

After more than six years incarceration, Nur Misuari is free – sort of. The chair of the Moro National Liberation Front was charged with rebellion, accused of ordering his MNLF troops to attack the military brigade in Jolo, Sulu. After six years, Nur has been allowed to post bail. Why and why now?

Is the charge of rebellion aailable crime? According to a lawyer friend, “No. However, if the evidence is not strong, the court may grant bail to the accused”. Several years ago, I asked a senior official of the Department of Justice about Chairman Misuari’s case and he told me that the case against the former ARMM Governor was weak. Why then did it take more than six years for the court to decide that the evidence was weak?

A news item yesterday reveals that Judge Winluc Dimayas (Branch 59 of the Makati City regional trial court) approved the bail in accordance with the instructions of the Cabinet security cluster. Malacanang orders the judiciary to do its bidding? What a thought! Checks and balances in our system of government require that the executive branch must not influence the judiciary. Presidential mouthpiece Ignacio Bunye, interviewed about Mr. Misuari, even said “We will not interfere with court processes”. *Talaga?*

So why was Chairman Misuari granted bail?

The timing is intriguing. Special Envoy Sayed El Masry of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OCI) was recently in Manila to monitor the tripartite review of the 1996 GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement (FPA). The OIC is mediating the assessment of the implementation of the historic accord. While government claims it has implemented 100% of its commitments, the MNLF claims that the government has failed. During the 10th anniversary of the signing of the agreement, Mr. Misuari even said the FPA must be resurrected before it can be implemented.

Chairman Misuari’s release has been a precondition demanded by the MNLF and supported by

Misuari: Chess Master or Pawn? - MabuhayRadio

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the OIC. "There is light at the end of the tunnel", said El Masry last week. Is there light because the Palace has finally agreed to release Mr. Misuari? Is Mrs. Arroyo caving in to the demand of a foreign institution? How can this be? (wink wink)

In the surprising move to release Chairman Misuari, I wonder who is the chess master and who is the pawn. I also wonder what the stakes are and what the end game is.

On the one hand, Chairman Misuari's release on bail is a smart move for government, a proof of sincerity that the OIC and Nur's followers can believe in. Misuari's people probably believe that they have won. Have they? If Mr. Nur takes any step which his jailers don't like, they can whisk him back to jail. What did Misuari promise? On the other hand, government has to be worried that Mr. Nur is now accessible to media. It will be more difficult for government to hide the fact that the FPA has failed, in large part because government has not lived up to its commitments. Further, Chairman Nur can now take action to unite the MNLF. He can neutralize the recent action of Cotabato City Mayor and MNLF leader Muslimin Sema in declaring himself the new Chair of the MNLF. A united MNLF leadership can make it difficult for the government to hide the untrammelled militarization of Muslim Mindanao, contrary to the government's commitment of supporting the autonomy of ARMM.

On the positive side, a united MNLF under Mr. Misuari also makes it easier for government to address the military-MNLF hostilities which have burdened the people of Sulu. Government can now negotiate with one leader who commands the respect and loyalty of the rebels holed up in the mountains of Sulu. A united MNLF also makes it a little easier to have discussions between the MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, a move that has been strongly recommended by the OIC. The son and heir of Libya strongman Khadaffy, Seif Al Islam, tried to broker unity talks between the two liberation forces. He failed, in part because Misuari did not participate.

Since 1996, the road to peace has become more dangerous. Landmines abound. It is my fervent prayer that the Chairman Misuari will use his temporary freedom and unite the MNLF. He is back in the driver's seat. He has the opportunity to steer the MNLF organization and make it respond to the demands of his people for justice, peace and development. Take them to the Bangsamoro homeland he promised. # # #

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