

FEDERALISM IN THE PHILIPPINES: AN UPDATE

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Conflict and adversity have a way of defining what could or should be. What otherwise would seem vague and unacceptable during relatively calm periods, would suddenly gain credence and a sense of urgency.

This is what seems to be happening to the idea of Federalism in the Philippines. It is gaining currency in the light of the apparent intransigence of a rebellion that seeks independence for the Bangsa Moro homeland in Mindanao, and will thus dismember the republic.

World history, of course, is replete with the examples of all manner of states and nations struggling for self-rule, autonomy or outright total freedom. Most of these were characterized by bloodshed and bitter fighting.

Such, indeed, is the still on-going struggle of the Moros in Mindanao for the chance to run their own affairs on the basis of the verities of Islam. But all armed conflicts result in one grievous tragedy: displacement, deprivation, destitution and death to hundreds of thousands of non-combatant women, children and men – regardless of creed, ethnic origin or political affiliation. The instruments of death are simply marked: TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

But apart from the Mindanao angle, the idea of federalizing the Philippine archipelago is also gaining more adherents as a way of rationalizing the great diversity of the Filipino nation. This is exemplified by significant regional differences – in language, in culture, in particular aspirations, not to mention that many of us are physically separated by bodies of water.

Federalism has, of late, also been attracting some interest among more and more citizens due to the apparent inability of the centralized national leadership structure to effectively address basic social and economic needs of citizens living outside the National Capital Region.

In fact, a kind of resentment has been building up among these citizens at the way economic development and the benefits of modernization have been concentrated in the Metro Manila area. There is a sense that this distorted situation was brought about, and is being perpetuated, by the unitary system of government where policy decisions involving all Filipinos throughout the country are being effectively made only by the powers-that-be in the national capital. Thus, the negative term: Imperial Manila.

It doesn't help that after four administrations since the restoration of democracy in 1986, there is a general feeling that nothing much has changed in the quality of life of the people and that genuine development is hindered by "too much politics."

With some measure of faith and logic, this situation is now being attributed to the ineffectivity of a highly-centralized decision-making and power structure.

Thus, the growing clamor for political re-structuring of the Philippines from the present unitary and centralized form into a more power-sharing federal system where the component states (regions) have well-defined rights to self-governance of their own affairs and resources.

But the nature of the current movement that is spearheading the advocacy for a Federal Republic of the Philippines is also reflective of the general disaffection over “too much politics” or more precisely, too much wrong politics.

Indeed, the Movement for a Federal Philippines (MFP) which I and Dr. Abueva represent here in this conference, is basically a Citizens Movement – organized by, for and of the citizens. It has more grassroots linkages than powerful-politicians connection. It is people oriented rather than political leaders or political parties oriented. Or, at least, it tries very hard to be one and to remain so.

The politicians or political leaders, of course, play an important role in any political movement. But this one will not be run or dominated by them. The Movement for a Federal Philippines is inclusive and non-partisan. Advocates contribute their personal commitments. This is true even of the politicians, and political blocs or various organizations may relate with the

movement only as affiliates. The movement itself will be run by a council of leaders representing the different regions and/or major sectors.

The wariness about allowing the lead role to be played by politicians stems from recent sad experience.

The most significant campaign for a federal Philippines so far was Pilipinas '92, spearheaded and led by Senator John "Sonny" Osmena. They were able to publish brochures, leaflets, and other campaign materials, although they were unable to organize extensively save for core formations in some key centers in the country.

Unfortunately, it came and went only in that single year. Its biggest drawback I think was that it was timed with the presidential election. Considering how much presidential contests occupy the minds and hearts of the Filipino voters, the campaign for federalism never got the hearing and projection it deserved. Also, rightly or wrongly, it got identified with the political ambitions of Senator Osmena.

The other significant undertaking for federalism was in the late 1980s. Coming out of the turmoil in Mindanao and led by a Mindanao stalwart, former Cagayan de Oro Mayor Reuben Canoy, the effort did not succeed because the national government put a stop to it.

Understandably so. It was, after all, being undertaken by the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) headed by Canoy. The MIM advocated for separation and the establishment of the Federal Republic of

Mindanao. As far as campaign paraphernalia went, MIM was far advanced. It had produced its own money, the Mindanao dollar, passport and visa system, the Mindanao Constitution, the works.

But being separatist firstly, it could not last very long as the national government had to invoke sovereignty over all Philippine territories.

Then there was the attempt at “federalism” of the late Bohol Congressman Bartolome Cabangbang in the 1970s. But his campaign was not really to transform the Philippines into a Federal Republic, but to make it the 51st state of the United States of America. His project was more properly called The Philippine Statehood Movement and should not be confused with the federalism effort.

Now we have this current campaign for a Federal Republic of the Philippines. Started by Lihok Pideral Mindanaw two years ago, the effort is now being undertaken nationwide by the Movement for a Federal Philippines.

The movement has conducted regional conferences in the Visayas and Mindanao, the Cordilleras and Manila and is lining up conferences in Bicol, Cagayan Valley, the Ilocos and Central and Southern Luzon. The Conferences are also organizational meetings and result in the formation of regional core groups and chapters.

All these regional formations will be convened in October this year for the formal launching of the national movement. Political leaders, political

organizations, sectoral groupings, other national or regional formations that are sympathetic to the federal advocacy will also be invited.

In the meantime, a national steering committee of the Movement has been formed to manage the preparations for the national conference, the organizing and expansion, and the other campaign activities.

We also have more materials now, brochures, information leaflets, primer, readers and references from an advisory committee, other scholars and political leaders. A draft constitution of the proposed Federal Republic of the Philippines, which serves as workshop and conference discussion paper, has also been prepared by a team headed by Dr. Abueva.

A medium-term plan and advocacy timetable is now in place.

Federalism in the Philippines?

Truly, the movement towards a Federal Republic of the Philippines is on the road. It has acquired a life of its own. Very soon, it will be ready to participate in the legal processes that are required to bring it about.

Its time has come. Its time is now.