

Signs of Peace

An Interview with Peace Advocate Joeven Reyes

September 2016

The current Philippine government shows political will to end fights with the Philippine leftist movement and to pursue lasting peace for the first time in decades.

What were the mile stones of the peace process during the government of Benigno Aquino III?

JR: Nothing really substantial happened, in fact, the first formal talks in February 2011 were the last formal talks as well. Although in the last few years, starting in 2013, there were attempts to start formal talks with the NDF but unfortunately it still did not happen.

I think the former president and its administration lacked political will to really push through with the talks. This is also because the Aquino government is more into neo liberalism, more a social democrat which is in very contrast in the views of the NDFP.

How come the peace talks are revived now? Who took the initiative?

JR: Even before his campaign Duterte already signifies his intention to really pursue all the peace talks in the Philippines, not only with the NDF but as well with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). This, he said, is his priority

on peace and order not only for the drug problem but also for peace in the country. And then of course, he said he is a socialist and at the same time a friend and student of Jose Maria Sison who is the founding member of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). So there is a political will and both have been showing their confidence and their high trust in each other, so that is a very important factor in really pursuing the peace talks.

What happened before the official talks in Oslo, August 2016?

JR: Even before Duterte formally assumed office in June 30, he already had a meeting with the NDF spokesperson Fidel Agcaoili. Initially they already talked about the releases of the political prisoners and in fact they went beyond the release of the JASIG consultants. President Duterte and NDF are saying that they will have a general amnesty. The second one, of course, is exploring the possibility of having a ceasefire. And then, re-affirming the past agreements. In the mid of June 2016 there has been an ex-

President Duterte shakes hands with former National Democratic Front peace panel chair Luis Jalandoni in a meeting held in Malacañan on Sept. 26, 2016. Also in the photo are Government of the Philippines chief negotiator Silvestre Bello III (3rd from right) and Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Jesus Dureza (2nd from right). Foto: Presidential Communications Facebook Page.



ploratory talks that happened in Oslo. Part of it was to talk about the amnesty proclamation, the ceasefire, re-affirmation of the talks and the release of the JASIG consultants. Before the formal talks in August the government was able to deliver its promise to release the 22 JASIG consultants of the NDF so that they could participate in the peace process. These are really some big names in the leadership of the CPP like Wilma Tiamzon, Benito Tiamzon, Tirso Alcantara, Alan Jazmines, Ernesto Lorenzo among others. Who of course, based on their leadership position and expertise in the different issues can really bring a lot in the peace talks. So the release of the JASIG consultants is very much welcome for us in civil society.

They also agreed that the next round of releases will be 125 political prisoners. These are the sick, the elderly and the women of the political prisoners. The NDFP is waiting for their immediate release. We hope that some of them can be released before the next formal talks this October.

Beside of that, President Duterte in his State of Nation Address (SONA) declared a unilateral ceasefire. Unfortunately, there has been some misunderstanding in regard to this ceasefire because the government was expecting that the NDFP would immediately respond to the ceasefire. But of course the NDFP said that they still have to review the document on the ceasefire declaration of the government which is the suspension of military offensives and the suspension of police offensives. Three, four days after the unilateral ceasefire the Davao del Norte en-

counter happened and with that President Duterte has lifted the unilateral ceasefire on July 30. We got worried that this could affect the talks but we are happy that the talks pushed through.

What are the agreements of the first formal talks?

JR: One is that both had declared an indefinite unilateral ceasefire effective on August 30, 2016. The second one, they agreed to fast-track the process. According to the government they expect to finish the agreements in one year. Realistically speaking we think one year is not enough to be able to finish the agreements. The formular of both parties in order to fast-track the formal talks is the agenda of the social and economic reform. Both parties have committed its own reciprocal working committee. But on the other hand for the next two agendas, the parties agreed to come up with a reciprocal working group, different from the committee so that they can already explore, study and come up with its draft agreements as well. Third is that both parties affirmed its commitment in the past agreements. There were ten major agreements signed during the time of Ramos, one of it is the CARHRIHL (Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law) which is the basic foundation of the other three agreements. They also decided to re-vitalize and operationalize the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC). That would ensure the implementation of CARHRIHL.



The NDFP Panel poses for a group picture with a show of fists in solidarity with President Duterte. Foto: NDFP International Information Office Facebook Page.

Who are the advisors?

JR: The Office of the Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process (OPAPP) is headed by Secretary Jesus Dureza. He is from Davao and used to be a presidential advisor for the peace process during the time of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. He also played a key role in the past peace talks. The chairperson of the peace talks is Secretary Silvestre Bello III, he was part of the peace negotiations in the past years and he used to be the Secretary in the Department of Justice. The third one is Commissioner Rene Sarmiento. He was the vice chairperson of the government panel before, during the time of President Ramos and he became for a short time the presidential advisor during the time of Arroyo as well.

Having this three key persons inside the panel of the government is very important because they have the institutional memory of the past processes, second they know the NDFP very well, they were also able to build good relationships with them which is a very important factor in peace negotiation. The GPH delegation is further made up of Dr. Francisco Lara, Dr. Jaime Aristotle Alip, Atty. Adel Abas, Senior Supt. Wilmer Panabang and Atty. Marie Dinah Tolentino-Fuentes. Except for one Angela Lebardo all the members of the government panel are men.

On the NDF side, its main consultant is Jose Maria Sison. And the chairperson is Luis Jalandoni and its vice chairperson is Fidel Agcaoili (he is also chairperson for the Joint Monitoring

Committee, JMC, and the ceasefire), the other members are Juliet De Lima (wife of Jose Maria Sison) and Coni Ledesma (wife of Luis Jalandoni). The NDFP team is further made up of Benito Tiamzon, Rafael Baylosis, Tirso Alcantara and Alfredo Mapano, while Wilma Austria-Tiamzon, attended the discussion as observer.

(Editor's note: The GPH working group is composed of atty. Efren Moncupa, Roberto M. Ador, Dr. Eric Batalla, and atty. Rhia Corazon Lano. The NDFP members are Julie de Lima, Alan Jazmines, Rafael Baylosis, Randall Echanis, and Adelberto Silva, as well as three additional consultants.)

On the side of the government we noticed that most of the members are from the academic institutions, experts, lawyers, former part of the security sector, so there is really no representation coming from the basic sectors and important groups in the Philippines, for example women representatives, Indigenous Peoples representative. We are hoping that they would include more women, not just putting a woman inside the panel but a woman that can bring woman's issues, the gender issue, inside the panel. And of course, the Indigenous Peoples (IP) as well because they are affected by the conflict, the military operations of both parties are happening in ancestral domains. So they really have to be heard as well in this peace process. We are really pushing for independent observers, where women, church and IPs can also be represented.

Brief History of the Conflict

For more than 40 years the armed conflict between the government (GPH) and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front of the Philippines (CPP-NPA-NDFP) has been going on. The CPP has been founded in 1968 in order to set up a people's democratic state and building a socialist society. In 1969 the CPP established the NPA as its military arm and finally the NDFP in 1973 as a broad alliance of mass organizations standing for national freedom and democracy.

Only after martial rule from 1972-86 the government under Corazon Aquino initiated peace negotiations with the NDFP in 1987. But the talks were not resumed until 1992, when the GPH under Fidel Ramos and the NDFP signed The Hague Joint Declaration. Between 1992-98 there were several other agreements signed by both parties such as the JASIG, Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (1995) protecting the rights of negotiators, consultants and other personnel. The first substantive agreement The Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) was reached in 1998 which could significantly mitigate the negative impact of the armed conflicts throughout the countryside. It builds confidence in the peace negotiations and paves the way for further agreements on fundamental agendas such as social and economic reforms, political and constitutional reforms, and finally the end of armed encounters. After 9/11 in 2001 the CPP-NPA and its leader and founder Prof. Jose Maria Sison were placed in the terrorist list by the US and its allies (including EU). Formal peace talks were only resumed in 2004 resulting in the first Oslo Agreement. Due to violent encounters and lacking political initiatives the formal talks were only resumed in 2011 with no further substantial agreements.

The violent encounters between the armed resistance of the NPA and the counter-insurgency operations of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) affects civil society for decades now. Especially farmers and Indigenous Peoples living in the countryside as well as human rights and environmental activists were among the many innocent victims caught in the crossfire of this armed conflict.

What role plays the Royal Norwegian Government?

JR: The Royal Norwegian Government through its Norwegian facilitator Elizabeth Slatum facilitates the talks, so it is different from a mediator role. As a facilitator the Norwegian government only provides spaces, venue, possible advices if asked by both parties but it would really give decisions to the parties in terms of agreements and processes.

There were really situations where civil society organizations have pushed the Norwegian Government to take a more active role in this peace negotiations. But the Royal Norwegian government's stand is that this is a process of the Filipino people and the Filipinos should own this process and be able to resolve the issues by itself.

What is your role with Sulong CARHRIHL?

JR: What we have been doing in the past years and up to the present is: one, we conducted several workshops and conferences on the issues and agendas of the peace agreement, for example on the social and economic reform. Together with the other peace organizations within the Citizens Alliance for Just Peace we conducted a series of thematic workshops on agrarian reform and national industrialization. Right now we are also doing a research on the social and economic reforms, we are doing a mapping of legislators and doing more advocacy work with the legislators in order to create more support for the peace process.

We are doing research and analysis so that we can recommend to both parties, we are doing constituency work so we explore and try to expand the possible support for the peace negotiation. We continue advocating, doing public events, disseminating materials related to the peace negotiation so that the public will know, we have been engaging the media as well in that aspect. And we are also monitoring the compliance of both parties in the CARHRIHL. In addition to that since there is this unilateral ceasefire, we would also like to help to monitor the ceasefire compliance of both parties, so we monitor as well any form of human rights violations, human rights abuses by any of the parties and we document this case and provide action response.

In the international level we continuously inform our partner embassies, other international delegation like the United Nations, the European Union Commission.

Both parties see us as a neutral and impartial organization, we are respected by both parties and we are also transparent on our engagements and activities. I think transparency is very important to sustain the trust that they have.

How is the current situation regarding the war against drugs and the state of emergency influencing the peace talks?

JR: With regards to the ceasefire, in terms of violent incidents in the community level, so far it has not been happening. There is no fighting or military operations, at least both parties are keeping their words in the unilateral ceasefire. With regard to the drug situation, the President is really so obsessed with the campaign against drugs and he is pulling not only military but also police force to help him in his battle against drugs. The communist party of the Philippines issued a statement with regard to the increase of the number of extrajudicial killings saying that they are also calling for a due process. However, in the other aspects of the situation, there has been no much actions coming from the left movement with regards to the state of emergency or the war on drugs compared to the past where they have been very active in terms of combatting human rights violations, their call against the state of emergency in the past years. I think it's also because they are really now focused on the peace talks and they wouldn't want anything to jeopardize the ongoing peace negotiations.

What are the expectations from both parties? On what practical level can they really come to an agreement?

JR: In the practical level, if you are asking the civil society organizations, esp. the farmer's groups, they want the full implementation of the CARP which is one of the main issue in the socio-economic reform which both parties are looking at. The agrarian reform itself is not that easy, it has been the CARP for decades but the full implementation has not been achieved. So I think, both parties are seeing what realistically



Joeven Reyes and José Maria Sison in Utrecht. Foto: Joeven Reyes.

can they do with the distribution of the agrarian reform land. Hopefully, there would be consultations, and transparent drafting of the agreement so that the people can also participate looking at this draft and suggest recommendation.

Is there any perspective of more civil society engagement?

JR: We are hoping! I would say, for example, I don't want to sound very one sided but what we can see right now, in terms of making the process more inclusive and more participatory I don't see the government asserting so much effort on it. In fact, some of the peace organizations feel like being side-lined, being shelled, not being consulted. And if you look at the composition of the committees, they are largely experts, academe. Of course they are also needed in the process but you are talking about the majority of the Filipino people, and who are the majority? The IPs, the farmers, the workers, the ordinary citizens, the business community, so where does all these people come in in the peace process? Learning for example from the MILF, from the Columbian peace process, what made

it also very successful is the participation of the people. It created the solid foundation for the peace negotiation.

On the side of the NDF in the past years they have already done many consultations. Second, they have a very thick draft of the agreement already, so they are just reviewing it now. And they have a very big mass base, and this mass base has always been consulted. Then, it's the first time we are also receiving positive feedback from them and they are more open to civil society engagements apart from those that they have been engaging in the past years. We are seeing those positive changes in the NDF allowing more civil society engagement. We just hope that the government will do their efforts in making the process inclusive since they have the capacity, they have the funding, they have the institutional mandate.

Interviewer: Lilli Breiningen

About the Interviewee

Joeven Reyes Escobar (JR) is the Executive Director of *Sulong CARHRIHL*, a human rights and peace network. *Sulong* means advance and CARHRIHL is the first substantive agreement signed between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). The organization has 59 network partners nation-wide and works on local, regional, national and international level on monitoring both parties and advocating peace issues.



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