

Impressions of Switzerland

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Picture perfect countryside sceneries. A train system that operates with clock work precision. And yes, clocks and watches that are mechanical marvels and are second to none in the world.

Add the humanitarian spirit of its people. And a citizen-friendly system of governance that is effective, efficient, and rational. Well, you have Switzerland.

Coming from a first time visitor who went through only a six-day study tour of the country, these sentiments may be interpreted as knee-jerk reactions bordering on romanticism. But the trip was a journey of confirmation and affirmation of how an entire people can think from the heart and act from the head.

By this I mean being able to operate a system of governance that is dynamic and progressive enough to be a model of efficiency, and a structure of civic and human relationship that can only be described as civilized and anchored on traditional but enduring values.

The Swiss themselves may not feel comfortable with this view knowing how their system tends to be dragging and slow at times. Or most of the time, as many of those we met on our study tour would always point out.

The relative slowness of decision making at the national level is due to the unique system of cantons (or regional states) that puts premium on their right to self-rule. Consensus as a basis of decision-making rather than simple majority rule is understandably a more rigorous process and takes more time.

Still, it is a small price to pay when you have a citizenry that is highly participative in cantonal and federal affairs. Indeed, I think this is what makes Switzerland an exemplar of participatory democracy in the world.

The emphasis on basic human rights and respect for minority rights seems to me a trademark of Swiss national ethics. This finds casual expression even in such mundane urban reality as traffic where patience, civility and good-natured give-and-take rule the streets. This contrasts sharply with the rough and tumble "I have to be first" indiscipline of most urbanized centers in the world.

The Swiss nationals apparently take their civic responsibilities seriously. Their sense of accountability to others and to the country is quite strong, and is apparently ingrained in their national psyche.

This translates into a relatively low crime rate, comparatively cordial social relationships, and a strong sense of responsibility and professionalism among their public officials — from the top ministers to the municipal police officers.

There are plenty of lessons to be learned and practices worth emulating from the Swiss experience and current system. But mostly, they will require compatible socio-political climate and comparable attitude among the people.

In the effort to restructure our own political system from unitary to federal, the Philippines will benefit in considering several aspects of the Swiss system and the discipline required for effective implementation or practice.

Our week-long journey and visit to five out of the twenty-six cantons of Switzerland was very enriching in that we were introduced to how the system works at the municipal, cantonal, and federal levels. But it is not enough to warrant substantive conclusions about the country and its people. Consider these perorations then as tentative impressions.