Does federalism decrease social cleavages and lead to greater political stability? [1]

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The question posed in the title is not just rhetorical.   It is one of our fundamental concerns as we continue our discourse on whether federalism will be a better option for the country.

Why is federalism being considered in many conflict areas now where there is continuing rival claims over territory and locus of power ?

 Why is federalism being viewed as the solution for Afghanistan with its long history of warlordism?

  Why is federalism being seen as the solution to the festering divide between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots?

 Why is federalism being seen as the main solution to the Tamil liberation movement in Sri Lanka?

Why is federalism being chosen as the answer to the Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria?

Why is federalism the desired option for the Basques of Spain and France?

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Finally, why is federalism one of the optimal choices to the protracted Palestinian Israeli conflict?

In all of the above conflicts, note that each of the countries/territories noted are deeply embedded in ethnic, religious, tribal and other identities. Note also, that these conflicts are not just about territories, air space and water rights but also about power allocation.

To turn to our main question posited at the beginning, does federalism lead to the decrease of social cleavages?

The empirical literature is mixed. The answer really is: " It depends"…

The one single variable that we see that will enable a federal structure to more likely lead to decrease in social is the absence of a "core ethnic group."

In countries where there is a clear numerical majority of any one group and where such group is also characterized by one ethnic group, there is a tendency for this core ethnic group to dominate the rest of the groups in the political system. The net effect is for this set up to exacerbate, rather than decrease social conflicts based on ethnicity. Here, the numerical minority will feel threatened by this numerical majority and will most likely see repressive policies emanating from the latter to the disadvantage of the former. Consider the case of Sri Lanka and the Tamils…

This is the same challenge of the newly formed government of Iraq. Here the Shiite group constitutes the numerical majority which has been repressed and not represented during the long

regime of Saddam Hussein. Suddenly, the "new democracy" in Iraq changes the power equation and now, the President of Iraq, though largely ceremonial, comes from the Kurds and the Shiite numerical majority, long underrepresented, is now the majority in the government. The continuing insurgencies are coming form the disfranchised Sunnis, aided ostensibly by some external actors, who continue to question the legitimacy of the present government by daily violent acts.

The challenge to the Iraqi government now is to make sure that the Sunnis are given "voices" in the new government so they will not make their presence felt through continuous violent actions. Federalism, indeed, is a very serious option to the Iraqis…

In countries, however, where there is no core ethnic group, like in the case of India, Spain and Malaysia , federalism has attenuated social cleavages and has effectively brought down the level of insurgent actions from the disfranchised groups.

The presence of core ethnic groups may be destabilizing because a "dual center of power" is created and the numerically minority groups will thus feel threatened and swamped by this core ethnic group. This may eventually lead to secessionist acts of the minority who continue to be marginalized by this core ethnic group.

Thus, we see in the aforementioned cases that in a federal system, it is important to minimize the power of a demographically dominant group. We see, therefore, that federalism is one of the more realistic ways to maintain national unity in the face of extant regional centers based on power and ethnic divides.

The danger of "locking in ethnicity"

Ethnicity is one of the sources of identification of peoples. Recent studies, however, show that ethnicity is not necessarily the most important identity trait that an individual considers salient. Rather, ethnicity becomes magnified as a result of both institutional and social factors.

I will venture to declare an anti orthodoxy here when I aver that federalism , in the Philippines, should not lock in ethnicities. Federalism, in fact, should de-ethnicize and should blur the cleavages and the divides of society.

Consider the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. While the intention is noble in allowing those regions where there is a clear majority of Muslim Filipinos to have their own self government, in the end, this may have the effect of creating "islands of separate groups" reinforcing their separateness and differences rather than bridging over to the rest of the polity.

It is important to change the institutional structures of our government towards federalism that will not exacerbate these cleavages based on ethnic factors. The institutional settings, in fact, should be able to reduce this ethnic factor and shift the identities of people to other sources like their professions. Thus, one is identified as an engineer, a computer technician, an embroiderer , a professor and yes, one does not have to indicate one's ethnicity to define who one is…

This can be done also by electoral changes. Winner take all systems as the one we have where whoever gets the highest number of votes wins lead to disproportionate amount of political control to some groups. A proportional representation (PR) system as well as ranked votes may more

likely lead to better representation as well as less chances for a dominant political group to capture election votes from election year to election year. Electoral reforms also allow for moderate candidates to surface as empirical evidence suggests.

The need, therefore, is for us to be careful that we do not lock in ethnicities as we design a federal system and that we depoliticize it also in the process as we use less ascriptive and more achievement criteria for filling up political positions.

Does federalism reduce conflict and lead to stability?

Certainly, federalism will not eliminate conflict. It will , however, provide a better environment by giving people more control over their future and by entrusting to them important decisions about their way of life according to their needs.

In this concluding section, I want to address intergovernmental relations which I consider to be the FULCRUM of every federal structure. Intergovernmental relations is the dynamics between the central government and the state and local units. It is dynamic because it has to respond to the changing circumstances and changing demands of people.

The success and failure of federalism will be largely dependent on the success of the swinging balance between the central government and the federal units. As the term federal comes form the latin "foedus" which means a covenant, so will the success of the federal system be based on the agreement among its participants in regard to the distribution of powers among them.

No one can arrogate with finality areas of political power. While it is true that right now, foreign policy and defense may be the singular jusrisdiction of the central government, at a

future time when conditions are different, even these areas will be "shared" with the federal units.

Consider the case of the United States. Education is the jurisdiction of the state and local government. This is the jurisdiction of the counties, the cities and the municipalities of the 50 states o f the United States of America. However, because of the differing achievement of its students, the federal government started the No Child Left Behind Program (NCLB) signed in 2002 under President Bush.

Under this NCLB program, federal grants are made available to the 50 states to close the achievement gaps of students all over the United States. These federal grants also provided for more accountability for educational outcomes to schools bench marked on a scientifically derived educational measure. The NCLB program also provided flexibility to many school boards to   adopt the educational programs that work best in their localities. Finally, this NCLB program reshaped the role of state and local public administrators in the US which were not foreseen at the time of the setting up of the federal system.

Indeed, the biggest advantage of federalism lies not in its fixity but in its flexibility.

It is a truism that there is no pure federal system nor a pure unitary one. It is more or less of each one depending on the exigencies in each country.

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