

THE BIG FEDERALISM PROJECT IN THE PHILIPPINES: MISSED OPPORTUNITIES AND UNFULFILLED PROMISES

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Abstract: The “big federalism project” in the Philippines is considered a missed chance to enhance governance, reduce regional disparities, and decentralize political power. Promoted as a reform during Duterte’s presidency, it involved a consultative body of legal and political experts. However, calls for reform failed due to resistance from political elites, underdeveloped party structures, and negative public perceptions. This study synthesizes historical and current discussions to examine the theoretical framework, concerns, and unrealized opportunities of federalism in the Philippines. It uses qualitative research to analyze policy actions, theoretical constructs, and topics of decentralization and governance. The study also observes that federalism has not been given much attention because there are new challenges and the government that followed is not fully dedicated to it. Therefore, this paper concludes that federalism remains a practical solution to the challenges of governance.

Keywords: Federalism, Decentralization, Philippines, Governance Reform, Regional Disparities, Political Elites

1 Introduction

The presidency of Rodrigo Duterte was ushered in on a campaign anchored on a platform of federalism. Having come from Mindanao, Duterte’s positioning as the champion of the cause fits very well with the long-standing aspirations of marginalized regions for greater autonomy and self-governance (Teehankee, 2018). In the run-up to the 2016 elections, Duterte went on a nationwide campaign explaining what federalism was to the populace using language that was familiar to them. This was a worthy experiment, as Duterte handily won the elections that year. It was, therefore, reasonable for all to expect that constitutional change would be his main priority and shift to a federal system of government as he took power.

At the beginning of the Duterte presidency, federalism seemed to have received a shot in the arm through the convening of a consultative committee on charter change chaired by Reynato Puno, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Aquilino ‘Nene’ Pimentel Jr., a prominent proponent of federalism, served on the committee and was the previous Senate President as well as the author of the Local Government Code of 1991. Over the years, Duterte’s federalism idea did not come to fruition, prompting speculation about whether it was a mere political strategy to garner support or if it was sincerely intended. Regrettably, the federalism initiative in the Philippines did not come to fruition and ultimately faded away from the public discourse and retreated into the halls of the academe.

This article analyzes the Philippines’ foray into what this study calls the “big federalism project,” focusing on its historical backdrop, conceptual underpinnings, challenges, and future outlook. It outlines the project’s development from its inception to its current

status. This study critically assesses the promises and challenges of federalism and explores how barriers have shaped its prospects. As shall be discussed in this paper, the journey towards achieving this vision has not been smooth owing to various factors such as party politics, the elite, and various individuals and their part in shaping the project's success or failure.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology, drawing on secondary data and critical analysis, to examine the extensive federalism initiative in the Philippines. Certain data sources emphasize primary research undertaken and disseminated by various scholars, policy documents, and reports, in addition to investigations conducted by governmental entities and researchers. In this vein, the objective of this paper is to identify the project's potential and some issues with the federalism movement in an analysis of the existing literature and scholars' viewpoints.

This study's research design consisted of a descriptive analysis of historical and current documents and materials pertaining to federalism in the Philippines. The criteria used to filter the sources were relevance, credibility of the source in the federalism discourse, and the significance of the source. The data collected were subjected to critical insight, with specific emphasis placed on the focus areas of power concentration, political elites, and the role of party politics in determining the trajectory of the phenomena. To achieve this, a thematic analysis approach was applied to classify the promises as well as future possibilities, challenges, and barriers to federalism. This analysis also examines the historical development of these themes and their contribution to the development of the "big federalism project." Through a critical analysis of these themes, this study intends to offer a clearer appreciation of the challenges that faced the federalism movement in the Philippines. The analysis aims to present an integrated account of observations coming from various sources in the form of policies for federalism, interviews, academic literature, and engagements from advocates.

2 Literature overview

This literature review collates different analyses of the arguments for and against federalism in the Philippines, including several scholarly works that discuss the advantages and disadvantages of proceeding with the proposed shift. Following this, a contextual discussion and broad commentary on the terrain that the federalism project navigates is useful and instructive.

The Philippines has a long history of centralized governance, with power concentrated in the hands of the national government and the elites (Turner, 1999) (Hutchcroft, 2000) (Atienza, 2004) (Nowak, 1977). This has resulted in political deterioration, inadequate provision of public goods, and erosion of democratic values among Filipino citizens (Teehankee & Calimbahin, 2019). This centralization was fueled by colonial influence and the political transformation of the nation within the backdrop of a politically fragmented state.

The weakness of the Philippine party system has been identified as one of the major challenges to democratic consolidation and better governance, as it is characterized by sharp factionalism and a lack of clear-cut programmatic stands (Hicken & Tan, 2020) (Teehankee, 2020). As a result, personality politics have taken center stage, and elite networks have manipulated legislation. These elements constitute a broader array of

chronic diseases affecting the country's political evolution: a democratic deficit, absence of political accountability, inability to articulate interests, and failure to transcend the status quo, characteristics prevalent among political parties in the Philippines within the context of their constrained and unstable post-Marcos development (Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 2003) (Buendia, 2021) (Arugay, 2005) (Hicken & Tan, 2020).

Having laid the broad contours of the socio-political context and background that gave rise to the big federalism project, this paper now surveys some of the major works that have touched on the topic.

A cursory review of the literature reveals that the discourse is replete with materials that either advocate federalism or rail against it. As early as the '80s, scholars such as Buendia (1989) argued for a federal system to address the highly centralized, imperial, and unitary Philippine presidential system and its associated flaws. He described the federalism project as an "imperative" that the country must consider, given its diversity and regional imbalances, which led to the marginalization of certain areas. Buendia (1989) called these disparate sectors "nations" and looks at federalism as a way to achieve a majority-minority nexus. Other experts such as Brillantes and Moscare (2002) have likewise made the case for federalism, claiming that it is the key to unleashing the "full potential of local governments" and empowering the regions. They also drew lessons from the global community to support the argument that the shift to federalism must be based on popular support from the people and anchored in participatory governance. Abueva (2005) argued that the Philippines would benefit by shifting to a federal and parliamentary form of government. In fact, Abueva (2002) even wrote a constitution envisioning a federal-parliamentary system to be adopted by the Philippines. Miral (2017) analyzed the advantages of federalism for the nation, focusing on two developmental issues: slow economic growth and poverty.

Following the same line of thinking, Ebel and Venugopal (2013) pointed out that there is a need to establish a minimum level of rule of law in order for the local governors to be able to balance the national government's authority, which is important in preventing dependency and misuse of power by the central government. According to Tusalem (2019), the unitary system led to stunted growth in the provinces that are distant from the capital; therefore, federalism might enhance regional autonomy and foster equitable development. Luyun et al. (2021) support these claims by noting that some people believe that federalism is essential to ensure that there is standard legislation at the local level, increase interests, and provide assurances of other related local policies.

Dioso and Pagua (2021) established that the lack of sufficient decentralization has led to the clamor for federalism. This sentiment can be applied to the plight of the Moro people toward independence. As explained by Rido (2022), the Philippine government has tried to assimilate the Moros into society through integration. However, these efforts have been resisted because the Moro people have not been given genuine autonomy. The push for federalism can thus be seen as a response to the historical grievances of marginalized groups seeking recognition and self-governance.

Critics or skeptics of the big federalism project are also not in short supply. Federalism has always received massive criticism from several people in the Philippines, particularly concerning its suitability and prospects. The opponents of the change from a unitary to a federal state believe that such a shift may only worsen the existing

inequality and increase the fragmentation of power rather than improve the status of the regions. May (2007) and Tigno (2017) asserted that a more effective strategy would be to deepen decentralization and local autonomy. This concern is well captured by Dioso and Pagua (2021), who acknowledged that because decentralization has failed to meet expectations, federalism has been considered as an alternative, but they are aware that such a system does not necessarily guarantee equal resource allocation or effective representation of provinces considered to be in the periphery.

Hutchcroft (2017) noted that adjusting to federalism carries some dangers, such as the intensification of clientelism and the strengthening of the ruling political clans. It is also worth recognizing that, although Brillantes and Moscare (2002) support federalism in general terms, they have also outlined some critical considerations that are significant, including the measures to successfully set up a working party system, enhance governance institutions and capabilities in local governments, and increase the visibility and accountability of the transition processes.

The political dynamics surrounding the push for federalism also played a crucial role in shaping opposing perspectives. Takagi's (2017) analysis of policy coalitions in the Philippines suggests that ambitious politicians may exploit the federalism debate to challenge existing power structures. This may result in increased political fragmentation instead of unified governance. The tension stemming from this viewpoint focuses on the influence of local and national players in federalism discussions: local elites may resist federal authority to enhance their own standing. Another criticism is that the current political climate might not support such a significant change. For example, the expansion of opportunities for corruption and bureaucratic sluggishness at the regional level prompts questions about the ability of local authorities to exercise these new powers efficiently.

Moreover, the Philippines' political map adds another layer of complexity to the debate on federalism. Examining the "imperial Manila" phenomenon, Tusalem (2019) demonstrated that the political and economic dominance of the capital city has created structural injustices, hinting that the federal system could place power in the hands of the regions more fairly. However, this redistribution cannot be a haphazard process, as it may only worsen existing tensions and inequalities between different regions. Conflict over the number and distribution of resources and the manner in which the structures are to be managed is probably the most crucial issue that cannot be ignored in addressing the issue of federalism. This is the reason why supporters of federalism have often been accused of harboring intentions to establish an even bigger government and, hence, potentially deal with more bureaucrats and, therefore, more bureaucratic slowness. Skeptics argue that a federal system may cause a blurring of authority and responsibility between levels of government, foster duplicate programs and institutions, and complicate policy and administration (Dioso & Pagua, 2021). This argument is persuasive, given that the current systems in the Philippines suffer from fragmented and ineffective governance. Numerous people have articulated concerns that federalism could intensify these problems, hence resulting in the dismissal of the governmental system reform.

The literature suggests that social approbation and the readiness to embrace federalism are critical components of the discourse. Perron (2009) contends that the question of federalism remains ambiguous among local political leaders and citizens. The success of

the federal system will, therefore, hinge on the leaders at both the center and the region to respect and uphold the tenets of democracy at every level.

The anti-federalism front also stands in contrast to the project based on ethnic and regional considerations. Rai (2023) describes how decisions to adopt federalism in nations with multiple ethnic groups can lead to a concentration of power in the hands of dominant ethnic groups to the detriment of minorities, thus counteracting the democratization process. This standpoint is especially crucial given that the historical animosities among the country's diverse ethnic groups may be further fueled by a federal system that fails to meet their demands and expectations. Another major argument of anti-federalism is the possibility of secession or higher regionalism, which can be observed in other Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia and Thailand, where federalization processes resulted in tensions and conflicts.

Moreover, additional aspects must be examined to further clarify the problem, including perception and political legitimization. Mendoza and Panao (2021) assert that political activities, events, and scandals significantly influence public opinion, hence affecting the legitimacy of governance institutions. In a world where people lack trust in politics and political leaders, federalism may be seen as a way through which leaders are looking for an opportunity to gain more authority and influence the polity than had been previously the case. This is due to the historical experiences of the Filipino people regarding governance in the Philippines, which was tainted with corruption and patronage politics (Claudio, 2014).

An additional apprehension over federalism stems from its presumed instability and shreds of violence that may result from it. According to Holden (2009), left-wing parties have often not been able to establish themselves in national politics and might not do so with the introduction of federalism, which might even increase polarization between the people. Decentralization of power has been an issue of debate in federalism studies, as Rai (2023) opined that it may lead to conflict in ethnically diverse societies.

Apart from these political and social issues, there are economic factors that could be associated with federalism, which claimed that it could worsen inequality by enabling rich regions to preserve their resources, in contrast to poor ones that can barely provide basic services (Tusalem, 2019). In the Philippines, the influence of economic inequalities cannot be dismissed, as it has been widely observed. In a similar vein, critics of federalism argue that it gives rise to a race to the bottom in public services and infrastructure investment that will only worsen the plight of disadvantaged groups and regions (Tusalem, 2019).

It is critical to understand that opposition to federalism has countless effects on the historical, political, social, and economic domains. Critics argue that the proposed change will actually serve to entrench existing political and socio-economic inequalities, allowing local elites to dominate other communities and ultimately leading to increased political instability and conflict. The interdependency between the perception of authority's legitimacy, the electorate's trust, and the efficiency of the governance fosters another layer of complexity in the federalism issue as citizens deliberate upon the consequences of such a massive political shift. As the debate on federalism persists, it is relevant to acknowledge these views to appreciate the issues of governance in the Philippine context.

3 Beginnings, Challenges and Pitfalls of the Big Federalism Project

The big federalism project had a long gestation period starting in the '80s. Pimentel, Abueva, and Brillantes have been keen on this reform, asserting that it would solve the problem of centralization and the aggregated distribution of power. In his political party, PDP-Laban, Pimentel championed the change of the system to federalism. However, his ideas were met with opposition from other political groups. Pimentel pushed for constitutional amendments that would pave the way for a federal set-up. For the longest time, the federalism project never took off, leaving only an ideal vision more than anything else. This was until Duterte became the president in 2016. Nonetheless, the attempts of their predecessors to actualize this vision have been marred by resistance from party politics and bureaucracy from the political elite (Takagi, 2017) (Teehankee, 2020).

Within this context, therefore, a federal form of government was advanced as a solution to the state's problems of governance. Advocates believe that decentralization of power and shifting to the federal system of government will decrease corruption rates, improve the functioning of state-owned companies, and bring more voice to peripheral regions in decision-making. However, the implementation of such a broad federalism agenda is a challenge owing to the political and power relations that exist in the Philippines. An examination of the federalism discourse uncovers several issues linked to the party system in the Philippines. Despite the advocacy of notable individuals like Pimentel, Puno, Abueva, and Brillantes for federalism to resolve the nation's governance issues, their initiatives have consistently been obstructed by party politics and the vested interests of the political elite (Araral et al., 2017).

The Federalism Promise: A Vision of Reform and the Role of Political Parties

Federalism has remained a relevant topic in Philippine politics owing to the many groups and parties that support its implementation to help address regional disparities, administrative problems, and conflict. Notably, the Partido Demokratikong Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban), Promdi, and the Citizen's Movement for a Federal Philippines (CMFP) have been at the forefront of federalism.

Created in 1982 with the objective of resisting the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos Sr., PDP-Laban redirected its goals after the reemergence of democracy in 1986. Under Pimentel's leadership, federalism was made an essential part of their platform since the party saw it as a remedy to the problems of inequality between regions and the incessant insurgent issues, especially in Muslim Mindanao. In support of local self-governance and as part of his federalist agenda, his work outlined the broad direction of future dialogues on constitutional reform. Pimentel proposed a federal Philippines partitioned into ten states: four from Luzon, three from Visayas, and three from Mindanao, with Metro Manila recognized as a unique federal administrative entity. He contended that federalism would promote equitable development, alleviate regional disparities, and offer a political resolution to the Mindanao conflict (Teehankee, 2018) (Cruz et al., 2018).

The Promdi Party, founded by Emilio Mario Osmeña in 1998, likewise promotes enhanced municipal autonomy. Promdi, an abbreviation for "Probinsya Muna" (Province First), advocates for decentralization by redistributing governmental authority from the capital, Metro Manila, to provincial regions. The party contended that this

transition would promote economic advancement in areas that have traditionally been overlooked by the central government. Promdi's platform embodies the conviction that regional governments have the capacity to self-govern and foster local development independently of national government intervention (Cureg & Matunding, 2006).

The Citizen's Movement for a Federal Philippines (CMFP) is a notable participant in the federalist movement, especially over Mindanao. The CMFP advocates federalism as a way of attaining peace in Mindanao – a region that has been plagued by conflict and rebellion. The organization also argues that federalism might provide the Moro people with the degree of sovereignty they require to reduce tensions between the national government of the Philippines and the Muslim population. The CMFP asserts that federalism presents a viable pathway for peace-making by tackling the fundamental causes of conflict and enabling local governments to operate autonomously (Cureg & Matunding, 2006).

In 2005, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo established a Consultative Commission (ConCom) to propose amendments to the 1987 Philippine Constitution. The objective was to change the country's presidential-unitary system to a parliamentary-federal one, with the intention of enhancing local governance and competitiveness (Consultative Commission, 2005). The ConCom's majority report, led by the former University of the Philippines President Jose V. Abueva, proposed a unicameral parliament with autonomous territories that would eventually become a federal state. A minority report, signed by seven commissioners, critiqued the inadequate consultation process and insufficient justification for such systemic changes (Cureg & Matunding, 2006).

The Citizens' Movement for a Federal Philippines (CMFP) and the Coalition for Charter Change Now! (CCCN) became leading protagonists for constitutional change. CMFP advocated a ConCon to advance federalism with less centralization and more responsibility in addressing power relations (Cureg & Matunding, 2006). During the leadership of former House Speaker Jose De Venecia, CCCN supported constituent assembly (ConAss) as the amendment of the Constitution and supported the unicameral system emphasizing efficiency in governance (Cureg & Matunding, 2006).

Federalism has met a lot of challenges in the Philippines, as is the case with many other countries. Ideological resistance, lack of bureaucratic support, as well as challenges in dissemination have made it almost impossible to implement the big federalism project. However, it remains a force in Philippine politics and is still pushing for federalism and local self-government as the solution to the nation's unceasing problems of social inequality.

The platforms of PDP-Laban, Promdi, and CMFP underscore the varied causes driving the advocacy for federalism in the Philippines. The primary objective is to empower local governments and foster equitable development, with each organization contributing a distinct viewpoint to the federalism discourse. Together, they signify a substantial movement aimed at transforming the political landscape of the Philippines in the quest for enhanced autonomy, peace, and development. Political parties have played a crucial role in shaping the federalism debate in the Philippines, with varying degrees of commitment and focus over the years. PDP-Laban, the party founded by Pimentel, has historically advocated for federalism. The party's platform became more prominent during the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte, a vocal proponent of federalism.

Under Duterte's leadership, PDP-Laban pushed for constitutional reform, aiming to shift the country from a unitary to a federal structure. However, internal disputes within the party, coupled with the lack of a cohesive strategy and sufficient political support, ultimately stalled the federalism initiative.

The Partido Federal ng Pilipinas (PFP), on the other hand, is a relatively new political party formed in 2021 with the explicit goal of advancing the federalism agenda. However, despite its name and advocacy, the current administration under President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., affiliated with PFP, has not prioritized federalism. The Marcos administration focused on economic rehabilitation and many other political programs and gave little importance to the drive toward constitutional change and federalism.

This demonstrates the dynamic, at times adversarial relations within political parties. It is worth noting that parties have multiple interests and goals. Therefore, matters such as economic redevelopment, internal party politics, or individual ambitions might take precedence over long-term, strategic concerns as constitutional structure. This underscores the difficulty of translating support for federalism into tangible political engagements and change processes, as it entails unwavering commitment and coalition among multiple political players.

The subsequent section of the study explores the obstacles encountered by the extensive federalism initiative, assessing its potential and proposing alternate trajectories for the present and imminent future.

Federalism as a Broken Promise: Why It Has Not Yet Materialized

Since the beginning, the big federalism project has been bedeviled by several factors. This paper shows that the future of federalism in the Philippines is shaped by the complex interplay of factors that include decentralization, political personalities and scholars, and the dynamics of party politics. It also highlights the significance of political parties in pushing the federalism campaign. This paper highlights why and how the prospects of federalism have been encouraged and discouraged by party politics and fluctuating political demands to show the underlying processes. The next section elaborates on the factors that have persisted as barriers to achieving federalism in the Philippines.

The federal system in the Philippines has always been espoused as a way of devolving power, strengthening subnational governments, and reducing developmental imbalances. However, this has remained unfulfilled to date. The broad idea was to improve on the Local Government Code of 1991, which Pimentel authored to decentralize power and enhance the autonomy of LGUs. Federalism was supposed to be the next step in this process, as it would grant regions more independence and direct control over resources. However, the federalism agenda was unsuccessful. It was a focal point of Duterte's campaign but has somewhat faded and regressed from the sphere of politics to the sphere of ideas under the current presidency. Critics opine that the project has reached a political stalemate and that the national government is a major cause of the federalism project being stagnant.

As for the political elites' reluctance to support federalism, Araral et al. (2017) note that this is due to the fact that the decentralization of decision-making would result in a

redistribution of power, which is unfavorable for political elites who possess power in their hands. The Duterte administration marked a pivotal moment for federalism in the Philippines. His party, PDP-Laban, pushed federalism as a central policy platform, framing it as a solution to the country's over-centralized governance and regional disparities. With the establishment of the Consultative Committee (ConCom) led by Puno, there was an initial momentum toward drafting a new federal constitution that could gain political and public support.

Despite previous efforts, several scholars, including Teehankee (2018), highlight that the federalism initiative faced numerous challenges within Duterte's own political circle. He noted that internal conflicts within PDP-Laban and rival factions vying for influence created divisions that weakened the party's unified support for federalism. The administration never adequately explained the rationale of federalism, including its advantages and working from its principles to garner broader popular support. As a result, the federalism project led by the Duterte administration stagnated and was sidelined for other political concerns, such as the war on drugs and infrastructure programs, making the failure of federalism a missed chance for policy transformation (Araral et al., 2017).

The country's political culture, which rejects structural changes, also constitutes one of the main barriers to federalism. Opponents of the change, particularly those who have much to gain from the existing unitary arrangements and political influence, have been effective gatekeepers in forestalling any possibility of change. This is aided in a significant manner by the fact that there are no stable programmatic parties in the country (Hicken & Tan, 2020). This is further compounded by sharp factionalism within political parties, which poses a problem when it comes to pushing for the advocacy. Political polarization that results in the fragmentation of power or authority, lack of discipline within members of a party, and extreme factionalism have been enduring features of Philippine politics. This situation does not augur well for the formulation of sustainable party policies that are core to functional federal systems, which have traditionally relied upon steady and coherent political parties (Teehankee, 2020) (Chambers & Ufen, 2020). These underlying issues are made worse by the shift from a two-party to a multi-party system, which, as Kurniawati (2024) comments, had led to party loyalty being overshadowed by factional loyalty and parochialism.

Additionally, political dynasties have been obstacles in the push for the federalism project as well since their existence, by definition, runs counter to federalism's target of distributing power across diverse levels of governance (Fiva & Smith, 2018) (Kasuya, 2019). The continuation of these dynasties is supported by a political culture that highlights patronage and personalities, unlike institutionally disciplined parties that are necessary for the creation of federal systems (Tusalem, 2016). Furthermore, the absence of a strengthened democratic setting in the Philippines also adds to the requirements of federalism. Democratic federalism also emphasizes the need for separation of powers, as does traditional federalism, but it also means creating the institutes that allow the functioning of the federalistic model (Memon, 2024). The challenges attendant to any democracy are also present in the federalism proposal, as the current political system favors the elite (Benz & Sonnicksen, 2015). The absence of strong and sustainable national political parties and efficient electoral incentives are some of the lost opportunities for federalism because leaders might be more concerned with maintaining their hold on power than advocating the shift (Memon, 2024) (Ha,

2024). Such a situation indicates that local autonomy can be incompatible with national policy goals and may lead to gaps, inefficiencies, and paradoxes that can hamper the goals of the federalism drive. Thus, it could be said that the weaknesses of the Philippines' push for federalism have largely stemmed from its weak party politics.

The negative effects of factionalism, political dynasties, and weak democratic institutions hinder the establishment of a federal system that promotes decentralization and improves local governance. Overcoming these obstacles requires pressure to reform political structures, enhance intra-party democracy, and establish stakeholders committed to democratic principles.

During the Duterte administration, opposition figures led by former Vice President Maria Leonor 'Leni' Robredo expressed concerns that the federalism initiative could be used as a means to consolidate power and extend the president's rule (Teehankee, 2018) (Mendoza & Ocampo, 2017). Ironically, even current President Marcos Jr echoed similar sentiments when he was a sitting senator of the republic, notwithstanding his decision to run as the standard bearer of the Partido Federal ng Filipinas, which, as its name would suggest, strongly advocates federalism.

Another factor that made the adoption of federalism in the Philippines unsuccessful was the changing political priorities and dynamics within political parties. Even Vice President Sara Duterte, daughter of the former president, has all but abandoned this issue for other political and economic concerns. Her position helps explain the fluidity and unpredictability of parties' stands on structural reforms like federalism that, under the conditions of party competition, develop into interests in distinct policies for different times. The dynamics within the party limit the momentum of constitutional reforms, generating a cleavage among political elites, with some being either for the proposal or others choosing to ally themselves with other policy priorities where they have more political capital to gain.

The opposition from the academe has been no less vociferous. Many scholars, including Hutchcroft (2017), have dismissed the concept of federalism as the ultimate remedy for the nation's governance ills by propounding that while they promote decentralization, they could further compound the problem of regional inequity and foster new ones (Mendoza & Ocampo, 2017). Similarly, Ocampo (2017) wrote a scathing commentary on the Pimentel model of federalism, saying it would eventually lead to the dismemberment of some territories in the country. For all the faults that have been attributed to the unitary system that has been in place in the country for the longest time, Ocampo believed it is still the ideal system that can best lead the Philippines to progress and development.

These multifaceted challenges - political resistance from elites, shifting party priorities, and critical academic perspectives - have combined to create a formidable obstacle to the realization of federalism in the Philippines. As if these are not enough, questions that fall squarely under the rubric of Public Administration also besiege the federalism agenda. This article will now proceed to dissect these issues.

Institutional Capacity and Administrative Concerns

Institutional and administrative issues have contributed to making the big federalism project even more difficult to implement. Researchers have expressed concerns about the ability of local governments to handle the additional tasks that would come with a federal system (Benton, 2020) (Anders & Shook, 2003). From the explanation of Brillantes & Moscare (2002), despite decentralization efforts, much is left to be desired in terms of the capacities of LGUs, particularly in fiscal management and governance competencies. These deficiencies, when not addressed, could hamper the LGUs' future delivery of public services and governance under a federal set-up.

As highlighted by Luyun et al. (2021), such transformation demands resources and human capital from LGUs and authority to execute their roles. However, at present, most LGUs lack the organizational structure and staff to effectively and efficiently handle more workload. This inadequacy may result in poor service delivery, which could greatly enhance the existing disparities between regions. In addition, the country's historical experience indicates that the bureaucracy has been traditionally highly centralized. This trait becomes problematic as local governments may not have much capacity to deal with large decision-making responsibilities (Luyun et al., 2021).

Also, the matter of regional disparities has emerged as another big test to the federalism agenda. Andriesse (2017) noted that the Philippines has significant economic and social vertical and horizontal divisions by regions and that the social and structural factors have been discussed at length. If federalism is implemented in a way that centralization is more favorable to areas more prosperous areas that are able to use their newfound autonomy to produce wealth, while disadvantaged areas that struggle to establish effective local economies and governance, then federalism can, intermittently as a result, widen these inequalities. Additionally, there is no well-defined framework for equitably allocating resources across regions, which creates the concern that federalism can allow imbalances to be reinforced rather than addressed (Andriesse, 2017).

Potential conflicts between national and local governments arise out of administrative concerns. A precise delineation of power and accountability is necessary to prevent jurisdictional disputes that obstruct government. Dickovick (2014) asserts that decentralization may incite problems in intergovernmental interactions, especially when local policies contradict national mandates. This tension disrupts federal governance by resulting in inconsistent local policies that negate national legislation. Closely related are the capacities of local government where the policy is implemented. It is stressed that there should be a sufficient number of trained personnel to carry out the tasks of governing. However, the present and existing models of education and training may not adequately equip local authorities for bigger tasks. As a result, governance becomes disjointed because leaders fail to have the right skills to design and implement policies that can meet the community's needs, such as eradicating poverty and increasing productivity (Cruz, 2020).

The institutional capacity and administrative challenges associated with federalism in the Philippines are multifaceted and require a systematic approach to resolution. Some essential conditions that are necessary for the functioning of federalism include local government readiness in terms of capacity, sound and fair relations among levels of government, and the improvement of governance structures for accountability and transparency.

If anything, the project had another glimmer of hope in the elections and even after the inauguration of President Marcos Jr.'s administration. However, the validity of this optimism remains to be critically examined. The subsequent section addresses this question in a preliminary manner.

The Marcos Administration and Federalism's Dim Prospects

It is quite uncertain how federalism will fare under the current administration because of the history, political climate, and other institutional factors that this paper has earlier explored. The advocacy for a federal system has always been couched on the concern over the imperfections of the present unitary system, more pointedly, the hegemony of "imperial Manila." Such centralization has created a "core-periphery" structure that puts provinces at a disadvantage. Therefore, there are debates about the federal system to establish a system of distribution of power and resources that could be much fairer (Tusalem, 2019).

Additionally, the current administration did not make federalism a focal policy agenda despite the PFP having federalism as one of its main campaign planks. This mirrors the general state of affairs in the Philippine party politics. Marcos Jr.'s government has not pursued constitutional amendments as vigorously as his predecessor did and has instead concentrated on bringing the economy back on track, improving infrastructure, and solving present-day socio-economic problems. This shift shows that federalism becomes relegated to the background when political realism demands other options.

Duterte's departure from office and the subsequent ascension of the Marcos Jr. administration have shifted the political landscape. Currently, federalism appears to have lost its prominence as a policy priority. The shift in focus toward more immediate economic and social challenges, coupled with the practical complexities of navigating coalition politics, has relegated federalism to the background. The Marcos Jr. administration's main agenda has centered on economic recovery, infrastructure development, and addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the federalism project has been frustrated due to a lack of political will and, therefore, lack of a clear vision.

While the current administration tries to strengthen its affiliations and work with many coalitions, federalism as a system that can destabilize the hierarchy cannot be viewed as a politically feasible option at this time. The intricacies of managing various political entities, conflicts of interest, and socially sensitive topics have further reduced the viability of federalism under this administration, given its obligation to address public concerns. The political geography of the Philippines significantly influences the discourse on federalism from a strategic standpoint. The idea that new metropolitan centers could devolve economic and political powers away from Manila is hopeful. However, the discussion on whether federalism can achieve the right change remains open.

Reasons for Federalism's Stagnation

The persistent failure of federalism to materialize in the Philippines can be attributed to several interrelated factors. A major element impeding the progress of federalism in the Philippines is the entrenched political culture defined by patron-client relationships and oligarchic power structures. Pacquing (2022) points to the patrimonial culture in the Philippines as contributory to cultivating a political landscape characterized by the concentration of power among a select few elite families, resulting in a governance

system that emphasizes personal devotion rather than institutional accountability. This culture not only diminishes the prospects for decentralized governance but also sustains a framework in which local governments are deprived of essential autonomy and resources for effective operation, as emphasized by Dioso and Paguia (2021), who contend that the deficiencies of decentralization have sparked a resurgence of interest in federalism, albeit without resolving the fundamental problems of political patronage.

Moreover, the cultural and financial disparities between “imperial Manila” and the provinces complicate the implementation of federalism even more. Concerning what he calls a “core-periphery” relationship, Tusalem (2019) asserts that the continuance of resource and political power in Manila weakens provincial regions and makes federalism an impractical solution for redressing geographical inequality. The demand for federalism is therefore viewed as a method of restoring balance among the regions in terms of power and resources. However, the contemporary political context may hinder this change as local elites would not be interested in the changes that threaten their position.

The lack of coherent political will from political leaders has resulted in the slow development of federalism. According to Teehankee (2020), the Philippines lacks institutionalization of political parties, and the political scene is highly factional, thus resulting in a fragmented government approach. Countering the argument that this debate will lessen the federal government’s importance overlooks the need to enhance local government capacities and responsibilities. Liwanag & Wyss (2019) opine that it is necessary to improve the institutions and capacities of local governments to ensure flexibility and effectiveness of governance at the local level, regardless of the political system in place. This viewpoint posits that the stagnation of federalism may stem not only from political opposition but also from deficiencies in local government that must be rectified to render federalism a feasible alternative. The stagnation of federalism in the Philippines is a complex issue stemming from past political dynamics, economic imbalances, and institutional deficiencies. Confronting these difficulties necessitates a holistic strategy that not only promotes federalism as a structural modification but also underscores the importance of capacity building and accountability within local governance.

In light of the dismal circumstances surrounding the project, this study will now examine alternate strategies that the Philippines can contemplate in response to the obstacles encountered in its pursuit of constitutional reform.

4 Prognosis: The Future of Federalism and Governance Reform in the Philippines

In light of these various challenges, it is important to understand that federalism is still feasible and can still be implemented as a reform strategy to address the aforementioned causes of governance dysfunctions in the Philippines. The supporters of federalism are of the opinion that it is capable of decentralizing power, enhancing the status of local governance, and providing for balanced regional development (Guess, 2005) (Mendoza & Ocampo, 2017). These are fundamentals for long-term economic stability and steady growth for the whole archipelago.

For better or worse, the future course of federalism depends on how political leaders will breathe more life into the process of engaging citizens and rally them in support of this type of governance reform.

Challenges Ahead: Breaking Political Hurdles and Getting Stakeholders on Board

Nevertheless, the journey towards federalism is far from smooth and is replete with huge political challenges. Since the system of governance proposed within the framework of federalism is radically different from the current centralized, unitary system that has developed over the years, the change may be met with opposition by influential political elites and vested interests, including powerful families and clans that dominate the country's political life and that are likely to perceive federalism as a threat to the status quo.

Therefore, whether or not federalism will take root in the Philippines in the future largely depends on addressing the challenges and impediments identified in this paper. The ability of the federalism movement to avoid such impediments and establish political and economic alliances, as well as find a solution and an effective message that can address the concerns of different regions and interest groups across the country, is also crucial. It will be critical and even more challenging to mobilize the public once again and form strategic alliances for the continuation of the reform, as well as develop a coherent plan of action to ensure that this form of governance reform is implemented in the long term. Other stakeholders have supported certain governance reforms but have been somewhat circumspect about the idea of federalism. This approach is not unique: while there is interest in decentralization, there is also some hesitancy. In the future, there can be changes in leadership, which may bring perspectives for the development of federalism if political parties have common interests. As Teehankee (2018) pointed out, it is still possible to come up with public consultations and partisan cooperation to rebuild the momentum for federalism and other reforms in governance.

Pathways for Immediate Decentralization Reforms

Since it will be difficult to get federalism due to political, structural, and societal constraints, the Philippines can take short-term decentralization reforms that will advance local governance and create a foundation for federalism should the time come. Raising the fiscal responsibilities of LGUs is both essential in helping regional governance work on their specific locality requirements. Strengthening the computation of the IRA formula to correspond with the regional development demands would enable the LGUs to be more financially responsive, which could improve the efficient implementation of local services.

The recent decision on the Mandanas-Garcia case (Mandanas-Garcia Flagship Report, 2022) provides the government with another avenue towards fast-tracking these decentralization programs with the LGUs by increasing the flow of fiscal resources to them. This can be done by taking this occasion together with the enactment of the Local Government Code to establish the necessary framework for improving the local governance structure that could then pave the way to the full realization of federalism.

There are some preconditions that federalism needs to work in the way this country needs it. There are a number of core reforms and conditions that must be fulfilled for federalism to work. Academics call for anti-dynasty measures and structural reforms that can curb political influence peddling by local dynastic families (Mendoza et al.,

2018). If these checks are not put in place, federalism can distort the natural political development of political dynasties and local oligarchs and elite and distort the essence of the reform aimed at developing real regional autonomy and development. This perspective of institutional reforms should also feature governance and fiscal accountability arrangements that would make it possible for local governments to finance development activities appropriately and to enhance transparency on the use of public resources (Siddiquee et al., 2012).

Further, the shift to federalism must be optimized with an ambitious and credible fiscal reform agenda to make sure that regional and local governments have the personnel and the administrative apparatus to discharge their new tasks. Only when past disparities in distributing resources and financing the public sector have been redressed will federalism gain legitimacy.

5 Conclusion

This article has analyzed the possibilities of federalism as a governance reform for the Philippines and the reasons that have impeded its advancement. Federalism has been promoted as a method to decentralize authority, enhance regional development, and establish a more equitable allocation of resources. Political opposition is one of the most persistent barriers to the progress of federalism to date. Little by little, some political elites who benefit from the existing centralized pattern have continuously prevented measures for genuine change to be implemented. The paper highlights how these challenges, coupled with limited public engagement and skepticism, have kept federalism from advancing beyond its theoretical promise. Nevertheless, federalism continues to be seen as a viable solution for the country's governance challenges, provided that these political and structural obstacles can be overcome through strategic reforms and leadership.

Although marginalized in recent years, federalism continues to be a viable and essential solution for the Philippines. Competing with the nation's deeply-seated issues of centralism, regional discrimination, and imbalance, the structural revolution that federalism may bring must be employed to address these issues. The ideas put forth by the pioneers remain relevant, and the federalism thrust may be revived if there is a favorable political climate. This indicates that federalism can only operate effectively with strong leadership, coordinated consensus on essential policy issues, and significant public support. The Philippines can realize the initial commitments of federalism by establishing a coherent, transparent implementation strategy and fostering a collective endeavor.

This paper advocates for the Philippines to enact prompt decentralization reforms to generate momentum for federalism and ready the nation for a possible transition. The Local Government Code of 1991 can be enhanced to enable local government units to function more effectively and independently. The Local Government Code of 1991 can be improved to allow local government units to operate more efficiently and autonomously. Amending the code to enhance budgetary authority and guarantee uniform execution will foster a favorable atmosphere for local governance reform.

Furthermore, augmenting fiscal autonomy via refined revenue-sharing frameworks and capacity-building for local government units can represent practical measures towards federalism. These steps will enable LGUs to have the necessary resources and

information needed for proper governance to pave the way for federalism. With these reform measures implemented immediately, the Philippines would lay the groundwork for a future federal government, making sure it is ready to face the challenges and opportunities that come with it and directed toward the sustainable and equitable development of the country.

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