

# **Democratic Framework Towards Finding Genuine and Lasting Solution to the Mindanao Problem**

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Much has been said and done to stop the conflict and war in Mindanao but less has been achieved to resolve the conflict and attain peace amongst the Mindanaoans.

For centuries and generations the conflict in Mindanao has been addressed concretely in different forms and methods but the substance or the framework remains the same, that is, mainstreaming the Mindanaoans and specifically the Moro people; the one nation-state of the Philippine Government or earlier under the colonial powers of Spain and the United States of America.

This framework defines peace as the absence of armed resistance to their governance so that development can take roots and grow and a new society or strong republic can be realized. A deviation from this framework has been seen as weakening or threatening a new society or a strong republic hence, an iron rule, total war or an all out war is needed to preserve peace and a proper atmosphere is provided to continue with its development efforts.

Armed resistance is seen in this framework as sign of backwardness and very destructive and should be dealt with accordingly and with calibrated intensity. Victory is seen on the numbers of battles won and peace is achieved when war has ceased and the leaders of the armed resistance have surrendered or have been neutralized.

This frame of mind has dominated and guided the programs and actions of many if not all of the past and present leaders of the Philippines in looking at and resolving the conflict in Mindanao. Their vision and sincerity to resolve the conflict is blurred by the belief that peace and development in Mindanao can only be achieved by more efforts towards assimilation and integration of peoples to one country, one nation and one state. Mindanaoans should be united as one people and their vision should be integrated with the rest of the peoples in the country. For them, anything less than this outlook is non negotiable.

Under the era of globalization, this thinking has been reinforced because the divisions between nation-states or countries are removed to facilitate an easier access to a bigger single market.

Protective measures of economy of small countries like the Philippines have been removed while big and more advanced countries have firmly secured theirs. Distinct identities of peoples and nation of countries with multi-nationalities are subtly removed to facilitate the attainment of globalized values and culture, governance and economy.

## **Understanding the Organic Development of Mindanao and Its Peoples**

Mindanao and the islands of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Sabah and Palawan had reached certain level of development before the arrival of the Spanish colonialist. Economically, it had traded with China, Siam and other neighboring countries. Politically, the Sultanate of Sulu had already been established and recognized by many countries. In other parts of Mindanao economic and political developments had also reached certain levels of advancement. The Sultanate of Maguindanao would later be established in early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The political influence of the Sultanate had reached as far as the islands of Luzon and the Visayas.

During this period, many of its inhabitants had been Islamized but there were those who had chosen to remain with their pre-islamic beliefs and outlooks.

When the Spaniards arrived and tried to conquer the islands they named after King Philips, they found the fiercest resistance from the peoples in Mindanao. History would tell us that they (Spanish and later the Americans) had never fully subjugated the islands and peoples of Mindanao. But they had succeeded in Christianizing some of the islands' inhabitants.

The islamized inhabitants of the islands of Mindanao under the leadership of the Sultanates had continuously resisted the invasion of the Spanish colonizers. The economic growth in their area had been stunted but they were able to maintain their distinct political identity. They were never fully subjugated by the foreign invaders.

The Christianized inhabitants in the islands of Luzon and other parts of the Visayas had also resisted the Spanish colonialism, which had tremendously weakened the central Spanish leadership, which was based in the Northern island of Luzon.

It was in this situation when the so-called annexation of the American of the Philippines from Spaniards took place. The already weakened Spanish rulers sold the Philippines to the Americans including the islands and peoples of Mindanao which and who were never been subjugated.

The new American colonizers had tried new methods and forms of subjugating the people in Mindanao using religion and education to penetrate the value system and formation of being distinct politically and economically. Its tactics of divide and rule had been very effective in weakening the resistance and minoritizing the Moro people in the islands of Mindanao.

American supported Philippine governments would later be following these footsteps and employed methods of breaking up the backbone of the continued Moro resistance. The political objective had been to integrate and assimilate all the inhabitants of the islands of Mindanao with the rest of the country.

The Moro people had consistently struggle for their rights to self-determination as a people mainly through armed resistance. There were times when they employed the non-armed form like constitutional amendments and petition writings but it had never been listened to by the powers that be.

The Moro National Liberation Front and later the Moro Islamic Liberation Front have been the product of the continuous and protracted struggle of the Moro people against colonialism. Their use of armed means is a direct result of limited options that they have experienced.

Meanwhile, the other inhabitants of the islands of Mindanao the Lumad (the unislamized and mainly unchristianized), and the christianized inhabitants as well as those descendants of settlers from the Visayas and Luzon have been waging their own struggle to preserve and reclaim their ancestral domain and the natural resources against the greed of big business which are mainly based in Manila. Some of these inhabitants joined the Moro Fronts while some of them joined the other revolutionary groups fighting against the big landlords and the big business that they believe to influence and control the powers of the Philippine government that favor and protect their own interests.

At present, under the era of big business controlled globalization and the vital role of the islands of Mindanao in the over-all development strategy of the Philippines, the exploitation and suppression of the natural resources of the resistance of its human resources will be expected to intensify. The bases, though expressed in different forms, for the struggle for the right to self-determination, will be relevant more than ever.

### **Three People Mindanaoans**

In order to understand the conflicts and war in Mindanao and make effective steps towards comprehensive, genuine and lasting peace in the island one has to know its peoples.

It has been known that like the rest of the peoples in the Philippines its origin can be traced from the Malay race. Thousands of years ago the people from what are now known as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand had used the land bridges to travel to and from the islands of Mindanao. They had brought with them their arts and culture so that when they began to settle down, their communities had developed with its own economic and political system e.g. the balangay.

This development had been hastened when traders and religious missionaries from as far as (what is known as) the Middle East brought with them beliefs and their system of governance. Islam was introduced and the Sultanate was established from its already growing stage of traditional governance.

Many of the inhabitants of the islands of Mindanao became followers of Islam while others remained with their religious traditional beliefs. Islam with its complete outlook in life became more dominant as it had brought with it more advanced economic system. It had peripherized the unislamized portion of its population but the Monotheists and the Polytheists co-existed in many of the land and territories.

The Spanish colonizers had brought with them not only a different set of economic system but new belief and religion - Christianity. A portion of the population of the islands of Mindanao had been Christianized and often used by the Spanish colonizers to fight and proselytize the islamized and the unislamized portion of the populations in the islands.

Although Christianity had monotheist outlook (like Islam), it had brought with it a new set of outlook and culture from different civilizations from Europe.

This context had created the atmosphere of co-existence between three sets of beliefs, outlooks and system in one territorial domain. Three peoples in one land but face with similar problems of

coercion from the external factor/power blocking their right to freely determine their lives and their future.

They had been used by these external powers with the collaboration of their own leaders (in many cases) to fight against each other while their natural wealth and resources had been continuously exploited.

The absence of peace in Mindanao has been created by the outside power drawing strength from the local elite to perpetually destabilize the situation so that exploitation and suppression would be unhampered.

Historically, it has been known that amidst the diversities and differences between and amongst the three peoples in the islands of Mindanao, accommodation, understanding and unity had been possible and in fact been practiced.

Barter had been practiced between and among the three peoples. Lands and territories had been occupied by them based on mutually accepted and recognized boundaries. Foods had been abundant and the bounties of the lands had never been scarce for the three peoples. Traditional methods of managing and settling conflicts had been practiced and proven effective between and amongst the three peoples.

Things and events became bad and had become worse when big business interests had occupied their lands and natural resources. Laws were enacted by the national government favoring their big business interests. The unseen hands of these big business interests had become visible in the faces of law enforcers who mainly came from the islands of Luzon and Visayas. And all things became scarce and food had been difficult to produce. Ancestral lands had been declared reservations and had been titled by the unseen but powerful people with strong business and political connections. The traditional methods of conflict management and resolution had been rendered useless and new alien laws for the three peoples had been introduced and became the basis of the Judicial System strongly implemented by the armed forces of the central government.

Economically dislocated, politically disempowered and judicially rendered useless, the three peoples had again struggled for the recognition of its distinctness. Divisions had been stressed and steps towards unity had become suspicious. The leaders and the elite of the three peoples had begun to lose their local advantages and began to fight to retain and regain their lost privileges. Options had become limited because even in the electoral arena the local elites had begun losing their position and power.

It was in this context when armed conflicts erupted in the early seventies. Triggered by the unlimited greediness of the big business interests over the natural wealth of Mindanao, the three peoples had found themselves fighting each other creating wounds, which would be very difficult to heal. The big business interests maintained their unseen presence but used the elite and the leaders of the three peoples to fight the wars while they continue to rape and reap the bounties of Mindanao.

The Moro Revolutionary Fronts have led the Moro struggle for self-determination aiming at principally attaining political freedom and later the democratic freedom of its people.

Other revolutionary groups aimed at uniting all the oppressed peoples of Mindanao with those from Visayas and Luzon fight mainly through armed methods the basic problems that affected all the oppressed peoples. For them the oppressive situation created by the basic problems had led to the existence of national oppression of the Moro people, hence, solving the basic problems first would

lead to the elimination of the national oppression. As if losing the distinct identity of the people with their inherent right to freely determine their lives and their future starts and ends with the solution of the basic problems face by all the peoples in the Philippines. In fact, for this revolutionary group the basis for the right to self-determination of peoples would be removed when the basic problems have been resolved.

The big business controlled globalization believes that there is a need to unite the peoples of Mindanao with the rest of the peoples in the country to facilitate the development of one big market and production processes will be less expensive. Hence, assimilation and integration of peoples of Mindanao with the rest of the peoples of the country and of the world will be given paramount importance in its development strategy.

Mindanao and its islands, just like the rest of the country, have been peopled by multi-nationalities. This premise should be set first before any agenda for attaining genuine peace and development. When the peoples are united about their differences then mutual respect and understanding will easily follow. Objectively, they can discuss and reason out about the bases/sources of their conflicts and resolve them on their own traditional methods, which have been proven effective up to the present. In this process a reality will become crystal clear that in Mindanao there are three peoples but they are all Mindanaoans. The more and the deeper they understand their distinctness the more Mindanaoans they become.

### **New Understanding, New Options and New Actions**

The struggle for the right to self-determination of people is an inherent right. There are no conditions for any people to engage in the struggle for the realization of factually determining their way of life and thinking. In fact, to respect and actually support the struggle of people to freely determine their lives and future is a moral obligation of any people in any given time and place.

The struggle of the Moro people to self-determination should be understood in this context. It may be expressed differently using different methods and forms of struggle but it can still be true to its essence when its aim is to free the people from any external coercion or force.

But this does not mean that it will struggle by itself and for itself excluding other peoples struggling for democracy and freedom. And most importantly, this surely does not mean that the democratic rights and people's participation will be subsumed by the struggle against national oppression.

The struggle of people to self-determination should be both democratic and political. That means, that while it aims to free itself from the national oppression perpetuated by the majority nationality it ensures that in all stages the democratic participations of the peoples as the real stakeholders should be observed. Otherwise, it will only be a change of oppressors and the mode of exploitation. It is only in this process where struggle for democratic and political rights of peoples can be qualitatively achieved and the right to self-determination is fully realized even to a higher level.

The struggle of people for the right to self-determination should be intertwined with the struggle of other peoples and nationalities for freedom and democracy. It is in this manner, where oppressed peoples from different nationalities can unite and struggle against the source of the existence of the national oppression. In this process, the more they are united against the common source of their miseries and oppression the more they can understand each others differences and common vision.

And then there can be no situation where they will be divided, ruled and made to fight each other. The respect they have learned in the praxis of struggle for right to self-determination makes them

give stress more on unity and less in divisiveness.

And then they can visualize and build peace and avoid the causes and destructiveness of war. And healthy seeds of genuine peace sown in Mindanao will start to take roots and grow when freedom becomes a reality for all the nationalities.

Mindanaoans will become freer when the Moro people will realize their right to determine their lives and the future.

## **Options of the Moro People and the Mindanaoans**

Having a Tri-peoples' vision for lasting peace in Mindanao includes the actualization of different if not all the options of peoples in Mindanao.

Considering the historical development and the present realities in Mindanao the vision for lasting peace should be anchored in the democratic participation of the stakeholders - the Mindanaoans. The struggle of the Moro people to freely determine themselves should be fully respected and supported by the Lumad and Majority Settlers and their descendants. The Lumad peoples' struggles for self-determination should be fully respected and supported by the other peoples in Mindanao. And the Majority Settlers and their descendants can fully realize their vision of freedom and peace if the Moro and the Lumad peoples are supporting their struggle for democracy and sovereignty.

The forms of the rights to self-determination of peoples or specifically the Moro people can be expressed in the following: Independence, Autonomy, option to federate with other states and remains with the framework of one country.

The Moro people can freely decide to choose any of the forms and can even use different methods to achieve it. For centuries it has used the armed method in achieving this political aim but events tell us that it has not gone too far, much more in depth. Other methods should be tried but not necessarily excluding the other methods. In fact, sometimes applying simultaneously different methods can hasten things to be achieved. But regardless of the forms or of the methods, one thing should be considered - that the democratic participation of peoples should be realized in all stages of the struggle and in the realization of their vision.

The democratic aspect should also include the participation of other stakeholders - that is other Mindanaoans.

In the process of choosing the appropriate form of self-determination, the Moro people need the support of other peoples to ensure that coercion of big business interest and political elite can be neutralized, if not totally eliminated. It should be considered that national oppression exists and develops because of the collaboration of the elite of the Moro people and hence, it should be a big help to neutralize their influence in the process of creating proper atmosphere for full democratic participation of the democratic forces of the Moro people with other peoples in Mindanao.

Only in this process one can ensure that the other peoples in Mindanao cannot be used to sabotage the full democratic and political exercise of the Moro people to freely determine their lives. And in doing this, the other peoples in Mindanao can also become free and fully realize their vision of lasting Peace.

The Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement (MPPM) has taken the right steps towards this direction. We should give and share our part in realizing this VISION.