

# Philippines: On the Government/MILF Framework Agreement

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## **GPH-MILF FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT: A MEETING OF SIMILAR MINDSETS AND COMMON INTERESTS**

The 32<sup>nd</sup> round of the Exploratory Talks between the Negotiating Panels of the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) finally reached a “Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro”. A product of 16 years of negotiations, this document was preceded by the GPH–MILF Decision Points on Principles last April, 2012.

Louder than before, a global chorus of alleluias is heard from the United Nations, US, Japan, Britain, Switzerland, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Christian and Muslim political leaders, Mindanao business community, the AFP, and the peace movements in the country, with a definitive aura of certainty that peace is finally on the horizon. UN, Australia and EU called it a “historical leap” to reach a “landmark agreement”.

With pomp and grandeur, the “peace accord” was formally signed, October 15, at the Malacanan Palace.

Yes, everyone has long desired for peace in Mindanao. But any framework for agreement could only arise from the question why war was waged in the first place. At the ground, the ordinary people have long wanted to have peace—free from bombings, displacement, atrocities, and killings. Nobody wanted to become collateral damage of the war—war whose outcome is far from what the people wanted in the first place.

The United States, admittedly, plays a role in the Mindanao “peace” efforts. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Special Report 202 in February 2008 had this to say: “Without question, the US government could and must take an active lead role in any peace process in Mindanao. Apart from its official status and responsibilities, the US government has many more resources at its disposal than does USIP ... the US government wields significant leverage to encourage both the MILF and the GRP to sign and implement a sound agreement. US policy instruments in Mindanao include diplomacy, conditionality of US economic and military assistance programs, and more punitive measures on counterterrorism front.” USIP facilitated the peace process from 2004-2007.

Soon enough, the US had struck a level of collaboration with the MILF, as the other negotiating party. A cable released by Wikileaks last August 2, 2011 said that MILF leader Murad Ebrahim “had tagged the US as the ‘only country’ that could help solve the rebel group’s decades-long conflict with the Philippine government. By then, the MILF had consciously allowed itself to be an indispensable player in a peace game whose contours are defined by the US.

The earlier Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) was the best proof of this capitulation. But the BJE turned to be a fiasco when sections of the ruling class (both at the national and local levels) vehemently opposed the scheme. The Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA–AD)

creating the BJE was finally rendered unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

In less than a year after the botched MOA–AD, the International Contact Group (ICG) was formed in 2009. Its members are United Kingdom, Turkey, Japan and Saudi Arabia as well as representatives from Muhammadiyah (an Indonesia-based international Islamic NGO), Conciliation Resources (a UK-based international NGO), Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (a Switzerland-based international organization), and the Asia Foundation (TAF). The ICG “was created to complement the work of the Malaysian facilitator, particularly to aid in maintaining a level of comfort and mutual trust between the negotiating parties” (UK in the Philippines, August 27, 2012.)

Undeniably, both the Malaysian facilitator and the ICG provided the mediation, normally considered as “external involvement to the talks”. The participation of The Asia Foundation (TAF) as one of the members of ICG is most instructive. TAF has long been identified and documented as a front of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). TAF came in after the USIP.

The participation of Turkey came also as no surprise. The US ambassador to Turkey is Francis Ricciardone. The ambassador “was principally responsible in asking for MILF clarifications on their position on the war and eventually the State Department came out with the US policy on the Mindanao conflict in response to the letter of Salamat Hashim” in the earlier period. (Ishak Mastura, *Geo-political Games and Why Peace Talks Matter*, April 2, 2011). US ambassador to Indonesia Scott Marciel was the “Asean envoy of the US who carried the State Department’s letter to Murad Ebrahim in November 2009 regarding US policy on the Mindanao conflict (Ishak Mastura, *ibid.*).

In his speech on October 6, 2012, the President announced that the new political entity “deserves a name that symbolizes and honors the struggles of our forebears in Mindanao. That name will be Bangsamoro”.

The Filipino people, in general, and the people living in Mindanao, in particular, should be the reapers of the real peace dividends. Unfortunately, they could end empty handed.

Kilusan para sa Pambansang Demokrasya (KPD) views that honoring the Bangsamoro struggle is, first of all, to uphold and put into place the content of the struggle in the agreement, that is, assertion of national sovereignty. Bangsamoro emerged out of the anti-colonial struggle during the early part of the Moro resistance in the 1970s. Its roots can be traced farther back to the 1906 Bud Dajo and 1913 Bud Bagsak massacres of Tausugs who defied the payment of a head tax and disarmament policy of the American troops.

The fundamental problem of the ordinary Moro people—the very condition created by the long history of neo-colonialism in the country was never a part of the agenda neither of the BJE nor of the new agreement. At best, it only considers peripheral facets of the problem like marginalization, monopoly of land, constricting territory and private interests within the Moro lands.

The new framework agreement clearly declares that, “vested property rights shall be recognized and respected”. Without any doubt the new framework could be a mechanism wherein vested interests (of the Moro and non-Moro elite and of foreigners) will get the best terms. The agreement could very well provide the local ruling class wide latitude in their maneuvers within the new political entity.”

The key positions of the new state apparatus would again become “prized trophies to be won and plundered”. The long history of feudal relations in the Moro territories will all the more establish the personal power of the propertied class. Patronage will again be the main mechanism to integrate the Moro people in the new political entity.

PNoy has also earlier indicated that the cessation of war, as a logical consequence of the agreement,

will pave the way for the unhampered operation of capital in the profitable sections of the new political entity (NPE). In the whole island of Mindanao, the imperialist plunder is yet to unfold in these areas. The Liguasan march in the heartland of Mindanao has natural gas deposits with an estimated worth of \$580 billion. The Sulu and Tawi-tawi Seas are proven to be rich in oil, running also in billions of dollars. Expansion of palm oil plantations, business process outsourcing (BPO) and tourism are eyed this early.

Foreign equities in Mindanao and the rest of the country could be further widened should the constitutional provision of 60-40 Filipino-foreign rule on ownership of land and businesses be relaxed. This provision has been consistently referred to as an obstacle to foreign direct investments (FDI) in the Philippines.

PNoy admits that the Framework Agreement is “still a work in progress, there are still details that both sides must hammer out”. But unlike the BJE debacle before, the latest agreement is welcomed with relief and hope by both the local elite and the people, especially the war-weary constituents of the viewed as failure and almost derelict entity, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The new framework is additional feather in the cap of the still popular President Noynoy Aquino who vows to complete the institutionalization of the new regional set-up until his term ends in 2016.

The agreement is meant to urgently end the war. If it stops here the new agreement could only mean the perpetuation of a system where the dominance of vested interests (whether Moro, non-Moro and foreign) is accentuated.

Cessation of hostilities is most welcome. However, what is most important is the elimination of the roots of conflict and war. The continuing quest for just and lasting peace that has since been done through negotiations could only be more real and meaningful to the people if they are the main actors in the process and not those who have monopoly vested interests in the forsaken “Land of Promise”. The people’s legitimate and fundamental interests—national sovereignty, national patrimony and genuine democracy—should be the main agenda.

KPD and its member organizations would stay keenly vigilant to expose and oppose the Framework Agreement for what it is—a structure to perpetuate the system ruled by elite class interests; a disservice to the Christian, Lumad and Moro martyrs who laid down their lives in the long struggle against the colonialism by US imperialism.

The hands of the US Armed Forces and government are quite obvious in the whole process of crafting the documents of the “peace agreement”.

**Kilusan para sa Pambansang Demokrasya (KPD)**

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