

# **The State of the Mindanao under the US-Backed GMA Administration**

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President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) came to power as President of the Philippines at the time when the country was at its worst - the legacy left behind by ousted President Joseph Ejercito Estrada and the previous presidents before him. The country's poverty streaks in appalling numbers that border on real hunger, crime, graft and corruption, unemployment and social unrest.

Mindanao is the microcosm of the country in grave crisis. The economic condition of the people here had not change much. Many are still living in dire poverty especially those families affected by armed conflicts and natural calamities. Unemployment rate continue to soar with the policies of global market on liberalization, deregulation and privatization. Massive lay-offs, retrenchment of workers, company shut down and labor-only-contracting are elsewhere in Mindanao. Eventually, the purchasing power of the people became weaker. The increase in the prices of oil and other prime commodities and the impending purchased power adjustment (PPA) further push the people at the edge of helplessness. Migrant workers continue to increase in number. The glaring fact is, GMA has not come out with a coherent economic policy that would help stabilize the country's ailing economy.

The political scenario in Mindanao is even worst. Excessive politicking in government is very much evident. During the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Elections last year, and the just concluded Barangay Elections, incidents of fraud, manipulations and vote buying were widespread. Patronage politics coupled with graft and corruption is still dominating, a practice that commonly characterized Philippine elections.

Political stability is vulnerable. Even behind bars, then ARMM Governor Nur Misuari is allegedly insinuating rebellion among Bangsa Moro fighters loyal to him in defense of his position as ARMM Governor and chair of the infamous Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). The peace negotiation between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Government of the Philippines (GRP) is also far from being over. An armed group from the Indigenous Peoples known as IPFA (Indigenous Peoples Federal Army) demanding for the creation of a tri-people federal state in the country is slowly "stirring" the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the National Government. Meanwhile, the Communist Party of the Philippines-New Peoples Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) continues its military offensives in selected urban and rural areas in Mindanao. Other revolutionary groups are also leaving their marks as defenders and promoters of peoples' agenda and issues.

Most of all, Mindanao has just become the battlefield between the so-called "defenders of democracy" in the person of the US troops and the AFP, and the "forces of evil" in the image of the Abu Sayyaf.

Expectedly, in her bid to run in the presidential race on 2004, GMA courted US Pres. George W. Bush by fully defending and backing his "war on terrorism", a campaign that places US political adversaries and potential enemies of its ally countries in their list of "order of battle" in the pretext of pausing a threat to international security. To this, GMA committed to wiping out terrorism "wherever it is, whatever form it takes".

The US likewise supported GMA's "iron hand" policy towards the Abu Sayyaf whom it considered local terrorists because of its great interest in Mindanao that has a strategic role in the Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines East Asia Growth Area (BIMP EAGA). BIMP EAGA is an economic growth area also referred to as "growth triangle" with the central goal of intensifying economic cooperation in trade, investment, and tourism between and among the participating countries.

The support came in the form of Balikatan 02-1, a joint US-RP military training exercises conducted in Zamboanga and Basilan. Here, GMA made the people believe that this war game "will help us go the last mile in destroying the Abu Sayyaf and have peace at last" and development too, as the logic goes on.

GMA recently declared a total war against kidnapping and gave new Philippine National Police (PNP) Director General Hermogenes Ebdane Jr. one year to neutralize the 21 most active kidnap syndicates in the country, foremost of which is the Abu Sayyaf. This was a desperate pronouncement considering that Balikatan 02-1 is supposed to put an end to these bandits which in actual, are far from elimination. For how can the kidnapping syndicates be eradicated in one year when even with the support of the US troops with high tech and modern war facilities and equipment failed to curb the small Abu Sayyaf group in Basilan?

Despite the opposition from the different sectors, peoples and some legislators on the extension of the Balikatan 02-1 because of its unconstitutionality and the negative effects to the socio-cultural and economic life of the people in Mindanao, GMA is determined to have its extension. In fact, another Balikatan Exercises worth \$1M is now going on in Subic Naval Base, Luzon.

Where is the country heading to or Mindanao for this matter?

On Monday - July 22, 2002, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo faces the nation with her State of the Nation Address (SONA). The Mindanao Peoples Peace Movement (MPPM) calls for the people's vigilance because what GMA might report and promise might cost us our freedom and sovereignty as people.

Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement