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### WILL PEACE HOLD IN MINDANAO?

by

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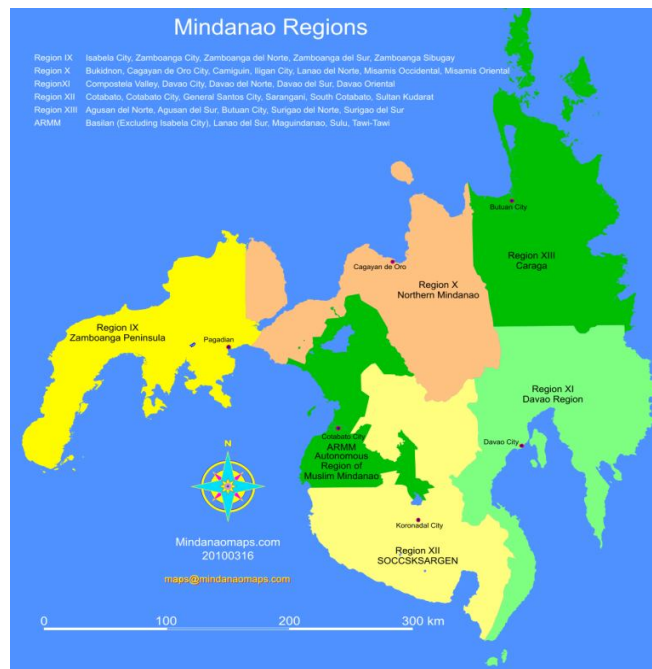
## WILL PEACE HOLD IN MINDANAO?

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**AL HAJ MURAD EBRAHIM**  
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### Brief Historical Glimpses of the Bangsamoro Struggle

An Australian author describes the Bangsamoro Homeland in this manner: “Southwest of Japan is a large island called Mindanao that has Indonesia and Malaysia close to it southwesterly and the island of Luzon and the Visayas north of it. About the size of Greece, 18 to 20 million people live here.” The land is fertile. Its seas, rivers, lakes and marshes abound with aquatic resources and the climate is good, and very rarely visited by typhoons that the islands of Luzon and the Visayas frequently experience. It has abundant deposits, oil and gas and used to have a lush rainforest cover that has now shrunk to critical levels, due to the abusive and irresponsible activities of greedy logging concessionaires. Contact with Mindanao by Muslim traders, travelers, Sufis and Muslim missionaries from today’s Indonesia and Malaysia long predated the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was responsible for the reversion to Islam of its inhabitants, and the formation of the Muslim Sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu among others. Spain subdued the northern island of Luzon (where Manila is located) and most of the “in-between” islands of the Visayas, converting most of the inhabitants to Catholicism, but never succeeded in controlling Mindanao. The Muslim Sultanates with well-organized administrative and political systems and determined Moro warriors enabled them to put up effective defense against adventurers and to survive centuries of military campaigns by western colonizers.



Bangsamoro (Moro nation) is the generic name for the 13-ethno linguistic Muslim tribes, which constitute a quarter of the population in Mindanao. They number from 9 to 10 million (this number is contested) and are found in every major island of the country. They have a distinct culture, speak different dialects, are varied in their social formation but share a common belief in Islam.

Of the 13, there are three major groups on the basis of population and their leadership. These are the Maguindanaons (people of the flooded plains) of central and western Mindanao, the Maranaos (people of the lake) of the two Lanao provinces, and the Tausogs (people of the current) of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi.

Only with the arrival of the Americans at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and after the end of the Philippine-American War, was most of the island brought under central control, although hostility and conflict remained endemic. In 1905, Dr. Najeeb M. Saleeby wrote in a book, *Studies in Moro History, Law and Religion*, “the Moros are a law-abiding people, provided, however, they feel that the government that rules them is their own. They do not regard the present government as their own.” More than a hundred years on, the same sentiments persists with the majority of the Bangsamoro people and their resolve for self-determination has survived to this date despite the impact of Spanish colonization, American imperialism, Japanese invasion and Philippine neo-colonialism. The core issue of the problem therefore is the continuing assertion of the Bangsamoro people for the restoration of their historical independence. Problems of land ownership, mass poverty, neglect and underdevelopment and other social inequities are just consequences of their lost freedom, oppression and injustice. These are compelling reasons why the issue of the political relationship of the Bangsamoro people with the Philippine government deserves serious and immediate attention.

The conflict in Mindanao in contemporary times has largely been concentrated in the Muslim-majority areas of central and southwestern Mindanao. Although the Bangsamoro have been engaged in hostilities with various foreign and Philippine administrations at various times in history, it took the imposition of Martial Law by President Ferdinand Marcos in September, 1972, citing Muslim secessionists as one of the biggest threats to national security, to act as a catalyst for an “organized” resistance by the Muslims of Southern Philippines. However, Marcos deliberately concealed that the true reason for Muslim unrest, especially since the time of Philippine independence (notwithstanding the earlier anti-Moro Spanish attitude) was the systematic minoritization and marginalization of the Bangsamoro in Southern Philippines achieved thru western education, discriminatory land laws and Christian migration from Northern Philippines. Whilst the percentage of Muslims in the Philippines has remained virtually static, the demographic ratio of non-Muslim to Muslim in the Southern Philippines has risen ominously and suspiciously, which observers rightfully refer to as “statistical genocide.”

### **JABIDAH MASSACRE AND RESURGENCE OF THE “ILAGA” MOVEMENT**

March 18, 1968 was a day which signaled to the Bangsamoro just how expendable the Moro youth was to further the aspirations of the President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Edralin Marcos. This day saw the murder of dozens of young Muslim army recruits in Corregidor island in Luzon. This heinous event, better remembered as the Jabidah Massacre, will remain in the annals of Philippine history as a monumental evidence of government’s exploitation of the Moros. Young Muslim recruits discovered all too late that their true mission in training was to fight fellow Muslims in Sabah (North Borneo), which would have involved killing their own Tausug and Sama relatives living there (Whitman 2005).

Sanctioned by the military and Pres. Marcos, the Christians, mostly Ilonggo political leaders, organized a fanatical semi-cultist group called the "ILAGA" or better still, Ilonggo Land Grabbers Association. More violence against Muslims happened in massacres at Upi, Ampatuan, Manili, Kulong-Kulong, Malisbong and Buldon in mainland Mindanao perpetrated by the "ILAGA" as well as soldiers. President Marcos controlled local elections in Cotabato to wrest power from the incumbent Muslim local executive and installed thereafter a Christian military officer, Col. Carlos Cajelo, as governor. Christian oligarchs and politicians combined with government military forces to plunder and demolish the political base of Muslim politicians in the province of Cotabato. Later, Cotabato province was gerrymandered by Pres. Marcos into three unevenly divided provinces, namely, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat and North Cotabato. Pushed to the brink of annihilation and painfully watching Muslim villages go up in smoke, their women raped in military detention centers by soldiers, villagers killed mercilessly and waylaid in the killing fields, the most coward of the Bangsamoro was willing to take up arms and confront the marauding ILAGAs. All these criminalities and atrocities against them gave the Bangsamoro no alternative but to resist and fight back with organized paramilitary action or continue to live in shame and humiliation.

The "Jabidah" massacre and the succeeding series of killings in mass of innocent Bangsamoro largely perpetuated by the "ILAGA" Christian fanatics and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) was widely recognized as the catalyst for the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), with Nur Misuari, a lecturer at the University of the Philippines as its first chairman.

## **MARTIAL LAW**

On September 21, 1972, citing Muslim secessionists as one of the two biggest threats to national security and quoting themes of communist conspiracy, President Ferdinand Marcos thru the expedience of Presidential Proclamation imposed Martial Law. It was a grandmaster move of Pres. Marcos to remain as President. Instead of suppressing the Bangsamoro movement, however, Martial Law had the opposite effect. Martial Law had the catalytic effect of inflaming the pride and honor of the Muslims, particularly the youth sector. In no time, support for the anti-government movement spread to other southern Philippine provinces such as Zamboanga del Norte and del Sur, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi .

By December 1974, majority of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) strength was fielded in Mindanao to fight the Bangsamoro guerillas. Carnage and mayhem perpetrated by the Philippine government forces and government paramilitary forces was widespread and extensive. The estimated damage was somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 lives lost and about a million Muslim civilians displaced from their homes and farms had to put up with the difficulties and sufferings in ill-managed refugee camps and wherever they find shelter. An estimated 200,000 evacuees sought refuge in Sabah, Malaysia (Alim 1995).

## **GPH-MNLF NEGOTIATIONS**

Faced with international pressure and growing military casualties, Marcos reluctantly agreed to negotiate with representatives of the MNLF, much less allow representatives of the OIC act as interlocutors and mediators. In December 1976 a peace agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MNLF was signed in Tripoli, Libya what is known as "1976 Tripoli Agreement". In this formal written document, the Philippine government recognized the Bangsamoro's right to self-determination. The agreement was aimed at providing a guideline for a political negotiated settlement of the so-called Moro problem through the grant of autonomy to the Muslims in Southern Philippines.

The Philippine government insisted on a plebiscite to settle the territorial boundaries of the autonomous government as provided for in the agreement. The MNLF refused adamantly to

recognize the result of the plebiscite which was in fact a major setback in the implementation of the agreement. In the meantime, Marcos won over to the government side many of the MNLF commanders through various forms of attraction, ranging from political amnesty to luxurious government posts and promises of a better economic life. He then pursued unilaterally the creation of two administrative autonomous regions. He also created the Muslim Affairs Office directly under the Office of the President. All these were meant to appease the Moro people. Amid all these government programs, the armed struggle continued. Eventually, Marcos was removed from power during the EDSA 1 revolution in February 1986. Epifanio delos Santos Avenue or EDSA, a main thoroughfare in Manila was the venue for the "people power" revolution led by Corazon "Cory" Aquino, the wife of the assassinated prominent opposition leader to the Marcos regime. A massive assembly of millions of Filipinos of all walks of life fearlessly faced government military tanks and armed soldiers and incessantly demanded the ouster of President Marcos. At the end of five days, the U.S. facilitated the flight of President Marcos and his family to Hawaii, U.S.A.

President Corazon C. Aquino assumed the Presidency in 1986 after the departure of Pres. Marcos. Her government initiated a revival of the peace talks with the MNLF, which resulted to the signing of the Jeddah Accord on January 3-4, 1987 where the two parties agreed to continue discussions of the proposal for the grant of full autonomy. However, the two parties failed to reconcile their differing and conflicting proposals. In 1987, the government adapted a new Constitution which supplanted the 1935 Constitution. Among the salient provisions of the 1987 Constitution is the setting up of autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and the Cordilleras. With this constitutional mandate, President Aquino, unilaterally proceeded to establish the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao ( ARMM).

It was under the Presidency of Fidel V. Ramos, a former military general (AFP Vice-Chief of Staff under Marcos) who succeeded President Aquino that the final agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF was reached with the active mediation of Indonesia. The 1996 Peace Agreement was to be implemented in two phases. During Phase 1 of the agreement, the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SPCPD) and the Consultative Assembly were to be established covering the provinces mentioned in the Tripoli Agreement.

The differences between the Philippine government and the MNLF negotiating positions did not end with the signing of the final peace agreement, because both parties could not agree on the modalities of the implementation of the accord. The MNLF continued to accuse the government of flagrant violation and non-implementation of some vital provisions of the peace agreement. On the other hand, the government maintained that it had faithfully implemented the accord.

### **Fragmentation of the MNLF**

Throughout the gamut of Moro history no group or organization has ever caused nationwide political and security "tremor" but the MNLF. During the embryonic stage of the MNLF, every Moro youth would leave school and sacrifice his education to join the MNLF. They see MNLF as the way and the opportunity to turn their youthful and rightful vengeance against an oppressive regime into jihad and offer their lives for Islam and the homeland. Any Moro family was ready to share the last cup of rice in their kitchen with the mujahedeen believing that every grain of rice contributed to the MNLF fighters would entitle them to countless blessings. Such was the mood and enthusiasm of the fighters and the masses. What ignited the jihad spirit of the Bangsamoro? Going to the warpath in the name of jihad was inevitable in the face of unabated atrocities and oppression against them throughout the length and breadth of the homeland. Massacres of civilian Muslims in Manili, Carmen inside a mosque, massacres in Tacub, Lanao del Norte, in Kulong-Kulong, Palembang, Sultan kudarats, where evacuees were herded like cattle in barbed-wire fenced open field detention areas and where women were raped by soldiers at will, where hundreds of MNLF supporters were massacred by government soldiers. Mass arrests of Muslims in almost all provinces were a

daily occurrence. The clouds that loomed over the Bangsamoro homeland became darker with the full consequences of Martial Law felt in every town and barangay. Such was the grim spectre of events under the Martial Law regime of President Marcos. Martial Law left a deep “scar” in the economy, landscape and mindscape of the Bangsamoro. Rehabilitation and rebuilding of the Moro provinces to raise their economic condition and to be at par with neighboring provinces would entail decades of reconstruction work that can only happen in an atmosphere of trust, hope, mutual understanding and reassuring peace. On the positive side of things, Martial Law was an eye-opener to the Muslims, a clarion call. Because of Martial Law, the MNLF did not find it hard to entice the Muslim youth and masses to support the rebellion against the government.

However, such momentum was not sustained for long. After the Philippine pursued its strategy to dismember the MNLF, top officers of the front started to fall. Very early on no less than the Vice Chairman of Misuari jumped over to the other side of the fence in 1973. The succeeding Vice Chairman also accepted the government in the early 80's which significantly weaken the MNLF. Also in the early 80's the most serious threat to the leadership of Misuari was the breaking away of Ustadz Salamat Hashim, supported by more than 70% of the field commanders of the MNLF. The Salamat faction of the MNLF later morphed into what is now the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Much later, in recent years, the Council of 15, a group of MNLF leaders and members of the Central Committee who believed that Misuari failed to serve effectively the MNLF cause, banded together, ousted Misuari as MNLF Chairman and installed Muslimin Sema, an elected mayor of Cotabato City at the time as their new Chairman

Misuari's claim to MNLF leadership is now belied by recent events and his insistence on the implementation of some provisions of his peace agreement with Pres. Ramos simply deserves everyone's sympathy.

### **The MILF—Salamat's Legacy**

After the collapse of the 1976 Tripoli Talks and the non-implementation of the Tripoli Agreement, there was a sweeping feeling of dismay over the leadership of Misuari. Feeling betrayed by events and the inevitable bitter in-fighting among the rank and file, more than 70% of MNLF field commanders from Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Davao, Zamboanga and other areas of Mindanao called for the ouster of Misuari. A formal petition was then filed with the OIC Secretariat endorsing Ustadz Salamat Hashim, to replace Misuari. The petition was in plain terms a vote of confidence for Salamat Hashim's leadership and a withdrawal of support for and trusts in Misuari. Salamat for a time continued to stay within the umbrella of the MNLF but maintained control of his break-away group which observers recognize as the “Salamat faction”. In 1982 the Central Committee of the MNLF New Leadership under Salamat Hashim ultimately decided to declare that the group shall henceforth be known as the **MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT (MILF)**.

### **MILF PEACE NEGOTIATION**

The MILF, on its part did not want to complicate or scuttle the GRP-MNLF peace talks. In an official statement circulated by the MILF, Chairman Salamat Hashim said, “The MILF is maintaining a consistent policy towards the peace process. We will reject any attempt by the Philippine, government to open separate negotiations with the MILF unless the GRP-MNLF talk is finally concluded” (Hashim 1993). When the Philippine government was sure that a final agreement with the MNLF would be forthcoming, it then sent feelers to the MILF. Initially, an emissary was commissioned to meet the MILF Chairman at the latter's office at Camp Abubakre bringing the message that Pres. Ramos wants a peaceful political settlement of the Mindanao problem. After continuous exchanges of communications, the technical committees of both parties were organized. The GRP and MILF technical committees met on January 7, 1977 at the Da'wah Center, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao

which marked the beginning of the official negotiations between the government and the MILF.

On June 17, 1997, in gross violation of existing peace agreements, the AFP launched massive military operations in the municipalities of Pagalungan and Sultan sa Barongis in Maguindanao and Pikit in Cotabato province. A pattern of government treachery in the peace process was becoming obvious to the MILF.

Subsequent meetings of the GRP-MILF Technical Committees were focused on the cessation of hostilities. Agreements were mainly on the operational guidelines for the general cessation of hostilities, administrative procedures, monitoring mechanisms and identification and acknowledgement of MILF positions/camps.

After twenty months, more or less, of negotiations at the technical committee level, the formal negotiation on the panel level was inaugurated on October 25, 1999 at the Da'wah Center, Crossing Simuay, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. With this milestone in the GPH-MILF peace process, the MILF has thereby laid the most important predicate in the history of the negotiations—MILF as the official bargaining representative of the Bangsamoro regardless of the end result of the peace talks.

### **Estrada's All-out War**

President Joseph Estrada who succeeded President Fidel Ramos had a vague policy on the peace process with the MILF. His public pronouncements while supposedly pursuing the peace process was less than conciliatory. His "hawkish" propensity was later confirmed by what was dubbed as "all-out war" against the MILF stronghold. Estrada executed 180 degrees turnaround from peace negotiation to shooting war using the full might of the Armed Forces with the sole objective of "pulverizing, reducing to ashes Camp Abubakar and annihilating MILF forces and decapitating the MILF of its leadership. Pres. Estrada and his military strategists then shared a simplistic view that if Abubakar falls, the MILF will consequently fall. But Camp Abubakar is just a physical manifestation of the real strength of the MILF, which is Islam, embedded and entrenched in the hearts and minds of the Bangsamoro mujahideen.

### **EDSA 2**

In January 2001, in EDSA (Epifanio delos Santos Avenue), millions of people assembled for the second time and once again in the political history of the Philippines, by sheer "people power" President Estrada was forced to leave Malacanang Palace. He was the second Philippine president to be deposed in the annals of Philippine political history thru massive public assembly of protesters. Vice-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was immediately sworn into office as President. Estrada was eventually detained at Sta. Lucia, Laguna but he was later pardoned by Pres. Arroyo after months of detention.

Pursuing the road to peace, President Arroyo sought the assistance of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad to help convince the MILF to go back to the negotiation table. Prime Minister Mahathir sent his top aides to talk to MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim. After a series of trips by the Malaysian emissaries to the Islamic Center in Buliok, Pikit, North Cotabato, Ustaz Salamat agreed to resume talks with the Philippine government through the facilitation of Malaysia. Subsequently, the MILF declared the Suspension of Offensive Military Action (SOMA) against AFP forces on April 3, 2001 to reciprocate the Philippine government declaration of Suspension of Offensive Military Operations (SOMO) against the MILF forces. Satisfied that its conditions were met, the MILF Central Committee agreed to the resumption of the negotiations and reconstituted members of its negotiating panel.

Tripoli, Libya was chosen as the venue for the resumption of the negotiations. The meeting on June 19-22, 2001 resulted in the signing of the Agreement on Peace between the

Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, otherwise known as the Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001. The agreement called for the discussion of three issues: Security (ceasefire); Rehabilitation and development of conflict-affected areas; and Ancestral domain.

A significant provision of the agreement is the recognition by the government of the distinct identity of the Bangsamoro as a people occupying a definite territory, referred to in the document as the Bangsamoro homeland, and the inherent right of the Bangsamoro people over their ancestral domain. It also acknowledged the fundamental right of the Bangsamoro to determine and pursue their future and political aspirations. Series of Exploratory Talks followed with the following results:

The Implementing Guidelines for the Security Aspect of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001 was signed on August 7, 2001 at Putrajaya, Malaysia

The Manual of Instructions for the Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities(CCCH) and Local Monitoring Teams(LMT) was signed on October 18, 2001 at Mines Resort, Selangor, Malaysia

An agreement that provided for the respect of human rights and observance of international humanitarian laws was signed on May 7, 2002. This agreement authorized the MILF to determine, lead and manage relief, rehabilitation and development in the conflict-affected areas of Mindanao through a project implementing body that it would organize. The agreement also stipulated that the GRP would provide reparations for properties lost in the conflict. Pursuant to this agreement, the MILF Central Committee passed a resolution creating the Bangsamoro Development Agency on June 2, 2002 with Dr. Abas A. Candao as Chairman of the Board.

Ancestral Domain was the third issue to be discussed but the talks were not resumed after the May 7 meeting when unfortunate events supervened. Armed offensive launched by Philippine government forces on MILF positions in Pikit, North Cotabato and Pagalungan, Maguindanao on February 11, 2003, at the time the Muslims were praying in celebration of Eid ul Adha (feast of sacrifice), derailed once again the resumption of negotiations.

The GRP and the MILF met for the 4<sup>th</sup> round of Exploratory Talks on 5-6 September, 2003 in Kuala Lumpur. The parties agreed to research and revisit the issue of ancestral domain before the next round of talks. Significantly, the MILF agreed to the suggestion by the GRP that the World Bank be approached for assistance to rebuild the conflict-affected areas in Mindanao, in the likely event of a signed final peace agreement. (The WB approved this request on October 7, 2003.)

#### **The 5<sup>th</sup> GRP-MILF Exploratory Talks: February 2004**

February 19-20, 2004, saw the 5<sup>th</sup> round of GRP-MILF Exploratory Talks held in Kuala Lumpur. Both parties supported the WB's Multi-Donor Trust Fund, which would be used to rebuild war-torn areas of Mindanao in the future. It was at this meeting that the parties upon insistent of the MILF to form an International Monitoring Team (IMT), to observe and enhance the implementation of the ceasefire agreement. Initially the IMT consisted of military and civilian personnel from Malaysia, Brunei and Libya. Later Japan, Norway, the European Union (EU) and Indonesia joined in.

The 6<sup>th</sup> GRP-MILF Exploratory Talks held on 20-21 December, 2005 was also significant in that for the first time it was agreed that AFP and MILF armed regulars establish joint monitoring outposts in several conflict prone areas. The MILF made on record at these talks its complete opposition to terrorism and criminality by agreeing to the formation of an Ad



HOC JOINT ACTION GROUP (AHJAG) with the GRP for the interdiction of criminal elements in its area of control.

### **MOA-AD**

The MOA-AD debacle is a historic lesson in negotiation strategy. The Philippine government showed the whole world that it was ready, willing and able to sign the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) earlier initialed by the two negotiating panels in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The stage was set, complete with media coverage and foreign dignitaries, including US ambassador to the Philippines, Christy Kenny were invited to lend grace and importance to the occasion. At the eleventh hour before the ceremonial signing of the MOA-AD, exploding like an unexpected time-bomb, was the news from the Philippines that the Supreme Court issued a TRO (Temporary Restraining Order) to stop the signing of the MOA-AD. At the end of the day, the Supreme Court upheld the petition and declared the MOA-AD unconstitutional for lack of consultations. Political analysts observing closely the way MOA-AD was mishandled by the Solicitor General say that Malacanang was half-hearted in defending the government's position during the hearing.

Politically, two major stumbling blocks have hampered the peace process:

Firstly, successive regimes in Manila have followed a pattern of political strategy of unilateral implementation of accord accompanied by the co-optation or involvement of individual members of insurgent groups and other Moro leaders into these government offices. Such strategies (divide and rule) intensified internal divisions within the Moro fronts. Ramos' selection of Misuari to lead the ARMM is a classic example to divide the Moro fronts. While often successful in the short term at reducing hostilities, this has ultimately undermined the peace process by generating distrust within the Moro community and a general sense of disillusionment towards their own leaders and dimmed the prospects for an equitable negotiated settlement. Nur Misuari's ineffective term as head of ARMM and the subsequent dismemberment of the MNLFF epitomized this process.

Secondly, the peace process in Mindanao has become something of a political football in Manila. On the one hand, for presidents facing other disconcerting political problems, a renewed armed offensive in Mindanao has often provided effective distraction of public attention. Marcos' initial declaration of emergency that enabled him to remain in power for another fourteen years was legitimated in part by the violence in the South, while both Estrada and Arroyo launched new offensives when their popularity was sinking. On the other hand, however, for opponents of incumbent presidents, peace negotiations have occasionally provided opportunities to score points against sitting Presidents by depicting them as betraying the territorial unity of the Philippines.

### **MILF-GPH FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT ON BANGSAMORO:**

Last October 15, 2012 the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, representing the Bangsamoro people sealed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro. The Agreement redefined the totality of relationship between the Bangsamoro people and the Philippine Government which is described as asymmetric. The relationship preserves the territory of the Philippines from disintegration, at the same time gives the Bangsamoro people the power to govern themselves with less interference from the Central Government.

The Bangsamoro People for centuries constitutes an independent nation and only when the colonial powers handed them over to a newly created Philippine state that they lost their independent status. That was the reason why the Bangsamoro liberation fronts, including the MILF, following the trend of the liberation movements in the early part of the last century defined their goal as political independence for the Bangsamoro People.

While separation from the Philippine state is the ideal on the part of the Bangsamoro and integration is desirable on the part of the Philippine Government, but the MILF and the Philippine Government are also conscious of the changing trend towards accommodation. In the Framework Agreement the Central Government recognizes Bangsamoro as the identity of our people and they remain citizens of the Philippines. A new form of government which is ministerial shall be established, which will be different from the unitary system of the Central Government, in a defined territory. Powers are allocated to the Central Government and the Bangsamoro Government, and there are powers that both have to share.

The Framework Agreement does not only solve the armed conflict in Mindanao but opens opportunities for the Central Government, the Bangsamoro People and the Muslim World.

With peace that the Framework Agreement will bring to the country foreign and domestic investments are expected to increase. A successful peace deal with the Bangsamoro will certainly encourage other armed groups to pursue peace negotiations with the Government contributing to the stability of the country. A successful Bangsamoro ministerial government will provide lessons for other regions to learn. And the savings that government can generate from the absence of war will tremendously increase government capacity to deliver basic services to the Filipino people, like education and health.

The Framework Agreement opens opportunities for the Bangsamoro People to govern themselves and rebuild their economy.

The Basic Law will be drafted by the Transition Commission and will be transmitted to the Philippine Congress for legislative action. After it will be passed in Congress and approved by the Philippine President the Basic Law will be submitted to the people of the territory for ratification, and then a new government will be established starting with the Transition Authority and then a regular government after the election in 2016.

For those who have been in the struggle since the early 70's and for those who have been in the frontline of peace negotiations under several Philippine Presidents, they say that the Framework Agreement is by far the best that could be achieved. This, in fact is understood by the fighters and the Bangsamoro masses. Buntings and streamers, deep green in color, proudly decorated homes and indented highways signifying popular support for the peace agreement.

Support of the international community, the likes of U.S., European Union, International Contact Group, O.I.C. and other foreign supporters have been profuse and unremitting for the on-going GPH-MILF peace talks. But what, one may ask, is the Framework Agreement on Peace signed on October 15 at Malacanang Palace? In a nutshell, it outlines the issues and points of agreement the details of which the negotiating panels will discuss in succeeding panel meetings to flesh out the framework. There are three contentious issues that the panels have yet to resolve, namely, wealth-sharing, power-sharing and normalization. More significantly, the "buck does not stop" on the negotiating table. Congressional imprimatur is indispensable in the passage of the Basic Law, which the Transition Commission is mandated to draft. Congressional support to the Basic Law and other phases of the talks hinge heavily on Pres. Aquino's hold on Congress and Senate. The recent outcome of the Philippine 2013 mid-term election wherein the allies of Pres. Aquino in both congress and senate dominated is seen as a positive and encouraging development. The greatest fear of observers is an opposition-dominated Congress and Senate in 2013, which may serve as obstacle in the passage of a drafted Basic Law.

## **WILL PEACE HOLD IN MINDANAO?**

The MILF as an Islamic Revolutionary Organization is always guided by the teachings of Islam in her policies and activities. The Late Chairman and founder of the MILF Salamat

Hashim always emphasized that negotiation is the most civilized and practical solution to the Bangsamoro Question. He presented leadership of the MILF and the entire membership to the same line of principle. We have always believed that honest and sincere dialogue premised on inclusivity, sensitivity, open-mindedness and a conciliatory attitude, sense of justice and fairness and the recognition of the historical injustices, minoritization and marginalization of the Bangsamoro as well as the dynamics of the present conflict situation and conducted in a conducive atmosphere of international facilitation, support, mediation and monitoring that is reinforced by a strong political will can result to mutually agreed solutions for a lasting peace, inshaAllah.

Significantly, a large segment of Philippine society, from the indigenous groups from way up northern Philippines to way down south in Mindanao, civil society groups, the Philippine military, religious groups and politicians, the academe as well as international NGO's and funding institutions, foreign countries and observers are united in their clamor for peace in Mindanao.

Under the present administration of President Benigno Aquino III, optimism of both government and MILF Negotiating Panels to reach a final and conclusive agreement is at a high level. The government of Malaysia, acting as facilitator has been performing creditably to the satisfaction of both the government of the Philippines and the MILF. Going by the records of all previous negotiations between the government and the MNLF and subsequently the MILF, this is the first time the international communities including the United States of America have taken an open and unequivocal stand in support of the on-going GPH-MILF Peace Talks. A group of powerful countries in Europe, the Middle East and Asia banded together as International Contact Group (ICG) to support the peace process. The popular leadership of Pres. Noyonoy Aquino stands out to be a big plus factor in galvanizing the positive response of the international community to the peace process.

The Marcos era is long gone. Many of our youth of today have little or no memory at all of the atrocities and oppression that we have suffered in the hands of the government. Now the prevailing sentiment of both young and old among the Muslims is thankfulness to Allah and relief and joy over the GPH-MILF Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro (FAB). At present, political and security conditions are a far cry from the Martial Law days and our people look forward to a better life.

Civil conflict always destroys much more than physical plants and infrastructure. The core of the damage is done to the fabric of society, to the stock of social capital. Social capital is essentially trust capital which, unlike physical capital, grows as it is used. Thus, the process of peace negotiations and cooperative implementation of an agreed framework—with the affirmative involvement of the international donor community—could gradually replace the vicious historical cycle of dispossession, resistance and mistrust in Mindanao with a positive dynamic. There is at this juncture a unique confluence of internal political evolution in the Philippines, conflict fatigue on both sides and the international political and security concerns emerging after September 11, 2001. This confluence offers a historic opportunity to finally come to terms with the reality of pluralism in the Southern Philippines and reach a final settlement to this second-oldest civil conflict on the planet. The human and economic benefits would be massive—not only for the Bangsamoro and other inhabitants of the directly-affected conflict areas but also for the Christian majority areas of Mindanao and the Philippines as a whole. In time, the impact of the settlement of the conflict in the Philippines could even extend to other countries in Southeast Asia, through a positive demonstration effect on other civil and political conflicts in the region and elsewhere, and an improvement in the international image of the region as a whole.

We are fully aware of the colossal weight of the problem that we carry upon our shoulders but at the same time we appreciate those who believe that peace in Mindanao cannot be the responsibility of just a chosen few. Truly, it must be understood and realized that sustaining

peace in Mindanao is a collective responsibility of the people of Mindanao, the Philippines and even the International Community. Indeed, Allah (s.w.t.) said, "people" and not "person" who must "change what is in themselves" before Allah (s.w.t.) "will change their condition." Love of God, love of neighbor, tolerance, understanding, unity in diversity, sensitivity and sense of justice and fairness--- these are noble and lofty universal values that, inshaAllah, strong enough to make us initiate that "change within ourselves." Allah said in the Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13: "O mankind! Lo We have created you male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other (not despise each other). Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.

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