

Philippines: Peace Agreement Between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)

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The Peace Accord to be signed in Manila on the 15th of October 2012 between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is of tremendous significance to the Philippines nation. If it succeeds, it will not only bring to an end a decades-old conflict which has claimed at least 150,000 lives but also resolve the larger question of the rights and dignity of the Muslim populace in a land that they once ruled — a question which is deeply rooted in the tragic history of Spanish colonialism and American occupation.

The Accord addresses the primary concerns of both the Manila Government and the Muslims of Mindanao. For the Government it preserves the territorial integrity and the geographical unity of the nation in accordance with the Philippine Constitution. Besides, the Government will retain authority over foreign policy, defence, security, monetary matters and citizenship. Mindanao Muslims will exercise some control over revenues, enjoy an equitable share of the benefits of taxation, and manage local-level law enforcement within an autonomous Bangsamoro region which will come into being in about two years.

The Peace Accord will be finalised in 2016 by which time details about the extent of the Bangsamoro territory and the laws governing the region would be worked out. The next few years will also witness a plebiscite to be followed by an election. A Ministerial form of Government will most likely take shape.

Given the challenges that lie ahead before peace becomes a reality, one can only be cautiously optimistic about the future. After all there have been many other attempts in the past to reach a settlement. The Tripoli Agreement of 1976 failed to end the violence when the late President Ferdinand Marcos violated its terms. In 1989 the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was created but was never really implemented. Then in 1996, the Philippine Government and the Mindanao National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed an agreement which gave some substance to the ARMM. Again, the implementation was hobbled by elements on both sides of the divide. From 2002 to 2010, the Manila-Mindanao conflict blew hot and cold with peace talks punctuating escalating military confrontations on the ground. Finally, in August 2011, President Benigno Aquino met up with MILF chief, Al Haj Murad Ibrahim, in Tokyo and resumed peace negotiations which in spite of setbacks here and there culminated in the present Peace Accord.

If we reflect upon the failures of the past, it is apparent that the lack of sincerity on the part of critical groups and individuals among the principal protagonists at the level of implementation has been the main stumbling-block. President Aquino and Al Haj Murad appear to be determined to ensure that the Peace Accord succeeds. Their political will is going to be a critical factor.

Equally important would be the immediate and effective implementation of people oriented socio-economic programmes that will help overcome problems of poverty, unemployment and social immobility in those parts of Mindanao that will eventually become Bangsamoro land. It is not just the Philippine Government that will have to play a role in this. Its ASEAN partners must be willing to come forward. Malaysia, in tandem with the Philippine Government, should take the lead in mobilising both the public and private sectors in ASEAN to meet the challenge of fulfilling the basic aspirations of the Bangsamoro people. After all, it is Malaysia, more than any other ASEAN state, that has been adversely affected by the protracted turmoil in Mindanao which has seen thousands of Filipinos crossing the border to Sabah over a period of almost four decades.

It is also true that Malaysia had played an important part in the quest for peace in Mindanao. Malaysia's second Prime Minister, the late Tun Razak Hussein, was the first ASEAN leader to raise the question of the plight of the Mindanao Muslims in ASEAN circles in the early seventies. The fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, as the host to the peace talks from 2001, was instrumental in keeping the dialogue going in very difficult circumstances. From 2010, the current Prime Minister, Dato Sri Mohd Najib Razak, showed a firm commitment to the peace negotiations — a fact that was acknowledged by Aquino when he announced the Accord in Manila on the 7th of October 2012.

Indeed, the role that Malaysia has played in facilitating the Manila-Mindanao Peace Accord is a reflection of the emphasis it has given since Independence to the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes involving the nation itself and other nations. There are few other countries in the world that have demonstrated through deeds such an unwavering commitment to peace among nations, a peace that shuns war, violence and bloodshed. Malaysia's outstanding contribution to major UN helmed peace-keeping missions since 1961 and its principled opposition to wars such as the Iraq War of 2003 would testify to this. Our regional and international record on behalf of peace is in a sense an extension of our dedication to the maintenance of inter-ethnic peace in one of the most complex multi-ethnic nations in the world — a feat which has few parallels on earth.

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