



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (5/2006)

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## **The GRP-MILF Peace Process: The Quest for International and Domestic Legitimacy**

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NEGOTIATIONS between the Government of Republic of Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) are set to resume this month in Malaysia. There are signs that an agreement will be reached on the guidelines for the implementation of the 'ancestral domain' issue. This has been the most difficult question that has stood in the way of a settlement of the conflict because of the demand for territory that could amount to a Moro homeland. There was however some headway made during peace talks in mid-2005 following two previous arrangements; one on security in August 2001 and another on humanitarian, rehabilitation and development aspects in May 2002.

The MILF split from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) nearly three decades ago. It was not part of the 1996 peace agreement that the MNLF signed with the GRP. But before the start of the discussions this month, the MILF and some MNLF factions are warming up to each other. The MILF has issued statements saying that they support the early release of jailed MNLF leader, Nur Misuari. The 'MNLF-Committee of 15', another splinter group, has also pledged to support a peace pact between the GRP and MILF. What is behind these harmonious statements?

### **Subtle Manoeuvres**

In the past few years, there have been a lot of subtle manoeuvres by the rebel groups in the southern Philippines. In the domestic arena, the MILF has distanced itself from the Abu Sayaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), groups with which it had collaborated previously. It is now claiming that any cooperation with the ASG and JI are the handiwork of renegade commanders. At the same time, the MILF has also sought to improve relations with the MNLF. In the international arena, the MILF has insisted on external mediation after the resumption of peace talks by President Gloria Arroyo in 2001. This was a deviation from its original strategy to conduct direct negotiations with the GRP. These actions can be explained by the pursuit of domestic and international legitimacy.

The quest for domestic and international legitimacy can be traced back to the formation of the MNLF. Led by Nur Misuari and his Moro nationalist cause, the MNLF garnered very high support among the Moros during the 1970s. But MNLF's domestic authority proved insufficient as then President Ferdinand Marcos adopted a military response and declared martial law in 1972. Nur Misuari realised this deficiency and embarked on a strategy to gain international legitimacy for MNLF's objective. Libya, via the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC), became the chief benefactor of the conflict and brokered the 1976 Tripoli

agreement between the GRP and MNLF. Towards the end of the 1970s, the secular outlook of the MNLF gradually lost domestic backing and the international legitimacy provided by the OIC was inadequate for the successful implementation of the Tripoli accord.

The recognition of the MNLF as the sole representative of the Filipino Muslims by the OIC persuaded then President Fidel Ramos, who took over as president in 1992, to conduct peace negotiations with Nur Misuari. President Ramos even undertook a secret trip to meet Mohammed Gaddafi to ensure Libya's support for the peace initiative. Initial negotiations took place outside the Philippines but the final peace agreement was signed in 1996 in Manila. The latter event enhanced domestic support for the peace accord among the Filipinos. Similar quests for domestic and international legitimacy can be witnessed in the current GRP-MILF negotiations too.

### **Complications in Legitimacy Claims**

After signing the peace agreement with the MNLF, President Ramos realised that lasting peace in the southern Philippines is not practical unless a deal is also struck with the MILF. Other than amassing arsenal, the MILF now also had considerable influence among the Muslim grassroots communities in the region. In short, the MILF had reasonable domestic legitimacy towards the end of the 1990s. During the period 1996-2000, GRP and MILF negotiated with no external mediation. The MILF utilised the lack of international mediators and pushed for government recognition of its camps. While this phase achieved some success with the General Cessation of Hostilities agreement and the General Framework of Agreement of Intent, these proved insufficient. The absence of international legitimacy also allowed Ramos' successor, President Joseph Estrada to declare an 'all-out-war' against the MILF.

The peace process between both sides resumed only after President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo came to power in early 2001. The need for international mediation was recognised and Malaysia assumed the role of facilitator. Libya also played a mediatory function in the background. The first round of formal talks was held in Tripoli and the rest were held in Malaysia. Although the current peace process is not being held under the auspices of the OIC, the MNLF, MILF as well as GRP are pushing to be recognised as the legitimate representative of the Filipino Muslims. The quest for international legitimacy became more complicated after the United States got involved in May 2003 over terrorism concerns. From then on, the spectre of international terrorism has become entangled in the peace process.

The domestic scene of the peace process changed with the death of MILF leader Hashim Salamat in July 2003. Hashim's chosen successor, Alim Mimbantas, was an ethnic Maranao but there were concerns over his leadership as primary support for the MILF came from ethnic Maguindanaos. In the end, Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim, an ethnic Maguindanaon, took over the mantle. Although Murad Ebrahim is now leading the MILF negotiations with the Philippine government, domestically he may not be as influential as Hashim Salamat. MILF's domestic weakness also lies in absence of ethnic Tausug support in Sulu where the MNLF and ASG have better authority.

ASG's initial association with the MILF was primarily tactical. But MILF's courting of the ASG was mainly to gain domestic legitimacy among the Tausugs. But after the ASG became the target of the US-led war of terror, the MILF has been attempting to reach out to the various MNLF factions. The MILF realise that Nur Misuari, an ethnic Tausug, has now

become a symbol of Moro resistance in the southern Philippines and recent comments backing the release of Nur Misuari needs to be seen in this context. One aspect not addressed in the current peace process is on the role of the Lumad, or indigenous people of southern Philippines. Their agreement with the Moros, especially on ancestral domain, hinges on traditional and loose treaties. Including Lumad's concerns directly into the peace negotiations will enhance the domestic legitimacy of the peace process.

## **Conclusion**

The peace talks later this month will be a small step ahead in the long-drawn peace process that began in 1996. Throughout the negotiations, the quests for domestic and international legitimacy have proven to be important factors. The absence of one of them may result in the derailment of the peace process. Will the successful completion of the GRP-MILF peace process remove the threat of violence from the southern Philippines? Not entirely, since groups such as the ASG, JI and the new Raja Solaiman Movement still seem to prefer the violent option. But the peace process is important in order to ensure that moderate elements of the MILF reintegrate into mainstream Filipino society.

A number of domestic and international actors are risking their reputation on the peace process and hence the stakes to conclude an agreement are high. But rushing to sign a peace accord will only be detrimental to all parties. The ideal moment to conclude a peace treaty will be when domestic and international legitimacy for the peace process is at its peak. This will ensure that the implementation of the peace agreement will be supported by the Moros, the Filipinos and the international community.

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