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11

## A federal-parliamentary system for a 'grown-up' Philippines

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**E**XCITING times are ahead for Filipinos as our country moves towards a federal-parliamentary form of government sooner than expected. We need this change as we have been stuck in a rut for so long due to the inefficient presidential system imposed on us by foreign subjugators.

Such a change will bring the Philippines into the ranks of modern democracies with a dynamic parliamentary system where the Prime Minister (PM) is the one running the government and the bureaucracy, and the President will be the head of state. The PM will be accountable to the legislature which may vote him out through a motion of no-confidence.

The country may also go for a mixed presidential-parliamentary system where the PM will still be in charge of the bureaucracy and the Cabinet, but the President will handle foreign policy, defense and the military, among others. Under this system there is no need for a vice president. The head of legislature or one of the chambers can serve as interim president (in case of death or resignation) until a new election for president can be held.

These are among the details that our legislators will need to discuss as they convene as a Constituent Assembly to discuss the changes in the Constitution, perhaps as early as this January.

For too long, the central government has been oblivious to the needs of people in the poorest provinces such as Samar, Maguindanao, Lanao, and Zamboanga. In turn the poverty in these areas feed the communist and Islamic insurgencies as the desperate people turn to these terrorists for help and succor.

Federalism would mean more re-

Credit the fast-moving reforms to the politically astute allies of President Rodrigo Duterte in both houses of Congress. House Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez and Senate President Aquilino Pimentel III are both committed to revising the Constitution to allow for a shift from the old presidential-unitary form of government to the more modern federal-parliamentary system.

This is a historic opportunity that the nation must not squander. For one, the top three leaders of the country are all Mindanaoans who have long believed, and rightly so, that federalism is the key to resolving the economic inequities brought about by a Manila-centric national government.

In fact, since the 1980s, Pimentel's father Aquilino "Nene" Jr. had been advocating for federalism, or the division of power between the central government and the states or regions. The initial plan calls for 11 to 13 Philippine states to be created, with some lower-income provinces to be matched with the richer ones, and considering as well language, culture, and geography.

We really need this federal system to redress our chronic underdevelopment.

4 FEDENA USM



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11

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sources pouring into these neglected provinces as the state governor will now have a free hand in directing his or her area's economic growth. The bulk of revenues generated by the state is expected to stay in their area unlike the present system where all taxes collected are turned over to the Treasury and these areas have to wait for their measly budget allocation.

Apart from having three leaders that are pushing federalism, another element that has helped create the perfect storm for radical changes in the Constitution is the popularity of the current leadership. President Duterte has approval and trust ratings of above 80 percent. Unlike previous presidents who attempted charter change, Duterte is trusted by the Filipino electorate - he has mass backing and can expect any measure he endorses to be approved by voters in a plebiscite.

It is good that our legislators have agreed to hold a constituent assembly instead of the more costly Constitutional Convention (around P9 billion just to choose district delegates). Indeed, why get new people when we have these congressmen and senators who can work hard for the money we pay them by being the members of the "con-ass."

We could already have a new federal system in place this year if the House of Representatives and the Senate can agree to convene as an assembly this January, and hold quick and substantive discussions. If this scenario happens - overly optimistic as it sounds - then the proposed charter changes can be submitted to a plebiscite during the May 2018 barangay elections.

Alvarez is pushing for this speedier move towards a federal-parliamentary system and is even willing to extend the term of senators to 2022 while the

legislators fine-tune the details of the new government. This approach means there will be no need for the mid-term elections in May 2019.

However, Pimentel wants a more delayed timetable with the plebiscite done concurrent with the May 2019 elections. He and the other senators are also opposed to the no-election scenario for that year.

Change is always nerve-wracking especially for senators who are used to their "special status" in the local political arena. But they should set aside their

fears and think of what is good for the country. Besides, they can always run again in the new parliament that will be formed, and perhaps gain enough clout to become prime minister, or they can even run for president (if we adopt the hybrid presidential-parliamentary system, similar to France).

But unlike France, which has a two-chamber parliament, I think that the best plan for the Philippines is to have a unicameral legislature. If we continue to have two chambers we run the risk of going right back to where we started - having legislative deadlock, or seeing important bills being ignored (such as the death penalty bill, which was passed by the House way back in March, but has been languishing at a Senate committee).

Worse, keeping the Senate means seeing again these preening senators do "committee hearings in aid of legislation" instead of real legislative work. The Filipino people are so tired of lazy, obstructionist politicians who only want to raise their media profile so they can run for president.

There are many advantages to unicameralism. First off is the savings as the taxpayers need to pay only for one chamber - we'll be seeing less money

being spent for the useless consultants of certain senators. Second, laws can be passed faster and more efficiently if there is only one chamber. Legislators are bound to be less partisan if they belong to the same chamber.

Third, there will be greater transparency and accountability as the people will be able to see clearly if the government or parliament is working or not. If not they can be easily voted out.

The voters are the real checks and balances. Let's forget the United States as a role model whose own presidential, two-chamber political system is broken. Filipinos can chart a better political course, studying the experience of governments in Asia that have adopted a federal-parliamentary system to great success.

This brings me again to the realization that Filipinos must embrace their Asian-ness, and abandon their pretensions at being the brown-skinned "Americans." Asians are good at cooperation, at conflict resolution, dialogue and negotiation - leave the dogfights to the Americans whose DNA favor such a style of democracy.

We don't need the Western-style of political confrontation which will just drag our country further down. Unity and a common purpose are better bets for our future. Let's build our own style of governance that is suited to our own culture and values, and pertinent to our economic and social goals.