

# **Philippines: Storm surging for Peace in Mindanao - Part 6 -The Building of Physical Infrastructures: Do the People NEED THEM?**

Sunday 5 April 2015, by [DE SILVA Raymund](#) (Date first published: 3 April 2015).

After the declaration of an all out war against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) on February 25, 2015, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) General Gregorio Pio Catapang, Jr. had announced an end of this war on March 26, 2015 or almost a month later. The general has claimed that the BIFFs were effectively paralyzed and dispersed and are not anymore capable of launching further offensives.

Yesterday, the AFP had to fire several rounds of their artillery because there were sightings of the BIFF closing in on Datu Unsay municipality (highway municipality). It seems that General Catapang has prematurely declared the incapacitation of the BIFFs. Indeed they (BIFFs) have dispersed in small groups but they still have capacity to regroup on their own time and place.

Three days ago, a much projected activity of national and regional officers which included Secretary Butch Abad of the Department of Budget and Management, General Gregorio Pio Catapang, Jr and Governor Mujiv Hataman had trooped to the municipality of Mamasapano to launch the building of the famous bridge of Mamasapano and other infrastructures. A not so good acting and posturing to cover up the past and long neglect of the national and regional governments to municipalities like Mamasapano. It would help very much if one tries to look at the miserable situations of other municipalities in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) or particularly in the province of Maguindanao. Amidst the billions of pesos which have been poured in and made available to these areas, the people remained incredibly poor or even have become poorer as administration changes from one to the other. In fact it will help a lot if a thorough and objective audit will be done from the time of the creation of an expanded ARMM (2001) to the present. At least people can see where are Tens of billions of pesos they paid as taxes have been spent. This becomes more important in the context of President Aquino slogan of having “Matuwid na Daan” as applied in the ARMM. This is very timely since the six year term of the President is about to end. But, this audit activity becomes most important in the current context of building the Bangsamoro which again requires several billions of pesos coming from the peoples’ tax and in effect depriving the budgetary needs of other regions for the sake of building peace of the government with the MILF.

The budgetary needs in building the Bansamor;o is now subject of Congressional debates (between Senate and the Government Peace Panel – GPH Peace Panel). It should be made clear that the peace building activities are priceless. One can never put a price in pursuing peace - that is - if this peace is both sustainable and inclusive. But this is another story.

The much projected national and regional activity of building bridge in Mamasapano and other socio-economic projects for the people there should really be put into its proper perspective. If this is a cover up of the past neglect - then it should really start in building the economic-socio and political infrastructures. Just like in many if not all areas in Maguindnao or other parts of ARMM

what have been functioning are the informal or non-formal social, economic and political structures. State institutions (except schools) have not functioned in these areas and the financiers and its kind are the ones who have the control of the State functions in underground and informal manner. In events like wars, armed conflicts and clan wars (*rido*) those people involve in these activities have to run to the financiers to loan money to start and sustain their activities. Even for the Internal Revenue Allocation (IRA) which a government unit receives regularly (but always delayed) the LGU has to run to the financiers in their own way to make a loan with excessive interests. In effect the financiers have the effective control of the LGU and its activities.

A very good case in point is the 5<sup>th</sup> class municipality like Mamasapano. Next year there will be the local and national elections and yet Governor Toto Mangudadatu – the governor of Maguindanao has never set his foot in Mamasapano and in many if not all municipalities of the second District of Maguindanao. This is for obvious reason and that is- the Ampatuan controlled these territories. The governor of the ARMM, if not for the January 25, 2015 failed police operation could not have come and visit the Mamasapano municipality or other municipalities of Maguindanao for that matter. It would mean that for the need of the municipality the Mayor has to rely on other means – like loans from the financiers.

While the bamboo bridge of Mamasapano is a clear sign of past government neglect – the stress here should not be literally the bamboo bridge – but the abject poverty and miserable situations of the people. This leads to many questions. What has happened to the much projected Sadjá Hatra or the poverty alleviation program which the President himself launched two (2) years ago in the MILF main camp – Darapanan? Where have those millions go? It has been known that Sadjá Hatra projects are under the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace Process (OPAPP) which deals directly to the identified beneficiaries of the MILF/BIAF. Assuming that the January 25 Mamasapano bloodlust did not happen, and the Bangsamoro Transition government (BTA) would have been set up by June 2015 to May 2016 (election). What could have happened to those municipalities like Mamasapano? Will there be various projects from both Regional and National governments? Will there be miracle overnight transforming the municipalities into vibrant and dynamic political and economic activities? What will be the composition of United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) the electoral body set up by the MILF to govern the Bangsamoro and LGUs late last year? Should the commanders of the three base commands (Base Commands 105, 106 and 118) compose it? Is Mayor Bizar Ampatuan, the current Mamasapano mayor be included? What about the BIFF, should it morphed into MILF to be part of the government under the Bangsamoro? These questions can also be addressed to other municipalities within and outside the Bangsamoro. But since peoples' money would have been spent to make this some kind of miracle to happen, further studies should be done so as to help the Congress and the Office of the President to decide in favor of a Sustainable and Inclusive peace.

## **BUILDING POWER BLOCKS: SPENDING PEOPLES' MONEY**

It will be good to pursue the case of the province of Maguindanao. Since 2001 – when the expanded ARMM was approved through RA 9054, the provincial government has to build three (3) provincial government centers. One is in the town of Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. This was built up earlier during the time when the Mastura Clan (with Candao) had controlled of the province. The Clan has its own power based in the town of Sultan Kudarat. When the Ampatuan Clan took over the province, they had to create an “ambush me” situation so as to have serious reasons to have the provincial seat of power transfer to Shariff Aguak – the power base of the Ampatuans. They have to build (just like Sultan Kudarat) another multi-million pesos (if not billions) building for the province. But just like the buildings in Sultan Kudarat, the Shariff Aguak provincial government buildings have not been used and have been fast deteriorating. Peoples' money have been spent to these buildings and people every time they pass by on the roads where they can literally see the shameful and wasteful spending of their own money. When Governor Toto Mangudadatu was elected provincial governor

(after the 2009 Maguindanao Massacre) he also set up his own provincial center in his own power base - Buluan, Maguindanao, where one has to pass the provinces of North Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat to reach the place. When can we stop spending peoples' money to build buildings to satisfy the interest of a particular clan and group? It should be but proper to call for audits on all those projects because peoples' money have been spent in the most wasteful manner.

No government official from the President to ARMM governors have raised points on these blatant abuse in spending the peoples' money. For instance, in the case of the Ampatuans, the government or even the BIR Commissioner Henares have not raised the points of their excessive wealth and money. Are they paying exact taxes? Currently, they are trying to buy justices from the courts and to the relatives of the 2009 Maguindanao Massacre victims in order to be free in time of 2016 elections. One of them has been freed already by posting bail bond worth Php11.5Millions.

As mentioned earlier, one of the topics to be discussed in Congress will be about finances and the budget needed to set up the Bangsamoro, it will be very helpful to consider the abovementioned points. It is even timely to consider now or to anticipate such important point since a new Bangsamoro Political entity should be build up. How many more buildings should be build? Cotabato City has decided through a Sangguning P0anlunsod resolution late last year, to be excluded in the Bangsamoro, what will happen to the multi-million ARMM building located in the city? Will the MILF build a Regional complex in its main camp - Darapanan?

The stress here is not the physical buildings but the manifestations and symbols behind the physical infrastructures. Obviously, the need for unity among and between clans is urgently needed in the province of Maguindanao lone. How can one build a Bangsamoro political entity amidst this great divide? How can the MILF unite these clans because they are part of the Bangsamoro? And we are just talking here about Maguindanao, what about Lanao del Sur and the island provinces?

Again, building a bridge in Mamasapano is a good propaganda for President and his Administration but it needs more than the physical infrastructure - it is the socio-economic and political infrastructures which are badly needed. If billions of money will be poured in in these areas and the people, there should also be infrastructures to ensure that taxes be collected and should be give priorities as well. One can not always justify the blatant neglect and historical injustice to be passive and mendicant in the current quest for just and equitable society we want to build. The government that should be build as result of the struggle for right to self determination should be the one which will help eradicate economic exploitation, political isolation and cultural alienation - in short erase the National Oppression and its current manifestations. Anything short term than this, is simply mainstreaming activities - and no political and economic value added to the national liberation movement. One should deserve the government that it wants to have.

### **ARMM - A FAILED POLITICL EXPERIMENT? OR FAILED POLITICAL WILL?**

At this point one cannot really understand the Statement of both the President and the MILF that the ARMM (expanded) is a failed political experiment. In fact they both agreed that a new Bangsamoro political entity cannot be set up on this kind of political entity.

But if one tries to examine the content of the BBL, many in its provisions have been culled out from the RA 9054 which created the expanded ARMM, like the terms of territorial scope. It (BBL) even includes the result of 2001 plebiscite expanding the areas of Bangsamoro (six municipalities of Lanao del Norte and 39 barrios of North Cotabato) when people decided to be included in the ARMM, they did so because they believed that it was the MNLF who were leading in the conduct of the 2001 plebiscite (Nur Misuari group boycotted the plebiscite) but it is besides the point - that is- it was an MNLF activity and possibly if it was done by the MILF people might have different view

and could have opted not to be included in the ARMM.

One can also see many economic provisions from the expanded ARMM which have become integral part of the proposed BBL.

SO ONE WONDERS, WHY DID the ARMM Fail? It has not been perfect but it has been a product of the political settlement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which for a while the MILF had been part. It has also been a product of the historical struggle for Right to Self-Determination of the Moro People to eliminate the national oppression which brought about so much miseries and sufferings on the Moro Peoples. More than 150,000 lives had been lost because of such struggle. The blood of the martyrs of the Moro Mujahiddens from both MNLF and MILF and those who died in OPLAN MERDEKA had been offered as sacrifice to the altar of justice and freedom.

It could not be a failure. The struggle of the Moro people now as led by the MILF is an integral part of the century-old struggle of the Moro People for Self-Determination. The Bangsamoro Political Entity is the current manifestation of the Bangsamoro struggle. As it has been shown, it (political entity) does not just fall from heaven, rather it is a political block build on other blocks set up by the Mujahiddens and its martyrs in the past and has continued at present in its current form and substance and led by the MILF. Forgetting such historical past will be fatal for it could only bring a very uncertain future.

If the failure has been referred to the ARMM administrations after the MNLF (Misuari and F. Hussien) especially the Ampatuan period then it was because they did not follow or not be consistent with the struggle for right to self determination as manifested in the provisions in the RA 9054. It is very clear that it was not RA 9054 which has failed, it was the people including Misuari who did not fully agree with the autonomous provisions as part of their political settlement with the GRP. It has been the failure of the MNLF and those who supported them, including foreign governments and entities which helped in the failure to realize the appropriate political expression as well as appropriations at that time of the struggle to right to self determination in the form of autonomy. The appearance of people and clans like the Ampatuans is the most concrete picture of what failure means. The coming into existence of radical Islamic fundamentalist groups like Abu Sayyaf and other networks of Jemaah Islamiyah is a clear proof that Moro Revolutionary groups like MNLF had failed in the realization of the Bangsamoro's quest for national liberation and freedom. These Islamic Fundamentalist groups and their movements have tried to fill in the gaps left vacuum by the MNLF - and they seem to fall and take roots in the fertile ground on the Moro peoples sufferings and miseries. These concrete political experiences should give valuable lessons especially for the MILF. Because if by failure, they have in mind the people behind the past and current ARMM officials then it is just a little part of that failure. They should study and review what the framework of the ARMM is. Does it address those reasons behind why there is such a national oppression and has never faded away inspite of so many economic and political investments poured in and allocated into it? What are the reasons behind of the MNLF's divisions into several groups especially after the 1996 final peace agreement? Answers to these questions can help very much in setting up the new Bangsamoro political entity. There is an urgent need to have an objective appraisal on the historicity of the Moro struggle for their right to self determination in order to understand the current set up and become much prepared for the future.

## **NATIONAL PEACE SUMMIT (NPS): HEARING ONLY THE VOICES FROM ABOVE**

The setting up of peace council by the President to further discuss the provisions of the BBL, is no different from the act of physical building the Mamasapano bridge. If there is one thing that should be learned from these Presidential initiatives - it is the superficial if not a very shallow appraisal and

understanding of the situations of Mindanao and of the country. Any activity with this regards should be part of the macro development framework of the country. Activities like the much projected building of a bridge in Mamasapano is just for show at best and band aid solution at its worst. What will be the purpose of a physical bridge if the essential bridge for life will not be facilitated to flourish? Priority should be given on building economic and political structures to replace the informal political and economic machineries which currently exist in the municipality of Mamasapano and in many if not all the municipalities in the ARMM and the whole country. The setting up and strengthening of formal government infrastructures can help government officials to become responsible and accountable to the people.

The people who were appointed by the President to compose the Peace Council are indeed well known personalities in their own fields. But they simply belong to the elite and can hardly hear the voices of the broad section of the three peoples from below in Mindanao in whose name the BBL is proposed. One can just imagine what will happen in April 6, 2015 the day when the National Peace Council is convened to discuss the BBL.

Besides one wonders why the President has called for the convening of the National Peace Council. Actually it is an indirect admission that the so called wide spread and broadest consultations with different stakeholders initiated by the OPAPP and the GPH and MILF Peace panels before the Mamasapano bloodlust were just information drives and not hearing the voices of the peoples.

But assuming that after a lightning which hits the President and illuminating his mind to call for a national Peace summit, it should be a some kind of wakeup call which tells them the basic truth that their version of the BBL has not been acceptable to the majority of people in Mindanao or in the ARMM. This means that if there was no January 25, 2015 Mamasapano fiasco of the police operation these oppositions and genuine peoples' voices would just be permanently stifled and silenced.

The convening of the NPS to discuss important political issues like the BBL is indeed very important but it should be done as integral part of the democratic consultative processes and not to neutralize and deodorize the Presidential blunders.

## **Conclusion**

It is just a little more than one year (14 months to be exact) before the national and local elections, the President and his administration should unite its acts together in order to face squarely the burning political issues at hand. For instance, the meeting of minds between the executive and the legislative is very important. It should be best if the judiciary can come in and join in the unifications so as to face MILF and its peace proposal as one. Disunity among and between the government branches and machineries are not only giving the BBL and the peace process for free and exclusive for the MILF but will be again a huge waste of peoples' time and resources.

The worst thing to happen will be creating a political entity in Mindanao which divides the people rather than unites them to work together for the attainment of just, sustainable and inclusive peace.

This is just like building walls of division rather than building unity among and between the three peoples in Mindanao.

The failure to do these basic activities of unification can result to another serious blunder and it will be the thousands if not millions of people in ARMM or in Mindanao who will become collateral damage.

The building of the Mamasapano Bridge and the convening of the NPS should be seen in the context of correcting the past neglect of the government in planting the seeds and nurturing them to bear

fruits of peace. The government as well as the MILF should always transcend from their own needs and interests. After all the Bangsamoro Political Entity is not only exclusive to the MILF – people in a realized Bangsamoro do not only belong to the MILF, they include other people and other political groups.

The Bangsamoro government should be built in a strong foundation – that is – based on justice. The struggle to get justice to the families of the 2009 Maguindanao massacre should be given due attention and priority. The loss of lives in the botched PNP/SAF operation in Mamasapano should be given immediate attention and the perpetrators must be brought to justice. It will be very decisive moves if justice and indemnification of the victims of the massacres of the 2008 MOA-AD should be given priority as well.

Making these steps for justice and indemnification will surely pave the way into looking and correcting the historical injustices done to the Bangsamoro as well as the Indigenous People in the ARMM areas and in Mindanao.

These processes if done immediately and correctly should soften the way of building just and sustainable peace.

The remaining days of the Aquino administration if done properly and work towards such direction can rightly claim a durable legacy in the country during the last phase of his term. Surely he will be remembered on the same level if not higher than his parents. This is more than receiving a prestigious award of the Nobel Peace Prize.

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**P.S.**

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