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Philippines

**A critique of the Framework
Agreement on Bangsamoro
(FAB) between the
Government of the Republic of
the Philippines (GPH) and the
Moro Islamic Front (MILF)**

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The formal signing of the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) on September 2, 1996 had brought in so much joy, optimism and new hope to so many people. It had shown a picture of reaching and finally “seeing the long awaited light at the end of the tunnel”. The Organization of the Islamic Countries (OICs) had hilariously celebrated the signing of the FPA for it had a direct hand and even a very decisive role in reaching such historical event. The multilateral bodies and the International Donor countries had promised the release and literally flooding of more funds to Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and its transitory mechanism for expansion of the regional autonomous territory – namely the Southern Philippine Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD).

The signing of the FPA had gone through several meticulous processes and resulted in the strengthening of cooperation between the government and the MNLF. Four(4) months before the September 1996 signing, an agreement was reached in June 1996 to establish the Southern Philippines Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD). It would be composed of 14 provinces (including the new province of Sarangani) and the nine cities as stipulated in the Tripoli Agreement in 1976.

The FPA has two phases namely: Phase I, which covered three (3) years, and would be for the establishment of transitional mechanism specifically the formation of the SZOPAD. This would be chaired by the MNLF Chair, whose task was to oversee the development initiatives and programs in the 14 provinces and 9 cities. The MNLF Chair would also be elected as Governor of the ARMM. This phase of three years would culminate in a plebiscite in the SZOPAD areas to approve amendments to the Organic Law R.A. 6734 of 1989. The plebiscite would also determine the provinces and cities which would be part of the ARMM. The Phase II would have started after the plebiscite and when an expanded ARMM was formed. The ARMM was composed of only four provinces and no city after 1989 (a result of the plebiscite). Cotabato City, the political center of the ARMM since 1987, did not vote to be part of the ARMM.

The whole process would be implemented for several years but only the part of the Agreement which mentioned about the integration of the armed combatants of the MNLF was said to be relatively successful. Enormous amount of resources both financial and human - had been poured into this political activity – and now it had been considered by everybody as a failed political project.

It is easily noticed that there are many similarities between the FPA and the FAB- which will eventually lead to signing of FPA between the GPH and the MILF.

But this period, everybody was very excited because for once and for all and after the almost four decades of the Moro struggle for self-determination led by the MNLF, it had reached a political resolution and peace had finally been achieved. Although, there were sectors who raised and expressed doubts about the success of the political process. No one had questioned the fact that such event could have indeed marked the resolution or at least achieved towards that direction - the Bangsamoro problem vis-a-vis the national oppression in the Philippine-Mindanao context.

The full support of the whole administration and government under the leadership of then President Fidel V. Ramos had made the doubts and hesitations of some sectors of society rest their concerns with much ease. The legal and constitutional experts of the administration had done their job well that the constitutional basis for the nature and

function of SPCPD was fulfilled with the Article X of the 1987 Philippine Constitution. In short, the cooptation and the mainstreaming of the MNLF to the Philippine dominant system had been almost completed both legislatively and judicially. The struggle for the right to self-determination of the Bangsamoro led by the MNLF had been almost consummated. It was now a matter of implementation which would prove to be the most difficult part of the Agreement. The enormous works of rebuilding the social infrastructure damaged and the physical infrastructure destroyed during the decades-long civil war, would prove to be even more difficult.

Only a few months after the signing of the FPA with the MNLF, the government sat down with the leadership of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to start another peace negotiation for the purpose of another ending of the Bangsamoro struggle for the right to self-determination. Since less attention had been given to such initiative, nobody really bothered to point out in the open about the stated political objective of the new peace negotiation for a new political settlement in the context of the newly signed FPA between the government and the MNLF which was also to have resolved the Bangsamoro problem. The act seemed to tell us that the FPA with the MNLF was already foreseen to be a failed political project before its implementation began.

Looking back at this stage, one can just surmise that the government did not really believe that with the FPA, the Bangsamoro problem was resolved that was why it had started another talk with the MILF or because of the peace momentum of the political event with the FPA, the government would not want to miss such opportune moment and it wanted to have the MILF in the package, hoping of course that such political initiative would be finalized in a short time or at least during the Ramos' term – a clear sign of underestimating the MILF.

On the other hand, the MILF had agreed to start the peace talks to make a political message to the country in general and to the Bangsamoro in particular that they were still a political force to reckon with and therefore they could not be sidelined because of the FPA between the MNLF and the government. Another point was that the leadership of the MILF was truly convinced that nothing would happen with the FPA and that it (MILF) could easily fill-in the political vacuum left by the MNLF. The MILF's engagement with the peace process with the Ramos government would provide the much needed political and democratic spaces for such moves and opportunities. The MILF central leadership had strongly believed that the opportunity that could be provided by the peace process would create a very excellent situation for their political and military expansion outside of the Maguindanao and Lanao provinces. It saw the political advantage to consolidate its political and military organizations without being bothered by military operations of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The MILF had also maximized the space that the peace process had created an excellent situation to strengthen its international networks outside the OIC which was tied like glue with the MNLF at that time.

It is very important to take note at that point the attitude of the MNLF leadership about the Indigenous Peoples' and their struggle for the right to self-determination. In the FPA, the IPs were never factored in and their ancestral domains were treated as part of the Bangsamoro territories. As a people, the IPs were referred to as highlanders.

For the MNLF, the whole of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan were part of the Bangsamoro homeland which explained the inclusion of the thirteen (13) provinces out of twenty one (21) at that time of Tripoli Agreement and nine (9) cities out of fifteen (15) cities. The historical blind spots were intentional to exclude those citizens who were the original inhabitants of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan but who did not convert into Islam and even those who converted into Christianity during the Spanish colonization. And worst, even those who were Moro Muslims but would not wish to be part of the MNLF were unilaterally claimed by the MNLF. The concrete case of this situation is the MILF unilaterally claimed by MNLF but which would later claim the same right over the other peoples' in Mindanao in its Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro.

The framework of compartmentalized peace could be a clear case of not really wanting a genuine and sustainable peace but more to divide the revolutionary movement and the people. And worst could be integral part of the

Agreement although almost always covertly or implicit, the decommissioning or the disarming of the combatants of the revolutionary front involved would not really be stressed because they would be asked to help the government to control and disarm the other armed groups in their claimed territories.

The experience of the MNLF and similar situation in the current context could definitely fail in building and sustaining peace in Mindanao. The selective historical amnesia of the revolutionary fronts and movements would promote more divisions than the basic unity of the broadest possible sections of the population that genuine revolutionary front worth its name would really work out as one of its urgent tasks.

The historical context and current realities of Mindanao should be understood objectively and put into hearts by any revolutionary leadership so that it can get the widest and broadest support in its peace process and sustaining it. Concretely, the not so recent experience would tell us that "peace from above" would never succeed. The talks done and concluded between and among the leaders of both the government and Moro Fronts and keep other stakeholders in the waiting and will be involved only during the plebiscite would never go far in reaching a comprehensive political settlement and sustainable peace in the country.

Does the Right to Self Determination of smaller and weaker nations have to be liquidated in an arrangement between bigger and stronger nations?

In a multi-nationalities and multi-ethnic nation like the Philippines, the struggles for the right to self determination of oppressed and dominated nations against national oppressions have been complicated since the basic framework used by the revolutionary movements is more theoretically inclusive but exclusive in deed.

The issue has become more complicated when political resolution and the so-called peaceful settlement is reached by one revolutionary movement with the dominant system because they (revolutionary party/Front and the government) tend to be very divisive and mainly politically self fulfilment process.

In no way and in no other situation/condition can a practice or fulfilment of the right to self determination of any nation/people can justify the liquidation of the right to self determination of other people/nation. This is very un-revolutionary to say the least and can invite more wars rather than create situation conducive in building and sustaining peace.

The exclusive framework for the resolution of the struggle for the right to self determination is politically synonymous with the neo-liberal program of globalization as implemented by the dominant system of the country and the perpetuation of the political divide among and between people.

The adoption of such framework in both theory and practice by any revolutionary movement is simply political capitulation in favour of the elites of both the dominant and dominated nations.

The unevenness and the backwardness or the combination of both in the economic development of the areas where the minority nationalities are found can be a very strong reinforcing factor in the mainstreaming of the revolutionary group/party which represent the abovementioned nationalities in their struggle for self determination. The introduction of modern technologies in agriculture for instance would easily attract the attention of the Bangsamoro farmers in the context of its own very backward technology and absence of development model in agriculture by the MNLF. It would create the situation to easily adopt the neo-liberal framework of capitalist globalization.

In the Philippine context, inspite of its archipelagic nature, the neo-liberal orientation of its economic development has

been geared towards the formation and strengthening of one market since the early 90's or the post dictatorial period.

Under the Presidency of Fidel V. Ramos (1992-1998), the country had formulated the Philippine 2000, a comprehensive economic development program based on the neo-liberal framework of capitalism. Mindanao would be integrated into the Philippine economic program and its specific role had been identified in the development of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines (BIMP) East Asia Growth Area (EAGA). And it was such historical context that the Philippine government entered into a final peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), without which Mindanao and the neighboring islands would not have a favourable and secured environment for the development of a vibrant and feasible market of the country and in the region.

The MNLF did not have a distinct economic program and direction to present and argue with the Philippine government before, during and after the 1996 FPA and therefore its leadership under Nur Misuari with the ARMM and SPCPD as core and expansion areas covered by the agreement had to follow the government's neo-liberal framework of the Ramos government. Hence, during those times, one could always hear Misuari boasting about building eight-lane super highways in Sulu and other parts of ARMM instead of prioritizing the well-being of the peoples in ARMM through providing the proper environment and enhancing the skills needed for the economic productivity and development in the region and with its population instead of having economic hallucinations disguised as economic vision.

A nation/people who do not have a clear economic framework and agenda with its people in the course of their struggle will definitely have difficulties in achieving its political independence be it in the form of secession or by autonomy from a bigger and stronger nation. Relative economic independence of a smaller and weaker nation fighting for political self determination from bigger and stronger nation can sustain the former in its struggle and even make it less susceptible from the bullying or blackmailing of the latter.

The 1996 FPA agreement between the government and the MNLF had definitely been a unilateral show of the government over Misuari's MNLF which swallowed the neo-liberal economic framework of the Ramos government and in the process politically marginalizing itself as manifested in a weakened organization and a split/divided leadership. It was just a matter of time when it would be completely sidelined and become irrelevant. The money and resources which were pour down to the ARMM and the MNLF could not do something to reverse the situation in favour of the MNLF. In fact, these resources and finances had added to the divisions and splits of the MNLF.

In the case of MNLF and its FPA with the Ramos government, it was clear that is (MNLF) had been used by the representative of the dominant class of the dominant nation to subjugate and liquidate the right to self determination of the smaller and weaker nations. This was done by simply ignoring the issue and citing historical legitimacy as understood by them. Through the integration of the Bangsamoro Armed Forces (BAF) into the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police, the Ramos government had intended to use them against the other revolutionary groups but at the same time distancing them (BAF) from the leadership in the MNLF.

Furthermore, any nation or people who oppress other people cannot liberate itself. Hence, liquidating the right of self determination of other nations in the name of other's right to determine itself is in essence allowing itself to be enslaved by the dominant system's national oppression which it has vowed to eliminate. The enslavement that it did not want others to do to itself is the same enslavement it had done with other nation/people when it included them unilaterally in its claim and possession.

Can the freedom of smaller and weaker nations be secured by the "victory" of the bigger and stronger nations?

The freedom of smaller and weaker nations cannot be achieved by becoming integral part of the system of the neoliberal capitalist globalization. It should be the result of struggle for self determination of peoples in smaller and weaker nations and can only be sustained and won if it will be part of the struggle of other nations against today's version of Imperialism.

The struggle against national oppression can be effectively waged and eventually won if solidarity among and between smaller and weaker nations is established. Furthermore, it can be strengthened and sustained if the oppressed and the most exploited sections of these nations are united in struggling against the national oppression and forge solidarity with the oppressed and exploited sections of the stronger and bigger nations.

The establishment and strengthening of solidarity from below can only be genuinely done in revolutionary context and when the oppressed and exploited sectors of the dominated and dominant nations have become empowered. Their solidarity has made them assert and struggle for their rights, build their own lives and determine their own future.

This is building peace from below wherein people can genuinely express their voices to become part of the arrangement of the bigger nations. The opposite is the peace from above as claimed by the stronger and bigger nations. The latter will first claim or occupy the territories of the smaller and weaker nations and they ask the population's consent to be part of their claim. Consultations such as these are reduced to a shameful comedy. Peoples should give their reply/consent with regards to their inclusion in any political arrangement without being threatened by ready to shoot guns.

The democratic unquestionable "right" of the nations to self determination should not necessarily become into the right of strong and big nations to make acquisitions and impose oppression over weak and small nations. The right of the big and strong nation to self determination does not and cannot negate the same right of the small and weak nations to freely determine their lives and their future.

The basic right of small and weak nation can only be secured by themselves and in solidarity with other oppressed nations and the most exploited sector within the weak and small nations with the unconditional support of the oppressed and exploited sectors from the strong and big nations. Those from above from both strong and big nations as well as from the small and weak nations cannot be relied upon to deliver genuine support to those from below.

Only political charlatans or hopeless simpletons can still believe that the freedom of the small and weak nations can be secured by the victory of one side or the other. Determining people's lives and future cannot be relied on to others' struggle for genuine emancipation. National liberation starts in the process of struggle in achieving it and democracy should be realized in the process of the same struggle of peoples for self determination.

Can self suppression or passive opposition to remain at home and become neutral, as form of self preservation of the weak and small nations a viable political option?

Achieving political option of the self determination can only be done in a political and democratic struggles against the dominant system which has created the national oppression.

In the current context of neoliberal globalization, the dominant system becomes part of the global capital domination of the poor people/nation in weak and small nations. The ruling classes of the strong and big nations and the weak and small nations have united in the interest against the poor of both strong and weak nations. Furthermore, the ruling classes of the weak and small nations can also be prominent in leading the weak and small nations in the national struggle against the dominant and strong nations in order to maintain its monopoly and self interest within

the former nations. The people of weak and small nations can have material bases to unite in the struggle against the dominant system which cause national oppression but at the same time ensure that democratic content of such struggle should be part in all the stages and not at the later part of the struggle.

The ruling class of the dominant and strong nation will always reach out with the ruling classes of the dominated and weak nations to suppress the democratic and national struggle of the oppressed sectors of the latter. The former can even use one or two small and weak nations to fight the other similar situated nations through granting a pseudo form of political options for self determination in order to weaken the democratic forces so that they can easily be neutralized and defeated.

The national oppression even in the current context of neo-liberal framework cannot be eliminated by granting political autonomy to any weak and small nations by the big and strong nations within its framework. The substantial change can only be achieved by changing the power structure and real power built from below. The oppressed section of the weak and small nations should empower themselves politically and economically and from this point reach out to the oppressed sections of the dominant and strong nations to complete the power structure change. It would be hopeless and directionless to ask the ruling class of the strong and big nations to grant political accommodation for the latter. The struggle and ownership of the political option that will be appropriate for a genuinely struggling people can only be earned and not given as a grant.

The people who do not struggle for their political option to self determination do not deserve to have one because if they do not work hard to achieve what they should deserve to win, they cannot also sustain and even reach a higher stage of development as a people building their own future.

Any form of self determination can only be as good as the people who struggle for it, earn it and make the best out of it. This process cannot be requested or be transferred to any people regardless how deserving or undeserving they can be.

Can the Framework Agreement on Bangsamoro (FAB) be an answer to the Moro Question and the Philippine/Mindanao problem?

At a glance, there are substantial similarities between the processes and the substance of the MNLF-GRP Final Peace Agreement (FPA) and the FAB and the eventual FPA between the GPH and the MILF.

Both have gone through elaborate stages before reaching political arrangements for the transition from old to new forms of political governance. In the case of MNLF, the process and agreement had been reached to form an expanded ARMM and had amended R.A. 6734 to have R.A. 9054 to ensure its constitutional bases. It had established the SPCPD which would manage the development activities in the SZOPAD under the leadership of the MNLF. In the case of MILF, it will make laws called Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) to amend R.A. 9054 and form the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) to replace the ARMM. All of these initiatives will be under the leadership of the MILF and which will be part of the formation of the Bangsamoro Government (BG).

Both processes look very elaborate at least theoretically and politically doable except that, they both would be implemented in the socio-economic and political context of the existing dominant system of the Philippines. This brings one and all to ask basic question of the root cause/s of the Bangsamoro struggles for self determination. The dominant system in the country is a neo-liberal stage of global capitalism which has caused the intensification of the current form of national oppression of the Bangsamoro especially the most oppressed and exploited sections of its population. The Bangsamoro people in general has been economically exploited, politically marginalized and culturally alienated for a very long time. The struggles for self determination led by different Moro revolutionary fronts

were all geared towards the elimination of the national oppression and the causes which made them possible. The setting-up of the political and economic structures has been part of the process of building a nation within a bigger nation.

Instead of initiating activities to resolve the causes of the national oppression the dominant system through the Philippine government has tried to hasten the mainstreaming of the Bangsamoro into the system of the country. This kind of solution has been patterned to the pacification model used by the colonial governments in the past.

The glaring ineffectiveness and failure of this kind of model had caused the upsurge of the Moro uprisings and revolutionary movements since the colonial years and even today.

The FPA between the government and the MNLF is the latest version of this model where peace is won not in the battlefields but on the negotiating table but miserably failed. And one of the strong manifestations for its failure is the FAB. But where did the MNLF-FPA fail that the FAB can take on and learn from it?

The national oppression of the Bangsamoro which is the main reason for its struggle for self determination has never been addressed in the FPA. The focus was only on the MNLF leadership especially Nur Misuari and when the former and the latter became divided and weak, they became marginalized while the whole population of the Bangsamoro have been subjected to the process of mainstreaming.

The FAB, this early has shown similar signs where the MNLF is being swallowed by the dominant system. The BBL cannot be and will never be allowed to be contradictory to the substantial laws framed by the dominant system of the country. The BG will soon become integral part of the country's political system which will be dictated by the neo-liberal framework and its technocrats. The MILF does not have its own economic system and therefore it is a matter of time when new Bangsamoro elite or recycled elite will dominate the whole Bangsamoro population in connivance of the elite of the dominant system.

The FAB is not inclusive in spirit and in deed and if this orientation will not change it will lose the vital support of the non-Moro and non-Muslim population in Mindanao in particular and the whole country in general.

It has never factored in the distinct history and circumstances of the Indigenous (IPs) both as a people and having their distinct territories. Therefore, it cannot have genuine support of the IPs before, during and after the BG is established.

These are just few signs that the FAB cannot really answer the Bangsamoro issue on self determination and the Mindanao/Philippine problem with regards to the national oppression in the context of the neo-liberal capitalist-led globalization in Mindanao in particular and the whole country in general.