

Opinion

Why peace in Muslim Mindanao and how it was reached matters

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The signing on 25 January of the final agreements of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro ended more than forty years of war in Muslim Mindanao. But the agreement does more than that. It also shows a world beset by intractable conflicts how sustained political will and skillful negotiation can produce comprehensive agreements to address the complex drivers of conflict and offer the hope of lasting peace.

The second decade of the 21st century has been stony ground for peacemakers. New conflicts have erupted across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and old conflicts have been rekindled. The Arab Spring that marked the start of the decade has left countries that tried to embrace democracy bitterly divided along ethnic and religious lines; African states where internal conflict had been settled through negotiation or dialogue, such as Mozambique and the Central African Republic, have seen old wounds re-opened. In Asia, chronic sub-national conflict seems to defy prolonged mitigation efforts in India, much of Southeast Asia and the fringes of China.

So for the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to reach the finishing line after almost two decades of negotiation is not just a cause for celebration in the Philippines, it also offers hope for the wider world. Muslim Mindanao may not have the visibility of the tragic civil war in Syria, or South Sudan, but the bitter contest for autonomy waged by the Muslim Moro has cost the lives of more than 100,000 people since the 1970s and disrupted the lives of millions more.

To end such a war has taken political courage, vision, and a significant measure of collective thinking about what kind of agreement will bring about lasting peace. First there was the realization that fighting would not resolve the conflict; then the parties needed to secure support for negotiations from their constituencies. A durable ceasefire and effective architecture was put in place with sufficient international monitoring and support.

These steps ensured that negotiations could then proceed unencumbered by the need to constantly revisit mandates and re-affirm legitimacy. Finally, the Philippines suppressed its own natural desire to resolve its own conflicts by allowing a third party, Malaysia, to facilitate the process.

That's not to say it was all plain sailing. For the first few years, levels of mistrust ran high. The peace process went off the rails in 2008 when an agreement on ancestral domain that the parties had already initialed was overturned by the Philippine Supreme Court. There followed a flare up in fighting, that displaced more than 500,000 people.

But rather than give up and return to war, the process was reset. A new facilitator was brought on board and in a unique and bold move, the parties agreed to the formation of an International Contact Group comprising of states and non-governmental organizations.

As a member of this group, the HD Centre had the privilege to observe and support the negotiations over the past five years. Sitting in the last plenary session of the last round of talks at the end of January, as the parties reviewed the text of what they had agreed to, line by line and comma by comma, the huge implications of this agreement for the Moro people of Mindanao were evident.

Not for the first time they have been promised autonomy. There was after all the Final Peace Agreement of 1996. But this time the agreement offers hope that autonomy will actually work. In its broad scope and fine grained detail, every aspect of what it takes to secure a peaceful future is addressed, from wealth sharing, to revenue arrangements, powersharing and the creation of Joint Cooperation Zones in the Moro Gulf and Sulu Sea.

Critically there is this time a comprehensive agreement on security arrangements that presents a unique 'holistic' concept of normalization and transitional justice. The agreement also provides for an amnesty and specifically defines the role of international donors and experts in supporting implementation. It may have taken almost two decades, but if this agreement doesn't work, it will speak very badly of the whole art of crafting peace through negotiation.

With the completion of negotiations, the challenging task of implementation begins. The next step will be the framing of a Bangsamoro Basic Law to be passed by the Philippine Congress, followed by a plebiscite later this year. Again, it is striking how well prepared the parties are. A body comprised of experts from both parties, the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, has already been working on drafting the Bangsamoro Basic Law, which the government hopes to get through Congress in April. The agreement provides for several mechanisms such as a Joint Normalization Committee, Independent Decommissioning Body and Joint Peace and Security Committee monitoring the various components that the larger normalization process involves.

Credit is due to the Philippine government for sustaining a vision of peaceful negotiation to end conflict across four different elected administrations. In part this reflects the early move to see a public consensus on the desire for a peaceful end to conflict rather than all out war, and then the creation of a special office under the President for managing peace processes headed by a cabinet secretary. Chronic as armed conflicts are in the Philippines, never have they been so carefully managed and attended to – nor in such a democratic and inclusive manner.

Both the MILF and the Government were also open to outside support and advice. It would have been hard to design such a comprehensive agreement and architecture without being receptive to the experiences and lessons learned from other contexts. There may initially have been a counter terrorist motive for the elevated levels of international support in the wake of 2001, but donors such as Australia, the EU, Japan and the UK as well as others have remained committed long after the terrorist threat waned because of the promise of peace this process offered.

If there is a lesson to be derived for the wider world, it is simply that this landmark moment in the quest for peace in Muslim Mindanao demonstrates the value of open, structured and inclusive negotiations to end conflict. It is in many ways, the antithesis of Syria: a forgotten, nasty conflict, peacefully resolved.

MindaViews is the opinion section of MindaNews..

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