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Debate on Federal Philippines: A Citizen's Handbook

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Debate on Federal Philippines: A Citizen's Handbook

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. 108 pages.

The question of a federal Philippines has been a longstanding debate among academics and policy makers. However, the Duterte administration has recently fast-tracked the path to federalism, forcing the debate to enter public discussion. As of the most recent public opinion poll, 67 percent of Filipinos remain opposed to federalism. However, due to the highly political nature of the current federalism proposal, everyday discussions on the topic have been highly polarizing and partisan, thus failing to reach the core political and structural issues. Despite the public chatter, the regime's transition toward federalism is gradually becoming a strong possibility. In July 2018 the administration's constitutional commission released a draft for a federal Philippines, containing many of the administration's priority reforms. As federalism progresses on the legislative side, the government contributes little to the popular discourse except through a vulgar song-and-dance routine, *Pepedederalismo*, by Presidential Communications Assistant Secretary Esther Margaux "Mocha" Uson. Filipinos searching for more meaningful discussion may find the *Debate on Federal Philippines: A Citizen's Handbook* a timely and highly welcome assistance in objectively examining the implications of such a drastic political change.

This handbook comprises six chapters by six different authors from across the spectrum of the federalism debate. Each chapter takes a frequently asked questions (FAQ) format for the benefit of nonacademic readers and ordinary citizens. In the first chapter Gilbert Llanto, president of the Institute of Development Studies, provides a general background on decentralization in the Philippines and the Local Government Code of 1991. Some readers may find it odd for a book on federalism to begin with the Local Government Code. However, Llanto's chapter frames federalism as merely one of many options for the ongoing decentralization process. The Local Government Code is an already existing attempt at addressing the same issues that federalism is purported to address. This chapter poses two options: improvement of the current unitary system, which has already

been gradually decentralizing, or an outright shift to federalism. Llanto also identifies the distribution of power as the core issue in the federalism debate. By beginning with this chapter, the book challenges readers to examine the sufficiency of the current path of decentralization before considering the more radical option of federalism.

Following Llanto's chapter, that of Julio Teehankee, professor at De La Salle University and a member of the constitutional commission, provides a comprehensive history of the federalism debate in the Philippines and the basic characteristics of federalism across different countries. Teehankee sees federalism as a means of correcting the country's overcentralized power structure and uneven economic growth originating from past colonial administrations. This particular argument would have been stronger had the chapter included more economic indicators of an overcentralized system. Interestingly, the chapter includes lists of both existing and defunct federalisms, revealing that federalism has its limitations and may be vulnerable to changing political conditions. Among the existing forms of federalism are the three primary models, namely, the American, Canadian, and German models (30). Readers may realize the difficulty of adapting these Western models to the Philippine setting. The chapter also reveals the connection of the federalism question to the debate on the Philippines's shift from a presidential to a parliamentary form of government. The latter debate has its own distinct component issues, such as the balance of executive power, legislative dynamics, party politics, regional representation, and electoral politics. Although the most common arguments for federalism include fiscal equity among regions and improved relations between central and local governments, this chapter reveals how federalism can drastically alter the power structures within the Philippine government and echoes Llanto's assertion on power as the debate's core issue.

In chapter 3 Ronald Mendoza, dean of the Ateneo School of Government, tackles the common fears and risks regarding federalism, such as possible regional secessionism, entrenchment of political dynasties, increased corruption, and economic inequality. While allaying these fears, Mendoza states that the existing academic literature does not provide a clear answer to many of these questions, especially in the case of the Philippines. One concrete prediction Mendoza makes is decentralization furthering the entrenchment of political dynasties and underdevelopment in the regions. The tone of this chapter suggests caution in light of these risks and unintended

consequences from the country's experience with decentralization. Mendoza's alternative approach is to consider the particularities of what is known regarding decentralization and focus on specific areas of reform, such as fiscal policy, internal revenue, and local government resources.

Chapters 4 and 5 stand out in the collection because they are both sourced directly from the Partido Demokratiko ng Pilipinas-Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) Federalism Institute, the main think-tank behind the current federalism campaign and sponsored by Duterte's own political party. In chapter 4 Eduardo Araral, former vice-dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy of the National University of Singapore, lists down a "grand bargain" (60) of necessary accompanying reforms that would ensure the success of federalism in the Philippines. Such reforms include party development, proportional representation, and the elimination of political turncoatism and dynasties. Although the chapter contains little data to support its more specific argument, it echoes Mendoza's caution on the risks of an unexamined shift to federalism. In chapter 5, rather than citing academic literature, Jonathan Malaya, executive director of the PDP-Laban Federalism Institute, paints a more vivid picture of federalism based on the institute's current proposal. Malaya describes the specific changes in basic government processes under an assumed federal order, such as the role of the police, the authority of cities, the collection of taxes, elections, and the division of new regional territories. Although Malaya's more descriptive contribution may be valuable in understanding federalism's everyday governance, it is not immediately clear why these changes are necessary or how they address the problems of the current unitary system.

In the concluding chapter Paul Hutchcroft, professor at the Australian National University, relates a more direct and critical case on how the debate on federalism must be questioned and analyzed. He reiterates the concern many have with this issue: "If federalism is the answer, what is the question?" (85). For Hutchcroft, the common rationales for federalism do not necessarily require such a major shift. He argues for a problem-driven process toward federalism, accompanied by a greater understanding of existing conditions and dynamics. He also points out that the Philippines is already among the most decentralized countries in Southeast Asia and that there is little sense in further decentralization through federalism. Hutchcroft makes for an excellent *de facto* discussant of the overarching questions throughout the book and gives a good counterpoint to the rationales Teehankee raises in chapter 2.

The handbook accomplishes its basic objective of clarifying fundamental concepts and questions related to federalism for a general readership. Novice foreign scholars on the Philippines may also find it somewhat useful as a primer on the current debate. However, the richness of the arguments in this compilation may not be immediately straightforward to its main audience due to its format. The book's compact structure, while being a selling point, is also its greatest limitation. For one, there is little transparency as to how these "frequently asked questions" were formed or arranged, a crucial point considering the implications of the arrangement and context of the arguments, as identified in this review. Moreover, the lack of a main editorial rejoinder explaining the arrangement and moderating the various voices may leave the reader oblivious to the underlying threads and issues. Another issue that could have been further highlighted is the reasoning behind the current push for federalism. Teehankee's chapter narrates a brief history of movements for federalism but stops short of situating Duterte's particular push for federalism in this chronology. There are also clear disagreements between the contributors, particularly between the second and last chapters, which would have benefitted from a moderating voice. Furthermore, the book chapters do not seem to follow a standard for empirical evidence as some chapters have unsubstantiated arguments.

On close reading, one finds each chapter having a distinct purpose, with some being argumentative while others being descriptive. Such confusion with the discordant tones could have been remedied by providing a proper editorial chapter. This book may not satisfy readers with any definitive answers or necessarily convince anyone to support either side of the debate. Nonetheless, it is a necessary reading material for laypersons to properly begin rethinking old assumptions while understanding the intricacies and consequences of the debate. Hopefully its open-endedness and brevity may challenge readers to explore these issues further and formulate new questions beyond this book. Perhaps its brevity may be an opportunity for others to discuss and publish their own views on federalism. Despite scholarly and political differences, the authors clearly articulate their common message on the need for greater rigor and caution in proceeding with the debate.

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