The web of relations shaping the Philippine peace talks

Isabel Bramsen

How critical for reaching an agreement is relational peace between negotiating parties? And how are peace talks shaped by multiple relations? This chapter investigates elements of relational peace between the negotiating parties of the Philippine peace talks (2016–2020) between the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the Philippine government. It shows how the talks broke down despite elements of relational peace between the parties at the table and discusses how this relates to the larger set of relations shaping the peace talks.

The chapter builds on participatory observations from the third round of talks in the Philippine peace talks in 2017, where I was allowed to observe the negotiations from the back of the room over the course of a week of talks. Likewise, the chapter draws upon video material from the first, second, and fourth rounds of talks as well as interviews with negotiators taking part in the talks and peacebuilders working in the Philippines. The chapter shows how the relationship between the parties present at the talks can be characterized as relational peace between friends, or at least between fellows, in the form of: (1) deliberation, non-domination, and elements of cooperation; (2) respectful attitudes toward each other as well as elements of trust; and (3) fellowship and in some cases even friendship as the idea of the relationship. This relational peace was built up over several years, with the same negotiators having participated in several attempts at negotiating peace since 1986. Yet despite constructive interaction at the negotiation table, positive attitudes toward the opponents, and friendship-like relations in 2017, the talks fell apart after the third round because of transgressions of the ceasefire on the ground and supposedly also conflicting interests within each party.

Based on observations of the talks, analysis of the overall situation, and insights from relational peace theory and peacebuilding literature, the chapter discusses three further sets of relations besides the relations between the
negotiators that shaped the peace talks: (1) interparty relations between the different political and military components of each party; (2) relations between the leaders of the respective parties, Rodrigo Duterte and Jose Maria Sison; and (3) civil society relations. Finally, the chapter discusses the lessons for relational peace and suggests that political reforms are needed in the Philippines to promote peace.

Apart from a few exceptions (Kingsbury 2006; Ahtisaari 2008), research on peace talks generally builds on secondary material and rarely analyzes the actual behavior and attitudes expressed around the negotiation table. This chapter contributes to the study of diplomacy and peace talks with fine-grained observations and analysis based on in-person fieldwork. Moreover, the study contributes to the body of literature on various cases of peace talks (Michael 2007; Ahtisaari 2008; Cohen-Almagor 2019), adding the importance of cohesion, civil society, and presence of the leaders, and discusses the potential of an agonistic peace.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it discusses how the relational peace framework can be operationalized in a micro-sociological setting. Second, the chapter analyzes the behavioral interaction at the negotiation table, respective attitudes toward the other party, and the idea of the relationship between the parties. Third, it describes the breakdown of the peace talks and discusses the web of relations shaping the talks including interparty relations, leadership relations, and civil society relations. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the takeaways of the study for the relational peace framework, and the prospects of peace in the Philippines as well as future research avenues.

**Peace talks**

Peace talks imply negotiation and dialogue that are intended to improve the relationship between conflicting parties and, ideally, to find sufficient common ground to sign a peace agreement that can put an end to hostilities (Bramsen and Hagemann 2021). Peace talks are often facilitated by a third party specialized in peace diplomacy, for example a country like Norway or Qatar, an NGO, or, alternatively, international organizations like the UN or the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Wallensteen 2011; Lehti 2014). The mediator (often assigned as Special Envoy) is usually assisted by a mediation team and/or a mediation support unit, i.e., an NGO specialized in supporting mediation processes. Mediation is a voluntary process that requires the consent of the conflicting parties to initiate talks, and throughout the peace process, each party may at any point withdraw from the talks or the agreement. Apart from the
micro-dynamics at the table, which is the focus of this chapter, various contextual, structural, and geopolitical factors greatly shape the outcome and dynamics of mediation and in many cases may determine the likelihood of success (Kissinger 1994).

In literature on mediation efforts, the success or failure of peace talks has been ascribed to the bias of the mediator, the ripeness of the conflict, the level of conflict intensity, and the nature of the issue(s) in question (Kleiboer 1996; Svensson 2014; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014; Svensson 2020). Moreover, recent studies of mediation have focused on inclusion (Paffenholz and Zartman 2019), the role of women (Aggestam and Svensson 2018), and mediator responsibility (Jensehaugen et al. 2022), as well as a mediator’s ability to build “relational empathy” between the conflicting parties (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2017: 107). However, research on mediation and peace talks has rarely gone into the specific practicalities and dynamics of the talks. One reason for this is that researchers are rarely granted access to directly observe peace talks because of the confidential and sensitive nature of such efforts (Bramsen 2022), and hence our knowledge of peace talks has previously stemmed from biographies or writings by diplomats, negotiators, and heads of state. Drawing on direct observations for one of the first times in the study of peace talks, this chapter aims to contribute to the mediation literature with insights about relational peace and interactional dynamics in practice. Moreover, the direct observations allow us to go beyond the focus on ripeness outside the negotiation room and allow for a more detailed, micro-sociological analysis of peace talks, that is, how parties engage with each other in and around peace talks. However, because the talks eventually broke down, the chapter argues that friendship at the negotiation table is insufficient for reaching peace and that other relations between the leaders, within-party relations, and the relations to civil society are critical for reaching a peace agreement, as well as for achieving peace in itself.

In addition, the chapter aims to contribute to the literature accumulating “lessons” from various peace talks as well as from the Philippine peace talks specifically. While previous studies have emphasized lessons from peace processes such as the Aceh peace talks (Ahtisaari 2008), the Cyprus peace talks (Michael 2007), the Afghan peace talks (Shinn and Dobbins 2011), and the Israeli–Egyptian peace talks (Cohen-Almagor 2019), the chapter aims to add lessons from the Philippine peace talks to that pool of research, exploring the importance of cohesion, civil society, and the role of the leaders. With a few exceptions, there have been almost no academic studies conducted on the Philippine peace talks with the CPP, and thus the chapter also addresses a gap in the accumulated knowledge of peace talks in general as well as the specific case of the Philippine government–CPP talks.
Relational peace

Theorizing and defining peace has, for good reasons, been at the core of peace research since the beginning of the research tradition. In a recent interview, one of the fathers of peace research, Johan Galtung, provided a very simple definition of peace that is quite different than the negative-positive vision of peace with which he is often associated: “Peace is: I do good to you, you do good to me.”1 Though very blunt, this is a very precise description of peace that reflects the idea that peace is reciprocal and relational but also dynamic in the sense that it suggests that peace may change, depending on the actions of either party. In a similar manner, Söderström, Åkebo, and Jarstad make a very convincing argument that peace should be defined relationally (Söderström et al. 2021; Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction). Specifically, they define a peaceful relation as behavioral interaction characterized by non-domination, deliberation, and/or cooperation between actors in a dyad where the actors “recognize and trust each other and believe that the relationship is either one between legitimate fellows or between friends” (Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction). By defining peace as a particular quality of a relationship, Söderström et al. avoid the pitfalls of defining peace too narrowly (negative peace) or too broadly (positive peace), and make peace relatively tangible.

While I welcome the attempt by Söderström et al. to theorize peaceful relations, I want to question the importance of the third component in the definition of a peaceful relation: the idea of the relationship itself. While peaceful relations certainly often correlate with an actor’s idea of a relationship as friendly (or peaceful), I would argue that the idea of the relationship does not characterize the relationship per se, but rather it is an effect of the fact that the relationship is peaceful. In other words, it is not the (cognitive) ideas about the relationship that constitute the relationship, but rather relational aspects such as interactions and social bonds between the parties. One can even imagine a situation where one party considers a relationship to be a friendship while the other does not. For relational peace to be truly relational it needs to focus on the purely relational aspects rather than individual perceptions. Moreover, one can distinguish between a momentary peaceful relation and the overall definition or idea of a relationship. For example, a married couple may characterize their relationship as friendship and marriage yet still have non-peaceful relations on occasions. I would therefore argue that for relational peace to be more dynamic, it should be tied more closely to the nature of the interactions in question and less to the overall idea of the relationship. Söderström et al. argue that “the idea of the relationship” is necessary in the definition of peaceful relations in order to describe, for example, the non-peaceful relation between the US
Relational peace practices

and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Söderström et al. 2021: 495), but I would argue that an assessment of the levels of trust, recognition, and collaboration is sufficient to make such a distinction. However, while not necessarily constituting the relationship per se, “the idea of the relationship” or perception of the other as friend or enemy is still a valid measurement of the status of the relationship, because it says something about how the parties consider the relationship. Hence, an assessment of the parties’ ideas of the relationship is also included in this chapter.

In terms of behavioral interaction, this chapter contributes with a micro-sociological take, arguing that interaction shapes social bonds between participants, and energizes and de-energizes them, depending on the nature of the interaction. Engaged, rhythmic interaction where participants respond to each other’s utterings in an appreciative manner, for example by laughing, smiling, nodding, or adding to the conversation, energizes participants and generates a social bond between them (Collins 2004; Bramsen and Poder 2018; Holmes and Wheeler 2019). This could be considered collaboration as defined in the relational peace framework, but could equally entail, for example, friendly mocking of each other. I therefore refer to this form of interaction as friendly interaction. In particular, when analyzing interaction at a negotiation table it is important to have this rather subtle nuance; parties at the table of course do not exactly collaborate, for otherwise they would reach an agreement right away. Rather, friendly interaction refers to an engaged, responsive, and open mode of interaction that may or may not involve collaboration. Disengaged interaction, on the other hand, de-energizes participants. In such interaction there is no clear focus, a lack of rhythm in the exchange of words for example with long pauses, lack of eye contact, etc. Collaboration may in principle take this disengaged form, and so could deliberation, violence, and many other ways of interacting (Bramsen and Poder 2018: 9). The reason for integrating this extra element along with the relational peace framework here is to go beyond the description of behavioral interaction and capture how interaction energizes and de-energizes participants, using the micro-sociological approach, and how it potentially can generate social bonds and thus relational peace.

Methodology

This chapter builds on direct observations from the Philippine talks as well as interviews with participants in the talks. It applies a micro-sociological methodology (Collins 2004) focusing on micro-interactions between the communist party and the Philippine government. I was allowed to observe
the Philippine peace talks in January 2017, a possibility that was made possible by my contact with the then Special Envoy to the Philippines, Elisabeth Slåttum, whom I met at a Nordic Women Mediators annual meeting in 2016. Slåttum kindly agreed to ask the parties to the Philippine peace talks whether I could come and attend the third round of talks in January 2017, and they agreed on the condition that I would sign a nondisclosure agreement promising not to reveal anything from the talks before eighteen months after the ending of the meeting, and that I would let the parties look at my descriptions of my observations first. From January 19 to 25, 2017, I was therefore allowed into the engine room of diplomacy, where very few researchers have been allowed over the years. I stayed at the hotel where the negotiations took place, and participated in the Norwegian team’s planning meetings and in the meals at the hotel as well as in the official talks, where I was sitting behind the negotiation table with other observers from civil society organizations, lawyers, and representatives from the military. The talks took place in Rome, Italy. They were facilitated by Norway, with diplomats from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs attending, as well as senior advisors from the Norwegian mediation support unit at the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF).

I also stayed close to the back-channel negotiations in 2020, which took place in Utrecht in the Netherlands. Here I was not allowed to observe the direct talks, but I took part in a dinner with participants from the two delegations as well as several activities with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) including an internal planning meeting for the negotiations, where I also conducted interviews with representatives from the two delegations. Besides this I conducted online interviews with civil society representatives from the Philippines. To supplement the participatory observations and the interviews I draw upon thirty pictures from the talks that I collected in order to be able to analyze the interactions in greater detail, as well as video material from the first, second, and fourth rounds of talks which are available online on YouTube. The video material enables me to not only focus on the third round of talks that I observed, but also draw on data from the other three rounds and thus have a broader basis on which I can draw conclusions about the interaction. Moreover, the video material allows me to analyze micro-details of interaction such as laughing, and to capture the exact phrases in the opening speeches that set the stage for the rest of the talks. Hence, the micro-sociological approach enables me to analyze relational peace in very concrete terms in the form of direct interaction and engagement between conflict parties. Finally, the chapter also draws upon news articles particularly texts from Philippine news sources such as Rappler, Philstar, and CNN Philippines.
The Philippine peace process

The conflict between the communist rebellion of the Philippines and the Philippine government dates back to 1968, when the communist movement was established by Jose Maria Sison. The communist insurgency consists of the New People’s Army (NPA) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) as well as the CPP. The communist insurgency is therefore referred to as CPP/NPA/NDF or CNN for short (an abbreviation of the abbreviations). Whereas the CPP is considered the “brain” behind the movement, the NPA is the armed front and the NDFP is the political branch mainly responsible for the peace talks as well as other diplomatic efforts. Sison was an English teacher at the University of the Philippines, and he has written numerous books on the prospects of a communist revolution in the Philippines. The aim of the CNN is to promote constitutional reforms, social and economic reform, and land reform.

The talks between the Philippine government and the NDFP have been ongoing intermittently since 1986 with shifting presidents but with many of the same negotiators on both sides. The peace talks have led to several interim agreements throughout the years, including the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in 1998 (CHARHRIHL 1998).

When Duterte took office in the Philippines in August 2016, he reconvened the peace talks. During his presidential campaign he had promised peace with the communist party, and he considers himself a leftist (Gita-Carlos 2019) and agrees with many of the same ideas put forward by the communist party. During his campaign Duterte even had a friendly and cordial conversation with Sison, which was recorded and put on YouTube (Kilab Multimedia 2016). It was hence an even bigger disappointment that the talks did not bear any fruit right away. Duterte wished for a quick peace deal and pledged that it could be reached within the first year of his presidency; however, as the unilateral ceasefire was breached in January 2017, the hopes for a quick peace deal fell apart (The Guardian 2017).

The parties first met in Oslo in August 2016 and then again at a second round of talks in October 2016, a third round of talks in January 2017, and a fourth round in April 2017. Between the third and fourth rounds, the talks broke down, but thanks to back-channel negotiations the parties resumed the talks again in April. However, the talks broke down again, and since then only back-channel talks have been conducted. In July 2020, Duterte signed an anti-terrorism act labeling the CNN as a terrorist organization and thus a party that cannot be negotiated with, and this naturally has been devastating for the peace process. On May 9, 2022, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was elected as the new president of the Philippines. Marcos Jr. is the son
of the dictator Ferdinand Emmanuel Edralin, who was ousted by a popular uprising in 1986. The new presidency does not offer much hope for the peace talks with the CPP (Engelbrecht 2022), and the leadership of the CPP is very critical of the new presidency (Raymundo 2022). Hence, the prospects for resuming peace talks in the near future are weak. Nevertheless, important insights about the dynamics of relational peace can be gained from studying the 2016–2017 peace talks and the larger web of relations surrounding and shaping the talks.

The following section will analyze the relationship between the two delegations representing the Philippine government and the CPP (2016–2017), drawing upon the three central dimensions of relational peace: behavioral interaction, subjective attitudes toward the other, and idea of the relationship.

Behavioral interactions

As I will show in the following discussions, the behavioral interaction taking place at the negotiation table and in the breaks corresponds with several of the elements of relational peace in terms of deliberation, non-domination, and even cooperation.

Deliberation

Peace talks are in and of themselves a symbol and practice of deliberation between conflicting parties. As argued by Söderström et al., deliberation “does not imply a demand for consensus, but rather an acknowledgment of disagreement through dialogue, and the presence of a venue for transforming relationships” (Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction), and peace talks can be considered exactly such a platform. The interactions at the peace table in the Philippine peace talks were characterized either by being friendly, with jokes being made and smiles being exchanged, or by being disengaged, with a lack of mutual focus and a slow rhythm of interaction (Bramsen 2022). Both forms of deliberation are friendly and polite, but the first form is much more engaged. While engaged, friendly interaction can provide conducive conditions for reaching an agreement, it does not in and of itself lead to an agreement. The low-intensity, disengaged interactions were especially prevalent when the negotiations were concerned with technical issues, issues of law, and discussions of specific formulations. When the talks reached a point where no solution could be found, the Norwegian facilitators often called for a break, and when the parties returned to the negotiation table, the issue that had divided the parties prior to the break was often solved. Such breaks could take up to two hours, and during them the heads of the
negotiating parties would meet outside to have more one-on-one discussions about the issue over a cigarette or similar. When I interviewed the head of the communist delegation I asked about the dynamic in these breaks, and he described how issues that would cause tension in the official talks were solved more easily in informal talks as the parties could talk more freely and, importantly, they spoke in a different more direct and dialogical manner, which increased the understanding between the parties. Hence, the particular space of interaction also shapes the potential for and character of deliberation, with breaks and other informal spaces being particularly conducive to cultivating friendly and engaged interaction.

**Non-domination**

While power is always present and thus one cannot imagine power-free peace talks (Bramsen et al. 2016), domination entails that one party sets the rhythm of the interaction, talks down to the opponent, and interrupts the other or in other ways establishes a “top-dog” position through interaction. Given that the conflict between the Philippine government and the NDFP is asymmetric on the battleground, the talks were characterized by remarkably little domination and hence “the room for action of the weaker actor in a dyad” was not determined by the stronger party (Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction). Despite the clear power asymmetry, which can often be a challenging condition for peace negotiations (Aggestam 2010), the parties seemed to consider each other equals, and this was reflected in their manner of engaging. The parties took turns to express their concerns and goals at the negotiation table, neither party dominated the room with their body postures, tone of voice, or expressions, and none of the delegations seemed restricted by the other when it came to room for maneuver.

**Cooperation**

Although the parties met to solve a broader conflict in the Philippines, they cannot be said to have had the same goals apart from the overall and more abstract goal of peace in the Philippines. However, in spite of the absence of goals that they can cooperate to achieve, they can still “make moves that benefit the other” as argued by Jarstad et al. (this volume, Introduction). The initiation of the peace talks was characterized by exactly such “goodwill measures,” as the Philippine government released twenty-one political prisoners from the CPP, and both parties declared a unilateral ceasefire. However, the parties did not agree as to whether these actions were cooperative enough: the CPP wanted more prisoners to be released and the Philippine government wanted a bilateral ceasefire. At the table too, the interaction
cannot be said to have been cooperative in the sense of working together toward a common goal, but nevertheless it was cooperative in the sense of engaging with each other’s concerns and proposals in a cooperative manner. Moreover, representatives of the NDFP offered gifts to all delegates and other people present at the talks (including myself). Such a gift-giving ritual can be considered a cooperative act cultivating a friendly atmosphere and relationship.

A video from the fourth round of talks shows the opening speech of the special advisor to the peace process, Jesus Dureza, stating that “we are no longer in the concept of negotiating but already sharing common values and common aspirations for a better Philippines” (Kodao Productions 2017). This is particularly remarkable because the fourth round of talks followed an initial breakdown of talks after the third round, as will be described later. Since I took part in only the third round of talks, however, I do not know whether this attitude also characterized the confidential parts of the fourth round of talks, but given the tense situation it is likely that this tension was also felt at the talks. Likewise, there is of course an element of performativity in the statement, and thus it is unclear how much it actually reflects reality at the time.

Subjective attitudes toward the other

Besides the interactions at the table, in the breaks, and in front of the media, an actor’s attitudes and perceptions of the opposite party also define the peacefulness of their relationship. In this case, the attitude of the parties toward one another was very much one of recognition, symbolized, for example, by their putting their hands together to display teamwork and cooperation, as seen in Figure 7.1.

Whether or not the parties actually trusted each other is more challenging to assess. My sense, also from the interviews, was that there was a relatively high degree of trust between the individuals representing the two parties, but that there was not necessarily trust in the overall machinery of the government, for example. Of course, even the trust in particular individuals would vary depending on the relationship and prior interaction. Besides relative levels of trust and friendly affection among the parties, several government representatives, most notably the Philippine minister of foreign affairs, Perfecto Yasay Jr., even expressed their admiration for the communist chief political advisor, Sison. In his speech Yasay stated the following:

I must also confess that my trip has brought about the fulfillment of two of my top bucket list, one is to be able to meet Joma Sison and that is more than
enough for me, to justify my trip to be here and that also justifies why I am
dumbfounded and speechless, Joma thank you for this occasion of meeting
with you. I had look(ed) up to him and continue to look up to him even
when I was still a young college student at the Central Philippine University
in Iloilo City and we have a lot of mutual friends. I know Joma to be a very
dedicated leader and Filipino who works greatly and singly for the welfare
and benefit of the Filipino people. I know him and it is one of the reasons
why I admire him most is because when he wants to get things done for the
good of the country, he will be relentless and he will not end until that is
done. (Dureza 2017)

While agreeing to hold talks can be seen as a form of thin recognition
in and of itself (Strömbom 2014), the expressions of admiration and respect
reflect a certain level of thick recognition as well. Importantly, however, the
trust and recognition between the representatives at the negotiation table
were not reflected among all of members of the government: as mentioned
by one informant from the government, there was a high level of mistrust
in general, even within the government, because of the violent dimension
of the conflict:

If this was just an ordinary, political fight settled through political processes
– no problem. But the mere fact that there is an armed component to it, the
reaction is also extreme on both sides. These are the things you need to balance
in the negotiations, because the soldiers fighting them also were paid to do it
or are committed to do it. And here we are as negotiators trying to broker a
peace agreement, also in their names, the direct combatants, the families and
The victims of the insurgency on both sides so you can just imagine what is running into our heads in the negotiations, and how we are perceived by the outside world in the negotiations so, the level of mistrust is high, imagine fifty years of fighting.\(^2\)

Hence, the trust and subjective attitudes toward the other visible at the table were not reflected in all fractions of the government, an issue which I will come back to as one of the challenges for the peace talks.

### Ideas of the relationship

The idea of the relationship between the two groups of delegations representing the Philippine government and the CPP respectively ranged between “fellowship” and “friendship.” In a video from the second round of talks in October 2016, the special advisor to the peace process, Jesus Dureza, mentions “our friends on the other side of the table” in his opening statement, referring to the NDFP representatives (Capiastrano 2016). Following Dureza’s opening speech, on the other hand, Sison expresses his gratitude to “my compatriots on both sides of the table” (Kodao Productions 2016). While some of this rhetoric may be performative given the negotiation situation, this attitude is also reflected in the private conversations as well as interviews that I had: “some of us are really friends.”\(^3\)

Because negotiations between the two delegations have been going on sporadically since 1986, many representatives of the delegations have known each other for many years. Silvestre Bello, for example, the leader of the government delegation, also took part in the talks in 2001–2004. Some delegations have even had family-like bonds; for example, the head of the CPP delegation was the godfather of Hernani Braganza, who was with the government delegation. Moreover, Secretary Bello and Braganza were previously affiliated with the revolutionary movement and thus have ideological ties to the CPP, though this was before they entered into party politics. These connections also seem to create a greater level of understanding by the government representatives of the aims of the CPP and the kinds of causes for which it is fighting. When asked about the friendship-like idea of the relationship, a representative from the government delegation responded that the relationship was characterized by “not only friendship but respect” and described how he respected the communists’ decade-long fight for redistribution of wealth, land, and rights. He added that if he did not have this level of respect and friendship with the CPP, “that kind of dinner would never happen,” referring to the dinner that I participated in the night before with representatives from both parties.

The idea of the relationship as one of friendship also seemed to be echoed at the level of the leaders, as reflected, for example, in the hand gestures...
that the parties applied. The representatives of the government of the Philippines and the CPP used different hand gestures: pushing a clenched fist forward (the government) symbolizing force, and holding an arm up in the air (the communists), and very often they assumed these poses when having their picture taken. However, interestingly in Figure 7.2, a photo of a meeting between President Duterte with members of the government of the Philippines and NDFP peace panels on September 26, 2016, Duterte is making the same hand gesture as the CPP instead of his “own” gesture. This perhaps signals recognition and indicates the apparently close ties that existed between the government and the CPP, at least symbolically, when Duterte first became president.

**Breakdown of talks**

Despite visible elements of relational peace and the very friendly atmosphere at the table in the third round of peace talks in January 2017, discussions
broke down right after the third round ended. On January 23, in the middle of the third round of peace talks in Rome, there was an incident of violence in Makilala, Cotabato, where both parties accused each other of being responsible for initiating the violence. The violence did not seem to have a significant influence on the relationship between the parties at the table or the outcome of the talks. The panel chairperson of the government, Secretary Bello, in an interview with the media, stated that the violence was a clear sign of the need for a bilateral ceasefire, which was the main goal of the government at the time. Likewise, in a press release and also in an interview, the panel chairperson of the NDFP, Fidel V. Agcaoili, blamed the government’s forces for the attack. In the joint statement on the successful third round of formal talks, it was stated that “the parties note that their unilateral indefinite ceasefires remain in place. They note however that there are issues and concerns related thereto” (Manlupig 2017). However, just one week after the peace talks, on February 1, the NPA, the armed wing of the communist party, declared the end of the ceasefire and launched attacks, killing two government soldiers and kidnapping two others (The Guardian 2017). While the talks were at first called off, diplomatic efforts in back-channel talks managed to get the two parties together again for a fourth round of talks in April 2017 in the Netherlands. However, the talks soon broke down again and have remained closed or limited to back-channel talks since then.

How could the talks break down despite good relations between the negotiating parties and, perhaps even more puzzling, given the relatively aligned perceptions of ideal political solutions in the Philippines? Critically, this illustrates the importance of not only intra-party relations at the table but the multiple, interrelated relationship-shaping peace talks, which will be discussed in the following section.

The web of relations

Söderström et al. rightly state that “peace and war can co-exist in webs of multiple interactions” (2021: 488), and one can argue that the challenge in peacebuilding is to promote relational peace across this web of multiple interactions. Peace talks cultivate peacefulness in a certain set of relations, namely between the respective representatives present at the table. However, these relations are by no means the only relations that matter for the materialization of peace, or even for successfully reaching a peace agreement. Equally critical are relations among the actors constituting each party and between the leaders not necessarily present at the table, as well as between the parties and civil society (and among civil society actors). This section
Relational peace practices

will therefore discuss the importance of (1) interparty relations, (2) relations between the parties’ leaders, and (3) relations to civil society for the cultivation of peace.

**Intraparty relations**

It is often forgotten that relations within each party matter at least as much as the relations between parties when it comes to peace talks. In an interview about the 2012–2016 peace process in Colombia, the negotiator who represented the government in talks with the FARC, Sergio Emilio Caro, stated, “you are negotiating with your own side all the time [...] and that was really hard, you know sometimes harder than negotiating with the FARC.”

This is also reflected within the Philippine government during the (official and unofficial) peace talks from 2016 to 2020, where there seemed to be a lack of coherence regarding position in the talks. According to one informant there was a division within the government between “those who are against the talks, those who are for the talks, there is a wide gap of ‘why should we talk to them?’ […] within the government there are many differences, there are those who are advocating not to talk to them.”

Moreover, there are certain indications that the peaceful interactions that occurred at the negotiation table in 2017 were not translated to the armed forces on both sides. While both sides accuse each other of instigating the violence and it is unclear what exactly happened on the ground, the fact that violence occurred in the Philippines as the peace talks were going on in Rome, and that the ceasefire was terminated despite successful talks, is an indication that the talks occurred far – probably too far – away from the ground and that the peaceful relations at the table were not reflected in the military relations on the ground. The NPA’s official reason for withdrawing from the ceasefire was that the government did not release political prisoners and did not respect the unilateral ceasefire. However, all things being equal, the fact that the NPA declared the end of the ceasefire immediately after the political leadership had reconfirmed the ceasefire indicates limited coordination or agreement between the political and armed wings of the communists. Currently Sison is in exile in the Netherlands and therefore is geographically removed from everyday life in the Philippines. While the communist party naturally denies that it lacks control over the armed wing, not only the violence during the talks but also the corresponding cancelation of unilateral ceasefire by the NPA indicate a limited cohesion between the different fractions of the communists. This lack of coherence has also been pointed out by other researchers. For example, Walch (2016) pointed toward the lack of cohesion within the communist party as one of the core elements of the failed peace talks in the Philippines prior to 2016.
The limited connection within different fractions of the communists, as well as the lack of cohesion within the Philippine government, corresponds with what Lederach has termed the interdependence gap. According to Lederach (2005), most peacebuilding efforts are done horizontally, in order to create peace in the relationship between the conflicting parties. Thereby, Lederach argues, the necessity of creating a link between different layers of society is missed (Lederach 1999: 1). Lederach therefore calls for a focus on the vertical relations, to strengthen the interdependence across the different levels of the participants within the society. Similarly, Ramsbotham (2010, 2016) calls for strategizing and confidence-building meetings within the respective conflicting parties in intractable conflicts so as to support the cohesion prior to diplomatic engagement with the opponent. Such efforts at generating relational peace within each party may also strengthen the peace process between the communist coalition and the Philippine government.

Relations between the leaders of the parties

Like the relationship between the parties at the table, the relationship between the leaders of the conflicting parties, President Duterte and Sison, also has friendship-like elements, at least when it comes to the idea of the relationship. Duterte has expressed on several occasions that he was “friends” with the communists, even after the talks fell apart (Colina 2018; Gita-Carlos 2019). However, as fighting broke out and the talks fell apart, the proclamations of friendship were mixed with accusations and negative labels (Mendez 2018; Corrales 2019), and in 2020, Duterte declared the CPP to be a terrorist group (Gotinga 2020). According to some analysts, Duterte considered the CPP’s decision to withdraw its unilateral ceasefire as “a ‘betrayal’ of his own friends” (Fonbuena 2017: 1) and thus reacted in a more extreme way (by canceling the talks altogether) than he would have done if he had not considered the communists his friends. Another explanation for the simultaneous expressions of friendship and harsh accusations is put forward by Duterte’s statement that “you know, only the closest of friends can talk harshly to each other and still continue to talk” (Clapano 2018: 1). Maintaining a friendship while engaging in unfriendly behavioral interaction is not unlike a marriage where the partners continue to perceive the relationship as one of friendship, while spending most of the time fighting. This supports my theoretical objection to the “idea of the relationship” component of the relational peace framework, namely that one might have conflict with fierce exchange and even violence, and still have the idea of the relationship as one of friendship. In fact, you might be even more furious about attacks by someone you consider a friend. In that way, the idea of the relationship does not necessarily reflect the changing levels of enmity and peacefulness.
between a dyad, since the idea of the relationship may be more stable than fluctuations in peacefulness.

Recently, scholars have begun recognizing the importance of face-to-face interaction in diplomacy and exploring how trust and social bonds are generated through direct interaction (Wheeler 2018; Holmes and Wheeler 2019). The implicit argument is not that interaction in and of itself necessarily fosters peaceful relations, but that certain circumstances can promote friendly interaction and social bonds. Yet the implicit logic in this argument is that trust is more likely to emerge in face-to-face interaction than in non-face-to-face interaction, and this should increase the chance of success for peace talks (Holmes and Wheeler 2019). However, mediation and diplomacy often take place between representatives of groups or countries rather than the leaders. Hence, the interaction that can potentially give rise to trust and social bonds occurs between people with limited leverage to change the status of affairs, and often much depends on leadership. In the case of the Philippine peace talks I would argue that this is part of the problem (Bramsen 2022). The analysis of the talks shows perfectly how good relations between the negotiators were built through friendly interaction over time. However, President Duterte did not take part in the negotiations, and while Sison was present at the venue, he did not take part in the actual negotiations. In December 2019, it was proposed that Duterte and Sison should meet alone, for example in Hanoi. If such a meeting ends up taking place, it is very likely to lead to progress. As argued by one interviewee, “Their media persona is very different from their actual persona, the way they are portrayed in the media is very different from their actual standpoint” and therefore “face-to-face interaction should not be underestimated at this point in time.”

Relations to civil society

Apart from the difficulty of translating the potential good relationships between representatives of the conflicting parties to their respective leaders, a major challenge in peace diplomacy is to translate and transfer the emerging connection generated at the negotiation table to the wider society. If peace emerges in interaction and “corporeal encounters” (Väyrynen 2019), everyone from one side of the conflict should ideally meet everyone from the other side of the conflict. This is of course not possible, but it points toward a crucial difficulty in transposing the relations built behind closed doors in peace talks onto relations in the broader society.

This is also highly relevant in the Philippine context. In a TV program called “Pros and Cons, produced by the Philippine News Agency, the agency showed a poll that it had conducted on Facebook where viewers were asked whether or not the government should go through with the peace talks
The Philippine peace talks

191

(Philippine News Agency 2020). It reported that 95 per cent voted against going through with them (see Figure 7.3). While the Philippine News Agency is a newswire service of the Philippine government and thus is not impartial in matters of the peace process, this gives an indication that at least some segments of the Philippine society are skeptical about the peace talks (Philippine News Agency 2020).

Lessons may be drawn here from the Mindanao peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), where civil society was increasingly involved and importantly played a key role in ceasefire monitoring (Ross 2017). In an interview, a program manager at Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines mentioned that thanks to the successful involvement of civil society in the MILF peace process, he has tried to also involve civil society in the peace process between the CPP and the GRP but that he did not succeed in raising funding.

Figure 7.3 Poll on support for the peace talks from the TV program Pros and Cons, January 27, 2020

(Philippine News Agency 2020). It reported that 95 per cent voted against going through with them (see Figure 7.3). While the Philippine News Agency is a newswire service of the Philippine government and thus is not impartial in matters of the peace process, this gives an indication that at least some segments of the Philippine society are skeptical about the peace talks (Philippine News Agency 2020).

Lessons may be drawn here from the Mindanao peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), where civil society was increasingly involved and importantly played a key role in ceasefire monitoring (Ross 2017). In an interview, a program manager at Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines mentioned that thanks to the successful involvement of civil society in the MILF peace process, he has tried to also involve civil society in the peace process between the CPP and the GRP but that he did not succeed in raising funding.
In April 2019, Duterte formed a new negotiating panel, substituting the long-running negotiators with mainly military personnel and tasking them to facilitate “local peace talks,” presumably inspired by the Colombian peace process. However, the NDFP is very critical of the talks. It does not consider them genuine attempts to include locals in negotiations but rather a political bluster to satisfy voters or enforcement of government-interest in rebel-lead areas. According to Sison, local NPA commanders have not been willing to participate in local peace talks, and “all commands of the New People’s Army at all levels have rejected since a long time ago the offer of localized peace talks as an inutile tactic of deception to divide and defeat the armed revolutionary movement” (Sison 2019). Given the skepticism toward the government’s attempts at local peace efforts, it might be relevant to involve an impartial third party in the local peace engagements to ensure legitimacy and funding of local organizations. Perhaps a third party such as the Norwegian government or NOREF could be further involved in including and funding civil society in the peace process.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the relationship between the negotiating panels of the Philippine government and the CPP could be characterized as relational peace “between fellows” during the third round of peace talks in 2017. The interactions were generally either friendly or disengaged, while the parties’ attitudes toward each other demonstrated respect, recognition, and even admiration. The idea of the relationship between the parties at the table was very often one of friendship.

The chapter has shown how the framework of relational peace is very relevant in the context of peace negotiations, in particular because it focuses on the development of the relationship between the particular parties taking part. However, the chapter also showed how difficult it is to translate peaceful relations that are generated and cultivated at the peace table to the wider public as well as to the decision-makers who are not necessarily present at the table. Moreover, it explored the critical importance of intra-party relations for improving the prospects of peace. Hence, relational peace needs to be cultivated not only at the peace table but in the wider web of interactions within which the talks take place. Similarly, studies of relational peace should ideally focus not only on a single dyad, but rather on the comprehensive web or relations shaping a particular intergroup relationship. However, it is nearly impossible to account for all dyads shaping the situation in, for example, the Philippines. Nevertheless, this chapter has shown that it is possible to map out some of the central strands shaping a peace process such as the Philippine peace talks.
In relation to this, the chapter has also illustrated the difficulties of studying actors who are meant to represent a larger dyad, given that dyads may have several representatives with diverging opinions and perceptions that hence constitute a network of dyads rather than a node within a dyad per se. Importantly, the chapter challenges the importance of friendship in peace talks, showing that on its own, friendship between negotiating parties is not sufficient to generate peace. In accordance with the saying “If you want to make peace, you don’t talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies” (Dayan 1977: 1), it is not sufficient to bring together the most moderate representatives from two sides of a country: the hawks also need to be present.

Inspired by the relational peace framework and theorizations of agonistic peace (Shinko 2008; Strömbom 2019; Strömbom et al. 2022), one could argue that what is needed in the Philippines is a reform of the political system that would allow insurgent groups to continue their fight with political means, so that violence does not become their only means of influence (Santos 2022). However, such reforms are currently not within sight, particularly not with the new president in place (as of May 2022).

Future research could compare the case of the Philippine talks with other talks that did lead to a peace agreement, for example the Colombian peace talks, which were also facilitated by Norway (and Cuba) and which also involved a conflict between a communist insurgency and a government. Moreover, future research could investigate the potential of the new president to revisit the peace talks and the prospects for peace with the new president in office.

Notes

1 Virtual interview conducted by the author and Anine Hageman, September 7, 2018.
2 Interview conducted by the author, February 17, 2020.
3 Virtual interview conducted by the author, May 13, 2019.
4 Virtual interview conducted by the author, April 21, 2022.
5 Interview conducted by the author, February 17, 2020.

References


The Philippine peace talks

The Philippine peace talks are a series of negotiations between the government of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). These talks began in 2012 and ended in 2021 without a final agreement. The talks were facilitated by various mediators, including the Norwegian Helsinki Group and the Office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The talks focused on issues such as human rights, political prisoners, and the end of hostilities. Despite the efforts of the mediators, the talks were marred by political disagreements and failures to deliver on key issues. The failure of the talks is a testament to the complexity of the conflict in the Philippines and the challenges of peace negotiations in a highly contested political environment.


