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BEYOND ETHNIC SEPARATISM: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

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In 1996 The Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed a Peace Agreement. The agreement, which was based upon an agreement signed in Tripoli almost two decades earlier, was widely hailed as bringing an end to the Muslim insurgency in the southern Philippines which had begun in the early 1970s. Such a view was always optimistic. For one thing, it assumed that the agreement with the MNLF was sustainable; for another it tended to overlook the fact that the other major faction of the Muslim separatist movement, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), was not a party to the 1996 agreement and vowed to continue the armed struggle; and thirdly, it did not take account of the Abu Sayyaf, a group which had emerged in the early 1990s engaged primarily in extortion and kidnap for ransom, but justifying its actions in terms of the demand for a separate Islamic state. This paper will look at developments in the Philippines with particular reference to these three factors, and attempt to place the situation of Muslim Mindanao in the broader context of developments within and beyond the region, including developments since 11 September 2001.

The MNLF and the 1996 Peace Agreement.

Attempts to negotiate regional autonomy in Muslim Mindanao¹ were initiated during the Marcos regime, within the framework of the Tripoli Agreement of 1976. Negotiations between the government of the Philippines and the MNLF concerning implementation of the Tripoli Agreement, however, broke down and what eventuated, following a referendum in the then thirteen provinces covered by the Tripoli Agreement, were two regional autonomous assemblies covering a limited area, which were not recognized by the MNLF and thus never had much credibility or effectiveness. Following the People Power Revolution of 1986, talks were re-opened with the MNLF, and a new constitution made specific provision for an Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. But again a referendum was held to determine which of the (now fourteen) provinces and nine cities specified in the Tripoli Agreement would be included, and, as before, the Moro factions boycotted the plebiscite, which yielded a vote for the ARMM in only four provinces and no cities. The new ARMM proved to be only marginally more effective than its predecessors.

¹ The term 'Muslim Mindanao' is sometimes used to refer to the (now) fifteen provinces which constitute the area claimed by Muslim nationalists as traditional Muslim homelands, or Bangsa Moro (Moro Nation), and which were recognized as such in the Tripoli Agreement. Due largely to immigration from the north, however, most of this region is dominated by non-Muslim populations. The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) includes only those provinces and cities which voted to join the ARMM, namely (prior to the implementation of the results of the August 2001 referendum), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. (In August 2001 the province of Basilan, and Marawi City both voted to join the ARMM.)

In 1996 a significant breakthrough was achieved following President Ramos's initiative in resuming negotiations with MNLF chairman Nur Misuari and progressing talks through the Organization of Islamic Conference (the paramount international body of Islamic countries) and its Ministerial Committee of Six chaired by Indonesia. Under the 1996 Peace Agreement, which was subtitled 'The Final Agreement on the Implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement', a ceasefire was agreed upon with the MNLF, a Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) was created in the area covered by the Tripoli Agreement, and a Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development was authorized to 'control and/or supervise....appropriate agencies of the government that are engaged in peace and development activities in the area [of the SZOPAD]'. The powers of the SPCPD were described as an extension of the powers of the president and funds for the SPCPD and its associated institutions were to come initially from the president. Provision was also made for a Consultative Assembly headed by the chair of the SPCPD and dominated by members of the MNLF, and for the integration of 7500 former MNLF (Bangsa Moro Army) fighters into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippines National Police (PNP).

Potential jurisdictional problems between the existing ARMM and the newly-created SPCPD were bypassed when Misuari, having returned from the Middle East to the Philippines and been appointed chair of the SPCPD, was subsequently elected governor of the ARMM. Avoiding another potential problem, the inevitable referendum seeking approval to expand the existing ARMM to cover the area of the SZOPAD was scheduled to be held within two years of the establishment of the SPCPD; in fact, the referendum was not held until August 2001.

Despite the euphoria with which the Peace Agreement was greeted in some quarters in 1996, and notwithstanding the fears it generated amongst a large number of the non-Muslim people within the SZOPAD, its impact was limited. For one thing, the executive order (EO 371) intended to give effect to the Peace Agreement was a significantly watered down version of the agreement, omitting several key provisions, and the SPCPD/ARMM leadership continually complained that it did not receive adequate funding to fulfil its goals. In March 1999 Misuari warned that unless conditions improved, former MNLF fighters would return to the hills (indeed as early as 1997 there were reports of former MNLF guerillas joining the MILF). Secondly, the MNLF administration has been accused of inefficiency, mismanagement and nepotism, and Misuari's leadership has itself come under attack. In 1999 a National Islamic Command Council (NICC) group challenged Misuari's leadership, and in August 2001 a group identifying itself as 'Executive Council of the 15' and led by MNLF Vice Chair Hatimil Hussin claimed it had 'retired' Misuari, giving him the title 'chairman emeritus'. Misuari responded by dismissing those he described as 'traitors'. Misuari retains the support of the Philippine government and the OIC, as well as many Philippine Muslims, but the Executive Council of the 15 is said to have support from Indonesia, Malaysia and Libya, and from the presidential adviser on Muslim Mindanao, Farouk Husin.

In August 2001, despite objections from Misuari and the MNLF, the long-awaited referendum on the expansion of the ARMM was held. Predictably, given the demography of the area involved, the proposed expansion to include all the territory recognized in the Tripoli Agreement received a 'yes' vote in the five predominantly Muslim provinces and one city but a negative vote in the other ten provinces and eight cities.

The fallout from the referendum is still taking place. Whether, as Misuari forewarned some time ago, this outcome will cause significant numbers of Muslims to renounce the Peace Agreement and perhaps return to armed struggle remains to be seen. What seems certain, however, is that the failure to achieve the long-sought expansion of the ARMM will undermine Misuari's position and encourage a more radical leadership within the MNLF. It may also feed into a broader resurgence of Islamic militancy in the southern Philippines.

The MILF

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front split from the MNLF in 1977, over personal, strategic, ideological, and probably ethnic differences. Under the leadership of Hashim Salamat the MILF sought to secure recognition from the OIC as the leading faction of the Moro movement, but failed in this. It was not a party to the attempted reconciliation with the Philippine government in 1987, and continued the armed insurgency. During the early 1990s the MILF appears to have grown significantly in strength and militancy. It established permanent camps in the provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur, which became in effect small municipalities under MILF administration, and was said to be undergoing a transition from guerilla force to a 'semi-conventional army'. During the Ramos presidency there was a tacit agreement that the AFP would not attack the camps of the MILF, and throughout the 1990s there were intermittent attempts at peace-making (including a 'general cessation of hostilities' in 1997).

Formal peace talks were resumed under the Estrada presidency, and December 1999 was set as the deadline for a substantive agreement. But December passed without a settlement, and following MILF attacks on non-Muslim communities in April 2000 President Estrada declared 'all-out war' against the MILF. The campaign against the MILF culminated in the overrunning of about fifty MILF strongholds, including its headquarters, Camp Abubakar, which fell in July 2000. Salamat was reported to have taken refuge in Malaysia, from whence he called on the Moro people to rise in a *jihad*. Nevertheless, in October the Philippine government announced that it was again attempting to revive peace talks with the MILF, and following Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's succession to the presidency in early 2001 the peace process was strengthened. This has resulted in the Kuala Lumpur Agreement on the Framework of the Peace Talks, in March, the Tripoli Agreement on Peace, in June, and recently (August 2001) the Kuala Lumpur Agreement on the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Agreement on the General Cessation of Hostilities between the GRP and the MILF.

Abu Sayyaf

While a fragile peace settlement has been achieved with the MNLF, and one appears imminent with the MILF, a third Muslim group, Abu Sayyaf, has recently come to demand increasing attention as a threat to security in the southern Philippines.

Abu Sayyaf was founded by Abdurajak Janjalani, a former MNLF member but a critic of Misuari. Returning to the Philippines in 1991 after religious training in Libya, Janjalani became a charismatic preacher and an advocate of a separate Islamic state in the southern Philippines, with a small but committed following including some MNLF supporters who were said to have

fought with the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan. He also became involved in kidnapping and extortion. Abu Sayyaf appears to have links to radical Muslim groups in the Arab world, principally through Saudi businessman Mohammad Jamal Khalifa (brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden). Janjalani was killed in 1998 in a confrontation with police, but the group continued to operate, mainly through what Filipinos have termed 'commercial insurgency'.

In early 2000 Abu Sayyaf attracted international publicity when it kidnapped twenty-one people, including several Europeans, from a resort on the Malaysian island of Sipadan, and demanded ransom. Its ransom demands were subsequently expanded to include an independent Islamic state, the release of international terrorists held overseas, the banning of foreign fishing vessels from the Sulu Sea, protection for Filipinos in Sabah, and ransom payments of up to \$US1 million per hostage. These hostages were eventually released, but the 'contribution to development' which the group received from Libya to secure their release enabled Abu Sayyaf to purchase boats which, in another hostage-taking incident, were able to outrun the Malaysian navy. In September 2000 the AFP mounted a heavy assault on Abu Sayyaf bases in Basilan and Jolo and there were reports of substantial Abu Sayyaf casualties and surrenders. But kidnappings continue. In October 2001 Abu Sayyaf's hostages included two Americans; a third was reported to have been killed by his captors. Prompted by this, the US offered to assist the Philippine government by providing training in counter-terrorism.

There have been reports of former MNLF and MILF fighters joining Abu Sayyaf, but for the most part, it seems, other Philippine Muslim groups have little sympathy for Abu Sayyaf. In September 2000, for example, the head of the Ulama League of the Philippines endorsed the government's decision to 'flush out' the Abu Sayyaf, arguing that its kidnapping activities gave Muslims a 'bad name'.

The impact of 11 September

On 11 September over 100 Filipinos died in the attack on the World Trade Center. In the aftermath of the attack it was announced in Manila that US military and civilian personnel were being sent to the Philippines, with 'special equipment', to train Philippine troops in counter-terrorism and assist them in going after Abu Sayyaf, and that the Philippines would provide bases for US aircraft operations against the Taliban. National Security Adviser Roilo Golez was quoted as saying that the US and the Philippines would look at ways of helping each other 'with respect to planning, training, and adjusting our programs addressed to the local and international terrorist problem'. Given the salience of US bases and 'low-intensity warfare' in the politics of the Philippines Left in the 1980s, reaction to these announcements has so far been surprisingly muted.

As the war against the Taliban regime commenced, however, a protest rally in Marawi city condemned the air strikes on Afghanistan and burned an American flag. According to reports (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 10 October 2001), a large crowd shouted 'Death to America and long live Usamah Bin-Laden' and hundreds of Philippine Muslims volunteered to go to Afghanistan to fight with the Taliban. It is not yet clear how extensive or how deep such sentiments are, but they are there and may provide a new security challenge for the Philippines government in the months ahead.

Nor is there much data on Philippine links to international Muslim terrorism. Abdul Hakim Murad and an associate were arrested in Manila in 1995, and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef narrowly escaped arrest but was apprehended in Pakistan soon after; these three were allegedly involved in the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 and in a plot to assassinate the pope in Manila in 1995. Yousef was allegedly funded by bin Laden, and had links with Abu Sayyaf. Bin Laden's brother-in-law Khalifa also has strong links with the Philippines, including the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), which has funded humanitarian work, education, and the building of mosques in Mindanao and Sulu; Khalifa is also said to have supported Abu Sayyaf.² As this suggests, linkages with the international Islamic community are extensive, but while they are doubtless mostly benign, little is known about them. By implication, if the war on (and by) terrorism escalates, places like the southern Philippines may provide strategic bases for international terrorist networks, posing new types of security challenge not just for the Philippines but for the international community more generally.

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15 October 2001.

² See M. Danguilan Vitug and G.M. Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs and Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000).