



It's Now or Later... or Never?

MOHAGHER IQBAL

CHAIRMAN, MILF PEACE PANEL

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I thank the Philippine Political Science Association (PPSA) for inviting me as one of their speakers in this conference here in Cagayan de Oro City to speak on a subject that is close to my heart. In truth, I have been involved in the GPH-MILF peace negotiation for the last fifteen years or so, as chairman of the MILF peace panel for almost nine years since July 2003. In particular, I thank Dr. Teresa Encarnacion Tadem for this invitation; up to the last moment, my coming was still hanging in the balance. Had the 27th GPH-MILF Exploratory Talks pushed through on its original schedule and not moved to April 24-26, then definitely I would not be here today. Frankly, it is very hard on our part to commit to a particular date; even in that particular time we have no commitment yet, because scheduling the peace talks in Kuala Lumpur follows no regular pattern. It can be reset or cancelled at the instigation of one party. Moreover, as members of a revolutionary organization, unpredictability in our movements is more predictable than its pattern.

Before I try to answer the query contained in the theme of this session, “GPH-MILF Peace Agreement: Now or Never?” let me say this first: I don’t know the future and I prohibit myself to predict with certainty what lies ahead. I am just analyzing data or events related to the peace negotiation as objectively as possible, the outcome of which may or may not be correct. Besides, it is unfair to prejudge the capability of the government to come to terms with the MILF. We still trust President Benigno Aquino III in his commitment to solve the Moro Question and the armed conflict in Mindanao during his term of office. Moreover, there is still time to do it.

However, the signs of the times speak otherwise. Our negotiation with the government has dragged on for more than a decade already. Since January 1997 we have already dealt with four Philippine presidents and ten chief peace negotiators or peace panels, not to mention the signing of around 90 documents on various issues and concerns. Combine all these with the time, efforts and resources that both the peace panels and their principals, and the Malaysian government as facilitating country have invested on this peace process—the result would be staggering and awesome. And only the penultimate agenda, i.e., finding the political solution to this sovereignty-based conflict in Mindanao remains on the negotiating table. It is therefore time to conclude this negotiation under the Aquino administration. Passing the buck to the next administration is not a good policy; it is laden with uncertainties.

Frankly, whether there is signing of peace agreement now or never is not easy to make. I must confess I don't have the exact answer now. I don't know if my counterpart from the government who had addressed this conference earlier had given you a categorical answer. They are the ones who made that ambitious deadline that a comprehensive agreement with the MILF will be signed during the first quarter of 2012. It is now April and as far as I am concerned, there is no sign of it yet. I don't know if that hoped-for "miracle" by Secretary Teresita "Ging" Deles-Quintos would ever happen, especially during our forthcoming meeting in Kuala Lumpur this month. I hope the good secretary would explain to the public how this miracle unfolds itself.

Candidly, I don't want to appear pessimistic before you, because as a negotiator, we are taught by our hard experience not to be pessimistic or optimistic. By the intensity of reality, we are educated to be very objective. And for this reason, I have to tell you very directly that signing an agreement with the government now can only happen if the MILF agrees to their formula or if they agree to ours. This sounds weird, but this is the only way I can give you an affirmative answer that there is signing now. Truly, the current state of the negotiation is so tough and fraught with complexities that unless the government sees the light of our proposal for a state-substate

asymmetrical arrangement and adopts it, we see no instant or forthcoming breakthrough.

Added to this difficulty in moving fast the process is the almost characteristic flip-flopping of the government on many agreed points. Set aside the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) because that was quite a long time ago in 2008. The latest of this attitude was the sudden reversal of position by government in annotating the agreed text of the 11-point basic principles which the two peace panels had already settled and crafted during the 25th GPH-MILF Exploratory Talks on February 13-15, 2012 and was readied for signing on the subsequent 26th GPH-MILF Exploratory Talks last March 19-21. Sensing bad faith and the annotation destroying the letter and spirit of the document, the MILF did not sign it.

Close to the end of the second year in office of President Aquino, no substantive agreement, as pointed out earlier, has been signed with the government. Much of it was spent on peripheral issues. To date, the government insists on its 3-in-1 or 3 for 1 formula to address the Moro Question and the armed conflict in Mindanao. We have already rejected this proposal and we will continue to do so, because it will never solve the age-old problem in Mindanao. On the contrary, it would only prolong and complicate it. Even outsiders like Fr. Eliseo Mercado Jr. and Judge Soliman Santos Jr. did not see the government proposal as the key to solving this centuries-old problem in Mindanao. Mercado told the government to abandon the 3-in-1 formula, because it is merely a formula to reform the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) while Santos told a roundtable forum at the Ateneo de Davao University last month that the GPH panel “should not just think of the current PNoy (President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino) administration and its doables or what it can do up to 2016; it should think also of leaving a more strategic legacy beyond that,” adding, “it is the centuries-old Bangsamoro problem that we are solving here, not just its fate under PNoy.”

What is this 3-in-1 formula of government? Simply put, the proposal has three components: (1) socio-economic development wherein the MILF partners with government in the implementation of projects; (2) creation of a Bangsamoro Commission, wherein the MILF gets three out of nine slots; and (3) the rewriting of Moro history on the premise, without stating, that Moro narration is part of the national reality. On the first component, even without this negotiation, development projects can still be implemented by government. Besides, the government has been doing this since the birth of this republic. The second component is nothing but an attempt of the government to effect convergence in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) of the MILF, MNLF, and those running the entity right now. Its reform is the crux of the ARMM agenda. If the MILF accepts this offer, it would only become the laughingstock of everybody; for what the MNLF got in 1996 is clearly better than this one. The third is the cheapest of all. We don't negotiate facts of people's history; we write them down as honestly as possible.

In essence, this formula is still glued to integration as the ultimate solution to the Moro Question and the armed conflict in Mindanao. It perpetuates the status quo wherein Manila rules and decides and Moros merely follow and obey. The unitary system is so one-sided and arbitrary that being the majority in the Moro Province¹ from 1903 to 1913, today we are not only minoritized but we also lost most of our ancestral lands in Mindanao. Through "legalized landgrabbing," only around 12-15% of our original landholdings remain at our hands. All the rest were lost forever.

What the MILF wants to happen in this negotiation is to redefine this totality of relationship between the Philippine state and the Moros. We want that Moros run their own internal affairs, pursuant to the principle of the right to self-determination (RSD) and the essence of real autonomy. This is the reason why the agenda on power-sharing, wealth-sharing, territory and interim arrangement are on the negotiating table. We are not seceding from this Republic; the future Moro substate or whatever name we can agree with the government to call it is still part of the larger

Philippine state. This is a formula of peace and unity to ensure that this republic is intact especially in the face of the saber-rattling in South China Sea and the missiles launched by North Korea. It is sound national policy to consolidate the home front first before confronting the larger external enemy.

Through this state-substate arrangement, the Moros would like to stand on their own feet. Whether they swim or they drown, they themselves are to be blamed. It is time to prove which of the two sides of the argument is correct: The Moros are a problem, and are thus referred to as the “Moro Problem.” Their marginalization is caused by outsiders, especially the suffocating effects of the unitary system prevailing in this country. The Moros are much maligned, despised, or even hated—why not let them self-destruct by giving them their substate? This sounds nihilistic, but we are solving a problem. Sometimes, in curing a serious illness you have to amputate a leg, hand, or finger.

As pointed out earlier, the negotiation is seemingly going nowhere. Even my counterpart from the government, former Dean Marvic Leonen, who boldly claimed that there would be a signing of a peace deal with the MILF in the first quarter of 2012, had already predicted this bad omen in his opening statement in Kuala Lumpur last March that negotiation is “nearing a stalemate.” He said unambiguously: “We are approaching what would seem to be a stalemate in our ideas for transition as well as in our ideas of how to make permanent the solutions that work for our peoples.”

Under this situation what will be the most logical decision of the MILF? To go and proceed with the negotiation aimlessly, run the risk of becoming irrelevant and lose its moral ascendancy as the vanguard of the Moro revolutionary movement in Mindanao? Or just fold its arms and allow the mercy of circumstances to give the necessary shot in the arm to resuscitate itself? Or change options and resume hostilities in Mindanao? How about the radical elements within and outside of the MILF, what will they do? The truth is that the current MILF leadership has a hard time defending its position in entering into a peace negotiation with the

government, which uses it as a counter-insurgency measure. The difficulty increases manifold after the government proves an intractable partner in this negotiation. Perhaps, the Aquino administration is not yet in this category, but we want to give it the benefit of the doubt.

To reiterate, faced with this dilemma, what will the MILF do? Of course, this decision is not mine to make or to know. The mandate rests with the MILF Central Committee, the highest policy-making and executive organ of the MILF. I think this decision is forthcoming.

However, all conflict resolution experts whom I talked to, including those involved in the negotiations in South Sudan, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Mozambique, Aceh in Indonesia, East Timor, and South America, told us that no matter what happens to the negotiation we are “to stay engaged.” We are still engaged; that is why I am here with you today.

Thank you and good day!

EDITOR'S NOTE: Since Iqbal's speech at the April 2012 conference of the Philippine Political Science Association, and despite its pessimistic tone, the PH-MILF peace negotiations have since moved forward capped by the signing of the Bangsamoro Framework Agreement in October 2012 and an Annex on Wealth Sharing in June 2013. Progress, however, is considered slow and the discussions still highly contentious. Two more equally litigious annexes need to be agreed on: power sharing and normalization - after which a new enabling law has to be crafted and approved by the Philippine Congress.

Note

- 1 The Moro Province was made of five districts namely, Cotabato, Davao, Sulu, Lanao, and Zamboanga. The capital was Zamboanga.