

Written by Amina Rasul

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In spite of my pneumonitis, I stayed up to watch the inaugural activities in Washington, D.C., for the 44th President of the United States. Disobeying my doctor's advise to rest, I joined millions of viewers around the world who were glued to their TV sets. I wanted to hear what the new President would say, not just about the crisis affecting the United States, but the crisis affecting the world community, especially the Islamic world post-9/11.

I was not disappointed. President Obama, during his inaugural speech, reaffirmed his belief in the greatness of his nation but said, "We understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned."

Muslims around the world must have rejoiced when he categorically stated, "As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals." He gave the assurance that his government would support the rule of law and human rights, stressing that "we will not give them up for expedience's sake." His statement that "power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please" made we wonder how our own government would now look at its strong-arm tactics in pursuit of alleged terrorists, violating human rights in the guise of securing the state. After all, the government's draconian measures were founded upon their alliance with the Bush administration on the war on terror. (Was Gov. Sakur Tan of Sulu, in threatening the families of the kidnapers of the International Red Cross team, merely following the lead of the Arroyo administration?)

Muslims have taken tentative steps forward to meet President Obama halfway as he proclaimed, "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

President Obama's promise that "We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people, and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan" was followed the following day with his directive to close the infamous Guantanamo Bay prison. In the eyes of the Muslim world, Gitmo had become the symbol of a superpower that would do anything, including torture, because it could.

Thus, Muslims have taken tentative steps forward to meet President Obama halfway as he proclaimed, "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

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I wonder how the Arroyo administration received the next statement: “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history.” But there is a positive line, “we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”

And so the winds of change in the United States have reached our shore: A gentle breeze of hope for peace between the Muslim world and the superpower that is the United States.

On January 26th, more than 200 ulama (Muslim religious scholars and leaders) participated in their three-day Second National Ulama Summit at the Imperial Palace Suites in Quezon City. Representing more than 100 ulama organizations, community based and regional, several of the leaders have shared with me their optimism that Barack Hussein Obama will be the harbinger of positive change. Several hoped that the Obama administration could help bring peace and justice to their brothers and sisters in Mindanao by supporting the peace process. Many ulama would like to write President Obama their thoughts on how, together, we could all move forward.

Why is this summit significant? The influential ulama—if they succeed in establishing a national network—can become a potent vehicle for peace and development in Muslim Mindanao, especially in the areas of conflict.

Besides launching the first federation of Ulama groups, the summit featured respected Islamic scholars and leaders from the region. Dr. Endang Turmudi, Secretary General of Nadhlatul Ulama of Indonesia, and Dr. Anwar Abbas, chair of the Entrepreneurship and Economic Council and Secretary of the Central Board of Muhammadiyah, also from Indonesia, shared the experiences of their organizations, the two largest Muslim organizations in the world with a combined membership of 75-million. Speakers on “Islam and the Challenge of Modernity” were Prof. Dr. Abdullah Saeed of the University of Melbourne, Australia, and Dr. Hisham Hellyer, a principal fellow at the International Institute of Advance Islamic Studies, Malaysia.

The ulama discussed issues such as human rights, the peace process, governance and electoral reforms in ARMM, economic development and poverty alleviation, da'wah, human rights and women's rights. Resource persons included Atty. Leila de Lima, chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, Assistant Secretary Camilo Montesa, Office of the Presidential

## Even President Obama Bats for a New Way Forward But Can Malacañang Follow? - MabuhayRadio

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Adviser on the Peace Process, Commissioner Rene Sarmiento of the Commissions on Elections, Ambassador Henrietta de Villa, chairperson of the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), Atty. Mehol Sadain, former Commissioner of the Comelec, and Atty. Nasser Marohomsalic, former Human Rights Commissioner.

The winds of change are coming. Even the ulama of war-torn Muslim Mindanao can feel it. Can Malacañang? # # #

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