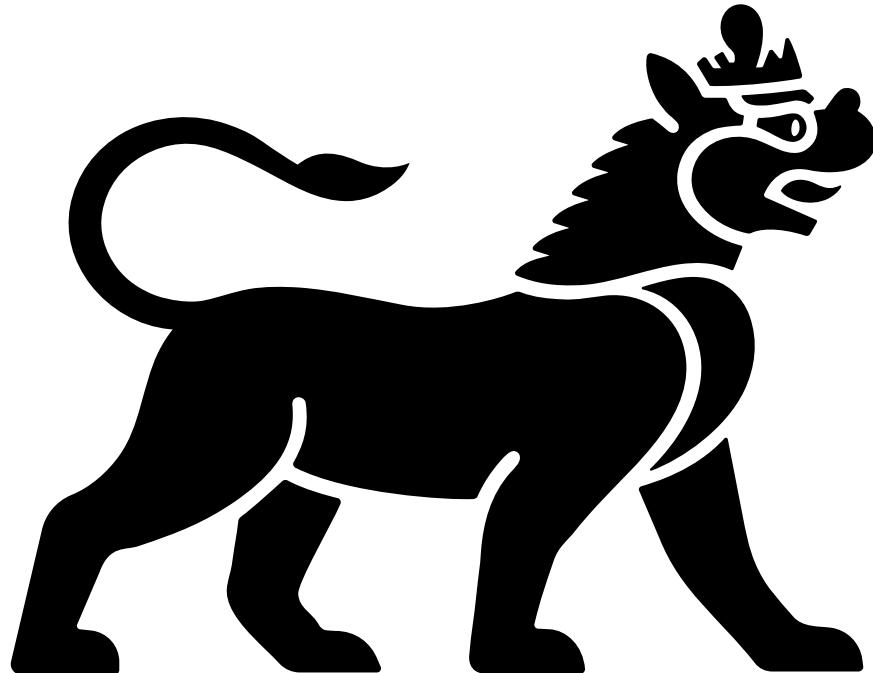


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# The Origins of the Muslim Separatist Movement in the Philippines



**by Thomas M. McKenna**

## The American Colonial Administration of "Moros"

The remote causes of the Muslim separatist rebellion that engulfed much of the southern Philippines in the 1970s and continues in parts of the South today may be found in the policies and practices of the Philippine colonial and national states. Early American rule in the Muslim Philippines followed a pattern quite similar to American governance of the rest of the colony--pious paternalism punctuated by brutal pacification operations. In the Muslim South, however, pacification took longer to achieve, requiring even harsher methods, while paternalism was also more pronounced. By 1914, "Moroland", as it was most commonly termed by the Americans, was considered fully pacified and civilian colonial rule was finally inaugurated 13 years after its establishment in the rest of the colony. Moroland soon came under the primary administrative supervision of the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes. Philippine Muslims were grouped together with tribal Filipinos for administration because both were thought to need special attention to advance to the level of civilization of Christian Filipinos.

There were at least two ways, however, in which Philippine Muslims were viewed as distinct from tribal groups by American colonial administrators. For one, although regarded as barbaric, Muslims were not considered savages as were tribal groups. This was due principally to their possession of both a world religion and an aristocracy. In line with the popular orientalism of the time and drawing on the experiences of earlier European colonizers in Muslim Southeast Asia, American colonizers often exhibited a certain respect for the "Mohammedanism" they found in the Philippines and did not encourage Christian proselytization among Philippine Muslims. Tribal groups on the other hand became a principal target for American Protestant missionaries. As one consequence of this attitude, American colonial administrators tended to conglomerate various Muslim ethnolinguistic groups under the single label "Moro" rather than focusing on the "tribal" divisions among them.

Secondly, unlike tribal Filipinos, Philippine Muslims were overwhelmingly lowlanders and were not exempted from the land registration and individual land ownership policies of the American colonial government. The Bureau of Lands conducted land surveys throughout Muslim areas and processed homestead applications. While there is some evidence to suggest that American colonial administrators believed that land registration would improve economic security for Muslim commoners, the actual application of American land policy led to the loss of traditional land rights for a great many Muslims (Thomas 1971).

With the establishment of the Philippine Commonwealth in 1935, government policy toward Philippine Muslims shifted significantly. The Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes was abolished in 1936 and with it the presumption that Muslims should be governed any differently, or afforded more protections, than any other citizens of the Commonwealth. This change in attitude was accompanied by a new policy priority: the economic development of Mindanao for the benefit of the nation, especially by means of Christian migration into traditionally Muslim regions.

### **Philippine Muslims and the new Philippine Republic**

In 1946, a severely war-damaged Philippines received its formal independence and the new Philippine Republic continued to pursue the primary policy goal of its predecessor in Mindanao with far greater vigor. Independence brought a tremendous expansion of government-sponsored Christian Filipino immigration from northern provinces to the Muslim South. Demographic data from a single municipality--Kapatagan-- in the province of Lanao del Norte in central Mindanao illustrate the scale of the post-war influx of Christian migrants. There were about 24 Christian settlers in the Kapatagan area in 1918. By 1941 their number had risen to 8,000 and by 1960 there were a total of 93,000 immigrants. By 1960, Christian immigrants vastly outnumbered the 7,000 indigenous Muslims still living in the area (Hausherr 1968/69 quoted in Thomas 1971:317). The demographic shift throughout Muslim Mindanao in the post-war years, while not as dramatic as in Kapatagan, was equally momentous. The population of Central Mindanao,

the area which saw the highest overall Christian immigration, soared from 0.7 million persons in 1948 to an estimated 2.3 million persons in 1970; representing a growth rate of 229 per cent as compared with the national figure of just under 100 per cent (Burley 1973).

While the scale of Christian immigration to Muslim Mindanao caused inevitable dislocations, the manner of its occurrence also produced glaring disparities between Christian settlers and Muslim farmers. From 1935 onward, the successive administrations of the Philippine Commonwealth and Republic provided steadily more opportunities and assistance to settlers from the North. By contrast, the government services available to Muslims were not only meager compared to those obtained by immigrant Christians but were also fewer than they had received under the colonial regime. The land laws of the postcolonial government defined all unregistered lands in Mindanao to be public land or military reservations (Gowing 1979). Unfamiliar with the procedures or deterred by the years of uncertainty, the steep processing fees, and the requirement to pay taxes during the interim, many Muslims neither applied for the new lands opened up by government-funded road construction nor filed for legal title to the land they currently occupied (Thomas 1971). For their part, officials and employees of the Bureau of Lands (virtually all of them Christians) were at best inattentive to Muslims. By contrast, Christian settlers regularly obtained legal ownership of the best newly opened lands as well as crop loans and other forms of government assistance. The new Christian communities became linked to trade centers and to one another by networks of roads while Muslim communities remained relatively isolated.

Most rural Muslims found themselves peripheralized in place as a result of the maneuverings of Christian settlers and speculators. Others, however, were physically dispossessed of their lands. The Bureau of Lands recognized land rights on the basis of priority of claim filed, not priority of occupation. It was not unusual for individuals to obtain legal titles, either intentionally or unintentionally, to already-occupied lands. In such cases, the legal owners were mostly (but not always) Christians and the previous

occupants ordinary Muslims. Poor Muslim "squatters" would usually be offered small amounts of money to vacate the land and would often accept it and leave. If the occupants refused to move and the titled owner was sufficiently wealthy or influential, he would gain possession of the land by use of armed might, most often supplied by local units of the Philippine Constabulary. A 1963 survey commissioned by the Philippine Senate Committee on National Minorities concluded that the principal problem in Mindanao was land (Gowing 1979). By 1970, differential access to both land and government resources had produced a profound economic gap between Muslim and Christian communities throughout Mindanao. In 1971 the same Philippine Senate Committee reported that until that year there were no irrigation projects in any municipality in Mindanao where Muslims were a majority (Gowing 1979).

### **State Efforts at Integration and the Generation of Muslim Separatism**

As early as 1954 the economic disparities between Philippine Muslims and Christians generated by Christian migration to the Muslim South were already becoming conspicuous. The Philippine Congress, prompted by an intensification of Muslim "banditry" in Mindanao and Sulu, appointed a Special Committee to investigate the causes of those disparities and their possible solutions. The committee adopted the colonial discourse of Muslim backwardness and guided integration in its report. The report acknowledged the poverty plaguing Philippine Muslims but ignored the evidence linking the relative impoverishment of Muslims to Christian in-migration and blamed only Muslim culture for Muslim poverty: "In their ignorance and in their trend toward religious fanaticism, the Muslims are sadly wanting in the advantages of normal health and social factors and functions" (Congress of the Philippines, House of Representatives, 1955 quoted in Glang 1969:35). The Special Committee recommended the creation of the CNI (above). By relying on the CNI's college scholarship program as the principal policy instrument to effect integration, the postcolonial Philippine government continued the practice first established during the American period of "developing" Philippine Muslims not by providing

them the material resources of the West but by endeavoring to remove (by the selective provision of university educations) the cultural disabilities perceived to be impeding their advancement and, indirectly, that of the Philippine Nation.

It should not be surprising that such efforts at integration by means of removing alleged deficiencies were mostly failures. In the case of Muslim CNI scholars, those efforts actually appear to have backfired. To illustrate the perverse effects of the CNI scholarships we need look no further than the most famous of the CNI alumni, Nur Misuari, the founder of the MNLF and presently governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Misuari was not the only young Philippine Muslim politicized by his time spent as a university student on a CNI scholarship. The shared experiences of the more than 8,000 Muslim CNI scholars studying in Manila between 1958 and 1967 profoundly affected Muslim politics after 1968. Much of their political education was gained outside university lecture halls from observing and participating in campus political activism. They also experienced at first hand the magnitude of popular anti-Muslim bias in the national capital and, after the election of Ferdinand Marcos as President of the Republic in 1965, witnessed an increasing antagonism toward Muslims by the same Christian-dominated state that had provided them scholarships. By 1968, the CNI scholarship program had unintentionally created a group of young Muslim intellectuals schooled in political activism and able to articulate the frustrations both of Muslim students disaffected by their encounters with Christian cultural hegemony in Manila and of peripheralized Philippine Muslims in general. Their political efforts eventually led, in 1971, to the formation of the underground Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) headed by Nur Misuari. With the declaration of martial law by President Marcos in 1972 the MNLF began an armed separatist insurgency against the Philippine state.

## The Muslim Separatist Rebellion

From 1972 through 1976 a ferocious war between Muslim separatist rebels and the Philippine military raged

throughout the southern Philippines. An estimated 120,000 people died in the fighting, which also created one million internal refugees and caused more than 100,000 Philippine Muslims to flee to Malaysia. The war was also extremely costly to the Marcos government. It was reported that, by 1975, as much as three-fourths of the Philippine Army was deployed in Muslim areas of Mindanao.(Ahmad 1982:2; Noble 1976:418). By 1976 the fighting was stalemated, with neither side able to inflict a critical defeat on the other. The war was also contested on diplomatic and ideological fronts. Ferdinand Marcos realized early on that an exclusively repressive response to the rebellion in the South was far too costly financially and politically. The MNLF had international support from various Muslim states and also from an influential international body, the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers. The Islamic Conference threatened to suspend oil deliveries to the Philippines from Arab oil producers should Philippine policy towards its Muslims not take a visibly more benevolent turn.

Marcos responded with a campaign to convince Muslims in the Philippines and, more importantly, heads of Muslim states abroad, of his sincere desire to solve the "Moro problem". A large mosque was built in the center of Manila, important Muslim holy days were officially recognized by the government, an Islamic Studies Institute was established at the University of the Philippines and a code of Muslim personal laws was drafted and approved by the President, though never effectuated while he held power. At the same time he stepped up diplomatic efforts to end the separatist war.

### **The Tripoli Agreement: A Charter for Philippine Muslim Autonomy**

Those efforts led eventually to a diplomatic agreement that seemed, at least initially, to be an enormous victory for the MNLF. In the last weeks of 1976, representatives of the Philippine Government and the MNLF met in Tripoli, Libya to negotiate an end to the war in the South. Those meetings culminated with an agreement on a cease-fire and tentative terms for a peace settlement (Noble 1983). That peace

settlement, known as the Tripoli Agreement, "provided the general principles for Muslim autonomy in the Philippine South" (Majul 1985:73). It provided for "the establishment of autonomy in the southern Philippines within the realm of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines" (Ministry of Muslim Affairs 1983). The Tripoli Agreement was hailed as a breakthrough in the Mindanao war by all sides--the government, the MNLF, the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers and Libya, the latter two having jointly sponsored the Tripoli conference. The agreement implicitly recognized the MNLF as the official representative of Philippine Muslims and accorded it belligerent state status. The terms of the agreement were also quite favorable to MNLF demands. The cease-fire went into effect in late January, 1977 and was generally successful for about nine months. Talks were begun in February on the implementation of the peace settlement, and very soon broke down over widely divergent interpretations of the key terms of the agreement. Marcos then proceeded to "implement" the Tripoli Agreement on his own terms, principally by creating two special "autonomous" regions, one for Central Mindanao and the other for Sulu. The Marcos administration gained substantial benefits from signing the Tripoli Agreement; it obtained a much needed breathing spell from the economic drain of the war and from the considerable diplomatic pressure for settlement coming from the Middle East. In retrospect it seems clear that President Marcos never sincerely intended to implement the agreement as signed.

Although the cease-fire collapsed in much of the South before the year was out, the fighting never again approached the level of intensity experienced before 1976. After the signing of the agreement, the rate of defections from the MNLF accelerated, its support from foreign sources was reduced, and dissension intensified in its top ranks, eventually leading to a schism and the creation of a second separatist organization, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The armed Muslim separatist threat to the martial law state remained significant but was no longer an immediate one. The "autonomous" regional governments devised by the Marcos administration in the South have been aptly described as "essentially hollow, and productive

of cynicism, frustration, and resentment" (Noble 1983:49). The governing bodies of the nominally autonomous regions were cosmetic creations with no real legislative authority and no independent operating budget. They were headed by martial law collaborators and rebel defectors. By 1983, the regional governments had developed a layer of bureaucracy that employed a number of college-educated Muslims, but the great majority of Muslims were completely unaffected by the new regional administrations. For the first nine years of its formal existence, Muslim autonomy in the Philippine state had virtually no political reality.

### **Constitutional Reform and the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao**

It was only with the removal of Ferdinand Marcos from office in 1986 and his replacement by Corazon Aquino that Philippine Muslims saw any possibility for a genuine implementation of the Tripoli agreement and the establishment of a single Muslim autonomous region covering all the traditionally Muslim areas of the South. Their hopes were raised by the resumption of peace talks between the Philippine government and the MNLF and the drafting of a new Philippine Constitution in 1987 that provided for the creation of an autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao. They were dashed again in 1989, however, with the passage of the enabling legislation that actually established the single Muslim autonomous region. The formal autonomy that had been won in a hard-fought war was recast by the Philippine Congress as something granted to the Muslim minority by the Christian majority and implemented by means of majority rule. The enabling legislation required ratification by a plebiscite in each of the 13 provinces and nine cities included in original autonomous areas described in the Tripoli agreement. Only those areas voting in favor would be included in the new autonomous region. Because of the massive Christian in-migration of the previous 40 years, most of the affected provinces and cities now had Christian majorities. The MNLF broke off peace negotiations with the government over the majority-rule requirements of the organic act and called for a boycott of the plebiscite. When the plebiscite

was held only four of the 13 provinces and no cities voted for inclusion in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). That small number was not only the result of Christians opting out of ARMM. Basilan and Marawi City, both majority Muslim areas, voted against inclusion in ARMM primarily as a result of MNLF opposition to the plebiscite. The new Muslim autonomous region was established in 1990. Despite the announced goal of the new administration to create something more substantial than the meaningless autonomy implemented by Ferdinand Marcos, the new autonomous region looked very similar in size and structure to the former ones and still very far away from the autonomy envisioned by the Muslim signatories to the Tripoli Agreement.

## The 1996 Peace Agreement

The 1992 national election brought a new president to power. As a former military man, President Fidel Ramos was well aware of the potential costs of a continued state of war with the MNLF, which was still receiving substantial diplomatic support from the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers. He also had much firmer control over the Philippine military than did his predecessor and thus was better able to offer incentives to the MNLF even against the wishes of some military officers. Ramos convinced the MNLF to reopen peace talks by offering to move closer to the Tripoli agreement through exploring means to enlarge both the boundaries and the authority of the autonomous region (Ramos 1996).

Peace negotiations were held between 1993 and 1996 and resulted in a comprehensive peace agreement that managed both to hew closely to the Tripoli Agreement signed 20 years earlier and to stay within the formal bounds of the 1987 Constitution and the congressional bill establishing the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. The 1996 agreement arranged for the implementation of the Tripoli agreement in two phases. First, it created a transitional administrative structure known as the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). This body substituted for the provisional government that

was called for in the Tripoli agreement but was not allowed under the 1987 Constitution (Ferrer 1997). The role of the SPCPD was to supervise the implementation of the agreement during a three-year trial period. Most significantly, the SPCPD covered all 14 provinces and nine cities envisioned in the Tripoli agreement. Nur Misuari, the founder and chairman of the MNLF, was made chairman of the SPCPD and won election as governor of the ARMM. The agreement also provided for thousands of MNLF fighters to be integrated into the Philippine armed forces and national police. The "development" component of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development was viewed as key to the agreement. During the three-year trial period, the SPCPD was to demonstrate both to Muslims supporters and suspicious Christian residents the economic benefits of peace under an autonomous region by channeling national and international development funds into the region as well as by attracting foreign investment.

The second phase of the 1996 Peace Agreement, which was originally scheduled to begin in September 1999, called for the establishment of a new Regional Autonomous Government with its own executive council, a legislative assembly, and representation in the national government. It would also have tax raising powers, a regional security force, an educational system that would incorporate the madaris (Islamic schools), and a system of Shariah (Islamic) courts (Muslim 1999). The boundaries of this new Regional Autonomous Government were to be determined by a plebiscite. However, the agreement allowed for the redrawing of provincial boundaries "to cluster predominately Muslim municipalities", thus making it likely that the new Regional Autonomous Government would be significantly larger than the current ARMM and would include most Muslim communities in Mindanao (Gutierrez 1999).

Despite the initial promise of the 1996 Peace Agreement, it too has stalled badly in its implementation and is in imminent danger of unraveling altogether. The September 1999 deadline for initiating the second phase of the agreement has come and gone. The autonomy agreement is stuck in its initial transition phase and has made very little

progress in achieving either peace or development in the Muslim South. While the reasons for the failure of the most recent attempt to achieve meaningful autonomy for Philippine Muslims are complex, two particular (and indirectly related) problems stand out. First, as with the previous failed attempts at crafting an autonomous government for Muslim Mindanao, this latest version was also provided entirely inadequate levels of power and resources. Not only was the SPCPD deprived of any internal taxation authority, its overall authority was severely restricted. It could neither initiate development planning in the region nor direct national government agencies to address the development priorities it had established. It could only make recommendations to the Philippines president (Gutierrez 1999). Furthermore, the extremely weak financial support provided by the national government has meant that the budget of the SPCPD, like that of its predecessors, has been mostly expended on salaries and operating costs for its officials and personnel, with very little left for development purposes. Specifically, there has been only the most minimal progress made in poverty alleviation, employment and the provision of basic services to poor Muslim communities. As one writer has remarked, "SPCPD is functioning much like the ARMM and the defunct Regional Commissions [under Marcos]: as a mechanism for co-option and conflict regulation, not conflict resolution" (Muslim 1999).

The second particular problem is that the 1996 Peace Agreement has not brought peace to Muslim Mindanao. As with the 1989 negotiations, the Philippine government decided to negotiate only with the main Muslim separatist faction--the MNLF led by Nur Misuari, a signatory to the original Tripoli Agreement. In the years since the 1996 agreement, two other armed separatist factions--the Muslim Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf (Sword of the Father)--have clashed militarily with the Philippine army and those clashes have recently escalated tremendously. Although the Philippine government tends to promote the view that these two factions are interchangeable, they are in fact quite distinct geographically and politically. The Abu Sayyaf faction is of relatively recent origin, appearing only in 1993, and is

centered on the island of Basilan. They are a small, loosely organized, and rather mysterious group that has had limited popular support (although recent events may have increased that support somewhat). . The MILF dates from 1984 as a separate organization but can trace its roots to the beginnings of modern Muslim separatism (McKenna 1998). It is centered on the large island of Mindanao, is well-organized and has thousands of fighters and broad popular support in rural villages. While the Abu Sayyaf faction has garnered more headlines with its killings and kidnappings, the MILF (which has condemned the activities of the Abu Sayyaf) is the only rebel group with sufficient military might and civilian support to wage a protracted war once again against the government. After some initial armed encounters with government troops shortly after the 1996 agreement was signed, the MILF signed a cease-fire agreement with the government in 1997 and entered into peace talks. Negotiations proceeded slowly and were punctuated by occasional skirmishes. Since late 1999, however, fighting has intensified and in early 2000 the MILF withdrew from peace talks. At this writing (September 2000), fighting between the MILF and government troops is more intense and widespread than at any time since the signing of the Tripoli Agreement.

Two factors seem to be at work in the escalating failure of the 1996 Peace Agreement to bring about peace in the Muslim Philippines. For one, the largest Muslim population concentrations in the Philippines are in Central Mindanao, the stronghold of the MILF. The political strength gained by the MNLF in Central Mindanao since the late 1980s seems to be dissipating somewhat with the failure of the 1996 agreement to produce any tangible economic benefits for the large majority of Muslims there. Growing disillusionment with the peace agreement made by the MNLF has led to increased support for the MILF, especially among young men of fighting age. At least as significant, however, is the increasingly antagonistic stance of the current Philippine president, Joseph Estrada, toward Muslim separatists. Since taking office in 1998, Estrada has been lukewarm at best toward the 1996 Peace Agreement, and his lack of consistent support for its implementation has certainly contributed to the failure of the SPCPD. He has also taken

an unusually intransigent stance in negotiations by demanding that the MILF "lay down its arms", threatening massive retaliation, and imposing absolute deadlines for the conclusion of peace talks. This tough talk from the Estrada administration prompts the impression that it has not yet learned the lesson so well understood by the three previous administrations; there is no genuine military solution to the Philippines' "Moro problem." Almost 25 years have passed since the signing of the original peace agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine Government, an agreement that provided for Muslim autonomy. Yet, despite its enshrinement in the Philippine constitution and the guarantees of consecutive national governments, genuine Muslim autonomy has yet to be realized and, consequently, a stable peace in Muslim Mindanao has yet to be obtained.

## **Impediments to Peace and the Current Crisis**

Turning to the impediments to improvement in the circumstances of Philippine Muslims, the two most prominent appear from opposite directions. First is the extreme reluctance on the part of the Philippine government to transfer any real power to the autonomous region it has authorized. Second is the armed resistance on the part of certain Muslim separatists to the autonomous region as currently constituted. These two problems are clearly related in that continued armed separatist resistance is a response in part to the ineffectiveness of the present autonomy arrangement. It would be a mistake, however, to view continued armed separatist resistance as simply an impediment to a stable peace. The demonstrated capacity of Muslim separatists to mobilize armed force is better seen as the key symptom of the Philippine government's predicament in respect to its Muslim minority.

Armed separatist mobilization is the price the Philippine government continues to pay for its past mistakes (and those of its colonial predecessors) in Muslim Mindanao. By marginalizing Philippine Muslims in their own homeland through massive government-sponsored in-migration, the government created a relatively impoverished regional

minority resentful of the benefits provided to Christian migrants and highly suspicious of government motives.

Even so, the Muslim separatist rebellion begun in 1972 was by no means inevitable. It was the highly aggressive actions of the martial law regime that transformed Muslim suspicion into organized armed antagonism toward the central state. Armed separatist resistance, and the international support it attracted, led to the signing of the Tripoli Agreement and it is continued armed resistance (actual or threatened) that has brought about all subsequent autonomy agreements, including the most recent. It is difficult or impossible to imagine any government offer of Muslim autonomy without the armed challenge.

The Philippine government has thus found itself caught between its desire to end a costly armed separatist challenge that has proved impervious to military suppression and the significant pressures placed upon it by various interest groups, especially Mindanao Christians, not to make any substantive concessions to Muslim separatists. This has resulted in the creation of a succession of formally autonomous entities that are extremely limited in both their power and scope. It has also caused the Philippine government to ignore to the greatest extent possible the MILF--the Muslim separatist front based in Central Mindanao and operating most closely to concentrations of Christian population. Since 1987, the MILF has engaged in offensive action only to force the government to the negotiating table with a show of its armed capacity. In 1987 it turned to offensive armed action after a peaceful mass demonstration in Cotabato City drew absolutely no government response (McKenna 1998). It is likely also that the MILF changed its announced goals from its original demand from autonomy to a call for a separate state primarily to gain the government's attention.

If the experience of the past 28 years of armed conflict in Muslim Mindanao teaches anything, it is that the current administration's "get tough" policy will have the opposite of its intended effect. It will energize the MILF and increase its popular support while undermining what is left of the 1996 Peace Agreement. There is an untried alternative to an attempted military solution to the continued armed

separatist challenge in Muslim Mindanao--genuine regional development. After more than 25 years of Philippine government claims to be "developing" Muslim Mindanao, recent national statistics illustrate the sad reality. In virtually all measures of physical and economic well-being, the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) is found at or near the bottom of the national rankings (National Statistics Office 2000). In government-supplied services ranging from access to prenatal care to availability of college scholarships for low-income students, ARMM ranks last (National Statistics Office 1998). As found with separatist movements elsewhere, ordinary Philippine Muslims are most likely to fight for or support an armed separatist front when they perceive no alternative means to overcome discrimination and better their living conditions. Rather than empty autonomy arrangements or further military offensives, the Philippine government might substitute a genuine commitment to both protect the cultural heritage of Philippine Muslims and provide them with tangible means to improve their livelihood. Those provisions are, after all, what Philippine Muslims most require from the Philippine government.

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