

Delivered during the #Youth4Peace on Philippine Independence Day Conversation
on June 12, 2020

Good evening, *assalamu alaykum*. Before we begin, to my fellow Filipinos, I hope that you have had a meaningful commemoration of our Independence Day. I realize that we are in the midst of so much apprehension and uncertainty, yet this is exactly the reason why it is important for us to pause and take stock of the freedoms we enjoy now, and what it took to get us here, and what it will take to preserve them.

If you've been following the news on the Philippines recently, you would know why—and that is because as we try to survive this pandemic, we're also anticipating the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Bill into law. This bill intersects so many things— not only is it an issue of national security, it has implications on the country's peace process, it's a big issue for human rights advocates, and it's also a big issue for our country's young people.

And if you've been following the news, you have seen debates on both sides, and on different layers or through different lenses. There's the Constitutional or legal layer. The human rights layer. The political layer. But there's an entire layer of discussion that has been absent in all this for the most part—and that's an examination of the issue from the Bangsamoro point of view.

That is problematic, because while most discussions on the bill hinge on (largely) hypothetical abuse or hypothetical overreach, the apprehensions of the Bangsamoro are rooted in lived realities and concrete communal experiences of abuse and injustice. When the Bangsamoro talk about this proposed law, we're not just talking about what might happen; we're talking about our history and about our here and now. Because the painful truth is that the Bangsamoro identity has always been tied to suspicions of terrorism.

I remember when I was young that whenever I would hear news of bombings or kidnappings or firefights, I would find myself fervently hoping that it wasn't a Muslim behind it—because I know what would come next to our communities. Because the sad reality is that the Bangsamoro experience with counterterrorism has largely meant raids, profiling, prolonged detention, and protracted trials for people who often had no means to access good lawyers, and constant awareness of the feeling that any Muslim can at any time be tagged a terrorist and have his/her life ruined on the slightest suspicion.

The absence of this nuance, of this context, is problematic because on the flip side, the Bangsamoro know firsthand what works best in countering terrorism. I would say that our communities are **frontliners** when it comes to this issue. And we could tell you that overly broad and overly vague laws, which also leave a very wide leeway for authorities, will not help. They might even do the opposite. The resulting injustices that would likely be inflicted on entire communities would only strengthen resentment, which then heightens their vulnerability, especially of young people, to recruitment. It will only create a vicious cycle. More often than not, an outstretched hand works infinitely better than a mailed fist.

And that, I think, is where the peace process also comes in. This might sound too simplistic, but perhaps the best way not just to counter terrorism but also to get our communities to reject outright those who would try to incite terrorism is *to give them no excuse*. Let's give them no resentment to feed on. Let's give them no injustices to exploit. Let's give them no

vulnerabilities to manipulate. A peace process with a strong transitional justice component—coupled, of course, with responsive politics and governance, an **inclusive economy**, and a dependable justice system—guarantees that. It guarantees redress for injustices both historical and urgently present. It emphasizes the well-being of communities and families, and highlights the futility of violence, the inadequacy of military solutions, and the transformative capacity of dialogue.

Young people have a key role to play here. That's not just because they're often targets of elements with radicalizing tendencies. That's because they offer fresh insights and they have contagious energy and they are proving to be so much more naturally attuned to social justice and equity than their elders. They show ways forward that those who came before them could never have imagined.

So let's invest in young people. Let's connect them with the wisdom and experience of their elders and give them the resources and the space they need to become better persons and better citizens and better leaders. Let's invest in our communities. Let's look for solutions that prioritize empowering them and not just arming our security forces (though the latter is important, the former is equally so if not even more). Let's invest in efforts on peace and human rights—because when we guarantee both, we give violence and terror no room to grow. We give our communities and our families and our young people a real chance at a better, brighter future.

Thank you.

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