

A Malicious National Language by Manuel Faelnar

The concept of a national language is Napoleonic. It stemmed from Napoleon's desire that France should be one people - French, and one language - French. And to think Napoleon was born in Corsica and his native language was the Corsican dialect of Italian.

This Napoleonic thinking dominated nation builders and policy makers in the early 20th century. This kind of thinking is now dated. Multiple identities in one nation is now recognized. I will shortly give as examples, Spain, Wales in the United Kingdom, and Belgium.

Forcing the language of one ethnic group (such as Tagalog) upon other ethnic groups is divisive and disruptive of the national fabric. It does not unite. Pakistan learned this the hard way after the super nationalists in Islamabad declared that only Urdu would be the national and official language of Pakistan. This led to the break-away of East Bengal and the formation of Bangladesh. The ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka had as a major cause, the imposition of Sinhalese as the sole national language over the objections of the Tamils. Belgium nearly had a civil war and finally had to recognize Flemish as an official language along with French. Until then, following the Napoleonic Doctrine, only French was the official language and the sole language of instruction in Belgium. Spain after Franco wisely recognized the regional languages as official languages and as languages of instruction.

A perhaps unintended consequence of this Napoleonic thinking of our nations' early fathers is the serious damage to our non-Tagalog languages and non-Tagalog cultures. Gemma Cruz Araneta put in her PDI column, "It shows a decline in the number of users of Filipino languages other than Tagalog as through the years, Tagalog users have steadily increased in number; from 19 percent of the population in 1948 (a decade after Pres. Manuel Quezon decreed Filipino as the national language) to 29.30 percent in 1995. The rise of Tagalog is far from spectacular, until compared to the decline of other local languages. To illustrate the urgency of the situation, Zambali is spoken only in four obscure towns in Zambales".

We believe that without mandated devolution of central powers as in Spain, our non-Tagalog languages are doomed. We need a more enlightened approach to assure the continued existence of our indigenous languages and cultures. We can take heart from the examples of post-Franco Spain, the United Kingdom, and Belgium.

SPAIN

Spain is federal in everything but name, a matter of semantics. The evolution of Spain after Franco is a thought-provoking case in point. Catalan, Basque, and Galician have been co-officialized and are now used side by side with Spanish in their respective regions. A conscious and systematic language policy favoring the elaboration and social implementation of minority languages in all fields of social life has led to spectacular results. The affirmation of one's own linguistic identity is felt as a stronger need than the need of far-reaching communicative efficiency. Spain is often considered as a model of linguistic development and the peaceful solution of ethnic and linguistic conflicts in the process of nation building.

WALES (UNITED KINGDOM)

The United Kingdom has no written constitution. But with devolution of powers to Wales and Scotland, the UK has effectively become federal.

The Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Government of Wales Act 1998 provide that the Welsh and English languages should be treated on a basis of equality. Public bodies are required to prepare and implement a Welsh Language Scheme. Thus the Welsh Assembly, local councils, police forces, fire services and the health sector use Welsh as an official language, issuing official literature and publicity in Welsh versions.

BELGIUM

In 1993, Belgium became a fully-fledged federal state when the communities and regions received full powers and federalism was officially enshrined in the Constitution.

There are now three levels of government (federal, regional and linguistic community) with a complex division of responsibilities.

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