

Early this year, former Peace Adviser Jesus Dureza dangled federalism as a key to unlock the deadlock in the GRP-MILF talks over the territory that would form ancestral domain. The idea was for a single amendment of the Constitution, which would create a federal state for Muslim Mindanao. However, the MILF leaders saw the offer as a trick. Opposition leaders concurred, claiming that the revival of Charter change or Cha-cha, which coincided with the Senate investigations of the scandalous \$329-million National Broadband Network deal with the Chinese ZTE corporation, was a Malacañang ploy to distract attention. Worse, Cha-cha would simply be a way to remove term limits. Thus, Mrs. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo could stay in power beyond 2010, this time under a parliamentary setup.

However, Senate Minority Leader Aquilino "Nene" Q. Pimentel, Jr. believes that Cha-cha, which would focus on the adoption of a federal system, is the best way to jumpstart the stalled peace negotiation. Manong Nene maintains that the shift to a federal system of government will accomplish two main goals: economic development of the entire country, and the elimination of the root causes of rebellion, particularly in Mindanao.

Senator Pimentel filed Senate Resolution No. 10, now supported by 16 senators, calling for amendments to the 1987 Constitution for the adoption of a federal system of government through a constituent assembly. Mr. Pimentel proposes the creation of eleven states out of the Republic, which "would establish centers of finance and development in the archipelago." The current system concentrates too much power in the hands of central government, leading to the abuses of power being investigated by the Senate.

Senator Pimentel maintains that the shift to a federal system of government will accomplish two main goals: economic development of the entire country, and the elimination of the root causes of rebellion, particularly in Mindanao.

Gen. Rodolfo Garcia, chair of the government panel in the peace talks with the MILF, has commented that said the federalism option has to be approved by the MILF in peace talks and cannot be unilaterally offered. General Garcia did, however, feel that federalism is a solution to the deadlock, one which the government can support since it would follow constitutional processes.

Even MNLF Chair Nur Misuari, triumphant after the successful MNLF Peace Congress last week, which drew over 50,000 MNLF and MNLF supporter from all over Mindanao, supports the federalism proposal. Two weeks ago, Mr. Misuari met with Davao Congressman and House Speaker Prospero Nograles. The two discussed the Pimentel proposal. Chairman Misuari is reported to have agreed to the proposal. However, in a conversation I had with the MNLF chairman, he said he would support a federalism proposal only if fewer states will be created. He believes there should be three states: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Muslim Mindanao can be a special region of autonomy in Mindanao, but clothed with real powers.

I can empathize with MILF advisor Michael Mastura when he asks, "Why does the government prefer to disrupt the procedural steps of the peace talks while redirecting the MILF side's position to be locked into the constitutional mandate?"

Manong Nene, can Cha-cha be safeguarded? Will a shift to federalism truly allow Muslim Mindanao to exert their right to self-determination, a core demand of the MILF? Will a change in political system provide more powers to the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao? Or will tinkering with the system become an opportunity to take away power already granted under the Organic Act? What guarantees do we have that ARMM will not become an even weaker vessel than it already is, even less autonomous than the non-autonomous administrative regions? On paper, the Organic Act already allows the ARMM government – with its Regional

Legislative Assembly – to chart its own course. On paper, ARMM is supposed to be free of the control that the central government normally wields over the 15 administrative regions of the country.

Will a shift to federalism truly allow Muslim Mindanao to exert their right to self-determination, a core demand of the MILF? Will a change in political system provide more powers to the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao?

Clearly, if the puppeteers in the Palace control the implementers, no amount of power provided on paper will benefit ARMM. My friend Benny Bacani, executive director of the Institute of Autonomy and Governance, points out: “The problem does not lie in the structures of autonomy but in the Malacañang-anointed regional leadership that is unwilling to exercise in full the powers already.” Benny is one of the Cotabato City legal experts in touch with the MILF.

In the meantime, a bomb explosion on Thursday outside the Colonel Edwin Andrews Air Base (EAAB) in Zamboanga City has claimed 3 casualties and wounded 23. The MILF has been accused by the military. Khaled Musa, deputy chairman of the MILF committee on information, has denounced the allegation and condemned the attack.

A way back to peace is imperative. The government and the MILF must return to the negotiating table. Perhaps it is time to suspend our suspicions and investigate the federalist option offered by Senate Resolution 10. # # #

[Joomla SEO powered by JoomSEF](#)