

**SPEECH OF MINISTER MOHAGHER IQBAL**  
Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education; and  
Chair, MILF Peace Implementing Panel

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**“Braving the Changes and Accepting the Challenges: My Leadership Journey”**  
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***Asalaamu Alaikum warakmatulahi taala wa barakatuh.***

My courtesies to all esteemed Education leaders and professionals present in this significant event, especially to the management of the Association of the Department of Education Directors, Inc. I want to apologize for not being with you today. Nevertheless, I hope that my speech can contribute to the objective of this three-day gathering and help inspire current and upcoming leaders in the education sector.

I should start by saying that my “leadership journey” is perhaps different, uncommon even, compared to most of you here. I was propelled into a position of authority due to extraordinary circumstances. Of course, I am speaking of the armed struggle in the Bangsamoro and the peace process that began in the late 1990s to address long-standing issues that fueled the conflict in Mindanao. It is also because of the peace process between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front that I found myself serving as the Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

For those not be familiar with the GPH-MILF peace process, I should give some background information. The ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (Republic Act 11054) and the subsequent founding of the BARMM are stipulated in the negotiated peace settlement signed by the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. I am referring to the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, the four (4) FAB Annexes on Transitional Arrangements and Modalities, Wealth-Sharing, Power-Sharing and Normalization, and the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. We cannot merely implement the CAB and FAB, which are political documents, without a legal instrument. That is why the BOL was drafted, which contains the critical provisions of the peace agreements, and lobbied actively for its approval in Philippine Congress.

The BOL and the BARMM embody the aspiration of the Bangsamoro people for their right to self-determination, or the right to chart our own political, economic, socio-cultural future and express our distinct culture and traditions. Allow me to emphasize that the armed conflict in Mindanao is not about Christianity versus Islam – that is a simplistic view. The revolutionary movement wanted to correct the historical injustices committed against the Bangsamoro people and realize our right to self-determination. Genuine autonomy is a form of self-determination, as expressed by the founding Chairman of the MILF, the late Ustadz Salamat Hashim. With the BARMM in place, we hope to make that aspiration for self-determination a reality. But to avoid any confusion, I want to reiterate that the BARMM is part of the Republic of the Philippines and it's stated clearly in the BOL. But as an autonomous political entity, the BARMM has a list of powers it can exercise within the Bangsamoro independently from the central government. One of the powers granted to the BARMM is administration over the educational system, hence my appointment as Education Minister.

Admittedly, I've only been Education Minister for six (6) months, and I am sure most of you here are more knowledgeable in this area. Moreover, MBHTE is the largest agency in the BARMM, where 60 percent of the employees report here, including teachers. What I lack in technical expertise, I make up in grit and determination to carry out my mandate to serve the Bangsamoro people and fulfill the directives of my principal, the BARMM Interim Chief Minister Ahod B. Ebrahim. Moreover, my years working in the peace process as both MILF chief negotiator and peacebuilder provided me with invaluable lessons on leadership. In addition to the challenges we faced in setting up the BARMM, I hope you don't mind that my talk would also cover my experiences in the peace process. It is quite challenging to discuss the two topics separately since the BARMM is a product of the GPH-MILF peace process through the CAB and the BOL. While it is somewhat unconventional, I believe some themes are universal or relevant to you.

I was appointed as Chair of the MILF Peace Negotiating Panel in July 2003. By that time, the peace process was already six years old, but trust was needed to be rebuilt between the two parties after two (2) major armed hostilities in 2000 resulting from the all-out war policy of former President Joseph Estrada and the battle in Buliok, Maguindanao in February 2003. It is in that tense environment where I was tasked to lead a panel of Bangsamoro professionals and negotiate for the interest and aspirations of our people.

It is safe to say that not everyone possesses the skill of negotiation right at the beginning. I believe the ability to negotiate effectively should be a trait of any leader to cope

with a multitude of situations. Authority has its limits, and you cannot automatically get what you seek. Before you reach the end goal, you have to deal with people who could be smarter than you, has more influence, and has access to resources. When we agreed to negotiate with the Philippine Government, we are well aware that if we are careless and complacent, the State could overpower us in the peace talks. It took us 17 years of hard negotiations to finally reach a peace settlement that we believe reflects the aspirations of the Bangsamoro people. And up to the present, I remain the Chair of the MILF peace panel, and now we are the implementation phase, which includes the transition from ARMM to BARMM.

I want to share with you several lessons I learned as the MILF panel chair in the last 16 years, which have been instrumental in the establishment of the BARMM. Some of these lessons have appeared in the book "Negotiating Peace: An Insider Perspective of the Bangsamoro Struggle for Self-Determination," which is a collection of my speeches from 2005 to 2018.

1. **Real negotiation starts when the other party says no to a proposal.** It is like a truck driver hitting a roadblock or a dead-end; he has to find different routes to reach the same destination. Impasses, no show-ups, proximity talks, an outright rejection of offers, postponements, etc. are normal in negotiations. Never be surprised by them and prepare for them. Prepare, prepare, and prepare is one of the primary rules to adopt. During talks, expect anything to happen, including duplicity.
2. **A peace negotiator has to control or manage his/her emotions.** A person prone to pique has little space in negotiation. Negotiation is like engaging in war. You are up to all kinds of pressures and even dangers. In battle, a combatant can die anytime, unlike in a negotiation where no one dies. But when a negotiator agrees to sign something inimical to his group, he would be blamed bitterly for the consequences since he did not only compromise himself but the group he represents and also the people at large.

A member of a foreign delegation trying to learn from the MILF experience in negotiation asked me about the secret of our success in talks with the government that led to the signing FAB and CAB. I responded by saying: ***"We manage to control our emotions, persevere in the course of the long and hard negotiations, we stay consistent to all signed agreements of the parties, and we are willing to stake everything in defense of what we hold as morally right."***

3. **Be easy-going on people but strict on issues.** Whenever exchanges get heated in negotiations, remember that it is not personal. The opposing side was given a set of instructions, so they are just following orders. Hence, always attack the position, but never the person. If tensions arise, take a break if necessary. Conventional wisdom states that cooler heads prevail. Through time, you develop a rapport with your counterpart. The working relationships that were formed between peace panels allowed us to discuss and agree on vital matters outside of the formal peace talks. For instance, we realized that many of the hard issues are decided outside of the negotiating table usually via back-channeling and with the help of third-party facilitation or international consultants.
4. **Negotiating, as a problem-solving exercise, is not only having to compromise to move the peace process and succeed. It is also protecting your principles or “non-negotiables.”** Negotiation is taking and giving or giving and getting. However, the basic principles that a revolutionary movement, or any similar group, stands for must be upheld at all times. You can compromise on methods and approaches, **but not on principles that are considered non-negotiable.** For instance, the right to self-determination is a universally recognized right of people and therefore must be protected at all cost. Hence, the BARMM must be known as an autonomous political entity.
5. **Don't give anything away without getting something in return.** Unilateral concessions are self-defeating. Whenever you give something away, get something in return. Otherwise, you are inviting the other negotiator to ask you for additional concessions. When you give something away without requiring them to reciprocate, they will feel entitled to your demands, and won't be satisfied until you give up even more. But if they have to earn your compromise, they will derive a higher sense of satisfaction than if they got it for nothing.
6. **Nothing is agreed until the parties have placed it on paper and signed it, which is the standard rule of negotiation.** We've endured so many bad experiences in the past with so many agreements disregarded or violated, we added a long dash and then put the words: "and signed." To add more, **those agreements in principle or gentlemen's agreement are not binding at all;** they cannot be effectively asserted. The best safeguard is to write everything down and sign them. Signed documents, including peace agreements, are critical in implementation because these are the

basis of any program or activities. Moreover, it ensures that the peace process itself will stay on the course as agreed by the parties.

7. **The trust and confidence of your principal, in my case, it's the MILF Central Committee and the BARMM Chief Minister, has to be ensured at all times.** The MILF Central Committee must first clear all significant decisions during the peace negotiations. As Chair of the MILF peace panel for 16 years, I have never thought that I did a perfect job. But we always find time to criticize ourselves and review our path with our principals to avoid making hasty or unjustifiable decisions on behalf of the organization.
8. **A perfect balance between confidentiality and transparency has to be instituted throughout the peace process.** The parties in a negotiation have to agree when to be secretive and when to be transparent. Confidentiality is an essential factor in ensuring the success of the exercise. Providing secrecy is the reason that the government and MILF have resorted to various modes of engagement, from direct face-to-face discussion to back-channeling, proximity talks, and not talking at all, etc. On the other hand, transparency is not precisely the twin of confidentiality; it occupies a place at the forefront. Leaders as negotiators or peacemakers must undertake regular consultations with all sectors of society, especially those who are directly affected. The people have the right to know the discussion in the peace talks.
9. **Do not burn bridges. But at the same time, manage relationships, especially with key actors or stakeholders.** It is possible that the person you initially faced at the negotiating table as an adversary becomes your partner in peacebuilding. They can become your champions or allies. Nevertheless, there are situations where it is necessary to accommodate individual personalities for political reasons. Hence, it is vital to be aware of all key players and comprehends their connections, interests, and perceptions.

Success has many relatives. The passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) and establishment of the BARMM opened up an avalanche of relatives or friends of leaders of the MILF or BARMM. Nevertheless, we need to give precedence to professionalizing the BARMM regardless of relatives and friends.

10. **While we needed experts and consultants in the peace process and government work, we mustn't allow them to take over the process.** The primary role of

consultants is to provide options and technical support, but not to decide for the organization. Those who are too eager or presumptuous tend to usurp the situation if given a chance. However, I am not saying that they are ill-motivated, but “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” If the consultants would start imposing their ideas and mindset, then their motives become questionable.

Anyone, including international experts, can suggest or propose ideas. We in the BARMM are open to engaging civil society groups and the international community for aid and technical support. I have worked with a number of them in the peace process, and it has been beneficial. However, official decisions, especially strategic, are made by the political leadership of either the MILF, the peace panel, or the BARMM. Therefore, you must have clear objectives and policy when engaging other actors. Moreover, there should be terms of references so they will not cross the line concerning the nature of support expected from them.

**11. Understanding the public’s perception of one’s organization is crucial, whether as MILF or as BARMM.** It does not matter if impressions are true or false. Unfounded speculations can inform narratives, and if not addressed accordingly, it will be regarded as the truth. We have to be sensitive to the pulse of the people and also deal with misconceptions through the use of strategic communication modalities. Moreover, as BARMM, for instance, our messaging must be consistent and united.

**12. Public consultations are still meaningful, especially in the preparation of projects and programs.** Decision-making bereft of proper context and relevant information from the ground can result in programming that does not reflect the concerns of the communities. Moreover, we will be wasting precious government funds when we implement ineffectual programs. We in the MILF have to ensure that the priorities of our constituents are also our priorities. We cannot afford to be detached from the Bangsamoro people, especially now that the MILF leadership are part of the government structure through the BARMM.

Most of my learnings and observations from my experience as a negotiator and peacebuilder were also utilized when I served Chair of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission that drafted the first iteration of the Bangsamoro Basic Law from 2013 to 2016. And I will continue to do so in my capacity as a member of the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority, the Minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education, and more recently, as the BARMM Co-Chair to the Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) Body. As someone who has the

institutional memory of the Bangsamoro struggle and given a position of authority, I have to play my part in ensuring we stay on the course towards fulfilling the obligations stated in the signed peace agreements and the BOL.

Now, as part of the BARMM, our focus is the implementation of priority programs on education, social services, health, and the economic upliftment of the Bangsamoro people. But I do recognize that transforming MILF leaders into instant technocrats and administrators will take time. The management styles would have to evolve in the process of learning the ways around bureaucratic governance, without, however losing the tried and tested leadership styles.

Within our ranks, we need to correct the perception that governance is more comfortable than fighting the enemy on the battlefield. The intricacies of the bureaucracy are complex for executives to overcome. Moreover, poor management can lead to complications that can affect the welfare of our people in the long run. Hence, in the BARMM, we observe the principle of "Moral Governance" espoused by the BARMM Chief Minister. In a nutshell, it is about employing ethical values in governance. No doubt, it is the essential duty of the government to effectively and equitably implement legitimate programs aimed to protect and uplift the welfare of the people. Adherence to moral governance it revitalizes hope in the system while allowing us to manage their expectations.

Education is paramount for the BARMM, and it is discussed extensively in the BOL. As Muslims, we believe that every act is a form of worship. Seeking knowledge is an act of worship, and therefore, mandatory to all. The first word revealed to Prophet Mohammad (SAW) as appeared in the Quran is: "Iqra," which means "read" – which is knowledge. Knowledge is a cycle: we learn to improve ourselves, implement or apply our learnings in our lives, and then we teach others. In the MBHTE, our rallying cry is "no child in the Bangsamoro left behind." We, therefore, have to improve the educational system in the Bangsamoro and look into policies, programs, and activities to enhance the performance of every child, from the curriculum to the teachers.

We envision that the educational system in the Bangsamoro shall embody a quality standard with a broad, relevant, and inclusive curriculum. Education in the Bangsamoro should be accessible to all students – Moro, Christian or IP – and will guarantee equal opportunity to all graduates regardless of their chosen field. We aim to produce (at least) one professional in every family in the BARMM. It will not matter if our young professionals will graduate from

a traditional academic institution or a technical-vocational training center. What is essential these establishments offer a curriculum that is relevant for employability.

But to help our students, we need excellent teachers and school administrators. The Bangsamoro teachers and school officials should be well trained, competent, and compensated adequately to increase their ability to teach and facilitate the learning of our children. We recently organized the Regional Human Resource Merit Promotional and Selection Board to properly oversee the screening process for those applying for teaching positions.

In addition to competent teachers and administrators, our schools should be secure and have the appropriate facilities. Any academic or technical institution should serve as space where bright ideas are born, nurtured, and realized. Furthermore, we should create safe and inclusive school environments for students with disabilities and additional needs. This would also include developing the knowledge and skills of school staff and giving schools clearer guidance and specialist support to better respond to the needs of students with disabilities.

We hope our young people and future generations would be the vanguards of tomorrow. Hence, we need to guarantee that they are not only well-educated but in good health. Education and health will help our children and youth to take on the challenges of leading the Bangsamoro nation in the future. A healthy body produces a healthy and sound mind, which is critical for future and current leaders in their decision-making process and nation-building.

The MBHTE hopes to encourage the parents to invest in education and respond to their children's intellectual needs. We have to make them understand that without training, their children are robbed of a potentially bright future. Moreover, the MBHTE shall work closely with community leaders and local government units in the implementation of relevant educational programs and other frontline services at the community level.

Mindful of the need to improve the Bangsamoro educational system, we must introduce reforms within the regional government. For instance, one of our priorities is the improvement of the Ministry's internal processing systems to promote good governance practices and transparency and accountability. In the MBHTE, we will not tolerate any exercise that could trigger poor governance and corruption. In connection to this, we have plans of establishing a



robust and functioning monitoring and evaluation system to record and assess the progress of education programs and projects implemented in communities.

To say that the Ministry has an impossible task ahead is an understatement. The MILF-led BARMM would need to deliver and prove that its current leaders are competent administrators or managers. In addition to the delivery of public services, the rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reconciliation in the Bangsamoro, after decades of armed conflict, must happen as soon as possible. Despite these challenges, we remain optimistic. A famous saying goes, "Sometimes when things are falling apart, they may be falling into place." Slowly but surely, we in the BARMM shall build on the gains of the peace process and institute relevant programs and reforms that would have an immediate impact on the lives of our people. The fifty years of the Bangsamoro struggle provides us the needed inspiration to move forward.

I hope my presentation proved to be inspiring, as well. I am grateful to the Association of the Department of Education Directors, Inc, for their kind invitation. I again would like to apologize that I could not deliver this message in person. However, I hope we will have the chance to interact in the future.

Magandang umaga po sa ating lahat! Asalaamu Alaikum warakmatulahi taala wa barakatuh.

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