

Special Seminar

T i t l e : Practical Challenges to the Federalism Campaign in the Philippines

S p e a k e r : Miriam Grace A. Go

D a t e : September 13th (Wed.) 2017, 16:00 – 17:30

P l a c e : East Building Room 107, CSEAS, Kyoto University

Abstract:

In October 2018 – if and when Philippine Congress approves now the postponement of this year's village and youth elections – the Duterte government plans to piggyback on the exercise a plebiscite on a new Constitution. If time is too short for that, there is the May 2019 mid-term election with which the plebiscite can be synchorized.

Except within very limited groups of experts, however, not much discussions, much less consultations, are being done on the details of the proposed shift from a unitary to a federal system of government. And, so far, what the public knows are the bare bones: matters that will be handled by the federal government, and by the local governments (the textbook type of classification); the number of regions or states (even this varies, depending on which study group you are talking to).

Because the discussions and the information campaign have generally not gone beyond these, the nitty-gritty of the shift are not known. We are not even sure if discussions with the experts' groups working with government have reached that level.

There are 3 things the public have to know much sooner, even now:

- * the unaddressed issues with decentralization
- * levels and powers of government
- * where the people are in the discussion

For the first item, there are questions on what happens to the national bureaucracy. And as old as the Local Government Code of 1991 has been the calls of local governments — automatically brushed aside by the national government — is the sharing of resources between the two levels of government. All these years, too, the tax reforms have focused more on what and who to tax, but never on how collections should be distributed nationally.

An elephant in the room since a shift to federalism was first proposed in the early 2000s has been the abolition of the provincial level of government. Regional governments will be created, when the Philippines' regional councils and offices have mostly been given token powers, much less resources. After the level of regional governments come the level of cities and municipalities. How do we expect the current governors — the political clans they come from — to help in this campaign?

President Rodrigo Duterte has just ordered the dissolution of the Negros Island Region, barely two years after it was created. There are no funds to establish offices for the new region that residents were hoping would make development planning and governance more attuned to the needs of the Negros provinces. Then there is “threat” done out of nowhere by the Quezon City mayor that Metro Manila can be an autonomous region if the entire country refuses to federalize. With varying and changing — and unresolved — proposals on what states a federal Philippines will have, we can imagine experts cannot even begin with baseline planning. We don’t plan only after a country has been broken up into autonomous regions.

Amid all these, people have a limited understanding of what is being proposed, even the concept itself of federalism to begin with. You can tell it from the types of questions they are made to answer in limited number of surveys. The Department of the Interior and Local Government has directed local government units to conduct barangay assemblies to discuss the proposal. But barangay assemblies are done only twice a year, and the communication plan is not exactly implemented strategically.

There is a need for civic and people’s organizations to do their share in disseminating information and initiating discussions in their communities. The media has tremendous responsibility too. You would wonder why, when we are talking about restructuring an entire system of running a country, the media has given the issue only token coverage.

About the speaker:

Miriam Grace A. Go co-authored the books *Ambition, Destiny, Victory: Stories From A Presidential Election* (2011), *How to Win An Election: Lessons from the Experts* (2006 and 2009), and *Investigating Local Governments: A Manual for Reporters* (2001). Her work is anthologized in *Prize Journalism* (2006) and *Unholy Nation: Stories from a Gambling Republic* (2003).

Gigi writes mostly about local governance and party politics, and speaks at forums and workshops on campaigns and elections, investigative journalism, and online journalism, and facing the media.

She has received local and international awards for her works, mostly for Newsbreak, where she started as senior writer until she became executive director. She was a fellow of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (Bangkok), the Marshall McLuhan program of the Canadian Embassy, and the Jefferson Fellowship of the East-West Center (Hawaii).

In 2008 she was recognized as an outstanding alumna of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication for her contributions to the field of investigative journalism. She is currently news editor of Rappler.com, the Philippines’ pioneering social news network.

Moderator: Prof. Caroline Hau, CSEAS, Kyoto University

