

---

# OPTIONS IN THE PURSUIT OF A JUST, COMPREHENSIVE, AND STABLE PEACE IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

---

---

Nathan Gilbert Quimpo

---

---

Over four years ago, during the term of President Fidel V. Ramos, the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), with the mediation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), signed what was billed as “the final peace agreement,” a compact ending nearly three decades of armed conflict between the two sides. The agreement provided for the establishment, after a transitional period, of a regional autonomous government in Muslim and mixed Christian-Muslim areas of Mindanao. The government and the MNLF hoped that in the course of the implementation of this peace accord, they would be able to attract and win over the great majority of the Muslims in the Southern Philippines—or the Moro people—including the leaders, members, and supporters of Moro rebel groups still fighting for secession, and that the accord would eventually pave the way for the attainment of a just and enduring peace in the Southern Philippines.

Under the administration of now unseated President Joseph E. Estrada, the prospects for achieving such a peace somewhat dimmed. After countless violations by both government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) forces of a July 1997 cease-fire agreement, Estrada declared an all-out war against the MILF in March 2000. A few months later, in the wake of the capture by

---

Nathan Gilbert Quimpo is a former lecturer in Political Science and Sociology at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, and will be a Ph.D. student in the Department of Political Science, Australian National University, Canberra. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the forum “Kalinaw! The Quest for Lasting Peace in the Philippines” at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands, September 2000.

*Asian Survey*, 41:2, pp. 271–289. ISSN: 0004–4687

© 2001 by The Regents of the University of California/Society. All rights reserved.

Send Requests for Permission to Reprint to: Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704–1223.

government troops of the rebels' main base, Camp Abubakar, MILF chairman Salamat Hashim called on the Moro people in a radio broadcast to rise in *jihād* against "the enemy of Islam."<sup>1</sup> GRP-MILF peace talks, which officially were begun in January 1997 but started tackling the substantive issues of the conflict only in October 1999, collapsed.

Following the fall of Camp Abubakar, violence in Central and Southern Mindanao increased. There were direct clashes between government and MILF units, but the deadliest incidents were bombings and shootings directed at innocent civilians—Muslim, Christian, and *lumad* (non-Muslim indigenous people)—perpetrated by unidentified armed groups. According to Cotabato Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, head of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, and Bishop Romulo Valles of North Cotabato, fighting between government troops and secessionist rebels had spread to previously unaffected areas despite the Estrada administration's assurances of a "war of rapid conclusion."<sup>2</sup> Major urban centers swelled with refugees.

Meanwhile, on the island of Jolo in Western Mindanao, the government launched a massive military offensive against the more extreme Moro separatist group, the Abu Sayyaf. The group had been responsible for a series of killings as well as kidnappings of civilians, including foreigners, in Jolo, Basilan, and two neighboring Malaysian islands. The kidnappings, which for a while looked as if the Abu Sayyaf had turned into a multimillion-dollar cottage industry, drew worldwide attention and concern. The government cordoned off Jolo and virtually placed it under martial law. In the military operations against the group, many civilians found themselves caught in the crossfire and thousands of families were forced to flee their homes.

Toward the end of 2000, in the thick of the impeachment proceedings against Estrada for corruption, bomb blasts ripped through several public places in Metro Manila, killing 22 and wounding nearly 100 bystanders. The chief of the Philippine National Police tagged "MILF extremists" allegedly trained in Afghanistan as the perpetrators of the bombings, but the MILF immediately denied responsibility.<sup>3</sup> The military and police rounded up 17 alleged suspects, mostly Muslims. In Central Mindanao, two army divisions geared up for renewed offensives against the MILF. Opposition groups,

---

1. Nash B. Maulana, "MILF Chief Cries Jihad," *Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)*, July 12, 2000. Ever since its founding, the MILF has often referred to its struggle as a *jihād*. Thus, Salamat's call for *jihād* in July is actually only a reiteration, but its timing and the characterization of the Philippine government as the enemy of Islam are significant.

2. Jewel F. Canuday, "War Spreading in South, Says Bishop Valles," *ibid.*, September 10, 2000; and Carolyn O. Arguillas, "Gov't, MILF Urged to Set Ceasefire," *ibid.*, September 16, 2000.

3. "Lacson Tags Moro Rebs in Bombings," *ibid.*, January 7, 2001.

however, accused Estrada's allies of carrying out the bombings to divert attention from the president's corruption trial.<sup>4</sup>

With the all-too-sudden ouster of Estrada from office, the renewed offensives against the Moro rebels were aborted. Estrada was forced to flee Malacañang Palace as protest rallies and actions snowballed nationwide—reminiscent of the 1986 “people power” uprising against Marcos—and huge crowds of angry protesters besieged the palace and threatened to eject him physically or do worse. The newly installed president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who became openly critical of Estrada's all-out war policy shortly after leaving his Cabinet, has made a turnaround in government policy toward the Moro rebels—or at least the MILF. Upon inauguration, she announced that the government would seek to reopen peace talks with the Moro rebels (as well as with communist ones); shortly after, she officially ended the all-out war policy against the MILF. A new government negotiating panel, headed by Jesus Dureza, presidential assistant for Eastern Mindanao, has been constituted and exploratory GRP-MILF talks have been initiated. However, whether formal negotiations will indeed materialize, move on to the substantive level, and, much more, bring about a comprehensive political settlement is far from certain. The MILF may insist on the conditions it had earlier set for the resumption of negotiations—implementation of previous cease-fire agreements, including the acknowledgement of seven MILF camps; OIC mediation; and a foreign venue for the talks—conditions that the government may not be willing enough to accept.

Since the outbreak of the armed conflict in Mindanao 30 years ago, the people of Mindanao and the entire Filipino nation have yearned for a comprehensive and stable peace in the Southern Philippines and the country as a whole. With the unexpectedly early exit of an “all-out war” president and the installation of a new administration, the Filipino people now have an excellent opportunity to take a good, hard look at the situation they find themselves in and to study very well—or reconsider—the options before them in the pursuit of that elusive peace. Does the solution to the long-standing “Moro problem” lie in secession, regional autonomy, or a federal system? To resolve the problem, is a negotiated political settlement feasible or is war the only viable recourse left?

### A Brief Historical Review

An ethnic conflict, according to Michael E. Brown, is “a dispute about important political, economic, social, cultural or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities.” An ethnic community, according to Anthony D. Smith, is “a named human population with a [belief or] myth of common

---

4. “Military Ready to Help Cops Arrest Salamat, Murad et al.,” *ibid.*, January 8, 2001.

ancestry, shared memories and cultural elements; a link with a historic territory or homeland; and a measure of solidarity.”<sup>5</sup> Under such a definition, “Muslim” and “Christian,” as well as “Moro” and “Filipino” qualify as ethnic communities.

The roots of the ethnic conflict in Mindanao can be traced back to the Spanish and American colonial periods, when the indigenous Muslim communities resisted subjugation, encroachment into their lands, and the destruction of their communities. In a long series of wars waged against the Mindanao Muslims known as the Moro Wars, the Spaniards compelled the *indios*—natives who had been converted to Christianity—to fight with them against the Muslims, called *moros*, who counterattacked fearfully. Under the Americans, especially during the Commonwealth period, thousands of Christian Filipinos from Luzon and Visayas were encouraged to settle in Mindanao, “the land of promise,” even in traditional Muslim areas. When the Philippines gained independence in 1946, most Muslims could not identify themselves with the new republic, whose laws were clearly derived from Western or Catholic moral values and whose public school system was too Americanized and alien to Islamic tradition. And they resented the continued influx of Christian settlers to Mindanao and the displacement of Muslims from their ancestral lands.<sup>6</sup>

The resentment deepened as decades of Christian transmigration transformed the demographic picture of Mindanao completely. The Muslims were reduced from about 75% of Mindanao’s population at the turn of the century to about 25% in the late 1960s<sup>7</sup> and less than 18% in 1990.<sup>8</sup> In 1918, there were 110,926 Muslims and only 61,052 non-Muslims (mostly Christians) in Cotabato Province, a ratio of nearly two Muslims to one Christian. By 1970, the ratio was completely reversed: 711,430 non-Muslims and 424,577 Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Since then, Cotabato has been split into five provinces. Christians constitute the majority in four, and Muslims, only in one—Maguindanao.

Over the past half-century, the Muslims in Mindanao have also felt greatly disaffected by the inability of the government to adequately meet the basic needs of their community or at least bring them to the same level of socioeco-

---

5. See Michael E. Brown, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 4–5, 28–31.

6. Cesar Adib Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines* (Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan Press, 1985), pp. 29–31.

7. Macapado A. Muslim and Rufa Cagoco-Guiam, “Mindanao: Land of Promise,” *Accord*, no. 6 (1999), p. 13.

8. Rudy Rodil, “The Tri-People Relationship and the Peace Process in Mindanao” (lecture delivered at Inahan sa Kinabuhay Diocesan College Seminary, Iligan City, the Philippines, March 1998), available on the World Wide Web at <<http://mindanao.com/kalinaw/dev/tri-people.htm>> [accessed January 31, 2001].

9. Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement*, p. 31.

conomic development as the Christian majority. Muslim areas are among the Philippines's most backward. Two predominantly Muslim provinces, Sulu and Maguindanao, are the two poorest in the entire country, and the three other predominantly Muslim ones—Basilan, Lanao del Sur, and Tawi-Tawi—are also listed among the 12 poorest.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the Muslims in Mindanao have chafed under "the perennial discrimination against [them] in many levels of the national life as well as the misrepresentation or distortion of their true image as a historic people."<sup>11</sup>

In the late 1960s, in a prelude to the current armed conflict, Mindanao Muslims became particularly restive following the exposé of the Jabidah Incident of March 17, 1968, in which at least 28 Muslim trainees of the Philippine Army, reportedly recruited to infiltrate the Malaysian state of Sabah, were slaughtered by their superiors on Corregidor Island. In the wake of the Jabidah massacre, Datu Udtog Matalam, a powerful Muslim political leader, established the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM). Young MIM militants were sent to Malaysia for military training. Tensions in Mindanao grew; disputes over land heated up. Christian politicians identified with landed and logging interests formed paramilitary units and bands of goons; traditional Muslim politicians did the same.

Then the guns barked. The erstwhile Christian paramilitary groups, known in general as the "Ilagas," and their ostensibly Muslim counterparts—the "Blackshirts" and "Barracudas"—attacked and terrorized Muslim and Christian communities, respectively, killing mostly innocent civilians. As the violence escalated, many Muslims increasingly felt that the government and its armed forces were actually colluding with the "Christian" warlord-politicians. One particular incident that so enraged the Muslims was the massacre of June 19, 1971, when Ilagas attacked Manili, a barrio in Carmen, North Cotabato, that had been put under Philippine constabulary control, shooting down or hacking to death at least 70 Muslims, mostly old men, women, and children, the majority of them inside a mosque.

In September 1972, President Marcos imposed martial law, citing Muslim secessionists as one of the two biggest threats to national security. All hell broke loose in the Muslim areas. The MNLF, set up in 1969 by young Muslim militants led by former University of the Philippines lecturer Nur Misuari, took to the fore of the Muslims' armed struggle for self-determination. It appropriated for the Muslim people the very epithet by which they had been branded in the past, a name that had evoked contempt but also fear among their enemies: Moro. In 1974, the MNLF issued a manifesto con-

---

10. "The MNLF and 'Poor' Mindanao," *ibid.*, June 25, 1996.

11. Muslim Leaders in the Philippines, "Muslim Leaders' Consensus of Unity," *ibid.*, July 21, 1971.

demning the “genocidal campaign” of “Filipino colonialism” against the “Bangsamoro people” and declaring their renunciation of the Philippine government and the establishment of the “Bangsamoro Republik.”<sup>12</sup> The area of secession covered the islands and island groups of Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu (including Tawi-Tawi), and Palawan.

Upon the mediation of the OIC, the Philippine government and the MNLF signed the Tripoli Agreement in December 1976 in which the two sides agreed to end their armed conflict and establish autonomy for Muslims in the Southern Philippines comprising 13 provinces<sup>13</sup> (including all cities therein). Not long after, unable to see eye to eye with the Marcos government on how to interpret and implement the agreement, the MNLF reverted to a secessionist stance. Misuari signed another peace agreement with Marcos’s successor, Corazon Aquino—the Jeddah Accord of 1987—but talks to work out the details floundered once again. The 1996 agreement forged by Misuari with the Ramos government was the third GRP-MNLF peace agreement. All three peace pacts promised genuine regional autonomy for the Muslims in Mindanao, but few Muslims appear to be satisfied with the actual results on the ground.

Other Moro rebel groups have carried on the fight for secession but with a difference—they want to set up an independent *Islamic* state, not a secular one. They claim it is this for which the MNLF is fighting. The MILF, which developed from a group that broke away from the MNLF in 1977, waged armed struggle initially for the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement (i.e., regional autonomy). About seven years ago, however, the MILF shifted to a secessionist stance, calling for a separate Islamic state for predominantly Muslim areas in Mindanao. Ever since its inception in 1991, the Abu Sayyaf has advocated for the establishment of an independent Islamic state encompassing the original area of secession declared by the MNLF.

## Options for Muslim or Moro Self-Governance

The historical as well as contemporary grievances of the Muslims in Mindanao (or Moros) have led them to raise many and various demands. These include demands for (1) greater political rights (e.g., self-governance, redress of violations of human rights, and greater participation or representation in political decision-making); (2) greater economic rights (e.g., recovery

---

12. Moro National Liberation Front, “Manifesto on the Establishment of the Bangsamoro Republik,” March 18, 1974, in Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement*, pp. 117-19. *Bangsa* means “nation.”

13. The area supposed to be covered by the Tripoli Agreement now consists of 15 provinces, as two new provinces (Sarangani and Zamboanga Sibugay) have been created from parts of two of the original 13 (South Cotabato and Zamboanga del Sur).

and protection of ancestral lands, a larger share of public funds, and greater access to quality education and to jobs); and (3) social and cultural rights (e.g., protection from attacks by paramilitary groups and vigilantes, freedom of religious beliefs and practice; and rectification of historical distortions and misrepresentations of the Muslim people).

Of all these demands, it is that of self-governance—secession, regional autonomy, or federalism—that has proven to be the most contentious. In relation to the other demands, it is also the most crucial. If the secession of the Muslims or Moros becomes a reality, the issues of greater political access, greater economic rights, and social and cultural rights would become moot and academic. In addressing the demand for self-governance of the Muslims in Mindanao, therefore, the question is which of the three territorial methods of self-governance offers the best prospects for attaining a just, comprehensive, and stable peace in Mindanao?

### *Secession*

The principle of national self-determination is a principle recognized in international law, a principle enshrined in the U.N. Charter no less. All over the world, ethnic communities that have been victims of oppression and have a highly developed sense of identity have claimed for themselves the right of self-determination.<sup>14</sup> In the name of the oppressed “Bangsamoro people,” the Moro rebel groups—MNLF, MILF, and the Abu Sayyaf—have invoked such a right and, at one time or another, called for secession.

The problem with secession, however, is that neither international law nor international practice allows for an unqualified right for any ethnic or national group to secede from an existing state. As a matter of fact, the principles of territorial sovereignty and self-determination are contradictory ones in international law. Furthermore, the demand for secession has often been highly threatening to the dominant community because it challenges the majority’s own nationalist ideology. Thus, moves toward secession have led to many grinding and devastating conflicts, including some of the most deadly wars of the past century.<sup>15</sup> A major study of ethnonationalist movements that fought wars of secession in the post-World War II period up to 1992 has shown how protracted and costly such conflicts can be, some lasting for over 20 years. Of the 30 movements studied, not a single one achieved indepen-

---

14. Stephen Ryan, *Ethnic Conflict and International Relations*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot, U.K.: Dartmouth Publishing, 1995), p. 54.

15. Connie Peck, *The United Nations as a Dispute Settlement System* (The Hague: Kluwer, 1996), pp. 76–77.

dence (prior to 1991, at least); 14 attained some form of regional autonomy, but only after incurring substantial losses.<sup>16</sup>

The toll in human suffering in the protracted, 30-year armed conflict in Mindanao has been tremendous. Around 120,000 people have thus far been killed, more than 1,000,000 rendered homeless, and over 200,000 Muslim refugees have fled to Sabah.<sup>17</sup> It has also led to enormous destruction of property and infrastructural damage as well as immeasurable lost opportunities for trade, investment, and economic development in general.

Still another problem with secession is that ethnic communities are often so geographically mixed that it is impossible to demarcate clean boundary lines, and pockets of each ethnic community are left on the wrong side of the border.<sup>18</sup> Those living in such pockets often face serious risks, especially in the aftermath of particularly bloody and bitter conflicts. In large-scale exchanges of populations, those on the move are highly vulnerable. If predominantly Muslim areas in Mindanao were to secede, what would happen to Muslims in the predominantly Christian South Cotabato Province and Christians in the predominantly Muslim Maguindanao Province?

Both parties in the Mindanao conflict have to carefully weigh the pros and cons of continuing the war. The Philippine government has to consider whether allowing the discontented Muslims in Mindanao to secede is preferable to a seemingly endless and costly war. On the other hand, the Moro rebel groups have to weigh the uncertain prospects of victory against the terrible toll on their own people, if not on the Christians and *lumad* as well.

### *Regional Autonomy*

Billed as the final agreement on the implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, the GRP-MNLF compact of 1996 provided for the establishment of a regional autonomous government. It called for a transitional period of a few years before the setting up of a new autonomous region; there would then be a plebiscite in which the people in the provinces and cities supposed to be covered by autonomy under the Tripoli Agreement would vote on whether they would want to be part of the new region. During the transitional phase, the MNLF would be given the chance to run transitional as well as regular structures of autonomy, prove itself in governance, and thus improve the chances of convincing the people in most if not all of the provinces and cities concerned to vote in favor of autonomy.

---

16. Ted Robert Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993), pp. 294–97.

17. Muslim and Cagoco-Guam, “Mindanao: Land of Promise,” p. 16.

18. Peck, *The United Nations*, p. 77.

Early last year, even before the escalation of the war between the government and the Moro rebels, Canadian scholar Jacques Bertrand already described the 1996 peace agreement as “fragile.” He cited several reasons why it might be failing:

First, the transitional structures of autonomy have failed to provide a good test for future autonomous institutions because of mismanagement and corruption. Nur Misuari and the MNLF leadership failed to show that their control of autonomous institutions could benefit all Muslims and non-Muslims in a new autonomous region. Second, and partly as a result of the first reason, these structures received little support from groups other than the MNLF because of the mainly Tausug base of the MNLF and the failure to involve non-Muslims of Mindanao in the peace negotiations. As a result, the current autonomy proposal is not perceived to be an adequate solution for all groups, including non-Tausug Muslims supporting the rival Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Third, the agreement did not address the issue of land rights, which is crucial to any long-term peace in Mindanao. Fourth, the peace accord has not produced many of its expected benefits. Most significantly, it has not yet led to an improvement in the living standards of Muslims. While MNLF leaders can be blamed in part, a lack of strong commitment and resources from the Philippine government is also responsible.<sup>19</sup>

There is no denying that the 1996 agreement has succeeded in putting an end to the armed hostilities between the government and the MNLF. With respect to its larger objectives, however, the accord is not merely failing: it is already a failure. The accord was supposed to attract and win over the Moro rebels still fighting for secession and their supporters, politically isolate the “extremist” elements, and lead the way to a comprehensive and stable peace. Now, the rebels are back in the battlefield and the extremists have had a field day kidnapping as well as recruiting. During the last year of Estrada’s shortened term, the government and the MNLF still went through the motions of deliberating on what was tentatively named the Muslim Autonomous Region in Mindanao (MARM) to replace the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), but for most Muslims this no longer has any charm. It may still be possible to work out a viable regional autonomy for the Muslims or Moros in Mindanao, but this probably can no longer be simply within the framework of the 1996 agreement, which, among other flaws, excluded or lacked the substantial involvement of other Moro rebel groups and other Muslim ethnic groups, as well as of non-Muslims (Christians and *lumad*).

---

19. Jacques Bertrand, “Peace and Conflict in the Southern Philippines: Why the 1996 Peace Agreement Is Fragile,” *Pacific Affairs* 73:1 (Spring 2000), p. 37.

*Federalism*

In the past few years, federalism as a territorial method of addressing, among other things, the Muslims' demand for self-governance has gained increasing support. Among those advocating for a federal system for the Philippines are some multisectoral coalitions like Kusog Mindanaw and Lihuk Pideral-Mindanao, a number of senators and congressmembers, and some scholars, both Christian and Muslim. The push for federalism initially came about not really as a response to the Mindanao conflict but as a reaction to the overly Manila-centered workings of government in general. Many of federalism's early advocates were those coming from the provinces who felt that their efforts to bring about development in their respective areas were handicapped by Manila-based bureaucrats who were biased in favor of "imperial Manila." With the worsening of the armed conflict in Mindanao, Senator Aquilino Pimentel, Jr., has argued that "the adoption of the federal form of government would enable the Bangsamoro [people] a fuller opportunity to promote their own identity and culture and their own economic development at their own pace without the need of seceding or declaring their independence from the republic."<sup>20</sup>

The idea of a federal system for the Philippines is not something new. It dates back to 1899 when Apolinario Mabini and Emilio Aguinaldo proposed a federal state composed of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, the three main island groupings of the Philippines. The contemporary version that appears to have gained the most credence envisages the re-constitution of the Philippines not just into three states but into as many as 10—four in Luzon, three in the Visayas, and three in Mindanao, one of which would be a Bangsamoro state. Nine of the 10 states would be predominantly Catholic and one predominantly Muslim. Such a division would be similar in a sense to the Canadian federal model, except that what primarily distinguishes the two main ethnic communities in Canada is language and not religion. Canada has 12 relatively equal-sized provinces and territories, 11 of which are predominantly English-speaking, and one, French-speaking (Quebec).

Samuel K. Tan, a professor of history at the University of the Philippines, who is a Tausug, believes that for the Muslim community to achieve genuine self-rule still within Philippine sovereignty, "[i]t must be something where the Christian majority has no more say or influence in Muslim affairs except ceremonial and nominal requirements of symbolic sovereignty." The federal system should be seriously considered, he says, as this "liberates the Philippine government and the Christian majority from the psychological and real

---

20. Aquilino Pimentel, Jr., "Federalizing the Republic: The Ultimate Basis for a Just and Lasting Peace in Central and Southern Mindanao" (paper presented in a forum organized by the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, August 2000).

burden of a people who no longer want to be called Filipinos but Bangsamoro with a government, territory and Islamic institutions of their own.”<sup>21</sup>

The advocates of federalism have been campaigning hard lately, but it appears that they will have to drum up much more support in Luzon and Visayas, and also to get the Moro rebel forces to consider federalism more seriously. Since Marcos’s time, so much has been talked and written about various models and schemes of regional autonomy, none of which have worked, that many Muslims are getting tired of hearing about it. Perhaps they may be somewhat more open to federalism. A major obstacle to the adoption of federalism, however, is that it would require the revision of the Philippine Constitution. In the past six years, both Presidents Ramos and Estrada tried to have the Constitution amended purportedly for political and economic reforms, but after encountering stiff opposition they were forced to abandon their attempts. Many Filipinos are too wary of vested interests using or manipulating charter change to perpetuate themselves in power.

*Accommodating the Idea of an Islamic State or System*

Some advocates of regional autonomy and federalism believe it may be possible to convince a movement like the MILF, which is more Islamic than nationalist, to drop its demand for an independent state if it can be assured that a truly Islamic system can be established in areas where Moros predominate. At the start of GRP-MILF negotiations, the MILF had expressed the hope that the negotiations would find a solution to the Bangsamoro problem, with the end in view of establishing a system of life and governance suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro people.

According to lawyer-scholar Soliman Santos, an Islamic system can be worked out in a Moro autonomous region or in a Moro state within a bigger federal Philippine state. Santos has put forward the concept of “one country, two systems,” with the secular system and the Islamic system peacefully co-existing in one country. The concept is patterned after the China-Hong Kong model, except that the latter consists of a coexistence of a socialist system and a capitalist system.<sup>22</sup> One drawback to introducing the concept of an Islamic system is that, like federalism, it will have to overcome the hurdle of constitutional revision, for the Philippine Constitution expressly provides for the separation of church (or institutional religion) and state.

---

21. Samuel K. Tan, “Understanding the Mindanao Conflict: Mindanao at the Crossroad” (paper presented in a symposium organized by the Cotabato City Peace and Development Forum, Cotabato City, July 2000).

22. Soliman M. Santos, Jr., “Constitutional Accommodation of a Moro Islamic System in the Philippines” (L.L.M. thesis, University of Melbourne, September 1999).

## The Entrapping Process of Conflict Escalation

For almost a year now, the Philippine government, asserting national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the Moro separatist rebels, invoking self-determination, have again been at war. To be sure, there has never really been any let-up in armed hostilities between government troops and the Abu Sayyaf since the surfacing of the rebel group, which the government has branded as “criminals” and “bandits” and treated as a “police matter.” What many Filipinos—Christian, Muslim, and indigenous people alike—find most regrettable and alarming is the resumption of the armed conflict with the much bigger rebel force, the MILF, which had been negotiating with the government and already agreed to a cease-fire for some time.

Contrary to the Estrada’s government’s rosy projections, the armed conflict in Mindanao has not turned out to be a war of rapid conclusion. Far from getting any nearer to conflict resolution, what in fact has started to happen is that the government, the Moro rebel forces, and the Christian and Muslim communities in Mindanao are being sucked once more into what social scientists engaged in conflict and peace studies refer to as the entrapping process of conflict escalation. Not so long ago—in the 1970s—Mindanao experienced the trauma of this entrapping process. By the 1990s, it seemed to have gotten out of the trap. Unfortunately, the lessons do not appear to have been fully learned.

Connie Peck, a U.N. expert on preventive diplomacy and peace making, explained this entrapping process:

- Social conflict often arises when basic human needs, such as the need for physical security and well-being, cultural recognition and participation, and distributive justice are repeatedly denied, threatened, or frustrated. Grievances and feelings of injustice accumulate, especially when one’s own community is perceived to be discriminated against.
- Historical grievances augment contemporary grievances; feelings of grievance and anger harden into enemy-image perceptions. Cultural reminders (stories, songs, art work, etc.) promote this belief system. When tensions heighten, propagandists reinforce the community’s politicized “history,” portraying one’s own group as heroic and demonizing the other side.
- A strong and pervasive zero-sum mind-set makes conflict more likely as the contending sides see the world in “winner-takes-all” terms, overlooking the possibility of a win-win or lose-lose result.
- Each side adopts a position, often without a careful assessment of the problem, and mounts arguments in favor of their own solution. Since defending a position makes one more committed to it, both parties become increasingly entrenched and inflexible.

- Each side tends to view the situation solely from its own perspective. It sees its own position as “right” and the other’s as “wrong” and believes in its own “good” intentions and the other’s “bad” intentions.
- To force the other side to yield, each side uses coercive tactics. The government resorts to military operations, states of emergency, death squads, arbitrary detention, etc.; rebel groups launch armed attacks, assassinations, kidnappings, and so on.
- Each side regards the other’s actions as provocations that must be punished.
- Reduced communication between the two sides increases enemy-image misperceptions. This is compounded by “groupthink,” the tendency for leaders to surround themselves with like-minded individuals who are not likely to challenge the beliefs of the rest of the group.
- The conflict grows in size and importance, as both gains and losses contribute to further aggression. Gains reinforce aggression by encouraging the belief that one might win one’s objective through continued struggle. Losses contribute to conflict escalation by increasing the sense of anger and injustice and consequently the desire to retaliate.<sup>23</sup>

For those who still doubt that Mindanao has been falling into the trap of conflict escalation, here is Archbishop Quevedo’s assessment of the situation:

[The reports that come out in the media], usually based on military reports, speak of wounded and killed MILF units, of MILF “stragglers” and “surrenderees,” of MILF attackers being driven off, of bombs allegedly set off by the MILF, etc. [These reports] do not tell the whole story of Mindanao. They do not tell of a cycle of action-retaliation by both groups, of civilian combatants on both sides getting involved in the war, of third parties possibly taking advantage of the situation, of the economic greed of some Christian groups as a fuel for violence against the *lumad*, of the fear and suspicions among many Moros that the war is being waged so that the land abandoned by evacuees could be used for plantation development, of the psychological warfare being waged by military spokespersons, of the fear and anxieties of Christian communities with [militiamen] and/or military detachments harassed almost every day by MILF fighters. There are so many other things that do not appear in the news.<sup>24</sup>

Last December, Fr. Peter Geremia, head of the Tribal Filipinos Apostolate of the Kidapawan Diocese, reported before a U.N. Development Program conference on displaced persons in Mindanao that the “virus of prejudice and fanaticism” was spreading among villages affected by “all-out war,” and that the “warring parties” were neither government soldiers nor MILF guerrillas but Moro, *lumad*, and Christian civilians. In Carmen town, North Cotabato alone, 43 civilians had been killed and 42 others wounded in eight massacres recorded from August 4 to December 8. Geremia said the killings showed that the conflict had developed into a fight among civilians and along ethnic

---

23. Peck, *The United Nations*, pp. 26–37, 48.

24. Arguillas, “Gov’t, MILF Urged to Set Ceasefire.”

affiliations. "Previously harmonious relations [among] Muslims, *lumad* and Christian populations are now broken or seriously damaged [and] mutual fear and hatred are prevalent in several communities," Geremia said. Imelda Abarquez, coordinator of Oxfam's Emergency Program in Central Mindanao, corroborated Geremia's findings, saying that initial feedback from Oxfam's field researchers indicated that the killings appeared to be "retaliatory attacks" carried out by relatives of victims.<sup>25</sup>

The capacity of the Moro rebels to carry on indefinitely with the struggle for secession should not be underestimated. For one thing, the aspiration for political independence remains very much alive, notwithstanding the MNLF's acceptance of regional autonomy. In fact, according to Tan, the desire for independence of the Muslim community in Mindanao has been growing ever larger. He cites the following factors for the hardening of the independence imperative of the Muslim struggle: the inability of the state to adequately or substantially meet the basic and ideal needs of the Muslim community; the trend on the part of the Muslim community to seek ultimate satisfaction of their aspirations from within their own societies and the Muslim world; the exploitation of the Mindanao conflict by external vested interests; and the failure of civil society, particularly the dominant Christian sector, to remove the lingering anti-Muslim bias in historical consciousness. Tan believes that in the ongoing military campaigns, the government may be able to defeat the Moro rebels out of sheer military superiority (land, air, and sea), but it will not be able to destroy their will to resist, a will clearly manifested in the struggles against Spanish and American colonial rule. The government, adds Tan, may win the war but lose permanently the enduring peace it seeks.<sup>26</sup>

Developments in ethnic conflicts in other parts of the globe may also encourage the Moro separatists to fight on. It is true that for over 40 years after World War II, few new states were created through ethnic secession.<sup>27</sup> In fact, out of the many protracted wars for secession fought by various ethnic communities between 1948 and 1991, only one new ethnic state, Bangladesh, emerged.<sup>28</sup> Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Ethiopia, however, "secession has become a growth-industry, the in-vogue method of ethnic conflict resolution."<sup>29</sup> In the light of the recent rash of new ethnic states, Moro rebels may come to believe that history is on their side. The

---

25. Jowel Canaday, "Ethnic Strife Sparks Killings in Mindanao, UNDP Told," *PDI*, December 21, 2000.

26. Tan, "Understanding the Mindanao Conflict."

27. Anthony D. Smith, "The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism" in Brown, *Ethnic Conflict*, p. 27.

28. Peck, *The United Nations*, p. 76.

29. John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 11.

MILF, in fact, has been particularly inspired by the struggle for independence of East Timor and has been calling for the holding of a U.N.-sponsored plebiscite similar to the one held in that soon-to-be-proclaimed state.

### For a More Integrative and Participative Negotiation Process

With all the violence of the past year in at least two regions of Mindanao, the Christian and Muslim communities are being brought to higher levels of hostility in the upward dynamic of conflict escalation. To prevent further conflict escalation and truly resolve the conflict, there is no alternative but to go back to the negotiating table. The conflict can only be truly resolved if the contending parties discuss the issues and roots of their conflict, find out each other's deepest interests, explore the various options, and come up with a mutually beneficial solution.

Peace talks again? Skeptics would point out, of course, that the government has conducted negotiations for political settlement with the MNLF and the MILF over the past 25 years, yet peace remains elusive. For a new process of peace negotiations to have better chances of success, the conduct of past negotiations as well as the content and actual implementation of past agreements will have to be examined. The flaws and weaknesses of past negotiations and agreements will have to be seriously addressed. Too often in the past, the government and the Moro rebel forces have treated peace negotiations as but a continuation of the power struggle by other means, in which each side engaged in tactics and ploys and maneuvers and counter maneuvers, as in a chess game, to compel the other side to give in to the other's demands or make concessions.<sup>30</sup> The Tripoli Agreement collapsed after Marcos maneuvered to have a plebiscite held in the already-agreed-upon areas of autonomy. The GRP-MILF power play on the thorny issue of the "acknowledgement" of the "MILF camps" appears to have been the precipitating factor in the resumption of armed hostilities between the two sides.<sup>31</sup>

After 1976, the government, the MNLF, and the MILF combined the power-based approach in conflict resolution with a rights-based approach in which the contending sides often referred to a common standard—the Tripoli Agreement—to show which side was in the right and which was in breach of the pact. But the rights-based approach did not get anywhere, as the two sides could not see eye-to-eye on the interpretation and method of implementation of the agreement.

---

30. Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Back to War in Mindanao: The Weaknesses of a Power-based Approach in Conflict Resolution," *Philippine Political Science Journal* 21:44 (2000), pp. 100–02.

31. *Idem.*, "The Thorny Issue of the MILF Camps," *PDI*, May 31–June 2, 2000.

In future talks, it might prove helpful for the protagonists in the Mindanao conflict to shift from a power-based method of conflict resolution (or a combination of power- and rights-based approaches) to an interest-based approach, an alternative conflict resolution approach that has become widely known and practiced in a number of settings. Interest-based negotiations are a farther development of the principled negotiations concept introduced in 1981 by Roger Fisher and William Ury of Harvard's Program on Negotiation. In an interest-based approach, the focus is not on the opposed positions of the contending parties but on the interests that lie behind these positions. The parties try to explore each others' interests—their needs, wants, fears, and concerns. "A close examination of the underlying interests will reveal the existence of many more interests that are shared and compatible than ones that are opposed."<sup>32</sup> With a better understanding of underlying interests, it is often possible to devise a solution that satisfies both parties' interests. Solutions resulting from this process are said to be "integrative," as they integrate or bridge the contending parties' interests.<sup>33</sup> In a 1988 study, Ury, together with Jeanne Brett and Stephen Goldberg, ascertained that a power-based approach is the most costly and the least rewarding (in terms of satisfaction with result) of the three general approaches to disputes; an interest-based approach, the most cost-effective; and a rights-based approach, in between the other two.<sup>34</sup> (For Peck's summary of Ury et al.'s findings, see Table 1).

The three general approaches to disputes are often related, with the focus shifting from interests to rights to power and back again in the course of resolving a dispute. A former member of the Philippine government panel has revealed that during the GRP-MNLF negotiations in 1991–96, the two sides did in effect shift from a power-based to an interest-based approach. "After two years of talking," narrates Rudy Rodil, "the relationship between the two panels graduated into the 'dropping' of debates in favor of 'cooperative' negotiation. There was no dual decision to do that; it's just the way it happened. The shift in the mode was very evident. More points of agreement were reached this way. From October 1993 to September 1996, there was never any employment of the power-based approach."<sup>35</sup> Obviously, Estrada's all-out war marked a return to a power-based approach.

---

32. Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 43.

33. Peck, *The United Nations*, pp. 38–40.

34. See William Ury, Jeanne Brett, and Stephen Goldberg, *Getting Disputes Resolved: Designing Systems to Cut the Costs of Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988). For the application of the interest-based approach in various conflict situations, see William Ury, *Getting to Peace: Transforming Conflict at Home, at Work, and in the World* (New York: Viking, 1999) (later republished as *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop*).

35. Rudy Rodil, letter to author, December 17, 2000.

TABLE 1 *The Three Approaches in Conflict Resolution*

	<i>Power-based Approach</i>	<i>Rights-based Approach</i>	<i>Interest-based Approach</i>
Description of approach	<p>Disputing parties try to determine who is most powerful through a power contest.</p> <p>War is the most obvious and extreme version of this approach, but less intense forms are also common.</p> <p>In negotiations using this approach, parties engage in "hard bargaining": Each side adopts and justifies hard-line positions and tries to convince the other to make concessions through various tactics and ploys, or to outmaneuver the other.</p>	<p>Disputing parties try to determine who is right according to some standard (e.g., international law). Each presents arguments or evidence to prove that the other has violated some agreed-upon rule, such as a treaty, convention, or accepted custom.</p>	<p>Disputing parties attempt to reconcile their underlying interests by discovering solutions that will bridge their different needs, aspirations, fears, or concerns in a manner that is satisfactory to both.</p>
Cost-effectivity	Least cost-effective.	In between the two other approaches.	Most cost-effective.
Cost	This consumes more time, energy, and money than other approaches. When a power contest escalates, it often leads to enormous destruction of resources (through deaths, injury, property or infrastructural damage) and lost opportunities (for trade, etc.).	<p>Less costly than power-based approach.</p> <p>More costly than interest-based approach.</p>	Because it attempts to address and meet the parties' underlying interests and to achieve a satisfactory outcome for all concerned, it is unlikely to lead to the destruction of resources.
Effectivity	In a power contest, losing party is often dissatisfied with the outcome. The conflict appears solved but is only temporarily settled. Unaddressed grievances and dissatisfaction can make the resolution unstable and result in a recurrence of the conflict once the losing side has regained sufficient strength to renew the struggle.	While one party may be judged to be "in the right" and therefore to have its position upheld, the other is left with its interest unaddressed. As well, the adversarial nature of a rights contest inevitably strains the relationship, although not as seriously as in a power contest.	Because the goal is to meet all parties' interest, disputants are more likely to be satisfied with the outcome. Use of such a problem-solving approach thus minimizes damage to the long-term relationship. Since the parties' concerns will have been addressed, the conflict is less likely to recur and the resolution will be more stable.

SOURCE: Connie Peck, *The United Nations as a Dispute Settlement System* (The Hague: Kluwer, 1996), pp. 10–12.

The question of the non-inclusion of important actors in the Mindanao conflict will also have to be addressed in future talks. In Bertrand's view, as mentioned earlier, one of the flaws in the negotiation process leading up to the 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreement was the failure to involve non-Muslims in the peace talks. Before the signing of the accord, observed Bertrand, Christians and *lumad* voiced strong opposition as they feared inclusion in a region ruled by Muslims. Direct participation of non-Muslim groups in the actual talks would perhaps not have been wise, as this would have made the talks more complicated and unwieldy. Nonetheless, to ensure greater participation and support from Christians and *lumad* in the peace process in the years ahead, the so-called "tri-people approach" being advocated by a broad range of Mindanao non-governmental organizations and popular organizations should be seriously considered. The tri-people approach, which seeks to promote among the three peoples of Mindanao (Christians, Muslims, and *lumad*), greater awareness of each other and deeper unity in diversity, would be effective in building peace outside the framework of formal negotiations.

Perhaps a more real flaw in the negotiation process leading to the 1996 agreement was the exclusion of the MILF. Instead of holding talks with a joint MNLF-MILF side or negotiating with the MNLF and the MILF separately but simultaneously, Ramos chose to negotiate and forge an agreement with the MNLF first and with the MILF later.<sup>36</sup> After the 1996 accord was signed, the government hoped to entice the MILF with reforms and incentives "added on" to the agreement.<sup>37</sup> But the agreement was purely between the government and the MNLF; there was no place in it for the MILF and its largely non-Tausug base. Had the government and the MILF panels gone deeper into the substantive issues of the Moro problem, they would have run into a brick wall: the 1996 agreement. It would have been futile to talk about a separate Moro state: a Moro state within a bigger federal state or an autonomous Moro region in which the MILF would play a role would have largely overlapped with or practically been the same as that covered by the 1996 agreement.<sup>38</sup> Even if the MILF had opened up to the idea of regional autonomy, it would have rejected the "add-on" formula as something tantamount to being offered crumbs. As for the Abu Sayyaf, it has excluded itself from the peace process by persisting in committing abominable acts contrary to the principles of the international humanitarian law of armed conflict. The group

---

36. According to Rodil, the MNLF refused to agree to having a joint MNLF-MILF negotiating panel or to having simultaneous GRP-MNLF and GRP-MILF negotiations. *Ibid.*

37. Defense Undersecretary Orlando Soriano, interview by author, Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City, September 23, 1999.

38. Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Three-Cornered Diplomatic Battle at OIC: GRP, MNLF, MILF," *Human Rights Forum*, August 2000, p. 35.

will be politically isolated and marginalized in the event of a comprehensive political settlement resulting from serious peace negotiations.

The participation of the OIC in future peace negotiations of the government with the MNLF, MILF, and any other Moro rebel group is unavoidable. Having brokered the 1976 and 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreements, the OIC is legally and morally bound to uphold them and any change would require its acquiescence. If the government and the MILF were to forge an agreement (e.g., self-rule in Moro areas) without MNLF and OIC participation, the government would be violating these two internationally recognized agreements. Despite the apparent failures of the two agreements, the OIC can still play a positive third-party role in the peaceful resolution of the long-standing Moro problem. It remains highly respected by all the contending parties. But it would have some untangling to do. It would have to deal with the different Moro rebel groups more evenhandedly and stop holding on to the myth of the MNLF being the sole legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro people.

All-out war and *jihad* will not lead to peace but only to more war. The attainment of a just, comprehensive, and stable peace in Mindanao does not lie in the continuation of the present war but in a more integrative and participative negotiation process, one that employs an interest-based approach rather than the usual power play and one that involves not just the government and one Moro rebel group but also other Moro rebels willing to negotiate and all ethnic communities and groups concerned.