

LESSONS FROM THE NEGOTIATING TABLE: The True Meaning of Peace

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To begin with, since 1986 – 38 years ago and running through six administrations - there have been 18 rounds of peace talks between the GPH and NDFP. The first stage of the talks from 1992-2004 resulted in formal agreements signed by the two peace panels at foreign venues.

Among these agreements were the Hague Joint Declaration (1992) which set the frame of the peace negotiations aimed at attaining “a just and lasting peace,” based on “mutually acceptable principles, including national sovereignty, democracy and social justice and no precondition shall be made to negate the inherent character and purpose of the peace negotiations.” The Hague declaration also defined the sequence of the agenda paving the way for an agreement on the “substantive agenda” - respect for human rights and international humanitarian law (HR-IHL); socio-economic reforms (SER); political and constitutional reforms (PCR); end of hostilities followed by disposition of forces. Other agreements were the Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG, 1995). Peace negotiations with the Ramos administration created the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL, 1998). The First Oslo Agreement (2004) defined the role of the Third Party Negotiator – the Royal Norwegian Government.

Although intermittent, protracted, and nuanced by suspensions or collapse depending on the predisposition if not whims of the incumbent GPH presidency, the talks just the same laid down the basic mechanisms to move the peace negotiations forward.

Under the current administration since July 2016 the two peace panels – the GPH headed by Secretary Silvestre Bello and the NDFP headed by Fidel C. Agcaoili - held five rounds of formal talks but were suspended or cancelled four times by Duterte. The last formal talks on June 28 this year in Oslo where the agenda was about a stand down agreement and land distribution under the proposed Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms (CASER) was unceremoniously “postponed” by the president after a command conference with the DND-AFP. According to the NDFP, Duterte had virtually ended further talks in late November and December last year with his issuance of Proclamation 360 terminating the talks followed by another proclamation tagging the CPP-NPA as a “terrorist group,” respectively.

Based on records and narratives, the dynamics of the grinding, 38-year GPH-NDFP peace negotiations underlined predictably the sharp differences between the two negotiating parties – with the NDFP fighting for systemic reforms enroute to a socialist perspective, and the GPH which represents and defends the status quo state that administers an elite-dominated political system. Consistent has been the underlying demand of the GPH on the other side to “lay down its arms”; for an indefinite ceasefire; in its refusal to respect previous agreements or committing outright violations thereof. At some point the GPH pressed on its counterpart

to fast track the talks with a shortened “final peace agreement” and in numerous times, refused to honor previous commitments on the release of political prisoners while unilaterally cancelling or withdrawing from the peace process. To top it all, in 38 years of the peace process, the GPH launched total wars and relentless US-backed counter-insurgency operations in a bid to bring the other side to its knees.

But the other side is not easy to deal with. As the united front umbrella of 16 allied organizations waging a struggle “to end the rule of US imperialism and its local allies of big landlords and compradors, and attain national and social liberation,” the NDFP engages the GPH in peace talks to work for a “just and lasting peace” and advance the peace agenda and sequencing of talks to address the fundamental roots of the civil war. The NDFP appears to be resolute in upholding and implementing past agreements hammered out through long and acrimonious negotiations particularly the JASIG and CARHRIHL.

Ironically, the hardliners in government have long been calling the shots in the peace talks since 1986. Under Duterte, the GPH peace negotiators are overshadowed by the militarist approach of the defense department and armed forces. The GPH’s lead negotiators often have access problems with the president whilst the latter leans toward the counsel of his Cabinet security cluster headed by the defense secretary. Defense and military officials accuse the CPP-NPA of continued tactical offensives and mass recruitment but their own forces have under *Oplan Bayanihan* intensified bombings, ratcheted the occupation of rural barangays, and mobilized paramilitary units all resulting in grave human rights abuses including the displacement of entire communities as documented by local and international HR watchdogs.

Walking the talk

The true measure of a peace option is not in calling on the other side to come to the negotiating table. It is in discerning whether those who say that they stand for peace do so in practice. In my view, all past administrations including the present one have championed market-oriented economics, public-private partnership, and other neo-liberal policies that are a bane to a people-centered development. While favoring the few such policies inflict more hardships to the many in the absence of genuine land reform that would have transformed millions of landless peasants into productive forces while failing to institute job-generating industries.

As a result under Duterte, there has been an evident increase in poverty incidence across the country. The following statistics bear this out:

48% or 11.1 million families consider themselves as poor; 36% of them transitioned into poverty from previously being non-poor (*SWS self-rated poverty survey, July 2018*);
19.7% or 9 million adults are jobless as of June 2018 (*SWS survey*)
To top it all, inflation as high as 10% registered the highest in 10 years

These facts are dramatized by wealth inequality that aggravated under Duterte to 84% in 2017 compared to the previous year’s 83%. Eight of 10 Filipinos earn below P30,000 a month as against hundreds of thousands times more amassed by CEOs. The cumulative net worth of the country’s richest 50 tycoons amounting to \$74 billion (about PhP4 trillion) last year is equivalent to 24% of the GDP (\$305 billion) in 2016 or the aggregate earnings of 60 million Filipinos.

Disillusionment has stepped in among many Filipinos who were misled to believe that change will come under Duterte. After 2½ years the writings on the wall are unmistakable: in key officials being reassigned to other posts to evade investigation and prosecution for corruption; in the proliferation of drugs despite a so-called relentless war marked by the killings of drug suspects; in the increase of crime incidence most notably murder that has soared unprecedentedly due to reported summary killings in the drug war. Family dynasties and elite dominance in all levels of government are as strong and resilient as ever making state institutions like Congress and the justice system as dysfunctional and fragile like before.

Like its predecessors, the Duterte administration lacks the capacity to make governance inclusive and progressive, in short, it lacks the capacity to address the roots of poverty and the systemic socio-economic causes of the civil war. It has, in fact, served to perpetuate the political and economic structures that marginalize the poor politically, economically, and culturally. No doubt the Duterte regime is a government of the elite and powers that be making it no less different from previous administrations. It is authoritarian by militarizing the bureaucracy with an increasing reliance on military power supposedly to shake up agencies that are rotten to the core which makes them beyond repair, anyway.

Such modus operandi betrays a cognitive dissonance – a disconnection between, on one hand, the harsh realities fuelling the civil war and its underlying class struggle and, on the other, a strong bias for a mailed-fist policy - borne out of the feudal politics of Davao - as the antidote to an ideologically-driven, deeply-rooted, and mass-supported rebellion. Dissonance is a screen that makes one unable to understand what true peace means and the compassion that it entails. Once more, the pressing need for social, economic, and political reform is forsaken by an illusory military deadline to finish off the Marxist revolutionary movement by mid-2019 instead – an approach whose latest victims have included the 9 sugar workers recently massacred by militiamen in Sagay, Negros Occidental and the well-loved human rights lawyer who was investigating it as well as the deportation of an esteemed social activist nun back to Australia.

The hate language, demonization, and verbal aggression coming from what some foreign press consider as one of the world's most “powerful” figures are deemed “policy directives” by many officials and security authorities in the Philippines. Shockingly, not a few people have been desensitized by the killings that have mounted for the past two years and the violence that is a socially-condemned behaviour is now perceived as a path to peace. Such incurable behaviour by the GPH principal constitutes an obstacle to peace being pondered upon at the negotiating table. It promotes the continued dehumanization of war and certainly negates whatever gains have been made in the peace platform like CARHRIHL. On the other hand, refusing to negotiate on just grounds especially when reasonable breakthroughs are close at hand is denying a chance for peace.

Suing for peace is one thing, keeping the peace is another. Peace advocates should be well advised on the learning lessons drawn from many peace agreements and cessations of hostilities in many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and other regions over the past decades. Most of these ultimately failed as a result of reforms unfulfilled by the sitting or triumphant regimes; a number of rebel forces resumed fighting. The few peace agreements that worked were the result of negotiations involving a balance of forces – or where revolutionary forces were ascendant.

Still there is hope for peace in the Philippines. In a nationwide survey last March, Pulse Asia found 74% of Filipinos are aware of the peace talks between the GPH and NDFP. Of those are aware, nearly 80% believe that peace talks can end the hostilities between the warring forces. This shows the great potential of broadening the peace platform on all walks of life and a strong desire for a solution to the oppressive conditions millions of people face everyday.

The ecumenical church community has had a long history of peace engagements and in the quest for social and national liberation dating back to the colonial years, through the peaceful uprisings that ousted despised regimes, and in the frontline of struggles for social justice, human rights, and freedom.

The next 3½ years of the Duterte administration is a most challenging time in light of the plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law in January 2019 followed by the tougher and unpredictable process of forming the BARMM under an extended martial law in Mindanao; the May mid-term elections which is a symbolic referendum on Duterte; and the continuing campaign by the administration and its allies for charter change. Economic conditions are expected to be more acute. The failure to address the roots of armed conflict in Mindanao will make political extremism more ascendant there - and elsewhere.

Such political uncertainties all the more summon us to strengthen the advocacy for peace including the possible resumption of peace talks between the GPH and NDFP if not now in the next administration. As we need to test the limits of the peace process, however, it becomes more imperative to renew building the blocks of peace here and now. Let us renew the struggle for peace by raising our voices louder and clearer for urgent social, economic, and political reforms. Let us claim and spread the true meaning of peace – not the peace of the “killing fields” – but one founded and built on justice as well as genuine reform, and work for it in the people’s daily challenges for a better life and on the basic issues that confront them – in the streets, schools, urban and rural communities, factories and fields, government offices, far-flung areas, and in social media. Peace should no longer be the proverbial “lone voice in the wilderness” but one that inhabits the hearts and minds of the people.

Peace, after all, transcends the end of war. Peace is the light that triumphs over darkness, the water that quenches the thirst for freedom, a great dream fulfilled. #