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Philippines

Why solidarity with Mindanao requires opposing martial law

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We need to block rather than support Duterte's martial law in Mindanao in order to pave the way for a different kind of peace that will not just benefit Mindanaoans but all Filipinos.

As with their "war on drugs", Duterte and his army of enablers are trying to rally support for martial law and their own version of the "war on terror" by claiming that, just as there is no other way to help and support victims of drug-related crimes but to curtail people's rights and exterminate drug peddlers/dependents, there is now no other way to help and support the victims of "terrorism" in Mindanao but to curtail people's rights and liquidate the "terrorists." Those who support martial law are the only ones who "care" about the people of Marawi; those who are against it are on the side of, if not in cahoots with, the "terrorists."

This is of course not only dishonest but ridiculous. We oppose martial law precisely because we stand in solidarity with the people of Mindanao, and because we know that martial law will not help but only harm, and indeed, terrorize them – just as so many people from Mindanao themselves have said (See statement from over 20 Mindanao-based groups below, for example).

Duterte's "war on terror" will only allow and embolden state forces to perpetrate even more human rights violations against all those they suspect as the "enemies" and we know that, despite all the legal restrictions imposed on them on paper, they will tag and treat as enemies even ordinary civilians. It is bound to create or reinforce a climate of impunity that is likely to result in so many illegal arrests, arbitrary detentions, disappearances, torture, and other atrocities that, instead of resolving the conflict, will only drive even more people – the sons, daughters, brothers, sisters or friends of those they terrorize or slaughter – to join rather than reject the likes of the Maute Group, thus further perpetuating rather than ending the conflict.

We – and many people in Mindanao, especially – know this from experience (and common sense): Marcos also imposed official martial law in Mindanao in 1972 (and successive regimes imposed 'unofficial' martial law after) but, instead of ending the violence, their own wars of terror only led to more blood and tears. Instead of eliminating the "enemies," official and de facto military rule only drove many Moros and lumad to join, and fight with, the various resistance groups in the region.

The root of all the violence and suffering in Mindanao is all too clear (despite so many governments' attempts at Filipino-nationalist historical revisionism): The emergence and persistence of groups such as the Abu Sayaff or the Maute group – their continuing ability to draw recruits and keep fighting – has been the consequence not just of the spread of irrational ideologies such as "Islamic fundamentalism" nor of conspiracies hatched by the United States. It has been the result of the abject failure of all previous negotiations agreements between the government and various Moro/Muslim and other groups in Mindanao (the MNLF, MILF, etc.) to improve the conditions of life in Mindanao and to guarantee real as opposed to bogus autonomy to the Moros and lumad.

Those agreements failed, in turn, because politicians, landowners, capitalists, military generals, and other elites from the northern Philippines (and from other countries) have refused to give up even just a small portion of the vast lands and resources they took from the Moros/Muslims/lumad from the 19th to the 20th century through state-sanctioned land grabs and resettlement programs (itself an attempt to pacify all those whose lands they grabbed in the Visayas and Luzon).

"Conflict" has continued because instead of simply acquiescing as they were effectively subjected to colonial rule by Filipinos, the Moros/Muslims/and lumad organized themselves and formed various groups (the MNLF, MILF, etc), to

fight for their rights – groups that, because their oppressors used arms and violence to subdue them, also felt compelled to use arms and violence to fight back. The history of Abu Sayyaf and Maute groups are nebulous, but available information suggest they were formed largely by rebels who felt betrayed after the government failed to deliver on its promise to grant them real autonomy, and who feel that they could only finally achieve their goals by fighting for an independent (and 'Islamic') state.

Oppression breeds resistance

It's easy to think of them as just dupes or stooges of ISIS (or of the CIA), but what more likely happened is that, isolated and desperate to attract support, they only adopted the language and ideology of ISIS (and perhaps accepted resources from them and other groups) in order to pursue their own homegrown goals. We may disagree with (and we should condemn) their methods, but it would be inaccurate to dismiss them all as mere "bandits" or "terrorists."

Oppression always breeds political resistance, and political resistance comes in many – sometimes ugly and detestable – forms.

This is why the "war on terror" now being being waged by Duterte – and being justified by his army of enablers – will not actually help but only further harm, and terrorize, those they claim to "care" about. Unable to once and for all pacify Mindanao, Duterte is once again unleashing the swords of war in yet another attempt to once and for all open up Mindanao to local and foreign investors and foster capital accumulation – something he could not quite do for as long as armed groups continue to fight the state.

But even if Duterte captures, tortures, or slaughters all the members of the ASG/Maute and other groups – just as Marcos and his henchmen tried to capture, torture, or slaughter members of the MNLF/MILF/etc in the 1970s, many of their sons and daughters will simply replace them, and much of Mindanao will only continue to be a valley of blood and tears, for as long as the injustices committed against the Moros/Muslims/lumad (and landless Christian settlers) in the region are not corrected.

The kind of military "solution" that Duterte is now pursuing – the same solution that Marcos (and Erap, GMA, etc) before him pursued, will therefore not work to end the violence; what's needed instead are political solutions – the same ones that Cory, FVR and others tried to pursue but ultimately failed to deliver.

What's needed is for the government to conduct earnest and honest peace negotiations with the various armed groups in the regions and be willing to finally respect rather than suppress the right to self-determination of the Moros/Muslims/lumad in Mindanao. And the enemies or the "spoilers" here, let us be very clear, are not the oppressed but the landlords, investors, generals and other elites who, seeking to hold on to their stolen property, would rather that Mindanao continues to be ruled as a de facto colony.

There is another way to help, or be in solidarity with, the people of Marawi and the rest of region – just as there is another way to help, or be in solidarity with, drug dependents and the victims of drug-related crimes.

We need to block rather than support Duterte's martial law in Mindanao in order to pave the way for a different kind of peace that will not just benefit Mindanaoans but all Filipinos: the peace of the free and living, not the peace of the muffled, nor the peace of the graveyard. –

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