

Decentralization as a Strategy for Redemocratization in the Philippine Political System

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The Aquino government has the responsibility of giving more meaning to decentralization, or systematically and rationally dispersing government power and authority to local level institutions so as to allow multi-sectoral decision making to be as close as possible to the spatial location of the problem. Decentralization can be undertaken by way of deconcentration, devolution, privatization, and through the use of alternative channels for delivering services, primarily through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For decentralization to be meaningful, 1) the selection process of leadership at local levels must truly reflect the genuine will of the constituency; 2) the problems of duality of government services at the field level must be resolved; 3) more power and responsibilities should be entrusted to the local government; 4) the government must pursue the policy of effective privatization; 5) the increasing uses of NGOs must be considered; and 6) the government must continue in its advocacy of transparency in its operations.

Introduction

After the people's power revolution at EDSA in February 1986 that led to the ouster of the Marcos regime and the installation of the Aquino government, the Philippines today faces the major challenge of redemocratizing its political system. The democratic/representative political institutions which were established during the colonial and post independence periods were weakened and/or deinstitutionalized during the martial law years. It was during this era when free, competitive elections were temporarily suspended and political parties were disbanded. The bicameral Congress was also abolished in 1972 and laws were enacted through Presidential Decrees (PDs). Although attempts were made subsequently to re-establish political institutions like the legislature during the latter stages of the Marcos rule with the holding of elections under the 1973 Constitution, these were viewed on the whole, as mere facades designed to give legitimacy to the authoritarian dispensation.¹ Similarly, local government units were structured in a manner so as to facilitate central control over them and their operations.

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After the overthrow of the Marcos regime however, and with the ratification of a new Constitution in February 1987 under the Aquino government, the resumption of the use of the electoral process for leadership selection at the national and local levels was re-instituted; likewise the re-establishment of a bicameral legislature, as well as the reorganization of the judicial and executive branches of government.

These developments have engendered the redemocratization process under a regime fairly considered to be adhering to democratic principles. While the resurgence of the democratic process is confronted with a burgeoning agenda that must address complex problems of national economic recovery, peace and order, insurgency and delivery of social services, among others, a major concern that occupies the list of priorities is how to strengthen the institutions of governance to restore their integrity and equip them with sufficient capacity to fulfill the multifarious demands of the redemocratization process. In essence, our redemocratization efforts will have to begin with the strengthening of the Philippine political system.

A major strategy that could be used toward the attainment of that objective is the decentralization of the operations of government and the strengthening of local level institutions. This paper addresses the issues involving decentralization of government operations as a strategy towards enhancing political institutions. As such, it discusses the concept of decentralization and the different approaches employed to operationalize it. While decentralization in the past have been advocated, much of the efforts have been stunted or derailed as a result of the aberrations of authoritarian rule. With the advent of redemocratization, we can now perhaps give the decentralization strategy a fresh start, taking into account the lessons of the past, and the exigencies or demands of the future. We can also take a look at recent developments, which may involve, among others, the pursuit of privatization and the use of alternative channels such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for the delivery of social services. Secondly, this paper dwells on what we perceive to be the major premises or conditions that must be met for the decentralization strategy to be viable. Decentralization, as a strategy, requires the fulfillment of certain preconditions that must be recognized by government for it to work.

Concept of Decentralization

The Philippines under the administration of President Corazon C. Aquino is committed to achieve greater decentralization as a means of promoting redemocratization policies. Decentralization, in this context, connotes the idea of dispersing power and authority to political institutions like local government units so as to allow smooth and unhampered flow of government operations, flowing systematically from decision centers to strategic areas of performance.

As a policy of the state, decentralization is succinctly embodied under expressed provisions of the 1987 Constitution which, among others, provided that the territorial and political subdivisions of the Philippines, comprising of the provinces, cities, municipalities and barangays shall enjoy local autonomy.² Under the new Charter, Congress has also been mandated to enact a local government code that will provide a system of decentralization. Thus, Sec. 3, Art X stipulates as follows:

The Congress shall enact a local government code which shall provide for a more responsive and accountable local government structure instituted through a system of *decentralization* with effective mechanisms of recall, initiative, and referendum, allocate among the different local government units their powers, responsibilities, and resources, and provide for the qualifications, election, appointment and removal, term, salaries, powers and functions and duties of local officials, and all matters relating to the organization and operation of the local units (*italics supplied*).³

This policy is likewise enunciated under the reform program of the Aquino government, as provided in the 1986 Development Plan which was formulated even before the ratification of the new Constitution. The policy agenda for the people-oriented development program of President Aquino states that the role and structure of government will be guided by the key organizational principles of, among others, decentralization.

What is decentralization? Decentralization essentially refers to the systematic and rational dispersal of governmental power and authority to local level institutions so as to allow multi-sectoral decision-making as close as possible to problem areas. Seen from this standpoint, decentralization can be undertaken through four approaches:

Firstly, decentralization can be undertaken by way of *deconcentration* which is the "delegation of responsibility and authority by the national government departments and agencies to regional, district, or field offices. The arrangement is administrative in nature and implies no transfer of final authority from the national department whose responsibility continues."⁴ In the Philippines, efforts toward deconcentration have been pursued by the delegation of authority and functions from central to field offices. National government departments have established offices in each of the regional centers for the purpose of administering services in the region. Regional Development Councils have also been created in all the regions except the National Capital Region (NCR) for the formulation of regional development plans and to serve as the coordinative bodies for regional planning and development. Regional and sub-regional development authorities have also been created to accelerate development in depressed areas of the country. Integrated Area Development (IAD) projects and approaches have been developed to accelerate economic growth in depressed areas and to increase participation and equitable distribution of gains.

Secondly, the process can be approached by way of *devolution*, which is "the transfer by the central government to local government units or special statutory bodies the power and responsibility for the performance of specified functions."⁵ Devolution in the Philippines have been attempted through the efforts of various Philippine legislative bodies which passed a number of laws giving more autonomy to local government units either through the grant of additional powers or lessening national controls over local officials. In 1959, the Barrio Charter was passed which conferred powers upon barrios for the performance of certain functions through the barrio council. In 1963, the Local Autonomy Act granted extensive and broader powers to local governments, particularly budgetary and taxing powers. In 1967, the Decentralization Act was passed, and more powers were devolved or transferred to local officials while removing national approval over a number of local actions.

Even during the martial law years, certain decentralization measures were adopted. Regional government were established in three regions of the country. Local development councils were created in provinces and cities thereby, decentralizing the planning function. The important role of local governments was recognized in the 1973 Constitution which guaranteed local autonomy and gave local government units the power to create their own sources of revenues and to levy taxes.

A third approach is through *privatization* which connotes the transfer of responsibility for certain governmental functions to the private sector.

Lastly, decentralization can be implemented through the *use of alternative channels for delivering services primarily through the non-governmental organizations (NGOs)*.

Privatization and the transfer of functions from the government to non-governmental institutions and groups have been pursued in a much more limited manner. However, our limited experience shows that certain services may be delivered much more efficiently and in the long run, more cost-effective if administered by private or non-governmental institutions. The provision of agricultural credit, the administration of public markets, some forms of health delivery services, housing services, the nutrition program, population and family planning services, and education may be cases in point. Certain non-governmental institutions have played active roles in the delivery of services. In some instances, government itself has limited their participation to being members of inter-sectoral planning committees.

While development requires unity of effort, rational allocation of resources to meet competing needs and speed in policy decision-making, it is argued that the powers of government must be centralized.

However, it may be counter argued that the crucial issue of development is the generation of widespread initiative, effort and social responsibility throughout the society and thus, political/governmental power must be decentralized. Decentralization will lead to redemocratization by allowing fuller citizen participation in government affairs. By decentralizing powers and functions, delays associated with having to clear most decisions with national offices will be done away with. More importantly, decentralization will improve local self-reliance and administrative efficiency and suit official actions to local conditions. Because of these, decentralization will give local governments and communities a more active role in economic, social and political development.

Decentralization and the Premises for it to Work

While decentralization policies have been advocated in the rhetoric of development strategies during the past regime, its substance and meaning however were lost due to lack of political will, resolve or commitment. As the authoritarian rule went about making policy pronouncements for decentralization, it acted differently in the actual practice and exercise of power and authority. The past dispensation consolidated and centralized power within the national government as a way of entrenching its rule, and as a result, has not given much to local units to operate freely. The organizational structuring of local units, as well as national-local government relations in the sharing of power, authority and responsibilities have been built in a manner that the system turned out to be not conducive or ideal for decentralization policies to succeed. Moreover, the lifting of martial law in the Philippines in 1981 had not curtailed the tendency then towards centralization, and has led to more usurpation of local responsibilities by the central government. The powers granted to the then Ministry of Human Settlements in local planning, environmental protection, housing, and building regulation, serve as a case in point. The central government remained as the dispenser of reward and patronage to local government. The test then of a meaningful redemocratization is the granting of powers and functions to local government units which are appropriate at that level.

Concededly, this failure may be traced to the character of the regime, and as such, it becomes incumbent for us to assess the weaknesses of past policies and structures to allow decentralization efforts to thrive and be preserved. For decentralization to prosper under the climate of redemocratization, it becomes imperative to ensure conditions that will be appropriate for it. We submit that if the present leadership is committed to meaningful decentralization at the local levels, the following concerns may have to be addressed decisively:

The selection process of the leadership at the local levels must be made by way of free, honest, fair, orderly and competitive elections which will truly

reflect the genuine will of the constituency. The integrity of the electoral process is an important component of redemocratization which must be fostered at the local levels so that the local leadership will merit the support, confidence and respect of the populace. As such, the government must be committed, not only in policy statements, but in the actual conduct of elections as well, to ensure that the will of the people is not subverted through various forms of deceit, manipulation, cheating, or terrorism. Consequently, the merit system and respect for the independence of the civil service and security of tenure of career personnel must be upheld. Leadership and personnel selection in the most rational manner is thus a *sine qua non* not only of the decentralization process, but of the redemocratization efforts as well.

The problem of duality of government services at the field level must be resolved. The existing "dual system" of personnel of central and of local authorities where the national government maintains field personnel performing functions that duplicate those of local units brings about confusion and conflict in authority relationship and in responsibilities. Thus, in the Philippines today, regional and/or field offices of national government departments or agencies maintain field personnel whose functions are the same as those maintained by local units. We have such redundant positions as district engineers under the Department of Public Works and Highways operating in the same area as the provincial engineers. This duplication appears to be endemic in most agencies; we have field personnels of the different national agencies operating side by side with those of the provincial, city and municipal governments. This issue is not new, and has been raised as early as the sixties. Thus, Sady, in a study of central agencies and institutions of local government has observed that this dual system inhibit the capacities of local units to perform their functions even under situations where local autonomy has been advocated. Thus, describing this system and its effects, he says:

It is one in which local authorities have autonomy legally to perform services; but, except for the larger cities, they actually perform a few, if any, developmental services directly or on behalf of central ministries. The ministries provide services through field units and sometimes duplicate the services performed by local authorities. Local authorities under this system are viewed more as instruments of *political decentralization* than of social and economic development.⁹ (italics supplied)

From this perspective then, it becomes important for us to resolve this impasse so as to ensure unification of efforts that otherwise bring about confusion, duplication, if not outright conflict between field and local personnels. The present system of service delivery at the local levels is done by field administrators and workers who are related to their respective departments by direct lines of command. The field agents therefore operate in a common local government area belonging to separate functional

hierarchies responsible for different government programs/services. As such, there is no generalist representative of the government, resulting, as studies show, in inconsistent policies and unsynchronized, fragmented and discontinuous implementation of policies and programs, wherein the people are not able to obtain complete and integrated packages of development projects and services.⁷ Moreover, this situation does not fix responsibility of functions and allows the pernicious practice of national and local governments "blaming one another" because of their inability to provide or perform basic services.

It is the position of this paper that if decentralization is to be given meaning at all, the local units which must be in direct contact with its constituency, and therefore, must have the appropriate perspective of the needs of the community should be given the responsibility of delivering basic community services. For this to be substantiated, it will be imperative to secure the services of technically competent personnel who shall be responsible to the duly elected representatives of the people. This relationship embodies the true spirit of democracy as crystallized in overriding principles of such time-honored values as the politics-administration dichotomy. This springs from the need to balance democracy and technocracy, and representation and efficiency in local governments.

Once this duality problem is resolved, local government units should be entrusted with more powers and responsibilities in the implementation of development programs and projects. These powers will have to be defined and concretized through consensus between the national and local governments, using perceptions obtained from the people who are the beneficiaries of the system. Policies can be formulated at the national level, from where, sub-policies with a regional, or provincial character will have to be adduced.

It is important likewise for government as a matter of course and of policy, to begin relieving itself of responsibilities in the performance of functions that are better left off to the private sector. Thus, such functions as extension of farm and other credits, the operations of public markets, housing and other operations involving market mechanisms must be surrendered to private initiative. These functions are better restored to the private sector to allow free operations of market forces unhampered and unrestricted by government except for those where regulation may have to be made in the interest of public welfare. As a policy, government should not compete with the private sector in the delivery of certain services, so as not to unduly burden it (government) and to allow economic activity to operate freely.

The government, both at the national and local levels should now consider increasing the use of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as church groups, civic clubs and other such organizations in the delivery of services and in the monitoring of government programs or activities. By utilizing NGOs,

government benefits from the commitment and resolve of these institutions in dispensing services. The character of NGOs, as witnessed from their activities during the past regime, is built in such a way that they have the awareness, consciousness and concern for the people's welfare and are generally cause-oriented, not motivated by profit as in the case of entrepreneurial organizations. They are also cost conscious because of limited resources and are therefore, prone to promote this value in service delivery. NGOs are potent allies at both the national and local levels, not only in the delivery of services, but also in the monitoring and evaluation of government programs and projects. They can serve as watchdogs that can bring to attention acts of rapacity, graft and corruption, or other forms of misfeasance by the bureaucracy and the political leadership. Likewise, they can inject cause-orientedness in government so as to bring alternative systems of service delivery in development programs with the view of serving those who truly deserve government assistance.

Finally, government must continue in its advocacy of transparency in its operations, as espoused by the present regime. The government, by operationalizing the values of transparency in operations through distinct and viable policies as allowing its activities to be in the open view of its constituency will help encourage people's participation in the affairs of government. In this sense, constant communication between the government and the people through institutionalized forums can help bridge the gap between governors and governed. This will allow the government to have a view of the perceptions of the populace, and the public can have a better perspective of how government operates.

Redemocratization should thus bring about an equilibrium among the various levels of government. Political power should not be centralized or concentrated in Manila but should be shared and deployed to local government units which are at the frontline of governance. Only through systematic, rational and meaningful decentralization can we reach out to the people, particularly in the rural areas where majority of our countrymen reside.

Endnotes

¹Raul P. de Guzman and Luzviminda Tancangco, "An Assessment of the May 14, 1984 Batasang Pambansa Elections" (1985).

²Section 2, Article X, *The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines*.

³Sec. 3, Article X, *Ibid*.

⁴United Nations Technical Assistance Programme (UNTAP), *Decentralization for National and Local Government* (New York: United Nations, 1962), p. 88.

⁶ _____, *Handbook on Public Administration* (New York: United Nations, 1961), p. 64.

⁶Emil J. Sady, "Central Agencies and Institutions for the Improvement of Local Government," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 10, Nos. 2-3 (April-July 1966), pp. 243-244.

⁷Raul P. de Guzman, "A Proposal to Restructure Local Governments in the Philippines" in *Local Government Bulletin*, Vol. XVI, Nos. 1 and 2 (January-December 1981), pp. 20, 44.