

Genuine autonomy in ARMM

By Atty. Romel Regalado Bagares

During a recent speech at the University of the Philippines, former Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was asked what he thought of President Benigno Aquino III's decision to postpone the elections in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to pave the way for reforms in the region.

Mr. Anwar's response may have come from an astute politician's sense of the *realpolitik* in diplomacy but it nevertheless offers food for thought to both opponents and supporters alike of P-NOY's decision.

What is important, said Anwar, is that the government affords the people of Mindanao the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the electoral process.

Postponement is one thing, but denial of the right to vote is quite another. There can be no genuine autonomy if the results of the formal electoral processes have already been predetermined. These days in ARMM, politicians no longer bother to make it appear that people are actually allowed to vote according to their preferences — not after the Hello Garci scandal.

Mr Anwar had earlier asserted in his speech that the Philippines under P-NOY was best positioned in the ASEAN region to promote a fundamental principle: That any state's drive for economic development cannot be divorced from its commitment to preserve standards of human rights.

Anwar's interlocutor had noted that it was under the administration of P-Noy's mother, Corazon Aquino, that ARMM was established, with an avowed aim to promote and develop genuine autonomy for the region; and now it seemed his administration was bent on undermining his mother's legacy.

The interlocutor was referring to a law passed by Congress—upon P-NOY's prodding—to synchronize the August 8, 2011 ARMM elections with the May 13, 2013 polls, and allowing the President to appoint officers in charge (OICs) to serve in the interim.

Not long after Anwar's visit to UP, the Supreme Court, voting 8 to 4, issued a temporary restraining order against the implementation of the law. P-NOY's reaction was deep disappointment. There is so much that needs urgent action in the region, to name a few—the raid of public coffers, the challenge to peace posed by a secessionist group born and bred there, and debilitating poverty among the mostly Muslim masses. In any case, the government's earnestness for reforms in the ARMM must be translated into results that touch the lives of those who need it the most.

There is after all, a limit to people's capacity to take their rulers' cynical ways. Lest P-NOY and his advisers forget, under international law, the right to self-determination becomes a right to secession where citizens are denied their right to participate meaningfully in the political life of the nation and where citizens are also targeted by gross human rights violations. Both situations form a combustible mix for civil unrest — a mix neither the President nor the Supreme Court would want to see explode.