

Three Wars and the President

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The government of President Joseph Estrada is waging three wars in Mindanao: a military war, an ideological war and a war against poverty. These are related to the fundamental causes of the Mindanao crisis and to the difficulties in achieving a lasting peace. The military objective has been realized with the fall of Camp Abubakar. The ideological war is being fought at a different level. The government's weapons against the Bangsamoro are constitutionality, Filipinism, democracy and pro-poorism, which have so far failed in defeating the Muslims' desire for autonomy and independence, the ideological basis for their struggle. The third war, the war against poverty, is said to be the most crucial one. If the government can defeat poverty in Mindanao it is likely that the two other wars will cease.

This topic assigned to me by the Third World Studies Center for this symposium is difficult for me to fully discuss because I am not privy to the inner dynamics of decision-making directly involving no less than the President. I can only make use of whatever statement the President had made and reported in media including those comments coming from the people around the President. These sources together with my own perception and researches on Mindanao constitute the basis of the view expressed in this discourse or essay. With this brief clarification of the basis of my discussion, allow me now to present the three types of war going on in Mindanao that are related to the fundamental causes of the Mindanao crisis and the difficulties of achieving the enduring peace we all desire.

The Military War

Just like the rest in the archipelago, the military operations of the government are expectedly directed against all acts of criminality by individuals or syndicates with no ideological motivation. This is more of a police response to local/regional problems. But what concern the purpose of this essay are the acts of insurgency or rebellion related to organized movements to radically change the entire Philippine politico-social system in favor of a Marxist-Leninist or Maoist model or whatever or to establish a distinct independent state within the Philippines. Specifically referred to herein are two long enduring movements which have seriously challenged the mettle and capability of the government.

One is what the government has called the communist or communist-inspired insurgency war of the NDF-NPA armed struggle, which traces its rationale for being to the unfinished revolution of the masses, peasants or workers against colonial-feudal and neo-colonial exploitation and oppression. But what has been underlined by the Erap administration as most serious in Mindanao is the separatist movement of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led by *Ustadz Hashim Salamat*

Understandably, the government has concentrated its military might with the use of land, air, and sea forces against the MILF armed components entrenched in about 50 or more military camps especially the most important being Camp Abubakar, site of the headquarters of the MILF hierarchy. Undoubtedly and expectedly, the military objective of the government has been realized. It would have been shocking if the government failed to overrun the camps given the massive concentration of military hardware on a geographically contained area. This is reminiscent of a micro demonstration of the same military might in the siege of Rizal Alih and his "dirty dozen" on Cawa Cawa boulevard in Zamboanga City where marine contingents and land forces were deployed with armed vehicles and tanks aided by Sikorsky helicopters blasting the army headquarters.

While the destruction of MILF camps is indeed a boost to the military ego and a cause of jubilation of victorious soldiers, it is not something unique or historic. The history of Mindanao since late 19th century is full of illustrations of Spanish forces from 1889 to 1893 led by Spanish governors like Colonel Juan Arolas, literally crisscrossing the islands of Sulu, especially Jolo, to enforce Spanish sovereignty with the aid of Sultan Harun Narassid and his followers only to realize the obvious failure to destroy the Sulu Muslim will to resist. The same was true of three decades of American rule, which also pursued relentless military operations from 1900 to 1913 against hundreds of *cottas* in Muslim Mindanao from Lanao to Cotabato, Basilan, and the Sulu archipelago. The last series of *cotta* fights in Lanao was in the 1930s especially against *Amai Milon* and *Dimakaling* of Lanao who wanted to establish separate states or kingdoms. American rule ended without removing the will to resist or revolt of the Muslim people. In post independence times, Filipino rule was shaken by the *Kamilon* uprising in Jolo in 1953 and inflicted such a serious blow to the famous *Nenita Unit*, hence reminding the government that the will to resist had remained unshaken. The uprising was ended by the

Magsaysay negotiation using the local leaders including *Dayang Dayang* Piandao.

But if history were to be a lesson, one fact has remained constant: the destruction of *cottas* and the suppression of revolts have not eliminated the Muslim will to resist and desire to continue the armed struggle, however costly it may be to their socio-economic life. This brings the question that really matters after the military destruction of the MILF camps. Was the government military capture of MILF camps really advanced the cause of peace to its desired end — the permanent cessation of Muslim armed conflict with the government? My honest answer is NO. What can be expected is a lull just like in the last 100 years of the Muslim struggle. There will be a reexamination of strategies and tactics. There will be subtle forms of *modus vivendi* on the part of the MILF with all factions and leaders of society including the long OIC-desired unification of MNLF-MILF forces into one Bangsamoro entity. The implication to the future of conflict is obvious. There will be all kinds of efforts to strengthen the resolve and resources of the Muslim armed struggle but certainly not to give to President Estrada what he has publicly demanded from the MILF and other Muslim armed groups, namely: (1) to abandon their independence aspirations; and (2) to lay down their arms.

Evidences for this projection take too long to explain and can be done in a separate essay. This projection brings us to the second type of war the government has to successfully fight: the ideological war.

The Ideological War

The protagonists in this ideological war are the same as in the military war and many more. The battlefields are not military camps that can be leveled by helicopter gunships, Bronco bombers, and the Howitzer 105 and machine guns. The enemies of the State, the government especially, are invincible and abstract. Their entrenchments are the human minds and hearts. The logistics they need to survive are limitless spanning centuries of impregnable mental fortifications that have survived the combined forces of colonial-biased literature, religion, social amenities, and education.

The ideological weaponry of the NDF-NPA is well-known in the country and beyond. The Marxist-Leninist/Maoist paradigm has long been entrenched in the consciousness of the Filipino masses and has remained a serious threat simply because the socio-economic benefits of development and progress have still remained the privilege of the few and powerful. Despite the collapse of the Marxian defenses in the Soviet Union and its satellites, and the pragmatic attitude of Maoist ideology to global diplomacy, the effects on the Philippine ideological ferment seem to develop a hybrid kind of radical ideology that follows the Filipino genius for synthesizing otherwise conflicting ideologies or ideas. It is this Filipino ideological resiliency that the government has to fight effectively.

Compounding the government front is, perhaps, a more serious ideological conflict with the Bangsamoro separatist struggle, which is different from that of the NDF-NPA but not necessarily hostile to the strategies, tactics, and methods of struggle. Whether viewed from the MNLF, MILF, Abu Sayyaf, and the conservative or liberal organizations in the Muslim sector, the ideological basis of struggle had already shifted since 1968 from integration or autonomy to independence. Whatever accommodation of autonomy as a compromise was made is the result of external pressures from the OIC and not from an internal change in wind and heart attributable to government ideological success. The written agreements of 1976 and 1996 including the various written protocols or instruments between 1976 and 1996, just like the colonial treaties since the 17th century, are valuable, relevant, and binding only if the Bangsamoro sense of freedom is duly satisfied short of complete independence. This concept of freedom necessarily involves at least (1) the freedom to use the Koran as the fundamental law of the Bangsamoro people, (2) the freedom to use the *shariah*, which is derived from the Koran and the *Hadith*, as the governing instrument of Bangsamoro private and public life and action, and (3) the freedom to establish a Islamic state as the structural apparatus to implement 1 and 2 aspirations with a definite, albeit limited in terms of contemporary realities, geographic area to give some meaning to the recovery of ancestral lands.

The ideological weapons of the government to neutralize the NDF, NPA and Bangsamoro ideological armories are (1) Constitutionalism, (2) Filipinism, (3) Democracy, and (4) "pro-poorism." Likening constitutionalism to the Howitzer 105, Filipinism to the machine gun, democracy to the helicopter gunships and Bronco bombers, and "pro-

poorism" to the popular armalite, the ideological weapons have been fired since 1900 on the Muslim minds and hearts and have not exploded because the bullets were dud or, if they did, they were in the wrong minds. In brief, the government has no effective response to the Bangsamoro ideological weapons that tend to reinforce the desire for independence. On the contrary, the Filipino-controlled media, education, and other information highways including hundreds of seminars and conferences have tended to strengthen Muslim fears, frustrations, resentment and subsequently, bias that they have no place in the Filipino national community and that their only hope for the future lies in their identification with the Muslim world.

Unmistakably, one of the factors influencing the Muslim ideological shift to separation has been the deteriorating socio-economic conditions, even for the bare needs for physical survival which they have attributed to government neglect and inadequate capacity to meet the desired needs and goals. This makes the pro-poor thrust of the government relevant to the third type of war in Mindanao, which the government (using its own rhetorics) calls the war against poverty — *Ang Laban sa Kahirapan*.

The War Against Poverty

Undoubtedly, this is a very powerful weapon the government can use to win the minds and hearts of the masses in Mindanao regardless of differences, ideological or otherwise. But the success of this war depends on two important factors. One is the extent to which those who literally control the socio-economic future and resources by ownership and political clout are willing to share with the masses the profitable returns and benefits of investments beyond the limits of exploitative but legal arrangements between management and labor, between landowners and tillers. The resources needed to address the enormous demands of the poor and the marginalized sectors cannot be fully provided by the government which has not been emancipated from the ills of graft and corruption, the sickening pace of the bureaucratic process, and the continuing preoccupation of leaders and people with politics that divides. The other factor crucial to any anti-poverty measure is the very attitude of the masses to the corrupting influences of the Philippine style of democracy in which the exercise of freedom often becomes license to the commission of evils that seriously erodes the moral and ethical fibers of

the nation. Without a strong moral basis, decision-making in the national and local leadership becomes very vulnerable to oppressive, coercive, and exploitative tendencies even in the best of men and women.

Is the government winning this war against poverty since Philippine independence in 1946, since Filipino leadership was granted the freedom to chart the course of Filipinism and nationalism? Contemporary realities are the best answers to this question. We can only hope and pray that the government succeeds because the triumph over poverty is one of the surest avenues to "peace that passeth understanding," to quote a noted biblical passage.

Conclusion

Finally, what are the possible solutions or steps to attaining the meaningful resolution of conflict or crisis in Mindanao? The government and the nation as a whole may consider the following:

1. The theoretical acceptance of the Bangsamoro ideal of an independent Islamic state as the one valid basis of renewed peace talks.
2. The sincere offer by the government of a new autonomy pursuant to President Estrada's statement in his SONA referring to "radical reform" in exchange for the abandonment of independence as premised in the Bangsamoro stand. The idea of a radical element differentiates the new autonomy from the 1996 package assuming the President was not just using the term for rhetorical purposes. It seems to me this radical reform can possibly be an "autonomy in form but independence in substance" which allows the government only the exercise of nominal or symbolic sovereignty.
3. The change in the vocabulary of tri-media and other information channels to bridge the widening psychological gap between Muslims and Christians because of centuries of embedded colonial prejudice. The process of decolonization must start in the Christian mind.
4. The dropping of President Estrada's preconditions and that of the MILF to renew talks between two parties and to dialogue anew on the idea of a "new autonomy."
5. The immediate cessation of military hostilities. ●