Federalism seems to have acquired new life as a cure-all for economic and political problems in Uganda. State House, ministries, kingdoms and districts are grappling enthusiastically once again with the possibilities of redistributing power. But key figures are entering into a debate in which they will do more harm than good to the cause of federalism. Even as they augment their own power and think this a step forward, they will bind themselves ever tighter to the authority of the centre.

In the excitement about the revival of federo, it is worth remembering that if the programmes are implemented as conceived today, the result will be a strengthening of central government and not a real devolution of power.

Decentralisation is not enough. What is required is a wholesale restructuring of the relations between State House and the districts. Genuine federalism is an arrangement where the central government draws its authority from the consent of the people in the localities – not through elections but through the constitutional delegation of limited decision making power. This means that leaders in Buganda, Bunyoro and other units of sub-national government must have the power to decide what the centre is permitted. What is discussed in public these days is precisely the opposite: the President originating proposals about the new authority of sub-national leaders.

There are two reasons why these circumstances cannot lead to federo which actually weakens the centre in favour of the kingdoms, regions or some other set of second-tier authorities. First, the economics simply are not right. After fifteen years of nominally decentralised local government most districts are not viable financially. Mechanisms for collecting and allocating tax money begin and end with the Uganda Revenue Authority. Local economies depend on transfers from central government because even basic administrative costs outstrip their capacity to fund them. This makes the districts – and any successor institutions in a federated Uganda – dependent on the centre for survival.

The possible exception to this is Buganda. It benefits from the concentration of political and economic activity in Kampala, and it would dominate any new governmental arrangement which allows more power to regions. But economic infrastructure throughout the kingdom originates...
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from and is managed by central government institutions or by Kampala City Council. If it is to be truly self-reliant then Buganda would have to acquire or create most institutions of its new regional government.

Related to this is the problem in all districts of institutional capacity at sub-county and parish level, where any new regional government would interact most often with its constituents. Lack of resources to carry out budgetary authority which has already been devolved mean that simply changing the nominal administrative authority to a federated region instead of decentralised district will leave revenue deficiencies unchanged. This means that government under whichever master will be ineffective, and we should expect the political consequences of this to persist. The result could be a shifting of blame for economic problems from the district or the current central government to the new regional government with no real increase in accountability to citizens at the bottom of the structure.

The second reason the path we are laying now will not lead to real federo is the scramble to capture state power. Opposition parties are focussed on unseating the President and NRM in 2011. Leaders of the kingdoms and traditional institutions negotiate with the government to increase their influence in the present political settlement. But if you want federalism, you should be discussing ways to peacefully dismantle the present system instead of ways in which you can grab its levers. Attention is directed at the wrong questions, at the calculus of power today. Getting federo which gives real power to the localities means wiping the slate clean instead.

Assuming the basic economic and political problems could be resolved and the country put on the path to genuine federal re-formation, a third obstacle would impede development of real power centres outside Kampala. Presently, alternatives to present administrative structures are not democratic. If power were devolved today to regions based on pre-colonial ethno-linguistic areas, the result would simply replicate existing power relations in miniature. Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro, Busoga and a likely revived Ankole are autocracies or oligarchies with varying popularity and administrative efficacy. Power there depends on personal relationships with leaders and such resources as they control directly are tightly held by a cabal of elites.

If you are a believer in federo then these are not hopeful circumstances. Federalism is ultimately the cause of the individual. We think that by disassembling national government into smaller parts that we will automatically accomplish increases in individual liberty. But this requires more than simply re-writing the constitution. If we do not change the economic realities of everyday life for the farmer, the shopkeeper and the labourer then we risk creating many unaccountable, corrupt governments where today many people see only one. If we cannot
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create better conditions in which professionals, entrepreneurs and investors can develop loci of economic power outside the state then we will likely see an expanding, inefficient government absorb greater shares of GDP. Federalism can check pathological development, but it must be developed from below, not given by a central government which has no fundamental interest in limiting its own power.

Permitting the centre to steer the debate about federalism will eventually lead to a hijacking of the process by people who are determined to keep most of their influence even as they attempt to redesign the system which got them where they are. Traditional or other leaders who participate in the process without also advocating internal devolution in their home regions are signalling their desire to replicate existing anti-democratic practices under a new name. In this case the result will be a collection of federated mini-Ugandas in which each competes for influence over others using the same methods and with similar results as presently. This can only increase the power of the centre as the arbiter of disputes, which will negate any advances made by federalism.

Mr Madill is Adjunct Professor of Government, Department of Historical and Policy Studies at Oakton Community College, USA
mmadill@oakton.edu