

MINDANAO: THE AGENDA FOR NON-VIOLENT NATION-BUILDING**

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Introduction

The conference today on Mindanao issues is very timely — Mindanao is veritably a “social volcano” on the brink of an eruption more extensive and more intense than ever before; thus, the urgency of a continuing public discussion towards a consensus that is a prerequisite of peaceful change cannot be over-emphasized. For as long as we continue talking, or agree to disagree within the bounds of reason and democratic change, for so long shall we succeed in keeping the peace. Hopefully also, we shall succeed in guiding the peaceful transition towards Mindanao’s future.

This paper has been prepared from the standpoint of an academician. More precisely, the thoughts contained in this paper are those of an administrator of a state institution of higher learning primarily motivated to contribute his share for whatever it is worth towards the peaceful realization of Mindanao’s future. This clarification is necessary because, thanks to Nur Misuari’s MNLF and more recently to Reuben Canoy’s Mindanao Independence Movement, and notwithstanding its being under the auspices of an association with an historically non-separatist pedigree, a participant in public discussions on Mindanao such as today’s conference, is very likely to invite suspicions of insurgency and rebellion. The situation in Mindanao is very similar to the revolutionary ferment in Rizal’s time during which any articulate man was bound to be branded a “filibustero” and declared an enemy of the state. We can still recall how the armed forces were poised to arrest and incarcerate the leaders of the Mindanao Congress in Cagayan de Oro City last year. I have no desire to conjure up the “Gulag syndrome” in this conference, so I hope you will indulge me these long-winded introductory remarks. These long-winded introductory remarks are thus necessary to avoid a “Gulag syndrome” which would be disastrous to a family man whose only means of livelihood is government service.

To further underscore the point, this paper is written by an academician as a student of the history of social change and as a critique of contemporary movements in Mindanao in the context of their postulated goals and the higher interests of our people. Its specific objective is to analyze the fundamental requirements and parameters of a consensus on the Mindanao question and outline an agenda for non-violent change.

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ROOTS OF DISCONTENT AND THE CASE FOR RADICAL CHANGE

Most of our brothers from the North do not fully understand the growing clamor in Mindanao for a radical transformation of the existing political and economic system. Our Northern compatriots view with alarm and antipathy the converging undercurrents of separatist sentiments in Mindanao, epitomized by the MNLF assertion that Mindanao has never been a part of the Philippine Republic, because the roots of our discontent are not fully appreciated and understood.

The case for a radical change in the status of Mindanao vis-a-vis the Philippine Republic has already been amplified by the exponents of independence. However, even those in Mindanao who are not prepared to adopt this extremist position can readily concede that our grievances are valid and call for fundamental changes in the prevailing economic and political relations which in sum define the colonial status of Mindanao.

A brief resume of the inequitable political and economic relations is sufficient to establish this point. In the political dimension, Mindanao as a region has never enjoyed its just share of governmental power commensurate to its population, resources and contribution to the larger economy.

For this reason, the sentiment of the Bangsa Moro that he does not really belong is understandable. For instance, in the Philippine legislature only seven Mindanaoans (four Christians and three Muslims) have made it to the Senate since 1946, and none has been reelected. In the cabinet, Mindanao has always been under-represented ever since the time of Quezon and the Commonwealth. Under the present administration, the situation has arguably worsened. The observation is perhaps well taken that of the only two Cabinet ministers said to represent Mindanao, one is just a symbol and the other is not truly of and for Mindanao. Furthermore, not one jurist from Mindanao, Christian or Muslim, in spite of the growing roster of competent professionals, has ever made it to the Supreme Court. And we cannot name one Muslim General other than Gen. Mamarinta Lao who, as Misuari has pointedly observed, has no command, reflecting the built-in distrust of and discrimination against Muslim military professionals in the Philippine Republic. But has any significant ruler of Christians from Mindanao also risen high enough in any government agency on the national level, to prove that there is no discrimination against Mindanaoans in general?

One ludicrous example of Mindanao's being kept outside the political mainstream is the fact that Ilocanos have generally monopolized the Philippine Coconut Authority despite the fact that there are practically no coconuts in the Ilocos and Cagayan Valley Regions whereas Mindanao produces nearly 60% of the total coconut output. This tragi-comic anomaly invites one to ask whether the Ilongos will be happy if a Davaoeno will head the sugar industry or whether Ilocanos would welcome a Tausug head of the tobacco industry.

The economic relations are just as exasperating. In contrast to the fact that Mindanao contributes at least one-third to the GNP, its share of the national budget averages only one-fifth. One very crucial aspect of this unbalanced share of budgetary resources is the pathetic condition of state institutions of higher learning in Mindanao. The bulk of the resources for higher education continues to be channeled to established centers of learning in the North, thus perpetuating the underdevelopment of the human capital of Mindanao and the unabated influx of settlers from the North who have benefited from their more privileged share of educational investments to assume key positions in key industries in Mindanao.

To cap it all, Mindanao generates about 60% of foreign exchange earnings. But does Mindanao receive in return its just share of foreign loans and grants for capital investments? Hence, what we can see is a classic picture of colonial exploitation—Mindanao produces the bulk of the hard currency with which to pay off foreign loans — most of which are channeled to the already more developed regions of the North. My friends, the people of Mindanao and their childrens' children will continue to pay for the ever-increasing foreign indebtedness of the country, loans from which they have barely benefited. While Mindanao inexorably plunges into poverty, the North will continue to build white elephants from proceeds of foreign loans it is too jealous to share.

In the context of the inequities inherent in a colonial status of Mindanao, it should be possible to elicit the people's sympathy and support for Mindanao's clamor for redress of its just grievances. Mindanao's path towards a peaceful transition to a new political and economic order must be founded on a solid grasp and understanding of the internal contradictions of colonialism.

BASIC PREMISES OF NON-VIOLENT CHANGE IN MINDANAO

The central problem of this conference is to define the stand and course of action that we must take and propagate vis-a-vis the predominant movements bearing directly on the future of Mindanao. From the objective standpoint, the fundamental question that has been raised by the separatist movements may be restated as follows: What is the valid and viable social order and political framework within which the interests, aspirations and destiny of Mindanao and its people could best be ensured? The thesis of the separatist movements is that the rights, interests and well-being of the people of Mindanao cannot be secured and promoted except in the context of full sovereignty as a separate and independent state. The position of the government of the Republic of the Philippines is that the same goals and objectives can be achieved in the context of autonomy albeit still undefined. Whatever the details may be of the settlement of this issue, the three basic premises for non-violent change in Mindanao are:

1. the new social order and framework of political life is acceptable to and embodies the consensus of a clear majority of the Filipino nation as a whole;
2. the consensus is founded on justice inherent in the outline and fundamental principles of the social order and political framework; and,

3. this new social order is founded on justice because it consists of recognition and mutual accommodation by and among the majority and minority communities of Mindanao of their respective historic rights and legitimate interests.

If peaceful change is to be steadfastly pursued as a common aspiration, such a consensus must, firstly, incorporate all areas of agreement. Secondly, the areas of agreement should not be less than the bare minimum and should outweigh, as they are more fundamental than, the areas of disagreement. Thirdly, the consensus should incorporate a commitment to the principle of conflict-resolution within commonly shared notions of justice and accepted "rules of the game" including the crucial notion of "the rule of law."

Whether or not such a consensus shall be obtained, it must embody as an irreducible minimum, the recognition and acceptance of the following principles:

1. the territorial integrity of the Philippine Republic;
2. the legitimacy and validity of the Bangsa Moros' claim of their unique and distinct national identity and aspirations; and,
3. the legitimacy of the aspirations of all other inhabitants of the MINSUPALA areas.

Acceptance by the exponents of Mindanao movements of the principle of the territorial integrity of the Philippine Republic need not be elaborated as a prerequisite for peaceful change. It is enough to observe that the very same thesis that Mindanao can stand alone is sufficient argument, on the grounds of self-preservation, for the rest of the Filipino nation to resist at any cost the dismemberment of the Republic. Hence, if the leading exponents of Mindanao movements are sincere in their profession of commitment to peace, there is no recourse but to acknowledge the necessity and legitimacy of this principle. The alternative is to prepare for the certainty of fratricidal war. Only the most bigoted will deny the reality and the positive aspects of the historic ties that bind Mindanao with the Visayas and Luzon.

The second principle is more problematic as it is a claim advanced, in the context of the Philippine Republic, by the minority Muslim community through the MNLF of Nur Misuari. Nonetheless, acceptance of this principle by the majority is a *sine qua non* to peaceful change in Mindanao.

Elsewhere, I have elaborated on the historic legitimacy of the Muslim people's struggle to protect their political independence and their cultural and territorial heritage against the incursions of Western and subsequently Filipino Christian colonialism. Let me just restate at this point my observation that a historical parallel exists between the 19th century Philippine revolution and the contemporary Bangsa Moro struggle for national liberation. In the same manner that Rizal and the other Great Propagandists had asserted the distinction between the colonialists and the subjugated Filipino nation, Misuari today has articulated the national consciousness of the Bangsa Moro, contrapuntal to Filipino colonialization of Mindanao. The

Bangsa Moro claim to national identity today is not different from the 19th century Filipino struggle for emancipation from Spanish colonial rule and may, therefore, be considered not any less historically valid and legitimate.

The implication of this historical perspective is very clear. Just as Rizal warned Spain a century ago that the emergence of the Filipino nation was as inevitable as the birth of the child of a pregnant mother whose time has come, the birth of the Bangsa Moro nation can only be either bloody and violent as a separate state or bloodless and peaceful as an integral but fully autonomous component of the Philippine Republic.

In the face of this certainty, what posture then can the rest of Mindanao and the Filipino nation as a whole adopt within the bounds of peaceful change? To my mind, the clear implication is that the rest of Mindanao and the Philippine Republic as a whole is being afforded an opportunity to dismantle our colonial legacy and establish in its stead a regime of justice, liberty and democracy. The MNLF struggle may thus be viewed by the majority as the spearhead towards establishing meaningful self-government at the regional or local levels not only in the Muslim regions of Mindanao but in the Philippine Republic as a whole. If the consensus is that in the interest of the people's welfare the concentration of power in Manila must be dismantled, then the logical stand to take is for the rest of the nation to support rather than oppose the MNLF struggle and aspirations for self-determination.

But this begs the question of the feasibility for the Christian majority in Mindanao to accept the notion of working hand-in-hand with the MNLF and vice versa. The major consideration is the apprehension by the Christian majority of their dislocation under a Muslim/MNLF domination of the political and economic affairs in what the MNLF perceive as their homeland. These fears among the Christian majority are unfortunately the consequence of misconceptions, the propagation of which is, on analysis, but the handiwork of those whose interests are served by keeping the people of Mindanao divided and at war with themselves. To some extent it is also the consequence of the failure of the MNLF to project an image of a commonality of aspirations with the rest of the Mindanao folk.

However, it is important to note at this stage that during his recent sojourn in Lanao, Nur Misuari categorically affirmed the MNLF position that "Bangsa Moro" as a concept of nationality is not limited only to Muslims but also incorporates the tribal highlanders and the Christian community. Hence, the Bangsa Moro whose homeland is Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan is identified on the basis not of religious persuasion but on the basis of his actual residence in Mindanao and his belief in its unique identity and destiny vis-a-vis the Philippine Republic as a whole.

During the same occasion, the MNLF Chairman articulated the idea of a federal system of government that shall accommodate the unique circumstances of the inhabitants of MINSUPALA as a whole. In other words, the MNLF not only concedes but also welcomes the realities of the cultural demographics and disparities of Mindanao. Misuari made it clear that, from the MNLF standpoint, the

will of the people of Mindanao shall be his primary guidepost and that the option of self-government within the territorial integrity of the Philippine Republic is an option worthy of serious consideration. Nonetheless, the negative reactions among the Christian majority to his recent consultative visits to Mindanao communities in the company of the brigade-strength corps of armed bodyguards are symptomatic of a failure in communications and the extensiveness of the climate of distrust and fear that keeps the MINSUPALA community a house divided against itself.

AGENDA FOR NON-VIOLENT NATION-BUILDING

It is absolutely clear that the crucial problem confronting Mindanao and its inhabitants today is the vague state, if not the actual lack, of a consensus on which basis a unified program of action may be undertaken. The problem has become acute in the face of the predominance of the strategic and tactical programs of action of political movements which are more clearly defined than their underlying political philosophy. What is sorely missing is the articulation and dissemination of an ideology which can provide the lexicon of political discourse, thereby evolving the consensus for concerted social action.

In order for such an ideology to succeed in mobilizing and directing towards common objectives the energies and enthusiasm of the people, it must meet two basis functional requisities:

1. define clearly the social boundaries of the political community (i.e., the "body politic") and establish clear standards for determining who does or not belong, which standards are acceptable to and actually accepted by a clear majority of the people;
2. formulate and systematize a code of beliefs and values explaining and justifying the origin and articulating a vision of the future of such a distinct body politic, which system of beliefs and values are acceptable to and actually accepted by a clear majority of the people.

It is only the foundation of this basis consensus that programs of action such as those propagated by contemporary political movements in Mindanao could be validly formulated, valid in terms of their understanding and acceptance by the people constituting the body politic.

It seems to me, however, that the contemporary political movements in Mindanao are putting the cart before the horse—action before reason and consensus, a heavy emphasis on armed struggle and the lack or absence of the more fundamental internal revolution in beliefs and values. Therefore, in the agenda for the non-violent process of nation-building focused in MINSUPALA herein suggested, what may be the top priority is the formulation and dissemination of the political philosophy of Mindanao in the same manner that the "Propaganda Movement" led by Rizal et.al., was a precondition to the Katipunan of Bonifacio. This means that the armed might of, for instance, the MNLF, must be anchored on a collateral, intellectual or educational movement. Along this line, the practical courses of action that readily come

to mind are: 1) the formulation of political party with an extensive grassroots membership dedicated to the goals, objectives and programs of action of Mindanao today and tomorrow; 2) the formulation of a network of supportive non-political organizations to support and complement the political programs of action; and 3) harnessing the human and material resources of public and private institutions throughout the length and breadth of Mindanao. What are, therefore, suggested are strategies and tactical objectives, as well as practical courses of action within the bounds of peaceful change and the prevailing socio-political order.

As an academician and representative of the educational sector I cannot help but emphasize the need at this hour to tap the intellectual capital of our people. Apart from the complexity of our socio-cultural, economic and political conditions in Mindanao, the process of social change is very intricate and demands a precise language of discourse with a clear conception of the fundamental ideas that must guide social action. In spite of what is clear to me as a unity of interests and aspirations, the people of Mindanao still face the danger of plunging into war simply because of semantics — or the imprecise definition of key concepts. A political party, supported by a network of organizations and institutions, is the most efficacious mechanism for articulating the political philosophy of a social movement, including definitions of the basic terms or concepts of political discourse.

One important product of the envisioned process of consensus-building is the drafting of a basic law enshrining the fundamental principles of a new social order and political framework. This basic law is a prerequisite towards establishing a new regime that may be so desired and ensuring its stability and durability. Necessarily, such a basic law shall be the work of many minds. At this early stage, however, I propose to advance, as springboards for discussion, what I perceive as the two sets of fundamental principles germane and imperative to the peculiar conditions obtaining in Mindanao.

The first is the political principle of balanced and equitable distribution of governmental power among the district communities of Mindanao, namely the indigenous communities which may be further distinguished as the Bangsa Moro and the highland tribes and the settled communities. The details of the basic law should include provisos safeguarding adequate representation and power sharing of all elements of the body politic. This constitutional principle directly proceeds from one of the basic premises of peaceful change in Mindanao earlier advanced, namely: the recognition of the legitimacy of the claims of national identity of the Bangsa Moro and the historic and fundamental rights and vested interests of the minority communities.

Also proceeding from the same premise is a constitutional principle of respect for the unique cultural heritage of the indigenous communities. Such a principle would allow the adoption within their respective territories of political and social institutions in keeping with their cultural heritage such as the sultanate system and its integral titles and social practices of royalty, and the Islamic political traditions of the fusion of Church and State.

This also means, however, that in predominantly Christian territories the structure, principles and practices of government shall also be in consonance with the people's mandate. The underlying premise is popular self-determination applied equally to the various district communities of Mindanao.

Closely related is a constitutional principle defining the place of religion in law and jurisprudence. The Indonesian model may herein be advanced which postulates no state religion but ensures the full exercise of all religious faiths. The break of Pakistan from India should teach us the lesson of the impracticability of defining statehood along religious bounds. The case of Lebanon should also be studied for the lessons that may be drawn on the problems of stability in spite of constitutional delineations of power-sharing among religious communities. Hence, it may be advisable, henceforth, to refrain from defining communities along religious distinctions. The delineation of indigenous and settler communities may not be perfectly satisfactory but at least it veers away from an inherently divisive demography.

The other set of proposed constitutional and statutory principles are those that guarantee the protection of inherent and vested economic rights of Mindanao's communities. The major concern is landholding which is at the root of the conflict in Mindanao. The principle herein advanced is recognition and respect of all valid claims and vested rights not only of indigenous communities on the grounds of patrimony but also of settlers on the basis of legitimate titles and transfers of ownership by purchase and inheritance. In recognition of the real handicaps of indigenous communities, the principle may further specify that in the disposition of unclassified lands that may still be classified as alienable and disposable, priority shall be given to the indigenous communities, and further that within a limited period of say 30 years from original disposal, their transfer by sale shall be valid only within and among members of the indigenous communities.

It seems to me that apart from landholding, the other major grievance of indigenous communities is the inequitable distribution of opportunities for social advancement. A related constitutional principle that may thus be considered is one mandating the State to reserve financial resources, particularly those derived from the exploitation of natural resources within their recognized patrimonial heritage, for the educational and professional advancement of indigenous communities. A corollary statutory principle is a requirement imposed on establishments located in such areas to accord an employment ratio, say of 70%-30%, in favor of the indigenous communities within a limited period, say 25 years.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The overall thrust of these proposed basic constitutional and statutory principles is a strategy of "reverse discrimination" which is deemed necessary to redress the balance between the advanced settler communities and the disadvantaged indigenous population of Mindanao. Such a social policy is justifiable under the time-honored principle of social justice.

At this point, some comments on the proposed constitution are in order. It is difficult for me to see how the Bangsa Moro and the MNLF could swallow the autonomy provisions in the draft constitution which does not incorporate the basic constitutional guarantees safeguarding their historic rights and survival as a distinct national entity. The case may be advanced that there was really no adequate consultation between the Mindanao communities and the Commissioners appointed to articulate and defend their interests.

What is to be kept in mind is that the prevailing social, political and economic order in Mindanao is founded on unjust relations which have spawned the violent struggles for the redress of grievances in the past. Only a new order based on justice shall prevent the eruption of the social volcano that is Mindanao today.

Finally, it must be reiterated that what is now in order is an agenda for building a true consensus. The idea of unity and cooperation among the various communities of Mindanao may at present be a minority opinion. But the lesson of history is that with regard to social reality there are no absolute truths, and truth always begins with one man. If the belief is valid its truth shall sooner or later prevail.