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Trading Swords for Ploughshares: How Sajahatra Bangsamoro could bring peace to Mindanao

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Synopsis

11 February 2013 marked another milestone in the peace process between the Philippines Government (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) with new initiatives to address the socio-economic roots of conflict. They underscore President Aquino's commitment and bode well for the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB).

Commentary

PRESIDENT BENIGNO Aquino III made history as the first chief executive to visit the headquarters of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) on 11 February 2013. The symbolic gesture, coupled with initiatives to address the socio-economic roots of conflict, bodes well in sustaining gains made after the signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) last October.

The launch of "Sajahatra Bangsamoro" (Peace Bangsamoro) is another milestone in the peace process between the Philippine Government (GPH) and the MILF. Sajahatra is an inter-agency programme intended to enhance health, educational, and livelihood programmes in conflict-affected areas in Mindanao. What underscored the commitment of the Aquino administration was that the launch was a stone's throw away from the MILF's headquarters at Camp Darapanan. Notwithstanding the slew of agreements between the Philippine government and various Mindanao-based rebel movements that have fallen by the wayside, there are reasons to believe that the FAB may not meet the same fate.

Restraint by all parties

First, there is a strong measure of political will in both camps. The signing of FAB was presaged by zero armed clashes between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the MILF. Confidence-building measures have established a workable ceasefire and greater restraint by both sides. AFP commanders pointed out that Darapanan is well within range of artillery and aircraft based in Cotabato City.

Had the AFP chosen to use force, Darapanan would be easily captured. Likewise, while MILF forces had previously been reluctant to step aside when government forces conducted operations against lawless elements hiding in MILF territory, the rebels in recent times had even been providing support to such law enforcement operations.

This restraint is not solely limited to combatants. Other stakeholders with the wherewithal to stymie the peace process have also demonstrated support. A case in point is how former Vice Governor Manny Piñol, once a vocal critic of concessions to the MILF who in 2008 went so far as to call Christians in Mindanao to take up arms against Muslim rebels, has surprisingly expressed support for the FAB.

Second, international actors have played a sustained and positive role. Community-level peace initiatives have been given a tremendous boost by the Malaysia-led International Monitoring Team. When they entered the fray in 2004, Malaysian facilitation was viewed with suspicion in many quarters in the Philippines. The prevailing view then was that Malaysia's involvement was foremost driven by its interest to suppress any prospect of a revival of the Philippine claim to the East Malaysian state of Sabah, which Manila has yet to officially disavow. According to this interpretation, the objective of Malaysia was to prolong the conflict.

In 2008, the outbreak of violence in Central Mindanao between MILF hardliners and government forces called into question the ability of Malaysian-led mediation yet again. In response, the International Contact Group (ICG) was formed in 2009. Comprising representation from Britain, Japan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia as well as non-governmental organisations such as the Asia Foundation and the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the ICG managed to restart stalled talks between the two contending parties.

The new series of talks culminated in a "secret meeting" between President Aquino and MILF Chairman Murad Ibrahim in Tokyo in August 2011. The internationalisation of negotiations dispelled any suspicions that the peace talks were opaque and controlled by Malaysia.

Promise of peace and prosperity

Third, Sajahatra Bangsamoro offers prospects for economic prosperity and a reduction in income inequality. While peace must come via a political solution, it can only be sustained through tangible economic and material improvements. As early as 2005, the United Nations Development Programme's Philippine Human Development Report has identified economic factors as the main driver of conflict and violence in Mindanao. It highlights how the absence of significant improvements in quality of life has rendered communities and individuals prone to violent extremism.

Conversely, the Philippines' National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) have concluded that Mindanao can "grow much faster than Luzon" once armed conflict is resolved through strategic use of the region's human capital and the tourism industry. The World Bank for its part identified the youthful urban demographics of regional centres around central Mindanao as potential hubs for technology startups. The region is also a natural draw for industries such as power generation and large-scale agriculture.

Malaysia's Felda Global Venture, the world's largest producer of crude palm oil, has already expressed interest in converting the estimated one million hectares of otherwise fallow grassland in Mindanao to palm oil plantations. Further out, the Liguasan Marsh, the Cotabato Basin, and the Sulu Sea, all part of the prospective Bangsamoro area, are potentially energy-rich areas that has drawn attention from international oil companies.

Sustaining the momentum

There is no doubt that immense challenges lie ahead for Mindanao. For starters, the Framework Agreement is not yet a complete document. In fact three annexes - on power sharing, wealth sharing, and normalisation - slated to have been completed by December 2012 have yet to be seen. It has been widely reported that the issue of disarming and demobilising MILF fighters has proved to be tricky with some tactical-level MILF commanders reluctant to turn in their weapons.

In short, the institutionalisation of the newly conceptualised relationship between the Philippine government and the new Bangsamoro political entity, may take several more years. The FAB nonetheless provides a firm base for development, political participation, and empowerment in Mindanao.

Sajahatra Bangsamoro is just a start of a long process of creating the conditions for resolving conflict. Indeed, while the projections of a March 2013 signing of a Final Peace Agreement may sound too optimistic, the fruits of peace in the Southern Philippines appear ripe for harvest.

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