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Executive Summary

## **Federalism: Issues and Problems**

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President Duterte has committed his administration to a formal shift to federalism as a system of government through a constitutional convention. However, there has been little discussion so far about the details of this proposed radical shift in governing authority.

Any major institutional change in the formal structures of governance such as a shift from our present unitary form of government to federalism necessarily requires a clear understanding of the problems to be addressed and the proposed institutional responses to such concerns. As in any major institutional change, the devil is always in the details.

In our own context, the demand for federalism has been driven by at least two major problems. First, there is the long-time lament that Manila or the central government has disproportionately controlled power and authority at the expense of peripheral governmental units especially those in Mindanao. Second, there is the argument that the long history of armed separatist Muslim movements in Mindanao can best be addressed by federalism which guarantees substantial regional autonomy.

In brief, the federalist dream in its most optimistic version is fueled by visions of an alternative development model that relies more on local initiative and innovation to sustain economic growth, political stability and integration, and greater accountability of public officials to their communities.

However, federalism, by itself, represents only a shift in governing authority at one level of governance: the power and authority relationship between central and local government units. Federalism does not automatically address fundamental issues of power relations between the people and elites, especially in social contexts such as ours long dominated by the oligarchic power of a few families. In the absence of equally important institutional changes such as more representative and inclusive electoral systems and programmatic political parties, federalism may end up entrenching further the power and authority of local oligarchic elites.

Thus we should be extremely careful in attributing any causal effect to any single institution such as federalism independently of its interaction with other institutions (formal and informal) and structures in society. In short, addressing our long standing problems of pervasive poverty, economic inequality, and oligarchic control of our economy and politics, to name a few, requires a serious examination of a range of institutional reforms (executive-legislative relations, electoral systems, political party reform, etc.,) not necessarily covered by a simple shift to federalism.

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