

# Some Insights and Issues on the Peace Process in Southern Philippines\*

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## I. Introduction

**B** *ismillahi rahman ir raheem*. First of all, allow me to thank and express my debt of gratitude to Cagayan Capitol College Administration for its support; To Dr. Frank Kaufmann, Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace, a new-found colleague and a partner in the pursuit of peace; and to the sponsors of this Summit of World Muslim Leaders, in particular, former Indonesian President, His Excellency Abdurrahman Wahid and many others, for this singular opportunity to

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participate in this two-day conference “as we seek to bring a voice of unity, harmony and compassion to greet crises and opportunities.”

It is very timely indeed and significant because of the present unfolding world event as well as those “unfortunate incidents” which are brought to us right in our living room in vivid color.

There is no doubt that the September 11 event has dramatically altered people’s perception of the “invincibility” of the US as the world superpower, or as world policeman. There is going to be a thorough re-examination of US policies vis-à-vis its allies and, in particular, the Muslim countries in general. Likewise, we will continue to see a new evolving and emerging concept of bipolarism, re-defined as democracy versus global terrorism that cut across nation-state boundaries.

The Philippines as an old ally of the US has declared its staunch and unequivocal support to the latter. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, in her speech before the Philippine Constitution Association last September 26, outlined six measures and fourteen pillars to address the current “most urgent issue in the world today, terrorism.” Of the fourteen pillars, item No. Seven is worth mentioning here, as it relates to our concern today: Pursue broader inter-faith dialogue to promote Christian-Muslim solidarity. Again, in a editorial, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (November 3, 2001), spoke of the “three realities that would guide the strategic priorities of her foreign policy, the third explicitly deals with the OIC, whose member states are the main source of oil imports and which exerts a powerful influence in moderating the current of the separatist movement in Muslim Mindanao.”

In brief and in essence, the domestic events that are unfolding though they may be localized, have a tremendous international and regional impact both on world security and economy. As Professor Yu Sui mentioned (March 2001), the twin issue of peace and development are intertwined. Furthermore, “the grim fact is, if a country does not integrate itself into the world economy, it is difficult for it to achieve big development.” Suffice it to say that “poverty is one of the causes which lead many developing countries into chaos and instability.” Poverty has

been associated with the breeding ground for terrorism, as President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has stressed.

With this brief background, let us now proceed to the task assigned, which is, to discuss the topic, "Insights and Issues on the Peace Process in Southern Philippines." By the way, "Southern Philippines" is a term interchangeably used with "Muslim Mindanao" to avoid "religiosity-political" implications. Other Muslim groups either use the terms "Bangsa Moro" or "Muslim Mindanao." There was an attempt to delete the phrase "Muslim Mindanao" during the drafting of the autonomy law but that did not succeed. This is another issue that can be dealt with in the near future.

## **II. Insights and Issues on the Peace Process in Muslim Mindanao**

As we proceed with our discussion, allow me to present to you some transparencies to elucidate our "insights" and discuss further some "issues." As an observer just like you, I am rather surprised why in spite of the series of peace talks, dialogues and so on, the problem still exists and persists.

Two Filipino writers (selected at random) have complementary views about the problem. Conrado de Quiros states: "Terrorism isn't just a physical force, as should be equally obvious, it is an idea. In fact, it draws its force from being an idea, its occasional use of the physical force being made only for demonstration effect. Its persistence comes from the logic that people who have been driven to the wall, or to the sea, have no recourse but to fight back in this way. Indeed, its power comes from the argument that a people who are fighting for their home and their beliefs, but are left with nothing to fight with, have no recourse but to strike back in this way. You will not kill that idea with bombs, you will only spread it like germs."

On the other hand, Antonio J. Montalvan II asks, "Is dialogue and co-existence between the Moros and non-Muslim-Filipinos possible?"

From the point of view of religious tolerance alone, it certainly is.”

To continue further, here are some insights and issues which we have put together for our discussion.

## **1. Perspective and Perception**

Anthropologists use the term “worldview” but for our own purpose, “perspective” and “perception” will be utilized for lack of term. Moreover, they are more easily understood. One fundamental and significant issue in the peace process is this combination of perspective and perception. The government panel would always insist that its perspective and perception of the problem should be the basis of the resolution of the conflict. What it means is that the discussion on any topic/issue should be anchored on Philippine sovereignty, constitutional integrity and the inviolability of its territorial integrity.

In essence the discussion is between representatives of a sovereign state (RP), and its citizens (MNLF-MILF). Though this argument is legitimate and is a legal issue, the “revolutionary groups” would not easily accept it. On the contrary the discussion is between a sovereign state with another “state,” the bangsa Moro “state.” This is the latter perception and perspective and that the discussion should begin with at least an acceptance of this “social reality.” It is anchored on the philosophy that the sovereign state (Sultanate) was never a part of the so-called Philippine Republic. It has its historical antecedents: Treaty of Paris, Bates Treaty, Tripoli agreement, etc. This brings us to the second point, the concept of a nation, bansa/bangsa.

## **2. Nation/Bansa**

According to Ben Kadil (2001:175), the concept of bangsa/bansa found among the Iranun, Maranao, Maguindanaon, and Tausug, is attached to the word agama (religion), the existence of a mosque, Shariah (Islamic law), adat (customary practices), as instituted by the Sultaniyyah through the panglima and other officials of the Sultanate.

Our initial research has also shown that the concept *bangsa/bansa* through its development has enriched an indigenous concept known as *merepeda sa posed* (part of a long umbilical cord), as practiced by the Maranaos.

In contrast, the Filipino concept, its equivalent is still elusive though it may have originated from *balangay/barangay*. However, it is difficult to find on what philosophy it is anchored. One slogan says, “Isang bansa, Isang diwa.” What does that really mean? Do Filipinos have a philosophy to anchor the concept of nationhood?

### **3. Constitutional Integrity/Process viz. Shariah (Islamic Law)**

One other stumbling block in the peace process is RP’s constitutional integrity vs. Shariah. To the former and the representatives of the GRP Panel, any discussion for that matter should, and is always anchored on its “constitutionality.” The other side always argues that discussion should also consider what the Shariah dictates because, otherwise, it may not be considered “legal” and moral from the Islamic perspective. The other fundamental difference is that the Constitution is man-made while the Shariah is God’s law.

### **4. Soldier and Mujahideen: A Contrast**

The soldier in combat mission is sent to the battlefield to defend his country against the so-called “enemy of the state.” Moreover, as a soldier, it is his foremost duty to defend the state against those considered to be “threat” to the nation, as well as those violating the laws of the land.

The mujahideen’s primary obligation is to defend his religion against the so-called kafir (unbelievers) and those considered “threats” to his religion. Jihad-ul-asghar (holy war) has mandated every able Muslim to engage in “holy war.” Those who die in battle are not considered “dead” but are in fact considered martyrs (sayyed). Of course, there are conditions which should be observed in dealing with both combatants and non-combatants as well as conditions that will justify if

a holy war is inevitable. However, this concept can also be exploited to justify one's cause one way or the other.

This principle is reinforced with another belief which says that "Muslims are like one body, if a part of the body suffers pain, the whole body (community) feels the pain." According to this belief, it is the duty of every Muslim to stand up and fight for the cause of Islam in any place/country.

### **5. The Concept of Peace: "Western" and Islamic**

Another debatable issue is the definition and concept of peace. To the government, peace is always associated with development. Thus, the argument has always been – "there can be no genuine peace, if there is no development." A closer examination of the concept of development would reveal that "clustering" and the so-called "corridor for development" are always to the disadvantage of the Muslim communities.

As a result and consequence of these concepts of development, "dependency" will continue and a contrast between two communities: those developed are "christianized" whereas the underdeveloped are Muslim areas because they cannot have development without peace being assured. The reality, however, is that the so-called development projects are mostly targeted on communities which are predominantly inhabited by Christians. An empirical study of this assumption is worth pursuing.

To the Muslims, peace (from the Arabic word, *salam*, *salama*), is one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah. It has three levels, namely: (1) man himself, consisting of two entities: physical and spiritual; (2) man, his fellowmen and the creations in the environment; and (3) man in relation to his Creator, man being considered as *abd* (slave) and *Khalifa* (trustee) of Allah on this earth. His essence as a creation with other creations is nothing but to worship his Creator. This is what *din-ul-Islam* means, "way of life."

## 6. Peace Process?

One wonders, how long will the peace process last? What are its basis and philosophy? Who are the actors? What kind/mode/process will it take to resolve the conflict? How will actors in each group perceive the other in a peace process? Are there pre-conditions which should be met before any discussion would take place? How important are mediators in a peace process? Do they also influence the peace process output? How does each group perceive the mediators? Is there a common agreement of the expected output in a peace process? Or, is the peace process destined to be a long process itself that may not bring the expected output by either of the protagonists? Or, is it an ad hoc process that is dependent upon whoever is in power?

## 7. Autonomy for Whom?

Though RA 6734 Article 1, Section 2 provides the basis for the establishment of two autonomous regions in the country, it has infirmities. First, its interpretations are to the disadvantage of the Muslim sector, specifically those that refer to the smallest political unit – barangay. Secondly, the process which mandated its implementation was likewise disadvantageous to the Muslims because numerically they are the minority. In other words, the politics of numbers in a plebiscite worked favorably on the government side and the “christianized community.” Today, some sectors object to the holding of the ARMM election, about which the government cannot agree completely (cf. Nawal, PDI (11/18/01), p. A4, cols. 1-6). In fact, one gubernatorial candidate complains because, according to him, Malacañang interferes with the election of the officials. The question is, who wants autonomy and for whom?

## III. In Summary

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) can be and should be an approximation of the Sultanate. In essence, this is what the average Muslim would like to see happen. On the contrary, however, the biggest obstacle towards autonomy is the infirmity of the

law itself that created it. Suffice it to say, the process is another roadblock to genuine autonomy.

Recent events like in the past have relegated the issue to the background because of current events which are more significant than the grant of autonomy. Moreover, it seems that the government, as in the past, has succeeded in its continuous campaign to utilize one sector/group against another – the so-called “divide and rule” policy. The conflict has moved to the “ethnic level” wherein one group contests the other. This strategy has its origin from the American period when a three-prong approach to destroy the Sultanate power base was utilized. The electoral process is one alternative of electing political leaders in the ARMM but it is not necessarily democratic and devoid of dirty politics!

Quite a number of scholars and others have presented alternative solutions to the resolution of the conflict. Numerous studies and conference/symposia were held for the singular purpose of understanding and offering alternative solutions to the conflict. The fundamental question is, how is it that we have not solved the problem? How long will it take to solve the conflict? Cf. Rocamora, PDI, (11/30/01), p. A10, cols. 1-4.

Perhaps, one possible answer which we have argued since the beginning is the question of perspective/perception or what anthropologists call worldview – *pananaw*. Both sides continue to argue that it has its own solution and, therefore, it should be tried and implemented. Is the ARMM an attempt to solve the problem and perhaps resembles the Moro Sultanate? It has its infirmities as well as hope in a new beginning. The question is, is it the model of governance that the Muslim communities want? Or, is it what the government wants? Will it succeed within the “framework” of the Philippine constitution and national integrity? Cf. Alipala, PDI (11/30/01), p. A15, cols. 2-3.

**Postscript: Nur Misuari, Abu Sayyaf and International Terrorism**

Nur Misuari and the Moro/Muslim struggle for self-determination cannot and should not be oversimplified as acts of “terrorism.” Misuari is being linked with the Abu Sayyaf, a terrorist group responsible for a number of kidnappings in the south including those in Sipadan, Malaysia.

Misuari thought that the “democratic process” would be an alternative avenue and, thus, he shifted his struggle from the armed to the “democratic process.” Unfortunately now in that, Mahathir Mohammad has observed that “Misuari shirked his responsibilities as ARMM governor – spent more time overseas and in Manila than bringing progress and development to his people.” For his part, Senator Rodolfo Biazon wants Misuari to account to the P4.8B that the government funneled to the region for economic development.

Whichever option Misuari must pursue should involve self-re-examination and further confrontation with his comrades (the fifteen Council members) that ousted him as Chairman of the MNLF.

If found to be a “terrorist” and his links with Abu Sayyaf well established, it may be remembered that the U.S. is out to hunt the so-called “terrorists.” When that happens, Malaysia may not be that “friendly” to accommodate him for the second time. Misuari and Osama Bin Laden may have commonalities but are not really of the same breed and idiosyncrasies. However, handling both persons has global implications. Both must be dealt with locally with global implications.

For the moment, Misuari is seeking refuge with the United Nations and the Organizations of Islamic Countries. There is still an avenue that should be further explored – a non-violent alternative!

A peace process should work if both sides understand what they both want to achieve. A peace process can likewise delay the attainment of meaningful peace. In the midst of these unfolding events we can only hope for a peaceful nonviolent alternative. That decision should be the concern of everyone including ourselves in this two-day conference. As

the saying goes, “Two heads are better than one.” Let me add further, “Whose heads are we talking about?” Thank you and good day everyone. Assalamu allaikom...

### PERSPECTIVE/PERCEPTION OF THE CONFLICT

GRP	MNLF/MILF
1. PEACE – western concept	PEACE – one of the 99 beautiful names of Allah
2. PEACE Process – methodical, ad hoc	Peace Process- long but with meaningful impact
3. Autonomy – within the constitutional framework	Autonomy – based on Islam, dar-ul-Islam (way of life)
4. Autonomy for whom?	Autonomy – basically for the 13 ethno-linguistic groups +
5. Sovereignty	Self-determination (i.e. resemblance of the Sultanate)
6. Nation	Bangsa Moro
7. Constitutional Integrity	Shariah (Islamic Law)
8. Soldier – in defense of the Constitution/nation	Mujahideen – in defense of Islam, bangsa
9. ARMM – the model of some governance?	ARMM – evolving, need innovations

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

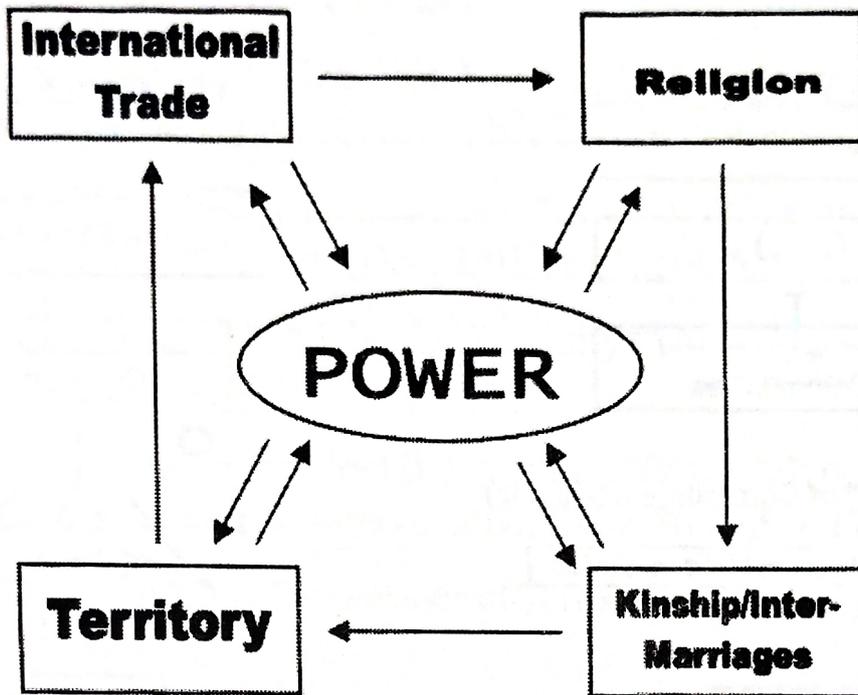


Figure 1

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

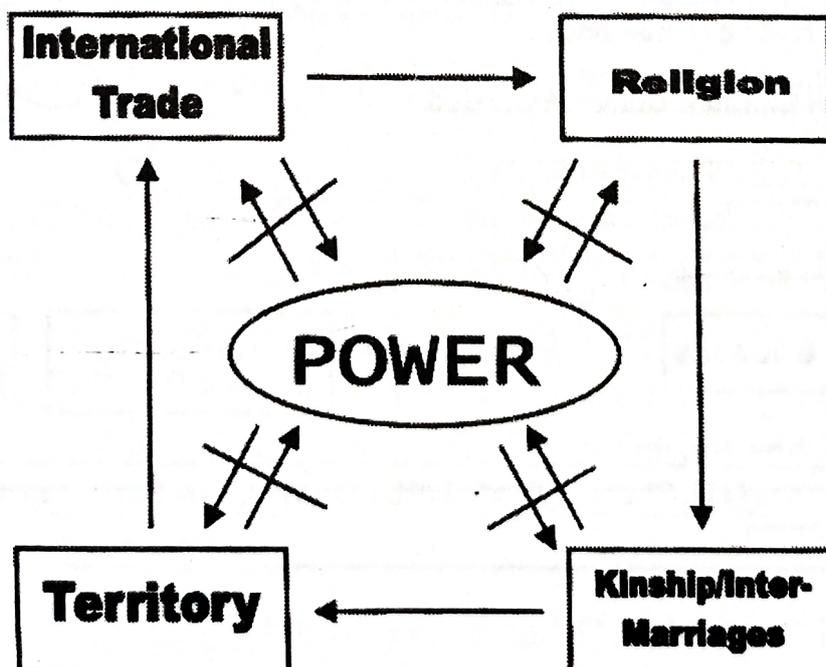


Figure 2



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