

MILF will always be guided by protocols and mechanisms

Mohagaher Iqbal | 20 July 2016

The peace process in Mindanao, and perhaps elsewhere in the world, has been likened already to a journey. Prof. Paul D. Hutchcroft's book, titled as "Mindanao: The Long Journey to Peace and Prosperity", is obviously a work that also subscribes to that metaphor.

In 2007, Mr. Salah Jubair (perhaps he may be known personally to some of you) also came up with a book of quite similar title as the one we are launching today. His book was entitled "The Long Road to Peace: Inside the GRP-MILF Peace Process."

Journey. Road. Undoubtedly these two words are most fitting descriptions to our aspiration and endeavor we call peace, and the process we undertake to achieve that.

For those who have journeyed this road for more than 40 years, like myself and countless others, we have come to mark the milestones by the advent and exit of Philippine presidents – from Marcos, Aquino the mother, Ramos, Estrada, Arroyo, Aquino III and the new President Rodrigo Duterte.

Each of them has made indelible marks on the peace process, with the exception yet of Pres. Duterte with whose administration the MILF has yet to engage FORMALLY in the continuation of the peace process.

By FORMALLY, I mean the engagements must be done by the Peace Panels of the MILF and the GPH. The MILF Peace Panel remains constituted as to its authority and membership. We are waiting for our counterparts in the GPH side.

Of course, there were already non-official, informal, backchannel dialogues made by and between the new President and MILF key officials, including our Chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim. These low-key talks are, as in the past, proving to be very useful in establishing mutual confidence and hastening continuity of the process.

As may be clear already to all, the MILF will always be guided by protocols and mechanisms established by signed agreements. The continuity of the peace process will, in great respect, proceed along lines already mutually agreed upon, most essentially those stipulated in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB).

We are aware though of the lessons of history and experience. Almost every administration from Marcos onwards had peculiar approaches towards the Bangsamoro Problem or Question. With the exception of Marcos and Estrada, and Arroyo to a certain extent, everyone else showed concrete measures to achieve negotiated political settlement rather than going to war as a national policy. Even then, it was during Marcos' time that the 1976 Tripoli Agreement was signed; it was in Estrada's time that MILF camps were officially acknowledged and recognized by the government; and it was to Arroyo's credit that we signed with government the Tripoli Agreement on Peace in 2001, considered the mother of all agreements signed with government by the MILF.

We are fortunate that under the leadership of former Pres. Benigno Aquino III, the peace negotiations between the MILF and GPH that started in 1997 were technically completed with the signing of the CAB on March 27, 2014.

The implementation though of the signed agreements is proving to be as difficult, or more difficult, than the negotiations.

I would surmise this new book by Prof. Hutchcroft has delved on issues related to the under-achievement of the projected stages of implementation mechanisms we all commonly and conveniently referred to as the roadmap. I say under-achievement because we have yet to have a Bangsamoro Basic Law, a plebiscite for that, the establishment of Bangsamoro Transition Authority, the regular Bangsamoro government and finally the conclusion of the Exit Agreement.

Of course, we in the MILF are also aware that the new President is embarking on a shift to a federal form of government for the entire Philippines. The implications of this policy towards the implementation of the CAB are already being studied carefully by the MILF. Even this early, however, we already know that the shift to federalism, WHILE WE ARE SUPPORTIVE OF IT, is not one of easy picking. The powers of the status quo and those enjoying by it will always have a hard stare at it. Anent this, it is our firm view that the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) should be passed first, as promised by the President during his campaign for the presidency and make it as template for federalism in this country. I am upbeat that the President can do it smoothly for several reasons. He is extremely popular, the time factor is on his side, and he is not anti-Moro; in fact, he has a Moro blood running in his veins; and finally he has shown so far that he is a decisive leader. As the old adage says, “there is no rocky hill for an iron will.”

Truly, the peace process is once again in an interesting time and on the spotlight.

It is thus opportune that a new book on this old topic is coming off the press.

As Mindanao, in particular, continues on its hard and winding journey to peace and prosperity, there would always be events that would pose as issues and challenges. Sometimes they are so surprising and overwhelming that we are momentarily lost for explanations, such as what transpired in Mamasapano, Maguindanao on January 25, 2015.

There are confluences, nay divergences, of interests, forces and events that call for sober, methodical, and dispassionate analysis that oftentimes are within the luxury of those in the academe. The direct actors or participants in this unfolding of events would do so well as to reflect on the works and contributions of those in the academe.

I believe this book of Prof. Hutchcroft would be another useful volume towards a better and objective grasp and understanding of the Bangsamoro Problem or Question.

Certainly, we in Mindanao have a long journey to take. We don't know when and where it ends. But as the same Salah Jubair also wrote in his book, “Success, including that in the peace talks, always takes the long and winding road: this is the only way.”

In closing, I congratulate Prof. Hutchcroft and the other contributors for coming out with this book. We appreciate the interest you've taken on a subject that is so close to our hearts.

Thank you.

Mohagher Iqbal Message during the book launch of "Mindanao: The Long Journey to Peace and Prosperity" on 19 June 2016 at Discovery Primea, Makati City.