THE ROLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN
DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT, AND PEACE:
THE PHILIPPINE CASE

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Introduction

My parents brought us up to appreciate the concepts of public service and democracy. My father, the late Ambassador Abraham Rasul, supported his three daughters' participation in school politics and other extra-curricular activities. My mother, former Senator Santanina T. Rasul, encouraged a strong streak of independence in her daughters. They both believed in equality between men and women, citing the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and his wife, Khadija. They both also believed in the accountability of public servants, citing that Muslim rulers and leaders are held to standards higher than those created by man-made laws. I therefore grew up believing in my own capacity and responsibility to work for a better life for myself, my family, and my community. Today, I find it incredible that what my parents taught their daughters is under attack as un-Islamic by some leaders.

Muslim historians and analysts have been studying the stagnation of societies in many authoritarian Muslim countries. The critics of regimes such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein maintain that human liberty and freedom, which are enshrined within Islam, had been taken away. Thus, there is much support for democratization in countries like Iraq. However, the democratization process must be home-grown—witness the successes in Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia.

Although the Philippines is known as ‘democratic’, most Muslims there do not feel free. During the May 2004 national elections, at least two of the opposition parties documented the electoral fraud that took place in Muslim areas, reducing the pillar of democracy called free elections to so much rubble. In Maguindanao Province, for instance, an officer of the election monitoring group\(^1\) informed me that they reported the elections to

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\(^1\) National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL).
be generally peaceful and orderly. However, he also told me that their report on Maguindanao never said the elections were honest, only that they were relatively peaceful and orderly.

We are caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock is the state’s militarization of Mindanao and the oppressive form it predominantly takes in securing the peace against terrorism. Ignorance about the Muslim faith makes many leaders tend to perceive religion itself as a threat. The hard place is the aggregation of fundamentalist groups who want to monopolize Islam. These groups accuse anyone talking of moderation, patience, legitimacy, reason, and pragmatic thinking of being un-Islamic or anti-Islam.

Lack of freedom in our communities has stifled our society. In the days before martial law, our community leaders could be openly critical about the policies or actions of our elected leaders. No longer: we are silenced by fear of retribution, which prevents any debate on what is wrong with our community today. Add to the lack of freedom, a loss of dignity, a sense of hopelessness and despair, and we have a fertile breeding ground for all kinds of extremism and violence. Clearly, the solution is to support the growth of democracy in Muslim communities, which implies a radical expansion of the freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, and freedom to form independent organizations.

Some people claim that the Muslim world needs the rule of law, but not necessarily democracy. Yet it is impossible to separate the two; we cannot have rule of law without democracy. When the law comes from an illegitimate administration, it is illegitimate itself, and its enforcement, in the absence of independent branches of government, leads to dictatorship. The transition to democracy may take a few years. However, the transition must be real, sustained, and irreversible. Many governments or government officials have become adept at promising democratic reforms while delivering more oppression. This has created an environment of great disappointment and frustration.

What can we Muslim women do? Women in the Philippines have overcome tremendous hurdles to participate in politics and governance. We have had two women presidents: former President Corazon C. Aquino and former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Mrs Aquino, heralded as the leader who brought back democratic processes to the country and who initiated the peace process with separatist groups, still has a strong following among the so-called ‘middle forces’. She has publicly called on Mrs Arroyo to step down amidst allegations of corruption and manipulation of the 2004 presidential elections, among others. In this, she joins another woman leader, Mrs Susan Roces Poe, the widow of the opposition Presidential candidate