

Suggested Speech for
Minister Mohagher M. Iqbal
on the occasion of
Ateneo de Davao Graduation Ceremony
Ateneo de Davao, Davao City, April

[Greetings]

[insert dignitaries here]

...thanks for having me here today.

Fortes in fide.

We live different lives. While many of you here grew up at the comfort of your homes and community, I grew up in an absolutely opposite setting.

When I was your age, I joined the revolution that we call the Bangsamoro armed struggle for self-determination. It is a stark contrast of the lives you live today.

Many of you grew up in Davao City, one of the most peaceful cities in Mindanao – even in the country today. I grew up in the province of Maguindanao where we founded the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 1977 – five years following the establishment of the Moro National Liberation Front.

You grew up minding only your studies and living the life your parents afforded you. I grew up always on the run. I started as a foot soldier of the MILF. Armed encounters with government forces were my day and night.

To this day, I can still vividly recall the deafening blast of landmines, the orchestra of machine guns and high-powered firearms, and the whistling of bombs before they explode, all these left a trail of dead bodies and burnt homes.

To this day, the howling cries of mothers who lost their sons to the battles still haunt me in my sleep. I lost family members and friends to the battles, too.

You might wonder how I survived the more than 50 years of armed struggle.

Fortes in fide, Ateneo de Davao's motto comes to mind. *Fortes in fide*, a Latin phrase that means "Strong in Faith."

My faith to Allah [SWT] never weathered throughout the years. In fact, as a mujahideen, my faith to Allah [SWT] is as strong as my resolve to helping my people achieve our right to 'self-determination.'

You may ask, what is this right to self-determination?

It has been long-established that the Moro people were never subjugated. What does this mean? It means that while the Spanish and the Americans both considered Moro Mindanao as part of the colonial Philippines, we were never conquered – we the Moro people were never under colonial control.

When the Philippine republic was established, the Moro nation comprised of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan was annexed as Philippine territory.

This led to the creation of colonies and settlements in Mindanao through what we see as repressive land laws, resulting in the "minoritization" of the Moro people.

You see, records show that the Moro population has declined throughout the years. We comprised 75.8 percent of the Mindanao population in 1913 – this is the earliest record that we can get – and down to only 29.7 percent at the end of 1946.

And in the year 2000, we were down to only 22 percent of the more than 16 million people in the entire Mindanao-Sulu-Palawan.

The Bangsamoro people only comprised 23 percent of the more than 24 million people in Mindanao alone in 2015.

What does this mean for us? It means that there was already a glaring issue on resource allocations – mainly land – because of these laws on land distribution. In the process of establishing the Philippine republic, our lands and our resources were taken away from us.

The Moro struggle is hinged on this premise but eventually transformed into a full blown armed struggle following the Jabidah massacre. I think many of you have stumbled upon this incident in your history lessons.

The Jabidah massacre took place in Corregidor on March 17, 1968. Former President Ferdinand Marcos gathered some of our Tausug brothers and trained them in battle to forcibly take Sabah from Malaysia. The rest is history.

I would like to point out though that while our lands and territories were taken from us, it is illogical for us to take them all back. We cannot do that.

Therefore, our armed struggle is also premised on the notion of “self-determining” what is left of us – our identity, our culture, and our resources. As Bangsamoro people, we want to till our own land, fish our seas, and govern on our own.

The Bangsamoro Organic Law is a product of 17 years of negotiations, across five Philippine presidents, 14 GPH negotiators and four MILF negotiators.

About 200 documents were signed, culminating with the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro on March 27, 2014.

Across this timeline, three major armed encounters with government forces took place in 2000, 2003, and 2008 following the failure of MOA-AD. But despite it all, our faith to the peace process was made even stronger.

We know for a fact that we cannot pursue our armed struggle for life. *Matatanda na kami sa pamunuan ng MILF*. Now, after more than 50 years...*ngayon lang namin nakamit ang aming mithiin sa pamamagitan ng* Bangsamoro Organic Law and the establishment of BARMM.

Thanks to President Rodrigo Duterte – the first president from Mindanao and former Mayor of Davao, your Mayor – for signing into law the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao on July 26, 2018.

Fortes in fide. Our strong faith to Allah [SWT] and our ideals will remain strong as we pursue a better Bangsamoro.

Gone is our armed struggle. The new struggle now is pushing for the reforms that we fought for.

I know that this is easier said than done – especially because during the transition period, *mamanahin namin kung ano man ang* issues and concerns *meron ang* ARMM. And let's face it, ARMM has a lot of problems and loopholes.

But I would like to point out also that the Bangsamoro Organic Law is not the solution of all the problems in the Bangsamoro Region. We never said that the BOL will fix everything.

What we are trying to achieve here is better governance, which we hope will translate into better services for all the people in the Bangsamoro.

For my part, as Minister of Education, I believe that providing better services means providing our children quality education that is reflective of our aspirations as a people.

The Bangsamoro Organic Law says that education will be a top priority of the Bangsamoro Government. It shall establish, maintain, and support a complete and integrated system of quality education, which shall be a sub-system of the national education system.

But what makes it different from ARMM?

Unlike the ARMM set up, the ministry of education under the BARMM is composed of three merged agencies: the former DepEd-ARMM, CHED-ARMM, and TESDA-ARMM. It shall be called the Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education.

I think it is the biggest ministry. The Basic Education component alone has over 24,000 teaching and non-teaching personnel. For me, it is a huge task to be managing a ministry this big.

Moving on, the Bangsamoro Government shall institutionalize peace education at all levels of education.

The law adds further that any school, college or university existing in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region as of the effectivity of the Organic Law, and such other schools and institutions that may be established hereinafter, shall be deemed integral components of the educational system of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, and shall be governed by their respective charters.

This next provision is very important. The right of sectarian and educational institutions to propagate their religious beliefs shall not be curtailed. The regional

educational system shall not discriminate against the sectarian educational institutions in any manner or form.

The Bangsamoro Government shall ensure the integration in the elementary and high school education curricula the teaching of Islamic and Arabic studies for Muslim pupils and students in public schools.

I think we all agree that education is very important. The first word of the Holy Quran is “Read.” For us Muslims, education is vital to living our ways of life in Islam. A particular Hadith in the Holy Quran also encourages us “to seek knowledge – from the cradle to the grave.”

The Bangsamoro Government is on the right track. We will be investing heavily in producing graduates that are not only experts in their fields, but also those that put their knowledge to good use.

Fortes in fide.

My faith tells me that we can do this.

My faith tells me that the sacrifices of our brother and sisters throughout the course of our armed struggle will not be put to waste.

My faith tells me that our mothers in the Bangsamoro Region will now see their children in schools – not in the battlefield.

And my faith, which is stronger than ever, also tells me that the dawn of a new Bangsamoro is in the offing.

I would like to end my speech by telling all our graduates today, that no matter what hardships come your way, remember your school's motto: *Fortes in fide*.

When all else is lost, our faith is all we have.

Shukran.

Thank you for having me here today. #