

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OPERATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON HARRY ROQUE
BY KAREN DAVILA/HEADSTART/ANC
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DAVILA: Secretary Roque, good morning to you.

SEC. ROQUE: Good morning, Karen; and good morning, Philippines.

DAVILA: Magandang umaga, Secretary. Ang problema na raw ngayon vaccine envy. Let's start first with the realities on the ground. Can you talk about the A4 rollout; how was the rollout and the problem we have now with the supply?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, the symbolic rollout was a huge success I thought and you have to remember that even within IATF there was really controversy on whether or not we should begin with A4 or we should finish with A1, A23 and A3 and that the consensus after much debate became we should open A4 and reserve an express lane for those from A1, A2 and A3.

I think you are correct, there are some kind of vaccine envy now, people are excited to get the vaccine; but the reality too is while we have a million Sinovac vaccines that arrived, they have not been actually used because they still have to be subjected to what is known as the certificate of analysis and this is a study to confirm that the quality of the latest batch that arrived is the same as the quality we have received from the manufacturer.

Now, we have actually made steps to improve and hasten the distribution in the past. Sinovac would not be distributed without the certificate of analysis but Secretary Duque in the rollout of the A4 vaccines, said the policy now is to distribute it while awaiting certificate of analysis. So that by the time certificate is issued then the vaccines could already be given.

So, that is where we are, naubusan dahil nga mataas po iyong intake ng ating mga kababayan, mataas po iyong demand ng ating mga kababayan, pero nandiyan naman po ang supply, mayroon lang pong mga pinag-aaralan na para masigurado po na kapareho ang kalidad.

DAVILA: Okay. So itong Sinovac na we have a million doses, so roughly that's for 500,000 individuals. Kailan po ito ipapadala sa mga LGUs, sir?

SEC. ROQUE: Nasa LGUs na po iyan. Hindi lang ino-authorize na i-inject pa 'no kasi inaantay pa iyong certificate of analysis, binago na po iyong proseso. Before we would not even ship them out without the certificate of analysis; but now, they have been shipped out but the DOH would still have to issue the order that they can already be used.

DAVILA: Medyo po matapang ang nagiging pahayag ni Manila Mayor Isko Moreno saying that don't expect herd immunity to be achieved this year kung panaka-naka ang supply, kumbaga huwag ng paasahin ang taumbayan. Do you still believe that herd immunity will be achieved this year? That would mean 70% of the population covered.

Okay. We lost Secretary Harry Roque. He's back. I think now his signal is better, okay. Secretary, your microphone, sir.

SEC. ROQUE: I understand the frustration of Mayor Isko, it is in fact a frustration of everyone that we just want to rollout the vaccines. But I think the temporary shortage, it's temporary, because the supply is in, we can't just use it without the certificate of analysis, 'no is temporary.

And we can achieve population protection as we intended specifically for Metro Manila +8 'no, because the numbers are achievable. I think the jabs that we have to inject for Metro Manila + 8 is about 120,000 and the local government units have proven that they can actually achieved this, because it's a small number compared to their capacity.

So, I wouldn't worry about the temporary delay, it's should be a day or two then we can proceed with the vaccination again.

DAVILA: All right. Now, one thing that's made the news is the President actually saying in one of his meetings that it's possible to file maybe murder charges and then it goes as far as reckless imprudence which is two charges that are so far apart from each other frankly against quarantine violators. And the one who gave this idea as Secretary Sal Panelo during one of the meetings. You are a lawyer yourself, Secretary Roque, let's be honest, can it actually be done in the Philippines?

SEC. ROQUE: Well I think—I cannot speak for Secretary Sal Panelo. But as lawyers, you know we do have a thousand interpretation of the same law. But I am with the opinion that perhaps reckless imprudence would be more in point rather than murder. Because murder number one, you need definitely an intent to kill; and number two, you need to have qualifying circumstances such as you know treachery abuse of strength and all of that, which you can't actually prove when you infect someone with a disease.

Now reckless imprudence could be, but my point of view there is although there is a penalty attached to it because of our laws in probation and parole, wala rin kulong. And that is why I have reiterated that we still need a quarantine law. To be moved once and for all the legal basis for holding individuals liable, criminally liable for breaches of minimum health requirements.

Again, I stress the ideal is to have a separate quarantine law, but I think we do have functional equivalent, we do have existing statutes for instance, there is a provision on the RPC also on disobedience to lawful orders given by persons and authorities. That could also be a basis in addition to reckless imprudence. And moreover as far as the use and sale of drugs is concerned which should not be sold, we do have a provision in the FDA law which prohibits and penalizes individuals who will sell, distribute drugs which have not been given commercial use by the FDA.

DAVILA: Okay. And actually it's good that you pointed that out, Secretary Roque, that you believe that it wouldn't be a strong charge. Because actually in the US for example, if one person knows that he is positive with HIV - and I'm sure you have been familiar, Secretary, with cases like this - and yet does not reveal it to his partner, his sexual partner. The case of attempted murder is even hard to prove in court and yet several states had to make a new law, making it criminal transmissions specifically for HIV AID. So when that statement was brought out, netizens came out and said another ridiculous statement coming from Malacañang which does not help Filipinos essentially in terms of compliance or poor communication. Why do these statements come out, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, that's the personal opinion of Secretary Sal Panelo and I am glad you mentioned the HIV 'no, because I authored the National AIDS Policy Law when I was a member of the 17th Congress and that is why I know we need a special law because in that law, we made

it criminal specifically for any person who knows that he has disease to transmit it to another person and in that same law, we also said although this is criminal knowingly transmitting the disease to another person, we also imposed criminal sanctions on those who will discriminate against HIV positive individuals.

DAVILA: And they are both different, because HIV and having intimate relations with someone is directly with one person compared to one person coming into a room. I mean, the good question coming from a lawyer here is this: How would you be sure that you are one who infected that other person with COVID? That, one. How could you prove that even and which circumstance would qualify it as murder and not homicide? Would homicide be a possibility still?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, anything is possible. As I said lawyers and construe a law in many ways 'no. But going back to the issue 'no. Well we do have a law 'no and that is that you are obliged to report to the DOH if you have a communicable disease. If you fail to do so, also has a penal provision. And I think the reason, the rationale of the law for this, is if you have a communicable disease, the DOH should know so they can isolate you.

So, I don't think we should be really talking about homicide or murder at this point. I think it's sufficient that existing law on failure to give notice to the DOH maybe a basis for criminal liability. But as I've said, the ideal is to still come up with a national quarantine law.

DAVILA: Okay. What about Republic Act 11332 on the failure to report notifiable diseases. Would that cover some kind of sanction, Secretary, what you mentioned?

SEC. ROQUE: That's the law that I mentioned.

DAVILA: What sanction would that cover?

SEC. ROQUE: There is penal clause there.

DAVILA: Okay.

SEC. ROQUE: There is a clause which provides for imprisonment for failure to give notice to the DOH.

DAVILA: And do you think that's strong enough already when it comes to COVID-19 or you believe hindi pa rin po?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, because what is penalized there [I'm sorry] if you fail to notice to the DOH so you can be isolated. But we do have situations where a person may knowingly transmit the disease to another person for whatever reason 'no, which is what we have in the National AIDS Law policy which we passed in the 17th Congress. So, I believe that if a person knows that he has the disease and goes around with the intent to spread it, that kind of conduct should be separately penalized from failure to report the communicable disease to the Department of Health.

DAVILA: But not murder as Secretary Panelo says?

SEC. ROQUE: With all due respect I think it's a far shot.

DAVILA: Okay. All right, let's talk about politics now, Secretary Roque. Well, the President – first – you said that he chose five successors and then last night with Pastor Quiboloy he said that

well, he wants to retire; and then the next is no one actually is good enough to succeed him was another sound bite. Where do you believe, number one, is this all going? Has the President actually verbalized his plans?

SEC. ROQUE: You know, he keeps his plans very close to his chest. My advice to everyone is you can speculate all you want but we will find out whether he will file certificate of candidacy only in October. We're not even sure that October is the cut off 'no because there is a period for substitution sometime in December. So, we would finally know what his decision would be in December when the period for substitution lapsed.

DAVILA: But with Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte statement saying that I don't understand why 1Sambayan and the Palace are playing a slapping game about a Duterte-Duterte tandem. The President already said he does not believe I'm fit to be President because I'm a woman. Period. Some interpret that as Sara Duterte clearly will not run with her father as VP.

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I have never said and I'm surprised that people think it has been a Palace declaration that the President will run with Mayor Sara. All that I have said is that the President is thinking about his nomination as vice president. We're not really sure who the PDP-Laban will nominate in fact for the presidency.

So, I think anything now is fair game from now until the filing of the certificate of candidacy and historically no one really knows who's running until they've filed their certificate of candidacies.

DAVILA: Okay. Secretary, in that press conference yesterday you also talked, I mean you were asked by a reporter about you running for the Senate and I wanted to ask you at this point, you said that funding of course is a consideration. What are the other considerations on your end, given that you've been in this similar situation during the last elections?

SEC. ROQUE: My biggest worry is my health, because the last time I filed and I had a health issues and I had to withdraw. So, I really need to have a serious talk with my doctors and an honest to goodness assessment if I'm up for it because I don't want the same kind of heartbreak, literally and figuratively, that I experienced in 2019.

DAVILA: Okay. But if ever, I mean this one I'm not—have you moved to PDP-Laban? Are you PDP-Laban?

SEC. ROQUE: No, I'm not I—

DAVILA: Oo, until now. Do you plan to move?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I'm a card-bearing member of Hugpong and I'm affiliated with People's Reform Party of Miriam Defensor-Santiago and we have recently renewed our certificate of alliance with Hugpong.

DAVILA: Okay. So, if you decide to run, an interesting factor now is of course, I'm assuming you'd be running under the President's party?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I would run with the Administration but I think I will only run if Mayor Inday Sara will run for the position of the president.

DAVILA: Okay. Can you repeat that? That's quite interesting. You would only run if Mayor Sara..?

SEC. ROQUE: Seeks the presidency.

DAVILA: I see. So you would want Mayor Sara to be your President? I think you've—in a way you're declaring it today on Headstart, she is your president.

SEC. ROQUE: I think as a card-bearing member of the PRP, the party of Miriam Defensor-Santiago, it is Inday Sara who I believe has the same qualities as Miriam Defensor-Santiago to become president.

DAVILA: Okay.

SEC. ROQUE: I'm one of those who are praying that Mayor Sara will in fact seek the presidency.

DAVILA: So, in a way, Secretary, if you want water please do have some water, please do. Relax, relax! So, this means you don't technically agree with what the President said that he doesn't believe Sara is fit to be President because she's a woman. That's one thing you don't agree with?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I don't agree with that and I think the President merely emphasize that given the hardships of being president, he does not want it, he does not wish it on his family which is understandable coming from a good father 'no. But I think Mayor Sara will eventually make up her mind and she will have to decide on her own regardless of what her father says because being president does not mean it is an entitlement just because you're a daughter. She knows she has to work for it, she knows that when she wins that the challenges are very great ahead of her and that's why it will have to be her personal decision.

DAVILA: Okay. What if in a rare, I mean in a surprising moment, the President for some reason chooses Senator Bong Go over his daughter? You would still go with Sara?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, we have already a certificate of alliance, officially, between the People's Reform Party and Hugpong Pagbabago. Or let's just say that we are bound by our alliance with Hugpong 'no and if Hugpong later on decides that they will not field any candidate, then that is the time when we make a decision. But I think Jun Santiago, the husband of the late Senator has already accomplished the renewal of the certificate of alliance.

DAVILA: Okay. Now, Sara running for the presidency right after a Duterte presidency, some say it really—it smacks of a political dynasty and even if they've mentioned two Macapagal Presidents – GMA, let's say the Aquinos, ang sabi ng ilan may pagitan po iyon, hindi po iyon magkasunod and they ran under different circumstances. What do you say about that, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Ultimately, it's the people's decision who will determine the presidency. So, I know the arguments against dynasties but this is a different dynasty because the father is telling the daughter not to run.

DAVILA: But you do agree that it is a dynasty? You are agreeing it is a dynasty?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, they are relatives but a dynasty is perpetuation of the same family by choice or because of a willful decision. If Mayor Sara runs it will be against the wishes of her father and

I don't call this dynasty because clearly, the President is clear, "I don't want the mess of the presidency on my family." But if she so decides then it is up to the electorate and I don't think we can accuse the Duterte family of perpetuating themselves in power because the President made it clear, "I don't want the presidency for Mayor Sara."

DAVILA: Okay. Do you have a relationship with Mayor Sara, Secretary? I mean, have you become friends? It was quite surprising that when I spoke with Gilbert Teodoro, he knew her casually and it was technically the first time he sat with her, spoken with her at length. I'm curious what your relationship is with the Mayor?

SEC. ROQUE: We are on friendly terms but I am not as close as other political personalities. I think we are very good acquaintances and I think we can say that we are friends but I cannot claim to be a very close friend in the same way that the Speaker and his wife are really very close to Mayor Sara.

DAVILA: Yeah. Do you plan to visit also, Secretary?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, I'm always at Davao but I'm hesitant to visit because of very strict quarantine rules that we in the Cabinet have to comply with. For instance, because of MECQ 'no, the rule is we go to our meeting with the President and we leave. So, there's also been a reminder that my press briefing should be online also because we try to avoid broadcasting from the premises of PTV 4 while in Davao City. So, it's very difficult for me.

DAVILA: Okay. All right. Now, let's talk about funding for nurses in the midst of COVID and you have spoken about this but the Administration, I know, you said has yet to find a clear source for funding for the back pay, and we're only talking about back pay of government nurses and this was coming from a Supreme Court decision. Let's talk about that, how much are we talking about in terms of bulk back pay?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, Secretary Avisado told me that he will inform me within the day how much is it po. But the reason why we are waiting for guidance from the Executive Secretary, we have had a precedent 'no and that precedent is a decision in a case that I helped win for Governor Dodo Mandanas, the higher IRA's for local governments. Although the decision of the court similarly in the ANG NARS petition is that the increase salary should have been given to all the nurses. There was no mention of whether or not it should be retroactive or only prospective.

But in the Mandanas ruling, the court said it will only be prospective. So, we don't know if the Supreme Court ruling also has retroactive effect, because if one precedent where the Supreme Court ruled of the entitlement of LGUs it will commit [garbled].

DAVILA: Oo. And then when if it's retroactive, the back pay would move back to what year?

SEC. ROQUE: Correct 'no! That is why—

DAVILA: Oo. That's I am curious, what year.

SEC. ROQUE: There is a need to clarify it from the court itself because in the Mandanas ruling, there was such a clarification sought from the High Court.

DAVILA: Okay. Now in terms of back pay is one issue, but then funding for increase salaries, do we have the money for that? Does the government have that?

SEC. ROQUE: Prospectively, I have talked to Secretary Wendel and he says he is confident, we can source it. But [garbled] it's prospective, if it is back pay, because it's a Supreme Court decision, we will comply. The only issue is if we can give it now or if we can give it later, because the ruling covers back wages, we can still pay for it but it will have to wait for the 2022 budget—

DAVILA: But you don't have an idea at least Secretary like a figure more or less that is needed for funding first of the increased salaries. Is it I'm curious to billion, three billion?

SEC. ROQUE: It's rather substantial because I hear that in PGH alone, the back wages of the nurses would amount to like a couple of hundreds of millions which is you know incredible amount.

DAVILA: And that is one hospital.

SEC. ROQUE: That is one hospital alone. But really I wouldn't worry about it, for as long as we get advice on whether or not it is retroactive, it can always be put in the 2022 budget or maybe on the supplemental budget that Congress has enacted.

DAVILA: All right. Well I wanna thank you for your interview this morning, your time sir. Sir anything you wanna announce before we go?

SEC. ROQUE: Well, so far we have announced everything.

DAVILA: Already today, including your presidential candidate, you have also announced.

SEC. ROQUE: I think so, but I don't think anything is etched in stone right now. As far as Senator Bong go is concerned, I think the decision is whether or not the President will in fact run for the position of Vice President, because Senator Bong Go has also maintained that he will only run if the President does run as his Vice President. And I think the issue now is whether or not Mayor Sara will in fact run. Because if she does not then I dare say, that the President will have to make up his mind on what is best for the country. If he runs for Vice President, then it's a certainty that Senator Bong Go will run for the presidency and of course if this happens, I will be supportive of Bong Go and Duterte candidacy.

DAVILA: Wait, what do you mean, you will be supportive of a Sara Duterte-Bong Go candidacy?

SEC. ROQUE: No, no. Senator Bong Go has only said that he will run if President Duterte runs as.

DAVILA: He is his VP?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes and this will only happen if Mayor Sara does not in fact run for the presidency.

DAVILA: Yeah, okay, but what if they both run and you had to make a choice, frankly speaking.

SEC. ROQUE: If Mayor Sara does not run and if the President thinks that Senator Bong Go is the best thing for the country, then I am confident that the President will in fact file for his certificate of candidacy for Vice President, in which case, I will be very, very supportive of a Bong Go and President Duterte together.

DAVILA: Okay. But then if it were down to Bong Go and Sara. I don't know if will happen, it won't happen?

SEC. ROQUE: It will never happen.

DAVILA: You are certain of that; that one won't run against the other?

SEC. ROQUE: Yes. I'm sure with that.

DAVILA: Okay. On that note, Secretary Harry Roque, thank you so much this morning, also for your surprise with where you want to run under. Thank you, sir. Have a good day, sir.

SEC. ROQUE: Have a good day too.

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