

Interview with Rey Claro Casambre

In November 2024, Scholars for Peace asked for an interview with Rey Claro Casambre, a peace consultant involved in the formal negotiations between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), to shed light on important issues related to the peace process. Scholars for Peace sent him a set of questions, and Mr. Casambre's answers are presented verbatim in the text below. The group expresses its deepest appreciation for Mr. Casambre's positive response to its request.

Scholars for Peace (SfP): *Please give us a brief overview of your activism and how you took the path of being a peace consultant for the NDFP panel.*

Rey Claro Casambre (RCC): I was born and raised in the UP [University of the Philippines] Diliman campus. Growing up in a typical close-knit family, I acquired Christian values and a liberal education in a community that was fiercely patriotic and critical, while at the same time strongly influenced by and attracted to Western values and models. Love of God and country, in my young and growing mind, eventually translated to loving one's fellowmen and more concretely, to serving the Filipino people entirely and wholeheartedly. My generation had the fortune and privilege of having our principles and values steeled, tempered, honed and tested in the crucible of struggle against the US-Marcos dictatorship.

Having been unjustly arrested and detained for one week in 1971 when the privilege of the writ of *habeas corpus* was suspended, it was relatively easier for me to decide to evade arrest when martial law was declared in 1972.

It was not until 1991 that I would again be arrested, this time with my wife, and charged with trumped up criminal offenses. We were released at exactly

the time the GRP and the NDFP were conducting exploratory talks for the resumption of peace negotiations after these broke down in 1987.

My defense counsel, Atty. Romeo T. Capulong, was also assisting then NDFP chief negotiator Luis Jalandoni in these talks. Atty. Capulong broached to me the idea of putting up a resource center to provide research and technical assistance to the peace process. We eventually established the Philippine Peace Center (PPC), with Atty. Capulong and Justice Abraham Sarmiento as Co-Chairmen of the Board and myself as Executive Director. Since 1992, the PPC has served as one of the most reliable resource centers for the GRP-NDFP peace negotiations, providing technical assistance, research, education and peace advocacy, peace building and accompaniment materials and services for the peace process.

2. SfP: *What are your realizations about the peace talks, especially in light of the twists and turns during the Duterte administration?*

RCC: Negotiations are an essential and useful arena in the struggle for a just and peaceful society. Twists and turns are inevitable and are part of the terrain. There are no shortcuts to a just and enduring peace.

Peace negotiations cannot be the main arena in the struggle for a just and lasting peace. The strength and effectiveness of the peace negotiators and peace panel derive from the strength of and support from the mass struggles for essential reforms that will improve the people's lives and lead to a just and lasting peace.

3. SfP: *What were the difficulties that you faced as a political detainee? What were the things that you learned during this period in your life?*

RCC: I had been a pol [political] detainee three times—first in 1971 before the declaration of martial law; second in 1991 during the Cory Aquino administration, and just recently in 2018–2023. The lessons learned are (1) it is only one's physical body that can be imprisoned; it is entirely up to the prisoner whether or not his mind remains free; (2) if an oppressive and exploitative regime throws you in prison on trumped up charges, it means you are doing good work contributing to the struggle to change the status quo and thereby serving the people; (3) if successive oppressive and exploitative regimes repeatedly do so, and detain you much longer each time, it means you are not only doing good work, you are doing it better each time; (4) mere detention, no matter how long and tortuous physically and mentally, does not compare with the suffering of victims (and the agony of

their kin and loved ones) of torture, enforced disappearance and extra judicial killings and summary executions; and finally, (5) visits by one's kin and old friends reassure the political detainee and provide much needed material, psychological and moral support on one hand; while visits and expressions of support by young activists whom one does not know personally boost the morale and confidence of the detainee that the forces of change are invincible and shall ultimately prevail.

4. SfP: *Prof. Jose Ma. Sison played a significant role in the peace process up to his passing in 2022. Did his passing lead to any changes in the dynamics within the NDFP peace panel and/or in the peace negotiations as a whole?*

RCC: At the outset, Prof. Sison laid down clearly the basis, conditions, goals and principles for the ND movement to engage in peace negotiations with the GPH [Government of the Philippines]. With him playing a key and active role as Chief Political Consultant, the NDFP negotiating panel brilliantly engaged the GPH in peace talks resulting in the CARHRIHL [Comprehensive Agreement for the Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law] and in common drafts for ARRD [Agrarian Reform and Rural Development] and NIED [National Industrialization and Economic Development] of the CASER [Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms] from 1992 to 2016.

Without him, any NDFP negotiating panel will be guided by the strategic principles set by Prof. Sison as well as practical and tactical lessons learned in 24 years of negotiations.

But no one can replace Prof. Sison in his unique and outstanding role as the master of language engineering in formulating mutually acceptable formulations, as the “good cop” who could flexibly bend back from a hard position to achieve a compromise, as chief tactician, and of course in providing overall leadership.

5. SfP: *The issuance of the Oslo Joint Statement in 2023 was a surprise given the way things worked out during the Rodrigo Duterte administration. What do you think were the factors that led to this development?*

RCC: From 2018 when Duterte terminated the talks and formed the NTFELCAC [National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict], the NDFP had always expressed its openness to resuming the talks so long as the roots of the armed conflict are addressed and resolved, and prior bilateral agreements are honoured and reaffirmed.

After five years, the GRP proposed that both Parties meet again to negotiate and agree on reforms that will address and resolve the roots of armed conflict and lead to a just and lasting peace.

I believe this positive development was brought about by (1) the continuous deterioration of the economy and intensifying political crisis, especially the sharpening contradictions between the Marcos & Duterte cliques, (2) the conflict between US and China especially over control of the West Philippine Sea, and (3) last but not least, the repeated failure of the NTFELCAC in meeting its own self-declared deadlines for ending the armed conflict through “local peace initiatives” and/or “addressing the roots of the armed conflict on the ground”.

6. SfP: *Scholars for Peace is an alliance of teachers and researchers who are advocates of a just and lasting peace, and we aim to mainstream peace issues in schools. What role should schools and educators play in the peace campaign?*

RCC: The mis-education of the Filipino people under centuries of colonial and neocolonial rule has long been exposed and opposed. Today, our people not only remain miseducated but worse, **mal-educated** as the educational system and cultural values are further contorted with impunity by the entrenched ruling classes serving foreign interests and dictates.

Scholars for Peace can play a major, particular and special role in producing and presenting a comprehensive critique of the Philippine educational system and proposing and advocating programs and specific measures to overhaul and transform it into one that shall serve the interest of the greater majority of the people in an independent, democratic and progressive society. The critique should identify and highlight its dual role in preserving and even aggravating the status quo and the interests of the local elite and their foreign masters on one hand, while identifying and supporting its progressive role in building a patriotic, scientific and pro-people counter-consciousness and culture on the other. In order to produce, develop and propagate this critique, Scholars for Peace should constantly investigate the concrete conditions especially of the masses, integrating with and learning from them their concrete conditions, and acquiring the ability to communicate and work with them in the common struggle for a just and lasting peace. #

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