

People's ID card launched

By Paolo Romero

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Encouraged by a favorable Supreme Court ruling, President Arroyo launched yesterday a unified government identification system to streamline citizens' transactions with government agencies.

The "unified multipurpose ID system" is "for the convenience and security" of the public, Mrs. Arroyo said in a statement read to reporters.

The National Statistics Office, which has been tasked to test the system, said, however, that citizens will not be compelled to obtain the ID card, and those who do not have it will not be denied benefits and services from the government.

The issuing agency may issue the ID for free or charge a small amount not to exceed P100.

But critics and civil rights advocates warned the card could be open to abuse and civil rights violations.

"This system fills the last mile in the gap between people's needs and a streamlined government that serves those needs," Mrs. Arroyo said in a brief statement on national television.

The President said the purpose of the so-called "People's ID Card" is to "strengthen good governance, improve transparency, empower our citizenry, and give every Filipino faster access to dependable government services."

She said the system is being tested by the National Statistics Office (NSO) and the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) to make it foolproof and to remove glitches.

Mrs. Arroyo said the new system will "integrate and harmonize existing ID systems" in different government agencies and government-run corporations.

The identification card will help the public gain access to health insurance, pensions and housing loans as well as help those seeking work overseas. The card stores some of the owner's physical characteristics, including fingerprints, to give a definitive identification of the person presenting it.

"Isn't it better to just have one ID that you can use for all your transactions with the government instead of having a wallet bursting with so many IDs that you need?" she said.

Lawyer Neri Colmenares of the Counsels for the Defense of Liberties, a civil liberties group, said the new system will be open to abuse by security forces who will eventually gain access to and use personal information contained in the ID to crack down on political dissenters.

"All the ingredients are now present for a garrison state — political killings, human rights violations everywhere, the military has the upper hand, a unified ID system, no respect for the rule of law and Supreme Court decisions, the Congress and the Senate," Colmenares said.

NEDA chief Romulo Neri downplayed security concerns saying there will be "sufficient safeguards" so that privacy rights are "amply protected."

He said the new system is different from the national ID system being proposed in an anti-terrorism bill. He said he could not predict what lawmakers will do to the new unified identification system once they pass a law requiring a national ID.

Carmelita Ericta, head of the National Statistics Office, said the new ID will be the "primary identifier of a person transacting business with government" and will solve the problem of "assumed identity."

"The (ID) will help us prove that we are the ones we say we are," she said.

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She said citizens will not be compelled to obtain the ID card, and those who do not have it will not be denied benefits and services from the government.

Ericta said requiring citizens to apply for the ID would need a law from Congress.

The new ID system was launched only yesterday but it turned out that the NSO and NEDA started implementing it as early as March or nearly three months before the Supreme Court issued a favorable ruling on an executive order requiring all government agencies and corporations to harmonize their IDs.

NEDA Director General Romulo Neri, whose agency has the primary responsibility of implementing the system, said he expects the system to be fully in place by 2007.

In July, the Supreme Court ruled with finality upholding the legality of Executive Order 420, issued in April last year, which establishes a single ID for government agencies and government-owned and controlled corporations.

The court upheld its April ruling declaring the presidential order as constitutional. It junked petitions from left-leaning party-list groups Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) and Bayan Muna., who argued that EO 420 would violate the right to privacy and lead to abuses.

On April 19, the court voted 12-2 to uphold the constitutionality of EO 420, saying it was a "proper subject of executive issuance under the president's constitutional power of control over government entities in the executive department, as well as under the president's constitutional duty to ensure that laws are faithfully executed."

It said EO 420 was limited to the executive branch of the government and does not apply to the judiciary or to other independent constitutional commissions.

Further, Mrs. Arroyo did not make, alter or repeal any law when she issued EO 420 and that she merely made use of existing laws.

Malacañang hailed the final court ruling, saying the ID system would help curb crime and combat terrorism. Since then Arroyo administration officials have been repeatedly assuring that the ID system would not be used against political opponents or be abused by corrupt law enforcement officers.

Citing the July court ruling, Neri said EO 420 does not violate the Constitution as it is within Mrs. Arroyo's prerogative to direct government agencies to streamline and harmonize their IDs and databases. "EO 420 does not establish a national ID system."

The card

A holder of the credit card-size People's ID Card would be issued a 12-digit number — to be known as the Common Reference Number (CRN) — which would be an individual's lifetime identification, Ericta said.

Included in the ID's face is the full name, gender, CRN, address, birth date, signature and photo of the holder.

The ID would have either a smart chip or barcode that would contain the same data on the face plus a template on two fingerprints, height, weight, parents' names, civil status, distinguishing marks, and other card information.

One side of card would be identical or have a "common look" regardless of the agency that issues it while the design of the other side would be up to the issuing office, Ericta said.

The card will have hologram or ultraviolet prints to prevent forgery. The issuing agency may issue the ID for free or charge a small amount.

Neri said the fee would range from P50 and not exceed P100 for affordability.

Ericta said exempted from the unification of the government-issued IDs are the driver's license and the Professional Regulatory Commission ID and other cards issued in conformity with international statutes and treaties like passports and seafarer's ID.

There would be no unauthorized access to the databases unless there is consent from the ID holder. She said queries without consent would be answered only by "yes" or "no" and no other data would be provided.

Consent would also be needed to update the records of an individual in the government registry.

"We have often been put in a spot because we refuse to disclose records, so the track record of the NSO would speak for itself as far as confidentiality is concerned," Ericta said.

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Bad memories

It is not yet certain if EO 420's opponents will challenge the new government ID system. An attempt to establish a national ID system in the past was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1996.

Efforts to implement a national ID system mainly as a crime prevention measure failed in the past due to public opposition fueled mainly by memories of the brutal Marcos dictatorship.

On Dec. 12, 1996, the Supreme Court, voting 8-6, shot down Administrative Order 308 issued by President Fidel Ramos that sought to create a "national computerized identification reference system."

The court said the order was unconstitutional because it involved a subject not appropriate to be covered by an administrative order and that it infringed on the right to privacy.

It also said only Congress has the authority to establish a national ID system.

The six dissenting justices, however, argued that the order merely merged the ID systems of government agencies such as the Social Security System, the Government Service Insurance System and the Land Transportation Office.

In its 1996 ruling junking AO 308, the Supreme Court said there is a "clear and present danger" that the ID system would violate one's right to privacy and may even tempt authorities to misuse personal information.

"The Court will not be true to its role as the ultimate guardian of the people's liberty if it would not immediately smother the sparks that endanger their rights but would rather wait for the fire that could consume them," the court said.

The court warned that the "existence of this vast reservoir of personal information" constitutes a "covert invitation to misuse, a temptation that may be too great for some of our authorities to resist."

It emphasized that civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution make one's right to privacy, liberty of abode and travel "inviolable."

In dissenting against EO 420 last April, Justice Consuelo Santiago said the court ruling disregarded the 1996 decision. "Although couched differently, AO 308 and EO 420 are similar in their effects and intent," she said in her dissenting opinion. — **With AP**

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