



Peace Monitor

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Shunning the Carnival

When the Gloria-gate crisis exploded in June and the opposition began to mobilize for mass actions, most observers expected the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to join in the fray. After all, as one syndicated columnist reported, every other Tom, Dick, and Harry has had the audacity to anoint himself as opposition, from Marcos loyalists to Erap supporters, from FPJ fans to military has-beens, from hooded Marxists to maverick priests. Such personalities would “grace a police line-up,” noted veteran newsman Juan Mercado. Indeed, for the MILF, which has waged a protracted battle for secession over the last two decades, to hoist its own *Gloria Resign* placard seemed quite expected.

Yet it did nothing of the kind. “We’re talking to government, not personalities,” curtly declared MILF peace panel chair Mohagher Iqbal. How could it plunge itself in the carnival of partisan politics when, at a recent MILF consultation attended by tens of thousands of its supporters, its chair Al Haj Murad Ebrahim said that “honorable and lasting peace is partly at hand”?

The rebel group had just concluded its eighth round of exploratory talks with the government. Held in Kuala Lumpur, the talks were hailed by both parties

as having settled some 80 percent of the otherwise thorny issues relating to the Muslims’ right to profit from the resources of their homeland. “We’re in the final stretch” of the negotiations, Murad had told reporters.

On President Arroyo, Murad revealed that her “political will and decisiveness to negotiate and submit to international arbitration through the good offices and governments of Malaysia and Libya playing the lead role in the peace process supported by the Organization of Islamic Conference, has played a great role.

“Once peace will rightfully be in place, the Bangsamoro and Muslim Ummah will remember President GMA as a leader who is instrumental in the fulfillment of the Bangsamoro aspirations to have their homeland,” he continued.

Neither was the group inclined to destabilization, saying that it is taking a “hands-off policy” with regards to moves to unconstitutionally undermine the government.

“Hands-off *kami*. We are not interfering on the issues that are besieging the Arroyo administration. *Hindi*

kami nakikibahagi dyan," said MILF spokesman Eid Khabulu.

The MILF had reason to be cautious about political instability. Any unwanted distractions to the talks could spell doom to the peace process, which is generally headed towards a comprehensive settlement. At stake is a windfall of foreign assistance through loans and grants. European Union ambassador Jan de Kok was quoted to have said that some 12 million euro worth of development assistance is waiting in the pipeline, pending the signing of a formal accord between Manila and the MILF. Already, as if to entice the rebels even more, over \$16 million has been cleared for release by the National Economic Development Authority, a package put together under the auspices of the United Nations to fund peace programs in Mindanao. If that was any indication, Mindanao, especially *Muslim* Mindanao, could be awash with money and programs should an agreement see the light of day. Cheering over the theatrics over a wiretap incident could stonewall the talks altogether, and send the rebels back to the hills, there to kill and be killed in a perpetual war of attrition.

To appreciate just how serious the MILF has been about achieving peace, it has embarked on goodwill overtures, apparently aimed at demonstrating good faith. One such measure was a preliminary meeting conducted between the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) with project developers of the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP). The BDA is the official development arm of the MILF, while the PBSP is a 30-year-old institution that facilitates implementation of self-help programs across the Philippine countryside. The latter is

supported by some of the country's top private corporations.

"The PBSP can dovetail with the BDA in its capacity-building priorities," said the latter in a statement, adding that one area of collaboration could be micro-enterprise in conflict-affected communities. Brokering the meeting was Datu Ibrahim Paglas, president of Paglas Corp., himself a successful Muslim entrepreneur and an avid supporter of the peace process.

Sources:

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