



the **Practitioner's** *page*

José de Venecia Jr. of the Philippines

A Philippines politician charts a new course: federalism as the wave of the global future

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We in the Philippines are even now considering constitutional change — from the presidential to the unicameral parliamentary system — and from the unitary to the federal state.

Obviously, we don't want to undergo such a basic change without thinking through all its potential consequences for national society. So I came to the International Conference on Federalism in Brussels not really to debate, but to learn from your collective wisdom and your accumulation of experience, as leaders of well-established federal states.

The Philippines is an archipelago of some 7,000 islands, scattered off the coast of East Asia, between China and Indonesia. We Filipinos nowadays number some 85 million. Our 160-odd languages and dialects reflect our ethnic, religious and cultural diversities.

Administratively, our archipelago is divided into 79 provinces — 117 cities, 1,501 municipalities and over 41,900 villages.

Because these public institutions are run — nationally — by a president, a Congress of two houses, and an independent judiciary and — locally — by governors, town and city mayors, and village captains, plus their own legislative boards and councils, you can imagine how complex administering the unitary Philippine State could become.

Creating a sense of nationality from diversity

Both geography and history have combined to make the sense of nationality difficult to instill among our people. On the broad and fertile deltas of mainland Southeast Asia and Java, great empires arose during Asia's classical period. But — on our archipelago's short river-systems and narrow coastal areas — only decentralized principalities ruled by chieftains of roughly equal power could establish themselves.

Many of these small-scale autocracies survived our 374 years of colonialism.

Until now, they make up the building blocks — and the motive power — of our political parties. And these local factions — in pursuing their narrow interests — generate centrifugal forces that work in opposition to the centralizing efforts of the national government in Manila.

Federalism as a safeguard against separatism

Over this past generation, local frustrations and grievances against an "imperial" Manila — both for its efforts to micro-manage local affairs and for its neglect of the regions — have flared up in separatist rebellions.

Already these rebellions have forced Manila to concede the creation of two autonomous regions — one for the indigenous peoples of the North Luzon mountains, and another for the Muslim communities of the Sulu archipelago and Central Mindanao in the south, although the first one failed in the plebiscite.

Some among us, of course, fear federalism would merely embitter these separatist tendencies until they tear our country apart. But I myself believe that — to the contrary — federalism would be a safeguard against separatism — because it will protect the identities of our diverse communities and empower them to take their future into their own hands.

In the course of my series of back-channel negotiations with our separatist Muslim guerrillas, their leaders repeatedly assured me that federalism would satisfy their demands for a state of their own — one where they would be able to apply aspects of Koranic law.

Why limited autonomy did not work

In 1989, our Congress also passed a Local Government Code, which devolved many functions of the Cabinet departments — particularly in agriculture, education and health care — to local government units. Even limited autonomy has enabled some cities and provinces to "grow" their own skilled, self-confident and self-sufficient leaders.

But since Manila continues to control the financial strings, autonomy has merely starved “devolved” Cabinet department functions of funds Manila continues to administer.

Indeed, Manila’s control over public finances has bred a culture of dependency in our local governments. And these mendicant attitudes I believe only federalism could break.

How would federalism work in the Philippine setting?

Philippine federalism would be “holding together” federalism — of the type that works so well here in Belgium, but failed so bloodily in Yugoslavia. To make our union of diverse communities work more efficiently, the unitary state would yield some of its powers to local governments. Under the most elaborate framework proposal already made, the 14 administrative regions into which the country is divided (for purposes of economic planning and Cabinet outreach) would be consolidated into 10 “proto-states” during a transition period of 10 years.

Each of these “proto-states” would make up — as far as possible — a social and economic whole. Each would have its own charter — its own capital-city — and enough powers of taxation, fund-raising and borrowing to make decentralization meaningful.

What would a federal Philippines look like?

Few of us harbour any illusions that federalism will work flawlessly in our country.

Among the many practical problems I foresee, there are two that are intractable.

The first is that most of our “proto-states” will still have to be shared by people who speak different mother-tongues. Our ethnic and language groupings are so many that it will be impossible to give each one the full measure of political autonomy it would want.

The other basic problem is that uneven development is exceptionally severe among the Philippine regions. In the year 2000, for instance, individual incomes in our richest administrative region were almost five times higher than they were in the poorest region. One can easily foresee a Philippine federal authority as having great difficulty ensuring a sufficient measure of distributive justice within and among its sub-units.

Associated with this problem of uneven development is the fact of still fairly widespread Filipino poverty — which has impeded the development of the civic culture necessary for any flowering of representative democracy.

Yet civic culture must be a requisite of the federal state, whose citizens must owe political obligations to two — and not just to one — public authority.

Having said all these, I still believe only federalism will answer our need to develop a strong national identity while preserving our cultural diversity. Only federalism will give local feelings a voice — to which officials at the centre must listen. Only federalism will enable our local communities to decide for themselves how their society should be ordered: for what purposes and for whose benefit. Only federalism can provide economies of scale in the consolidation of small provinces, cities and townships.

In practical ways, federalism will give local peoples more control — not only over their own resources but also over their livelihoods, their police and their children’s schools.

In a word, only federalism will ensure that the central government becomes the partner — and not the master — of local governments. That federalism should also stimulate competition among local governments is a side-benefit we might also expect to enjoy.

We must congratulate the United States, Canada, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Spain and Malaysia and many others that are successful models of federal government.

An East Asian “federation of nations”

In a wider sense, federalism at home will prepare Filipinos to function in the “federation of nations” that East Asia is likely to become — as the 10 Southeast Asian states already unified in ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) combine with China, Japan and Korea — in an “East Asian Economic Grouping”.

The initial phase of this grand union — a free trade area between the Asean-10 and China — started last year, and should be completed by 2010. Just as “coming together” federalism is doing in the European Union, so will this East Asian community reinforce our global competitiveness by enlarging our internal market and maximizing our economies of scale.

Politically — just as the EU has embedded Germany irrevocably into a European community — so would an East Asian federation contain and channel the energies of the vigorous peoples of China, Japan and Korea. A federated East Asia would also become the third leg in the tripod of global interdependence — the other two, of course, being the EU and NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) — that will ensure the 21st century sees a new dawn of peace and prosperity.

Not a cure-all

I do not expect federalism to be a cure-all for our complex problems of governance and economic development in the Philippines. But I believe it will help us deal with those problems more efficiently — and in ways that local people will support, because they would have a part in making the decisions taken to resolve them. And I am optimistic about our federalist future — because we Filipinos have always been a resilient people. We Filipinos have always accepted change as part of the national life.

I envision federalism as becoming the wave of the future — as newly-emancipated peoples struggle to preserve their autonomy against the demands of the modern state and their uniqueness against the homogenizing influences of the international pop culture being spread by the new communications technology.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, the French political philosopher Montesquieu asked memorably: “What is that form of government which will grant to people the greatest of personal liberties?” In the global system evolving before our eyes, it may be in federations, and in their constituent states — which an American president calls “laboratories of democracy” — that this age-old question will find a lasting answer. ☺