

Philippines past and present: Nationalism revisited

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As we mark the 119th anniversary of the declaration of our people's emancipation from Spain, it is worth revisiting the values and experiences that led us to that historic event. There are many forms of nationalism. In the light of what is happening in the world today, we should bear in mind where ours is rooted.

We know that Aguinaldo's hurried proclamation of Philippine independence on June 12, 1898, could not prevent the takeover of the country by American colonial power. Even so, the anticolonial struggles against Spain and the United States became the wellsprings of Filipino nationalism for subsequent generations. The remembrance of our elders' aspirations and heroic sacrifices has helped unify our people, particularly in times of crisis. It has restored pride and confidence in ourselves as a nation, after centuries of subjugation.

Elsewhere in the world, nationalism is making a comeback—not as a progressive emancipatory force, but as a movement of reaction and bigotry. Its perceived enemies are the complex forces that globalization has unleashed: the migration of populations across continents, the free flow of capital across national borders, the relocation of factories and service centers to places that assure higher profits and virtually unregulated operations, and the emergence of a world society and global culture that threaten entrenched identities and hierarchies.

Almost overnight, the vision of a world order founded on international solidarity, universal human values, peace and shared prosperity, and the preservation of planet Earth for the generations to come, has been replaced by pessimism and paranoia. Invoking national sovereignty and the duty to ensure the survival of their own peoples, populist politicians in the developed countries are turning their back on nearly all the evolutionary achievements of a modern world system.

America's Donald Trump perhaps best epitomizes this atavistic regression. He is withdrawing his country from all the commitments made by his predecessor toward a global climate change agreement. He has pledged to bring back the factories and jobs that have left America as a result of economic globalization. With the promise to restore America to its previous unmatched glory, he has embarked on an inward-looking policy that contradicts almost everything that America has hitherto stood for. He seeks, for example, to impose a ban on immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries—in total defiance of timeless ideals that animate the American Constitution.

Trump merely represents a form of reaction that is rapidly spreading in the West today. Threatened by the massive inflow of immigrants and refugees from the war-torn countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Europe is seeing a resurgence of racist politics that is hiding behind the banner of nationalism. This is exactly the "belligerent, aggressive, and chauvinistic nationalism," as the writer Horace Davis described it, that had given the term its ugly connotations in much of Western Europe during the postwar period.

But it is also this kind of nationalism that we project every time we tell other countries and international organizations that express their concern over what's happening in our country to leave us alone and mind their own business. Given how we have welcomed and seized the opportunities opened up by the modern world system—sending millions of our own people to take up employment in other countries and hosting a thriving BPO (business process outsourcing) industry that has transferred a broad range of jobs in the global service economy to our shores—we should be the last country to invoke nationalist sensitivity in the conduct of our affairs.

Having assumed our place in the community of nations, we have no reason not to be mindful of the international covenants we have signed, and of the rights and responsibilities we have willingly taken upon ourselves, under a global legal order. The South China Sea issue would have been the perfect occasion to assert this enlightened form of nationalism in a modern world society that is supposed to be governed by mutually agreed norms.

But, on this question, it seems we have opted to act like a fearful vassal state that is dutifully taking its subservient role in a premodern hierarchical order. Not only does this behavior go against the anticolonial ethos from which the Filipino nation was sprung, it also runs against all the values that have undergirded the collective efforts of past generations to create a modern nation-state out of the diverse ethnic communities that have long inhabited this archipelago.

That regional identities and perspectives continue to be asserted in the nation's political discourse—in mindless disregard of the fact that this discourse is often conducted in a shared national lingua franca—attests to the ease with which local identities can easily be tapped in the service of an antiglobal backlash.

The federalist move to carve out regional states from the existing unitary political system is consistent with this trend. It represents an attempt to manage the anxieties brought about by globalization—not by directly confronting the problems of weakened nation-states in a centerless world, but by retreating into the illusory comforts of smaller subnational systems.

It has taken us 71 years—82, if we include the Commonwealth period—to develop an independent modern state and nurture a citizenry imbued with national consciousness. It is an unfinished and fragile project. A reckless shift to federalism could spell its dissolution.

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P.S.

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