

## Sharing of personal insights from the peace negotiations

Mohagher Iqbal | 26 January 2016

If one wants to enjoy life, never spend it as a negotiator. Negotiation is never fun. It isn't easy, as it is generally a trait that has to be developed rather than an inherited trait.

Frankly, I did not desire to be a negotiator, much more as head of the MILF negotiating team. For several years, there were more lawyers in the team than those of the other professions. I find it more challenging, nay more difficult, dealing with lawyers, than those of the other members. But without a lawyer in the team, I don't know if we can reach this far in the negotiation. Lawyers are indispensable part of the endeavour.

There are times that emotions run high in the course of negotiations. I consider this as the most difficult thing in any negotiation. Uncontrolled emotions will wreck the engagement and destroy goodwill among men. But once one succeeded to make sure that he/she strips himself/herself of the emotion and deal with the facts, then we see opportunities more objectively, and the engagements thus become more and more productive. This is due to the fact also that parties are more anxious to agree than to disagree. Disagreement is never generally considered an achievement.

People or groups negotiate because they are in disagreement over certain matters. But those who learned to disagree without being disagreeable have discovered the most valuable secret of negotiation. Both sides have a lot of this in the course of our more than 17 years of harsh, hard, and protracted negotiation.

It is the nature of man to fear the unknown. Fear of the dark is not only common among children, but sometimes, even adults are not immune to it. But this fear is not fear of darkness itself, but fear of possible or imagined dangers concealed by darkness.

Fear is not absent in negotiation, especially when those of the opposite side include prominent or brilliant personalities. But the late American President John F. Kennedy had this advice: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."

I confessed that there are far more bitter memories of the negotiation than the good ones. In fact, we cannot reckon all these bad memories, but the good ones can be counted in our fingers.

I used to act as acting chair of the MILF peace panel from the years 1999 to 2000. While government troops were already pounding the fringes of Camp Abubakar with mortars and artillery and ground troops closing in, a government negotiator (I do not want to name name) still insisted that they had no plan to enter it. The rest is part of the narrative already.

Yes, it is true that in negotiation, like in war and in love, everything is fair. But to do it in such a crafty or ingenious way is not so pretty to be appreciated.

There is no doubt that the hardest part of the negotiation happened from 2012 up to 2014. It started with former Dean and now Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Marvic Leonen. While both Prof. Miriam Coronel-Ferrer and I cannot claim all the credits for the successes in the engagements --- maybe just a modest part of it --- but it is a fact that those crowning achievements took place during our stewardships of the respective peace panels. In these defining, nay tumultuous, moments, I find her as steady and as committed to overcome all the trials, tribulations and obstacles along the way to pave the way for the signing of the four Annexes of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), the Addendum on Bangsamoro Waters, and finally the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). I salute her and all the other members of the GPH and MILF Peace Panels for this feat of a lifetime. I also share this success with the other members of the MILF Peace Panel and Secretariat, and all those part of our negotiating team or delegation. I also acknowledged the great roles of Malaysia, as third party facilitator, and the international community in making this peace process successful.

More importantly, the guidance and wisdom of the MILF Leadership, especially Chairman Alhaj Murad Ebrahim, and above all the Will of the Almighty God, allowed us to steer the negotiations through to its end.

My only concern is that the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) which translated the political documents, the FAB and Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), into a legal document, is still pending in Congress. Chances are high that it will not pass at all.

Finally, let me express my deep appreciation and gratitude to the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD) and the European Union for making this compilation possible. In particular, I thank former CHD Country Representative, Ali Salem, and Atty. Bong Montesa, CHD Senior Programme Officer, former EU Ambassador to the Philippines, HE Guy Ledoux, and current EU Ambassador to the Philippines, HE Franz Jessen. This is indeed a great effort.

Thank you and have a good day!

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A short message read by Mohagher Iqbal, chair of the MILF Peace Panel and Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC), during the launching of the “Journey to the Bangsamoro: A Compilation of all signed agreements from the GPH-MILF Peace Process,” at the Makati Shangri-La Hotel, on January 25, 2016.