

Brillantes review

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Decentralization and Federalism in the Philippines: Lessons from Global Community Alex B. Brillantes, Jr. and Donna Moscare

More than five centuries of being under the Spaniards, has created a system of government which is highly centralized, bureaucratic, and hierarchical. Not only did the Philippines continue to implement a centralized system of governance, but it also developed a culture predisposed to dependency, and a mindset that looks down on local level institutions. Although centralized governments have their positive aspects, the flaws in the system stand out in the Philippine setting due to the fact that the Philippines is an archipelago composed of more than 7, 000 islands, 400 of which are inhabited, and more than 80 Provinces. The difficulty in travel, communication, and access to the far-flung provinces and sitios has made the task of administering so tedious and inefficient. This has resulted to poor delivery of basic services to the various sitios, and opened the eyes of Filipinos to the benefits of decentralization. I would like to point out however that this problem did not go unnoticed as the Philippine government enacted numerous laws to provide more power and autonomy to local governments. The most familiar and extensive of these is the Local Government Code of 1991. Though the Philippines has had numerous milestones and setbacks in its struggle to empower the local governments, the perceived openness of the Filipinos to this form of devolution of powers and the observed progress and efficiency among local governments has revived the debate on the implementation of a Federal form of government. The main argument being, if decentralization has led to numerous gains, then a Federal form of government would definitely lead to more gains. Senator Aquilino Pimentel, pointed out two

major reasons why Federalism would be good for the Philippines, he believed that this would, 1. Hasten the economic development among the various regions of the country by allocating power which at present is concentrated in the central government to the regions that will be converted to federal states. The devolved powers will allow the federal states to mobilize their resources for development without being hindered or controlled by the central government; (Page 9) 2. And dissipate the causes of the recurrent armed Moro challenges against the government and, thereby, lay the basis for a just and lasting peace in Central and Southwestern Mindanao. (ibid) The main idea behind the economic argument is grounded on the belief that a local government if allowed to pursue a direction without hindrance and control from a central government would be able to be more efficient in developing creative solutions to the problems experienced in the locality. It goes without saying that a central government bent on controlling local decisions without experiencing the problem first-hand could result to solutions that do not really address the problem. An example of this would be the “ Bridges to Nowhere” of former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, which pushed for the construction of bridges in various provinces but resulted into the unfinished bridges and bridges that are impassable when it rains. Though it was rumored that the desire of the central government to collect kickbacks from the projects, resulted into the unfinished projects, it is undeniable that the central government’s power to override decisions and implement projects in the local governments could result into a disconnect between the actual need and solution. The second argument for Federalism is grounded on the hope that this would lead to lasting peace in Central and

Western Mindanao. However, I must point out that this may not be the lasting solution we are looking for as the secessionist movements in Muslim Mindanao are not really fighting for autonomy but rather to establish a new nation of their own separate from the Philippines. This was also pointed out by Dr. Brillantes, when in page 12, he stated that, “ A point to be considered, however, is on whether the Moros will find a federal state of their own an acceptable alternative to their separatist goal. Compromise between the government and the Moros, therefore, is needed”. THE FUTURE OF FEDERALISM IN THE PHILIPPINES Federalism indeed has its pros and cons, but the need for a more responsive local government is vital if we are to establish a strong state. This responsive local government can only be achieved when we provide them with the power to actually make decisions without explicit control, and if we provide them with the means to source out funds of their own, and with complete control over the disbursement of these funds. For what good is a state that possesses all powers of autonomy yet has to continually bow down to the central government for its finances? The promise shown by Federalism if practiced in the Philippines, could in fact lead to vital gains in the long run as this would allow Filipinos to cultivate their regionally shared cultures which in the present context is being placed behind the drive to develop a “ National Culture”, which has resulted to a confused Filipino citizenry. The Philippines is multi-cultural as can be evidenced by the presence of regional groupings, Indigenous people, and the Moros of Mindanao, and the creation of a Federal State could lead to the development of a high sense of belongingness which will lead to numerous benefits in the long run. I would not want to quickly point out that Federalism

is the ultimate solution to the problems of the Philippines, but it does lead us towards a direction we ought to take.