

The Secessionist Movements in Southern Philippines: Prospects and Challenges in Negotiating for the Mindanao Peace Process¹

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Abstract

Unless peaceful and negotiated settlements can be put in place and accepted by the majority of the people in the affected areas, the Bangsamoro secessionist movements in the southern Philippines will continue to affect not only the well-being of the Bangsamoro people but also the other peoples of Mindanao. It will not only threaten the national security of the Republic of the Philippines and the stability of Southeast Asia but also pose an important security concern for other countries whose security interests in the region are undeniable. Hence, this paper is of significance as it attempts to articulate some of the prospects and challenges that a peaceful and negotiated settlement on the secessionist problem entails in the southern Philippines.

Keywords: Bangsamoro, secessionist movements, regional autonomy, peace process

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¹ A paper presented at the Second International Philippine Studies Conference of Japan (PSCJ 2010) with the theme "Remapping the Philippines in the Globalizing World" in a conference organized by Tsukuba University of Japan as an international forum aimed to discuss various issues and approaches on Philippine Studies on November 13-14, 2010 at the International Congress Center Epochal Tsukuba, Tsukuba University, Ibaraki Japan. The original version of this paper was presented at the symposium on *Securing Peace in Mindanao: Resolving the Roots of Conflict* in New York City, co-sponsored by the Asian Society, the United States Institute of Peace and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars held on September 27-29, 2004 at Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, New York City, U.S.A.

The Prospects:

1. Secessionist Groups' Willingness to Negotiate

The two most dominant groups of the Bangsamoro secessionists, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) are both willing to settle their political differences with the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) through peace negotiations. In fact, the former had already signed the 1996 Final Peace Agreement and what remains to be done is the full implementation of the specific provisions of the agreement. The latter is currently engaged with the GRP in a peace negotiation.

2. People's Support for the Peace Process

The majority of the people especially the civilian sectors including the Bangsamoro, the Lumads, and the Settlers in the affected areas, who are, in the first place, the real victims of the secessionist war in Mindanao are very supportive of the Mindanao peace process and are strongly hoping for the peaceful and permanent solutions to this Mindanao problem.

3. Continued Support of the OIC

The continuing role of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), as a third party mediator in the Mindanao peace process was a very important factor in forging the successful MNLF-GRP 1996 peace negotiations and is intently monitoring the MILF-GRP peace process.

4. Commitment of Other Foreign Governments

The commitment of foreign governments such as the United States of America, the European Union, Britain, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Malaysia, Libya, Brunei to support and facilitate the on-going MILF-GRP peace negotiations is a very welcome development and it can definitely contribute to the success of the Mindanao peace process.

5. War Fatigue Makes People and the Conflicting Parties Long for Peace

The ill-effects of the protracted war in many parts of the world on the lives of the people affected should become inspirations for the Bangsamoro secessionist groups and the Philippine government to earnestly pursue peace negotiations to end the war in southern Philippines. Since both the secessionist groups and the Philippine government see that the ordinary people are the most unfortunate victims of violence; and since they both claim to represent the interest of the ordinary people, they are therefore expected to pursue a peaceful settlement of the Southern Philippine question.

6. Inspiration from Successful Negotiated Settlements

The success stories of negotiated settlements to secessionist problems in other parts of the world are good lessons to learn from for the Mindanao peace advocates. Cases such as that of East Timor and Ache in Indonesia are only few of the instances that provide inspiration.

7. Peace Initiatives from the Grassroots

Apart from the top level peace negotiations and peace building efforts (i.e. the government, MILF, OIC, etc.), there is a growing number of Civil Society Organizations (NGOs, POs, Religious Sector, etc.) which are exerting tremendous effort to facilitate community dialogue at the grassroots level and promote a Culture

of Peace among the affected communities. Hand in hand, these two processes can accomplish significant gains.

Worth-mentioning among the Civil Society Organizations that work hard for the promotion of peace is the Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC). When the MILF and the GRP panels, for instance, suspended the top-level peace negotiations after violence erupted again in August 2008, the BUC thoughtfully conceived and carried out a project named "Konsult Mindanaw"². It continued the peace process in a way by listening to the voices of numerous affected individuals/stakeholders who have traditionally been excluded in the top-level negotiations. BUC's "Konsult Mindanaw" brought the valuable collective opinions, feelings, clamors and aspirations of ordinary people to the attention of the conflicting GRP and MILF who both claim to be representing the people.

8. Positive Response from the Academe

The academe [e.g.: Mindanao State University (MSU), Notre Dame University (NDU), the Department of Education and other academic institutions] has positively responded to the call for contributions to peace by coming up with programs on peace education. NDU has been for several years now offering degree programs on peace, while MSU has embarked upon integrating peace into existing courses as its response to Executive Order 570 which mandates the integration of peace education at all levels of education, elementary, high school and tertiary. The peace education programs of the academic institutions cannot be underestimated as their captive audiences, i.e. the young students are still mouldable and can easily imbibe values, attitudes and views relevant to a more peaceful Mindanao.

² KONSULT MINDANAW. A Project of the Bishop-Ulama Conference on People's Platform Of Peace In Mindanao. Final Report, January 2010.

The Challenges:

1. Fragmentation of the Bangsamoro Secessionist Groups

The Bangsamoro secessionist groups are highly fragmented. There are three main groups with different objectives, strategies and political ideologies, the MNLF, the MILF, and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The MNLF is the most liberal among the three factions. Initially, it advocated national liberation of the Bangsamoro people through secession but, later on, it conceded to the establishment of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) as an alternative to secession. The MILF is the radical one. It advocates secession from the Philippine Republic and calls for the establishment of an Islamic State in southern Philippines. However, like the MNLF, while it rejected the 1996 Peace Agreement and the ARMM, they are also willing to accept the establishment of a genuine regional political autonomy in Mindanao as an alternative to their original demand to secession. Only the ASG is not engaged in peace negotiations with the Philippine government; it is the extremist among the three and employs terrorist tactics in pursuing their demands for an Islamic state and the Islamization of the Bangsamoro society. This factionalism among the Bangsamoro secessionist groups, if not properly resolved among them will make the fruitful conclusion of the Mindanao peace process very difficult to achieve. It will be harder for the GRP and much more difficult for international donors to put in place effective and sustainable peace and development agenda for Mindanao. One proof was that immediately after the MNLF and the GRP signed the 1996 Peace Agreement, the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf refused to recognize said agreement and, instead, vigorously pursued their secessionist wars against the national government.

2. Heterogeneity and Inter-ethnic Dynamics of the Bangsamoro

The factionalism among the Bangsamoro armed groups is further complicated by the fact that the Bangsamoro in the Philippines

are not homogenous. There are 13 ethnolinguistic groups that comprise the Bangsamoro people. The evidence of a strong inter-ethnic rivalry, competition and discrimination is clearly manifested in the running of the affairs of the ARMM. For instance, if the regional governor belongs to a particular ethnic group, the majority of the employees in the regional government especially those in the key positions would usually be occupied by his own tribespeople; and the focus of attention and development, if there is any, would be the communities of said ethnic grouping. This situation had consistently been observed whoever gets elected in the ARMM officialdom. In fact, some independent observers are saying that it is even less difficult to solve the conflict between the Bangsamoro people and Philippine government compared to the process of resolving the conflicting interests within the Bangsamoro society.

3. Prevalence of *Rido* (Clan or Family Conflict)

The prevalence of the clan or family conflict popularly known among the Maranaos as *rido* or *pagbanta* among the Tausugs³ is also adding more problems to the already difficult peace and order situation within the conflict areas. Among the Bangsamoro of Mindanao, a simple personal conflict could escalate from the individual to the clan since the honor of one member is closely linked with the honor of the family or clan. Such conflicts may start with accidental or deliberate offenses that are followed by violent retaliations and counter retaliations. The result then is a vicious cycle of violence by the involved families or clans which may belong to the same tribe or different ethnic groups.⁴

³ See Jamail A. Kamlian, Understanding Rido and the Maguindanao Massacre: Perspectives from the Social Sciences, a paper presented at the Public forum on "The Maguindanao Massacre: Perspective from the Social Sciences" at the Pulungang Claro M. Recto, Bulwagang Rizal, University of the Philippines, Diliman Quezon City on January 19, 2010. This Forum was sponsored by the Third World Studies Center, The Asia Foundation and the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. The same paper was also presented during the In-service Training of the College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology, Tibanga, Iligan City, Philippines on March 15, 2010. See also the same author's Clan Feuds in Bangsamoroland *Philippine Daily Inquirer* December 5, 2009 issue.

⁴ It must be emphasized that family conflicts and clan feuds do not only happen in Mindanao. In fact it happens all over the world. However, it becomes different in Moroland because of the severity in

At one perspective, however, *Rido* can be viewed as an effect and not the cause of poor governance in the predominantly Bangsamoro territories of Mindanao and Sulu. The Philippine justice system is so slow that Bangsamoro families and clans feel desperate and lose hope that justice could be served to them through legal means. Hence, they usually take the law into their own hands through *Rido*. This implies therefore that *Rido* can be prevented if justice is delivered as quickly as possible by the state.

It might be interesting to note also that, at times, *Rido* could also trigger hostilities between secessionist armed groups and the military in some areas of Mindanao. How is this? Usually, affiliation of families with armed groups matter. For example, those who have relatives in the Armed Forces of the Philippines usually ask help from the military while those who have relatives among the MNLF or MILF would seek help from the MNLF or MILF. This way *Rido* becomes a trigger of conflict between government forces and the rebel groups.⁵

This particular aspect of the Mindanao peace and order problems should be confronted with much vigor and creativity, since, this agonizing peace and order problem will threaten all other peace and development programs that will be put in place in the area as a result of the Mindanao peace negotiations.

terms of lost lives, destruction to property, transfer of residence and others. See also Eduardo Climaco Tadem. Maguindanao Massacre: Political Rivalry, Not Rido-driven *Philippine Daily Inquirer* December 5, 2009 issue.

⁵ Based on a research published by the Asia Foundation and USAID in 2007, the highest number of *rido* is actually coming from Lanao del Sur (284 cases from 1994-2004); followed by Maguindanao (226 cases from 1970-2005); Sulu (145 cases from 1940-2005;) and then Lanao del Norte (154 cases from 1930-2005). Note that the topnotchers in *Rido* are the three largest Muslim areas – Maguindanao, Maranao, and Tausug territories. Of the documented *rido* cases, 52% have been resolved, 40% unresolved, and 3%, had been resolved but unfortunately recurred. It must be noted that aside from the fact that these provinces have a significant Muslim or Moro population, these areas also suffer very high incidents of poverty, lack or absence of law enforcers and government courts, proliferation of firearms and inadequate delivery of basic services. See Wilfredo Magno Torres III (ed.) *Rido: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao* (Makati City: The Asia Foundation), 2007.

4. Failure to Make a Difference

The failure of the Bangsamoro armed groups to behave properly when they are already in power and to make a substantial difference on the lives of the majority of the people in the ARMM who, incidentally, belong to the poorest populations of the country has contributed much to the loss of faith among the majority of the people in the region, and, consequently, in the Mindanao peace process. Specifically, the failure of the MNLF under the leadership of Chairman Nur Misuari once jailed for charges of rebellion, to run the ARMM and, most significantly, to deliver the basic social services to its constituencies, has resulted in the loss of faith not only on the Mindanao peace process but also on the credibility and legitimacy of what the rebel groups are fighting for. The hope for the successful alternative governance in the ARMM as a solution to the centuries old Mindanao conflict was shattered by the failure of the MNLF to deliver on its promised political and economic reforms. There are now more from among the Bangsamoro who doubt even the ability of the other armed groups like the MILF and the ASG to do better, assuming they are given the opportunity to lead the regional government in the future.

5. Lack of Synchronization and Policy Coherence

Another important challenge to the Mindanao peace negotiations is the non-continuity of the Philippine government's policies on the Mindanao problems. The Philippine government policies on Mindanao are basically *ad hoc* in character. They always change according to changes in administration leadership. In most cases, a peace agreement signed by an incumbent administration does not behoove the incoming administration to support the same. The usual practice is for the new administration to come up with its own new policy agenda for Mindanao.

In addition, there is the lack of policy cohesion and position synchronization among government agencies that are directly or indirectly involved in the peace process. In 2008, for instance, the GRP panel, Malacañang and the Supreme Court had perfectly

demonstrated this in the case of the GRP-MILF Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). On several occasions too, at the height of the conflict in 2000 and 2008, the local government units (LGUs) also clashed with the national government or the military on how to address or respond to certain issues. This kind of scenario muddles things up and definitely makes negotiation very challenging for secessionist groups especially because things become vague to them as to whom should they be dealing with (i.e. should they deal with the LGU, Philippine Military, GRP panel, Supreme Court, Malacañang, etc., separately?) Indeed, the *ad hoc* type of government policies and the unsynchronized stand of various government agencies will definitely make the Mindanao peace process difficult, if not, an agonizing task for peace advocates.

6. Dynamics of Local Politics

Local politicians and their selfish interests also complicate things in resolving the Mindanao problem once and for all. Instead of enlightening their constituents about the legitimacy of the ancestral domain claim, they even contribute to blur the issues more by generating rumors and hearsays that make people angry or unwilling to listen to other perspectives. Not a few of the local traditional politicians (both Bangsamoro and Settlers) are against the granting of the right to self-determination not only because their privileged status in the present government set up is threatened but also because of the large landholdings they have in the affected areas.

7. Pulsating Mess of the Abu Sayyaf to the Mindanao Peace Process

The terrorist activities of the ASG such as the kidnapping of foreign nationals, indiscriminate bombing of public places and other violent assaults to humanity, are muddling the Mindanao peace process. Especially after the 9/11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York City, when the Bush administration considered the ASG as a terrorist group with links to the Al Qaeda international terrorist group; there is now the

tendency for some influential civilian and military authorities within the Philippine government to lump all the Bangsamoro armed groups as terrorists. This predicament tends to cloud the legitimate demands of the Bangsamoro in their struggle for self-determination. This resulted in the government's more militaristic approach in responding to the Mindanao conflict instead of earnestly pursuing the Mindanao peace process.

8. The Case of the Lumads

There are substantial numbers of non-Bangsamoro populations in the contested areas of Mindanao. These are mostly Lumads (indigenous peoples) and Settlers whose political and economic well-being will also be greatly affected by the Mindanao conflict, and the results of the Mindanao peace process. Therefore, any future peace agreement between the Bangsamoro and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines that are without the proper consideration of the basic rights and interests of the non-Bangsamoro populations of the affected areas will be accepted by the majority of the people with great difficulty, and, will only attain limited success in its actual implementation if any. This poses another important challenge for peace advocacy in Mindanao especially on how to situate properly the interests of the non-Bangsamoro without sacrificing the legitimate demands of the Bangsamoro in any future peace agreements.

9. Religion Contested

The last, but not the least, in its significance to the Mindanao peace process, is the role of Islam and the issue of Islamic governance. One of the most complicated issues to handle in the Mindanao peace process is the role of Islam in future Bangsamoro governance in Mindanao. There are three important and interrelated issues that should first be clarified before substantial discussion can take place in this regard. Firstly, so far, aside from the motherhood statements of the MILF and the ASG on Islam and an Islamic state based on the Qur'an and the Hadith, there is no specific and concrete definition on what they mean by Islamic

state and the nature and characteristics of the Islamic governance they wish to establish in Mindanao. Without the specific descriptions and details of its Islamic governance, the majority population of Mindanao, including the Bangsamoro, who are more accustomed to secular and democratic governance of the Republic of the Philippines, will remain apprehensive and wary about Bangsamoro self-government in Mindanao. Secondly, how far can the Philippine government allow the implementation of Islamic and Shari'a laws aside from the existing Shari'a court that is limited in jurisdiction to only personal and family laws? Will it allow the Shari'a court to include in its jurisdiction the adjudication of criminal acts committed by the Bangsamoro? Or, will the government allow the enhancement of the power of the Shari'a court to go beyond its current domain? And lastly, how ready are the Bangsamoro in Mindanao to accept Islamic governance in the way it is understood to be led by any of the Bangsamoro armed groups in southern Philippines? Recognizing the reality on the ground that they are more or less at home and familiar with the western, secular and democratic governance of the Republic of the Philippines, and recognizing, further, the fact that Islam in Mindanao as in many parts of the Islamic world are very much contested. This would mean that among the Bangsamoro in Mindanao there would surface a problem of who among the Bangsamoro of Mindanao should define and speak in behalf of Islam. Will it be the Bangsamoro armed groups, as represented by the MNLF, MILF or the ASG; the Ulama or Ustadz who had finished their Islamic Studies abroad, or the traditional Imams who have learned their knowledge of Islam from the home grown indigenous experts; or, the Bangsamoro professionals who had learned their expertise from the western educational system here and abroad; or, the Bangsamoro women; the Bangsamoro youth; or, other experts on Islam? Unless this particular issue is settled amicably among the Bangsamoro people, their aspirations for the establishment of an Islamic government in southern Philippines will remain an elusive dream.

Some Concluding Notes

This paper endeavored to highlight some problems and opportunities in negotiating for peace in Mindanao. Though this paper has listed an almost equal number of problems and opportunities in the peace negotiations, somehow, the problems outweigh the opportunities. This in effect will make the journey towards peace and development in southern Philippines a very difficult one. The peace advocates in the region will have to traverse through a long, rugged and winding road before reaching the desired goal of lasting peace in the contested area.

Meanwhile, the Bangsamoro people and the other stakeholders of peace and development in the area can only hope that while the MILF and GRP Panel of negotiators are working on the possible peace agreement, the sound of guns and cannons will remain silent as ever.

Finally, the stakeholders of peace and development can also hope that the MILF and GRP can work with more creativity to make for their hard work to bear fruit and to become acceptable to the majority of the people of Mindanao, and in the entire Philippines.