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Fr. Eliseo “Jun” Mercado, Jr., OMI

Introduction

Mindanao, in southern Philippines, is home to the country's largest concentration of Muslims (an estimated 35% of the island groups' population are avowed Muslims). The history of the violence in Mindanao spans decades. The current conflicts are a result of the migration of Christians in great numbers from other areas of the country during American rule, the martial law policies and war against the Muslim separatists during the Marcos era, and the unfulfilled hopes of peace after the restoration of democracy in 1986. Mindanawons in general often feel policymakers in Manila do not consider their views when deciding on national issues.

The creation of Kusog Mindanaw (“Strong Mindanao”) in 1994 had so far brought 16 roundtable conferences centered on peace and development for Mindanao. This multi-sectoral coalition, whose creation was spearheaded by Fr. Eliseo “Jun” Mercado, Jr., OMI, was primarily established to promote peace and development, and begin a process of increasing the voice of Mindanawons in national policymaking.

The Issue

Macro Context – A Historical Perspective

The struggle of the Moro people began sometime in the 16th century when Spain invaded Muslim Mindanao. Before coming to the Philippines in 1521, the Christian Spaniards already felt deep hatred and prejudice toward Islam and the Muslims, whom they called Moros (Moors). The Moors had actually ruled Spain for 700 years from the 8th to the 15th century. Spanish Muslims were killed, expelled or forcibly converted to Christianity after Christians from northern Spain defeated the Muslim rulers.

Having successfully established their kingdom in Luzon and Visayas, the Spaniards invaded Mindanao and Sulu. The Muslim kingdoms resisted the Spanish throughout the 350 years of Spanish colonial rule and the Spanish presence in Mindanao and Sulu was restricted to only some coastal areas of Mindanao (notably Jolo, and Zamboanga) where they established military bases. The war inflicted extreme hardship on the Muslims, who were subjected to persecution and genocide; but in the end, the Muslims managed to survive.

Meanwhile, the Christianized natives of Luzon and Visayas accepted Spanish colonial rule and, in fact, helped the invaders in their invasion of Mindanao & Sulu. The Spaniards treated the Filipino Christians as allies, while picturing the Muslims as enemies who had to be subdued or otherwise killed. Hatred for anything Muslim was so prevalent that the Moros were always depicted as the villains – parents would often tell their children that if they didn't do as they were told, they would be given to the Moros. This psychological hatred for the Muslims, which the Spaniards created in the minds of the Christianized Filipinos remains real to many.

In 1898 Spain sold the archipelago to the United States. During the last half of the American period, Mindanao and Sulu were incorporated into the Philippine nation-state. However, many Muslims remained discontented. Muslims fiercely resisted US rule despite their antiquated weapons.

Filipino and American historians agree that the Muslims of Mindanao and Sulu proved the hardest to defeat during the American occupation of the Philippines. Often, a lone Muslim would attack American soldiers and camps, killing many of them before losing his life. The Spanish and Americans disparagingly called this act “juramentado” (somewhat similar to the Japanese Kamikaze, but where the aggressor acts even more ferociously). The “juramentados” were so strong that American firearms could not stop them. This prompted the Americans to develop a weapon that would become a global standard – the .45 caliber pistol.

In 1941, during the Second World War, the Japanese invaded and drove off US forces from the islands. The Moros fought the Japanese invaders. Six months before US forces led by General Douglas MacArthur landed in Leyte to retake the Philippines, the Muslim territories in Mindanao became free of the Japanese. After three hundred years of war, the Muslim sultanates were much weakened. The Moros still continued their resistance in many ways and supported Muslims guerillas fighting the Americans.

The US strategy to take Mindanao was to open it to new settlers, notably Davao, Cotabato, and Zamboanga, mainly Christian Filipino from Luzon and Visayas. This became a priority of the Philippine Commonwealth government under the presidency of Manuel L. Quezon. When the US granted independence to the Philippines on July 4, 1946, the Moro domains were included under the newly established Philippine Republic with the acquiescence of Muslim politicians and formal leaders. However, there were protests from Moro leaders and elements of the Muslim masses. The US leaders, their Filipino counterparts and the Muslim politicians based the validity of the other annexation on the 1898 Treaty of Paris. However, the Moros argued that the treaty was “only between two thieves,” and did not apply to them as they were never under the Spanish in the first place. This perspective was however contradicted by other historians who point to the existence of certain agreements between the US and specific Moro families.

Post-World War II

Some historians argue that under Philippine rule, the Moros were like a subjugated people forced to attend Philippine government and Catholic-run schools. While forcible conversion to Christianity was avoided, Muslims who studied in Catholic schools were compelled to study religion (Catholicism) in schools as part of the curriculum in many areas. In jobs, Christians were given preference. Representation in the national government was marginal and - with very few exceptions - only those Muslims who have totally embraced the government's policy of assimilation have been appointed to senior positions under the Filipino rulers.

Under several government programs, Christian settlers came in droves and were awarded land titles based on Western laws that ran counter to tribal laws and the Shariah. These affected not only Muslims but indigenous peoples as well.

Meanwhile, in the rest of Mindanao, there was state-backed terrorism against Muslims. In 1969-71, before Ferdinand E. Marcos declared the martial law, the burning of Muslim homes and mosques happened daily. Muslim farms and plantations were looted and destroyed. Government backed paramilitary groups and armed Christian fanatics massacred Muslim civilians, young and old, men and women alike. Muslim villages, towns and farmlands were cleared, to be taken over by Christians. In February 1973, just months after Marcos declared martial law (on September 21, 1972), the Moros retaliated through an armed revolutionary faction, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The MNLF was a mix of Islam and Moro nationalism. The phrase Bangsamoro was coined and Muslims rallied to its revolutionary banner and fought as a unified force for the first time.

To be clear, Mindanao-Sulu Muslims are a homogenous group. They are composed of seven to nine ethno-linguistic group of which the Maguindanao, Maranao and Tausug are the most well known. Palpable hostilities existed between these different groups. Some people had observed that only in presence of a common goal does a Bangsa Moro identity emerge. Otherwise, they are Tausug, Maguindanao, Maranao and what have you.

From 1972 until the signing of the Tripoli Agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine government in 1976, which led to a cease-fire, an estimated 150,000 Muslims were killed. More than 500,000 were forced to seek refuge in Sabah, Malaysia. Of those who stayed in Mindanao, more than one million were rendered homeless. At this time, they decided that the only solution to what the government referred to as 'the Mindanao Problem' was to gain their independence from the Philippines.

The issue of independence was ignored by the Philippine government. The Organization of Islamic Conferences (OIC) accepted the Philippine government proposal for regional autonomy and helped persuade the MNLF to accept the proposal instead of fighting for full independence.

Micro-Context – Enabling Environment

Morale within the MNLF withered as a result of the various amnesty programs leading to the surrender of many of its top leaders and military commanders. In 1996, Nur Misuari, chairman of the MNLF, surrendered to the Philippine government and accepted his governorship appointment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) by President Fidel V. Ramos. Then there was the emergence of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from the defunct MNLF, and the breakaway factions such as the Abu Sayyaf, which resulted in renewed guerilla warfare and banditry. The Abu Sayyaf faction has been the center of attention owing to their kidnapping tourist across international borders giving an international character to their activities.

Lack of National Government Support for and Consultation in Mindanao

The Mindanao conflict is partly due to the perception that national government had not provided support to Southern Philippines. Muslim Mindanao participation and impact on national affairs had been “minimal.” In the two decades immediately after World War II, there had been little attention given to Mindanao, a sentiment shared by Christian settlers. Development had progressed rapidly in Metro Manila, Luzon, and the Visayas while the

Southern Philippines, except for Christian areas like Cagayan de Oro, Davao and Zamboanga, suffered.

The budget allocations for Mindanao (which makes up a third of the total land area of the country) was nowhere near the corresponding figure of 30%. Fr. Jun Mercado, Chair Uson of Kusog Mindanao, said “There should be better budget allocations for the Mindanao—30% of the national budget should be allocated for Mindanao. The Autonomous Region ARMM only receives P4.7B compared to the P30B that goes to Region III.” Investment in infrastructure and other basic services were always focused on Luzon and partly the Visayas. It was often said that

“in Mindanao, there were so many rivers and no bridges; while in Manila, there were so many bridges with hardly any rivers,” referring to the fly-overs being constructed in the metropolis.

Representation in national public offices also reflected the disproportions, particularly for Muslims. The Arroyo Administration tried to balance this by appointing a Muslim Secretary of the Department of Public Works and Highways (Sec. Simeon Datumanong). Fr. Mercado said,

“Aside from equal budget allocation there should also be equal representation in national government. So far, there is only one cabinet secretary that is Muslim. Why?”

To begin with, the starting point of all discussions is wrong. The way national government officials view Mindanao is not validated. National government officials believe that there should be one nation, while there really should be a ‘multi-nation state’ (with many languages, religions, and cultures). There should be more respect for diversity,” Fr. Mercado related.

Because of these, there were no feelings of inclusion or belongingness among the people of Mindanao. Injustice was felt instead.

“Some people in Manila think that the best way to resolve the Mindanao situation is by dropping a nuclear bomb there!” Fr. Mercado said with a sigh of frustration. He on further saying, *“What is really needed is social cohesion, and a build-up of social capital.”*

The Stakeholders

Dynamics within the Tri-People of Mindanao – Muslims, Christians, IP’s

Throughout American colonial rule, Christian Filipino civilian and military officials, controlled the administration of Mindanao. In fact, it was only after World War II that Muslims were appointed as governors in the Muslim populated provinces. After the Muslims were the Americans started to resettle Christians from Luzon and the Visayas to Mindanao. This was accompanied by economic and social changes as forests were cleared, plantations were established, businesses were opened, and settlements organized. More than just the Filipinos came. The Japanese established abaca plantation in Davao as well.

The Catholic Church followed the immigrants, establishing its presence in the various settlements in Mindanao. Starting with a few communities in 1912, the resettlement program increased during the Commonwealth and continued after World War II. Agricultural

colonies began growing where Christians, Muslims and Lumads were made to live as one community.

In the 1950s, additional government-initiated resettlement areas were established. At the same time, more Christians from Luzon and the Visayas arrived on their own, further contributing to the change in the demographics.

As a result of the various resettlement programs, the demographics in Mindanao shifted in favor of Christian Filipinos. In 1918, the Muslims and Lumads constituted some 60% and 25%, respectively, of the total population in Cotabato, respectively, compared to 2.6% for Christians. By 1970, the distribution reversed: 62.2% were Christians, 27.8% Muslims and 6.7% Lumads.

At the same time, several land laws, patterned after western schemes were passed. The Land Registration Act of 1902, requiring the registration of lands occupied by private persons or corporations, and the application for registration of title, and the next, more significant one, was Land Act No. 718 of 1903, which declared null and void all land grants from Muslim sultans if consummated without government approval. The other one was the Mining Act of 1905 declaring all public lands in the Philippines as open for exploration, occupation and purchase by citizens of the Philippines and the United States.

The Muslims and the Lumads vehemently opposed these public land laws, stating that their own communal and ancestral domains should not be covered these laws. The competition for land with immigrant settlers caused by the resettlement programs and the passage of these land laws became a major source of conflict between the settlers, the Lumads and the Muslims.

In order to achieve their goal of one nation, the Americans instituted cultural uniformity among the Filipino people. The Americans and Christian Filipino Administrators eliminated certain Muslim political and social institutions—the most critical among them was the role of the sultans and datus in governing the people in Mindanao. The U.S. removed from them (sultans and datus) their police and judicial functions and ensured non-succession to traditional titles.

The Muslims, in general, did not participate actively in the struggle for independence during US colonial rule. On the contrary, about a hundred datus lobbied to the Americans not to include Mindanao in the proposed independent Philippine state. After the Second World War, some Muslims wanted Mindanao excluded from the Philippine Republic. Not a few wanted statehood in the US.

After the declaration of Philippine Independence in 1946, the Muslims continued to experience difficulties in assimilating into the rest of the country. They continued to insist on their Islamic values which often conflicted with Philippine laws. The Muslims were not convinced that the public education curriculum would continue to nurture their own religion and values. Because of this, the Muslims preferred that their own schools be continued to be used instead. Central to the conflict was a theological difference. The US colonial government had molded the emerging Philippine government along the US ideology of the separation of Church and State. In Islam, politics and religion go hand in hand. Daily conduct is guided by Shariah Laws.

The Indigenous Peoples' (or Lumads) struggle had been continuing for several centuries. All of the different Indigenous Peoples' tribes have been pushed to migrate into higher and more interior lands during the Spanish times when rewards in the form of land were given to the loyal Christian Filipinos. Significant portions of these lands were in reality the ancestral domains of the Lumads that they were forced out of. Right after the World War II the demand for lumber was very high. The government issued logging rights in ancestral domains. The Lumads wanted to retain Filipino citizenship, but govern themselves in their own ancestral lands and in accordance with their own customary laws.

The Muslims and the Lumads, once the majority in Mindanao, were now the poor and landless minorities. Christian population expansion and government resettlement programs have eased them out of their ancestral lands and threatened their culture. To be accurate hard conflicts had also happened between Muslims and Lumads.

Christians from Luzon and Visayas had settled well in Mindanao. They were now the more dominant people in the territories traditionally of the Muslims and the Lumads, and had established their social, economic, and political institutions in these areas.

The long period of conflict in Mindanao has contributed to distrust and animosity among the Christians, the Muslims and the Lumads. The Christian more or less saw themselves in a more favorable light, while seeing the Muslims in an unfavorable light, and vice versa. It was not uncommon for Christians to see Muslims as "savages and bandits." Christian further saw Muslims as "illiterate culturally backward and unprogressive." At the same time some Christians often saw themselves as modern and progressive. Muslims pictured Christians as "landgrabbers and people who wanted Muslims eradicated."

Perspectives of the Stakeholders

Dr. Parouk Hussin, then Assistant Secretary for the President's Education for Peace Program, said that the continuing struggle of the Muslims "could not also be simply attributed to religion.

Rather, it is primary political where a combination of discontinuities in history and diametrically opposed routes in nation building has led to a seemingly unending conflict that has cost the lives of many people and has made the prospect of peace dim." In pursuing peace and development in the southern Philippines, the Assistant Secretary underscored the need for the national leadership to make real full participation of the MNLF in governmental affairs, particularly in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs in Muslim Mindanao.

Former Senate President Aquilino Pimentel strongly opposed the use of force as a means to settle the historical, political, social, economic and cultural issues in central and southern Mindanao. "History reveals that military solution never worked," he stated. He emphasizes the importance of continuing the peace talks and implementing a comprehensive solution. In this regard, he reiterated his proposal of offering a federal form of government to Muslim Mindanao.

"Federalism would provide an equitable opportunity for economic development for all provinces that would fall under the federal system," he said. "These federal states will be independent from the

central government and it will allow the Muslims to pursue their cultural and economic development according to Shariah laws.”

However, he said that the Islamic legal system may have to be modified to be consistent with the Philippine Constitution.

At the same time, Professor Julkipli M. Wadi of the University of the Philippines' Institute of Islamic Studies said that the Mindanao conflict was not just a national concern but a regional security issue as well as. He took a closer look at the Southeast Asian regional security and reconfiguration of the Moro struggle and noted that

“any economic development and intervention in the Mindanao situation must take into consideration the larger issue of Moro's historical, political and human rights which impact on Philippine economic, social, political, security including foreign policies.”

The UP Professor echoed Senator Pimentel's position. Any solution to the Mindanao conflict must adopt “a holistic approach and take into account the views of the primary stakeholders.” He pointed out that the Moro struggle is ideologically based. Wadi said that the conflict has three levels:

- *the Philippine claim of sovereignty and territorial integrity over Mindanao and Sulu,*
- *the geo-political and geo-strategic interests on Malaysia; and respect of national sovereignty*
- *regional cooperation among ASEAN member countries.*

As for the long-term solutions, former Senator Santanina Rasul identified areas that would address the social concerns of the region. She cited education as a crucial element in knowing ones identity. A “correct perspective” on the role of Muslims as well as other IPs will prevent a biased view on this sector. Entrepreneurial and other training programs, both in government and private sectors for Muslims and lumads with support infrastructure will improve livelihoods, retool and assist them to create their own niches in a market-integrating world.

Dr. Alex Magno, Executive Director of the Foundation for Economic Freedom, did not agree that federalism would help solve the problems in southern Philippines. He said that the breakdown in Muslim Mindanao could be attributed to the absence of good governance and the practice of patronage refunds had bred graft and corruption. He said that it was not a failure on the part of the State and stressed that good governance was vital in the over-all development of the region. He also identified “three contradictions and tensions” in the south; Secularism vs. Fundamentalism; the idea of Bangsamoro vs. tribal loyalties; and feudal obligations vs. modern assertive citizenship.

Mr. Ibrahim Iribani, Consultant of the National Defense College of the Philippines, suggested the significance of drawing lessons from the past GRP-MNLF negotiations in order to move forward. Based on his experience, Mr. Iribani alluded that before, the negotiations were power and interest based which significantly affected the over-all peace process. He cited that the failure of the Estrada Administration to understand the Moros which had to the collapse of the negotiations.

“What is important now is the implementation of the 1996 peace agreement and enactment of current administration’s intentions to restore peace process,” he said.

For the military, Col. Victor Corpuz, Chief of the Intelligence Service of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, agrees that the use of military force “would not lead to a sustainable solution to a decades-old problem.” He supported the participation of local communities through programs or projects such as “community-based forest management that would bring about development and sustainable livelihood.” He also advocated the “development of distance learning to elevate the quality of education specifically in marginalized areas.”

Action

The Burning of Ipil and the Creation of Kusog Mindanaw

On April 4, 1995, suspected Muslim guerrillas raided seven banks in Ipil, Zamboanga del Sur, in Southern Philippines. The bandits set the town center on fire and killed many people. The Police suspected that it was the handiwork of the Abu Sayyaf group. 200 heavily-armed men wearing green fatigue uniforms attacked the small town in a bloody rampage that left more than 40 people dead, mostly civilians, including the town's chief of police. More than half a billion pesos were looted from the town's banks. This became the impetus for the creation of Kusog Mindanaw.

Having already recognized the need for greater unity, participation, and inclusion among the Mindanawons in his almost 4-decades of experience in the Southern Philippines, Fr. Mercado (then president of Notre Dame University of Cotabato City) organized a series of roundtable discussions with his contacts in the various socio-political organizations in Mindanaw.

“In the 60’s, the thrust was integration and assimilation through education. In the 70’s, it was rebellion, and later on negotiation. All these strategies had already failed to work,” he said. Fr. Mercado realized that “they (the Mindanawons), and only they, could move Mindanao forward into peace and development.” He thought that the people of Mindanao “should not just sit and wait for the government to act for them. They had to act on their own if they wanted to get things done. They had to act together.”

Presenting a United Front

“It could not be just the Catholic Church, or the Muslims. It could not be just the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or just the people’s organizations. It could not be just the mayors and governors; neither could it be just the business sector; nor just the academe. It had to be all of them acting all together for peace and development to occur,” Mercado said.

Fr. Mercado held a series of meetings with various social leaders in Mindanao, including leaders from the religious sector, civil society, the academe, the local chief executives (governors and mayors), media, cooperatives and people’s organizations, and the business sector. These comprised the bulk of the prime movers of Mindanao that were a good mix of Muslims and Christians and Lumads.

Each of these organizations existed on their own, and also had their own agenda for peace and development in Mindanao. What was missing was what was missing for the last 500

years in Mindanao—working together. Mercado believed that the feeling of exclusion could be solved through sincerity and through openness between groups. He goes on further to say,

“It would help to remember that what is good for the Muslims is good for the country.”

Mercado, who was, Chairman of the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) in Maguindanao and ARMM, contacted the various governors and mayors that he knew and worked with. His integrity earned him their trust and confidence in participating in the meetings that he had called for.

He lived in the second district of Maguindanao for 10 years teaching the children of the datus. Mercado’s social investment in them, by being a “Kumpare” (godfather) in weddings, and being there for the people in times of death, now paid off. These children were now the social leaders. Once he called on them to participate in his discussions, the former pupils eagerly contributed their efforts to

Mercado’s cause.

As Catholic priest, Mercado tapped his own sects’ organizations to be part of the newly created Kusog Mindanaw Roundtable Conference. This included the Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF), a dialogue forum consisting of Catholic bishops of Mindanao and Muslim Religious Leaders convened by Archbishop Fernando R. Capalla, Gov. Mahid M. Mutilan, and Bishop Hilario Gomez. All three in the spirit of inter-religious dialogue, affirmed their “common commitment to the peace process.”

Having the BUF on board was a key move it lent greater influence to his informal coalition. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), the Order to which Fr. Mercado belonged, were assigned to the Mindanao area. Being the president of one of the most advanced educational institutions in Mindanao, Notre Dame University, it was easy for Fr. Mercado to rally the other schools and universities to also join the discussions. This lent an academic perspective to all discussions, as well being able to be in touch with the youth, through the various school representatives. It also helped that Notre Dame University had campuses in several areas of Mindanao – Cotabato, Kidapawan, Tacurong, Marbel and Jolo.

As a missionary of long standing in Mindanao, Mercado had contacts at the grassroots level. Because of this, He was able to harness the participation of the Mindanao Cooperatives, and the Mindanao-wide Peoples Organizations Federations. Once again, his integrity brought him the support of these two critical groups who had the voice of the masses. At the same time, Mercado also invited the coalition of Mindanao NGOs with whom he was very familiar being in touch with grassroots development as a missionary. These organizations were now able to gain further strength in numbers, and had their development agenda thrown to the forefront of discussion.

Mercado invited the Mindanao’s premier business organization, the Mindanao Business Council (MBC), to participate in the dialogues, wishing to include a business perspective in the discussions. The entry of MBC had a dual positive effect. First, it allowed Kusog Mindanao’s non-business members to understand the business economic perspective.

Second, it gave the business people and management the social and political rubric within which to situate their activities.

Mercado invited the Mindanao Lawmakers Association to have a direct link with those framing policies at the local and national level. This allowed the various sectors to have a hotline to the critical policy-makers that would create the biggest impact to further their objectives.

Equally important, he brought on board the Mindanao Media Association that would *“give their voice to the people of Mindanao. The role of media has thus far been to level the barriers of language,”* said Mercado.

This allowed the coalition to communicate what they were trying to achieve and how they were going to go about achieving it to the people of the Southern Philippines in their own languages (they spoke various languages and dialects). The OMI owned a radio station which made it easier for Mercado to reach out to the masses.

In the beginning, Mercado was the informal leader of the coalition. He was formally elected Chairman of Kusog Mindanaw. He was not merely a unifying agent but was a leader which was able to balance the desires of the various groups and organizations that formed the informal coalition.

Impact of Kusog Mindanaw

Kusog Mindanaw operated as a forum for unity rather than a formal organization. It was a gathering of peers that made it an ideal mechanism for consensus building among the various major organizations in Mindanao. It meet as a roundtable conference and conducted roundtable discussions to elicit and consolidate various sectoral views in order to arrive at a minimum consensus on basic

Mindanao concerns.

Kusog Mindanaw proceeds on the basis of and was guided by the spirit and principle of “harmony in diversity:” it sought to highlight’ points of unity rather than disagreement, something that was uncommon in the Southern Philippines until then. Starting from a minimum consensus among Mindanawons, Kusog Mindanaw builds the critical mass that undertook concerted action to secures for Mindanao its “just due” in terms of political parity and economic equity, genuine autonomy and self-determination, and equitable development for all Mindanawons – Muslim, Lumads, Christians and other alike. It became the for a voice out concerns among and within the people of Mindanao.

Being Chairman of Kusog Mindanaw, Mercado regularly met with different cabinet secretaries, especially the DBM (Department of Budget Management) Secretary to discuss the budget allocations for Southern Philippines, and the DPWH (Department of Public Works and Highway) Secretary to coordinate the identified key infrastructure projects for Mindanao, and to voice out the general concerns of the people.

Mercado believed that things were moving “a bit faster” now for Mindanao. Mindanawons were being appointed to high national government positions. Also it was Kusog Mindanawons that recommended DPWH Sec. Datumanong to President Arroyo. They were

able to discuss issues with key leaders like DBM Sec. Boncodin, who consulted with them. One of the key adjustments Kusog was pushing for was for 35% of the agriculture budget to go to the Mindanao group of provinces, especially Southern Mindanao.

The resolution of the 16 Kusog Mindanaw Roundtable Conferences brought to the attention of local and national policy-makers the perceptions, wants, and needs of the people of Mindanao. (See Annex 1 for some of the approved resolutions). Focused discussions on the Peace Process facilitated by Kusog became a regular process for leaders of the different contending groups for peaceful discussions. It was believed that these discussions helped put an end to the armed conflict.

Persona

Mercado saw the base of his leadership as not of a formal nature. As he saw it, it was “morality.” What inspired him the most were “the people, the Bangsamoro.” According to him, they were the ones that “gave him energy to go on and fight for their cause.” Although he came from the province of Bulacan, he had been in Mindanao since 1965. He grew up in what he described as a “compassionate and service-oriented Christian home with devout Catholic parents.” He was an activist during the Marcos years and was part of the “1st Quarter Storm.”

He was been very active in other underground movements against the Marcos dictatorship. He was Bayan national vice-president and was active in Muslim-Christian groups. From 1969 to 1974, he studied Philosophy and Theology in Rome and in other parts of Europe. With regard to the peace process the MILF, NDF, MNLF, Mercado believed that there should be a tripartite settlement. This meant that not only would the top authorities of both sides agree on the peace package, but of equal importance, the grassroots of all sides should be involved and be in full agreement with the terms of the agreement. This way, the creation of breakaway factions such as the Abu Sayyaf would be avoided.

Future Directions

Mercado believed that the “best way to ensure Mindanao’s peace and development” was to have a federal system of government. This would ensure sufficient funding for development projects and at the same time provide the right amount of freedom to undertake key reforms in general administrative policies. This, he said,

“will hopefully be the answer to our quest for complete peace and total development of Mindanao.”

His success as a bridge leader centered upon his integrity and morality as well as his past experiences. Having been an outsider looking in (on the Mindanao situation), and later on as a key figure in the development of Mindanao, he was able to see the situation objectively. Having been transparent and having no “hidden agenda,” the various groups and organizations threw their support behind him and rally together in pursuit of peace and development in Mindanao.

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