

LUPA SUG AND THE PATH OF AHLUS s-SULUK

Monograph

Selected Essays from the International Conference
on Sulu History and Power



University of the Philippines



Mindanao State University - Sulu



Province of Sulu

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The Sulu Project 2025: Lupa' Sug and the Path of Ahlus s-Suluk

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Lupa' Sug and the Path of Ahlus s-Suluk

*Selected Essays from the International Conference
on Sulu History and Power*

Foreword

Ang *Sulu Project 2025: Lupa' Sug and the Path of Ahlus s-Suluk* ay isang mahalagang proyekto ng Unibersidad ng Pilipinas. Ito ay bunga ng mandato ng Republic Act 9500 na humihikayat sa UP, bilang Pambansang Pamantasan, na kumalap at magpalaganap ng kaalaman maging sa pambansang usapin o sa usaping galing sa laylayan.

Nagsimula ang proyektong ito sa isang pagpupulong sa UP noong huling bahagi ng 2024, nang humingi ng gabay ang Department of Interior and Local Government ukol sa desisyon ng Korte Suprema na nagbago sa ugnayan ng Sulu sa Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. Mula sa puntong iyon, malinaw na ang usaping Sulu at Bangsamoro ay hindi dapat manatili sa silid paaralan o sa loob ng mga opisina ng gobyerno sa Metro Manila; kailangan pagusapan ito doon mismo sa Sulu at Bangsamoro kung saan sila ang pinakanaaapektuhan ng desisyon ng Korte Suprema.

Ang Tanggapan ng Pangalawang Pangulo para sa Mga Gawaing Legal (OVPLA) ay nakipagtulungan sa UP CIDS, UP College of Law at UP Law Center, UP Mindanao, UP Bangsamoro Development Initiatives, at Mindanao State University–Sulu upang maisakatuparan ito. Payak lamang ang aming layunin: magsagawa ng seryoso at magalang na talakayan tungkol sa nakaraan at hinaharap ng Sulu, at mapakinggan ang mga kapwa nating Filipino doon sa Sulu.

Makasaysayan ang ginawang kumperensya na ginanap sa Jolo noong Abril 2025. Pinagsama nito ang mga iskolar, mga pinuno ng pamahalaan, mga miyembro ng lipunang sibil, mga lider ng Sulu, mga aktor ng seguridad, at mga mamamayan ng Sulu sa isang bulwagan. Narinig natin ang iba't ibang tinig na humuhubog sa kapalaran ng Sulu.

Ang tema ay nakatuon sa (1) Kasaysayan at Kultura, (2) Kapayapaan, (3) Ekonomiya at Pag-unlad, at (4) Pagkamamamayan, Pagkakakilanlan at Kapangyarihan. Hindi mga abstraktong kategorya kundi mga agarang alalahanin, na konektado sa mga tunay na karanasan ng mga komunidad ng mga Tausug at Sama. Hinarap ng mga tagapagsalita sa talakayan ang mahihirap na tanong tungkol sa sariling pagpapasya, pamamahala, at kaunlaran, habang pinagtitibay din ang mayamang pamana ng Sulu at ang patuloy na lugar nito sa mas malawak na mga kwento ng Timog-silangang Asya.

Para sa OVPLA, mahalaga ang proyekto dahil ipinakita nito kung paano hinuhubog ng batas ang pagbuo ng bansa. Ang desisyon ng Korte Suprema ay hindi lamang isang legal na tanong—binago nito ang awtonomiya, pamamahala, at representasyon sa Bangsamoro at Sulu. Binigyang-diin nito ang halaga ng pakikipagtulungan. Hindi maitanghal ang proyektong ito kung wala ang pakipagtutulungan ng UP, MSU, lokal na pamahalaan kabilang ang Sultan ng Sulu at ang Gobernador ng Sulu, at mga komunidad. Pinatunayan ng proyekto na ang pag-aaral at pananaliksik ay hindi abstrakto, kundi base sa ebidensya na kinakalap sa mismong mga lugar ng pinangyayarihan.

Hindi lang inilathala sa bawat pahina ng peryodikong ito ang mga kaganapan sa proyekto. Bawat pahina ay naglalaman ng mga pananaw na nagpapalalim sa ating pag-unawa sa Sulu at sa mga Tausug, Sama at Bangsamoro. Ipinapaalala nito sa atin na ang mga unibersidad ay hindi lamang dapat magsalita, magaral, at manaliksik mula sa sentro, kundi dapat ding tumayo at makibaka kasama ang mga nasa laylayan ng lipunan. Pinapasalamatan ko ang aming mga kasama sa UP at MSU, ang mga pamahalaang panlalawigan at lokal ng Sulu, ang Sultan ng Sulu at ang Gobernador ng Sulu, ang mga iskolar na nagbahagi ng kanilang mga gawain, at ang mga lumahok na nagbigay ng kanilang oras at pananaw.

Hindi dito nagtatapos ang usapang Sulu, 'Tausug, Sama, Lupa' Sug at Bangsamoro. Ang tagumpay ng Sulu Project ay dapat maghikayat sa atin na patuloy na lumikha ng mga espasyo para sa dayalogo sa buong bansa. Bilang pambansang pamantasan, may tungkulin ang UP na dalhin ang kaalaman sa mga lugar na higit na nangangailangan nito. Umaasa ako na ang mga magbabasa nitong monograph ay makakapulot hindi lamang ng mga aral, kundi pati na rin ng mga dahilan upang kumilos, manaliksik, at, higit sa lahat, maglingkod sa mga komunidad tulad ng Sulu na patuloy na naghahangad ng sariling pagpapasya, kaunlaran, at kapayapaan.



Atty. Abraham Rey M. Acosta

Project Leader, Sulu Project 2025
Vice President for Legal Affairs (10 February 2023 – 14 August 2025)
University of the Philippines

Introduction

In a pivotal moment for the Sulu archipelago, the University of the Philippines (UP) and Mindanao State University (MSU)–Sulu jointly convened the Sulu Project 2025: Lupa’ Sug and the Path of Ahlus s–Suluk—International Conference on Sulu History and Power, from April 23 to 25 in Jolo, Sulu. This initiative came about following a visit by DILG Secretary Juanito Victor “Jonvic” Remulla to UP on 21 November 2024, to seek the University’s advice on the ramifications of the Supreme Court decision redefining Sulu’s relationship with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). That meeting was attended by representatives from the Islamic Studies Institute, UP Diliman College of Law, UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), and Vice President for Legal Affairs, Atty. Abraham Acosta. From that meeting came the impetus to organize a conference that would provide a vital platform for scholarly discourse, bringing experts to examine Sulu’s complex historical, cultural, legal, economic, and peace-related dimensions. The idea was to mount a conference to foreground the profound implications of this ruling, and surface the sentiments and opinions of Sulu population on this important political juncture.

The selected essays in this monograph are structured around four core themes: History and Culture, Peace, Economy and Development, and Nationhood, Identity, and Power that sheds light on the critical aspects of Sulu’s past, present, and future. Dr. Patricio Abinales’ keynote speech anchored the proceedings by providing a summary of the narratives on Sulu from local and international scholarship, and how they parallel political developments on the ground. Four plenary session featuring invited scholars explored Sulu’s rich heritage, its role in the Bangsamoro movement, its international linkages, and its potential for sustainable development outside the BARMM framework. Crucially, the legal implications of the Supreme Court decision, including governance, land rights, and resource management, were analyzed. By engaging in informed conversations and generating evidence-based insights, the Sulu Project 2025 sought to contribute to policies that address the unique needs and aspirations of the Tausug people, ultimately paving the way for a more peaceful, prosperous, and self-determined future for Sulu.

As co-convenor of the Sulu Conference, UP CIDS is proud to be at the forefront of this landmark event. The first conference was held in November 2024 in Bongao, Tawi–Tawi, in partnership with MSU–Tawi Tawi and UP Visayas. We are now leading the second iteration and, as UP’s policy research unit, our commitment remains to foster informed dialogue and build research capacity for impactful policy outcomes. By facilitating these dialogues,

CIDS aims to deepen the understanding of complex issues, such as those facing Sulu, and to support the development of collaborative solutions that address the needs and aspirations of communities emerging out of conflict.

Convening an academic conference comes with the usual challenges, with the added dimension of security risk as the venue is in Sulu. Notwithstanding, the speaker line up, moderators and discussants was an august grouping of scholars and advocates who have been writing and researching about Sulu for the past decades, committed and hopeful to seeing this province pass its marred conflict history. The synergy created by the interactions of these Manila-based and local intellectuals made for a robust, raucous, and at times heated debate at the conference floor. But the conversation, I would say was a learning moment for many of us in the audience on competing perspectives about Sulu's political and economic challenges and prospects.

Building on UP CIDS strong Islamic Studies Program (ISP), this Sulu Conference 2.0 monograph mainstreams scholarship on Sulu's rich pre-colonial culture and history as regional maritime trading center. This monograph compendium celebrates the Sulu people's proud heritage and desire for peace, underscored by stable governance and mutually beneficial relationship with the national and regional governments. It is also a testament to UP's commitment to a just and inclusive Philippine society, and dauntless courage to bring the policy conversation to the island provinces in Mindanao.



Rosalie Arcala Hall, PhD

Executive Director
UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

About the Monograph

This selection of papers was derived from the presentations during the International Conference on Sulu History and Power held on 23–25 April 2025 at Sumadja Hall, Capitol Site, Jolo, Sulu. The conference was organized by the University of the Philippines, through the Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Office of the Vice President for Legal Affairs, UP College of Law and UP Law Center, UP Mindanao, and the UP Bangsamoro Development Initiatives together with the Mindanao State University (MSU)–Sulu, and the Sulu Provincial Government.

The conference featured an AVP produced by the TV–UP which traced the history of Sulu from its heyday as a Sultanate, its centrality as center of the Bangsamoro movement, its inclusion in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao and successor Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, and its subsequent exit from the autonomous arrangement following the landmark Supreme Court decision (GR No. 242255 dated 9 September 2024). Welcoming messages were delivered by several distinguished guests, including Hon. Abdusakur M. Tan, Governor of Sulu; Atty. Angelo A. Jimenez, President of the University of the Philippines; Atty. Basari Dimakuta Mapupuno, President of the Mindanao State University; MSU Sulu Chancellor Nagder J. Abdurahman; and Lt. Gen. Antonio G. Nafarrete, Commander of the Western Mindanao Command, Armed Forces of the Philippines. The opening remarks were given by Dr. Rosalie Arcala Hall, Executive Director of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies. The keynote speech was delivered via video by Dr. Patricio Abinales of the University of Hawai'i – Manoa, which set the stage for succeeding plenary discussions following four key themes – History & Culture, Peace, Economy & Development, and Nationhood, Identity, & Power.

The History & Culture panel was moderated by Martin Hilario L. Mapolon, and Dr. Abraham Sakili as discussant. Speakers Benjamin Bangahan, Darwin Absari, Julkipli Wadi, and Raya Mucha Shim–Quiling discussed the prominence of Ahalus Suluk (Sulu spirituality), Sulu power, and the themes of transitionality and mobility as the Sulu Raya enters a period of potential decline.

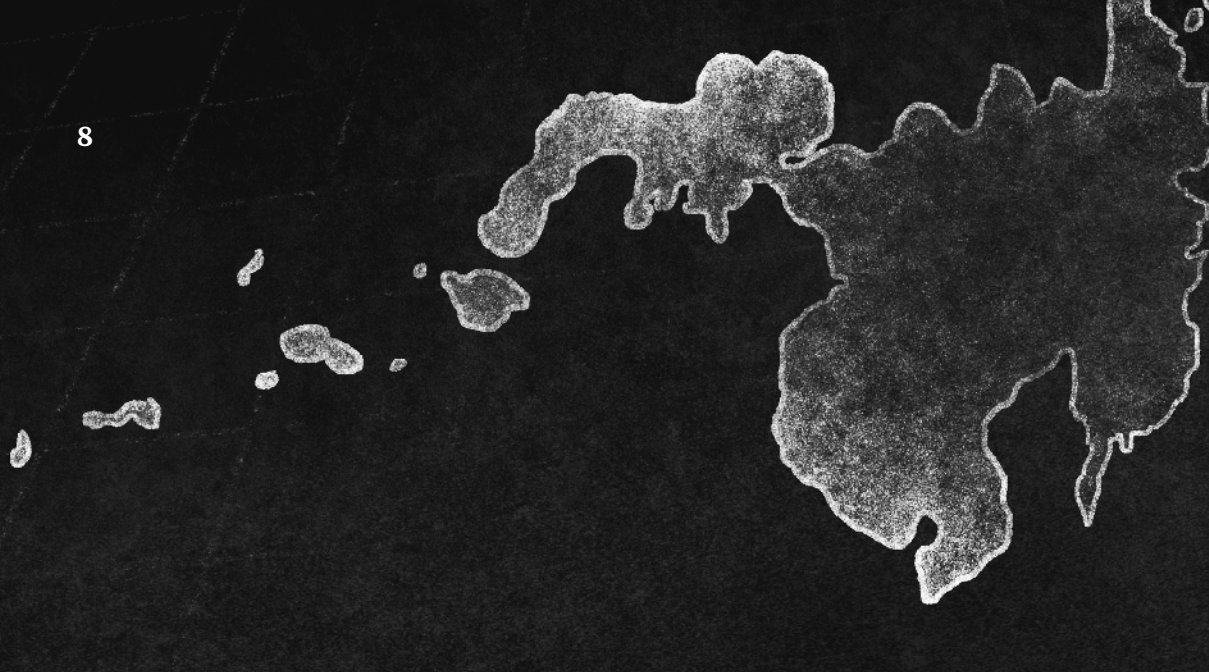
The Peace panel was moderated by Cecilia Jimenez–Damary. Speakers Amina Rasul, Meltino Jaujan Sibulan, Georgi Engelbrecht, and Criselda Yabes delved into the complex dynamics of democracy, self–determination, and conflict resolution in Sulu.

The Economy & Development panel was moderated by Dr. Rosalie Arcala Hall. Speakers Francisco “Pancho” Lara Jr., Hussein Sinsuat Lidasan, Makmod Pasawilan, and Arturo Corpuz explored challenges and opportunities for development in the Sulu Archipelago.

The Nationhood, Identity, & Power panel was moderated by Dr. Norman A. Abdurahman. Speakers Hannbal Bara, Mehol Sadain, Rashmie Estino, and Neil Silva discussed the complex legal and political issues surrounding Sulu's governance and its historical autonomy.

An estimated 140 participants from local universities and colleges, local government units, civil society organizations, police, coast guard, and Armed Forces based in Sulu, Tawi Tawi, Basilan, and Zamboanga provinces attended the 2-day event. Conference dinners and socials were generously hosted by UP Bangsamoro Development Initiatives, MSU-Sulu, and The Office of the Provincial Governor. There was a pre-conference meet with Vice Governor Abdusakur A. Tan II and a visit of the Sulu historical museum. Invited guests also toured Rajah Baguindah shrine in Bud Datu; marker for a Chinese admiral Poontao-Kong in Indanan, and the reconstructed Sultan's Palace in Maimbong,

The rationale behind the conference is to provide a platform for scholarly and focused discussion on Sulu's future, grounding such on the articulations and aspirations of Sulu people. Holding the conference in Sulu is to reiterate UP's commitment to bring issues of national importance where it matters, and to impress upon the larger Philippine public otherwise wary of the security situation in this island province, that “all is well” in this corner of the Philippines. The successful holding of the conference and the tour, the first in Sulu's post-conflict timeline, was significant for its optics and substantive discussion.



Notes on Moro Mindanao, Sulu, and the Nation State

PATRICIO N. ABINALES

Abstract

Studies of Mindanao often frame its history through the lens of resistance, portraying Muslim and lumad communities as persistently opposing external domination. While this “resistance school” has shaped both scholarship and public discourse, it overlooks long periods of relative peace between episodes of rebellion. This paper addresses that puzzle by arguing that Mindanao’s stability historically emerged when the central state retreated, and conflict erupted when it intervened aggressively. Episodes labeled as the “Moro Problem,” separatist wars, and communist insurgencies reveal this pattern of state intrusion and local reaction. Rather than viewing Mindanao solely as a site of unbroken resistance, this study offers a counter-narrative that foregrounds negotiation and accommodation between local actors and the national state. It contends that the island’s political dynamics are best understood not as perpetual defiance, but as a recurring negotiation shaped by the rhythms of state engagement and withdrawal.

Introduction

Scholars of Mindanao have consistently emphasized resistance as the process that best explains Mindanao's complex politics. Tausug historian Samuel K. Tan, for example, contends that a homogenous Muslim umma has been in perpetual resistance against an unholy alliance of Filipino politicians, American imperialists, and Christian settlers since the early 20th century.¹ Tan is not alone; scholar-activists Eliseo Mercado, Rudy Rodil, and Macario Tiu have, in their works, presented analogous lines of argument, broadening this portrait of resistance to include the *lumad*—the non-Muslim communities indigenous to Mindanao.² The views of these academics have filtered down into the public sphere, adopted by local journalists, NGO activists, and ideologues of Muslim separatism.³

But here is a puzzle: between the two episodes when southern resistance was said to be at its most intense, Mindanao was generally peaceful.⁴ There were no rebellions in the magnitude and intensity that the Americans faced in Luzon and the Visayas in the early 1900s; that the Japanese encountered all over the archipelago in World War II; and which the fledgling and corrupt Republic under Manuel Roxas and Elpidio Quirino almost ran away from when the Huks launched their “great rehearsals for greater things to come.” And while a bigoted Manila media played on people's fears of “brutal Moros,” the truth was that Mindanao's average crime rate was no different from Manila, which was notorious also for its own Hadji Kamlons in Oxo and Sigue-Sigue gangs, and the occasional killers in Forbes Park and other Golden Ghettos.⁵

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- 1 Samuel K. Tan. *The Filipino Muslim Armed Struggle, 1900–1972* (Manila: Filipinas Foundation, 1977); Tan. *Decolonization and the Filipino Muslim Identity* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, Department of History, 1989).
 - 2 Eliseo R. Mercado Jr., “Social-Cultural Cleavages and the Peace Process in the Southern Philippines,” in *Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention in Asia: Managing Diversity through Development*, ed. Nat J. Colletta, Teck Ghee Lim, and Anita Kelles-Viitanen (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2001), 418–28; Rudy B. Rodil, “Conflict between the Moro Liberation Fronts (MIM–MNLF–MILF) and the Government in Historical Perspective,” *Ateneo Law Journal* 54 (2009–2010): 256; Macario Tiu, *Davao 1890–1910: Conquest and Resistance in the Garden of the Gods* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Integrative Development Studies, 2002).
 - 3 Note, for example, the almost mind-numbing repetition of this argument by journalist and most of the columnists in the web-magazine *Mindanews*.
 - 4 Roughly sixty years separated the “Moro problem” the American army confronted and the separatist and communist insurgencies that bedeviled the Marcos dictatorship.
 - 5 Recall the exaggerated reportage of the *Philippine Free Press* throughout the first half of the 1900s about hostile Mindanao, continued by post-colonial newspapers which dazzled readers about the depravities of the “pirate” Hadji Kamlon in the 1950s, to the *Barracuda* hype on the eve of martial law.

So, how to account for this long period of silence? Unfortunately, none of the above historians have addressed this conundrum. Going by the over-arching and broad way in which the “resistance school” portrays opposition by Mindanao’s diverse communities of outsiders trying to take control of their patrimony, the only explanation that I think is being suggested but not openly asserted is one Marx employed in his classic *Communist Manifesto*: that at times the struggle is open and fierce, sometimes it is hidden and muted.⁶ The problem here is that this purported cyclical nature of the Mindanao resistance is not only analytically compelling (it sounds more like an excuse), but it can also be empirically disproven (the newspapers, declassified reports from the U.S. State Department, or the available presidential papers indicate no massive southern resistance).

But there is an answer to the puzzle, and it may be pretty apparent at this point: it is when the central state leaves Mindanao alone that the island is generally stable. And it was in those moments when the state aggressively intervenes that conflict erupts. What historians call “the Moro Problem” of the early 20th century, and political scientists refer to as the “separatist rebellions” and “communist insurgencies” of the last 20 years of the same century, were disturbances that broke out because of the aggressive intrusion of the state in Mindanao.⁷ This, I would suggest, is the contradiction that has structurally determined and continues to determine the island’s multi-ethnic communities’ relationships with the national state since the Americans successfully integrated the isle to the body politic. It is also what enabled anti-state actors with fantasies of seizing national power or defying the nation state to experience relative success, only to falter in the end once its protagonist, the state, downgraded its bellicose approach, worked out a compromise, and scaled down its presence in Mindanao.

I do not deny the existence of anti-state resistance, but I would also argue that this was not only what Mindanao politics was all about. Much of it was characterized by an uneasy but resilient interaction between local actors and national state leaders. In the succeeding pages, I would like to present a “counter-story” to the orthodox “resistance school” in support of this suggestion as well as to help catalyze further discussions on Mindanao’s past and present.

6 The exact lines go like this: “Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, with an introduction by Eric Hobsbawm (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 35.

7 Some of the best sources on these southern “rebellions” are Tan (1977); George (1980); Mercado (1984); Majul (1985); and Vitug and Gloria (2000).

The Origins of Accommodation

What followed after the American military campaigns of the early 1900s to reduce resistance of various Muslim communities, enforce tax laws, contain and eventually eliminate the practice of slavery, and establish an effective governing authority for “Moro Mindanao” was an unusual political calm that was preserved by American arms and, more importantly, by the agreement between American military officials, Muslim *datus*, and *lumad* leaders to work together to pursue their respective interests.⁸ For the Americans, their concerns were obvious: consolidate their authority in an area the Spanish had never been able to rule. For the Muslim *datus*, the tactical alliance was the chance to recover the powers they were steadily losing to the Spanish, add new titles to their already multiple pedigrees—that of a colonial officials and allies of the United States—and restore their prestige and business reputation in maritime Southeast Asia.⁹ For the *lumad*, American presence was a chance to create a barrier between their dwindling numbers and the marauding Muslims and to regain the foothold they had over the forest resources they once traded with the lowland Muslims. This appeared to be the general response among the “Tagacaolos” of Davao, with the legend of Datu Mangulayan's act of resistance the exception rather than the rule.¹⁰

But the strongest basis of unity for all three was their collective antipathy towards the “caciques,” i.e., Filipino politicians and entrepreneurs who had been trying to muscle their way into Mindanao. The Muslims supported the Americans because the latter promised them that “they will never be under Filipino rule.”¹¹ This is why the Muslims and the American military were obdurate in pushing for Mindanao autonomy or separation on three separate occasions: the first when Filipino leaders began to pressure Americans to the de facto autonomy of the Moro Province; second, when the Jones Law was being debated in the U.S. Congress; third, during the term of the pro-Muslim Leonard Wood as Governor-General.

8 These are goals that the resistance school shows as evidence of American imperialist perfidy. But what is often not admitted by these scholars that many of these “campaigns” were participated in by rival Muslim and *lumad* elites who saw in the Americans an ally who could help them defeat their rivals and a chance to have their “crimes” against the Americans forgiven and forgotten. Cameron Forbes reported that American documentation of the crimes by Muslim *datus* had forced them “in a position practically [like] that of prisoners of parole.” Governor Forbes however added: “If they behaved themselves and assisted the government in breaking up piracy, cattle thieving and crimes of violence, they enjoyed in effect an amnesty for past offenses” (Forbes 1928: 20–21).

9 Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 86–112.

10 Tiu, *Davao 1890–1910*

11 Florence Horn, *Orphans of the Pacific: The Philippines* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941), p. 110.

Colonial politics, however, were ultimately decided in Manila and Washington, not Zamboanga or the new provincial “tiger economy” of Davao.¹² Army rule gave way to Filipino civilian hegemony as the American Congress felt uncomfortable with maintaining a sizeable army in the Philippines. At the same time, military officers had to return to the mainland to help build a national army.¹³ The Muslim–American separatist tactical alliance unraveled and gave way to direct supervision of the entire Mindanao by a Filipino–controlled colonial state.¹⁴ Manuel Quezon and the Nacionalista Party, however, were also astute leaders, sensitive to American popularity in Mindanao and aware that for the Filipinized colonial state to have a presence in the periphery, it had to have the support of its communities, particularly the Muslims.¹⁵

So while the Filipino–controlled Department of Mindanao and Sulu was a more centralized agency, Quezon and the Department’s director Teofisto Guingona Sr. also sought to coopt Muslim *datus* by offering them a place in the Nacionalista Party and the Philippine Assembly, continuing the American policy of public education and special scholarships, keeping the state’s hands off religious matters and introducing limited suffrage.¹⁶ After initially refusing to cooperate (partly because of the promise of American officers to return and “save” them from the Filipinos), most Muslim *datus*, very much following what their forefathers did during their heydays as Southeast Asian men of prowess, accepted this new alliance. The cost may be the shrinking of their Southeast Asian world into the policed boundaries of an embryonic nation–state. However, this new limited space still offered a lot: new official titles, largesse from the state, and continued autonomy.¹⁷

And it is also at this point that the nature of “Moro resistance” changed. Bereft of their firepower, Muslim *datus* adapted new tactics. In 1934, rumors spread that Wood was committed to restoring Moro Mindanao’s autonomy, Lanao and Cotabato *datus* sent

12 Shinzo Hayase, “Tribes, Settlers, and Administrators on a Frontier: Economic Development and Social Change in Davao, Southeastern Mindanao, the Philippines, 1899–1941” (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 1984).

13 Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 212–247.

14 Michael Onorato, *A Brief Review of American Interests in Philippine Development and Other Essays* (Manila: MCS Enterprises, 1972); Frank H. Golay, *Face of Empire: United States–Philippine Relations, 1898–1946* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

15 Here the Lumad began to disappear from the colonial lens, to return back to the political arena in the postwar period when settlement and logging began to destroy their communities.

16 Teofisto Guingona, “Historical Survey of Policies Pursued by Spain and the United States towards the Moros of the Philippines” (1919), reprinted in *Dansalan Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1981); Maximo Kalaw, *Self–Government in the Philippines* (New York: Century Company, 1919).

17 Mamitua Saber, “The Muslim Minority in the Philippines” (unpublished manuscript, 1962).

petitions to the United States Congress, renewing their call for separation.¹⁸ A few years earlier, the powerful Datu Piang of Cotabato and his son Abdullah employed the services of an American lobbyist, a Sunset Cox, who was to form a “Moro Commission on Separate Government” and inspire “sympathetic Muslims and Americans” to donate money for a “Muslim-financed mission to the USA.”¹⁹ Nothing happened to the mission mainly because Cox and Abdullah were more concerned with making money.²⁰ But what is notable here is that these datu were aware of how these tactics benefited Quezon and the Nacionalistas, and thus were not averse to adopting these themselves.

Moreover, where the resistance school found unrelenting revolts against colonial rule, the defiance of some datu suggested new motivations were at work. A good illustration was the 1927 revolt of Datu Tahil Lidasan, who became famous for leading the Battle of Bud Bagsak, but who also later served as a member of the Sulu Provincial Board. Lidasan withdrew with 100 followers to a *cotta* to await government attack after he announced his opposition to the head tax and the ban on carrying weapons in public. At first glance, this seemed to be a repeat of Bud Bagsak. Still, a closer look revealed a different picture: Lidasan revolted at the instigation of his wife, the American-educated Princess Tarhata, niece of the Sultan of Sulu, who, upon failing to get her husband appointed as Jolo governor, convinced him to take up arms. The Constabulary defeated Lidasan (35 dead) and sentenced him to seven years' imprisonment. Tarhata divorced her now politically useless husband, married a Cebuano, and re-entered local politics.²¹

On the eve of World War II, the new generation of Muslim leaders was more comfortable with the central state and saw their political future as closely aligned with the colonial center. Their involvement in World War II further cemented this integrative relationship for whatever positions they took during the war—be it collaborator to the Puppet Republic or leader of the anti-Japanese resistance movement—their choices had become inextricably linked to the future of the emerging nation-state.²²

18 See for example the May 15, 1934 letter of Datus Guiambangan, Hadji Pandasalan, Hadji Nor Usup, Hadji Mukamad and others to the Governor-General, pleading once more that Muslim Mindanao be governed separately by the Americans. Joseph Ralston Hayden Collection (henceforth JRH), University of Michigan, Box 27-32.

19 With Abdullah as chair and Cox, the Commission's “publicity manager.”

20 JRH, November 18, 1926, Box 28-24.

21 This incident was wonderfully narrated by Horn (1941: 155).

22 United States of America, Office of Strategic Services, 1945; Edward Haggerty, *Guerrilla Padre in Mindanao* (Manila: Bookmark, 1946); Uldarico Baclagon, *Christian-Muslim Guerrillas of Mindanao* (Manila: n.p., 1988).

Post-war Continuities

Thus, the relationship crafted by Quezon was readily adopted in the post-colonial period. Muslim leaders effortlessly reverted to the now-traditional mutual accommodation with the central state, some so successful that they even became national figures.²³ What made this return to the late colonial arrangement remarkable was that it was restored amidst massive changes in Mindanao's demography. The migration of over a million people from the north and central Philippines enhanced Mindanao as a site where people were constantly on the move, following forest concessionaires as they cut down one rain forest after another; where settler communities began to intrude into or co-exist with Muslim and *lumad* villages; and where suddenly a new electoral blocs were born.²⁴ The nature of this massive movement of people is also the subject of myth-making by many from the resistance school. The orthodoxy argues that the government had a hand in inundating Mindanao with settlers. The data, however, belie this insistence. The government did sponsor land settlement schemes, but these only attracted a minuscule number of people and were failures. Most people preferred to move on their own. The mistake of the resistance school is to think that projects like EDCOR were the umbrella for all these movements.²⁵

In the next twenty years or so, while Manila feared a communist takeover, most of Mindanao was also peaceful and stable. There was enough land to satiate settlers' needs and not threaten those who were under Muslim or *lumad* control. The newness of the opened areas, the continuous flow of migrants by communities rather than individuals, and the relatively weak capacities of the state's land agencies also precluded land concentration from moving at a rapid pace, thereby reducing class and ethnic animosities. The expected major land battles between settlers and *lumads* never happened. Instead, as a Cotabato "old-timer," the

Mindanews columnist Patricio Diaz recalls, the settler-indigene relationship was generally congenial, and land disputes were the exception rather than the rule.²⁶

The mutual accommodation between the local elite and the national state via party alliances, patronage, and elections became powerful mechanisms to channel popular

23 See the case of Salipada Pendatun in in McKenna (1998: 113–137).

24 Frederick L. Wernstedt and Paul D. Simkins, "Migration and Settlement of Mindanao," *Journal of Asian Studies* 25, no. 1 (November 1965).

25 Patricio N. Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020).

26 Patricio P. Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict* (Davao City: Mindanews Publications, n.d.).

energies towards a manageable form of political confrontation. The response of Mindanao's growing population—both Muslim and Christian (I am not sure about the lumads)—was quite enthusiastic. Davao and Cotabato, for example, were consistently in the top 15 vote-rich provinces between 1953 and 1961, the periods when migration to Mindanao was at its highest.²⁷ There were indeed areas where the fabled “guns, goons, and gold” reigned. But the mistake of many observers of Mindanao is to generalize this phenomenon as if it affected the entire island. In fact, in the 1950s, this problem was limited to some small towns in “hot spots” like Lanao del Sur and Cotabato. In the rest of Mindanao, people voted.

Let me reiterate: this is not to deny that land and other conflicts did not happen. But what the available data (newspaper reports and court proceedings) show is that there were as many, if not more, land fights between settlers as there were between settlers and indigenes. The data also showed that these were not only happening in the Muslim areas, but also in settlement zones like Davao and Bukidnon. But the most important thing that the data tell us is that a lot of these fights were settled through the intercession of local strongmen acting on behalf of the state.

Political order was thus maintained not by the presence of the Constabulary (which was small and too dispersed), but by this mutual accommodation between local politicians and national leaders, where the latter allowed the former control over their respective bailiwicks in exchange for keeping order in these localities in the name of the state. During elections, these local leaders “delivered” the votes for national candidates, and in exchange were privileged with monies from pork barrel. We do not have the proverbial tension and conflict between state and local power that scholars are wont to suggest. It was the other way around.

Marcos

It was when Marcos decided to be more vigorous in integrating Mindanao into national development plans, and when his political ambitions led him to displace Mindanao politicians who opposed him, that stability began to break down. Marcos tried to accomplish these two projects using two state agencies whose authoritarianism was second nature—the technocracy and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. In Mindanao, this deployment of the

27 Patricio N. Abinales, review of *Militant Labor in the Philippines*, by Lois A. West (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), *Journal of Political Ecology* 6, no. 1 (1999): 107–10, <https://doi.org/10.2458/v6i1.21504>.

technocratic model of development and the military idea of stability proved devastating. Marcos broke the delicate balance between state and strongman, thereby upending the stability that this connection preserved in the earlier years. He also created his network of local strongmen, less autonomous and more beholden to him, whom he then unleashed on his enemies. At a time when the frontier began to “fill up,” the use of the military and the fostering of new local allies against the Pendatun–Matalam alliance of Cotabato.²⁸ and the Lucmans of Lanao created the conditions where to the typical weapons of political combat (i.e., patronage and elections) were added more coercive ones—private armies, assassinations, executions and electoral harassments. The wars that broke out in the late 1960s and early 1970s also created heinous creatures, such as Feliciano Luces (a.k.a. Kumander Toothpick), who became idolized by settler communities. On the other side, pre-separatist formations began to take shape, foremost of which was Datu Udtog Matalam’s Muslim Independence Movement.²⁹

The breakdown of mutual accommodation also opened Mindanao’s political arena to new actors. The dynamic of these new forces included the student moderates and radicals who were organizing “the masses” for a confrontation with the state and the local strongmen. In the Muslim areas, Nur Misuari and his comrades from the Manila schools joined forces with Hashim Salamat and student pensionados from Libya and Egypt, and young warlords Rashid Lucman and Abdul Khayr Alonto to prop up the weakened Matalam and lay down the foundations of the Moro National Liberation Front.³⁰ In Davao and northern Mindanao, the moderate group Khi Rho was organizing chapters at breakneck speed, with its radical rival *Kabataang Makabayan* not far behind.³¹ The confrontational character of these movements dovetailed perfectly with the increasing violence triggered by Marcos’ centralization schemes and the declining power of local strongmen. When Marcos declared martial law, the stage was set for Mindanao to become a war zone.

The rest of the story we all know as told to us by such fine books as Marites Vitug’s and Glenda Gloria’s *Under the Crescent Moon* (2001) and Thomas McKenna’s *Muslim Rulers and Rebels* (1998). What I wish to point out here is that these are accounts that are also notable for not falling into the trap of sentimentalizing and mythologizing the resistance. There

28 Abinales, *Making Mindanao*, 163–71.

29 T. J. S. George, *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in the Philippines* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980), 129–77; Rad Silva, *Two Hills of the Same Land: Truth Behind the Mindanao Problem* (Mindanao: Mindanao–Sulu Critical Studies and Research Group, 1979).

30 George, *Revolt in Mindanao*, 200–201.

31 *Manila Times*, October 16, 1969; *Mindanao Times*, April 9, 23, and 30, 1970.

was never a unified Bangsamoro; there is still none to this very day. Islam has not united southern Mindanao; in fact, it is southern Mindanao's unusual ecology that has diversified Islam into different strands—from the MILF, to the secularism of the Muslim trapos,³² to the folk that the majority of Muslims affirm. Even today, with the MILF and the ASG as the lead on the “Moro resistance,” religion and ethnicity do not play that important a role.

Admittedly, Mindanao's landscape has altered considerably since Marcos. There are more people and less land, growing cities and declining farmlands. There is practically no more forest cover. The failure to resolve the wars of the 1970s and their deadly consequence also means that arms and armies continue to breed, and violence has become more endemic. The MNLF has been replaced by the MILF, while the communist insurgency gave birth to vigilante groups, many led by lunatics who believed they were God's messengers and democracy's defenders. Still, there is the possibility that Mindanao can recover its lost stability. The clue lies in what has happened to state-society relations since 1986.

Constitutional democracy's emphasis on local power under Aquino led to the integration of the MNLF into the polity and the wilting of its separatist ideals. In the post-authoritarian era, popular sentiment has reverted to the familiar and the most convenient: elections, support for local politicians, and patron-clientism. It also means that the general population would prefer a return to mutual accommodation. Yet, there is the weakened disposition of the central state, precipitated by the failure of authoritarianism and the return of “cacique democracy.”³³ Politics had become dissipated, allowing for local power centers to reassert themselves and forge a mutually beneficial relationship with those in control of the central state. One of its unintended consequences—at least in the realm of academic inquiry—is the emergence of a different kind of local history that privileges less periphery-center, local-national interactions, but the lateral connections between various localities that were not necessarily in an unequal power relationship.

32 “Trapo” is a pejorative term used to describe the “typical” Filipino politician engaged in corrupt practices.

33 Benedict Anderson, “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams,” *New Left Review*, no. 169 (May–June 1988).

Sulu's Place in the Story

Sulu and its history are one such example. After the recession of authoritarian power in the archipelago, Sulu began to assume a different historical hue. A place considered by many in the national capital as the farthest point of the national territory, to its people, it is what the historian of early modern Southeast Asia Oliver Wolters would call a center on its right.³⁴ The stories coming out of the archipelago attest to that. Consider this encounter between Brigadier-General John Bates and Sultan Jamalul Kiram. As they “negotiated” (Bates imposed) over the issue of sovereignty, the latter suddenly asked the former if, as part of whatever agreement they would sign, he, the Sultan of Sulu, will be allowed “to hoist the American flag with his own” when he travels outside his domain, especially in Singapore where the Sultan had a house and where he traded. Bates, of course, said no for obvious reasons: his order was to bind the Sulu and the rest of Moro Mindanao to the emerging Philippine colonial body politic.³⁵ As a consequence, this “international trade” that the Sultan was engaged in was now illegal. All business activities now needed Manila’s approval and had to be coursed through the colonial capital for tax purposes.

In short, the Sultan and everyone else would have to cease involvement in this regional trade whose history predated the formation of colonial regimes whose circumscribed cartographies were invented and negotiated over in imperial capitals. This was a world that was immensely larger than any other maritime region. You can see this in a map, which the scholar of early Southeast Asia Heather Sutherland created, where she overlaid maritime Southeast Asia over the Mediterranean Sea. Under the Americans, however, Sulu was reclassified as a frontier, an unstable endpoint of the Philippine map. The Sultan’s and his community’s cosmopolitanism was expunged. He would be transformed into a “traditional” (i.e., backward) leader of a community of heathens of dubious loyalties, prone to savagery and criminality. By the stroke of Bates’s pen, the regional history in which Sulu was a principal player “disappeared.”³⁶

Yet, the centrality of the Sulu archipelago did not wane into irrelevance despite efforts by the colonial and then the national state’s historians to make it extraneous. Prof. Cesar Adib Majul hints at this in his two essential books on Moro history. He would be followed by the likes of

34 O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1999).

35 Vic Hurley, *Swish of the Kris: The Story of the Moros* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1936), 154–56.

36 Abinales, *Making Mindanao*, 75–76.

James Warren and Anthony Reid and younger academics like Joshua Gedacht, whose works give us a glimpse of the importance of Sulu to the trade in commodities and human enslaved people that was the critical commercial activity of the region and one which the Spanish tried to suppress in vain. Until the Americans came, it was the BIMP-EAGA of the late 19th and early 20th century. What needs adding here is the story of what happened next, when the Americans successfully integrated Moro Mindanao and later passed on that sovereignty to the Philippine Republic. Did this transfer of power spell the end of Sulu's centrality? I would argue it did not. It simply went under the radar to avoid Manila's prying eyes.

There are—I think—three manifestations of this resilient centeredness. The first is in what the state now calls illegal: smuggling. In an earlier paper, I presented at the November 2024 international conference on Tawi-Tawi, I noted that once the goods left Sandakan, they went through Bongao, Sitangkai, Cagayan de Sulu, Balabac, Taganak, and Turtle Islands, and from these places to several islands in the Visayas and other parts of Mindanao. These were then loaded into passenger and cargo ships heading to Manila. In some other cases, powerful *kumpits* would also take them directly to Manila and northern Luzon.³⁷

But it was also a two-way trade. The Philippines, through Sulu, was “exporting” copra from the Visayas in the 1950s and the 1960s. As one news report complained: “No less than 6,000 tons of Philippine copra were being smuggled to North Borneo every month and no less than \$18 million or roughly P72 million a year was smuggled out of the country to North Borneo.” How profitable was this trade? In 1960, Zamboanga customs officers captured a speedboat containing products and valuable goods worth more than P1 million pesos (₱148,707,19.503 in 2024). About the same time, Cebu customs captured a shipment of “diamonds, cigarets, textiles, perfumes, narcotics, and explosives” from Hong Kong coursed through Sandakan, Borneo, and Sulu, valued at P10 million pesos (₱1,487,071,495.026, in today's value, with 1960 as the base year).³⁸ The question you would like to ask is how much of these goods—not the arms or drugs, but food or other household goods—coming from Borneo and coursed through the Sulu archipelago had helped Filipino families, especially during challenging times like the protectionist 1950s and the economic crises of the 1960s? How much did this alternative market with Sulu as its hub contribute to keeping families' heads above water? I do not have the data for the sixties and onward, as the smuggling from the Sulu

37 Patricio N. Abinales, “Blue Seals and the Sulu World” (paper presented at Embracing the Currents: An International Conference on the Sulu Archipelago, Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, November 12–14, 2024).

38 Daily Mirror. March 31, 1952.

Sea and “technical smuggling” (the faking of import duties) were lumped together. This makes disaggregating the data more difficult, although the case studies done by the NGO International Alert suggest how to do it methodologically (Villanueva 2016).

Where else did Sulu continue to figure prominently? Here, the data from Manila’s end is sparse but appears rich at the ground level. I refer to the pilgrimage to Mecca. Where did they go once they left Jolo and landed in Sandakan? How did they get to Mecca? While cheaper airfares make it easier to transit through Manila these days, we know very little about this singular movement out of the Sulu archipelago towards the Middle East before that. But why concern us with Sulu and the Hajj? I would suggest that this was the main route for most of the 20th century and, in a way, kept Sulu Moros and all Mindanao Moros connected mentally and culturally to the larger Islamic ecumene. So we ask ourselves what kinds of cultural appropriation do they go through when they interact with other pilgrims? What changed? What was preserved? What was adopted and what was rejected in the global interaction of Moro pilgrims? What role did the Sulu archipelago play in all these?

My curiosity was particularly kindled by the mention of the historian Eric Tagliacozzo on the role of women. He wrote: “A hereditary princess from Sulu in the southern Philippines told of new gendered arrangements as well: because of her high status, she led a contingent of two thousand Filipino Muslims on Hajj several years ago, the only woman heading a delegation from anywhere in the world that year.” Tagliacozzo notes, “It is extremely rare for a woman to be given this honor, she explained. All of these arrangements show how the actual journeying of the Hajj mutates as circumstances change in the wider world.”³⁹ But how peculiar is this when we all know how powerful Moro women had been going as far back as Princess Tarhata Kiram?

The third one is unfortunate for the violence and destruction wrought on the peoples of the archipelago: the separatist war of the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and their more radical and fundamentalist aftermaths. In the works of Vitug and Gloria, as well as Rod Rodil, we read stories about the rebellion from above. We are also exposed to the ideological arguments in favor of separatism from the pens of Sallah Jubair and Michael Mastura. However, narratives of that war from the eyes of the combatants (rebel and ordinary soldiers), the communities affected, and local leaders remain scant.

39 Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 278.

There is a notable absence of studies on the international dimensions of the war and Sulu's vital role in that story. But the latter was reasonably necessary. Libyan support has been frequently mentioned, but not much. Malaysian assistance, none at all.

We learn of the Al Azhar University's influence on Moro nationalism and hints of Moro fighters earning their war spurs in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ But these are only the tip of the iceberg. Again, consider the global connections here regarding the flow of armaments and the back-and-forth of fighters as they trained abroad to do better on the battlefield, and Sulu's place in it. Imagine also what mental comparisons these fighters nurtured as they left Jolo, then off to Sandakan, and transiting in Kuala Lumpur as they traveled across Pakistan to Cairo and Tripoli for political education or military training.

The resistance-mutual accommodation narrative thus gets a bit more complicated here for several reasons. First, Sulu's elites rely mainly on state largesse to keep themselves in power. Still, the communities under their authority need not be that dependent on them because their regional (and dare I say global) connections guarantee them alternative sources of revenue. They prefer benefiting from this income stream peacefully, but as the revolts of the past—from Hadji Kamlon's solo defiance to Nur Misuari's MNLF and Abdurajak Janjalani's Abu Sayyaf Group—showed, resources coming through this cosmopolitan "southern backdoor" could sustain resistance.

Conclusion

All this would impact the future of places like Sulu. For the archipelago to grow, the only feasible option would be to shift to federalism and push for full devolution. The central state not only needs to relinquish its powers to determine the appropriate national and regional development program, but it should also allow Sulu to explore its regional and global connections, and its cosmopolitan world to the fullest. This would include even allowing the communities of Sulu to craft their own "economic policies" regarding the admixture of the licit and the illicit, and the retention of whatever profits derived from this fusion in the archipelago and not be extracted back to Manila.

40 "MILF Leader to Nida'ul Islam," "'Perhaps the Moro Struggle for Freedom and Self-Determination Is the Longest and Bloodiest in the Entire History of Mankind,'" Nida'ul Islam, April–May 1998, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/ph2.htm> (accessed July 11, 2025).

This is from Manila's side. There is also a challenge to be posed to those living in the "Sulu Zone," and those who study its ecosystems. All these cosmopolitan features remain unexplored because this so-called Philippine historiography, or to be more precise, the historiography from Manila, treats Sulu as a local history with its politics subordinated

to the nation's story. Moro anti-colonial resistance, for example, is framed in national terms, hence the term "Filipino-Muslim struggle." The consequence is the erasure of the Sulu Archipelago's connections with the region, one that, as mentioned above, predates the nation-state and which accounts for this unusual, understated cosmopolitanism of the peoples of the archipelago. If these regional connections are ever mentioned, state historians impose a time limit on them (the Spanish period), painting them thereafter as illicit (smuggling) and the catalysts of instability. You can write about Sulu being Southeast Asian, but this stopped in 1900.

Sulu's history *as regional, not local, might be more appropriate and meaningful*. We need a story that treats the archipelago's Southeast Asian and global connections equally, highlighting its ties with Manila and the rest of the Philippine archipelago. This rethinking, however, comes with several challenges. First, the written documents are sparse, and if there are ever any, one may find them in archives spread all across Southeast and South Asia, stretching from Sandakan to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, to as far as Tripoli and Cairo to the west and facing north from Xiamen to Hong Kong. These are multilingual sources and demand expertise in both English and Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malayu, Arabic, Fujianese, and Mandarin.

Relying on local sources can also present us with problems, the foremost of which is the sparseness of written accounts. Oral narratives are bountiful, but we also face the difficulty of memory recollection, particularly from the generations who fought the rebellion, the reluctance of "smugglers" to share one's trade, especially with police and the customs officers nearby, and the fear that the stories could stoke old rivalries or foment new ones. And what do we do once we have recorded these stories?

Will the state and its historians allow a narrative where the target of its decolonial project is not U.S. imperialism but 'Filipino colonialism?' Will they agree to reorient the national story to recognize that its farthest border zone has a story that parallels or contradicts it? I do not know. But going by what the folks of the Center for Integrative Studies of the University of

the Philippines—the State’s premier school of higher learning—are sponsoring here, there is hope. These might be possible, even doable.

Ultimately, it is a question of politics. It is difficult to imagine economic autonomy and region-based development under the present constitutional and political arrangement. Economic independence can only succeed if a regional development council, composed of provincial and local leaders, undertakes the above project (again, Tomas Osmena is the appropriate model), is imbued with powers to chart a development strategy fit for Mindanao’s diverse populace, and is allowed an opportunity to test its capacities.

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HISTORY AND CULTURE

The background is a dark, textured surface with a faint grid pattern. Overlaid on this are several white, hand-drawn line art elements. On the right side, there is a large, irregular shape resembling a cloud or a stylized animal. Below it, towards the center, is a smaller, more complex shape with several internal loops. On the left side, there is a simple, elongated shape. These elements appear to be sketches or doodles.



Sulu Spirituality and its Influence in the Philippines

DARWIN J. ABSARI

Abstract

Sulu's strategic location and active involvement in the ancient Southeast Asian maritime trade led its inhabitants, the Tausug, to inherit spiritual traditions of the Indians, Chinese, and later the Muslims who came to trade with them. Later, the Tausug produced their own spiritual system which became the essence of their culture, way of life, and the foundation of their civilization. At the height of their power in the beginning of the 15th century when Sultanate was established, the Tausug led the inter-island trade where their spiritual system found its way to influence the psychological and spiritual makeup of the early Filipinos. Its legacies remain alive until the present, which can be a potential source in establishing national unity.

Sulu spirituality was shaped by various civilizations encountered by the Tausug (people of Sulu) before even the arrival of Islam. The map (figure 1) shows how Sulu was an entrepôt; its involvement in the international sea trade facilitated the entry of Indian and Chinese traders and sages bringing with them their culture and spirituality. From the Hindu-Buddhist, the Tausug learned the concept of *Dukkah* to refer to sorrow, which in Buddhism is suffering. This was the first realization of Buddha on the nature of life in this world which became the first of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhist teachings.

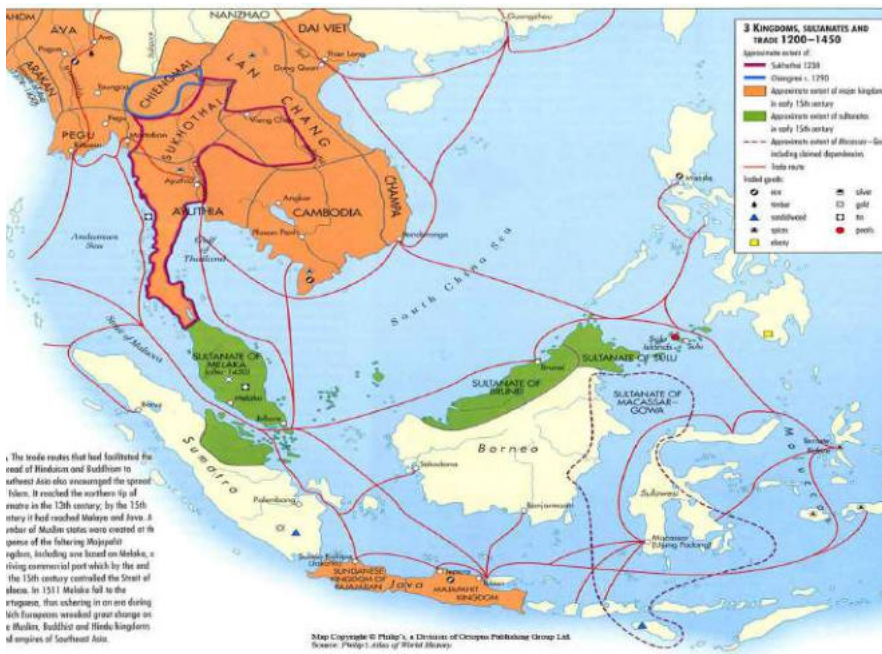


Figure 1. A map of Southeast Asian trade routes c. 1200-1450.

Bakti, from the Hindu *Bakhti*, means a devotional service and *bartapa* from Sanskrit *bratapas* (seclusion in the mountain) remain popular practices of acquiring divine knowledge in the circle of Tausug mystics. Even the term *Bud* which refers to mountain in the Tausug language must have been given by the Buddhists. *Budh* in Sanskrit is translated to awakening or restoring to life or consciousness so that to seclude in the mountain (*bartapa*) is to awaken from the sleep of ignorance and reach the state of the Buddha (The Awakened). Another important religious word which the Tausug inherited from Hindu-Buddhist is *agama* to refer to religion.

Taoist sages also contributed to the development of the Tausug spirituality in Sulu. The Tausug word *Tao* to refer to people may have been taken from the *Tao* of Taoism. According to Tausug spiritual practitioners, people are both the way and the goal, which is why knowledge of *PagTuhan* (Sulu spiritual system) is anchored in knowing oneself which was first learned from the Hindu sages. God in His Essence cannot be known—the *PagTuhan* concept of a Being beyond words, sounds, and letters (“*di mahurup, di matitik, di masuwara*”)—similar to “the nameless Tao.” This nameless Tao is identified as the *Wu Ji* (absolute nothingness) in the beginning of creation from which *Qi* (breath) arose and from which Yin and Yang arose. The Yin and Yang then gave rise to the five elements, which gave rise to the eight trigrams, and eventually the “ten thousand things” or the creation. Both the Tausug spiritual practitioners and Taoist sages agree that this state is beyond the reach of the human mind, but finding God is going back to this state—which in Taoist philosophy is returning to the source or embracing the Tao (the One).

Shêng jên, or sacred man, are those who have reached and embraced the Tao and become the perfect manifestation of the Way. They are also called *hsien* or immortal. Immortality is synonymous with enlightenment—a conscious union with the universal mind—and with the attainment of a spiritually transformed body that will last forever like heaven and earth.

There are different stages and levels of being immortal (*hsien*). In the *Pao-p’u-tzu*, Ko Hung describes three levels. The first is “the deliverance from the corpse” (*shih chieh*), wherein the adept are unable to transform their bodies sufficiently during their lives. “Earthly immortals” achieve an immortal body, but are unable to ascend to the heavens, and thus inhabit sacred mountains, distant isles, and paradisaal regions on earth. Even though they are not at the highest level of perfection, earthly immortals still enjoy great powers. “Heavenly immortals” are said to ascend to the heavens in their metamorphosed bodies in broad daylight. They are also called “flying immortals.” Similar practices and experiences can also be found in Sulu spirituality particularly the concept of *limāya* (immortal) includes the *talbang*, a person who vanishes in the grave before the last wall of rest is erected.

This already sophisticated religious and spiritual tradition which the Tausug had inherited from the Taoist and Hindu-Buddhist compelled the Muslims preachers who came beginning in late-12th century to teach the much higher-level Islamic intellectuality to facilitate a smooth transition to Islam. Working on the existing spirituality of the Tausug, Muslim preachers who were Sufis, brought Sulu spirituality to its peak. And after learning from various spiritual masters, the Tausug people produced their own spiritual system reflecting

their values and disposition and while harmoniously integrating their learnings from various spiritual sages. They call this spiritual system PagTuhan.

PagTuhan are mostly found in what the Tausug call *Kitab Kamaasan* (Book of the Elders) and in the mystical poetry known as the *Tarasul*. The famous *Kitab Kamaasan* is the *Baghawi* that contains spiritual knowledge on creation, worship, death, and purification. A chapter on creation for example shows a mother with a baby in her womb and the number of days (120–145 days) when the soul was breathed unto her/him. (figure 2).

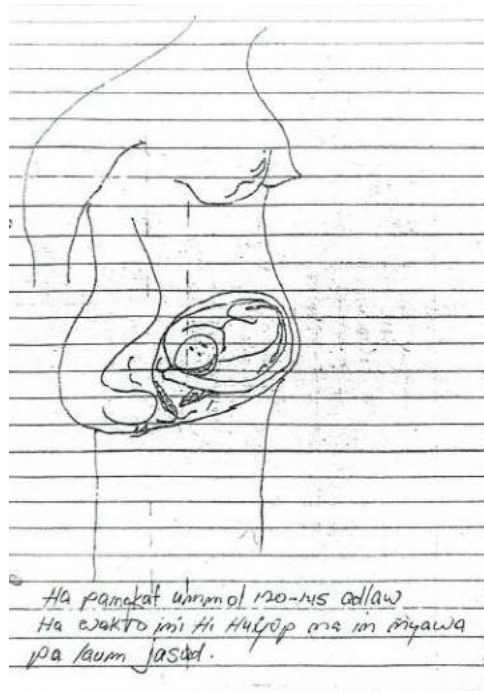


Figure 2. Baghawi illustration of a fetus in gestation at 120–145 days in utero.

This chapter of the Baghawi talks about how human beings were created and both the physical and the spiritual aspects of creation. Embryology and biology have only studied the physical self, but our ancestors knew even the soul—especially where it came from and exactly when the two (body and soul) merged and became one human being. There are two separate developments: the development of the soul from the source, who is God, and the development of the body from the water (egg cell) of the mother and the water (sperm) of the father. And at some point, these two merged, and a baby—a new life—was born.

What does it imply? If you look at creation—at our own self—we had no participation. Not even a single strand of hair did we contribute to our creation. So, we must not be arrogant. That is what Kitab Baghawi says. Whatever you have achieved in life, that is not you. And everything that is in us—our sight, our hearing—these are entrusted by God. Just because you have a PhD, it does not mean you should get angry when someone does not call you “Dr.”

The Kitab Baghawi teaches us to remain humble, to keep us reminded that we are nothing regardless of whatever you achieve in this world. You have to remain humble. Why? Even the Qur’an says that “Even a speck of pride in the heart, you will not even smell Paradise.”

This teaching serves as a reminder that we are nothing—that we are totally dependent on the power of God. It also teaches that we have to be grateful for our life—especially our sight, our hearing. Humanity in general is described in the Qur’an as ungrateful. The Qur’an says, “It is God who produced you, gave you hearing, sight, and heart, but few are grateful.” The teaching on the *Usul Ginhawa baran* or the “Essence of the Self” is to remind us and keep us grateful for the things that we have—our sight, our hearing. How to be grateful is to use our life, to use our hearing, to use our sight in the service of God and in the service of humanity.

Rooted in the concept of “we are nothing,” the Tausug people do not have a sense of ownership. For example, if a person had a piece of clothing and someone said, “Wow, your clothes are beautiful!”—they would take it off. If someone complimented your watch—even if it is worth ten thousand pesos—you would take it off. It is an unwritten rule, because everything you possess is not truly yours, it was entrusted to you. Once it is mentioned, it is no longer yours—it is theirs. That is the true Tausug.

The other implication is to give due appreciation and recognition to the people involved in creation—mothers. Among the Tausug, they say, “Even if you fed your mother from your palm, laid her down on money, you still would not be able to repay what she did for you.” That is why among the Tausug, the curse *putangina* (your mother is a whore) is a taboo. Speaking hurtful words is tolerated, but once you curse like that, it is over—it becomes a fight because you have involved someone’s mother.

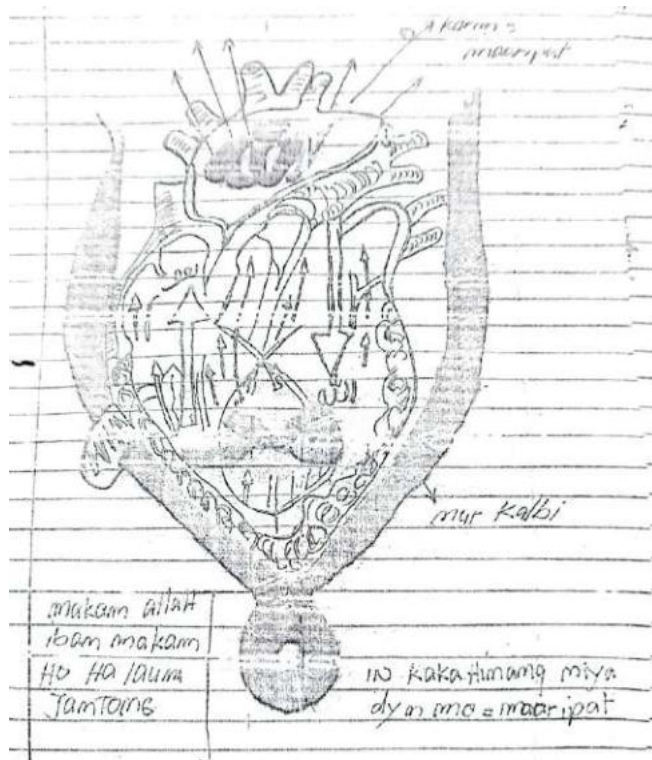


Figure 3. Illustration of a heart from the Kitab Bagawi.

Another chapter in the Kitab Bagawi is the discussion of the name of God, “ALLAH,” which according to the kitab, is a matrix encapsulating the story of creation. The Kitab Baghawi tells us to remember Allah through the heart as illustrated in the kitab. This is also beautifully expressed in the *tarasul*:

*Ampa in Kalimah Allah,
ha atay magkawasa.
In maksud parayawa, in Tuhan ta malasa.*

(And Allah that is a name
who controls the inner feeling
very well you refine your end
for our God is very loving.)

In some versions, one chapter of Baghawi is summarized in four lines of mystical poetry:

*Kalimah Allah masigpit,
ha atay mimikit.
Parayawa in katasdik,
ampa kaw di masirik.*

(The word Allah is tightly fit,
in the heart very well fixed.
Mentally you right contemplate it,
You won't be a polytheist.)

When the heart is tight, there is no space for other things. It means there is nothing else uttered by your heart but “Allah,” because the heart is the source of everything. The Prophet said, “Verily in the body is piece of flesh which, if sound, the entire body is sound. And if corrupt. The entire body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart.”¹ The Qur'an describes, “In their hearts is disease, So Allah has increased their disease.”² Another verse says, “Only in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest.”³ This particular teaching teaches us to keep our life attuned to the divine remembrance.

This spiritual tradition became the essence of Tausug culture that gave them power, manifesting in the culmination of the Sultanate. At the height of the Sulu Sultanate, Tausug were everywhere. There were many historical accounts. Even Quiapo came from the Tausug “Kayapo,” from the kayapo mushroom. Pasig, Tondo, Malabon—all these places were visited by the Tausug, extending to the farthest north. You can see in the map (figure 4) before the coming of the Spaniards. The black-shaded areas, these are Muslim areas.

1 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 52, Hadith 45.

2 Qur'an 2:10.

3 Qur'an 13:28.

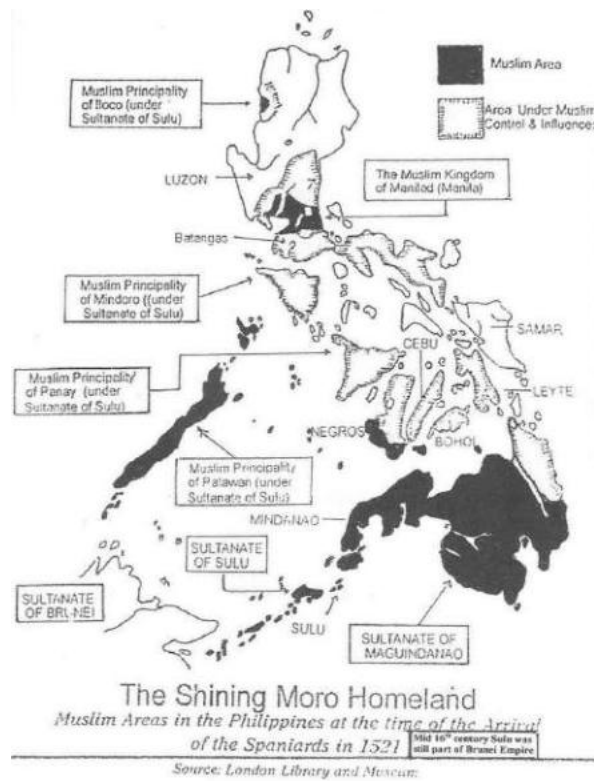


Figure 4. A map of Moro land holdings upon the arrival of the Spanish.

These territories extended as far as Ilocos, under the influence of the Sultanate of Sulu, including Panay and other areas.

At some point in history, the inter-island and international sea trade was led by the Tausug. There are many historical accounts which you can find in books. That trade exchange and partnership between the Tausug and the early Filipinos resulted in cultural exchange. The Tausug were spiritual masters in the entire country. From this emerged a legacy of *kapwa* (self). The concept of *kapwa* was first studied in the 1960s when Filipino nationalist scholars began uncovering indigenous thoughts. From a Western perspective, *kapwa* means “fellow human being,” without any connection to the us. Upon examining Filipino concepts, scholars found that the original meaning of *kapwa*, according to old Filipino psychology, is an extension of oneself. “If I look at you, I see myself.” Enriquez, the scholar who pioneered the study of *kapwa*, tried to trace the model. Where did the Filipino concept of *kapwa* come from? He studied Greek thoughts, Indian thoughts, Chinese thoughts—he said, “None.” His conclusion was, “Asian.” But I wondered, “Why didn’t he look into Islam? Maybe he would

have found the answer.” Among our ancestors you still hear, “That is you, that is me” and “I cannot hurt you because if I hurt you, I hurt myself.”

Who taught them the concept of *kapwa*? The ancestors of the Tausug. The *kapwa* concept is the core psychological principle of Filipinos. From the concept of *kapwa* emanated *pakikiramay* (empathy), *pakikisalamuha* (social interaction), *pagmamalasakit* (concern for others). Where did they get that? Our ancestors taught them. The concept of *kapwa*—“that is you, that is me”—was taken by our ancestors from the divine concept of *tawhid* (Oneness).

Their understanding of *tawhid* was not just the worship of one God. It meant seeing the world—all of creation’s varied manifestations—as embraced in Divine Oneness, or the Oneness of Existence. As the spiritual masters put it: “See the One within the many; see the many within the One.” When you look around, you should see Divine Oneness—a sense of deep connectivity. That is why our ancestors not only loved their fellow Tausug, but also loved Christians. We still hear it: “They are also God’s children.” They loved nature as well, because of this sense of connection, this sense of *tawhid*.

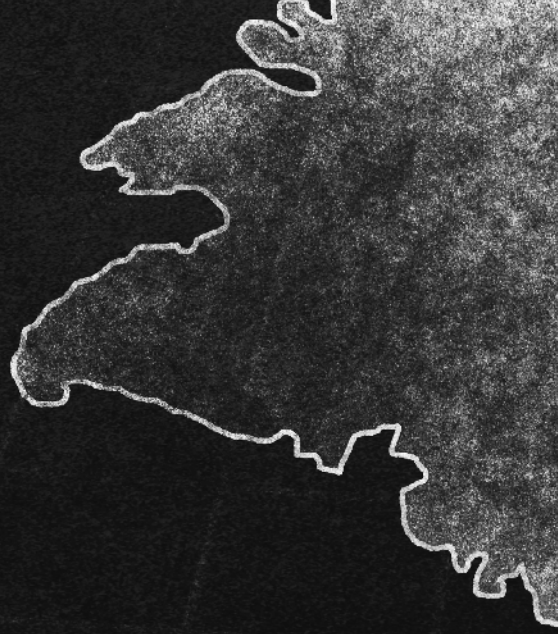
Ginhawa is another example of the Sulu spirituality influence in Luzon and Visayas. In his book *The Filipino Mind*, Leonardo Mercado proposed the common term *ginhawa* to replace the borrowed word *espíritu* (soul).⁴ It is used by the Tagalog, Bisaya, Maranao, and the Maguindanao. The word *ginhawa* was taught and popularized by the Tausug of Sulu. *Ginhawa* in Sulu means the entirety of the self. The prefix “gin-” means totality.

Another important legacy can be seen in the tagalog word *saliksik* (Research) which is derived from the word *salik*, the singular form of *suluk* (spiritual seeker) where the name Tausug was taken. This means that the way the Tausug taught the early Filipino ancestors their concept of research was not merely the gathering of data, it was the search for God. We are not the only *ahlus suluk* (people of the path) because we taught the whole nation how to seek God. That was the essence of early Filipino *saliksik*.

4 Leonardo N. Mercado, *The Filipino Mind* (Manila: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994).

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The Prominence of Ahalus Sūlūk

BENJAMIN. S. BANGAHAN

Abstract

The historiography about Ahalus Sūlūk has remained misinterpreted for centuries because of the failure of western writers to understand what the term refers to. It being purposely made as a topic in a conference for possible rectifications of the inaccurate historiography is a welcome move, for the errors have led to dishevelments of Sulu history, and incorrect suggestions of etymology of names have been committed. Writings done by genuine unbiased Bangsa Sūg scholars and university professors are expected to provide objective outputs especially regarding the Ahalus Sūlūk's teachings on Islamic spirituality, cultural ways of life and language, and love of the motherland. The openminded contemporary discernment of the Ahaluk Suluk beneficence is emphasized.

Introduction

Ahlu s-Suluk and *Suluk* are interconnected ideas I have advocated for years. This part of the conference is, in fact, more like a prologue that helps audiences understand what *Ahalu s-Sūlūk* (or *Ahl ul Sūlūk*) is—whose actual prominence has been poorly perceived, even by some of us Tausūgs and more so by non-Tausūgs. Yet, it can be shown that there have been historiographic misses and inaccuracies that, if rectified, could alter people's general concept about Sūlū. We appreciate efforts geared towards eliminating these misconceptions and uncover the significance of the independent Tausūg citizens.

Insight on the inexact historiography has been shared by the present father figure of our motherland, inciting the rectification of the erroneous and the acquaintance of the Bangsa Sūg with the more accurate Sūlū history. We aim to make it known that the *Ahalul Sūlūk/Ahalus Sūlūk* has, for many centuries, been the root from which the Bangsa Sūg grew and that the ra'ayat (citizens) have been enlightened and made resilient by Islam, with a complementary incipient governance—which also influenced the wider culture and language.¹ We hope the Bangsa Sūg, as well as interested outsiders, will benefit from the positive impacts of this conference. I also take it upon myself to convey our Bangsa's feeling of gratitude to its hosts, the UP System through the UP-CIDS, and the MSU Sūlū.

Aiming to recoup our values, I have opted to encompass the uncertainty period, the rightful roles of *Ahalul Sūlūk*, and its impacts on the Tausūgs' sense of peoplehood.

Suluk: The Primordial Name and the Point of Reference

I start by considering “Suluk” as the most appropriate primordial name to which relevance or irrelevance of any point should hinge; it is also the most suitable starting point of this write-up despite the etymologic sources being hazy or, in fact, unheard of by foreign writers. Additionally, *Suluk* is the only primordial name that remains in strong use and is distinct from the many other names and notions by other historians.

Suluk, however, would later be written as *Sulu*, with an altered orthography, which is now used by writers to enhance readability and considering that readers may think that the lost

1 Bangahan, Benj. S. The Origin of the Terms Sūlū and Sūg. *The Peacemaker, Journal of Congressman Yusop Jikiri*: Vol. II, No. III. Aug. 2008. 1995.

letter “k” looks like a lost syllable at the end. The writer who thought of this must have been familiar with Bahasa Malay that tolerates the practice of using the letter as a symbol for “glottal stop” sound. A glottal stop, or a glottal plosive, is more familiarly notated by Western writers with an apostrophe sign (') if they find it necessary, a practice that is not common in formal writings. Within the practice of Bahasa Malay speakers, both “Suluk” and “Sulu” could be observed being used interchangeably. But as will be explained more clearly later, *Ahalul Sūlūk* is an Arabic term, not Malay.

Suluk's Other Names and Possible Etymology

As part of my personal endeavor to create some clarity among the orthographic variations of Suluk as a nomenclature, I am exploring the Bangsa Sūg predilection for contracting syllables in day-to-day conversations, focusing on those with the letter “L.” Namely: *wala'* contracts to *wā'* (meaning not or no), *malayu'* contracts to *māyu'* (far), *salla'* contracts to *sā'* (defect, imperfection), and *Sūlūk* contracts to *Sūk'*; the use and meaning of the original ones are undeleted.

Sūk, as the contraction of *Suluk* needs to be touched on further. First, the word is similar to the Arabic “Sūq”—meaning market—that has excited some Tausūg students in the Middle East into deducing that “sūq,” the market, is the etymologic source of *Sūk*, the place. To me, the idea could be probably but is likely flawed, as there has never been an Arabic market in our homeland formidable enough to set up the name.

Secondly, *Sūk* ultimately was transformed into *Sūg*,² a word that the Tausūgs have now considered unalterable—as a root and a suffix—that is responsible for developing compound nouns which can be written in many allowable ways: spaced, as exemplified by *Lupa' Sūg*, *Raayat Sūg* and *Bahasa Sūg*; hyphenated in *anak-Sūg*, *lawd-Sūg*, *kapū'an-Sūg*; and closed or solid as in *Tausūg* and occasionally *Bangsasūg*. We must not forget, however, that *Sūk* has had its time of use and has not been removed from the vocabulary. For example, the Sama-speaking people, especially the Sama Dilaut, have been using “A-a Sūk” to mean “Tausūg” up to now, confirming that “Sūk” has been initially useful.

Many may wonder why and how *Sūk* was transformed into *Sūg*. My perception attributes the process to the human deficiency for aural keenness for words that are heard during

2 Bangahan, Benj. S. English – Bahasa Sūg Dictionary, *Kitab-Maana Anggalis-Bahasa Sūg*. Quezon City: Vibal Publishing House. 2015.

conversations and the unrefined ways of enunciating in other instances. With both being potential causes of confusions of end-syllable phonemes like those of the letters “K” and “G,” which are hard to distinguish. Especially when distance serves as an unfavorable factor, the transformation could be expected, hence Sūk becoming Sūg.³

The name Sūg, however, has also been picked by foreign writers, and even by homegrown enthusiasts, as a good subject for conceptualizing possible etymological sources. Dr. Najeeb Saleeby, a non-Muslim Arab-American from Lebanon, wrote that Sūg could have been derived from “sulug,” a Maguindanaon word that means sea current,⁴ despite the fact that Maguindanaon language and culture have never played a role in the development of the Bahasa Sūg and Tausūg culture; additionally, the Sulu Sultanate as a sovereignty was much older than the sultanates in mainland Mindanao. To add to that, the Sama word “sollog,” meaning sea current, has been offered by some people as a possible etymology of Sūg, though there is neither an appropriate historical event nor an attention-catching sea current in the region to bolster it. Another related etymology arose when Major C.E. Livingstone, an American constabulary officer during the American regime, wrote the “Constabulary Monograph of the Province of Sulu” where he stated that Sulu was derived from “Su’ug” which means “a current of the sea” due to “the island’s location being sliced by many swift-flowing currents.” He was only contributing to his group’s unawareness, however—all the oceans of the planet earth have swift-flowing currents, and some of them may even be more palpably iconic. Incidentally, he was quoted by James Francis Warren.⁵

The preceding ideas do not measure up to the primordial name Suluk.

The involvement of “sea current,” however, has brought up a distinct but disputable point that developed from a misuse of a meaning of one word for another to which it is not related, though with nearly similar pronunciations. Sūg, the terminal form of the contracted Suluk, does not have any meaning in the Bahasa Sūg vocabulary aside from being the name of the place. On the other hand, “sea current” in the Gimbahanūn dialect—spelled with a schwa, an unstressed mid-central vowel like the phoneme of “u” in “turn” or “urn,” and written here as “ü” with a diacritic umlaut, (but written by IPA as an upside-down e hence “ə”)—“süwg” is also written as “sūg” in the dialect of the Parianūn since they do not use the

3 Bangahan. English-Bahasa Dictionary. 2015.

4 Saleeby, Najeeb M. The History of Sulu. Manila: Bureau of Printing. 1908.

5 Warren, James Francis. The Sulu Zone 1768-1898. Quezon City: New Day Publishers. 1981.

schwa vowel. Because of this, Sūg has been wrongly understood as “sea current” and the misapplied etymology for Tausūg, “people of the current,” even went into use.

The development of the dialectal variations was probably due to the different colonists, travelers, and religious disseminators that passed by or settled in Southeast Asia, each with their respective language. The mother of Asian languages, the Proto-Austronesian (PAN), from which later arose the Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) language, has four vowel signs⁶—a, i, u, and ü (schwa)—and was the source of the Gimbahanün alphabet with its four vowels. During the regime of the Srivijayan Empire (7th–14th centuries), the Sanskrit language, which also has four vowels, laid over the PMP and led to the development of the Old Malay language that the Srivijayan later enthusiastically propagated for centuries; the use of the four vowels was emphasized again by the subsequent settlers, like the Majapahit whose alphabet also has four vowels.⁷ During this Srivijayan period, Arab and Persian merchants and travelers would frequently pass by these areas, with their languages influencing Old Malay, transforming it into Classical Malay, the period of the language that later branched out widely. On the other hand, the Arab *alifbā’tā’* (alphabet) which has only three vowel signs (a, i, u), was taught during the Islamic propagation, but its coverage was limited to the urban and shoreline areas, resulting in its adoption by the Parianün but not by the Gimbahanün, leading to the dialectic and lexical differences.

More Orthographic Touches on Sulu From Foreign Writers

Sulu, the name that has been renowned, also went through inaccurate orthographic variations (Sulo, Sooloo and Soeloe) at the hands of writers who were unoriented with the term. On the part of the Spanish alphabet, various dynamics have taken place. For example, during the medieval period, the letter X was used to make the “s” sound, and was also used to write “Sulu” as “Xolo.” In the mid-17th century, the “X” phoneme then morphed into the letter “J” while producing the hard “H” sound. This dynamic of the Spanish alphabetic could be the whim behind the change of “X” in “Xolo” to “J,” hence “Jolo.” This is a specific Spanish brainchild that must be emphasized to obviate a confusion with another unfitting term that was picked from a Chinese vocabulary, “Ho Lo,” by some writers, which my research also did not find any positive link.

6 Blust, Robert, *The Austronesian Languages*. Pacific Linguistics. 2009.

7 Myron Malkiel-Jirmounsky, *The Study of the Artistic Antiquities of Dutch India* (n.p., 1939).

Nevertheless, mention must be made that China had called Sulu as “Ku Ling,” a Chinese orthographic corruption of “Kulan,” a part of the name “Banjar Kulan” that Banjarmasin and Srivijayan gave to Sulu in the 9th century after they defeated the Orang Dampuan (Champan people from southern Vietnam). The Orang Dampuan was in Sulu since the 5th century doing international business in Sulu pearls.⁸

The Srivijayan empire, however, was defeated by the Majapahit in 1049, and during the Majapahit, the poet Mpu Prapanca wrote a poem in 1365 titled *Nāgarakretāgama* in which he mentions *Solot* (with a parenthesized “Sulu”) in Canto XIV, as one of the places the Majapahit ruled in the region.⁹ It would not be flimsy to regard the possibility of “Solot” as the Majapahit’s peculiar pronunciation and writing of the Arabic word “Sūlūk,” which must have had its introduction and circulation within the region at least a number of centuries before this use. Geoff Wade in his work *Early Muslim Expansion in South-East Asia, Eighth to Fifteenth Centuries*, has claimed that there is little doubt that the earliest introduction of Islam to South-East Asia was by Muslim merchants who had travelled along the maritime routes, which could be about five centuries before the period of the Majapahit Empire.¹⁰ Wade’s claim is a good basis for estimating the approximate period when the name “Sūlūk”/“Sūlū” was first used, especially in relation to the earlier name “Banjar Kulan” given by the Srivijayan/Banjarmasin colonists.

The Ahalus Sūlūk and the Unperceived Syllabic Accents

I was once one of the many Tausūgs who were unaware of the prominence of the Ahalul Sūlūk/Ahlu s-Sūlūk, until one day during my post-high school time I had the opportunity to listen to a speech by the late Congressman Salih Ututalum (a former schools division superintendent of Sulu). For the first time, I heard the name Sulu repeatedly pronounced as Sūlū—with the two syllables prolonged—which created a doubt in my mind on what was the accurate meaning of the word that most people believed it to be. I was in awes for years and wanted to talk to friends, read materials that were hard to find, and consult elders familiar with esotericism. Only after 35 or so years with my curiosity had I found a chance to request

8 Beyer, H. Otley. Historical Introduction. In E. Arsenio Manuel Chinese Elements in the Tagalog Language. Manila: Filipiniana Publications. 1948.

9 Ututalum, Sururul-ain; Hedjazi, Abdul-Karim. The Rise and Fall of the Sulu Islamic Empire (1675-1919). North Carolina: Professional Press. 2002

10 Wade, Geoff. Early Muslim Expansion in Southeast Asia, eight to fifteenth centuries. 2010.

a friend, who had the ability to fathom the essence of the matter, to search for some esoteric books on my behalf. Fulfilling it, he sent me three books from Malaysia: one of them being the “Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri,” the published doctoral thesis of Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas for his PhD in Islamic Studies at the University of London. There I found Sūlūk with the right orthography, accent, etymology, and the exact meaning.

Sūlūk, an Arabic term that originates from “salaka” which means to travel or to journey, is used to mean “path,” but more likely is in the context of Sufism where it refers to the path of spiritual development in seeking closeness to God. The phrase “Ahlu s-Sūlūk,” or “Ahlu l-Sūlūk” then refers to the “People of the Path to Allāh” as written in “The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri” as well as in other esoteric books that I found useful for comparison, like the “Contemplative Discipline in Sufism.”¹¹ They turned out to be learned Awliya’ Sufi Islamic gurus travelling to disseminate their Islamic tradition until a considerable number of people in the region were able to adopt the Islamic dogma, after which the name Ahlu s-Sūlūk became etched on the people’s mind. Dismissing additional names hypothesized more out of fancy, I then believed that there could have been no other more precise etymologic source of the name Sūlūk/Sūlū than those gurus of Islam, considering the similarity of the terms and the apparent lack of other possible sources that have a convincing approximate to the name.

Who Could Be Considered as Part of the *Ahlu S-sūlūk*?

The gurus who could be part of the esteemed group would not be easy to elucidate, however, as they reached our motherland at different times. The unclear circumstances that surrounded the events of the *Awliyas*’ arrivals might have served as part of the implicit deterrence at attempts to know who the gurus exactly were, or to determine their respective periods of influence. Augmenting the complication were the manners through which the narrative had been transmitted which came in various forms. For one, it used to be narrated as a word-of-mouth tale in informal gatherings, which became the most common method. Sometimes it would be also sung as *kissa*, a Tausūg musical genre that chants the ballads in a rhyming song. Occasionally, the legend would be used as part of a *hutba*’ or sermon, during the Friday congregational prayers.

Our indoctrinated Tausūg ancestors came up with the phrase *Pitu Magtaymanghud* (“Seven Siblings”) to refer to those initial gurus, and the phrase has become a part of the Tausūg mind-setting myth. It is obviously a Tausūg metaphorical way of referring to the pioneering

11 Valiuddin, Mir. *Contemplative Discipline in Sufism*. East-West Publication. 1980.

Islamic teachers, apparently conceptualized from the circumstances of their arrivals and proselytizing that occurred in sequence, with one following another, and with a varying length of time in between each. In addition, the legend could have transcended beyond the numerical context, for it is possible that the actual gurus could have been more than seven in number if the periods from the ninth to the later centuries were taken into account.

This folk narrative would then be widely circulated and tales about the Ahalus Sūlūk and their main objective and significance, as well as names of those that were remembered, were handed down from generation to generation. Many names were mentioned in history books written by foreigners, even including names of others who were not cited in the circulated folk narrative. We were able to interview some sources who still remember their own family's version.

The **first source** is a Tausūg Mukali-adherent, a Burhānūn descendant residing in Jolo, who our group interviewed in February 2016. The Jolo resident outlined their family's stories of the seven siblings and their identities: (1) Muhammad Ali (no other data mentioned); (2) An unnamed sibling buried in Kabinga'an, an island east of Lugus and the Tapūl Islands and northeast of mainland Siasi; (3) Another unnamed one whose tomb is found in Būd Pula, a mountain in the island of Lugus southwest of Tapūl; (4) Tuwan Mahadum, also called Mahadum Aminullah; (5) Apu' Biyaw, buried in an area somewhere in Siasi Island, with no specification; (6) Another unnamed sibling, whose place of burial is Būd Kāha', near Būd Karāwan, municipality of Indanan; and (7) Ambu' Dayang Arūya, said to have been buried in Punungan, an old place in the eastern coast of Siasi island.

This first source specifies the areas where the tombs are located, although some have not been fully identified. Only four individuals were named, and only two have been mentioned in historical pieces: Tuwan Mahadum and Muhammad Ali. Tuwan Mahadum/Mahadum Aminullah could plausibly point to Karīmūl Makhdum, the Sharif Awliya', whose proper name is Sharif Ibrahim Zayn al-Din al-Akbar. Al-Attas concurs with the year 1360 as the Sharif Awliya's arrival to Sūlū, and his tomb has been said to be located in East Java, where he died after his return from Mindanao.¹² The term *Makhdum*, *Mahadum* or the like should be dealt with care since there has been a trending belief that there were more than one *makhdumin* (plural of *makhdum*), as this term is only a title that could be applied to anyone with an appropriate attainment of Islamic knowledge. Furthermore, there are confirmed tombs of

12 Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Historical Fact and Fiction*. Unibersiti Teknologi Malaysia. 2012.

supposed *makhdum* found in different islands in the Sūlū Archipelago; I personally saw the one in Tandu' Bānak, a shoreline community of Sibutu' Island in Tawi-Tawi Province, where the tomb had already grown on its own into a hill. Another tomb on top of Būd Bonggaw (which I also personally saw) has been touted as that of a possible *makdum* or part of *Ahalus Sūlūk*. Of the four names of the gurus in this first source, only two are male-sounding (Muhammad Ali and Tuwan Mahadum), and only one sounds female (Ambu' Arūya). Apu' Biyaw's gender is not specified.

The **second source** is a Parang-born Sharif resident of Pangutaran, who mentioned five completely different names from those in the first version. All seven in this version are males and are considered as *Awliya'* and *Sharif*. There are more names here that are familiar as they have been mentioned in some history books, like Sharif Hashim Shakirullah (who could possibly be Shariful Hashim, the first Sultan of Sūlū, who was himself an Islamic missionary), and Sharif Alawi Balpaki, who arrived in the eighteenth century—the latter was supposed to have died here and his tomb is said to be in the north of Tawi-Tawi.¹³ The other five are Sharif Makhdum Aminullah, Shari Karīmatullah, Sharif Barrahamah, Datu Masukud (mythicized to have a “long tongue”), and Sharif Kabungsuwan (Kabungsuhan).

The seemingly similar names in the list, like those of Sharif Makhdum Aminullah and Sharif Karīmatullah, need some clarifications, however, as they could possibly refer only to Karīmul Makhdum—the Sharif Awliya' already described in the preceding paragraph—though these could as well refer to different individuals, suggesting additional mix-up.

The **third source** is another Sharif whose family originates from the island of Tapūl, Sūlū, but who are now permanent residents of Davao. His narrative, which includes more historical names, enumerates Sharif Makhdum, Sharif Awliya', Sharif Marja, Sharif Hasan, Sharif Jaynal Abidin, Sharif Raja Baginda, Sharif Abubakar, and Sharif Muhammad ibn Ali. There are obviously eight “siblings” enumerated, but the first two names (Sharif Makhdum and Sharif Awliya') have already been identified in the preceding paragraph as that of the Karīmul Makhdum.¹⁴

13 Majul, Cesar Adib. *Muslim in the Philippines* (3rd ed.). Manila: St. Mary's Printing. 1978.

14 Al-Attas. *Historical Fact and Fiction*. 2012

Sharif Maraja apparently points to the third version's Sharif Marja, who arrived in Maguindanao about a generation after Karīmūl Makhdum.¹⁵ Though his identity has not been firmly established, Al-Attas enumerates that his identity has been affirmed by genealogists as related to Sharif Awliya' and to Sayyid Ali Zayn al-Abidin. On the other hand, the name Sharif Muhammad ibn Ali should tie up with the first version's Muhammad Ali—who actually was the real Sharif Kabungsuhan (also mentioned in the second version), the youngest son of Sharif Jaynal Abidin (Sayyid Ali Zayn al-Abidin) and his wife, the daughter of Sultan Iskandar of Johore (Malacca). He also had two elder brothers, Muhammad (or Alawi) and Ahmad.¹⁶ However, the Sūlū *sarsila* in the possession of Hadji Butu, as cited by Al-Attas, states that Sharif Abubakar or Shariful Hashim was the son of Sayyid Ali Zayn al-Abidin, whose mother was the daughter of Sultan Iskandar of Johore, therefore making him a brother of Sharif Kabungsuhan, a claim that Al-Attas has not negated and in fact has made him opine later that the three brothers would then become the sultan of Brunei (the eldest), sultan of Sūlū, and sultan of Maguindanao, which is why the three sultanates are related by blood.

“Sharif Raja Baginda,” a historicized name, most likely refers to Rajah Baginda, the one who arrived in Sūlū from Minangkabaw about ten years after Karīmūl Makhdum, and who became the father-in-law of Shariful Hashim. Some genealogists have attempted to identify Rajah Baginda, coming up with the proposal that he was a brother of Sayyid Zayn al-Abidin, therefore making him the uncle of Shariful Hashim.¹⁷ What becomes more recognizable here is a bigger picture that shows that these “People of the Path” are related to one another as progenies of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

The **fourth source** is also a Sharif, hailing from Zamboanga del Norte but claims Parang, Sūlū as the possible origin of his ancestors, is generally congruous with the others above. He gives here a comment with regard to the “long tongued” issue in the myth that asserts that Datu' Masukud was a mere companion of an *awliya'* (Karīmūl Makhdum), a claim also shared by the sources of the second and the third versions.

It has been observed that some historicized names have not been mentioned by any of the sources we have talked with, which is not unexpected in old narratives orally transmitted from generation to generation. To emphasize some examples, there is Tuwan Mashaika who

15 Al-Attas. Historical Fact and Fiction. 2012

16 Al-Attas. Historical Fact and Fiction. 2012

17 Al-Attas. Historical Fact and Fiction. 2012

is considered the first to proselytize Islam to the Tausügs. He arrived in Sülū in the middle or later part of the 13th century, about a century ahead of Karimul Makhdum, the builder of the first mosque in Simunul in 1380. He married the daughter of Rajah Sipad the Younger with whom he built a family. Tuwan Mashaika died in 1310 and his tomb is on top of Būd Datu', a part of Indanan municipality in Sülū. Another name not mentioned by the sources, but mentioned by Saleeby in his history of Sulu is Tuwan Mukbalu.¹⁸ Tuwan Mashaika and Tuwan Mukbalu were long understood to be two different gurus until Al-Attas proposed that they were one and the same person.¹⁹

Perhaps a facet of this subject that must be mentioned is the non-Arab participation in the dissemination of Islam, whether or not they were with the *Awliyas'* groups or trips. More frequently mentioned are the Chinese, specifically the Muslims from Hui-Hui, China. There could have been a number of them across multiple trips as suggested by a number of Chinese *tampat* (*Awliya's* tomb) found in a number of places. One of them is on top of Būd Tapūl, and another one can be found in Panglayahan, Patikul, Sülū.

To have all the data included, it would be beneficial to cite the unmentioned expansions of Islam between the ninth and the 15th centuries which are subsumed in the following chronology by Alkhateeb²⁰:

1. *The early period of the ninth or 10th century, which is that reckoned period of the initial Muslim arrivals to Southeast Asia from mainland China—through Formosa—during their escape from the Chinese civil war (878–889 AD) originating from the rebellion of Huang Chao against the Tang dynasty;*
2. *The period of the Indian colonization during which Indian Sufis, who had been taught Islam in the seventh century by Muslim Arab and Persian missionaries, were believed to have subsequently taught the Sülūk ancestors;*
3. *The coming of the Hadramawt Sufis, the progenies of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), that frequented the region more from the 12th to the 16th centuries; and*

18 Saleeby. History of Sulu. 1908.

19 Al-Attas. Historical Fact and Fiction. 2012

20 Alkhateeb, Frias. How Islam Spread in India. Retrieved March 2017. lostislamichistory.com.

4. *The role played by Sharif Ali, an Arab missionary from Taif, who during his term as the third Brunei sultan (1425–1432) arrived to Sūlū to establish Islam and convert the Hindus; he died and was buried in Lupa’ Sūg but his tomb was destroyed by the Spaniards.*²¹

Impacts on the Tausūg Sense of Peoplehood

The *Ahalul Sūlūk* indoctrination of the Tausūg to the Islamic dogma has been so ingrained that it is reflected in the region’s state of affairs, consequently influencing polar opposites approaches—such being die-hard enemies who fight to death, or esteemed and faithful friends willing to give their lives for someone precious to them. Examples of a conflict-developed extreme, among the many, that were enhanced by racial and religious differences are the Battle of Būd Dahu’ (1906) and the Battle of Būd Bagsak (1913)²² in which Tausūg warriors, women, and children made the mountain tops their forts of defense against the American colonists despite their overwhelmingly outnumbered and outgunned position. They embraced their internalized ethos tightly from the very start, that nothing could ever detach them from the Almighty Allāh and stop them from living the Tausug way of life. One important but poignant part of the four-day Būd Dahu’ Battle was how Adam, a head of the three warrior groups, reacted to his emotional conflict brought about by his love for Islam, his daughter, and for Sūlū, the Motherland. On the fourth day, when he sensed that it would be the last, he made a decision. He took his 4-year old daughter with his left hand and carried her by his left side, unsheathed his wavy kris with his right hand, and declared out loud, “I will be happy to die with my daughter and we’ll be together in the hereafter, rather than leave her alone and be enslaved by these infidel Americans,” before rushing into the enemy line. They received a total of 15 bullet hits before they fell to the ground.

The thousands of warriors, women, and children of both wars met their defeat, but we proudly call them “honorable defeats,” as despite being outnumbered and outgunned, they continued fighting, adhering to the Tausūg ancestors’ guiding aphorism, “Labi pupudjihūn in tau muti’ in būkūg dayng sin tikūd-tikūd” (translated to “A person is more honorable with his bones showing their white than their heels paling while in flight.”)

21 Ututalum, Sururul-ain; Hedjazi, Abdul-Karim. *The Rise and Fall of the Sulu Islamic Empire (1675–1919)*. North Carolina: Professional Press. 2002

22 Fulton, Robert A. *The Battle of the Clouds*. From Moroland. Bend, Oregon: Tumalo Creek Press. 2007.

The opposite extreme is one that promotes love, peace, and harmony following the discipline of Islamic brotherhood that Muslims should love one another to generate one worldwide family that is propped by the shared faith. Such a belief is steadfastly carried out by the Tausūg. The Bangsa Sūg empathize with all Muslims who are terrorized, disrespected, considered low-class humans, massacred, and subjected to genocide. This trait of empathy for the esteemed people a Tausūg has considered precious and for whom he is willing to give his life must have been an offshoot from the discipline of Islamic Brotherhood.

From Arabic “Ahlu S-Sūlūk,” we are the *Sinugized* Ahalus Sūlūk, people of the path to Allāh, literally Tausūg, who make up the Bangsa Sūg... not people of the current, nor any other.

Māassalam.

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The background is a dark, textured surface with a faint, light-colored grid pattern. Several white, hand-drawn outlines of landmasses are scattered across the page, including a small island on the left, a larger landmass in the center, and a complex shape on the right.

PEACE PROSPECTS



Sketches of Sulu: The Long *Durée* of Peace, Conflict, and Beyond

GEORGI ENGELBRECHT

Abstract

After decades of intermittent warfare, insurgency, and clan conflict on the island of Sulu—one of the southernmost provinces of the Philippines—has slowly recovered. Locals and external observers alike highlight that the situation has been the most peaceful in recent history. However, some articulate that peace may be temporary and that Sulu's history shows a conflict trap. The recurrence of conflict in Sulu is, however, not only a product of Philippine post-colonial history but also part of a *longue durée* that started with the very onset of one of the first political entities in the nation state that is now the Philippines. The ebb-and-flow of conflict throughout the centuries found its apotheosis in recent years with the last battles between the military and the networked actor, the Abu Sayyaf Group, which also resulted in the first suicide bombings in the country. External linkages also influenced both the long conflict and its recent manifestation. But what caused organized political violence in Sulu to reproduce itself over the decades and what are its prospects for sustainable peace? This paper relies on historical records, field notes over nine years, conflict data, and interviews. It will also attempt to stay in the tradition of linking the small or micro-level conflict to the bigger picture of recurrent cycles of history and the wider region.

Introduction and strategic context

The secessionist conflict in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, and its succeeding manifestations of organized violence, have been one of the most enduring examples of armed conflict across the globe. Sulu, as a key theatre of the armed violence, has been a crucial part of the Moro rebellion that started in the late 1960s. In Mindanao and Sulu, rebel-related violence, in line with the typology of Brosche, Nilsson and Sundberg,¹ has been a conflict cluster marked by actor, behavior, and issue complexity. Just like other instances of organized violence in Mindanao throughout the decades, the conflicts in Sulu are also an example of a conflict spiral. In other words, the recurrent violence in Sulu, which has existed on a sub-national level, is also an example of a conflict trap widely discussed in literature.²

After its exclusion from the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region following a landmark Supreme Court decision, Sulu stands on its own as a province.³ Its present strategic context is determined by three variables. To begin with, Sulu is at the western edge of the Mindanao–Sulu socio-political ecosystem and at the far eastern periphery of the Islamic world. As part of the Philippine archipelago, it is also a critically located island at the fringe of the Philippines and increasingly exposed to non-traditional security challenges and maritime politics of the Philippines. Lastly, because of Sulu’s proximity to Malaysia and Indonesia past and present, it is a quintessential part of maritime Southeast Asia, historically known as the Nusantara zone. This strategic-sociopolitical context of the province makes it a key element in Philippine national security.

Sulu at present is a patchwork of interests and political-military actors that operate under a status quo arrangement that keeps a fragile peace. Politically, the island is under control of the Tan clan that has ruled the province for many years. The patriarch, Abdusakur Tan, is the Vice-Governor while Sakur’s son Toto is the governor-elect.⁴ Most mayors of Sulu politically align with the Tans, even though the political skill of Sakur has been to not interfere much

1 Brosché, Johan, Desirée Nilsson, and Ralph Sundberg. “Conceptualizing civil war complexity.” *Security Studies* 32, no. 1 (2023): 137–165.

2 See Lichbach & Gurr (1981); Quinn, Mason & Gurses (2007); Dahl & Høyland (2012); Hegre & Nygård (2015). Collier, Hoeffler & Söderbom (2008).

3 In a unanimous decision dated September 9, 2024, the Supreme Court ruled that Sulu is not part of BARMM, citing the province’s rejection of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) during the 2019 plebiscite.

4 Of Chinese–Tausug descent, Abdusakur Tan comes from the municipality of Maimbung and later expanded his base to Jolo. His eldest daughter Shihla Tan–Hayudini is the mayor of Maimbung.

in local matters and allow chief local executives a degree of autonomy.⁵ Other political clans such as the Loongs, Arbisons, and Tulawies remain important in their fiefdoms. The Moro National Liberation Front, a revolutionary or “dissident” movement that sparked the Moro revolution, is also still present on the island and keeps its men under arms, but is also “peace-inclined” and cooperates with the national and local government. The two Sulu MNLF factions are respectively under the formal leadership of Nur Misuari, currently *de facto* led by his son Abdulkarim, and the Executive Council of 15 that has been identified with the late Yusoph Jikiri. Both factions maintain generally positive relations with the Tan family.

Beyond the MNLF and local politicians, other forces come into play. Members of the Abu Sayyaf network, a former criminal-cum-terrorist armed insurgency, are mostly lying low or have already surrendered. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) are monitoring the residual ASG and the MNLF groups; the military has an infantry division and three brigades spread across the island. The last encounter between the military and the Abu Sayyaf was on 21 February 2023 in the village of Kabbon Takas in Patikul. Since then, most of the violence in Sulu has been related to criminal or political skirmishes. This included also cases of clan feuding that has drawn on MNLF members, also known as *pagbanta*.

Another key socio-political element of Sulu is the relevance of the so-called “tau gimba,” the people of the hinterlands or the island interior who have been supporting rebels, ex-guerrillas, politicians, and other strongmen. These linkages, further infused with new economic opportunities, make Sulu at present an island both shaped by political-economic momentum and an entity that also shapes its residents and environment.

This paper, which is an elaboration of the ideas and findings presented during the international conference at MSU Jolo in April, seeks to answer three key puzzles. First, how does the “long durée” of conflict manifest itself in Sulu throughout the decades? Second, what explains this pattern of conflict given the shifting nature, character, and identity of armed insurgent actors? Third, what are the current anchors and challengers of the relative peace that interrupted this long durée? In terms of methods and material, the article builds on a literature review of various secondary sources, such as academic articles and reports,

5 A small exception was perhaps an incident in Maimbung in 2023. Two police officers and one soldier were hurt on Saturday after they figured in a shootout as they were about to serve a warrant to former Maimbung, Sulu Vice Mayor Pando Mudjasan. Some observers considered politics as the actual root cause behind the clash.

and primary sources, such as official documents, interviews conducted between 2016 and 2025, focus groups and observation with key actors. The paper also builds on an original dataset developed by the author in early 2025 on conflict trajectory in Sulu.⁶ It employs a mixed methodological approach and continues the author's research agenda as practitioner and theory-interested analyst. To facilitate the conduct, the author visited Sulu twice: The first time in late 2015 as a member of a multinational peacekeeping team, and in 2025 during a conference organized by the University of the Philippines and Mindanao State University Sulu. The article proceeds in three major sections: beginning with a history of the conflict in Sulu, then an analysis of post-conflict challenges and trajectories, and concluding with a discussion.

Sulu's Long Duree

A key starting point for this paper's inquiry is the social process of Sulu's evolution of conflict that renders it crucial to look into both pre- and post-war manifestations of violence. The essay continues the inquiry by Shesterinina who stressed the path-dependent dynamics in conflict trajectories and Staniland's historical sociology of the genesis of armed groups.⁷ Fernand Braudel's concepts of geographic time, social time, and individual time also feed into the analysis.⁸ In hindsight, the Zamboanga Siege in 2013, for instance, raises the question if this was a one-off event or rooted in a particular context in which this urban battle was just one episode. Thus, Sulu's rich experiences and historical depth require a look before the political rebellion actually unfolded. Wadi⁹ makes a similar point, writing about "rich historical data in Sulu Studies that could be pieced together to constitute as *longue durée* especially in terms of stages, pattern, and trends."

This paper proposes distinct phases to discuss Sulu's history of conflict. The first phase is the so-called precursor period lasting from Philippine independence to the outbreak of the Moro rebellion. The second phase is the time between the launch of the MNLF rebellion and the Tripoli Agreement. The third phase is the on-and-off period in hostilities until 1989 and the creation of the ARMM and the genesis of the Abu Sayyaf. The fourth phase

6 The data relies on available open source conflict data on Sulu including the Uppsala Conflict Program, ACLED, the Maryland Terrorist Database, the Conflict Alert data, and newspaper sources.

7 Shesterinina, Anastasia. "Civil war as a social process: actors and dynamics from pre- to post-war." *European journal of international relations* 28, no. 3 (2022): 538-562.

8 Braudel, Fernand. "Histoire et sciences sociales: la *longue durée*." In *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 725-753. Cambridge University Press, 1958.

9 Wadi, Julkipli. *Sulu Power and its Longue Duree*. April, 2025.

is set between 1989 and 2014, marked by the passage of the Comprehensive Agreement of the Bangsamoro and the end of armed MNLF episodes. The fifth and last phase is from 2014 until the declaration of Sulu as insurgency-free in 2023. A caveat, however, is that his categorization is only one of the many possible historic methods to look at Sulu's cascades of violence and is intended to contribute to the discussion.

Precursors

Colonial resistance to Spanish, American, and Japanese invaders have been documented in other literature,^{10,11} so, I will focus here briefly on post-independence conflicts. With Islam's arrival in the Sulu archipelago towards the end of the 12th century, conditions were set in motion to develop a polity and in the early 1400s, the nascent Sulu Sultanate consolidated Sulu and environs. At its height, it controlled the archipelago of over 2000 islands and islets including Palawan and North Borneo (the present Sabah).¹² Its influence reached as far as the Malay entities such as Sumatra and Malacca and featured a sophisticated organization of politics, warfare, and resistance.¹³ Centuries of war with the Spaniards then followed. Saleeby described the Hispanic efforts to subjugate Sulu as "... a cruel inhuman strife marked with an astounding profuseness of bloodshed and terrible loss of life and evil of all sorts, was prolonged for the space of three hundred and twenty years without any advantage that is worth considering."¹⁴

At the end of the "long 19th century," Sulu was weakened but not defeated.¹⁵ After wars with Spain, confrontations with the Americans followed who were quick to incorporate the Philippines into their possessions. Yet even though the Sulu state faced internal strife and the legacy of perpetual warfare, sporadic uprisings made it hard for the United States to exert de facto control. Many of these uprisings occupy the historical imagination of the Tausug and played a role in the revolutionary narratives of Bangsamoro's self-determination.¹⁶ During the Second World War, war once again came to Sulu, though a period of calm followed

10 Majul, Cesar. *Muslims in the Philippines*. University of the Philippines Press: Quezon City, 1999.

11 Jubair, Salah. *Bangsamoro, a Nation under Endless Tyranny*. 2nd edition. Mindanao: Islamic Research Academy, 2014.

12 Tan, Samuel K. *The Muslim south and beyond*. UP Press, 2010.

13 Warren, James Francis. *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898: The dynamics of external trade, slavery, and ethnicity in the transformation of a Southeast Asian maritime state*. NUS press, 2007.

14 Saleeby, Najeeb M. "The History of Sulu. Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild." Inc., (Makati, Philippines, 1963) (1963).

15 Warren, Sulu Zone.

16 For example in the narratives about the battles of Bud Dajo and Bud Bagsak. The American colonial military attacked Moro encampments in Bud Dajo in 1906 and Bud Bagsak in 1913

the hostilities.¹⁷ Muslim guerrillas played a major role in the war, fighting for freedom, independence, and the preservation of the traditional Tausug way of life. This opportunity to protect Sulu sovereignty was also a leitmotif for a number of men (and also women) to join armed groups including the Abu Sayyaf.¹⁸

Before the organized Moro rebellion in Muslim Mindanao, Sulu was the site of two initial incidents of protracted violence after 1945. First, the Kamlon uprising—the first instance of post-independence armed violence in Sulu—which proved to be a shape of things to come.¹⁹ Confrontations between traditional Tausug leader and the constabulary lasted from 1948 to 1955. One researcher, who stayed from 1966 to 1968 in Tubig Nangka, a community in Eastern Jolo, described the basic dilemma of the government rather vividly:

“A massive military operation on Jolo simply cannot work, for unless the government wishes to commit itself to a permanent garrison of tens of thousands of men, eventually the soldiers must leave and the situation will return to the way it was before. The government attempted a massive military operation in eastern Jolo in the early 1950s against an ‘outlaw’ named Kamlun, and in certain regions, almost all men of fighting age were killed. Their children are now grown men lacking mature adult leadership (...) and a potentially explosive situation was brewing in this area. The ideas men have about law and justice cannot be eliminated by force without destroying the entire society.”²⁰

Another incident was a clash between landowners and planters with workers in the Tongkil municipality in 1965, during which, the navy had to send a ship to pacify the clash. Years before the Moro rebellion, it still was an indicator of brewing unrest on the island.²¹ Of course, the 1950s and early 1960s are now considered Sulu’s “peaceful age,” but in hindsight even the calm had warning signs.²² Together with the Kamlon rebellion, the Tongkil episode

17 A side effect of the World War was the massive influx of firearms and guns into the archipelago.

18 Paiso, Sherhannah. "ASG Push and Pull Factors: A Qualitative Research on the Drivers of Islamist Violent Extremism in Sulu", Office for Strategic Studies and Strategy Management Quarterly Digest, Volume 28, no. 3 (2023): 1–25.

19 For details on the Kamlon rebellion, see also McKenna, Thomas. Kamlon’s Rebellion, 1948–1955: A Forgotten Sulu Insurgency and the Hidden Legacies of World War II. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6aRKtQDzfAI>. Webinar.

20 Kiefer, Thomas. *The Tausug: violence and law in a Philippine Moslem society*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972.

21 Mostly underreported, and lacking many historical sources, this land conflict continues even until now, albeit less violently than in the 1960s.

22 Interview, civil society activist, 21 December 2019.

came out of two major factors that became relevant in the Moro rebellions: injustice and land.²³ These historical notions of resentment, fueled by misguided policies by the Philippine government, led to a boiling point only a few years later.²⁴

Martial Law and Civil War Onset

Despite inherent tensions and social unrest in Central Mindanao and the Sulu precursors, armed rebellion for Bangsamoro independence only began in 1969. Incidents such as the Corregidor or Jabidah massacre alienated a broad number of young Moro men and their leaders, the *datus*, triggering a path of resistance in an opening space for rebellion. Typical of the Mindanao conflict, local root causes met influences from the outside, as several religious and intellectual leaders, often from Moro aristocracy, encountered various strands of political Islam in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. It is important to note, however, that the Moro secession movement continued to thrive on root causes that were already present in Sulu. In an interview with a reporter, an MNLF commander in 1974 identified three key causes for the formation of the MNLF: "the Corregidor Massacre, land grabbing, and the disappointment of the broad masses toward government failure to solve social, political and most of all, economic problems."²⁵ In Sulu, mobilization occurred under an ideology with the unifying formula of *hulah*, *bangsa*, and *agama*—homeland, people, and religion.

Most of the initial MNLF rebel commanders came from Sulu, which became the cradle of the MNLF. Martial Law under Ferdinand Marcos Sr. aimed to curb the unrest, but provoked even more armed opposition in Muslim Mindanao, with massive military deployment leading to widespread clashes in Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan. But not everyone joined the rebellion, as some actors who were associated with the government remained opposed to insurrection.²⁶ This is mirrored today by some perceptions, even among the Tausug, that it was the MNLF that caused trouble and harm on the island, not the government. More nuanced voices see both conflict parties at fault.

The battle of Jolo in 1974 proved to be a key point in the rebellion, as it devastated Sulu's capital, changed the landscape of war from pitched battles to guerrilla warfare and raised

23 A military officer stated that land conflicts in Sulu were of a different kind than in Central Mindanao as they lacked a Settler–Moro dimension. Interview, 1 August 2020.

24 One consequence of Kamlon's rebellion and his subsequent pardon by President Magsaysay was the creation of the Mindanao State University.

25 Noble, Lela Garner. "The Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines." *Pacific Affairs* 49, no. 3 (1976): 405–424.

26 Interview, Sulu mayor, 23 December 2019.

international attention. The armed conflict became a stalemate, and both sides signed a peace agreement in 1976. President Marcos, however, wanted to weaken the MNLF and put the conflict on hold, not resolve it.²⁷ The 1976 Tripoli Agreement, however, was an inherently flawed peace pact which did not prevent the MNLF from reigniting hostilities and further engaging in occasional skirmishes.

Interregnum

A splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, did not believe in the peace efforts at all and started to dominate the rebellion in Central Mindanao. Run primarily by ethnic Maguindanaons, Iranun, and Meranaws, it emerged in 1977. Post-Tripoli, the political landscape of Sulu changed as key rebel commanders assumed local government power in Sulu after surrendering to the government. They later became known as the “Magic Eight.” Yet, government services and full political-military control remained only in the main municipalities. The Malay scholar Wan Che Man provides a vignette on the situation during a visit to Sulu:

“When I arrived, my friend, 'Wati', told me that there exist two 'governments' on the island of Sulu: The Manila government, which controlled the capital city of Jolo, and the 'MNLF government' which ruled the countryside.” (...) “Though one may see government soldiers on routine patrol in these villages, the soldiers dare not to interfere in the village affairs.”²⁸

As in many other conflicts, the army could only control the immediate surroundings, with some local politicians backhandedly giving support to their former comrades. A line of control was established in Jolo’s periphery, as Che Man again described: “As we drove through the outskirts of Jolo, scores of armed men in green uniform were seen walking along the unpaved road. As in other 'liberated' areas, we wandered around the village without fear or hesitation.”

While the MNLF remained entrenched in key areas, occasional skirmishes still occurred and intra-clan fighting—often for political reasons—continued, though not as strong as before the Tripoli agreement. The end of the Marcos regime in

27 Plank, Friedrich. "Not enough pieces of the cake? The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the Mindanao final agreement." *Asian Security* 11, no. 2 (2015): 154–177.

28 Che Man, Wan Kadir. "Muslim separatism: The Moros of southern Philippines and the Malays of southern Thailand." Ateneo de Manila Press, Manila (1990).

1986, however, led to fresh negotiations between Manila and the MNLF, resulting in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989. Years later, Misuari and his lieutenants formally embarked on peace negotiations.

After Autonomy

MNLF rank and file members and commanders who did not believe in peace talks coalesced around the charismatic preacher Abdurajak Janjalani, alongside other disgruntled fighters, who broke away from the MNLF and created the first incarnation of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Sulu Archipelago. This armed outfit would continue to fight the Philippine government for the next three decades.

Seven years after the ARMM's creation, the MNLF would officially put an end to the conflict through the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) in 1996. However, the peace agreement was once again flawed as it did not give the Moros significant autonomy and lacked provisions on fiscal autonomy the government, both of which would only later be corrected. More worrisome, however, was that rebel forces were also not demobilized, as only one quarter was integrated into the Philippine military and police. The peace agreement thus resulted only in a "tentative and partial" peace.²⁹ This further proved the point that disarmament could not exist in a vacuum³⁰ and despite a broad pacification of MNLF forces, splinters, and fringes soon haunted Sulu. Many Sulu cadres stayed armed, and with other Tausug commanders joined the nascent Abu Sayyaf as a vehicle for their frustrations. The Sulu-born historian Samuel Tan opined that at this stage, the original MNLF struggle was already taken over by other movements and events.³¹ Some MNLF fighters also went rogue and became known as "lost commands" engaged in abductions, kidnappings³² and tactical alliances with the Abu Sayyaf, resulting in a degree of plausible deniability for the MNLF.

Worryingly, Nur Misuari, MNLF's founder, would become the governor of the ARMM upon the endorsement of late president Fidel Ramos. ARMM did not function well, however, and its achievements were still marginal overall. Unsurprisingly, in 2001 MNLF leaders

29 Santos Jr, Soliman M. "MNLF integration into the AFP and the PNP: successful cooptation or failed transformation? (Case study)." *Primed and purposeful: Armed groups and human security efforts in the Philippines* (2010): 162-184.

30 Molloy, Desmond. *Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration: Theory and practice*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016.

31 Tan, Samuel K. *Internationalization of the Bangsamoro Struggle*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 2003.

32 Ugarte, Eduardo F. "The "lost command" of Julhani Jillang: an alliance from the southwestern Philippines." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 4 (2009): 303-321.

toppled Misuari and created the so-called Executive Council of 15 as a response to perceive mismanagement, poor leadership and corruption.³³ A large chunk of ground forces remained loyal to Misuari though, and the MNLF rearranged itself into a Sulu State Revolutionary Command comprising commands from Mindanao, Sulu, Basilan, and Palawan. Misuari's key lieutenants were Khadi Ajibon and Ustadz Habier Malik. Those commanders would sporadically attack Philippine military bases in Sulu and Zamboanga City and would continue to occasionally battle the government until 2013.

The major conflict line in Sulu was thus the effort of the military to both keep the peace with the mainstream MNLF while fighting renegade rebels and defeat the slowly growing Abu Sayyaf network.³⁴ Major battles happened in 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2009 resulting in mass displacement and civilian casualties. Combined with intense political infighting, this decade further solidified Sulu's reputation as a continuous warzone by external observers, even if many local actors tirelessly worked on peace. A last stand of some MNLF forces occurred in 2013 when rebel forces attacked Zamboanga City on the western tip of Mindanao, resulting in the death of Malik.³⁵ Parallel to occasional MNLF hostilities, Sulu remained in a semi-anarchic state. Starting with the 1990s and lasting until the 2000s, so-called "lost commands" ventured through Sulu's interior, mostly in search of lucrative options to raise revenues while maintaining a historical "anti-state" position. The most active armed group was the Abu Sayyaf.

33 The council was initially composed of MNLF elders like Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema, late Sulu Congressman Yusup Jikiri and Hatimil Hassan of Basilan.

34 The military had a key tactical challenge as the towns of Indanan, Parang, Maimbung, Talipao and Patikul, where the ASG had influence, were also the location of the major MNLF camps.

35 Malik's son was later appointed as a member of the Bangsamoro interim government.

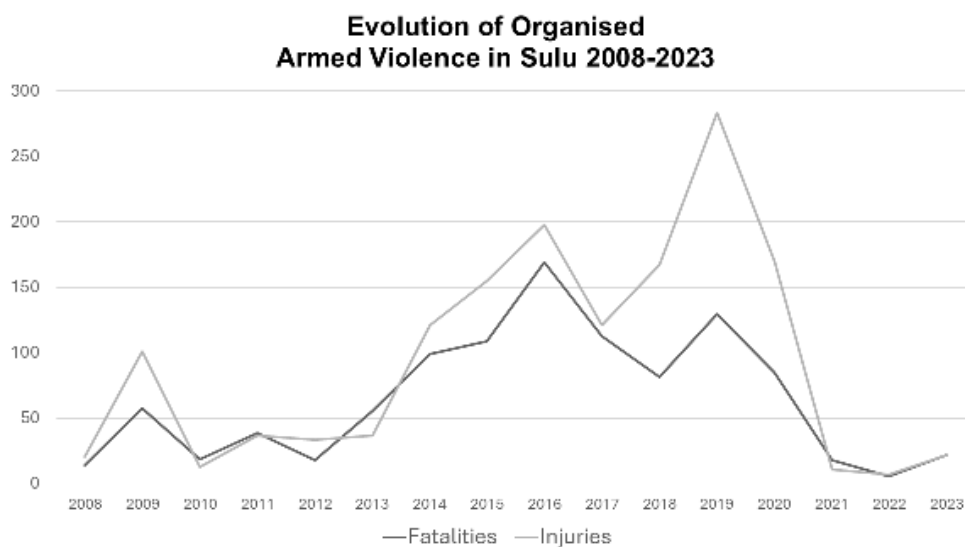


Figure 1: Organized armed violence in Sulu 2008–2023.

Founded by disgruntled MNLF members and those who sought a more Islamic character to the Moro revolution, the Abu Sayyaf network carried out kidnappings, attacks, robberies, and bomb attacks since the early 1990s, including the firebombing of a ferry in 2004 that killed over 110 people.³⁶ The group has also beheaded hostages. Areas where Philippine security forces could not reach also became training grounds for other militant groups, notably Jemaah Islamiya, Al-Qaeda's offshoot in Southeast Asia. In its prime, the ASG trained and conducted attacks in Central Mindanao. Years later, some ASG factions also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Those who did not still regularly used jihadist tropes and imagery, albeit not as sophisticated as Janjalani's original speeches that were later mirrored in ASG discourse.

Yet the most interesting aspect of the network—that has always been more than just an armed group—was how it survived military offensives, leadership decapitation, and almost permanent pressure by security forces. Though the network has weakened through the years, it still caused significant harm to government forces and the civilian population because of its resilience as a key characteristic was the ASG network's ability to adapt to its

³⁶ In the precolonial era in Sulu, the Iranuns and Balangingi societies carried slaving activities for the datus of Tausug society. Slave raiding was conducted to meet the dominating societies' need for manpower as the demand for labor intensified, see also Warren (2007). According to the maritime think-tank Stable Seas, between 2014 and early 2019 85 ship crew members were taken from the Sulu Sea.

environment.³⁷ Social responses, such as aid to communities, may not have been enough to truly transform the ASG into a more responsible armed actor even if it only partially operated under a paradigm of “social banditry.”³⁸ In fact, locals observed that “the sufferings of the Moros brought about by the ASG insurgence almost surpassed the ordeal they experienced during the height of the MNLF revolution.”³⁹ From 2010 onwards, growing ransom payments continued to fund various ASG commanders.⁴⁰ Although some key operators were arrested or died, the residual force was strong enough to engage in more kidnapping operations. Gradually, the radius of operations also shifted towards western Jolo, though select pockets in the east continued to exist.

MNLF Détente and Abu Sayyaf’s Endgame

The MNLF ended up broadly pacified following the landmark 2014 peace agreement between the government and the MILF. Several MNLF leaders endorsed the peace process despite it being led by its erstwhile rivals. After several years, even commanders and forces loyal to Misuari were politically integrated into the Bangsamoro autonomous government. When the Supreme Court issued its Sulu decision, the MNLF continued to subscribe to the peace process. At present, key observers and policymakers consider the MNLF as “unfinished business” as the group maintains its political and military structures and stays armed. Although it is “peace-inclined,” there is no formal coordination mechanism with the Philippine government. At the same time, some observers stated that since Misuari gained even more importance in the course of the BARMM creation, his political and military cadre will continue to expect personal benefits.⁴¹

To manage and weaken the Abu Sayyaf proved to be a more difficult endeavor for the Philippine government. After its relative weakening post 9/11 terrorist attacks, with the backdrop of the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom in the Philippines, some ASG sub-groups underwent a resurgence from 2014 onwards, accelerated by the global phenomenon of the so-called Islamic State and its appeal. Apart from core ASG fighters, other sub-groups, such as the “Ajang-Ajang,” “Anak Ilu,” or the “Lucky Nine” were fluid kin networks that

37 Turner, Mark. “The management of violence in a conflict organization: The case of the Abu Sayyaf.” *Public Organization Review* 3 (2003): 387–401.

38 A teenage member of the ASG could earn as much as 15,000 pesos in 2014.

39 Mohammad, Margani U. *The Bangsamoro Dilemma. Memories of anguish and sufferings.* Veegor Printin, Paranaque 2012.

40 East, Bob. *The Neo Abu Sayyaf: Criminality in the Sulu Archipelago of the Republic of the Philippines.* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.

41 Interview, Zamboanga City, December 2019.

fed into residual Abu Sayyaf power. In other words, if the search for organizations or groups in the Sulu context was relatively futile and if ASG lacked boundaries of growth,⁴² finding proper responses would have been more complex. That made Sulu a different theatre from Basilan.⁴³

In the mid-2010s, only a few known leaders of the hybrid ASG network remained alive, including former MNLF commander Radullan Sahiron and the cell surrounding Hatib Sawadjaan. This commander later accommodated foreign fighters from Indonesia and boosted a key transactional network. Sawadjaan, meanwhile, was on the run but still capable of striking the military with deadly ambushes. His true allegiance to IS-central remained murky, however. In his home turf in Sulu, he remained mostly limited to the village of Patikul, where he also collaborated with the non-IS affiliated old-school fighter Sahiron. After two suicide bombings and other attempts, the networked insurgents ran out of steam and were slowly cornered by the Philippine military. Ironically, the Abu Sayyaf proved to be the most lethal when it already lost significant ground.

In its campaign to finally dislodge the armed groups, the Philippine military had several key objectives, from key tactical strikes⁴⁴ to rehabilitation of insurgent kin to civic engagement and collaboration with the local government; the national government also learned how to apply soft power more consistently.⁴⁵ The insurgent network's decentralized nature also proved to be its demise.⁴⁶ As other militaries across conflict contexts, security forces took advantage of shifting tactical control and squeezed the ASG into enclaves while maintaining a net of informers.⁴⁷ The military also maintained a positive relationship with the MNLF forces that oscillated between situational partnerships (the Jikiri faction) and the ability to

42 Collier, Kit. "A Carnival of Crime: The Enigma of the Abu Sayyaf." In *The US and the War on Terror in the Philippines*, edited by Patricio Abinales and Nathan Quimpo, 152. Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2008.

43 The Basilan-Model towards peace and development aimed first to dislodge militants from the island through a continuous cooperation between LGUs and the Philippine military. This counter-insurgency program has been sustained by a very focused provincial government which aimed to monitor the municipalities and secure the wins through the implementation of Martial Law. Security governance was outsourced from the military to village militias from their areas, which seemed to block the influx of the ASG. Often, those militiamen were former ASG members who returned to the fold of the law and whose inclusion under the government created fissures in family networks. This has been largely beneficial for deterrence. The provincial government thus used kinship effectively in weaken irregular forces. This advantage enabled the government to spearhead development projects, expand infrastructure and improve services. The Basilan program further provided former militants medical check-ups, psychological interventions, housing and skills training.

44 Interview, military analyst, 24 August 2021.

45 Talking about one of the key battlefields in Sulu in late 2019, an NGO worker said: "People are angry in Patikul because the military always bombards them." Interview, Zamboanga City, 23 December 2019.

46 Jones, Seth G. *Waging insurgent warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic state*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

47 Kalyvas, Stathis N. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

maneuver in or near camps (Misuari faction). Local militias, trained and developed by the military, held the ground once military units moved to other tactical tasks. The killing of Mundi Sawadjaan proved to be the last serious kinetic engagement. In September 2023, the military officially declared Sulu as insurgency-free.

Trajectories

As Sulu enters a state of relative stability, three factors require attention: the disengagement of fighters, conflict management on the horizontal level, and the ever-present challenge of climate change. This paper argues that policy responses to these three dimensions are crucial to maintain Sulu's stability in the long-run. While the first two factors relate in one way or another to the main conflict lines, the third one is a conflict multiplier.

1. *Sulu's exit raises the question of how former Abu Sayyaf members will be handled.* Programs on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) are increasingly implemented in contexts of "violent extremist" conflict.⁴⁸ Sulu is one theatre, where a government has implemented these policies. The Bangsamoro interim government, for example, maintained several programs, from the so-called regional TUGON program down to various provincial programs. Some of these provincial programs even came first (for example, PAVE in Basilan). Sulu, meanwhile, primarily relied on actions spearheaded by local government units and the military. This encompassed cash assistance, livelihood support, rehabilitation of conflict-affected villages, and even the buyback of firearms. While BARMM has not supported all former fighters financially or through programs, its ministries have still engaged with local partners in providing support to communities and individual fighters. The onus will be on Sulu to continue this path after the exit of BARMM. However, it is still not fully clear how much and what has BARMM contributed to combatant disengagement. Logically, the support to ex-fighters is only a sub-national Sulu issue, as similar concerns exist also elsewhere in the country—like in former areas of communist rebellion. Beyond that, there needs to be a clear vision of how to distinguish between bona fide ideological participants and those who joined the Abu Sayyaf for material reasons. Not realizing this cleavage and applying one template can cause "unsatisfactory" results.⁴⁹

48 Richards, Joanne. "High risk or low risk: Screening for violent extremists in DDR Programmes." *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 3 (2018): 373–393.

49 Sharif, Sally. "A critical review of evidence from ex-combatant re-integration programs." (2018).

2. *A second question is about horizontal violence.* Here, hybridity of conflict resolution prevails at present as much as around a century ago. During the American era, Schueck Montemayor described the situation: “Emig trained his sons to run the plantation and to maintain relationships with the many factions in Jolo, ranging from the military, to the rebels, to the government officials, businessmen and, and religious leaders.”⁵⁰

In Sulu, formal (local government units, military) and informal resolution mechanisms (the Sultanate, MNLF, community leaders, adat) co-exist. A mechanism to coordinate between MNLF, military, and police—the JMSSC—has already been established. At present, it operates quietly, and to an extent informally, but is one guarantor of local peace.⁵¹ Another local best practice is the hybrid peacebuilding undertaken by the local organization Tumikang Sama Sama, which has been resolving clan feuds since 2010.⁵² As in the rest of the Mindanao–Sulu political ecosystem, a key question is whether peacebuilding actors can move beyond conflict management and fully enter the space of conflict prevention. Even Kalyvas, who focused mostly on untangling cleavages causing and sustaining civil wars, opined that reducing violence also means “as much local action as action at the center.”⁵³ This requires a continuous investment in peacebuilding to address local drivers of violence. The focus on handling local feuds that involve MNLF members or even former Abu Sayyaf combatants is an effort to tackle “violent entrepreneurs” who have the capacity to re-engage in political or social violence.⁵⁴ In the words of a local civil society activist from Sulu, “reconciliation is also relationship building.”⁵⁵ The present state of calm across the island and the absence of large-scale conflict offers a chance to further sustain the emerging peace potentials—even amid challenges in local governance—as elaborated by observers.⁵⁶ Beyond conflict resolution, the political equilibrium on the island will be logically a key variable.

3. *The third concern is ecology and the environment.* As the Philippines remains one of the world’s most disaster-prone countries, it is increasingly clear that the Sulu archipelago is equally vulnerable to floods, droughts, and other extreme weather events. Parts of Tongkil

50 Montemayor, Michael Schück. “Captain Herman Leopold Schück: the saga of a German sea captain in 19th century Sulu–Sulawesi seas.” (No Title) (2005).

51 Interviews, 11 June 2025.

52 TSS handled over 200 clan conflicts and resolved around 150 in the last ten years.

53 Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence*.

54 Kreutz, Joakim. “Conflict prevention in post-conflict settings.” In *Research Handbook on Conflict Prevention*, pp. 324–340. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024. In the run-up to the conflict in Marawi and after, the military also tried to engage with academe and civil society in Jolo to ensure a degree of early response to possible recruitment and spillover. Interview, military officer, 5 July 2025.

55 Interview, civil society activist, 25 January 2017.

56 Yabes, Criselda. *Creating Sulu: In Search of Policy Coalitions in the Conflict-Ridden Island*. Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 295–312, August 2021.

and Pangutaran, for instance, will be very vulnerable to rising sea levels. Quality of seaweed has also been declining. In 2021, the island municipality of Pata grappled with drought. Risks of climate change are the ultimate manifestation of the *longue durée* and Sulu and other parts of the Philippine archipelago need to prepare. Most likely, these pressures will further feed into existing social conflict lines. As armed actors might be demobilized in the next years or decades, it is likely that climate pressures will rise and in the worst-case cause social conflict or unrest.

Discussion

Engelbrecht proposed four logics of conflict that apply to the Bangsamoro context: continuity, choice, kinship, and village.⁵⁷ In Sulu's case, all four lenses apply to varying degrees. The structural logic of continuity emphasizes the unfulfilled peace agreement, mediocre peace implementation, and armed vanguards who interlink and contribute to the conflict's continuation. Here, the ambiguous legacies of the Tripoli Agreement and the Final Peace Agreement play a key role, as they could not fully restore peace in Sulu. The logic of choice focuses on the key role of political and military commanders such as Nur Misuari, Habier Malik, and Hatib Sawadjaan, who shaped the actions of armed groups. Kinship ties also matter, especially on the tactical level, as it explains MNLF–Abu Sayyaf linkages and the key role of local elites, whether in support, neutrality, or against insurgents or the military.⁵⁸ Finally, path-dependent processes in key locations such as Patikul set the conditions for continued insurgency (also known as “conflict trap”), mirroring variations in peace and conflict on a sub-national level.⁵⁹ In her recurrent travels to Sulu, Criselda Yabes detailed the cyclical nature of clashes, with violence sometimes being followed by lulls or “relative peace.”⁶⁰ Resurgence of conflict has also occurred nationally and regionally.⁶¹

57 Engelbrecht, Georgi. "The logics of insurgency in the Bangsamoro." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 32, no. 6 (2021): 887–912.

58 Khaid Ajibon, chairman of the Sulu State Revolutionary Command, mainly operated in Camp Marang in Indanan. His blood ties with ASG commanders Albader Parad and Dr. Abu as well as the overlapping areas of MNLF and ASG have naturally resulted in cross-organisational interaction.

59 Kurtenbach, Sabine. "Variations of Peace in Colombia." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 1–18.

60 Yabes, Criselda. *Peace warriors: on the trail with Filipino soldiers*. Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2017.

61 For example on Negros island when in the 1990s a decimated communist rebellion regained force or in Aceh where the conflict resurged in the late 1980s.

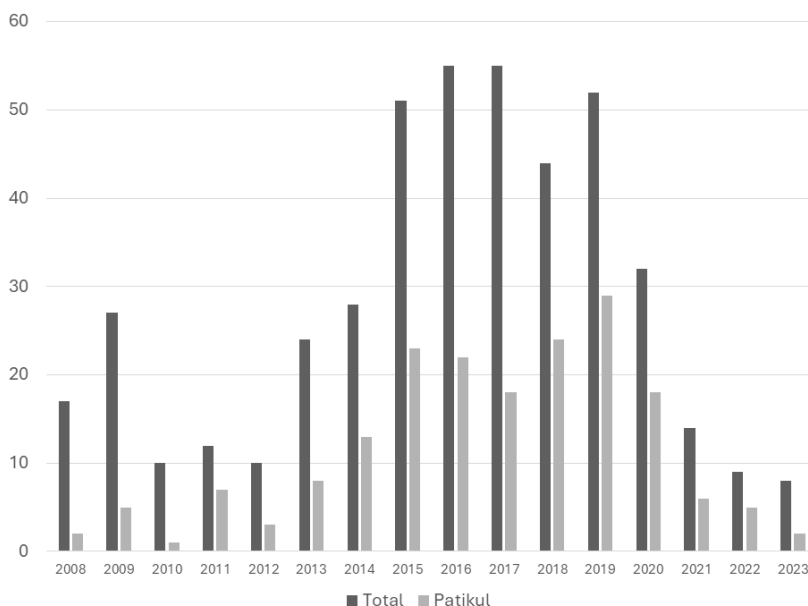


Figure 2: *The Long War in Patikul, Sulu.*

In Sulu's case, conflict continued after the Tripoli peace agreement because of an inherently flawed peace agreement and an MNLF that continued to be armed and engaged in conflict. After the 1996 FPA, several factors remained interlinked and continued to cause instability, such as clan feuding, the criminal-cum-jihadist activities of the Abu Sayyaf, and the on-and-off clashes between the military and the MNLF. Misuari himself let the conflict continue by ordering his forces to engage in hostilities. The most obvious peak of this period was the Zamboanga Siege in 2013. The vertical conflicts in Sulu between 1996 and 2012 were thus also, to a strong degree, marked by individual commander decisions. Kinship ties and the existence of particularly vulnerable areas resulted in specific battle incidents and protracted violence in certain locations, such as Patikul. Interestingly, parts of Jolo island and the small island municipalities of the province remained generally conflict-free.⁶² With the nominal attention given by Manila to the MNLF, continuous dialogue with political and military leaders, and the presence of MNLF representatives in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, stability is likely to continue at least in the short term, perhaps breaking the cycle of violence.

62 Outlier island municipalities in Sulu such as Tongkil, Pangaturan, Lugus, Tapul – easier to control politically and without major communal violence – have been largely peaceful in the last years. That mirrors Adam's findings of spaces marked by continuous strife and those that have been relatively at peace for some time (Adam 2017).

The changing nature of armed organizations in Sulu also deserves attention. Both the MNLF and the ASG network could be imagined as expressions of Stanilands's (2014) "parochial" organisations, entities that are locally embedded but with weak links at the top.⁶³ Even though the MNLF had ambitions to be a centralized force, even early observers noted the fragile rebel organization. Here, Che Man (1987) is worth quoting at length:

"In the contemporary struggle, the MNLF was the first to establish an organized front with an administrative hierarchy including a policy-making body and local operational units. In practice, however, the hierarchical structure of the organization gives way to the vagaries and flux of village life. It is one thing to organize and direct the central and provincial committees and quite another to unite and control the thrust of a mass movement comprising different ethno-cultural groups. The MNLF is therefore a loosely organized front, unable to control the behaviour of the various factions or to establish a clear chain of command. Even during the height of the movement, the organization's policy-making body, the Central Committee, contented itself with furnishing broad policy outlines, giving the local leaders the power to make their own decisions. Its major function was to consolidate existing groups of Moro fighters by supplying them with weapons and funds received from various sources."⁶⁴

This explains autonomous actions in the past when rebel commanders conducted their own offensives, cooperation "under fire" (i.e. joint action by different armed groups opposing the state's military operations) as well as the current questions of the MNLF's trajectory with varying degrees of allegiance. This organizational model further extends to the organization of the Abu Sayyaf that was always more of a network than a group. It also means that any long-term conflict resolution in Sulu needs to tackle both fighters, their communities, but also the environment that for decades has enabled the long *durée* of conflict. This also puts an onus on Manila to ensure the effects of Sulu's exit are managed to ensure political and fiscal representation of the Tausug people on the grassroots level, including the *tau gimba*. In other words, co-optation of local political and military elites will not be enough.

Where do we go from here then? With the relative demise of the Abu Sayyaf but an uncertain political future of Sulu, the experience of the last years brought a baseline of peace to the island. Sulu so far also avoided major post-war violence and its composite categories.⁶⁵ Its

63 Staniland, *Networks of rebellion*.

64 Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*, p.141.

65 Bara, Corinne, Annekatrin Deglow, and Sebastian Van Baalen. "Civil war recurrence and postwar violence: Toward an integrated research agenda." *European journal of international relations* 27, no. 3 (2021): 913–935.

peculiar composition of a locally powerful political actor, semi-demobilized insurgents, and arguably a garrison state raises the question of the “armed order” and its sustainability.⁶⁶ One of the key questions could thus be if the governance challenges still present in Sulu and its hybrid political order can be further exacerbated by an armed component or eventuality cause more violence. For now, the likelihood for such an event remains low but not impossible.

Indeed, several risk factors remain. First, Sulu remains an armed society. Studies show that postwar environments where armed actors keep the capacity to use violence or with a large pool of ex-combatants available for remobilization are more prone to experience repeat conflict. As a study noted, it is access to firearms that often catalyzes violence.⁶⁷ Second, the question of Sulu representation is still unanswered. The Tausug political elite needs to keep its role either at the regional or national level to not feel disempowered. Third, the question of succession lingers. As dynastic politics are entrenched in Sulu, the second-generation of clans are standing by, but the elders such as Sakur Tan are still full in control. The equilibrium between political-military players can still shift, which some identify as a risk in fragile transitions.⁶⁸ A fourth factor is the uncertainty about Sulu’s political-institutional role after the BARMM exit. While some hope for an eventual plebiscite and re-entry to BARMM, others argue that the province needs to return to Region IX or constitute a new autonomous region together with Basilan and Tawi-Tawi (BASULTA). Clarity on Sulu’s final nature needs to be decided soon, otherwise the absence of resources could further contribute to a state of continuous sub-national fragility on the island.⁶⁹

Though the GPH-MILF post-conflict peace implementation in the Bangsamoro is ongoing, the 1996 peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF remains a work in progress. MNLF officials often highlight that work remains to be done despite existing mechanisms such as the government’s coordinating committees with the Sema, Jikiri, and Misuari factions. Manila’s counterpart program to the MILF’s normalization process is the so-called “transformation program.” And even more applicable to the broader Bangsamoro

66 Staniland, Paul. "Armed politics and the study of intrastate conflict." *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 4 (2017): 459–467.

67 Oreta, Jennifer and Tolosa, Kathline Anne. "Pagpati'ut Mediating Violence in Sulu." Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, March 2012.

68 Polat, Furkan. "'Infernal Cycle': Why War and Peace Repeat Themselves in Libya." *International Peacekeeping* (2025): 1–24.

69 Aina, Folahanmi. "Political economy of sub-national fragility and armed conflict in Northwest Nigeria." *African Identities* (2024): 1–18.

peace accord, it cannot be denied that even peace in Sulu is “incomplete,” resembling the cases of Northern Ireland,⁷⁰ Colombia,⁷¹ and Chechnya.⁷² As Fernandez writes, “at this stage of the Bangsamoro peace processes, a major challenge is addressing unmet expectations of the ‘peace dividend.’ This is rooted in the history of multiple waves of socio-economic programs after the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, which many felt were undermined by inefficiencies and elite capture, and thus did not always trickle down to grassroots actors.”⁷³

Scholars such as Hegre, Nygård, Ræder suggest that every new year of peace would bring an additional stability to a conflict context, and the longer the peace can be sustained after a civil war, the less likely armed organized violence is to recur.⁷⁴ Within the Sulu context, the vertical conflict that may arise is likely to be a recurrence of an MNLF pocket rebellion, a renaissance of the Abu Sayyaf network, or a more diffuse localized conflict. Economic growth in places like Jolo, Maimbung, and Parang are positive signs that Sulu’s peace can be sustained. Short of that, a push and pull of different post-conflict tendencies may cause a more “hybrid”⁷⁵ or “insecure”⁷⁶ peace and conflict equilibrium, resembling the rest of the Philippine polity, even without a renewed organized rebellion. This makes further studies compulsory to assess Mindanao’s post-conflict momentum amid a changing conflict-space⁷⁷ and Sulu’s spatial-chronological nature of conflict and peace.

Conclusion

Whether Sulu will remain peaceful in the long-term remains to be seen. A striking continuity has shaped the province’s political and security evolution from the immediate post-colonial

70 Hall, Amanda Lynn. "Incomplete peace and social stagnation: Shortcomings of the Good Friday Agreement." *Open Library of Humanities* (2018).

71 Niño, César. "Why Has Peace Not Come to Colombia? Between Total Peace and Armed Peace." *Journal of Strategic Security* 17, no. 2 (2024): 77–88.

72 Nibali, Samantha. "Strategies to End Violence in Ethnic Conflicts: What is Sufficient? The Case of “Peace” in Chechnya." *International Negotiation* 26, no. 3 (2021): 560–580.

73 Fernandez, Maria Carmen. *Peace beyond Signed Agreements. A Review of Long-Term Conflict Mediation & Multi-stakeholder Security Coordination in Sulu, Philippines, 2010–2022*. 2024. <https://hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Sulu-review-Digital-Version-HD-Centre.pdf>

74 Hegre, Håvard, and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård. "Governance and conflict relapse." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 6 (2015): 984–1016.

75 Teehankee, J. C. (2025). Post-conflict party-building in Southern Philippines: the promise and perils of institutional re-engineering in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. *Policy Studies*, 1–27.

76 Söderberg Kovacs, Mimmi, Kristine Höglund, and Mélida Jiménez. "Autonomous peace? The Bangsamoro region in the Philippines beyond the 2014 Agreement." *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 16, no. 1 (2021): 55–69.

77 Bell, Christine, and Laura Wise. "The spaces of local agreements: Towards a new imaginary of the peace process." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 5 (2022): 563–583.

era until the present time. Notwithstanding the immensely rich and helpful contributions in this edited CIDS volume, future research should zoom in on key aspects of the current state of peace and conflict in Sulu. First, a comparative lens should investigate Sulu's relative gains compared with the more conflict-affected areas in Central Mindanao. Second, peace-centered policy questions could examine risk factors for demobilized insurgents to rejoin armed violence. Grassroots initiatives that pacified feuds could be analyzed to develop a set of best practices. Third, a historical lens may unpack the reasons for the relative continuation of conflict in Sulu after the 1996 Final Peace Agreement despite an international development program spearheaded by global donors. Were the interventions at all well-timed, sufficiently prepared and equipped with sustainability pathways? A parallel to the current state of the GPH-MILF peace process is clear. Fourth, a more regional research agenda should focus on the legacy of the Sulu zone amid increasing geopolitical competition between the United States and China. And fifth, in line with Warren's original contribution, studies should not forget the "little people" in Sulu's story of peace and conflict, men and women, who might be on the margins such as shopkeepers, fishers, tricycle drivers, dock workers, community mediators, teachers and many more.

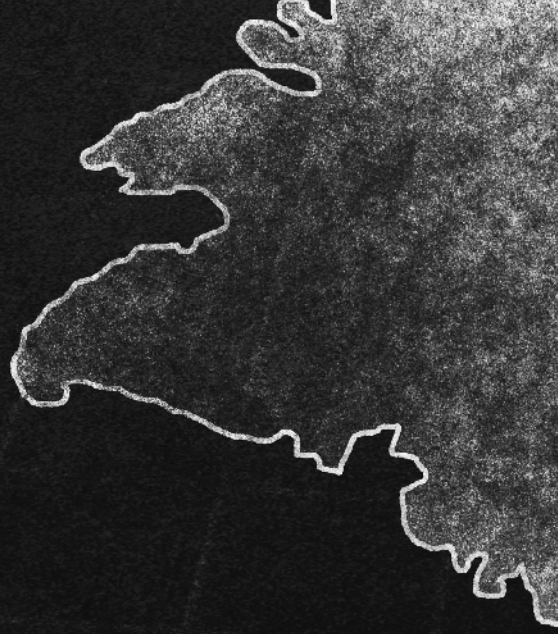
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Democracy, Peace, and Security in Sulu: Then and Now

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of democracy, peace, and security in Sulu, exploring the region's historical trajectory and its ontemporary significance. As Sulu stands at a pivotal moment in its history, the focus on its role in the Bangsamoro movement and the establishment of an autonomous regional government highlights the intersection of local governance, identity, and peacebuilding. Through an exploration of Sulu's past, and its future prospects outside the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the paper addresses how these factors have shaped the region's current political landscape. Central to this discussion is the role of democracy, with its emphasis on representation, justice, equity, and freedoms, in fostering a peaceful and prosperous future for Sulu. This study offers a critical reflection on how the convergence of democratic principles can contribute to the creation of a more inclusive, just, and equitable society in Sulu, Mindanao, and beyond, underscoring the ongoing relevance of historical legacies in shaping contemporary governance and security policies.

Introduction

I consider myself a fortunate Muslim. I am a Muslim woman born in the Philippines, in Southeast Asia. Muslims in the Middle East may see us as the periphery of the Islamic world, but our region is home to the largest number of Muslims in the world. Southeast Asia has a rich history of homegrown democracy, having overthrown its colonial masters. We also live in a multi-ethnic region with a tradition of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, where men and women play active roles in both public and private spheres. Southeast Asian Muslim women enjoy liberties denied to many of our sisters in the Middle East, the heartland of Islam. This is very true for us in the Sulu and the country.

However, our world is changing and our liberties are at risk. It has been decades since 9/11, and we Muslims are still grappling with the aftershocks. The aftershocks have even threatened our peace process, with the entry of violent extremists such as ISIS. In minority Muslim areas of Thailand and the Philippines, for instance, our liberties are at risk from internal conflicts with the central government, taken to a new level and complicated by what is now termed “radicalization.” The radicalization of Muslim groups—mainly through the expansion of extremist religious interpretations of Islam—does not help us. We are at risk from within and from without.

Historical Background of Sulu

To understand Sulu’s role in the broader peace process, we must begin with its rich and complex history. Long before the arrival of colonial powers, Sulu was governed by a network of independent villages, led by *datus* who oversaw governance, justice, and trade.

Let me give you an abridged version of the history of Sulu and our Sultanate. When I held lectures at universities outside Muslim Mindanao, I give them four snapshots: When Islam arrived in Sulu, the Sultanate under Spain, then under the Americans, and lastly under the new independent Philippines.

Arrival of Islam

Islam came to us peacefully, through traders who were also preachers. Islam arrived in Sulu in the last quarter of the 13th century. Natives did not have any monotheistic religion; religious orientations at that time were more on ancestral, nature, and animalistic worship. The Sulu Sultanate was established in 1451. The Maguindanao Sultanate, meanwhile, was

established in the second decade of the 17th Century. Each Sultanate was independent, had sovereign powers, and had diplomatic and trade relations with other countries in the region.

As evidence of this, the Sulu Sultanate had relations with China. In 1417, Sultan Paduka Batara of Sulu traveled to China—together with 340 others—in a goodwill mission and was received by the Chinese Emperor Zhu Di during the Ming Dynasty. Unfortunately, the Sultan died during the expedition and was buried in China, having been given grand funeral rites befitting a Sultan. Two of the Sultan's sons stayed behind. The descendants of those sons visited Sulu in June 2005. They were received by Foreign Secretary Romulo.

What do these historical facts tell us? The early development of Islam, which predated the arrival of the Spaniards and the establishment of the Philippine nation, stands on record as the first political institution, the first institutionalized religion, the first educational system, the first institutional legal system, and the first civilization in the Philippines, and that its economy was far advanced than those of the other indigenous communities. This is the historical basis for asserting the independent existence of the Moros.

Spanish Colonization

When the Spanish arrived in the islands in 1521, most of these islands were governed by Muslims. Spanish colonization of the Philippines commenced later in 1565. Superior Spanish forces pushed the Muslims to Mindanao, where the Sultanates' resistance against colonization was strongest.

It is crucial to note that the Spanish government recognized the sovereignty of the sultanates, entering into treaty arrangements with the latter. Even when the sultanates were at their weakest, the Spanish government respected the treaty arrangements. Sultan Jamalul Alam signed the last treaty with Spain on July 22, 1878. This treaty had translation flaws: while the Spanish version stated it had sovereignty over Sulu, the Tausug version described the relationship as being a protectorate and that Sulu customs, laws, and religion were not subject to Spanish jurisdiction.

The Spanish colonization, which came after the existence of the Islamic sultanates and principalities, represented the beginning of a parallel/separate historical development between the Muslims and the soon-to-be-independent Filipinos. While Filipino nationalism was essentially anti-Spanish, the nation that was created after the 1896 Revolution remained Catholic.

Spain Cedes the Philippines to the Americans

When Spain turned over control of the Philippines to the Americans through the Treaty of Paris (1898), they also illegally ceded the sovereign sultanates. In simpler terms, Spain cannot cede what was not theirs. As a form of resistance, wars were waged by the Muslims against the American forces. Again, superior armed troops forced the Muslims to retreat. Mark Twain wrote about the massacres of the Muslims in Bud Dajo in Sulu. In August 1899, Sultan Jamalul Kiram II reluctantly signed a treaty with Gen. J.C. Bates, which included mutual respect, non-interference with religion, social and domestic customs, and internal economic or political affairs, assurance that the US would not cede or sell Sulu or any part of it to any other nations, among others.

In all likelihood, the U.S. signed this peace treaty as a way of stemming any resistance to its occupation in the South while it was suppressing the resistance in the North. This treaty was unilaterally abrogated by the US on March 2, 1904.

Philippine Independence

As the Philippines was certain to gain its independence, Muslim chieftains gathered in Dansalan (now Marawi City) on March 18, 1935, and authored a petition to the US President requesting not to be included in the new republic. The Muslims preferred to be under the US rule, recognizing that they would become second-class citizens if made part of the Catholic Philippines. Their petition was ignored. The Christian Illustrados gained their independence along with control over the Muslim territories.

The inauguration of the Filipino Republic, therefore, presented a paradox. On one hand, it was able to establish a state and a semblance of an identity. On the other hand, while the new Republic tried to consolidate its newly found sovereignty, the Moros—reeling from decades of animosity with the Christianized Filipinos—tilted towards independence instead of integration. This historically parallel development of the Filipino nation and the Muslims gave the rebellion its ideological character in calling for the realization of a separate Moro nation in contradiction to the Filipino nation.

Sulu and the Bangsamoro Movement

At the heart of the armed struggle of the Muslims—also called Moros—was this historical injustice, land dispossession, and political exclusion.

The founding of the MNLF in 1972 by Tausug leader and Professor Nur Misuari was a manifestation of the growing resentment, particularly after the declaration of Martial Law and the 1968 Jabidah Massacre. Martial Law destroyed Sulu's local infrastructure, forced our businesses, and trained professionals to leave their homes by the thousands and relocate to "safe havens" protected by the military, such as Zamboanga City, Cagayan de Oro, etc.

Later on, tensions surfaced within the MNLF. The late Ustadz Salamat Hashim and his forces separated from the MNLF in 1976 and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as a response to Misuari's acceptance of proposed regional autonomy instead of independence.

These tensions would again manifest in the 2019 plebiscite, when Sulu voted against joining BARMM. Some analysts point to Sulu leaders' fears of MILF dominance, some say it's the unequal resource control, while others say it's our leaders weakened political influence that fueled the decision. The province's formal exclusion has had serious effects, such as threatening local employment, delaying projects, and destroying the unity of the Bangsamoro people. As the birthplace of the MNLF and the cradle of the Bangsamoro struggle, Sulu's absence weakens both the symbolism and political strength of the autonomous region, leaving the promise of inclusive peace and governance still incomplete.

Thousands of regional government employees in Sulu now face uncertainty, and development projects funded by BARMM are in danger. The decision has also complicated preparations for the region's first parliamentary elections, originally set for 2025. Debates are intensifying over whether the polls should be postponed again to accommodate Sulu's exit and reorganize parliamentary seats. At its core, this situation highlights the ongoing challenge of building inclusive and equitable governance in the Bangsamoro. The future of peace and autonomy in the region will depend on how both Sulu and the BARMM leadership choose to navigate this transition, whether through collaboration, compromise, or renewed competition.

Democracy and Local Governance in Sulu

As we think about Sulu's long struggle for autonomy and justice, we must also confront the lasting consequences of conflict. For decades, Sulu has experienced violent clashes. From colonial resistance, political uprisings, to recent battles with extremist groups. Each wave of conflict has built traumas on communities, affecting lives, livelihoods, and the region's social and economic structure.

Peace agreements like the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, and the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro highlighted significant progress. However, implementation has often been uneven, and many in Sulu felt excluded from these negotiations. This exclusion, coupled with unresolved grievances, makes peace fragile on the ground.

At the same time, intensified counter-terrorism operations and military presence have deeply affected local communities. While these are meant to address security threats, they have sometimes led to civilian displacement, economic disruptions, and tensions between the state and the people. True peace requires not just military action but addressing the deeper causes of conflict, which include poverty, marginalization, and the need for inclusive governance.

The Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy (PCID) and UP National College of Public Administration and Governance (NCPAG), together with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, conducted an 18-month research project to understand the situation and the foundational issues and problems of the provinces in what was then the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. We studied the State of Local Democracy (SoLD) in the ARMM and constituent provinces. When we did the research, the heated debate was on whether to postpone the ARMM regional elections scheduled for August 2011. The research has since been published as a book.

Allow me to share a tiny part of our research on Sulu, reflecting on our politics.

Our research on the SoLD ARMM assessment further highlights the achievements and challenges faced by the region's democratic journey over the past decades:

1. Limited Institutional Strength wherein local governments struggle to provide basic services and uphold the rule of law. Corruption, clientelism, and an overall lack of transparency have hindered the growth of democratic institutions.

- As such, Sulu needs to (a) strengthen local governance through capacity-building, greater transparency, and decentralization of power; and (b) be more responsive to the needs of its constituents and more capable of delivering essential services.

2. Participation and Inclusivity for many marginalized groups, especially women, youth, and indigenous communities, still face significant barriers to participating in the political process, undermining the very principles of democracy and weakening the legitimacy of local governance.

- Sulu should strengthen programs that empower these groups instead and create safe spaces for them to participate in governance.

3. Human Rights Violation where the legacy of insurgency and violence continues to impact the lives of the people in Sulu, and human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, displacement, and denial of basic freedoms, remain pervasive.

- As a response, much emphasis should be placed on establishing and strengthening robust legal frameworks, independent human rights institutions, and genuine accountability for violations to guarantee political freedoms and address human rights abuses.

4. Peace and Security, because the remnants of the armed groups and the impact of past conflicts have created significant barriers to achieving lasting peace.

- This highlights the importance of the continuation of the comprehensive and concerted effort to address the root causes of conflict through peacebuilding and peacekeeping initiatives, build trust among all sectors of society through community dialogue programs, and continue the work towards socioeconomic development, justice, and reconciliation.

The SoLD ARMM Assessment also gathered survey responses related to the elections:

1. Electoral Integrity: 54% of respondents reported that they believed local elections in ARMM were often marked by irregularities, including vote-buying, intimidation, and manipulation. This undermines the trust of the electorate in the democratic process and poses a major obstacle to genuine democratic governance.

2. Voter Participation: 40% of respondents indicated that they did not feel fully informed or engaged in the electoral process, a reflection of the broader challenges of civic education and the lack of confidence in electoral institutions.

3. Political Patronage: 62% of respondents felt that local elections were primarily driven by political dynasties, with power being concentrated in the hands of a few families. This practice stifles democratic accountability and prevents meaningful change.

4. Youth and Women's Participation: Only 25% of young people and 30% of women felt that they had a substantial influence on the outcome of local elections. This speaks to the significant barriers that still exist in terms of inclusive participation, particularly among underrepresented groups.

V. Security and Peacebuilding Efforts

The role of women in peacebuilding must also be highlighted equally. Tausug women have long been leaders in their communities, mediating disputes and preserving culture, though often overlooked in formal processes. Supporting women's participation in peace and security efforts is crucial to achieving lasting, inclusive peace in Sulu.

The Sultanate's history was also shaped by the significant contributions of women leaders, challenging the common perception that governance in Sulu was solely the domain of men. Figures like Princess Tarhata Kiram and Dayang-Dayang Hadja Piandao Kiram played pivotal roles in governance, diplomacy, and social development.

Princess Tarhata, the first Muslim woman pensionado sent to the United States, returned to Sulu, embracing native customs, and later became deeply involved in politics and resistance movements alongside her husband, Datu Tahil, leader of the 1927 Moro revolt. Her advocacy during Tahil's imprisonment and her continued public life highlighted the influential roles women held in both political and social spheres.

Likewise, Dayang-Dayang Hadja Piandao, daughter of Sultan Badaruddin, was considered a power behind the throne during Sultan Jamalul Kiram II's reign. In 1939, she led a legal battle in the High Court of North Borneo, securing a favorable ruling that upheld the Sultanate's heirs' rights under the 1876 Lease Agreement, a landmark decision reinforcing Sulu's sovereignty.

Today, Tausug women are deeply engaged in politics, business, and development. Our madrasah system has women, not just men, as educators and spiritual leaders, shaping religious, intellectual, and cultural life in Sulu. This long history of women's leadership in Sulu stands as a testament to a tradition of inclusive governance, where women were valued participants in public life, a legacy that continues to inspire the region today.

My late mother, former Senator Santanina Tillah Rasul, is a clear testament to the role women have played in the modern history of Sulu. She was elected as a barrio councilor in Alat in the 60s, then the only opposition candidate to win as Provincial Board Member in the 70s, then as the first Muslim woman to be elected Senator in 1987.

She lived a life that embodied values essential for today's world: leadership through service, courage, humility, pride in her culture, and an unwavering commitment to peace and education. She wasn't just a public servant or a mother—she was a peacebuilder, a teacher, and an inspiration to generations. What made her truly remarkable was that no matter how far she went, she never forgot where she came from. Her pride in her roots and culture was at the heart of everything she did.

Leadership grounded in service

She believed that leadership wasn't about titles or power; it was about service. As the first Muslim woman senator, she used her platform to fight for those who couldn't fight for themselves. During her two terms in the Senate, she authored eight laws as Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Civil Service and Government Recognition and the Committee on Women and Family Relations. One of her first laws, Republic Act No. 6656, protected civil servants from unjust dismissal during a time of government restructuring. Mama always said that being a leader meant standing up for the voiceless and the vulnerable. Her work reminds us that real leadership is about uplifting others, especially the underserved and marginalized. Republic Act No. 7192, the Women in Development and Nation Building Act, outlawed discrimination against women, opened the doors of the Philippine Military to

women, and mandated that a substantial portion of government funds at all levels be used for programs that would benefit and develop women's capabilities. She also sponsored Republic Act No. 6949, the law declaring March 8 of every year as National Women's Day.

Education and empowerment

One of her most significant contributions was her pioneering work in adult literacy, particularly through the *Magbassa Kita* program. This initiative was a cornerstone of her belief that education is the foundation for peace and development, especially in Muslim Mindanao. "Magbassa Kita" means "Let Us Read" in Tausug. She recognized that high illiteracy rates in Muslim Mindanao were not just educational issues but barriers to economic growth, political empowerment, and lasting peace. By focusing on adult literacy, Mama sought to give people the tools to understand their rights, participate in governance, and make informed decisions. Her leadership reminds us that addressing root causes, like illiteracy, is key to solving bigger societal problems.

Why adult literacy matters for peace and development

In Muslim Mindanao, illiteracy had long been a silent barrier to progress, particularly in conflict-affected areas. Mama believed that literacy was not just about reading and writing—it was about empowerment. Through *Magbassa Kita*, she equipped hundreds of thousands of adults with the skills they needed to engage meaningfully in society. Literacy allowed them to understand land ownership laws, manage small businesses, and access government services. For women, it was especially transformative, enabling them to advocate for their families and communities.

Senator Nina Rasul often said, "How can we achieve peace if people don't even understand the agreements being signed in their name?" Literacy gave people the ability to read peace agreements, understand government programs, and participate in dialogues. It gave them a voice. And with that voice came the power to reject extremism, demand accountability, and work toward unity.

Conclusion

Peace will not come through force alone. It will be built by creating democratic spaces for everyone, addressing community needs, and empowering local voices, especially those

historically silenced. As we move forward, several peace and governance pathways must be considered if we are to secure a future of dignity, justice, and inclusive peace in Sulu:

First, we must rethink autonomy and decentralization in a way that ensures not only the devolution of authority but also its democratization. Autonomy should not be captured by elite interests but should reflect the voice and diversity of local communities, with meaningful participation from sectoral leaders (youth, women, indigenous peoples, and grassroots leaders). For our people to participate, they must have access to education—hence Mama’s advocacy for adult literacy. The Mindanao State University in Sulu must expand its outreach program to serve our people.

Second, it is important to strengthen democratic institutions at the local level. This means enforcing electoral reforms and building responsive, transparent, and accountable governance systems that can deliver essential services and uphold the authority of the law.

Third, grassroots peacebuilding initiatives must be sustained and expanded. Local communities possess the wisdom and resilience to manage conflicts and rebuild social cohesion. Traditional conflict mediators, religious leaders, and civil society groups must be empowered as co-creators of peace.

Lastly, Sulu must not be relegated to the margins of national and regional peace frameworks. Its maritime position, historical legacy, and rich cultural heritage make it a critical actor in shaping interregional relations and national policy. It must be engaged not as a peripheral province, but as a vital partner in building a just and peaceful Mindanao.

Sulu’s story is not merely one of conflict and marginalization. It is also a story of resilience, agency, and an enduring aspiration for dignity and justice. Its people, from sultanates and datus to women leaders and grassroots peace advocates, have long demonstrated their capacity to shape their future. Today, as we stand at another pivotal juncture, let us honor this legacy by committing ourselves to a peace process and a democracy that leaves no one behind.

Thank you very much.

Tau Sug People's Right to Self-Determination: Legal and Political Dynamics

MELTINO J. SIBULAN

Abstract

The right to self-determination is a fundamental principle enshrined in international law, particularly emphasized in the context of colonial countries and peoples seeking independence. The case of the Tau Sug people and the Sultanate of Sulu exemplifies the complexities surrounding this right, as they navigate their historical claims and the legal and political dimensions against the backdrop of the governance of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The United Nations has established numerous resolutions, such as Resolution 1514 (XV), affirming the right of all peoples to self-determination and the necessity for decolonization. The Sultanate of Sulu's historical context, including its past as an independent State, raises critical questions about its current status as a non-self-governing territory. The continuing struggle for self-determination by the Tau Sug people reflects their desire for genuine autonomy and recognition of their rights under international law, ultimately allowing them to determine their political status and pursue their socio-economic development freely. This abstract explores the legal and political dynamics of the Tau Sug people surrounding their assertion of right to self-determination, and considering the implications of international resolutions and the responsibilities of the administering States—the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia—over the Tau Sug people and the Territory of the Sultanate of Sulu.

I. HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

A. *Earliest Inhabitants and Tribes*

According to traditions and legend, Jamiyun Kulisa was the first person to live in Sulu (Saleeby 1908, 152; Rasul 2003, 6). At the time, Sulu was known as “*Lupah Sug*” (Julkarnain 2011). His wife was Indira Suga. They had a son named Tuan Masha’ika, who in turn had a son named Mawmin, whose descendants “multiplied greatly” and are the original ancestors of the current generation (Saleeby 1908, 152). The *Buranuns* were the oldest group (Majul 1978, 53). *Buranuns*, meaning “mountaineers” or “hill people,” often refer to the island’s original inhabitants (Saleeby 1908, 156). Thereafter, they were followed by *Tagimahas* (152), the second group that came and lived, and the third group, the *Baklayas* (Majul 1978, 53). Before Islam, three independent groups or kingdoms were on the island: the *Buranuns* in the mountains, the *Tagimahas* along the rivers, and the *Baklayas* along the coasts (41–42). The fourth major group to come to Sulu was the *Badjaos*. The *Badjaos* did not stay in a particular place; they are asserted to have been scattered among the three earlier groups (53). Thereafter, the people of Sulu became four parties (Saleeby 1908, 149).

It is reported that a group of immigrants, known as *Orang Dampuans* from southern Annam [now Vietnam], had come to Sulu between 900 and 1200 AD. The fame of Sulu had reached as far as northern Borneo, and soon Banjarmasin [now the largest city in South Kalimantan, Indonesia] and Brunei, two of the important sub-states of the Empire of Sri Vijaya, sent traders to Sulu, which it developed into an emporium. Trading ships from Cambodia, China, Java, and Sumatra cast anchor at Sulu ports to savor their wealth and splendor (Agoncillo 1990, 23).

In 1380, Arabian scholar *Makhdum* came to Sulu (Agoncillo 1990, 23). He arrived after the *Badjaos*. He made his home in Buansa, “where the *Tagimaha* nobles lived” (Majul 1978, 42). He was later called “Tuan Sharif Aulia” (55). Another *makhdum* also came to Sulu, called “Karim,” whose proper name was Aminullah and entitled Sayyid un-Nikab and denominated as “*Mohadum*” (53). The Chinese called “Hoy-Hoy,” a local version of “Hue-Hue,” the Chinese term for Muslim, referring to Chinese Muslims who also came to Sulu (54).

According to the Sulu Genealogy, ten years after the arrival of Karim ul-Makhdum, Raja Baguinda had arrived from Menangkabaw, Sumatra [now part of Indonesia] (Majul 1978, 55; Saleeby 1908, 149). Five years after Raja Baguinda arrived at Sulu, the Raja of Java [now an island also in Indonesia] sent a messenger to Sulu with a present of wild elephants (Saleeby

1908, 150). After Rajah Baguinda had consolidated his position in Buansa, another significant event happened in Sulu (Majul 1978, 56). Sayyid Abu Bakr came to Sulu in Buansa, lived with Raja Baguinda, and married his daughter Paramisuli. Without a male heir, Raja Baguinda appointed Abu Bakr, his son-in-law, chief judge and priest, as his heir and delegated to him all the authority he exercised over Buansa and the Island of Sulu (Saleeby 1908, 154).

The natives called Sulu “*Sug*,” which means sea current, or “Lupah Sug” (Land of the Current). Lupah Sug does not only refer to the present Jolo Island; it is the appropriate designation for the archipelago as a whole (Abubakar 1973; Saleeby 1908).

Groups of inhabitants—Buranuns, Tagimahas, Baklayas, and Badjaos—were also referred to as “*tribes*,” The Genealogy of Sulu is a succinct analysis of the tribes or elements that constituted the bulk of the island’s early inhabitants and is the most reliable record of the historical events that antedated Islam (Saleeby 1908, 150).

Based on the above factual narrations, there was already a “*territory*” called “Lupah Sug” but no “*people*” yet called “Tau Sug,” only tribes with their respective names. How did the “*tribes*” become “*one compact nation*” or “*single nationality*”?

And, based also on the above factual narrations, an earlier state before the establishment of the Sultanate¹ of Sulu was the Lupah Sug (Jawi: لڤوس) (Julkarnain 2011).

B. The Sultanate of Sulu Nation-State (Sultaniyyah sin Lupah Sug)

There is no valid reason to question the existence of the Sharif ul-Hashim. All *tarsilas*, *khutbahs*, and traditions affirm his coming and his establishment of the Sultanate (Majul 1978, 13). However, the *kitab* of Haji Buto states that Sharif ul-Hashim ruled from 808 to 823 Anno Hegirae (1405–20 AD) (12) as Sultan² with regnal title: “*Paduka Mahasari Maulana al-Sultan Sharif ul-Hashim*” (Majul 1978, 14) and founded the independent and

1 The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary (2025) defines *sultanate* as “a state or country governed by a sultan”

2 The word *sultan* (Arabic: سلطان) is derived from the Arabic root “SLT,” which means “power, authority, dominion.” Meaning: Ruler or sovereign, especially of a Muslim state (Etymology World 2025).

sovereign country—the “nation³-state”⁴ of the “Sultaniyyah⁵ Sin Lupah Sug,” also known internationally as the “Sultanate of Sulu” (New World Encyclopedia Editors 2023).

Sultan Sharif ul-Hashim. This is the title assumed by the first Sultan, whose proper name was, according to the Sulu Genealogy, Abu Bakr. His titles, as inscribed in his tomb, are: Paduka Mahasari Maulana al-Sultan Sharif ul-Hashim. The term “maulana” (Arabic for protector) is used in the sense of a respected teacher or learned man. The Sharif is reported to have lived about thirty years in Buansa, the seat of the sultanate, and his tomb is located on one of the slopes of nearby Mount Tumantangis. The khutbahs and kitabs describe him as wise, intelligent, learned in fiqh (jurisprudence), master of his age and time (sayyid ul-’Asr), and “kindled light of Allah.” (Majul 1978, 14)

In the only case decided by the Supreme Court of the Philippines, the “founding” of the Sultanate of Sulu and its “territorial expansions” from original island of the *Lupah Sug* (Sulu) to “over territorial areas” of Tawi-Tawi, Palawan, Basilan and Zamboanga were correctly cited, citing Samuel K. Tan (1997, 47–48), thus:

*The Sultanate of Sulu was established and claimed jurisdiction over territorial areas represented today by Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Palawan, Basilan, and Zamboanga.*⁶

According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, the Sultanate of Sulu is a Muslim “State”:

The Sultanate of Sulu was a Muslim state that ruled over many of the islands of the Sulu Sea, in the southern Philippines. (New World Encyclopedia Editors 2023)

3 Isagani A. Cruz and Carlo L. Cruz (2024, 20) state: “Hackworth observes that ‘the term *nation*, strictly speaking, as evidenced by its etymology (*nasci*, to be born) indicates a relation of birth or origin and implies a common race, usually characterized by community of language and customs.’”

4 The *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* (2025) defines *nation-state* as “a form of political organization under which a relatively homogeneous people inhabits a sovereign state, especially a state containing one as opposed to several nationalities.”

5 The term *Sultaniyyah* typically refers to *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah*, an influential classical Islamic legal and political treatise. Written by the jurist Abu al-Hasan al-Mawardi (d. 1058 CE), this work discusses the principles and governance of an Islamic state, including the roles of the caliph, judiciary, and administrative systems. It is considered a foundational text in Islamic political thought. In *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah*, al-Mawardi (1996, 45) explains: “The ruler is obligated to act in the best interest of the people by ensuring justice, preserving public order, and adhering to the principles of the Shari’ah”

6 *Cruz v. Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources*, 400 PHIL. REP. 904., G.R. No. 135385 (6 December 2000). <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/1/36882>.

The *Convention on Rights and Duties of States*, adopted by the Seventh International Conference of American States and signed at Montevideo, Uruguay on 26 December 1933, establishes the “standard definition” of a “State” under international law (Britannica Editors 2024):

*Article 1. The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states.*⁷

In one case decided by the Supreme Court of the Philippines, it judicially defines “State” as follows:

*“It is a community of persons, more or less numerous, permanently occupying a definite portion of territory, independent of external control, and possessing a government to which a great body of inhabitants render habitual obedience.”*⁸

Historically, the Sultanate of Sulu did meet these qualifications during its peak as a sovereign polity. As explained below, it retains its “sovereignty” and all the historical, political, and legal rights.

C. Sultanate of Sulu’s Four Elements⁹ of State

1. Sultanate of Sulu’s Permanent Population

People refer simply to the inhabitants of the State. While there is no legal requirement for their number, it is generally agreed that they must be numerous to be self-sufficing and to defend themselves, and small enough to be easily administered and sustained (Cruz 2024, 23).

Historically, the independent and sovereign “nation-state” of the Sultanate of Sulu had its own permanent population consisting of the different ethnic tribes mentioned above, inhabiting within its State’s territory, which became a “single” (Saleeby 1908, 162) or “one compact nation” (Rasul 2003, 132) or “nationality” (Saleeby 1908, 162), the so-called *Pārbangsahan* Tau Sug. *Pārbangsahan* means citizenship (Bangahan 2015, 146). They are

7 United Nations iLibrary. Retrieved at https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789_210596800s003-c002. Last accessed on March 9, 2025.

8 *Collector of Internal Revenue v. Campus Rueda*, 42 SCRA 23, G.R. No. L-13250 (29 October 1971).

9 The elements of a State are: people, territory, government, and sovereignty (Albano 1998, 4).

customarily called *Raayat*¹⁰ Tau Sug also (Bangahan 2015), or now publicly and proudly identify themselves as the *Bangsa*¹¹ Tau Sug or, simply, pure “*Bangsa Sug*.”¹² *Tau* means people, while *Sug* refers to a place (Absari 2021, 2), or country—the Sultaniyyah sin Lupah Sug a.k.a. Sultanate of Sulu.

According to Justice Jainal D. Rasul (2003, 142), *Struggle for Identity*, “during the reign of Al-Marhum Sultan Shariful Hashim at Buansa, *a congeries of warring tribes and clans* gradually came into ‘*one compact nation*’ under him.”¹³

According to Dr. Najeeb M. Saleeby, who compiled oral histories and native genealogies, in his book, *The History of Sulu*, the four tribes lost their identity and became a “*single nation*”—“*national*” in character, thus:

The four tribes thus brought so closely together mixed very intimately and later lost their identity in the development of a “single nation.”... the “national character” thus formed has remained unchanged throughout history, and the Sulu of today still maintains that same individuality which he acquired in his earlier days. (1908, 156)

Dr. Saleeby emphasizes that the pre-Islamic divisions gradually dissolved as these ethnic communities merged, eventually forming “*one nationality*”:

The Samals [also called Badjaos] exceeded the Sulus [Tau Sug] in number, and the effect of such overwhelming immigration must have been considerable; but nevertheless, the Sulu maintained his “nationality.” (1908, 156)

By the 13th century, “*Sinug*” emerged as the “*lingua franca*” among the different tribes, further binding them under a “proto-national identity” understood as the shared sense of belonging rooted in cultural, linguistic, or historical commonalities, which existed before the emergence of a formal nation-state (Anderson 2006, 11–12); and the Sama and Badjaos [and all others within the Sultanate’s territory] feel obliged to learn it (Gowing 1977, 5).

10 Meaning “*citizen*.”

11 Nation [noun] a group of people living in a particular country, forming a single political and economic unit; a large number of people who share the same history, ancestors, culture etc. (whether or not they all live in the same country; or people [noun plural] (noun singular) a nation or race. BANGSA | English translation - Cambridge Dictionary retrieved at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/indonesian-english/bangsa>. Last accessed on April 12, 2025.

12 The Province of Sulu marks every 16–18 September as Bangsa Sug Day. Last year’s celebration in 2024 was the “634th Bangsa Sug Day.”

13 Justice Jainal D. Rasul Sr., *supra* note 1, at 132.

“This centralization allowed for cultural integration, especially among the lowland and maritime groups, giving rise to the *Tau Sug* as a “unified people” who shared a common language (*Sinug*), religion (*Islam*), and political leadership (*Sultan*, Arabic: *ناطلس*) under one independent and sovereign country, the State of Sultaniyyah sin Lupah Sug a.k.a. Sultanate of Sulu.”

Modern international law reflects early notions of state-based “nationality” and “citizenship.” In the *Nottebohm Case* before the ICJ, “nationality” is a legal bond having as its basis a social fact of attachment, a genuine connection of existence, interests, and sentiments, thus:

*According to the practice of States, to arbitral and judicial decisions and to the opinions of writers, nationality is a legal bond having as its basis a social fact of attachment, a genuine connection of existence, interests and sentiments, together with the existence of recip-rocal rights and duties.*¹⁴

By this international standard, the *raayat* Tau Sug qualifies as a national community, possessing territory, common governance, and identity.

i. Raayat Tau Sug: Not Filipinos

Filipino comes from the word *Filipinas*, translated to English, *Philippines*. *Felipinas* was the name given by the Spanish explorer Ruy de Villalobos to Tendaya (Leyte or Samar) in 1543 in honor of the Spanish crown prince, Philip (Felipe in Spanish), who later became King Philip II [of Spain]. Villalobos later applied *Felipinas* to all the islands of the (Philippine) archipelago. After Miguel Lopez de Legazpi began the colonization of the islands in 1565, *Felipinas* became *Filipinas*. *The natives literally became subjects of Felipe* (Alip 1954, 127 quoted in Quimpo 2003). The term “Filipino” originally referred not to the native peoples of the archipelago, but to Spaniards born in the Philippines—a colonial elite known as *criollos* or *insulares*:

The term “Filipino” was first applied to Spaniards born in the Philippines, not to the Indios. It was a badge of local birth among the colonial ruling class. (Agoncillo 1990, 85)

14. *Nottebohm Case (Liechtenstein v. Guatemala)*, Second Phase, [1955] I.C.J. Rep. 23.

On February 18, 1823, Luis Rodriguez Varela, a Conde Filipino, became the first person to identify himself as Filipino in a nationalist sense. He was a Creole, born in the Philippines [Filipinas] (Roces 2010). Before the 1880s, the term “Filipino” actually referred to the people of Spanish parentage born in the Philippines [Filipinas] (Cruz 2018).

Based on the above factual narrations, from 1565 to 1823, or for a period of 280 years, there was already a “territory” called “Felipinas” or “Filipinas,” but there were no people yet called “Filipinos.” And there were already Tau Sug since c. 1405 when the Sultanate of Sulu was established.

Therefore, Tau Sug people are ahead of the Filipino people by 418 years.

ii. Raayat Tau Sug: Not Indios

In time, those inhabitants who had already abandoned what little of Islamic practices they might have adopted, as well as those who were clearly not Muslims, were designated “*indios*” by the Spaniards. Although it appears in early Spanish records that the pagan natives were also called “*indios*,” this term in time came to mean the Christianized inhabitants of the Archipelago (Majul 1978, 80).

The native inhabitants were called “Indios” by the Spaniards, and were excluded from being called Filipinos until the late 19th century. Only during the Propaganda Movement of the 1870s–1890s did the term “Filipino” begin to include the Christianized Indios advocating for political reforms. Before the Reform Movement, the word *Filipino* never included the Indios. It was only later redefined as a national identity (Constantino 1978, 165).

Therefore, historically, the raayat “*Tau Sug*” were neither “*Indios*” nor “*Filipinos*.” They had never become Spanish subjects of Spain during the entire period of Spain’s attempt to subjugate, colonize, or Christianize the Sultanate of Sulu since its first military expedition in June 1578 to its final evacuation in May 1899, or for an exact period of 321 years of “*war-peace-war-peace*” state of affairs between these two countries—the Sultanate of Sulu and Spain.

iii. Raayat Tau Sug: Not Moros

On being not “Moro,” the term “*moro*” came to be generally reserved for the Muslims of [the Sultanate of] Sulu, Mindanao, and Borneo, regardless of their stage of Islamization

(Majul 1978, 80–81). The concepts of “Moro” and “Filipino” carry deeply rooted colonial and political meanings. The raayat Tau Sug of the Sultanate of Sulu were neither originally “Moros” nor “Filipinos.” The terms were imposed by Spanish colonial authorities and do not reflect the true identity of the people (Blanchetti–Revelli 2003).

Historically, with the rise of Islam, Mauritania became a Muslim province under the Umayyad Caliphate. Before long, Muslim armies conquered and then ruled much of the Iberian Peninsula from 711 to 1492, a total of 781 years (Kamlan 2012). In fact, the name “Moro” is a Spanish term for “Moors,” referring to the Muslims who ruled the Iberian Peninsula. The Spanish expelled the Moors and reclaimed the peninsula during an event called the Spanish Reconquista (Michigan in the World, n.d.).

Etymologically, the word Moro was derived from the term “Moor,” itself originating from “Mauru,” a Latin word that referred to the inhabitants of the ancient Roman province of Mauritania in northwest Africa, which today comprises the modern states of Algeria, Mauritania, and the Kingdom of Morocco (Kamlan 2012).

The raayat Tau Sug in Jolo were called explicitly by Legazpi “*moros*”:

As was inevitable, they met at the walls under artillery fire; and they continue to do so in Jolo, fighting a battle that began on the borders of Guadalete. And this, as if nothing should detract from that continuing, Legazpi called them moros, a name they keep up to this time and which, regardless of their having nothing in common with the Mauritians, signifies a community of religion shared with the Spanish Arabs. (de Morga quoted in Majul 1978, 77–78)

For the Spaniards, the term Moor did not necessarily have a derogatory connotation. It was simply the Spanish name for anyone who was Muslim. In the colonial Philippines, the Spanish rulers used the word “Moro” to refer to all the inhabitants of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan, believing that they all belonged to the Islamic faith (Kamlan 2012). The raayat Tau Sug did not ever identify themselves as “Moro.” Islamic resistance was labeled as heretical, barbarous, and outside of Christian civilization, using this colonial exonym, thus:

To the Spaniards, the word “Moro” did not describe an ethnicity but a religious and political enemy, regardless of local context. (Scott 1982, 95)

2. Sultanate of Sulu's Defined Territory

Territory is the fixed portion of the surface of the earth inhabited by the people of the State. As a practical requirement only, it must be neither too big as to be difficult to administer and defend nor too small as to be unable to provide for the needs of the population. The components of the territory are the land mass, otherwise known as the *terrestrial domain*, the inland and external waters, which make up the *maritime and fluvial domain*, and the air space above the land and waters, which is called the *aerial domain* (Cruz and Cruz 2024, 24).

Historically, the independent and sovereign “nation-state” of the Sultanate of Sulu controlled a “defined territory” that included the Sulu Archipelago, Basilan, parts of Mindanao, Palawan, Ilocos, Mindoro, Panay, and Cavite, now under the Philippines, and portions now under Indonesia and Malaysia, as shown below.

The island of Lupah Sug (Sulu), which was the original core territory of the Sultanate of Sulu, was divided by Al-Marhum Sultan Sharif ul-Hashim for purposes of administration and governance, in this wise:

The island was accordingly divided into five administrative districts, over each one of which one panglima exercised power subject to the supervision and superior authority of the sultan. These districts were again divided into smaller divisions, which were administered by subordinate officers or chiefs called maharaja, orangkaya, laksamana, parukka, etc. The districts were called Parang, Pansul, Lati, Gi'tüŋg, and Lu'uk. (Saleeby 1908, 162–63)

To reiterate, in the only case decided by the Supreme Court, the “*founding*” of the Sultanate of Sulu and its “*territorial expansions*” were correctly cited:

*The Sultanate of Sulu was established and claimed jurisdiction over territorial areas represented today by Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Palawan, Basilan, and Zamboanga.*¹⁵

Before the *International Court of Justice*, Malaysia has *already admitted* in its “Reply of Malaysia” dated 2 March 2001, filed before the ICJ, in the case entitled “*Case Concerning Sovereignty over Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan (Indonesia/Malaysia)*” decided on 17 December 2002 that “**North Borneo**” (leased to British North Borneo Company or BNBC) is **part of the territory of the Sultanate of Sulu**, in this wise:

15 Cruz vs. Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources.

A. Malaysia's Case for Sovereignty over the Islands

1.3. Malaysia's sovereignty over the islands is clear and well established. It follows from the following propositions, which – as will be shown in detail in the following Chapters – Malaysia has demonstrated with full reference to the available evidence.

*Like other islands off the east Coast of Borneo (Danawan, Si Amil, Omadal, Mabul...), Sipadan and Ligitan [part of North Borneo] **were part of the dominions of the Sultanate of Sulu** in the nineteenth century; the people of these islands owed allegiance to the Sultan, which allegiance they transferred to the BNBC [British North Borneo Company] from 1878.”¹⁶*

The raayat Tau Sug of the Sultaniyyah sin Lupah Sug (Sultanate of Sulu) would like to thank Malaysia for *judicially admitting*, in the said case, that the “*territory of North Borneo*” is “*part of the dominions of the Sultanate of Sulu*” and reserve the rights to dispute the rest of Malaysia's contentions or propositions in due time, *in sha Allah*.

Furthermore, regarding territorial “expansion” of the Sultanate of Sulu, “it was during Sultan Nasiruddin's reign that the Sulu Sultanate was expanded beyond the original size established by Al-Marhum Sultan Sharif ul-Hashim. This time, the Sulu Sultanate was enlarged and divided into five (5) districts, namely: (1) *Jolo*, (2) *Borneo*, (3) *Palawan*, (4) *Tawi-Tawi*, and (5) *Basilan*” (Rasul 2003, 133).

According to Majul's *Muslims in the Philippines*, “it is important to note that at this point the Sulu ruler claimed dominion over the islands of *Sulu*, *Tawi-Tawi*, *Taguima (Basilan)*, and two places in the island of Mindanao, namely *Zamboanga* and *Cavite*” (1978, 218). Sulu sultans had always considered *Basilan* part of their domains (280). At the height of its power, its territorial domains included the entire *Sulu archipelago*, *Basilan*, *Palawan*, some coastal areas of *Zamboanga*, and *North Borneo* (Abubakar 1973).

According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, “between 1768 and 1848, foreign trade increased until Sulu's hegemony extended over the islands that bordered the western peninsula of

16 Case Concerning Sovereignty over Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan (Indonesia/ Malaysia), *Reply of Malaysia*, 2 March 2001, I.C.J. Pleadings, 1–2

Mindanao in the east, to the modern Malaysian state of *Sabah* (North Borneo) in the west and south, and to *Palawan* in the north (*New World Encyclopedia* Editors 2023).

According to Justice Jainal D. Rasul (2003, 133), “the reign of Sultan Mawallil Wasit marks the beginning of the bloodiest war... In fact, the Sulu Sultanate reached the zenith of its power. For this time, Sulu Sultanate was further expanded to include *Celebes* (the present Suluwasi, Indonesia with *Makasiar* as the capital; *Kalimantan Utara*, Indonesian Borneo; with *Balikpapan* and *Tarakan* as the capital; *Sabah*, with *Sandakan* and *Marudu* as its seat of government; *Palawan* to oversee Visayas and Luzon and *Basilan* to oversee Mindanao).”

The Sulu Archipelago is generally divided into two groups: Jolo and its neighboring islands, and Tawi-Tawi and its adjacent islands (Rasul 2003, 44). The old name of Basilan is Taguima, and its capital is Isabela. Isabela’s old name is Pasangan. Before American rule, Basilan was governed by Sulu Datus and paid tribute to the Sultan of Sulu (43). Palawan Muslim inhabitants are found in the southern portion. Its Datus are related to the Sultan of Sulu, and one of its datu, Datu Harun, once became, though not popular, Sultan of Sulu, supported by the Spaniards (43). Sulu Sea, which made Sulu really great in the annals of colonization, covers a large, deep interisland sea located between the southwestern Philippines and northeastern Borneo (44).

There were other islands, considered part of Sulu, where Dutch and British flags flew, which necessitated diplomatic negotiations between the United States and these nations. The island of *Miangas* (*Palmas*) at the southern extremity of Sulu, for example, was visited by Gen. Leonard Wood, the first Governor of the Moro Province, in January 1906. He was surprised to find that the island was under the *de facto* government of the Dutch East Indies authorities. The United States and Holland disputed the island until April 1928, when the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled in favor of Holland (Forbes quoted in Gowing 1977, 28).

Other Sultanate of Sulu territories, as mentioned by Majul’s (1978, 200–202) *Muslims in the Philippines*, are in this quote:

This old warrior [Sultan Badar ud-Din] died around 1740, leaving to his son [Azim ud-Din I] the administration of ***Tirun territories*** on which he had spent a great part of his life pacifying. In 1746... the Sultan [Azim ud-Din I] turned his attention to the *Tirun territories* conquered by his father [Sultan Badar ud-Din]. Specifically, this was the coastal area from *Sibuko River* down to *Tapeadurian* along the eastern part of Borneo inhabited by the

Tiruns, a non-Muslim people who have been noted for their cruelty and slave-hunting expeditions... [Sultan] *Badarud-Din* was not only the son of a Tirun lady but also married a Tirun lady of the ruling class. What ensued from the series of expeditions, which were directed mostly against the Sibuko area, was *reaffirmation by the Tirun chiefs of their allegiance to the Sulu sultanate*.

Rasul presents a description of the Sulu Islamic flag:

Sulu Islamic *flag* has a crescent and five stars representing areas as follows: (1) Kalemantan, Indonesia with Balikpapan and Batarakan as a seat of power; (2) Sabah with Sandakan and Marudu as seat of power; (3) Palawan, to oversee Visayas and Luzon; (4) Basilan to oversee Mindanao, and (5) Sulu, as overall central government. (2003, 164)

Jolo, the capital, was once the seat of the Sulu Empire (Rasul 2003, 44).

In the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Intervention of the Republic of the Philippines in the same case: “*Case Concerning Sovereignty over Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan (Indonesia/Malaysia)*,” the Republic of the Philippines’ presentation, in the 28 June 2001 Oral Proceedings at the Peace Palace, ICJ, The Hague, through Mr. Merlin M. Magallona, Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs as Co-Agent and Counsel, *judicially admitted that “North Borneo” belongs to the Sultanate of Sulu and that all other territories appertaining to the Sultanate, the Philippines is merely “agent” and “attorney” for the Sultanate, stated in this wise:*

*12. May I state that the territory ceded by the Sultan to the Philippines in 1962 covered only those territories which were included and described in the 1878 Sulu-Overbeck lease agreement. The Present Application for permission to intervene is based solely on the rights of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines transferred by and acquired from the Sulu Sultanate. If at all there are other territories appertaining to the Sultanate not covered by the Sulu-Overbeck lease of 1878, the Philippines, as agent and attorney for Sultanate, has reserved its position on these territories.*¹⁷

17 INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE (ICJ), Oral Proceedings. Retrieved at <https://icj-cij.org/case/102/oral-proceedings/102-20010628-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf>. Retrieved at <https://icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/102/102-20010628-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf>. Last accessed on March 9, 2025. See also University of the Philippines, Institute of International Legal Studies, *The Philippine Claim to a Portion of North Borneo: Materials and Documents* (Quezon City: Institute of International Legal Studies, University of the Philippines Law Center, 2003), 334.

In contemporary international law, territory is a *sine qua non* requirement for the existence of a State (Montevideo Convention 1933, art. 1). A defined territory with recognized boundaries with other states is a fundamental attribute of statehood (Raj 2024). The obligation to honor a state's territorial integrity is based on the assumption that its boundaries are the result of national self-determination (Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples 1960).¹⁸

3. Sultanate of Sulu's Government

Government is the agency or instrumentality through which the will of the State is formulated, expressed, and realized. From the viewpoint of international law, no particular form of government is prescribed, provided only that the government is able to represent the State in its dealings with other States (Cruz and Cruz 2024, 32).¹⁹

The Sultanate of Sulu historically had a functioning *de jure* government (Cruz and Cruz 2024, 64), which was and is still a “sultanate” (a state or country governed by a sultan),²⁰ like the independent and sovereign State of the *Sultanate of Brunei*. The Sultanate of Sulu and the Sultanate of Brunei share some similarities in their establishment, primarily due to their connections to Islam (Majul 1973, 45–47).

Thus, after ascending to the throne of Sulu, Sultan Sharif ul-Hashim then politically reorganized the government by framing it on the same principles as those of an Arabian sultanate (Saleeby 1908, 162). As a result, the government was run in accordance with local laws and customs, which were modified to the extent that they did not conflict with the Quran's precepts. To maintain this uniformity, Abu Bakr created and issued a set of laws. After it was established, this served as a guide for all state officers below it, and they generally followed its directives (164).

To reiterate, the island was accordingly divided into five administrative districts, over each one of which one *panglima* exercised power subject to the supervision and superior authority of the sultan. These districts were again divided into smaller divisions, which were administered by subordinate officers or chiefs called *maharaja*, *orangkaya*, *laksamana*, *parukka*, etc. (Saleeby 1908, 163).

18 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, G.A. Res. 1514 (14 December 1960). Retrieved at http://www.Unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/c_coloni.htm. Last accessed on Aug. 10, 2011.

19 Isagani A. Cruz and Carlo L. Cruz. *supra* note 36, at 32.

20 SULTANATE Definition – Merriam-Webster. Retrieved at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sultanate>. Last accessed on March 9, 2025.

The general lines on which Abu Bakr conducted his government seem to have been followed very closely by all his successors (Saleeby 1908, 163). Sultan Alimud Din I revised the Sulu code of laws and system of justice (180). Sultan Pulalun, following the steps of his father, published a revised code of Sulu laws and conducted the affairs of his government with care (218). The Spanish Government recognized the supreme authority of the Sultan of Sulu (179).

Nowadays, the legal status of the Sultanate of Sulu's government is still a *de jure* Government, even though it has no power of control over its historic State's territories because the *de jure* Government of the Sultanate of Sulu still "*has a rightful title*" which is never transferred to the administering States.

4. Sultanate of Sulu's Sovereignty

Based on the above facts, the Sultanate of Sulu did acquire "*sovereignty*" from the moment Sharif ul-Hashim ruled in 808 Anno Hegirae (1405 AD) as the Sultan with regnal title: "*Paduka Mahasari Maulana al-Sultan Sharif ul-Hashim*" and founded the independent and sovereign "nation-state" of the "*Sultaniyyah Sin Lupah Sug*," also known internationally as the "*Sultanate of Sulu*."

And, based also on the above facts, the Sultanate of Sulu is ahead of the Republic of the Philippines by 541 years from its independence in 1946 [$1946 - 1405 = 541$]; ahead of Indonesia by 540 years from its independence in 1945 [$1945 - 1405 = 540$]; and, lastly, ahead of Malaysia by 558 years from its independence in 1963 [$1963 - 1405 = 558$]. The *Sultanate of Sulu* is now 620 years old; the *Philippines* is 79; *Indonesia* is 78; and *Malaysia*, the youngest of them all, is 62.

Sovereignty is the supreme and controllable power inherent in a State by which the State is governed (Cruz and Cruz 2024, 44). *Laurel v. Misa* (1947) characterized sovereignty this way: "*Sovereignty is permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, absolute, indivisible, inalienable and imprescriptible.*"²¹

According to the Supreme Court of the Philippines, sovereignty is the possession of sovereign power, while jurisdiction is the conferment by law of power and authority to apply the law

21 *Laurel v. Misa*, G.R. No. 409, January 30, 1947; 77 Phil. 856.

(*Saguisag v. Executive Secretary* 2016).²² There are two kinds of sovereignty, to wit, *legal* and *political*. Legal sovereignty is the authority that has the power to issue final commands, whereas political sovereignty is the power behind the legal sovereign, or the sum of the influences that operate upon it. Sovereignty may also be *internal* or *external*. Internal sovereignty refers to the power to control its domestic affairs. External sovereignty, which is the power of the State to direct its relations with other States, is also known as independence (Cruz and Cruz 2024, 44).

Historically, the Sultanate of Sulu was and/or is still a nation-state with sovereignty, which is *permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, absolute, indivisible, inalienable, and imprescriptible* (*Laurel v. Misa* 1947).²³ Among the many pieces of evidence of its sovereignty and possessing sovereign power and independence were its currency “*Pilak*”; the various embassies it established in foreign countries and the treaties and agreements it entered into with foreign powers like China, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, France and the United States of America, among others, as proof of “*capacity to enter into relations with other states*” (Montevideo Convention 1933, art. 1).²⁴

The implication of a requirement for capacity to enter into international relations involves demonstrating some practical measure of independence (Cruz and Cruz 2024, 44). The Sultanate of Sulu is replete with demonstrating its independence.

Having acquired “legal title” or “sovereignty” ever since it was founded and established in c. 1405, and had never ever legally transferred to Spain, the United States, the Netherlands, and United Kingdom, and also to their successor administering States—the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia respectively, the Sultanate’s “sovereignty” is retained and remains with the Sultanate of Sulu because “*sovereignty is permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, absolute, indivisible, inalienable and imprescriptible*” (*Laurel v. Misa* 1947).²⁵

By virtue of these characteristics, *sovereignty is not deemed suspended, although the acts of sovereignty cannot be exercised by the legitimate authority* (Cruz and Cruz 2024, 44). Therefore, the Sultanate of Sulu’s sovereignty is still intact and maintained and is not deemed

22 *Saguisag v. Executive Secretary*, G.R. No. 212426, January 12, 2016, citing Black’s Law Dictionary, 1523 and 927 (9th ed., 2009)

23 *Laurel v. Misa*, G.R. No. 409, January 30, 1947; 77 Phil. 856.

24 Article 1, Montevideo Convention, 1933.

25 *Laurel v. Misa*, G.R. No. 409, January 30, 1947; 77 Phil. 856.

suspended, although the Sultanate of Sulu's *de jure* Government cannot yet exercise acts of its sovereignty in the meantime. Unless the raayat Tau Sug's right of self-determination under international law is faithfully respected and recognized, and they can determine their political status freely, unresolved decolonization remains under UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV).²⁶

II. SULTANATE OF SULU'S FINAL RELATIONSHIP WITH SPAIN

A. Sultanate of Sulu's Status Before and After the 1878 Treaty

Before the Spaniards of Spain arrived, the Sultanate of Sulu had already been an independent and sovereign State for 173 years [1578 – 1405 = 173]. The first ever contact between them was during the first military expedition of Spain to Sulu in June 1578 and continued until June 1878 or a total of 300 years of sporadic war-peace-war state of affairs. At last, it ended in peace or succeeded in restoring peace, in the form of a treaty, in July 1878 (Saleeby 1908, 164, 225–26).

The 1878 Treaty of Peace between the Sultanate of Sulu and Spain lasted until the final evacuation of the latter in May 1899, or for 21 years only [1899 – 1878 = 21]. This being the last treaty entered into by both countries or States—*Sultanate of Sulu* and *Spain*—it may [should] be considered to define their final relationship and the exact position that the Sultanate of Sulu occupied in the Philippine Archipelago during the last period of the Spanish régime (Saleeby 1908, 227).

According to Saleeby (1908, 231) in *The History of Sulu*, the status of the Sultanate of Sulu as defined by this treaty resembled that of a “**protectorate**” rather than a “dependency” because the internal administration of the Sultanate, its customs, laws, and religion were fully respected and not subject to Spanish jurisdiction, confirmation, approval, or interference of any sort, except in matters on regulations for the use of firearms. The foreign political relations of the Sultanate were made subject to the full control of Spain.

B. Protectorate's Territory: Not Possession of Protecting State

Accordingly, the five modes of acquiring territory may be distinguished, namely: *cession*, *occupation*, *accretion*, *subjugation*, and *prescription*. And whatever may be the value of the

²⁶ A/RES/15/1514 – *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* – UN Documents. Retrieved at www.un-documents.net/a15r1514.htm. Last accessed on March 9, 2025.

opinions of publicists, so much is certain that the practice of the States recognizes cession, occupation, accretion, subjugation, and prescription as distinct modes of acquiring territory (Oppenheim 1912, 284).

Howland presents how territorial acquisitions were historically discussed in international law:

In his seminal work of 1927, *Private Law Sources and Analogies in International Law*, Hersch Lauterpacht (1927: pp. 43f, 50, 91) argued that, because international lawyers so often discussed State “*acquisition of territory*” with the term “property,” *State possession of territory* was the best example of a reasonable analogy drawn between international and private law. He found it reasonable to *equate State territory and State property* (2020, 857).

Possession by a state refers to the exercise of *de facto* control over a territory, including the administration of laws, protection of borders, and international recognition. While effective control is critical, *legal title* forms the *basis for lasting sovereignty* (Crawford 2019, 200). The legal ties between the *territory* and the *State* can be established by occupation or possession, but *such possession must demonstrate effective control and administration* consistent with international law (International Court of Justice 1975, par. 79). State possession entails the intersection of *legal title*, *effective occupation*, and the *display of authority* within a given area. *Without effective occupation, legal claims to possession can be challenged under international law* (Shaw 2021, 346).

By the above legal standards, was the Sultanate of Sulu—the protectorate of Spain, its [Spain’s] territorial possession under any of the modes of acquiring territory in international law? This raises the question: What is a protectorate?

A protectorate, according to James Crawford’s *Brownlie’s Principles of Public International Law*, is a relationship in which *a state undertakes to protect another state or territory* in exchange for certain concessions, *often related to external affairs and defense*. The protected state *retains domestic autonomy* (2019, 235).

According to Malcolm N. Shaw’s *International Law*, protectorates are *established through agreements* in which *one state assumes responsibility* for specific aspects of governance or *international representation of another state* while the latter remains *formally independent* (Shaw 2021, 452).

According to Jennings and Watts' *Oppenheim's International Law*, the protectorate "represents a relationship where the protecting state undertakes responsibilities for external matters, such as *diplomacy and defense*, leaving the protected entity to govern its internal affairs independently or semi-independently" (1996, 211).

According to Lassa Oppenheim (1912, 141) in *International Law: A Treatise*, "they are called **half-Sovereign States** because they are sovereign within their borders but not without."

The term *protectorate* refers to "a relatively powerful State's promise to protect a weaker State from external aggression or internal disturbance, in return for which the protected entity yields certain powers to the protector. Typically, the legal basis for a regime of protection is a treaty by which the protecting State acquires full control over the external affairs of another State or territory, while the latter continues to have command over its internal affairs. The dependent entity is not annexed or formally incorporated into the territory of the protector" (Trilsch 2011). A protectorate is "a territory that is dependent on a particular sovereign nation. The sovereign nation usually grants the dependent nation local autonomy and some independence to manage some of its issues. In simple terms, a protectorate is a country or territory protected by a powerful country" (Misachi 2017).

A "**colony**" is different from a "*protectorate*" in that a colony "has local rulers who are answerable to the main state's authority, unlike in a protectorate, which is considered an '*independent state*' and merely receives protection from a larger and more powerful country. In fact, the core business of the sovereign state is to protect and defend its protectorate, whereas a '**colony is entirely under the mother country and is considered part of that country.**' **All the activities of a colony are controlled by the sovereign country**" (Misachi 2017). The protectorate is usually allowed to have foreign relationships only with the protecting power. In case another state is interested in having any dealings with the protectorate, it must first pass through the protecting power. The protecting power then decides to give the other state a go-ahead or deny it (Misachi 2017).

Britain has overseas territories that it has declared as protectorates. These **protectorates are not part of the United Kingdom**. The protectorates are self-governing and have the responsibility of managing their internal issues. The UK's government only has the responsibility of defending the territories and taking part in foreign affairs (Misachi 2017).

The following were once declared as protectorates of the United States: Cuba, Panama Canal Zone, Nicaragua, Hawaii, Haiti, Germany, Honduras, South Korea, and the Dominican Republic (Misachi 2017).

Since losing control over foreign affairs involves a loss of independence to some extent, a regime of protection always results in a split of sovereignty. *The protectorate continues to have a separate international status and personality* (Trilsch 2011).

It is generally acknowledged that they *continue to be regarded as States* for at least some purposes, for example, insofar as *treaties concluded before the establishment of the regime of protection remain in force*. Although the protector handles them, the international relations of the protectorate remain formally distinct. A protectorate, thus, *enjoys personality as a State* under international law. This was confirmed by the "International Court of Justice" in the *United States Nationals in Morocco Case* ([1952] ICJ Rep 176). Having placed itself under the protection of France by virtue of the Treaty of Fez (Treaty for the Organisation of the Protectorate [adopted 30 March 1912] [1913] 106 BFSP 1023), *the conduct of all international relations of Morocco was forthwith delegated to France*. According to the ICJ, *Morocco nevertheless retained substantial international personality*. It can thus be said that a protectorate's lack of capacity to act internationally on its own behalf *does not undermine its status as a subject of international law* (Trilsch 2011).

In sum, the protectorate *preserves a certain measure of international personality* which can be distinguished from the personality of the protector. As a consequence, the term "protectorate" is a residual category for territories having lost their independence as a State but having preserved separate international status. As a result of its separate international personality, **protectorates do not constitute an integral part of the protecting State**. Treaties concluded by the protecting State are therefore *not automatically binding on the protégé*. The **territory** of the State under protection **did not legally belong to the protecting power** (Trilsch 2011).

The treaty of protection establishes an *international union* between the States involved. Hence, the relations between a protecting State and its protégé are matters of international law. As was confirmed in the *Nationality Decrees in Tunis and Morocco Case*, this principle stands even when the dispute between the two States concerns a matter normally within a State's domestic jurisdiction (like that of *nationality*). The question of which State may exercise the powers in regard to this matter is related to protectorate status and can therefore not solely lie within domestic jurisdiction (Trilsch 2011).

In the *United States Nationals in Morocco Case*, the ICJ acknowledged that *treaties concluded by Morocco before the protectorate were not affected by the regime of protection*. Generally speaking, so long as the protected entity *retains its international status, pre-protection treaties concluded with third States stay in force* and must be respected according to the terms of the treaty of protection (Trilsch 2011).

Since the protected entity *does not formally become part of the protecting State, but retains its international status as a State*, its nationals *neither lose their nationality, nor do they normally obtain the nationality of the protecting State*. Unless stipulated otherwise in the treaty of protection, *they become "protected persons" (protégés) of the protecting State*, which entitles them to *diplomatic protection* when in foreign countries. They will thus *acquire at least some rights traditionally associated with citizenship*, secured by virtue of the international status of the protecting State (Trilsch 2011).

Therefore, based on the above legal standards or "*judicial decisions*" and the *teachings of the most highly qualified publicists of the various nations*,"²⁷ the historic independent and sovereign nation-state of "Sultanate of Sulu" or, in particular, about its title to its "territory, dominions, possessions, dependencies, principalities, and/or lands" were "*not part*" of *Filipinas, Spain or of Spain*; were "*not part*" of *United Kingdom* concerning the territory of *North Borneo*; and, were "*not part*" of *Indonesia* pertaining to Sultanate's territory under it as clarified above.

Specifically, Spain cannot claim sovereignty over the Sultanate of Sulu because none of the "five (5) modes of acquiring territory were present: *cession, occupation, accretion, subjugation, and prescription*" (Oppenheim 1912, 284).

1. Spain never ever conquered the Sultanate of Sulu; therefore, Spain cannot claim sovereignty by conquest—there was no subjugation.

Conquest, in international law, is the acquisition of territory through force, especially by a victorious state in a war at the expense of a defeated state. An effective conquest takes place when physical appropriation of territory (annexation) is followed by "subjugation" (i.e., the legal process of transferring title) (Britannica Editors 2007).

27 "Subject to the provisions of Article 59, judicial decisions and the teachings of the most highly qualified publicists of the various nations, as subsidiary means for the determination of rules of law." *Statute of the International Court of Justice*, Article 38(1), 1945.

2. Raayat Tau Sug have never ever become Spanish subjects.

When a nation takes possession of a country by conquest, the conquered inhabitants, unless a treaty otherwise provides, become the subjects of the conqueror and owe it allegiance. (de Vattel 1844, bk. 3, ch. 13)

3. Only Luzon, Visayas, and a portion of Mindanao were conquered by Spain and became a “colony” of Spain, which was named “Las Islas Filipinas” (translated to English—Philippine Islands). The *Sultanate of Sulu had never become a “colony” of Spain*; therefore, *it was not considered part of Las Islas Filipinas (Philippine Islands) of Spain*. The Spaniards failed to incorporate the greater part of Mindanao and Sulu into the political system with which they united the central [Visayas] and northern [Luzon] regions (Gowing 1977, 47).
4. As a protectorate of Spain, the Sultanate of Sulu was not annexed or formally incorporated into the territory of Spain; Spain recognized its autonomy, and some independence, split sovereignty – a half-sovereign State; separate international status and personality. The Sultanate of Sulu “**treaties**” concluded before the establishment of the regime of protection **remain in force**, (i.e. the “*Grant by the Sultan of Sulu of a Permanent Lease covering his Lands and Territories on the Island of Borneo*” dated January 22, 1878 with Translation by Prof. Harold C. Conklin in 1946) (University of the Philippines Institute of International Legal Studies 2003, 10). The Sultanate retained substantial international personality; preserved separate international status; did not constitute an integral part of Spain; **the treaties concluded by Spain are not automatically binding on the Sultanate**; Sultanate’s territories did not legally belong to Spain; **Sultanate did not become part of Spain; raayat Tau Sug neither did they lose their nationality**, nor did they obtain the nationality of Spain.
5. Based on the above legal reasoning, Spain cannot legally cede or sell the Sultanate of Sulu or its people and territories to any other state. Therefore, the **Treaty of Paris (1898)**, concluded between Spain and the United States, Spain’s ceding of the Philippines Islands (Filipinas) for \$20,000,000,000²⁸ was perfectly valid as it was Spain’s “colony”; however, it was **invalid insofar as the Sultanate of Sulu or its territory is concerned, including the Treaty of Washington²⁹ (1900)** or the Cession of Outlying Islands of Philippines, particularly the islands of Cagayan [Mapun], Sulu, Sibutu, and their dependencies, for \$100,000.

28 Though originally titled the Treaty of Peace, this treaty is now referred to as the Treaty of Paris in most literature. Treaty of Paris, U.S.–Spain, 10 December 1898, T.S. No. 343.

29 U.S.–Spain, 7 November 1900, T.S. No. 345.

Aside from being its protectorate, Spain did not acquire 'sovereignty' over the Sultanate of Sulu, because "*Spaniards never subdued the inhabitants [the raayat Tau Sug], whom they called Moros; they were fiercely independent...*" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1989, 389).

III. SULTANATE OF SULU'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S.

A. Arrival of Americans; Evacuation of Spaniards

Historically, the Sultan of the Sulu Sultanate vigorously asserted that he had exercised internal sovereign powers before the Americans' arrival under the 22 July 1878 Sultanate of Sulu–Spain Treaty, it was a protectorate of Spain (Gowing 1977, 285).

To reiterate the discussion fully ventilated above during Spain's regime of protection of the Sultanate of Sulu from July 1878 to May 1899 or for a period of 21 years, the *Sultanate of Sulu was never under the sovereignty of Spain* by title of conquest; "*not conquered*" by Spain; "*not a colony*" of Spain; *not a territorial possession* of Spain but simply under the Spanish protection (protectorate); hence, Sultanate had never become part of Las Islas Filipinas, Spain and that the raayat Tau Sug had never become Spanish subjects. The Sultanate of Sulu was neither annexed nor formally incorporated into Spanish territory or of Las Islas Filipinas; Spain did recognize Sultanate of Sulu's autonomy, some degree of independence; split sovereignty or status of *half-Sovereign State*, and with retained and separate international status and personality from Spain, and that *its treaties concluded before the establishment of the regime of protection remain in force*, and did not constitute an integral part of Spain; that *treaties concluded by Spain were not automatically binding on the Sulu Sultanate*; Sultanate's territories did not legally belong to Spain or did not become part of Spain; and, lastly, neither did the raayat Tau Sug lose their nationality, nor did they obtain the nationality of Spain.

On the arrival of American troops, General Otis dispatched two battalions of the U.S. 23rd Infantry to Jolo. The American troops arrived on May 19, 1899, and relieved a Spanish garrison of 24 officers and 800 men whose commander was about to turn over Jolo to the Sultan of Jolo (Gowing 1977, 121; Enriquez [2014]). Before the Americans arrived, the [gagandilan raayat] Tau Sug massacred the Spaniards inside their little garrison at Tataan in Tawi-Tawi (Enriquez [2014]). The *Spaniards*, who had given up on the Americans relieving them, *had already turned over the Siasi garrison to the government of the Sultan* and were *preparing to turn over the Jolo garrison as well* (Gowing 1977, 133).

What was the legal meaning of the protecting State's (Spain's) withdrawal or evacuation from the territory of its protectorate—the Sultanate of Sulu?

The Sultanate of Sulu *became a full sovereign State from a half-sovereign State*. The protectorate under protection resumes its full sovereign independence, which was partially suspended during the protectorate regime (Trilsch 2011).

Furthermore, it was nearly impossible to spare U.S. troops from the battle against Gen. Aguinaldo's forces in the north [Luzon and Visayas to be sent to the Sulu Sultanate]. However, there was fear that the Sulu Sultanate would join the Filipino insurgents in their fight against the U.S. (Gowing 1977, 24). The Filipino insurgents had actually initiated correspondence with the Sultan, looking toward some sort of alliance. The Sultan had given no response because he saw no real gain in allying themselves with their *traditional enemies, the Christian Filipinos* (26).

Initially, Sultan Jamal-ul Kiram II was disappointed at the turn of events and did not respond to an invitation to call on the Americans. Possibly persuaded by the *good behavior* of the Americans and their *promises* not to interfere with the religion of the Tau Sugs, the Sultan issued a cautiously worded warning in a proclamation to his subjects that **Americans will not take their lands, religion, or customs and will leave them their laws**, and urged them not "**magparang sabil**" "**if you love your country...**" the substance of which was as follows:

The Americans have come here in exchange for the Spaniards; they are different from Spaniards, and it will not be good to "juramentado" [magparrang sabil] against them. They did not come to take our lands, religion, or customs. They leave us our laws, if you love yourselves and your country, avoid coming into contact with the Americans, because they are like a matchbox—you strike one and they all go off. (Gowing 1977, 29)

In June 1899, the U.S., through Dr. Jacob Schurman, the President of the First Philippine Commission, sought to renew the 1878 agreement of the Sulu Sultanate with Spain, but the Sultan wanted better terms. President McKinley, who had "**entertained doubts**" **as to "Spain's sovereignty" over the Sulu Sultanate**, promptly directed that a formal agreement be made with the Sultan (Gowing 1977, 30).

Interestingly, even U.S. President McKinley had entertained doubts about Spain's sovereignty over the Sultanate of Sulu.

B. Legal Status of the Sultanate of Sulu

Before the 1899 Kiram–Bates Treaty

To reiterate, what was the legal meaning of the protecting State's (Spain's) withdrawal or evacuation from its protectorate—the Sultanate of Sulu?

The Sultanate of Sulu *became a fully sovereign State* from a half-sovereign State. The protectorate under protection resumes its full sovereign independence, which was partially suspended during the protectorate regime (Trilsch 2011).

The Sulu Sultanate's entering into a treaty with the U.S., known as the Kiram–Bates Treaty (20 August 1899), was clear evidence of its independence and an actual exercise of its sovereignty.

In Oppenheim's *International Law: A Treatise*, a prominent legal scholar highlighted treaty-making as a fundamental aspect of state sovereignty, and the capacity to conclude treaties is an attribute of every sovereign State (Oppenheim 1992, 120).

In the *Wimbledon Case*,³⁰ the *Permanent Court of International Justice* declared that “the right of entering into international agreements is an attribute of state sovereignty (Magallona 2015, 175). Hence, the Sultanate of Sulu was a fully sovereign State and duly exercised its sovereignty by entering into a treaty with the U.S., known as the Kiram–Bates Treaty.

C. Legal Status of the Sultanate of Sulu

After the 1899 Kiram–Bates Treaty

The salient article of the Agreement was number XIII, which states that “*The United States will give full protection to the Sultan and his subjects in case any foreign nation should attempt to impose upon them.*” This article, for all intents and purposes, established the *Sulu Sultanate as an American protectorate rather than a territorial possession* (Gowing 1977, 34).

Other legally significant articles of the Kiram–Bates Treaty were:

30 S.S. *Wimbledon*, PCIJ Series A, no. 1, 25.

Sultanate's "Article I" version states, "*The support, aid, and protection of the Jolo Island and Archipelago are in the American nation*" (Kho, n.d.). The English version of "Article I" reads, "*The sovereignty of the United States over the whole Archipelago of Jolo and its dependencies is declared and acknowledged*" (Gowing 1977, 348).

It is worth mentioning that there was a very critical translation error from English to Tausug. The word sovereignty was not used anywhere in the Tausug version. Najeeb Saleeby, an American of Lebanese descent who was assigned to Mindanao and Sulu, caught the translation flaws and charged Charlie Schuck, son of a German businessman, with deliberately mistranslating the treaty. Schuck was acquitted of all legal charges (Kho, n.d.).

Article III guarantees the rights and dignity of His Highness the Sultan and his datus will be respected, that Tau Sugs will not have their religious beliefs infringed upon, and that all of their religious customs will be honored. Article IX recognized "*the Government of the Sultan*" twice, where crimes and offenses were committed by the Tau Sugs against Tau Sugs, "*the Government of the Sultan*" will bring to trial and punishment of the criminals and offenders, who will be delivered to "*the Government of the Sultan*" by the United States authorities if in their possession. In all other cases, persons charged with crimes and offenses will be delivered to the United States authorities for trial and punishment." Article X stated, "Any slave in the Archipelago of Jolo shall have the right to purchase freedom by paying to the master the usual market price. Article XIV stated specifically that the United States *would not sell* any part of the Sulu Archipelago to any foreign nation *without the Sultan's consent* (Gowing 1977, 348). The document [Kiram–Bates Treaty] was forwarded through channels to President McKinley, who conditionally confirmed and approved the Agreement on 27 October 1899, and forwarded it to the U.S. Senate on 1 February 1900 (35).

Reiterating the discussion fully expressed above and by replacing Spain for U.S. in the context of the Kiram–Bates Treaty, thus, as a protectorate of the U.S., the Sulu Sultanate was not annexed or formally incorporated into the U.S. territory of Philippine Islands (exactly referring to Spanish Crown colony of Las Islas Filipinas which was comprising Luzon, Visayas and portion of Mindanao only) which was lawfully ceded by Spain to the U.S. in the 1898 Treaty of Paris and which was ultimately conquered by the U.S. in the Philippine–

American War,³¹ during which the Sulu Sultanate was not part of the said Philippine Islands, and the Tau Sug was not a party because the Sultanate of Sulu and its raayat, Tau Sug, was independently self-governing, not even under the U.S., by the terms of the 1899 Kiram–Bates Treaty.

As a protectorate, the U.S. recognized the Sultanate of Sulu's autonomy, some independence, and split sovereignty—a half-sovereign State. It retained separate international status and personality; and its treaties concluded before the establishment of the regime of protection remain in force (i.e. the “*Grant by the Sultan of Sulu of a Permanent Lease covering his Lands and Territories on the Island of Borneo*” dated 22 January 1878 with Translation by Prof. Harold C. Conklin done in 1946) (University of the Philippines Institute of International Legal Studies 2003, 10); did not constitute an integral part of the U.S. territory; treaties concluded by the U.S. were not automatically binding on the Sultanate; the Sultanate's territories did not legally belong to the U.S.; did not become part of the U.S.; the raayat Tau Sug neither did they lose their nationality, nor did they obtain the nationality of the U.S.

Besides, no less than Peter Gowing stresses that the Kiram–Bates Treaty made the Sultanate a *protectorate* of the U.S. *rather than a territorial possession*, meaning the U.S. did not acquire title of sovereignty over the territory of the Sultanate of Sulu—cannot even sell it—under the 1899 Kiram–Bates Treaty.

To reiterate, none of the five recognized modes of acquisition of territory was present: *cession, occupation, accretion, subjugation, and prescription* (Oppenheim 1912, 284).

D. Sultanate of Sulu's Legal Status After the U.S.'s Unilateral Abrogation of the Kiram–Bates Treaty

Outstandingly, the Sultan of the Sultanate of Sulu, Sultan Jamal–ul Kiram II, legally asserted, ***“The abrogation of this Agreement simply restored the status quo ante. The Sultan's authority was de jure, if not de facto”*** (Gowing 1977, 285).

31 The Philippine–American War is a “war between the United States and Filipino revolutionaries from 1899 to 1902, an insurrection that may be seen as a continuation of the Philippine Revolution against Spanish rule. It began after the United States assumed sovereignty of the Philippines following the defeat of Spain in the Spanish–American War. Although an end to the insurrection was declared in 1902, sporadic fighting continued for several years thereafter” (Britannica Editors 2025).

1. Sultanate of Sulu's Resumption to its Full Sovereign Statehood

The protectorate [Sulu Sultanate] under protection [by the U.S.] resumes its full sovereign independence, which has been partially suspended during the protectorate regime (Trilsch 2011). Therefore, the Sultanate of Sulu will continue to be a fully independent and sovereign State, restored to its original full independence and sovereignty after the U.S. unilaterally abrogated the Kiram–Bates Treaty of 1899.

Even after the U.S. unilateral abrogation of the Kiram–Bates Treaty, the Tau Sug chiefs and the panditas continued to exercise their traditional powers and prerogatives in a manner contradictory to the U.S.'s Philippine law (Gowing 1977, 283). The chief offender [still governing despite U.S. assertion of sovereignty] was the Sultan of Sulu, Jama-ul Kiram II (284).

The Sultan had never surrendered his power to try and decide civil and criminal cases. He considered such power inherent in his authority as head of the Sulu Muslim community. His power had been expressly recognized in the Bates Agreement. Since the abrogation of the Bates Agreement in 1904, the U.S.'s Zamboanga Government had insisted that the enforcement of criminal laws was its legal privilege. The U.S. Government affirmed that the trial and adjudication of the civil and criminal cases were vested exclusively in its own [U.S.] courts of justice [in the Sultanate of Sulu] (Gowing 1977, 285).

The Sultan countered these [Americans'] assertions by protesting that he had exercised internal sovereign powers prior to the Americans' arrival. Under the Bates Agreement, the Americans acknowledged the Government and authority to administer justice in cases arising between the Moros [Tau Sugs]. The abrogation of this Agreement simply restored the *status quo ante*. His authority was *de jure*, if not *de facto* (Gowing 1977, 285).

The Americans, in the years between 1904 and Carpenter's administration, found that the Sultan's authority was *de facto* among many datus and a large proportion of the people of Sulu. The latter continued to look to Jamal-ul Kiram II as their ruler and religious head. The result was, according to Forbes, "confusion and recurring unrest because of uncertainty as to the extent of the powers of [U.S.] government and the limitations of the Sultan's prerogatives. The Sultan and his agents pressed his ancient powers, rights, and claims with all possible vigor within the limitations imposed by the American presence (Gowing 1977, 285).

The time came, however, when the Americans could no longer remain permissive. Carpenter wrote:

“The activities of the Sultan, especially as to the exercise of the judicial prerogatives in the trial of both criminal cases and civil cases, as well as along other lines, such as taxation of pearl and turtle fisheries, markets, etc., compelled a determination of the entire matter. To this end, the Sultan was called to Zamboanga on March 11, 1915, and directed to bring with him his advisers and persons of his immediate confidence, no nominal recognition being given to his cabinet or council [the Rumah Bichara]. These conferences began on March 13, 1915, and terminated March 22, 1915, by the signing of the agreement...” (Gowing 1977, 285)

The “negotiation” of the 1915 Carpenter Agreement is highly dubious; accordingly, coercive under belligerent or military occupation, therefore, invalid; not a treaty to acquire territorial title, and without even the consent and concurrence of the “*Rumah Bichara*.”³²

Subsequently, the U.S.’s next moves over the Sultanate of Sulu would be pivotal to determine whether the U.S. had legally acquired a title of sovereignty over the Sultanate of Sulu or merely a temporary title of administration only.

From the Sulu Sultanate’s protectorate status under the 1899 Kiram–Bates Treaty, what was its status with the U.S. after the latter’s unilateral abrogation?

First, it is to be emphasized that because of the U.S.’s good behavior and promises, the Sultan issued a “*proclamation*” to his subjects that Americans will not take their lands, religion, or customs, and will leave them their laws (Gowing 1977, 29).

Second, under the first U.S. Organic Act for the *insular* Government of the Philippine Islands, which was the *Philippine Bill of July 1, 1902*,³³ the Sultanate of Sulu, *firstly*, was treated

32 The real function of *Ruma Bichara*: “There is a prominent royal council during the Sultanate era called ‘Ruma Bichara.’ Some had translated it to mean ‘House of Discussion,’ from ‘ruma’ (Sinama and Malay for house) and ‘bichara’ (to speak, to discuss). However, if we dig deeper into its origin, ‘bichara’ is not necessarily from Sinug ‘bissara’ or from Malay ‘bechara,’ but is originally from Sanskrit word ‘achara,’ meaning ‘cause or suit’. Thus, a suit in legal parlance is ‘an action or process in a court for the recovery of a right or claim’ or ‘recourse or appeal to feudal superior for justice or redress.’ In this way, the Sinug ‘bichara’ in the office of the ‘ruma bichara’ is not simply a discussion council, but a feudal high court or a court of final appeal for justice, or redress of grievances composed of state ministers, the heirs to the throne and presided over by the Sultan himself” (Learning Sinug 2020).

33 U.S. Congress, *Philippine Organic Act of 1902*, Public Law No. 57–235, 32 Stat. 691 (1902), entitled as “ACT OF CONGRESS OF JULY FIRST, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND TWO, “THE PHILIPPINE BILL” AN ACT TEMPORARILY TO PROVIDE FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE AFFAIRS OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT IN THE PHILIPPINE ISLANDS, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.”

separately and distinctly from the Philippine Islands because the Sultanate of Sulu was under a treaty-relationship with the U.S. – a protectorate of the U.S.; *secondly*, the raayat Tau Sug of the Sultanate of Sulu was not under the Christian Filipinos’ “*Philippine Assembly*” which the U.S. granted them (the Christian Filipinos) a temporary civil government’s *legislative power in all that part of said Islands not inhabited by Moros*, hence, the Sultanate of Sulu was not part and excluded from Christian Filipinos’ “*jurisdiction*,” thus:

*Section 7. That two years after the completion and publication of the census, in case such condition of general and complete peace with recognition of the authority of the United States shall have continued in the **territory** of said Islands **not inhabited by Moros** or other non-Christian tribes and such facts shall have been certified to the President by the Philippine Commission, the President upon being satisfied thereof shall direct Commission to call, and the Commission shall call, a general election for the choice of delegates to a popular assembly of the people of said territory in the Philippine Islands, which shall be known as the Philippine Assembly. After said Assembly shall have convened and organized, **all the legislative power** heretofore conferred on the Philippine Commission **in all that part of said Islands not inhabited by Moros** or other non-Christian tribes **shall be vested in a Legislature** consisting of two Houses — the Philippine Commission and **the Philippine Assembly**. Said Assembly shall consist of not less than fifty nor more than one hundred members to be apportioned by said Commission among the provinces as nearly as practicable according to population: Provided, That no province shall have less than one member: And provided further, That provinces entitled by population to more than one member may be divided into such convenient districts as Commission may deem best. (Philippine Organic Act of 1902)*

The so-called “Philippine Bill,” passed by the United States Congress on 1 July 1902, recognizes the distinction between the *Moros*, *Pagans*, and *Christian Filipinos* and the consequent necessity for providing different forms of government for the different groups of people (Gowing 1977, 72). A *direct rule* for the *Christian Filipinos* and an *indirect rule* (73) for the *raayat Tau Sug* because of the 1899 Kiram–Bates Treaty. Clearly, therefore, the *raayat Tau Sug* were “*not Filipinos*” and “*not considered*” by the Americans as “*Filipinos*.” The Christian Filipinos’ Philippine Assembly was denied the right to legislate for [the Sultanate of Sulu under] Moro Province (255). *Thirdly*, the Sultanate of Sulu’s ‘*Government*’ was duly recognized by the U.S. under the 1899 Kiram–Bates Treaty (a purely *Tau Sug* Government neither under the Americans nor *Christian Filipinos*). *Fourthly*, Section 5 of the said Philippine Bill of 1902 did not apply to the *raayat Tau Sug* because it was *not intended for raayat Tau Sug but for Christian Filipinos*, thus:

Section 5. x x x

That no law granting a title of nobility shall be enacted, and no person holding any office of profit or trust in said Islands, shall, without the consent of the Congress of the United States, accept any present, emolument, office, or title of any kind whatever from any king, queen, prince, or foreign State. (Philippine Organic Act of 1902)

Third, the U.S. General Policy, at first, was to neutralize the raayat Tau Sug of the Sultanate of Sulu in the Philippine–American War, thus:

At first, the “Moro Policy” of the military authorities was quite simple: neutralize the Moros [raayat Tau Sug] in the Philippine–American War... Army officers on station were confused in their relations with Moro leaders [Sultans] because no firm policy decisions had as yet been made concerning Moroland. (Gowing 1977, 47)

“Moroland” means the land of the Moros (4). As explained above, the raayat Tau Sug of the Sultanate of Sulu, among others, were merely called “Moros” by the Spaniards and *then by the Americans*; and that the two important sultanates were already flourishing which the Spaniards failed to incorporate into the political system with which they united the central [Visayas] and northern [Luzon] regions [named as Filipinas] (47), thus:

Two important sultanates, in Sulu and Mindanao (in the region of present-day Cotabato City), were already flourishing in the southern Philippines by the time the Spaniards arrived to stay in 1565. (7)

Fourth, the Bates Agreement, with respect to the Sulu Sultanate was a general *laissez-faire*³⁴ **policy** regarding Tau Sug internal affairs (Gowing 1977, 148). Under the *military occupation*, the United States pursued a **policy of relative non-interference** in the **Tau Sug internal affairs**. This policy was embodied in the Bates Agreement with respect to the Sulu Sultanate (315).

Fifth, the American government of the Muslim Filipinos (?) between 1899 and 1920 should be judged by the **general mandate** which President McKinley had defined for America’s presence in the Philippines: “**to develop, to civilize, to educate, to train in the science of self-government**” (Gowing 1977, 315)

34 “The idea that people should be free to choose how to do things, without too much control from someone in authority” (*Cambridge Business English Dictionary*, s.v. “laissez-faire,” accessed 9 March 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/laissez-faire>).

Sixth, President Wilson's *Message* was "to the effect that the United States regarded herself [the U.S.] as a "*trustee*" only (Gowing 1977, 258).

Seventh, under the *Jones Law of 1916*,³⁵ the U.S. intention was not a conquest, as expressly stated in the first "*whereas*" clause:

"WHEREAS it was never the intention of the people of the United States in the incipency of the war with Spain to make it a war of conquest or for territorial aggrandizement."

In sum, based on the above factual circumstances, there was no iota of intention on the part of the U.S. to acquire title of sovereignty over the territory of the Sultanate of Sulu by *conquest*, then a *valid mode of acquiring territory* of another State [in this case the "territory" of the Sultanate of Sulu] or by virtue of any other valid modes because the U.S.–Sulu Sultanate relationship was governed and defined by the Kiram–Bates Treaty—U.S. protection of its protectorate—the *half-sovereign State* of the Sultanate of Sulu.

The simple truth is that General Davis saw that the United States had struck a bad bargain in signing the Bates Agreement—bad that is, from the standpoint of establishing American-style laws and government in Sulu. He searched for a way out of the Agreement (Gowing 1977, 193). One might question the good faith of the American Government toward the Sultanate of Sulu (104).

The Bates Treaty did not last very long. After the U.S. had completed its goal of suppressing the resistance [of General Aguinaldo's forces] in northern Philippines, it *unilaterally abrogated the Bates Treaty* on 2 March 1904, claiming the Sultan had failed to quell Tau Sug resistance and that the treaty was a hindrance to the effective colonial administration of the area (Kho, n.d.).

To the first governor of the Moro Province, Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood (1903–1906) assumed the responsibility of organizing the Province and of initiating the *Government's new policy* of "*direct rule*" and "*interference*" in the Tau Sug internal affairs (Gowing 1977, 193). On 19 February 1904, the Legislative Council passed Act No. 39 which provided that the *territory* (beyond the municipal districts) inhabited by Moros and Pagans *way to be divided into "tribal*

35 U.S. Congress, *Philippine Autonomy Act of 1916* (Jones Law), Public Law No. 64–240, 39 Stat. 545 (1916).

wards” delimited in such a way that each ward, as far as practicable, *would comprise a single ethnic group* or homogeneous division thereof” (114) The U.S. was making the already “*one compact nation*” or “*single nationality*” of the raayat Tau Sug into a disunited one [divide and rule], returning the Tau Sug into an era of “*tribalism*” [or “*asabiyyah*” which Islam forbids or condemns]. The U.S. policy was to develop individualism (115)—among the Tau Sug, from “single nationality” back to ethnic tribes mentality.

Subsequent events showed that while the *Sultan* had accepted the annual payments made by the United States, he *did not accept American sovereignty* (121). The *datus* and the people of Sulu looked to him as their legitimate ruler and religious head (121–22).³⁶ The imposition of American laws and policies on the Tau Sug of the Sultanate of Sulu, among others, was not quite so simple. The Tau Sug had a more politically developed society (141)—under the Sultanate of Sulu.

2. U.S. Military Occupation of the Sultanate of Sulu

It was a rule that war should never be commenced without a declaration of war (Oppenheimer 1912, 50). Between 1899 and 1903, the American policy in Moroland slowly took shape under **military occupation** (Gowing 1977, 50). Beginning in July 1903, the Moro Province was to be built on the policy foundations laid down in the years of the **military occupation**. Later on, the American occupation ran into armed opposition in Mindanao and Sulu (51).

The term “**military occupation**” is broad, encompassing a wide range of cases in which the armed forces of a State, or of several States, exercise authority, *on a temporary basis*, over inhabited territory outside the accepted international frontiers of their State. It refers to **belligerent occupations** (Roberts 2009).

Based on the above facts, the U.S. belligerently or militarily occupied the sovereign and independent State of the Sultanate of Sulu, and the facts that there was no U.S. declaration of war to demonstrate its acquisition of the territory by conquest; and factually clear, no apparent intention of act of conquest, it was to be regulated by the Hague Regulations, which the U.S. was a signatory to; the relevant articles are provided below:

³⁶ Id. at 121–122.

1899 Hague Regulations ³⁷	1907 Hague Regulations ³⁸
Article 42. Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation applies only to the territory where such authority is established, and in a position to assert itself.	Article 42 Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been establish- ed and can be exercised.
Article 43 The authority of the legitimate power having actually passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all steps in his power to re-establish and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safe ty, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.	Article 43 The authority of the legitimate power having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all the measures in his power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.
Article 44. Any compulsion of the population of occupied territory to take part in military operations against its own country is prohibited.	Article 44. A belligerent is forbidden to force the inhabitants of territory occupied by it to furnish information about the army of the other belligerent, or about its means of defence.
Article 45. Any pressure on the population of occupied territory to take the oath to the hostile Power is prohibit- ed.	Article 45. It is forbidden to compel the inhabitants of occupied territory to swear allegiance to the hostile Power.

While continuing to maintain that an **occupying power does not, by the fact of occupation, acquire sovereign title over the territory**, the emphasis of the legal regime thus shifted from preserving the interest of the displaced ruler to *administering the occupied territory for the benefit of the local population* (Benvenisti 1993, 105–6 quoted in Ukhuegbe and Fenemigho 2015). The framework recognizes **occupation as a temporary** situation that **does not transfer sovereignty**, imposes significant obligations on the occupying power, and establishes mechanisms to supervise compliance (TheLaw.Institute 2024). The Hague Regulations

37 Hague Convention (II) on Laws and Customs of War on Land, July 29, 1899, art. 23, 32 Stat. 1803, T.S. No. 403.

38 Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, October 18, 1907, art. 4, 36 Stat. 2277, T.S. No. 539.

were effectively given a new lease of life, and “remain the keystone of the law of **belligerent occupation**” (Ukhuegbe and Fenemigho 2015, 273–74). This framework recognizes the unique vulnerability of civilians under occupation and aims to ensure their basic rights and needs are protected, even as the **occupying power exercises temporary control** (TheLaw.Institute 2024).

The foundation upon which the entire law of occupation is based is the **principle of inalienability of sovereignty** through unilateral action of a foreign power, whether through the actual or the threatened use of force, or in any way unauthorized by the sovereign. **Effective control by foreign military force can never bring about by itself a valid transfer of sovereignty** (Benvenisti 2012, 6 cited in Lenzerini 2024).³⁹

Thus, the Sultanate of Sulu retained its sovereignty.

A fundamental concept in occupation law is the ‘principle of conservation,’ which holds that the occupying power should maintain the status quo as much as possible. This means *preserving existing legal, social, economic, and political structures* rather than implementing profound changes to the territory’s character or institutions (TheLaw.Institute 2024). **Even if a whole country is occupied**, and the legitimate government goes into exile and does not participate actively in military operations, the **occupant does not have any right of annexation**. This rule represents a declination of the ***ex injuria jus non oritur* principle**, literally meaning that law cannot arise from injustice, or, in other words, that **illegal acts cannot be a source of legal rights**. In sum, “**occupation cannot of itself terminate statehood**”, and, in case of annexation based on occupation only, “**the legal existence of [...] States [is] preserved from extinction**” (Lenzerini 2024).

Therefore, the Sultanate of Sulu’s legal existence remains intact.

3. Sultanate of Sulu’s Opposition to Christian Filipinos

The agitation by the Christian Filipinos in the Moro Province for political recognition had continued because of the Zamboanga Chamber of Commerce’s resolution of 30 January 1910, that *Mindanao and Sulu be formed into a territory of the United States by Act of Congress* (Gowing

39 See also Lenzerini (2021, 320); Roberts (1990, 38); McCarthy (2005, 49–51); Ben-Naftali, Gross, and Michaeli (2005, 560); Cohen (2006, 497); and Lancaster (2006, 63).

1977, 205, 250); Colonel Hoyt's recommendation of: *permanent separation as early as possible of the southern islands, including Mindanao, Sulu Archipelago, Palawan, with all the islands adjacent thereto, from the rest of the Philippine Archipelago* (206); and that of the Sultanate of Sulu people's vehement opposition, among others, Datu Mandi: "if the American government does not want [Moroland] any more they should give it back to us as it belongs to us"; Datu Sacaluran: "we shall not be given over to the Filipinos"; Olangkaya Ujato: "but if after that it should be that we shall be given over to another race [Christian Filipinos], we had better all be hanged"; and that, Hadji Nuño declared: "we are a different race; we have a different religion; we are Mohammedans. If we should be given over to the Filipinos... we far prefer to be in the hands of the American... than to be turned over to another [Christian Filipinos] people (251–52). These are but another proof that the raayat Tau Sug were not Filipinos—they did not want to be given by the Americans to the Christian Filipinos and did not consent to be governed by the Christian Filipinos.

4. Legal Consequences of the 1915 Carpenter Agreement⁴⁰

The 1915 Agreement was signed [on 22 March 1915] by Sultan Jamal-ul Kiram II [and questionably without the participation of the full members of his Council or Rumah Bichara—but only two datos: Datu Rajamuda and Datu Mohammad; Hadji Mohammad and Panglima Tahil] together with Governor Frank Carpenter [and on the side of the U.S., (who supposedly to be on the side of the Sultanate (making the Agreement highly dubious and suspicious)] were Hadji Butu (Special Assistant to the American Provincial Governor of Sulu), H. Gulamu Rasul (Aide-de-camp of the American Department Governor] (Gowing 1977, 353). The new Agreement provided that the Sultan, specifically and without reservation, recognized the sovereignty of the United States in the Sulu Archipelago with "all the attributes of sovereign government that are exercised elsewhere in American territory and dependencies ..." This means that the Sultan unequivocally abdicated all his temporal power, including his prerogatives associated with the courts and collection of taxes. The Government, in turn, recognized the Sultan of Sulu only as "the titular spiritual head" (286), which was contrary to the Sultanate's "*Deen wa Dawla*" (Arabic: دِين و دَوْلَة) State's policy and/or form of government—"the Sultan was both the temporal and spiritual ruler." Jamal-ul Kiram II as their ruler and religious head (287).

The 1915 Carpenter Agreement was *invalid* because (a) the *consent* of the Sultan and his

40 Memorandum Agreement Between the Governor-General of the Philippines Islands and the Sultan of Sulu signed at Zamboanga, 22 March 1915. See Gowing (1977, 352).

advisers **was obtained by coercion**, since the Sultanate of Sulu was **under U.S. belligerent or military occupation**; (b) **without** the participation of the Sultanate of Sulu Council or the **Rumah Bichara**. The negotiation was regarded as a notable “**coup**.” Based on relevant facts, i.e., the U.S. intention was not to acquire title of sovereignty, in particular, to the territory of the Sultanate of Sulu but merely, as discussed above, *to develop, to civilize, to educate, and to train in the science of self-government*; U.S. as *trustee* only; and it was *never the intention* of the people of the U.S. in the incipency of war with Spain *to make it a war of conquest or territorial aggrandizement* as expressed under the *Jones Law of 1916*. The Agreement was intended only to strip the Sultan of what had been agreed and recognized under the *Kiram-Bates Treaty of 1899*, i.e., “the Government of the Sultan” in Article IX, again, not to acquire title of sovereignty over its territory.

Again, before the signing of the Carpenter Agreement, the Sultan and his chiefs exercised acts of sovereignty, and the Sultan’s assertions occurred:

- (a) The Tau Sug chiefs and the panditas continued to exercise their traditional powers and prerogatives in a manner contradictory to the U.S.’s Philippine law (Gowing 1977, 283). The chief offender [still governing despite U.S. assertion of sovereignty] was the Sultan of Sulu, Jama-ul Kiram II (285).
- (b) The Sultan had never surrendered his power to try and decide civil and criminal cases. He still considered such power inherent in his authority as head of the Sulu Muslim community. His power had been expressly recognized in the Bates Agreement (284).
- (c) Since the abrogation of the Bates Agreement in 1904, the U.S.’s Zamboanga Government had insisted that the enforcement of criminal laws was its legal privilege. The U.S. Government affirmed that the trial and adjudication of the civil and criminal cases were vested exclusively in its own [U.S.] courts of justice [in the Sultanate of Sulu] (285).
- (d) The Sultan countered the Americans’ assertions by protesting that he had exercised internal sovereign powers prior to the Americans’ arrival. Under the Bates Agreement, the Americans acknowledged the Government and authority to administer justice in cases arising between the Moros [Tau Sugs]. **The abrogation of this Agreement simply restored the status quo ante**. His **authority** was **de jure**, if not *de facto* (285).

(e) The Americans, between 1904 and Carpenter's administration [1914–20]⁴¹ (257), found that the Sultan's authority was *de facto* among datus and a large proportion of the people of Sulu. The latter continued to look to Sultan Jamal-ul Kiram II as *their ruler and religious head*. The result was, according to Forbes, "confusion and recurring unrest because of uncertainty as to the extent of the powers of [U.S.] government and the limitations of the Sultan's prerogatives. *The Sultan and his agents pressed his ancient powers, rights, and claims with all possible vigor* within the limitations imposed by the American presence (283).

(f) The time came, however, when the Americans could no longer remain permissive, thus: The activities of the Sultan, especially as to the exercise of the judicial prerogatives in the trial of both criminal cases and civil cases, as well as along other lines, such as taxation of pearl and turtle fisheries, markets, etc., compelled a determination of the entire matter. To this end, the Sultan was called to Zamboanga on March 11, 1915, and directed to bring with him [only] his advisers and persons of his immediate confidence, no nominal recognition being given to his cabinet or council [the Rumah Bichara]. These conferences began on March 13, 1915, and terminated March 22, 1915, by the signing of the agreement..." (283)

Legally important recognition and admissions by the U.S. in the 1915 Carpenter vis-à-vis the Treaty of Paris of 1898⁴² and the Cession Treaty of 1900⁴³ where ***Spain***, therefore, had ***no title of sovereignty over the territory of the Sultanate of Sulu*** under the following:

(a) Prior to American occupation, the Sultanate of Sulu had been for ***more than 400 years an independent sovereignty***.

(b) During the latter portion of the Spanish regime, the Sultanate had ***partially relinquished the exercise of that sovereignty as to foreign relations*** (being a protectorate or half-sovereign State) and to a lesser degree as concerned the port of Jolo and four other points occupied by Spanish military garrisons.

(c) A ***temporal sovereignty, partial but nevertheless de facto, existed*** and was ***recognized by the Bates Treaty*** (being a protectorate) in the term "the Government of the Sultan," to which the American authorities were by that agreement required to turn over for trial cases "where the crimes and offenses are committed by Tau Sug against Tau Sug."

⁴¹ Id. at 257.

⁴² U.S.–Spain, 10 December 1898, T.S. No. 343.

⁴³ U.S.–Spain, 7 November 1900, T.S. No. 345.

(d) The *de jure sovereignty of the Sultan*, who subsequently *neither by conquest nor otherwise lost or relinquished his claims to sovereignty so far as concerned the internal affairs of the Government* of the Sulu Archipelago.

(e) Therefore, *by estoppel*,⁴⁴ the U.S. can no longer assert the Treaty of Paris of 1898 *since, by its admission under the Carpenter Agreement, Spain did not possess a title of sovereignty over the Sulu Sultanate.*

5. Initiatives to Separate the Sultanate of Sulu from the Philippine Islands

The Zamboanga Chamber of Commerce, made up mostly of American businessmen, *asked that Mindanao and Sulu be formed into a territory of the United States by Act of Congress* (Gowing 1977, 205). Christian Filipino nationalists, fully aware that the “*territories*” of the Sultanates of Sulu, Maguindanao, and Lanao had *never been under their possession or ownership since time immemorial*, acted in bad faith by questioning the exclusion of the “Moroland” [*Sultanate of Sulu was made part of it by the Americans*] from the Christian Filipinos’ Philippine Assembly’s jurisdiction, and further agitated by the Zamboanga Chamber’s move in 1910.

Thus, *La Vida Filipina*, a Filipino newspaper, expressed the sentiments of the Christian Filipino nationalists that, “*the Commission in creating the Moro Province, evidently wanted Mindanao and Jolo considered separate and almost independent territories from Luzon and Visayas* (Gowing 1977, 205). When, in truth and fact, the Sultanates of Sulu, Maguindanao, and Lanao were separated and distinct from Luzon and Visayas, *Spain named them Filipinas [only Luzon and Visayas]*, and the *U.S. called them the Philippine Islands*. The Christian Filipino nationalists pressured the American authorities (207). *Governor General Bliss* had *made it clear* that *he did not favor turning over* the Moro Province [*in particular, Sultanate of Sulu*] *to the Christian Filipinos*, nor was he in favor of making it an American colony. The Province should be developed for the benefit of all its inhabitants (206).

44 Estoppel – Definition: “The legal principle of *estoppel* keeps a party from alleging a fact or acting in a certain way, then attempting to claim something in opposition to that fact or action later in the proceeding to suit their purposes” (*Legal Dictionary*, s.v. “estoppel,” 5 January 2015, <https://legaldictionary.net/estoppel/>).

Colonel Hoyt, the Acting Governor, recommended in 1909:

The permanent separation as early as possible of the southern islands, including Mindanao, Sulu Archipelago, Palawan, with all the islands adjacent thereto, from the rest of the Philippine Archipelago. (quoted in Gowing 1977, 206)

In 1921, 57 of the leading men of Sulu Province presented a “Petition to the President of the United States of America from the People of the Sulu Archipelago.” The petition asked that **Sulu be governed separately from the rest of the Philippines**. The document also charged Christian Filipino officials with abuse of power (Gowing 1977, 311). In 1924, another petition, addressed to the United States Congress, was drawn up by “a delegation of Moro leaders” at Zamboanga and presented to Governor-General Wood. The document asked that **Mindanao and Sulu be made an unorganized territory of the United States of America**. It, too, charged Christian Filipino officials with abuse of power. **Otherwise, the signers threatened to form an “independent constitutional Sultanate”** (311).

Therefore, based on the above, the Sultanate of Sulu demanded the actual exercise of sovereignty within its territory after the U.S. did not heed the Tau Sug people’s desire to become a U.S. territory or be governed by it separately from the Christian Filipinos.

In 1926, Representative Robert L. Bacon of New York **introduced** a bill into the U.S. Congress **providing for the separation of Mindanao and Sulu from the rest of the Philippines** (Gowing 1977, 250–51). Separating the separate, how does it work?

6. The American Title over the Sultanate of Sulu: Title of Administration, Not Sovereignty

Based on the above facts, the **U.S. did not acquire a title of sovereignty** over the territory of the Sultanate of Sulu, including the territories of the Sultanate of Maguindanao and the Sultanate of Lanao. The U.S. titles over the Sultanates of Sulu, Maguindanao, and Lanao were merely titles of administration—titles from “**belligerent**” or “**military occupation**,” and accordingly, **cannot of themselves terminate statehood, and the legal existence of States is preserved from extinction**.

The difference between a *title of sovereignty* and a *title of administration* lies in the ability of its holder to dispose of the territory concerned. On the one hand, States enjoying a title of sovereignty can exercise the plenitude and exclusivity of rights related to a territory. On the

other hand, *States that simply administer a territory* only possess the specific powers that are conferred on them by the title they hold, i.e. the mandate or trusteeship agreement, or by the treaty-based and customary rules governing the factual situation in which a State finds itself in control of a territory, *such as the case of military occupation* (Kohen and Hébié 2021).

IV. SULTANATE OF SULU'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JAPAN AFTER U.S. WITHDRAWAL

Most legal writings indicate that a *military occupation of territory ends when the foreign troops leave*. As one classic work on international law put it, “[o]ccupation comes to an end when an occupant withdraws from a territory, or is driven out of it” (Oppenheim 1912, 436). Or, as a leading work on military occupations said: “[i]t seems to the writer that *an occupation would be terminated at the actual dispossession of the occupant, regardless of the source or cause* of such dispossession” (von Glahn 1957, 29 quoted in Roberts 2009). Similarly, when one part of a State has been occupied, there is usually a demand for a resumption of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State concerned (Roberts 2009). Again, the Sultanate of Sulu petitioned the U.S. President *to make it a U.S. unorganized territory*, but *the U.S. did not* heed its petition. Then, it petitioned again to the U.S. Congress, if still unheeded, *otherwise, it wanted to become an independent constitutional Sultanate*.

In the post-1945 period, increased attention has been paid to another kind of end-State: one based on *self-determination of the inhabitants of certain occupied territories*. However, in respect of certain types of problems, the *principle of self-determination has been much emphasized by UN organs, especially by the UN General Assembly*: “the right to self-determination of peoples which remain under colonial domination and foreign occupation.” It has been a key principle in the attempt to establish a legal and political framework for those territories (Roberts 2009). An act of self-determination often takes the form of a *referendum* to establish whether there is support for independence in the territory concerned, and it also tends to require, as a prerequisite or consequence, the withdrawal of foreign forces (Roberts 2009)—of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Another way in which many occupations have frequently ended in the past has been with the *return of the ousted sovereign*. Indeed, this end-State was viewed by a leading writer on occupations as the typical case, in which “it can be assumed that *the legitimate sovereign will be in control of the territory* in question as soon as the occupation ends” (Von Glahn 1957, 257 quoted in Roberts 2009).

A. Sultanate of Sulu's Military Occupation Again by the U.S. After Japan was Driven Out

As discussed above, the U.S. title over the Sultanate of Sulu was merely a temporary title of administration. The U.S. administered the Sultanate of Sulu territory and only possessed the specific powers conferred on it by the title it held under belligerent or military occupation.

B. Philippine Supreme Court Decision Regarding the Japanese Occupation of the Philippine Islands

“LAUREL vs. MISA⁴⁵ CASE”

“... the absolute and permanent allegiance of the inhabitants [*Filipinos*] of a territory [*Philippines*] occupied by the enemy [*Japan*] of their legitimate government or sovereign [*U.S./Philippine Government*] is not abrogated or severed by the enemy occupation [*Japanese occupation*], because the sovereignty of the government or sovereign *de jure* [*U.S./Philippine Government*] is not transferred thereby to the occupier [*Japan*], as we have held in the cases of *Co Kim Cham vs. Valdez Tan Keh and Dizon* (75 Phil. 113) and of *Peralta vs. Director of Prisons* (75 Phil., 285), and if it is not transferred to the occupant [*Japan*] it must necessarily remain vested in the legitimate government [*U.S./Philippine Government*]; that the sovereignty vested in the titular government [*U.S./Philippine Government*] (which is the supreme power which governs a body politic or society which constitute the state) *must be distinguished from the exercise of the rights inherent* thereto, and may be destroyed, or severed and transferred to another [*Japan*], but *it cannot be suspended* because the existence of sovereignty cannot be suspended without putting it out of existence or divesting the possessor [*U.S./Philippine Government*] thereof at least during the so-called period of suspension [*Japanese occupation*]; that *what may be suspended is the exercise of the rights of sovereignty* with the control and government of the territory [*Philippines*] occupied by the enemy [*Japan*] passes temporarily to the occupant [*Japan*]; that the subsistence of the sovereignty of the legitimate government [*U.S./Philippine Government*] in a territory [*Philippines*] occupied by the military forces of the enemy [*Japan*] during the war, “although the former [*U.S./Philippine Government*] is in fact prevented from exercising the supremacy over them” is one of the “rules of international law of our times”; (II Oppenheim, 6th Lauterpacht ed., 1944, p. 482), recognized, by necessary implication, in articles 23, 44, 45, and 52 of *Hague Regulation*; and that, as a corollary of the conclusion that the *sovereignty itself is not suspended and subsists* during the enemy [*Japanese*] occupation, the allegiance of the inhabitants [*Filipinos*] to their legitimate government or sovereign [*U.S./Philippine Government*] subsists, and therefore there is no such thing as suspended allegiance, ...”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Laurel v. Misa*, 77 PHIL. REP. 856, G.R. No. L-409 (30 January 1947).

⁴⁶ *Laurel v. Misa* (1947).

C. Applying the Laurel vs. Misa Case to the Sultanate of Sulu's Military Occupations by the U.S. and Japan

- a. The ***absolute and permanent allegiance*** of the inhabitants [Tau Sug] of a territory [Sultanate of Sulu] occupied by the enemy [U.S./Japan] of their legitimate government or sovereign [Sultanate Government] is ***not abrogated or severed by the enemy occupation*** [U.S./Japanese occupation];
- b. because the “***sovereignty***” of the government or sovereign *de jure* [Sultanate Government] is ***not transferred thereby to the occupier*** [U.S./Japan];
- c. And ***if it [sovereignty] is not transferred to the occupant*** [U.S./Japan] ***it [sovereignty] must necessarily remain vested in the legitimate government*** [Sultanate Government];
- d. that the “***sovereignty***” ***vested in the titular government*** [Sultanate Government] (which is the supreme power which governs a body politic or society which constitute the state) ***must be distinguished from the ‘exercise of the rights’ inherent thereto, and may be destroyed, or severed and transferred to another*** [U.S./Japan];
- e. but ***it [sovereignty] cannot be suspended*** because the existence of sovereignty cannot be suspended without putting it [sovereignty] out of existence or divesting the possessor [Sultanate Government] thereof at least during the so-called period of suspension [during the U.S./ Japanese occupation]; that ***what may be suspended is the ‘exercise of the rights of sovereignty’*** with the control and government of the territory [Sultanate of Sulu] occupied by the enemy [U.S./Japan] ***passes temporarily to the occupant*** [U.S./Japan];
- f. that the “***subsistence of the sovereignty***” of the legitimate government [Sultanate Government] in a territory [Sultanate of Sulu] occupied by the military forces of the enemy [U.S./Japan] during the war, “although the former [Sultanate Government] is in fact prevented from exercising the supremacy over them” ***is one of the “rules of international law of our times”***; (II Oppenheim, 6th Lauterpacht ed., 1944, p. 482), recognized, ***by necessary implication***, in articles 23, 44, 45, and 52 of *Hague Regulation*;
- g. and that, as a corollary of the conclusion that the “***sovereignty***” [of the Sulu Sultanate] ***itself is not suspended and subsists during the enemy*** [U.S./Japanese] ***occupation***, the

allegiance of the inhabitants [*Tau Sug*] to their legitimate government or sovereign [*Sultanate Government*] subsists, and therefore ***there is no such thing as suspended allegiance.***

Therefore, by analogy, “sovereignty” of the Sulu Sultanate is *permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, absolute, indivisible, inalienable, and imprescriptible*. The U.S. and/or Japan merely exercised acts of sovereignty; by their military occupations, they did not acquire sovereignty over the Sultanate of Sulu, nor was the sovereignty of the Sultanate of Sulu transferred to them during their respective period of occupation.

V. SULTANATE OF SULU’S RELATIONSHIP WITH INDONESIA, PHILIPPINES, AND MALAYSIA AFTER THE NETHERLANDS, THE U.S., AND THE UNITED KINGDOM’S WITHDRAWAL

Again, the five modes of validly acquiring title to the territory of the Sulu Sultanate are: *cession, occupation, accretion, subjugation, and prescription* (Oppenheim 1912, 284).

Under what mode did Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia acquire the respective portions of the territory, now under them, of the Sultanate of Sulu?

What titles did the Netherlands, the U.S., and the United Kingdom hold that they transferred to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, respectively?

What is the significance of the Sultanate of Sulu’s “sovereignty,” which it cherished since c. 1405, or now 2025, for 620 years, accordingly, is *permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, absolute, indivisible, inalienable, and imprescriptible* (*Laurel v. Misa* 1947) plus the ***Raayat Tau Sug’s right of self-determination*** under the **1945 United Nations Charter**, signed on 26 June 1945, which predates:

Philippines’ independence on 4 July 1946, from the United States?

Indonesia’s independence on 17 August 1945, from the Netherlands?

Malaysia’s independence on 16 September 1963, from the British Empire?

In Advisory Opinion of 21 June 1971 issued by the *International Court of Justice* (ICJ) by 13 votes to 2, the Court was of the opinion:

[T]hat, the continued presence of South Africa in Namibia being illegal, South Africa is under obligation to withdraw its administration from Namibia immediately and thus put an end to its occupation of the Territory. (International Court of Justice 1971)⁴⁷

Oppenheim, in *International Law: A Treatise*, states:

“The supreme authority which a State exercises over its territory makes it apparent that on one and the same territory can exist one full-Sovereign State only. Two or more full-Sovereign States on one and the same territory are an impossibility.” (1912, 231–32)

“[T]he administration of a piece of territory by a foreign Power, with the consent of the owner-State... a cession of pieces of territory has for all practical purposes taken place, although in law the respective pieces still belong to the former owner-State. Anyhow, it is certain that only one sovereignty is exercised over these pieces—namely, the sovereignty of the State which exercises administration. On the other hand, however, the fact that in these cases pieces of territory have for all practical purposes been ceded to another State does not empower the latter arbitrarily to annex the territory without the consent of the State owning it in law.” (232–33)

“Cession of State territory is the transfer of sovereignty over State territory by the owner State to another State.” (285) [The Sultanate of Sulu’s sovereignty over its territories has never been legally transferred.]

“Conquered enemy territory, although actually in possession and under the sway of the conqueror, remains legally under the sovereignty of the enemy until through annexation it comes under the sovereignty of the conqueror. Annexation turns the conquest into subjugation. It is the very annexation which uno actu makes the vanquished State cease to exist and brings the territory under the conqueror’s sovereignty. Thus, the subjugated territory has not for one moment been no State’s land, but comes from the enemy’s into the conqueror’s sovereignty, although not through cession, but through annexation.” (304) [The Sultanate of Sulu has never been conquered.]

47 INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE. Retrieved at <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/53/summaries/5597.pdf>, at <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/53/5597.pdf>; *Legal Consequences for States of the Continued Presence of South Africa in Namibia (South West Africa) Notwithstanding Security Council Resolution 276 (1970)*. ICJ Reports 1971.

“[A] cession of pieces of territory has for all practical purposes taken place, although in law the respective pieces still belong to the former owner–State. Anyhow, it is certain that only one sovereignty is exercised over these pieces—namely, the sovereignty of the State which exercises administration. On the other hand, however, the fact that in these cases pieces of territory have for all practical purposes been ceded to another State does not empower the latter arbitrarily to annex the territory without the consent of the State owning it in law.”

“[A] piece of territory leased or pledged by the owner–State to a foreign Power. Thus, China in 1898 leased the district of Kiauchau to Germany, Wei–Hai–Wei and the land opposite the island of Hong–Kong to Great Britain, and Port Arthur to Russia. Thus, further, in 1803 Sweden pledged the town of Wismar to the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg–Schwerin, and the Republic of Genoa in 1768 pledged the island of Corsica to France. All such cases comprise, for all practical purposes, cessions of pieces of territory, but in strict law they remain the property of the leasing State. And such property is not a mere fiction, as some writers maintain, for it is possible that the lease comes to an end by expiration of time or by rescission. (233–34)

“NEMO DAT QUOD NON HABET” – No one can give what he does not have (*Gochan v. Heirs of Baba* 2003).⁴⁸

Therefore, the United States of America, the Netherlands, and the British Empire cannot give [SOVEREIGNTY over the SULTANATE OF SULU] that they did not have to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, respectively, which are now merely the administering States under international law.

Again, on the issue of North Borneo and all other territories appertaining to the Sultanate, as expressed by the Philippines before the *International Court of Justice* on the 28 June 2001 Oral Proceedings at the Peace Palace, The Hague, through Mr. Merlin M. Magallona, Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs as Co–agent and Counsel, *judicially admitting that the “North Borneo” belongs to the Sultanate of Sulu and that all other territories appertaining to the Sultanate, the Philippines is merely “agent” and “attorney” for the Sultanate:*

“12. May I state that the territory ceded by the Sultan to the Philippines in 1962 covered only those territories which were included and described in the 1878 Sulu–Overbeck lease agreement. The Present Application for permission to intervene is based solely on the rights of

⁴⁸ Felix Gochan, *v. Heirs of Raymundo Baba*, G.R. No. 138945 (19 August 2003) . See *Skelwith (Leisure) Ltd v Armstrong* [2015] EWHC 2830 (Ch); [2016] Ch 345 [UK]. Retrieved at <https://www.iclr.co.uk/knowledge/glossary/nemo-dat-quod-not-habet/>. Last accessed on March 9, 2025.

the Government of the Republic of the Philippines transferred by and acquired from the Sulu Sultanate. If at all there are other territories appertaining to the Sultanate not covered by the Sulu–Overbeck lease of 1878, the Philippines, as agent and attorney for Sultanate, has reserved its position on these territories.” (International Court of Justice quoted in University of the Philippines Institute of International Legal Studies 2003, 334)⁴⁹

The alleged “cession” by the “Sultanate of Sulu” to the “Philippines” of the Sultanate’s “territory” of “North Borneo” in 1962 is questionable. It is absurd if the Philippines is merely an “agent” and “attorney” for the Sultanate’s other territories, and an owner in the case of North Borneo. For worthless (?) territory, if there still be any, of the Sultanate of Sulu, the Philippines is merely an “agent” and “attorney” for the Sultanate. For a priceless one, like the Sultanate’s territory of North Borneo, the Philippines is claiming ownership... is it just?

*“Every person must, in the exercise of his rights and in the performance of his duties, act with justice, give everyone his due and observe honesty and good faith.”*⁵⁰

VI. ON THE SULTANATE OF SULU’S TERRITORY OCCUPIED BY MALAYSIA

Again, before the *International Court of Justice*, Malaysia has already admitted in its “Reply of Malaysia” dated 2 March 2001, filed before the ICJ, in the case: “CASE CONCERNING SOVEREIGNTY OVER PULAU LIGITAN AND PULAU SIPADAN (INDONESIA/MALAYSIA)” decided on 17 December 2002 that the “territory” of “North Borneo” is *part of the dominions of the Sultanate of Sulu*, and argued in this wise:

A. Malaysia’s Case for Sovereignty over the Islands

1.3. Malaysia’s sovereignty over the islands is clear and well established. It follows from the following propositions, which – as will be shown in detail in the following Chapters–Malaysia has demonstrated with full reference to the available evidence.

49 INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE (ICJ), Oral Proceedings. Retrieved at <https://icj-cij.org/case/102/oral-proceedings/102-20010628-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf>. Retrieved at <https://icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/102/102-20010628-ORA-01-00-BI.pdf>. Last accessed on March 9, 2025. See also University of the Philippines, Institute of International Legal Studies (2003, 334).

50 CIVIL CODE, as amended, art. 19.

1. *Like other islands off the east Coast of Borneo (Danawan, Si Amil, Omadal, Mabul...), Sipadan and Ligitan were **part of the dominions of the Sultanate of Sulu** in the nineteenth century; the people of these islands owed allegiance to the Sultan, which allegiance they transferred to the BNBC [British North Borneo Company] from 1878.*"
2. After 1878, the BNBC administered the two islands, along with the rest of the Ligitan Group, even though they fell outside the scope of the Sulu grant of 1878.
3. The BNBC's administration of the offshore islands was not challenged by Spain or by the Netherlands. In particular, the Netherlands specifically disclaimed any title to territory or islands east of Batu Tinagat, in the negotiations for the 1891 Boundary Convention and subsequently.
4. The BNBC's administration was recognised as a fact by the United States when the USS Quiros claimed title to the islands in 1903, and it was regularised as a continuing right of BNBC administration by the Exchange of Notes of 1907.
5. The BNBC's right of administration was converted into a full right of British sovereignty as a result of the British–United States Treaty of 1930.
6. Malaysia succeeded the British sovereignty over the islands, and its sovereignty continues uninterrupted to the present day. The exercise of that sovereignty has taken a variety of forms, including nature conservation, regulation of natural resources and tourism, security and policing, and the construction and maintenance of lighthouses.⁵¹

The raayat *Tau Sug* of the *Sultaniyyah sin Lupah Sug* (Sultanate of Sulu) would like to thank Malaysia for judicially admitting, in the said case, that the “territory of North Borneo” is “part of the dominions of the Sultanate of Sulu.”

The Sultanate of Sulu expressly reserves its right to dispute or challenge the rest of Malaysia's assertions, contentions, or propositions. Such challenges shall be presented at a time and in a manner appropriate and consistent with the principles of fairness, justice, equity, and applicable legal frameworks.

⁵¹ Case Concerning Sovereignty over Pulau Ligitan and Pulau Sipadan (Indonesia/ Malaysia), *Reply of Malaysia*, 2 March 2001, I.C.J. Pleadings, 1–2.

VII. CONCLUSION

H. Otley Beyer, in his 1946 memorandum titled “*Brief Memorandum on the Government of the Sultanate of Sulu and Powers of the Sultan during the 19th Century*,” states:

The Sultanate of Sulu was in no wise abolished by the Carpenter Agreement; but the Sultan and his council merely relinquished their temporal powers, to be exercised by regularly appointed or elected officials of the Philippine Government. It is generally believed that only the Sulu people themselves (through a plebiscite or an elected popular assembly) could legitimately abolish the Sultanate. (Beyer 1946)

In the case of the “*Province of Sulu v. Executive Secretary*,”⁵² the Supreme Court has these phrases: “of addressing the historical injustices,” “does not fully address the historical injustices,” “correct historical injustices,” and, lastly, the important, “to do justice for all the historical injustices suffered by its peoples”:

“... guarantee of addressing the historical injustices against Moros [Tau Sug of Sultanate of Sulu]...⁵³ Establishing an autonomous region... the exact same structure fails the locals... does not fully address the historical injustices against the marginalized, indigenous peoples of this country.⁵⁴ ... in the longstanding quest for self-determination... to confer genuine autonomy to indigenous peoples, correct historical injustices, and pave the way for unity and a just lasting peace.⁵⁵ ... Legal recognition, as a product of long historical struggle, is an honorable and peaceful means to do justice for all the historical injustices suffered by its peoples. Assured of its own understanding of our varied history as well as the commands of the Constitution, this Court knows where it should stand.”⁵⁶

With full faith, the administering States’ Governments know where they really stand – to address, or fully address, correct, and to do justice for all the historical injustices suffered by the Raayat Tau Sug of the Sultanate of Sulu.

To address, or fully address, correct, and to do justice for all the historical injustices, the ***Tau Sug people’s right of self-determination*** in international law under: Art. 1, para. 2, Art.

52 *Province of Sulu v. Executive Secretary*, G.R. Nos. 242255, 243246, and 243693, September 9, 2024.

53 *Id.* at 43.

54 *Id.* at 92.

55 *Id.* at 97.

56 *Id.*

55(c), Art. 73, Chapter XI, Art. 76, Chapter XII, of the United Nations Charter; Articles 15(1), 21 of UN General Assembly Resolution 217A (III) or the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; Art. 1 and Art. 1(3) of UN General Assembly Resolution 2200A(XXI) or the “*International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*” and “*International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*”; UN GA Resolution 637 (VII); UN GA Resolution 1514 (XV) or the “*Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*”; UN GA Resolution 1541 (XV); UN GA Resolution 2131 (XX); and Annex to UN GA Resolution 2625 (XXV) – **must have to be respected** and **recognized**, with a view of arriving at some just solution.

UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) is crystal clear by its title:

**“Declaration on the Granting of Independence
to Colonial Countries and Peoples”**

Country:	Sultanate of Sulu
People:	Tau Sug a.k.a. Bangsa Sug

UN General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV), on the other hand, under Principle VI provides that, “**A Non-Self-Governing Territory can be said to have reached a full measure of self-government by**”:

- (a) Emergence as a sovereign independent State;
- (b) Free association with an independent State; or
- (c) Integration with an independent State.

Recognizing the Tau Sug people’s right to self-determination as outlined under UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) is not only a legal obligation but also a moral imperative. This landmark resolution underscores the obligation of all nations to respect and uphold the inherent right of all peoples in colonial territories to freely determine and decide their political status and pursue their socioeconomic and cultural development. It stresses the need for an immediate and unconditional end to colonialism in all its forms.

As holders of the right to self-determination, the Tau Sug people assert their unwavering and patient desire to freely determine and decide their political status to govern themselves according to their aspirations and dignity. This is their inherent right, rooted in justice and equality, and they stand resolute in its pursuit.

Despite the innumerable challenges, the Sultanate of Sulu has strived for centuries to preserve its unique identity, culture, and sovereignty and assert its rightful place in the world. This call for justice demands the compassion and attention of administering States and the international community. The Tau Sug people solemnly urge the administering States and the international community to do justice by upholding their inalienable right to self-determination.

With deep sincerity and hope, the Tau Sug people of the Sultanate of Sulu earnestly appeal for recognition and respect of their right to self-determination or their right to decide how they want to be governed by allowing them to freely determine or choose from among the political status under UN General Assembly Resolution 1541 (XV)—as sovereign independent State, free association with an independent State or integration with an independent State—and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development without external interference.

* * * * *

“There is no sweeter peace than the peace that is a product of justice, which gives us inner peace.” – Ulung

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Creating Sulu: In Search of Policy Coalitions in the Conflict-Ridden Island

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Abstract

The island province of Sulu has seen a military presence for decades, the result of a failed rebel uprising in 1974, when the capital town of Jolo was burned to the ground. It has not been able to fully recover since then. This paper seeks to recommend possible policy coalitions for local transformation in Sulu. It reflects on how the military and civilians came together in a tacit and binding agreement to set the pace in changing the status quo. For the military, it meant doing more than what was expected of soldiers in a conflict area; it meant dealing with people face-to-face and learning local history. Over the years, it has been shown—though scarcely studied or investigated—that officers with a keen sense of leadership and a wide understanding of history, politics, and society are more likely to shake the ground for better results. For civil society, it was an opportunity to seek congruence from an armed unit that was going to be their friend, not an enemy as it had been in the past; civil society was going to find a substitute for the local government's lackluster performance (if not outright incompetence) to restore a semblance of normalcy. Lastly, a proposal for a military governorship is examined, and a set of crucial conditions to implement the proposal are presented, based on the findings on the ground.

The island province of Sulu has seen a military presence for decades arising from the result of a failed rebel uprising in 1974 by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), when the capital town of Jolo was burned to the ground. It has not been able to fully recover since then, until, perhaps, the post-pandemic period that offered changes that many did not think possible. Over the past years, the military delivered a tough search-and-destroy approach and later shifted to a civil-military campaign attempting to develop basic services. Between 2007 to 2019, I travelled often to Sulu and other parts of Mindanao documenting the Muslim conflict that brought about a kind of complexity endemic to the country's southernmost region. In 2011, *Peace Warriors: On The Trail With Filipino Soldiers* (Anvil Publishing) was published, an account of my travels from Sulu to Lanao and Maguindanao provinces showing how the military was veering towards a softer approach, experimenting with a strategy learned from too many debacles in the 1970s.

But problems persisted, with the dilemma of dealing with radical rebels involved in kidnappings and bombings, local leaders having private armed groups, and a population trapped in a cycle of poverty. Because of persistent violence without the legitimate domination of physical force, some argue that politics in Sulu is characterized as "bandit politics," which fits well with the framework of the weak state.¹ Such one-dimensional label, however, does not capture the dynamics on the ground. In recent years, it has been shown that officers with a keen sense of leadership and a wide understanding of history, politics, and society are more likely to shake the ground for better results.² In line with this framework, Lt. Col. Antonio Mangoroban proposed a military governorship with a limited term, the success of which should depend mainly on vetting officers who can do the job.³ This didn't happen, but something close to military dominance slowly reversed the downward spiral of Sulu.

First, let us examine some background facts on the island-province: Sulu (land area of about 168,000 hectares) was once a shining example of progress and cultural cohesion between Muslims and Christians. It was the center of gravity in the southern fringes of the Sulu Archipelago: the home of the Tausug elites under a once-powerful sultanate. It is also a prime example of a tragic fate: it was destroyed after the 1974 uprising, leaving the

1 Gutierrez, Eric. "From Ilaga to Abu Sayyaf: New Entrepreneurs in Violence and Their Impact on Local Politics in Mindanao." *Philippine Political Science Journal* 24, no. 47 (2003): 145–178.

2 Yabes, Criselda. *Peace Warriors: On the Trail with Filipino Soldiers*. Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, 2011.

3 Mangoroban, Lt. Col. Antonio. "Military Governorship as a Solution to the Insurgency Problem in Southern Philippines." Master's thesis, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2012.

victims in the hands of warlords, bandits, and extremist fighters who raised the stakes with kidnappings and other terrorist incidents. There was a brief spell of military rule after 1974, but it eventually gave way to the rule of political families who sought dominance through entrenchment (Gutierrez 1995).

In the opinion of military commanders with whom I had spent hours interviewing, something was wrong with the rehashing of previous doctrines borrowed largely from the American colonial campaign. Consequently, the Armed Forces of the Philippines went through a shift in its own strategy, one that has been constantly modified over the years in search of a solution to the insurgency problem nationwide. The military implemented the *Lambat Bitag* (Fish net) strategy in the late 1980s, aimed at fighting Communist guerrilla fronts by deploying special operations teams to the countryside. Later the strategy included modules that had to fit in with the cultural traditions of Muslim Mindanao vis-à-vis the insurgency in the south. The armed forces headquarters, which formulates strategies, had this critical aspect to bear in mind. It may have had brilliant minds writing about doctrines and strategies, but what it needed was equally brilliant officers carrying out plans on the ground. This meant a careful selection from the officer corps, shuffling promotions, exercising vigor and discernment in choosing mid-level and/or field-grade officers ready and willing to take command in the complex swarm of Sulu and other provinces. The AFP's *Bayanihan* strategy, carried over from *Lambat Bitag*, and now modified into *Kapayapaan* (Peace), has an overall plan of intersecting governance, development, and security. This challenged the military with the demands of nuances in leadership and dealing with elected local officials. Maj. Gen. Rafael Valencia, the architect of the strategy since its inception as *Bayanihan*, said it could do well only if commanders took the time to read and analyze the classified operational directives given to the unified commands, which in turn should transmit the orders to the men in the field.

After the democratization of the Philippines in 1986, there were various reform attempts in Muslim Mindanao, including Sulu. In the 1990s, trade with Indonesian and Malaysian neighbors was revitalized through an economic scheme called the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also helped finance the economy of the country's poorest provinces.⁴ However, commercial prosperity waxed and waned depending on the level of violence. Sulu had its cycle of violence that usually came before elections or

4 Danguilan–Vitug, Marites, and Criselda Yabes. *Jalan–Jalan: A Journey through EAGA*. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1998.

when rebels needed money from kidnapping ransoms. In between the spates of violence was when commerce could thrive. The long-heralded Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) had been negligent, if not a failure, in serving the broad interests of Muslim Filipinos (about 15 percent of Mindanao's total population of more than 20 million), who are also victims of their own elected leaders. It has been described as nothing more than a "bureaucratic layer providing little" except power and privileges for Muslim politicians.⁵

Sulu's eminent revolutionary who led the uprising in 1974, Nur Misuari, was the first ARMM governor when he accepted a peace deal offered by the Ramos administration in the mid-1990s. His leadership crumbled under the weight of nepotism, corruption, and ethnic divisions. The people of Lupah Sug, as Sulu is locally called, gravitated from traditional clan institutions to a shadow state fueled by an informal economy of the illicit drug trade, gunrunning, and kidnapping business.⁶ One way or another, Misuari's ARMM leadership took the Muslim narrative on a downhill curve, an example of failing promises to ordinary people. Power and privileges of the old datu structure trumped modern education, rights, and unity binding the region. Dissatisfaction among the Muslims funneled into the hands of religious leaders, who were often caught in a bind by radical forces and threats of violence. The idea, therefore, of a democratic style of governance was lost in the ensuing generations searching for a common good.

Sulu and other Muslim provinces are essentially run by members of political families elected by their own people. The leadership deteriorates when they fight (literally and figuratively) other political families or rivals—an elevated *rido* or clan wars. Civil-military operations (CMO) were a mere disguise for undercover work designed to unearth the ideology infecting a local population. By 2000, Sulu had become home to a group of radical rebels called the Abu Sayyaf, which was linked to the al-Qaeda masterminds of the 9/11 terrorist attack. Then came the batches of American special forces teams under the Philippines–United States Visiting Forces Agreement as the government took part in a US-led global "War on Terror." Their presence harkened back to the American colonial era of the early-1900s, during which the Sulu Sultanate abdicated. Sulu became a laboratory for counterterrorism strategy. There was a joint task force aimed at striking down high-value targets (HVTs), namely, the key leaders of Abu Sayyaf—whose strength peaked at an estimated 1,200 fighters around 2000.

5 Lara Jr., Francisco J. *Insurgents, Clans, and States: Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014.

6 Lara Jr., Francisco J., and Schoofs, Stevens. *Out of the Shadows: Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016.

Almost three-fourths of Sulu was considered “threatened” in 2005 (Quemado 2017). The US-backed Oplan Ultimatum between 2006 and 2008 resulted in a setback for Abu Sayyaf, so much so that in the momentum a few years later, only one out of the five “original HVTs remained to be operationally active.”

While the government went back to the negotiating table with the dominant Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of Maguindanao on the mainland of Mindanao—a breakaway from the MNLF—CMO became a standard necessity (even in demand in some villages) in Sulu simply because the rationale of governance had disappeared. Town mayors and barangay captains had made their private homes in the Christian-dominated city of Zamboanga, neglecting their jobs in Sulu and merely collecting their handouts in the form of Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA). At the grassroots level, there were no infrastructure services; the military ended up providing such services by default. In many places, the only shadow of governance left was the military presence. It was the only government symbol there was. In writing *Peace Warriors*, I discussed the diversified and creative strategies employed by military officers to restore peace in Sulu and the islands as well as in the mainland. About one of three brigades falling under an Army Infantry Division or the Marine Corps was led by commanders willing to initiate prospects of “nation-building” with the civilian population.

The brigades had in their command the battalion commanders, who were the front liners. These brigades, in turn, fell under the divisions. The military had a total of 10 divisions, four of which were in Mindanao. An 11th division was added in 2018 for the entire island of Sulu alone – and this became the game changer that will be explained shortly. In effect, each commander had their own creative ideas of what had to be done. For the military, this meant doing more than what was expected of soldiers in a conflict area; it meant dealing with people face-to-face and learning local history. For the civilian sector, it was an opportunity to seek congruence with an armed unit that was going to be their friend, not an enemy as it had been in the past; it was going to find a substitute for the lackluster performance (if not outright incompetence) of the local government unit in a force that would lead them to a process of normalcy.

From Mount Bayog to Bud Datu, the Marines vs. the Army

In examining the military’s critical role in Sulu, let me begin by saying there was an inherent rivalry between the Army and the Marines at the outset. Whether this inadvertently resulted in a creative endeavor in seeking peace still remains to be seen. My last trip to Sulu before

my return in April 2025 was just before the outbreak of COVID-19 in January 2020. There was a five-year gap between what I saw then and what has now improved in terms of finding peace, albeit tenuous. The 11th Infantry Division was just getting started, having installed itself in 2018, in what used to be the brigade camp near the airport. The recruitment line was getting longer through the employment of local Tausugs as foot soldiers; this, too, was to spell a difference in shaping the role and responsibility of the Sulu population. Additionally, the Special Forces were brought in, slowly carrying out their missions in the villages of Patikul, the common lair of the ASG rebels. Though they were slowly getting used to the lay of the land, it didn't help that artillery firing was taking place every night over the same villages whose support the military was trying to seek. This was about to change when Covid struck.

Allow me to explain the evolution of the military's CMO trajectory: The Marines' campaign called for an "80-20" strategy: in the overall scheme of operations, the military would carry out 80 percent CMO and 20 percent combat. Sulu was going to be a template for the two other southern island provinces to follow, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. Known by their acronym BASULTA, they fall under the ARMM (now the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao or the BARMM). This strategy could have worked, but it did not, for several reasons—mainly that commanders had to adjust to each province, which had their own dynamics at play. CMO had some successes, however, and these were brought to fruition after the pandemic. This template was to become a precursor to the *bayanihan* strategy crafted by the armed forces in 2010, and approved by President Benigno Aquino III when he took office. This alone was a turnaround from previous models, bringing in the framework of a "whole-of-nation" approach in the search for peace and stability. For this strategy to work, the military needed the cooperation of key government departments and agencies to make the switch from lack of governance to development.

From 2008 to 2014, the Philippine Marine Corps was fully deployed over BASULTA as part of the Navy's master plan for a Fleet Marine Concept. Amphibious in nature, the Marines were to have the islands as their ships, so to speak, in the absence of modern boats from which they were supposed to operate. From the early days of the rebellion, Sulu received the brunt of military operations, in a way that gave the appearance of martial law. From the time the insurgency began in the 1970s, military commanders alternately deployed the Army or the Marines depending on the political circumstances or the personal judgments of top generals. Not all the Marines could understand the meaning of the 80-20 campaign. An internal survey of one Marine battalion showed that

almost 60 percent of the men did not even understand the Tausug culture. How could they then go about making peace with people targeted as the enemy? But a great majority of the men said they were willing to learn and that it was important to gain the trust of the local people.⁷

From men in uniform who were feared and hated, the Marines began repairing bridges and building schools, using their trucks to ferry children to classrooms, augmenting the jobs of teachers, and transporting agricultural produce that otherwise would have been impossible to do in a war zone. The atmosphere in some villages even turned festive, though the local population was still wary of the new situation (Yabes 2012). It was a stunning move then when a Marine battalion commander in Sulu built a replica of the Astana in his camp. The symbol of the Astana, the palace of the Sultanate of Sulu at the twilight of the sultanate's power, was arguably significant. The replica, constructed in 2013, was set up on Mount Bayog, in the town of Talipao, where the camp was located, restoring pride among the people of Sulu. It was an innovative and clever idea on the part of the commander, Col. Romulo Quemado, to allow local folks to visit the replica for weekend picnics—to feel at home—for soon enough even rebels in disguise and influential community leaders befriended him. It was the replica of the Astana that helped forge relationships, enabling the commander to obtain information from locals—rather than forcing it out of them.

By forging an alliance with the community, the Marines had locals on their side, temporarily at least. This widened the military's scope of influence. One telling sign was that there were Philippine flags flying over huts—this had never been seen before. It was the symbol of the Astana that had opened the way forward. The lack of doctrine or standard policy supporting civil-military affairs left commanders toying with their own ideas and limitations. A leadership framework was needed to guide CMO in the field. Quemado and a few of his fellow officers helped put some shape into Community Relations Training (CRT), producing a manual for others to follow. Workshop modules had the combination of the community (i.e., academe, local government units, religious leaders, non-governmental organizations, and others) and security sector (military, police, and militias). These workshops focused on Sulu's culture and religion. The traditional CMO was going to be transformed into a *bayanihan*, a collective community endeavor. The leadership was not aiming for a military

7 Quemado, Col. Romulo. "The Bridging Leadership Approach in Civil-Military Relations." Presentation to the Command and General Staff College, Camp Aguinaldo AFP Headquarters, Quezon City, 2017.

state, but for a state in which power was going to be shared. There was a thin line for the military to watch out in playing the role of servant leader: were they soldiers or civil servants? It was hard work.⁸

It was time to reinvent the wheel, said Quemado, by co-creating the process for the goal of peace. He said the military could not help build bridges if the bridges were later going to be bombed; they could not build a school or a road without the opportunity of forging genuine relations with the people. In a status report presented to a class of the Command General Staff College—those preparing for senior ranks—Quemado showed that the CRT years from the mid-2010 to 2014 had reduced Abu Sayyaf's strength to an average of 250 from an estimated 1,200. One crucial aspect in the CRT module was courting the youth, especially the orphans of the conflict. Having them on the military's side could mean one less generation of fighters.

But the Marines were held accountable for not delivering enough in terms of body count. It was alleged that under their watch the rebels had managed to quietly expand their base and had carried out a series of kidnappings of foreigners that had brought millions of pesos into their ransom booty.⁹ The Army units were let back in; they disrupted the status quo and fired more rounds of artillery than usual. A new brigade commander had to be flown in, ostensibly to salvage the situation. Gen. Jose Faustino knew the terrain; his tack on CMO was to be "purposive" and not simply allow it to be a "stand-alone" campaign. What, he asked, would be the purpose of building too many schools if there were no teachers? He looked back on his past efforts and said he had to recalibrate, recalling a situation when his unit had provided 20,000 pesos for a water pipe in a village. He should not have done that, he said. He should have shown the village chief how he could use the IRA disbursed by the national government for his people's basic needs. He would give CMO a ratio of 60 percent (instead of 80 percent) over combat operations of 40 percent. It was key, he said, to let people know that *barangay* halls were there to serve the community centers, not for personal use. As for the CMO, the army's *bayanihan* team immersed in a village was armed with a checklist of what to do, to avoid mistakes in social relations and be sensitive to the traditions of Muslims. And once the community arrived at a sort of comfort level with soldiers, the team was scaled down to a platoon.

8 Yabes, Criselda. *Peace Warriors: On the Trail with Filipino Soldiers*. Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, 2011. 216–235

9 Lara and Schoofs, *Out of the Shadows*, chap. 4.

Above are profiles of two officers (Quemado and Faustino) in the theater of Sulu, one from the Marines, the other from the Army, as they saw the island from their own prism. They also reflected, one way or another, a long-standing rivalry between the two units, a rivalry well known within the military circles. Sulu needed more than one solution to find peace, or at the very least an equilibrium to restore the essence of governance. One has to dive in with empathy, to read history and calculate where one must stand, to play things by ear and observe meanings through the eyes of the people. A commander's tour of duty could be as long as two years, although it was often shorter. That was too brief a time to expect rapid changes on the ground; moreover, a military unit taking over from the previous one could change the flow of the campaign or even stop it. The problem lay in vetting officers for positions. Much of the decision-making turned personal when claiming turf and loyalty among the officer corps, which inevitably upset the playing field.

The turning point came when the 11th Infantry Division settled in, giving a wider impact on the military's presence. We are now talking of not only one, but three brigades and additional support units holding stake on the entire island, possibly short of the military governorship that Lt. Col. Mangoroban had suggested in his thesis at the US Marine Corps Command and Staff College in Virginia, U.S.A.¹⁰ The military face was now writ large and the course of the CMO slowly changed people's attitudes and perception: the monster was gone. It was a kind of mutant military rule by default, wherein people want to cite the names of officers more than they would of their elected civilian leaders. Furthermore, the Covid lockdown brought a lull to the fighting, more than two years after the siege of Marawi in Lanao del Sur province in 2017, that reduced ISIS influence over local rebel leaders to nil.

I was absent during the critical changes that took place from 2000 until the present, 2025, due to the limitations of travel during a nationwide lockdown. From what I gathered, it was around this period when rebels in Sulu were slowly losing grasp of their territorial control, especially within the municipality of Patikul just on the outskirts of the Jolo capital. The holdout rebels in Sulu were split into factions between the hardliners and the old-timers led by Radulan Sahiron, who was believed to have passed away some time in 2022. Potential suicide bombers, young ones at that, from Indonesia and Egypt crept through the back seas but were soon caught by military intelligence operatives. During the pandemic, what were the insurgents to do when it comes to bombings or kidnappings—when there was no one to be kidnapped in the lockdown?

10 Mangoroban. Military Governorship.

In a turn of fortune, and under such circumstances, the commanders deployed in Sulu had a meeting of the minds on their advantage in possibly turning the tide. They operated on a division of labor wherein some commanders would take charge of operations and others would concentrate on seeking development for the grassroots—a two-pronged undertaking they managed to coalesce for victory on their side. Finally, it seemed they knew what had to be done at the given opportunity. Lessons from the past gave them the handiwork of what to avoid and what to pursue, hoping to come out of the pit, to see the light at the end of a long tunnel. The rebel territories in Patikul slowly diminished and a *modus vivendi* was thus accomplished: don't come near us and we stop the trouble, as the rebels had given as condition; and before you know it the rebel leaders surrendered in 2023, advertised in the media as a step towards 'Balik-Loob' – returning to the fold. It somehow came about that things fell into place one after another in that passage of time, a lull that gave the military the upper hand. It had more power now, able to leverage with their size and strength over the island's radius. Sulu, it seemed, was theirs for the taking. They succeeded in achieving a relative peace that people had thought unimaginable after all those years of fighting, on and off. People let their guard down. Curfew was lifted. They could stroll the streets without always looking behind their backs. They could have their coffee in peace, in makeshift cafes by the sea. There was a sense of calm and freedom everywhere, though it remained one of the poorest provinces in the southern Philippines.

The Voices of Lupah Sug

Recalibration of Civil–Military Relations on the Ground

Throughout my years of covering Sulu as journalist, I came across many civilian groups known collectively for their undertaking as part of 'civil society.' Among them was Mercia Alli who was with the local office of the Department of Agriculture, which was then barely getting by with a minimal budget trickling down from the ARMM office based in Cotabato City on the mainland. The Americans stationed in Sulu at the time were offering veterinary services for their medical mission. This was a solution to saving cattle on the brink of perishing. Cows, carabaos, and goats were the only tangible source of income for poor peasants in the most far-flung of villages; they could easily be sold when required. Relations between the Americans and local people was two-pronged: the American soldiers were making an entry into the heart of Sulu, close to the lairs of the rebels and the communities that supported them, while the local government office needed help that the state could not provide. The condition Ms. Alli had set for this arrangement was that there would be no military operations of any kind: no attacks, no raids. She was certain that there were rebels among the people watching, but she did not fear them as she was there to help people.

In due time, a community partnership was fostered through saving the cows and other later projects, with the Americans handing over the initiatives to Filipino Marine officers to take forward. Ms. Alli was struck by the respect she felt for herself and her staff. The military did not make them ride in military vehicles; they made sure to provide them with civilian transport when going to the villages. All plans were made through consultations. The CRT workshops were held in camps, and the people involved in the workshops were all at ease with the arrangement after the CMO activities they had done together. In addition to her job in the agriculture office, Ms. Alli formed a group of volunteers to help improve the livelihood of local folks. She called it Matawkasi, which means “going beyond” and the group branded themselves as advocates for peace. Ms. Alli’s influence grew among communities in the conflict areas. She traveled to nearly all corners of the island, doing what other local government units should have been doing in the first place, to get a firsthand view of the needs in remote hamlets.

The military had put the Matawkasi group in touch with civic groups from Manila, extending help with the mainstream purpose of nation building. The military, on the other end of this partnership, also courted civilians and private companies for its outreach programs and civil-military campaigns. Small steps led farmers to Manila, where they met agribusiness experts who gave technical support. Fresh harvests of exotic fruit such as mangosteen and durian brought bigger profits when transported by plane to markets outside Jolo. Sulu coffee was back in the limelight and being sold in high-end grocery stores in Manila. This was a breakthrough courtesy of a Muslim princess who returned to her hometown and saw her old neighbors living in an abject state. She decided to turn things around in her village, which had once been a rebel camp. She found the basic equipment to help villagers mill coffee beans instead of leaving them to dry on the road, where they would be crushed when military trucks drove by (Yabes 2012a).

The Local Government Code of 1991 decentralized power to local government units by giving them the IRA, however, this led to families fighting for government positions. Such positions became a family affair, so to speak, preventing potentially progressive leaders from running for office. This began a race among families who saw the IRA as their personal coffer if they were to run for office, and it triggered bloody fights just to win an election for to win local seats. The late Interior Secretary Jesse Robredo of the Aquino administration knew of the problem as he had been a mayor of Naga City in Southern Luzon for about 20 years and led reform programs, even winning a seal of good governance and good housekeeping. His tragic death in a plane crash in 2012 put an end to the program, but it sowed the seeds for

reform. In the two years that he was cabinet secretary, he was committed to training leaders in Muslim Mindanao to follow the same path and traveled to many places in Sulu to get his vision across. He felt that this was the right—albeit daunting—process for the political and social transformation of Filipino Muslims.¹¹

In October 2016, the municipality of Jolo (population 125,000) was awarded the coveted Seal of Good Local Governance from the Department of the Interior and Local Government, which oversees the local government code throughout the country. At first glance it seemed to be a fluke, or a joke, that a city as dangerous as Jolo could ever be given the thumbs-up for its administrative performance. The colonial era-style municipality hall underwent a dashing makeover, turning it from a structure that was on the verge of ruin to a renovated piece of bureaucratic order with the seal prominently displayed in the lobby. A glass-encased bulletin wall had lists of budgets, procurements, programs, and a host of other procedures of a normally functioning municipality. When I returned in 2025, a new public library in a modern architecture was built across the city hall. In the center of town, commerce appeared to be booming, with more shops and cafes, and people roamed with more ease. Outside the city, primarily in Patikul, the former rebel lair, more roads were built and the spirit of creating cooperatives bore successes for small entrepreneurs.

One example was that of Kankitap Cooperative or KKC, first organized by Muddazer Hailanie, who wanted to bring back the community spirit when he returned in 2005 after years of working in Saudi Arabia. The people in his village of Danag, in Patikul—where Abu Sayyaf rebels are said to have their base—were fed up of false promises from the government as well as non-governmental organizations that came and went. The water system was at risk of drying up, and Hailanie did not want that to happen. It was the villagers' only water source, and it was rare for villages to have a water system installed, as was the case with electricity. The villagers were living hand-to-mouth. Hailanie had a plan: he asked each household to contribute 10 pesos per month to keep the water pump running. His efforts were not very successful, but a few people believed in him and worked with him to fix the pump. With this small group of people Hailanie decided to start a cooperative. With capital of less than 10,000 pesos, the villagers began what seemed like a small business. They purchased about a dozen sacks of rice to be sold among the villagers—this was cheaper and more accessible than going to the market in Jolo. The undertaking grew into a full-fledged consumers' cooperative by late 2011, selling not only rice but also local produce and goods that would have made

11 Yabes, Criselda. Jesse Robredo: His Story. Quezon City: Jesse Robredo Foundation, 2018.

Sulu wealthy if it were not for the war. Patikul was the nearest and biggest town next to Jolo. The military had suspected that commerce was being financed by ransom money from the rebels. Hailanie said the cooperative, named Kankitap, would dissuade others from joining the rebels and would show that business could be done through sheer effort and cooperation, a sign of *bayanihan* at work.

When I returned to Sulu, Kankitap has become a household name of sorts – it is now where people would go to buy coffee and other goods. That is where I bought mine to give as presents to friends, and I felt awe and pride at what they have achieved from a small and difficult beginning. During the short week that I was there, I also managed to visit two other villages that became examples of what the military called ‘Balik-Barangay’ – a partner program of the rebel returnees’ ‘Balik-Loob,’ which involved amnesty and livelihood assistance. In Patikul in particular—as this was where the Abu Sayyaf rebels were concentrated—the military helped villagers return to what was once their home. Nine barangays were made beneficiaries of the return program. In places that used to be considered ‘no-man’s land’—abandoned and dangerous—they were now examples of community-building. A precursor was a special forces operation that identified places that needed security, which was what residents asked in the first place. In Kabban Takas, for example, the barangay captain’s story was an epitome of what many other Tausugs had gone through during the years-long conflict: Ahajuli Ahajani was only six years old when martial law was imposed in 1972, and since then he remembered nothing but evacuation and displacement. They couldn’t stay put in one place. They couldn’t look after their livelihood and were forced to leave their crops. Children couldn’t go to school and rebels came to stay with them, making them targets of military operations. It was only in late-2020, when a senior military officer (who happened to be Muslim himself), Gen. Taharudin Ampatuan, listened to their pleas of going back to the home they knew. Ahajani is now 56 years old and sits as barangay captain in a village of about 300 families. It has a new barangay hall, schoolrooms, and other basic structures. This program came timely with the help of BARMM, releasing long overdue funds for the construction of services.

In Maligay, a village of more than 200 families, a woman sits as barangay captain. Her staff recounted a similar story of moving and leaving, of going back and forth for more than a decade. By 2016, no one was left in their village. As it was in Kabban Takas, the village leaders approached Gen. Ampatuan, who by then had sought the help of the government Task Force ELAC (Ending Local Armed Conflict), which combined crucial government agencies that were under BARMM, those that could provide even the most basic of necessities such as housing,

school, water, hygiene facilities. They were given rice, canned foods, things for children. They were literally starting from scratch, and the barangay captain decided it was important to have a monthly meeting for everyone to help getting their lives started again. They didn't want to be leaving anymore. They wanted progress from now on. Meanwhile, the military was working on convincing rebels to surrender through their relatives living in the same villages. At first, only three families had agreed to return, confident that soldiers would keep their word at keeping them safe. The military employed trained military as well as barangay 'peace teams' to secure the villages. It was only then that the others followed. The barangay treasurer said the conflict may have been a "blessing in disguise," otherwise they would not have been able to come together and start anew. I thought that maybe she meant there was a "silver lining" to their hardship and misery. She added that "there's always a rainbow after the rain" – and that was perhaps how I could also sum up the success borne out of years of trying to find peace in Sulu.

In the short week that I was there, I was however made aware that all the good signs might be a respite, that anything could spark another conflict again. The chances of that would be lessened if economic activities would continue and develop in robust. Last year, the Supreme Court gave Sulu its demand to leave BARMM due to many reasons, one of which is the ethnic differences that has plagued the Muslims of Mindanao. Sulu's right to "self-determination" will be put to a test. It is yet early to see if this was a mistake, if the province would no longer benefit from BARMM's hefty budget and trickle-down programs. BARMM has had problems of its own and there has been little transparency on where projects are going and what barometers they have put in place to give meaning to Mindanao's autonomy for the Muslims. In Sulu, a chapter on the past may have closed; it is now their chance to rise again. An academic said this would depend on the military; I think not entirely. After having visited the villages, I am convinced the people of Sulu can now choose their path. If they are aware of that, time is in their hands. If this time around they see a future, they would know how to make use of what might be their new-found peace.

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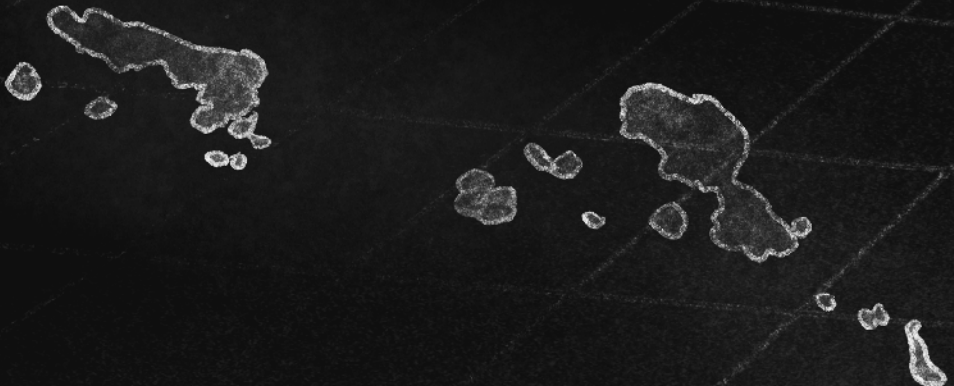
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3



ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT





Using Centrographic Measures and Density Gradients to Describe the Spatial Characteristics of Growth in Sulu, 1970–2020

ARTURO G. CORPUZ

Abstract

The spatial characteristics of local and regional growth are commonly perceived as changes in land uses, infrastructure, and other elements of the built environment. Often, because of the lack of quantitative data and other measures, these observations are anecdotal and not historically comparable, thus compromising the preparation of development policies and plans. In this paper, spatial statistics in the form of centrographic measures and density gradients are used to demonstrate how it can complement existing spatial analyses and improve local and regional planning. These measures and gradients describe spatial growth characteristics in Sulu, from 1970 to 2020, based on barangay- and municipal-level census data. They suggest increasing, but uneven, spatial integration within the province. They also reveal and unravel some complex patterns that are often underappreciated, if at all recognized, thereby offering alternative inquiries towards understanding the social and economic phenomena behind such patterns.

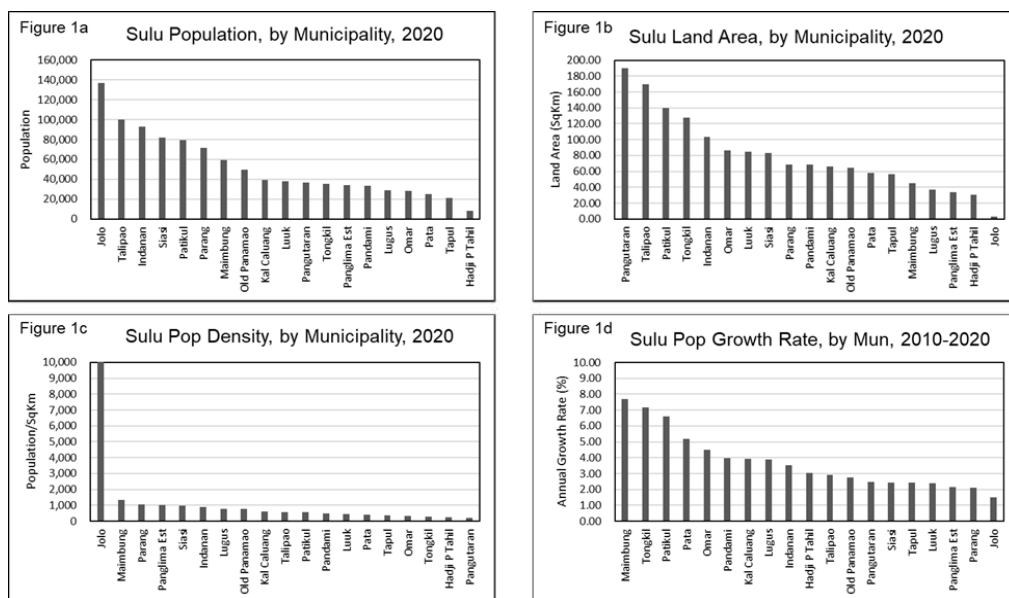
Introduction

The spatial characteristics of growth (or the lack of it) are typically described by changes in demographic, economic, and other social conditions, and in the physical characteristics of built-up areas and natural environments during the period of analysis.

In the case of Sulu province, its population more than tripled between 1970 and 2020, reaching a total of over a million and a density of 660 persons per square kilometer with an annual growth rate of 1.94 percent. During the 2010–2020 census period, Sulu grew more than twice as fast as the national average and slightly faster than the average for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. Figures 1a–1d show the distribution of Sulu’s population among its municipalities and corresponding land areas, densities, and growth rates.¹

Beyond these basic statistics, not much else is available to describe the spatial extent of changes in the built-up areas and specific sectors (income, employment, production/output, housing, education, healthcare, etc.) at the local and sub-local levels. Furthermore, most of the statistics that are available are anecdotal and not historically comparable. In this paper, barangay- and municipal-level population, density, and growth rate data (1970–2020) are complemented by statistical tools in the form of centographic measures and density gradients to describe spatial growth characteristics of Sulu. The intent is to demonstrate how such tools can provide historically comparable quantitative measures, even with limited data, towards a better understanding of existing conditions and, consequently, more informed policies and plans. Some interpretations of the measures are presented, although these are not intended to be conclusive but to illustrate analytical directions.

1 Unless otherwise stated, population data and shapefiles (source of land areas) mentioned in this paper are from PSA/NSO/NCSO censuses. Densities, growth rates, centographic measures, and density gradients are results of computations by the author with the assistance of Beatrisa H. Corpuz and Joel N. Gargallo. Presentation maps are based on maps prepared by Joel N. Gargallo.



Figures 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d: Sulu Population, Land Area, Density, 2020; Annual Growth Rate, 2010–2020; by Municipality. (Source of data: PSA, author's computations)

Centrographic measures and density gradients

Three centrographic measures are used in this paper: population center, standard distance, and ellipse of density (figure 2). A population center is the centroidal **location** of a population (the point from which the sum of the distances of a population is minimized) described by its longitude and latitude. Standard distance is a measure of the extent of **dispersion or concentration** of a population from the center. It is displayed graphically as a circle, where a larger circle indicates a more dispersed distribution. Ellipse of density is a measure of the **shape** of a population. It is shown as an elliptical shape (although it is not a true ellipse) where a narrower ellipse indicates a distribution biased along its longer (principal) axis. In both the standard distance and the ellipse of density, the size of the circle or of the ellipse is not an indication of the size of population.^{2,3}

Density gradients describe the linear distribution of population across an area, with reference

2 See: Jones et al., 1994 for a detailed discussion of the technical definitions, origins and history of centrographic measures.

3 Corpuz, Arturo G. Centrographic Measures of Metro Manila Growth Trends with Comparisons to the Metropolitan Areas of Bangkok and Jakarta. Paper presented at the 31st Conference of the Federation of Asian Economic Associations, Singapore, 2006.

to its center. The center can be the population center or, as used in this paper, the centroid of the barangay where the established traditional center (typically where the municipal/city hall or provincial capitol, marketplace, or mosque/church) is located. A gradient that gets steeper through time indicates a growth bias towards the center while a gradient with a declining slope indicates a bias towards the periphery.⁴ (See Annexes 1 and 2 for summaries of the population, densities, growth rates, centographic measures, and density gradients used and derived in this paper.)

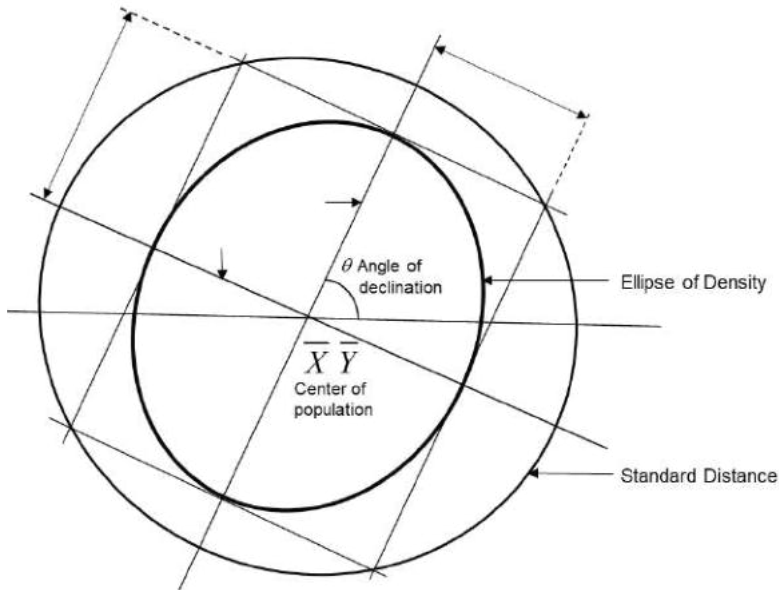


Figure 2. Centographic Measures
Source: Based on Jones et al., 1994.

4 Corpuz, Arturo G. Density Gradients as Measures of Urban Population Distribution in Third World Cities: The Cases of Metro-Manila and Metro-Cebu. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Population Institute, 1991.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the resulting centrophobic measures and density gradients suggest complex growth patterns that may not be apparent based on analyses that are limited to choropleth maps and similar data interpretations. The complexity is evident through time (1970–2020) and within varying spatial levels: Jolo municipality, Metropolitan Jolo, Jolo Island, and Sulu province.

Jolo

Jolo is the largest municipality in Sulu in terms of population (137,266 according to the 2020 census) and ranks 112th among cities and municipalities outside Metro Manila. Since 1970, its population center has moved in several directions, taking several turns and reversals before reaching its 2020 position, close to a kilometer east of where it started. Its most drastic movement took place between 1970 and 1980: a likely consequence of the intermittent armed conflicts in the capital of Jolo at the time. This period also marked the slowest growth of Jolo since 1970, with several barangays experiencing large, absolute population decreases. The largest decline was in the Walled City, with a negative 14.4 percent annual growth rate, resulting in a 79 percent decline from 1970 to 1980. Overall, it took about two decades for the population of Jolo to recover, demographically and spatially, from the turmoil that started in the 1970s (figures 3, 4, 5).

The standard distances of Jolo show the population dispersing from 1970 to 2000, after which it started to concentrate until 2020. Concentration is often associated with increasing economies of agglomeration. This is consistent with the trajectory of its demographic recovery (figure 6).

Jolo's ellipses of density show a steady southwest–northeast orientation from 1970 to 2020. This suggests increasing interaction with the adjacent municipalities of Indanan and Patikul, which lie along the principal axis of Jolo. Typically, such inter-municipal relations involve the core urban area (Jolo) providing employment and services beyond its boundaries. Among others, this is supported by the presence of the only operational airport and the busiest port of Sulu in Jolo.

The growth of Jolo may also be described by its density gradients (figure 7). In most cities and municipalities, growth is biased either towards the core or the periphery. Jolo's gradients do not follow these established patterns. First, the gradients are mostly flat, which

indicate little bias or relatively even growth between the core and periphery. Second, Jolo's gradients show an erratic pattern, sometimes showing the more common negative slope, but sometimes exhibiting an unusual positive slope, indicating not just bias towards the periphery but a decline in the core area. Jolo's unusual gradient patterns may be explained, in part, by the extreme migratory pressures it experienced, even with overall absolute growth continuing to take place in the municipality.

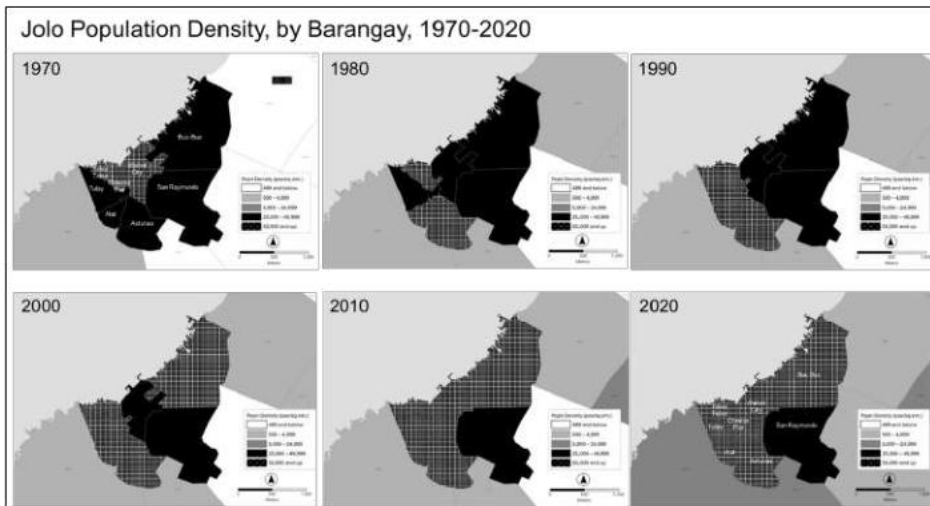


Figure 3. Jolo Population Density, by Barangay, 1970–2020.

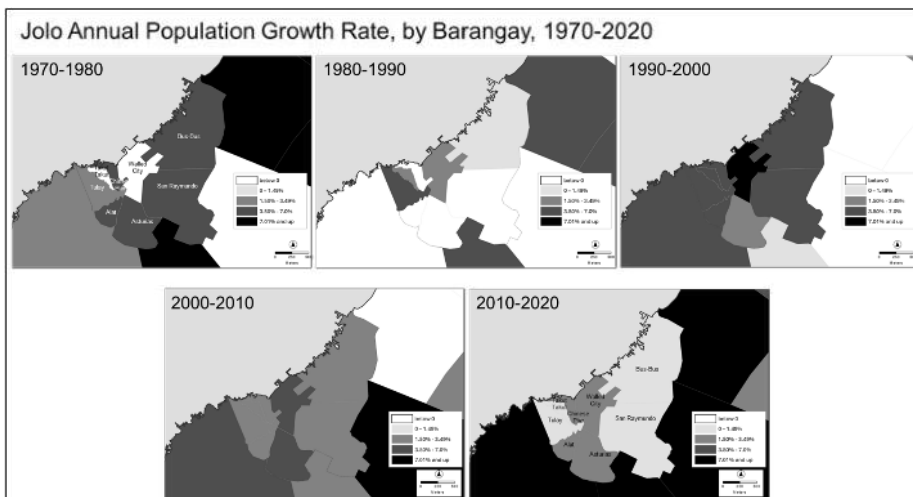


Figure 4. Jolo Annual Population Growth Rate, by Barangay, 1970–2020.

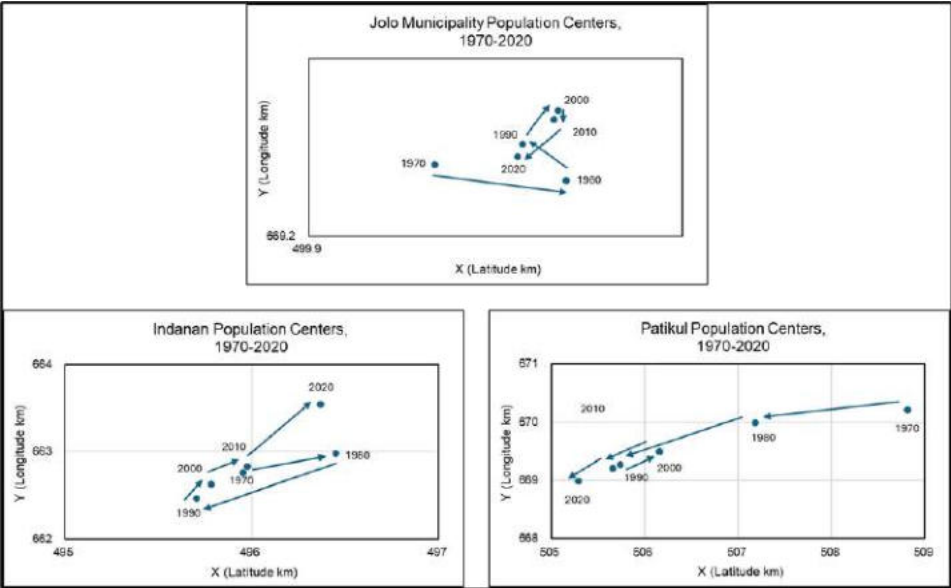


Figure 5. Jolo, Indanan, Patikul Population Centers, 1970–2020.

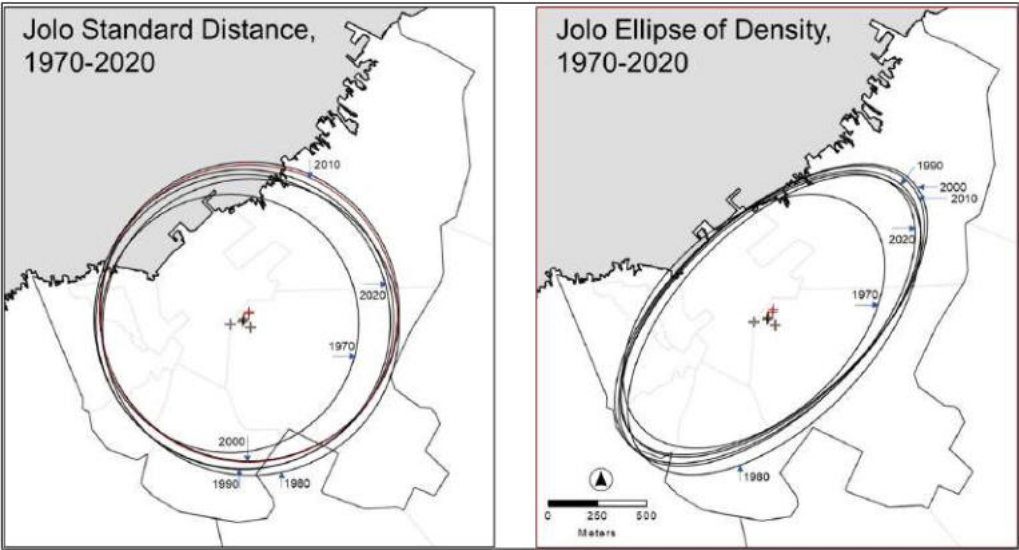


Figure 6. Jolo Standard Distance, Ellipse of Density, 1970–2020.

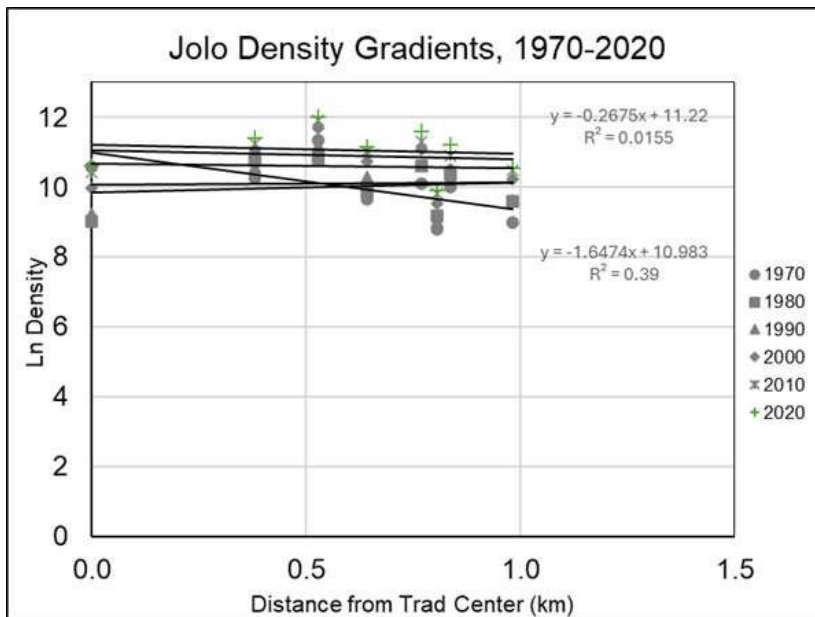


Figure 7. Jolo Density Gradients, 1970–2020.

Metro Jolo

Jolo's growth patterns suggest that it functions as the anchor of a metropolitan area that extends to its neighboring municipalities. Based on visible built-up corridors that extend continuously from Jolo to Indanan and Patikul, a Metro Jolo has been defined in this study to include the municipality of Jolo plus the two barangays of Indanan and seven barangays of Patikul.

The population centers of Metro Jolo show a net southward movement, with the western and eastern movements cancelling each other out (figure 5). This supports the idea of a metropolitan structure that includes both Indanan and Patikul because the symmetry of the western and eastern movements is consistent with Jolo's function as the overall center.

The ellipses of density of Metro Jolo are also consistent with the southwest–northeast directions of Indanan and Patikul; a robust southern movement towards Maimbung and Talipao is further suggested by the increasingly fatter shape of the ellipses (figure 10).

The collective and individual centographic measures of Jolo, Indanan, and Patikul support Jolo's role as the anchor of a metropolitan area. Between 1970 and 2020, the population

centers of Indanan and Patikul moved towards Jolo, suggesting a strong economic influence of the latter on its adjacent municipalities. These movements are not monotonic but are well-defined. The construction of the proposed Patikul-Jolo-Indanan coastal bypass road will provide another direct link among these municipalities and will reinforce their metropolitan functions.

The densification of Jolo and the adjacent barangays of Indanan and Patikul is also apparent. While growth is often biased towards the periphery of a metropolitan area, this pattern is exceptionally pronounced in Jolo and is likely the result of population movements away from the center of conflict in the 1970s, extending further into the periphery in the 1980s. Since 1990, however, there appears to be a period of recovery that continued into 2020, exhibiting a pattern typical of market-influenced growth, i.e., slower growth in higher value land in the center and faster growth in the periphery where land is cheaper and lower in density. This pattern is clearly visible in Metro Jolo's density gradients (figures 8, 9).

Overall, the centographic measures and density gradients are consistent with the existence of a metropolitan structure anchored to the Jolo municipality. The spatial extent of this structure is likely to continue shifting in the future as social, political, and economic functions evolve. It is worth exploring, for example, if Hadji Panglima Tahil, the multi-island municipality directly north of Jolo, is already integral to and therefore should be included in Metro Jolo.

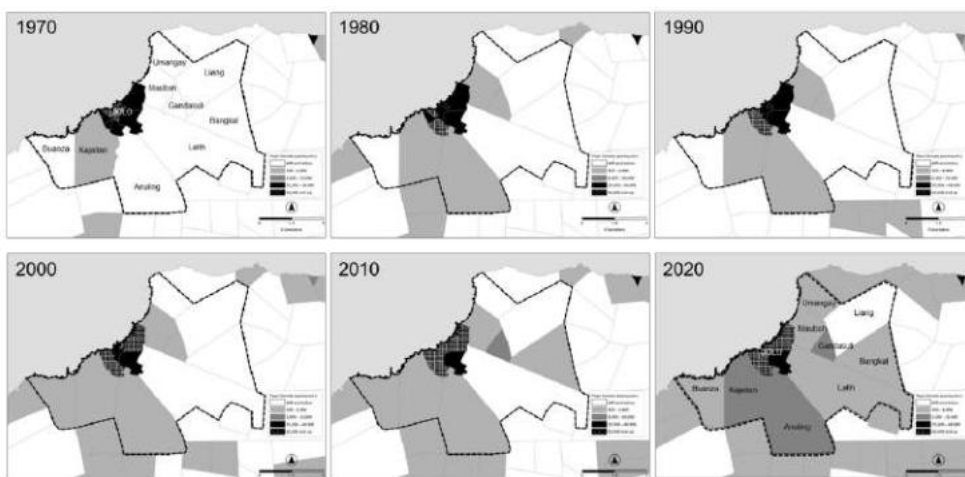


Figure 8. Metro Jolo Population Density, by Barangay, 1970–2020.

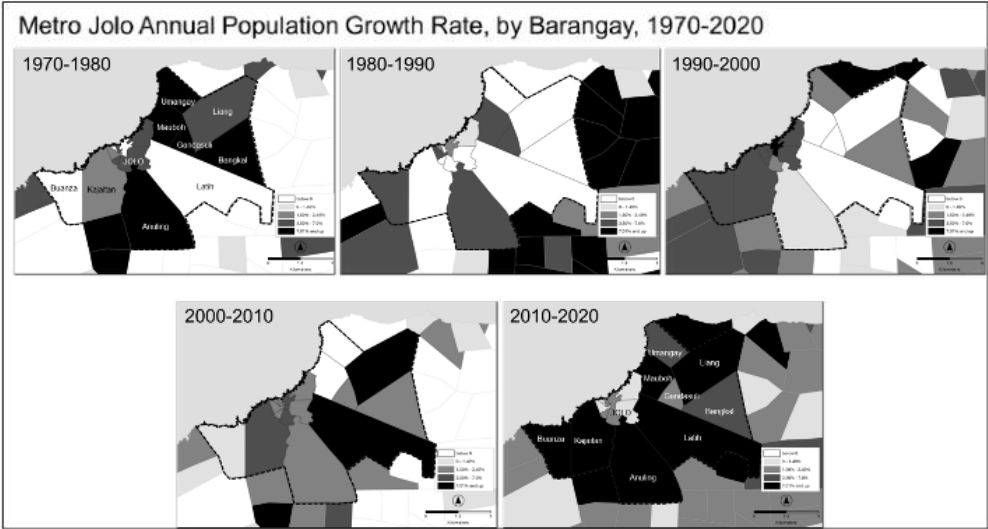


Figure 9. Metro Jolo Annual Population Growth Rate, by Barangay, 1970–2020.

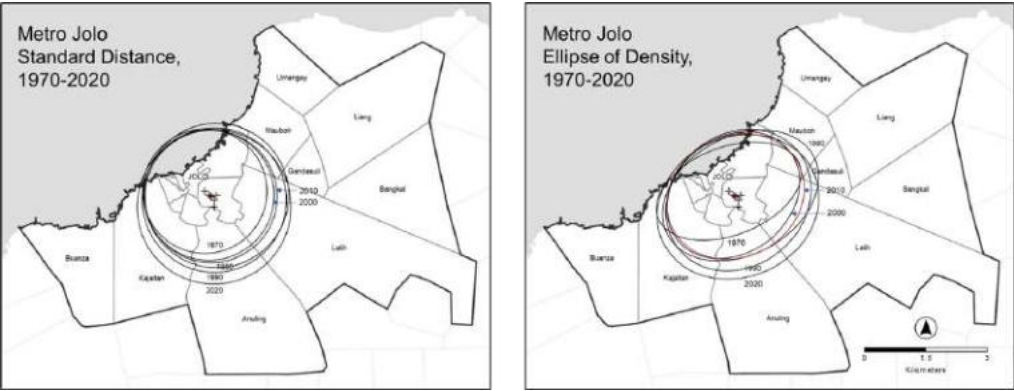


Figure 10. Metro Jolo Standard Distance and Ellipse of Density, 1970–2020.

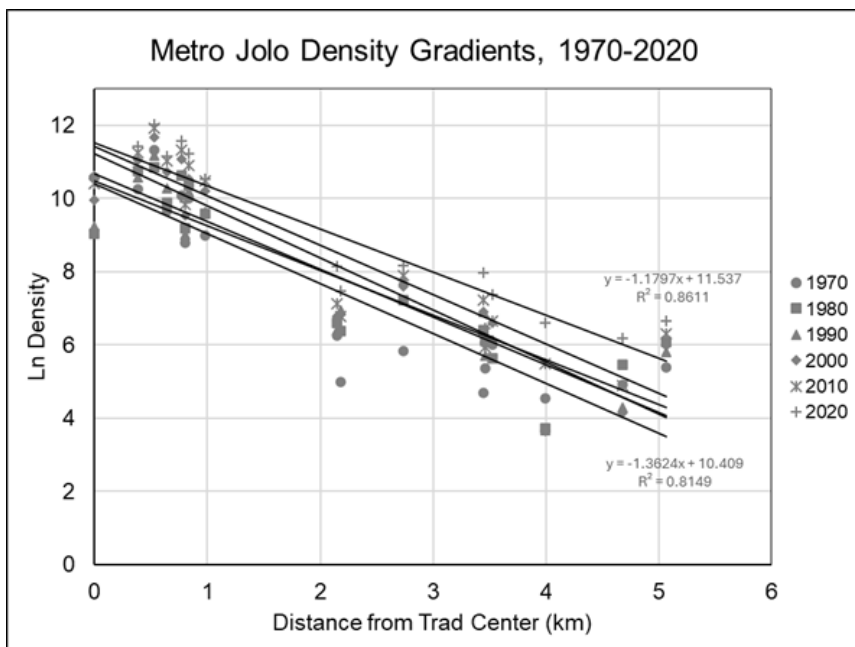


Figure 11. Metro Jolo Density Gradients, 1970–2020.

Jolo Island

Jolo Island provides context to the growth of Jolo and other municipalities. Its overall growth patterns are consistent with, and appear to be influenced, if not driven, by the population movements of Metro Jolo. Similar to Metro Jolo, the center of Jolo Island's population drifted slightly to the southeast; likewise, its population has been dispersing consistently since 1970 (indicated by the increasing standard distance) (figures 12, 13, 14).

But individual municipal movements reveal a complex set of movements from 1970 to 2020. These are evident in the shifting patterns of concentration and dispersion (standard distances) and varying shapes of population distributions (ellipses of density).

Despite the complexities, several patterns stand out: (1) the increasing influence of Metro Jolo, (2) the emergence of other urban centers, and (3) the continued orientation towards the coast.

First, municipal population densities since 1970 show the dominance of Jolo in what was then a predominantly rural island, and the steady spread of urbanization. Historical barangay growth rates reveal shifting growth patterns in the island: slow or stagnant growth of Jolo

and rapid growth of its periphery in 1970–1980, even more rapid growth of its extended periphery and the rest of the island in 1980–1990 as the impacts of protracted conflicts stifled growth in Jolo, and then a period of recovery at least up to 2020.

Jolo's primacy is reinforced by the dendritic road network of Jolo Island, where the main roads emanate from the urban core towards the eastern and western municipalities and, although less developed, towards the southern coast.

Second, as of 2020, three urban areas stand out: Jolo, Maimbung, and Old Panamao. Further discussions on the historical growth and potential development roles of these urban areas are needed but it is useful to keep in mind that Maimbung (a former sultanate capital) and Old Panamao are among the earliest communities of Sulu. Other noteworthy features of these two municipalities are the following:

- Maimbung is the fastest growing municipality of Sulu (7.68 percent in 2010–2020); it is second (next to Jolo) in terms of population density (1,324 persons per square kilometer in 2020).
- Suuh barangay of Old Panamao is the fastest growing barangay in the entire province of Sulu from 1970 to 2020, growing annually at 7.38 percent which means that its population doubles every 9.4 years.
- Poblacion Maimbung grew at a phenomenal 27.35 percent annual rate from 2010 to 2020—the fastest in the province—with its population experiencing a more than an eleven-fold increase.
- Poblacion Maimbung and Suuh barangays are among the largest barangays in Sulu as of 2020 in terms of population (ranked fifth and eighth, respectively) and population density (ranked twelfth and twenty-fourth), among the 410 barangays of Sulu.
- Outside of Jolo, seven of the ten highest density barangays in the island (out of a total of 263 Jolo Island barangays) are in Maimbung and Old Panamao.

It is somewhat odd, however, that Maimbung and Old Panamao are not included in the list of growth centers identified in the Bangsamoro Spatial Strategy.⁵ Under this strategy, the

5 Bangsamoro Development Authority. Draft Bangsamoro Spatial Strategy, Chapter 3, Bangsamoro Development Plan. 2022.

“primary growth centers” of Sulu are Jolo, Patikul, and Talipao while the “secondary growth centers” are Pata and Siasi. It will be useful to review the criteria used to identify these growth centers and reconcile them with this study. Recognizing Metro Jolo, for example, will combine Patikul with Jolo and enhance the role of Maimbung and Old Panamao as “growth centers.”

Third, the coastal orientation of Sulu’s municipalities is not surprising given the island configuration of the province. Direct access to the sea has dictated the location of many social and economic activities including the clustering of administrative, market, and transportation functions. This is demonstrated by the proximity of municipal halls to municipal ports, usually in the same barangay. The coastal orientation of the recent decades of growth is evident in the 1970–2020 ellipses of density of the municipalities of Jolo Island. But there are two notable exceptions.

One exception is Talipao, the second largest municipality in terms of population size and land area in Sulu. Talipao’s east–west growth orientation, rather than towards its southern coast, appears to have been influenced by the Jolo–Luuk Highway (also referred to as the Transcentral Road), which bisects the island but also bypasses the coastal area of Talipao. The largest barangay (Bilaan Poblacion) and the municipal hall of Talipao are both located inland near the intersection of the road leading to Jolo and the Jolo–Luuk Highway.

Another exception is Luuk. Luuk is a relatively large municipality. It spans the entire island from the northern to the southern coast, with municipal ports along both coasts. Similar to Talipao, its población (Barangay Tubig Puti) is located inland.

Further analyses are needed to understand how these exceptions came about. It is likely that the proposed Jolo Island Circumferential Road, if implemented, will increase access to and from the southern coastal areas and the eastern municipalities, as well as provide much needed redundancy to the road network.

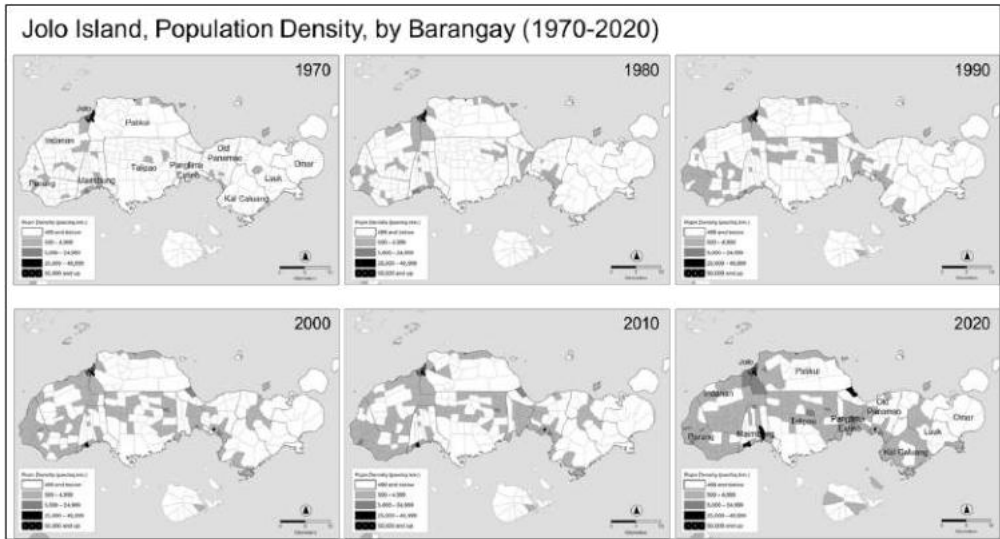


Figure 12. Jolo Island Population Density, by Barangay, 1970–2020.

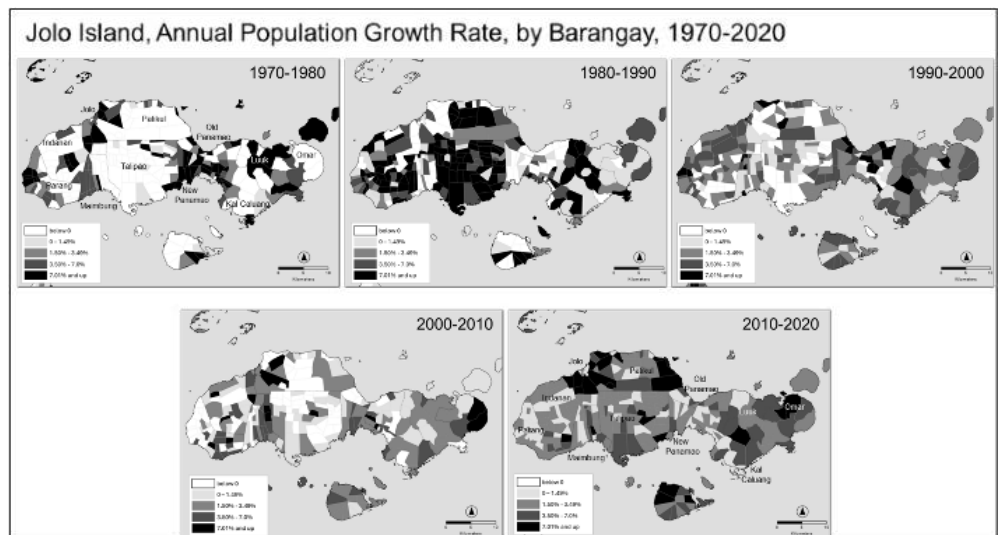


Figure 13. Jolo Island Annual Population Growth Rate, by Barangay, 1970–2020.

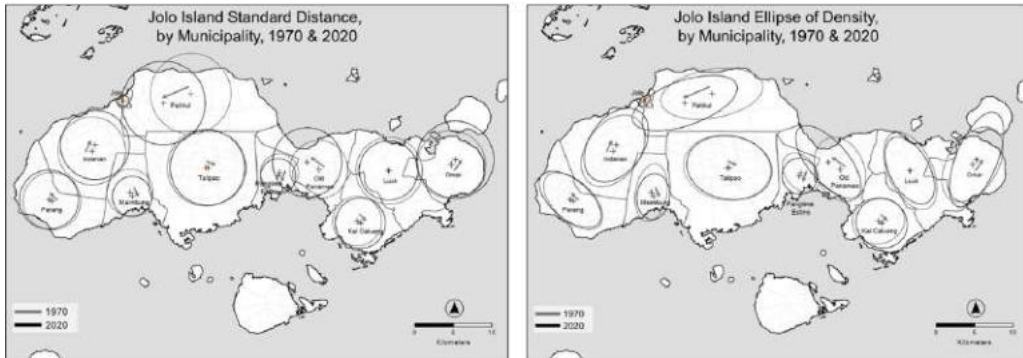


Figure 14. Jolo Island Standard Distance and Ellipse of Density, by Municipality, 1970–2020.

Sulu

Compared to Jolo Island municipalities, the rest of Sulu province grew slower from 1970 to 2020 (1.55 percent average annual growth rate vs 2.11 percent). This helps explain why the population center of the province as a whole moved towards Jolo Island during the same period; it is consistent with the strong province-wide influence of Jolo (figures 15, 16).

With some exceptions, the population in each of the rest of Sulu’s municipalities is also more dispersed (larger standard distances) compared to those in Jolo Island. This is not surprising considering that the former (Pangutaran, Hadji Panglima Tahil, Tongkil, Tapul, Pandami, and Siasi) are spread out across separate islands. The larger ellipses of these municipalities are also caused by the wider areas spanned by their component islands. As a whole, however, Sulu’s population has been concentrating as shown by the smaller standard distance in 1970 compared to 2020. Further, since 1970, overall growth has been biased towards Jolo rather than the peripheral islands (figure 17).

The standard distances of some Sulu municipalities (Siasi, Pangutaran, Lugus, and Pata) outside Jolo Island have been relatively stable over the decades and are not showing any clear tendency to disperse or concentrate. This may be indicative of stagnant population and economic growth. The case of Siasi is illustrative.

The Case of Siasi

Siasi's prominence as a port, economic hub, administrative center, and military garrison was already established even before the Spanish colonial period. Once the seat of Brunei's Maharaja in Sulu for North Borneo, Spain established ports and military presence in Siasi to overcome local resistance and assert sovereignty vis-à-vis other foreign powers.⁶ Siasi was one of three municipalities organized into the United States Moro province, together with Jolo and Cagayan de Sulu. (Act No.38, approved by Philippine Commission in 1904). In the 1920s, it was one of two ports in Sulu (the other was Jolo) along commercial distribution routes.⁷ Well into the twenty-first century, the port of Siasi remains integral to barter trade routes that run from Zamboanga to Sabah (Sandakan and Tawau) and Kota Kinabalu. This was recognized by Executive Order 64 (2018) , which identified Jolo, Siasi, and Bongao as areas where legal barter ports could be established.⁸

Siasi was once the largest municipality in the entire Sulu archipelago (including Tawi-Tawi), based on population counts from the 1939, 1948 and 1960 censuses.⁹ Siasi had two large centers. The largest in 1960 was Laminusa, an island along the eastern coast of Siasi. Laminusa was the largest barrio (the predecessor of the modern barangay) of Sulu at that time, with a population larger than five of Sulu's municipalities. The other center was Poblacion (Maddas) on the western side of the main island. Since 1960, and like many other large barrios/barangays of the country, Laminusa and Poblacion have been subdivided successively into smaller barangays. But both centers continue to bookend much of the development of Siasi, forming a swath of varying densities across the middle of the island.

Siasi's decline as the largest center of Sulu in the twentieth century started in the 1960s. By 1970, Jolo overtook Siasi as the most populous municipality of the Sulu archipelago, and by 2020, Siasi was overtaken by Talipao and Indanan. Notably, for five decades (1970–2020), Siasi was the only municipality of Sulu that had a growth rate slower than the provincial average. It is not surprising that Siasi's share of the provincial population declined from 11.5 percent to 8.2 percent during this period.

6 Amirell, Stefan Eklof. *The Sulu Sea. Pirates of Empire: Colonisation and Maritime Violence in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

7 Camara de Comercio de las Islas Filipinas (Chamber of Commerce of the Philippine Islands). *Yearbook of the Philippine Islands 1920*. Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1920.

8 Asia Foundation. *Trade in the Sulu Archipelago: Informal Economies Amidst Maritime Security Challenges*. San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2019.

9 Bureau of the Census and Statistics (BCS). *1960 Census of the Philippines*. Manila: BCS, 1963.

The slow growth of Siasi's population over the past decades suggests a corresponding, lackluster performance with respect to its trading and other traditional economic activities. Identifying and understanding the specific events and conditions that led to this apparent decline require further study, but the trend is consistent with Siasi's centographic measures and density gradients—the slight contraction of its standard distances, and the lack of movement of its center and in the shape of its ellipses suggest stagnant or tepid growth (figures 18, 19).

Siasi's density gradients do not follow the common growth pattern of most cities and municipalities. Using Poblacion Campo Baro as the traditional center, the positive slopes of the gradients indicate that throughout 1970 to 2020, net population growth has been consistently biased away from the western center.

The density gradients reinforce the idea that the twin-centered corridor of the island (from Poblacion Campo Baro to Laminusa), rather than a single center, remains the dominant spatial form of development. It may be further speculated that the corridor may have been an advantage in the past when the scale of trading activities and active politico-juridical role of Siasi were significant development drivers. But as regional conflicts escalated and lingered, the available amount of development capital was not only reduced but also dispersed thereby compromising agglomeration and scale economies. From an economic geography point of view, it may be indicative of a dispersed and relatively weak center that is unable to generate and attract sizable investments.

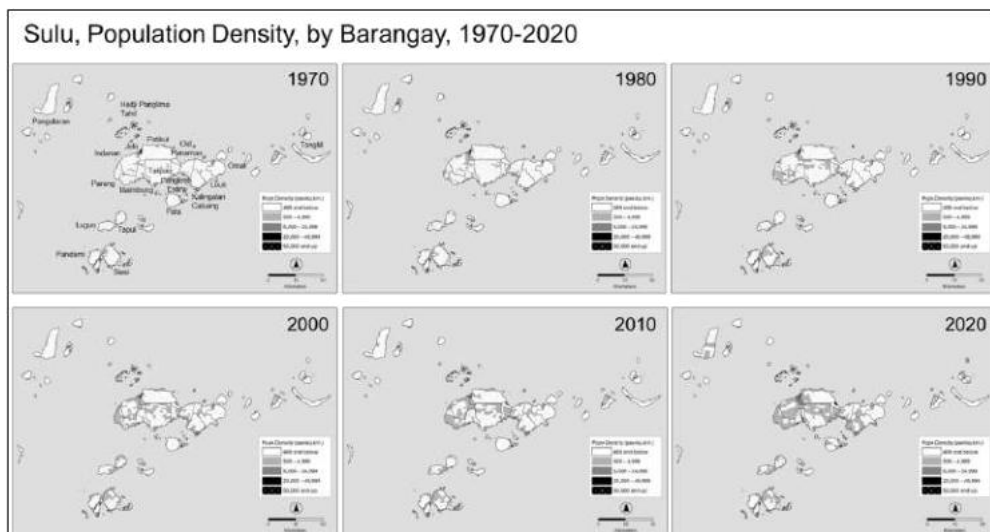


Figure 15. Sulu Population Density, by Barangay, 1970–2020.

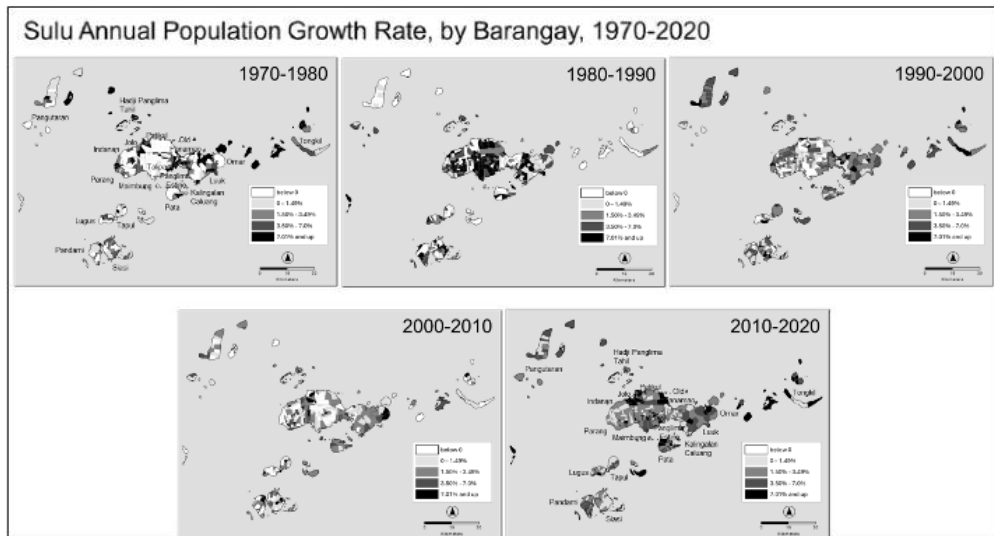


Figure 16. Sulu Annual Population Growth Rate, by Barangay, 1970-2020.

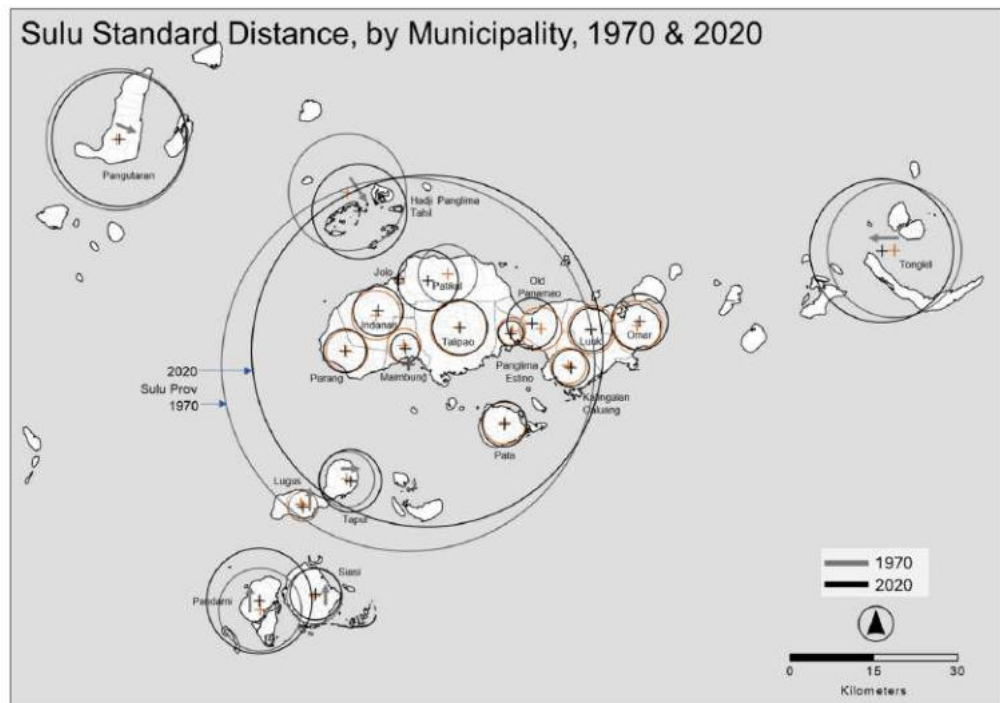


Figure 17. Sulu Standard Distance, by Province and Municipality, 1970, 2020.

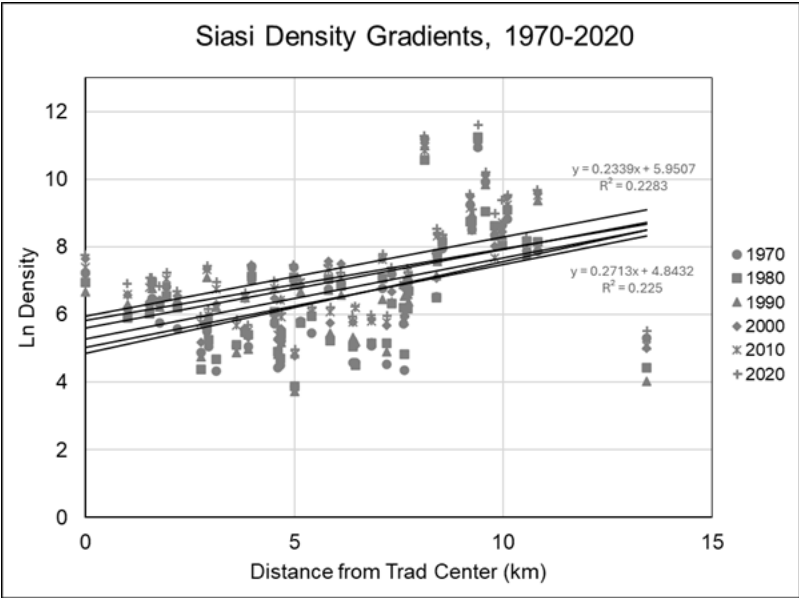


Figure 18. Siasi Density Gradients, 1970–2020.

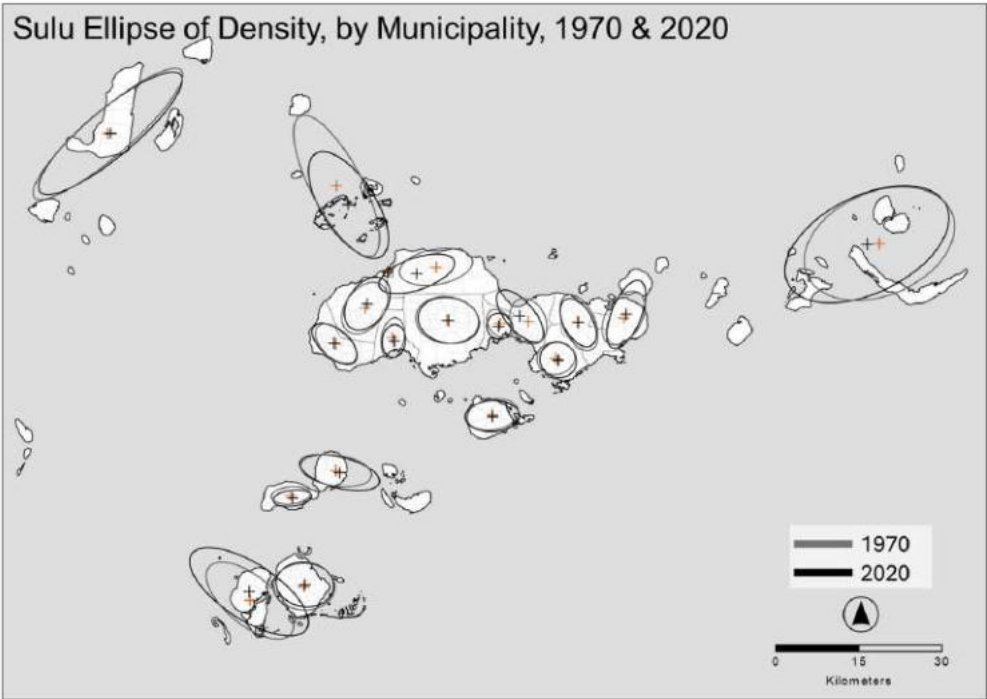


Figure 19. Sulu Ellipse of Density, by Municipality, 1970, 2020.

Conclusion

The centrophraphic measures and density gradients derived in this study suggest increasing spatial integration within the province of Sulu. This can be inferred from various levels: the apparent increasing influence of Jolo with its adjacent municipalities and the formation of a functional Metro Jolo, the continuing net dispersion of population from the metropolitan area, and the increasing growth orientation of the rest of Sulu towards Jolo Island. Such integration appears to be reinforced by the dendritic pattern of the Jolo island road network, and the location of the busiest port and only operational airport in the capital. Further analysis of inter-island and inter-province transportation movements and commodity flows will help confirm this trend.

Spatial integration through increased internal mobility and external linkages can lead to greater economies of agglomeration. As transportation costs decline, producers and consumers have more options to locate in areas where they can be more efficient, thus leading to increased productivity and overall economic growth. The conditions that define the thresholds whereupon agglomeration economies will be of material impact in Sulu are not yet clear, but such impacts are likely to be more visible in the urban areas and, to a lesser extent, in rural areas that are well-integrated into the provincial-regional economy. Growth is likely to be uneven across the islands, however, as different locations respond differently to varying investment and growth opportunities.

Applied to several levels of analyses, centrophraphic measures and density gradients reveal a complex set of moving parts behind overall patterns even as they help unravel the complexities of growth by providing more insight into their spatial characteristics. It is likely that as more granular sectoral data become available—e.g., data on income, poverty, employment, industrial output, education, land use, and various environmental conditions at the barangay and municipal levels—the range of applications of these spatial statistical tools in aid of research and analysis will be wider. At the least, centrophraphic measures and density gradients help identify research questions that can confirm or lead to a revision of current thinking about growth patterns.

Ultimately, centrophraphic measures and density gradients are spatial statistical tools that are fully appreciated only by understanding the history of the economic and other social phenomena they describe.

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Annex 1

Population, Density, Growth Rates, Centrographic Measures (Population Center, Standard Distance, Ellipse of Density)

Municipality/Province	Population						Center			
	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	1970 X	1970 Y	2020 X	2020 Y
JOLO	46,586	52,429	53,055	87,998	118,307	137,266	500.3	669.4	500.3	669.4
TALIPAO	31,904	25,139	66,261	73,015	75,173	100,088	510.2	659.2	510.2	659.2
INDANAN	26,380	32,074	41,969	53,425	65,858	93,168	495.4	662.8	495.4	662.8
SIASI	36,190	37,362	46,468	59,069	64,229	81,689	484.5	612.3	484.5	612.3
PATIKUL	22,577	26,208	30,455	34,396	42,036	79,564	509.4	668.9	509.4	668.9
PARANG	21,115	22,304	43,273	54,994	58,028	71,495	491.1	656.4	491.1	656.4
MAIMBUNG	15,557	20,080	17,251	24,982	28,445	59,597	500.9	657.8	500.9	657.8
OLD PANAMAO	12,039	19,460	27,189	35,906	37,933	49,849	525.4	661.5	525.4	661.5
KALINGALAN CALUANG	10,525	8,639	15,824	22,688	26,848	39,549	531.0	653.8	531.0	653.8
LUUK	10,649	12,604	18,949	24,939	29,897	37,873	535.2	659.8	535.2	659.8
PANGUTARAN	16,172	19,311	17,122	26,211	28,461	36,374	441.5	688.0	441.5	688.0
TONGKIL	9,095	15,716	10,469	15,933	17,802	35,616	582.7	669.0	582.7	669.0
PANGLIMA ESTINO	5,599	14,213	15,683	21,443	27,724	34,249	519.8	659.8	519.8	659.8
PANDAMI	15,235	12,974	17,159	19,964	22,474	33,177	467.0	614.7	467.0	614.7
LUGUS	8,716	11,257	14,907	18,839	19,839	29,043	481.9	628.8	481.9	628.8
OMAR	5,686	7,065	10,429	13,880	18,098	28,070	543.4	662.2	543.4	662.2
PATA	8,077	7,213	9,244	11,791	14,918	24,736	518.4	643.3	518.4	643.3
TAPUL	11,978	12,215	10,111	14,881	16,370	20,799	495.4	631.5	495.4	631.5
HADJI PANGLIMA TAHIL	1,341	4,325	4,153	5,314	5,850	7,906	490.6	688.8	490.6	688.8
SULU	315,421	360,588	469,971	619,668	718,290	1,000,108	500.9	653.5	504.7	655.9
METRO JOLO	55,944	70,485	74,655	111,943	151,396	210,403	500.2	669.1	500.4	668.7

Table A-1. Population (1970–2020) and Population Centers (1970, 2020).

Sources: Population and land areas: NCSO 1974; NSO 1983, 1991, 2001, 2012; PSA 2021; Population centers: author's computations.

Municipality/Province	Area (sqkm)	CAGR	Standard Dist (m)		Ellipse of Density (m)					
			1970	2020	1970			2020		
					Minor	Principal	Angle	Minor	Principal	Angle
JOLO	3.0	2.2	654	747	784	490	47.0	939	484	45.7
TALIPAO	170.1	2.3	5,023	4,911	5,714	4,221	97.3	5,598	4,111	100.3
INDANAN	103.1	2.6	4,397	4,491	3,469	5,161	36.2	3,509	5,295	35.3
SIASI	83.1	1.6	4,948	4,664	5,591	4,208	91.9	5,238	4,009	97.7
PATIKUL	140.1	2.6	5,241	5,439	6,703	3,165	80.0	7,125	2,900	70.9
PARANG	68.8	2.5	3,751	3,849	4,657	2,539	132.9	4,832	2,506	130.0
MAIMBUNG	45.0	2.7	3,034	2,590	2,056	3,766	9.7	2,106	2,997	6.2
OLD PANAMAO	64.3	2.9	3,784	4,508	3,140	4,334	157.3	2,591	5,824	139.6
KALINGALAN CALUANG	65.7	2.7	3,200	3,257	3,412	2,972	80.3	3,370	3,140	120.7
LUUK	84.8	2.6	4,332	3,834	2,890	5,401	155.1	2,594	4,761	151.4
PANGUTARAN	189.7	1.6	12,698	12,085	17,503	4,016	49.2	16,547	4,280	50.2
TONGKIL	128.0	2.8	12,015	12,871	14,196	9,337	66.4	15,962	8,748	63.8
PANGLIMA ESTINO	33.4	3.7	2,466	2,293	1,973	2,876	139.6	2,232	2,353	158.6
PANDAMI	68.7	1.6	7,454	9,469	9,581	4,397	129.1	12,401	5,053	123.1
LUGUS	36.8	2.4	2,738	2,690	3,552	1,541	85.7	3,507	1,474	82.9
OMAR	86.1	3.2	4,444	5,014	3,268	5,368	31.5	2,699	6,557	22.5
PATA	57.9	2.3	3,853	4,021	4,690	2,773	80.4	4,961	2,779	87.8
TAPUL	56.2	1.1	4,988	5,688	6,481	2,786	98.5	7,411	2,744	104.0
HADJI PANGLIMA TAHIL	30.2	3.6	10,572	8,504	4,611	14,222	152.2	4,857	11,002	147.3
SULU	1,514.9	2.3	33,481	31,526	37,245	29,236	56.2	36,191	26,038	67.2
METRO JOLO	48.5	2.7	1,510	1,875	1,846	1,074	69.1	2,029	1,707	65.6

Table A-2. Land Area, Annual Growth Rate, Standard Distance, Ellipse of Density (1970–2020).

Sources: Land area and CAGR: author's computations based on PSA 2021; Standard Distance and Ellipse of Density: author's computations.

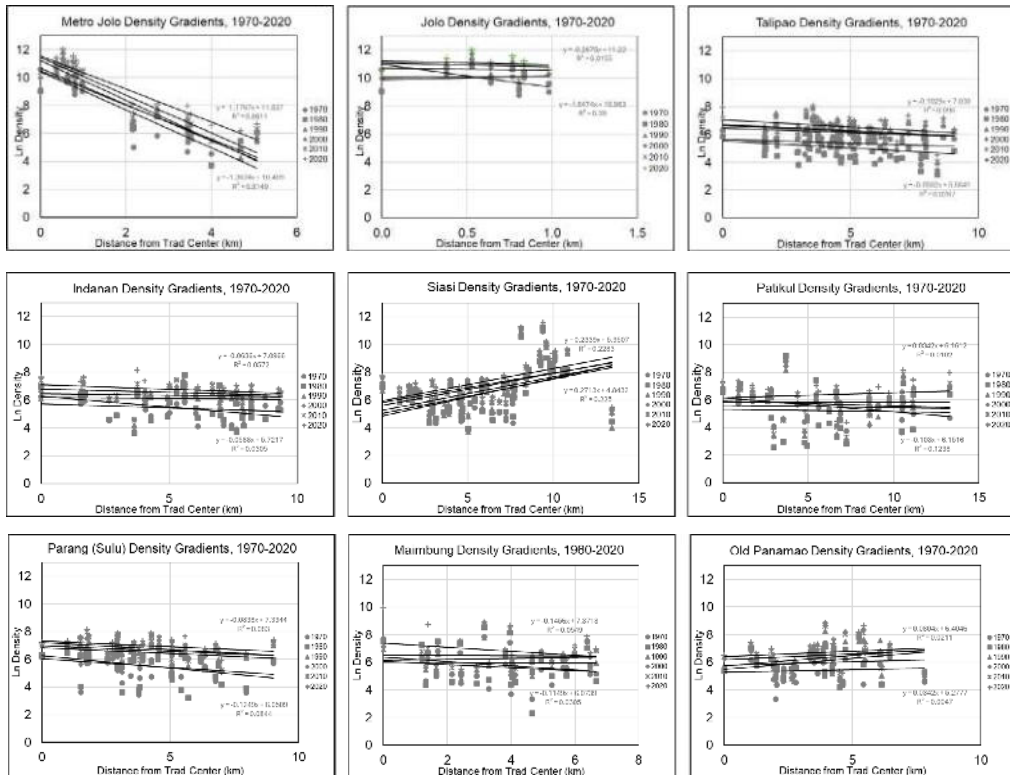
Annex 2

Density Gradients

Municipality/Province	1970			1980			1990			2000			2010			2020		
	Slope	Y-int	R2	Slope	Y-int	R2	Slope	Y-int	R2	Slope	Y-int	R2	Slope	Y-int	R2	Slope	Y-int	R2
JOLO	(1.6)	11.0	0.39	0.3	9.9	0.02	0.1	10.1	0.00	(0.1)	10.7	0.00	(0.2)	11.0	0.01	(0.3)	11.2	0.02
TALIPAO	(0.1)	5.7	0.03	(0.1)	5.6	0.06	(0.1)	6.5	0.04	(0.1)	6.6	0.05	(0.1)	6.7	0.07	(0.1)	7.0	0.09
INDANAN	(0.1)	5.7	0.03	(0.2)	6.3	0.14	(0.0)	6.2	0.00	(0.0)	6.5	0.01	(0.0)	6.8	0.03	(0.1)	7.1	0.06
SIASI	0.3	4.8	0.22	0.2	5.0	0.21	0.2	5.3	0.20	0.2	5.6	0.21	0.2	5.8	0.21	0.2	6.0	0.23
PATIKUL	(0.1)	6.2	0.12	(0.0)	5.3	0.00	(0.0)	5.6	0.00	(0.0)	5.9	0.01	(0.0)	5.8	0.00	0.0	6.2	0.01
PARANG	(0.1)	6.1	0.08	(0.2)	6.3	0.12	(0.1)	6.9	0.08	(0.1)	7.0	0.05	(0.1)	7.2	0.11	(0.1)	7.3	0.08
MAIMBUNG	(0.1)	6.1	0.03	(0.2)	6.4	0.04	(0.0)	6.0	0.00	0.0	6.1	0.00	(0.0)	6.5	0.00	(0.1)	7.4	0.05
OLD PANAMAŌ	0.0	5.3	0.00	0.1	5.8	0.01	0.2	5.5	0.06	0.1	5.7	0.06	0.1	6.2	0.02	0.1	6.4	0.02
KALINGALAN CALUANG	0.1	4.6	0.24	0.1	4.3	0.08	0.1	4.9	0.17	0.1	5.4	0.14	0.1	5.6	0.14	0.0	6.3	0.03
LUJUK	(0.0)	5.0	0.00	0.1	4.8	0.04	(0.0)	5.5	0.00	(0.1)	6.0	0.04	(0.1)	6.1	0.04	(0.1)	6.4	0.06
PANGUTARAN	(0.1)	5.2	0.51	(0.1)	5.4	0.53	(0.0)	5.2	0.41	(0.1)	5.7	0.55	(0.1)	5.8	0.54	(0.1)	6.0	0.58
TONGKIL	(0.1)	5.1	0.51	(0.0)	5.5	0.34	(0.0)	5.1	0.34	(0.0)	5.6	0.43	(0.0)	5.7	0.42	(0.0)	6.4	0.43
PANGLIMA ESTINO	(0.1)	5.5	0.07	(0.3)	6.6	0.51	(0.3)	6.7	0.37	(0.2)	7.0	0.34	(0.3)	7.3	0.43	(0.3)	7.5	0.42
PANDAMI	(0.1)	6.4	0.16	(0.1)	6.3	0.16	(0.0)	6.4	0.08	(0.0)	6.6	0.09	(0.1)	6.8	0.14	(0.0)	7.1	0.10
LUGUS	(0.1)	5.9	0.16	(0.1)	6.2	0.14	(0.1)	6.3	0.04	(0.3)	7.2	0.50	(0.2)	6.9	0.27	(0.2)	7.3	0.25
OMAR	(0.0)	4.3	0.00	0.2	3.7	0.67	0.2	3.8	0.50	0.2	4.3	0.68	0.1	5.0	0.18	0.1	5.6	0.27
PATA	(0.1)	5.0	0.02	(0.0)	4.8	0.00	0.1	4.7	0.06	0.1	5.1	0.06	0.0	5.3	0.06	0.0	6.0	0.00
TAPUL	(0.1)	6.4	0.36	(0.1)	6.5	0.43	(0.2)	6.3	0.43	(0.2)	6.6	0.37	(0.1)	6.7	0.38	(0.1)	6.8	0.34
HADJI PANGLIMA TAHIL	(0.1)	5.1	0.41	(0.1)	6.6	0.47	(0.1)	6.7	0.59	(0.1)	6.9	0.60	(0.1)	7.2	0.70	(0.1)	7.4	0.70
METRO JOLO	(1.4)	10.4	0.81	(1.2)	10.5	0.79	(1.3)	10.7	0.82	(1.4)	11.2	0.84	(1.4)	11.4	0.9	(1.2)	11.5	0.86

Table A-3. Density Gradients, Values by Municipality, 1970–2020.

Source: Author's computations.



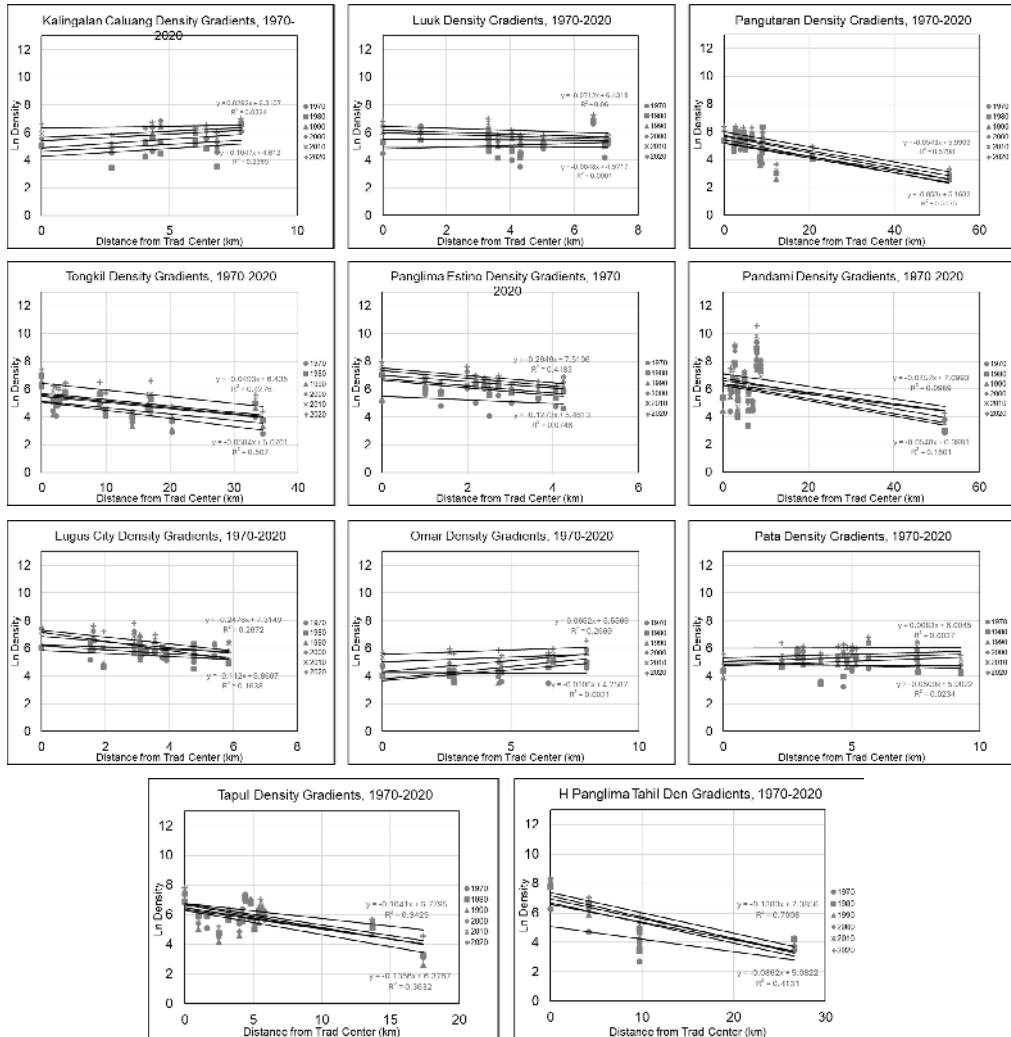
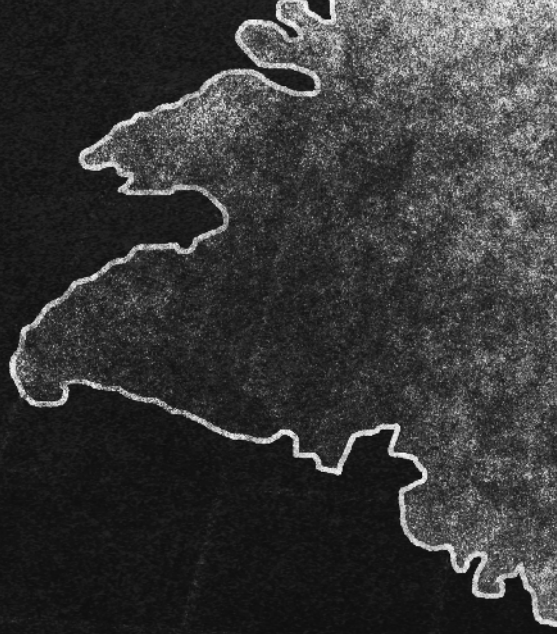


Figure A-1. Density Gradients, Graphs by Municipality and Metro Jolo, 1970-2020.



The Paradox of Peace in the Sulu Sea

FRANCISCO J. LARA JR.

Abstract

Conflict patterns in the Bangsamoro reveal a striking paradox: the highest levels of violence occur in the mainland provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur—where state authority is strongest—while the island provinces, especially Sulu, have remained relatively peaceful. Data from 2012 to 2024 show that mainland violence is driven by election rivalries, clan feuds, shadow economies, and identity-based attacks, whereas Sulu's stability stems from local political settlements, elite bargains, and strong coordination between local governments and security forces. Cross-border trade networks and the weakening of extremist groups have further reinforced peace. Sulu's experience demonstrates that durable stability may arise not from centralized state control but from negotiated local authority and historical autonomy. The Bangsamoro paradox challenges conventional theories of state-building, showing that peace can flourish at the periphery when local governance and sociohistorical arrangements provide legitimacy where formal state structures do not.

The paradox

We encountered a paradox when we established the Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System in 2012 and discovered a puzzling trend.¹ **Why was mainland violence out-performing violence in the rural island provinces?** Why was conflict more intense and persistent in the mainland urban areas of BARMM, where the power and authority of the State was strongest?

This puzzle emerged after we had gathered panel data that enabled a comparative analysis of conflict incidents (conflict intensity) and conflict costs (i.e., deaths, injuries, and displacement), also known as conflict magnitude, over time in the **mainland provinces** of Maguindanao and Lanao Sur, and the **island provinces** of Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi. Over a ten-year period, the data showed that violence fluctuated across much of the mainland, especially in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur,² **while violence has been decreasing in the island provinces since 2012** (figures 1–4).

The lower numbers in the island provinces were interrupted only by the explosion of extremist violence from 2016 to 2017 and a slight spike during the anti-drug war of the Duterte government. After the war in Marawi, the end of martial law in Mindanao, and the end of the COVID pandemic, violence across the region started to go down until 2021, when violence began to rebound until 2023, and jumped by 20% in 2024.

Why are we puzzled? The conflict studies literature

We learn from conflict literature that vulnerability to violence is caused by the absence of a state monopoly of the means of coercion. Long-held theories on state building and the modern state from Thomas Hobbes,³ Max Weber (1918), and Charles Tilly⁴ uphold the connection between the monopoly of force and the ability to subdue violence.⁵

1 The International Alert Philippines Office (IAP) established the Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System (BCMS) in 2012, renamed the Conflict Alert in 2014 when IAP started adding data from other Mindanao areas outside the BARMM. The database contains quantitative data on vertical and horizontal incidents and the costs of violence in the Bangsamoro region from 2012–2024, and from Southern and Eastern Mindanao from 2015–2019.

2 International Alert. *Rebellion, Political Violence and Shadow Crimes in the Bangsamoro: The Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System (BCMS), 2011–2013*. Conflict Alert (now Climate Conflict Action), August 2014.

3 Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*. Edited by Ian Shapiro. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

4 Tilly, Charles. “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime.” In *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

5 Max Weber referred to a State as a political organization with continuous operations that possesses a “claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order.” Meanwhile, Thomas

However, more recent studies conducted by the Yale political scientist Stathis Kalyvas theorized that areas undergoing civil war may be divided into five zones of control⁶: (1) *total incumbent control*, (2) *dominant incumbent control*, (3) *contested control*, (4) *dominant insurgent control*, and (5) *total insurgent control*. Incumbents represent the state as opposed to the insurgent challengers. Zones 1 and 2 are within the grip or control of the State, while Zones 4 and 5 are under the control of insurgents or other armed non-state actors and criminal groups, including triads and cartels.

Given the link between control and violence, Kalyvas predicts violence to be unlikely in zones 1 and 5. Actors are more likely to employ indiscriminate violence against zones of enemy control (zones 1 and 2 for insurgents and zones 4 and 5 for incumbents). In areas of fragmented control, selective violence is employed primarily by the dominant political actor: incumbents in zone 2 and insurgents in zone 4. The balance of control between insurgents and incumbents in zone 3 areas is likely to produce no selective violence by either side, which “suggests a complete contrast between symmetric and asymmetric war when it comes to violence.”

The above tells us that violence will likely be higher in more distant places beyond the administrative and politico-military reach of the State, where various threat groups are outside the control of the State. Conversely, the literature suggests that violence is less likely in mainland urban areas, in contrast to distant places, where the entire politico-military apparatus of the State is located.

However, in the current scenario both vertical and horizontal violence is rising faster in areas of total and dominant incumbent control. The literature suggests that this can be explained by the absence of a monopoly of the means of coercion. The flow of unregistered and illicit weapons across the country and especially in the Bangsamoro leads to the creation of “bad neighborhoods” occupied by various threat groups, sometimes referred to as “contagion,” or “war next door” theories (Di John 2008).⁷

Hobbes viewed government primarily as a device for ensuring collective security. Political authority is justified by a hypothetical social contract among the many that “vests in a sovereign person or entity the responsibility for the safety and well-being of all.” In the more modern discussions about the role of the state in providing security, Charles Tilly argued that “war makes states,” as the competition among “wielders of coercion” for control over territory and resources led to the creation of the European-style state, complete with a military, police force, tax bureaucracy, and courts of law.

6 Kalyvas, Stathis. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

7 Collier, Paul, Anne Hoeffler, and Nicholas Sambanis. “The Collier-Hoeffler Model of Civil War Onset and the Case Study Project Research Design.” In *Understanding Civil War*. Vol. 2, Europe, Central Asia, and Other Regions, edited by Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2005; Weiner, Myron. “Bad Neighbors, Bad Neighborhoods: An Inquiry into the Causes of Refugee Flows.” *International Security* 21, no. 1 (1996): 5–42; and Fearon, James D., and David D. Laitin. “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War.” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90.

These issues beg at least two important questions: *One, why is violence less pronounced in the island provinces—far from the major urban areas of the BARMM? Two, why is violence more intense and persistent in mainland Maguindanao, where the BARMM regional government sits?*

Is demography the answer?

One can argue that a simpler explanation is demographic in nature, i.e., the higher number and concentration of the population in Maguindanao could explain the intensity of violence in urban and densely populated areas as opposed to dispersed and rural communities with smaller population numbers amidst a large geographic size. To circumvent these endogenous effects, this comparative analysis calculated the incidents and costs of conflict on a per capita and per square kilometer basis. Yet we came up with broadly similar results: Maguindanao remained on top while the islands were generally more peaceful than the mainland (figure 5).⁸

In terms of conflict deaths per 100,000 persons from 2020 to 2023, Maguindanao came second to Basilan only in 2022, before returning to the top again in 2023 (figure 6).

In terms of conflict density or conflict per square kilometer, Maguindanao also had the highest number of incidents among all provinces from 2021 to 2023 (figure 7). In conflict deaths per 1,000 square kilometers, Basilan overtook Maguindanao only once in 2022.

There are other more complex explanations too: the interrelated vulnerabilities noted above can be intersected with poverty, injustice, and exclusion to predict the other sources and triggers of violence. Other explanations include notions of a “resource curse,” that underlay the “greed versus grievance” debates in 1990s (Collier: 2000).⁹ In the same decade, Kaldor spoke of “new wars versus old wars,” highlighting the “primordial” identity issues that can lead to hateful extremism and the assertion and rise of identity-based conflicts.¹⁰

8 In 2020, conflict incidents per 100,000 persons was bigger in Basilan than in Maguindanao that came second and Lanao del Sur in third. However, over the past three years (2021–2023), Maguindanao would regain its pole position among all provinces.

9 Reno, William. *Warlord Politics and African States*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999; Reno, William. “Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars.” In *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, edited by Mats Berdal and David Malone. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.; and Berdal, Mats, and David Malone, eds. *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000.

10 Kaldor, Mary. *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001; Hutchinson, John, and Anthony Smith. “Introduction.” In *Ethnicity*, edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; and Meagher, Kate. *Identity Economics*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2010.

However, none of these explanations will help unravel the earlier puzzle until we turn it around to focus first on the mainland and ask *why violence was most intense in Maguindanao, the seat of regional authority and the center of the State's politico-military control in Muslim Mindanao?*

Here, at least five (5) possible answers emerged:

One, there is the temporal reality that the current period has seen a series of elections starting with the national elections in 2022 and the bloody barangay elections in 2023. These are followed by the 2025 mid-term elections in May 2025, and finally, the first BARMM parliamentary elections later in October. The fifteen years of data in the database of Conflict Alert show consistent spikes in violence during elections, especially in the main urban areas such as Cotabato city, Datu Odin Sinsuat, and Marawi, which are centers of trade, communication, and transport, and where non-rural communities are concentrated.

Two, we have monitored extended strings/cycles of revenge killings and horizontal wars. There are at least two important sources of horizontal violence: (a) the impervious clan wars or “*rido*” including 29 major clan feuds over land and political offices currently being monitored by CCAA, and (b) the widening MILF fractures and violent infighting within the ranks of combatants. In fact, more than half (15) of the horizontal clan wars saw MILF commanders siding with one party or both (tables 1–2, Figure 8).

Three, violent shadow economies in drugs, guns, and kidnap-for-ransom (KFP) have reemerged as sources of funding, coercive power, and authority (table 3).

Four, there has been an explosion of targeted identity-related attacks against indigenous people, especially the among non-Moro indigenous peoples (NMIP), e.g., Teduray, Manobo, and Iranun communities. To date, a total of 85 NMIPs have been killed from 2014 to 2025, including 12 leaders, 7 youth, and 8 women. Most incidents remain unsolved. Hotspots of violence against NMIPs included South Upi, Datu Odin Sinsuat, and Upi.

The Police Regional Office Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (PRO-BAR) found 36 cases of NMIP killings in PNP reports from 2014 to 2024. The Commission on Human Rights recorded 65 male, 7 female, and 7 youth in their 2024 situation report. Land conflict incidents intertwined with IP claims have become deadlier, especially in 2023–2024. Fifty-eight (58%) of the incidents happened in Maguindanao.

Five, there has been a re-emergence of violent extremism in areas previously declared as VE-free, such as Basilan (table 3, Figure 9). Violent extremism also often results multiple deaths per incident, such as the military operations against Dawlah Islamiyah (DI) in Piagapo, Lanao del Sur (9 deaths), and against Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in Datu Saudi Ampatuan (12 deaths).

Explaining the paradox of Sulu

Let us now return to the islands and unravel the second puzzle: *why has conflict gone down in the islands?* Let us use Sulu as our case in point and begin by examining its conflict data (figures 10–11). The data shows how conflict intensity has been low in Sulu, compared to the mainland and even the island province of Basilan, in some years. It also shows that Sulu is the only province that has evaded the conflict rebound that started in 2021.

This is a remarkable and unparalleled achievement that only Sulu can claim. This is because Basilan and Tawi-Tawi saw similar rebounds in violence witnessed in the mainland since 2021. The situation begs an important question: *Why does Sulu stand out in contrast to the rest of BARMM?*

The conventional explanations focus on the military and security-oriented aspects of the war against crime, terrorism, and violent extremism. These include: (a) the military defeat of Al Qaeda in Sulu and Basilan. Indeed, more than any other province in the BARMM, the declining influence and the near total decimation of the extremist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Sulu is credited for the fall of vertical violence in the island and the rest of the BASULTA area; and, (b) the long imposition of martial law across the region following the Marawi siege, that was later extended by the COVID pandemic, delivered a knock-out punch to an insurgent group already weakened by a severely compromised and reduced network in Southeast Asia that was reeling from a series of setbacks in Marawi and Basilan in Mindanao and in Jakarta, Bali, and Central Sulawesi in Indonesia. Farther away in the Middle East and in Africa, politico-military setbacks in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria in the Middle East and in Nigeria, Chad, and Niger in West and Central Africa and Somalia in East Africa also fueled the further collapse of similar extremist violence.

While it is true that military tactics and external pressures contributed to the decline in violence and conflict in places like Sulu, this is only one side of the story. There are other explanations that highlight the hidden or unconventional politico-military and political economy aspects that help crack the paradox of peace in Sulu.

First, while it is true that security forces were able to deal a near-fatal blow to the ASG, this victory came about not only from the force of arms, but from a more politico-military action and alliance that combined (a) the stronger, more coordinated, and consistent joint actions between local governments and the country's security forces; and (b) the use of more responsive and innovative applications of strongman rule.

In a forthcoming volume on Bangsamoro clans, a chapter on Sulu discussed how stronger cooperation between local government units (LGUs) and security forces, plus the ability of local strongmen to craft elite bargains and local political settlements between warring local clans, was ultimately responsible for the evolution of a more peaceful Sulu.¹¹

The study underlined how local strongman rule embodied by leaders like Sakur Tan was credited by citizens for settling (*pag-sulot*) various clan feuds in Sulu, usually providing the balance of blood money whenever the 'guilty' party comes up short in a peace dialogue (*suwarah*), just to seal the agreement or conciliation (*sulot*). He also backed negotiations to end horizontal violence with the coercive muscle needed to solve security problems. In some cases, local elites were even willing to pay the "board and lodging costs" incurred by kidnappers before a hostage is released.

Tan embodied what the American anthropologist Thomas Keifer¹² called the genuine or authentic strongman in Mindanao—one who governs mainly by building strong alliances rather than sowing fear or using force. Sakur Tan is a master in the building of alliances beyond electoral purposes and has actively rallied his fellow governors and other local executives to influence national policies on taxes, cross-border trade, and the decentralization and devolution of powers.

Tan is one of the few Muslim leaders who opposed regional or subnational encroachment into the power of the provinces and advocated for the shared interests of the island-provinces. Tan also aggressively campaigned to remove Sulu from inclusion in the newly established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Finally, Tan is one of the few post-modern and trans-local strongmen who continue to appeal to the residual influence of the

11 Rodriguez, Joel. "Ruling, Trading, and Resisting: Strongman Rule and Clan Dynamics in Sulu and Tawi-Tawi." In *Stronghold and Stranglehold: The Clans of the Bangsamoro*, edited by Francisco Lara Jr. Manila: Climate and Conflict Action Asia, 2025.

12 Keifer, Thomas M. *The Tausug: Violence and Law in a Philippine Moslem Society*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972.

sultanates, despite the near-total marginalization of the sultanate at the provincial (Sulu), subnational (Bangsamoro), and national level decision-making processes.

Second, there are broad and deep historical political economic ties across the Sulu Sea. Sub-regional trade provided a peace dividend that allowed residents to explore and experience an environment conducive to more vibrant business linkages with Sabah, Sandakan, and Tawau in Malaysia, and Manado and Tarakan in North Kalimantan, Indonesia. Business abhors violence, and to some extent, trade-focused economic interventions, including the elusive and illicit trading activities across the Sulu Sea were permitted to operate more robustly.

These historical ties and trading linkages offered scale and flexibility of movement, resource generation, and the provision of protection. There is ample evidence of the lingering involvement of the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi clans in sustaining the existence of coping, deadly, and/or criminal economies, particularly those associated with the unregulated trade in rice and other foodstuffs, and the illegal in guns and other weapons.

Prospects following the decoupling of Sulu

Based on the underlying context in the foregoing section, the grave concerns raised by social scientists and avid supporters of regional integration on the negative impact of Sulu's decoupling from the BARMM are clearly misplaced.

The real and valid concern about Sulu's decoupling can only be reasonably found within the BARMM itself. Is there any doubt that the real question is one of legitimacy? Can the BARMM lay claim to the "right to rule" without the Sultanate of Sulu? The victorious campaign of the Tausug for exclusion from BARMM does not impact on the former, but the latter. *It fractures the political legitimacy of the BARMM.*

There is no doubt now that Sulu's decoupling was a masterstroke engineered by Sulu's strongmen who aggressively campaigned to remove Sulu from inclusion in the newly established BARMM. The belief that Sulu should not be part of a regional body that does not carry its distinctive interests received remarkable support in the 2019 plebiscite when Sulu's voters won the provincial vote.

The mistake was to ignore Sulu's authentic aspiration to be treated separately and distinctively from the rest of Muslim Mindanao. Forcing the people to be part of a region

that they did not want, nor agreed to join incentivized Sulu's "*orang besar*" and other leaders to strive for separate autonomy for the province.

Finally, few observers realized how the weak politico-economic reach of both the regional and national state in Mindanao's far south also immunized island-states such as Sulu from transition-induced violence. History, culture, and distance fenced Sulu from other causes and triggers of violence such as MILF-related violence. Sulu was shielded from the violent internal dynamics that exploded due to violent fights over access, or the lack of it, to the funds and resources that the transition offered. This created violent fissures at the center of the Bangsamoro state, to the extent that "distance from the regional capital correlated with greater peace."¹³

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Figures and Tables

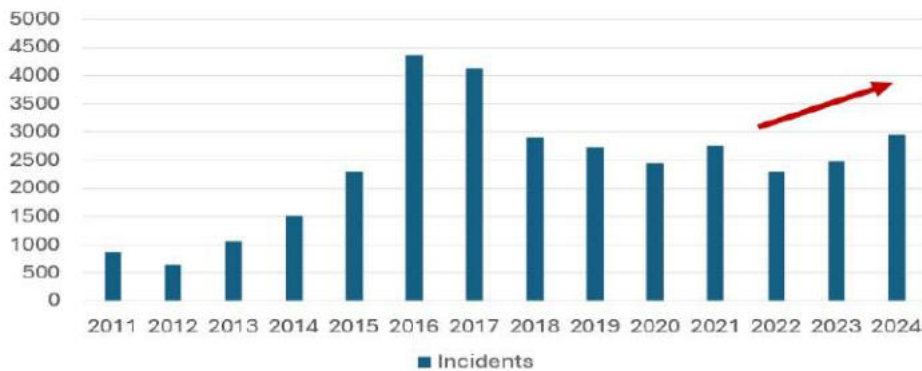


Figure 1. Incidents by year, 2011-2024.

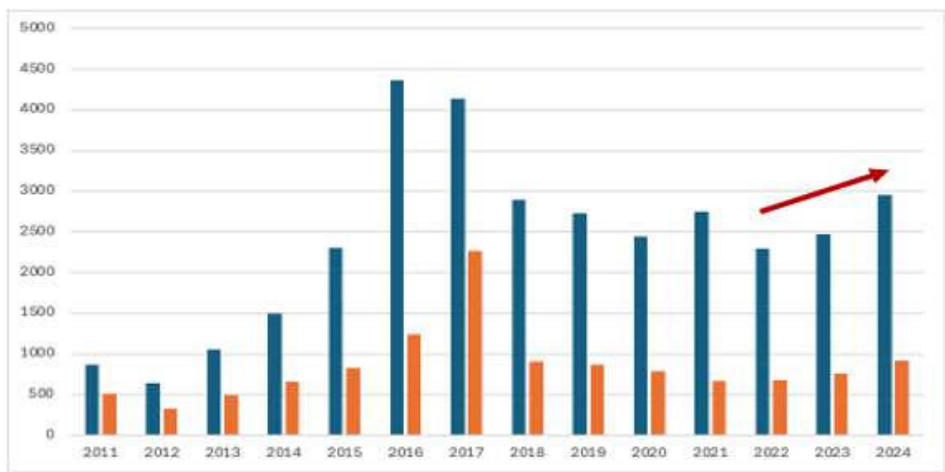


Figure 2. Incidents and deaths, 2011-2024.

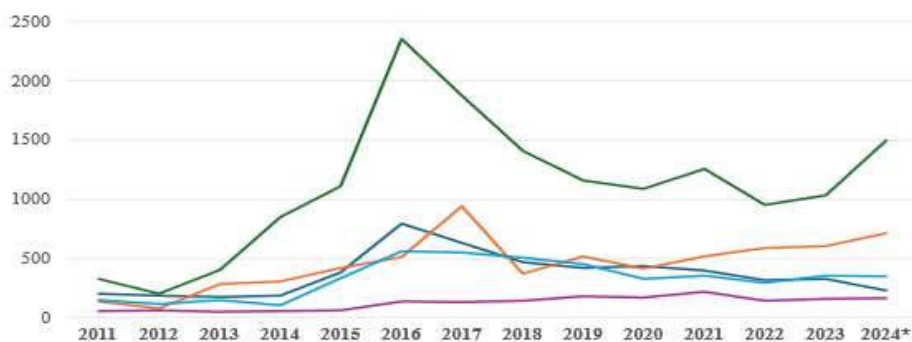


Figure 3. Number of conflict incidents by province, 2011–2024.

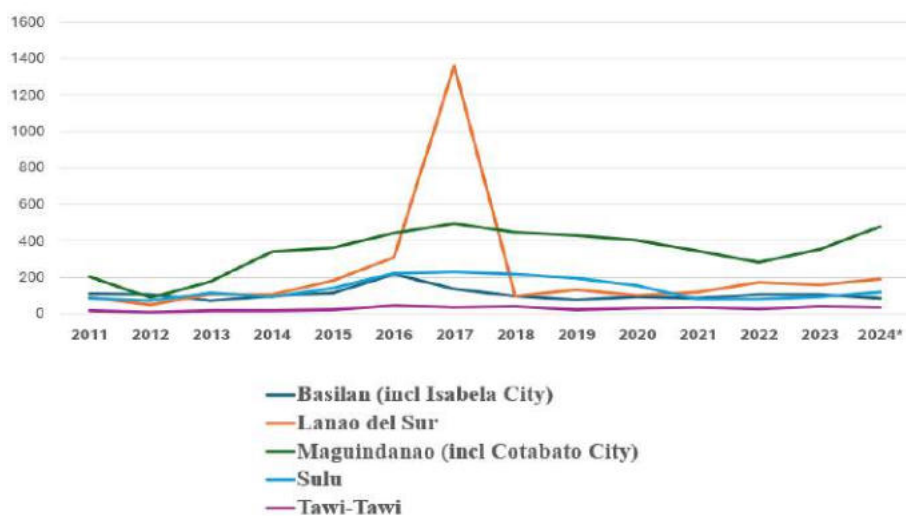


Figure 4. Number of conflict deaths by province, 2011–2024.

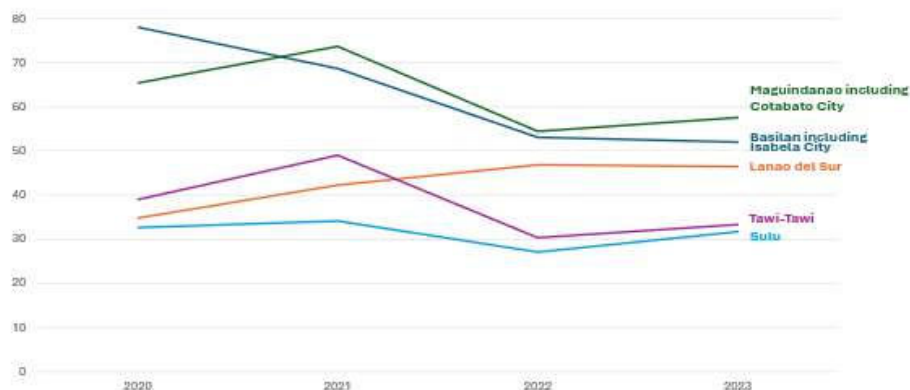


Figure 5. Number of incidents per 100,000 persons, per province 2020–2023.

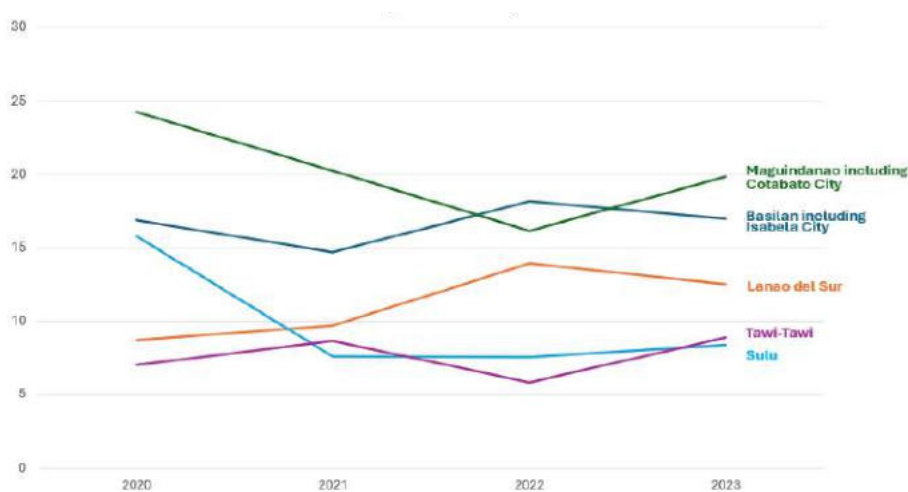


Figure 6. Number of deaths per 100,000 persons, per province, 2020–2023.

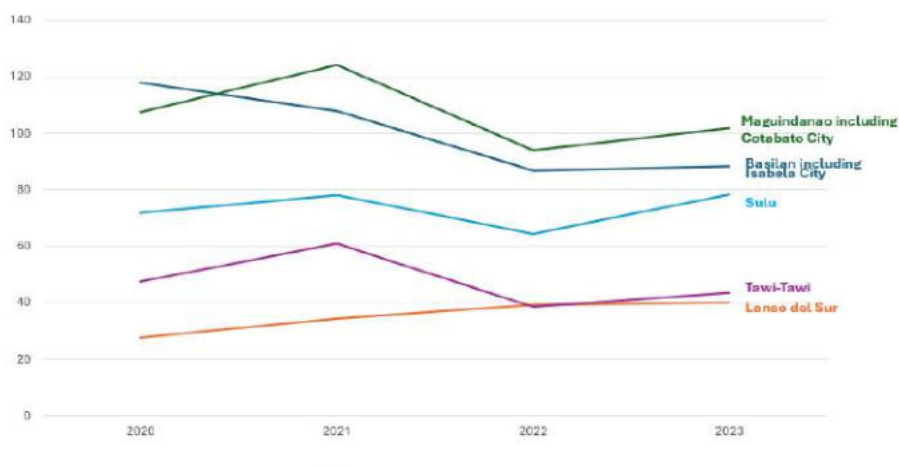


Figure 7. Number of incidents per 1,000 sq. km., per province, 2020–2023.

Province	Active Clan Feuds	with MILF Involvement
Maguindanao del Sur	8	6
Lanao del Sur	5	1
Maguindanao del Norte	2	-
Special Geographic Areas	10	6
Basilan	3	-
TOTAL	28	13

Table 1. Extended string of revenge killings and horizontal wars.

MAGUINDANAO DEL NORTE	
1	Datu Lester Sinsuat vs Jojo Limbona (Rido Matrix)
2	Boyong vs Ayunan (Rido Matrix)
MAGUINDANAO DEL SUR	
1	Marato Angkangat Felmin/Jaypee Emran vs a.k.a Aris MILF SSB
2	Maon Family vs Lamalan Family 106 th SSB
3	Kanao Maslamama vs Ebrahim Katil a.k.a. Bangladesh 108 th SSB
4	Jaypee Emran vs Kaling and Bauti Sali 105 th SSB
5	Uyag Galmak vs Rosita Family
	Mayor Resty Sindatok vs Mahdi Adam and Kumander 118 th
6	Wahid Tundok
7	Datu Mail Omar cs Datu Kuno Omar
8	Kumander Sawad vs Kumander Trenta 118 th Shariff Aguak

Table 2. MILF involvement in horizontal wars.



Figure 8. MILF infighting.



Figure 9: Reemergence of VE in Basilan.

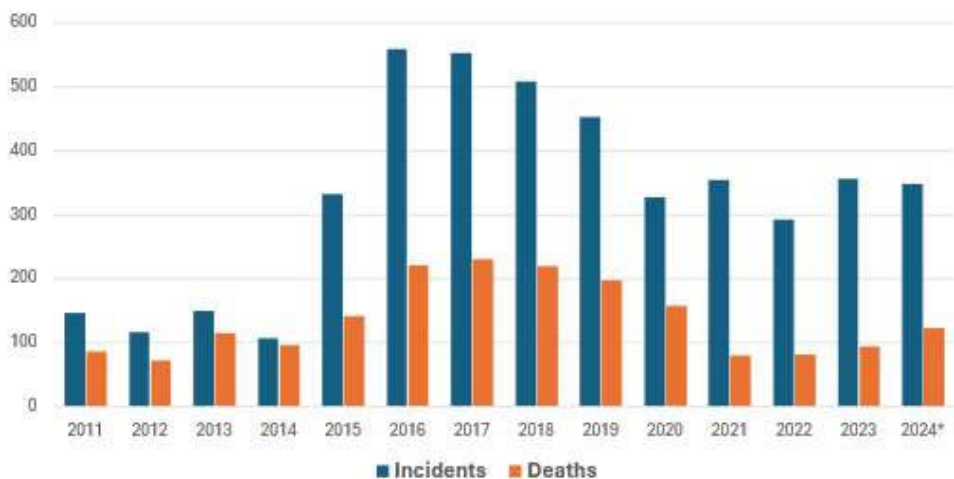


Figure 10: Conflict incidents and deaths in Sulu, 2011–2024.

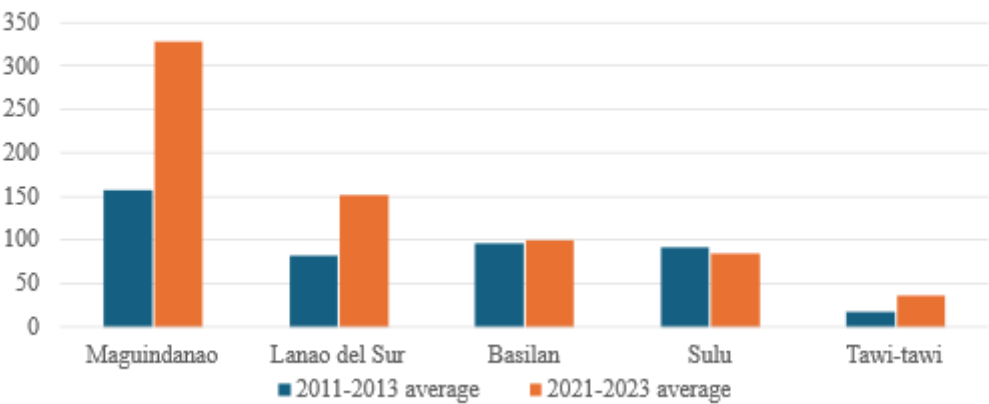


Figure 11: Conflict deaths by province, average three-year period, 2011-2013 and 2021-2023.

CEMS category	2023	2024
Weapons (SE)	34	81
Elections (PV)	16	67
Clan Feud (IC)	27	55
Violent Extremism (IC)	37	25
Grudge (IC)	31	35
Land Conflict (RC)	22	15
Drugs (SE)	15	10
Common Crimes	12	19
TOTALS	194	307

Table 3: CEMS Listing of deaths, 2023-2024.

An Overview of Transport Planning Process and Intermodal Logistics in the Context of Enhancing Development in the Sulu Archipelago

HUSSEIN S. LIDASAN

Abstract

The paper was culled from a presentation in the international conference on Lupa' Sug and the Path of Ahlus s-Suluk, held in Jolo, Sulu, Philippines last April 23-25, 2025. It discussed the need to understand the requirements of enhancing development in the Sulu Archipelago in the context of BIMP-EAGA subregional economic cooperation. Initially, a brief overview of transport planning and intermodal logistics was given, followed by assessing the development of the archipelago followed by recommendations on how to integrate the Sulu Archipelago in Mindanao's development framework and meeting its economic growth.

Introduction

The Sulu Archipelago, found in the Mindanao island group, is one of the southernmost island groups in the Philippines. The archipelago consists of the provinces of Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, and Sulu, lending to the region's secondary name: BASULTA. The archipelago is named after the Sulu Sultanate, one of the first known polities in the Philippines, which at its greatest territorial extent, controlled lands in Sabah, Palawan, and mainland Mindanao.

Despite its connected history, however, the Sulu archipelago and its former territorial holdings are presently divided across countries and domestic regions. Even the provinces of the Sulu Archipelago are divided, with Tawi-Tawi and Basilan located in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Sulu province was also formerly included in the BARMM until a Supreme Court ruling that determined that its inclusion into the region was null and void. However, political divisions are often not reflective of social, economic, and cultural connections, as despite these divisions, the peoples of these areas still regularly engage in trade and cultural exchange. Transportation and logistical channels serve as media that facilitate these historic cross-regional and international relations independent of recognition from the national government. Key to the development of the Sulu Archipelago and its recovery is the development and expansion of these transportation and logistics channels through planning and development.

Transportation planning is the policy process that determines the investments, goals, and objectives needed to connect people and industries. In the context of Sulu, transportation planning encapsulates the province's transport and logistical integration to Mindanao, the neighboring BARMM, and even regional trading partners in ASEAN. The transportation layout and structure then feed into the available intermodal logistics

Planning, especially subregional planning, is essential in improving the quality of Life (QoL) of peoples and communities, addressing the impacts of development, ensuring balanced and inclusive development, and obtaining immediate economic recovery after calamities, both manmade and natural. Natural and budgetary restraints persist, however, and as such, planning must maximize the limited resources available. Planning also aims to offer support for humanitarian logistics during disasters or calamities, ensure development anchored on the potential of locales, enhance the existing intermodal logistics network, and provide for the establishment of economic zones. Particular to the context of the Sulu Archipelago, the recognition of socioeconomic and cultural intricacies in planning is an important factor in ensuring that development initiatives are responsive to the needs of the archipelago.

The first sections of this paper will present an overview of the transport planning process and intermodal logistics, followed by a discussion on the BIMP-EAGA and subregional development in Mindanao, and lastly how the Sulu archipelago can be incorporated back into Western Mindanao given its departure from the BARMM.

Basics of Transport Planning and Intermodal Logistics

The Development Frameworks

The overall development concept suggested in this paper is anchored on the concept of Balanced Inclusive Green Growth (BIGG) proposed by Dr. Munasinghe in 1992 at the United Nations Earth Summit. The concept of BIGG emphasizes sustainable development that is achieved through the balance between the three factors of development—economic, social, and environmental—and the importance of insuring the symmetry between them.

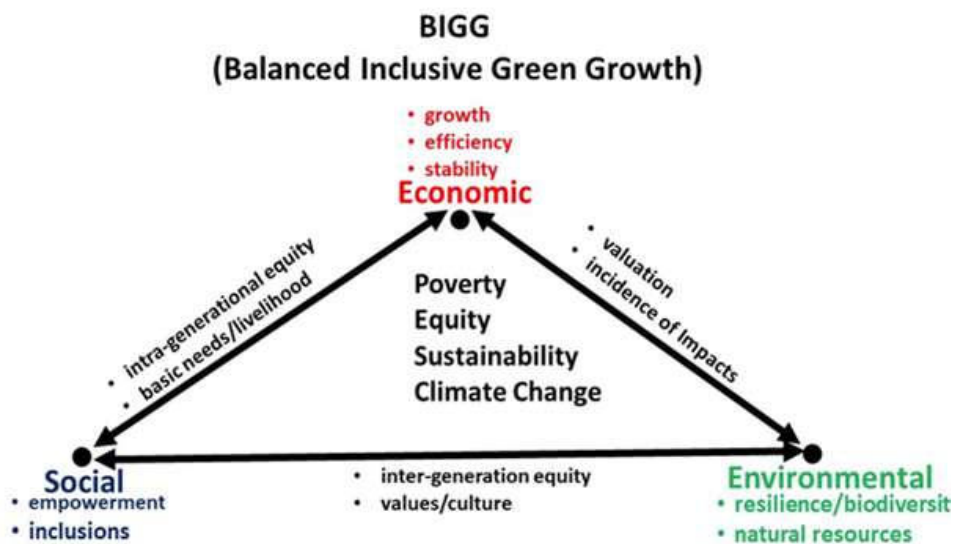


Figure 1. The BIGG development concept.

BIGG puts focus on economic factors with emphasis on short- and long-term growth, cost efficiency, and future-proofing. These economic considerations feed into the potential of systems to empower communities and include marginalized groups, while providing stable livelihoods to workers. Both considerations are also given equal weight to minimizing the environmental impacts of growth, especially the negative impacts of habitat destruction and land use. BIGG is largely in contrast to the conventional idea of economic growth—where

growth supersedes environmental considerations or social impacts—but also presents a framework for achieving social advancement and environmental advocacy while minimizing the economic costs of such.

Dr. Munasinghe further argued that the introduction of Smart Sustainable Systems (S3) can make achieving BIGG possible. S3 relies on the use of digital technology and ICT to augment existing systems and improve outcomes while keeping BIGG in mind. S3 can also minimize the overall negative environmental impact of systems by lowering resource use while also increasing economic efficiency. Caution must be exercised, however, with the implementation of S3 in achieving BIGG with respect to Sulu archipelago development as the S3 may not be in place at present. However, it is important to consider the implementation of S3 in the near future, including their associated institutional mechanisms. This implementation of BIGG is similar to that of ESD (Environmentally Sustainable Development).

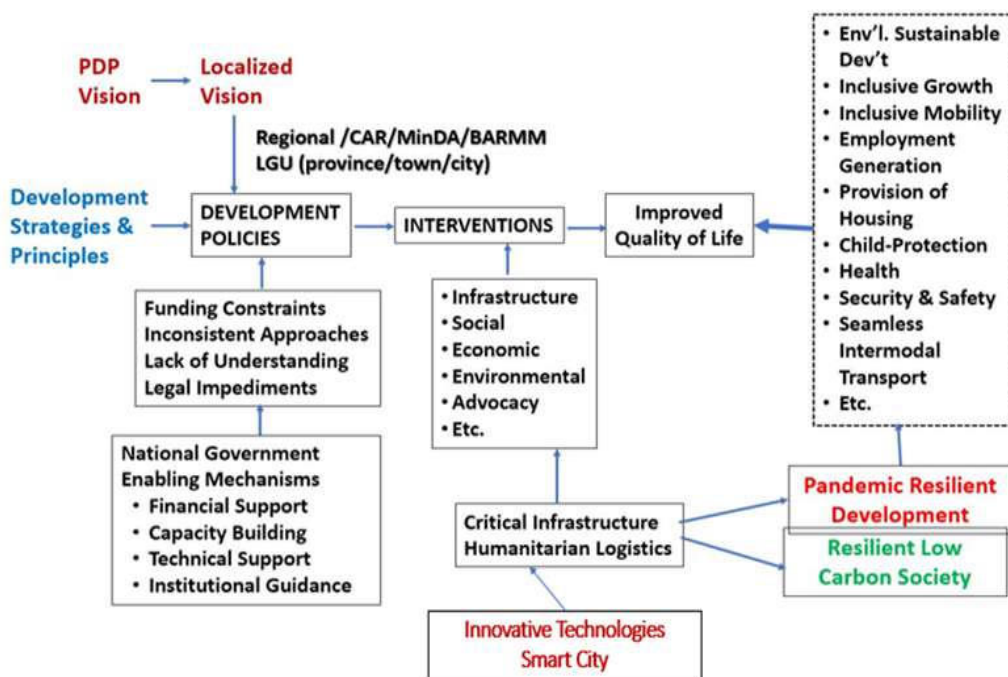


Figure 2. Development policy framework.

The development policy framework that is worth considering in the case of Sulu, however, is the one shown in figure 2. Unlike the factor-focused nature of BIGG, the above framework highlights the need for interventions based on infrastructural, social, economic and

environmental strategies supported by a strong advocacy to increase the QoL (quality of life) of the people and communities. The development strategies and principles need to be guided properly to address the constraints, such as how the government will come up with the enabling mechanisms with the help with critical infrastructure developments and innovative technologies, such as Smart City. Development, in this concept, is anchored onto development strategies aligned with national development priorities contextualized to the needs of the local communities and complemented by innovation like smart cities and information technology. The framework also indicated the need to come up with pandemic resilient development and achieving low carbon society. Humanitarian logistics is also important in this regard. Likewise, the framework is directed by visions and policies from the national government down to the local government.

Consistent with the above development policy framework is the transport policy framework that is being considered. This is illustrated in figure 3 and it follows the same approach as that of the development policy framework but more focused on transport developments.

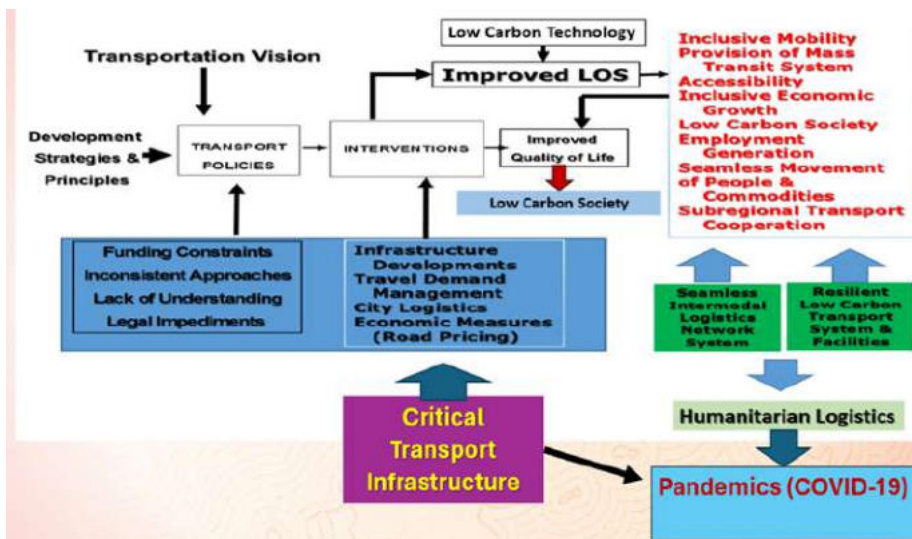


Figure 3. The transport policy framework.

Specialized to the needs of transportation, the transport policy framework applies the structure of the development framework onto the infrastructure and logistics-heavy needs of the transportation sector. The transport policy framework provides a process on how to devise transport policies and their corresponding initiatives in the forms of strategies,

programs, and projects toward meeting the requirements of transport development that will ensure the economic developments are in place and at the same time address the impacts of on the environment and reducing climate change.

Basics of Transport Planning Process and Intermodal Logistics

The above section provides an overview of development and transport policy frameworks, whereas this section discusses the fundamentals of the transport planning process and intermodal logistics. For a better understanding of transport planning and intermodal logistics, it is essential to know the three closely related components of a transport system that are crucial for providing efficient transport: (a) transport infrastructure, (b) vehicles, and (c) transportation system management. Transportation infrastructure is composed of the roads (including road signs and traffic signals) upon which vehicles traverse; facilities, including public transportation terminals and parking areas; railways; and walkways. Cars and trucks (both public and private), commercial and freight ships, and airplanes constitute vehicles. Lastly, the transportation system management is composed of the usage policies, traffic management and enforcement schemes, traffic conflict management and resolution, and demand management systems that manage the transport system and its users.

The interactions among the transport systems crucial in transport planning are described in figure 4, indicating a cyclical and direct interactions. The cyclical process shows the dependence of transport systems on each other and the impact of information, policies, and innovations taken by each onto the other systems. As such, proper planning, followed by introducing the policies and initiatives are assured in improving the levels of services of the transport system.



Figure 4. The cyclical process of the transport planning process.

The primary purpose of transport planning is to generate information useful to decision-makers on the consequences of alternative actions, which are aided by analytical and quantitative tools that follow the Urban Transportation-Land Use Planning Process (figure 5).

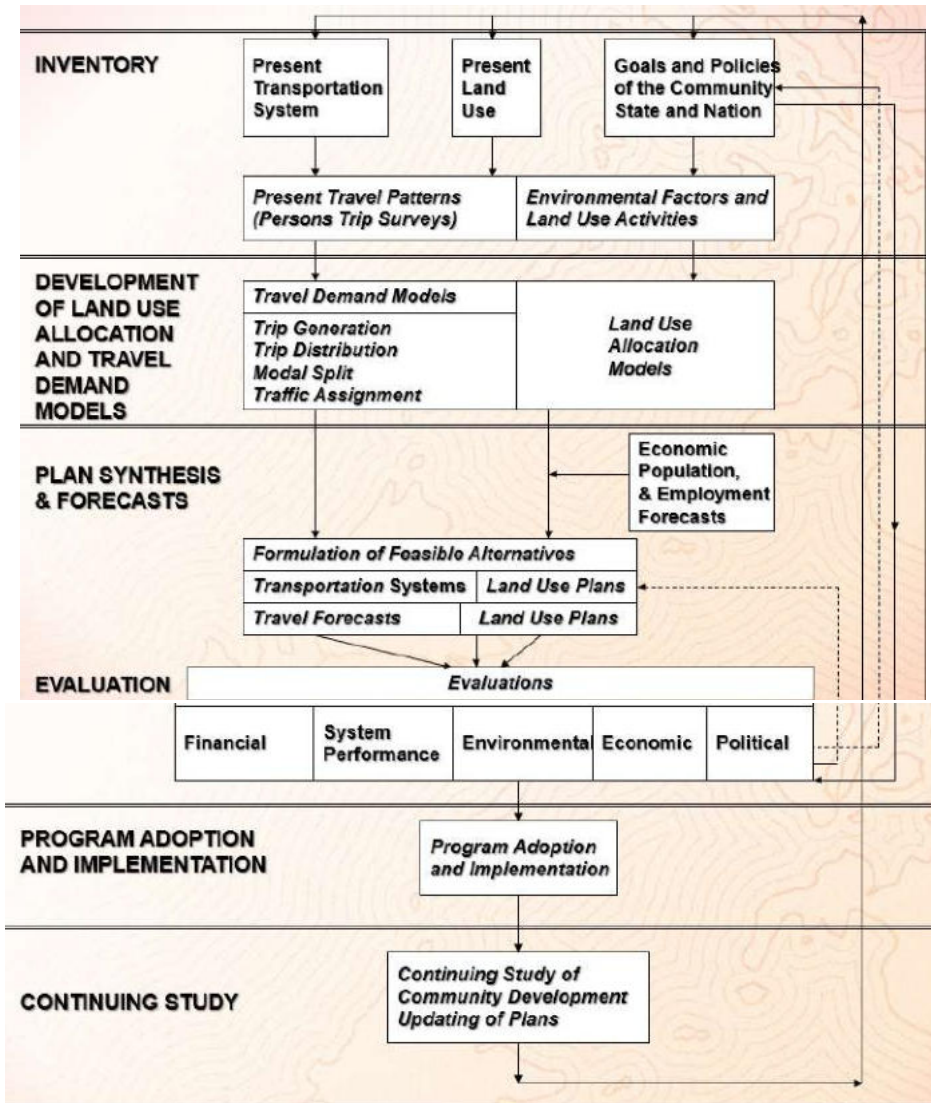


Figure 5. The Urban Transportation-Land Use Planning Process.

Though the Urban Transportation-Land Use Planning Process focuses on the urban transport planning process, the procedure can be adopted for other geographical patterns like the Sulu archipelago. Transport planning is essential in devising an intermodal logistics system for

any area or locality. Combined with the transport planning process, logistics is defined as the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of raw materials, in-process inventory, finished goods, and related information. Logistics begins from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of conforming to customer requirements. It also considers how to get the right goods or services to the right place, at the right time, and in the desired condition, while making the greatest contribution to the firm.

On the other hand, intermodalism is categorized as (1) the process of transporting freight (and/or passengers) through a system of interconnected networks, involving various combinations of transport modes where all component parts are seamlessly linked and efficiently coordinated; and (2) the intermodal freight transportation of door-to-door movement of freight from shipper to consignee, optimizing the use of combining transportation modes for sea, air, rail, or highway

In essence, intermodal logistics is the efficient movement of cargo, vehicles, and information with the aid of efficient planning, infrastructure, and proper logistics management. For the Sulu archipelago, logistics is crucial not only in the delivery of commodities and movement of people but also in times of emergencies, disasters through humanitarian logistics. The following diagrams illustrate the categorization of intermodal logistics.

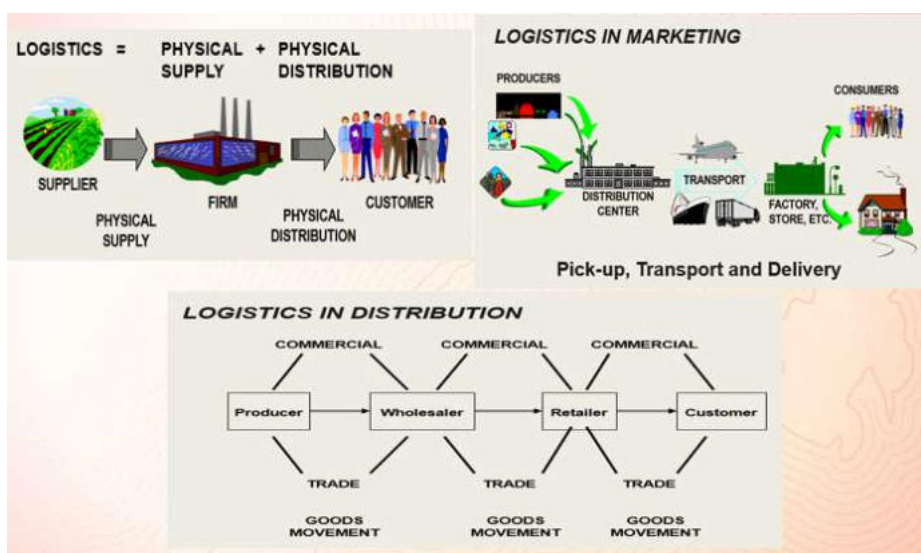


Figure 6. Illustrations of intermodal logistics.

Given the categorization of intermodal logistics systems in the context of transport planning, it is now worth looking at the characteristics of the Sulu archipelago. Just like any other groups of islands, the archipelago's planning considers the dominance of modes of transport, accessibility and connectivity, tourism, and environmental concerns. Due to geography, most island transport relies heavily on ferries and small boats for inter-island travel, while land-based transport like buses or cars are limited to intra-island travel. Access to essential services must also be ensured to all communities on the island through a well-planned network of transport routes and schedules, especially for remote areas. The management of tourist influx is also undertaken through the optimization of transport infrastructure—considering peak seasons and minimizing congestion. Lastly, sustainable transport options like electric vehicles can also be integrated, reducing emissions from ferries, and considering the impact of infrastructure development on natural habitats.

In the context of Sulu especially, however, additional planning issues need to be addressed relevant to its underdeveloped and island nature such as ferry scheduling and optimization, intermodal transport hubs, pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, community engagement, and infrastructure development. There are also special challenges arising from high construction costs, weather variability, limited land space, and economic constraints. These special concerns need to be considered in the creation of transport systems and intermodal logistics network systems in the Sulu archipelago, especially in connection to Sulu's place within the Mindanao development corridor framework and subregional economic cooperation such as the BIMP-EAGA.

The BIMP-EAGA Subregional Economic Cooperation

The subregional economic cooperation of the BIMP-EAGA falls under the regional cooperation initiatives of the ASEAN and is just one of the ASEAN cooperation among the economic cooperation that exist. It was based on the premise that the member countries will capitalize on their economic advantages and complement each other rather than engage in direct competition. Similarly, the subregional cooperation will also provide support on the subregion's initiative to address the environmental impacts of development and climate change as the cooperation's members (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines) are among the most vulnerable countries to climate change.

The BIMP-EAGA subregion was established as a cooperation initiative in 1994 to spur development in remote and less developed areas in the four participating ASEAN countries. In order for the BIMP-EAGA to exploit its potentials and enhance subregional economic cooperation, it follows the approach of establishing economic corridors. These corridors capitalize on the economic and trade potentials of the member countries and considerations on their intermodal logistics systems.

To ensure that the subregional economic cooperation is attained, the BIMP-EAGA created select economic corridors and outlined their functionalities:

The Western Borneo Economic Corridor—covering the routes of Pontianak–Kuching, Kuching–Bandar Seri Begawan, Bandar Seri Begawan–Kota Kinabalu, and Muara–Labuan—is the BIMP-EAGA’s oil and gas corridor as it passes through areas of Brunei Darussalam, West Kalimantan in Indonesia, and Sarawak and Sabah in Malaysia that are major exporters of crude petroleum and natural gas. This corridor has well-established transport infrastructure and linkages from Pontianak in West Kalimantan to Kuching in Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam as well as existing trade and investment ties within the corridor through traditional border crossing points.

The Greater Sulu–Sulawesi Economic Corridor—covering North Sulawesi in Indonesia, Sabah in Malaysia, and Mindanao and Palawan in the Philippines and mainly determined by the geography of the Sulu–Sulawesi Seas—is the nerve center of barter trade in BIMP-EAGA, particularly in agriculture and aquaculture products. The corridor covers four routes: Palawan–Sabah, Zamboanga Peninsula–Sabah (including Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi–Tawi in the Philippines), Davao (Davao del Sur), and General Santos–North Sulawesi. It lies on the Sulu–Sulawesi Seas: a highly biodiverse, globally significant biogeographic unit in the heart of the Coral Triangle and the center of the world’s highest concentration of marine biodiversity. There are strong historical trade links in the corridor, with trade concentrated between North Sulawesi and Mindanao, and between Sabah and Mindanao. Transport connectivity consists of port-to-port trade flows and shipping services within the Sulu–Sulawesi seas.

At present, a third economic corridor is also being contemplated. The East Borneo Economic Corridor covers the other four provinces of the Indonesian portion of Borneo: Central Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, North Kalimantan, and South Kalimantan. It will connect to Sabah through a new road in Tanjung Selor, the capital of North Kalimantan, and will pass through the new capital city of Indonesia, should this proposal push through.

The establishment of the BIMP-EAGA subregion is the culmination of the subregion's aspiration of maximizing the its opportunities. BIMP-EAGA has the potential to help build a single ASEAN production base by providing supply and value chains and by supporting the development and active participation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in productive sectors. The subregion's increasing population and incomes can also provide a growing market for goods and services

The system also promotes sustainable development of industries where it already has, or could easily develop, a competitive advantage. These include green manufacturing, agro-industry and fisheries, and tourism. A rolling pipeline of priority infrastructure projects is designed to further improve connectivity within the growth area and with other markets, making it more conducive for business, trade, and investment opportunities—including public–private partnerships for selected BIMP-EAGA projects. These infrastructure investments are also specifically focused on the development of the West Borneo Economic Corridor and the Greater Sulu–Sulawesi Corridor, which will link production with supply chains and provide opportunities for SMEs within the region.

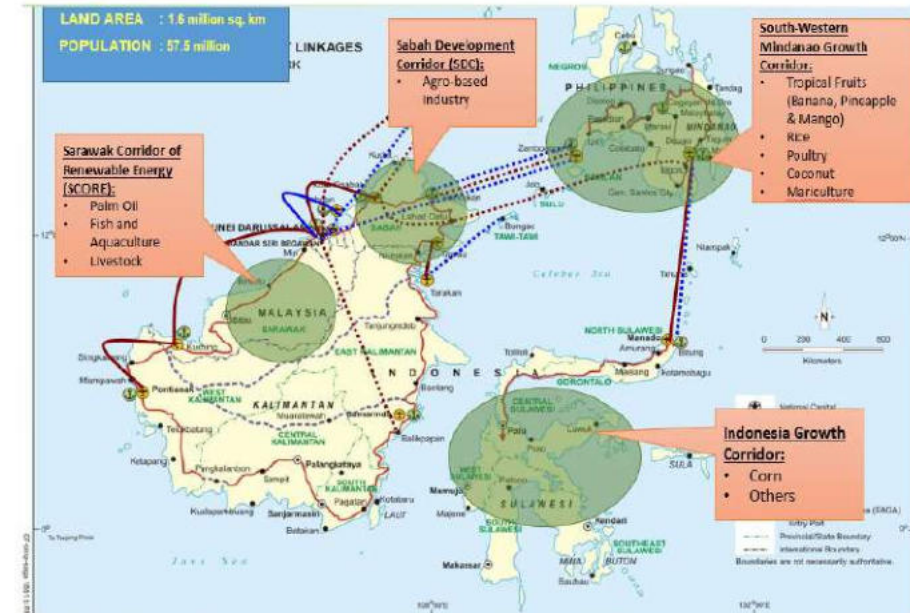


Figure 7. BIMP-EAGA food, agribusiness and logistics corridors. (Source: Mindanao Development Authority)

Given the agricultural products in Figure 7, the economic corridors are further considered as logistics corridors. These corridors are supported by MinDA (Mindanao Development Authority) and as such, the development framework of Mindanao is anchored on the BIMP-EAGA development corridor framework. With this in mind, it is empirical that the Sulu archipelago should be in its rightful place that in the Western Mindanao region. This is likewise logical in the context of the BIMP-EAGA economic corridor framework. With this in mind, it is appropriate that the development of the Sulu archipelago is toward meeting the requirements of the Greater Sulu-Sulawesi economic corridor. Historically, this has been the case.

Looking at the intermodal logistics system of Mindanao, one can surmise that indeed, the transport directions of the Sulu archipelago is toward the Zamboanga peninsula and to Borneo.

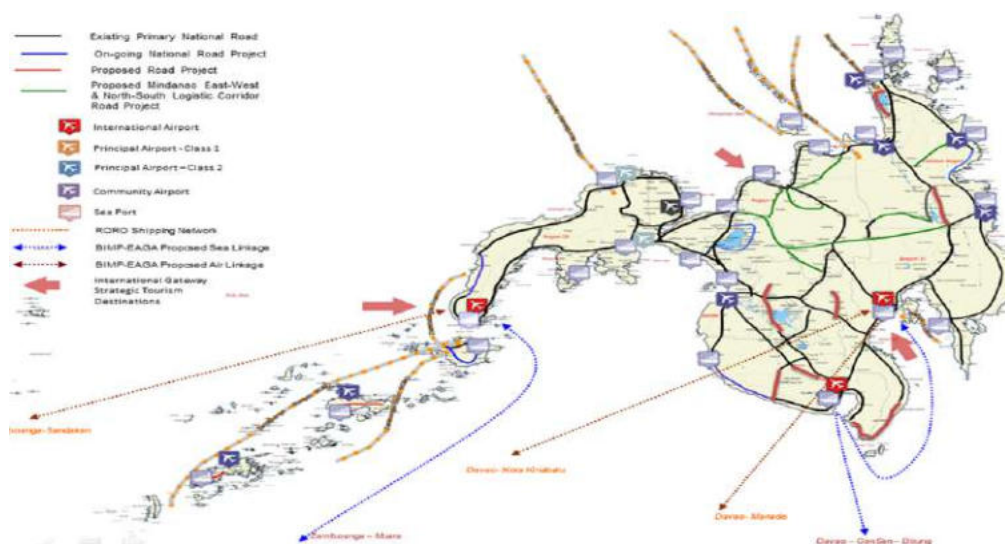


Figure 8. Mindanao Intermodal Transport Network System.

The Mindanao Development Corridor Framework

The Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) has been following a development framework consistent with the PDP (Philippine Development Plan) and is anchored on the BIMP-EAGA subregional economic framework. This is based on the development corridor approach that capitalizes on the geographical advantages of the various regions of Mindanao and their economic potentials and interconnectivity. The development corridors were defined based on

the comparative advantages of the regions to capitalize on local resources and industries and potential economic/business advantages arising from consolidation. The corridor approach also discourages competition, focusing on consolidation. The development corridors are also further defined by their creation of agro-industrial zones (AIZ) and the development of freeports supporting these AIZ through logistics network optimization. Freeports also reduce the seam in the intermodal logistics network system and thereby increase efficiency and competitiveness of Mindanao.

Figure 9 shows how the development corridors were created out of the economic potentials of the regions within Mindanao.

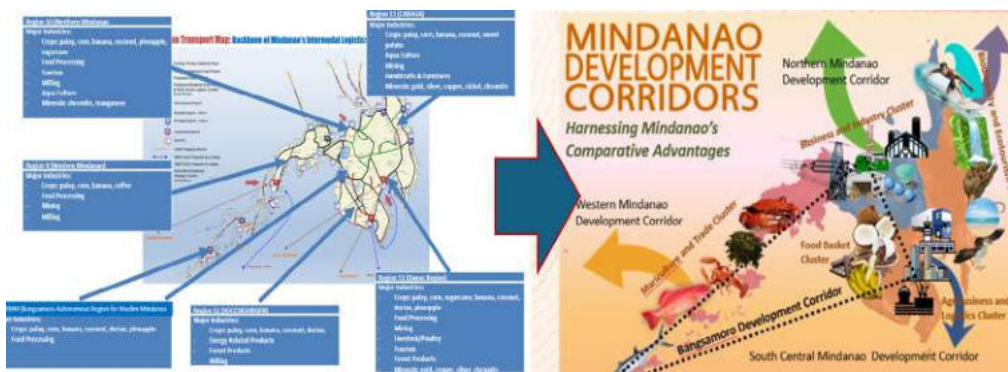


Figure 9. The Mindanao development corridor framework.

The Western Mindanao Economic Corridor

Prior to its inclusion in the BARMM, the Sulu archipelago was part of Western Mindanao and has been the channel towards the eastern stretch of Southeast Asia. It is worth mentioning that the archipelago may be more suitable in returning back to Western Mindanao in the context of geographically and economic point of view, notably considering the BIMP-EAGA subregion. With this in mind, a study commissioned by ADB, to which the author of this paper was tasked to do, would be the reference for this section and in the possibility of the Sulu archipelago return to Western Mindanao. This is notably true with the exclusion of the Province of Sulu from BARMM after a Supreme Court ruling recently.

The ADB study was done based on three premises: (1) despite the vast potentials of Western Mindanao, its development, notably of the island provinces of BASULTA, is not at par with the other areas in Mindanao; (2) there seems to be disparity among the provinces of

BASULTA, which comprises the Sulu archipelago; and (3) there are strong indicators for Western Mindanao to enter subregional economic alliances like BIMP-EAGA.

Given the above, the study further noted that there is a need to come up with transport development framework in the context of economic corridor approach of MinDA to address the above three points. Western Mindanao, including the BASULTA provinces were assessed to ascertain certain development benchmarks, mainly the region's support of inclusive growth and environmentally sustainable development, the facilitation of a responsive and inclusive economic growth tapping into the vast natural and human resources of Mindanao, creation of a strategy for balanced growth and environmental protection anchored on the development corridor approach, and the competitiveness of the envisioned development corridors in Mindanao in the BIMP-EAGA arena and the ASEAN. The study also aimed at find ways to aid in the influx of investment and economic support from the private sector within the framework of PPP.

Appendix B provides the materials on the Western Mindanao economic corridor study of ADB.

Based on this ADB study, one may conclude indeed that returning to Western Mindanao is best for the Sulu archipelago given the MinDA development corridor framework and in considering the BIMP-EAGA economic corridor that is the Greater Sulu-Sulawesi corridor. This will further strengthen the economic ties of the archipelago in ASEAN, not only through the BIMP-EAGA subregion. Combined with the Zamboanga Peninsula, the Sulu archipelago can further enhance complementing economic and trade activities and thereby strengthen its economic base. As the ADB study cited is based on the concept of duo-polar development.

Final Remarks

This paper—based on the presentation of the same topic given in the recent Sulu International Conference—highlights how the Sulu archipelago can attain a heightened economic position and how it can be further integrated into the Mindanao economic corridor development and the BIMP-EAGA subregional economic cooperation. It is therefore worth noting that the Province of Sulu—or BASULTA, the former Sulu archipelago, in general—may stand to benefit from the reversion back to the Western Mindanao region in the context of development planning and intermodal logistics. Traditionally, maritime trade in BIMP-EAGA subregion passed through the Sulu Archipelago; the barter trade within the region also thrives until the present. There is also a need to strengthen the intermodal logistics network

of BASULTA in support of its entry and greater integration into the BIMP-EAGA economic and transport subregional cooperation. There is also a need to ensure a balanced, inclusive, and green growth in Mindanao, and especially in the Western Mindanao region.

Being an archipelago and as such island communities, it is essential that the transport planning and intermodal logistics should consider this characteristic of the Sulu archipelago. This would then imply that the intermodal logistics system of the archipelago should be anchored on its maritime transport system. Albeit this suggestion, there is a need too to include humanitarian logistics and with this critical infrastructure to support the transport and logistics network system.

Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning that the socioeconomic and cultural intricacies of Sulu and BASULTA, in general, need to be considered in development and logistics initiatives to ensure entry to the BIMP-EAGA subregional economic cooperation. In this regard, MinDA can play a significant role. The economy of sulu can be enhanced through its entry to the BIMP-EAGA. An intermodal logistics roadmap for the Province of Sulu, and in general of the Sulu Archipelago, is necessary to ensure its entry to BIMP-EAGA subregional cooperation and the Western Mindanao economic corridor.

Currently, the MinDA is contemplating on updating its economic/development corridor framework to be more adept to the present requirements of Mindanao and BIMP-EAGA. Perhaps, the return of the Sulu archipelago to Western Mindanao shall then be included in this endeavor.

Finally, in relation to BARMM, perhaps the possibility of introducing sub-state autonomy in BARMM—specifically, a mainland substate (Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, and the SGA) and island substate (BASULTA)—or the reversion back to the previous arrangement of two autonomous regions—Western Mindanao and Central Mindanao—could be of benefit, even if futile.

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Unfolding GEMS: Sulu Archipelago in the Context of the Mindanao Development Corridors (MinDC) and the Brunei Indonesia Malaysia and the Philippines East Asian Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA)

MAKMOD S. PASAWILAN

Abstract

The paper examines the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) as a central institution shaping Mindanao's development trajectory and regional integration within the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). It analyzes how MinDA's integrated peace and development framework and spatial development strategy seek to address the region's structural inequalities while leveraging its comparative advantages in agriculture, energy, and trade. Within this broader context, the study highlights the strategic significance of the Sulu Archipelago as both a developmental frontier and a bridge linking Mindanao to the wider ASEAN subregion. Sulu's evolving role within the Mindanao Development Corridors and the reconfigured BIMP-EAGA Economic Corridors underscores emerging efforts to align local recovery with regional economic integration. By situating Sulu's socioeconomic transformation within Mindanao's planning and policy frameworks, the paper demonstrates how spatial and regional coordination can promote inclusive, sustainable growth in historically conflict-affected island economies.

The MinDA, M2020, Mindanao Agenda and Mindanao

The Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA)¹ is a sub-national government agency created by Republic Act No. 9996 or the Mindanao Development Act of 2010, and signed into law by former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on February 17, 2010. The agency aims to improve the overall socio-economic development of the island of Mindanao. MinDA coordinates Mindanao-wide initiatives, acts as the Philippine Coordinating Office for BIMP-EAGA (PCOBE), harmonizes efforts with Mindanao-wide perspectives, and formulates the Mindanao Peace and Development Agenda. MinDA is the lead agency in coordinating and integrating peace and development efforts that bring about accelerated socio-economic development across Mindanao. Its Board is composed of the Chairpersons of the Regional Development Councils (RDCs) of Regions IX, X, XI, XII, XIII and the Bangsamoro Economic and Development Council (BEDC); a Mindanao Local Chief Executive (LCE) designated by the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines (ULAP); the President of the Mindanao Confederation of Governors, City Mayors and Municipal Mayors League Presidents; the Administrator of the Southern Philippines Development Authority (SPDA); the Secretary of the National Commission on Muslim Filipino; legislative officials (a Mindanawon² Senator, the Chairperson of the House Committee on Mindanao Affairs, the Chairperson of the House Committee on BIMP-EAGA Affairs); and representatives of the private sector (Mindanao Business Council, Mindanao Academic Sector, and Mindanao Non-government Organization (NGO) Sector). The MinDA Chairperson serves as an ex-officio member of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA)³ Board and the Philippines' signatory for the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA).

In fulfillment of its mandate, the MinDA spearheaded the formulation of the Mindanao 2020 Peace and Development Framework Plan (2011–2030) or M2020—a comprehensive, twenty-year roadmap for integrated peace and development in Mindanao. Completed in

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- 1 MinDA was formerly known as the Mindanao Economic Development Council (MEDCo), which was initially established on March 19, 1992, through Executive Order No. 512 issued by President Corazon C. Aquino, and later operationalized under President Fidel V. Ramos. MEDCo was created to promote and coordinate the active participation of all sectors in the socio-economic development of Mindanao by employing a holistic and integrated approach.
 - 2 Mindanawon is a term used in the Mindanao 2020 Peace and Development Framework Plan 2011–2030 referring to the inhabitants of the island of Mindanao regardless of ethnicity, religion, or cultural background.
 - 3 The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), now known as the Department of Economy, Planning, and Development (DEPDev), was established through the signing of Republic Act No. 12145 by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on April 10, 2025.

2012, the plan serves as a strategic blueprint that aligns Mindanao's development trajectory with national priorities outlined in the country's medium-term development plans. As a successor to the Mindanao 2000 plan, the M2020 was designed with the overarching goal of improving the quality of life for all Mindanawon through inclusive, sustainable, and resilient growth.

The emergence of key developments—most notably the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019, the landmark Mandanas–Garcia Supreme Court ruling, and the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020—significantly reshaped the region's development context. These transformative events necessitated a comprehensive review and reassessment of M2020, ultimately leading to the formulation of the Mindanao Agenda 2023–2028. This new medium-term strategic plan reflects a renewed commitment to inclusive and sustainable development and is the product of an exhaustive and collaborative consultation among stakeholders across Mindanao.

Complementing this agenda is the Mindanao Development Corridors (MinDC) initiative, which spatially translates the strategic vision of M2020 and is anchored on the Agenda 5: Transport Logistics and Connectivity. The corridor approach leverages Mindanao's geographic and economic strengths, positioning the island more competitively within both national and global markets.

The island is strategically proximate to the flourishing markets of the Asia Pacific. Mindanao cities, including Davao, General Santos, and Zamboanga are about two hours away by plane from the nearby urban centers of Brunei–Darussalam, Indonesia, and Malaysia—the member countries of the regional growth polygon of BIMP–EAGA. The northern coast of Mindanao is also 90 and 30 minutes by air from the two largest domestic markets of the country, Manila and Cebu, respectively.

Considered the second largest island in the Philippines, Mindanao has a total land area of 102,022 square kilometers or 34 percent of the country's land area, and is composed of six regions and one autonomous region, 28 provinces, 33 cities, 410 municipalities and 10,048 barangays. It is a home of 26.25 million Mindanawons⁴ with a unique socio-cultural background.

4 Philippine Statistics Authority. "Total Population, Household Population, and Number of Households by Region and Province/Highly Urbanized City: Philippines, 2020." PSA OpenStat PX-Web, updated April 22, 2024. Accessed via PSA PX-Web database.

Mindanao plays a vital role in ensuring the Philippines' food security and export competitiveness. As the country's foremost food-producing region, it is also a major exporter of key agricultural commodities. According to 2023 data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) processed by MinDA, Mindanao ranks among the world's top four exporters of bananas, seaweeds, and pineapples, and places eighth globally in the export of both rubber and tuna.

These exports reach a broad international market with bananas shipped to Japan, China, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Iran; seaweeds to the United States, China, the Netherlands, Spain, and Germany; pineapples to Japan, South Korea, the United States, the Middle East, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands; rubber to Malaysia, China, South Korea, Vietnam, and Indonesia; and tuna to the United States, Japan, Spain, Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Poland, and the Netherlands.

In 2023, Mindanao contributed 17.2 percent to the national gross domestic product (GDP). The region's economy is increasingly service-driven, with the services sector accounting for 55 percent of output, followed by industry at 26 percent, and agriculture, forestry, and fisheries (AFF) at 19 percent. This distribution reflects Mindanao's gradual but steady economic diversification.

Over the past decade, Mindanao has demonstrated consistent and resilient growth. Between 2013 and 2023, it posted an average annual growth rate of 5.5 percent, outpacing the national average of 4.8 percent. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), including the province of Sulu, has been a significant contributor to this performance by playing a growing role in regional development.

Often referred to as the nation's "food basket," Mindanao is indispensable to the Philippines' food supply. It accounts for approximately 45 percent of the country's total food trade, and nearly one-third of its land area is devoted to agriculture. The island dominates national production of high-value crops, contributing 99 percent of rubber, 96 percent of oil palm, 89 percent of cacao, 88 percent of pineapple, 83 percent of both banana and coffee, 79 percent of seaweeds, 61 percent of coconut, and 44 percent of abaca production. The BARMM region, in particular, serves as a key production center for seaweeds, rubber, coconut, coffee, bananas, and abaca.

Mindanao's agricultural productivity not only sustains domestic food supply chains but also enhances the Philippines' standing in international commodity markets, affirming its role as both a food powerhouse and an economic growth driver.

Mindanao Development Corridors and the Regional Spatial and Development Strategy

To align with the broader objectives of the BIMP-EAGA, the MinDA formulated the MinDC, a spatial development strategy focused on optimizing regional growth based on each area's unique potentials and strategic roles within Mindanao's overall development.

The corridor approach builds upon the trade and economic strengths among Mindanao's regions by enhancing infrastructure, connectivity, logistics, industry development, and investment facilitation. This strategy aims to increase Mindanao's contribution to the country's gross regional domestic product (GRDP) growth to at least six to seven percent over the next decade while reducing poverty across the island. Additionally, it seeks to prepare Mindanao for deeper economic cooperation within BIMP-EAGA and to support ASEAN integration.

The overarching goal of the MinDC is to create pathways toward a connected and globally competitive Mindanao, fostering inclusive, balanced, and sustained growth throughout the island region.

MinDC promotes inclusive growth and resilience by improving competitiveness and leveraging comparative advantages in key sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, food manufacturing, tourism, and other strategic drivers of growth. The initiative aims to attract greater investments, increase trade, and enhance market access, particularly within BIMP-EAGA and the broader ASEAN community. These efforts are expected to generate employment opportunities for Mindanawons and ultimately drive inclusive economic growth.

The MinDC encompasses four development corridors across defined geographic areas: the Western Mindanao Development Corridor (WMDC), the Northern Mindanao Development Corridor (NMDC), the South-Central Mindanao Development Corridor (SCMDC), and the Bangsamoro Development Corridor (BDC). It also includes five clusters: the Mariculture and Trade Cluster, Industry and Trade Cluster, Biodiversity and Ecotourism Cluster, Logistics Cluster, and the Food Basket Cluster, as illustrated in figure 1.

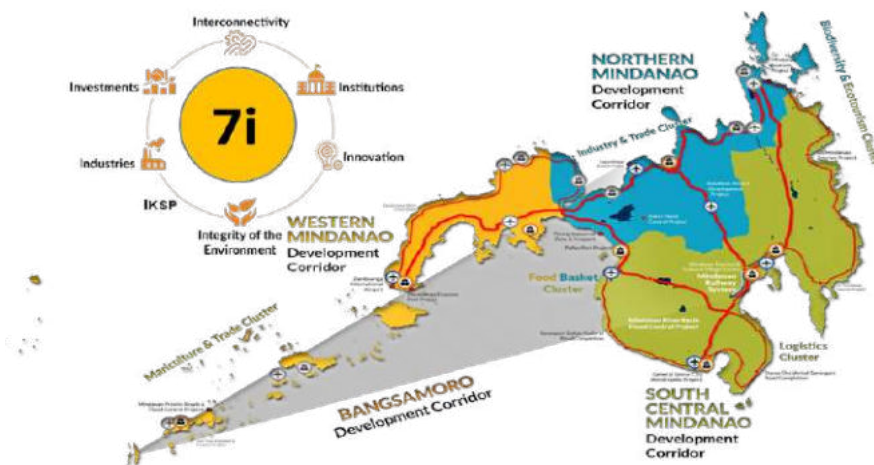


Figure 1. The Mindanao development corridors.

Based on the MinDC framework, the Western Mindanao Development Corridor (WMDC) comprises the provinces of Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, and Zamboanga Sibugay or the Zamboanga Peninsula. Strategically positioned—along with the provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi (BASULTA)—this corridor functions as the Philippines’ gateway to the BIMP-EAGA. Existing maritime trade links connect WMDC through BASULTA with major urban centers in Sabah and Brunei, while proposed expansions of air and sea routes aim to enhance future investment and trade opportunities. The corridor is anchored along key economic hubs, including the cities of Zamboanga, Pagadian, Dipolog, and Isabela, as well as the municipalities of Bongao and Jolo. Notably, WMDC leads Mindanao’s fishery production, accounting for approximately 60 percent of the region’s total output.

The Northern Mindanao Development Corridor (NMDC) includes the provinces of Misamis Oriental, Misamis Occidental, Bukidnon, Camiguin, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Agusan del Norte, and Surigao del Norte. This corridor boasts significant potential to emerge as a world-class center for industry and services, supported by robust public infrastructure, economic zones, and a mix of industrial and agribusiness enterprises. NMDC features a diverse economic base, including a strong agricultural sector, expanding mining activities, a competitive tourism industry, a substantial agri-industrial foundation, growing business process outsourcing (BPO) and information and communications technology (ICT) sectors, a developing financial services industry, and a skilled professional workforce. The economic objectives of industrialization and services development hinge on effectively harnessing

synergies among these sectors. The corridor's development is anchored by the urban centers of Butuan, Cagayan de Oro, and Iligan.

The South-Central Mindanao Development Corridor (SCMDC) covers the provinces of Davao del Sur, Davao del Norte, Davao Oriental, Davao de Oro, Davao Occidental, Sarangani, Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Agusan del Sur, and Surigao del Sur. This corridor is characterized by agricultural production zones, agribusiness ventures, ecotourism sites, and logistical infrastructure. A key feature is the high-standard highway linking Davao City and General Santos City, which traverses multiple regions and integrates production areas, facilitating the efficient movement of goods, services, and tourists. SCMDC is home to three regional centers: Davao, Koronadal, and Cotabato. The corridor adopts a growth-triangle approach anchored on the primary transport corridor connecting Metropolitan Davao, General Santos, and Cotabato, with these cities serving as regional markets and growth centers in line with the South-Central Mindanao Development Framework Plan.⁵

The Bangsamoro Development Corridor (BDC) covers the mainland provinces of Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Cotabato City, the Special Geographic Area, and the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. This corridor supports diverse economic activities such as production, agribusiness, tourism, halal industries, mariculture, barter trade, and serves as the center for Islamic banking and financing. The economy of this corridor is anchored by Cotabato City and Marawi City on the mainland, as well as the municipalities of Bongao, Jolo, and Lamitan in the island provinces.

Mindanao's development corridors are further organized into five strategic clusters that highlight the region's economic strengths. The Business and Industrial Trade Cluster—which includes Northern Mindanao, Lanao del Sur, Agusan del Norte, and Surigao del Norte—serves as the island's business and industrial hub and gateway to domestic markets in the Visayas and Luzon. This cluster hosts heavy industries, industrial estates such as PHIVIDEC, mineral companies, and key logistics infrastructure including Laguindingan Airport and the Mindanao Integrated Container Terminal.

5 The South-Central Mindanao Development Framework Plan was prepared in 2016 by Dr. Arturo A. Corpuz, commissioned by the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA), with technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The Mariculture and Trade Cluster—covering Western Mindanao and the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi—is the top producer of fishery products and seaweed, contributing over 60 percent of Mindanao’s total production. It also produces significant quantities of rubber, mangoes, and coconuts, benefiting from close cultural and trade ties with neighboring countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei Darussalam.

The Food Basket Cluster—spanning Region XII and provinces in BARMM such as Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte—accounts for more than half of Mindanao’s agricultural output. This cluster integrates key agricultural provinces from the South-Central and Northern Mindanao Development Corridors, linked by a high-standard highway that facilitates efficient movement of goods to major markets.

The Biodiversity and Eco-tourism Cluster—located in parts of South-Central Mindanao and Caraga regions—boasts rich ecosystems including rainforests, caves, rivers, and pristine shorelines. It encompasses natural attractions such as the Agusan Marsh Wildlife Sanctuary, the Enchanted River in Hinatuan, and Tinuy-an Falls, and focuses on long-term environmental conservation and climate resilience.

Lastly, the Food, Agri-Business, and Logistics Cluster includes Davao del Norte, Davao del Sur, Davao Occidental, Sarangani, and South Cotabato, where agri-industry, processing, and mineral resource development thrive. Metropolitan Davao and General Santos City serve as the cluster’s twin growth centers, with Davao City positioned as the business, tourism, and services hub, while General Santos City capitalizes on trade, finance, and transport, contributing more than half of Mindanao’s gross value added in trade.

The strategy is anchored on seven key components that are interdependent and closely interconnected. These components establish the necessary preconditions for inclusive, balanced, and sustainable development across Mindanao’s regions, with peace, environmental stewardship, good governance, and human development serving as cross-cutting themes. The components include interconnectivity, industry development, investment promotion, institutional development and policy support, innovation, environmental integrity, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge and practices.

The MinDC complements the broader regional spatial and development frameworks,

including the Mindanao Spatial and Development Framework.⁶ Within the Bangsamoro Spatial and Development Strategy 2024–2050,⁷ Sulu’s designated functional role is that of an agro-industrial processing center, reflecting its strengths and competitive advantages within the region, Mindanao, and the BIMP-EAGA economic zone.

In 2024, a Supreme Court ruling excluded Sulu from the BARMM. Despite this, Bangsamoro ministries, offices, and agencies continue to deliver basic services and implement projects within the province. Over 5,000 BARMM employees remain committed to their mandates serving the Tausug people of Sulu. Completed projects are being turned over to the Provincial Government as the Bangsamoro Government plans to fully withdraw by the end of 2025. This transition poses potential institutional and administrative gaps in essential service delivery, including education, health, and agriculture, which must be addressed promptly by the national government and its agencies. In response, the Provincial Government is coordinating with national agencies to establish satellite offices to ensure continuity of services.

Given the uncertainties surrounding Sulu’s regional affiliation⁸—whether it will be integrated into Western Mindanao or revert to BARMM—the province’s critical role within these development corridors is being carefully assessed. Meanwhile, Western Mindanao employs a Concentric Y spatial and development strategy that leverages the strategic roles of Dipolog City, Pagadian City, Ipil, and Zamboanga City as key anchors for regional growth and development.

6 The Mindanao Spatial and Development Framework 2015–2045, published by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) in 2016, outline a long-term spatial vision for Mindanao’s development and integration within national planning.

7 The Bangsamoro Spatial and Development Strategy 2025–2050 serves as a comprehensive long-term plan for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. It was formulated by the Bangsamoro Government, led by the Bangsamoro Planning and Development Authority (BPDA).

8 Sulu is part of the Zamboanga Region (Western Mindanao) before the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 1989 through Republic Act No. 6734.

The BIMP–EAGA Economic Corridors and the Reconfigured BIMP–EAGA Economic Corridors



Figure 2. The BIMP – EAGA economic corridors.⁹

The Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area is a sub-regional economic cooperation initiative that encompasses the entire territory of Brunei Darussalam; the provinces of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Papua in Indonesia; the states of Sabah and Sarawak and the federal territory of Labuan in Malaysia; and the island of Mindanao and the province of Palawan in the Philippines. These areas share a centuries-old tradition of trade and economic exchange, where barter trade was a dominant form of commerce until only a few decades ago. The sub-region covers approximately 1.6 million square kilometers and has an estimated population of 81.86 million in 2023.¹⁰

Strategically located in the Sulu Sea, the Sulu Archipelago lies at the center of BIMP–EAGA and enjoys geographic proximity to surrounding member regions. This strategic location enhances its potential as a key player in the sub-regional socio-economic development efforts.

⁹ BIMP–EAGA. 2012. BIMP–EAGA Implementation Blueprint 2012–2016.

¹⁰ BIMP–EAGA Facilitation Centre. BIMP–EAGA Statistics. 2025. Accessed May 29, 2025. <https://bimp-eaga.asia/statistics>.

In 2007, BIMP–EAGA adopted an economic corridor strategy as a means to guide infrastructure investment and development. The aim was to stimulate growth in remote and less-developed areas through spatial or area-based corridors, allowing the benefits of development to extend to marginalized communities and contribute to sustainable and inclusive growth. The success of these development corridors relies heavily on the engagement of the private sector, local government units (LGUs), and relevant BARMM and national government agencies.

BIMP–EAGA's development strategy includes three primary economic corridors: the West Borneo Economic Corridor (WBEC), which focuses on oil and gas industries; the Greater Sulu–Sulawesi Economic Corridor (GSSC), which serves as the maritime corridor and the historical center of barter trade; and the East Borneo Economic Corridor (EBEC), which is designed around a multimodal transport network.

Of these, Mindanao and Palawan are key parts of the GSSC, a predominantly maritime corridor centered on the Sulu Archipelago. The region's geography, including the Sulawesi Seas, positions it as a strategic trade hub with strong historical links, particularly between North Sulawesi and Mindanao, and between Sabah and the BARMM. The GSSC remains the nerve center of barter trade in BIMP–EAGA, with significant commerce in agriculture, aquaculture, agribusiness products, food and fish processing, and tourism. This corridor is supported by active port-to-port shipping and shipping services.

Transport connectivity in the GSSC plays a vital role in advancing ASEAN transport connectivity. The corridor currently benefits from sea and air linkages, including services by Filipino local shipping operators such as Aleson Shipping Lines, Inc. Additionally, an air route between Zamboanga City and Sandakan is underway. The ports of Jolo and Bongao in Tawi–Tawi are especially critical to the region's barter trade, reinforcing the role of the GSSC as a dynamic driver of sub-regional trade and development.

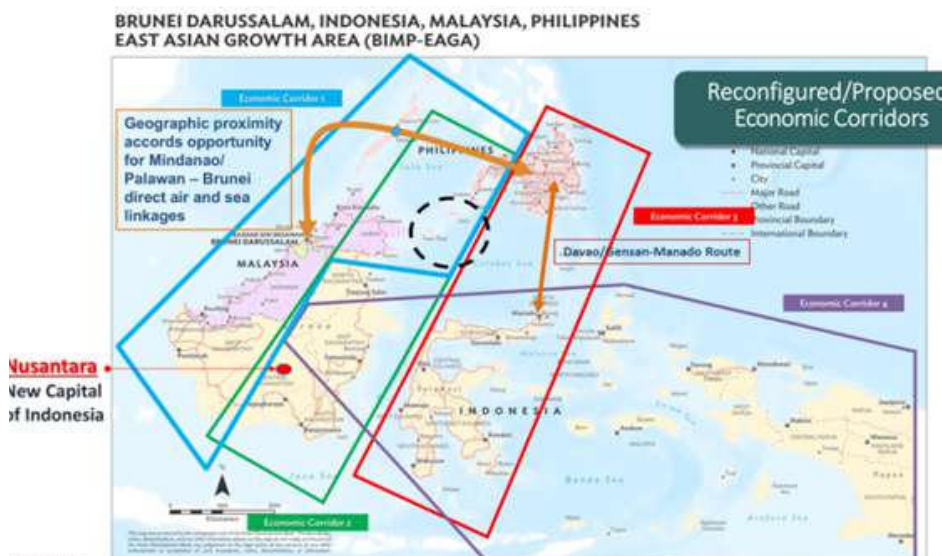


Figure 3. The reconfigured/proposed economic corridors in the BIMP-EAGA.¹¹

Recently, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) conducted the BIMP–EAGA Economic Corridors Study, which assessed the existing economic corridors and proposed additional corridors to enhance sub-regional integration and development. As a result, the number of economic corridors has expanded from three to four, with the Sulu Archipelago playing a pivotal role in two of these corridors. Based on the study, the proposed corridors are as follows:

Economic Corridor 1 (EC1), renamed the West Economic Corridor (WEC), is based on the original West Borneo Economic Corridor (WBEC). It has been expanded to include parts of the Philippines due to their active and potential trade engagements within the corridor. EC1 now covers all four BIMP–EAGA countries. In Brunei Darussalam, it includes the districts of Belait, Brunei–Muara, Temburong, and Tutong. In Indonesia, it covers West Kalimantan. In Malaysia, it comprises the Federal Territory of Labuan and the states of Sabah and Sarawak. In the Philippines, it covers Basilan, Sulu, Tawi–Tawi, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay, and Palawan.

Economic Corridor 2 (EC2), now called the Central Economic Corridor (CEC), is a reconfiguration of the original East Borneo Economic Corridor (EBEC). It covers areas in three BIMP–EAGA countries: in Indonesia, the provinces of Central, East, North, and South

¹¹ The reconfigured BIMP–EAGA Economic Corridors are based on the findings of the ADB BIMP–EAGA Economic Corridors Study (Asian Development Bank 2025).

Kalimantan; in Malaysia, the states of Sabah and Sarawak; and in the Philippines, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga Sibugay.

Economic Corridor 3 (EC3), formerly the Greater Sulu–Sulawesi Seas Corridor (GSSC), has been renamed the North–South Economic Corridor (NSEC). It covers mainland Mindanao and the entire island of Sulawesi. The Indonesian provinces included are Central Sulawesi, Gorontalo, North Sulawesi, South Sulawesi, Southeast Sulawesi, and West Sulawesi. The Philippine provinces included are Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, Bukidnon, Camiguin, Davao de Oro, Davao del Norte, Davao del Sur, Davao Occidental, Davao Oriental, Dinagat Islands, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, Misamis Occidental, Misamis Oriental, North Cotabato, Sarangani, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Surigao del Norte, and Surigao del Sur.

From the original GSSC, the states of Sabah in Malaysia and Palawan in the Philippines have been reassigned to EC1 (WEC). Meanwhile, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga Sibugay in the Philippines are now part of both EC1 (WEC) and EC2 (CEC).

Economic Corridor 4 (EC4), a proposed new corridor named the East Economic Corridor (EEC), covers the eastern parts of Indonesia. This corridor extends the BIMP–EAGA value chain into the provinces of Maluku (Maluku and North Maluku) and Papua (Papua, Central Papua, Highland Papua, South Papua, West Papua, Southwest Papua). It also includes North Sulawesi, South Sulawesi, and East Kalimantan. The EEC is envisioned to serve both as a supplier and consumer market, linking to EC2 (CEC) and EC3 (NSEC).

The development of these economic corridors is a critical driver of BIMP–EAGA’s connectivity strategy, underscoring the strategic role of the Sulu Archipelago. Additionally, Indonesia’s planned capital relocation to Nusantara City¹²—projected to house half a million residents and located near Sulu and Mindanao—presents further opportunities for expanding trade and socio-economic activities in the sub-region, which the Philippines can capitalize on.

12 Nusantara is Indonesia’s new capital, established to replace Jakarta due to overpopulation and the city’s increasing vulnerability to land subsidence.



Figure 4. The BIMP–EAGA designated ports and airports in Mindanao (Philippines).

As the nerve center of barter trading, four out of the five officially designated barter ports in the Philippines—according to the Bangsamoro Administrative Code of 2020—are located within the Sulu Archipelago, which forms part of the Mariculture and Trade Cluster of the MinDC. Among them, Bongao Port is further designated as a BIMP–EAGA Gateway Port.¹³ A review of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on sea linkages is currently underway, with proposals to amend the agreement to include other strategic ports, such as the Port of Jolo and the Polloc Freeport.

The MinDA, which serves as the Philippine Coordinating Office for BIMP–EAGA, is collaborating closely with the Transport Cluster, led by the Department of Transportation, and the Bangsamoro Government through its Sub-Cluster on BIMP–EAGA under the Bangsamoro Economic and Development Council (BEDC).

The institutional basis for barter trading in this region dates back to Memorandum Order No. 24, issued on July 24, 1986, by President Corazon C. Aquino, which declared Sulu, Basilan, the Zamboanga area, and Cotabato City as official barter trading zones. This was further reinforced by Executive Order No. 64, signed by former President Rodrigo Duterte in 2018, which created the Mindanao Barter Trade Council and officially designated the Ports of Jolo, Siasi, and Bongao as barter ports¹⁴—all within the Sulu Archipelago or BASULTA.

13 Gateway Ports, meanwhile, were designated through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by BIMP–EAGA countries in 2017 to enhance regional maritime connectivity.

14 Barter Ports have been established to facilitate the barter trading system and serve as official entry points for goods in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region.

Currently, Mindanao hosts 26 airports, 74 government ports, four (4) BIMP–EAGA–designated airports, and eight (8) gateway ports. Transport connectivity is the main pillar of the corridor development strategy, making priority infrastructure projects a focal point of cooperation. Within this context, BIMP–EAGA continues to support initiatives outlined in the BIMP–EAGA Vision 2025, which promotes resilient, integrated, and socially inclusive regional development.¹⁵

Air and sea linkages are crucial to this agenda. Air connections between Zamboanga and Sandakan and sea routes between Sandakan and Borneo—through the Ports of Jolo, Siasi, and Bongao—are critical maritime corridors. These routes are currently serviced by Aleson Shipping Lines, representing the Philippines in BIMP–EAGA maritime operations.

Despite BIMP–EAGA's ongoing development of economic corridors, the provision of reliable transportation infrastructure remains primarily the responsibility of national governments. Therefore, Philippine government agencies must collaborate with the Bangsamoro Government, the Sulu Provincial Government, local government units, and the private sector to fully realize the development potential of these corridors.

One key Priority Investment Project (PIP) is the Improving Growth Corridors in Mindanao Road Sector Project (IGCMRSP), an initiative originating from the MinDC and supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). This project focuses on enhancing land connectivity across the Zamboanga Peninsula, Sulu, and Tawi–Tawi. Critical components include the upgrading of Bongao Port (a barter port), improvements to Sanga–Sanga Airport, and the rehabilitation of Jolo and Siasi Ports. Additionally, the construction of a new, larger airport in Sulu—potentially located in Maimbung—is under consideration to further bolster Sulu's integration into BIMP–EAGA's economic network.

To support the goal of physical and digital interconnectivity across Mindanao, MinDA is actively working with key agencies such as the Department of Transportation (DOTr), Ministry of Transportation and Communications (MOTC), Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), and the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT). These partnerships aim to close infrastructural gaps and improve transport connectivity in BARMM, particularly in Sulu Province.

15 BIMP–EAGA Secretariat. BIMP–EAGA Vision 2025 (BEV 2025). 2015. <https://bimp-eaga.asia>.

Moreover, inter-regional transport projects are being prioritized to physically link Sulu with the rest of Mindanao. Notably, the Mindanao Transport Improvement Project, funded by the World Bank, aims to improve the connectivity between the major metropolitan areas of Cagayan de Oro, Davao, and General Santos City. While the primary focus is on Mindanao's urban centers, this project lays the groundwork for extending similar connectivity enhancements to more remote provinces like Sulu, enabling them to participate fully in regional economic growth.

MinDC Development Initiatives



Figure 5. The improving growth corridors in Mindanao road sector project.

The **MinDC** continues to advance key infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing regional connectivity and supporting economic transformation in Western Mindanao and the island provinces. Among these initiatives is the **Improving Growth Corridors in Mindanao Road Sector Project**, funded by the **Asian Development Bank**. This project encompasses major road infrastructure improvements across the **Zamboanga Peninsula, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi**, as illustrated in Figure 5.

A central component of the project is the construction of **three strategic bridges in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi**, which will connect the mainland to Bongao Island by land. These bridges are expected to significantly improve access to **Sanga-Sanga Airport**—the gateway airport—

and **Bongao Port**, a designated barter port. The bridges will enhance the island's logistical integration, facilitating the efficient movement of goods and people across previously isolated areas.

This infrastructure development directly supports the **mariculture and trade cluster** of the MinDC, bolstering its role as the **Philippines' front door to the BIMP–EAGA**. Upon completion, the project will greatly enhance intra- and inter-regional connectivity within the Zamboanga Peninsula, extending transport links via land, air, and sea to the provinces of the **BASULTA**.

Another critical undertaking is the **rehabilitation and upgrading of the Sulu Circumferential Road**, spanning approximately **168 kilometers**. This project aims to connect the **eight municipalities on Jolo Island**, the mainland of Sulu Province. Its completion, anticipated by 2028, is expected to provide vital land-based connectivity, improve access to local ports, and significantly boost Sulu's agriculture and fisheries sectors.

The Sulu Circumferential Road will link communities across the island, serving as a backbone for **intermodal transport integration**. When combined with ongoing upgrades to Sulu's ports and airports, this project is positioned to strengthen the province's strategic role in regional and sub-regional economic development. As a key node within the **BIMP–EAGA economic and maritime trading network**, Sulu's enhanced connectivity will serve as a catalyst for inclusive growth, improved logistics, and stronger integration with Mindanao and the broader ASEAN sub-region.

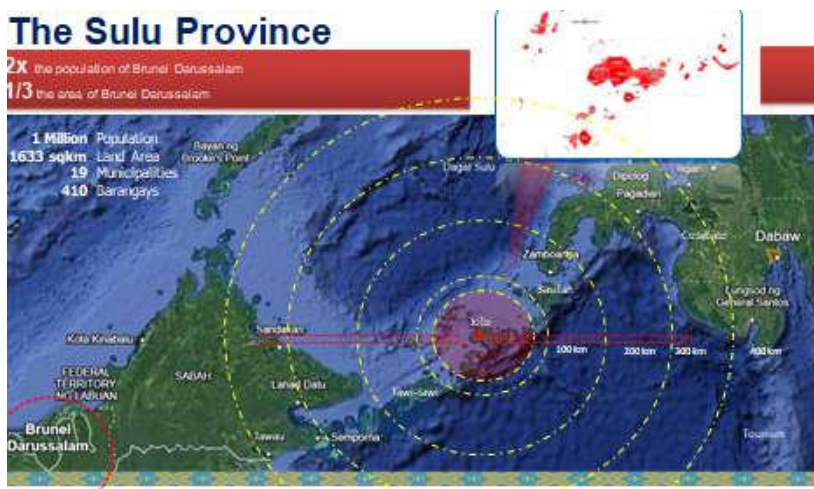


Figure 6. The Sulu Province in the Sulu Sea.

Sulu Province is strategically located in the Sulu Archipelago and has competitive advantage in the BIMP-EAGA. Its geographical proximity, historical and social ties with BIMP-EAGA and other countries such as People's Republic of China, India, and Arabia are evident of the crucial role of the province in the economic and maritime trading in the sub-region.

For regional context, Sulu province has a land area of 1,633 square kilometers (based on PDPFP) and a population of 1,000,080,¹⁶ 19 municipalities and 410 barangays. Its capital is Jolo, a first class income municipality and the most populous town in the province. The Sulu population constitutes 23 percent of the BARMM population and four percent of the Philippines. Sulu is located in the center of Sulu Sea, approximately more than 300 kilometers away from mainland BARMM, Western Mindanao Regional Seat (Pagadian City), Province of Palawan, Sabah and Borneo.

Despite occupying only a third of Brunei Darussalam's land area, the province is home to twice its population. It is strategically located in the Sulu Archipelago—which encompasses Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, and surrounding islands—and serves as a key center for barter trade in the region, reflecting its historical and economic significance.

The province is accessible by air and sea through the Jolo Airport and Jolo Port. Regular sea trips from Zamboanga City to Jolo served by Aleson Shipping Lines and Montenegro Lines (overnight trip) and Sug Aventure fast craft (backpackers only and limited slot). Leading Edge, a 70 seater propeller airline, is serving Zamboanga – Jolo two times a week.

16 Philippine Statistics Authority, "Total Population by Region and Province, 2020."

V. The Sulu (Archipelago) Economy and Development Prospects

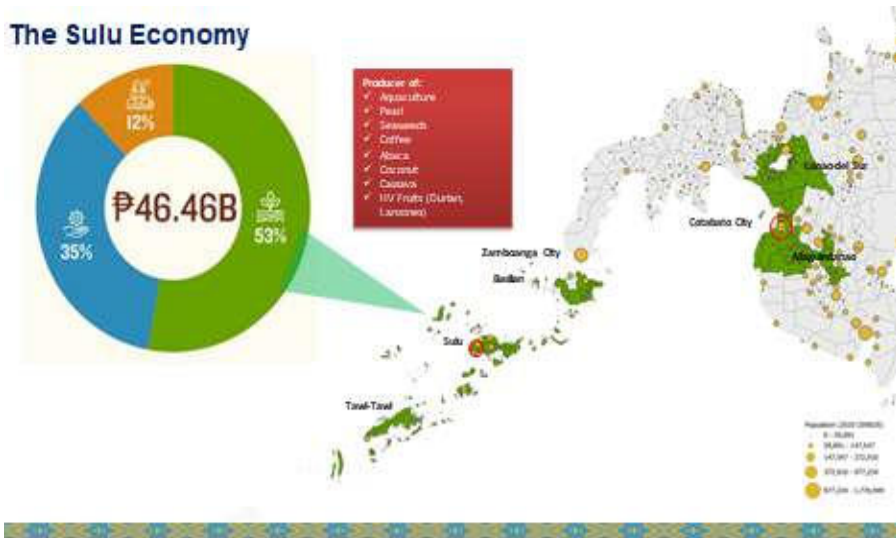


Figure 7. The Sulu Province economy.

The economy of Sulu remains largely dependent on the primary sector. According to 2023 data from the PSA, the economic composition of Sulu is approximately 53 percent agriculture, forestry, and fishing (AFF), 35 percent services, and 12 percent industry. The dominance of AFF underscores the province's heavy reliance on natural resources and food production as its economic backbone.

The service sector, accounting for 35 percent of the economy, includes critical industries such as healthcare, education, finance, hospitality, and entertainment. This substantial share reflects Sulu's evolving economy, marked by a growing dependence on non-manufacturing activities.

Meanwhile, industry contributes a smaller share—12 percent—covering manufacturing, construction, and energy production, suggesting a less industrialized economy with a stronger focus on the primary and service sectors.

Sulu is a significant contributor to the country's export market, notably accounting for 40 percent of the Philippines' carrageenan exports—an essential food and industrial additive globally. The province is also renowned for its high-quality, export-ready coffee, world-class Sulu pearls, and exceptional beach and cultural tourism destinations.

Beyond these established sectors, Sulu is endowed with untapped natural resources such as oil and gas reserves, promising opportunities in the blue economy, and a wealth of high-value tropical fruits. These resources provide fertile ground for expanding agro-industries and value-added products, boosting economic diversification and resilience.

Key development initiatives are underway to strengthen Sulu's strategic role within the Mindanao Development Corridor (MinDC) and the broader Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP–EAGA) framework. These efforts aim to enhance long-term growth prospects, improve connectivity, and foster sustainable development throughout the archipelago.

At the heart of Sulu's vision is the aspiration for “a progressive and peaceful Sulu steered by competent and dynamic leaders driven by empowered and morally upright citizenry, living in disaster-resilient communities and proud of its cultural heritage.” This vision encapsulates the province's rich socio-cultural fabric and the enduring spirit of the Tausug people, whose centuries-old traditions of governance and community resilience continue to shape Sulu's path toward sustainable development.

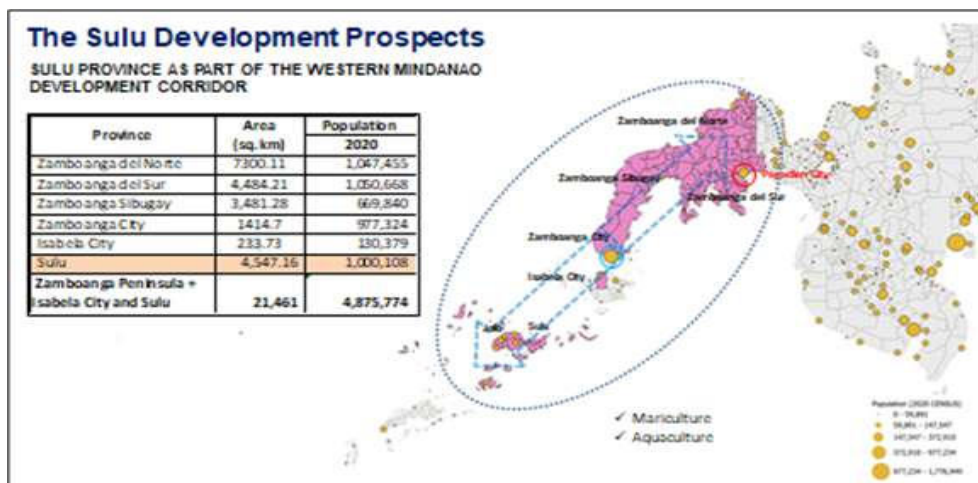


Figure 8. Sulu Province as part of the Western Mindanao development corridor.¹⁷

17 An agglomeration proposed as option by the author.

Sulu Province as Part of the Western Mindanao Development Corridor

The **Zamboanga Peninsula**, designated as the **Western Mindanao Development Corridor**, stands as a crucial mariculture and trade cluster encompassing the provinces within the proposed BASULTA region. This cluster accounts for over 60 percent of the Philippines' mariculture output and barter trade, firmly establishing itself as the nation's leading producer of fishery-based products.

In addition to its mariculture strengths, Western Mindanao boasts significant comparative advantages in agricultural commodities such as rubber, mango, and coconut—each ranking prominently within Mindanao's overall production. These diversified assets highlight the region's robust economic base and potential for sustained growth.

Sulu Province and the Zamboanga Peninsula share deep-rooted socio-economic ties. Traders, business leaders, politicians, academicians, and prominent public figures from Sulu often regard Zamboanga City as their second home. This longstanding history of trade and economic collaboration reinforces their shared competitive advantage under the frameworks of the Mindanao Development Corridor (MinDC) and the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP–EAGA).

Together, this regional agglomeration supports a population of approximately 4.48 million¹⁸ across a combined land area of 18,548 square kilometers. It is well positioned to sustain leadership in agriculture, aquaculture, cultural and eco-tourism, barter trade, and ecozone development. Key infrastructure—including the barter ports of Siasi, Jolo, and Lamitan, alongside the Zamboanga Special Economic Zone—bolster these sectors and drives further economic expansion.

Aligned with the MinDC's Mariculture and Trade Cluster and integrated within the Western Mindanao Concentric Y spatial development strategy, this agglomeration plans to extend growth to Isabela City and Jolo. These cities are anticipated to serve as dynamic growth hubs by improving transport connectivity and maximizing maritime trade opportunities within the BIMP–EAGA corridor.

18 Philippine Statistics Authority, "Total Population by Region and Province, 2020."

Zamboanga City remains the industrial and commercial heart of the region, while Pagadian City serves as the administrative regional center following the relocation of most government regional offices. The region prides itself as one of Mindanao’s key centers of trade and commerce.

For sustained socio-economic progress and enhanced regional integration, geographic centrality and efficient transport connectivity are vital. Accordingly, the agglomeration advocates reverting regional center designation to **Zamboanga City**, enabling it to better catalyze and sustain the area’s aspiring development goals.

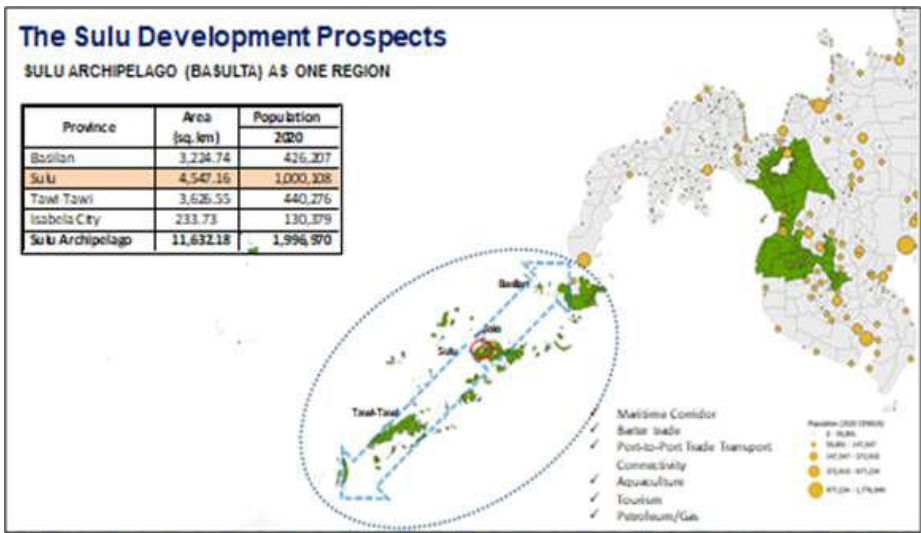


Figure 9. Proposed Sulu region (Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi).¹⁹

BASULTA: Proposal for a Sulu Archipelago Region (SAR)

Another important regional agglomeration concept is BASULTA, a proposed unified region comprising the provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. This area had a population of approximately two million in 2020, spanning a total land area of 8,713 square kilometers. Due to its geographical proximity, shared culture, resources, history, and potentially aligned aspirations, BASULTA presents a compelling case to be established as a separate administrative region.

19 An agglomeration proposed as option by the author.

The proposed Sulu Archipelago Region (SAR) has the potential to fully leverage its maritime competitive advantage within the frameworks of the Mindanao Development Corridor (MinDC) and the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP–EAGA). Historically, this region has been an active economic and maritime trading hub with BIMP countries and other partners such as China. The SAR could scale up economic activities in aquaculture, tourism (both beach and cultural), barter trade, agriculture, halal industries, ecozones, and more.

Home to diverse indigenous groups including the Tausug, Sama, and Yakan, this region reinforces the historical significance of the archipelago in maritime trade and development. The regional center could be located in Jolo, Patikul, or Maimbung in Sulu to maximize administrative and economic efficiency.

The region's long-standing trade relations with Sabah, Borneo, Sarawak, and Brunei Darussalam—within the BIMP–EAGA framework—are supported by deep religious, cultural, and business ties. This foundation makes the pursuit of **Greater Economic and Maritime Supremacy (GEMS)** logical and achievable, aiming to revive the archipelago's former prominence in regional trade.

The establishment of this region will require a strong legal framework, especially since it would directly affect the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) under Republic Act No. 11054 and other Philippine laws. This paper does not delve into the legal considerations but instead focuses on the technical and corridor perspectives within the context of BIMP–EAGA.

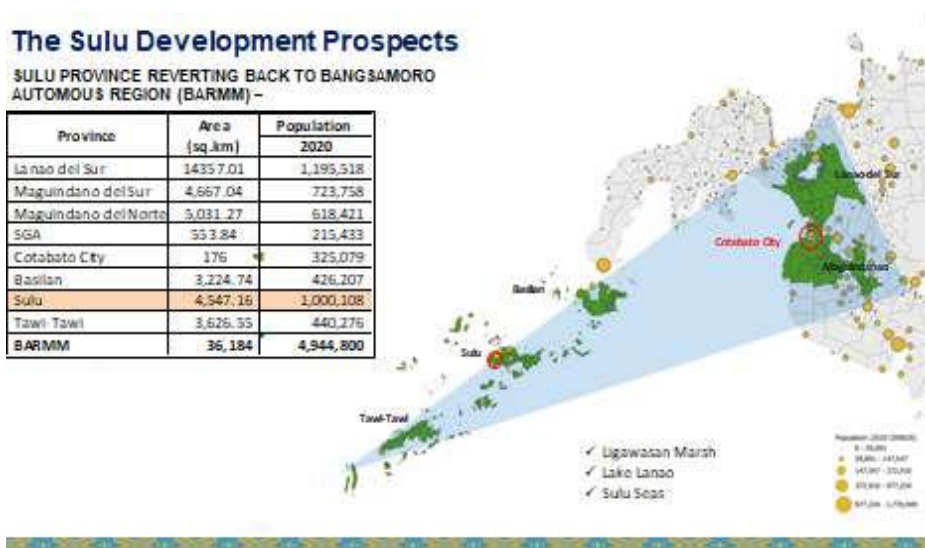


Figure 10. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and Sulu's Reversion

The **Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)** was officially established in 2019 following the ratification of Republic Act No. 11054, also known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law. BARMM consists of the mainland provinces of Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, and Lanao del Sur, as well as the Special Geographic Area (SGA), and the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu (excluded since 2024), and Tawi-Tawi. The region includes three cities: Cotabato, Marawi, and Lamitan.

As of the 2020 PSA census, BARMM has a population of approximately 4.94 million and a land area of 36,184 square kilometers. The region is home to diverse ethnolinguistic groups such as the Maguindanaon, Iranon, Meranaw, Tausug, Yakan, and Sama peoples. Key natural resources and sites include Ligawasan Marsh, Lake Lanao, and the Sulu Sea, all vital to the socio-economic development of the region.

BARMM is envisioned as the center for the halal industry, Islamic financing, and a major agricultural and fisheries hub in the Philippines. It is also positioned as the front door to the BIMP–EAGA economic zone. As a predominantly Muslim region, BARMM holds a competitive advantage in advancing economic and maritime trade within BIMP–EAGA.

A collaborative effort among national, regional, and local governments, supported by the private sector, has helped transition BARMM from a conflict-affected area to an emerging investment hub. Through its Ministries, Offices, and Agencies (MOAs), the Bangsamoro government delivers essential services in education, health, social welfare, agriculture, fisheries, infrastructure, and transportation—enabling inclusive development throughout the region.

Known as the **Bangsamoro Development Corridors**, these areas align with the Sustainable Accelerated Long Term Agglomeration of Multimodal Bangsamoro (**SALAM Bangsamoro**) spatial strategy. This corridor approach fosters new economic opportunities in halal industries, Islamic finance, the blue economy, and maritime trade.

Key economic anchors within BARMM include Cotabato City (the regional seat), Marawi City, Lamitan City, Jolo, and Bongao. However, the region faces challenges in transport connectivity, particularly between the mainland and the island provinces. For instance, the distance between Cotabato City and the capitals of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi exceeds 400 kilometers, with travel times to Jolo often exceeding a day.

Cotabato City is accessible primarily via Awang Airport (Cotabato Airport), which offers limited flights to Sanga-Sanga Airport but none to Jolo Airport. Sea transport includes an inter-island Roll-on/Roll-off (RoRo) shipping route established in 2023 between Basilan and Maguindanao del Norte through Polloc Freeport, served by the MV Island Paradise. This route aimed to facilitate faster and more affordable trade but was halted due to low demand and operational issues.

Plans to extend this route to Jolo and Bongao are underway to enhance transport connectivity. These efforts will complement ongoing infrastructure projects such as the construction of three bridges in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, improvements to the Sulu Circumferential Road, proposed new airport development in Maimbung, Sulu, and upgrades to seaports in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Additionally, enhancements in water and power utilities, information and communication technologies, ecotones, agro-industry, and processing facilities are necessary to support the region's sustainable growth.

Insights and Conclusion

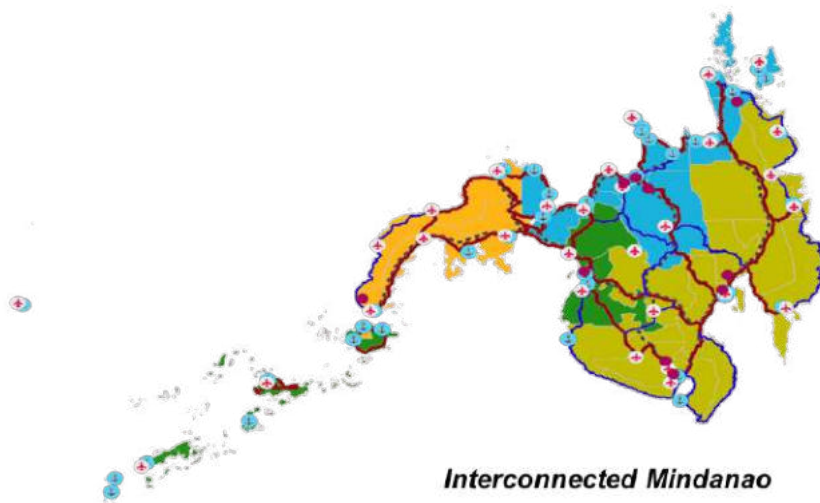


Figure 11. Map of physically interconnected Mindanao.

Sulu plays a vital role in the economic corridors of both the Mindanao Development Corridor (MinDC) and the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP–EAGA). Strategically situated in the Sulu Sea, the province has historically served as a central hub of maritime trade. With an economy primarily anchored in the agriculture, fisheries, and forestry (AFF) sector, Sulu holds promising potential for economic transformation—particularly in light of recent improvements in peace and order, enhanced local governance, and a united call for inclusive development from its leaders and people, the Tausug.

Ongoing efforts to enhance transport infrastructure and inter-island connectivity are positioning Sulu as a vital maritime gateway to the broader BIMP–EAGA region. These investments are expected to lay the groundwork for a structural shift in Sulu’s economy—from one dominated by the primary sector to a more diversified mix that includes industry, services, and value-added agriculture.

The MinDC adopts an inter-regional planning perspective that treats Mindanao as a single spatial and economic unit. It promotes regional agglomeration based on competitive advantage and scalability, emphasizing the importance of connectivity—both physical and digital—as a foundation for sustainable and inclusive development. By transcending

conventional political boundaries, the economic corridors under MinDC seek to integrate areas with high development potential into the broader regional economy.

Within this framework, Sulu emerges as a critical node in the maritime economy of the Sulu Sea. Its development is essential to achieving the strategic objectives of both the Mindanao MinDC and BIMP–EAGA Economic Corridors. Consequently, regional strategies emphasize the need for resilient transportation and infrastructure systems that can effectively connect Sulu to key logistics hubs, regional markets, and international trade networks.

To complement ongoing development initiatives, it is equally important to enhance water utilities, power and energy systems, and information and communications technology (ICT). These foundational services are crucial for supporting long-term growth. Moreover, the active participation of the LGUs and the local private sector in improving the business climate is vital for attracting investments and sustaining inclusive economic development in the province.

While MinDC supports all three potential development scenarios for Sulu, it remains highly cognizant of the province’s unique cultural identity and political context. Ultimately, the trajectory of Sulu’s development must be charted by its people and leaders—the Tausug—whose aspirations, values, and vision must serve as the compass for planning and implementation.

In shaping the province’s future, the active participation of the Bangsa Sug²⁰ is not only necessary but foundational. Their proud legacy of leadership in maritime trade and regional governance reinforces their capacity to play a transformative role in contemporary development. Through the corridor-based approach, Sulu is well-positioned to reclaim and expand its **GEMS—Greater Economic and Maritime Supremacy**—solidifying its place as a key maritime and economic hub in BIMP–EAGA and within the broader vision for Mindanao's development.

20 The term “Bangsa Sug” refers to “Nation of the Tausug” or “People of Sug,” where “Sug” is the Tausug name for the Sulu Archipelago.

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- Supreme Court. *Decision on the Constitutionality of Republic Act No. 11054 (Province of Sulu v. Office of the President)*. G.R. No. 237428. August 13, 2019.

4



NATIONHOOD, IDENTITY, AND POWER

Bangsamoro Right to Self-Determination: History and Prospect of Hard and Soft Power

RASHMIE G. ESTINO

Abstract

Bangsamoro was born out of the armed struggle waged by the Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu. Before colonialism, these people had established legitimate and sovereign governments called Sultanates—a monarchial regime whose legitimacy is recognized internationally as shown by different treaties and trades forged in the past. The Sultanate of Sulu was established and strengthened by a compact nation and dominated by the Tausug since 1450 onward. Their leadership was disturbed when colonial masters such as Spain, America, and Japan intervened politically and administratively—leaving the Moros in general to pursue their right to self-determination through hard power or the power to use military to defend their territory. With particular reference to the Tausug, several hard power or decisive moments have been witnessed in Sulu history. The battles in Sulu mountains in early 1900s, Kamlon Uprising in 1950s, Jabidah and the foundation of MNLF in the 1970s, the meeting of traditional leaders in Barangay Talipao Proper to formalize the revolutionary movement, and the participation of some Tausug during the Soviet-Afghan War in 1980s are evidences that cannot be denied in the past. After the birth of the Philippine Republic and with the pursuance of diplomatic means and peace agreements since 1970s, the Bangsamoro struggle underwent a paradigm shift from hard power to soft power—political autonomy inspired by international instruments such as the Atlantic Charter, United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 1514 and 1541 in 1960 and other legal documents recognized and the national political tool of Republic Act 11054 or the Bangsamoro Organic Law of 2018. BARMM is a soft power as it can influence the

nation's destiny through political values, cultures, and institutions that have greater bearings on the life of the Bangsamoro people at large. The paper is a narrative analysis of Bangsamoro history with contemporary soft power deemed as a decisive moment platform. The methods utilized in this paper are combination of personal interview, observations in some MNLF meetings especially during the celebration of March 18 as the foundation of the movement, library research, internet browsing and local publications in Sulu concerning the Bangsamoro struggle and right to self-determination. The epitome of the research is that "soft power" is a necessary remedy to cure two wounds in the past and in the present: historical injustices and contemporary political aspirations for a better Bangsamoro homeland.

Introduction

The concept of the right to self-determination (RSD) is a modern thinking. Its origin is traced back to the emergence of several political phenomena starting from the conclusion of Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 ending the thirty-year war in Europe to the emergence of the idea of the nation-state after the end of the First World War in 1918. The recent manifestation is ascribed to the United Nations program for decolonization—giving rights to colonized people to determine their social, economic, and cultural fate with some sort of political recognition (UN General Assembly Resolutions 1514 and 1541). To some observers, RSD is a form of political apology. It is actually a paradox principle where the same political entity which caused the subjugation of peoples and nations calls for the emancipation from foreign domination known in history as colonialism. This prompted some scholars to develop the idea of ideological transformations of colonialism into neocolonialism— as an indirect rule by big powers through non-political means.

During the height of Age of Exploration, Portugal, Spain, Britain, and other European powers vied to expand colonial possessions and created their own routes in America, Africa, and Asia. In modern times, this course was further exploited by several powers such as the United States of America, Russia, Germany, Italy, and Japan. The immediate effect was known to be the age of imperialism—controlling territories, dividing peoples and nations and accumulating wealth of the world through economic policies. It was only in 1960 that the new era gave hope for the colonized people to determine their polity in response to

the third wave of United Nations decolonization program.¹ Though decolonization and RSD are commonly viewed as positive drivers to decide political matters, they are not without their accompanying negative element—that it is also part of another political maneuvering aimed to design a new world order in the contemporary period. As Rauf observes, while decolonization and the right to self-determination occur, European colonial powers still had a firm control over their respective colonial territories, and during World War I, manipulators found the principle of self-determination useful for allied propaganda to gain advantage with different minority groups, for instance within the Ottoman Empire.²

Many believed that the Republic of the Philippines is an offshoot of neocolonial policies of the great powers.³ Viewed from a critical perspective, the Republic was built by the colonial policies before and after independence. To trace the line of its politico-administrative succession, it was first the Spaniards, on the basis of its initial entry into the Morolands, who transferred its acclaimed sovereignty over the Philippines to the United States of America through the Treaty of Paris which was concluded on December 10, 1898.⁴ It is actually a cession in which the Sultanates were included without their consent. From the very beginning, problems in the Southern Philippines were aggravated because of international conspiracy.⁵ Afterwards, the Americans adopted a similar but not identical strategy with respect to Philippine administration and government. It was similar as the American government also transferred what belonged to the Moros to the Filipinos – the people who had nothing to do with their culture, legitimacy in governance, and civilizational advancement particularly in the context of Islamic religion. It was not identical because the political transition does not happen overnight, as it instead passed through different stages through different situations.⁶

The Spanish handed over the Philippines, including the Sulu Sultanate, as the result of the Treaty of Paris in 1898. Perceiving the Muslim Philippines as uncivilized and barbaric, the American authorities introduced progressive reforms to civilize, develop, and educate their

1 Kennedy, Dane. *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

2 Rauf, Arif. *The Basis of Right to Self-Determination*. International Islamic University of Islamabad, 2018.

3 Key Informant Interview A. Conducted in Sulu, 2018.

4 Majul, Cesar Adib. *Muslims in the Philippines*. University of the Philippines Press, 1999 (2nd ed. of the 1973 original); Gowing, Peter G. *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1979 and Tan, Samuel K. *Internationalization of the Bangsamoro Struggle*. University of the Philippines Press, 1993.

5 Rivera, T. C. (2008). *The Struggle of the Muslim People in the Southern Philippines: Independence or Autonomy?* In *The Moro Reader: History and Contemporary Struggles of the Bangsamoro People* edited by Bobby M. Tuazon, Quezon City: CenPEG Books; and Tuazon, B. M. (2008).

6 Key Informant Interview B. Conducted in Sulu, 2018.

newly colonized Muslim subjects. However, in opposition to forced education, payment of local tax, and the incorporation of the Muslim lands to the United States-controlled Philippines, the Muslims launched sporadic and local resistance throughout Mindanao.⁷ With regards to the administration of the Moroland, the Americans created the Moro Province (1903–1913), which was replaced by the Department of Mindanao and Sulu (1914–1920), still under American rule. Another colonial institution, the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes (1901–1936) under the Department of Interior—this time with Filipino Christian leaders occupying positions—was also imposed upon the Moros to shape their socio-political destiny.⁸ Shortly before independence, the Commonwealth Government, by virtue of the Jones Law (1916) and Tydings McDuffy Act (1934), was promised the emancipation of the Filipino people and their subsequent independence after ten years as soon as they could rule themselves competently. Finally on July 4, 1946, Americans granted Philippine independence and completely transferred sovereignty and jurisdiction to the Filipino people.⁹ Despite the push for diversity, the abovementioned concepts show how the politico-administrative paradigm shifts are simply the continuation of colonialism. Simply stated, the Spaniards, the Americans and the Filipino Christians usurped the land, heritage, civilization and government of the Moros.¹⁰ There arises the question worth raising: who is to blame for the loss of Muslim government? Is it the Spaniards? The Americans? The Filipinos? Or the Moros themselves? Perhaps all of them have some share in committing mistakes. If these trends are to be rectified, then policies on regionalization, decentralization and federation must be promoted. Legal institutions are always welcome when it comes to solving problems.

Methods

This research follows a narrative and descriptive approach to highlighting the decisive moments of the Bangsamoro nation. It is narrative in a sense that many local residents' perspectives on the Bangsamoro struggle were incorporated into the analysis. However, some, if not many personalities involved in data gathering, chose not to be disclosed because they considered some answers to have personal or security ramifications. Hence, only a general citation is provided. Equal weight was also given to common resources such as

7 Salomon, Erwin G. "Remembering and Forgetting: Counter-Memories of Tausug Survivors of the 1974 Battle of Jolo (Sulu, Philippines)." *Al-Jāmi'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2024.621.1-34>.

8 Magdalena, Federico V. *Managing the Muslim Minority in the Philippines*. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2017.

9 De Leon, Hector S., and Hector De Leon Jr. *Textbook on the Philippine Constitution*. 2014 ed., REX Book Store, 2014.

10 Bascar, C. M. *Sultanate of Sulu: The Unconquered Kingdom*. Western Mindanao State University, 2003.

library research, internet browsing, and journal and analytical research among others. It is also descriptive insofar as it presents the relevant facts that happened concerning the Moro that were decisively experienced, especially in matters of armed confrontation between combatants in Sulu and Mindanao.

The narratives of locals formed the primary data of this research as they are deemed essential in bringing reality beyond assumption. These narratives include personal interviews with personalities who have direct participation in the armed conflict or have directly experienced and witnessed the scourge of war during the Martial Law era, beginning in 1972 onward. However, for the sake of confidentiality, the actual names or identities involved during the interview were not fully disclosed as the researcher failed to obtain permission to do so. This is partly due to the critical nature of data gathered and the gravity of some narratives rendered by the respondents.

The terms Bangsamoro, Moro, Muslims, and Tausug are used in similar reference. All identities have essential bearings on the formation of armed struggle in the contemporary times. Since American times, the Moros have engaged in hard power as shown by series of wars since 1900. After Martial law in 1972, the groups began to accept different platforms of self-determination and chose the soft power or the power of institutions peacefully applied to affect change and development. This soft power is derived from the theory of international expert Joseph Nye, Jr. especially in his work *“Soft Power: The Means to Success in the World Politics”* published in 2004. Political autonomy manifested in BARMM today is considered crucial in shaping the political destiny of the Bangsamoro in Sulu and Mindanao. As shown by different experiences of state development in other regions, soft power is effective and safe to pursue the right to self-determination.

Results and Discussion

Prelude to the Conflict

It has become the tradition of the world that after every great war comes a new world order. This political inevitability is actually part of the cycles of world leadership phenomena.¹¹ The Thirty Years War in Europe ended with the conclusion of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which eventually led to the emancipation of the people from the unregulated influence of the Ecclesiastical authority. The French Revolution of 1789 caused the initial erosion of

11 Colin, Flint. *Introduction to Geopolitics*. Routledge, 2006.

European Empires and established the concept of nationalism. The First World War was a grand strategy to disintegrate the three Great Empires then, such as the Austria–Hungary Empire, Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire which led to the emergence of the idea of nation–state—one nation or distinct group of people for one state.¹² Most of these big power clashes engendered conflicts in their found colonies gained through the age of exploration.

Conflict is defined as the confrontation between one or more parties aspiring towards incompatible or competitive means or ends.¹³ Peter Wallensteen identified three general forms of conflict: interstate, internal and state formation conflict.¹⁴ Interstate conflict occurs between states. Internal conflict happens within the states state–formation takes place when there are two groups competing for political leadership. In some perspectives, conflict in Mindanao is an extension of conflict in the Iberian Peninsula. Many contemporary Moros continue to view the Philippine state’s policies as an extension of Spain’s original Catholic–driven attempt at Moro genocide.¹⁵ That is why colonial policies of succeeding invaders such as Spaniards and Americans were designed to inflict heavy blows to the civilizational advancement of the Muslims in what is now the Philippines.

With particular reference to the case of the Moro people in what is now the Philippines, the struggle is caused by a myriad of problems such as the social, economic, political and ideological crisis¹⁶; extension of the great war or crusade in Europe and Northern part of Asia¹⁷; civilizational campaign to remold the socio–political system¹⁸; Islamic resurgence and revolutionary movements¹⁹; revival of the Islamic political thought on governance and international relations²⁰; and impact of the 20th century rise of revolutionary movements.²¹ Of all these impetuses, two trends created the largest impact: Islamic Resurgence and Revolutionary Movements.

12 Khan, Azmat. 100 Years of the Middle East. Maktaba Islamic Publication, 2016.

13 King, Martin E. A Glossary of Terms and Concepts in Peace and Conflict Studies. 2nd ed., University for Peace, 2005.

14 Wallensteen, Peter. Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System. Sage Publications, 2002.

15 Hawkins, Michael C. Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines’ Muslim South. Northern Illinois University Press, 2013.

16 Tan, Internationalization.

17 Bara, Hadji H., and Rodelyn G. Estino. Handbook on Community Peacebuilding for Sulu. Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao, MSU–Sulu, 2022.

18 Gowing, Muslim Filipinos.

19 Armstrong, Karen. Islam: A Short History. Modern Library, 2002.

20 Gross, Max L. A Muslim Archipelago: Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia. National Defense Intelligence College, 2007 and Sabet, Amr G. E. Islam and the Political: Theory, Governance and International Relations. Pluto Press, 2008.

21 DeFronzo, James. Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements. 5th ed., Westview Press, 2015.

The armed movements that rebelled against the colonizing authority especially after the birth of Philippine Republic on July 4, 1946, was caused by the external concerted efforts of Muslim leaders scattered in different parts of the Middle East. Ustadz Abdul Baki Abubakar, Ustadz Hashim Salamat, and Nur Misuari become the channels for Muslim concerns in what is termed as the Southern Philippines crisis.²² Salamat and Abubakar were inspired by the teachings of Muslim reformers during the height of Islamic resurgence in the 2nd quarter of the 20th century while Misuari followed the path of revolutionary movements that are mostly socialist in orientation. They worked simultaneously in different parts of the Middle East. Gross notes that some central Asian states like Pakistan, Afghanistan and nearby regions also become the training grounds of Moro fighters.²³

As globalization had already taken a centuries-long advancement which paved the way for different parts of the world to come closer and reducing boundaries to mere political claims,²⁴ its effect on revolutionary movements like the MNLF in the Philippines also intensified and led to them gaining international support especially in countries like Libya.²⁵ For example, the speeches and reports of then-MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari about unbecoming colonial impact on the Moros delivered in many Muslim states in 1970s produced a powerful imagery of resentment and helplessness that eventually won external assistance for Moro struggle. This was the same thread sewn by Imam Khomeini when he launched his campaign against the Pahlavi Dynasty and anti-Americanism ideology to pursue the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran which was finally realized in 1979. Nonetheless, MNLF failed to transform its ideology of independence into governance and was only fated to become an autonomous political holder entity afterwards.

Concept of the Right to Self-Determination

The concept of the right to self-determination can be described using different perspectives. Three factors are considered in presenting the idea of RSD: traditional, practical, and legal concepts. Traditionally, RSD emerged side-by-side with human beings. As soon as human civilization developed, RSD followed through.²⁶ Traditionalists believed that humans are born with some kind of inalienable rights and freedoms necessary for surviving and dealing

22 Salmi, Ralph H., et al. *Islam and Conflict Resolution: Theories and Practices*. University Press of America, 1998.

23 Gross, *Muslim Archipelago*.

24 Friedman, Thomas L. *The World Is Flat*. Penguin Books, 2006.

25 Tan, *Internationalization*.

26 Barten, Ulrike. *Minorities, Minority Rights and Internal Self-Determination*. Springer International Publishing, 2015.

with other entities.²⁷ For example, even the earliest people in the world such as the hunter-gatherers and nomads acknowledged and followed the way of governing themselves.²⁸ They organized their own leadership systems, social protections, and economic managements so that they were able to survive despite the existence of many threats to life. Without some kind of leadership and cooperation, it is difficult to sustain togetherness especially when uncertainties of life are high.

With or without formal authority, people and groups subjected themselves to certain kind of leadership and political activities. This is the reason why even violent means are resorted to when external intervention comes in their way. This is the practical side of RSD. It is mentioned by Schumaker that there are many scholars who subscribed to the idea of people's desire to develop and maintain strong political engagements given the proper environment and without too much restraint.²⁹ The political side of RSD requires the establishment of a body-politic like state or government usually satisfying the requirement set out in the Montevideo Convention of 1933 that a state must have: people, territory, government and sovereignty.

The legal side of RSD found its origin when the Atlantic Charter was approved and pioneered by two international leaders—Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill—in the beginning of the Second World War (1941). This political institution for self-government was strengthened with the birth of the United Nations five years later in 1946. Crimea notes that the new world order can only become peaceful if the people, especially those with distinct identities, are granted such right. However, national leaders and scholars fear that RSD may be transformed into secessionism where social cohesion may be destroyed by too much adherence to pluralist ideology.³⁰ Some argue that RSD is only applied to those political communities organized prior to colonial experiences. RSD perhaps contains a never-ending job to have legal definition. What may be applied in one case may not be true to all other settings.

Types of the Right to Self-Determination

Autonomy: Autonomy is the granting of self-government authority to certain groups, organizations and communities thereby capacitating the people to rule by their way. The

27 Ipsaro, Anthony J. *White Men, Women and Minorities in the Changing Workforce*. Meridian Associates, 1997.

28 Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. W.W. Norton, 1999.

29 Schumaker, Paul. *From Ideologies to Public Philosophies: An Introduction to Political Theory*. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

30 Crimea, Self-determination.

Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science by Frank Bealey and Johnson Allan defines autonomy as “self-government.”³¹ Among political scientists, autonomy has been seen as a sort of half-way stage to full independence for regions and provinces. Self-government carries with it the idea of sharing of powers between the national and the local government. As described, autonomy can be found between independence and controlled entity. Autonomous governments like the BARMM and the Cordillera Region in the Philippines are granted social, economic, and administrative powers in “organic laws” to manage their affairs in accordance with their institutions.

Federation: Federation is a genus term referring to all those shared government by two politically organized body-politic.³² The idea of federation varies from one state to another. Cruz describes federation or federal union as a combination of two or more states which upon merger cease to be states, resulting in the creation of new state with full international personality to represent them in their external relations as well as a certain degree of power over their domestic affairs and their inhabitants.³³ Examples of federation countries are United States of America, Malaysia, Germany and India to mention a few.

It should be noted however that the term state in federated styles should not be confused with state as independent one. While there are many states in federal countries like USA, Germany and Malaysia, they remain one single state in terms of representation and recognition in the international community.

Independence: Independence is a political recognition giving the state the capacity to exist and survive on its own. It is also a manifestation of external sovereignty wielded by any political organization.³⁴ Some argue that independence is considered as the fifth element of a state as sovereignty is sometimes incomplete unless the political capacity is given recognition. Although there is no such thing as a truly independent state today (due to the fact that interdependence and cooperation are necessary to maintain international survival of nation-states), it is the notion of independence that makes the state functional. Independence privileges the state to become members of the international community and

31 Bealey, Frank, and Allan G. Johnson. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science: A User's Guide to Its Terms*. Blackwell Publisher, 1999.

32 Elazar, Daniel J. *Exploring Federalism*. University of Alabama Press, 1987.

33 Cruz, Isagani A. *International Law*. Central Books, 2003.

34 Roskin, Michael G., et al. *Political Science: An Introduction*. 14th ed., Pearson Education, 2007.

enjoy the right of being an international political entity. Agpalo gives the following as the manifestations of an independent state:

- Freedom from intervention by other state;
- The right to equal treatment;
- The right to self-defense; and
- The right to international intercourse (trade, business, alliance, etc.),³⁵

Sources of the Right to Self-Determination

1. International Law

Although the effectivity of international law is still disputed as it lacks an international body to enforce its will upon members and since the objects of international law are states with equal status as sovereign entities, it is still considered to have the force of a law as it calls for the regulation of state's conduct albeit done nominally. There are many international policies that mention and recognize the right of people to self-determination. However, in this article, only three will be presented because of space and time-constraint.

a) The Atlantic Charter (1941)

In August 1941, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill held a conference and agreed on a joint statement to be published simultaneously in Washington and London. The joint statement, which was soon to be known as the Atlantic Charter, announced eight principles that provided the framework for peace and for a better future.³⁶ The Charter declares, among others, that “their countries seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other”, “they desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned”, and “they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.”³⁷ The first three points of the Charter recognize the right of people of different

³⁵ Agpalo, Raul P. *Public International Law*. REX Book Store, 2006.

³⁶ Hatcho, Yukari. “The Atlantic Charter of 1941: A Political Tool of Non-Belligerent America.” *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 14, 2003.

³⁷ Kelly, Martin. “What Was the Atlantic Charter? Definition and 8 Points.” ThoughtCo, 27 June 2020, www.thoughtco.com/eight-points-of-the-atlantic-charter-105517.

racess to self-determination, although the word “equal” was not mentioned. According to some scholars, by implication, these international provisions capture the spirit of right to self-determination.

b) The United Nations Charter (1945)

The UN Charter (signed on June 26, 1945) constitutes the first document with legal force to proclaim the principle of the self-determination of peoples, although the formulation adopted saw the principle as an aspiration, and not a definite obligation. The expression ‘self-determination’ appears twice in the UN Charter: in Art. 1(2), in relation to the purposes listed in Chap. I ‘Purposes and Principles’, and in Art. 55 of Chap. IX ‘International Economic and Social Co-operation’, considered a sort of ‘second preamble.’³⁸ According to Joaquin Bernas, the proposal made by USSR (one of the original proponents for the establishment of the United Nations) on the subject was to recognize the right of self-determination of peoples under colonial domination.³⁹ In recent times however, most scholars pushed for the inclusion of self-determination “for peoples oppressed by despotic governments, peoples under alien domination, and peoples of multi-national states deprived of self-determination by the central authorities.” Article 1 now covers all of the above.

Article 1(2) of the UN Charter states that “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.” Additionally, Article 55 declares that “with a view to the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples...”

Based on the above international law provisions, it can be deduced that the right to self-determination as recognized by the UN Charter is a pre-requisite to establishing international peace and security. Historically, it can be recalled that most wars fought after the First World War were actually wars for national liberation. Asia, Africa, and Latin America became central regions where these wars have been waged. Although both declarations were subordinated to the larger aim of securing “peaceful and friendly relations among nations”⁴⁰ within the

38 Crimea, Kathryn V. *Self-Determination and Humanitarian Secession in International Law of a Globalized World*. Springer International Publishing, 2017.

39 Bernas, Joaquin G. *Introduction to Public International Law*. REX Book Store, 2009.

40 Getachew, Adom. *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton University Press, 2019. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3znwvg>.

international community, it still has direct impact on the stability and well-being of people as the UN General Assembly later approved Resolution 1515 (XV) titled “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to colonial Countries and Peoples” dated 1960 which recognizes, among others, that “All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” In the last paragraph, it calls all states to observe faithfully and strictly the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Present Declaration on the basis of equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of all states, and respect for the sovereign rights of all peoples and their territorial integrity.⁴¹

c) The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)

Another breakthrough made by the international community towards uplifting the status of humanity is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights made two decades after the historic proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1946. The Covenant was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966 and entered into force on 23 March 1976.⁴² Bernas summarizes the principles recognized by the Covenant in the following order:

- Life, liberty and property, and equality;
- Freedom against torture, ill-treatment and unfit prison conditions;
- Freedom of Movement;
- Legal personality, privacy and family;
- Thought, conscience, religious, expression and political freedoms;
- Empowerment and protection of minorities; and
- Self-determination of peoples.⁴³

⁴¹ United Nations. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 10 Dec. 1948. United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

⁴² United Nations. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. 16 Dec. 1966. United Nations Treaty Collection, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

⁴³ Bernas, Public International Law.

The international law provisions discussed above, however, are not direct declarations as far as the call to grant self-government or independence are concerned. Viewed critically, the following analyses provide that:

First, as stated above, international law lacks international bodies that guarantee both enforcement and compliance. It is also part of the consent of the agreeing states to regulate their conduct and not to place international law above them;

Second, UN member states adhere to the principle of state's equality as sovereign nation. It does not allow any interference of any kind. This means that the force of international law remains dormant unless the states enhance it through national law; and

Finally, the idea of the right to self-determination is broad. It can either refer to autonomy, decentralization, federation, or independence. International law only recognized but did not define its real nature. Hence, it is up to the state to provide the implementing mechanism for this concept. In the case of the Bangsamoro people, the Philippine Government responded to the call by strengthening decentralization policies towards the people of Mindanao and Sulu. The Philippine government added one specific provision in the Constitution for the establishment of Bangsamoro autonomous government as Article X, Section 1 states that "the territorial and political subdivisions of the Republic of the Philippines are the provinces, municipalities, cities and barangays. There shall be autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and the Cordilleras as hereinafter provided."

2. Constitutional Law

There is actually no direct mention of the term "right to self-determination" relative to Bangsamoro's political destiny in the Philippine Constitution. However, there are two provisions that can be cited as far as this political right is concerned. One provision in the 1987 Philippine Constitution contains no direct statement but captures the spirit of the term by implication. On the other hand, another provision that cites the exact word has no relevance at all. For example, in Article II, Section 7, it is declared that "the state shall pursue an independent foreign policy. In its relations with other states the paramount consideration shall be national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination." This declaration directly mentions the term "right to self-determination." However, the meaning is not treated to fall under state-people relations. The concept here is the principle that the Philippine government has to take into account when dealing with other states diplomatically or otherwise.

In Article II, Section 2, another provision speaks about something that the Bangsamoro people can reflect upon. The following is worth citing: “The Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy, adopts the generally accepted principles of international law as part of the law of the land and adheres to the policy of peace, equality, justice, freedom, cooperation, and amity with all nations.”

The Atlantic Charter, the United Nations Charter, the UN GA Resolutions 1514 and 1541, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are examples of principles of international law. According to De Leon and De Leon Jr., the second portion of the declaration binds the Philippines to enforce or observe within its jurisdiction the generally accepted principles of international law, whether customary or by treaty provision, as part of the law of the land.⁴⁴ There is here an automatic adoption of international law as part of the law of the Philippines under what is known as the doctrine of incorporation. The Philippine government has created different institutions for the Bangsamoro to exercise their right to self-determination: BARMM is actually the latest instrument at the time of writing this paper.

3. Statutory Law

Statutory laws or statutes are enactments made by a legislature and expressed in a formal document. These constitute the main source of the law of the state.⁴⁵ Statute therefore is a law formulated by the members of the Congress and given the name Republic Act. When war between the Bangsamoro insurgents and the Armed Forces of the Philippines was pacified through a number of negotiations and peace agreements from early 70s onward, a number of policies were institutionalized. The first was Republic Act 6734 which created the first autonomous government for Muslims in Mindanao. The law was ratified in 1989 by four provinces: Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. The second was Republic Act 9054 also known as the Expanded ARMM ratified in 2001 by ARMM provinces and two other local entities: the city of Marawi and Basilan province excluding its city. Finally, the third and the latest is the Republic Act 11054 also known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law of 2018. According to Mindanews, RA 11054 is composed of ARMM, Cotabato City, 63 villages in North Cotabato.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ De Leon and De Leon, *Textbook on the Philippine Constitution*.

⁴⁵ Zulueta, Francisco B. *Philippine Legal System*. 2011 ed., Rex Book Store.

⁴⁶ Arguillas, Carolyn O. “Bangsamoro Law Ratified; How Soon Can Transition from ARMM to BARMM Begin?” *MindaNews*, 26 Jan. 2019, Davao City. <https://mindanews.com/peace-process/2019/01/bangsamoro-law-ratified-how-soon-can-transition-from-armm-to-barmm-begin1>.

4. Natural Law

Natural law is a moral system to which human laws do, or should, conform; natural law lays down universal standards of conduct derived from nature, reason, or God.⁴⁷ Human beings are part of a larger system that comprises the universe. For safe operation and function, the universe follows the natural law as provided by God. Natural law comes from tradition, customs, and religion. The emergence of different civilizations dictates that people adopt a comprehensive pattern of life and society developed through time. It is also clear that prior to the age of conquest, the people enjoy freedom governing their community. No one can dictate how they must live. It is sufficient for them that they enjoy life in accordance with the system they adhere to. As the community becomes improves, the system of governance follows suit. This is how the natural law allows people to grow without intervention especially coming from outside.

Hard Power of the Bangsamoro with Specific Reference to the Tausug

Mindanao and Sulu would have been enjoying different levels of development had it not been of successive colonial interventions beginning in the 16th century. The Bangsamoro nation might have been a developed and peaceful entity today just like its neighbors in Southeast Asia, if not in the world. Six hundred years is more than enough to transform society positively.⁴⁸ As of the moment, the BARMM region is yet to keep pace with the development efforts of other regions. The traditional governments then in the form of Sultanates attained a formidable political status which earned international recognition. This time, it is even harder to convince the Moro about the value of sharing of governance at many levels of administration and bureaucracy. As soon as colonialists arrived, the Sultanates used a hard power strategy to quell foreign intrusion from their long-established governments.

Power is one of the most controversial concepts that has yet to achieve a general definition. This is because power is relative: covering almost all entities, material and non-material. A number of scholars describe power as something that can move or change people's behavior, sometimes without qualms.⁴⁹ Usually, all these definitions conform to what

47 Heywood, Andrew, and Ben Whitham. *Global Politics*. 4th ed., Bloomsbury Academic, 2023.

48 Estino, Rodelyn G. "Colonial Legacies to the Bangsamoro: History and Prospect of the Right to Self-Determination." *Pagbanug: Sailing Through ZAMBASULTA History and Culture*, edited by Abhoud Syed M. Kunting, Central Book Supply, 2022.

49 Dahl, Robert A. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. Yale University Press, 1961; Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. 3rd ed., Red Globe Press, 2021 and Waltz, Kenneth N. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. Columbia University Press, 2001.

is termed as hard power or the ability to use economic and military resources, both inducements and coercive measures, to influence the behaviors of others and achieve desired outcomes. Often, hard power relies on command, control, threats, and the promise of demands.⁵⁰ Hard power includes police power, border control, and anti-terrorism measures.⁵¹ The most common manifestations of hard power are guns, ammunitions, fighters, bombs, and all other armed elements usually having the capacity to wreak havoc or destruction on human and societal environments.

It should be noted that the term Bangsamoro encompasses all Muslim groups residing in the Muslim political order centuries before the dawn of colonialism. As defined under Republic Act 11054 or the Bangsamoro Organic Law, the term Bangsamoro refers to “those who, at the advent of the Spanish colonization, were considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago and its adjacent islands, whether of mixed or full blood, shall have the right identity themselves, their spouses and descendants, as Bangsamoro.” While the Bangsamoro is a collective identity of the Muslim-dominated society in Mindanao, Tausug is a specific race used to describe the people inhabiting Sulu Archipelago since the inception of the Sultanate of Sulu in 1450.

Manifestations of Hard Power of the Tausug

A great myriad of battles or armed conflicts were fought between the Tausug and the colonizers since the beginning of colonialism in early 16th century. Spain, America, Britain, and other European nations, including even Asian countries like Japan experienced the fiercest moment of the Tausug fighters defense of their lands in the name of *Hula-Bangsa-Agama*—a Tausug ideology for political order encompassing territory, race, and religion. However, in this paper, only a handful of war battles are enumerated, with focus on those beginning in the American occupation after the Treaty of Paris in 1898.

1. Yearly Battle fought on Top of the Sulu Mountains

The Famous American Chronicler of Sulu battles, Vic Hurley, stated in his work *Swish of the Kris* that Moro wars were witnessed in Bud Dahu, Bud Bagsak, Bud Talipao and others in early quarter of 18th century.⁵² However, according to a Tausug traditional leader, it has become

50 Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs, 2004.

51 Matlary, Janne Haaland. *Hard Power in Hard Times: Can Europe Act Strategically?* Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

52 Hurley, Vic. *Swish of the Kris*. F.E. Dutton, 1936.

the tradition of the Tausug in Sulu that every year, a group of people climbs up the mountain to fight against the colonizing enemies in spite of the fact that warfare tools between the two groups are mismatched—guns vs. kris.⁵³ Hence, Tausug–American Battles were not only limited to have taken place in the three mountains mentioned above. In some situations, American forces found the Tausug to be strong enough to endure bullet wounds and requested for a special handy weapon to be made to curb the Tausug rebellion in Sulu. As a result, caliber 45 was born and likened to a 50 caliber in performance. According to Tausug tradition, this practice is fueled by the so-called “*Pag-Sabil*”. The term *parang sabil* may have been derived from the Bahasa Sug parrang which means to fight, and *sabil* from Arabic *fi sabilillah* (in the way of Allah), hence it literally means ‘to fight in the path of Allah.’⁵⁴ Sakili and Majul emphasize that “practicing the parang sabil is not going amuck as popularly portrayed in films in the Philippines.”⁵⁵ Sakili states that, “it was a religious and patriotic act directed against the combatants of kafir (infidels) or foreign invaders.”⁵⁶ Parang sabil is the Tausug’s way of waging a holy war. It was waged as the last option of opposition against colonization.⁵⁷

2. Kamlon Uprising

What follows from a simple land conflict—a requirement for land registration, is a horrible battle that involved tens of thousands of Philippines Armies to curb the rebellion of Hadji Maas Kamlon, a Tausug World War II veteran from the Municipality of Luuk.⁵⁸ However, several other reasons kindled the conflict between Kamlon and two Philippine Presidents: Ramon Magsaysay and Elpidio Quirino from 1948 to 1955. Kamlon’s story began during World War II as a war veteran. He joined forces against the Japanese soldiers occupying Sulu. In stories told over and over between cups of coffee among my old bapahs and babus and their friends, he was known for killing several Japanese soldiers during the war. However, like several Hukbalahap guerrillas in Luzon who refused to surrender their arms after the war and then later banded together as an armed leftist organization, Kamlon led his own comrades as they raided the Sulu seas and coastal areas in Mindanao up to Palawan.⁵⁹ The

53 Key Informant Interview with a Tausug leader. Conducted in Sulu, 2018.

54 Ingilan, Sitti S., and Nazer C. Abdurajak. “Unveiling the Tausug Culture in Parang Sabil through Translation.” *Southeastern Philippines Journal of Research and Development*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2021.

55 Majul, Muslims in the Philippines and Sakili, Abraham P. *The Concept of Space and the Islamic Spatial Expressions in the Traditional Architecture and Visual Arts of the Philippine Muslims*. 1999. University of the Philippines, Diliman, PhD dissertation in Philippine Studies.

56 Sakili, *Concept of Space*.

57 Ingilan and Abdurajak, *Unveiling the Tausug Culture*.

58 Yumeko, Kirari. “The Story of Kamlon.” Studocu, 2020, www.studocu.com/ph/document/mindanao-state-university-general-santos-city/history-of-philippine-education/the-story-of-kamlon/18209687.

59 Mawallil, Amir. “OPINION: What Makes a Hero? | ABS-CBN News.” ABS-CBN, 13 Nov. 2024, www.abs-cbn.com/opinions/08/29/16/opinion-what-makes-a-hero.

uprising was ended by Magsaysay's negotiation using the local leader including *Dayang Dayang Piandao*.⁶⁰ Before and after Kamlon's rebellion, two decisive moments were witnessed: the undefeated spirit and courage of a Tausug represented by Kamlon and the granting of the Mindanao State University (MSU) as an established educational institution that shall develop the lives of the Moros in Mindanao and Sulu beginning in early 1960s.

3. Operation Merdeka and the subsequent Jabida Massacre

According to Thomas MacKenna, at least 180 young Muslims coming from Tausug and Sama were recruited by the Marcos Sr. government to undergo military training for a special mission known as Operation Merdeka that attempted to reclaim the region of Sabah, now under Malaysia, after it was illegally seized by the British and subsequently turned over to the Malaysian government when the latter gained independence in 1957.⁶¹ According to one survivor, Jibin Arola, when the plot of the government was began to leak to the public and became too visible to the public, the soldiers were executed by the Philippine military forces for fear of grave political complexities that would come after political maneuvering by the Philippine state. As a result, public resentment grew intensely which led for some groups of Muslims to take serious action to demand justice for grave abuse of authority by the government.

What is so unique about this decisive moment? Why were the Tausug and Sama chosen for the special and difficult mission of invading Sabah? Why did Filipino military forces not organize in disguise to move for territorial reclamation with huge military resources available? Simply answered, the Tausug are fierce fighters and possess extraordinary courage and war skills that are tested in different battles. For more than 300 years, the Spaniards failed to subjugate the Tausug and so did the Americans in their initial years. The Philippine government took advantage of the Tausug's belligerency for their Sabah claim plan.

4. Rise of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)

Ralph Salmi identified at least three movements simultaneously emerging shortly after the Jabidah Massacre in March 18, 1968.⁶² Muslim/Mindanao Independence Movement (led by Udtug Matalam); Bangsamoro Liberation Organization (led by Rashid Lukman) and

60 Tan, Samuel K. "Three Wars and the President." *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2000.

61 McKenna, Thomas M. *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines*. University of California Press, 1998.

62 Salmi, *Islam and Conflict Resolution*.

Moro National Liberation Front (led by Nur Misuari). However, the first two movements did not develop into a full resistance that pursued self-determination after advocating for independence. This is because the Philippine government was able to pacify and invite their leaders to join the Philippine political administration.⁶³ What remained was the MNLF with its founder, Nur Misuari, a Tausug from Tapul municipality and a former political science professor at University of the Philippines. Misuari played a decisive role when he demonstrated in front of Malacañang Palace for nine consecutive days and nights in 1968 demanding that the Marcos government take responsibility for violations of human rights and disrespect for the Moro nation in the South. After the formation of the movement, and as early as 1974, MNLF issued a manifesto in Zamboanga City calling for the independence of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan (MINSUPALA), separate from the Philippine Republic.⁶⁴ The MNLF led the banner in liberating MINSUPALA. It was the first concrete and decisive move to revive the Sultanates—the established government in Mindanao and Sulu that existed for 496 years before the birth of the Philippine Republic in 1946.⁶⁵ Since then, MNLF fighters continue to pursue their cause for complete emancipation of their territory and people from colonialism and all its forms. The revolution only ended in political autonomy when international parties intervened, especially the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and Libya.

5. Special Meeting of the Tausug Leaders in Talipao Proper, Talipao, Sulu

According to one source, about 59 traditional leaders across four Barangays in Talipao, Sulu, convened for a special meeting led by Nur Misuari. It took place several months before the declaration of Martial Law on September 21, 1972. The agenda of the meeting were the invitation of traditional leaders to join the cause of MNLF's right to self-determination, preparation for the training of MNLF fighters in foreign territory, and resistance to the illegitimate Marcos government in the name of Jihad—a struggle in the of God. It should be noted, however, that Jihad does not mean Holy war for there is no equal in Arabic neither in the Holy Qur'an nor in the tradition of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Jihad, in this case, simply meant defending one's land after it had been subjected to external subjugation. The purpose of Jihad is to uplift the word of God and to find peace in the land.⁶⁶ The Tausug easily accepted the invitation as the growing resentment from injustice had reached a high, considering the marginalization and tyrannical regimes experienced in many places.

63 Gross, *A Muslim Archipelago*.

64 Abinales, Patricio N., and Donna J. Amoroso. *State and Society in the Philippines*. 2nd ed., Ateneo de Manila University, 2017.

65 Bara and Estino, *Community Peacebuilding*.

66 Bonner, Michael. *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice*. Princeton University Press, 2006.

6. Participation of Tausug fighters in Soviet-Afghan War in 1980s

As soon as the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States' Cold War policies intensified as it poured money to aid Afghan fighters and other groups to fight against the Red Army. The plot for outside recruitment of Muslim fighters reached as far as Indonesia and the Philippines through Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) effort.⁶⁷ As discovered by American intelligence services expert, about 500 Muslim fighters were recruited from Mindanao and several more Tausug fighters even joined the Soviet-Afghan war in the following years. The leader of these Tausug fighters was Abdurajak Janjalani.⁶⁸ This narrative highlights the crucial moment that even in this inter-state war—one that involves two sovereign nations, the Tausug people were able to show competitiveness and heroism as they extended military aid to their fellow Afghan freedom fighters.

Concept of the Right to Self-Determination

Bangsamoro Political System and Soft Power in BARMM

Republic Act 11054 or the Bangsamoro Organic Law of 2018 is the latest manifestation of the RSD given to the Muslims in the Philippines.⁶⁹ Political system refers to how the government is designed in terms of power structure, law making, and implementing system.⁷⁰ Unlike its predecessor, the BARMM political system is different from the ARMM as the BARMM adopts a parliamentary system as a system of governing. In fact, one of the reasons why BARMM did not come into existence immediately is because of its inconsistency relative to the political system of the Republic of the Philippines. The Philippine state adheres to a presidential system and applies the principle of separation of powers between the executive and the legislative. This means that the members of the Congress are different from the members of the executive departments who are also called bureaucrats. Under a parliamentary system, meanwhile, the principle of union of powers is followed. This means that the members of the parliament are also performing executive functions.⁷¹ In addition, in terms of electoral process, ARMM follows direct election while BARMM follows the opposite: the indirect election or also known as party politics. This means that the voters will only choose their favored party and the party will determine who will constitute the governing authority or in the national context, the ruling administration.

67 Clark, Richard A. *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*. Free Press, 2004.

68 Gross, A Muslim Archipelago.

69 Estino, *Colonial Legacies*.

70 Hague, Rod, et al. *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction*. 11th ed., Red Globe Press, 2019.

71 Roskin, *Political Science*.

At the beginning, many questioned the validity of BARMM as it contradicts the national system of government. However, to study and analyze the issue critically, there is actually no problem with applying the parliamentary system in spite of the fact that the national government adopts the presidential one. According to the Philippine Constitution in Article X, Section 18,⁷² *“the Congress shall enact an organic act for each autonomous region with the assistance and participation of the regional consultative commission composed of representatives appointed by the president from a list of nominees from multi-sectoral bodies. The organic act shall define the basic structure of government for the region consisting of the executive department and legislative assembly, both of which shall be elective and representative of the constituent political units...”* This legal provision clearly provides that it is up to the members of the congress to design how the political system of the autonomous region would look like and how the local authorities would exercise their powers. In addition, BARMM is just another local government unit (LGUs) in the Philippines that enjoys local autonomy and it is governed by a separate law: the Republic Act 11054. The treatment is the same with other LGUs whose powers, functions and authority are subject to supervisory power of the president of the Republic of the Philippines (Article X, Section 14 and 16). To date, BARMM is governed by 80 presidential appointees known as the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA). The first election was supposed to be conducted in 2022, but due to issues and concerns related to governance, and the prevailing global pandemic brought about by COVID-19 Pandemic, another three-year term extension was approved by the members of the Congress. This means that the first BARMM election will come after another three years will pass.

Following the theory of an international expert Joseph Nye, Jr. that “soft power” is a power that rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others.⁷³ Soft power is a staple of daily democratic politics. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible assets such as an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. In this case, four variables are deemed essential in shaping public order through inclusive governance. These are attractive personality (leadership style), culture (behavioral determination), political values (collective decision making) and institutions (practical norms and traditions).

72 Philippines. The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines. Official Gazette, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/constitutions/1987-constitution/>.

73 Nye, Means to Success.

1. *Attractive Personality*

Bahavioralist thinkers such as Max Weber and Henri Fayol attributed great leadership to strong personality.⁷⁴ This type of leadership is highly linked to emotional intelligence, critical thinking, decision making, and intuition, among others. Although personality is the weakest form of Weber's authority in deriving political legitimacy, it has proven different in matters of gaining support when the case is viewed in the experiences of the Moro people under both MNLF and MILF organizations. Hashim Salamat and Nur Misuari are charismatic leaders that have moved people into action especially during the height of the Bangsamoro revolution. If the people were able to sacrifice many things including life in search of long-lasting peace and government restoration, it is not without its equivalent effect to expect the same in matters of governance. Loyalty in the Bangsamoro milieu is high especially when Islamic doctrine is incorporated. The basis is found in the Holy Qur'an which states that "O you who have believed, obey Allah, the Messenger and those of you in authority". Now, that moral governance forms a great part of the BARMM political system, it only takes honesty backed by political will to rescue the Bangsamoro people from the yoke of underdevelopment and push for positive transformation. Traditional authority has been very much respected in the Moro history since time immemorial. Moro leaders can find effective administration as decision making followed through popular consultation is enhanced by collective effort as opposed to personal and dictatorial leadership.

2. *Culture*

The most common definition of culture is that culture is a learned behavior.⁷⁵ This behavior is acquired and transferred through the agents of socialization such as family, religion, government, peers, school, and media.⁷⁶ The general connection of culture to the realm of politics has, of course, a long tradition. Underlining this connection, Cynthia Weber has even argued that, "Culture is political, and politics is cultural."⁷⁷ Some scholars term this interrelatedness as political behavior or how people, especially leaders, behave in a political environment. This political culture/behavior can be defined as the total way of politics and government as practiced and seen by a given group of people, based especially on the

74 Dreijmanis, John, editor. *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*. Algora Publishing, 2008.

75 Palispis, E. S. *Introduction to Sociology and Anthropology*. REX Book Store, 2007.

76 Roskin, Political Science.

77 Ohnesorge, Hendrik W. *Soft Power: The Forces of Attraction in International Relations*. Springer Nature, 2020.

attitudes and opinions which people hold about their government.⁷⁸ In this case, public opinion for good governance sometimes cannot be imposed from the top-level management like government. It is actually earned through quality governance.

As the Bangsamoro identity evolved from the Sultanate government where both the rulers and the people viewed a body politic to be a shared responsibility and Divine Trust, it is but essential to redesign governance through a culture-based paradigm.⁷⁹ A pride in one's culture, and especially a public acknowledgement of one's cultural identity, gives people a sense of social and historical rootedness. In contrast, a weak or fractured sense of cultural identity leaves people feeling isolated and confused and hence may create a social dent that can tear the social fabric.⁸⁰ A towering Muslim thinker and sociologist Ibn Khaldun warned several centuries ago in his masterpiece *Muqaddimah* that when *Assabiyah* or social solidarity is removed from the nation, any civilization is doomed to failure. As the Moro people became Muslims, they accepted Islam as a fundamental basis of faith.⁸¹ Among the essential cultural characters practiced by the Muslims then are: ***Khilafa*** or vicegerency (which breeds responsible government), **respect for the vulnerable members of the populations** (which facilitate co-existence), ***Shura*** or consultation (which improves collective decision making), **humanitarianism** (which promotes human rights), **environmental protection** (which protects the life of every generation), and **public interest** (which provides avenue for equal protection), among others. These cultural underpinnings are not new to the Bangsamoro and they are in fact consistent with the principles provided in the 1987 Philippine Constitution. If they are enhanced instead of neglected, they can give extra push as sources of soft power to shape a collective political destiny towards an inclusive Bangsamoro governance.

3. Political Values

The greatest challenge to all governments is the determination of the state's authoritative allocation of values according to David Easton.⁸² This problem creates in leadership a political dilemma that allows congruent weight of decisions given to the same public interest. Such issues as human rights, rule of law, public order, individual freedom, social justice, national security, environmental protection, empowerment, gender and development, peace and

78 Steven, Allan R. "State Boundaries and Political Cultures: An Exploration in the Tri-State Area of Michigan, Indiana and Ohio." *Publius*, vol. 4, no. 1, Winter 1974.

79 Estino, Rodelyn G. "Governing Society in Islam." *MSU-Sulu KISSA Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2021.

80 Heywood, Andrew. *Essentials of Political Ideas*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

81 Gowing, Muslim Filipinos.

82 Easton, David. *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*. Knopf, 1953.

security, social protection, education and health, become bases of public service delivery by the government. It is always a sad reality that all states suffer from limited resources and unlimited public needs. The two often go in opposite. However, there is something that can be done to ameliorate the situations. This is where the level of prioritization comes in. Joseph Nye has noted that “[o]f course, soft power is more than just cultural power. The influence of values in situations of negotiation and persuasion has a long tradition dating back as far as ancient Greece and the writings of Aristotle.⁸³ Political values through constant practice influenced the everyday recourse of politics both in administration and policymaking. Such values as respect, integrity, honesty, human dignity, trust, loyalty, justice and freedom have been integrated into the politics of everyday life in the Bangsamoro. Even in the traditional political settings in Mindanao, many people adhere to the standards of these values even to the point of sacrificing valuable things just to protect common interests among the groups. In the case of MNLF for example, the Moro people viewed Nur Misuari as embodiment of political will and political freedom even if MNLF has been trapped in the same failure at the same scenario. What is lacking in this situation is the real commitment and dedication to public welfare guided by the strong conviction of the collective right to self-determination. Values are already present in BARMM has had many institutions even in its predecessor ARMM. This institutions, as will be discussed in the following section, are not only repositories of essential values but determining factor of rectifying what has been dubbed in the past as failed governance. According to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), “it is not fit for a Muslim believer to be bitten twice in the same whole” reported from Sahih al-Bukhari 6133, Book 78, Hadith 160. With tremendous means and resources or soft power available to the Bangsamoro today, many things can be accomplished that can change people’s lives to attain the *long duree* promise of peace in Mindanao and Sulu.

4. Institutions

Institutions are a collection of values and rules, largely normative rather than cognitive in the way in which they impact institutional members, as well as the routines that are developed to implement and enforce those values.⁸⁴ Institutions can be formal and informal. The former may take the form of the state, policies, governments, parliaments, courts, executives, department, agencies, public organizations, international organizations, and private organizations. Informal institutions are seminars, conferences, fora, public

83 Ohnesorge, Soft Power.

84 Peters, B. Guy. *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism*. 4th ed., Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019

consultations, workshops, and other social gatherings. Both formal and informal platforms are significant in shaping human destiny as Heywood and Whitham declared that institution comprises the body of norms, rules, and practices that shapes behavior and expectations, without necessarily having the physical character of a formal organization.⁸⁵

For the Bangsamoro, the strongest existing public institution is the BARMM which was established by virtue of Republic Act 11054. In its early inception in 2019, BARMM received feedback that it was better than ARMM especially with its “block grant” provision. The defunct ARMM had to go through close examination by the national government before its budget would be released. Fortunately, the BARMM has the opposite characteristic. The National Government provides an annual block grant which shall be the share of the Bangsamoro Government in the national internal revenue tax collections of the Bureau of Customs (Article XII, Section 15 of RA 11054). In addition, the block grant shall be released without need of any further action, directly and comprehensively to the Bangsamoro Government (Section 18). According to the same policy, the Bangsamoro Government will receive a more than 60 billion Pesos block grant annually. Other sources of funding will come from the share in national Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), regional tax collection and share from the national agencies. This means that BARMM will receive 60 to 90 Billion Pesos annually.⁸⁶ The Bangsamoro Parliament on Tuesday, December 10, approved on the third and final reading, the Php94.411 billion budget for FY 2025, following weeks of intensive deliberations.⁸⁷ The Block Grant received by the Bangsamoro Government in 2024 was PHP 70.51 billion from the National Government. The total Block Grant received by the Bangsamoro Government from 2020 to 2024 was PHP 337.53 billion.⁸⁸

The significance of this block grant in BARMM is beyond doubt as government programs and projects are highly based on publicly funds.⁸⁹ However, the Bangsamoro in general and Sulu in particular were challenged gravely by the Supreme Court decision declaring Sulu as no longer part of the region on September 9, 2024. Many observers questioned the

85 Heywood and Whitham, *Global Politics*.

86 Bara and Estino, *Community Peacebuilding*.

87 BARMM Ministry of Finance, and Budget and Management. Bangsamoro Parliament Approves Php94.411-B Budget for FY 2025. 10 Dec. 2024, mfbm.bangsamoro.gov.ph/bangsamoro-parliament-approves-php94-411-b-budget-for-fy-2025.

88 Lo, Katrina. “National and Bangsamoro Governments Approve Review of BARMM’s Share in the National Tax Collections to Promote Fiscal Autonomy and Development.” Department of Finance, 9 May 2025, www.dof.gov.ph/national-and-bangsamoro-governments-approve-review-of-barmms-share-in-the-national-tax-collections-to-promote-fiscal-autonomy-and-development.

89 Bacani, Benedicto D. *IGR & Enhanced Fiscal Autonomy Towards Meaningful Bangsamoro Autonomy*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2019.

High Court's decision arguing that BARMM is a piecemeal legislative response to Mindanao problem and born out of MNLF and MILF Revolution in early 70s. Many people who led the revolution came from Sulu, mostly Tausug, and sacrificed properties and lives in search of long-lasting peace. In effect, BARMM as an institution cannot be separated from providing public services to Sulu constituents, otherwise the spirit of revolution and peace agreements since 1970s become meaningless. The purpose of an institution is to make life meaningful, and without life, peace would be meaningless.⁹⁰ What would be the prospect of Sulu as a constituent denied from the justice carved out of their blood? It remains a political matter and legislators' public agenda to determine how Sulu can still benefit from the BARMM institution as part of Bangsamoro legacy.

Highlight of Bangsamoro Self-Determination

It took more than 300 years for colonial powers to completely transfer the political power of the Sultanates to the Filipino Christians.⁹¹ The Philippine government, after independence, governed its own affairs, without interference, so to speak. With respect to Moroland and its administration, the Philippine government has adopted several strategies and processes to realize what the community of nations, across the globe, are advocating for during the early 60's on the eve of two world wars—giving a chance for people to realize the so-called self-determination—a political concept which signifies self-government.⁹² How will a newly independent Philippines implement what was agreed to by the world in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, considering its multi-ethnic society especially relative to the Bangsamoro nation? Implementing such agreements is complex and hard to realize for many reasons. Theoretically, it was planned but practically, much remains to be seen. For example, during the Marcos Sr. regime, the program for regionalization was conceived in order to give different people sharing common characteristics such as language, belief, and culture the right to rule themselves under the unitary set up. During the height of revolution in early 70's, a number of agreements between the belligerent groups were concluded. Among the points agreed to is the granting of autonomy, which, after democratic processes are followed, ended in the establishment of a new political entity known as Autonomous Region and Muslim Mindanao or ARMM by virtue of Republic Acts 6734 and 9054 respectively.⁹³

90 Estino, Rodelyn G. *Classification of Peace: An Introduction*. Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao, MSU-Sulu, 2022.

91 Muslim, Moro Armed Struggle; Rivera, *Struggle of the Muslim People and Tan, Internationalization*; Rivera, *Struggle of the Muslim People and Tan, Internationalization*.

92 Abubakar, Abhoud Syed M. *Peacebuilding and Sustainable Human Development: The Pursuit of the Bangsamoro Right to Self-Determination*. Springer, 2019.

93 Bara and Estino, *Community Peacebuilding*.

The region covers only a few areas against the larger ones based on initial proposals. This was supposed to be the fruit of revolution—for the Bangsamoro people who sacrificed many things, even life, just to regain their freedom and stolen governance.

Given many failures and unrealized promises concerning issues and concerns about Moro problems,⁹⁴ and for fear of future conflict or war from the revolutionary movement, the Philippine government resumed peace talks with the Moro which culminated in the signing of a peace agreement—a new document that would spell out political solutions for the Bangsamoro. Luckily today, by virtue of Republic Act 11054, a strong political entity was granted to the Moros—the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)—after long years of crisis that almost destroyed the hope of Mindanao and Sulu. BARMM leaders can create change and can shape the destiny of the people through the institutions of law as a soft power. Now that the national government has done something worthy, local leaders in Mindanao should not take it for granted otherwise they would lose the decisive moments that may not be given again given so many failures in local governance.

What is available today for the Bangsamoro to decisively pursue their right to self-determination is the soft power (power of persuasion as opposed to coercion) which consists of leadership impact, political values, culture, and institutions. The benefit of this instrument is that it is both legally constituted and politically organized. Unlike hard power through revolutions in the last decades, soft power does not involve risks, fear, sacrifice, and too much effort. It is neither a life-death contest nor a zero-sum game which usually ends up in the declaration of one triumphing over another. What is required is commitment and dedication to abide by the policy of good governance. Moral governance as espoused by the Bangsamoro recently is not an anathema to the Philippine Republic nor to democratic political model. Moral governance is another part of soft power institutionally based. The values and standards it promotes are commensurate with those mandated by most states' constitutions such as equal protection of the law, public interest, human rights, social and economic empowerment, social justice, political participation, collective policymaking, environmental protection, gender and development, rule of law and among others which are bedrock of a strong civilization. These are all the goals expected to be implemented by any body-politic like state and government at any level. If the Bangsamoro people were able to stand (starting with MNLF) united pursuing armed struggle against colonialism and all its

94 Tuazon, Bobby M., editor. *A Moro Reader: History and Contemporary Struggles of the Bangsamoro*. CenPEG Books, 2008.

forms, sacrificing lives and properties in the name of *hula-bangsa-agama* (territory, nation and religion), it would be a great paradox for them not to be able to have the same level of dedication now that they have already transitioned and given the soft power to shape their community. An American saying states that “where you stand depends on where you sit.” The Bangsamoro people to date have many representatives sitting in political positions. It is just now a question of what stand are they going to take and follow. For simple illustration, there are only two stands made available: public interest and private interest.

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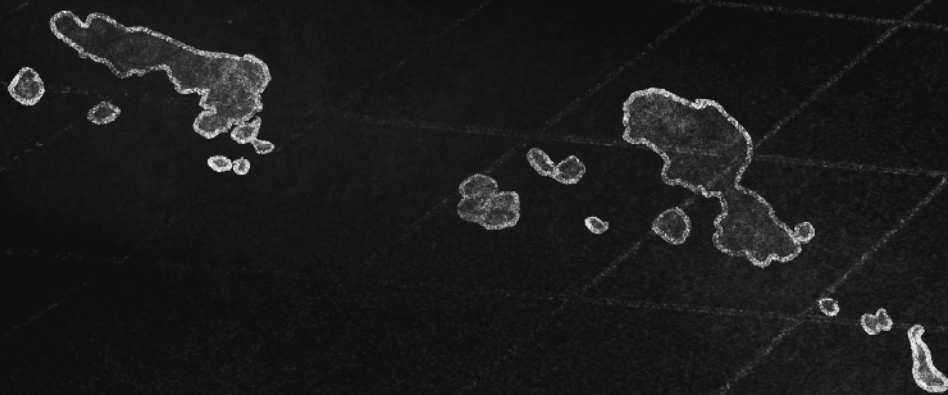
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The Text and Context of Province of Sulu v. Medialdea

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Abstract

From the Sulu Sultanate's treaty-making power to the Supreme Court's 2024 ruling in *Province of Sulu v. Medialdea*, Sulu's history reveals a persistent struggle for self-determination. The Sultanate's authority, rooted in Islam and recognized by Spain, Britain, and the United States, affirmed its sovereign status through treaties that projected its distinct political identity. In contrast, the 2024 decision upheld the Bangsamoro Organic Law but excluded Sulu from the BARMM, reaffirming its right to separate consent under the Constitution. This paper juxtaposes Sulu's historical sovereignty and its contemporary legal autonomy, asking whether constitutional exclusion represents renewed marginalization or a reassertion of traditional independence. The discussion highlights enduring tensions between divine, historical, and constitutional sources of authority, and explores Sulu's potential futures within—or outside—the framework of Bangsamoro regional autonomy.

Introduction and Background

Western Mindanao has long been a focal point of both challenges for governance and opportunities for development, owing to its location within a triborder area of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia that is distant from the metropolises of all three states, its proximity to the area subject to an outstanding international territorial dispute, and especially, its history as the meeting ground of cultures, beliefs, and political entities. The area witnessed the inhabitation of non-Muslim non-Christian indigenous peoples (collectively denominated as Lumads); the arrival of Islam and the establishment and expansion of non-Westphalian Muslim sultanates and polities; the advent of Christianity and the extension of Spanish suzerainty to Mindanao; the arrival of American colonial power, which succeeded in bringing the area under control through measures that included the encouragement of Christian settlement¹; and the brief Japanese occupation in the Second World War. Each of these changes was marked by political adjustment, normative and juridical transformation, and armed conflict, of which the insurgency-counterinsurgency actions of the early twentieth century are most remembered.

The succession of the Philippines to sovereignty over the area, first as an associated commonwealth in 1935 and then as an independent republic in 1946, did not fully resolve the tensions arising from the admixture of peoples and of religious-ideological, political, economic, normative-juridical, and cultural systems and identities. The subsequent history of Western Mindanao saw a series of armed conflicts, negotiations, peace agreements, legislative enactments, and even express accommodation in the constitution, each attempting to balance Philippine national sovereignty with Mindanao-based particularist aspirations for autonomy and self-determination.

It was amid the decolonization movements of the late 1960s and the sovereignty dispute over North Borneo that western Mindanao was plunged into renewed armed conflict between a particularist-separatist movement of Muslims politicized under the collective Spanish ethnonym 'Moro', and the central Philippine government based on Hispanized-Americanized Manila. The pivotal event that catalyzed the conflict was the Jabidah Massacre in 1968, where Muslim army recruits were reportedly killed by their superiors on Corregidor

1 Cesar Adib Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985).

Island. This incident, along with the increasing lawlessness and violence in the southern Philippines, fueled the formation in 1969 of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)² led by Chairman Nur Misuari.

It was with the MNLF that the Philippine government first entered into a series of peacebuilding agreements that entailed legal-normative and structural measures. The first of these was the Tripoli Agreement signed on 02 Muharram 1397 H or 23 December 1976³ between the MNLF and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GPH). The Tripoli Agreement promised the establishment of autonomy in the South of the Philippines⁴ within the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines, and of a Legislative Assembly and an Executive Council within the areas of the autonomy for Muslims. The Agreement also conceded to Muslims within the Autonomy the right to set up courts that would implement Islamic Shari'ah law; the ability to set up their own schools, administrative system, and economic and financial system; and a reasonable share in mineral revenues.

The section of the Agreement on Shariah courts was implemented through the enactment of Presidential Decree No. 1083,⁵ enacting the Code of Muslim Personal Laws “to promote the advancement and effective participation” of Muslim Filipinos in the government; and its provisions on autonomy were initially implemented through Proclamation No. 1628,⁶ declaring autonomy in the Southern Philippines. After a subsequent plebiscite,⁷ President Ferdinand Marcos Sr, who possessed legislative powers at that time,⁸ issued Presidential Decree No. 1816 creating two autonomous regional governments⁹—one covering the Sulu

2 Thomas M. McKenna, *The Origins of the Muslim Separatist Movement in the Philippines*, at <https://asiasociety.org/origins-muslim-separatist-movement-philippines>.

3 Tripoli Agreement, December 23, 1976, available at <https://peace.gov.ph/1976/12/1976-tripoli-agreement/>.

4 The areas of autonomy comprised the provinces of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, North Cotabato, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Davao del Sur, South Cotabato, Palawan.

5 See Bacani, Benedicto R., “Shariah Law and the ARMM”, ARMM Roundtable Series No. 8, March 5, 2004. Available at https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=7f513f7c-4328-1695-0910-79b2ea02256d&groupId=252038, last accessed 11 August 2025.

6 Proclamation No. 1628, March 25, 1977, available at https://lawphil.net/executive/proc/proc1977/proc_1628_1977.html.

7 Carolyn Arguillas, *The Bangsamoro Dream (3): 21 years of ARMM, 32 years of autonomy experimentation*, MindaNews, Sept. 10, 2011, at <https://mindanews.com/special-reports/2011/09/the-bangsamoro-dream-21-years-of-armm-32-years-of-autonomy-experimentation/#gsc.tab=0>.

8 Pursuant to Amendment No. 6 to the 1973 Constitution

9 Bell, Christine and Utley, Vanessa, “Chronology of Mindanao Peace Agreements”, Briefing Paper 02 (2015). Available at <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Briefing-Paper-Philippines-Mindanao-Chronology.pdf>, last accessed 11 August 2025.

archipelago and Zamboanga peninsula, and the other covering the provinces of Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, North Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat on mainland Mindanao. These measures constituted significant—and, truth be told, exceptional—developments for Philippine jurisprudence: the Code of Muslim Personal Laws carved out an Islamic legal system within a formally secular Philippine legal system that otherwise required separation of religion and civil government; while Presidential Decree No. 1816 created a regional government system that was not contemplated in the 1973 Constitution and only implicitly justifiable under its brief mention of local autonomy.

After the People Power Revolution of 1986, the 1987 Constitution of the Philippines created an explicit basis for further attempts at building and enhancing regional autonomy. Article X, Section 15 of that Constitution provided that:

“There shall be created autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and in the Cordilleras consisting of provinces, cities, municipalities, and geographical areas sharing common and distinctive historical and cultural heritage, economic and social structures, and other relevant characteristics within the framework of this Constitution and the national sovereignty as well as territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines.”

Section 18 of the same Article required Congress to “enact an organic act for each autonomous region” that would “define the basic structure of government for the region consisting of the executive department and legislative assembly” and “provide for special courts with personal, family, and property law jurisdiction consistent with the provisions of this Constitution and national laws.” It also provided that:

“The creation of the autonomous region shall be effective when approved by majority of the votes cast by the constituent units in a plebiscite called for the purpose, provided that only provinces, cities and geographic areas voting favorably in such plebiscite shall be included in the autonomous region.”

Thereafter, Congress created one Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) through Republic Act No. 6734. When the law and plebiscite to approve it were questioned before the Supreme Court, the tribunal laid down two key principles: first, that the plebiscite contemplated by the Constitution and the statute would determine the two questions of whether there would be an autonomous region and which provinces and cities would comprise it; and second, that the majority of the votes cast by the constituent units in a plebiscite, and not the majority of all the votes in the plebiscite, would be required for the

creation of the autonomous region.¹⁰ Thereafter, among the inhabitants of the provinces and cities listed under that statute, the voters in Lanao del Sur (except for Marawi City), Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi opted to join the ARMM.¹¹

On 02 September 1996, the government and the MNLF signed the Final Peace Agreement (FPA), intended to constitute “the full implementation” of the 1996 Tripoli Agreement. Phase 1 of the implementation of the FPA involved the establishment of the Special Zone of Peace and Development in Southern Philippines (SZOPAD)¹² and of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD); and Phase 2 would be the repeal of Republic Act No. 6734 and the creation of a new regional autonomous government with a Regional Legislative Assembly and an Executive Council. Phase 2 was carried out in 2001 through the enactment Republic Act No. 9054,¹³ which was, however, characterized as a “unilateral” act that omitted portions of the FPA. In the plebiscite of 14 August 2001, the majority of voters in all of the original ARMM provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi approved the amendment of ARMM charter; but only the voters in Basilan and Marawi City approved to join the four original provinces of the ARMM.

In the meantime, the Philippine Government had also begun negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a secessionist armed group that was formed by MNLF dissidents following disagreements on the conduct of peace negotiations. An early milestone of the negotiations was the signing on 24 March 2001 of the Agreement on the General Framework for the Resumption of Peace Talks.

These talks initially culminated in the signing on 05 August 2008 of the Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain Aspect of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001 (MOA-AD) between the Philippine Government and the MILF. The MOA-AD recognized a Bangsamoro homeland and a Bangsamoro people comprising the inhabitants of Mindanao, the Sulu archipelago, and Palawan, whose right to self-governance was deemed to be based

10 Abbas v. Commission on Elections, G.R. No. 89651, November 10, 1989, En Banc.

11 Anonymous, “ARMM History”, 28 June 2018. Available at <https://www.csc.gov.ph/regional-offices/barmm/about-us>, last accessed 11 August 2025.

12 This would cover the provinces of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, North Cotabato, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Davao del Sur, South Cotabato, Sarangani, and Palawan and the cities of Cotabato, Dapitan, Dipolog, General Santos, Iligan, Marawi, Pagadian, Zamboanga and Puerto Princesa. Final Peace Agreement, II.3

13 Republic Act No. 9054 (2001), An Act to Strengthen and Expand the Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Amending for the Purpose Republic Act No. 6734, Entitled 'An Act Providing for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao,' As Amended.

on the “ancestral territoriality” of the Moro sultanates as “First Nation”; and provided for the establishment of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity with an “associative” relationship to the Central Government. Subsequently, the MOA-AD was questioned before the Supreme Court, which declared it unconstitutional¹⁴ largely due to the MOA-AD’s treatment of the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity as being, in effect, an associated state, implying a path to independence that ran contrary to the Constitution’s recognition of a single Philippine state.¹⁵

Negotiations resumed between the GPH and MILF, and on 24 April 2012 they signed the GPH-MILF Decision Points on Principles as of April 2012, which stated that:

“The Parties agree that the status quo is unacceptable and that the Parties will work for the creation of a new autonomous political entity in place of the ARMM.”

Within the same year they signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) on 15 October 2012 between the GPH and the MILF. In the FAB, they agreed that a new autonomous political entity, the Bangsamoro, would replace the ARMM, and that:

“The provinces, cities, municipalities, barangays and geographic areas within its territory shall be the constituent units of the Bangsamoro.”¹⁶

After further negotiations on various aspects of the settlement, the GPH and MILF signed the various texts setting out the details of the FAB: the Annex on Transitional Arrangements on 27 February 2013, the Annex on Revenue Generation and Wealth Sharing on 13 July 2013, the Annex on Power-Sharing on 08 December 2013, and the Annex on Normalization and the Addendum on Bangsamoro Waters on 25 January 2014. Finally, they signed on 27 March 2014 the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB)¹⁷, which listed the various negotiated texts of the GPH and the MILF as integral parts.

One key milestone in the implementation of the CAP was the enactment of Republic Act No. 11054, or the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), signed into law on July 27, 2018, by then-President Rodrigo Roa Duterte.¹⁸ The statute replaced the ARMM with a new autonomous

14 Province of North Cotabato v. Government, G.R. No. 183591, October 14, 2008.

15 Id.

16 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, paras I.1, I.3

17 The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, March 27, 2014.

18 Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, Duterte signs Bangsamoro Organic Law, July 27, 2018, available at <https://peace.gov.ph/2018/07/prrd-signs-bangsamoro-organic-law/>.

political entity—the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), whose territory would comprise the area of the ARMM under Republic Act No. 6743 as amended by Republic Act No. 9054, as well as additional municipalities, barangays and cities listed under Article III thereof, subject to the results of the plebiscite.

Plebiscites for the BOL’s ratification were held on two dates. The first was on 21 January 2019, in the geographical areas of the ARMM, Isabela City, and Cotabato City. The second took place on 06 February 2019, in Lanao del Norte and various municipalities in North Cotabato.¹⁹ The results of the first plebiscite showed an overall majority in favor of the BOL with 1,540,017 “Yes” votes against 198,750 “No” votes across the ARMM. However, the Province of Sulu specifically rejected the law, with 163,526 “No” votes against 137,630 “Yes” votes.²⁰

Decision of the Supreme Court

Summary of the Decision

Republic Act No. 11054 faced immediate legal challenges, with several petitions being filed before the Supreme Court to question its constitutionality prior to the holding of the plebiscite. These petitions were docketed as G.R. No. 242255, filed by the Province of Sulu on October 17, 2018; G.R. No. 243246, filed by the Philippine Constitution Association (PHILCONSA) on December 11, 2018; and G.R. No. 243693, filed by Representatives Abdullah D. Dimaporo and Mohamad Khalid Q. Dimaporo on January 17, 2019.

On September 9, 2024, the Supreme Court handed down its 100–page decision²¹ on these consolidated petitions, which was mainly a signal victory for the BARMM and its proponents, except insofar as it partially granted the petition from the Province of Sulu by declaring void the provision of the Bangsamoro Organic Law that counted the current ARMM as a single voting area in the plebiscite. The Court, however, upheld the constitutionality of the remaining provisions of the BOL.

The Supreme Court's decision addressed a range of constitutional questions raised by the petitions. At the outset, the Court affirmed that Congress has the power to repeal or

19 Carolyn Arguillas, Bangsamoro law ratified; how soon can transition from ARMM to BARMM begin?, MindaNews, Jan. 26, 2019.

20 Id.

21 Province of Sulu v. Medialdea, G.R. No. 242255, September 09, 2024.

replace an earlier organic act with a new one, as long as the new law is consistent with the Constitution and is ratified by the affected people. The creation of BARMM was thus found to be within Congress's legislative authority. The Court also clarified that the BARMM is not a substate, as the autonomy granted is limited to internal governance, with matters of national defense, security, citizenship, foreign policy, and foreign trade remaining under the exclusive control of the national government.

The Court also held that the parliamentary form of government for the Bangsamoro is not unconstitutional, as the Constitution does not prescribe a specific governmental structure for autonomous regions, only that the executive and legislative branches must be elective and representative. This was an important legal validation for the parliament-cabinet structure agreed on in the FAB and established in the BOL, which is an arrangement not found in any other governmental level of the Philippines and which is closer to that found in the federal states of Malaysia.

As the claim that the BOL violates indigenous peoples' rights, the Court found it to be without merit. It may be recalled that the status of non-Muslim indigenous peoples had been debated in view of their non-participation in the negotiation of the CAB and the relative silence of early drafts of the BOL on the rights of non-Muslim minorities, which gave rise to concerns that their distinct identities would be derogated by law, thus:

“The overall fear of Lumads is that the Moros might try to further assimilate them, and that they could be pressured to convert to Islam or would otherwise lose their cultural distinctiveness, along with their ancestral lands. Given that IP advocates have reported the bureaucratic imposition of Arabic names on Lumads within the ARMM, as well as other pressures to assimilate to dominant Moro norms, such fears are not entirely unfounded.”²²

In the Province of Sulu decision, however, the Court cited the presence of provisions in the legislated BOL that would protect non-Muslim indigenous peoples. It highlighted the fact the Bangsamoro identity under the BOL is inclusive and voluntary, and it noted that the BOL includes safeguards for non-Moro indigenous peoples, such as reserved parliamentary seats and the recognition of their customary laws and ancestral domains.

22 Paredes, Oona, “Indigenous vs. native: negotiating the place of Lumads in the Bangsamoro homeland”, *Asian Ethnicity*, Volume 16, Issue 2 (2015), at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14631369.2015.1003690>, last accessed 02 July 2018.

The Sulu Inclusion Issue

The most significant portion of Court's decision dealt with the non-joining of Sulu in the Bangsamoro. This ruling was based on the principle that each constituent unit, such as a province or city, must individually approve its inclusion in an autonomous region. The Court further ruled that the BOL's provision treating the ARMM provinces and cities as a single geographical area for the plebiscite was a breach of the Constitution, as it violated the principle that the vote of each constituent unit is paramount for its inclusion.

The crux of the Supreme Court's ruling on the revolved around the constitutional provision for creating autonomous regions. Article X, Section 18 of the 1987 Constitution explicitly states that the creation of an autonomous region is effective only when approved by a majority of the votes cast by the constituent units in a plebiscite. It further mandates that "only provinces, cities, and geographic areas voting favorably in such plebiscite shall be included in the autonomous region." This principle was supported by the records of the Constitutional Commission and the ruling in *Abbas v. COMELEC*,²³ which held that the inclusion of a province or city in an autonomous region depends on the majority vote within that specific unit, saying:

"[U]nder the Constitution and R.A. No. 6734, the creation of the autonomous region shall take effect only when approved by a majority of the votes cast by the constituent units in a plebiscite, and only those provinces and cities where a majority vote in favor of the Organic Act shall be included in the autonomous region. The provinces and cities wherein such a majority is not attained shall not be included in the autonomous region. It may be that even if autonomous region is created, not all of the thirteen (13) provinces and nine (9) cities mentioned in Article II, section 1(2) of R.A. No. 6734 shall be included therein. The single plebiscite contemplated by the Constitution and R.A. No. 6734 will therefore be determinative of (1) whether there shall be an autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao and (2) which provinces and cities, among those enumerated in RA. No. 6734, shall comprise it."²⁴ (Citations omitted)

The Bangsamoro Organic Law, however, provided a different mechanism in its Article XV, Section 3(a).²⁵ This provision stated that the provinces and cities of the ARMM would form

²³ *Abbas v. COMELEC*, 258-A Phil. 870 (1989).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Article XV, Section 3(a) of the Bangsamoro Organic Law. Results of the Plebiscite – (a) The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region shall be established and all the provinces and cities of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao created under Republic Act No. 6734, as amended by Republic Act No. 9054, shall form part of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region if the majority of the votes cast in the Autonomous Region in

part of the BARMM if the majority of votes were cast in favor of the law across the entire ARMM, treating the region as a single voting unit and not individual provinces and cities that would vote anew on the BARMM as a new entity.

This “automatic” inclusion of the ARMM provinces and cities elicited protest even during the preparation of the BOL in the Philippines, when Sulu officials and personalities announced a position paper on behalf of “the Sultanate of Sulu and the multi-sectoral groups of the Bangsa Sug” pressing for the modification of that provision, among others. They argued that the choice of ARMM provinces and cities to join BARMM as its core territory “[p]recisely for the reason that the Bangsamoro entity is new, and is not just an amended version of the ARMM.”²⁶ Thus:

“When the constituent provinces voted for inclusion to the ARMM in past plebiscites, they consented to be included in the ARMM, and not in the Bangsamoro, which is a completely new legal entity. Ratification therefore should be on the basis of the majority votes of each constituent province, and not of the entire geographical area of the present ARMM.”²⁷

As noted earlier, while the overall ARMM vote was a “Yes,” the Province of Sulu specifically voted “No,” with 163,526 votes against ratification and 137,630 in favor.

Here, the Supreme Court ruled that the inclusion of Sulu, despite its constituents' clear rejection, “transgressed the Constitution and disregarded the autonomy of each constituent unit.” It decisively upheld the principle that each political unit—that is, each province, city, or geographic area—must vote favorably for inclusion in an autonomous region. The Court declared that the BOL’s provision for the ARMM to vote as a single geographical unit was unconstitutional, as it violated the autonomy of individual provinces and cities. The decision also confirmed that the BOL created a new autonomous region, the BARMM, rather than merely amending the ARMM. This meant that each political unit had to individually ratify the new law to join the region.

Muslim Mindanao shall be in favor of the approval of this Organic Law: Provided, That the provinces and cities of the present Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao shall vote as one geographical area. (Emphasis supplied)

26 “Sulu Sultanate, Bangsa Sug push revision of BBL”, SunStar, May 10, 2018, at <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/zamboanga/local-news/sulu-sultanate-bangsa-sug-push-revision-of-bangsamoro-basic-law>, last accessed 24 April 2024.

27 “Sulu Sultanate, Bangsa Sug push revision of BBL”, SunStar, May 10, 2018, at <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/zamboanga/local-news/sulu-sultanate-bangsa-sug-push-revision-of-bangsamoro-basic-law>, last accessed 24 April 2024.

As to the administrative effects of the decision, the Court applied the doctrine of operative fact. Thus, as an exception to the rule that unconstitutional statutes are void and have no effect, the doctrine of operative fact would not result in the summary nullification of all decisions, policies, and actions taken in good faith in reliance on Sulu's status as part of the BARMM. This would ensure legal stability, prevent the disruption of administrative actions and public services, and help ensure a smooth transition from the former state in which Sulu functioned as a constituent province of the ARMM and the BARMM.

Normative and Policy Implications the Non-Inclusion of Sulu

Prospective Effect on Cohesion of Bangsa Moro

As a result of the decision of the Supreme Court recognizing and giving effect to the decision of the voters of the province of Sulu not to join the BARMM, the territory of the BARMM would now include the original ARMM provinces of Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Tawi-Tawi, and Basilan (excluding Isabela City, which did not vote for inclusion), as well as six municipalities in Lanao del Norte, 39 barangays in North Cotabato, and Cotabato City, which all voted for inclusion.

The non-inclusion of Sulu marks a notable break between the political history of ARMM and of the BARMM, since the Province of Sulu had been a constituent unit of the ARMM since it was first established under the 1987 Constitution through Republic Act No. 6734. BARMM's former Minister of Local and Interior Government Atty. Naguib Sigarimbo spoke of the effects of Sulu's non-inclusion in very foreboding terms, predicting that it would strengthen centrifugal tendencies in the BARMM:

"A far more dangerous consequence of the decision will be the introduction of an OPT OUT provision not otherwise provided in the law but now read into the law by the SC decision.

"As a result of this, other provinces and cities, may now entertain and even pursue the idea of opting out from the autonomous region. In the end, we will be left with no provinces and cities.

"The consequence of this will be the DEATH of the Bangsamoro idea where a single identity unites all the 13 ethnolinguistic groups of Muslims who have stood against all forms of colonialism over the centuries."²⁸

28 Sinarimbo, Naguid, "BANGSAMORO SPEAKS: The consequence of the SC ruling is the 'death of the

Deputy Speaker Laisa Masuhud Alamia of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority Parliament, on the other hand, criticized the non-inclusion of Sulu for undermining peace and development efforts and the region's "historical and cultural unity", arguing that the vote of Sulu expressed a will to retain ARMM and not a will to be excluded from the BARMM.²⁹

Implications for the Jurisdictional Waters of the BARMM

This reconfiguration of the land area of BARMM would have an effect on the maritime and riparian jurisdiction of the BARMM. Under the Bangsamoro Organic Law, all lakes, rivers, river systems, and streams within the Bangsamoro territorial jurisdiction form part of the region's inland waters.³⁰ The law also granted to the region municipal and regional waters, which are the waters up to 15 kilometers and 19 kilometers, respectively, from the low-water mark of the coasts part of the Bangsamoro territorial jurisdiction.³¹

Furthermore, in a legal innovation drawn from the 2014 Addendum on Bangsamoro Waters, Section 18, Article III of the Bangsamoro Organic Law³² established Zones of Joint Cooperation in the Sulu Sea and the Moro Gulf to be governed by a joint body of national and Bangsamoro government representatives for the stated purpose of protecting traditional fishing grounds, ensure the equitable sharing of resources, and promote the free movement of goods and people. The metes and bounds of these Zones would be determined by an ad hoc Joint Body of the National Government and the Bangsamoro Government, the former represented by representatives from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority.

The effect of the non-joining of Sulu on the inland, municipal, and regional waters of the Bangsamoro are clear: Those waters drawn from or pertaining to Sulu would no longer pertain to Bangsamoro. A question would now arise as to the demarcation of Bangsamoro

Bangsamoro idea'", at <https://mindanews.com/mindaviews/2024/09/bangsamoro-speaks-the-consequence-of-the-sc-ruling-is-the-death-of-the-bangsamoro-idea/>, last accessed 15 April 2025

29 "MP Alamia: Sulu exclusion undermines Bangsamoro history and autonomy", at <https://www.luwaran.com/news/article/2817/mp-alamia--sulu-exclusion-undermines-bangsamoro-history-and-autonomy>, last accessed 15 April 2025

30 Article III, Section 3 of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

31 Article III, Section 4 of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

32 SECTION 18. Zones of Jointly Cooperation. Zones of Joint Cooperation in the Sulu Sea and the Moro Gulf are hereby created, the coordinates of which shall be defined by an ad hoc Joint Body composed of representatives from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority, and corresponding number of representatives from appropriate agencies of the Bangsamoro Government. The joint Body shall be convened within thirty (30) days after the ratification of this Organic Law and shall cease to exist after it has established the coordinates of the Bangsamoro territorial jurisdiction, including Bangsamoro Waters and the Zones of Joint Cooperation.

waters from Sulu waters: Would the demarcation be between the municipal waters pertaining to Sulu and the municipal waters pertaining to the constituent local government units (LGUs) of Bangsamoro, disregarding the regional waters granted to Bangsamoro; or would the demarcation be between the municipal waters pertaining to Sulu and the regional waters granted to Bangsamoro? The second alternative would be notably less advantageous to Sulu Province, given that regional waters of Bangsamoro extend up to 19 kilometers.

Far more complex questions arise as to Zones of Joint Cooperation. Unlike the municipal and regional waters, these Zones are not measured from the land mass but are to comprise portions of the Sulu Sea and Moro Gulf to be identified by the ad hoc Joint Body. The non-joining of Sulu, whose inhabitants have a claim to the traditional use of the Sulu Sea and Moro Gulf, raises two questions as to Zones of Joint Cooperation. First, should the portions proximate to Sulu, or historically used by Sulu fishers, be excluded from the geographical extent of the Zones; and if so, what would the most equitable to determine the area excluded? Second, assuming that these areas would not be excluded from the Joint Zones, how would the Joint Zones be governed in such a way that gives governmental participation to the National Government, the Bangsamoro Government, and the Province of Sulu? Perhaps, instead of a bipartite setup between BARMM and the National Government as provided in the BOL, a new framework would now be required involving three parties whose waters are involved in the Zones of Joint Cooperation, the establishment of which would necessitate continued consultations, dialogue, and perhaps legislation.

Prospects for the Province of Sulu

Following its exclusion from the BARMM, the Province of Sulu now faces three main paths.

The first option is to maximize its development potential as an independent province, particularly by effectively utilizing the provisions of the existing Local Government Code, Republic Act Act No. 7160, which confers significant fiscal and administrative powers upon local governments. For instance, under Section 299 of the Local Government Code, local governments can issue bonds and securities to fund development, investment, and infrastructure projects, thus:

“Subject to the rules and regulations of the Central Bank and the Securities and Exchange Commission, provinces, cities, and municipalities are hereby authorized to issue bonds, debentures, securities, collaterals, notes and other obligations to finance self-liquidating, income-producing development or livelihood projects pursuant to the priorities

established in the approved local development plan or the public investment program. The sanggunian concerned shall, through an ordinance approved by a majority of all its members, declare and state the terms and conditions of the bonds and the purpose for which the proposed indebtedness is to be incurred.”

Thus the Province of Sulu can issue securities and other instruments that confirm to Islamic Shari-ah principles, and it can leverage its cultural and economic connections to the larger Islamic world to attract investors in these instruments. It can leverage these same links to negotiate and secure financial grants or donations from local and foreign assistance agencies in accordance with Section 23 of the Local Government Code.³³ The Province of Sulu’s fiscal capacity is also bolstered by the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Mandanas v. Ochoa*,³⁴ which mandates a larger share of the national budget for Local Government Units.

The Province of Sulu can also take full advantage its strategic location along international shipping lanes and its position within the Sulu–Sulawesi maritime and biogeographical area to provide and receive compensation for services to users of the shipping lanes and the maritime area. It is significant that, although the proposed archipelagic sea lanes under Republic Act No. 10625 pass nearer Basilan and Tawi–Tawi, this does not prevent Sulu from benefiting from its proximity to these sea lanes.

Furthermore, the Province of Sulu may advocate for greater participation in the management of the other waters near its territory outside its municipal waters. It may consider adopting a model similar to the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development under Republic Act No. 7611,³⁵ which focuses on environmental and sustainable development, but with a regime closer to the Joint Zones negotiated by the Philippine Government and the MILF. Another possibility, which would be consistent with the Constitution’s policy to protect Philippine

33 SECTION 23. Authority to Negotiate and Secure Grants. – Local chief executives may, upon authority of the sanggunian, negotiate and secure financial grants or donations in kind, in support of the basic services or facilities enumerated under Section 17 hereof, from local and foreign assistance agencies without necessity of securing clearance or approval therefor from any department, agency, or office of the national government or from any higher local government unit: Provided, That projects financed by such grants or assistance with national security implications shall be approved by the national agency concerned: Provided, further, That when such national agency fails to act on the request for approval within thirty (30) days from receipt thereof, the same shall be deemed approved. The local chief executive shall, within thirty (30) days upon signing of such grant agreement or deed of donation, report the nature, amount, and terms of such assistance to both Houses of Congress and the President.

34 G.R. No. 199802, July 3, 2018.

35 Republic Act No. 7611 (1992). Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan Act.

marine wealth and to protect local subsistence fishermen,³⁶ would be to give Sulu and its fishers specific rights within the framework of the Fisheries Management Areas of the Department of Agriculture.³⁷

The second main path available to Sulu would be to explore becoming part of a new autonomous region. Indeed, prior to 1986, Presidential Decree No. 1816 established two separate autonomous regions covering the Sulu archipelago and the provinces of mainland Mindanao. The text of the 1987 Constitution is ambiguous as to whether only one autonomous region might be established for each of the areas mentioned therein, Muslim Mindanao and the Cordilleras; but it is noteworthy that under the 14th Congress, Representative Hermilando Mandanas filed House Bill No. 1533 to propose the creation of an “Autonomous Region for the Sultanate of Sulu”, and in the 19th Congress, Senator Robinhood Padilla filed Senate Bill No. 2879 proposing the creation of a “Basilan Sulu Tawi-Tawi (BASULTA) Autonomous Region.”

This option for a new autonomous region, however, presents significant political challenges. It would require a new organic act from Congress and a plebiscite where each constituent unit votes favorably for its inclusion; and it requires the agreement of leaders and voters in neighboring provinces, specifically Basilan and Tawi-Tawi, since a single province cannot form an autonomous region, as held by the Supreme Court in relation to Cordillera.³⁸ Of greater importance, the creation of a new autonomous region that includes either or both of the provinces of Basilan and Tawi-Tawi would likely require the concurrence of the voters in the BARMM as well, in view of the ruling of the Supreme Court in *Tan v. Commission on Elections*³⁹ which requires that the plebiscite to create a new local government unit should ask voters of all affected local government units. The reasoning of the Court in that case is easily applicable by analogy:

“To form the new province of Negros del Norte no less than three cities and eight municipalities will be subtracted from the parent province of Negros Occidental. This will result in the removal of approximately 2,768.4 square kilometers from the land area of an existing province whose boundaries will be consequently substantially altered... The economy of the parent province as well as that of the new province will be inevitably

36 Const. (1987), art. XIII, sec. 7. “The State shall protect the rights of subsistence fishermen, especially of local communities, to the preferential use of local marine and fishing resources, both inland and offshore.”

37 See BFAR FAO 23, s. 2019

38 *Ordillo v. Commission on Elections*, G.R. No. 93054 : December 4, 1990, En Banc.

39 *Tan v. Commission on Elections*, G.R. No. 73155 July 11, 1986, En Banc.

affected, either for the better or for the worse. Whatever be the case, either or both of these political groups will be affected and they are, therefore, the unit or units referred to in Section 3 of Article XI of the Constitution which must be included in the plebiscite contemplated therein.”⁴⁰

The third option available to the Province of Sulu is to join the BARMM and reverse the results of its vote against the BOL. This would require the enactment of a statute to call the plebiscite and appropriate funds for its conduct; but it may not require the amendment of the BOL since Sulu is already included by reference in the defined territory of BARMM under Article III of the BOL. Such an option remains open to Sulu provided the concerns that led to its rejection of the BOL are addressed.

40 Tan v. Commission on Elections, G.R. No. 73155 July 11, 1986, En Banc.



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