

# Negotiations and detours:

## the rocky road to peace in Mindanao

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The island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines has experienced protracted conflict over the last three decades. In Mindanao, unlike most of the country, Muslim (or Moro) and indigenous Lumad people live alongside the 'majority Filipinos' - the largely Christian descendants of twentieth century settlers from the northern and central Philippines. Mindanao has been home to a number of armed groups, including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF, founded 1969), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF, which split from the MNLF in 1977), the Abu Sayyaf (formed in the late 1980s), and groups that operate across the Philippines like the communist New People's Army (NPA). After over two decades of fighting between the MNLF and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP), peace negotiations under President Fidel Ramos led to a *Final Peace Agreement* (FPA) in 1996. Following this agreement, many key MNLF leaders, including its chairman Nur Misuari, became government officials after regional elections in 1997 in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM, an autonomous entity signed into law in 1989 consisting of four provinces that voted to join it in a plebiscite). However, despite their commitment to laying down their arms, the MNLF realized that the signing of the FPA did not put an end to the Moro struggle for self-determination. *Compromising on Autonomy: Mindanao in Transition* (Accord issue 6) left the story of the Mindanao peace process in 1999, when it was already becoming clear that the island's troubles were far from over. Subsequent events have confirmed that there was nothing 'final' in the *Final Peace Agreement*: it was just a prelude to more detours on the rocky road ahead.

In the years since the FPA there have been major offensives against the MILF in 1997, 2000 and 2003. Declarations of all-out war by the government have been reciprocated by the insurgents, but also interspersed with negotiations and agreements. Sporadic skirmishes, bombings, ambushes and burning of villages by unidentified armed men still occur with unnerving frequency in key cities and mountainous communities in many parts of central Mindanao. The latter include alleged camps or "mountain lairs" of the MILF, who, having been sidelined in the first peace process, has continued its armed struggle for a separate independent Islamic state.



Meanwhile, the strengthened autonomy stipulated by the FPA has been beset by troubles. Then MNLF leader Nur Misuari was elected governor of the ARMM in 1996, but a former rebel leader heading a democratic bureaucracy spawned more negative public perceptions about the already beleaguered and fledgling administrative region. Mindanao mass media were replete with reports on even greater levels of graft and corruption in the ARMM than ever before. Misuari was also accused of always being absent from office. One joke circulating in the region referred to the region's acronym: Autonomous Region in Metro Manila, alluding to Misuari's preference to hold office in the regional liaison office in Manila. It was also widely perceived that Misuari, either through omission or incompetence, squandered various opportunities that were made available to the region after the signing of the FPA.

Misuari's rule was prolonged as Congress failed to pass the legislation to expand the ARMM, a commitment of the Philippine government under the FPA. The legislation should have been passed by 1998, to give ample time for the agreed plebiscite and election of officers of the 'expanded ARMM' by March or September 1999. But with the failure of the Philippine Congress to pass the law, Governor Misuari's term of office, which should have ended in September 1999, was extended.

## Escalating conflict under Estrada

May 1998 saw the election to the presidency of an erstwhile movie star, Joseph Ejercito Estrada. Numerous members of his political party, the *Partido ng Masang Pilipino* (Party of the Filipino Masses) were also elected, many of them strongly opposed to the FPA. MNLF candidates had supported Ramos's defeated Lakas-NUCD party, and had polled poorly across the country. Across Mindanao the vote for Estrada was high.

Three months later a *General Framework of Agreement of Intent* was signed between the GRP and MILF, leading to meetings of their peace panels in 1999. Talks opened in October 1999, but amidst increasing violence no meetings took place until January 2000 (soon after Estrada had issued an ultimatum for the members of both panels to come up with a peace agreement by 30 June). Despite the August 1998 agreement, the Philippine armed forces (AFP) launched military operations at several camps earlier recognized and verified as MILF camps in central Mindanao in late 1999 and early 2000.

Following incidents blamed on the MILF in February and March, President Estrada announced "all-out war" against the group. This may have been partly to rescind the previous recognition of MILF territorial control over

their camps: government peace panel chair Edgardo Batenga later acknowledged that the military action of the previous months was intended to correct a “government blunder” in acknowledging seven of 46 MILF camps under the terms of the 1997 ceasefire agreement. But the all-out war may also have been partly to deflect growing opposition to Estrada’s faltering administration.

Talks between the peace panels in late April centred around the clearing of MILF checkpoints from a 14-kilometer stretch of the Narciso Ramos highway in Mindanao. On 27 April, the panels signed an *Aide Memoire* agreeing “on the need to work towards normalization of the situation in Mindanao;” “to pursue the on-going peace process;” and to achieve “stability and development in Mindanao.” However, the next morning, claiming they had been attacked by a group of rebels, the army launched a military operation to clear the highway without the GRP panel’s knowledge. The following day they started heavy military assaults on Camp Abubakar, the MILF’s largest and most important camp.

The mixture of negotiations and fighting reflected the complexities of government-MILF relations. From late 1999 to early 2000, the Estrada administration, through its back-channel negotiator, Robert Aventajado, had pursued a series of talks with MILF leaders like Gajali Jaafar, the Vice-Chairman for political affairs, while the members of the MILF-GRP peace panels were also meeting. This was perceived as a sincere gesture on the part of government, who hinted at the possibility of a meeting between Estrada and MILF leader Salamat Hashim meeting within the year. On the other hand, this approach led to suspicions in some quarters that back-channel meetings aimed to convince some MILF leaders to become partners in a possible “foreign-capitalized” business venture to be formed out of the development of most of Camp Abubakar as an economic zone. It was also at this time that there were rumours of factionalization within the MILF central committee, with one faction allegedly talking with the back-channel negotiator while the other faced the GRP panel in the formal peace talks.

Whatever the truth, the public gulf between the parties was becoming clearer. The government demanded that the MILF drop its secessionist goal, give up terrorist acts and lay down its arms. The MILF now insisted on talks being held outside the Philippines, under the auspices of the OIC or mediated by an OIC member country. On 21 August, the MILF disbanded its peace panel.

Around this time Estrada was also alienating MNLF counterparts with the creation in July of the Mindanao Coordinating Council (MCC), chaired by himself, to

regulate infrastructure projects with the ARMM. Critics claimed it marginalized the institutions provided for by the FPA, including the SPCPD and the SZOPAD Consultative Assembly. However, there is little evidence that it did anything, and it soon became defunct.

## Arroyo peace initiatives

In October 2000 events took a dramatic turn when gambling fraud allegations emerged against President Estrada. His resulting impeachment gave ample time for civil society to meet with Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, his constitutional successor, to present a post-Estrada plan of action. Among the demands were the resumption of peace negotiations between government and MILF, the appointment of at least three Cabinet members from Mindanao, creation of a Mindanao Peace and Development Committee to craft a mini-Marshall plan and the immediate return of refugees. Estrada was finally ousted through a bloodless coup that catapulted Arroyo to the presidency in January 2001.

After she took office, Arroyo declared that she would be unlike her predecessor and immediately promoted an “all out peace” policy in Mindanao. She sent emissaries to the MILF to resume talks, named Mindanawons to the Cabinet – as secretaries and undersecretaries – and appointed peace panel members for negotiations with both the MILF and the National Democratic Front (linked to the NPA). For the first time, the government’s peace panel to negotiate with the MILF was all-Mindanawon and headed not by a retired military general but by a civilian – Jesus Dureza, also Arroyo’s Presidential Assistant for Mindanao. Arroyo also named two women, one a former university president and a Maranaw Muslim, and the other, a prominent Christian woman leader based in Davao, in the five-person peace panel.

In addition, all government line agencies were convened to form a presidential task force to lead rehabilitation of the areas in Mindanao devastated by the war in 2000. With the cooperation and support of the international donor community, she also asked her technocrats to craft an institutional reconstruction programme. A series of consultations with civil society actors, especially women, indigenous peoples and other marginalized or disadvantaged groups were held in many places in Mindanao to present the framework for such a programme.

Peace negotiations in the year 2001 were fast-paced. With the help of the Malaysian Prime Minister Syed Hamid Albar who sent his top aide to meet Hashim, the MILF was persuaded to resume talks. Hashim sent his deputy, Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim, to Kuala Lumpur to meet

**Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar looks on as Murad Ebrahim (left) of the MILF shakes hands with Jesus Dureza, Chairman of the Philippines Peace Panel, after signing a ceasefire agreement on 7 August 2001 in Kuala Lumpur.**

Source: REUTERS/Bazuki Muhammad



Presidential Advisor to the Peace Process Eduardo Ermita for secret talks that not even Jesus Dureza was aware of. Murad and Ermita signed an agreement on the resumption of talks on 24 March. Both sides followed up with commitments to suspend military action, and re-organized their peace panels, with Dureza heading the government team, and Murad heading the MILF's.

In March MILF delegates and what would later constitute the MNLF Executive Council met in Malaysia in what some claim to be the initial phase of a MNLF coup against Misuari. The insinuation is that while the Arroyo administration knew that any peace agreement with the MILF would have to be in consonance with the Constitution, territorial integrity and sovereignty and the 1996 FPA, the administration's view of Misuari as an ineffective and inefficient governor led back-channel negotiators to encourage an MNLF coup. Whether or not this was the case, in late April the 15-person MNLF Executive Council ousted Misuari and collectively assumed the chairmanship. The Council 'retired' the former leader and named him 'chairman emeritus', a post he rejected, accusing the Council of treachery.

Meanwhile, legislators passed RA 9054 and scheduled 14 August as the date of the plebiscite mandated by the 1996 FPA. The MNLF rejected RA 9054, claiming it was unfaithful to the provisions of the 1996 FPA and rendered the autonomous region "less autonomous." They urged the postponement of the plebiscite, but the government insisted it was obliged to carry it out. Both the MNLF and the MILF boycotted the plebiscite, the MILF claiming the ARMM had done nothing to improve the plight of Muslim Filipinos. The voters in the four provinces already in the ARMM were asked if they were in favour of the amendments to the Organic Act which included, among other things, the expansion of the autonomous region. The voters of the non-ARMM provinces and cities were asked if they were in favour of the inclusion of their province or city in the ARMM. The result was that only one of thirteen provinces (Basilan, excluding Isabela

City), and one of fifteen cities (Marawi) voted to join, meaning five provinces and one city were to form the expanded ARMM. Despite the President campaigning for a 'yes' vote, there was a large 'no' vote by the Christian population and both radio and print media in central, southern and western Mindanao reported an unusually low turn-out, with commentators claiming that, "only the flies came to the polling places that day".

Further talks were held with the MILF throughout the summer. In June GRP-MILF talks were held in Tripoli, resulting in the *Tripoli Agreement on Peace 2001* which called for discussion on security, rehabilitation and development of conflict affected areas, and ancestral domain. In August they focused on implementing guidelines on the security aspects of the June Agreement. The October talks, held in Malaysia, focused on possible mechanisms for rehabilitation of refugees and areas affected by armed conflict. Both panels signed the Manual of Instructions for the Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) and the Local Monitoring Teams (LMTs).

## Setbacks

Gains made in these 2001 meetings were to be undermined by several setbacks. Misuari-led factions of the MNLF attacked and seized several security outposts in Jolo in what some saw as a failed attempt to prevent the ARMM elections. He was suspended from his post and replaced as governor in the subsequent polls. As bloody skirmishes continued, Misuari fled to Malaysia but was brought back and arraigned on charges of 'rebellion' in January 2002, sparking a series of protests by many elements of the Moro community. By mid-2003 his trial had still not been held.

The growing effects of the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA also had an impact on the peace process. President Arroyo was one of the few Asian leaders who immediately expressed support for President

Bush's 'war on terrorism'. Arroyo's pledge of support included a series of pronouncements that if constituents did not support the war against local "terrorists" (that included Muslim armed groups, although the MILF was not designated as a terrorist group), they would be labelled coddlers of terrorists and not "nationalistic".

The kidnapping of several foreign religious missionaries by the Abu Sayyaf (a newly prominent rebel group practising kidnapping and extortion, founded by ex-MNLF member Abdurajak Janjalani in the late 1980s) reinforced the government's tough stance. In the context of the 'war on terrorism', some local government officials called for hard-line responses to the Abu Sayyaf and MILF as members of what they imagined to be a local network of Al-Qaeda. In reality, the links to 'international terrorism' are probably far more tenuous, especially in the MILF case. The MILF have joined the Muslim mainstream in rebuking the Abu Sayyaf and its activities, although it is possible that some of their fighters on the ground may have joined or colluded with them on occasions.

A series of incidents in the first quarter of 2002 seemed to erase whatever gains were made in the talks between the two panels in late 2001, especially those forged during the October meeting in Kuala Lumpur. As the new ARMM leadership was installed in Cotabato City, reports of serious ceasefire violations by the MILF were rife. In March, President Arroyo suspended the conduct of formal peace talks "to give the MILF the opportunity to show its sincerity to the peace talks with the government". But Arroyo sent her back-channel negotiator, Presidential Adviser on Special Concerns Norberto Gonzales, to Malaysia - reportedly to back-room negotiations with the MILF. The talks resulted in a *Joint Communiqué* issued on 6 May allowing for joint government-MILF operations to "isolate and interdict all criminal elements within the conflict-affected areas" including all criminal syndicates and kidnap-for-ransom groups. On 7 May, *Implementing Guidelines on the Humanitarian, Rehabilitation and Development Aspects of the 2001 GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement* were agreed. Not one of the GRP five-man peace panel was involved in the crafting or signing of the agreements. One GRP panel member lamented that she was only able to get a copy of the document a day after it was signed.

By July, the MILF agency to implement rehabilitation and development programmes in conflict-affected areas (the Bangsamoro Development Agency) was established, and from August to September, a series of meetings were held to settle issues affecting full adherence of both MILF and government forces to the ceasefire status and to form the Local Monitoring Teams (LMTs). The LMTs were created as a mechanism to involve local government units, MILF political committees and non-governmental

organizations and the religious sector in the prevention and resolution of conflict in affected communities.

The May agreements drew criticisms from numerous 'hawkish' Congressmen, and even led to a congressional investigation. They questioned the provisions allowing for indemnification of the rebels and wanted government negotiators to explain why the MILF was granted the "privilege" of creating their own development agency.

## **Violence escalates amid expectations of agreement**

As 2003 unfolded, hopes were high that finally an agreement would be forged between the government and the MILF. Many observers thought this was a foregone conclusion after President Arroyo was reported to have approved a draft agreement for presentation to the MILF panel in early February.

But within that period, there had been a build-up of government forces in Pikit, North Cotabato. Efforts to prevent a conflagration were exerted by local religious leaders. But on 11 February (an important Islamic celebration – *Eid'ul Adha* or the Feast of Sacrifice), the military launched its campaign purportedly to rid the area of the kidnap-for-ransom Pentagon gang. Philippine government forces stormed the Buliok Complex in Pikit, leaving scores dead. The area sustaining heaviest damage was a residential compound belonging to MILF Chairman Hashim, including a madrasah and a mosque. Efforts to get the ceasefire committees to meet on 12 February failed as the MILF declined to attend the meeting unless the government troops moved out. The military campaign was criticized especially because the 6 May 2002 agreement provided a mechanism for joint action against the Pentagon gang. Pronouncements by Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes suggested that the real target of the military campaign was the MILF.

In view of the Pikit incident, Jesus Dureza, the presidential adviser on Mindanao and chief government peace negotiator with the MILF, announced back-channel talks were taking place to pave the way for the resumption of formal negotiations. However, a series of violent incidents in south central Mindanao occurred thereafter. Bombings in Davao City on 4 March and 2 April, which killed a total of 38 persons and injured 200 others, were blamed on the MILF despite its denials. Charges of multiple murder and frustrated multiple murder were filed against MILF Chair Hashim, Vice-Chair for military affairs Al Haj Murad Ebrahim (the MILF peace panel chair), Vice-Chair for political affairs Ghazaali Jaafar, spokesperson Eid Kabalu and 146 others: most of them, according to critical Davao City civil society leaders, anonymous Muslims who happened to be in the vicinity of the airport at the time of



the bombing and members of the family of one Muslim blast victim who came to recover the victims' bodies.

The series of bombings in key Mindanao cities has led to a hard-line government stance towards the MILF. Yet talks have continued. In late March the government and MILF representatives met in Kuala Lumpur and signed an agreement on 28 March to continue formal peace negotiations. The technical committees of both peace panels were due to meet on 11 April to plan a further round of formal peace talks, although these were delayed. In June, following an extended unilateral ceasefire by the MILF an agreement was reached to resume formal negotiations with Hashim personally leading the MILF panel.

### **Enduring stumbling blocks: incompatible aspirations**

In order to imagine a way forward, it is useful to first remember the enduring stumbling blocks that have kept the two sides apart. Both government and MILF leaders have agreed that finding a just, lasting and comprehensive solution to the problems confronting

Mindanao is imperative. But that is where the agreement ends. Central Philippine authority looks at the problem in Mindanao as a 'rebellion' but the Muslims consider armed struggle as part of their legitimate right to assert self-determination. For the government, MILF elements will always be labelled 'rebels' (and after September 11, threatened with the term 'terrorists'), but for Muslims who support the Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination, they are noble *mujahideen*, or freedom fighters.

For the MILF, lasting peace is impossible as long as there exist nine major issues which constitute what they call the "Bangsamoro problem": ancestral domain; displaced and landless Bangsamoro; destruction of properties and war victims; human rights issues; social and cultural discrimination; corruption of the mind and moral fibre; economic inequities and widespread poverty; exploitation of natural resources; and agrarian reform. The MILF Technical Committee presented these and other concerns on 25 February 1997, and there has been no significant diminution of those original demands. From the MILF point of view, solving this problem and "establishing a system of life and governance suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro people" will pave

the way for a “comprehensive, just and lasting peace” in Mindanao, although it is not entirely clear what this might look like.

In contrast to the MILF position, it is striking that the Philippine government’s set of principles for a comprehensive peace process defined in its framework, the *Six Paths to Peace*, start with the requirement that the process reflect “the values and principles of the Filipino as one community”. This strikes a discordant note among Muslims in the southern Philippines, who do not feel that they can identify themselves as Filipinos considering that the core of being such revolves around Christian-based values they do not share. Even Muslims themselves come from 13 different ethnolinguistic groups and have varying cultural traditions although they are members of the community of believers in Islam (*ummah*).

Another similarly contentious issue is component four of the *Six Paths to Peace*: the objective of “reintegration into mainstream of society and rehabilitation”. The terms “reintegration” and “mainstreaming” have always provoked heated debate in forums and consultative assemblies, with many Muslims quite apprehensive of “being mainstreamed” since this implies following the majority Christian-oriented way of life.

Since the start of the GRP-MILF peace talks, the latter has always asserted its demand for an independent Islamic state for the areas it claims to influence or control. But the Bangsamoro Islamic state conceived of by the MILF cannot find resonance in the present Philippine constitutional framework. Compounding this constitutional bind are two diametrically opposed realities: the central Philippine government will never allow a dismemberment of the Philippine state on one hand and on the other, the MILF refuses to engage in the Philippine government system, even through the constitutionally created ARMM.

## The prospects for a peaceful solution

Despite the threat of escalating conflict, some optimism remains amid debilitating events both within and beyond the region, springing from the dynamic and vibrant civil society groups now operating in Mindanao. Yet people also want to see ‘peace dividends’ unfolding before them and to participate actively in efforts to gain such rewards. It is imperative to tackle some of the real ground-level challenges in Mindanao that have caused detours on the arduous road to peace.

Firstly, high levels of distrust have not been addressed, but exacerbated. The arrest and detention of Misuari in November 2001 led one MILF official to reveal that they were seriously studying the continuing peace talks for

fear of the same happening to Salamat Hashim. The distrust is reciprocated by the government, who point to continued attacks attributed to the MILF amidst pronouncements on their readiness to talk.

Secondly, there are feelings of resentment among the majority population that despite the conflict the Muslims are ‘pampered’. Moreover, social preparation of any government-sponsored peace and development efforts has been insufficient. In this case, the activities could have included forums for community level conflict analysis and appropriate capacity-building programmes to enhance participation in interfaith dialogues and similar reconciliation processes. Without this, wider society fails to understand why there is a need to reach a peace agreement with the MNLF or MILF in the first place.

Thirdly, governance failures have occurred as a result of traditional patronage politics. The new ARMM officials have vowed to change this, but the appointment of their protégés to high positions negates this goal of transformative leadership. Most government officials are high on rhetoric but very low on making their pronouncements a reality.

Fourthly, the regional and global political concerns of international actors have shaped their involvement (or lack of it) in the peace process in Mindanao. The key mediating countries have been Indonesia and Malaysia. As fellow ASEAN countries they are committed to non-intervention in the Philippines’ affairs, although they are concerned about spill-over effects from Mindanao, such as Abu Sayyaf kidnappings in Malaysia. The OIC has not assumed the important role in the GRP-MILF negotiations that it did in the early stages of the GRP-MNLF process. It vacillated on its role in organizing a monitoring team to observe the implementation of the *2001 Tripoli Agreement*. Its experiences with a recalcitrant MNLF, and unwillingness to switch its backing to the MILF, leave it reluctant to engage.

Because of the Philippines’ so-called ‘special relations’ with the USA dating from colonial times, Philippine leaders have been able to invite American support when confronted with serious internal conflicts. The US and Philippine militaries cooperate in joint operations and training known as *Balikatan* exercises, which in 2002 focused on fighting Abu Sayyaf who had kidnapped US citizens. US-Philippine ‘special relations’ were calibrated after Arroyo became the first Asian leader to openly support the American government policies on terrorism. Her state visits to the USA underlined this and she obtained a US\$356 million package of defence and counter-terrorism aid for the Philippines. Interestingly, these relations have not disqualified the USA from being seen as a potential mediator by people on both sides.

The USA has expressed its interest in doing so, although it is not clear at this stage how realistic a prospect this may be.

Fifthly, a disproportionately small share of the national allocation for regional development goes to the region given the levels of poverty and instability, especially within the ARMM. Mindanao provinces are among those in the bottom of the socio-economic heap in the country as demonstrated by the UNDP 2002 Philippine Human Development Report. It is arguable that if not for the lopsided distribution of funds, Mindanao provinces would not fare so poorly in terms of overall human development and one of the factors fuelling the conflict would be mitigated.

Finally, while the government claims to have a clear peace agenda, its functionaries do not seem to be coordinating in its implementation. For instance, while President Arroyo appointed an all-Mindanao government peace panel, the members were not part of the deliberations that led to the signing of several crucial agreements with the MILF. Instead, the Arroyo administration relied on the back-channelling efforts of the Presidential Adviser on Special Concerns. Against the criticisms of the back-channelling efforts, the President's spokespersons have always made pronouncements on their positive outcomes, arguing that they are an informal confidence-building method (used in this case to agree on the "non-essentials") practised all over the world. Civil society activists responded by raising concerns that the lack of transparency was leading to waning public support for peace talks, demanding new efforts to strengthen the peace constituency and use civil society to monitor the peace process.

Perhaps a more serious variation of the lack of strategic coherence is the timing of military operations just after the signing of peace agreements, as happened in March 2000. Neither the government or MILF seems to be fully in command of its forces. With units spread all over central and western Mindanao, it is not clear if the MILF is in control of their fighters' actions. The more indiscriminate use of bombings in 2000-2003 (at least some of which can be attributed to the MILF) may be partly due to an ideological hardening of positions and greater factionalization and disagreement over whether it was worth pursuing talks at all when presented with the prospect of a weaker negotiating position under intense military pressure.

There are several fronts on which efforts could be made to get the Mindanao peace process back on track.

(1) Rethinking of military strategies in Mindanao, including the possibility of a gradual or eventual pull out, especially in areas that are slowly stabilizing. The constitutional provisions for the supremacy of the civilian-led police force in protecting peace and order should be put into practice. However, this can be problematic, as the military has constantly played a crucial role in influencing policy in Mindanao. Some opinion makers believe they are the *de facto* "determinants" of official government policy in Mindanao, exercising strong influence over Presidents. The military has, at worst, a unilateral, absolutist perspective, believing they can act independently of legislators, and seeing the military option as the only solution to the conflict. But they are not a monolithic block, and if they can be reoriented to look at the gargantuan costs of war instead of looking at the preservation of the so-called national security by all means (especially military), they might become part of the solution too.

(2) Sustained social discourse on the issue of a "multi-nation" state, to accommodate identities earlier excluded in the core of national values that serve to demarcate the national identity. This could include serious thinking and rethinking of the Constitution (and the question of federalism) and other legal remedies or instruments that could be used as parameters for discussing aspirations such as regional autonomy or a separate Islamic state for the Muslims.

(3) Peace constituency building on all fronts, and at all educational levels and accompanying sustained capacity building for peace-workers. This could include modules for various social actors, especially the military, to help them embark on more meaningful relationships with the civilian sectors.

Handled properly, Mindanao could be the linchpin that could pave the way for a vigorous regional economy and ultimately, a dynamic national economy built on self-reliance, fairness, justice and empowerment of its constituents. Mindanao has a vibrant civil society network composed of divergent groups and formations that are actively pursuing social development goals. It is wealthy in natural resources and has rich cultural diversity, owing to the many ethno-linguistic groups. Indigenous knowledge and skills could be further harnessed toward the formation of a vigorously developing society.