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# The Empowerment of the Muslim Filipinos

By Ambassador Emmanuel N. Pelaez

## The Empowerment of the Muslim Filipinos

It is my privilege to have been appointed by the President as the Philippine Government's Chief Negotiator in these talks. If it had been possible, I am sure that it would have been in the best interest of our country and of everyone concerned for Secretary Aquilino "Nene" Pimentel and Mr. Agapito "Butz" Aquino to carry on. They have contributed immeasurably to the peace which we enjoy today in Mindanao. More importantly, they have helped nurture the mutual trust between the Government and the MNLF which is the basis for our talks today.

They did their job splendidly. But they have been called upon to carry the banners of the Administration in the forthcoming senatorial election, and someone has to carry on. As I assume this grave responsibility, I wish to congratulate them for having served the country and the cause of peace and understanding so well. Also, I wish to thank them for having agreed to continue serving as advisers to the Government Panel.

As we resume our talks in this fair city of our beloved Mindanao let us raise our sights to put our tasks in their true perspective. The ecumenical invocation that marked the

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*Opening Statement of H.E. Ambassador Emmanuel Pelaez at the Government-MNLF talks in Zamboanga City on March 10, 1987.*



*FRATERNAL SMILES: The Ambassador shares a light-hearted moment with MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, to his right, and MNLF chief negotiator Habib Mujahab Hashim (extreme left) and Hatimil Hasan. At right is Public Works Secretary Vicente Jayme who attended the meeting as a peace panel member.*

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opening of this session symbolizes our greatest commonality and highest aspiration which is to live and enrich our lives, and the lives of all Filipinos, as brothers and sisters under one and the same Almighty God. To say this is not to deny the right of other Filipinos to worship according to their own religions or not to believe in any religion. In our pluralistic society mutual respect for our religions, cultures and histories is of paramount importance in our continuing search for peace, justice and development.

### One Brotherhood

Let me pause here to note the basic similarities between Islam and Christianity. I don't think I can improve on what Monsignor George E. Dion, O.M.I., Bishop-Apostolic Vicar of Jolo, has said: "(Islam)" is monotheistic like "(Christianity)". i.e., both. . . maintain that there is but one God. He must be the same God or we'd have two Gods, one for each religion. It is only the approach that is different. We go up to the mountain on one side, they on the other. One God, all brothers. In these days of materialism and godlessness it is well that we do not divide forces, but witness to God together. Both holy books, the Qur'an and the Bible, mention Abraham as our father in faith. Both mention God as creator of the world, both look forward to the next life where virtue will be rewarded and evil punished. The Qur'anic texts mention: Adam, Noah, Lot, Joseph and his brothers, Moses, David, Solomon, John and Baptist, even Jesus, although in a different way, and Mary. Both Christians and Muslims believe in prayer, alms-giving and fasting. Both refer to God as 'the Merciful', 'the Compassionate', 'the Glorious.' Both live to do His will."

Because our various religions profoundly influence our cultures and ways of life, in a sense today we join the continuing dialogue of civilizations that enrich and vitalize our evolving Filipino civilization and national identity. For our distinctive civilization may be seen as the living expression

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of the inexorable intermingling of indigenous and foreign elements. The latter include the Sinic civilization that reached our shores in successive waves of migration from the Asian mainland: some Indian influences; the Islamic civilization that came to our southern islands from West Asia through Arab missionaries and traders and our Malayo-Indonesian neighbors; the Judeo-Christian civilization that came to us during the Spanish and American colonial rule; a sprinkling of Japanese culture in more recent times, and the unceasing flow of ideas into our country, and outward, in a process of transnational communication and global interdependence.

The tenacity and richness of the elements that form our civilization are reflected in the survival of some 14 major languages and over 80 dialects spoken by the many ethnic communities comprising our pluralistic society. They are also reflected by the fact that English is widely spoken and Spanish is still understood if not also spoken by several thousand Filipinos. The use of Arabic is also spreading among our Muslim communities especially in prayer and madrasah schools.

In contrast to the ethno-linguistic diversity in our society and civilization, we have only two major religions: Christianity and Islam. In all frankness, it is high time that the Christian Filipino majority should rectify more vigorously its serious mistake in regarding the Muslim Filipino minority as being somehow inferior in their faith, culture and way of life. For this attitude and prejudice stem from our ignorance of Islam and of the great achievements of Islamic civilization and its contributions to the world as a whole. Moreover, until now many Filipinos do not appreciate the reality that poverty and underdevelopment in the Moro lands are traceable in part to the Moros' historic and nationalistic resistance to Western imperialist powers, to defend their freedom and to keep their faith and way of life as a distinctive ethno-religious minority. Similarly, after independence they expended great

time and resources to fend off the continuance of the universalistic policies of political integration, cultural assimilation and national development that were applied without due regard to the distinctive characteristics of the Islamic and Moro cultures in Mindanao.

### Cultural Interaction

With the massive migration to Mindanao of Christians from the Visayas and Luzon and their spread to areas originally settled by Muslim ethnic groups, which the government encouraged and facilitated, the Moros felt the increasing loss of their ancestral lands to Christians. This led to their apprehension that their faith, culture and way of life may be endangered as they are outnumbered and as they fall behind economically, socially, and politically. As a son of Mindanao I have shared these concerns.

This is not to say that progress has completely eluded our Muslim brothers and sisters. As the great Muslim Filipino scholar, Dr. Cesar A. Majul, has noted in his book *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines*: "There are certain changes or trends toward change that have developed and may lead to progress for the Muslims. . . The government has enacted reform programs to improve the living conditions of Filipinos in general and programs to accommodate the Muslims in particular to the nation's administrative and economic systems, it has made some effort to guarantee preservation of the Islamic faith."

There has been an increasing commitment among the Muslims to educate themselves better, to develop business and technological skills and to raise their economic status. This has been accompanied by an increasing consciousness of their own identity as Muslims in view of the ideals and values of Islam and a stronger commitment to preserve traditions of the faith. . . (on the other), a general change of heart may be seen spreading through the rest of the Filipino popu-

lation, including Christians; there is a definite trend toward accepting, respecting and sympathizing with the Muslims in their country."

This is why I thank God for giving me this opportunity to participate actively and collaborate with our Muslim brothers in redressing the damage inflicted by these wrong policies. I am equally thankful that we have a President who is sincerely determined to give our Muslim brothers and sisters the opportunity to achieve a breakthrough in their quest for equality, recognition and progress as a distinctive Islamic community in Philippine society.

All Filipinos are heartened by the agreements that have been reached between the MNLF, the MILF and the MNLF Reformist Movement, on the one hand, and Government, on the other, to stop the fighting. We need peace not only to save precious lives and safeguard property but also to find time and space for working out just and viable solutions to the problems that have beset Mindanao.

Just as we set an example to the world of how to overthrow a dictatorship and restore democracy peacefully, by the use of People Power, let us now endeavor as peacefully to elevate the rich heritage of the Islamic culture in our land, as well as other cultures, to a level of equality with Christianity. Thus our country will become the home of the two great religions of the world—Christianity and Islam—where their believers lived in harmony and concern for each other.

Let me also state that the Government is unequivocally committed to the empowerment of Muslim Filipinos in a bold step towards their economic emancipation and social development largely through their self-reliant efforts and with the assistance and facilitation of the Government. The primary means for this empowerment is the creation of autonomous regions as provided in Article X of the New Constitution, as well as through local autonomy and decen-

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tralized development programs. The younger generation of Muslim Filipinos, as exemplified by the MNLF and other rebel groups, is increasingly aware of the predicament of their role and participation in achieving basic structural reforms. It should be noted that the Organization of Islamic Conference has repeatedly expressed its desire that autonomy should be granted to the Muslim Filipinos.

As expressed in the Preamble of the New Constitution, we, the Filipino people, and therefore our Government as well, "implored the aid of Almighty God," are committed "to build a just and humane society." Given our diverse ethnic and cultural communities, the Government is responsible for helping preserve and promote the pluralism of our society, even as it must foster national unity and enhance our national identity. I submit that it is also our task in these talks to contribute to the never-ending process of building a just and humane society that is at once pluralistic and united, with a national identity rooted in a variety of cultures—both indigenous and foreign in their origin.

### **Harmony and Change**

As we pursue our common objectives of peace, justice and development in Mindanao, of respect for each other's religion and culture, of helping build a just, humane and pluralistic society, of strengthening our democratic institutions, and of creating autonomous regions for the betterment of the lives of Muslim Filipinos, let us work together as brothers and fellow citizens.

We are not antagonists engaged in an adversarial and confrontational negotiation. We are equal partners in the search for mutually agreeable definitions and solutions to the common problems we face. We are not playing games to outwit and defeat each other. We bear responsibility for a peaceful and fruitful sharing and exchange of viewpoints and experiences in order to reach a just and effective settlement of our

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differences. We who represent the Government are prepared to admit the mistakes of the past, but let not this admission open the door to unreasonable and impossible demands. Let us build confidence in our capacity to learn and to be creative.

In our talks, we want to make it clear that we are seeking understanding, consensus and solutions to our shared problems within the framework of the new Constitution and of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines. These principles which the organization of the Islamic Conference has upheld in supporting the demands for autonomy of the Muslim Filipinos. We should bear in mind that the new Constitution was overwhelmingly approved by the people not only in the country at large but also in the provinces and cities in Mindanao that are populated predominantly by Filipino Muslims.

As we believe in a just and humane society and in democratic government, let us carry on our talks in a manner that is just, humane and democratic. Democracy is both an ideal and an end in itself as well as a means for fulfilling our ideals and goals and for resolving our problems and differences as a nation. We must listen too, in order to learn from each other. We also have to listen to and learn from our various constituencies throughout the country, especially in Mindanao. There is so much to learn and to do in the very short time available. So, in all humility let us make the most of our time and our opportunity in meeting the awesome and historic challenge before us.

### **Consensus for Co-existence**

Let us agree to carry out our substantive discussions in private executive sessions, away from the glare of publicity that could lead to divisiveness, to the hardening of positions, and to frustration and delay. In our public appearances and joint statements let us reflect our growing consensus.

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We pray to Almighty God that He enlightens us now and all the days that we shall be working together.

In conclusion, let me quote from the statement of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II in his trip to Mindanao and Sulu. I would like to quote his words because they represent the true spirit in which we approach these talks: *"Dear Muslims, my brothers: I would like to add that we Christians, just like you, seek the basis and model of mercy in God Himself, the God to whom your Book gives the very beautiful name of Al-Rahman, while the Bible calls Him Al-Rahum, the Merciful One. I wish you to be convinced of the fact that your Christian brothers and sisters need you and they need your love. And the whole world, with its longing for greater peace, brotherhood and harmony, needs to see fraternal co-existence between Christians and Muslims in a modern, believing and peaceful community."* •



*The Ambassador and the MNLF Chairman hug each other in Maimbung, Sulu.*

# LETTERS OF MINDAHO LIBANAN

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