

## The Commonalities and Differences of the Possibilities of Peace for Philippines and Colombia

### **Impressions and Reflections on the Colombia-Philippines Exchange Visit Program**

My five-day exposure in Colombia and the exchange of information with peace experts in the country brought me to a process of looking at commonalities and differences with my country, Philippines. At the end of our visit and also after the dialogue with Colombian counterparts during their visit in the Philippines, I tried to capture my learning, reflections and personal wish that the two countries may achieved substantial and principled peace processes. These processes include the people most affected by violent conflict whom may have the chance to experience sustained peace and development which can take place to improve their quality of life.

#### 1) On the Aspect of Public Opinion and Political Will and other Alternatives

##### The Colombian Situation:

By and large the majority of the Colombian population is against any peace negotiations with any revolutionary groups in the country. Presumably, this was because of the perceived failure of the previous peace process during the Pastrana presidency and the public knowledge of the revolutionary groups being involved in the illegal drug business. The public opinion was maximized by a President who used the state machinery to engage the revolutionary groups in violent options and propaganda war rather than a principled peace negotiations.

Moreover, the political leadership did not waste anytime from the favorable public opinion against any peace negotiation in the country. It introduced a relatively progressive legislation, the peace and justice law. Although academics and civil society groups cited basic flaws in the law, it cannot be denied, however, that it has resulted to some important gains. Lawmakers going to jail, both militia and rebel leaders were able to benefit from amnesty and numbers of victims of the violent conflict were given reparation by national government.

Clearly, the framework in dealing with the revolutionary groups of the Colombian government is still counter-insurgency, which is getting some “fleeting achievements.”

##### The Philippine Situation:

After the debacle of the MOA-AD in 2008, the newly installed Aquino government is working hard to restore the trust and confidence needed to pursue the peace negotiations with MILF and has also opened its arms for negotiation with the communists. There was no official survey done on the public opinion of how many Filipinos support peace processes with various revolutionary groups in the country. But my sense is that it is the majority of Mindanaons who will support a peace process that will result not only to a peace agreement in paper but also with lasting positive impact on the communities directly affected by violent conflicts. Sadly, Mindanao is far from Manila and the majority of the population in Luzon and the Visayas do not actually care enough if there is a peace negotiation or none as long as they will not be affected by conflict. The peace constituency in Luzon and the Visayas are obviously weak. This situation will not make the President work hard with strong political will to resolve the decades old conflict in principled peace negotiations with revolutionary groups.

The government is not offering something new in the supposed resumption of the talks to all revolutionary groups. The new faces in the government panels can be a source of hope but I doubt if there will be breakthroughs since no new framework and approach were presented to the public. The old paradigm of charting the negotiation in political discussion will still dominate the negotiating table and other important aspects of negotiations will be sidelined thus repeating mistakes once more and sustaining the fatigue of peace negotiations.

## 2) On the aspect of Ownership of Local Government Units to the Peace Initiatives

I am a firm believer of local initiatives because it can be sustained, compared to nationally imposed programs. Local initiatives are likely to succeed especially if they go through a process of ownership from the local key stakeholders.

### Colombia

I was impressed by the presentation of the peace program of the local government of Bogota. While I acknowledged that many important points were lost in translation, I am most confident that a local peace initiative will have more substance as it is closer to its constituents and that local governments will have more sense of accountability compared to national government. I was more impressed when I found out that the budget to fund the peace programs were from the coffers of the local government. This is very important in the context of sustaining the programs and letting its constituents know how committed is their local government to building peace in their own way and not depending on the support of the national government.

The Bogota peacebuilding program initiative is laudable because it is locally initiated and has achieved a critical constituency that is needed in order to sustain the program and create impact not only for the Bogota but also for the common Colombians who want to seek shelter in Bogota after experiencing violence in their communities.

### Philippines

As an active officer of the Provincial Peace and Order Council of Misamis Oriental for almost 3 years, I personally witnessed how easy and inspiring it is to put forward and concretize programs that will contribute to building peace minus the rhetoric. Maybe because of the absence of political will and well defined program and guidance on peace from the national government, the progressive LGU's were forced to initiate their own version of peace program.

Being part of a process and in the implementation of local peace program, I personally witnessed how things move quite fast with government instrumentalities functioning their respective roles and deliverables. Issues on land reform, livelihood opportunities and delivery of social services were within reach. And project were able to realized faster than what was expected from government and other stakeholders.

There are similar stories of local government units taking the lead of doing peace and development work. Even with these promising initiatives that has positive results, the national government failed to maximize the opportunity to make its policies more encouraging for local governments to initiate their own peacebuilding programs or even craft a workable national policy based on the gains and breakthroughs of local government units related to peacebuilding.

### 3) On the Participation and Appreciation of CSO, Church and State Combatants and International Mediations Work

Understandably, the civil society, the church and other key players of peace advocacy in Colombia are few. I was fully impressed however, by their scholarly work as their positive contribution to the peace discourse even at its ebb brought about by unfavorable public opinion and a right wing government.

The state combatants largely remain in their comfort zone of looking at counter insurgency as their basic framework in relating with the conflict of Colombia. Eliminating the enemy with strong force and propaganda to totally defeat them is still favorite line of the institution, although I would suspect that there are a few officers out there in the conflict zones who might offer a different perspective and approach in dealing with revolutionary groups in the country. International participation in the peace efforts is also obviously weak in Colombia.

The Philippines, specifically Mindanao, can be considered a haven for peace advocates and workers. The churches, civil society and even growing numbers of state combatants are closely working together to promote understanding and cohesive action to pursue not only advocacy but concrete programs on building peace. International peace agencies and other countries have been consistent in the support on the different peace process in the country.

#### Hopes of a Peace Worker:

While respecting the present approaches by Colombian and Philippine government in ending the decades old insurgency problems, I cannot help but offer some points that might be considered as a humble reflection and hopes of a peace worker based in Mindanao.

First, I earnestly hope that a breakthrough in the approach of the Colombian government apart from counter insurgency will happen soon. While the counter insurgency approach can achieved gains based on numbers of enemy killed, I cannot see however any significant gains in the future if no principled negotiation will take place. Both state and non-state actors will continue with their propaganda wars without any real reforms happening which is badly needed to effect relative if not sustainable peace in Colombia.

The Philippines situation has the necessary ingredients needed to advance a principled peace process.

My prayer is that the key stakeholders and the principals in the negotiating table must consider equally important topics of economic development and strengthening local governance alongside the existing established peace agenda over the last decades of negotiations.

Lastly, may the exchange of information and peoples continue to inspire us further, to learn more from each other and be challenged to the fullest of offering innovations and greater creativity to achieved a certain level of peace that is acceptable not only to contending parties bit more to the peoples and communities most affected by violent conflicts.

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