

# The Muslim Problems and the Government's Response

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## Introduction

ISLAM, the religion of peace, came to the Philippines fully two centuries before the first Westerner set foot in the islands. In fact, when the Spaniards arrived in 1521, Islam already had many adherents in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. In Manila, several Muslim settlements existed under the leadership of Rajah Lakandula, Rajah Matanda, and Rajah Sulayman, among others. Pampanga, another Luzon province also had a small Muslim settlement. In Mindanao, two powerful Muslim sultanates — Sulu and Maguindanao — were founded.

Prior to the coming of the Spaniards in the Philippines, the Muslims already possessed a highly developed and workable socio-political system, a system of writing, an informal albeit religious educational system, and a progressive economy. The religious-political organizations which went beyond village levels resulted in political groupings that were strong because they were broadly-based. In Islam,

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the people found a rallying point, a source of identification.

The spread of Islam in the Philippines can be attributed to the important role it played in the politics of the era. This political role acquired greater significance at the beginning of the sixteenth century and thereafter with the appearance of the Europeans, among them the Portuguese and the Spaniards, who came not only with the intent of monopolizing the spice trade but also of spreading Christianity. In fact, their arrival in Southeast Asia was in many respects an extension of the struggle which had already been going on in Europe for centuries and subsequently carried into the Indian Ocean between Christians and Muslims. Shortly after the Portuguese captured Malacca, they sent their first missionaries to the Moluccas. The one and a half centuries which followed might be described as a race between Islam and Christianity to convert people of the region.<sup>1</sup>

With the landing of Ferdinand Magellan (a Portuguese explorer under the employ of Spain) in the Philip-

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<sup>1</sup> D.J.M. Tote, *The Making of Modern Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), I, p. 34.

pines in 1521, the archipelago gradually came under Spanish rule and remained so until 1898 when, by the provisions of the treaty of Paris, sovereignty was transferred to the United States. The Spaniards, like the Portuguese, came to convert the inhabitants of the Philippines into Christianity as well as subjects of the Spanish King. The Muslim settlements of Manila under Rajah Matanda and Rajah Sulayman fell into their hands in 1571. The Spaniards waged centuries of protracted war against the Muslims of Mindanao and Sulu in order to subjugate them but to no avail.

The Muslims, fighting under the Sulu Sultanate, the Maguindanao Sultanate, or as individual warriors, determinedly resisted the Spanish incursions into their territory until the Americans, another colonial group, arrived in the 1900's to replace them. Likewise, the Muslims resisted the Americans, thinking that they had the same plans as the Spaniards. However, with the Americans' shift of policy from that of open war to that of attraction, many Muslims put down their arms. The "war" therefore shifted from the battlefield to other areas of human life such as education, culture, economy, agriculture and the like. Nevertheless, the Muslim resistance to colonization and westernization continued.

The Muslims' determined and continued resistance is attributed to a number of factors, the most significant being that the Muslim sultanates

represented centralized political institutions more complex than the simple village-type *barangay* organizations found in the Northern Philippines. Some sultans ruled over scores of settlements under subordinate rulers and thus, the loss of one did not necessarily spell the loss of the others. Another factor was that Islam served as a rallying point, a source of identification. As it was, patriotism became firmly fused with religious duties. Defense of land, home, wife and children became in effect an Islamic duty.

#### Muslim Problem vis-avis National Governments

From the preceding discussion, one can trace the Muslim<sup>2</sup> problem to the time when the Spaniards came for the purpose not only of subjugating them but also of converting them to Christianity. This started in 1565. Through the years, the Muslim problem continued to plague the government.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term *Muslims in the Philippines* to refer to the Islamized Filipino groups in the country rather than the term *Muslim Filipinos*, which though more popular, is historically incorrect. This is because the term Muslim which means "a person who follows the religion of Islam or a person who submits completely to the will of God" antedates the term Filipinos or Philippines. The second reason for the choice is that in Islam, all Muslims are brothers, regardless of race, color, country, of origin, or political beliefs. In other words, in the concept of a Muslim, every Muslim belongs to a world brotherhood called Dar-ul-Islam or Islamic World.

When the Philippines was working for its independence, the Muslims petitioned to form a separate government patterned after the Muslim Sultanates but their petition was not heeded. This is indicated in the Dansalan Declaration which said that:

With regards to the forthcoming Philippine independence we foresee what conditions we will be in and those of our children when independence is granted these islands. This condition will be characterized by unrest, suffering and misery.

Should the American people grant the Philippines independence, the islands of Mindanao and Sulu should not be included in such independence.<sup>3</sup>

However, with the assurance of Christian Filipino leaders, the Muslims grudgingly acknowledged citizenship in the new Republic of the Philippines whose government is patterned after the Western countries. It was partly this Muslim desire to form a separate government like the one they had before the coming of the Spaniards which propelled them to continue with their struggle in preserving their culture, religion, and society.

The early years of Philippine Independence saw the problems of the Muslims aggravated further by their refusal to send their children to school for fear that they would become Christians.

<sup>3</sup> From the Dansalan Declaration, which was forwarded to the U.S. Congress through the President of the United States, "The Philippine Muslim News," Vol. II, No. 2, July 1968.

When the Americans introduced a universal system of primary education, most Muslims refused to send their children to school for fear that they might be converted to Christianity. When the American authorities offered scholarships, the leading families refused to send their children to oblige the Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Given their low standard of living, poor health and sanitation, and high rate of illiteracy, the Muslims scarcely improved. But worst of all, the cultural and religious animosity which the Spaniards engendered in their minds under their policy of "divide and rule" deepened.

The chronic problems of the Muslims in the Philippines alarmed the government so it conducted several studies in its desire to identify these problems and seek solutions. Thus, the so-called "Muslim Problem" or what was earlier erroneously known as "Moro Problem" with its long history, dating back as it does to the coming of the Spanish colonizers to the Philippines since 1521, finally became an official government concern. However, much as it wanted to solve the problem of the Muslims, the government was handicapped by certain prevailing factors and conditions such as crisis of leadership among the Muslims, too much politics, and ignorance of the culture of the Muslims. As a result, only stop-gap measures were employed. Every time the Muslims

<sup>4</sup> Cezar Adib Majul, *Islamic Influence in the Philippines and Cultural and Religious Responses to Development and Social Change* (Manila: CONVISLAM, 1971), p. 15.

complained, the government undertook some kind of reforms only to abandon them after some time.

Several studies of the so-called Muslim problem were undertaken, one of which was authorized by the Philippine Congress.<sup>5</sup> More recently, a private foundation, the Filipinas Foundation, Inc.<sup>6</sup> also came up with what it considers an in-depth study of the problems of the Muslims in the Philippines. In addition to these studies, several position papers on the problems of the Muslims in the Philippines were prepared by both experts and laymen. There were also individual researches made by Muslim scholars on specialized aspects of the Muslim problem.<sup>7</sup> One notes, how-

ever, that while there seems to be a general agreement on the outward manifestations of the Muslim problem, the fundamental problem is not very clear. In other words, the peripheral problems or symptoms are obvious but the core problem is not. Differences in the proposed solutions spring from this difficulty. All this appears to stem from a lack of a theoretical framework with which to view and analyze the Muslim problem.

### Theoretical Framework

The Muslim problem is not a simple one. There are various aspects involved in defining the problem. The first deals with the origins of the Muslim problem. It involves a long history of attempts to impose alien sovereignty over the fiercely freedom-loving Muslims. Coupled with those attempts, at least during the Spanish colonial period, was an intention to convert the Muslims into Christianity. The Muslims in the South, however, were rabid adherents of Islam so that the politico-military program of imposing sovereignty acquired a religious color. In fact it seems that the Muslims perceived an amalgamation of the political and religious ambitions of the colonizers. As perceived by the Muslims, the imposition of sovereignty would have facilitated their conversion of Christianity and conversion to Christianity would have opened the door to the imposition of sovereignty over them. Thus, it can be said that there would not have been a Muslim problem if there were no attempts to

<sup>5</sup> Philippines (Republic) Congress, *Report of the Special Committee to Investigate the Moro Problem*, especially with regard to peace and order in Mindanao, 3rd Congress, 2nd Session, 1954. Please see also *Report on the Problems of Philippine Cultural Minorities*, Senate, Manila, 1963, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> *An Anatomy of Philippine Muslim Affairs: A Study in Depth on Muslim Affairs in the Philippines* (Makati, Rizal: Filipinas Foundation, Inc., 1971), p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> On the religious aspects, we have the works of Ahmad Alonto, Cesar Adib Majul, and Kunug Pumbaya; on the educational aspects, we have Salih Utuhtalum, Masur M. Mangabang, Abdullah T. Madale, Juanito Bruno, Indin Nooh, Nunggo Pahn, Mauyag M. Tamano, and Samuel N. Iba; on the legal aspects, we have Mamintal A. Tamano, Macapanton Abbas, Jr., Michael Mastura, Pangalian Balindong, and Mama D. Busran; and on the socio-cultural aspects, we have Mamitua Saber, Cesar Adib Majul and Panfilo E. Figueras.

impose alien sovereignty on the Muslims.

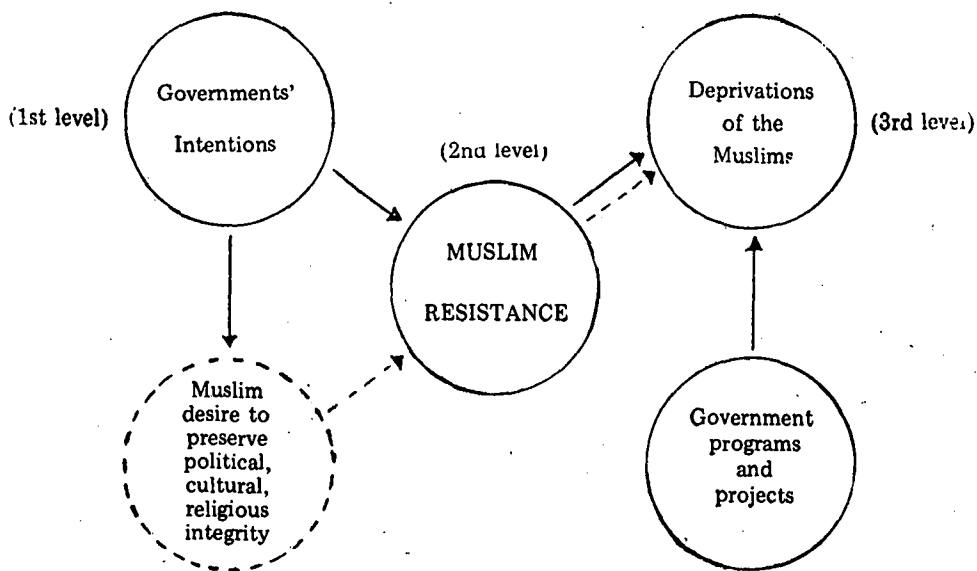
The second aspect involves the response of the Muslims to the attempts to colonize (and also Christianize) them. The problem at this level arose from the nature of the Muslim response. Although Islam is a religion of peace, Muslims are morally bound to resist any attempt to convert to any other religion. Thus, although Islam is perceived as bringing about unity and peace under the concept of universal brotherhood, the intrusions of other religions are resisted with fierce if not fanatical determination. It is to be expected that the nature of the resistance depends on the form of intrusion, so that when the colonizers utilized force to achieve their objectives, the Muslims countered with force. This counter move was in the

eyes of the colonizers-proselytizers a "problem."

The Muslim problem may, thus, be understood from two vantage views: from the point of view of the Muslims and from the point of view of the colonizers-proselytizers. These two perceptions of the same problem provides a framework with which to analyze government programs in the Muslim areas. The Muslim problem as thus conceived is diagrammatically represented in Diagram I.

The problem had its historical beginnings when the Spaniards tried to impose their sovereignty in Mindanao and Sulu and to convert the Muslim to Christianity. The policy of Spain against the Muslims stemmed from her having been able to drive the "Moros" from the Peninsula and her success in other areas like

Diagram I — The Theoretical Framework



Latin America. Hence, she assumed that the Muslims of Southern Philippines would also bow before the sharpness and might of "Toledor blades."<sup>8</sup> This arrogant attitude resulted in probably the most costly colonial venture of Spain. It also meant the imposition of burdensome taxes on Christian Filipinos to finance the "Moro" wars and the mobilization of the natives to augment the Spanish forces. The Muslims interpreted this participation, albeit forced, of the Christian Filipinos as an act of hostility and created in them a long-nurtured hatred, resentment, and suspicion.<sup>9</sup> The Christian Filipinos, in turn, became so ignorant about their Muslim brothers that the rule of the latter in the history of the Philippines, until lately, has been relegated to the background. Indeed, the term "Moro" up to now is used by the Christian Filipinos in a derisive and derogatory sense.

The Muslim problem up to the early years of this century did not go beyond the second level. The pattern, nevertheless, continued and even acquired a third level with the coming of the Americans. By virtue of the provisions of the Treaty of Paris of 1898, the Spaniards ceded the Philippines to the United States. The Americans had to effect their sovereignty, initially by force of arms, in the territory ceded to them including

the areas in Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan which were occupied by the Muslims. Since they recognized the intentions of the Americans as not very different from those of the Spaniards, the Muslims again resisted for as long as they could in what is now known as the "pacification" campaign in Mindanao and Sulu.

The armed confrontation between government troops (most of whom later on were Christian Filipinos) and the Muslims had subsided when the Commonwealth was established. The Muslims protested their inclusion, but to no avail. It was during this period that the late President Quezon initiated his policies of Muslim assimilation and the settlement of Mindanao through a massive influx of Christian Filipinos. The Muslims resisted mildly and this manner of resistance continued even when the Republic came into being in 1946. The pressure of Christian settlers and other factors directly or indirectly related to this eventually resulted in armed conflicts between Christians and government troops and Muslim groups. It was at this period when the policy of national integration was implemented.

The almost four centuries of resistance against the intentions and ac-tuations of various administration left the Muslims in a state of "backwardness" vis-a-vis the Christian Filipinos. This condition of deprivation prompted the implementation of programs and projects intended to accelerate the socio-economic and political development of the Muslims so

<sup>8</sup> Samuel K. Tan, "Sulu Under American Military Rule, 1889-1913," *Philippine Social and Humanitarian Review*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1 (March 1967), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

they could be more easily and rapidly incorporated into the Philippine body politic.

It should be noted at this juncture that since the Americans inaugurated their policy of attraction, through Quezon's policy of assimilation, and up to the Republic's policy of integration, the Christian political leaders proceeded from the premise that the Muslims were also Filipinos. A corollary to this is the participation of the Muslims in political processes. In time, the historical roots of Muslim resistance slowly faded away from the minds of policy-makers and administrators. It was not surprising, then, that the government programs and projects soon came to be regarded as measures to solve specific socio-cultural, economic, and political problems, the totality of which has come to be known in current thinking as the Muslim Problem. At this point in time, the third-level problem surfaced. This is with reference to the question of appropriateness and adequacy of the solutions to specific aspects of the Muslim problem.

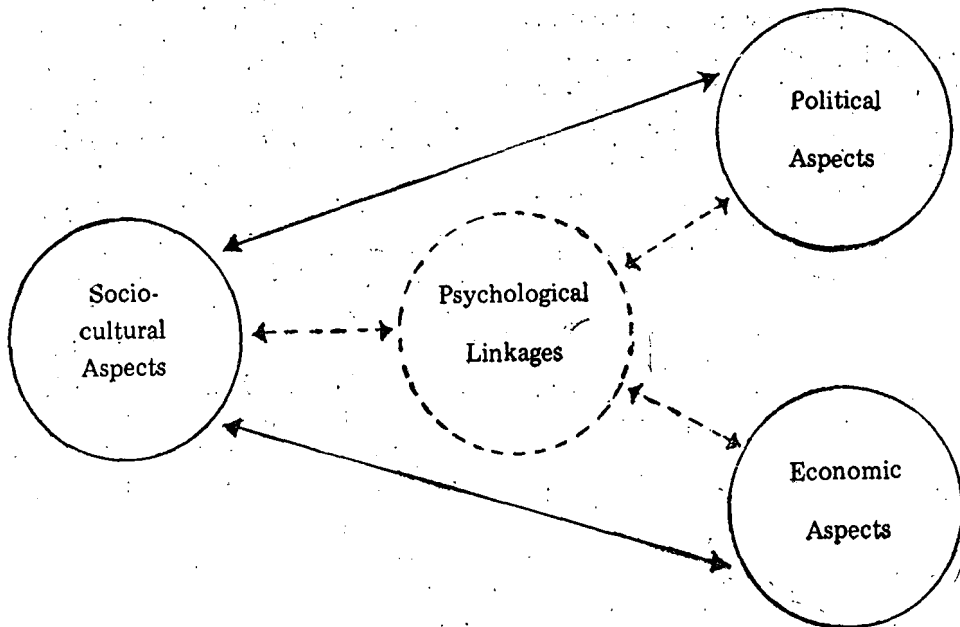
The lack of congruence between the government's perception of the Muslim problem and the Muslims' own perception became pronounced when policy-makers and public administrators assumed that the Muslims are Filipinos who, because of force of circumstances and historical accident, lagged behind the Christian Filipinos in the context of modernization. This can be seen in *Diagram I*. The solid lines in the diagram indicate

the government's line of reasoning while the broken lines stand for the Muslims' perception. Both perceptions are alike in terms of the proximate cause of the Muslims' condition of deprivation. However, because of the government's assumption regarding the political affiliation of the Muslims, it has paid all its attention to programs and projects designed to solve specific "problems" of the Muslims. On the other hand, the Muslims have viewed the government's succession of intentions (subjugation, colonization and christianization by the Spaniards, colonization and incorporation into the body politic by the Americans, assimilation and integration by the Christian-dominated government of the Commonwealth and the Republic), as threats to their traditional political concepts and to the integrity of their culture and religion. It is the desire to preserve what they hold dear which explains their resistance. This implies, therefore, that the appropriateness and adequacy of government programs and projects are measured by the Muslims in terms of this desire whereas the policy-makers' and the administrators' measures of the same things do not go as deep. This, therefore, is the crux of the lack of congruence of perception of the problem.

Such lack of congruence may be illustrated by the following diagram. The government perceives the Muslim problem in terms of its basic socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects which are interrelated. The

Muslims perceive these aspects and components as not only interrelated but ultimately linked to certain apprehensions.

Diagram II — The Various Aspects of the Muslim Problem



#### The Government's Response to the Problem: An Analysis

The Spanish colonial government had a simple formula: subjugation, colonization and conversion to Christianity. The American policy was pacification, colonization, and tutelage; that is, the Americans tried to prepare the Muslims for self-government together with the Christian Filipinos so that they would become real members of the body politic. The dominant policy during the Commonwealth period was assimilation coupled with the encouragement of Christian Filipinos to settle in the Mindanao and Sulu areas in order to accelerate the development of the region. It was during

this period when President Quezon enunciated his belief that the traditional government among the Muslims should not exist side by side with the civil government and, therefore, should be eradicated. Then the Japanese came. The Japanese occupation was short-lived; no clear-cut policy was pronounced. Nevertheless the Muslims were left pretty much to themselves.

Since the American regime, the response of the government to the problem has been quite consistent. The government would react to a specific situation, relaxing its efforts until another crisis since the Americans came to this country, the tendency to treat



the Muslim problem segmentally gradually became stronger. In other words, an armed uprising, for example, was treated as a problem of peace and order; the Muslims' inability to read and write in the alphabet, as a problem which the educational system could solve. This tendency became more apparent after the Second World War when the Philippines regained its independence.

Sporadic armed conflicts punctuated the continuation of Christian Filipino settlement of Mindanao and Sulu. Congressional investigations and other studies resulted in the inauguration of a policy of integration. The psychological bases of the problem, however, were not looked into. This seems to have been the result of the problem having existed for over four hundred years during which period its historical antecedents and reasons have slowly but surely receded from the forefront. The government only had an overview while the Muslims had the feel of the psychological dimension of the problem.

The establishment of the Commission on National Integration (CNI), the Mindanao State University (MSU), and the Mindanao Development Authority (MDA) represent the government's attempt to implement programs designed to solve the problem. However, the government's assessment that a massive program on a broad front was needed to solve the Muslim Problem was correct only up to a point; its principal weakness was its inability to discover and appre-

ciate the fact that while the Muslims wanted socio-economic-political development, they also wanted the preservation of the integrity of their socio-religious and political traditions.

The programs of the CNI, the MSU, and the MDA no doubt are premised on good intentions but their approaches are rather simplistic probably because they are based on unrealistic assumptions. For example, it would appear that the CNI program does not consider the fact that the Muslims believe they have (and they actually have) a culture and a society which antedate the ones established by the Spaniards. The Muslims seem to believe that the concentration of the CNI on scholarships implies that they must be as educated as the Christian Filipinos in order to qualify for integration into the body politic. Consequently, to the Muslims, integration becomes anathema because it connotes their abandonment of their traditional culture and religion which they hold dear.

The MSU, on the other hand, is likewise confronted with related problems. The relevance of its curricular offerings to the goals and aspirations of Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu can be questioned, given the Muslim aspiration to earn a decent living. In this connection, there is a feeling that the MDA was established not so much as an earnest and sincere attempt to accelerate the development of the Minsupala region but as a political ploy. In the first place, its funds have been duly limited. In the second place,

its limited funds apparently have been expended for projects which benefit the already developed areas like Davao City than the rural areas where the great majority of the Muslims live.

Whenever there is a short-fall in accomplishments, the government's sincerity likewise takes a downturn in the eyes of many Muslims whose hopes have been revived by the announcement of programs which strikes deep into the psychological premises of the problem.

The advent of martial law in the Philippines, however, paved the way for the implementation of a comprehensive reconstruction and development program in Mindanao and Sulu. President Marcos, in a more recent statement said that since the beginning of the effort to establish a New Society in the Philippines he has adopted a philosophy of development designed to strengthen all ethno-linguistic cultural communities in the Philippines, following three criteria, namely,

1. The preservation and enhancement of Islam which is the heritage of the entire Filipino people;
2. The preservation and advancement of Islamic culture and traditions; and
3. The promotion of the well-being of the Muslim communities including the restoration of their ancestral lands.

Toward this end, vigorous steps were taken to translate into laws and gov-

ernment policies and programs what could be done to elevate the quality of life of all the cultural communities in the Philippines. Among the innovative approaches introduced are the RAD (Reconstruction and Development of Mindanao and Sulu) program, the codification of Muslim traditional laws, the program to restore the ancestral lands of the Muslims, the establishment of the Philippine Amanah Bank, and the recognition of the important role played by Muslims in writing the history of the Philippines.

### Conclusion

Definitely, however, the Muslim problem is not yet satisfactorily settled or solved. This may be partly explained by the following statement of a top-level executive of the government:

Oftentimes in our eagerness to do something for the Muslims we devise programs which we think are good for them, but which to them are not. Therefore, it is important that before a program is proposed, some kind of a survey should be undertaken to find out what the people really want. Once this is identified, then a program can be evolved to fulfill it.<sup>10</sup>

The Muslims, who know what their problems are and what should be done to solve them, have not meaningfully participated in decision-making. Their fears, aspirations, expectations and ambitions have not been articulated.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with the Honorable Alejandro Melchor, Jr., Executive Secretary of the Republic of the Philippines on August 5, 1973.

In this connection, there is a need for a pioneering study based on empirical data to include an in-depth inquiry into the historical antecedents of the problems of the Muslims in the Philippines and a thorough presentation of the socio-cultural and psychological motivations of the Muslims.

This article only suggests that the Muslims in the Philippines should be given the opportunity not only to say what their problems really are but also to express how best they can be solved. It is only in this spirit that the Philippine Government can solve the Muslim problem.