

## THE BANGSA MORO AND THE PHILIPPINE NATION

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The Bangsa Moro (Moro Nation), popularly known as Moro<sup>1</sup> or Muslim, has an important place in the history of the Philippines. The Moro fought Spanish colonialism for over 300 years, resisted the military strength of the United States for almost half of a century, and posed a serious challenge to the Philippine government through their liberation movements since the late 1960s. This paper attempts to provide a brief account of the Moro community and their present standing in the Philippine nation-state.

### ISLAMIZATION AND COLONIZATION OF MOROLAND

Although most writings on pre-Islamic Mindanao are ambiguous, the Moro proudly pointed out the fact that their traditional literature, *tarsilas*, attest to their having established rights of domain in the Mindanao-Sulu region far back in the pre-Islamic era. The Moros consider themselves as being entirely separate in origin from the Christianized Filipinos.

Accounts of the spread of Islam in this area seem no less speculative than those from the pre-Islamic period. However, it is clear that Islam came to the Philippine Archipelago well before the arrival of Spanish reconnoitring expedition force in 1542. It named the islands the Philippines in honour of Prince Philip, the heir to the Spanish throne. It is suggested that Arab traders had established their settlements in the Mindanao region at the end of the thirteenth century (Majul 1973: 63-4). By 1450, a Muslim sultanate had been founded among the Tausugs at Buansa (Jolo) by a Mecca-born Arab trader, Syed Abu Bakr (Salleebey 1913: 10-11). Under the direc-

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<sup>1</sup>The term "Moros" refers to Muslims of various cultural-linguistic groups in the Mindanao-Sulu region of the southern Philippines. It is derived from the ancient Mauri or Mauretania and was sometimes used to denote the Muslim conquerors of Spain. Among some Spaniards, in the absence of a more accurate term, the term was loosely used to refer to any Muslim. The Moros generally referred to themselves as "Muslim".

tion or Sultan Syed Abu Bakr, the study of Islam was begun, political institutions along Islamic lines were developed, and preachers were sent out from Buansa to convert the people of the surrounding areas.

Half a century later, Maguindanao Sultanate was founded in Mindanao island by Sharif Muhammad Kabungsuwan, a Muslim preacher of Arab-Malay parentage from Johore. From there Islam spread along the coast to the Gulf of Davao and inland to Lake Lanao. Though no specific date is known for the Islamization of the people of Lake Lanao, the Maranao *tarsilas* trace their Islamic legitimation as well as royal lineage back to the same Sharif Kabungsuwan. In essence, the Moroland of the mid-sixteenth century was in the process of becoming part of the wider Muslim world of Southeast Asia. Commercial and political links made by the Moro sultanates with other neighbouring Muslim states sped the process.

The Islamization of Mindanao and Sulu resulted in an ideological bond among different groups of people in the region which led to the emergence of a new sense of ethnic identity that distinguished Muslim from non-Muslim population. In addition, Islam became a unifying force and provided the basis for resistance against foreign domination.

The colonization of the Phillipines by Spain brought the Spaniards into conflict with the Moros who had established a political and commercial domain and were spreading Islam in the region. The bitter experience of the long Iberian crusade (ca. 711-1492 A.D.) against the Moro led the Spaniards to regard the Muslims of the Mindanao and Sulu, whom they called "Moros", as enemies.

In pursuing its colonial goals, Spain dispatched a series of military expeditions against the Moros in Mindanao-Sulu islands. Since Islam had already taken a firm hold in the Moro areas, the Spanish imperialistic policy only served to strengthen the Muslims resistance and to provoke raids of reprisal against the Spaniards. Thus, the Spaniards and Moros were almost in continuous state of battle, raid and counter-raid for more than 300 years. Yet, the Spanish forces were not able to win the so-called "Moro Wars" and never actually achieved sovereignty over Moroland. Nevertheless, two aspects of the Moro Wars proved to have enduring consequences. The Spaniards fostered religious antagonism and a derogatory image of the Muslims in order to mobilize the Christianized groups or *Indios* to fight wars against the Moros; and beginning in the second quarter of the nineteenth century Spanish authorities had begun a strategy that entailed the large-scale relocation of Christian Filipinos from the overcrowded and poorer islands

in the north to the sparsely-populated frontier of Mindanao in order to colonize it by "proxy".

Following the defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American war, the United States took over the Philippines as successor to Spain under the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1898. Included in the Spanish cession was Moroland, even though much of its territory had never been incorporated into the Spanish colony. Like the Spanish, the American government adopted a policy aimed primarily at incorporating Mindanao into a wider Philippine state. The process of integrating the Moroland into the Philippines was seen by the Moros as a threat to the survival of the Muslim community. They resisted it with the same tenacity and the same vigour of religious obligation with which they had resisted the Spanish colonization.

But the Moros which were once the majority inhabitants of the Mindanao-Sulu region have today become a minority group as a result of colonization. The Moro population in the region which constituted seventy-six percent in 1903 was reduced to twenty-three percent in 1980 (Che Man 1987). These Muslims which are divided into thirteen cultural-linguistic groups as shown in table 1 are concentrated in western and southern Mindanao Island, the Sulu Archipelago, and the coastal areas of southern Palawan. Of the twenty-two provinces in Mindanao-Sulu-Palawan (MINSUPALA) islands, only five provinces (Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao and Basilan) have a Muslim majority.

Table 1  
Bangsa Moro Cultural-Linguistic Groups in Mindanao

Group	Moro population size (1980)	Percentage of Mindanao population
Maranao	742,962	6.61
Maguindanao	644,548	5.91
Tausug	502,918	4.61
Samal	244,160	2.24
Yakan	196,000	1.80
Sangil	77,000	0.71
Badjao	28,536	0.26
Kalibungan	15,417	0.14
Ilanun	12,542	0.12
Palawanon	10,500	0.10
Kalagan	7,902	0.07
Molbog	7,500	0.06
Bangsa Moro population	2,504,332	22.96

Source: (National Economic and Development Authority 1980; Abbahil 1983).

## MOROS AS CITIZENS OF THE PHILIPPINES

When the Philippines proclaimed its independence on 4 July 1946, Moroland became structurally part of the Republic even though many Moro leaders expressed their preference to remain under American rule. The Moros who perceived themselves as a nationality distinct from and older than that of Christian Filipinos possessed a strong sense of group consciousness and continued to assert their identity as Muslims. This conflicting loyalties was further compounded by a deepening sense of deprivation due to the government's policy of integration and to religious awareness because of the resurgence of Islam.

As a young Republic, the Philippines was facing challenges of nation-building, including establishment of economic viability, recovering from the devastation of the war, and coping with the predicaments of minorities. While Moroland (Mindanao and Sulu) was seen as a "land of promise" to solve some of the socio-economic problems of the nation, the Moros were seen by the government as a problem because they were a "backward" minority. However, the Moro problem was considered as manageable and a multi-faceted policy to solve it was devised by Manila in the early post-independence period to promote economic development and political integration of the Moros.

The Commission of National Integration (CNI) was one of the instrument for such policy. The CNI, however, fell short of its goals for reasons which included mismanagement of funds and suspicion of the government's real motive. The CNI was never well received by the Moros who feared that the true objective of integration and development was the destruction of Muslim identity (May 1984: 429). Some concessions made by the government to religious and cultural demands of Moro nationalism were seen as temporary expedients.

The Moros were also dissatisfied with the government policies that seem to create rather than to solve their socio-economic problems. In Sulu, for instance, the government restriction of trade with Borneo, the occupation by Christians of available agricultural land, and strong competition from Christians in fishing resulted in limited economic opportunities for the Muslims and forced some of them to resort to illegitimate activities such as smuggling and banditry.

In Mindanao, migration and competition for land had been the major elements contributing to Moro economic dissatisfaction. The Philippine government sought to relieve severe population pressure in Luzon and the Visayas by encouraging migrations to

Moroland. Table 2 indicates the estimated size of Moro and non-Moro population in Mindanao.

Table 2  
Estimated Size of Moro and Non-Moro  
Population in Mindanao

Year	Moro population	Non-Moro population	Mindanao population
1903	250,000	77,741	327,741
1913	324,816	193,882	518,698
1918	358,968	364,687	723,655
1939	755,189	1,489,232	2,244,421
1948	933,101	2,010,223	2,943,324
1960	1,321,060	4,364,967	5,686,027
1970	1,669,708	6,294,224	7,963,932
1975	1,798,911	7,348,084	9,146,995
1980	2,504,332	8,400,911	10,905,243

Source: (National Economic and Development Authority 1980; Gowing 1977, 1979; Abbahil 1983).

This migration policy also offered solutions for political and economic difficulties of the Christians in the north. The resettlement of the landless Huks in Mindanao, for example, was partly to solve economic problem in Luzon. The concessions made to corporation and individuals for plantation production and mining in Mindanao enhance the economy of the nation but brought little benefit to the Moros.

This socio-economic deprivation as viewed by the Moros was also extended to the elites. For example, the Moro traditional elite, the sultan and *datu*, is no longer recognized and given temporal power. Even though the Moro elites found it expedient to seek public office in the Philippine political system, the openings were sparse. Many of the responsible positions in the Moro provinces were reserved for Christians.

In 1974 the Marcos government gave formal attention to the Moro traditional elite by acknowledging the existence of the "Nineteen Royal Houses of Mindanao and Sulu". However, the Moros viewed this official attention to the Moro traditional leaders as part of the Manila attempt to enlist the support of the Muslim aristocrats in its campaign against the Moro liberation movement. In the case of non-traditional elites, such as secular and religious elites, they found it difficult to secure jobs in the public and private sectors

despite their professional and educational qualifications. This is due mainly to the perception that the Moros cannot be trusted (Tongson 1973: 20). Many of the non-traditional elites, especially businessmen and other professional groups, were constantly experiencing economic difficulties. Some had left Mindanao in pursuit of employment opportunities in different Muslim countries. T.S.J. George (1980: 122) summarized the socio-economic situation of the Moros as follows:

Two decades after the Philippines became independent, Muslims in Mindanao were a devitalized people, their economic condition stagnant, their social traditions in jeopardy, their laws and customs in danger of disintegrating.

In addition, the general resurgence of Islam in the Muslim World after the Second World War enhanced an atmosphere of religious and cultural awareness among the Moros. Muslim preachers from different parts of the Muslim World came to preach in Moroland, while young Moros were provided scholarships by Islamic institutions and universities in the Muslim countries. At the same time, Moro leaders were invited to participate in various seminars of different Muslim bodies, and an increasing number of Muslims performed the *haj* in Mecca. As a result, Islamic consciousness among the Moros was manifested in a proliferation of Islamic institutions such as mosque, Islamic schools (*madaris*), and Muslim associations. In 1983, for instance, there was a total of 987 *madaris* and 3,095 religious teachers with 132,811 pupils in the thirteen provinces of Moroland. These Muslim institutions strengthened the sense of Moro nationalism and solidarity which helped to sharpen the sense of "difference" between them and Christian Filipinos. Thus, the term Bangsa Moro emerged as an identifying name of the native Muslims of Moroland. The Moros refer to the government in Manila as "the Christian government" to emphasize a different religion. They view their traditional leaders, sultan and *datu*, as representing an institution of Islam and interpret the government refusal to recognize its authority as rejection of their religion. In a Preliminary Report of the Special Committee to Investigate the Moro Problem, the Philippine House of Representative (1956: 68) suggested:

Any move to deny the authority of his sultan, or to curtail his freedom as an individual in a Muslim state would make him believe, in his ignorant ways, that it is an affront on his religion. And he does not hesitate to do away with such curtailment even if it must cost his life.

In a sense, the socio-economic deprivation and the deepening sense of Islamic consciousness are two dominating factors that cause the Moros to resist integration and to become more articulate in defence

of Islam. Their concern was the preservation of their community and the elevation of their Muslim identity, and they remained little interest in national goals.

## THE MORO LIBERATION STRUGGLE

The sense of deprivation among the Moros deepened after Ferdinand Marcos became President of the Philippine in 1965. The Moros were bitter about the so-called "Jabidah Massacre"<sup>2</sup> in March 1968 and viewed it as demonstrating the disregard the Marcos administration had for their lives.

The immediate reaction to the Jabidah incident was the announcement by Datu Udtog Matalam in May of the formation of the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) with an avowed objective to create an Islamic Republic of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan. The motives attributed to the formation of MIM included the Moros' anger at the incident and their aversion to the deteriorating general socio-economic condition of Moroland. In the following year, Senator Domocao Alonto founded Ansar El-Islam aimed at gaining autonomy for the Moros by peaceful means, while a group of young Moros led by Nur Misuari formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) with the purpose of liberating Moroland from Manila rule. In 1970, Sultan Rashid Lucman and his group created an underground front named Bangsa Moro Liberation Organisation (MBLO).

With these organisations, the politicization of the masses and the propagandizing of Moro sentiments started; and violence began to erupt in different places in Moroland between Muslims and Christian settlers. The most publicized incident after the Jabidah Massacre was the Manili Massacre. It occurred in June 1971 when about sixty-five Muslims (men, women and children) were murdered at a mosque in Barrio Manili, North Cotabato. To the Muslim, the Manili incident carried special weight because it took place in a

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<sup>2</sup>Details of the Jabidah Massacre are less than clear because of conflicting reports. However, between twenty-eight and sixty-four Moro recruits out of a large number undergoing guerilla warfare training in Corregidor Island were massacred in late March 1968 by the Philippine Army Men. The training was allegedly in secret preparation for Philippine military operations in Sabah. The cause of the execution was never made public by the Philippine government. According to lone survivor, Jibin Arola, the trainees were shot because they refused to follow the order to attack Sabah. Knowing the possible impact of the leakage of this secret plan, the military authorities executed the entire company (quoted in Jubair 1984: 73).

mosque compound. It was seen as an act of religious humiliation. As Ali Treki of Libya stated, "We believe the conflict is now a religious war" (*Philippines Herald*, 8 July 1972). By the end of 1971, the fightings resulted in many casualties, disruption of the economy and mass evacuation.

The hostilities between the Muslims and Christians in the region escalated as the November 1971 elections drew near. When the election were over, political power in many parts of Moroland shifted from Muslims to Christians. This shift stimulated both sides to increase their hostilities, and atmosphere in Moroland was tense as sporadic clashes between the Philippine Armed Forces and the Muslims occurred.

The Moro liberation struggle started one month after the imposition of martial law on 21 September 1972, when a force of several hundred men attacked the headquarters of the Philippine Constabulary in Marawi City and seized the Mindanao State University campus. The rebel group appealed for Muslim support by reasoning that:

Since the Spanish times the government of the Philippines had always been against the Muslims and that it is necessary to overthrow the government so that there would be no restrictions on the practice of Islam (Gowing 1979: 196).

The clashes between government forces and the rebel, lasted twenty-four hours. Though the government regained control of the City, the unrest subsequently spread into rural and urban areas throughout Moroland.

As the issue of the Muslims in the Philippines captured the attention of leaders in various Muslim countries, the Islamic Directorate of the Philippines (IDP) was organised to serve as a centre for receiving assistance for the Moros. The IDP seemed to be able to unite at least temporarily the different groups of Moro leaders. Some of them went to Muslim countries as representative of Moro people to secure assistance for the Moro struggle. In Libya, for instance, Muammar Qadhafi promised that he would provide "all forms of assistance" to the liberation movement (MNLF 1982: 7).

After the uprising in Marawi City, Macapanton Abbas, secretary of the BMLO, went to Jaddah to present the Moro case to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and submitted a report on the Moro struggle to Tunku Abdul Rahman, the OIC secretary general. In about the same period, Misuari went to Libya to follow up the promises of the Libyan government. He took the trip as an opportunity to introduce the MNLF to the Moros and Muslims abroad. Soon after Misuari return from Libya, Selamat



Hashim (later become leader of Moro Islamic Liberation Front) joined him, and together they were able to convince the Libyan authority that the assistance should be given to the MNLF rather than to other groups.

With financial assistance and armed supplied from Libya and from Sabah government under Tun Mustapha the MNLF began to take overall charge of the armed conflict in Moroland by providing weapons and other supplies to the Muslim groups who were already at war with government forces and to those who want to join the struggle. At the same time, the MNLF leaders exerted this efforts to gain recognition from the OIC. The MNLF saw itself as representing repressed Muslims who needed an organized front as a vehicle of *jihad* to fight the alien domination.

While the MNLF carried out its armed struggle, the BMLO leaders Sultan Rashid Lucman, Macapantun Abbas, and others, who failed to secure assistance from Libya agreed to "cooperate" with the Marcos government. Their purpose was as they argued to "inject the rationale of the Moro struggle into government policies in order to lay the basis of the legitimacy of the Bangsa Moro Struggle" (MNLF 1982: 9). In 1973, for example, Macapantun Abbas and his associates joined the Presidential Task Force for the Reconstruction and Development of Mindanao (PTF-RDM) established to restore peace and order in the Moro region and to implement selective amnesty and rehabilitation (Mastura 1984: 248). In May 1974, Sultan Rashid Lucman was acknowledged by President Marcos as the "Paramount Sultan of Mindanao and Sulu" and in the following month the Sultan with several other Moro leaders organized a conference on "Government Policies and Programs for Muslim Mindanao" which was financed by the government. The conference adopted a resolution demanding autonomy. Since it was designed by Manila to draw support from Moro leaders, its resolution demanding autonomy disappointed the government. As a consequence, Sultan Rashid Lucman and his associates were labelled opponents of the government. In 1975, Sultan Rashid Lucman and several of his companions left Mindanao for Saudi Arabia where they reactivated the activities of the BMLO.

The MNLF under the leadership of Misuari was given formal recognition by the OIC, despite the fact that BMLO leaders, Sultan Rashid Lucman and Macapantun Abbas were the ones who originally submitted the Moro case to the OIC under Tunku Abdul Rahman. The OIC as well as Libya were convinced that the MNLF was dominating the leadership of the Moro struggle. In January 1975, President Marcos sent a delegation headed by his executive secretary, Alejandro Melchor, to Jeddah to negotiate with MNLF leaders.

The MNLF was able to convert sporadic clashes between the Moros and the Marcos regime to a "conventional war" which became the Philippines' most serious internal conflict since the Communist-led Hukbalahap rebellion of the late 1940s.

The ability of the MNLF to escalate the war during 1973 and 1976 and to stalemate it was considered a significant success, though the toll of the war was tremendous. Table 3 shows the estimated death toll of war between 1969-76.

Table 3

Estimated Death Toll of the Moro War 1969-76

Location	Death	Wounded	Displaced
Cotabato provinces	20,000	8,000	100,000
Lanao provinces	10,000	20,000	70,000
Sulu & Tawi-Tawi	10,000	8,000	100,000
Zamboanga provinces	10,000	8,000	40,000
Total	50,000	44,000	310,000

Source: (Khan 1979: 14-17; cf. Hussin 1981; Marinda 1985)

The MNLF gained international recognition, especially from the OIC member countries and was able to force the Marcos regime to concede by signing the Tripoli Agreement on 23 December 1976.<sup>3</sup> The rapid ascendancy of the MNLF, however, can be attributed to two main factors. First, prior to the MNLF's take-over of the leadership of the struggle, the Moro resistance against the Manila government had been carried on by different independent groups. The MNLF's principal contribution was to consolidate these existing groups. They include not only armed guerrilla units, but also most of the villagers in the war effected areas who seemed to be directly or indirectly involved in the movement. Second, the response of some Muslim countries to the plight of Muslim in Mindanao was a major factor contributing to the MNLF's success.

However, the MNLF's success was short-lived. Hopes for implementation of the Tripoli Agreement were shattered when

<sup>3</sup>The Tripoli Agreement was an agreement between the government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Liberation Front with the participation of the Quadripartite Ministerial Commission members of the Islamic Conference and the secretary general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The essence of the agreement was that the Philippine government must establish an autonomous region for the Muslims, comprising thirteen provinces in the southern Philippines.

President Marcos insisted on holding a plebiscite on the essential provisions of the agreement itself. As the plebiscite produced the result he expected the Marcos government "implemented" the agreement as it chose (Noble 1984: 9). The cease-fire agreed in the Tripoli Agreement collapsed and fighting resumed in late 1977. In March 1980, a spokesman of the Philippine foreign ministry issued a declaration renouncing the Tripoli Agreement as "null and void", though the government later denied it. In response, the MNLF announced the assertion of its original position of self determination at the Third Summit of the Islamic Heads of States in Mecca in January 1981. The struggle of the MNLF continued.

But following the breakdown of the Tripoli Agreement, the MNLF factionalized into three main factions: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) led by Maguindanao religious traditional leader Salamat Hashim; MNLF-Reformist under a secular traditional leader, Dimas Pundato, of Maranao group; and the original MNLF led by Misuari of Tausug ethno-cultural group. Ideologically, the MILF is considered as conservative Islamic-oriented front; the MNLF-Reformist is a conservative secular oriented organisation; and the MNLF is viewed as a liberal left-leaning front. Apart from these ideological differences, the three-way factional split between Misuari, Hasim and Pundato also reflects lines of ethno-cultural background and personal loyalty. However, the ethno-cultural boundaries are not rigid; crossing ethnic boundary lines is not uncommon. It causes or is reinforced by personal loyalties or ideological orientations.

After the Marcos regime was replaced through a four-day bloodless revolution in February 1986, the new government under President Corazon Aquino tried to negotiate an end to the protracted Moro war. In September 1986 President Aquino met the MNLF leaders headed by Nur Misuari in Jolo, Sulu and further talks were held in Jeddah in January 1987 between Aquilino Pimentel, a member of the Aquino cabinet, and the MNLF Misuari faction. The Jeddah sessions produced no pact, but the two parties agreed to start formal negotiations when the MNLF dropped its long standing demand for independence.

Subsequently, negotiations for full autonomy of Moroland as demanded by the MNLF met many problems. For example, autonomy for the region will be subjected to democratic process which must win the consent of the Christians who constitute about seventy-seven percent of Mindanao's population. The autonomy demanded by the MNLF may have serious legal implications because the new Philippine constitution rectified in February 1987 has its own provisions for the creation of autonomous regions in Muslim

Mindanao and the Cordilleras. More importantly, the Jeddah negotiation failed to include the MILF, the rival faction of the MNLF. These are among the obstacles that make the Moro problems remain unsolved and their struggle goes on.

## CONCLUSION

The Islamization and the establishment of Muslim sultanates in Mindanao and Sulu led to the emergence of a new sense of ethnic identity that distinguished Muslim from non-Muslim communities. This new identity became the root cause of the Moro resistance against the Spaniards, the Americans and the Filipinos.

The Moro resistance movement persisted and changed over time from a resistance group to an organised front demanding autonomy or independence. The present liberation struggle is primarily in response to government repressive policies and to internal and external stimuli such as the resurgence of Islam and the involvement of certain sympathetic Muslim states and organizations in the struggle. However, the strengths of different liberation fronts depend mainly on the fact that they are ethnically based, religiously motivated, and led by leadership groups that dominate the Moro community. On the other hand, factionalism has been one of the major sources of past and present weakness of the fronts.

While some Moros are gradually absorbed into the Philippine system through the process of national integration and development, the Moro armed liberation struggle is likely to continue if the Philippine government fails to recognize that the Moros perceive their conflict not in socio-economic terms but as ethnic, religious and nationalist. The Moros regard "national self-determination" as a fundamental right of every people, believing that "every people has a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live".

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