

**KEYNOTE SPEECH**  
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I would like first of all, to thank Xavier University and its Peace Center for the privilege of participating in this conference on Autonomy for Muslim Mindanao.

We had learned sometime ago about this research project on regional autonomy which a consortium of Mindanao Universities has been pursuing this past year, and we have been eagerly awaiting the results of the study. You can rest assured that your reports in this conference will receive careful consideration from the Peace Commission.

Let me also commend the scholars who have cooperated on this project for their hard work and congratulate them for their good fortune. It is not often that academics are able to apply their craft to issues of urgent national concerns in time to make a difference.

Academics are often accused, in fact, of isolating themselves in their ivory towers and wasting their time on abstractions of no practical relevance. But, of course, we know the danger of underestimating the power of ideas. The failure to appreciate the significance of such abstract concepts as "Nationalism" or "Communism" has frequently produced disastrous results. Both the Americans and the Russians can bear witness to this.

In the context of current developments in Mindanao, the idea of autonomy has potentially explosive impact. It is an idea whose time has come. But in our talks with community leaders from Mindanao, we have been struck by the wide range of meanings attached to the concept.

There are those, for instance, who believe that with autonomy, Nur Misuari will become the ruler of Mindanao. Some equate autonomy with secession or independence from the republic. Others interpret it to mean dole-outs from the central government.

The concept of autonomy can obviously have a positive or a pernicious effect on the government's effort to preserve peace in Mindanao. The Peace Commission looks to this conference for help in clarifying the meaning of autonomy and communicating it to our people.

What I would like to do this evening is to provide you with additional inputs for your conference deliberations. An update on the initiatives taken by the government to address the autonomy issue in Mindanao may provide a useful framework for your analysis and recommendations.

This afternoon, the President signed into law the bill establishing the Regional Consultative Commission. We have thus taken another step towards fulfilling the constitutional mandate to extend meaningful autonomy to Muslim Mindanao.

The RCC, which shall assist Congress in formulating the organic act for the autonomous region, will have a total of 50 members. Each of the 27 congressional districts in the proposed autonomous region has one RCC representative selected by the President from a list proposed by multisectoral groups. In addition, the President selected 23 other commissioners from a list of candidates nominated at large to insure that all sectors were fairly represented.

The RCC members will hold office in their respective districts. This will enable them to perform more effectively their key function: Serving as a channel of communication between the Congress and their constituencies.

RCC sessions will be conducted for the most part in Zamboanga or Cotabato to allow the people of Mindanao easier access to their deliberations.

The Muslim community makes up about 20% of the population of Mindanao. Pursuing a policy of affirmative action, the President has composed the RCC with a 50% Muslim representation. The cultural minority groups also have a greater share of RCC seats than their numbers in the population, 16% as against 6%.

The establishment of the RCC meets a mandate of the constitution. It is also a step towards complying with our commitment to honor the terms of the Tripoli Agreement.

Permit me to emphasize this point. In approaching the issue of autonomy for Muslim Mindanao, the Philippine government takes as its guiding principle its obligation to execute the Philippine Constitution and to observe the Tripoli Agreement. Let us, therefore, put to rest any doubts about the willingness of this government to abide by the Tripoli Agreement.

But let us make sure we understand what the Tripoli Agreement is all about:

First, it addresses an internal, domestic issue;

Second, it involves, as the principal parties to the agreement, the Philippine government and a group of its subject citizens;

Third, it envisions regional autonomy for Muslim Mindanao within the framework of Philippine national sovereignty;

Fourth, it recognizes that the implementation of regional autonomy must be pursued in accordance with Philippine constitutional processes; and

Fifth, it remains an uncompleted agreement.

The final point bears repeating because it is often forgotten or conveniently ignored by those who insist on the "full" or "sincere" or "genuine" implementation of the Tripoli Agreement. The substantive portions of the agreement which would have defined the character of the autonomous region were never resolved. They were instead deferred for future discussions. Thus, the crucial question of how the military, educational, legal and fiscal

institutions of the autonomous government would relate to the corresponding structures of the national government remains unanswered.

The only way to implement such provisions in the Tripoli Agreement would be to provide the venue for the discussion and settlement of the unresolved points. In constituting the RCC, the government has provided this venue.

It must also be pointed out that the government has tried other venues. The negotiations conducted by the Pelaez panel with the MNLF was only the latest effort to resolve the questions left hanging by the Tripoli Agreement. The talks, unfortunately, failed to produce a consensus. Negotiations collapsed, but not before it became quite clear that the MNLF wanted much more than the Tripoli Agreement could concede.

The MNLF first wanted the government to include the entire island of Mindanao as well as Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-tawi and Palawan within the scope of the autonomous region. Failing in this demand, it subsequently pressed for the President to issue an executive order placing the thirteen provinces covered in the Tripoli Agreement under virtually complete control of the MNLF for a period of five years, until elections could be held.

The President had to reject this demand as well. The promise to extend autonomy to Muslim Mindanao and the mechanism by which this was to be accomplished had already been embodied in the constitution. Congress was preparing to convene. It would have been singularly inappropriate and unbecoming for Mindanao to achieve autonomy through a midnight executive order. It would have cheapened a noble goal that, for so many years, so many had fought for. And the executive order itself would surely have been challenged by Congress.

But when the Peace Commission started the process of composing the RCC, one of its critical concerns was to maintain communication lines with the Muslim armed groups. The leadership of the three factions responded to the RCC in different ways.

The MNLF took the hardest line, repeatedly and publicly repudiating the constitution and rejecting the concept of the RCC. The other two groups periodically criticized the government's approach to peace, but largely maintained a discreet silence or occasionally offered lukewarm support. The Peace Commission maintained contact with all three factions.

While the public rhetoric of the MNLF top leadership remained intransigent, the reality on the ground had a different complexion. Field commanders, even of the MNLF, listened attentively to presentations of government policy and, on occasions, even initiated the contact with the Peace Commission. Those to whom we talked explained that while they could not seek RCC membership themselves, they could endorse people who could represent their cause.

When we are asked, therefore, whether the MNLF will participate in the RCC, we can quite honestly and quite simply say "yes." The longer answer would first go into the question of "Who is the MNLF?" Nur Misuari will not be participating in the RCC, although he could have done so if he had wanted to. But is Nur Misuari the MNLF? And even granting that Nur Misuari is the MNLF, is he the only one the government should deal with and listen to. Let us not forget that the government had, in fact, tried this approach. And it was severely criticized for ignoring other Muslim leaders. Moreover, the bilateral approach simply did not work.

The government had offered Misuari and the MNLF a leadership position in a provisional autonomous council and a strong hand in the organization of the RCC. The MNLF rejected this offer, and the negotiations with the Pelaez panel ground to a halt.

But even without the MNLF, the government had to comply with the constitutional mandate to extend autonomy to Muslim Mindanao, within the time frame established by the constitution.

With the RCC, the government has moved from bilateral negotiations with just one faction of the Muslim armed groups to multilateral consensus-building. The process followed in organizing the RCC recognized and respected the diversity of Mindanao. And it faithfully reflected two of the premises that guide the work of the Peace Commission: That the government should attend not only to the MNLF but to all Muslims and not only to the Muslims but to all of Mindanao.

But some quarters are now critical of the government because it abandoned a bilateral approach that had not worked. The move, they claim, deviates from the Tripoli Agreement which was bilateral in nature. They urge the government to bend every effort to bring Misuari back to the bargaining table, at long last to complete the Tripoli Agreement.

The criticism is rich in irony. The Aquino government had no hand in forging the Tripoli Agreement, if it had been in power then, it would perhaps not have concluded such an accord; according to Speaker Mitra, the agreement was "treasonous."

From all indications, the Marcos government had no intention of implementing the agreement to give genuine autonomy to Muslim Mindanao. The ploy of creating two structures, one for Region 9 and another for Region 12 betrayed the bad faith.

From all indications, the MNLF wanted the Tripoli Agreement only as a step towards the ultimate goal of secession. The extravagant demands for the whole of Mindanao during the negotiations with the Pelaez panel provided a clue to the real plan. But the leaders were really quite open about their aims. The Chief of the MNLF negotiating panel was quoted as saying:

"Actually, we don't want autonomy. The fact is, we were pressured thrice by the OIC to talk with the government. It will be our turn

now to pressure the OIC." (The Manila Chronicle, 8 June 1987)

But as a gesture of good will, the Aquino government is trying its best to implement an agreement neither of the contracting parties had intended to honor. How can it be castigated then for failing to revive after over a decade a baby that was delivered congenitally defective, if not actually still-born?

The Tripoli Agreement was perhaps a useful instrument at one point in time. But time did not stand still. And neither did Mindanao. Times change, and an agreement mutually convenient for Marcos and Misuari may no longer be adequate now to address new political realities.

One reality is that the Filipino people have overwhelmingly ratified a constitution committed to autonomy for Muslim Mindanao. They have also placed in power a government genuinely prepared to honor this commitment. A second reality is the emergence of new Muslim leaders where before there was mainly Misuari.

Nonetheless, the Aquino government persists in saving what it can of the agreement, implementing what is implementable and what does not do violence to the basic rights of its citizens. It does so only on the understanding that the Tripoli Agreement only intends genuine autonomy for Muslim Mindanao and the welfare of the Muslim community. It cannot legitimately be invoked simply to perpetuate the dominance of one armed faction, a dominance that many Muslims themselves would reject.

The bottom line, then, for this government is the welfare and the development of the country's Muslim population. For this reason, it has refused to limit itself to political initiatives. Even as it addresses the political problem of autonomy through the RCC, it has started a program to improve and expand the access of Muslim communities to the basic services of government: electric power, potable water, roads and bridges, literacy classes, health facilities.

During her visit to Tawi-tawi and Zamboanga, the President formally announced the government's service and action program. She did not present a plan, she reported on performance.

Critics have denounced the service and action program as a gimmick to distract attention from the goals of the MNLF. But the service and action program is no political gimmick. The projects under the SAP require no special funding; they are part of the regular program of work of the line agencies. In launching the service and action program, the President has simply established a system for allocating priorities to the areas in most need of help and for stimulating the performance of the bureaucracy.

For focusing on the urgent survival needs of the most disadvantaged communities, the government has been loudly attacked. Muslim leaders, comfortably settled in Manila or overseas, belittle these efforts as diversionary and insist that the government first resolve the political issue before

building roads or digging wells or providing electricity.

We have to wonder how closely those who preach this line listen to the people. Autonomy, to be sure, is an important issue. But the people out there in the farms and in the fishing grounds do not go to bed every night wondering about the structures of the future autonomous government. From what we can tell, people are concerned over more basic, rice and fish issues: jobs and income, peace and order and the services that the SAP seeks to deliver.

It takes two parties to conclude an agreement. But the government does not have to wait for anyone to deliver the basic services our people so badly need, and it will not wait. A third premise of its approach to peace in Mindanao recognizes the need to address not just the political but also the development agenda.

I have, I fear, taken too much of your time this evening, but I felt it was important to establish the rationale and the premises of the government's approach to the issues of autonomy, development and peace. Unfortunately, media has been much too pre-occupied of late with the sensational sabre-rattling stories to provide much analytical coverage of what the government is doing.

War obviously sells more papers than peace.

This fact of life, I think, is something that the participants in this conference must also confront. I know that you have much to contribute to our understanding of the issues that can bring war or peace to Mindanao.

Those who stay up in the ivory towers of academe may discern from their vantage point paths to peace which those who toil in the fields may be unable to detect. But they can not remain detached observers of the passing scene. Supremely indifferent as to who, if any, gathers the pearls of wisdom that they cast.

There will be many conflicting views on the issue of autonomy and how best it can be achieved. We will need your analytical skills and your creative insights. In addition to objective analysts, we will also require passionate advocates. Even the best ideas will not prosper unless their authors are also prepared to fight for them.

Thus, I think we will need more than just ideas from the academic community. We will also need their involvement, their willingness to express what they think and what they feel, their commitment to stand up and be counted for what they believe.

We are confident that we will discover in this community men and women who can craft that crucial combination of analysis and advocacy.