

On the Role of Civil Society in the Peace Process

Carmen A. Abubakr*

Good morning, everyone. *Assalamu Alaikum Wa Rahmatullahi Wa Barakatuh.* Magandang umaga sa atin.

I believe the role of civil society stakeholders is vital in building the nation. To my mind, everyone in the Philippines is a stakeholder. So rather than talk about stakeholders, I would like to talk about civil society in general and how they have been instrumental in the peace process.

Let me start by citing Sedyo Makiano's article on civil society, particularly its role in the peace process. For the purpose of this morning's discussion, I will only center on dialogue, the challenges and the dilemma of Sulu.

Now, dialogue has become a buzz word. Everybody is talking about dialogue. We know of a two-way dialogue that started way back in the 1970's. In the United Nations, they are talking about invitational dialogue. Dialogue has become very popular. But we have not yet seen the fruits of dialogue. In a recent publication of United Human Development in 2005, a survey noted that 47% of those surveyed admitted to an anti-Muslim feeling or sentiment. 47% is almost close to 50% of that population. So if we have started to dialogue since 1970 and after 40 years of dialoguing, how come we still have this 47%? If we have done multi-cultural dialogue informally in the marketplace or in the school, everywhere, trying to understand each other, still, how come we have this high level of anti-Muslim attitude everywhere?

I followed very religiously the media reports about what is happening, specifically among the IDPs, or internally-displaced people. Among the many accounts that really made me sad were stories involving children without a goal of what they wanted to be. It is more bothering to know that even aid groups now refuse to extend assistance. Even the attitudes of children and parents have been worrisome, especially toward internally-displaced people.

When something happens to the others who do not belong to our group the almost knee-jerk reaction, or the automatic response, would be *hindi sa atin yan, hindi natin alam* [they are not one of us, we do not know anything].

* Dr. Carmen A. Abubakr is a Professor and the former Dean of the Institute of Islamic Studies, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.

So, when we speak of dialogue, what are we really talking about? With whom are we dialoguing? Would it really help them to put the academe on stage to instill a sense of nationalism, or a sense of partnership among groups? Do we dialogue with known partners? Or do we invite those huge 47%? Do we feel more at home in dialogue with our contact partners? So we never really break out of this. We are talking to people who are already convinced of talking to others. But there is that 47% that we need to talk to. How do we embrace them? How do we make them part of our dialogue, if we want to push for this?

Part of the dialogue is what you hear and what you read. And what you hear and what you read comes from, of course, the media. And when we speak of the media, the media has not always been fair or balanced. Although some say that they are fair and balanced. Sadly, not all of media is always neutral or fair or balanced. But there are agencies that are trying to inject strategies to balance reporting by first, asking the reporters, not just to report, but to delve deeper into what they are reporting so that they could contextualize how to tell a story. There are also bills that are being passed in Congress, which are being debated in Senate. These bills would regulate the use of the words “ethnicity or ethnic diversity,” for example, which are being used to marginalize people in employment, housing, or even in other opportunities. There are of course, civil society groups that have provided alternative media reporting — media-watch, human-rights watch, and the like. Certainly they bring attention to activities that are enduring to some groups. This, I think, is where civil society should work — bridging the gap and increasing the level of trust among people, among individuals, among institutions.

The last element I would like to underscore is that civil society is not neutral. It is a variety of many people and groups, having their own interests and agenda. How do you put that together so that they could advocate peace? How do you do that? According to the MNLF, 80% of the Agreement of 1996 was implemented. Who is able to guarantee that this agreement that had been signed will be implemented 100%? How do we condition ourselves to support our peace process, and the goals that are very dear to us? A more deliberate attempt of strategy is necessary to ensure participation by civil society.

Thank you very much.