

Ramadan is a time for hope

By Amina Rasul

Last Wednesday, the Muslim world entered the Holy Month of Ramadan. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam, required of all Muslims. For one whole month, Muslims cannot eat or drink from sun up till sundown and must abstain from all worldly pleasures. The act of fasting cleanses the body. The whole month is also dedicated to cleansing of the spirit through prayer and meditation, through acts of kindness.

President Benigno Aquino, III greeted his Muslim constituents, reminding all that Ramadan is also a time for “great hope.” He said, “For the sacrifices that bring a community closer to one another and to the Almighty brings the promise of grace and abundance,” relating the sacrifices embraced by Muslims with the need of all citizens to think less of personal interest and more for “the greater good.”

It was a brief statement, but well received for the empathy President Noynoy Aquino (PNoy) shared with over 8-million Muslims in the Philippines. However, his message may well be lost amidst the mixed signals exchanged by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and by the government.

Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, spoke on government’s pronouncements on the peace process, as he hosted the MILF-Focap Forum on the Peace Process at Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, on August 9. Murad reacted to news accounts that the Aquino government was criticizing the ‘mistakes’ in the forging the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). Murad also reacted to a statement that government wanted to change Malaysia as mediator, which has gathered criticism from the MILF. (As a source has told me, there may be a desire to change the person, but not the country). Even PNoy’s State of the Nation Address (SONA) was brought up, as he had used the term “situwasyon sa Mindanao” or Mindanao situation, often used in connection with insurgency. Murad pointed out that he could only

speculate on the Aquino Administration's policy on the peace process, noting that the paucity of data is "aggravated by such misleading terminology 'Situwasyon Sa Mindanaw,' and by pinning the solution to the Moro, Lumad, and Christians talking to each other."

Murad cautioned: "Finally it is our firm hope that the Moro Question and armed conflict in Mindanao

will be settled now or in our lifetime; otherwise, this struggle of our people for freedom and right to self-determination will drag on for generation after generation".

The PCID Statement

As we observe Ramadan, let me share with you part of the statement of the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy for both government and MILF to be more optimistic. We cannot afford another year of fighting during Ramadan. All sides will be losers, especially the peaceful Moro who just wants to fulfill his religious obligation:

"As our Muslim brothers and sisters observe the holy month of Ramadan, the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy (PCID) calls on both the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to err on the side of optimism.

"MILF chief Al Haj Murad Ebrahim has expressed skepticism about the chances of the MILF and the Aquino government forging a peace agreement saying that the MILF has not seen any sign of the Aquino government's capability to offer a lasting solution to the Moro problem. The MILF added that they would be ready to use more than 60,000 weapons to wage war if peace talks with the government collapse.

"The MILF, through its chief negotiator Mohagher Iqbal, has also announced it would file a protest against government security forces for launching air strikes against their position in Maguindanao violating the existing ceasefire when they fired rounds of howitzers towards the MILF position in the town of Datu Piang.

"The PCID appeals for calm and circumspection from both parties to avoid a breakdown of the talks even before it begins, especially as we enter Ramadan.

"Despite the doubts expressed by the MILF, we urge their leadership to give the new administration a chance to prove its sincerity in achieving a just peace.

"We likewise call on the government to be more cautious in referring to the controversial Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain.

“While the previous regime has admittedly mishandled the peace process, the MOA-AD does contain provisions that represent the aspirations of the Moro people, particularly the Right to Self-Determination.

Despite the Supreme Court ruling on its unconstitutionality, the MOA-AD contains substantive language for ancestral domain on which the new peace talks can be founded upon”.

Mixed Signals May Again Lead to Military Confrontation

O ur fear is that the mixed signals may again lead to military confrontations in Muslim Mindanao, even as Secretary Voltaire “Voltz” Gazmin believes that the MILF is merely engaging in psywar.

Last year and the year before, the military did not stop operations against “rogue MILF” during Ramadan.

In Sulu, during last year’s Eidl Fitr festival, government thought nothing of strafing and bombing a village in Indanan, Sulu, to arrest three “high-value targets,” suspected terrorists. The military did not capture the three but the village failed to observe their religious obligation while more-than a thousand families became evacuees on that holy day. They violated Philippine law (Revised Penal Code) that imposes imprisonment for government officials and employees who prevent religious worship.

Of course, that was then and this is now. However, it does not hurt to remind one and all that the law guarantees that all citizens, Muslims and Christians, have the right to observe their religious obligations. We pray that the previous administration’s callous approach to state security is truly a thing of the past. To the macho leaders, please bring down the testosterone level. We are fasting. # # #

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