

# HOPES AND CHALLENGES OF THE BANGSAMORO: TOWARDS BROADENING A PEACE CONSTITUENCY

*By Gus Micalat*

Exactly a week ago, I was a witness to the unfolding of history.

As we all know by now, last March 27, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) was signed in the Malacanang grounds. No less than President Aquino and the beleaguered Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak along with a thousand or so other guests, witnessed this milestone.

Those who graced the event were mostly government officials, Senators, Congresspersons, the Cabinet, Diplomatic corps, the Donor community, the Armed Forces and the Police hierarchy, Religious and Church leaders, Civil Society stalwarts, Moro Islamic Liberation Front officials and cadres and Mindanao community leaders. I espied one or two Opposition legislators. And a coterie of media personalities.

I however noticed that the titans of industry and business were missing, or perhaps I really didn't know who they were or they were incognito?

Thus I am not sure if there were Rotarians present, specially from this prestigious chapter. Just out of curiosity, may I know if anyone of you in this room were there?

To me and many other fellow Mindanawans, Filipinos and specially Moros, the signing marked a turning point in the decades-old, nay, even century old conflict in Mindanao. The CAB promises to usher in a much desired peace, security and prosperity that our peoples have been hankering for so long. For as a settler in Mindanao myself, I have come to understand the situation – and the conflict there very simply. It is like this analogy:

A man has a house with plenty of vacant rooms. Someone knocks on his door one day and asks if he can be accommodated in one room. The man obliges and even tells this stranger to choose what room he wants. The stranger settles in one room.

One day, he returns together with a relative. By now he has become the friend of the house owner and asks the latter if he can spare one of his empty rooms again for his relative. The house owner agrees as he has plenty of rooms to spare. The relative of his friend settles in the room of his choice.

Soon, the friend brings with him another friend. And the same story happens. He asks the house owner if his friend can use one of the vacant rooms. And the owner again obliges.

And this same scenario will happen again. And again. And again.

Until the day comes when there was no empty room left. And the friend arrives with another relative in tow and this time had the

temerity to demand that the house owner leave his own house to be able to accommodate this new would be settler! This time the house owner did not budge.

He had to protect the only room left for himself in his once vast house.

Such is the story of the original inhabitants of Mindanao. They are the Moros and the indigenous peoples whom we now call Lumad. And we were the “friends” who settled in their rooms, in their spaces, in their land.

I can spin off other stories from this simple tale. How some of the family members of the house owner wanted to reclaim by all means necessary the entire house and drive away the settlers, some of whom in the meantime were able to spruce up the rooms they were given and even the entire house to boot with their toil, inputs and creative genius. But how the owner just wanted to keep the small room left in his own house that he and his family were ensconced in.

So this is what the CAB does.

It recognizes this historical right of the original house owner, who in the meantime have agreed to no longer reclaim the entire house but only to live in peace and manage his own room and the spaces where his family and kin reside in. The CAB more importantly recognizes that the house owner now left in that one room was indeed the original owner of the entire house and is thus entitled to rights, reparations and justice from the wanton exploitation he and his kin suffered from the inequities that obtained from the vagaries of history. The CAB also pays tribute to the identity of the house owner as distinct from the now majority settlers of his house and

rightfully restores the respect of his own mores, culture and ways of life including his ways of governance.

Of course, while the CAB is an agreement, the implementation of its provisions is the major hurdle. Foremost of these provisions is the drafting of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) that will hopefully reflect the CAB and its annexes on transitional arrangements, wealth sharing, power sharing, normalization, and the aspirations of the entire Moro people and not just those of an entity such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) which negotiated this pact with the government. Our hope is that it will also consider and embed even the desires and needs of other stakeholders including the indigenous peoples and settlers living within the territory at stake – or that remaining room in their house.

The test of the pudding is in the tasting so to speak. The challenge does not stop there. There is Congress that needs to pass this law. There is the possibility that this issue may be “politicized” by either the Administration or the Opposition. My hope is that it does not tread this messy path. I hope that the Administration will not gloat that it is because of them that this Agreement has come to pass. And I hope the Opposition does not poke for holes in the Agreement because it thinks that this is an Administration project. For in fact, this Agreement should be seen and accepted as the achievement of both the Moro and Filipino peoples and not just of PNoy or Chairman Murad. Of the PNoy administration or the MILF. For indeed this Agreement is the result of the collective, tedious and sometimes bloody struggle of our peoples both in Mindanao and from the rest of the country. So *“ibalato” na natin ito sa mamamayang Moro at Filipino.*

Meantime, I am sure there are a lot of cynics who believe that this

Agreement will fail. Already there are naysayers who have gone to the Supreme Court to declare its unconstitutionality. Our favorite feisty Senator has already declared with regret that the Agreement is “unconstitutional” citing alleged infirmities in the devolution of reserved powers of the central government and what she claims is the diminished sovereignty the Agreement makes. Some of the petitioners to the SC are buoyed by a previous SC ruling in 2008 when it declared the then about-to-be-initialed Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) unconstitutional. We all know what happened after that. Heavy skirmishes broke out. Hundreds were killed. Thousands were displaced. The peace talks virtually collapsed.

The cynics will bring up the issue of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao as a failed experiment, or why the Final Peace Agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Prof. Nur Misuari didn't pan out. They will point to the MILF's own breakaway group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Abu Sayaf, the entrenched local warlords, the proliferation of firearms in the island, the clan wars or *rido's*, etc, etc.

Well, there will always be spoilers in our midst even if some of the issues and concerns raised by well intentioned critics or even concerned friends are valid.

But let me just say that unlike the peace deals or projects of the past that tried to address the Mindanao conflict, this peace agreement forged between the government and the MILF are also owned by a lot of other stakeholders. They include among others civil society, local business and entrepreneurs, local officials, local churches, women, youth and even the international and donor community. But more so this Agreement was also forged by the perennial survivors

and “victims” of war themselves, the evacuees, the displaced, grassroots communities, the widows, children and orphans of war.

I have not seen a peace constituency as broad as that for Mindanao. And I am both humbled and proud that our organization, the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID) had in our own little way contributed immensely in building this constituency. Before we were involved in peace-building in Mindanao, there was nary a civil society formation that monitored, shadowed or were deeply involved in the peace process. Some Muslim friends told me that it was even easier for them to lug an armalite and do actual combat and be in the battlefield than holding a placard in the streets or sitting across a negotiating table.

It is to the credit of the thousands of faceless, nameless displaced persons, the survivors, mothers, widows, orphans and elderlies, community and grassroots leaders ravaged by countless wars who didn't lose hope that peace will reign someday from whom we sought guidance and inspiration in our work. And there were those confreres in civil society, local, national and international who accompanied us in this arduous journey. And of course there were those warriors and champions for peace on both sides who became our open and steadfast partners even if they oftentimes locked horns during intense debates and impasses.

The role that other stakeholders played such as local entrepreneurs, business, church, religious, tribal and local leaders were also pivotal in crunching this peace deal.

But for the peace agreement to really succeed and fly, it needs to be owned too by the entire nation, and not just us in Mindanao. It needs to be embraced by the Filipino people.

The peace constituency needs to go beyond Mindanao, into the halls of Congress and the Senate, into local and barangay councils in the Visayas and Luzon, in Metro Manila, into the board rooms of corporations, into the classrooms of universities and schools, into the consciousness of the MRT and LRT commuters, into mainstream news and talks shows and reflected even in the themes of soap operas and in the tills at the box office and into dinner and luncheon meetings and perchance flagship projects of Rotary clubs.

For indeed only when this peace agreement becomes the truth of all of us and will be judged as fair to all concerned, will goodwill and better friendship --and solidarity amongst our peoples-- be achieved that will eventually redound to the benefit of all concerned.

So I hope the Rotary Club of Makati West will continue its usual pioneering role in the Rotary family by helping us forge ahead, build and consolidate this peace at hand. Doing so, I believe will usher in an era of prosperity, security and goodwill not only in Mindanao, but in the country at large. And I hope to see more Rotarians in the signing of the Exit Agreement of this pact in 2016.

And perhaps, we can start to also look at the other peace tables that have yet to have its own happy ending such as that with the National Democratic Front (NDF). But that is another story. That is another speech to make. And another lunch to take.

*Maraming Salamat po!*

*Kalinaw, Kalilintad, Kapayapaan sa ating lahat!*

