, arrest Dick Gordon for the—ano bang tawag doon? NDC? Iyong you have to reimburse the amounts and be held accountable for that. He is practically... 'di ba?

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well he is not ordering. He's asking the Ombudsman to in fact perform its constitutional duty, to implement and ensure compliance with our anti-graft laws. So you know what the President's position is, the COA has said that there is an expense which was undertaken contrary to law and that's why there was a final order of disallowance upheld in the Supreme Court. So when there is a disallowance, that means there was misappropriation funds which constitutes a separate criminal offense other than the obligation to make reparation – return the money that should not have been spent in the first place 'no.

So he is merely asking the Ombudsman to undertake its constitutional mandate to enforce our anti-graft laws. And of course it is also the Ombudsman duty now to investigate the case of Pharmally. And if there are individuals who should be charged, it is only the Ombudsman that has the power to charge these individuals in the Sandiganbayan. The Senate cannot do that, they can file a criminal complaint that would trigger the process of Ombudsman's investigation but they have no power to file the cases themselves.

**VILLANUEVA:** But taking the devil's advocate, isn't it interference on a constitutional independent body like the Ombudsman in telling what and how to do its job on the part of the President?

**SEC. ROQUE:** I don't think so because if you were to say that all appeals to the Ombudsman to do its job is interference, then all public officials asking the Ombudsman to investigate will in fact be guilty of interference. I don't think the law intended that.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. Okay. On that note, I would give you the floor to give your closing remarks and any address on how we expect Secretary Roque to finally make up his mind soon on his Senate bid whether or not Sara runs or hopefully she said she runs so that you can also run as a senator.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Well, Ichu, I'm not flattering you but you are the personification of everything that is good with journalism.

**VILLANUEVA:** Thank you, sir.

**SEC. ROQUE:** I've been an ardent reader of your columns since you started writing your columns and of course I followed your career as a journalist because it's not the first time that I joined the public office 'no. I was even a staffer already in Congress when I was studying to be a lawyer in UP 'no so that's how long I have followed you.

**VILLANUEVA:** Thank you *[laughs]*.

**SEC. ROQUE:** And I think the judges who will have more objectivity should have awarded you an Nobel prize 'no *[garbled]* someone else.

**VILLANUEVA:** That's flattery! *[laughs]*.

**SEC. ROQUE:** *[Laughs]* But I'd like to thank you for this opportunity to discuss manner in a very rational—this opportunity to discuss public issues in a very rational manner. It doesn't happen too often nowadays. I think what has happened to the media is many of media personalities have become partisan writers and opinion-makers. I don't, of course, deny them that opportunity but it's refreshing to again have a professional journalist ask questions just because the questions have to be asked 'no without leading the person interviewed to an answer, to a preferred answer. So I'd like to thank you for that.

Anent your question on what will I do? Alam mo it's really a frustration. I really want to run for the Senate but what are the realities? I was not born rich. I was not born of a political family. I am an ordinary person and it is very difficult to run for the Senate if you are an ordinary person – that's the harsh reality of life. But thank you anyway for asking.

**VILLANUEVA:** Yes. And the nuisance candidates deserve to be eased out of—pestering us with their candidacies and while we wait for the more sensible and a more qualified ones, I hope you make up your mind even if Sara does not run. We need quali—to return the flattery to you—not really the flattery but I also admire your advocacy. You stick to your advocacy whether in the government or in... in and out of the government you have taken advocacy

no matter how unpopular it is. So it's not only a return flattery but please keep me in your mind when you run in the Senate because I will be rooting for you.

Thank you very much Secretary Harry Roque.

**SEC. ROQUE:** [Garbled] I will buy a lotto ticket right after this. [Laughs]

**VILLANUEVA:** [Laughs] That's the legal the most...

**SEC. ROQUE:** And pray – please, God, make me win the lotto. [Laughs]

**VILLANUEVA:** Thank you very much, sir. And to our Kapihan sa Manila Bay colleagues thank you for watching us and hopefully we will have other guests to share with us their thoughts and inputs on the national issues at hand. Thank you again, Secretary Roque.

**SEC. ROQUE:** Thank you. Have a good day. And thank you for watching everyone.

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