

# Power from the Iceberg: Imagining Peace in Mindanao beyond the Agreement on Paper\*

**Eric S. Casiño**

Hawai'i Pacific University, United States

**Abstract.** The following is a reconstruction and expansion of a fifteen-minute presentation made in Davao City, Philippines, last 1–2 December 2011. The occasion was a roundtable discussion entitled “Undercurrents: Imagining a Post-Peace Agreement Period in Mindanao,” which was organized by the University of the Philippines Mindanao and its partners in peacebuilding research, Hiroshima University, Japan, and the South-South Network for Non-State Armed Group Engagement (SSN). Incorporated in this update are responses to some comments made during the open forum. With the publication of the other papers, some redundancy might show up; but hopefully, because of such reemphasis, a fuller and more nuanced set of viewpoints and opinions will emerge to advance and implement the terms of peace in Mindanao long after the ink on the agreement documents has dried up.

**Keywords:** Bangsamoro; indigenous peoples; Lumad; Mindanao; peace process

## The Iceberg Metaphor

I want to start my remarks on imagining the “Post-Peace Agreement Period” in Mindanao by suggesting the iceberg as a useful metaphor. You might recall here the iceberg in the film *Titanic*. You see a part of the iceberg above the ocean. But there is a much bigger part you do not see below the water, the part that, if you are not aware of, could surprise you with a shipwreck. Using this image in the context of the Philippines, the tip of the iceberg stands for the visible combatants from both sides of the conflict. The invisible parts below the surface are the broad expanse of publics and forces often forgotten that we need to bring into play if we are going to establish and maintain a healthy society in Mindanao. The outline of the

iceberg above the water may also correspond to the visible Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) boundaries, but the iceberg’s invisible dimensions below the surface include the whole Mindanao and extend to the rest of the Philippines, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and to the international community. The issues of self-determination and national sovereignty are ones that people all over the world are concerned about. No nation is an island unto itself.

So what changes can we imagine for the social, political, and economic life of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious communities of Mindanao and Sulu, if and when the Moro rebellion is settled? That is my question. And my answer to this is as much “aspirational” as “futuristic imaginings.” I put them in quotation marks because the former implies personal aspiration to see things different from what they are. The “futuristic imaginings” are scenarios that may or may not correspond to a preferred future of any particular set of stakeholders.

Back to the hidden dimensions of the iceberg, the parts that we need to be aware of. They comprise several layers of stakeholders who want peace to prevail. So any imagining of

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**Correspondence.** Dr. Eric S. Casiño, Adjunct Lecturer, Hawai'i Pacific University, 1164 Bishop St, Honolulu, HI 96813, United States. Email: [casinoe@wwdb.org](mailto:casinoe@wwdb.org)

post-conflict Mindanao must bring into active involvement both the visible active combatants and the invisible publics, factors, and issues. We need to begin identifying especially these multiple layers of invisible stakeholders, nationally and internationally, because those who want peace and progress are not limited to people in the Philippines. Among these publics and sectors and trends that influence the conflict and the peace outcome we may include local government, business, education, agriculture, mining, environment, pollution, and the demographic forces driving rural and urban development. This is just a list of possible interest groups, but I do not intend to go through all of them here.

We already know who the visible combatants are: those from the government side and those from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Abu Sayyaf group (ASG), and other fighters committed to changing the political relation of the Muslim communities with the Philippine state. But what or who are the invisible stakeholders, interest groups, and concerned citizens? Included among them are the families and communities inside and outside ARMM, local governments, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), funding agencies, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, and international businesses and investors from Japan and the United States that have ongoing and future interests in Mindanao. The list can go on. All of them are in various degrees concerned stakeholders for future peace in Mindanao, interested in seeing Mindanao and Sulu transition into a healthy society.

Dr. Koki Seki of Hiroshima University, Japan, expanded on the meaning of the visible and invisible parts of the iceberg metaphor. His comments were most useful when he introduced related contrasts between the formal and informal, official and unofficial, dimensions of groups, factors, and issues. For instance, the conflicts between clans and dynastic political families, even within the ranks of Moro communities, are not seen as parts of the “official” rebellion; nevertheless

such conflicts known as *rido* do affect the environment of peace and conflict in Mindanao. Those in clan wars may be considered invisible combatants. A good reference on *rido* is found in Torres (2007). Dr. Koki also introduced the quite commonplace tension between ethnolinguistic divides in the Philippines, apart from the binary opposition between Muslims and Christians. Another invisible or ignored factor is the fact that some Muslims do not want to be identified as Moros. In such a situation, some will ask, how viable then is the Bangsamoro construct? I have discussed elsewhere the general issues relating to levels of binary opposition of social categories in the Philippines; as well as the history of government policies towards indigenous peoples (Casiño 1987; Casiño 2011).

One point I wish to expand on is how the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) has unwittingly politicized the Lumads. IPRA allows Lumads to assert control over areas they claim as ancestral domains or ancestral lands. To strengthen these claims, they have to convert them into titles, known as certificate of ancestral domain title (CADT) and certificate of ancestral land title (CALT). Areas declared as ancestral domains and ancestral lands contain resources that have aroused the interest of the groups within the state and multi-national corporations engaged in mining, ranching, logging, and large agribusiness enterprises. Conflicts between these interests and the Lumads have occurred in the past, and the future relations will be problematical (Gaspar 2000). Under IPRA and National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) rules, such outside interests have to go through community gatekeepers who are the Lumad leaders. Now that is a formula for a potentially difficult situation. The gatekeepers may be enlightened, with a strong sense of inclusivity, who will look for the common good of their community. Or they may be ambitious, wanting to accumulate power within a narrow circle of followers, against the interest of the larger community. That is what I mean by IPRA politicizing the Lumad communities. Used wisely, IPRA can be a solution; but it can also be a tool for oppression. According to one legal anthropologist (Gaymaytan 2007), there are Lumads who refuse to resort to the IPRA statutes to resolve problems

of resource use and self-determination in their areas, to avoid being caught up in legal and political violent conflicts.

Somewhat tangential to the comments Dr. Koki made is the changing nomenclature for what government agencies and NGOs use to describe what they do. I have observed that there have been four terms that came in succession in terms of their popularity with people working with the poor and marginalized communities. First there was “modernization,” then came “development,” which was followed by “sustainability,” and now the new fashion is “inclusivity.” In the beginning, just after World War II, we pushed “modernization,” helping the Third World catch up with the West by getting them to modernize, modernize, and modernize. And then we shifted to the related concept of “development,” striving to develop this aspect and that aspect of society or culture. Later, people added the term “sustainability,” so that development was often paired as “sustainable development.” Because, of course, you do not just want to achieve a new benchmark in progress, but you must maintain and sustain the development. The last word, which I really like, is “inclusivity.” That means when we plan and work to improve things, we need to be more inclusive than we were in the past. So this idea of a tripartite conference organized by University of the Philippines Mindanao, the South-South Network for Non-State Armed Group Engagement, and Hiroshima University is for me an excellent example of inclusivity in the search for peace and sustainable growth in Mindanao.

## Imagining a New Mindanao

### The Youth, Education, and Empowerment

To imagine a peaceful Mindanao, we need improved education. Children in the affected communities will need special attention to help them catch up with those who are less affected. We imagine that more attention will be given to intensive training on inclusive citizenship, and on communal thinking that transcends religious and ethnic divisions.

Along this line, Mr. Mussolini Sinsuat Lidasan, director of the Al Qalam Institute for Islamic

Identities and Dialogues in Southeast Asia, built up on the twin concepts of empowerment and the youth. He asked whether or not the discourse on the right to self-determination which the older Moro leadership has been promoting has trapped the youth from pursuing the more urgent cause of democratization and empowerment. He wondered how long we will remain trapped in this discourse, while we know that historically we had Muslim brothers from the Tausug, Maranao, and Maguindanao communities, as early as 1901, who joined the Philippine Senate and Congress, and served in the Cabinet. Moreover within the ranks of the Moros there are deep ethnic divisions, where some elements also want to separately exercise the right of self-determination, and so there seems to be no common ground. He preferred to focus on the issue of empowerment particularly of the youth, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. He cited the examples of the youth in Tunisia and Egypt. The youth there revolted against the status quo, in spite of the fact that these countries are Muslims. Thus power is actually in the hands of the people; the youth demonstrated to the world that they were free to exercise their power, to envision and construct a democratic society, different from the status quo. Lidasan's view of the essence of empowerment is summed up in his final remark: “I don't believe that our future is highly dependent on the output of the peace process. We, as a people, have our own power, and that power is within us. We have the option to choose what our future is, and we are not dependent mainly on what will happen to the GPH-MILF peace agreement.”

I agreed with the observation that the youth have power to change society. But I pointed out the difference between the Philippines and Tunisia. The revolution in Tunisia started with one young man who was brave enough to kill himself to express his defiance of the status quo. In the Philippine we do not have young people killing themselves to express their frustration, because there is room for young people to express different opinions. Still the youth are willing to sacrifice, as they did in the early battles of the MNLF against the government; and as they did in the days of student activism in the '60s and '70s when students faced death confronting the police and the military. What is needed is for the youth to come together

once again to form their own party, to empower themselves politically. But unless they do that, they will remain individual voices out there, not focused enough to change the status quo. And they should not wait for the existing parties in Manila, where some old people carry ideas in a mindset stuck in the last century. We need a new mindset of the youth, not just of the Moros, but all the young people in Mindanao. They have the power to change things, and not wait for the old people to tell them what to do—and how to do it.

One factor that has a significant role in empowering the youth in the future Mindanao, as it did in the Arab Spring, is social media, as raised by Ms. Mitzi D. Austero, a local consultant of the international NGO Conciliation Resources. She pointed out that in the Philippines, there are 26 million people on Facebook, although she does not know the number on Twitter or MySpace. The question was how the era of the Internet, free information, and social networking will impact our imagining of a post-peace agreement in Mindanao.

How did the young people in Tunisia and Egypt challenge the status quo? Was it not through social media? So if they could do it, can the young people in the Philippines do the same, challenging the status quo? And who are the power-holders that need to be challenged? I would think the Commission on Election (COMELEC) is one of them.

There are lessons to learn from the youth movements in the Middle East. The other point is that this power of self-determination is not given to you; you don't beg for it. You already have it in you; you just have to exercise it. The youth in Tunisia and Egypt have shown that they could exercise it. You don't have to wait. You can exercise it as long as you are willing to pay the price. There is a price you pay to change any structure that is oppressive. It's a painful price that some people were willing to pay in the past, and others doubtless will willingly pay again.

### **Business and Tourism**

We imagine the rise of new leadership. The Mindanao of the future will see more participation from the women's side. They will rise up as new models of political education and administrative leadership who will integrate the insights and inputs from women.

We imagine small and large businesses grow and expand, creating more jobs and absorbing people no longer engaged in fighting. Business will have a reciprocal effect with peace, because peace encourages the entry of new investors, and new businesses increases job opportunities.

We imagine an expansion of eco-tourism and cultural tourism. With better peace and security conditions, new and expanded tourist destination areas will flourish. People will not be afraid to travel in former conflict-affected areas. Infrastructure for travel and visitor facilities will be improved. Tourism is to be welcome as a counter-balance to environmental degradation that results from uncontrolled mining and large chemically-driven agribusiness enterprises.

One of the thorniest issues on the tip of the iceberg concerns the combatants. We imagine most of the soldiers and fighters from both sides will be out of jobs and will need to be productively employed elsewhere in society. This problem has been referred to as DDR—Disarm, Disband, Reintegrate. On the part of state militaries, we imagine their upkeep will be secured since they are part of the state's standing army; however, their presence and numbers in Mindanao will be reduced. But the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units (CAFGUs) will be disbanded, and their personnel will be absorbed in the regular labor sector. For those on the MILF side, their combatants will find employment in nonfighting jobs, integrated into the Philippine military, or remain in their fighting units as security forces. Finding funds for their upkeep will be a major problem. This situation is somewhat equivalent to downsizing in industries, where the solution is in retraining and placement in ongoing businesses or in self-employment in assisted programs, such as those supported by USAID.

### **Governance and Leadership**

Finally, there needs to be a constitutional and governance reform of ARMM. This governance apparatus, as many of you know, has not been functioning very well. We need to identify weaknesses in its structure and operation, and we need to consult with key stakeholders, not just with the MILF leadership.

This new governance and leadership should recognize that the situation of non-Muslim

indigenous groups or Lumads will remain problematical. I consider the Lumad factor, inside and outside the boundaries of ARMM, to be a major political and demographic issue; they form a large part of the invisible part of the iceberg. The passage of IPRA and NCIP has so politicized the Lumads that even if the so-called Moro problem were settled tomorrow, the problem of the Lumads of Mindanao will continue to simmer. As we demobilize the Moro issue, there already is an increase of mobilization among the Lumads. The reason for this is that the provisions of IPRA have given a measure of veto power to the Lumad leadership over the entry and expansion of mining, commercial agriculture, and other extractive industries trying to operate within their ancestral domains. Thus the Mindanao leadership, and those of us in academe, need to expand our vision of what a peaceful Mindanao of our hopes and dreams will be like. We can continue to dream of the future, but we need to deal with reality now. And the Lumads are a large part of that unsettled but empowered reality just below our current horizon of preoccupation.

As Prof. Yusuf Morales of the Institute for Comparative and Advanced Studies (ICAS), reminded the delegates of the conference, while the MILF is negotiating with the Philippine government, a new formation of individuals from Sulu has decided to resurrect their traditional political ideas, not to the extent of going back to the Sulu Sultanate, but to separate themselves from the politics of the Mindanao mainland. He wondered how the MILF would respond if representatives of these Sulu-oriented groups from Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Palawan, and North Borneo could speak at the negotiating table and declare they wanted out.

I addressed this question by recalling that Marcos's implementation of the Tripoli Agreement was to create two regions of autonomy, one Sulu-centered, and the other Mindanao-centered. When Cory Aquino took over from Marcos, she consolidated the two to form the current ARMM autonomous government. So prior to ARMM there were in fact two parallel tracks to autonomy. The Sulu-centric sentiments of groups wanting their own region of autonomy, I believe, will still persist, as manifested by some Tausug elements asserting their right to self-determination. Historically, the Sulu Sultanate was a feudal and

nondemocratic state, holding together a cluster of smaller segmentary power centers, successfully maintaining itself against British, Dutch, and Spanish attempts to conquer it. But whether the Sulu zone and its traditional power centers can again achieve self-determination in the twenty-first century remains to be seen.

This key question of viability of new states was raised by Prof. Osamu Yoshida of Hiroshima University, Japan, who also pointed out the related question of political education. On the viability of new states, I only pointed out that not all of them achieved independence through the exercise of the right to self-determination in wars of national liberation. The case of Singapore is a good example, because it did not seek to be an independent nation-state; it was pushed to become one by the Federation of Malaysia.

On political education, Prof. Yoshida pointed out that there is much controversy on content and who should determine it. It is a very controversial issue, especially in East Asia where it is considered part of interpreting and propagating a nation's history. In the Philippines, there is a similar controversy over content, such as remembering the abuses during martial law under the Marcos dictatorship. Possible contents for political education in Mindanao are found in some recent and not so recent attempts at reconstructing the cultural and political history of the Moros and the Lumads (cf. Gowing 1977; Warren 1985; McCoy 1993; Turner et al. 1992; McKenna 1998; Jubair 1999; Abinales 2010; Gaspar 2000; Casiño 2000; Casiño 2011).

As to who should determine the content, I believe the state should not be the sole authority or propagator of it. In my observation, during the years of student activism, students themselves determined the content and actively propagated them in seminars and sit-ins. Politically subversive ideas were circulating not inside universities through textbooks, but by word of mouth, in debates, seminars, and exchanges in these sit-ins. Through such circulation of ideas, the young people became more deeply aware of the status quo and how they could and should change it. And I believe this was what happened in Tunisia and Egypt, with students communicating through social media rather than sit-ins. The rise of revolutionary ideas reached such a level that the



central government could no longer stop it, could not stop the arrival of the Arab Spring. I imagine in the Philippines, and particularly for the situation in Mindanao, a new political education will reach a point that the young people will make a difference in changing the status quo. And it is up to us to imagine and determine what that difference will be like, when our own Mindanao Spring arrives.

Expounding back on the Lumad issue, Ms. Lualhati M. Abreu, a freelance researcher work and writing for NGOs in Metro Manila and Mindanao, reported that indigenous peoples (IPs) in north and southeastern Mindanao, particularly the Ata Manobo, have been politicized by NDF. The relationship between the two was the reverse of the typology presented at the conference. There the people's organizations were the visible forces, the public combatants, with the NDF helping them off the side. It was a Manobo organization that launched a *pangayaw* against loggers. The IPs in turn have supported the movement for almost fifty

years. With the help of some church groups, the IPs have started their own school and some economic projects. She dreams of peace with her question: "What if the government will sign with the NDF the fast-track proposal that the NDF is suggesting? Give them the right to develop their areas, just as GPH would give the MILF the chance to develop their areas . . . *magiging peaceful sa* Mindanao [Mindanao will become peaceful]."

My own brief comment was that we need to constantly remind ourselves that there are parallel conflict and peace processes, one with the MILF, the other with the communist side. When we talk about peace in Mindanao, we cannot limit it to the GRP-MILF peace process. We cannot forget that there is that other conflict going on in the other half of Mindanao. And it involves very much the IPs more than the Moros. And so the dreaming of a peaceful Mindanao of the future must include all Mindanaoans.

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