

## A view from the MILF

### Interview with Mohagher Iqbal

*The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) broke away from the MNLF, stressing the importance of Islamic renewal as part of the struggle for self-determination. Its goal is an independent Islamic state.*

*The MILF is still at war with the Philippine government. However, exploratory talks with the Ramos administration did lead to a ceasefire agreement, and preparations for substantive negotiations under the Estrada government continue amid further intermittent fighting.*

*Despite being described as 'fundamentalist', the MILF has maintained an open relationship with other political forces and with civil society organisations within and beyond the Muslim community. MILF leader, Salamat Hashim, heads a council of reclusive ulama (Islamic scholars), who live strictly according to Islamic rules and meditate on the Qur'an daily. This council sets policy for the Front and decisions are then implemented by political and military leaders, among whom is Mohagher Iqbal.*

*Chair of the Committee on Information of the MILF Central Committee, Mohagher Iqbal joined the Jabidah protests in 1968 as a student, has written books on the Mindanao conflict, and is considered a leading ideologue of the MILF.*

*'The MILF entered into a general framework of agreement of intent [to negotiate] with the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) on 27 August 1998.*

*'We [in the MILF] reiterate our right to self-determination. This right entails three important elements, namely:*

- ◆ Islam is our way of life;
- ◆ we should be governed according to the teachings of Islam;
- ◆ self-governance — we do not want to be governed by outsiders.

*'If the MILF enters into a peace agreement with the Philippine government, there will be three major points where we differ [from the MNLF]:*

- ◆ Difference in approach: Under the MNLF peace agreement, Misuari gave so much emphasis to foreign participation, i.e. the involvement of the OIC. In our case, though we welcome the OIC and other Muslim states, we can pursue peace talks on our own because we emphasise internal factors.

- ◆ Different political approach, especially on the question of territory. MNLF asked for 14 provinces and 10 cities. [The] MILF does not give so much emphasis on autonomy. It seeks to establish an independent Islamic Government in areas where Muslims are predominant.
- ◆ On plans to develop and uplift the living conditions of the Muslims: projects for the development of Muslims, Highlanders and Christians were conceptualised only after the signing of the agreement. Under the MILF, we are already involving them with some livelihood and development projects in order to uplift their living conditions even before we have entered into an agreement with the GRP. This is because we give more importance to self-reliance, to internal factors rather than external ones, especially aid.

*'The Peace Agreement between the MNLF and the GRP is significant because it is formalised and signed by the negotiating parties. It is an international affair because OIC was part of it. Theoretically, the seed of peace has already been sown with the signing of the agreement. Moreover, [there] is a ceasefire — no more armed encounters between the MNLF and the government forces.*

*'In the absence of fighting, there is peace in areas previously considered hot spots. The highlander, MNLF and local people have also benefited from the presence of international organisations and some government programmes.*

*'Before, [women were among] those who were deprived, but at least after the signing of the Agreement, women are given opportunities. They are now recipients of some livelihood programs. Some funding institutions have given the women a chance, and I believe they really have an important role to play in the development of society.*

*'[The agreement] has not solved the Moro problem. An indication of this is the government's invitation to forge a peace agreement with the MILF. [The] MILF cause represents the Moro problems and demands. Misuari himself is now discontented, the government did not fulfil its promises. The issue on land has not been properly addressed.'*

*Interview conducted in Cotabato City on September 18, 1998 by Macrina Morados and Editha Cabanban. ■*