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Copying federalism

HIGH BLOOD

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Filipinos used to be tagged as incurable copycats. I think this label has lost its sting because many Filipinos today make us proud of their achievements in various fields.

But colonial conditioning seems to die hard. Until now, vestiges of the mentality that anything foreign is superior and therefore worth emulating dominate our daily life. Thus, we copy foreign lifestyles, manufacturers, value systems, even ideologies. We revered white as the hallmark of pulchritude and supremacy—until Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama proved it otherwise. Still, our trade negotiators are said to get cold feet when faced with their white counterparts, and the hottest-selling cosmetic in the market is whitening cream. But all these are forgivable aberrations.

What I find most perplexing is copying a form of governance like federalism to replace the unitary-presidential system that took a century to evolve in this country.

Despite its infirmities (which can be corrected by amendments), the unitary system has carried this nation through tests of fire: the Filipino-American War (1898-1902), World War II against Japan (1941-1944), decades of internal rebellion, coup attempts, and, lately, terrorism and the war in Marawi. Why then do we need to demolish the entire system by express lane?

Federalism suits countries continental in size and with homogeneous cultures like the United States and the former Soviet Union. Having grown too large by accretion, these countries found governing increasingly difficult—hence the need to federalize.

In the case of the Philippine archipelago, already fragmented by geography into more than 7,100 islands, and divided by cultural diversity (Tagalog, Ilocano, Visayan, Bicolano, Moro, etc.), a system that unifies and holds the country together is imperative. This has been the constant rationale for the choice of the unitary-presidential system by framers of our constitutions. Federalism invites secessionist movements, which could lead to the dismantling of the Republic.

Is this federalism the requiem for the Local Government Code, an admission of its failure? If its purpose is to clip the powers of "Imperial Manila" and decentralize government operations, why not just reorganize and revitalize the existing regional development councils (RDCs) under the National Economic and Development Authority (Neda)? The RDCs are weak because they have no budget of their own. And for an economic development body, the Neda is dismally underfunded. And we expect it to produce economic miracles?

Why not concentrate resources on the "Build, build, build" infrastructure program? If properly funded and implemented, it will revolutionize the countryside economy and directly benefit our rural communities.

As a budget-conscious citizen, I greatly fear the creation of new states. This will multiply the number of revenue-sucking bureaucracies. The government is already top-heavy with high-salaried officials, some of whom do not know their jobs (the reason they hire numerous consultants). Imagine replicating Congress in eight or 11 states! The sitting dynasties will expand their kingdoms and hordes of new petty powerholders will be anointed. This will convert the government into a gigantic employment agency.

To expedite decentralization, why doesn't Congress, under its Herculean leader, pass the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law and fast-track its implementation?

Meanwhile, the rest of the country can contemplate and learn more about federalism. As of now, 9 out of 10 Filipinos think federalism is an alien from outer space. Only lawmakers (and their dynasties), lawyers (and their pockets, for they shall be swamped with loads of conflict cases) and a few intellectuals are familiar with its intricacies.

Incidentally, I find the consultative committee on Charter change sexist, with only one woman among the 19 members. Despite the inclusion of legal luminaries, it lacks gender sensitivity—a mark of primitive chauvinism.

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*FEDERALISM