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***The Current Political, Economic and Social Contexts in the Philippines
Center-Periphery Disparities***

A Presentation to the Conference on
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I. I. Introduction

By June 30, 2011, the current Aquino Administration will be completing 16.6% or 1/6 of its 6-year contract with the Filipino electorate. Among the most interesting aspects of analyzing the current context is looking into what has significantly changed after a year, whether for better or for worse. The basic limitation of my presentation is the lack of available 2011 data since most of data cover only up to the end of 2010. This means that it is quite difficult to determine the changes in the socio-economic and political contexts after six months of Aquino Administration (July 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010) based on available data. Since President Aquino ran on two basic platforms: anti-corruption and anti-poverty (“kung walang corrupt, walang mahirap”), it would also be interesting to look into the gains and failures on these two fronts.

However, it has to be made clear that the main purpose of this presentation is not to assess the first year performance of the Aquino Administration but to conduct a dispassionate analysis and discussion of the present realities in the Philippines in general and Mindanao in particular.

I also would like to state clearly the conceptual framework which guides me in this presentation: inequity in the ownership and control of the basic economic resources (land and fishing grounds) had caused the poverty of the majority. Since land is also a basic political and cultural resource, it is the major cause of the marginalization and continuing powerlessness of the majority. These continuing inequity, injustice and marginalization are in turn the main causes of the continuing unpeace and violent conflicts in the country particularly in Mindanao. Therefore, in order to bring about peace, the conditions of underdevelopment, poverty and marginalization caused by inequities have to be addressed squarely. However, the work for equity, development and peace is not linear. Rather, it is cyclical with each of the three intrinsically related to each other. This highlights the structural nature of the conflict or problem. Thus, the term *structural violence*.

The dispossession of lands and the marginalization of the people especially the farmers, the Moro and indigenous communities can be considered as among the biggest unresolved historical injustices in the Philippines in general and in Mindanao in particular. The effects of this historical injustice are felt until today.

This is also the conceptual framework that Balay Mindanaw adheres to. Balay Mindanaw Foundation, Inc. (BMFI) is a Mindanao-based, Mindanao-focused and

Mindanaoan-led NGO founded on May 8, 1996 focusing on land rights and advocacy for political parity and economic equity. It later added to its program interventions on good governance and sustainable integrated area development work with the barangay (Philippine village, and smallest political and administrative unit) as the locus and focus of intervention. It eventually added peacebuilding and conflict transformation work to complete its program menu.

II. II. The Philippines

History: Colonial and Recent

The Philippines has a colonial history that dates back to its “discovery” and annexation by Spain in 1521. More than a century earlier, Arab missionaries brought Islam to the Philippines beginning in the 14th century, and a formal Sultanate was established in 1450 in Sulu. In 1521 Ferdinand Magellan came to the Philippines and claimed the islands for Spanish rule. It was “sold” by Spain to the United States of America in 1898, and was granted “independence” after the Second World War in 1945. Ironically, it considers June 12, 1898 as its Independence Day – the day it was ceded by Spain to USA. Its governmental structures are patterned after that of the US except that it has a unitary (not a federal) system, thereby concentrating or centralizing all resources and decision-making in the seat of power and center of commerce that is Manila.

The Local Government Code is an attempt to correct the over-centralization of governmental powers in Manila. It has produced some inspiring stories of innovations in local initiatives, empowerment of local communities and devolution of powers as reflected in the growing list of awardees for excellence recognized by like Galing Pook, KAS and other award-giving bodies. However, despite these successes, there is still a growing clamor for at least a shift to federal form. After almost twenty years of the Local Government Code, decisions about the budgets and funds for the farthest and smallest political units are still made in Manila. Even the decision on the postponement of elections in the supposedly autonomous Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was made by the Senate and House of Representatives upon the prodding of Malacanang.

The Philippines is one of few countries to have formally recognized the rights of the first nations or indigenous peoples (IPs) through a law, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), enacted in 1997. However, the IPs remain the as the country’s most marginalized, exploited and threatened.

It also has one of the most progressive laws on agrarian reform. The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law which was originally passed in 1988 is considered as a social justice legislation aimed at correcting the landlessness of the Filipino farmers. It is an enabling law for the Constitutional principle of “Land to the Tiller”. After more than 20 years and two extensions, many of the farmers have remained landless and poor. It has also given rise to “second generation” land problems like the growing indebtedness of the rural poor. A proper implementation of CARPER would have significantly helped address the roots of poverty and hunger. In fact, a simple mathematical calculation could very well show this point: the present Philippine population is 90 million or 12.9 million households (average Philippine household

size is 7), 63 million or 9 million households are farmers (70% of the population). If the 9.1 million of Philippine agricultural lands were to be divided evenly among the farmers, each Filipino farming household would have at least one hectare of farm. Thus, no one should go to sleep with an empty stomach when enough food for everyone could be produced by a reformed agricultural sector.

The current President (and son of former President Corazon Aquino, under whose term CARP was enacted into law) has inherited the unfulfilled promise of giving land to the poor tiller.

Some Data on the Current National Situation:

In his presentation to the Asian-German Dialogue on June 24, 2011 in Singapore, Dr. Peter Koepfinger, who is Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's Country Representative to the Philippines, described the country's situation: "We have only a façade of democracy, high levels of violence and impunity, 25% of population in absolute poverty without improvement for decades." He also reported that the Philippines ranks 136th among 153 countries in 2010 Global Peace Index (down from rank 100 in 2007), ranks 134th among 170 countries in 2010 Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International, and 3rd world-wide in the Impunity Index Rating of the Committee to Protect Journalists for the years 2009, 2010 and 2011.

He asked: "How could this happen to a country which was considered to be the first and freest democracy in Asia, to be number two behind Japan in its economic development in the sixties?" He attempted to answer his question by quoting Former Chief Justice Reynato Puno and: "This vicious politics of patronage has allowed few oligarchs and bosses to rule us from colonial to post-colonial times, and their rule has brought us nothing but a façade of democracy."; and Former National Security Adviser General Jose Almonte: "Oligarchic influence on the highest State organs enables powerful individuals, families and clans to organize monopolies and cartels, tilt the rules of competition in their favour and acquire privileged access to the rents?"

To have a better understanding of some changes in the national situation, here are some data as recent as the first quarter of 2011:

Our GDP growth fell to 4.9% for the first quarter of 2011 compared to 7.6% for 2010. According to SWS, the number of hungry families increased to 20.5% or equivalent to 4.1 million families compared to 3.4 million in the last quarter of 2010. The number of unemployed and underemployed rose to 27.2% or 11.3 million from 9.9 million in the last quarter of 2010. Official government data show unemployment at 7.4% and underemployment at 19.4%. Inflation rate was 4.5% for the 1st quarter of 2011.

III. Mindanao

The data on the national situation do not fully reflect the skewed relationship between the center and periphery. A look into the Mindanao situation may provide a better and deeper understanding of the inequities and disparities that may explain the continuing unpeace.

Mindanao is the second largest island in the Philippine archipelago of 7,107 islands that has a total land area of 299,764 km. The population was 76.5 million in 2000 and is estimated to have reached 100 million in 2011.

One out of every four Filipinos is a Mindanaoan. Four out of every ten hectares of the country's territory are in Mindanao.

Most of the Philippines' earnings from agricultural and fisheries exports come from Mindanao. One hundred percent (100%) of banana, pineapple and tuna exports come from Mindanao. More than half of the country's mineral and forest resources are in Mindanao.

Mindanao is the island most threatened by the possible destructive effects of the onslaught of mining. In Caraga Region, for instance, mining permits have been issued covering 2,126,898.2 hectares. The total area for exploration is much bigger than the region's total area of 1,884,770 hectares. Aside from the threat of environmental destruction, the region's indigenous peoples are now in danger of being displaced and their tribes exterminated.

The indigenous peoples remain the least involved or consulted group of all. Fourteen (14) of the country's 20 poorest provinces are in Mindanao. All the Moro provinces belong to the 10 poorest. Eight of the ten poorest municipalities are in Mindanao.

Indeed, despite the island's richness and giftedness, Mindanao remains as the country's poorest region. Its rural populace alone, despite their closeness to agricultural resources are among the poorest, mainly because seventy percent (70%) of those who work in agriculture do not own the land that they till. Mindanao remains marginalized economically, politically and culturally. Decisions concerning the lives of Mindanaoans continue to be made by decision-makers in Manila, the Philippines' seat of economic, political and socio-cultural powers.

While the Philippines is ranked 97th among the 169 countries listed in the 2010 Human Development Index Report, disaggregating the data on the Mindanao's 14 poorest provinces from the national data would place Mindanao even lower than the 169th country which is Zimbabwe.

In its publication entitled "Shattered Lives", Amnesty International reports: "Mindanao, particularly in its conflict-ridden provinces, continues to lag behind the rest of the Philippines in economic and social development. According to the 2008/2009 Philippine Human Development Report which covers the period of 2004-2006, provinces with the lowest life expectancy in the country were Tawi-tawi, Sulu, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur (all conflict-affected for decades). Those living in Tawi-tawi province are expected to live only 53.5 years, 21 years less than those who live in La Union, the province with the highest life expectancy. This disparity could be explained by disparities in access to quality healthcare. Six of the country's provinces with the lowest high school graduate ratio are also in Mindanao. Finally, people living in the conflict-affected provinces of Saranggani, Maguindanao, Zamboanga del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi also had some of the lowest real per capita income and the lowest human development index (HDI) in the Philippines, with HDI levels of the provinces not significantly different from those of Uganda, Nigeria and Senegal. The same provinces, except for

Zamboanga del Norte, were also among the ten provinces with the lowest human poverty index, which captures deprivation beyond income poverty.”

“Finally, while the island region is poor and lacking in basic social services, it is flooded with weapons. In a public statement, a senior police officer said that 80 percent of the two million illegal weapons in the Philippines can be found in Mindanao. The official said, “in some communities, particularly in Mindanao, guns have almost become a fashion accessory to display power and authority”. In May 2009, the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) reported that the Philippines ranked 10th in the world in the list of countries with the highest number of gun-related killings, with an average of almost 10 gun-related deaths per 100,000 people annually.”

Aside from being the poorest (or perhaps more correctly, *because it is* the poorest), Mindanao is also the most war-torn region. It continues to suffer from the violent conflicts and the armed struggles being waged by the Moros as they continue to fight for self-determination, the Maoists’ revolution for national liberation, and the local Marxists-Leninists’ struggle against landlessness, marginalization and poverty.

References:

1. Dr. Peter Koepfinger
2. Amnesty International
3. Victor Gerardo Bulatao
4. IBON
5. SWS