

Insurgency and the election campaign in the Philippines

Insulting presidential bets for supporting peace talks

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This week President Duterte's counterinsurgency task force and his top intelligence adviser impudently and condescendingly spoke against four presidential candidates who each expressed the intent to pursue the GRP-NDFP peace talks - which he had unilaterally terminated in 2017 - should she/he win in the May 9 elections.

The four candidates are Vice President Leni Robredo, Senator Ping Lacson, Senator Manny Pacquiao and Manila Mayor Isko Moreno. They manifested their stand for reviving the peace talks during their interviews with veteran television journalist Jessica Soho shown on GMA 7 Saturday.

Last Monday, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) director-general Alex Paul Monteagudo insinuated it would be "insane" to resume peace talks with the Left, claiming it would surely fail as it did in the past. The four presidential aspirants, he reportedly said, were just trying to "gain votes" by appearing to be statesmen.

The National Task Force to End the Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) on Thursday followed with a statement assailing the stance of the four presidential candidates. Attributed to "Undersecretary Lorraine Marie T. Badoy, Spokesperson for Special Concerns," the statement reeked with condescension (even towards the government), arrogance and false claims.

In an online NTF-ELCAC briefing, Monteagudo made two claims:

- That "all administrations since 1986 held peace talks with the (CPP-NPA-NDFP), speaking with the same persons... The same peace talks, the same results. You will never get a different result."
- That the Left revolutionaries were never sincere in pursuing peace because their primary goal had always been to grab power, which Duterte used as basis to terminate the peace talks and organize the NTF-ELCAC.

A statement reiterating the "insincerity" claim was issued Wednesday by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU - the former OPAPP or Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process), headed by retired AFP chief Carlito Galvez Jr.

Both claims haven't been proven to be true. The written/published records of the peace talks show positive results under each administration; and the insincerity had, all too often, lodged on the government side, particularly the military.

Let me cite just one instance of such insincerity that led to the break-up of the peace negotiations under Duterte's watch, even as both negotiating panels confidently stated they had attained "unprecedented advances."

The simultaneous unilateral ceasefires declared separately by the GRP and NDFP at the start of formal negotiations in August 2016 held for more than five months. However, as the ceasefires began, Lt. Gen. Rey Leonardo Guerrero, then EastMindacom chief (now Customs director), ordered AFP troops to “recover” hundreds of barangays from NPA control. The troops intruded into NPA-held areas. Were the NDFP or the CPP-NPA insincere, the latter could have ordered attacks on the troops. But the NPA simply evaded them.

It was the GRP that caused the break in the ceasefire on Jan. 21, 2017 - while the third round of peace negotiations was ongoing in Rome, Italy. AFP troops raided an NPA camp in Makilala, North Cotabato, killing one NPA fighter. That impelled the NPA to switch from evasive action to active defense and thwarted the AFP aggression. Consequently, the CPP-NPA announced it would end its unilateral ceasefire effective on Feb. 10. Duterte suspended the peace talks and fighting resumed.

As regards Monteagudo’s claim that all administrations since 1986 held peace talks with the NDFP and all had failed, here’s how each administration scored:

The Cory Aquino administration initiated the peace talks based on “addressing the root causes of the armed conflict.” Militarists’ opposition and the Mendiola Massacre of marching peasants aborted the 1986-87 GRP-NDFP formal negotiations, yet Mrs. Aquino’s mantra has guided all the subsequent peace talks.

At least 10 major agreements and joint statements, signed and approved during Fidel Ramos’ watch, led to significant advances in the peace negotiations. The first of the five-point agenda was completed with the signing and approval of the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) in 1998.

No negotiations happened under Joseph Estrada’s truncated term - but he signed/approved the CARHRIHL. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo agreed to the third-party facilitation of the peace talks by the Norwegian government and the composition of the Joint Monitoring Committee to implement the CARHRIHL. Benigno Aquino III approved the law recognizing and providing compensation to tens of thousands human-rights violations victims under the Marcos dictatorship, as mandated in the CARHRIHL.

What about the NTF-ELCAC statement? It tagged the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations as “bogus peace talks,” claiming:

- “With no less than the Philippine government sitting across the table and involving European nations, (the peace talks) have given the CPP-NPA-NDFP the camouflage of respectability they need in the international arena to make it seem that they are what they claim to be - legitimate revolutionaries - rather than what they truly are: TERRORISTS.”

(Note: It was in December 2017 that Duterte declared the CPP and the NPA as “terrorist organizations” through a presidential proclamation. Late last year, the Anti-Terrorism Council, created by the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, arbitrarily designated the CPP-NPA and the NDFP as “terrorist organizations.”)

- “For every single time the Philippine government committed the grievous “error in judgment” of engaging in peace talks, “the body count of men and women in uniform reached sky-high...”
- By agreeing to resume the peace talks with the Left, it accused the four presidential candidates of having “harmed the country they claim to love... and have done so using the power of the mighty offices they hold.” Unless (they) educate themselves first about the “bogus peace talks ... and change their minds about the egregious pronouncements they have

made," it added, "they have clearly shown the Filipino people they are not worthy of the trust they ask from us and are unfit to hold the highest office of the land."

In taking the cue from their chairperson, the NTF-ELCAC is already trumpeting this belligerent stance ahead of the May elections.

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