

Dealing with the MILF and Abu Sayyaf Who's Afraid of an Islamic State?¹

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Three years after the signing of a peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front, the attainment of a lasting peace in Mindanao seems to be as distant as ever. Why is peace still proving so elusive in Southern Philippines? Why has the GRP-MNLF peace accord failed to win over other Moro rebel groups or to encourage them to forge their own peace pacts with the government? This essay argues that if it wants lasting peace in Southern Philippines, the Philippine government must take into account the differences between the three Muslim rebel groups in Mindanao, and stop skirting the subject of a separate Islamic state or system for Muslim Filipinos.

IN SEPTEMBER 1996, WHEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed a peace agreement after over two decades of fierce and bloody conflict, there were great hopes that this would pave the way for a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in Southern Philippines. There were expectations, at least in some quarters, that the agreement, apart from definitively ending armed hostilities between the government and the MNLF, would help bring about an end to the continuing armed conflict with other rebel forces in Mindanao, especially the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf—both of which are still fighting for secession and the establishment of an independent Islamic state in Mindanao.

Since the signing of the peace accord, the armed conflict between the government and the MNLF has in fact ceased. However, hostilities

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between government troops and the other rebel forces continue. A war has been going on and off between the government and the MILF, despite the forging of an agreement between the two parties for a general cessation of hostilities in July 1997. The Abu Sayyaf, the smaller but more radical Moro rebel group, has kept up its guerrilla attacks, bombings, kidnappings-for-ransom and 'revolutionary taxation' in western Mindanao, particularly in the island province of Basilan, notwithstanding the loss of its leader and founder, who was killed by the police in late 1998. Outside of the predominantly Moro-populated areas of Mindanao, communist guerrillas continue to engage in armed skirmishes with the government's armed forces.

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Why is peace still proving so elusive in Southern Philippines? Why has the GRP-MNLF peace accord failed to win over other Moro rebel forces or encourage them to forge their own peace pacts with the government?

This essay examines how the government has approached the pursuit of peace in Mindanao vis-à-vis Muslim rebel groups since September 1996. Instead of delving into government's relations with the MNLF it focuses on the handling of the Moro groups still at war with the government—the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf. It touches briefly on the implementation of the GRP-MNLF peace agreement and deals more with the impact of this agreement on the other Moro rebel forces.

ISLAMIC REVIVALISM

IN dealing with the MNLF, the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf, especially in the pursuit of peace, one has to take careful note not just of the similarities of the three groups, but perhaps more importantly, of their differences. The MNLF, the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf are similar in that they are all Moro rebel groups that are fighting—or fought at one time—for independence for the

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predominantly Muslim Moro (or Bangsamoro) people in Southern Philippines, specifically Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan. But there is a whole of a difference between the MNLF, on the one hand, and the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf, on the other. And there are great dissimilarities between the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf.

The MNLF is basically a nationalist movement whose struggle has been dedicated to the assertion of Moro nationhood—the Bangsamoro. It belongs to the tradition of nationalist and independence movements against colonial or neocolonial rule that have been fought all throughout this past century by oppressed peoples in various parts of the globe. The MNLF is secularist in orientation; in fact, the nationalism it espouses is a kind of secular nationalism. Although it regards Islam as one of the most important components of Moro nationhood, it does not see Islamic beliefs as the overarching principle of social life and politics.

The MILF and Abu Sayyaf, on the other hand, characterize themselves as and take pride in being Islamic revolutionary groups. They are first and foremost Islamic, and only secondarily, nationalist. These two rebel groups are part of a resurgence of Islamic revolutionary movements in many parts of the Muslim world. Some have referred to this trend as the rise of 'Islamic fundamentalism', but it is perhaps best to refrain from using this label as it is suffused with Western stereotypes and has become too associated with inflexibility, dogmatism and authoritarianism. Perhaps the more appropriate term would be 'Islamic revivalism' or 'Islamic activism'. According to American scholar John Esposito (1992), these terms are less value-laden and more in keeping with Islamic tradition.

Islamic revivalist movements date back to the late 1920s, but the current Islamic resurgence began in the 1970s and 1980s. The humiliating defeat of Arab forces in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, together with other reverses suffered by Muslims elsewhere (such as the civil wars in Pakistan and Lebanon), triggered a deep soul-searching in the Muslim world and led many to look inward for guidance and inspiration. In the midst of the dejection, the Iranian Revolution burst forth in 1979. Although Iranians are predominantly Shiite (and not Sunni, as most Muslims are), the Iranian Revolution had an electrifying impact on Islamic movements everywhere. Ayatollah Khomeini's 'Islamic Republic'

provided the first concrete proof that Islam could be used as a framework for a country's political system, that the dream of an 'Islamic state' could become a reality. Since then, Islamic movements have spread across the world, becoming a significant force in Afghanistan, Algeria, Sudan, Turkey and Chechnya.

Many factors have contributed to the rise of Islamic movements. It is in part a reaction to secularization, the spread of worldly or rationalistic ideas and values, which has led to a decline of Islam and the erosion of moral values in Muslim countries and societies. It is likewise a reaction to Westernization and Western-style modernization, which have destroyed Islamic as well as indigenous customs and traditions. Islamic revivalism is also a response to the failures of secular nationalism and revolutionary socialism to bring about socio-economic development in Muslim countries and to the failures of Muslim nationalist and socialist states to fulfill the great missions they had so proudly embarked on, such as the liberation of Palestine and pan-Arabic or pan-Islamic unification.

Widely accepted as the trailblazers of Islamic revivalism are Hassan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, and Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi, who organized the Jamaat-I-Islami (Islamic Society or Group) in India² in 1941. Al-Banna and Mawdudi, both Sunnis, continue to have a profound influence on contemporary Islamic movements. The basic principles of al-Banna's and Mawdudi's worldview, as summed up by Esposito (1992), are:

- a) Islam constitutes an all-embracing ideology for individual and corporate life, for state and society.
- b) The Quran, God's revelation and the example (Sunnah) of the prophet Muhammad are the foundations of Muslim life.
- c) Islamic law (the *shariah*, the 'path' of God), based on the Quran and the Prophet's model behavior, is the sacred blueprint for Muslim life.
- d) Faithfulness to the Muslim's vocation to reestablish God's sovereignty through the implementation of God's law will bring success, power and wealth to the Islamic community (*ummah*) in this life and eternal reward in the next.

- e) The weakness and subservience of Muslim societies must be due to the faithlessness of Muslims, who have strayed from God's divinely revealed path and instead followed the secular, materialistic ideologies and values of the West and the East—capitalism and Marxism.
- f) Restoration of Muslim pride, power and rule (the past glory of Islamic empires and civilization) requires a return to Islam, the re-implementation of God's law and guidance for state and society.
- g) Science and technology must be harnessed and used within an Islamically oriented and guided context in order to avoid the Westernization and secularization of Muslim society.

For Islamic revivalists, Islam is not just a religion but a complete way of life. The act of serving Allah is not restricted to praying; it encompasses all aspects of life. Islam sets norms on moral, political and economic behavior for individuals and for society as a whole. For Muslims to be able to live in a truly Islamic way, power has to be in the hands of Muslims who are true believers and who are righteous. Hence, revivalists view the setting up an Islamic state or government as crucial and urgent. French political philosopher Olivier Roy (1994) writes: 'All Islamists agree on one point: political power is indispensable to the establishment of an Islamic society'. Roy is quoting Mawdudi, who stated that it is impossible for a Muslim to observe successfully 'an Islamic pattern of life' under the rule of a non-Islamic system of government.

Islamic revivalists reject the concept of popular sovereignty and instead assert the concept of divine sovereignty—that is, the supreme and absolute sovereignty of Allah. Thus, they see a true Islamic government as one that is based on the doctrine of the sovereignty of Allah, with the Quran as the highest law of the land and affairs conducted in accordance with the *shariah* (Islamic law) (Lingga 1995).

Another very influential Sunni Islamic thinker is Sayyid Qutb, a Muslim Brotherhood ideologue in the 1950s-60s, who was arrested, tortured and eventually executed by the Nasser regime. Qutb is reputed to be the architect of radical Islam (Esposito 1992). He diagnosed the

modern world as being in a state of *jabiliyya*, a Quranic term that originally meant a period of ignorance in pre-Islamic Arabia, but which Mawdudi gave new meaning: a state of ignorance into which a society descends whenever it 'deviates' from the Islamic way. For Qutb, modern *jabiliyya* is a conscious usurpation of Allah's authority by man-made authority and this usurpation is exemplified by contemporary liberal, socialist, communist and nationalist systems, including those in Muslim countries. He thought it imperative for true Muslims to wage a *jihad*—a struggle in the cause of Allah—to dismantle a *jabili* society and replace it with an Islamic one (Euben 1997).

None of the early Islamic revivalist thinkers have provided a model for an Islamic state or government. In Mawdudi's view, an Islamic state can take on a variety of constitutional formulas, even one similar to that of Western democracy. But he clarified that Islam does not prescribe particular political bodies or institutions for the simple reason that it is 'a universal religion meant for all times and climes' (Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi, as cited in Roy 1994). Qutb wrote that Islam does not recommend a definite form or structure for an Islamic government and that Muslims may adopt any form provided it conforms with the *shariah* (Sayyid Qutb, as cited in Lingga 1995).

Hashim Salamat (1999), the founding leader of the MILF, acknowledges the pioneering role played by Al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood in the Islamic movement. His principal ideological influences, however, have been Qutb and Mawdudi. Qutb's writings in particular shaped Salamat's Islamic outlook and political beliefs (Amin and Shuaib 1999). On the other hand, Abdurajak Janjalani Abubakar, the founding leader of the Abu Sayyaf, has been greatly influenced by Said Saabiq, a contemporary Meccan scholar (Wadi 1998).

THE MILF: AN EVOLVING ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

MILF leader Salamat first became politically involved in the early 1960s when he was a student in Cairo, Egypt. As a leader of Filipino Muslim students in Cairo, Salamat clandestinely organized a core group of Muslim students who planned to wage a liberation struggle against the Philippine government which they believed was oppressing the Moro people. Salamat's group linked up with like-minded groups of Moro

youth and students both in the Philippines and abroad, especially those studying in Arab and Islamic countries. The young Moro intellectuals agitated for the independence of Mindanao. Meanwhile, batches of Moro youths secretly underwent military training. 'At first,' Salamat (1999) explained, 'we waged political struggle through peaceful means. But after the Ilagas attacked Moro communities in the early 1970s, many of us shifted to armed struggle. The imposition of martial law in 1972 completely removed the idea of peaceful struggle.' Salamat, a founding member of the MNLF, was chosen chairman of the Kutawato (Cotabato) Revolutionary Committee, then head of the Foreign Affairs Committee and eventually MNLF alternate chairman.

The MNLF, on the other hand, was established in 1972 by groups of young Moro intellectuals working for Mindanao independence. Nur Misuari, a former professor at the University of the Philippines, became the chairman of the MNLF.

In 1977, as GRP-MNLF relations were fast deteriorating because of sharp disagreements over the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement, the relations between Misuari and Salamat also deteriorated.³ The MNLF eventually split, with Salamat declaring an 'instrument of takeover' of the MNLF leadership and Misuari promptly expelling Salamat.

In the years that followed, Salamat's group was gradually transformed ideologically from being 'nationalist' to 'Islamic.' In late 1984, Salamat's wing of the MNLF changed its name to Moro Islamic Liberation Front to avoid confusion and to underscore the Islamic character of the group. As MILF propaganda chief Iqbal (1990) put it, the change was 'in order to set in perfect place and direction the very *raison d'être* for launching the struggle.'

The MILF now prides itself in being truly Islamic. It has adopted the Islamic ideology and way of life; it believes in the Islamic concept of state and government; and it is fighting for the establishment of an independent Islamic state. The MILF contrasts itself to the MNLF, which the former claims is 'more inclined to secularism' (Zahir 1998).

However, the MILF's demand for an independent Islamic state is a fairly new development. For a long time after it was formed, the MILF merely called for the implementation of the Tripoli Agreement, including its provision on the establishment an autonomous region for Mus-

lims. As late as December 1, 1993, Salamat declared: '[I]t is our conviction that the full implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement in letter and spirit is the only viable solution to the problem in South Philippines'⁴ (MILF press statement 1993).

Since then, the MILF has reverted to the original MNLF demand for an independent Moro state, but with important modifications: (1) the state to be formed would be Islamic in character; and (2) the territory of such a state would cover not the whole of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan, nor all of the areas covered by the Tripoli Agreement, but only those provinces and municipalities 'where Muslims are predominant' (Iqbal 1999).

The writings of Mawdudi and Qutb on the question of an Islamic state have acquired greater resonance. Salamat now declares that an Islamic government is one of the prerequisites in the perfection of a Muslim's service to Allah, and that it is the only way that 'Bangsamoro Muslims will attain prosperity in this world and in the hereafter.' The objective of the MILF in waging *jihad* is to make supreme the Word of Allah through the establishment of an Islamic government in the Bangsamoro homeland (Lingga 1995).

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In its revolutionary armed struggle prior to the current ceasefire, the MILF employed mainly mobile tactics of warfare but at times resorted to conventional methods. Its target was to destroy the enemy's 'will to fight' and to win the 'hearts and minds' of the population. The MILF geared itself for conventional warfare, which it saw as the crucial stage of their *jihad* (Iqbal 1990).

Largely overshadowed by Misuari's MNLF in the late 70s and most of the 80s, Salamat's group has grown into a formidable force. By the time the Ramos administration reopened peace talks with Moro rebels in 1992, the MILF was believed by some quarters to have already supplanted the MNLF as the main Moro rebel force, militarily speaking.

The MILF has established control or influence in various Muslim- and *lumad*-populated⁵ areas of Mindanao. In negotiations with the government, it has asked for the government's recognition of its camps—46 MILF camps all in all (13 major camps and 33 satellite camps). The MILF claims to have 120,000 men (six divisions) in its Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) of which more than 80 percent are well armed, plus 300,000 militiamen. They are armed with automatic rifles, light and heavy machine guns, artillery, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons as well as grenades and grenade launchers (Amin and Shuaib 1999).

The government estimates MILF strength to be much less than claimed, but admits that the rebel group is growing. Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado recently revealed that the MILF's ranks had gone up by 14 percent in just six months—from 13,459 fighters at the end of 1998 to 15,415 fighters in June this year—and that its firepower had increased by 11 percent during the same period—from 10,227 to 11,351 assorted firearms (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 1999a).

The MILF claims that about 10,000 MNLF members, disgruntled with Misuari's leadership and with the slow progress of development programs under the GRP-MNLF agreement, have gone over to their side. The military intelligence, however, estimates that only 1,500 MNLF men have defected to the MILF (*Manila Times* 1999a).

According to *Asiaweek*, most of the MILF fighters are still equipped with weapons used at the height of the MNLF's war for independence, but later-model guns are secretly bought from contacts inside the Philippine military itself. The MILF also manufactures some of its own weapons, such as RPG-2 grenade launchers and their warheads, right inside its camps (Davis 1998). According to the Philippine military, however, the MILF continues to get arms support particularly from radical Islamic groups. The AFP intelligence claims that the MILF has been smuggling in arms and ammunition received from foreign sources through the Moro Gulf, using Camp Omar in the Maguindanao-Sultan Kudarat boundary as transit point (*Manila Times* 1999b). Osama bin Laden, the US's number one enemy, has been reported to be supplying arms to Moro rebels. Salamat acknowledged that the MILF had indeed gotten some financial assistance from bin Laden, but he clarified that this had

gone only into the construction of mosques and Islamic schools, not firearms, and that this had lasted only until 1984 (*Manila Times* 1999c).

How does the MILF view the MNLF? According to Iqbal, the MILF now regards the MNLF as having 'joined the mainstream', as an organization that 'merely seeks reforms' and is no longer a revolutionary organization. It now sees Misuari as nothing more than an ordinary politician who is at the mercy of the government and who is gradually losing his credibility. 'The MNLF's priorities and values have changed,' comments Iqbal. 'Before, they were after arms, but now they're after nice houses and cars. They get blinded with material things.'

The MILF nonetheless maintains close links with the MNLF. Misuari has visited Camp Abubakar, the MILF's main camp, several times this year to confer with Salamat and he was warmly received by the MILF chief each time. Salamat (1999) says, 'I suggested to Nur: Try to maximize what you can get out of it [the

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MNLF-GRP agreement] to develop our homeland. On our part, we will continue our struggle. Who knows? In the end, there might be a coming together.'

The MILF maintains links and a tactical alliance with the Abu Sayyaf and has often served as an intermediary in government efforts for the release of kidnap victims of the Abu Sayyaf and the 'lost command' Moro rebel bands. During periods of resumption of armed hostilities with government forces, the MILF sometimes launches simultaneous or joint military actions with the Abu Sayyaf (Muhammad 1999).

Moreover, despite ideological differences with the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) and the Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa-Revolutionary People's Army (RPM-RPA), the MILF has had 'informal agreements' and 'tactical' cooperation with these communist rebel groups for several years now. The MILF believes that it can put up a strong alliance with the communist groups against their common foe on the basis of 'mutual respect and benefits.' According to *Maradika* (1998), the MILF's official publication,

it remains to be seen whether the tie-up will be elevated to a more formal and strategic cooperation.

In recent years, the MILF has opened up to peace negotiations with the Philippine government. The leaders of the rebel group claim that they would prefer to attain their goal of a separate Islamic state through peaceful means, but knowing that the government will not give in so easily, they continue to gird themselves for the possibility of an all-out war.

THE ABU SAYYAF: A WEAKENED 'EXTREMIST' GROUP?

THE Abu Sayyaf (Bearer of the Sword) is an Islamic revolutionary group composed mostly of young Muslims and operating mainly in Western Mindanao, specifically in Basilan, Sulu and the Zamboanga peninsula. It is widely regarded as much more radical than the MNLF and the MILF. It was formed in the early 1990s by a group of *ulama* (religious scholars) who studied and trained in the Middle East. They were led by Abdurajak Janjalani Abubakar, an Islamic scholar and a former member of the MNLF, who had studied and trained in Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Libya and Syria, and reportedly fought with the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 1994). Aside from engaging in guerrilla raids and gunbattles with the Philippine military and police, the Abu Sayyaf has been involved in kidnappings (mainly for ransom),⁶ bombings, assassinations, hold-ups and the collection of 'revolutionary taxes' from local companies, traders and businessmen. It targets ethnic Chinese traders and foreign priests and nuns as kidnap victims. The group is said to have been responsible for the raid and razing of the town of Ipil, Zamboanga del Sur in April 1995, in which 53 civilians were killed, as well as the killing of the Catholic bishop of Jolo, Sulu, Benjamin de Jesus, in February 1997.

The Philippine military often tags the Abu Sayyaf as 'Muslim extremists' and 'extremist bandits.' Describing the Abu Sayyaf as 'an Islamic extremist group,' the US State Department has included the rebel group in its annual list of the most dangerous international terrorist groups for two years now. According to the State Department, many of Abu Sayyaf's leaders have studied or worked in the Gulf states where they were exposed to 'radical Islamic ideology' and the Abu Sayyaf probably has ties to Islamic extremists in the Middle East.

American anthropologist Charles Frake (1998) says the Abu Sayyaf has filled a logical void in the identity matrix of the Philippine Muslim rebellion. The MNLF is dominated by Tausugs, led by a nontraditional university-educated elite, and associated with secular Islam, while the MILF is Maguindanao-dominated, led by Muslims from the established political elite, and secular in background and orientation, though sometimes employing Islamic rhetoric. 'In contrast to these two movements,' writes Frake, 'the program of Abu Sayyaf is militantly Islamicist. Its leadership comes from neither the Western-educated elite nor the traditional local elites. Its heavy recruitment from the displaced, unaffiliated youth of refugee communities, as well as its geographical base in traditional "outlaw" areas of Basilan and neighboring islands, frees it to some extent from the stigma of a dominating ethnic identification. Members are typically seen not as Tausug, Magindanao, or Maranao but as being "like outlaws," but outlaws with an agenda and an ideology.'⁷

Two young spokesmen of the Abu Sayyaf, Abu Jihad and Sayfullah, in an interview in 1999 introduced themselves as urban *mujahideen* and declared that their group is fighting for the establishment of an independent Islamic state in the whole of Mindanao. Like the MILF, the Abu Sayyaf is waging a *jihad* against the Philippine government to eliminate oppression and to establish an independent Islamic state in Mindanao. The Abu Sayyaf's strategy is two-pronged: building a rural/communal and military base to serve as a network center for conducting *da'wab*⁸ and military training; and creating an urban mobile force to be used in proselytization, politicization and guerrilla warfare (Wadi 1998).

While both the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf are waging a *jihad* to establish an independent Islamic state, they differ in the following ways:

- a) The MILF seeks an independent Islamic state for a much smaller territory (only the predominantly Muslim areas) while the Abu Sayyaf is targeting the whole of Mindanao.
- b) The MILF accuses the Abu Sayyaf of being anti-Christian for engaging in the killings and kidnappings of church people. Abu Sayyaf spokesmen deny the charge, asserting that their group respects freedom of religion and that in an Islamic state the

rights of Christians will be protected for as long as they abide by the laws of the Islamic state.

- c) The MILF condemns—at least officially—terroristic acts like kidnappings and the bombing of non-military targets, declaring that such acts go against the teachings of the Quran. Abu Sayyaf spokesmen forthrightly admit that their group engages in kidnapping-for-ransom, bombings and the collection of ‘contributions’. ‘Kidnapping,’ said Abu Jihad, ‘is part of the revolution.’ Disputing the MILF’s position that kidnapping is un-Islamic, he asserted that kidnapping is justified as a form of struggle in a *jihad*. The spokesmen admitted that the Abu Sayyaf was responsible for the kidnapping of Italian missionary Luciano Benedetti but they denied responsibility for the recent abduction of two Belgian nationals (Jihad and Sayfullah 1999).
- d) Unlike the MNLF and the MILF, the Abu Sayyaf totally rejects negotiations with the government. It considers the MNLF as already having completely capitulated to the government and no longer revolutionary, and it faults the MILF for going into peace talks with the government and, ‘not being consistently and thoroughgoingly revolutionary’ (Jihad and Sayfullah 1999).

Abu Sayyaf founder and leader Janjalani and two of his followers were killed in a gunbattle with police on December 18, 1998 in Lamitan, Basilan. Janjalani, a former Islamic and Arabic scholar, had been re-

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garded by the military as ‘the country’s most wanted criminal,’ with a P1.5 million prize on his head. Janjalani’s death was a big blow to the Abu Sayyaf. He was not just their leader, but also their ideological beacon. Nonetheless, it would be much too rash to conclude that Janjalani’s death would mean the end of

the group. As Australian scholar Mark Turner (1995) noted: ‘Several times, the Abu Sayaff [sic] has been described as decimated but it has shown a phoenix-like quality of rising from the ashes of defeat.’

According to military intelligence, Khadafi Janjalani, a younger brother of the slain Abu Sayyaf leader, has taken over the leadership of the rebel group. Khadafi is said to have been the deputy chief of the Abu Sayyaf's central command and the head of its urban demolition and intelligence team before his brother's death.

The military reported early this year that the Abu Sayyaf's military strength had remained just about the same in 1997-98—from 1,152 regular members in 1997 to 1,148 by the end of 1998 (around the time of Janjalani's death). Its firearms were estimated to number around 350 to 500 (*Manila Times* 1999d). Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) Secretary-General Azeddine Laraki, in his report to OIC foreign ministers last June, cited a much lower figure for Abu Sayyaf's guerrillas—he estimated that the group has 500 fighters (*The Bangsamoro Digest* 1999). A recent assessment by the US State Department says that the Abu Sayyaf is down to just about 200 armed rebels, from a peak force of about 1,000 guerrillas in the early 1990s. The department says that the rebel group has been considerably weakened by battle casualties, surrenders and an internal power struggle following Janjalani's death. But it nonetheless remains dangerous and it remains a threat (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 1999).

Whether or not the Abu Sayyaf has been truly weakened is debatable. Almost daily, local newspapers in the Zamboanga-Basilan-Sulu area carry reports of armed clashes between government and Abu Sayyaf forces and of other incidents in which the rebel group is supposed to be involved—bombings, summary executions, kidnappings, extortion, etc. Moreover, the Abu Sayyaf has been recruiting many Muslim youth and students—even boys as young as 12 years old (Jihad and Sayfullah 1999)—who undergo 'Islamic education' as well as military training.

THE GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH TOWARD THE MORO REBELS

IN the quest for peace in Mindanao, the government's approach to Moro rebel groups over the last few years has essentially involved the following thrusts:

- a) *Vis-à-vis* the MNLF: Prepare the ground for the establishment of a new autonomous region through intensive peace and development efforts, in accordance with the 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreement.

- b) *Vis-à-vis* the MILF: Hold exploratory talks, work out a ceasefire, move on to substantive talks and eventually forge a peace political settlement that would complement or add on to the GRP-MNLF agreement.
- c) *Vis-à-vis* the Abu Sayyaf: Wage an all-out war to wipe out this 'extremist' group.

The GRP-MNLF peace accord provided for the establishment, in three years, of a new autonomous region that would replace the currently existing Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). During the three-year transition period (Phase I), a Special Zone of Peace and Development in Southern Philippines (SZOPAD), covering 14 provinces and nine cities, would be set up. This special zone would be the focus of 'intensive peace and development efforts,' to be coordinated by the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). Also during the transition period, 7,500 MNLF fighters would be trained and integrated into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP). Within two years from the establishment of the SZOPAD, a plebiscite would be held in the SZOPAD-covered areas to determine which of the provinces, cities and municipalities therein would become part of the new autonomous region.

'Intensive peace and development efforts' is supposed to have been the core content of the groundwork for the new autonomous region. 'Peace' and 'development' are to be taken in a broad sense and to be interrelated—that is, that there can be no lasting peace without development, as well as no sustained development without peace. But 'peace' and 'development' can also taken in a narrow sense.

'Peace' in the sense of the absence of armed conflict between the government and the MNLF has been achieved. Indeed, whatever flaws may be found in the GRP-MNLF peace agreement and whatever shortcomings may be pointed out in its implementation, even its critics cannot deny that it has put an end to the armed hostilities between the two sides. The integration of the MNLF into the AFP-PNP has also gone fairly well. As far as 'development' is concerned, however, a lot less than what had been expected seems to have been accomplished. 'Things are coming on very slowly,' complains MNLF chairman Misuari (*Philippine*

Daily Inquirer 1999b). He puts the blame for the lack of socio-economic development in the areas covered by the agreement squarely on the government not releasing enough funds to these areas (*Today* 1999). Government officials, on the other hand, fault Misuari for poor work habits and for spending a lot of time outside of his region.

Misuari has been critical of the government's record not only in socio-economic development but also in the autonomy question. The government, he says, has failed to produce a new law amending or repealing the Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (RA 6734) and paving the way for the creation of the new autonomous region (*Today* 1999). Congress is still deliberating on the bill. Because of this, Phase 2 of the GRP-MNLF peace agreement—the actual establishment of the new autonomous region—has had to be delayed. Phase 1, which was supposed to have ended in September 1999, has been extended for another year. Government lawmakers attribute the delay in the passage of a new law to the complexities of the Philippine legislative process.

Paul Oquist of the United Nations Development Program finds that the Mindanao peace process was 'successful' but also that it 'faces a crisis of credibility.' The success includes the end of armed conflict between the two sides after two decades of internal war, the demobilization of combatants and their reintegration into civilian life, and the assimilation of some into the military and the police. The crisis of credibility is evident in the 'lack of progress on the issues of effective autonomy and increased investment to redress Mindanao's relegation from the mainstream of Philippine development.' But instead of pinning blame on just one side, Oquist states that the crisis of credibility affects all parties to the peace agreement—the government, the MNLF and the Organization of Islamic Countries (Oquist 1999).

The crisis of credibility is evident in the 'lack of progress on the issues of effective autonomy and increased investment to redress Mindanao's relegation from the mainstream of Philippine development.'

The government's peace package has succeeded in keeping the MNLF out of the battlefield. But what about the other Moro rebel forces?

Initially, the prospects that the peace package of autonomy and development would serve as the sparkplug for a more comprehensive peace in Mindanao looked promising. A month before the signing of the GRP-MNLF peace agreement, the government clandestinely opened exploratory talks with the MILF in Davao City (Arguillas 1999). In July 1997, after a year of talks disrupted several times by armed clashes between the government's armed forces and MILF fighters, the two sides agreed to a general cessation of hostilities. But by the end of the term of President Fidel Ramos in mid-1998, the prospects for achieving a GRP-MILF peace accord in the near future seemed to be fading. Negotiations remained at the exploratory level and had not tackled the 'substantive issues' of the armed conflict.

Shortly after the inauguration of President Joseph Estrada, the government signed an 'agreement of intent' with the MILF in which the two sides committed themselves 'to pursue the peace negotiations on the substantive issues as soon as possible, and resolutely continue the negotiations until the Parties reach a negotiated political settlement.' The AFP and MILF subsequently forged an accord by which uniformed MILF fighters could freely roam Cotabato City and six provinces provided they carried no firearms (*Manila Times* 1998b). To underscore his administration's commitment to attaining peace, President Estrada vowed toward the end of 1998 to intensify talks with the MILF, as well as with the communist National Democratic Front, and to complete these talks and forge peace pacts by the end of 1999.

Despite the July 1997 ceasefire agreement, many armed clashes ensued between the government and the MILF. Some—such as the clashes in Maguindanao in January 1999—were serious and nearly scuttled the talks altogether. The MILF has characterized the current status of a ceasefire agreement disrupted by many armed clashes as a 'no war, no peace' situation.

Furthermore, the government and the MILF have been postponing the start of talks on substantive issues. The two sides got bogged down ostensibly by an impasse over the issue of the recognition of 'MILF camps or positions.' The MILF had demanded that the government recognize 46 MILF camps—13 main camps and 33 auxiliary camps—and that no government troops be allowed inside these camps. The govern-

ment balked, perhaps fearing that, as retired university professor Patricio Diaz put it, it would give the MILF 'the status of belligerency' by acceding (*Manila Times* 1998c). Al Haj Murad, MILF vice chairman for military affairs, insisted that they were not demanding belligerency status, but 'mere recognition of our areas' for ceasefire purposes (*Manila Times* 1998d). Eventually, the government 'acknowledged' seven of the MILF camps, but the two sides could not agree on the precise delineation of the territorial coverage of the seven camps. In the government's map, each of the seven acknowledged

In the MILF map, however, the camps cover a much wider area, some as much as over a thousand square kilometers, the size of a small province.

MILF camps consists of only several square kilometers. In the MILF map, however, the camps cover a much wider area, some as much as over a thousand square kilometers, the size of a small province.

According to Salamat, the MILF has proposed an 'experimental agreement' to the Estrada government. 'We stop fighting, withdraw our troops [to our respective areas] and work together. We develop the area—with Muslims, Christians, highlanders [non-Moro indigenous people]. Then let's see what happens. Perhaps the people will forget about fighting the government. They'll forget about independence and autonomy.' Salamat says that the government has not yet responded to the proposal (Salamat 1999).

Following the historic vote for independence of the people of East Timor, Murad issued a press statement declaring that this had inspired the MILF to continue fighting for a separate state and that a plebiscite similar to that held in East Timor could be a peaceful alternative for the MILF. Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado immediately doused cold water on the idea of Mindanao becoming another East Timor, saying that there was no basis for comparison (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 1999c).

With much funfare, the government and the MILF launched the 'opening of formal talks' on October 25, 1999 in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. High government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, media, academe and NGOs witnessed the opening in which the two sides announced that they were finally going to tackle the substantive issues of the armed conflict.

A PARTIAL AND TEMPORARY SOLUTION

Notwithstanding its success in ending hostilities between the government and the MNLF, the September 1996 peace accord has failed to serve as the sparkplug for a more comprehensive and lasting peace in Mindanao. The government's peace package of a new regional autonomy, coupled with 'intensive peace and development efforts,' which has in the main worked with the MNLF, has not won over other Moro rebel forces nor provided much impetus for another political settlement, such as a GRP-MILF peace accord.

'From the very outset,' says Iqbal, 'the MILF did not believe that the GRP-MNLF agreement would work. We did not consider the agreement as the ultimate solution to the problem in southern Philippines' (Iqbal 1999). In Salamat's view, the MNLF-GRP agreement is only 'a partial and temporary solution' (Salamat 1999).

From the vantage point of the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf, nothing much has been achieved since the signing of the GRP-MNLF agreement. They regard such instrumentalities as the SPCPD and the ARMM as not having any real power to effect change. They think there is not much of a difference between the new autonomous region to be established in Phase 2 of the agreement and the autonomous regions worked out under the Marcos and Aquino administrations. Moreover, they do not see any significant outcome from the 'intensive' development efforts promised by the government in Moro areas. 'The implementation of the peace agreement,' adds Iqbal, 'is going very slow, [and is] way behind schedule. Billions of pesos have already been spent, but there have not been any tangible results. The government can hardly give anything anymore. No major development projects have been undertaken, and no significant investments have come in. We think the prospects of the peace accord are bleak.'

While not supportive of the GRP-MNLF peace pact, the MILF has given its assurance that it will neither interfere nor obstruct the accord's implementation. The MILF information officer clarifies: 'We are not anti-development. For as long as projects do not displace people and for as long as they are not just an excuse of the military for launching counterinsurgency operations, the MILF will not stand in the way.'

However, the development projects, though well intentioned, fall short of what the MILF wants. 'Everyone thinks that if you address the problem of underdevelopment,' says Murad, 'everything will get well. But we think that the problem of underdevelopment is just the fruit of a deeper problem. The problem is that we do not fit into the [Philippine] system. Our cultural, traditional, religious values are not in consonance with the system. We do not feel that we are part of it. We've always been outside of it. That's why we did not develop. Thus, the MILF believes that an Islamic system is the only way that the Moro people can develop. Our concentration is more on the system. We have to address the root cause' (Murad 1998). Salamat emphatically declares, 'The economic problems of the Bangsamoro people cannot be solved without a political settlement' (Salamat 1999).

'... the problem of underdevelopment is just the fruit of a deeper problem. The problem is that we do not fit into the [Philippine] system... We do not feel that we are part of it...'

After three years of exploratory talks, the GRP and the MILF have finally moved on to the 'formal talks' proper. The October 25 opening, however, was more ceremony than substance. Up to now, the two sides still have not agreed on an agenda for the talks on substantive issues. In February 1997, the MILF had proposed a single talking point—'To solve the Bangsamoro problem'—and expressed the hope that the peace talks would find 'a political and lasting solution to this [Bangsamoro] problem... with the end in view of establishing a system of life and governance suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro people.' The MILF elaborated that this one talking point involves, but is not limited to, the following issues: ancestral domain, displaced and landless Bangsamoro, destruction of properties and war victims, human rights issues, social and cultural discrimination, corruption of the mind and the moral fiber, economic inequities and widespread poverty, exploitation of natural resources and agrarian related issues. The government, which has insisted that the talks should remain within the limits set by the Philippine constitution, has been cool to the MILF's proposed single talking point, as this would inevitably lead to a discussion of the MILF's de-

mand for an independent Islamic state. The government has preferred to address the more specific issues and concerns brought up by the MILF and to tackle these one by one in a 'problem-solving' manner. Defense Undersecretary Orlando Soriano, the head of the GRP panel, believes that the eventual GRP-MILF agreement will be an 'add-on' to the GRP-MNLF agreement (Soriano 1999).

The framework of autonomy and development used by the government in dealing with the MNLF is not likely to work with the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf. Merely adding on to what has already been

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achieved with the MNLF, such as coming up with more development projects, will not be enough. The government has to face up to the fact that it is dealing with Islamic movements—movements that are after not just autonomy and development, but an independent Islamic state. If the government, in its talks with the MILF, tries to skirt the issue of an independent Islamic state and to tackle secondary concerns instead, it is likely that the talks will move in circles and the MILF will play hardball on the issue of the

recognition and delineation of the MILF camps. Likewise, confining the talks within constitutional limits will not get the talks anywhere.

Being more of an Islamic rather than a nationalist movement, the MILF might still be coaxed to drop its demand for an independent state if it can be assured that a truly Islamic system can be established in the areas where Moros predominate. It must be noted that the MILF, in presenting its main talking point, had added 'with the end in view of establishing a *system* of life and governance suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro people.' This position, in exactly the same wording, was reiterated by Aleem Abdul Aziz S Mimbantas, MILF vice-chairman for internal affairs, during the opening of formal GRP-MILF peace talks.

It may be possible for such an Islamic system to be worked out in a Moro autonomous region or in a Moro state within a bigger federal Philippine state. Soliman Santos (1999), a lawyer-scholar who has con-

ducted various studies on the Mindanao peace process has broached the idea of 'one country, two systems', in which a liberal democratic system in majority-Filipino areas would coexist with a much smaller Islamic system in Moro areas. (The idea is inspired, of course, by the China-Hongkong model, except that the latter consists of a coexistence of a socialist system and a capitalist system.)

Leaders and spokesmen of the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf themselves claim that there is no state currently existing that can be called a truly Islamic state. They recognize that the contours of such a state, or system, still has to be worked out.

CONFRONTING THE QUESTION

Is an Islamic state feasible? A number of scholars on Islamic movements are now increasingly asserting that Islamism has not been able to offer a real political or, for that matter, an economic alternative, and precisely because of this, is now on the wane. French political philosopher Olivier Roy (1994) contends that the Islamic state is a myth, that what Islamic movements would establish once in power would be not much different from existing states in the Muslim world. Islamic states, he believes, would only bring about regimes of the same single-party mold and the same patronage practices as before; rehash the nationalist, Third Worldist, anti-Western discourse of old, and impose policies of Islamization 'from the top' as officially secular or moderate regimes have already done before. Political Islam, he concludes, is a failure.

This pessimism notwithstanding, the government would do well to at least subject the issue of an Islamic state or Islamic system to wide and open discussion. Why not discuss this in the GRP-MILF talks? Why not ask the MILF to spell out its concept of an Islamic state and let the MNLF, other Moro forces, Mindanao politicians and ordinary people (both Moro and non-Moro) express their views on the matter? For sure, if anyone starts advocating for an Islamic state that is patterned after or similar to that of Iran under Khomeini or of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, there will be some strong reaction not just from majority-Filipinos but also from Moros themselves.

The MILF itself has lately been toning down its open pitch for an Islamic state. When President Estrada declared 'over my dead body',

in reaction to the MILF assertion of an independent Islamic state, the MILF clarified that the issue of an Islamic state is 'an internal affair of the Muslims' (*Maradika* 1999). 'Our main concern now,' Salamat clarified, 'is the liberation of our people. The issue of an Islamic state is something to be discussed later. Once liberation has been achieved, our people can decide whether they want an Islamic state or something else' (Salamat 1999). During the huge rallies in Cotabato City and smaller rallies in other cities of Mindanao just prior to the opening of formal GRP-MILF talks, the streamers and banners called for 'independence' but there was no mention of an Islamic state whatsoever. Ironically, the ones who did bring up the issue were anti-MILF forces who daubed the walls of Cotabato with slogans blaring 'No to Islamic state!'

The resolution of the question of an independent Islamic state may prove crucial in resolving the armed conflict with the Abu Sayyaf. It must be noted that the differences between the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf have to do more with the means rather than the end. Abu Sayyaf spokesmen have stated that should the MILF succeed in its efforts to form an independent Islamic state, the Abu Sayyaf would peacefully integrate itself into this state (Jihad and Sayfullah 1999). Salamat confidently says: 'Once we [the MILF] have achieved independence, the Abu Sayyaf will stop fighting...they'll join us' (Salamat 1999).

In the course of the GRP-MILF negotiations, the government and the MILF will eventually have to deal with the MNLF and the OIC. The government has already agreed to an autonomy arrangement with the MNLF—an agreement fully backed by the OIC. The government cannot simply come up with another bilateral agreement with the MILF providing for autonomy or federalism. Most, if not all, of the territory that could conceivably be included in a new GRP-MILF autonomy/state arrangement would overlap with the area covered by the autonomous region resulting from the GRP-MNLF agreement. To resolve the overlap, the MNLF and the OIC will have to be brought on board at some point. Will the MNLF and the OIC agree to an Islamic state or system as defined by the MILF? They would perhaps have no objection to an 'Islamic system' but they would probably conceptualize it in a different way. It is not inconceivable that an 'Islamic system' in predominantly

Moro areas of Mindanao could be worked out jointly by the government, the MNLF and the MILF, with the support of the OIC.

NOTES

1. This is the revised version of a paper presented during a conference on An Assessment of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement (Implementation of Phase 1) on November 11, 1999 at the University of the Philippines in Diliman.
2. When India gained independence in August 1947, it was split into India (predominantly Hindu) and Pakistan (Muslim).
3. An MNLF source claims this was due to personal and ethnic differences, but according to Mohagher Iqbal, the chairman of the MILF propaganda committee, there were criticisms leveled against alleged corruption, Misuari's 'authoritarianism' and the replacement of Islam by Marxist-Leninist ideology.
4. Asked recently why the MILF had originally demanded only for autonomy, Salamat replied: 'This is politics. We wanted to make the Philippine government think that we were "moderate"' (Salamat 1999).
5. The *lumad* are non-Muslim indigenous peoples of Mindanao.
6. Due in part to kidnappings by Moro rebels, the Philippines has been dubbed 'Asia's kidnap capital' and ranks number four in the world, behind Columbia, Mexico and Brazil, in the number of kidnap cases every year (*Manila Times* 1998a). The kidnappings have continued unabated, especially in Western Mindanao. Because of the rash of kidnappings of Christian schoolteachers in Basilan, Department of Education officials are contemplating the closure of all primary and secondary schools in the island-province.
7. As can be gleaned from what I have already written, I do not agree with Frake's characterization of the MILF as being only nominally Islamacist.
8. An invitation to embrace and practice Islam.

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