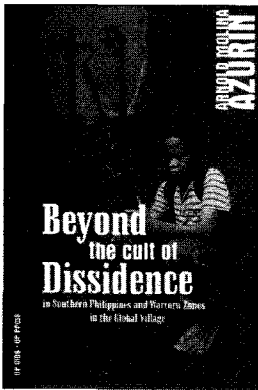


Saying More About the Moros

Joel Rocamora

Beyond the Cult of Dissidence in Southern Philippines and War-torn Zones in the Global Village. BY ARNOLD MOLINA



AZURIN. Quezon City: UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies and University of the Philippines Press, 1996. 360 pp. P250 (BK). ISBN 971-742-008-4

I HOPE Arnold Azurin does not mind my saying that one of the nicest things about his book is the picture of a boy soldier, presumably a member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), on the cover. The boy's expression, a mixture of fear, resentment and defiance, says more about Moros and their struggle than all of the words that have been written about them.

I agree with Azurin that it is a sense of identity and self-pride which lies at the

core of Moro reality. In what is undoubtedly the best chapter in the book, an account of the *haji* gives a glimpse of the deep religious roots of Moro identity. I wish that Azurin had also tried harder to make real for us the suffering and deeply ingrained feeling of oppression that centuries of Spanish, American and Filipino colonization has engendered in the Moro psyche.

'Colonization' is actually a weak word that does not tell us anything about its impact on Moro society, on its political economy. Neither does it convey the heady mix of cultural distance, and sense of superiority mixed with deep fear with which Filipino soldiers approached fighting Moros. This, I can only imagine, may have been shared by their Spanish and American counterparts.

SEPARATE HISTORY

Azurin's sympathy for the Moro struggle suffuses this book. But Moro militants might resent his main goal of 'pulling the curtains down [on] the hijacking of the past...to serve the secessionist psy-

war'. He presents convincing evidence that the 'Jabidah Massacre' may not have happened at all. This 'massacre' may have been the outcome of a still unraveled mix of conflicting psy-war maneuvers by Marcos, Moro leaders and the Malaysians. Yet in much the same way as the altogether too real Plaza Miranda massacre, Jabidah's uncertain parentage did not in any way inhibit it from becoming a central myth of the Moro struggle.

Azurin's dissection of the Philippine claim to Sabah is more fully developed. Successfully mobilizing histories of the region, Azurin points out that the Sulu Sultanate's claim to Sabah is built on 19th century conceptions of sovereignty that have little connection to contemporary reality. A simpler way of putting this is that the Sulu sultan did not have effective control of Sabah at the time he 'leased' it to the British. Not that the British and their political heirs, the Malaysians, have stronger legal claims, but they do have stronger navies and the advantage of occupancy.

While agreeing with Azurin's unmasking of Jabidah and the Sabah claim, I would not go as far as he does in exposing 'the ideological mindset in separatism...nurtured and amplified by the MNLF, which virtually created — largely out of disenchantment and imagination, and with little fidelity to the historic documents and truelife experiences — a separate history for the Moros that had conjured up the self-image of never having been vanquished by the Spanish *conquistadores* nor subjugated by the American imperialists' (p. 5). One can contest the historical veracity of

specific elements that go into the making of the Moro 'self-image', but in the end what is important is that they do have this self-image. Azurin states further that 'inevitably, such a fervent separate history can only lead to an exclusive destiny, even as its advocates discern their political lineage rooted back to the once powerful sultanates in Mindanao and Sulu — and their present ideological linkage spreading globally along with the currents of Islamism' (p. 5).

By the very nature of the activity, mythmaking reshapes history, often creating it out of thin air. Apparently, it is not mythmaking, per se, that Azurin objects to, but the appropriateness of the myth. 'But what if the clamor has changed from separatism to autonomy, or when the struggle for self-determination has shifted from the battleground to the negotiation forum? Shouldn't there be a corresponding shift in the consciousness and propaganda, from "separate histories" or "exclusive domains" (which somehow sound like echoes of that discredited apartheid in South Africa) to "shared legacies" or "multicultural communities"?' (p. 10). Not to worry, Mr Azurin. If the peace agreements stick, Moro leaders will shift their discourse towards 'shared legacies'.

While agreeing that this is necessary, I'm not altogether sure that abandoning 'separate histories' or deconstructing 'otherness' as Azurin does is best for the Moro people. We can argue specific claims from that 'separate history' but in the end what is important is that Moros feel they have a 'separate history'. It is the source of their identity as a people. I

don't think Azurin wants them to lose this identity and merge it with 'the vacuous consciousness of the Generation X smartalecks.'

More important than the specific elements of a people's identity is how it is used to organize the way people act politically and, in the process, shape current reality. Azurin argues that 'the overall effect of the dearth of a self-analytical tradition should not be glossed over: the Muslim intellectual in Southern Philippines has become captive to the self-aggrandizing traditions and clannish sociopolitical culture, including the feverish ethnic rivalries that dissipate cultural and economic growth' (p. 6). It is with this insight that Azurin approaches the peace talks with the MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1995-1996.

PEACE AND THE MNLF

More than half of the book is devoted to the peace talks. At the time these analytical pieces came out, they probably were among the better analyses available at the time. A couple of years later, one loses the immediacy of the issues. Azurin's meticulous attention to the debates on the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) in Congress is neither history nor current events. The words of senators and congress people sound like so much humbug.

Perhaps Azurin should now devote his energies to updating his analysis of the Mindanao situation. I was going to say that 'a lot has happened' since Azurin wrote the last chapters of this book. In fact, 'a lot has *not* happened' and

there lies the rub. The three-year transition period after the September 1996 agreement is more than half over. The plebiscite for expanding the Autonomous Regions in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) is scheduled for September 1999. The way things are going, the MNLF is not going to get the expanded autonomous region it wants.

The problem starts with the peace agreement itself which is riddled with infirmities. The agreement, like many such agreements, was a compromise. To give the impression that the Tripoli Agreement was being honored, the SPCPD covered the provinces and cities in the Tripoli Agreement. But because the government was unwilling (actually also unable) to grant outright autonomy, the SPCPD was formed to give the MNLF a chance to 'prove itself' such that when a plebiscite is held on the geographic coverage of a new autonomous area, more people would vote for the expansion of the ARMM. The problem is that SPCPD is, for all intents and purposes, only a consultative body with no significant powers and even fewer financial resources. Making it part of the Office of the President violates the principle of greater autonomy which is the essence of the peace agreement.

The MNLF is the key to the peace process in Mindanao not because it presents the most powerful military challenge to the government although some observers believe that the MILF is a militarily more powerful group. The MNLF is more important because, for most of the past quarter century, it successfully embodied the political

aspirations of Muslims in Mindanao. This was recognized by other Muslims, by Christian Mindanaoans, and by successive central government administrations. Furthermore, a major factor determining MNLF importance was the support it received from the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) which was relevant to potential investors from Muslim Indonesia and Malaysia.

MISUARI'S PROBLEMS

Because of the centrality of the MNLF and its leader, Nur Misuari, the problem at this time can be seen in terms of the problems of the MNLF. One major problem for Misuari is his position in the Muslim community. Instead of strengthening his political authority, his conclusion of a peace agreement with the government has lessened his authority. Because the sense of being an oppressed minority remains strong in the Muslim community, ceasing to be a rebel force of necessity detracts from the MNLF's authority. Misuari can regain this authority only if he can show that, by working within the government, he can secure significant economic and political concessions.

This situation has been exacerbated by the presence of another rebel group, the MILF, which has become a magnet for rebellious sentiment in the Muslim community. Even more threatening is that the MILF has become a magnet for disgruntled MNLF leaders and rank-and-file. Misuari's and the MNLF's position also has to be seen in relation to the elite Muslim politicians who constitute another set of competitors. Misuari

has an advantage over them in that he has armed capability greater than that of individual politicians and has a political organization cutting across ethnic and clan divisions, one built more solidly on Muslim grievances. But by moving into the legal political arena (a move highlighted by his and the MNLF's participation in the ARMM elections last year), Misuari has entered a terrain where elite politicians have more experience and whose political organizations are built on ethnic and clan alliances geared towards electoral participation.

The MNLF's relatively successful foray into the ARMM elections was made possible only by financial resources and pressure on competing elite politicians organized by Lakas-NUCD (Lakas-National Union of Christian Democrats) operatives. It remains to be seen how MNLF candidates have fared in the recent May 1998 elections when the Lakas-NUCD was too preoccupied with electing a president. In the long run, Misuari has to figure out how to convert the MNLF into a vehicle for electoral and other open political encounters. This is not an easy task. Misuari has to work out how to retain the 'movement' character of the MNLF and prevent himself and his key leaders from being tagged as *trapo* (traditional politicians) like other elite Muslim politicians.

Central government assistance to secure a strong MNLF position in the ARMM alleviates the problem of power and resources a bit. But ARMM itself has many problems that require Misuari's attention. He has to walk the tightrope between elite Muslim politi-

cians and the MNLF; then within his own organization — between Tausug, Maranao, and Maguindanao MNLF. He has to work with ineffective and corrupt local government officials with very little in the way of resources to enforce his writ. Besides, the MNLF's position in ARMM does not do much for MNLF capability to persuade people in the non-ARMM areas covered by the SPCPD to agree to the expansion of ARMM in the 1999 plebiscite.

Another problem is MNLF dominance in the SPCPD. It makes sense in the context of the peace agreement, but if the task is seen in terms of persuading enough people in the areas without Muslim majorities to join an enlarged ARMM, representation in SPCPD should reflect social realities better. As far as the plebiscite in 1999 is concerned, the key target of SPCPD efforts should be the non-Muslim population in SPCPD provinces. The MNLF, through its actions, has to show that it understands this reality.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 1996 agreement, it made sense that the MNLF focused on convincing its members and the larger Muslim *ummah* that there was something to be had from the agreement. There were positions in the ARMM and in a number of other local and central government offices for the leadership. But apart from the people already integrated into the military and police, MNLF rank-and-file have not seen any benefits. This is the source of oft-repeated complaints by MNLF leaders, including Misuari.

Perhaps because he has so few resources in the ARMM and the SPCPD, Misuari has spent a major part of his time trying to get the Manila government to deliver on its promises and, outside of the country, to persuade investors especially from OIC countries to invest in Mindanao. This has created a number of problems because he has not succeeded in generating an image as a hands-on leader of the ARMM and the SPCPD. His preoccupation with securing foreign investment and his failure to come up with an alternative framework for Mindanao development have provoked concern among those Christian groups, most importantly the community of nongovernment organizations (NGO) and peoples organizations (PO), who support SPCPD but are critical of the Ramos administration's development framework for Mindanao.

BEYOND THE COMMUNITY

To establish Mindanao peace on a firmer footing, the MNLF has to go beyond the Muslim community. If SPCPD is to succeed as a framework for expanding the territory of a Muslim-led autonomous region and if the MNLF wants to maintain its leadership, it will have to show a capacity to lead not just in the Muslim community but also among Christians. Because Christian politicians — and Muslim ones for that matter — see Misuari and the MNLF as competitors for control in their turf, the MNLF is not likely to find too many long-term allies among traditional politicians.

In the remaining year and a half of the transition period, the MNLF will

have to do something which it has shown little capacity or inclination to do: reach out to those organized Christian groups which are willing to work with it to change the political landscape in Mindanao. These include the more progressive Christian churches, the NGO-PO community, and the more forward-looking segments of business, the media, and the universities.

In this book, Arnold Azurin has shown that he has sufficient skill and empathy for the Moro cause to write

authoritatively about them. Writing about problems of dissidence in Mindanao should, in fact, not be seen as 'doing something for the Moros'. A central insight in this book is that 'dissidence in this region is a multiheaded monster with various stripes and masks. The activities of antigovernment and antisocial armed bands may be spurred by politicians and their groups in military uniform as much as by rebellious sectors in the community, which may be either Muslim or Christian' (p. 3).