

Philippines National Unification Commission:

national consultation and the 'Six Paths to Peace'

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The Philippines has experienced decades of armed conflict involving a number of different movements with distinct grievances and aspirations – including self-determination struggles (notably Cordillera and Moro Muslim movements), a communist/leftist insurgency and, in the 1980s, a rebellion by a segment of the national military. In July 1992, newly elected President Fidel V. Ramos announced new peace initiatives, starting with an expanded amnesty program and the decriminalization of communism as an ideology. The initiatives were rooted in Ramos' realization of the need to achieve political stability and national unity to advance his economic development agenda. Ramos had begun exploratory talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) while on the campaign trail. After his presidency was secured, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Organization of the Islamic Conference initiated conciliatory overtures at the same time as the more radical Abu Sayyaf Group was emerging, thus indicating the need to urgently address the situation in Mindanao.

The more progressive sectors of society were highly critical of Ramos' focus on amnesty – with those closely associated with the national democratic left perceiving the amnesty as an enticement to surrender. A number of influential civil society peace advocates, including some bishops, quietly advised the President to situate amnesty within a broader peace process. In September, Ramos appointed a National Unification Commission (NUC) to create a comprehensive and participatory consultation process and develop strategies for engaging in exploratory talks with all the armed groups.

The NUC's mandate was to produce: "a viable general amnesty program and process that will lead to a just, comprehensive and lasting peace" and it was given a budget of 12 million pesos (US \$ 600,000). The NUC's task was to hold consultations with all concerned sectors, including rebel groups – particularly the MNLF and the Communist Party of the Philippines-National Democratic Front-New People's Army (CPP-NDF-NPA) – as well as the Philippine military and police. It was initially asked to produce recommendations in 90 days but ultimately took ten months to complete its work. In addition to its political negotiation efforts, the NUC's legacy was its extensive programme of public consultations. The resulting recommendations were integrated to produce what many consider to be the classic framework guiding Philippine peacemaking: the *Six Paths to Peace*.

NUC composition and framework

The NUC was composed of a chair and eight members. President Ramos appointed Haydee Yorac, the liberal and feisty University of the Philippines law professor and former elections commissioner, as NUC chair and the secretaries of the justice and defence departments, a

Catholic bishop, and the leader of the Protestant National Council of Churches of the Philippines (NCCP) as commissioners. They were joined by four designated members of congress, two of whom were known to have friendly ties with the Left, while the other two were retired military generals. Also created were a Technical Committee to provide expert professional assistance, a Secretariat headed by a female executive director that provided administrative support to the NUC, and an eight-member Council of Advisers. This advisory body included an ex-president, an ex-senator, a retired ambassador, two former leaders of the old Communist Party, and – at the prompting of MNLF chair Nur Misuari – two prominent Muslim leaders.

The Commissioners and Advisors covered a fairly wide spectrum of ideological orientations and Haydee Yorac enjoyed the public's respect. More than 90 per cent of Filipinos are Christians and the churches have always been a moral and political force in the country. Involving the churches' leaders – and, in Muslim areas, Islamic religious leaders – also meant being able to mobilize resources nationwide and gain widespread acceptance.

The NUC apparently had the ear of the President. Because other public officials were also engaged in contacts with insurgents, the NUC asked Ramos to make it clear that only the NUC had the authority to engage in exploratory talks. The NUC issued policies and guidelines intended to promote coordination and limit the role of other authorities so that they could establish contact but not engage in actual negotiations.

Though the NUC met with key insurgency leaders, it was an *ad hoc* advisory group rather than a negotiating panel. It reviewed initial agreements between insurgent groups and government emissaries, pursued exploratory talks, issued safe conduct passes and recommended next steps to the President. For example, when the MNLF refused to hold talks in the country, the NUC suggested a compromise strategy of 'shifting venues' whereby meetings would be held in multiple countries including the Philippines. The NUC also improved and monitored implementation of the President's confidence building measures, such as the amnesty programme. The NUC conducted its work discreetly but issued regular press statements and reports to inform the public of developments in the process.

The NUC developed an operational framework that exceeded the expectations of the President's critics. It aimed to create a community-based vision that would guide the development of a programme to forge a new social contract for a just, equitable, humane and pluralistic society. It wanted to bring about: "principled and peaceful resolutions of the armed conflicts, with neither blame nor surrender, but with dignity for all

concerned". Its most high-profile efforts were the public consultations it conducted intensively from November 1992 to March 1993, which served as a mechanism to broaden public participation in defining a national peace programme.

Mandate and participation

The NUC consultations were intended to discuss: (1) participants' perceptions of the causes of the armed conflicts; (2) their proposals for how government and rebel forces should end them; (3) the issues they deemed relevant to the peace process; (4) the specific programmes, reforms, and entities that could implement proposals and promote peace; and (5) what their own group could do to promote peace. The NUC identified twelve key issues relevant to peacemaking: electoral reforms; human rights; political parties; dismantling of private armies; administration of justice; protection of the environment; socio-economic reforms; autonomy and cultural integrity; provisions for victims of armed conflicts; economic components of national unification; disposition of forces and armaments; and amnesty. They then asked participants to identify additional topics that should be included in the peace programme.

To ensure that it was a truly national process, the consultations were structured through a series of meetings at three levels: provincial, regional, and national. The NUC issued the 'Manual of Operations for the Conduct of NUC Public Consultations' to guide the process and its Secretariat was given overall responsibility for organizing the national and regional consultations. The Secretariat was assisted by an Advisory Group with representatives of the NCCP, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), the department of local governments and the National Coordinating Council for Local Governance. The NUC Secretariat and the Advisory Group designed the consultations process, appointed two members nominated by the NCCP and the CBCP to each Regional Convenors' Group (RCG) and monitored the conduct of the provincial consultations. The RCGs in turn identified the three core convenors for each of the provinces under their coverage. The Provincial Convenor Groups were required to have a minimum of four members, including the governor and representatives from an NGO and a people's organization as well as a religious leader. Each province could expand membership depending on the number of relevant sectors and different religious groups.

The NUC consulted with national formations, including large multi-sectoral coalitions such as the National Peace Conference and the People's Congress. These groups were responsible for pre-consultation activities among their networks and submitting proposals and documents to the NUC Secretariat before the consultation. The Regional and Provincial Convenors' Groups organized meetings at their respective levels and received and

collated peace proposals. Considerable flexibility was allowed at the provincial level because of the diversity in local conditions. Each PCG designed its own pre-consultation mechanisms, with some conducting municipal-level pre-consultations and others arranging sectoral meetings. These events channelled into a provincial consultation, where participants selected their ten representatives to the regional consultation.

The RCGs convened the regional consultations, which the NUC attended. Provincial representatives delivered their respective reports and an open forum followed each presentation. The body was then divided into workshop groups to fill in a matrix that was later consolidated into the regional report. In all, 71 provincial and 14 regional consultations were held and covered almost every province, including Muslim Mindanao.

The NUC identified 24 sectors whose representatives should be invited to participate, along with representatives from local and central government, the judiciary, police and armed forces. These included: women's organizations, child advocates, civic groups, cooperatives, the differently-abled, teachers and researchers, professional associations, farmers, fishermen, indigenous cultural communities, urban poor, media, labour, business, religious groups, social-development NGOs, cause-oriented and political organizations, issue-specific groups and groups of former rebels. In Mindanao communities with sizable Muslim populations, the representatives were also drawn from Muslim social, political and governing bodies. Furthermore, the RCGs jointly with the police and armed forces were authorized to issue safe-conduct passes to combatants that wanted to attend the regional consultations.

Religious and other civil society personalities and groups had leading roles in the consultative structures created. This meant that both practically and symbolically these consultations were led by civil society, rather than the government, at the local and regional levels.

The 'Six Paths to Peace'

In July 1993, the NUC submitted its report. It acknowledged that profound poverty and inequality were at the root of the country's conflicts and concluded that to achieve a just and lasting peace, at least six paths must be pursued simultaneously. The first was pursuit of social, economic, and political reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of armed struggle and social unrest. The second path was consensus building and empowerment for peace through continuous consultation at the national and local levels. The third was peace negotiations with armed groups. The fourth path was implementing measures for reconciliation, reintegration of former combatants and rehabilitation of those affected by the conflict. The fifth was conflict

management and protection of civilians. The sixth path aimed to build, nurture and enhance a positive climate for peace. The NUC also made recommendations on a set of 'do-ables' as specific measures that the government could immediately implement to partly address a root cause of the conflict. The document, in effect, legitimized and validated the long-existing demands of social movements and progressive sections of civil society: the need for comprehensive reforms to address structural inequalities and achieve lasting peace. President Ramos accepted the NUC recommendations and adopted them as the basis for his declared peace strategy.

That September, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) was created to assume the advisory and coordination functions of the NUC, whose official term ended in June 1993. The OPAPP followed up on the set of do-ables with the relevant government agencies. In addition, Government Peace Negotiating Panels were constituted for talks with the CPP-NDF-NPA, the Moro groups and the military rebels. The momentum and confidence gained between the parties through the NUC-led process combined with national and international interest to make a contribution to the peace talks. The government signed comprehensive peace agreements with the military rebels in 1995 and with the MNLF in 1996. A ceasefire agreement was also reached with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 1997. Formal talks with the National Democratic Front opened in 1995 and in 1998, shortly before the end of President Ramos' term, an agreement was signed but remains inoperable.

Issues and controversies

The NUC consultation process and outcomes had some detractors. Some leftist groups chose not to participate fully in the process. In Negros Occidental, they held a picket outside the building where the consultations took place. Statements and articles written by groups associated with the National Democratic Front after the NUC's work was concluded continued to reflect their distrust of the Ramos administration's peace overtures – and even revealed an ideological resistance to amnesty and reintegration programmes because they might undermine support for armed struggle. Pro-independence elements in the Muslim population continued to hear an unbending stance on sovereignty and territorial integrity in subsequent statements of the President. Some doubted that the process or outcomes would be relevant to their priority needs. Furthermore, some local government officials were alienated by the civil society-driven process. The NUC had to issue a memorandum in December 1992 requiring city mayors' inclusion in the PCGs. The NUC secretariat's executive director later indicated her belief that because some local governments did not own the outcome, they did not have much commitment to its implementation.



From a procedural perspective, some found the multi-tiered structure of consultations repetitive and tedious or dismissed the exercise as a reiteration of grievances and demands expressed in previous forums and earlier negotiations. Sometimes the discussions lost focus and participants raised seemingly unrelated concerns, such as pornography and family values. The NUC admitted that it did not attempt to undertake a strict scientific sampling and there might have been some sectoral bias in the results. One scholar queried whether it would have been better to leave the question on the issues for inclusion in the national peace programme open-ended. The NUC also noted that the quality of the consultation results varied considerably. They indicated time and logistical constraints, the degree of organization of the province and region and the level of awareness of the population to be among the factors affecting the consultations.

Assessment

Despite the dissatisfaction of some, the NUC's publicity and the nation-wide flurry of activities raised public awareness of the issues and mobilized active support for the peace process. Political negotiations were put back on track. The wide-scale consultative process also stimulated the emergence of a national network of peace convenors, peace advocates and peace groups. This network and the groups that emerged continue to participate in both government-led consultations and non-governmental programmes and campaigns.

To date, the *Six Paths to Peace* remains the operational framework for the Philippine peace processes. However, the subsequent administrations of Joseph 'Erap' Estrada and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo have revealed that the voices of OPAPP and peace advocates are heard only if the President is willing to listen. Inside government, the OPAPP has to counter the influence of a military establishment schooled in Cold War ideology and corporate interests unreceptive to the structural reforms identified through the NUC consultations as necessary for peacebuilding. These are the recommendations that have been the most difficult to implement.

The NUC exercise also helped institutionalize public consultations as a regular part of governance. Inspired by the NUC's success, government and civil society groups have used subsequent consultations – or 'summits' – to address specific issues like economic development, poverty and crime. Consultations that enable direct interface with government have generated more pressure to deliver results. But consultations alone are not enough. If held repeatedly but without substantial outcomes, participants become cynical about the purpose and the sincerity of those engaged. This soon overrides the usefulness of the process as a mechanism for building consensus. Instead, consultations should be cumulative and be seen as such – building from the outcome of the previous ones – rather than merely repetitive. Government and society must consistently follow through with the changes identified through these processes if a just and sustainable peace is to emerge, even if only block by block.