

**Patricio P. Diaz. *Understanding the Mindanao conflict*.
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Optimism created by the signing of the peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1996 appears to have been dissipated by the all-out-war policy of succeeding governments after the Ramos administration. Thus leading scholars conclude that “despite gains made in 1996, the situation in southern Philippines remains unstable” (May 2001). Peace remains elusive in the South, exemplified by the Camp Abubakar military offensives in 2000 and Pikit war in 2003, and the continued lack of breakthrough in peace negotiations beyond ceasefire. Despite the many agreements signed between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from 2001 to 2003, war remains an option.

The above developments serve as the backdrop of Patricio Diaz’s *Understanding the Mindanao Conflict*. Devoid of any academic jargons, the book chronicles the author’s critical assessment of the Mindanao conflict as a journalist and as a Mindanao settler since the last years of the American colonial era. The author acknowledges that it is not a scholarly work. It only analyzes the root causes of the continuing Mindanao problem which escalated due to the failure of institutions and actors concerned.

Major texts of the book come from the written commentaries of the Diaz from 2000 to 2003 on topics such as the peace negotiations, issues of autonomy, the Buliok offensive in Pikit, the military, and various policies of government. Also included in the book are the author’s editorials from the *Mindanao Cross* and various speeches of Muslim leaders since the 1960s, explaining how the problem grew into a crisis in the 1970s. By taking the readers back where the problem started, these writings provide readers better understanding and perspective of events. There is an attempt to elucidate the essence of the Mindanao problem in a simple and easily-understood manner.

Diaz argued that even with the establishment of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD), the problem degenerated into its present form because of the key actors’ failure to grasp the problem. Recurring ignorance, lack of sincerity, lost opportunities, squandered gains, and, most of all, lack of trust, goodwill and confidence between the government and the MILF caused the problem. For Diaz, the only path toward peace is for the government to pursue the road of reconciliation.

In Part I of the book, Diaz argued that the Muslim problem is just a part of the Mindanao problem—the former is sociocultural and the latter economic and political in nature. The Muslim problem stems from internal and external factors. Internal factors include social structure, culture, tradition and social inequity. Crucial to these is the poor leadership of the Muslim *datus*. External factors emanate from government policies and programs that contribute to the Muslims' socioeconomic exclusion. The Mindanao problem is largely ascribed to biased national policies—settlement program leading to Muslims' landlessness, SPCPD's biases towards the rebels, and the lack of attention regarding the needs and demands of Muslim communities.

Both internal and external sources of agitation should be addressed not just by government, but also by Muslim leaders. Diaz does not attribute the problem solely to policy failure but also to the poor involvement of other actors. Ordinary Muslims are unable to cope with changes while their leaders fall into the patronage and appeasement traps. This is exacerbated by the absence of proper comprehension of the problem pointing out the tendency of many to see it as a sociocultural difference between Christians and Muslims. Thus, Part II of the book is devoted to quashing this myth, contending that the misunderstanding is between the Manila government and the Muslim leaders, and between Muslim leaders and the Muslim-Christian leaders.

The author then proceeded to criticize the lack of consistent government policies, resulting in their failure to address the root cause of the problem. Although the author commends Aquino and Ramos for their reconciliatory approach, Diaz criticized the Estrada and Arroyo governments for adopting an all-out-war policy. The policy resulted in hostilities in 1999, which was a clear violation of the 1997 ceasefire agreement; in the 2000 military offensive in MILF camps; and in the 2003 Pikit war. The section brings to the readers' attention the need for an effective civilian control over the military. Yet Diaz repeatedly states that the root of the problem is landlessness.

Part III reiterates the neglect in the policies of the government from 2000 to 2003 contained in the author's chronologically arranged commentaries. Diaz considers the events in 2000 and 2003 as mistakes committed by Estrada and Arroyo and only goes to show "how the Mindanao conflict has been misunderstood" by our leaders.

To illustrate the train of faulty steps made by government that took the issue to a crisis, Part IV contained editorial pieces of *The Mindanao Cross* and speeches containing anecdotes of Muslim leaders on certain

events that led to the crisis in the 1970s. One would surmise that the author's purpose in this part is to make the readers see for themselves what went wrong in the past. The story of the Muslims ended in tragedy because of neglect and misinterpretation of the root cause of the problem, which in turn led to continued socioeconomic, cultural, and political alienation of the Muslims. This part makes one relive the past while reading through the speeches of Muslim leaders that mirrored their sentiments—their continued landlessness and fear of displacement.

The transformation of the plea for reforms into calls for self-determination through armed struggle could have been prevented had the government made sincere efforts to address the Muslims' grievances. The chapter also implicitly states that the Mindanao problem was not high in the agenda of past leaders until it became a thorn that refuses to be pulled out.

The last part reiterates what has been said in the first chapter but focuses on developments that took place in 2002. Here, Diaz shows how the government and the MILF lost confidence in each other, as each "engages in double talk" thereby putting "peace in Mindanao in a precarious balance."

The author, while successful in his aim, failed to cite that a better understanding of the issue also needs better understanding of the politics in Manila. To some extent, policies in Mindanao seem to be driven by Manila politics—sometimes used as pawn for political ends. A beleaguered Estrada used the Camp Abubakar offensive in 2000 to improve his waning performance rating. Moreover, the problem in Mindanao is reminiscent of the peasant struggle for land and patrimony taken away during the colonial years, so persistent that it produced feelings of vulnerability that the only recourse is rebellion.

The author devoted a large part of the book to commentaries that appeared in *MindaNews*. Although the author acknowledges, in the first part, that the book is not academic, it creates the contrary impression by citing works of various scholars who have studied Mindanao. But in most parts, it is like reading a newspaper on a day-to-day basis, although the focus is on Mindanao. Most of the commentaries of the author touched on many crucial issues that could impinge on the peace negotiations (e.g., the development of the MILF camps in Liguasan Marsh, the MILF's alleged terrorist links, among others). If not properly handled, these could potentially become sources of discontent and could even erode the road to peace in Mindanao.

The book is a testimony of the zenith of political frustration on how things in Mindanao have turned out with its author hinting great dissatisfaction. Anyone interested in the Mindanao problem should read this book. Its twin effect however is frustration on one hand, and greater appreciation of the plight of the Muslims, on the other. ❁

REFERENCES

- May, RJ. 2001. Muslim Mindanao: Four years after the peace agreement. In *Southeast Asian Affairs 2001*, eds. Daljit Singh and Anthony L. Smith, 263-275. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.