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## The iconic jeepney

As earlier announced, the Department of Transportation (DOTr) will finally carry out the government's ambitious program to modernize passenger jeepneys into electric-run jeepneys, or e-jeepneys that will soon ply the roads all over the country. As envisioned under this modernization program, public utility jeepneys (PUJs) that are dilapidated and 15 years old and above will be gradually phased out within a three-year period starting last Monday, Jan. 1, 2018.

Owners and operators of all registered PUJs under the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) are covered and required to comply with this program. The DOTr will launch the Motor Vehicle Inspection System (MVIS) to determine the age of a jeepney and its roadworthiness.

The venerable jeepney, that evolved from the post-World War II military jeep, must give way to modern-day conveniences offered by e-jeepneys being offered under this government's modernization program. According to the DOTr announcement, more than 500 electric and solar-powered jeepneys eyed as replacement for old jeepneys are set to operate starting this month.

It would indeed be exciting to see how the new e-jeepneys would run and operate, especially in Metro Manila where vehicles hardly move due to traffic gridlocks. Since these e-jeepneys are powered by electricity, it would be a test of battery life, how long could it sustain running in traffic jams.

We look at a very grim traffic forecast this year when the government starts constructing all of the infrastructure projects, especially those located in Metro Manila.

Under this modernization program, jeepneys 15 years and older will be replaced by either electric-powered, or

Euro 4 compliant diesel-fed vehicles. Euro 4 is a set of emission standards on particulate matter, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons.

As designed, many PUJs are powered by Euro 4-compliant engines but are run on ordinary diesel.

However, militant transport groups were unimpressed by the government's e-jeepney modernization program.

Groups like the Stop and GO Coalition and the Pinagkaisang Samahan ng Tsiper at Operator Nationwide (PISTON) expressed their conditional support to the rehabilitation but not the total phase out of current jeepneys. The groups staged a series of transport strikes to show their opposition to the modernization program.

To which President Rodrigo Duterte responded with his iron-fisted policy declaration to implement the program with or without the support of PISTON and other militant jeepney groups. The tough-talking President Duterte dared the arrest of left-leaning drivers and operators who will turn to violence if only to defy the government's e-jeepney program.

The replacement of old diesel-run PUJs with more environment-friendly e-jeepneys was the principal reason why President Duterte vowed to use all his powers under the country's Constitution to implement the modernization program. While being flippant about the Philippine accession to the Paris agreement on climate

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\* TRANSPORTATION

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change, it is quite ironic President Duterte now invokes the need to phase out diesel-run jeepneys that contribute to the carbon pollution coming from jeepneys.

Well and good if these e-jeepneys will have such modern-day conveniences of Wi-Fi and safety gadgets from dash-cams to GPS. Obviously, however, such features are subject to affordability of PUJ owners and operators.

When the e-jeepney program was first presented to the public in June last year by DOTr headed by Secretary Arturo Tugade described it as "not-anti poor." In fact, Tugade clarified this program is not designed to phase out our country's jeepney industry, or the PUJ business but to guarantee its profitability.

To further assuage the PUJ industry, Tugade explained the government will provide assistance amounting to P1.5 billion to transport firms and cooperatives to purchase their new PUJ units compliant under this program. The funding will come from the state-owned Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) under its Program Assistance to Support Alternative Driving Approaches (PASADA). The key features of this DBP loan window include five-percent equity for vehicle purchase, six-percent interest rate, and seven-year repayment period.

The eligible borrowers of the program include transport companies and cooperatives which have been qualified to receive franchise under the Omnibus Franchising Guidelines. Under these guidelines, individual jeepney operators will not be granted a franchise if they are not part of a cooperative or consortium.

Transport groups, however, have sneezed at the scheme, pointing to the fact that small operators and drivers simply cannot afford to take on new loans to buy vehicles. They accused the government of actually trying to kill the small cooperatives and single-unit jeepney owners with the end in view of replacing them with larger corporate-type PUJ franchise operators.

Their suspicions are not without basis because the government has yet to answer the questions they raised. First of all, who would supply all these electric-run jeepneys? Aren't they the big guys behind the makers of these modern PUJs? And who would supply the spare parts? Where would the electricity come from? They all come from big corporate groups operating them, aren't they?

Methodists think the most valid argument of transport groups on the ultimate impact of this jeepney modernization program would be the ordinary commuters who would bore the brunt of rising fares. The current minimum fare of P8 would go up if the government pushes through with the program, they warned.

Since these modern PUJs run on electricity, any increase in electricity rates would also mean fare hike every now and then.

Moreover, can these solar-powered and electricity-run jeepneys be as reliable like the ones we have now? The sturdy, not to mention very colorful jeepneys, are the kings of the road that can run even on flooded roads. At least, it is not the end of the road yet for the country's iconic jeepneys.

The iconic jeepneys were just evolved again into e-jeepneys of the future.