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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Waging Peace in Mindanao: The Aquino Way**

By Ava Patricia C. Avila and Justin Goldman

### **Synopsis**

*The resumption of the peace talks marks the first attempt of President Benigno C. Aquino III to end the separatist conflict in Mindanao despite factional divides that threaten the negotiation process. A key aspect is the shift to a human security approach articulated in the new internal security plan.*

### **Commentary**

ON 9 FEBRUARY 2011, both Philippine and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace panels met in Kuala Lumpur to seek the end of a long-running rebellion in Mindanao with Malaysia facilitating the process. Talks collapsed 30 months ago following the Philippine Supreme Court's ruling that the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), which specifies certain rights of domain to the Moros, to be unconstitutional. Strengthening the peace mechanism and clarifying proposals are major issues to be addressed. The direction from President Aquino is to achieve a comprehensive and lasting agreement within a year.

### **Aquino Presidency**

The dramatic political rise that led to the Aquino presidency in June 2010 presented a new opening in the peace process. In his first formal address, President Aquino presented the peace framework of his administration – good governance, effective delivery of basic services, sustainable development, and security sector reform. The question remains whether these measures are sufficient to quell insurgent violence. The government has promised to settle religious conflicts, resume peace talks and review the structure of the negotiation process. Multiple efforts along these lines were taken in the past and have failed to bring about peace. Pressing issues which may or may not have a direct impact on the peace process are developing.

On one hand there is a secessionist movement plagued by its own internal factions even as they prepare to go back to the negotiating table; on the other there are senior officers within the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) under Senate scrutiny for corruption. The AFP is tasked with reducing the ability of internal armed groups to threaten stability; to do so they must be viewed as legitimate in the eyes of their fellow citizens.

### **Campaign Plan**

The new Internal Peace and Security Plan (IPSP) focuses on human security: the emphasis is on the security of citizens within their communities, not just the security of the state. The plan involved wide consultations including academia, civil society groups, and civilian government agencies. President Aquino's IPSP message

acknowledged that a purely military solution will not end the persistent conflicts in the country; the plan supports the primacy of the peace process. The government has sought to make the IPSP available to all stakeholders in order to have a shared understanding down to the barangay or village level.

Carrying out Civil-Military Operations (CMO) is central to the IPSP, contributing to areas that are lacking in infrastructure and healthcare. These units support local governance in the delivery of basic services. This Whole-of-Nation approach reflects the fact that the local government units are the most critical actors in achieving peace and security.

Major General Natalio C. Ecarma III of the Philippine Marine Corps, partnering with Jainab Abdulmajid, the Provincial Head of Philippine NGO Gawad Kalinga (GK) in Sulu, has personified this approach through their collaboration which began in 2007. Through CMO and working with GK, an initial village was built with housing for 30 families in the town of Patikul. This is an attempt to build trust among the Tausug population and the Marines which made targeted development possible, including agriculture long hindered by the conflict.

Working with municipal leaders, twenty heads of cattle were distributed to Patikul farmers. Coordination with General Ecarma led the Marines to provide security for farmers concerned about safe passage to their farms during the harvest season. The efforts are ongoing as plans with GK call for several additional Sulu villages to be built in 2011.

### **IPSP and the Peace Process**

While the IPSP reflects an evolution in the approach taken by the AFP, it will ultimately be judged by its contribution to wider government efforts such as completing a final settlement with the MILF. Like most conflict resolution efforts, the challenge lies beyond the negotiating table - in the ability of the parties to the conflict to adhere to the agreement over time. When the talks broke down in 2008, people blamed it on the lack of consultation.

Now, the IPSP will ultimately allow the general public to be part of the process. With inputs from civil society at the local level, the larger strategic approach is tailored to meet the disparate needs of geographically spread areas. Planning and coordination with community leaders as in the Patikul case reinforces the tenet that the people have a stake in the outcome.

Renewed optimism has led Filipinos to believe that a peace accord could be signed within President Aquino's term, though doubts remain. There appears to be a growing restlessness within MILF ranks. Since the new Administration took office there have been divisions within the movement. While Manila was carrying out the Presidential transition, Commander Ameril Umbra Kato, a vocal adversary of the government, left the group with over a thousand men to form the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. In August 2008, Kato led the attack on multiple villages after the failed signing of the MOA-AD. While the MILF leadership is apprehensive of the setback this factional divide may bring, the government is concerned about its impact on the peace process and is seeking clarity on the issue. Although Kato is outside the MILF mainstream, he has the potential to disrupt the negotiations.

The experience of the MOA-AD process has informed the government of the risk posed by an agreement later unraveling. An enduring settlement is needed to create conditions necessary for development efforts that could ultimately transform the resource-rich island group of Mindanao into a land of prosperity; to move from a zone of conflict to a land of human dignity. Ultimately, those who will suffer most as the conflict persists will be neither the Philippine government nor the MILF panels but the people themselves.

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