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# What Muslim Mindanao Really Means to Arroyo

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Ever since the Arroyo government reopened peace negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, I've been having a lot of misgivings about these talks.

In the first place, past Philippine governments had signed peace agreements with the Moro National Liberation Front, and they were never fully or substantially implemented. Although the MNLF did have a lot of mistakes and shortcomings in doing its part, I'd put the greater part of the responsibility for the non-implementation on the Philippine government, which, after all, is the entity in power and has much, much more resources at its command.

That Malaysia - a third party acceptable to both parties - was brokering the talks was not reassuring to me at all. I do not doubt the good intentions of Malaysia at all, but I believed then - as now - that it lacks clout. What is badly needed in the Mindanao peace process is not just a peace broker that gets the warring parties to sign a peace pact but one that is able to make sure that the peace is truly implemented. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (with the special roles of Libya and Indonesia) was the peace broker in the 1976, 1987 and 1996 peace pacts. Was it able to do much to ensure the implementation of these peace pacts? NO. How could Malaysia, which is just one of the member countries of the OIC, possibly fare any better in ensuring that a GRP-MILF peace pact (if one does get signed) is implemented?

Gloria Macapagal Arroyo didn't strike me as a president who was really all that concerned about peace and development in Muslim Mindanao. For all her opposition to Estrada's "all-out war" against the MILF in 2000, her government fought pitched battles with the MILF in 2003. Moreover, I could not see any sign that her government was truly undertaking major development initiatives in the ARMM. The usual patronage would be passed off as "development projects." Much was being said in the international media about her government's gains and successes in fighting the Abu Sayyaf, but we all know that much of the credit does not really belong to her government. Besides, as I learned through a trip to Jolo earlier this year, the Abu Sayyaf is very much alive and kicking, thanks to rampant corruption in government and human rights abuses by the military.

My misgivings about the GRP-MILF talks deepened after Madame Arroyo, members of her family and her cronies became enmeshed in a series of mind-boggling corruption and fraud scandals, and after scores of disappearances and extra-judicial killings of activists and journalists were exposed by human rights groups and the media. How could a government that is widely perceived as being the most corrupt, most repressive and most unpopular since the Marcos regime possibly rally public support for any peace deal that it could forge with the MILF?

In 2005, amid all the corruption and fraud scandals, Muslim Mindanao was very much in the news. There were two developments that particularly appalled and galled me: the Hello Garci scandal and the ARMM elections. I was somewhat surprised that news analysts did not really go deeper into the implications of these two events on Muslim Mindanao and on the Mindanao peace process. To me, these two events provided valuable insights into the thinking of Arroyo and those around her as

regards Muslim Mindanao.

The Hello Garci scandal and the ARMM elections have to be viewed within the context of the country's politics. Political scientists have come up with various characterizations of Philippine politics, many of which emphasize the theme of elite or oligarchic domination: elite democracy, cacique democracy, patrimonial oligarchic state, boss-democracy, clientelist regime, anti-development state, etc. All the major parties are controlled by powerful political families and factions of the elite. The dominant forces in these parties are traditional politicians (trapos) that resort to patronage, huge electoral spending (including vote-buying), and not too seldomly, other forms of corruption, fraud, coercion and violence. Elite rule has managed not only to survive but also to entrench itself despite "people power" uprisings, insurgencies and military revolts.

What does the Hello Garci scandal tell us about Muslim Mindanao? It tells us that the ARMM has been transformed by the dominant trapo coalition into the national center for committing electoral fraud and stealing elections at the national level. As never before in post-Marcos Philippines, Muslim Mindanao now plays a stellar role in national politics, i.e., national trapo politics. That such a position has been somewhat consolidated is shown by the shenanigans of the 2007 senatorial elections.

And what about the 2005 ARMM elections? Simply, that, with full presidential backing, Muslim Mindanao has been turned over from the MNLF to the powerful political clans and warlords. For all the shortcomings and failings of the MNLF, I just cannot imagine how such a turnover can possibly promote peace and development in Muslim Mindanao. According to the PNP, Muslim Mindanao is the region which has the most private armies and the biggest number of unlicensed firearms. And then who do you deliver it to? In the patronage game, the ARMM has become the reward to valuable services provided to the patron, especially those who served well in the 2004 elections.

After the signing of the 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreement, the Ramos and Arroyo governments backed the candidacies for ARMM governor of MNLF leaders Misuari and Hussin, respectively. I think that the MNLF made the mistake of not building a strong electoral party; it became too dependent on the ruling trapo coalition. Trapo politics of patronage and corruption corroded a number of the MNLF cadres who were in the ARMM. Some have been swallowed up by the trapo parties and a few, who have unexplainable wealth, have now built powerful political clans and dynasties.

I could imagine just how the whole game with the MILF would unravel if a peace pact did get signed and the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity would take the place of the ARMM. As in the case of the MNLF, the government would let the MILF win the first two BJE elections or so. Then it would lure the MILF cadres into the trapo politics of patronage and corruption. Once enough corrosion had been achieved, then the ruling trapo coalition would turn the BJE over to the political clans.

Even if the MILF were to set up its own electoral party, it would be no match whatsoever to the powerful political clans and warlords who have mastered all the tricks of electoral game. Fernando Poe, Jr., couldn't get even 1 per cent of the vote in seven municipalities of Maguindanao in 2004. Would another electoral neophyte (the electoral party of the MILF) fare any better?

Despite all my misgivings about the GRP-MILF peace negotiations, I nonetheless supported the talks. As far as implementation of an eventual peace pact was concerned, I did not trust Arroyo at all. But I was hoping that a good peace pact could be signed just before the end of her term, and that the actual implementation would be done by the new government. Perhaps Arroyo would want something to crow about after her term, some sort of dramatic end, or crowning achievement for posterity. I was hoping that despite Arroyo's terrible record, a good peace pact could still emerge. I

knew the background of some of the members of the government panel, and I knew them to be men and women of integrity, who truly desired a just and enduring peace in Mindanao.

After five long years of negotiations, the GRP and the MILF panels have come up with a Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain. It's not even a comprehensive peace agreement yet. And what does Arroyo do? She throws it into the dust bin. That's treachery of the highest order.

Arroyo should have known that peace negotiations are serious business and not the usual game of patronage. If the Arroyo government did not conduct proper consultations with all sectors concerned, it should take responsibility. If there are provisions in the MOA that are indeed unconstitutional, it should take responsibility. It cannot simply wash its hands and walk away.

I'm very much saddened to say not that my misgivings about the GRP-MILF talks have been proven right.

Let me end by expressing my view on what I think Muslim Mindanao truly means to Arroyo and the ruling trapo coalition.

Muslim Mindanao has been wracked for almost four decades now by armed conflict between the government and Moro "liberation" forces. Due in good part to this armed conflict, there is great disorder and lawlessness, where you find all sorts of armed groups moving about - military, rebels, extremists, criminal elements, private armies, goons, vigilantes, etc. Corruption is rampant. I have written elsewhere that Muslim Mindanao has become a quagmire. If Muslim Mindanao were a state, it would easily qualify as a failed state, as some political scientists have pointed out.

But it is precisely because of this situation that Muslim Mindanao has become most valuable - a land of opportunity - to Arroyo and the ruling trapos. It serves as a national center for electoral fraud and stealing elections at the national level. It serves as a reward for powerful political clans and warlords who have delivered the most to the national patron. It serves as a hideout for Comelec officials who wish to run away from investigations and inquiries into election anomalies.

Muslim Mindanao has been so valuable, so useful. Why change all that?

Peace? That's too complicated. Pushing the MOA could even get one impeached. *Piss on your peace!* (The last sentence is a quote borrowed from the film *The Lion in Winter*.)

Arroyo's legacy to Muslim Mindanao and what Muslim Mindanao truly means to her are fully reflected in two simple words: *Hello Garci!*

### **Postscript:**

I do not wish to end this comment on a sour note. Let me just say to everyone in the Mindanao peace movement that we'll all have to view things from a longer perspective. I do not expect any substantial positive result from Arroyo's "peace" initiatives. She has lost all credibility. We'll have to think beyond Arroyo. We do not know if the next president will be better - or worse - than Arroyo.

Let me repeat what I said earlier. The Mindanao peace process needs a peace broker that has much more clout. In past negotiations, the OIC wasn't able to put enough pressure for the peace pacts to be fully or substantially implemented. In the current negotiations, Malaysia has not been able to get the two sides to forge an agreement. Getting the United Nations or some other powerful actor to serve as the peace broker will take some time - and hard work.