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Ramos-Interview

PRO-BUSINESS POLICIES TO STAY AFTER I LEAVE, SAYS RAMOS

By: Azman Ujang

MANILA, Aug 10 (Bernama) -- Philippine President Fidel Ramos has assured foreign investors that his pro-business and other policies will continue after he leaves office when his once only six-year term ends in about 10 months.

Ramos, largely credited for turning around the country's long-suffering economy with his Philippines Inc-style policies and strong political leadership, said all policies made during his administration are imbedded in the law.

"These (policies) are not coming as presidential or executive orders. The assurance I can make is that all directives from the President are based on the law.

"They are there for a very enduring period, until the Congress of the Philippines changes them. That's one thing I can say," he told Bernama in an interview at his office at Malacanang Palace here.

During the interview, Ramos answered questions on a wide range of subjects but spoke fondly on two -- his "very good" relationship with Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the peace treaty which he authored in Mindanao to end the nearly three-decade old armed conflict in the country's predominantly Muslim southern region.

He said another guarantee that the policies made during his administration will endure is that the Philippines is a very open and democratic society whose people will not have anything else except the Philippines-style democracy.

"Thirdly, we, just like Malaysia, are pursuing a policy of maximum cooperation with our neighbours and other neighbours around the world. This is not only for economic growth but also for social progress and solidarity," he said.

He was asked to describe the state of Philippine-Malaysia ties and his own personal relationship with Dr Mahathir, given the fact that Malaysian companies which have been pouring investments worth hundreds of millions of dollars since he took office, are now the country's biggest foreign investors from among Asean countries.

Ramos quickly replied: "Very good on both terms. The bilateral ties have been very good and our relations within Asean vis-a-vis Philippine-Malaysia are very good too."

"Personally, Prime Minister Mahathir and I are new pals. New in the sense that we didn't have this kind of relationship before, during the time of my predecessor.

"This I appreciate very much. In fact, PM Mahathir and I have been around the Philippines to visit our common project areas very informally," he said.

Asked if there are hangovers in his relationship with Dr Mahathir, Ramos said: "You have hangovers on the part of some other people, but as far as myself and PM Mahathir are concerned, I see that we would rather promote and pursue our common welfare...which is promoting our economies and our personal and social obligations."

"And perhaps, the other problems can be resolved in a better environment and in a more hospitable atmosphere in the future," he said but without mentioning what these problems are.

Although the retired four-star general has been praised at home and abroad for creating the most economically progressive and

politically-stable Philippines in many years, it was when talking about the peace process in Mindanao that appeared to give him the biggest satisfaction.

Unlike the peace process in West Asia which virtually died with the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin in 1995, Ramos said the peace treaty in Mindanao is also firmly imbedded in the law.

He explained that on hindsight, his decision a year ago to bring in Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leader Nur Misuari as an elected political official in the administration party and as new governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao has turned out to "very good moves."

In the beginning, these moves were opposed by many quarters in the local and national leadership but the administration has overcome all these difficulties and apprehensions.

"We are in fact going to celebrate the first anniversary of the signing of the peace agreement on Sept 2. We will do that by holding the Cabinet meeting in Jolo (the capital of Sulu province) as requested by Nur Misuari.

"We are happy to show to the people of the Philippines as well as Asean and the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) which supported the peace process, including Malaysia, that it's working," said a beaming President Ramos.

Ramos said he is also very happy to report that the long-depressed Mindanao which has six regions, is moving ahead of national average in regional domestic production, thanks to investments including from Malaysia.

He said even investors from the United States have agreed to help in the economic development of Mindanao, thanks to the creation of the East Asean Growth Area (EAGA) -- another Ramos brainchild -- which is aimed at tapping the resources and vast markets of the Southern Philippines, Indonesia's Kalimantan region, Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and Brunei.

"We will continue with that path and we will invite and welcome those from Asean especially Malaysia which is very well-positioned there and from other parts of the world to help develop Mindanao," Ramos said.

But Ramos, son of former Philippine Foreign Secretary Narciso Ramos, who was a founding signatory of the Bangkok Declaration which established Asean, remains modest despite all his achievements, when asked about his personal feelings and thoughts about being president of his country.

"You might probably know that my late father was Philippine Foreign Secretary from 1965 to 1968 and was the Philippine signatory to the Bangkok Declaration...we are happy that there is this contribution of our family personally as well as officially to the founding of Asean.

"Here I am as President of the Philippines also playing a position to contribute to the further consolidation and strengthening of Asean for the future," he said. -- BERNAMA

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