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Duterte: Delivering the Promised Peace to Mindanao

By Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

After years of starts-stops and derailment of peace agreements, the Philippines is today poised to make a peace breakthrough in strife-torn Muslim-dominated Mindanao in southern Philippines. The potential game changer is President-elect Rodrigo Duterte who has promised to break the past deadlocks in favour of a new federalism with a peace agreement with the Muslims in the south.

Commentary

THE PRESUMPTIVE President-elect of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, is strategically positioned to break the impasse in the Mindanao peace process that has dogged the security of the country for decades. Peace has continued to defy the region due to Muslims' historical grievances and distrust of the colonial powers in the past and of the Catholic-dominated administrations in Manila since 1947.

The three key exceptions to this trend were the 1976 Libyan-sponsored Tripoli agreement, the 1996 Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in March 2014. The CAP was to create a Bangsamoro political entity in place of the ARMM. The 2014 agreement was derailed by the Mamasapano Incident of January 2015 when more than 40 elite police troops were killed in an ambush.

Stalled and Failed Peace Efforts

The political agreement between the Philippine Government and the MNLF breakaway, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), was to be legislated into law

through the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) by Congress. Congress did not proceed with the passage of the BBL even though it was the Philippine Government that unilaterally violated the CAB. The congressional action was mainly motivated by its unwillingness to endorse the peace deal and to the then forthcoming national elections scheduled in 18 months' time. This made the BBL into a political football to gain votes.

The derailment of the peace deal aggravated the security situation in the south. It also reinforced the long-held Muslim perception that the Christian majority was never keen on peace but only interested in marginalising the Muslims in the south.

However, the 'business-as-usual' policy cannot go on due to the changes in the national, regional and global security landscape. This has to do with the rise of Islamist violent extremism driven by developments in the Middle East with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) as the key player. The big question is – will Mindanao become Islamic State's headquarters for Southeast Asia as it was for the Al Qaeda in the past? The failed peace process will definitely play a role in facilitating IS entry into the region. However, this could be prevented if the president-elect implements his promises. Why is there hope under Duterte?

Duterte as Game-changer for Peace in Mindanao

Duterte's possible game-changing role can emanate from six key factors:

1. Mayor from the South

With a political career spanning nearly 30 years, he is one of the longest serving mayors in the Philippines. In addition to being Congressman and vice-mayor, he has served for seven terms as mayor of Davao City, Mindanao. He is credited for bringing peace and development to one of the most violent cities in the country. He was the Philippines' first mayor to give Muslim representation, appointing them as vice-mayors to represent Muslim interests. Thus, he is grounded in southern politics and aware of the intricacies of dealing with Muslim Mindanao. He has also claimed Moro roots through his grandmother.

2. Man with Power and Legitimacy

Duterte enters office with a powerful mandate. This will give him strong legitimacy to undertake change. With a powerful political will and political capital, he is in a position to break the intractable logjam in the south and deliver peace to the nation, something he has promised to do.

3. President Who Fulfils his Promises

In the presidential campaign, Duterte was the only candidate from Mindanao. He was also the only one who met MILF leaders at their camp, talked of passing the BBL, spoke of the need to address Muslim grievances and the importance of peace in Mindanao for the whole of Philippines. The core of his policy to bring stability is to create a federal system with the BBL as a keystone that can be applied nationwide.

He promised to convene a Constitutional Commission to amend the 1987 constitution so that a new political structure can be established. Duterte has stated that he intends to appoint as his peace adviser Jesus Dureza, someone who had

served as presidential peace adviser to former presidents Arroyo and Ramos – thus demonstrating that peace is a priority for him.

4. President Who Does the Right Thing

After decades of missed opportunities, Filipinos have elected a man who is a deliverer. More important is that what Duterte has to do is not driven by rhetoric but the right thing to do. A failure to deliver the peace can lead to dire consequences. The MILF may be forced to take up arms again and the other armed groups will lose what little incentives there are to make peace with Manila. Such a situation can also provide IS with a golden opportunity to establish its base in Mindanao to threaten the Philippines and the wider Southeast Asian region. This will only worsen the state of radicalisation and terrorism in the Philippines and Southeast Asia as a whole. Hence, re-starting the peace process is vital for national and regional peace and stability.

5. Right Man at the Right Time

After the failure of the 1996 ARMM deal and the stalling of the 2014 CAB, the timing is right for the 'man from the outside' to make a difference. Duterte has a golden opportunity to deliver peace to the south and to the Philippines, something he has promised to do and something that he is also in a position to deliver.

6. Differentiating from the Past

The 71-year-old president-elect has an opportunity to break and differentiate himself from the past and leave behind a legacy of peace for the country. He has an opportunity to deliver the 'Davao City' model of peace, development and security at the national level for all to savour.

Philippines on Cusp of Change?

The Philippines today stands on the cusp of change – should Duterte walk the talk and deliver. At the vortex of this is a newly-elected president, with immense track record and popularity, and with near-revolutionary ideas of bringing the country to the next phase of peace and development. The population is also craving for change. An integral element in this shift is the peace agreement in the south. The dribbling of the ball may finally have a chance to culminate in a peace goal to the benefit of the nation and the wider region.

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