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An antimining voice in promining chorus

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY -- For the first time in her life, maverick lawyer and antimining activist Jean Feliciano banged the gavel on July 3 as the new vice mayor of Brooke's Point in Palawan and presiding officer of its legislative council.

The agenda for the council's inaugural session was, by tradition, nothing more than parliamentary niceties.

In the next few weeks, however, Feliciano and her peers will buckle down to tackle a highly charged debate on whether or not to allow two major nickel mining companies to operate in Brooke's Point.

"It's like the most impossible job in the world, but I'm here to fulfill a mandate," Feliciano said after taking her oath of office on June 30.

Thrust into public office by a simple majority of the municipality's antimining constituency, she ironically found herself as the lone voice in a chorus of a promining body politic.

Feliciano had been prodded by nongovernment organizations and mining site communities to join the political fray. She fought a closely contested fight for vice mayor, winning over the three-term mayor by just over 200 votes.

"Her victory shows that there is a strong sentiment in the communities against mining and other extractive forms of development," said Cleofe Bernardino, executive director of the Palawan NGO Network which supported Feliciano's candidacy.

Her upset win was a major victory for an emerging antimining lobby in a province that hosts some of the country's biggest nickel ore mining operations and nearly a hundred other mining venture applications.

Feliciano credits her victory to the support of tribal villagers where the mining projects are located and in the poblacion "where voters are generally more attuned to the issue of mining."

Green Vote

A practicing private lawyer in the otherwise sleepy town of Brooke's Point, Feliciano was at first reluctant to take on the mining companies planning to operate in the nickel-and-chromite-rich region of southern Palawan.

She had come back to Brooke's Point after 12 years of working overseas

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and was determined to pursue a childhood dream to become a judge.

"I have already begun to fill up my application and had spoken to several individuals who were to endorse my application until I got sidetracked into this advocacy," she said.

"I saw how blatantly accommodating (to the mining companies) the national government has been to MacroAsia and I saw the plight of the affected indigenous communities."

Feliciano claimed that when MacroAsia got its mineral production sharing agreement (MPSA) in December last year from the Mines and Geosciences Bureau, the agency attached to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in charge of issuing permits, the municipality was caught off guard.

"They (MacroAsia officials) haven't even conducted community consultations to see if there is local acceptability as required by the Mining Code," Feliciano said.

MacroAsia, Atlas

MacroAsia, the flagship company of airline and cigarette magnate Lucio Tan, and Atlas Consolidated Mining and Development Corp. are set to start full scale operations in Brooke's Point. Both companies are making a big push into the dollar-rich nickel ore business as they ride the tide of the national government's open arms policy and the favorable world demand for nickel.

MacroAsia has secured two MPSAs from the MGB allowing it to conduct exploratory activities, a permit which Feliciano claimed was defective.

Celestial Nickel Mining Exploration, a satellite company of Atlas Consolidated, has an MPSA issued in 1993 covering close to 3,000 hectares in the neighboring municipality of Quezon.

Feliciano vowed "transparency and strict observance of the law" in the municipality's dealings with mining companies, adding that "the true sentiments of the communities that will be affected by the project [will] be taken into account."

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