

Enlarging spaces and strengthening voices for peace:

civil society initiatives in Mindanao

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As the pendulum swings between war and peace in Mindanao, civic groups in favour of a peaceful settlement of the conflict have employed a variety of tactics to influence the armed actors and insulate their communities from the violence. Some work to enlarge spaces for peace in their own communities while others make noise through the parliament of the streets. Some work quietly to establish “backdoor” linkages with both the government and the MILF. Still others hold conferences to craft a common peace agenda. The story of locally-driven peace initiatives in Mindanao involves a jigsaw of sectoral responses, including religious leaders, the media, women and indigenous communities, among others. With their different agendas and styles, they continue to act both individually and collectively in the struggle for peace.

Calling for peace

Many civic actors initially viewed the re-escalation of the conflict in 2000 as an illustration of the vulnerability of their efforts and as a setback to nearly thirty years of peacebuilding in the province. But the human costs of the conflict, with its civilian casualties, massive population displacement and disruption of development programmes, have continued to inspire calls for its resolution. Demands for a peaceful settlement are articulated in various forms, against the backdrop of war as well as during times of negotiation. They are proclaimed in the usual chants and placards during street protests against the war and in the Women In White’s 40-day, hour-long, noontime silent protest in front of malls and in major streets in Davao City. They are expressed in the peace caravans travelling from Davao City to Cotabato City. They are delivered in sermons from the pulpits of Christian and Islamic places of worship and in the pastoral letters of Bishops. They appear in opinion pieces in newspapers, in cyberspace - particularly through the mindanao1081 listserve - and in letters to national officials from Mindanawon groups abroad. They are even reproduced in “Peace” stickers distributed by the Mindanao Women’s Group.

As the 2000 war re-ignited fears and prejudices amongst the population of Mindanao, it also challenged civil society to build bridges of understanding between members of the different faith communities. The Mindanao Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF), established

In Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte, where then President Joseph Estrada declared his “all-out war” against the MILF on 21 March 2000, a white streamer hangs on the veranda of the town hall, the message in red, reading, “Promotion of Community-based Peace Building Initiatives”. Mayor Moamar ‘Jack’ Maruhom declared, “We’re going to have a new image of Kauswagan. Kauswagan will mirror the image of peace.” Supported by a very active civil society, Maruhom proclaimed 17-22 March each year a “week of peace.” This year’s celebration included a *Panagtagbo sa Kalinaw* (convergence for peace), a peace forum and visits to historical sites. Several seminar-workshops have also been held on the theme of ‘a culture of peace’. Carino Veron Antiquesa, convenor of the *Pakigdait* (mutual understanding) initiative, said they have been conducting training and working with different *barangays* (communities) in Kauswagan for almost a year, “to heal the ruined relationships between Muslim and Christians as a result of the all-out war policy of the deposed President Joseph Estrada.” *Pakigdait* linked up with local government units for their peacebuilding meetings. *Pakigdait* co-convenor, Sanguila Musa, said the peace advocacy training has helped residents cope with reports of impending rebel attacks. Musa said that when they ask villagers, “What will we do if our village is attacked?” the question is answered from the perspective of building peace and strengthening relationships between Muslims and Christians.

In Pikit, North Cotabato, where more than half of this predominantly Muslim town of 69,000 inhabitants have fled their villages four times in five years as a result of the war, peace efforts have also continued. Despite the havoc wreaked by the warring parties, relations among the peoples in Pikit – Muslims, Christians and indigenous peoples – are strong. By the roadside on the wall of the gym of the Immaculate Conception parish where at least a hundred Muslim and Christian families have sought refuge since 8 February this year, a faded streamer still hangs, greeting the Muslims “Happy *Eid’l Fitr*”. Muslims likewise greet Christians during Christian holidays and Muslim market vendors often donate offertory gifts to the parish.

After the “all-out war” in 2000, Muslim and Christian residents in various villages – 13 *sitios* (subdivisions of *barangays*) in five different *barangays* – declared their villages “spaces for peace”. Local government units, the MILF and religious leaders of various faiths acknowledged the declarations. As government military offensives against the MILF began again in February, villagers in the “spaces for peace” planned contingency moves but stood their ground against evacuation.

Elsewhere in Pikit, the 370 Muslim and Christian families that constitute the *barangay* of Panicupan also decided

to resist the violence. As conflict escalated in early 2003, village leaders – Muslims and Christians, police and military officials in the areas – met on 13 February to decide their course of action. Tired of evacuating, the villagers decided to uphold their June 2002 declaration that their community is a “space for peace.” Here too the community made contingency plans but the consensus was to resort to evacuation only as a last resort. Fr. Roberto Layson, parish priest of Pikit and head of the Inter-religious Dialogue of the Oblates of the Mary Immaculate, attended the village meeting as an observer. “Peace is the only path to peace,” Fr. Layson would repeatedly tell his parishioners and the Christian and Muslim volunteers in the Parish Disaster Response Team, condemning the violent tactics of the armed groups.

While it is too early to discern the true impact of the “spaces for peace”, one significant early outcome is the improved relationships between Muslim and Christian inhabitants in the area. In the Catholic parish house in Pikit, it is no longer considered shocking for Catholic parishioners to see a Muslim prayer room. Muslims often visit the parish house, and interact in a relaxed atmosphere with the Catholic members of the parish on Sundays. The spaces provide some sense of safety, albeit temporary, as the community members realize that war is still being waged within and outside their peaceful spaces and its consequences are beyond their control.

Linking civil society to the formal negotiations

When President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo first took office in January 2001, her policy of “all-out peace” created opportunities for greater civic involvement in the government’s efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Anticipating the change in government strategy, *Kusog Mindanaw* (strengthen Mindanao), a Mindanao-wide grouping headed by Fr. Eliseo Mercado, sought direct input into future negotiations in November 2000 by coming up with a ‘first 100 days’ Mindanao agenda for Arroyo. Among its demands were the resumption of peace talks between the government and the rebel groups, return of evacuees to their villages, representation of Mindanawons in the Cabinet of President Arroyo and the demilitarization of Mindanao.

Before it left for the first round of negotiations with the MILF in Tripoli in June 2001, the government peace panel held consultations and workshops with civil society to create an opportunity for their views to be incorporated into the talks. However, the consultations were conducted in a rush and lacked broad participation. Consequently the urban and rural poor, persons with

**Sultan Esmail Kiram of Sulu
and Catholic bishop Angelito
Lampoon, Diocese of Jolo,
during a Muslim-Christian
peace rally in Jolo,
25 June 2000.**

Source: REUTERS/Romeo Ranoco



disabilities and other groups only saw their marginalization deepened by the process as they were not able to present their agendas. A few leading civil society figures were able to make inputs in the consultations, but their voices were drowned out by highly influential and powerful local government officials who dominated the discussions.

During the second round of formal peace talks in Malaysia, the Mindanao People's Caucus (MPC - a non-governmental and non-partisan umbrella peace advocacy organization consisting of some twenty peace advocacy groups drawn from Muslim, Christian and Lumad populations) sent a team of four observers, including two Lumad (indigenous peoples) leaders. The government and MILF peace panels welcomed the observers during plenary sessions but not during the executive sessions. The MPC observers, however, managed to bring their issues to the peace panels during negotiation breaks. On several occasions during meals, government and MILF peace panel members sat at the same table as the observers.

The MPC also lobbied for the representation of the Lumad in the government and MILF peace panels' technical committees. Both panels were receptive. Presidential Assistant for Mindanao, Jesus Dureza appointed Datu Al Saliling of Carmen, North Cotabato to the technical working group on ancestral domain. Outside the formal arena, the MPC also initiated several tri-peoples dialogues and a Lumad-Moro leaders' dialogue. These initiatives aimed to forge unity between the communities, through a process of clarifying areas of mutual distrust between the groups and developing a common agenda to present to the primary parties in the peace talks. However, only the limited circle of peace advocates in Mindanao are fully aware of the extent of the group's involvement in the current peace talks. The wider public is not aware of their existence, much less of their peace advocacy efforts.

Local monitoring teams

The peace panels also encouraged Mindanao's civil society to take part in the Local Monitoring Teams (LMTs) established in accordance with the ceasefire arrangements agreed in June and August 2001 and tasked with monitoring their implementation.

The LMTs are composed of five members, one from the Local Government Unit, one from the MILF, an NGO representative nominated by government, an NGO representative nominated by the MILF and a religious leader mutually agreed upon by both panels. The LMTs are supposed to report to the Joint Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (JCCH). They were originally conceived to work at the municipal level, but have instead operated mostly at the provincial level. The reason for this may be that the MILF was reluctant to expose its local level supporters. So far LMT activities have been largely restricted to workshop facilitation. At least three LMTs (one in central, another in western and one in southern Mindanao) are known to have conducted a series of conflict analysis and conflict transformation workshops during 2002. They have not been doing serious monitoring work to enable them to determine the responsibility of the primary parties for ceasefire violations, much less hold both parties accountable for their actions. When two provincial LMTs were able to conduct investigations - one in Lanao del Sur and one in Maguindanao - and forward their findings to the CCCH, no action was taken on these reports by the CCCH.

The disruption caused by the fighting in early 2003 left many LMTs existing only in a truncated form without their MILF or MILF-nominated representatives. With only two or three people participating, they are more like an extension of the government-mandated Peace and Order Councils at the local government level. However, the Office of the Presidential Assistant for Mindanao is now preparing for a resumption of these workshops with the LMTs in the coming months.

With the conflict escalating again in early 2003 and opportunities for civic participation in the political processes decreasing, the MPC decided to take action. It initiated a grassroots-based fact-finding mission in the conflict-affected areas, documenting reports of violations of the GRP-MILF ceasefire agreements from the communities affected. As the MPC does not draw its mandate from either the government or the MILF, these initiatives do not make the MPC a substitute body for the LMTs and the MPC team communicate with the LMTs in the areas they monitor. In playing this pro-active role, the MPC is viewed by the limited circle of civil society actors as an alternative voice in advocating the active participation of grassroots communities in the peace process.

Other civic initiatives and coordination meetings amongst peace groups continued during this period, despite the suspension of formal negotiations. However, the government chose not to engage civil society in exploratory talks with the MILF in Kuala Lumpur in March 2003 and the news came as a shock to many civic actors. Local and national media were informed only the day before the talks were held, giving insufficient time for civil society groups to prepare something to present to the parties in the talks.

Media and the conflict in Mindanao

Despite the mobilization and advocacy efforts of numerous peace groups, they have often struggled to make their voices heard above the clamour of war. The national media's penchant for a focus on the shooting, body count and reports from official sources has been a major obstacle, with Mindanawon voices for peace drowned out not only by the sound of gunfire but also by national TV, radio and newspaper reports on the war presented by mostly Manila-based journalists. Efforts of Mindanao-based journalists to give a broader view of the war from the eyes of Mindanawons have often been hampered by the Manila-based desk's view of the war. Anti-Muslim vigilantes have also posed a problem, with one group even distributing statements in General Santos City calling for a "Muslim-free Mindanao".

While hardliners such as Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes, Zamboanga City Mayor Ma. Clara Lobregat and Cotabato Governor Manny Pinol were criticizing the agreements reached on 6 and 7 May 2002, Mindanao's media leaders – newspaper editors, radio and TV station managers and news editors – gathered in Davao City from 16-18 May for the First Mindanao Media Summit. Representatives of non-governmental organizations, the academe and government information officers attended the Summit as observers. The event generated critique of the coverage of the 2000 'all-out war' and led to the signing

of a covenant entitled 'This is OUR Mindanao'. It included a 'reverse press conference' where representatives of the Bishops-Ulama Forum, NGOs and local officials asked questions of the media. The event also instigated discussions on a peacebuilding partnership between media and the academe based on the need to understand the historical background of the conflicts in Mindanao.

Other cultural and political commentators took a different approach. Harnessing the power of film, a full-length movie feature, *Bagong Buwan* (New Moon), by award-winning director Marilou Diaz-Abaya, tackled the conflict in Mindanao and the plight of displaced civilians for the first time. Abaya had Mindanawons Fr. Eliseo Mercado of the Mindanao Peace Advocates Conference and Datu Michael Mastura, a lawyer and historian and member of the MILF peace panel, as consultants. In December 2001, the film was screened to jam-packed theatres across the Philippines, bringing tears as it played to Christian and Muslim audiences throughout the nation. Many viewers found the film an effective method of helping the Christian majority look at the situation in Mindanao from the eyes of the Muslims.

Conclusion

Civil society's contributions to the peace process, through its engagements in the formal peace negotiations and its continued grassroots peacebuilding efforts, deserve commendation considering the difficulties and frustrations brought about by two major wars in a span of three years and the spectre of terrorism and anti-Muslim sentiments following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States.

But despite the best efforts of civil society actors, the powers to decide on war rests in Metro Manila with people who have not, and will not feel the consequences of their decisions. This is the greatest challenge for civil society. There is much more to be done to expand the spaces and to strengthen the voices for peace to be able to influence policies at the national level or even merely to prevent another war from erupting.