

Towards a Federal Republic of the Philippines

Liberating the country from the stifling, centralized,
Colonial control of "Imperial Manila"

By Jose V. Abueva

While several countries in the East Asia have experienced dramatic economic development and industrialization and higher standards of living and per capita incomes since the 1970s, the Philippines has stagnated as a developing, democratic country. Among the newly industrializing countries, Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand have democratized, Singapore and Malaysia have evolved partly free political systems, while China has instituted a successful mixed economy under the authoritarian rule of its communist party.

Amid the Philippines' continuing underdevelopment, mass poverty, inequity and social injustice – aggravated by the Marcos dictatorship – our people's growing difficulties and frustrations with our highly centralized unitary system and ineffective government culminated in the 1987 Constitution's design for reforming our political system. Among others, the constitution mandated the development of participatory democracy, local and regional autonomy, and an active role for civil society in governance.

To deal with the demands for substantial autonomy or secession of the indigenous communities in Muslim Mindanao and the Cordilleras, the new constitution allowed the creation of autonomous regions in those areas. Under the Local Autonomy Code of 1991, the national government functions concerning health, welfare, agriculture, environment, and local public works have been partially devolved on the local governments. Various departments of the national government have also decentralized their operations to their regional and local offices.

Devolution and decentralization of national functions, powers and resources through the Local Autonomy Code of 1991 should be accelerated by progressive amendments and effective implementation. Rather than force the conversion of our unitary system to a federal system by constitutional amendment or revision before 2004, as some senators have proposed, the change should be undertaken in two stages from now to 2010.

Under the proposed Federal Republic of the Philippines, government powers will be allocated between the national or federal government and the states with their local governments. The states will be coterminous with the ten administrative and socio-economic regions. To the federal government will be allocated such powers and functions as national defense and security, foreign relations, the monetary system, custom and tariffs, and the national judiciary.

To the states will be allocated all the powers and functions not reserved to the federal government, as well as those that the states share concurrently with the federal government. In general, the states will be primarily responsible for the economic, social and cultural development of their areas; the federal government of their areas, the federal government will provide grants and assistance to the less developed states in order to promote overall development equity, and help poor, disadvantaged and marginalized citizen.

In the first stage of the transition of federalism, the present 14 administrative regions, plus the ARMM, should be consolidated into just ten larger administrative and socio-economic regions and be granted more substantial autonomy: more powers, functions,

and resources. This new strategy of development through “regionalization” shall continue until around 2009-2010.

At the same time, our people should be reoriented away from their traditional and forced dependency on the national government, and toward greater self-reliance and responsibility through local governance and development. They should be willing and able to raise more local revenues and generate funding for local development and to attract investments in countryside development. More than just a constitutional and political change, the transformation of long-held values, expectations, and attitudes is required in order for a federal system to succeed.

Sometime after 2004, delegates shall be elected to a constitutional convention. By about 2008-2009 the constitutional convention should complete a draft for a federal system and other constitutional reforms. Delegates should learn from the experience of such federal systems as India, Malaysia, the USA, Canada, and the Federal Republic of Germany. The proposed new constitution shall be ratified in a plebiscite to be held also in 2009. The 2009 Constitution will govern the federal, state and local elections to be held in 2010. This is the second stage of the conversation to a Federal Republic of the Philippines.

Under the 2009 Constitution, we shall be replacing the stifling centralized unitary structure in the 1987 Constitution and in earlier constitutions, and during Spanish and American colonial rule. We would then be better able to unify, strengthen and develop the Philippines as a pluralistic nation and the Republic as a functional and democratic political system. Our political development, socio-economic development, and cultural development will be mutually reinforcing and sustainable.

To justify the proposal to transform our political system from its present unitary structure to a federation, these propositions are offered.

1. The Philippines has achieved sufficient national unity and democratization, including a measure of decentralization and local autonomy, as the basis for establishing a federal system of government. The latter will follow about a decade of transition: by development through “regionalization” and greater local autonomy involving both the national government and the local governments; the private sector and civil society.
2. A federal system, such more than a unitary system, will respond to the long-felt demands of local political leaders and businessmen for their release from the costly time-consuming, stifling, and demoralizing effects of excessive centralization and controls by the national government in the unitary system. The highly decentralized structures and process of the federation will challenge, empower and energize the people and their state and local governments; encourage creativity, initiative, and innovation, enhance the accountability of government leaders and employees, spur inter-state competition, and foster state and local self-reliance.
3. By removing the centralized structures that impose local dependency and stifle local initiatives and resourcefulness, and thus providing greater freedom and home rule, a federal system will greatly increase the capacity of the people and the government to deal with the country’s chronic problems of poverty, injustice, and inadequate social service and infrastructure—the manifestations of underdevelopment under highly centralized governance.
4. In a federal structure substantial equitable development for the whole country is most likely to be achieved, and the people’s liberty will be protected by the further

dispersion of power in the government and the society. Metro Manila, the national capital, will have the status of a special region or a state and will be able to deal more effectively with its interconnected problems as a metropolis.

5. A federal system will be better to be able to achieve and sustain national unity and identity, and at the same time protect and enhance the nation's cultural diversity and social pluralism. It will promote a strong national identity on the basis of economic, cultural and environmental diversity.
6. By strengthening the nation-state's capacity to deal with its critical internal problems and to develop its economy polity and culture, a federal system will also be better able to respond to the external threats to national security and the challenges of globalization.

The case for federalism should not be overstated. It is argued, however, that federalism offers a higher probability than our unitary system of enabling the people and the nation-state to realize the advantages and benefits enumerated. The proposal should be seriously studied and debated along with other proposals for constitutional change, such as the shift from our presidential system to a parliamentary system. When established the federation will not be a fixed structure but a flexible one. It will necessarily undergo continual change and adjustment in the degree of centralization and decentralization.

It will offer continuing challenges to federal, state and local leaders to effect the needed changes in policies and structures, the better to solve their unique as well as common problems, with the people's increasing participation. In some ways, as one scholar has said, it will be more difficult to make a federation work well. It will require not only "a federal spirit" of cooperation and compromise but also a lot of political will at all levels.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the federalist movement--spearheaded by *Kusog Mindanaw*, *Lihuk Pideral*, MNLF, MILF, and PROMDI has been gaining support in Mindanao and the Visayas. Its ideas and proposals, like those of the parliamentary government movement, deserve serious consideration by more and more leaders, scholars, journalists, and citizens. It is high time for the nation to develop and institute more basic reforms and constitutional changes.