
Reflection III: Challenges to Peacebuilding and Adjustments to Strategies in the Philippines Under the Duterte Administration



By Marc Batac

This reflection piece is a summary of a longer article containing more extensive background information. It is available to [download here](#).

The Philippines is faced by two primary sub-national conflicts: first, the Bangsamoro conflict, fuelled by decades-long marginalisation of the predominantly Muslim Moro communities in the Southern island group of the Philippines. Second, the protracted armed conflict between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDFP). In 2014 a peace deal was signed between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government, but the passage of the peace deal's enabling law was botched and public support faded. With the rise of President Rodrigo Duterte, the first President from Mindanao, many had hoped and predicted that both peace processes would run smoothly under this administration. Three interconnected policy trends have since interfered. These are (1) the rise in violence due to the 'war on drugs', (2) government attacks on democratic institutions and the rule of law, (3) the declaration and extension of Martial Law in Mindanao.

Adjustments

First, peacebuilders, including the organisation I work with, the Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID), continue to wrestle with the tremendous changes in the country. We realised that we are now working in an entirely different and fast changing political context. We are now contending with a change in the nature of violence which affects the communities and people we work with and the overall peace and security situation we aim to transform and nurture. While before we were in the phase of "windows of opportunity for peace negotiations", today we see a sustained shift to a phase of a more violent conflict.

Second, we cannot pretend that different types of violence happen in a vacuum. That is, we have to reject the belief that we may not concern ourselves with rising cases of social violence, because there are other organizations already working on this, and that these are "different" and "separate" from the conflicts that we are primarily concerned with. The violations impact on the Moro and indigenous peoples' communities that we work with directly or indirectly, as well as on the interests, intentions and internal dynamics of the conflict actors in the asymmetric conflicts that we primarily work on. Since last year, there have been shifts in the framing and implementation of some aspects of our Philippine program work. If before we almost worked entirely on facilitation on and

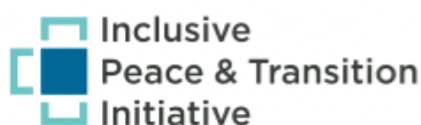
advocacy for a politically negotiated settlement and on social cohesion strategies, we now also work on monitoring of human rights violations, and on advocacy work for protection of vulnerable communities. For this, we have co-partnered with law and human rights groups.

Third, the core adjustment is how we relate with the government, calibrating between dissent and dialogue. Here, we employ a resource that we have—the different platforms (or networks of different civil society organizations) that we are part of or that we lead, to shift between different voices, when discussing with the government on different issues. To illustrate, allowing and accompanying our community partners to themselves express and expound on their opposition and the call to lift the Martial Law in Mindanao, while we only play supporting role, is more effective as a communication and advocacy strategy.

On issues of the formal peace talks on the other hand, there are certain issues and calls that a facilitating actor such as the organization such as IID can be more effective at. This is something we have not perfected yet, as another complication affects this strategy. The composition of these platforms at times mirrors as well the divisions and contradictions within the Filipino public and civil society as to how to relate or engage with the Duterte administration. However, even without these alternating strategies in the messenger, there is a vast universe between absolute dissent on one end and defeatist dialogue on the other end that we as an individual organisation can explore and work with.

A strong opposition stance against the Martial Law based on empirical data and well-argued principles may at the short-run risk the annoyance of the government, but in the long-run it can solidify the legitimacy of the organization among the communities we work with as well as respect from the same government officials who realize that we will not cower in front of intimidation of power and will duly stand our ground.

Ultimately, the shift in tones and tactics should be founded on a clear reading of the context and the behaviour of conflict actors, and be based on strong institutional principles of human rights and security. Lest we fall trap into opportunism, and the eventual erosion of the respect for us of various conflict actors and of the constituency whose voices we seek to amplify. At the end of the day, it is the voices and collective wisdom of the peoples affected by these conflicts and how they struggle to achieve their aspirations for self-determination, justice and peace that will be paramount and that will eventually guide us.



This reflection piece was a contribution to the online consultation "[Civil Society & Inclusive Peace - A Reality Check](#)" co-hosted by IPTI, Peace Direct and GPPAC on 27 February - 1 March 2018