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Our constitutional democracy offers much to take pride in and cherish

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WHEN Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi recently paid an official visit to the Philippines, reports were that he had an animated discussion over lunch with President Gloria Arroyo, in the presence of high Philippine officials including former President Fidel Ramos, on Malaysia's political and constitutional set-up.

The Prime Minister reportedly argued forcefully that Malaysia's relative success in recent years has been the result of a rigorous electoral system backed by strong governing political parties and an effective civil service.

The fact that Malaysia's brand of democracy has been functioning well, with four smooth transitions of national leadership in as many decades, has apparently not been lost on the Filipinos who are reputed to have one of the most free-wheeling democracies in the world.

It, therefore, should come as no surprise that a certain loss of confidence in the effectiveness of their own brand of democracy has seen a constituency developing among some powerful elements of thoughtful, even elitist, Filipinos advocating the adoption of a federal parliamentary constitutional set-up similar to Malaysia's.

That Malaysia has grown to become something of the regional flavour of the month was highlighted by the fact that former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been invited to speak before the general assembly of Indonesia's national Chamber of Commerce and Industry next month.

It is also no secret that the creation of the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines-East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) 10 years ago was largely inspired by admiration over how Sabah and Sarawak, long regarded as relatively poor country cousins to Peninsular Malaysia, have prospered as autonomous and comparatively well-governed States within the Malaysian federation.

Since the federation in 1963, Sarawak has licked its festering Communist insurgency, curbed excessive political infighting among its potentially fractious population and ushered in an era of quite unprecedented economic growth and development.

Similarly, Sabah has finally seen the back of persistent problems with illegal migration of people from across its porous and long coastline and the resulting political hiccups they occasionally presented to settle into hopefully a new era of growth and development as Sarawak has enjoyed over the past two decades.

In almost all social and economic indicators, Sabah and Sarawak lead all their BIMP-EAGA counterparts, with the exception of Brunei, of course. BIMP-EAGA visitors from Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, West Papua in Indonesia and Mindanao and Palawan in the Philippines to the two States are invariably filled with envious surprise over the very obvious physical signs of progress and relatively high standards of living enjoyed in Sabah and Sarawak.

There is clearly something to be said for local empowerment as enshrined under our Federal and respective State Constitutions relating to the separation of powers between the centre and the States.

The more traditionalist among our own critics are far too easily persuaded by their foreign counterparts with their own rudimentary knowledge of the Malaysian system into dismissing our political system as authoritarian or even dictatorial simply because we do not have - nor miss

- the classic check-and-balance of an alternating two-party system.

Our Federal Constitution provides for other healthy checks-and-balances between States and the centre and the dictates and demands of our heterogenous population ensure even greater, if more informal, checks-and-balances.

That the Philippines, with its rather elaborate, US-styled formal system of checks-and-balances, is now rather desperately seeking to untie the knots their system is affording them by shopping around for a more practical system of governance not unlike our own should be vindication enough against some elitist elements in our midst and their foreign busybody friends who tirelessly harp on the fact that Malaysia and Malaysians deserve "better".

Better the rough-and-ready system that works than a theoretically flawless system that stands up to the scrutiny of local and foreign snobs, but fails the people it is intended to serve miserably, any day. There may come a day when our people collectively, and not just the elite, expect or even demand changes to our system but as things now stand, we have other more pressing priorities than to fix something that is not broken.