

## Pitfalls of a parliamentary system

**T**he debate on what form of government to adopt to replace the presidential unitary system has been going on since President Duterte assumed office one and a half years ago.

During the campaign, Mr. Duterte boldly announced that if elected president, he would work for a shift to a federal parliamentary system to devolve power and resources from "Imperial Manila" to the regions.

While the idea is laudable, the administration, including the leaders of the ruling PDP-Laban, has not fully apprised our people on the form of government that they really want.

No less than former chief justice Artemio V. Panganiban (Opinion, 2/4/18) has said that the proponents to overhaul the 1987 Constitution, whether in Congress or other sectors, have presented "confusing, if not conflicting, concepts and theories." He cited a need to explain fully why a shift to federalism is beneficial to our people.

Indeed, some people are worried that in our earnest desire for change, we might be "jumping from the frying pan to the fire."

There are some parliamentary governments in the region that have made a mockery of democracy and the rule of law. This is made possible because under a parliamentary unicameral system, one who controls the ruling party also controls the government; thus, there are no checks and balances.

Take the case of Cambodia, a landlocked nation of 14.5 million and one of the world's poorest countries. It is ruled by Hun Sen, a former cadre of the notorious Khmer Rouge who has been in power for the last 30 years,

### COMMENTARY

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Cambodia pricked the world's conscience when, under the leadership of Pol Pot in 1975-1978, two million people were slaughtered in the regime's brutal pursuit of a rural utopia.

As in other parliamentary governments, elections are held in Cambodia but Hun Sen has reportedly rigged each one so that his Cambodian People's Party has remained in power for three decades. He has been accused of extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests and censorship, and is said to have a national network of spies and informers.

And all these are happening in a parliamentary democracy.

Leaders in other parliamentary democracies such as Malaysia and Singapore tend to stay long in power by ensuring that the party they lead always gets the majority in parliament.

In Malaysia, former prime minister Mahathir ruled from 1981 to 2003, or for 22 years, making him that country's longest-serving leader. As head of the then ruling party, the United Malays National Organization, Mahathir won five consecutive general elections by fending off a series of rivals in the party leadership.

Mahathir was credited with Malaysia's rapid modernization and fast economic growth, but the trade-off was that he curtailed some of the basic democratic values

such as press freedom and the right to assemble or seek redress for grievances.

After a long hibernation from politics, Mahathir, now 92, is reported planning to run again for parliament under the opposition Hope Alliance in the August election against Prime Minister Najib Razak, his former protégé and now his fiercest adversary. Najib is the son of the second Malaysian premier, Tun Abdul Razak.

Najib himself, who became prime minister in 2009, has clung to power despite corruption charges against him by controlling parliament through his National Front Coalition.

Singapore, a city-state with a population of only 5.8 million but one of the richest countries in the world, has had only three prime ministers since its founding in 1959, or for almost six decades. The late Lee Kuan Yew was the first prime minister (1959-1990). Even when he was no longer prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew held the strange title of "minister-mentor." He was succeeded by Goh Chok Tong, who retired in 2004, and followed by Lee Hsien Loong, Lee Kuan Yew's son. In power for 14 years, Lee has no intention of relinquishing his position.

These are some of the pitfalls of the parliamentary unicameral system of government that our neighbors have. Is this the type of government that we want to emulate?

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\*PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM