

EVOLUTION OF THE ARMED CONFLICT ON THE MORO FRONT

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A Background paper submitted to the
Human Development Network Foundation, Inc.
for the Philippine Human Development Report 2005

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I. Introduction

The armed conflict on the Moro front, i.e. between the Philippine government and the main Moro armed groups (successively and/or concurrently the Moro National Liberation Front, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and the Abu Sayyaf) has been going on for over 35 years now counting from the signal year 1968. The evolution of this conflict cannot of course but be seen historically, and this is only appropriate considering the historical roots and contemporary causes of the conflict. Its evolution can also be further seen in terms of key themes and changes in: Moro standard bearer, main demand or aspiration, main policy responses, forms of struggle, and features of the armed conflict. In the process, we cover the international influences and other factors affecting the ups and downs of the conflict as well as the efforts to solve it. What this review seeks to add to existing related literature on such history and themes is an attempt to examine the evolution from a human security and development frame, especially personal, community and political security.

The conflict might be viewed as a *clash between two imagined nations or nationalisms*, Filipino and Moro, each with their own narratives of the conflict. This has even had its connections with the so-called “clash of civilizations” between the West and Islam, in this case between Christian-Western civilization and Muslim Malay civilization. For the Moro liberation fronts, this was a conscious struggle to regain the lost centuries-old historical sovereignty of the independent Moro nation-states called sultanates over their old homeland in much of the Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan (Minsupala) islands. For the Philippine government and nation-state of the 20th Century, this has been a matter of defending the territorial integrity of the country against secession and dismemberment among the three main island regions of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao (Luzviminda), enshrined no less as the three stars in the Philippine flag. This has made the conflict a veritable case of “irresistible forces, immovable objects.”²

II. Some History and the Root Causes of the Conflict

The contemporary armed conflict on the Moro front is the sharpest expression of the *Moro or Bangsamoro problem*. This problem is the historical and systematic marginalization and minoritization of the Islamized ethno-linguistic groups, collectively called Moros, in their own homeland in the Mindanao islands, first by colonial powers Spain from the 16th to the 19th Century, then the U.S. during the first half of the 20th Century, and more recently by successor Philippine governments dominated by an elite with a Christian-Western orientation since formal independence in 1946. This marked full-fledged Filipino nation-statehood but ironically Philippine independence also sealed the loss of Moro independence because Moroland was incorporated (Moro nationalists would say annexed) into Philippine territory.

The Philippine state and republic is itself a successor to and bears the mark of two colonial regimes, Spanish and then American. These two colonial regimes had to successively contend with small but fiercely independent sovereign nation-states in the form of sultanates of the main Moro ethno-linguistic tribes (no imagined Moro nation or *Bangsamoro* yet). These tribes were Islamized after the arrival of Islam in Sulu in the last quarter of the 13th Century. The Sulu sultanate was established in 1451. Spanish colonization of the Philippines commenced more than a century later in 1565. The Maguindanao sultanate was established in the second decade of the 17th Century. The Spanish colonial period was marked by the bitter Spanish-Moro wars (the so-called “Moro Wars”) which were fought in six stages spanning the 16th to the 19th Centuries.³ The Spanish colonialists called the Muslim natives

² Peter G. Gowing and Robert D. McAmis, “Introduction: Irresistible Forces, Immovable Objects” in Peter G. Gowing and Robert D. McAmis, *The Muslim Filipinos* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1974) vii.

³ See Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 199 ed.).

“Moros” after their hated enemy, the “Moors” who had previously ruled Spain for eight centuries. The Moro people remained free of Spain but not free of the Christianized *indio* (Filipino) prejudice against Moros which was deliberately fostered by the Spaniards through such cultural institutions as the “moro-moro” plays.

Spanish rule ended and American rule began in the Philippines with the Treaty of Paris of 1898 whereby Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States after the old empire lost a war with the new empire. After a period of seemingly benevolent peace in the far south while U.S. colonial forces were occupied with the Filipino-American War in the north, U.S. military pacification of the Moros began in 1903 with the organization of the Moro Province, a military government distinct from that for the rest of the Philippines. It was the Americans who were finally able by force of arms to unite Christian and Muslim Filipinos under a single government and sovereignty by 1913. At that time, an American colonial official in charge of Moro affairs defined the Moro problem as the question of “method or form of administration by which the Moros... can be governed to their best interest... for their gradual advancement in culture and civilization, so that in the course of a reasonable time they can be admitted into the general government of the Philippine islands as qualified members of a republican national organization.”⁴ One might say that the post-colonial Philippine government’s definition of the Moro problem remains essentially the same, including in its corresponding policy solution of national integration.

The Moro problem is the cutting edge of the *broader Mindanao problem* of relationships *among* the three main peoples there (the majority Christian settlers/migrants and their descendants, the Moros or Muslims, and the indigenous highlander tribes or Lumads), and *with* the central Philippine government. The problem thus has both horizontal (people-to-people) and vertical (people-to-government) dimensions. Though we are more concerned here with the vertical conflict between the Philippine government and the main Moro rebel groups, the even longer-standing horizontal conflict between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao will also be touched.

A Filipino Muslim academic has summed up quite succinctly the historical roots and contemporary causes of the Moro problem.⁵ First, he points to **ten foundational causes** from 1898 to 1972: (1) Forcible/illegal annexation of Moroland to the Philippines under the Treaty of Paris in 1898; (2) Military pacification; (3) Imposition of confiscatory land laws; (4) Indioization (or Filipinization) of public administration in Moroland and the destruction of traditional political institutions; (5) Government-financed/induced land settlement and migration to Moroland; (6) Land grabbing/conflicts; (7) Cultural inroads against the Moros; (8) Jabidah Massacre in 1968 (during the first Marcos administration); (9) Ilaga (Christian vigilante) and military atrocities in 1970-72 (during the second Marcos administration); and (10) Government neglect and inaction to Moro protests and grievances.

On the basis of the said foundational causes, the **six key elements** of the Moro problem are: (1) Economic marginalization and destitution; (2) Political domination and inferiorization; (3) Physical insecurity; (4) Threatened Moro and Islamic identity; (5) Perception that government is the principal party to blame; and (6) Perception of hopelessness under the present set-up. And the triggering event of the contemporary Moro armed struggle was President Ferdinand E. Marcos’ declaration of martial law on 21 September 1972.

⁴ Najeeb M. Saleeby, *The Moro Problem: An Academic Discussion of the History and Solution of the Problem of the Government of the Moros of the Philippine Islands* (Manila: Press of E.C. McCollough and Co., 1913), reprinted in *Dansalan Quarterly*, Vol. V No. 1, pp. 7, 23, published by the Gowing Memorial Research Center.

⁵ See Macapado Abaton Muslim, *The Moro Armed Struggle in the Philippines: The Nonviolent Autonomy Alternative* (Marawi City, Philippines: Office of the President and College of Public Affairs, Mindanao State University, 1994) 52-133.

An Indian Scholar who studied the revolt in Mindanao once said, “The theories that run the gamut from religion to misgovernment were relevant only in so far as they were all pieces of an enormously complex jigsaw. To pick any one of them as the outstanding cause of the upheaval would be a hindrance to understanding the total picture.”⁶ In other words, the Moro problem has to be seen holistically. It is not only multi-dimensional but also evolving, with different dimensions coming to the fore at different times.

III. Periodization of the Contemporary Conflict

The contemporary armed conflict on the Moro front may be periodized as follows, based on qualitative changes in the situation, key issues, decisions and developments:

1. Formative Years (1968-72)
2. Early Martial Law and Moro War of Liberation (1972-75)
3. First Peace Negotiations and Tripoli Agreement (1975-77)
4. Rest of the Marcos Regime (1977-86)
5. Aquino Administration (1986-92)
6. Ramos Administration (1992-98)
7. Estrada Administration (1998-2001)
8. Arroyo Administration (2001-Present)

Presidential administrations are natural periods for the Moro conflict because of the differences in administration policy or approaches towards the Moro problem and the Moro liberation fronts. But there are also key developments, decisions or issues within one administration which mark the beginning or end of particular periods. This is especially so for the 20-year long (1965-85) Marcos presidency. In terms of milestones in the Moro conflict, this presidency was marked by the 1968 Jabidah massacre, the 1972 declaration of martial law, the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and the 1986 end of the Marcos dictatorship. It was the martial law dictatorship and the consequent dominance of the military and of military solutions which was the main feature of the Marcos years.

The Aquino administration which took over from that of Marcos was essentially preoccupied with the restoration of pre-martial law elite democracy and with defending this against several military coup attempts. With the situation more or less stabilized, the Ramos administration prioritized an economic development program to bring the Philippines to newly-industrialized country status by year 2000 (“Philippines 2000”).

By the time of the short-lived Estrada administration and continuing into the potentially ten-year Arroyo administration, **three tracks have emerged, parallel to each other though sometimes converging, which now constitute the current form of evolution of the Moro conflict:** (1) implementation of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement; (2) GRP-MILF peace negotiations; and (3) Post-9/11 Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism on the Moro Front.

But before discussing this current form of evolution, it would be instructive to discuss **certain themes in the evolution of the contemporary Moro conflict which cut across the various periods from the formative years to the current years.** Among these are: Moro standard bearer, main demand or aspiration, main policy responses, forms of struggle, and features of the armed conflict. In the

⁶ T.J.S. George, *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980) 11-12.

process, also discussed are international influences and other factors affecting the ups and downs of the conflict as well as the efforts to solve it - and an attempt to examine these from a human security and development frame.

IV. Moro Standard Bearer

The main standard bearer of the contemporary Moro armed struggle, at least from 1972 to 1996, has been the *Moro National Liberation Front* (MNLF). The MNLF was founded by its long-time Chairman *Nur Misuari* as an instrument for the **liberation of the Moro nation** “from the terror, oppression and tyranny of Filipino colonialism” and “to secure a free and independent state for the Bangsa Moro people.”⁷ It led the armed resistance in Mindanao against the Marcos martial law regime starting 1972. Through armed struggle, Islamic diplomacy and peace negotiations, the MNLF was the main vehicle for placing the Moro cause on the national and international agenda. This cause was articulated by Misuari as one “waged primarily in defense of the *Bangsa* (nation), the homeland, and Islam.”⁸ The MNLF’s early and lasting contribution was to make the name “Moro” respectable and the basis of a common identity and consciousness as a nation of the 13 disparate ethno-linguistic groups of Muslims in their historical homeland of Minsupala. In practice, the MNLF tended to project the nationalist (national self-determination) and territorial (homeland) dimension more than the Islamic one.

The MNLF is recognized as “the sole legitimate representative of Muslims in Southern Philippines (Bangsamoro people)” by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) where it has observer status. It is the signatory party to the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and 1996 Jakarta Accord achieved under the auspices of the OIC to address, if not solve, “the Question of Muslims in Southern Philippines.” Following the Jakarta Accord, the MNLF (first through Prof. Nur Misuari, then through Dr. Parouk S. Hussin) has been at the helm of the regional government of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) which is also the Philippine constitutional entity to address the Bangsamoro problem.

But the failure of negotiations on the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement in 1977 led to some frustration, differences of opinion, and an eventual split in the MNLF. With the collapse of the talks, Misuari wanted to revert to armed struggle for independence, thereby setting aside the Tripoli Agreement, while his Vice-Chairman *Salamat Hashim* was for exhausting the peace process for autonomy under the Tripoli Agreement. The MILF and the MNLF have therefore from time to time alternated their positions on political strategy (armed struggle vs. peace negotiations) and objectives (independence vs. autonomy). In the current conjuncture, the MILF (and possibly the MNLF Misuari group) represents the independence track for the Moros, while the MNLF (the officially recognized entity) represents the autonomy track.

A group led by Hashim broke away from the main group of Misuari in September-December 1977, initially calling itself the “New MNLF Leadership” (eventually the *Moro Islamic Liberation Front* in 1984). The split was based on differences not only in political strategy and objectives but also more fundamentally in ideological orientation (secular-nationalist vs. Islamic revivalist), leadership styles (centralized vs. consultative), and ethnic allegiances (Tausug vs. Maguindanao), reflecting the respective spheres of the historical Sulu and Maguindanao sultanates, respectively. There are Maranaos, the other

⁷ Hajji Nur Misuari, Chairman, Central Committee, Moro National Liberation Front, “The Manifesto of the Moro National Liberation Front: Establishment of the Bangsa Moro Republik,” Bangsa Moro Homeland, 28 April 1974, Appendix 3 of W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990) 189-90. This book is one of the best references on the Moro liberation struggle and the MNLF up to the 1980s.

⁸ Nur Misuari, “The Rise and Fall of Moro Statehood” in *Philippine Development Forum*, Vol. 6 No. 2, 1992, 1-41.

major Moro ethnic group, in the leaderships of both the MNLF and MILF although their area Lanao is proximate to the Maguindanao heartland of the MILF.⁹

The MILF emphasized “Islamic” in its name as its ideology and orientation (more precisely, radical Islamic revivalist)¹⁰ to distinguish itself from the secular-nationalist MNLF. This is also reflected in the educational backgrounds of their respective founding chairmen, Hashim at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo and Misuari at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City. Hashim belonged to the traditional (*datu*) and religious (*ulama*) elite, while Misuari was of the secular elite.¹¹ The *ulama* or Islamic scholars play a significant role in the leadership of the MILF but not in the MNLF. **This split would eventually shape the later course of the Mindanao conflict and peace process.** But it also indicated the weakness of fragmentation or factionalism among Moro groups and leaders, even on the rebel side.

The MILF is presently, at least since the advent of the Estrada administration in 1998, “the main standard bearer of Moro aspirations... its struggle is principally a nationalist and territorial one, although religion has certainly served as a rallying call and focal point of resistance to the central government.”¹² These Moro aspirations are stated otherwise in the “Declaration of the Second Bangsamoro People’s Consultative Assembly,” representing the MILF’s several million-strong base in Central Mindanao, in this way: “An **Islamic ideological paradigm** has become the framework of our vision to establish a new nation in fulfillment of the quest to reassert our right to self-determination and freedom.”¹³ The rise of the MILF comes with the unraveling of Misuari, the MNLF, the peace agreement implementation and the ARMM, as will be discussed later. The MILF has held fast so far after the demise of its long-time ideological and spiritual leader Hashim in 2003 though its Central Committee collective leadership is now under a more pragmatic and flexible Chairman from the secular elite, the long-time military leader and chief peace negotiator Al Haj Murad Ebrahim.

After splitting from the MNLF in 1977, the MILF continued to quietly build up its armed strength in Central Mindanao with a four-pronged program of Islamization, organizational strengthening, military build-up, and self-reliance. The MILF’s long-time main Camp Abubakar was firmly established by 1981, followed by at least seven more camps by 1985.¹⁴ And so, in March 1984, the MILF officially declared itself as a separate organization, representing Moro resistance against government coercion and cooptation.

⁹ For the Moro tribal dynamics, see Abdulsiddik A. Abbahil, “The Bangsa Moro: Their Self-Image and Inter-Group Ethnic Attitudes,” *Dansalan Quarterly*, Vol. V No. 4, 1984, pp. 197 et seq.

¹⁰ Among the main tenets or beliefs of Islamic revival are: (1) *Din wa Dawla* (religion and state) – no separation; *Qur’an wa Sunna* (the Holy Book and the way of the Prophet Muhammad) – return to these for authentic renewal; (3) Puritanism and Social Justice – as Islamic values and practices, rejecting Western cultural values and mores as alien to Islam; (4) *Hakimiyya* (Allah’s sovereignty) and *nizam al-Islam* (Islamic order or system) – where Shariah (Islamic law) is supreme and should replace Western law; (5) Jihad (holy war or inner struggle); and (6) Although Westernization is condemned, modernization as such is accepted but subordinated to Islamic beliefs and values.

¹¹ Che Man, *Muslim Separatism* 127-29.

¹² Andrew Tan, “The Indigenous Roots of Conflict in Southeast Asia: The Case of Mindanao” in Kumar Ramakrishna and See Seng Tan (eds.), *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2003) 112.

¹³ “Declaration of the Second Bangsamoro People’s Consultative Assembly” (2 June 2001, Simuay, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, Mindanao).

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, “Southern Philippines Backgrounder: Terrorism and the Peace Process” (Asia Report No. 80, ICG, Singapore/Brussels, 13 July 2004) 5, hereinafter referred to as ICG Report, citing Che Man, *Muslim Separatism* 93.

MNLF fragmentation continued in March-June 1982 with the emergence of the Maranao-based MNLF-Reformist Group (RG) led by Dimas Pundato. He and his associates were eventually coopted to join the government in the Office of Muslim Affairs (OMA) in 1985. After the breakdown of the Tripoli Agreement, the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO), still under the sway of Muslim politicians Rashid Lucman and Salipada Pendatun, reemerged and then vainly attempted to forge unity among the MNLF, MILF and MNLF-RG. The BMLO eventually died a natural death with the deaths of Lucman and Pendatun in 1984 and 1985, respectively. That marked the definitive passing away of the traditional Muslim elite leadership over the Moro struggle.

In fact, Bangsamoro generational change has been a critical variable in the whole Mindanao conflict and peace process, and “the upcoming generation will be the most influenced by the unfolding international tendencies in the Muslim world.”¹⁵ The *Abu Sayyaf* group was formed mainly by *Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani* in Western Mindanao in 1991 after returning from exposure to radical Islamism abroad and particularly the *jihad* against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They represent a younger and more radical Bangsamoro generation disgruntled with the MNLF leadership. They have wanted an independent Islamic state for the whole of Mindanao and use **extremist, terrorist methods** against Christian civilians – thus **antedating “9/11” by at least one decade**. How the Bangsamoro successor generation “relates to the existing configuration of MNLF, MILF, and Abu Sayyaf options, or whether it will develop new options of their own, is an unknown quantity of great importance.”¹⁶

V. Main Demand or Aspiration

The main demand or aspiration articulated or represented by the two Moro liberation fronts during the various periods from the formative years to the current years has alternated between independence and autonomy. Sometimes they would be articulated simultaneously by one front like the MNLF when it would up the ante, as it were, by raising the independence aspiration only actually as leverage to push for the implementation of an already agreed upon autonomy. Sometimes they would be articulated simultaneously by both fronts like in the current conjuncture where the MILF represents the independence track for the Moros, while the MNLF represents the autonomy track.

The *Jabidah massacre* of 18 March 1968, during which Moro trainees in guerrilla warfare, varying in reports from 28 to 64 in number, were massacred by their Philippine Army superiors on Corregidor Island at the mouth of Manila Bay after the trainees refused to be part of a planned invasion of Sabah in Malaysia, became the defining moment to mark the start of the contemporary Moro armed struggle. The MNLF reckons that date as its own foundation date even though it was actually founded in 1969, and celebrates it every year as Bangsamoro Freedom Day. It was rather the Muslim (later Mindanao) Independence Movement (MIM) which was organized on 1 May 1968 by Cotabato Governor Datu Udtog Matalam, thus **rekindling the spirit of independence** among the Moros but under the traditional Muslim elite. From hereon until the Tripoli Agreement of 1976, independence was the agenda of the new Moro movement. The MNLF reportedly began as an underground movement in the youth section of the MIM. The young Moro student activists and intellectuals eventually surpassed the traditional Muslim political leaders who were either coopted or intimidated by the Philippine government.

¹⁵ Dr. Paul Oquist, “Mindanao and Beyond: Competing Policies, Protracted Peace Process and Human Security” (Fifth Assessment Mission Report, Multi-Donor Programme for Peace and Development in Mindanao, UNDP Manila, Philippines, 23 October 2002).

¹⁶ Dr. Paul Oquist, “From National Security to Human Security in Mindanao: Protracted Armed Conflict in National and Regional Policy Perspectives” (Paper presented at the 27th General Assembly and Annual Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference for Human Development, Taguig, Metro Manila, 8 July 2003).

After four years of armed conflict starting 1972, then Islamic diplomacy and finally peace negotiations, the GRP and the MNLF eventually settled, with OIC mediation, on the *Tripoli Agreement* of 23 December 1976.¹⁷ This is the most significant juncture in the whole GRP-MNLF peace process because it **changed the dispute issue from independence to autonomy**.

The key factor in this change was the intervention and mediation of the OIC, particularly the crucial resolution at the 5th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in June 1974 which urged the Philippine government “to find a political and peaceful solution through negotiation with Muslim leaders, particularly with the representatives of the MNLF” but this was to be “within the framework of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippines.”¹⁸

The Tripoli Agreement became the main term of reference between the GRP and the MNLF for the next 20 years. It provided for the establishment of autonomy for the Muslims in the Southern Philippines within Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity. The areas of the autonomy were 13 provinces and all the cities and villagers therein but these would be subject to the plebiscitary consent of the people there. Foreign policy, national defense, and mines and mineral resources would be under the central government but nine substantive issues would be tabled for later discussion and would be detailed in a final agreement. There was agreed to be established a provisional government to be appointed by the President. The Philippine government was to take all necessary constitutional processes to implement the agreement.

But the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement was immediately problematic. For in March 1977, Marcos issued Proclamation No. 1628, creating two regional autonomous governments, thereby dividing into two groupings and reducing by three the 13 provinces under the Tripoli Agreement, and then subjecting this to a plebiscite in April. The MNLF rejected this new arrangement, leading into a break down in the peace talks, the ceasefire and the autonomy process. The MNLF’s continued armed struggle during the rest of the Marcos regime tended to project the cause of independence but this was tempered by the necessary diplomatic support from the OIC. **The trajectory was still to push for the Tripoli Agreement’s implementation.**

The eventual ouster of Marcos and assumption to office of the new President Corazon C. Aquino in 1986 opened a new situation which led to a ceasefire and resumption of peace negotiations. This resulted in the *Jeddah Accord* of 3 January 1987¹⁹ which actually deviated from the Tripoli Agreement by entertaining an MNLF proposal for the grant of full autonomy to Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan (23 provinces all in all) “subject to democratic processes.”

But this was overtaken in February 1987 by the ratification of the *1987 Philippine Constitution* with provisions for an **autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao** “within the framework of this Constitution and the national sovereignty as well as territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines.”²⁰ The government considered this as a constitutional process for the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement but the MNLF rejected it for having no part in its formulation and unsuccessfully

¹⁷ *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front with the Participation of the Quadripartite Ministerial Commission Members of the Islamic Conference and the Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference*, Tripoli, 23 December 1976. It was signed by GRP Defense Undersecretary Carmelo Z. Barbero, MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, Libyan Foreign Minister Dr. Ali Abdussalam Treki, and OIC Secretary General Dr. Ahmed Karim Gaye.

¹⁸ Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), 5th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 21-25 June 1974, Resolution No. 18, “Resolution on the Plight of the Filipino Muslims.”

¹⁹ *Joint Statement of the MNLF and the Philippine Government Panels*, OIC Headquarters, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, January 3, 1987. It was signed by MNLF Panel Chairman Nur Misuari and Philippine Government Panel Chairman Aquilino Pimentel, Jr., and witnessed by OIC Secretary General S.S. Pizada

²⁰ 1987 Philippine Constitution, Article X, Sections 15-21.

suggested the suspension of the plebiscite as far as the proposed constitutional provisions on autonomous regions were concerned. This had the most strategic and far-reaching consequences, for better or for worse, on the Mindanao peace and autonomy process because certain parameters for the autonomous region were now embedded in the fundamental law of the land.

The third and final episode (after the first under Marcos and the second under Aquino) of the GRP-MNLF peace negotiations under the Ramos administration²¹ resulted in the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement or *Jakarta Accord* of 2 September 1996.²² This was deemed as the **final and full implementation of the Tripoli Agreement** although this was actually deviated from. The formula agreed upon came from the GRP. It conceptualized a transitional implementing structure and mechanism in lieu of the MNLF-desired provisional government which the GRP could or would not accommodate. Phase 1 consisted mainly of a three-year extendible transitional Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD), under the Office of the President, to give the MNLF the necessary exposure and chance to prove itself over a now 14-province Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD), and thereby prepare the ground for a new autonomous region and government with presumably expanded powers and territory but subject to specified constitutional processes. These entities (SZOPAD and SPCPD) would be established by *Executive Order No. 371* in October 1996.

Then, there was to be Congressional action on a new organic act incorporating the Peace Agreement on the substance of the autonomy (to replace that of the existing ARMM) and then a plebiscite thereon to determine the final territory. The operation of the new Regional Autonomous Government would mark Phase 2 of the peace formula. In the meantime, in addition to this formula *inside* the Peace Agreement, *outside* it was the GRP offer accepted by the MNLF for a politico-electoral alliance with the Ramos ruling party which enabled the MNLF to gain control over the existing ARMM through elections with all-out administration support. Indeed, Misuari successfully ran unopposed for ARMM Regional Governor also in September 1996, barely a week after the Peace Agreement.

The latter agreement was found wanting by the MILF. They saw it not only as a deviation from the framework of the Tripoli Agreement. More importantly, they found it not to be the solution to the Bangsamoro problem. In elaborating on this single talking point for its peace talks with the GRP, the MILF said “Finding a *political* and lasting solution to this problem will form part of the agenda in the forthcoming formal talks between the GRP and the MILF panels, *with the end in view of establishing a system of life and governance suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro people.*”²³ (italics supplied) .” It is no secret that the **maximum objective of the MILF is an independent Islamic state** but this (nor any of those three words, for that matter) is not presented as its position in the talks (as the GRP would clearly not negotiate on this as a starting point). But the MILF would leave it to the Bangsamoro people as the final arbiter for acceptance of a suitable system or political solution.

²¹ See Fidel V. Ramos, *Break Not the Peace: The Story of the GRP-MNLF Peace Negotiations, 1992-1996* (Philippines: Friends of Steady Eddie, 1996) from the perspective of the Philippine President; Abraham S. Iribani, *GRP-MNLF Peace Talks, 1992-1996: Issues and Challenges* (Master in National Security Administration thesis, National Defense College of the Philippines, 2000) from the perspective of the Chairman of the MNLF Secretariat for the peace talks; and Rodil, *Kalinaw Mindanaw* from the perspective of a Mindanao historian, peace advocate and GRP peace negotiating panel member.

²² *Peace Agreement: The Final Agreement on the Implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) with the Participation of the Organization of Islamic Conference Ministerial Committee of the Six and the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Conference*, Manila, 2 September 1996. It was signed by GRP Peace Panel Chairman Ambassador Manuel T. Yan, MNLF Chairman Professor Nur Misuari, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, and OIC Secretary-General Dr. Hamid Al-Gabid.

²³ MILF Technical Committee on Agenda Setting, “Agenda” (25 February 1997).

It is also no secret that the GRP's parameters for any solution to the Bangsamoro problem are the Philippine Constitution, including specific provisions for an autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao, and the paramount considerations of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, national security and constitutional processes. These considerations have guided its main policy responses.

VI. Main Policy Responses

The main policy response of the Marcos regime to Moro unrest, particularly the MIM, in the early 1970s has been *Proclamation No. 1081* of **martial law**²⁴ in September 1972. This in turn brought out the MNLF in open rebellion which was then subjected to **military campaigns** with practically no holds barred under martial law. The ensuing armed conflict and its human costs could no longer be ignored by the OIC which then intervened diplomatically by 1973, backed up by petroleum pressure. This and the military stalemate in 1975 compelled the GRP to negotiate with the MNLF. In line with standard government dual strategy of **coercion and cooptation**,²⁵ there was the familiar tactic of **divide-and-rule** over Moro rebel groups and their leaders.

The government's right hand effort of a military counter-offensive had to be complemented by its left hand effort of a **Reconstruction and Development (RAD) Program in Muslim Mindanao** launched also in 1973. Although ostensibly the usual government strategy which called for a pacification campaign, rehabilitation and reconstruction, and development, the RAD program was the function of a new concept of national integration, a deliberate attempt to build a nationalist consciousness (of a nation with a single people and not several peoples) among both Muslims and Christians as Filipinos since the program depended on the cooperation of both. The development task was envisioned to involve particularly the human dimension, including a change in outlook and perception, one transcending individual and family interests as well as regional and religious differences, concentrating on the good of all.²⁶

But it didn't quite turn out that way. One factor was the "purge" from government of its prime mover Executive Secretary Alejandro Melchor in 1975. An American scholar noted, however, that: "Some of the projects resulting from that era remain, but few have been effectively or consistently administered: a Shariah law code and court system, attention to madrasah schools, barter trade, the Amanah bank, haj administration, aid funds. For both practical and symbolic reasons, these are important to Muslims wherever they live..."²⁷

With OIC-sanctioned parameters "within the framework of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippines," the GRP and the MNLF eventually arrived at the Tripoli Agreement in 1976 on Muslim autonomy that was to be implemented by the GRP through its "constitutional processes." This however became the legal basis for **GRP unilateralism**, especially during the Marcos and Aquino administrations. For example, Marcos' proclamation creating two regional autonomous governments in

²⁴ See Ferdinand E. Marcos, President, Republic of the Philippines, Proclamation No. 1081, "Proclaiming a State of Martial Law in the Philippines," Manila, 21 September 1972.

²⁵ Miriam Coronel Ferrer, "The Philippine State and Moro Resistance: Dynamics of a Persistent Conflict" (Paper presented at the SEACSN [Southeast Asia Conflict Studies Network] Conference 2004 "Issues and Challenges for Peace and Conflict Resolution," Penang, Malaysia, 12-15 January 2004).

²⁶ Presidential Task Force on the Reconstruction and Development of Mindanao, *Reconstruction and Development Program: Muslim Mindanao*, Vol. I, 1973, i-iii; and Alejandro Melchor, "A Book and a New Nation" in Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999 ed.) xi-xii.

²⁷ Lela Garner Noble, "Muslim Politics and Policy During the Aquino Era" (manuscript, San Jose State University, August 1992) 17.

1977 represented a unilateral “implementation” of the agreement, lending credence to the observation that Marcos never sincerely intended to implement it as signed.²⁸

Another major example of GRP unilateralism was the ratification of the *1987 Philippine Constitution* with provisions for an **autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao** as the constitutional process for the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement although not in accordance with it. Early on, the Aquino administration had, even more than the Marcos regime, adopted a policy to de-internationalize the MNLF, avoid reference to the Tripoli Agreement and OIC mediation, and discourage negotiations to bide time for a new Congress to be elected and to enact an organic act for the autonomous region with the assistance and participation of a regional consultative commission in accordance with the new constitutional provisions.²⁹

Because the Aquino administration had to deal with a military establishment which was averse to peace with the Moro and communist rebel groups, it shifted to a new peace strategy called the **“multilateral consensus-building approach,”**³⁰ which downgraded bilateral negotiations with rebel groups. One form this took was the multi-sectoral Mindanao Regional Consultative Commission (MRCC) in March-September 1988 which was, however, subjected to meddling from the executive department in its task of drafting the organic act.³¹ In the end, many of its draft provisions were not adopted by Congress in the final *Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Republic Act No. 6734*, in August 1989.

In the ensuing plebiscite in November 1989, only four (Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi) out of the 13 provinces enumerated in the Tripoli Agreement voted to join the ARMM. The first elections for its regional officials were held in February 1990 and they took office in March 1990. There would be three successive regional administrations under this organic act. Traditional Muslim elite leaders and politicians would be at the helm of the ARMM until 1996 when the MNLF would be placed at its helm as part of a political settlement.

From the very start of his six-year term in 1992, President Fidel V. Ramos viewed a certain level of peace as essential to his economic development program to bring the Philippines to newly-industrialized country status. The new Ramos administration started off on the right policy foot by creating the National Unification Commission (NUC) in September 1992 and this body conducted nationwide consultations, especially at the provincial then the regional levels up to May 1993, which were the basis of its recommendations for a subsequent comprehensive peace process.³² The core of this was

²⁸Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1998) 168.

²⁹Based on confidential documents in the author’s possession, and as can be gleaned from *Aide Memoire on the Mindanao Peace Talks: Position of the Philippine Government Panel* (Manila: Peace and Development Panel for Mindanao and the Cordilleras, 1987) and *Peace Betrayed: MNLF-RP Negotiations, Jan. 1-July 25, 1987* (n.d.) for the MNLF perspective.

³⁰Prescillano D. Campado, *The MNLF-OIC Dyad and the Philippine Government’s Policy Response to the Moro Struggle for Self-Determination* (Ph.D. Philippine Studies dissertation, Asian Center, University of the Philippines, 1996) 180.

³¹See Taha M. Basman, Mama S. Lalanto and Nagsura T. Madale, *Autonomy for Muslim Mindanao: The RCC Untold Story* (Manila: B-lal Publishers, 1989).

³²See *NUC Report to Pres. Fidel V. Ramos on the Pursuit of a Comprehensive Peace Process* (Quezon City, 1 July 1003); Maria Lorenza Palm-Dalupan, “The Development of the Government’s Comprehensive Peace Program” in *The Media and Peace Reporting: Perspectives on Media and Peace Reportage* (Pasig City: Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, 2000) 12-60; and Miriam Coronel Ferrer, “Philippines National Unification Commission: national consultation and the ‘Six Paths to Peace,’” in *Accord Issue 13/2002* with the theme “Owning the process: Public participation in peacemaking.”

the “**Six Paths to Peace**”³³ framework eventually institutionalized through *Executive Order No. 125* in September 1993. The third path was “peaceful, negotiated settlement with the different rebel groups.”

By the time of the current years of the Estrada and Arroyo administrations, **three competing policy positions** had crystallized. In the analysis of Dr. Paul Oquist of UNDP, there has been the existence across the years of essentially three competing policy positions in Filipino society, in the governments, in the armed forces, and in civil society at the Bangsamoro, Mindanao and national levels. The “**pacification and demobilization**” position consists of negotiating concessions necessary to achieve the cessation of hostilities and demobilization of rebel combatants. The “**military victory**” position advocates the military defeat of the MILF and NPA, the political defeat or marginalization of the MNLF, and the extermination of the Abu Sayyaf and other terrorist and kidnap-for-ransom groups. The “**institutional peace-building**” position advocates the short, medium and long-term construction of policies and institutions for peace in the economic, social, political, cultural and ecological spheres through participatory and consultative mechanisms.³⁴

Sometimes these positions combine in different proportions, especially the first two positions. On paper, like President Arroyo’s *Executive Order No. 3* of February 2001 defining government policy for comprehensive peace efforts, it might look like an “institutional peace-building” position. But in practice or operation by the GRP peace negotiators and by the Cabinet Oversight Committee on Internal Security (COC-IS) under *Executive Order No. 21* of June 2001, it has been mainly the “pacification and demobilization” position and sometimes the “military victory” position.

As for the dynamic among the positions, Oquist noted that all three of the competing positions are in play in the Mindanao peace process and they all have significant sources of support in civil society and government, including the AFP. None of these actors and stakeholders, including the AFP and the MILF, are monolithic in relation to these positions.

The relative influence of these positions varies dynamically across time. The balance among the positions also makes possible drastic policy shifts. These shifts have occurred not only from one administration to another but also within one administration. Perhaps the best example of this in relation to the MILF front was the shift from the “**all-out war**” policy of President Estrada in 2000 to the “**all-out peace**” policy of President Arroyo in 2001 and then back again to an “all-out war” policy in 2002-03.³⁵ All told, there is no policy consensus, coherence and consistency. Thus, the “extreme protraction of peace process” - just about as protracted as the protracted people’s wars themselves.

³³ These are: (1) pursuit of social, economic and political reforms; (2) consensus-building and empowerment for peace; (3) peaceful, negotiated settlement with the different rebel groups; (4) programs for reconciliation, reintegration into mainstream society, and rehabilitation; (5) addressing concerns arising from the continuing armed hostilities; and (6) building and nurturing a climate conducive to peace.

³⁴ See Dr. Paul Oquist, “Mindanao and Beyond: Competing Policies, Protracted Peace Process and Human Security” (Fifth Assessment Mission Report, Multi-Donor Programme for Peace and Development in Mindanao, UNDP Manila, Philippines, 23 October 2002). See also along similar but more concise and updated lines, Dr. Paul Oquist, “From National Security to Human Security in Mindanao: Protracted Armed Conflict in National and Regional Policy Perspectives” (Paper presented at the 27th General Assembly and Annual Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference for Human Development, Taguig, Metro Manila, 8 July 2003). A major part of the analysis on the Philippines is a result of intensive work undertaken jointly with Alma R. Evangelista, UNDP Philippines Peace and Development Advisor.

³⁵ See Soliman M. Santos, Jr., “All-Out War, All-Out Resistance, All-Out Peace: War of Words,” *Philippines Free Press*, December 28, 2002, pp. 20-21.

VII. Forms of Struggle and Features of the Armed Conflict

During the formative years of the Moro conflict, the armed conflict took the form mainly of depredations by and skirmishes between Christian vigilantes called “Ilagas” and Muslim vigilante called “Barracudas” and “Blackshirts.” The series of “Iлага” and military atrocities against Muslims in Mindanao, mostly in the provinces of Cotabato and Lanao, in 1970-71, also caught international attention and concern in the Muslim world, especially when reported as acts of genocide.³⁶ The most publicized was the Manili massacre in June 1971, during which 70 Muslim women, children and old men were killed by Ilagas inside a mosque in barrio Manili, Carmen, North Cotabato. One particular BBC radio broadcast on the Manili massacre caught the attention of Libyan leader Colonel Muammar al Ghadaffi which started him off in his personal interest in the question of Muslims in Southern Philippines.³⁷ By March 1972, the OIC first took official notice of that question in a resolution at the 3rd ICFM in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where it expressed “serious concerns for the plight of Moslems living in the Philippines.”³⁸ There was no mention of the MNLF.

The MNLF later became the main vehicle for placing the Moro cause on the national and international agenda by waging **armed struggle, Islamic diplomacy and peace negotiations**. It was basically these **three forms of struggle which would alternate in primacy during the various periods of the Moro conflict**. The same basic forms of struggle would also be used by the MILF during its turn as main Moro standard bearer.

It would take President Marcos’ proclamation of martial law in September 1972 to bring out the MNLF in open rebellion. An early thrust of martial law was the collection and confiscation of firearms from civilians, especially in Muslim areas. This could only spark Muslim resistance. Exactly a month after martial law was declared, some MNLF Maranao forces, without the official go-ahead signal of the Central Committee, led an attack on government forces in Marawi City in Lanao del Sur but it caught attention as the so-called Marawi Uprising. The “**Moro war of liberation**” officially began in Misuari’s Tausug heartland, Jolo island, in November 1972. The Jolo offensive was followed by another in the Maguindanao heartland of Cotabato in Central Mindanao in February 1973.

This prompted President Marcos to create the Central Mindanao Command (CEMCOM) of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to counter this MNLF offensive.³⁹ The fighting that ensued was considered the **most serious threat to the security of the state** (“we nearly lost Mindanao”), with the MNLF displaying all the earmarks of a military operation by an organized army, giving residents of Cotabato City a taste of war on their front steps. But even that was a picnic compared to the battle of Jolo where another major MNLF assault was made in February 1974, leading to the bloodiest battle between the MNLF and the AFP.

The Jolo and Cotabato battles were just the milestones among many battles in the “New Moro War.” The AFP mounted counter-offensives with a series of major military operations, from “Operation

³⁶ A documented yet still incomplete list of incidents is found in Salah Jubair, *Bangsamoro: A Nation Under Endless Tyranny* (Kuala Lumpur: IQ Marin SDN BHD, 3rd ed., 1999) 138-39. This book is a historical account from the MILF perspective.

³⁷ McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels* 155, citing Cesar Adib Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985).

³⁸ OIC, 3rd ICFM, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 29 February-4 March 1972, Resolution No. 12, “Resolution on the Situation of Moslems in the Philippines.”

³⁹ See Fortunato U. Abat, *The Day We Nearly Lost Mindanao: The CEMCOM Story* (San Juan, Metro Manila: Fortunato U. Abat FCA, Inc., 1993).

Sibalo” to “Operation Bagsik.”⁴⁰ The **mainly conventional and positional war** in 1973-74 saw the bloodiest fighting in the Philippines since World War II. It reached its peak and a stalemate in 1975. The veritable civil war also occasioned the worst human rights and international humanitarian law violations by both sides.

There were various estimates of the costs of the MNLF-AFP war up to that point. According to Dr. Inamullah Khan, secretary-general of the World Muslim Congress, the following were the estimated human costs between 1969 and 1976 by main area:

<u>Area</u>	<u>Dead</u>	<u>Wounded</u>	<u>Displaced</u>
Cotabato	20,000	8,000	100,000
Lanao	10,000	20,000	70,000
Sulu, Tawi-Tawi	10,000	8,000	100,000
Zamboanga	10,000	10,000	40,000
Basilan	<u>10,000</u>	<u>8,000</u>	<u>40,000</u>
TOTAL	60,000	54,000	350,000

Loss of property was estimated to have been between P300 million and P500 million.⁴¹ These areas of armed conflict have since then never really recovered in terms of human security and human development because of the persistence of the conflict, even if of lower-intensity.

The OIC could no longer ignore taking more action about this situation. In March 1973, the 4th ICFM in Benghazi, Libya tasked a Quadripartite Ministerial Commission (composed of Libya as chair, Saudi Arabia, Senegal and Somalia) to discuss the problem with the Philippine government.⁴² And in June 1974 came the crucial resolution at the 5th ICFM in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia which first officially mentioned the MNLF in the context of urging the Philippine government to enter into peace negotiations with it. These developments clinched the **OIC’s international influence and mediation role** in the conflict and peace process between the GRP and the MNLF as “the sole and legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro people.”

These developments also signaled a **new arena of struggle which we call Islamic diplomacy** where the OIC itself was the object of a diplomatic contest between the GRP and MNLF. In fact, **after the 5th ICFM resolution in 1974, the contest was more diplomatic than military.** Fighting had tapered off by 1975 and more so with the ceasefire in 1977. By the late 1970s, **war tactics shifted to lower-intensity guerrilla and counter-guerrilla mode.** Even before the OIC official involvement, the MNLF was already approaching leaders of Muslim countries for support.⁴³ It was only later when the Philippine government would play catch-up, deploying its Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA)⁴⁴ – perhaps the best evidence of the internationalization of the conflict.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 16, “Campaign Against the Muslim Secessionists” in Cesar P. Pobre, *History of the Armed Forces of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2000) 510-59.

⁴¹ Che Man, *Muslim Separatism* 114, citing Inamullah Khan, “The Situation in the Philippines” (typescript, 1979); Parouk Hussin, “The Marcos Regime Campaign of Genocide” in Komite ng Sambayanang Pilipino, *Philippines: Repression and Resistance* (Utrecht, The Netherlands: Komite ng Sambayanang Pilipino, 1981) 257-60; and Felipe B. Miranda, “The Military” in R.J. May and Francisco Nemenzo (eds.), *The Philippines After Marcos* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

⁴² OIC, 4th ICFM, Benghazi, Libya, 24-26 March 1973, Resolution No. 4, “The Problem of Moslems in the Philippines.”

⁴³ Interview (written answers) with Abraham L. Iribani, MNLF Peace Talks Secretariat Chairman, Special Emissary and Spokesman during the 1992-96 peace talks on 25 December 1998 in Manila.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Julkipli M. Wadi, “The Philippines and the Islamic World” in Aileen San Pablo-Baviera and Lydia N. Yu-Jose (eds.), *Philippine External Relations: A Centennial Vista* (Pasay City: Foreign Service Institute, 1998) 65.

Islamic diplomatic (and petroleum) pressure and the military stalemate led to **peace negotiations between the GRP and the MNLF, another arena of contention or form of struggle**. There have been **three episodes** of the GRP-MNLF peace negotiations corresponding to three successive Philippine presidents: Marcos, Aquino and Ramos. In between negotiations, there was a “no war, no peace” situation, with occasional resumption of hostilities, especially under Marcos, notwithstanding ceasefire agreements during each episode. While there were no negotiations, the conflict would be played out in the diplomatic circuit and to a lesser extent in the military field. OIC resolutions would almost perfunctorily call for further negotiations on and implementation of the Tripoli Agreement

Peace negotiations under Marcos were held from 1975 to 1977 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and Tripoli, Libya. Peace negotiations under Aquino were held in 1986 and 1987 in Jolo, Sulu (where she met with Misuari), Jeddah, and in several places in the Philippines. Peace negotiations under Ramos were held from 1992 to 1996, with exploratory talks in Tripoli and Ciplanas, Indonesia, four rounds of formal talks in Jakarta, and nine Mixed Committee meetings mainly in the Southern Philippines.

The short-lived 1977 ceasefire arising from the Tripoli Agreement validated the military stalemate situation. Hostilities would resume with the breakdown in the post-Tripoli talks. Though no longer as intense as the pre-1975 period and progressively lessening, there were still particularly bloody episodes. Among these were the Patikul massacre of Brig. Gen. Teodulfo Bautista and his men in October 1977 and the Pata incident in February 1981 which followed the familiar pattern of massacre and counter-massacre which left 2,000 civilian casualties.

The February 1986 EDSA “People Power” Revolution opened a new situation for questions of war and peace between the Philippine government and the two Moro liberation fronts. This was dramatically illustrated by the protocol-breaking meeting between the new President Aquino and MNLF Chairman Misuari in his homeground of Jolo in September 1986. They agreed on a ceasefire and to restart peace negotiations which resulted in the Jeddah Accord of January 1987 which deviated from the Tripoli Agreement.

Soon thereafter, the MILF launched a five-day tactical offensive (the “MILF 5-Day War”) also in January 1987 “to convey the message that it was not a pushover organization, but a power to reckon with.” Immediately, a truce was agreed upon between MILF military chief Al Haj Murad Ebrahim and National Affairs Minister Aquilino Pimentel, Jr. The next day President Aquino met briefly with Murad and MILF senior officer Mohagher Iqbal in Cotabato City.⁴⁵ The MILF had definitely arrived, as it were.

Towards the end of the term of the Aquino administration, the Abu Sayyaf group was formed mainly by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani in Western Mindanao in 1991 after returning from exposure to radical Islamism abroad and particularly the *jihad* against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He represented a younger and more radical Tausug (in Sulu) and Yakan (in Basilan) generation disgruntled with the MNLF leadership of the Moro struggle typified by Misuari. The original or early Abu Sayyaf was fighting for an independent Islamic state for the whole of Mindanao and went about this using extremist methods like acts of terrorism against Christian civilian targets. Thus, **terrorism in the Philippines antedated “9/11” by at least one decade.**⁴⁶

At the conclusion of the 1996 GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement, GRP Peace Panel Vice-Chairman Rep. Eduardo R. Ermita disclosed that “Over a period of 26 years since 1970, more than 100,000 persons were killed in the conflict in Southern Philippines... The AFP has spent about P73 billion in connection

⁴⁵ Jubair, *Bangsamoro* 186-87, 194-95.

⁴⁶ See Mark Turner, “Terrorism and Secession in the Southern Philippines: The Rise of the Abu Sayyaf” in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 17 No. 1, June 1995, pp. 1-19.

with the Mindanao conflict since 1970... Sixty-one percent of our Army and Marine battalions... more than 40 percent of our artillery capability and 50 percent of our armor assets... 63 percent of our tactical aircraft [were committed to the Mindanao conflict]...⁴⁷

Perhaps this also explains why the Ramos administration pursued peace talks with the MILF even as it had just clinched the final peace agreement with the MNLF. And so, a GRP-MILF exploratory meeting was held in August 1996, low-level negotiations started in January 1997 and a general ceasefire agreement signed in July 1997. But a **pattern of recurrent hostilities** also started such as in Buldon in January 1997 and in Rajamuda in June 1997.

Midway through the Ramos administration, the Abu Sayyaf and the Islamic Command Council (ICC) breakaway group from the MNLF made their presence felt most strongly thus far when they raided Ipil town in the Zamboanga peninsula in April 1995, resulting in more than 50 killed, the looting of all banks and the burning of almost all buildings in the town center.⁴⁸

We now discuss the **three tracks which constitute the current form of evolution of the armed conflict on the Moro front**: (1) implementation of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement; (2) GRP-MILF peace negotiations; and (3) Post-9/11 Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism on the Moro Front.

VIII. Implementation of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement (1996-Present)

This might be referred to simply as the “**MNLF track**.” It represents a **Moro stream of integration into the Philippine political and economic mainstream**. Although the established autonomy for the Muslims in the Southern Philippines is a limited one, still there are gains for the Bangsamoro people from the final peace agreement and its implementation. These are gains in terms of recognition, representation, participation, access and power sharing. The MNLF has consciously adopted the path of “Liberation through Peace and Development,” away from armed struggle. It has basically demobilized from combatant mode but has not disarmed, an arrangement that has been mutually acceptable to both sides. With MNLF integration of up to 5,750 fighters into the AFP and up to 1,500 fighters into the Philippine National Police (PNP), or a total of 7,250 integrees, at least half of whatever force strength it had, one can say that the MNLF has been substantially defanged. Not completely though because some fighters, much arms and a mass base still remain. The MNLF counts some 80,000 ex-combatants.

For two successive terms from 1996 to the present, the MNLF has been at the helm of the regional government of the ARMM. Some MNLF leaders have also successfully run for local government positions but not yet successfully for national positions. Invariably, they have found out that it is harder to run a government than to rebel against it. For some time, they were also at the helm of special regional development bodies like the SPCPD and the Southern Philippines Development Authority (SPDA) until these were abolished. At the ground level, there are MNLF mass base communities which have become “peace and development communities” benefiting from livelihood, cooperative and other projects with main funding support from international and foreign development agencies and organizations.

⁴⁷ Jubair, *Bangsamoro* 162-63, citing it as quoted in the speech of Sen. Alberto G. Romulo, Senate Majority Floor Leader, delivered on August 26, 1996 and published in the September 7, 1996 issue of the *Manila Bulletin*.

⁴⁸ Marites Danguilan Vitug & Glenda Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, and Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000) 192-93.

On the other hand, the MNLF feels that the peace process with them, particularly Phase 1, is being concluded by the GRP unilaterally without completely and satisfactorily implementing the important socio-economic development requirements of the process, including a verbal commitment to a so-called “Mini-Marshall Plan” for the SZOPAD. The MNLF blames the government for not having, generating or providing the resources for this component, in the face of the economic needs of its ex-combatants, not to mention the non-MNLF poor in their areas. As for Phase 2, which was signaled by the *New Organic Act for the ARMM, Republic Act No. 9054*, to start with, the MNLF sees this as violating or not including aspects of the peace agreement, one particular aspect of contention being strategic minerals. They view the new, expanded ARMM (Basilan province and Marawi City added) as too weak to address even the basic human development needs like health and education of ARMM’s five of the six poorest provinces in the country. All told, there is a general perception in the MNLF of its being marginalized from participation in the peace process, with some leaders who feel they are being cut off or undercut by the government for some reason.⁴⁹

This was of course most exemplified in the case of Misuari who revolted because he was being eased out of his positions of authority in the ARMM and MNLF. This and the frustrations about the (non-)implementation of the peace agreement were at the backdrop of the outbreak of hostilities between Misuari and government forces in Sulu and Zamboanga in November 2001 and again in Sulu in February 2005. The latter hostilities was complicated by Abu Sayyaf forces reportedly fighting alongside Misuari forces, and Valentine’s Day terrorist bombings in three big cities elsewhere claimed by the Abu Sayyaf.

The government considered Misuari to have become a liability to the ARMM and the implementation of the peace agreement because of his failed leadership. But from his perspective, it is the government which has in effect “abandoned” or “abrogated” the peace agreement unilaterally by implementing it “without the MNLF.” He has started to view the peace agreement,⁵⁰ even with its gains, as a “betrayal” or a “chain” from which the MNLF may be better off “unchained” – to pursue a “new phase” of the “struggle for independence” but preferably in a “peaceful, democratic way” where he “need not be in the forefront anymore.” This brings him closer to the MILF position. But like before, he would “wait for the last final word” of the OIC, because “we cannot afford to be isolated from the Islamic world.”⁵¹

The MNLF is now split into four factions where one of the dividing issues is Misuari’s leadership, the two main factions being the Misuari group and the anti-Misuari “Council of 15.” An MNLF unity process is, however, underway with support from Libya. Because of the MNLF split and leadership crisis, there has arisen in the OIC the question of representation of the MNLF as observer there. Parallel to this, the Philippine government has made a bid to replace the MNLF as observer on the basis mainly of the elected ARMM government representing the Muslims in Mindanao. The sense in the OIC seems to be to close the chapter in due time on the GRP-MNLF peace agreement implementation.

⁴⁹ Interview with Hatimil E. Hassan, new Chairman of the MNLF, on 6 October 2004 in Cotabato City; MNLF Maj. Gen. Abdul Sahrin, Message to the Bangsamoro National People’s Congress, 23 December 2003, Davao City, reprinted in *The Bangsamoro Parsugpatan*, Vol. 2 No. 1, March 2004, pp. 30, 21; and Dr. Paul Oquist, “Mindanao and Beyond: Competing Policies, Protracted Peace Process and Human Security” (23 October 2002) 23.

⁵⁰ See also Kenneth E. Bauzon, “The Philippines: The 1996 Peace Agreement for the Southern Philippines: An Assessment,” *Ethnic Studies Report*, Vol. XVII No. 2, July 1999. This critical assessment concluded “that while the Agreement conceded little by the GRP, it traps Misuari and the MNLF apparatus into a corner where it has compromised their ability to demand greater autonomy than that spelled out in the Agreement, much less ask for independence or return to the battlefield.”

⁵¹ This paragraph is mostly based on an interview with Prof. Nur Misuari, long-time MNLF Chairman, on 20 February 2002 in Sta. Rosa, Laguna, Philippines.

The MNLF has also, perhaps fatally, neglected to maintain or recreate itself as an organization, whether as a politico-military liberation organization or as “a political party and/or civil society movement and/or cooperative movement and/or business group, and preferably all of the above.”⁵² The pacification scenario for the MNLF seems to have come to pass: concessions, cooptation, divide-and-rule, demobilization, and worse, political defeat or marginalization through its own mismanagement of the ARMM. It may almost be said that they won the war (by stalemating the AFP) but lost the peace.

The February 2005 hostilities in Sulu involving the MNLF Misuari group is, however, like a wake-up call for this group which is now more clearly the real mainstream, not breakaway, of the MNLF with its biggest armed force. Since in their perception the government is “destroying” the Peace Agreement, then “we are back to being MNLF.”⁵³ This should also be a wake-up call for the government. Contrary to the government’s notions of the Sulu situation as “normalizing,” there is still a state of war there. For the government to treat what it calls the “Misuari Breakaway Group” (MBG) as “lawless elements” to be destroyed like the Abu Sayyaf is to miss the point, at its own peril, about the real MNLF mainstream which may finally reject the moderate track of the Peace Agreement in favor of a more radical independence track now bannered by the MILF.⁵⁴

A Filipino Muslim scholar has astutely described the complementarity of the two Moro liberation fronts this way: “The MNLF and the MILF are separated ideologically, they are like security guards with shifting schedules. When one takes a nap, the other takes over.”⁵⁵ For the most part since 1996, the MNLF has taken a nap (but recently woken up), the MILF has taken over.

IX. GRP-MILF Peace Negotiations (1997-Present)

This might be referred to simply as the “*MILF Track*.” With the unraveling of Misuari, the MNLF, the peace agreement implementation and the ARMM, the MILF has emerged as the main standard bearer of Moro aspirations. The maximum long-term aspiration is an independent Islamic state for the optimum practice of Islam as a way of life and governance in predominantly Muslim areas, and which is seen as the ultimate solution to the Bangsamoro problem of Philippine colonialism. The MILF **tendency is to exit or separate/secede from the Philippine system rather than to access or share power in it.**

This brings the MILF into frontal conflict with the GRP. Aside from the constitutional challenge it represents, the MILF is also a formidable military challenge. Though presently considered only second to the communist-led NPA as a threat to national security, the MILF has a force strength estimated at more than 12,000 concentrated in Central Mindanao (compared to just under 12,000 for the NPA dispersed nationwide). And this force strength has remained basically intact after being subjected to two major AFP offensives within three years time, the “all-out war” of 2000 and the “Buliok offensive” of 2003. Before the “all-out war,” the MILF had 13 major fixed camps and 33 secondary ones on which basis it was oriented to semi-conventional warfare, including positional warfare with the AFP, producing some of its weapons, notably rocket-propelled grenades (which the NPA does not have) for use against AFP armored vehicles. The MILF has since shifted to more mobile guerrilla mode with base commands still using field camps more remote or hidden unlike before.

⁵² Oquist, “Mindanao and Beyond” 21.

⁵³ MGen. Khaid O. Ajibon, State Chairman, Lupa Sug State Revolutionary Committee, MNLF, interview by the Sulu Peace and Solidarity Mission of the Mindanao Peaceweavers on 28 March 2005 in Indanan, Sulu.

⁵⁴ These were among the key findings of the Sulu Peace and Solidarity Mission conducted by the Mindanao Peaceweavers on 27-30 March 2005.

⁵⁵ Julkipli M. Wadi, “Radical Islamic movements complicate Moro struggle,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 14 February 1999, p. 10.

While holding on to its guns and the armed struggle option, however, it is clear that the MILF has made a **strategic (not just tactical like the NDF) decision to give the peace negotiations a chance**, even a maximum chance, to achieve a negotiated political settlement or solution to the Bangsamoro problem. The best evidence of this is its persistence in staying with the peace negotiations track despite what it considers two “treacherous” major AFP offensives against it while there were ongoing peace negotiations. It has also agreed to the general mode of a ceasefire accompanying the peace talks, in contrast to the communist-led NDF’s basic position of no ceasefire during peace talks until and unless there is a negotiated political settlement because an interim ceasefire could be disadvantageous in many ways to revolutionary forces. Unlike the NDF which adheres to an armed struggle primacy line, the MILF treats armed struggle and peace negotiations (“war by other means”) at par as forms of struggle.⁵⁶

Since 1997, the GRP-MILF peace negotiations have been held in two stages: a “domestic stage” from January 1997 to June 2000 and a “diplomatic stage” with Malaysian mediation from March 2001 to February 2003. The two suspensions, first from June 2000 to March 2001, and second from February 2003 to the present, were the direct results of the “all-out war” and “Buliok offensive,” respectively, which had both targeted the capture of MILF camps, which was the most contentious issue of the talks. And so the pattern of recurrent hostilities has continued although this appears to have been broken since the mutual ceasefire agreed in July 2003 (but marred by two firefights in January 2005) and will probably be consolidated with the support of both international and civil society mechanisms for ceasefire monitoring.

This security aspect is being complemented by a rehabilitation and development aspect with the MILF supposed to determine, lead and manage projects through its implementing NGO called the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), another bone of contention. The novel idea here is having a truce not only for negotiations but also for development, and for rehabilitation and development to go hand in hand with the negotiations. This is also supposed to create the right ground conditions by the time the talks come to discussion of contentious political issues.

There is some concern though about the talks falling into another pattern, that of protracted peace talks (seen also with the MNLF and NDF). Although the talks started early on with the presentation of the MILF agenda “to solve the Bangsamoro problem,” there has still been no negotiations on the substantive agenda, starting with ancestral domain, during this period of seven years so far. Itself already a complex, difficult, and contentious substantive issue (even only in the context of indigenous peoples rights), ancestral domain is made more so by its possible linkage to territorial (e.g. homeland) and governance (e.g. self-rule) aspects of the Bangsamoro problem. The ancestral domain aspect is not necessarily the last substantive agenda item for the peace talks but it could be close to that if discussed comprehensively to fast track a final peace agreement, as the GRP is inclined to.

Enhancing the nominally MNLF-led ARMM is the GRP’s preferred framework for a final peace agreement with the MILF based on power-sharing between the MNLF and MILF, their unity efforts being actually a parallel negotiation.⁵⁷ The question is whether this will satisfy the MILF avowed “end in view of establishing a system of life and governance suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro people,”⁵⁸ which notably does not explicitate an independent Islamic state. If a “political and lasting solution to this Bangsamoro problem”⁵⁹ can be found with “respect for the identity, culture and aspirations of all peoples

⁵⁶ Interview with Mohagher Iqbal, Chairman of the MILF Peace Panel, on 8 September 2004 in Pasig City.

⁵⁷ Interview with Sec. Norberto B. Gonzales, Presidential Adviser on Special Concerns, Office of the President of the Philippines, on 6 June 2002 in Manila.

⁵⁸ MILF Technical Committee on Agenda Setting, “Agenda” (25 February 1997).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

of Mindanao,”⁶⁰ then the GRP-MILF peace negotiations can not only complete the solution to the Bangsamoro problem, on top of the gains of the GRP-MNLF peace agreement, but also serve as a catalyst for the broader Mindanao peace process and even for the fight against terrorism in the Moro front. One of the bright spots and sources of hope for this process is the active and growing civil society-led movement for peace in Mindanao, sections of which have consciously adopted the human security framework.⁶¹ Hopefully, the emerging multiple international involvement – Malaysia, Libya, OIC, the U.S., the UN and other international organizations, some with a human security framework – will facilitate, rather than, complicate the crucial GRP-MILF peace process.

The alternative, as again highlighted recently by the “all-out war” and the “Buliok offensive,” are enormous costs of war, not only in human security and human development terms but also in economic and business terms.⁶²

X. Post-9/11 Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism on the Moro Front (2001-Present)

As we said, terrorism in the Philippines predated “9/11” by at least one decade through the Abu Sayyaf which prefers to be referred to as *Harakatul al-Islamiya* (Islamic Movement). In a sense, it represents a certain track, that of **local terrorism in relation to 9/11-type international terrorism**. After Janjalani’s death in 1998, the Abu Sayyaf degenerated from being a movement of young Moro rebels to banditry, with a confluence of Moro, outlaw and Islamic identities.⁶³ The group eventually achieved international prominence or notoriety when it perpetrated the Sipadan hostage-taking in April 2000 and then the Dos Palmas hostage-taking in May 2001 which featured the bold kidnappings for ransom of Westerners including Americans, beheadings of civilian hostages and a cross-border foray into Malaysia in the case of Sipadan.

There are now several factions of the group though the most recognized leader is Janjalani’s younger brother Khaddafy. A recent assessment by regional intelligence officials and terrorism experts, after the bombing of a SuperFerry passenger ship in February 2004, is that “Now, the group is returning to its Islamic roots and is using the familiar weapons of terror – bombing and assassination – in an

⁶⁰ *Agreement on the General Framework for the Resumption of Peace Talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front*, 24 March 2001, Kuala Lumpur, Article VII. This was signed by GRP Delegation Head Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Eduardo R. Ermita and MILF Delegation Head Vice-Chairman for Military Affairs Al-Hadji Murad Ebrahim.

⁶¹ See e.g. Howard Q. Dee, “The Human Security Framework of Tabang Mindanaw with the Bishops of Mindanao Working for Peace and Just Development of the Indigenous Peoples Communities and Relief and Rehabilitation of Evacuees” (Prepared for the Bishops Businessmen’s Annual Assembly, 8 July 2003).

⁶² See Miriam Coronel Ferrer, “War Costs and Peace Benefits: The Nexus of Peace and Development in Conflict Societies of Southeast Asia” (November 2002); Madelene Sta. Maria, “Manifestations of Conflict: The Socio-Economic Consequences of Conflict” (May 2004); Chapter 3: “Conflict and the economy” in Sylvia Concepcion, et al., *Breaking the links between economics and conflict in Mindanao* (London and Davao City: International Alert and Alternative Forum for Research in Mindanao, December 2003); Lualhati Abreu, “The Economic Dimension of War,” *Bantaaw*, Vol. 13 Nos. 5-6, 2000; Mindanao Business Council, “The Cost of War in Doing Business in Mindanao: A Rapid Appraisal” (March 18, 2003); Jacqueline Q. Borja, “Traversing the War Zone: The Costs of Militarization,” *Human Rights Agenda*, Vol. 9, Issue 3, May-June 2004, pp. 2-5; and Janet M. Arnado and Mary Ann M. Arnado, “Casualties of Globalization: Economic Interest, War, and Displacement along Ligawasan Marsh, Phjilippines” (Research under the Social Science Research Council’s Program on Global Security and Cooperation, 15 November 2004, Manila).

⁶³ Thus, the Abu Sayyaf “enigma” has been described in various ways like “quasi-rebel,” “quasi-bandit,” “social bandits,” “post-modern bandits” (e.g. with RayBan shades), and of course “international terrorists.”

attempt to achieve an independent Muslim republic in the southern Philippines. Abu Sayyaf already claims to be connected with al-Qaeda... National Security Adviser [Norberto] Gonzales describes Abu Sayyaf as ‘by far the most dangerous group in the country today.’”⁶⁴ It claimed responsibility for the Valentine’s Day 2005 bombings in three big cities and for the following month’s bold jailbreak in Bicutan which ended with a police siege killing 22 prisoners, only a few of whom were leaders of the jailbreak and of the Abu Sayyaf. Both the MNLF and the MILF have rejected and condemned its methods as “un-Islamic.”

It is no surprise that the Abu Sayyaf has been in the U.S. list of “foreign terrorist organizations” for several years running now, and was the target of joint U.S.-Philippine “Balikatan 02-1” military exercises launched in Basilan in February 2002. This joint military exercise was considered as the opening of Southeast Asia as the second front (after Afghanistan as the first front) of the U.S.-led “global war on terror.” This kind of internationalization of domestic conflicts has enabled the U.S. to intervene in certain domestic affairs. Philippine support for the American-led global campaign terrorism has reinvigorated Philippine-American relations.⁶⁵

President Aquino issued *Memorandum Order No. 37* providing for a 14-pillar anti-terrorism policy in October 2001, “but this plan, in the main, emphasizes military measures. Fundamental grievances, such as Moro landlessness, poverty, unemployment, widespread discrimination and Catholic militia abuses remain unaddressed.”⁶⁶ In the post-9/11 overriding focus on terrorism, the militarization of the response to terrorism (e.g. Abu Sayyaf) tends to be carried over to militarization of the response to rebellion (e.g. the MILF and the NPA). This kind of approach has in turn tended to disregard human rights, thereby aggravating the problem by creating more terrorists and rebels.

Another impact of the “global war on terror” on the armed conflict on the Moro front is to make it more intractable by localizing the “clash of civilizations” through the “terrorist” profiling of Muslims in general and Moros in particular. The negative impact on the Mindanao peace process is, therefore, not only on the vertical peace negotiations at the top but also on the horizontal Christian-Muslim relations at the community level. There has been a discernable increase in discrimination against Muslims in Mindanao and in other parts of the Philippines.

There are considerable reports, intelligence as well as journalistic, and some evidence of Al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah operations in the Philippines, highlighted by the rash of urban terrorist bombings in 2000, and linkages with the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf going several years back.⁶⁷ The difference is that these linkages at whatever level have been renounced by the MILF post-9/11 but not by the Abu Sayyaf. The linkages in the case of the MILF are not, however, sufficient to change its essential character as a Moro rebel group fighting “in defense of the Bangsa (nation), the homeland, and Islam.” More recently, it has also joined the fight in defense against terrorism. Indeed, in the context of the peace process and human security, the real threat of terrorism must be properly dealt with. The systematic and deliberate targeting of civilians to spread terror for some political objective has caused great loss of

⁶⁴ Simon Elegant, “The Return of Abu Sayyaf,” *Time*, August 30, 2004, p. 19.

⁶⁵ Rommel C. Banlaoi, “The Role of Philippine-American Relations in the Global Campaign Against Terrorism: Implications for Regional Security” in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24 No. 2, August 2002, pp. 294-312.

⁶⁶ Tan, “The Indigenous Roots of Conflict in Southeast Asia” 111.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Zachary Abuza, “Tentacles of Terror: Al Qaeda’s Southeast Asian Network” in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 24 No. 3, December 2002, pp. 427-65; Maria A. Ressa, *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda’s Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia* (New York: Free Press, 2003); ICG Asia Report No. 63, *Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged But Still Dangerous*, 26 August 2003; ICG Asia Report No. 80, *Southern Philippines Backgrounder: Terrorism and the Peace Process*, 13 July 2004; and Kit Collier, “The Southern Philippines and the International War on Terror” (Paper prepared as a forthcoming monograph in the *Policy Studies* series of the East-West Center Washington).

human life and constitute grave violations of human rights or international humanitarian law (IHL), among the principles upheld in some peace agreements.

Military solutions “will only treat the symptom, not the disease... military solutions in counter-terrorism should be carefully targeted and efficiently, and democratically monitored: the use of counter-terrorism as a legitimization for human rights violations could make the medicine more deadly than the disease.”⁶⁸ Counter-terrorism should not be misused by government to target political opposition, including Moro “unarmed struggle.”⁶⁹ Governments must ensure that counter-terrorism measures respect the rule of law, human rights and IHL, and explore a range of alternative counter-terrorism policies that could protect people from terrorist attacks while still respecting human rights, and create or reinforce mechanisms that monitor state performance and hold them accountable to human rights as well as constitutional standards.

XI. Conclusion

Addressing the root causes of rebellion in Mindanao would in a large way also address the root causes of terrorism there. The armed conflict on the Moro front had better evolve in this direction, for the sake of human security and human development in Mindanao and the rest of the Philippines. With regards to the three tracks constituting the current form of evolution of this conflict, it is *Track Two*, the GRP-MILF peace negotiations, which can be a *linchpin of the broader Mindanao peace process and the legitimate fight in defense against terrorism*. This is because this track is still evolving and being shaped. In *Track One*, the conflict with the MNLF has basically been settled with a final peace agreement which has encountered problems in its implementation, some of which problems though may be due to the inadequacy of the agreement. In *Track Three*, the nature of the terrorist problem with the Abu Sayyaf is such that it does not partake of peace negotiations.

It seems clear enough that Track Two is the *key link to prioritize*, while giving the two other tracks the proper attention they deserve. A good indication of this is the MILF’s highest level policy statement rejecting terrorism and terrorist links, its entering into joint action arrangements with the GRP for the interdiction of criminal elements, and its actual cooperation with the AFP in striking against such elements as the Pentagon gang which is in the U.S. list of “foreign terrorist organizations.” On the other hand, the MILF has ongoing unity processes and links with both main MNLF factions, namely the Misuari group and the “Council of 15.” It in fact offered to mediate between MNLF Misuari group and the government regarding the recent Sulu hostilities.

The prioritization of Track Two is the *bold step that must be taken for peace in our time* rather than the path of least resistance of just keeping to Track One. The MNLF can be expected not to begrudge additional gains for Bangsamoro aspirations (such as those not adequately addressed by the 1996 Peace Agreement) which the MILF might achieve in its peace negotiations with the GRP. In fact, at one point it seems necessary for those negotiations to bring in the MNLF. A Filipino political scientist once wrote about the need for a three-cornered “GRP-MNLF/MILF peace process” leading to “a new peace agreement involving the GRP, MNLF and MILF.”⁷⁰ Since the GRP-MNLF peace negotiations have already been concluded with a GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement, anything new will have to come from the pending GRP-MILF peace negotiations which are only about to enter the substantive phase. Then

⁶⁸ Ruben Thorning, “Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Southeast Asia: Which is the Greater Threat?,” *NIAS nytt* No. 3, September 2003, pp. 10, 18.

⁶⁹ This term is from McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels* 197.

⁷⁰ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, “Three-cornered Diplomatic Battle in Kuala Lumpur,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 25, 2000.

things could eventually settle to anywhere between the existing ARMM and Bangsamoro independence. A more recent proposal is to establish a GRP-MNLF-MILF Commission on Bangsamoro self-determination with an MNLF-MILF working group within it, to review the existing ARMM and determine what key changes may be necessary.⁷¹

Thus, the MILF-MNLF unity process should be sustained, as with the MNLF unity process. “It is difficult to imagine an experiment in Islamic self-determination succeeding against a backdrop of Moro disunity. While such disunity may have been instigated by Manila’s imperial governments in the past, no amount of constitutional accommodation by the center can solve this now for Muslim Mindanao. Self-determination now requires that the Bangsamoro people imagine themselves as one nation.”⁷² The MILF-MNLF unity process, which is strategic in that context, is seen as being actually a parallel negotiation to that of the GRP-MILF.

On one hand, the MILF should not just sweep aside and lay to waste the gains from the MNLF track because these also reflect some of the true sentiments and aspirations of the Bangsamoro people. There must be a way of preserving these gains, building on them while also addressing some gaps as regards their aspirations for an Islamic way of life and self-rule represented by the MILF track. On the other hand, the GRP should realize that the MILF did not split from the MNLF in 1977, and continue to wage its own armed struggle, Islamic diplomacy and peace negotiations, only to end up with mere enhancement of the ARMM which would still be basically same terms of settlement imposed earlier on the MNLF. It has to be qualitatively and substantially better than that.

MILF-MNLF unity or at least interface, because it covers two key streams or sets of aspirations among the Bangsamoro people, should be seen in the context of *finally completing the solution* to the Bangsamoro problem. If all their *aspirations*, at least the most important ones, are addressed or solved, then there should be no more social basis or firm ground for another, new Moro rebellion. This would leave, if ever, only fringe extremist groups like the Abu Sayyaf. And they would be better dealt with by the Moro mainstream groups and people instead. For example, in Sulu, the common main area of operation of the MNLF (Misuari group) and the Abu Sayyaf, the MNLF State Chairman there says that if things between the MNLF and the government are resolved, then solving the Abu Sayyaf problem is next in line for them.⁷³

That is also why it is important for the government to properly handle in the immediate term the current state of war in Sulu with the MNLF Misuari group. Track One with the MNLF is what is mainly at stake there, with implications to both Track Two with the MILF and Track Three with the Abu Sayyaf. In particular, the government’s handling of the MNLF Misuari group in Sulu will have a bearing on the GRP-MILF peace negotiations which has much promise and potential as it resumes. What is really at stake here is whether we can end this whole conflict in this generation or whether it will be passed on to the next and evolve into a new form.

⁷¹ Dr. Astrid S. Tuminez, “Ancestral Domain: Territory, Governance, Culture and the Quest for Bangsamoro Self-Determination” (Paper prepared for the Philippine Facilitation Project, U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., November 2004).

⁷² Randy David, “A Columnists Commentary” under a section on Comments in Soliman M. Santos, Jr., *The Moro Islamic Challenge: Constitutional Rethinking for the Mindanao Peace Process* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001) 184.

⁷³ Ajibon, interview by the Sulu Peace and Solidarity Mission.