

Economic Issue of the Day

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Forming a government: parliamentary vs. presidential system

The debate on the parliamentary versus the presidential system of governance in the Philippines has escalated in view of the result of the consultations and studies conducted by the Consultative Commission created to propose amendments and revisions to the 1987 Constitution. Their work principally involves examining the proposals to shift from the presidential-unitary system to a parliamentary-federal system of government. Proponents of a parliamentary form of government regard it as the more viable solution to solving systemic and structural problems in Philippine governance but critics of the parliamentary system—those who advocate for the status quo or the presidential system—have accused the major proponents of the shift as its main beneficiaries, thereby casting doubt on the viability of the parliamentary system.

To change or not to change?

For a nation that has adopted a presidential system for a long time, the parliamentary system is a foreign concept to most Filipinos despite the fact that many of its Asian neighbors have this form of government. With the political crisis grappling the country, *Mang Pandoy* or the ordinary Filipino is now not just confronted with rising commodity prices and diminishing income opportunities but also has to endure lengthy debates on the kind of political system the country has to adopt, and be on the look out as to whether or not a political change will occur. This *Issue* thus aims to provide some basic explanation of the nature of the political systems in question, specifically distinguishing the two forms in terms of leadership, separation of powers, and procedure of removal from office. Hopefully, this will help more Filipinos understand the issues better and participate more intelligently in the debates.

Option 1. The Parliamentary System

The parliamentary system typically has clear differentiation between the **head of government** and the **head of state**, with the former being the *Prime Minister* and the latter, the *President*.

The Prime Minister is the chief executive and, together with the Cabinet, exercises executive power or the authority to form and implement policies and programs. He/she is also usually the leader of the political party that wins the majority of votes in the legislature or parliament, either assuming the post automatically or gets elected by the legislature. The members of the Cabinet are chosen by the Prime Minister from the members of parliament and can come from the same party or from a coalition of parties.

The head of state, meanwhile, is the President, often elected by a designated electoral college as a figurehead with ceremonial powers. In some cases, however, the President could take on a more significant role during a constitutional or political crisis.

In the parliamentary system, there is fusion of powers between the executive and the legislative branches. This union serves to facilitate the exercise and coordination of governmental powers and functions to formulate desired policies and implement programs of government. The success of this fusion depends largely, though, on the reform of the country's political party and electoral systems.

For some parliamentary governments, legislatures can only amend legislation on narrow terms. There are a few permanent or standing committees in the parliament that assist in the drafting and review of legislation. Given its close association with the legislative branch, the executive can be made more accountable for its performance since they are answerable to the members of parliament.

There are two ways by which the Prime Minister and the rest of the Cabinet can be asked to step down. The first is through a vote of no-confidence by the legislature often initiated by an opposition party or coalition of opposition parties. This may or may not result in extraordinary elections. The other route is by virtue of a party vote, which does not force a new round of legislative elections. The Prime Minister, as long as he/she enjoys the confidence of the majority of the House, can dissolve the Parliament and call for early elections.

Option 2. The Presidential System

The Philippines is one of the countries with a presidential form of government together with South Korea, Indonesia, Nigeria, most South American nations and the US, which is the pioneer. Under this political system, the *President* is **both** head of state and head of government. The incumbent for the position is elected nationwide on timing that has been predetermined in the Constitution. Thus, in the presidential system, the President is said to enjoy a direct mandate from the people. There is a fixed term of office for the President, which may be reelected depending on the country adopting the system.

The executive branch, which the President heads, is distinct from the legislative and judicial branches of government, which are all independent of one other. This separation of powers serves to check and to balance certain actuations of either branch of government. While the members of the legislature are elected, the members of the Cabinet are appointed by the President and may require the confirmation or consent of the legislative branch. The formulation, amendment and review of legislation are the sole purview of the legislature. However, on many occasions, the executive could endorse a legislative agenda for consideration and veto a bill that was passed in the legislature. The latter, nonetheless, could overturn it via a two-thirds vote.

When it comes to the difficult process of removing a President, often the only legal way is through an impeachment process that is undertaken in the legislative branch.

Reassessing the option—what now, Mang Pandoy?

In theory, the parliamentary and presidential forms of government are on opposite sides of a pole. In practice, however, countries

customize their chosen system according to their needs, culture and beliefs resulting in the so-called hybrid model. France, for instance, is a country with a hybrid model cited as a semi-presidential system since its President is said to enjoy broader powers than the Prime Minister.

In the present state of Philippine affairs, changing its Charter and choosing the most appropriate form of government are of critical undertakings in the political scenario. *It becomes even more crucial when one has to bear in mind that institutional development and good governance are the foundations of a viable democratic political system (whatever it may be) and sustainable economic development.* The debate is expected to persist as more issues surface and the arguments become clearer.

An important consideration in all these is the question on whether changing the system of governance **would in itself** solve the economic and political crises. In a nation lacking in social cohesion and suffering from public confidence, political or economic change may simply douse the current fire but ignite a different flame. Ultimately, *the transformation from within each Filipino translating into a more unified stance and action may be the more essential change* that should take place to lead the country toward development and prosperity. *

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Summary of differences in the political system

Parliamentary	Distinctions	Presidential
Prime Minister ≠ President	Leadership	President as head of state and government
Fusion between the executive and legislative branches	Separation of powers	Executive ≠ Legislative Judiciary
Vote of no-confidence or party vote	Removal from Office	Impeachment

The *Economic Issue of the Day* is one of a series of PIDS efforts to help in enlightening the public and other interested parties on the concepts behind certain economic issues. This dissemination outlet aims to define and explain, in simple and easy-to-understand terms, basic concepts as they relate to current and everyday economics-related matters.

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The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of PIDS. *

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