

# Question Everything | 10 things to know about the peace talks between the communists and the government of the Philippines

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By **MONG PALATINO**

1. A civil war has been raging in the countryside since 1969. Landlessness, feudal exploitation, state brutality against the poor and marginalized – these are some of the issues that led to the formation of the New People’s Army. An armed force of the poor, by the poor, and for the poor which succeeded in establishing nationwide presence during the anti-dictatorship struggle.

Today, the government makes contradictory claims about the NPA being a spent force already while continuing to be the country’s top security threat.

The government denigrates the armed struggle of the NPA by criminalizing its revolutionary political activities. But the NPA views itself as part of the resistance movement battling despotic landlords, warlords, rapacious multinational mining and plantation companies, and government-sponsored mercenaries.

2. The peace talks started after the ouster of Marcos and the release of political prisoners in 1986. It is important to emphasize that first, the negotiation is between the government of Cory Aquino and the National Democratic Front, which is an alliance of revolutionary forces; and second, the aim of the peace talks is to address the roots of the armed conflict (poverty, injustice, oppression) and not to force the surrender of the NPA.

The NDF withdrew from the peace negotiations after the police fired shots and killed 13 protesting farmers near the presidential palace in 1987. But informal talks between the NDF and the Cory Aquino government continued.

3. Important peace documents were finalized during the term of President Fidel Ramos. Some of these key papers include the following:

-The Hague Declaration identified the substantive agenda of the formal peace negotiations: human rights and international humanitarian law, socio-economic reforms, political and constitutional reforms, end of hostilities and disposition of forces;

-The Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees or JASIG ensured the continuity of the peace process by providing protection and immunity to peace consultants and security staff of the NDF and the government;

- The Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law or CARHRIHL is the first landmark agreement of the peace process. It is proof that the peace talks can produce concrete results. President Joseph Estrada signed the CARHRIHL in 1998.

4. The peace talks are conducted in a neutral venue outside the country to facilitate the security of the negotiators and their personnel. During the 1986 peace talks in Manila, NDF members and consultants were subjected to state surveillance, harassment, and other forms of intimidation.

Since 2001, Norway has been serving as a third party facilitator of the peace talks.

Joma Sison, the chief consultant of the NDF, is living in exile in Europe after his passport was canceled by the Cory Aquino government in 1988. At that time, he was on a lecture tour in The Netherlands.

5. The arrest of JASIG-protected NDF leaders has undermined the peace process. More than 15 NDF consultants are currently in jail because of trumped-up charges. Although the NDF has clarified that the release of political prisoners is

not a precondition to resume the peace talks, it asserts that the government is under obligation to release detained NDF peace consultants as stipulated in the JASIG.

6. The government of President Benigno Aquino III has refused to recognize the validity of previous peace agreements. Aquino's peace negotiators wanted to ignore past agreements which they ridiculed as "documents of perpetual division." They also demanded the NPA to declare a ceasefire.

The NDF reminded the Aquino government about the importance of honoring past agreements in order to build trust and confidence in the peace process. Besides, how can the previous agreements "perpetuate division" when they provide the framework on how to properly conduct the peace talks?

Nevertheless, the NDF advanced several recommendations on how to fast track the peace process without ignoring the substantive content of the previous agreements. If the Aquino government is sincere, the NDF said a final peace pact can be signed in less than a year. Instead of a ceasefire, the NDF is offering a truce and a government of national unity based on mutually acceptable terms and principles.

However, Aquino and his peace advisers have outrightly rejected these novel proposals coming from the NDF.

7. The next major agenda in the peace negotiations will tackle the social and economic reforms that are needed to resolve the structural inequalities in Philippine society. This is likely to be contentious since the government is expected to defend its neoliberal economic policies (privatization, deregulation, free trade, debt dependency). Meanwhile, the NDF is pushing for genuine land reform and national industrialization which are deemed obsolete by Aquino's spokesperson even if these are bourgeois concepts. To be clear, the core of NDF's economic program will not transform the Philippines into a socialist state; rather, it seeks to develop the country's productive capacities and unleash the full

potential of the local economy while uplifting the living conditions of workers, farmers, and other marginalized sectors.

8. The idea that the Philippines will endeavor to rebuild its economy by shunning neoliberal economic prescriptions is expected to provoke the opposition of oligarchs, multinational capitalists, and foreign financial speculators. They will most likely actively campaign to stop the peace talks from reaching its final phase. Beware, they are powerful and wealthy spoilers. They have evil ties with politicians, bureaucratic leaders, and high-ranking officers in the military and police. They can use their clout in the media, church, and academe to whip up anti-communist hysteria.

Not all institutions are working to promote the peace process. The United States government, for example, has revived its listing of the NPA as a terrorist group. The last time this happened led to the scuttling of peace talks between the NDF and the government of President Gloria Arroyo.

But the biggest threat to achieving peace comes within the government. Aquino's peace advisers are accused of being rabid anti-communist which partly explains why they deliberately stalled the peace talks. They endorse the doctrine that NDF forces are already irrelevant and that the NPA armed struggle can be defeated through military offensive and delivery of socio-civic projects in the rural areas.

9. There is high optimism that the peace talks will prosper under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte who has maintained close links with the NDF and NPA in his capacity as mayor of Davao City. Duterte is also openly identifying himself as a socialist and Leftist. He has vowed to release political prisoners and resume the peace talks. He also guaranteed a safe pass to Joma Sison, his political science professor in college, so that the rebel leader can go home and pursue the implementation of the peace process in the Philippines.

Duterte is also praised for appointing Leftist personalities in his Cabinet. That the Communist Party has nominees working in the Cabinet is unprecedented in Philippine history.

10. As stated earlier, the goal of the peace talks should be finding ways to end the armed conflict by addressing the structural problems of Philippine society. Unfortunately, past and present governments only seek the capitulation of the revolutionary forces.

What is to be done under the Duterte administration? We have to add our voices supporting the resumption of the peace talks. We have to encourage both parties to use this historic opportunity to draft and sign agreements that will lead to significant reforms in society.

Most importantly, we must participate in the peace process. We must discuss the peace agenda. We must formulate specific sectoral and political demands as our contribution to the peace negotiations. How can we end poverty? How can we develop the rural economy? What kind of services should the state provide to citizens? What are the policies and laws that oppress our people?

The peace talks have never been and should never be exclusive to NDF and representatives of the elected government. It is a public process requiring public participation and democratic consensus. We need to embrace it as an act of politics that can potentially spark a genuine transformation in Philippine society. Make peace a reality in our lifetime. **(Bulatlat)**

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