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Twin pillars for Philippine society

COMMENTARY

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Two changes need to be pursued to make Philippine society more functional and durable: reforming the law of the land and restructuring the political system.

First: By reforming the Constitution, policy change is instituted at the national level, making the law of the land more responsive to the needs of the time. But an overhaul is not necessarily what is needed. What we need is a straightforward relaxation of restrictive economic provisions.

The relaxation of such provisions exponentially provides a more dynamic investment environment for foreign business and, at the same time, opens more economic opportunities for both local and national businesses.

It is high time to empower Congress to act on relaxing the restrictive economic provisions. Specifically, Sections 2, 3, 10 and 11 of Article XII (National Patrimony and Economy); Section 4 of Article XIV (Education, Science and Technology, Arts, Culture and Sports); and Section 11 of Article XVI (General Provisions) are the stipulations to be modified by inserting or appending the phrase "unless otherwise provided by law."

In the international scene, our Constitution has been flagged by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development as having one of the most statutory restrictions with regard to foreign investments. Making the provisions of the law of the land more flexible does not entail adopting a free hand but capacitating our institutions to be more judicious and responsive.

A more open economy will encourage employment-led growth and will raise the quality of competition to the benefit of consumers. Rent-seekers will be weeded out and substandard and oppressive operations will be eradicated. Hence, lending an entrepreneurial character to the law of the land raises the competitiveness of the economy and exposes the labor force to international standards.

Second: Local government units should be the subject of political restructuring. In making the LGUs more politically and economically efficient, their capacity for greater local autonomy and for undertaking greater responsibilities for a more direct and efficient delivery of public services will be ensured. In turn, LGUs must function with greater accountability toward their respective constituents. This will result in the achievement of adequate and sufficient administrative capacity.

Alongside capacity-building programs for LGUs, federal or not, the political party system should also be reformed. Institutionalizing a strong and principle-based political party system will eventually weed out political butterflies and eliminate political opportunism.

Political parties play an important role in constitutional reform as they contribute to the democratic process. The proposed shift to a federal system of government is quite a bold and complicated step. Should we sacrifice the democratic process to hasten the "inclusive development" that federalism is expected to bring about? Railroading the proposed shift will have unintended consequences that can spark disunity and social unrest.

In sum, the success or failure of the federal promise of development and democracy lies in three things: the preparation of the component units, institutional reforms in political participation and representation, and the actual performance of regional and local governments.

Pronouncements and isolated actions do not result in political and social change. Without the necessary policy shifts, the populist appeal of political leaders may simply degenerate into autocratic rule driven by totalitarian interventions. Our problems will remain; all that effort will be expended but it will still be the status quo, or even worse.

In essence, focusing on amending the economic provisions of the Constitution alongside the political restructuring of local government units will be the key to a more progressive and responsive Philippine society.

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THERE'S THE RUB

CONRADO DE QUIROS IS ON MEDICAL LEAVE. —Ed.



* ECONOMY
* POLITICS