

Delivered during The Usual Suspects: Counter-Terrorism in Moro Communities Forum
on June 6, 2020

Good afternoon everyone, *assalamu alaykum*, welcome and thank you for joining our forum today.

Before we begin, I'd like to thank MP Amir Mawallil and MP Rasol Mitmug who are our co-organizers in this forum; our moderator, Atty. Al Amin Julkipli; and of course our speakers, Atty. Laisa Alamia, our colleague as well in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Ms. Julie Alipala of the Philippine Daily Inquirer, Dr. Sherjan Kalim of the Cotabato Regional and Medical Center, and Atty. Musa Malayang of the Muslim Legal Assistance Foundation.

In the past few days, we saw the outburst of debate on the Anti-Terrorism Bill, which now only awaits the review and signature of the President. But largely absent from these debates, especially in the beginning, was an examination of the issue in the context of other marginalized and vulnerable communities in the country, notably the Moros. This, of course, had several exceptions, such as when some of our Moro legislators passionately spoke out against the bill at the House of Representatives, or when many of us took to social media to raise our concerns. But overall, this is a problematic omission especially since we can argue that it is Muslim communities that have been hurt the most by terrorism in this country—and Muslim communities who will likewise suffer under overreach and abuse in the zeal to counter terrorism.

And so we wanted to host this forum—this dialogue—because the issue of the Anti-Terrorism Bill takes an entirely different shape for Moros all over the Philippines. I mentioned this earlier: we are against terrorism, as I'm sure everyone is, as I'm sure all Moro communities are. But we have serious misgivings, despite the good intentions of the proposed law. Why is that? Let's examine our current legal climate. We have criminal laws which are arguably already restrictive while complying with the human rights provisions of the Constitution. But even then, with those restrictions and guarantees already in place, what is the Moro experience? Muslim communities are still exposed to abuse at the hands of authorities. Even with safeguards in place, we have profiling, we have raids, we have prolonged detentions and protracted trials, and ill-treatment during these periods. What happens, then, when we pass a law that gives even wider leeway for authorities, that uses vague language which evidence shows can only result in different interpretations, ultimately causing graver threats for the marginalized and vulnerable?

And so we hope this conversation is heard. Because that is where “The Usual Suspects: Counter-Terrorism in Moro Communities” comes in. We hope to be able to add constructively to the debate on counter-terrorism and security. For many of our speakers here today, and for many of the Muslim communities watching this forum, we will have to revisit painful memories. We will have to relive injustices. But we do so in the hope that this country's Muslim community can share their firsthand experience of what works in countering terror. We do so in the hope that we can help point a better way forward—one that does not force us to choose between our security on one hand and our rights on the other, but one that fully and truly guarantees us both.

Again, welcome to our forum, we hope we are able to take away much from this conversation, and thank you for joining us.

ATTY. ANNA TARHATA BASMAN
Member of the Parliament, Bangsamoro