

WHY WE SHOULD OPPOSE A PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

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Whatever politicians want, politicians get? That would appear to be the case if we are to believe the pronouncements of the politicians who say that the shift to a parliamentary form of government is inevitable.

But what exactly is it that the politicians want? Well, very simply, they want more power for themselves. The main attraction of a parliamentary system for our politicians is that executive power and legislative power are fused into a single body – Parliament – which basically allows the same set of people – the Prime Minister and his ruling coalition – to decide on, appropriate the funds for, and implement their desired programs and projects. Proponents of the parliamentary form contend that it is a more effective way of governing because it avoids the possibility of government paralysis brought about by the kind of deadlock that might occur in a presidential system where executive power and legislative power are wielded by different sets of people in two separate branches of government. On the other hand, advocates of the presidential form argue that this separation of powers is necessary so that each branch can act as a check to the other. They argue that this balance is essential because the powers vested in government officials are enormous and easy to abuse.

It is obvious that momentum is building for the shift to a parliamentary system because most of the major political players have publicly committed themselves to it. We can expect these politicians to campaign for the ratification and, given their personal followings, it might really be a foregone conclusion that this shift will be ratified in a plebiscite. The only (slim) hope for this not happening is if large numbers of concerned citizens organize some sort of a crusade to oppose this. Concededly, however, that is not very likely because it is difficult to generate much public interest in such an abstract and unexciting issue. It certainly has none of the excitement of ousting a president. This is too bad: giving unchecked power to politicians by shifting to a parliamentary system has long-term consequences and future generations will pay for this error.

There are five reasons why we should strongly oppose the shift to a parliamentary form of government.

First, the parliamentary system concentrates power instead of dispersing it. Given that political power in this country is already overly concentrated (in less than 1% of the population), the obvious appropriate response should be to disseminate and spread power, not concentrate it even more (which a shift to a parliamentary system does). Moreover, a parliamentary system allows this concentrated power to be wielded more easily and more effectively than in a presidential system where the executive and legislative functions are kept separate. A shift to the parliamentary form is therefore the completely wrong reaction to the country's present political and economic realities.

Second, the parliamentary system institutionalizes 'pork barrel' politics. The aforementioned fusion of executive and legislative power in a parliamentary system effectively makes the entire national budget (except of course for debt servicing and certain fixed expenditures) one big 'pork barrel'. There is no check for the power of the Prime Minister and his ruling gang to do what they want except to resort to the Judicial system, but that assumes that irregularities or kickbacks can be documented (which is never easy to do). Thus, if we are now disturbed by the way many politicians are presently wielding restricted powers, what do we imagine will happen after we've given them unrestricted powers?

Third, the parliamentary system enshrines 'horse trading' as a way of governance. The present 'transactional' decisions supposedly being made by the President to win the support of Congressmen is only a pale preview of the constant and recurring 'transactional' decision-making that is inherent in a parliamentary government. Since the government in a parliamentary system can be changed at any time through a no-confidence vote, the tenure of the Prime Minister and his cabinet is unstable and utterly dependent on the votes of the other members of Parliament. This has easily predictable repercussions. It means that the Prime Minister and his cabinet are always hostage to the demands of every member of Parliament, each one of whom typically represents narrow interests. Thus, the decisions expected to be made by a parliamentary government will be short-term in nature, narrow in outlook, inconsistent with each other, and not often

congruent with the national interest. The ability to change the government at the drop of a hat is not a virtue, but a very serious shortcoming.

Fourth, it is simply not true that it is 'legislative gridlock' that has held back the country's economic progress. There was no legislative gridlock at all during the Marcos years and yet it was during this period that this country fell behind its neighbors in economic growth. There was hardly any legislative gridlock during the Aquino years and the country fell even farther behind. Our failure to keep economic pace with our neighbors is a consequence of protectionist economic policies, too much regulation, and, basically, too much government. Not entirely facetiously, one might even say that legislative gridlock may sometimes help in that it prevents government from doing more things and thus doing the country more harm. Actually, what we really need is for government to meddle less, spend less, and tax us less.

Finally, the so-called connection between form of government and economic performance is demonstrably not true. For every country with a parliamentary government that is racing ahead of us economically, one can cite a country with a presidential system that is doing as well or better. Here in Asia, for example, for every Malaysia or Thailand (parliamentary), one can point to a South Korea or Taiwan (presidential) which are even stronger economically. (China and Vietnam, both economic racehorses, are not even democracies.) The economic performance of a country is a function of its economic policies, resource endowments, and certain environmental conditions, NOT its form of government. In fact, in a parliamentary system, it is much more difficult for government to adhere to economic policies that are right for the country as a whole because such are often in conflict with the special interests typically represented by members of parliament. Of course, all politicians represent special interests. This problem, however, is compounded in a parliamentary system because the fusion of executive and legislative power in the parliamentary form simply puts too much power in the hands of politicians. They can do virtually anything to promote generally parochial interests.

Certainly, we need to change parts of our Constitution. Such changes should include limitations in the powers and prerogatives of public officials, electoral reforms, a better way of impeaching or recalling elected officials, reforms in the Judiciary to

expedite judgments and make the system of justice more effective, enhanced local autonomy, and the liberalization of the economy and the removal of citizenship restrictions on the exploitation of natural resources, the operation of public utilities, and the ownership of land, mass media, advertising companies, and educational institutions. We should also enshrine voluntary exchange, open market competition, private initiative, and minimum regulation as the bases of national economic policy. If we want to stop looking enviously while foreign capital pours into our neighbors and creates the employment that spurs their economic growth, these are things we need to do. We do not need to change to a parliamentary form of government.

The rest of us will be better off if, this time, we don't let the politicians get what they want.