

## **PUSHING FEDERALISM WITH RENEWED VIGOR**

**By Rey Magno Teves**

It's basically a seasonal thing. As in every two years or so. Some crucial event will occur that somehow propels the idea of federalism as an interesting piece of conversation.

The Erap phenom. The Sipadan hostage-taking. The MNLF situation. The MILF question. Spotty and discordant Mindanao development. The inability of national government to squarely address the problems arising from these. The seeming helplessness of local leaders to effectively deal with their peculiar situations.

At the heart of it, the basic complaint is, (a) very limited funds, and (b) very little power or authority to secure these funds and to allocate them properly.

Somehow, even earnest local efforts go to naught. The decision as to how much and when to release public funds still belongs to some distant national agency or a beleaguered and oftentimes indifferent central government.

Somehow the earnestness gets dissipated along the way. The process of going to and coming from the rarefied heights of central authority slows down the momentum and douses enthusiasm.

Before long, one is confronted with the realization that we're back to square one. Or worse. As in, discovering that we have made two steps backward as we made one step forward.

The same problems persist. The same conditions prevail. Poverty and wholesale deprivation. Wanton government neglect. Inconsequential or sometimes disparate civil society participation. Crime, armed conflicts and war.

Considering the over-centralized set-up of our national governance, we are usually stuck with the challenge of having to look for and choose another person to lead the nation and institute change and make a difference in the lives of our people.

At this point in our history, maybe we should seriously ask this question already: Is it change in persons that we need, Or change in system also?

In fact, a fast growing movement of advocates coming from the NGO community academe, the Churches and basic sectors, business, and various political groups, is convinced that now is the time to address the inadequacies of our present political system.

## CURRENT INITIATIVES

Their alternative? FEDERALISM. This being an entirely different political structure, the opposite of our present unitary and centralized system, constitutional amendment is necessary.

In this regard, several initiatives are in the works or are being undertaken already:

The LIHOK PIDERAL MINDANAW (LPM), which is an offshoot of an alternative agenda initiative of the Mindanao Coalition of Development NGO Networks (MINCODE) and spearheaded by the Mindanao Congress of Development NGOs/NGIs or MINCON, is currently intensifying its organizing and consultation programs.

The LPM has established core groups in all the regions in Mindanao and has conducted about a dozen consultation-workshops. It has also facilitated one trainors' training.

Through the facilities of KUSOG MINDANAW as a roundtable conference of Mindanao leaders, the LPM has also touched base with federalism advocates in other parts of the country. It has conducted seminars in Cebu and Leyte and is planning two more in Negros and Bicol.

## EXPANDING ADVOCACY

Through an expanded mechanism of the KUSOG MINDANAW and the assistance of Konrad Adenauer Foundation, two conferences and/or seminars were conducted recently:

Federalism As An Alternative to Independence in Zamboanga City last April. This was exclusively for Muslim leaders in Mindanao and Manila and was co-sponsored by the UP Islamic Studies Center. Some 40 participants, including about a dozen Muslim women leaders, attended; and

A Consultation-Dialogue on Federalism in Baguio City last June 7-8. This was intended as an initial touching base with a potential core group of advocates in the Cordillera Region and the Northern Luzon area. It was co-facilitated by the Local Government Development Foundation (LOGODEF) headed by Dr. Gaudioso Sosmeña.

A similar dialogue is being scheduled in Bacolod City next month. This conference-dialogue will gather some 30 key advocates in the Panay-Negros, Cebu-Bohol and Samar-Leyte regions.

## PARALLEL ACTION

Meanwhile, a pool of eminent advocates has been working on draft Constitution of a proposed Federal Republic of the Philippines. The group, which has conducted two sessions already (in Davao City last March and Cebu City last May) is initially made up of Prof. Jose Abueva, former UP President, Dr. Gaudioso Sosmeña, Dr. Claire Carlos, president of the National Defense College, Datu Michael Mastura, Atty. Musib Buat, Bai Yasmin Macalandong, Lito Lorenzana, Prof. Rody Rodil of MSU Iligan, Kusog Mindanaw's Rey Magno Teves, and LPM stalwarts Charlito Manlupig, Ben Aspera, and Atty. Arlene Bag-ao.

On the political front, the action is once again taking place in Congress which will formally open on July 23. Already, at least two congresspersons have filed separate bills calling for constitutional change.

Another federal advocate, comebacking Congressman Edelmiro Amante is poised to file a bill that will call for a constitutional convention that will pass an amendment that will transform our system into a federal one.

Senate President Aquilino Pimentel, Jr. an acknowledged champion of federalism is expected to refile a similar bill that he introduced in 1991.

Between Senator Pimentel and the LPM and other support groups, an aborted national convention of federal advocates last year, may now be revived and undertaken towards the last quarter of this year.