

# THE BANGSAMORO ORGANIC LAW AND BEYOND

As the plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) draws near, we, Mindanao Catholic Church Leaders for Peace, wish to express our support for its passage with the following observations.

The BOL addresses the three historical injustices against the Muslim community as expressed by their own leaders: the diminution of their ancestral territory; the threat to their cultural identity; and the loss of their political governance. After more than half a century of armed struggle, and countless peace negotiations, the BOL represents the mutual acceptance by both sides for the creation of a Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

In this light, the BOL is more than just another piece of legislation; it is more significantly a peace agreement that involves the future development of Mindanao and the rest of the country. After many failed attempts, this may be the last concrete chance for a just and lasting peace in Mindanao.

While delineating the proposed boundaries for the autonomous region, the BOL explicitly recognizes that the Bangsamoro territory “shall always be an integral, indivisible, and inseparable part of the national territory of the country.”

The Shari’ah law shall apply exclusively to Muslims. Non-Muslims are not covered, unless they voluntarily submit to the jurisdiction of the Shari’ah court. The Bill of Rights under the Philippine Constitution continues to be in force for all Filipino citizens.

The Indigenous People’s Rights Act is explicitly acknowledged for the protection of the Lumad communities.

The proposed Bangsamoro Parliament includes representation for minorities and settler communities.

The police regional force in charge of security in BARMM shall be under the “direct operational control and supervision of the Philippine National Police.”

Unlike earlier peace agreements, there is a timetable for the de-commissioning of firearms by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The first phase has already been implemented.

We are aware that many challenges will continue to confront the Bangsamoro Transition Authority over the next three years as well as the future elected members of the Bangsamoro Parliament. Ultimately, it will be left to the residents themselves of BARMM to ensure the participatory and viable functioning of the autonomous region.

On our part, as Catholic religious leaders, we need to focus on the horizontal peace process on the ground—i.e., by engaging in the dialogue of life, action and spirituality among ordinary Christians and Muslims. We also need to commit to intrafaith and interfaith dialogue towards mutual respect and understanding so as to reduce or eliminate biases and prejudices. Religion should be viewed as a bridge towards reconciliation, not a wall that divides. As Catholic Church leaders advocating for peace, we must also know what the BOL says in order for us to make an informed and responsible choice, and vote on the merits of the BOL and not on the basis of bias and prejudice.

We also offer to help in quality education, in creating a more inclusive history of Mindanao that recounts the narratives of Muslim and Lumad events and personalities, and in providing other means of support such as fielding volunteer teachers for the madaris schools of Muslim school children.

The devastation of the Islamic City of Marawi in 2017, as well as the recent bombing of a mall in Cotabato City, alerts us to the looming face of violent extremism. As one parish priest in the front lines has pointed out, “The heart of peace is a change of heart.”

With all our constituents in parishes and schools, we pray for a lasting peace in Mindanao — a gift and a task — that respects cultural and religious diversity, while acknowledging one God, Creator and Provider of us all.

Signed:

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