

One step towards peace

the 'Final Peace Agreement' in Mindanao

For the outsider, what is most striking about the peacemaking processes in Mindanao is how they reflect the complexity of the Philippines' physical geography — an archipelago with differing concentrations of conflict and social organisation, where even the history of negotiations is disjointed and diverse. Mindanao's Muslim (or Moro) and indigenous Lumad peoples, now outnumbered by 'majority Filipinos' — the largely Christian descendants of 20th century settlers from the northern and central Philippines — are asserting rights to their traditional lands and to self-determination. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) resorted to a war for independence in the 1970s, after Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. Meanwhile, a communist-led rebellion spread from the northern Philippines to Mindanao, drawing in many majority Filipinos, particularly among the rural poor, and some Lumads into the New People's Army (NPA).

This issue of Accord focuses on one strand of the peacemaking: the negotiations between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MNLF which resulted in a

political settlement signed in September 1996. The GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement was, in many ways, a milestone. All previous attempts to negotiate an end to the 24 years of civil war — in which over 120,000 people died — had failed to define a sustainable settlement. In 1976, when Libya and other members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) persuaded the Filipino government and the MNLF leadership to accept regional autonomy as a compromise, a settlement seemed at hand. But the consensus reached in the 'Tripoli Agreement' unravelled in disputes over its implementation and within six months the brutal war had resumed.

Nearly 20 years later, the Tripoli Agreement remained the frame of reference for the final consensus reached between the Philippine government and the MNLF, again encouraged by the Islamic states. Both sides had overcome the antagonisms resulting from a lengthy war and the distrust arising from failures to implement previous agreements. Not only had the negotiators tackled these difficulties, but they also appeared to have become friends during the four years of talks — signalling hope that this time peace was near. On 2 September 1996, when signing the agreement, President

Election campaign, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Indanan, Jolo, September 1996



Fidel Ramos announced 'this Peace Agreement falls squarely into our aspiration of total peace and development for all, especially the millions of poor and destitute masses in our southern regions'. MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari was also hopeful, though somewhat more cautious 'we have to warn people not to expect too much, but this is not an excuse either not to maximise our efforts'.

The Final Peace Agreement could not be expected to end all violence in Mindanao. The MNLF was only one of several groups that had taken up arms against the Philippine government. The others included the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the much smaller Abu Sayyaf and Islamic Command Council, as well as the left-wing New People's Army and Revolutionary People's Army. In these circumstances, an accord between the government and any single rebel group — however significant — was exclusive by

definition and was always vulnerable to falling short of meeting the disparate aspirations not just of the other armed Moro groups but also of those of the unrepresented civil society organisations.

The Ramos administration deliberately chose to negotiate with the Moro armed organisations separately and to start with what many had seen as militarily the weaker group. The MNLF was also the government's choice of negotiating partner thanks to its status at home and abroad as an organisation which embodied Moro aspirations. It had blazed the trail by uniting various Muslim ethnic groups into an armed movement with clearly defined goals. The OIC formally recognised it as the representing the Muslims of the Philippines. By aiming for a settlement with the MNLF, the administration hoped to demonstrate to the Moro public and the OIC that their demands were being addressed.

The government clearly expected that the 1996 Agreement would help bring the other insurgent groups – particularly the MILF – into the constitutional fold. For the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), it re-defined the military possibilities. Soon after September 1996, the AFP did indeed appear to concentrate its forces to attack MILF camps.

To insurgent groups and their supporters, the Agreement would serve as an indicator of how serious the government was about finding a mutually acceptable settlement and abiding by it. The government hoped that the agreement would show how popular aspirations for social justice and self-determination could be met by peaceful political struggle – without resorting to a war for secession (in the case of the MILF) or to overthrowing the government (as in the case of the armed left).

In the event, the MILF leadership remained cautious about the government's intentions behind signing the Final Agreement, but clearly felt that the administration's efforts had to be taken seriously. In mid-September 1996, shortly after the peace agreement with the MNLF was signed, the MILF announced that it too would negotiate with the government.

Like all peace processes, the government-MNLF process was distinctively creative in its design and implementation. The strategies the parties pursued in the four years of negotiations show a commendable approach to peacemaking – in their commitment to maintaining multiple channels of dialogue and communication, in their approach to institutionalising communication and negotiations, and through the use of informal networks. The Ramos government's approach to the negotiations defined as the 'Six Paths to Peace' are an example of enormous



Source: Mike Goldwater

Dumagoc fishing village, Pagadian

international value in rhetorical intent, if — tragically — not in practice. Yet despite a negotiating process exemplary in so many ways, the resulting settlement has appeared vulnerable from the start. The much vaunted ‘consensus and consultations’ were largely limited to the negotiating parties, except for a few token efforts to communicate with civil society organisations. Thus both parties found it difficult to persuade a wider public of the wisdom of the deal when its terms were finally announced.

In an attempt to defuse controversy surrounding the agreement’s provisions — in particular the proposal for an MNLF-led council to oversee peace and development initiatives in 14 provinces — the administration and the MNLF leadership fanned expectations of spectacular economic development. Subsequently, it was the MNLF — without adequate financial or legal resources — who had to carry the burden of meeting these expectations.

The 1996 Agreement is a crucial step in a what is clearly going to be a very long process of constructing peace in Mindanao. This issue of Accord looks at the making of that agreement, its impact so far and the prospects of achieving the phased transition to greater autonomy that it outlines. In March 1999, the outlook for a successful transition is bleak. There is widespread disappointment in Mindanao with the results of the Agreement and the new administration of President Joseph Estrada is taking a more aggressive stance to rebel groups. Amid the tensions, the responsibility for resolving conflicts at community level and promoting cross-cultural understanding has fallen disproportionately on the shoulders of civil society groups. Whether implementing this Agreement leads to peace, or is simply a detour to renewed conflict, remains to be seen, but the efforts and innovations in peacemaking in Mindanao and the lessons learned are invaluable examples to those engaged in comparable conflicts around the world.

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Conciliation Resources,
London, March 1999 ■



Source: Bobby Timonera

MILF guerillas at Camp Bushra, Lanao del Sur, 1999