

Regionalization and the Special Autonomous Regions: Political and Institutional Issues

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In the search for the appropriate political and administrative model for the autonomous regions, the Aquino government and the separatist Muslims of the Southern Philippines find themselves in some kind of a tug-of-war. However, some common ground exists between the government and the rebels in Mindanao based on the Tripoli Agreement, which guarantees autonomy, although varying and opposing interpretations of the Agreement by the concerned parties give rise to a deadlock in the negotiations. The Aquino government should therefore continue to endeavor attempts to find the necessary compromise along constitutional and democratic lines.

Introduction

Regional autonomy is a major concern of the government in its quest for peace and development for the country. It is envisioned as a means to bring peace in the troubled areas of Northern and Southern Philippines so that the people in these regions can effectively participate in the political process and in the implementation of a sustained and massive socio-economic development program for their welfare and upliftment.

Self-governance for regional development and cultural cohesion is the basic aspect of this form of administration over certain geographical areas sharing a common cultural legacy and social structures, resources and aspirations. Since the Philippines is a unitary state, autonomy has to be guaranteed by the State as a measure of self-government to a territorial and political subdivision or region. Autonomy imposes upon the region or local government the corresponding responsibility for satisfactory performance and accountability for the exercise of authority and the use of resources.

Section 15, Article X, of the 1987 Constitution states:

There shall be created autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and in the Cordilleras consisting of provinces, cities, municipalities, and geographical areas sharing common and distinctive historical and cultural heritage, economic and social structures, and other relevant characteristics within the framework of this Constitution and the national sovereignty as well as territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines.

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From the time Congress was convened in July 1987, the legislators were mandated to enact an organic act for each autonomous region within eighteen months, a period that covered two consecutive regular sessions. In drafting the organic act, Congress was to be assisted by the Regional Consultative Commission of the respective regions. Members of the commissions were to be appointed by the President. The creation of the autonomous region shall be effective when approved by majority of the votes cast by the constituent units in a plebiscite called for the purpose, provided that only provinces, cities, and geographic areas voting favorably in such a plebiscite shall be included in the autonomous region.¹

The organic act will define the basic structure of government in the autonomous regions, with specific provisions on the unique and common features of the regional executive departments, legislative assembly, and special courts for indigenous family, personal and property laws. By definition, an organic act, is an act of Congress conferring powers of government on a territory, which takes the place of a constitution as the fundamental law of the local government. Once an organic act is effected in a territory, it becomes known as organic law, a term usually applied only to constitutional law and which carries a high degree of authority. The organic act therefore, will have as much authority as a constitutional provision and no amendment to the act would be valid unless approved by the people of the affected areas in a plebiscite.

Long before the ratification of the Constitution in February 1987 or shortly after the Aquino government came to power in February 1986, serious efforts were made by the government to negotiate a lasting peace with insurgent groups who, for years had struggled for self-rule as a first step towards regional autonomy. The Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) responded positively to the initiatives and went into peace talks with the government.

Without pre-empting the constitutional duty of Congress concerning autonomy, the negotiations sought to reorganize existing administrative structures in the affected regions to immediately grant the people concerned a meaningful participation in the conduct of their affairs in order to enable them to prepare for regional autonomy. The negotiations with the CPLA ended successfully on July 15, 1987. Executive Order No. 220 was signed, creating a Cordillera Administrative Region. The negotiations with the MNLF were less successful. On May 7, 1987, the peace talks were suspended because they reached a deadlock on a number of fundamental issues, including the authority of the President to create the autonomous region by Executive Order. The suspension of the talks came two days short of the 90-day deadline set by the Government and the MNLF to establish an agreement towards a peaceful solution to the Southern Philippines problem.

Why Autonomy for Muslim Mindanao?

The government, before the start of the talks with the MNLF, articulated its policy towards the Muslim Filipinos:

The expectation of our Muslim brothers are centered around the idea of justice and development as well as the hope that past indifference and neglect will be redressed. The new administration is pledged to its early realization.²

Brief Background of the Problem

Since 1986, the government has repeatedly spoken of the neglect of Muslim Mindanao in the past and the need to remedy this situation, specifically by allowing the Muslim Filipinos to govern themselves within the framework of the Philippine Constitution. Ambassador Emmanuel Pelaez, Chairman of the Peace and Development Panel for Mindanao and the Cordilleras, spelled out the government's sentiment in this respect in the clearest terms:

Until now, many Filipinos do not appreciate the reality that poverty and underdevelopment in the Moro lands are traceable in part to the Moros' historic and nationalistic resistance to Western imperialist powers to defend their freedom and to keep their faith and way of life as a distinctive ethno-religious minority. Similarly, after independence, they expended great time and resources to fend off the continuance of the universalistic policies of political integration, cultural assimilation and national development that were applied without due regard to the distinctive characteristics of the Islamic and Moro cultures of Mindanao.

With the massive migration to Mindanao of Christians from the Visayas and Luzon and their spread to areas originally settled by Muslim ethnic groups, which the government encouraged and facilitated, the Moros felt the increasing loss of their ancestral lands to the Christians. This led to their apprehension that their faith, culture and way of life may be endangered as they are outnumbered and as they fall behind economically, socially, and politically.³

One of the root causes of the Mindanao problem, therefore, could be attributed to the population movement from Luzon and the Visayas which caused social and economic dislocation of the Muslim population. As new settlers populated the profitable market centers and wider agricultural areas of Mindanao, the Muslims were edged out and relegated to being mere rural farm settlers, and small-time suppliers. As a result, in both urban and rural areas, the Muslims now constitute an economic minority while the other groups represent the dominant economic force. This illustrates the socio-economic imbalance in the general structure between the migrant groups and the indigenous Muslim communities.⁴

Hand in hand with increasing non-Muslim migration to the area was the growing Islamic consciousness among the Muslim Filipinos, through

increased contacts with Muslim world, and which generated Muslim separatist ideas.

The plight of the Muslim Filipinos was compounded by the imposition of martial law in 1972 which disregarded valid grievances in the region. The mid-1970s saw armed conflicts as the Muslims, led by the MNLF, waged a struggle for liberation from what they deemed as a colonial and oppressive system. Tens of thousands of Muslim Filipinos were slain, maimed or deprived of profitable activity as a consequence. Muslim refugees in Sabah are now widely estimated at 300,000.

The Tripoli Agreement

The Tripoli Agreement, signed by the Philippine Government and the MNLF in Tripoli, Libya, on December 23, 1976, with the assistance of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), laid down the principles and procedures for the establishment of ceasefire and autonomy in certain areas of Southern Philippines. It provided four principal purposes:

1) The establishment of a ceasefire between the forces of the Government of the Philippines and the MNLF;

2) The establishment of autonomy for 13 provinces⁵ in Southern Philippines within the context of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines and through constitutional processes;

3) The necessary specifics and details to flesh out and organize the autonomous region to be "discussed later" by a Mixed Committee, composed of representatives of the Philippine Government and the MNLF which would meet in February-March 1977;

4) The creation of a provisional autonomous government immediately after the signing in Manila of a final agreement on the abovementioned details.

The establishment of a ceasefire was implemented by the signing of a joint ceasefire accord by the two opposing sides on January 20, 1977.

The establishment of an autonomous region took a longer and questionable route. The Mixed Committee, which could have brought this into being, met in Tripoli as directed in the agreement and, subsequently, in Manila on April 22-26, 1977 but reached no agreements on the details for the creation of an autonomous region.

In an effort to break the impasse, Colonel Muammar Khaddafi of Libya telexed President Ferdinand E. Marcos on March 18, 1977 proposing:

- 1) the immediate issuance of a decree on autonomy for the 13 provinces;
- 2) the creation of a provisional government; and
- 3) the holding of a referendum in the 13 provinces.

On this basis, Marcos 1) issued Proclamation No. 1628 on March 26, 1977 proclaiming autonomy in the 13 provinces; (2) created a provisional regional government to take steps to organize the regular autonomous government including the holding of a referendum/plebiscite; and, (3) scheduled the referendum/plebiscite on April 17, 1977.

On the basis of the results of the referendum/plebiscite, Marcos issued Presidential Decree (PD) No. 1618 creating two autonomous regions for Regions IX and XII comprising five provinces each excluding Palawan, South Cotabato and Davao del Sur which had voted against their inclusion. Each autonomous region has an executive council of five members appointed by the President for a term of three years and a legislative assembly composed of 17 elective and 10 appointive members. Elections for the elective members of the assemblies took place in 1979 and 1982.

Considering the circumstances under which they were organized, coupled with the thinking that the powers granted to the autonomous governments were inadequate, the MNLF and the OIC did not accept them as constituting proper or full implementation of the Tripoli Agreement. This view was shared by the late Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. in a speech at the Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on May 12, 1981. He felt that the matter of implementation had to be done all over again. These sentiments influenced the incoming Aquino administration.

In March 1982, on the occasion of the state visit of Marcos to Saudi Arabia, His Majesty King Khaled bin Abdul Aziz brought up the point that there should be only one autonomous region, in conformity with the Tripoli Agreement. Marcos then issued PD No. 1843 on April 5, 1982 merging the two executive councils into one which was accepted by the people in the two regions in a plebiscite held on May 17, 1982 and subsequently ratified by the Interim National Assembly in *Batas Pambansa Blg. 229*. For some reason however, the merger was not implemented and the two executive councils of Regions IX and XII continued to exist separately.

Central to the Aquino government's policy towards the Muslims therefore, is the recognition that their demand for autonomy is just, and that this demand, contained in the Tripoli Agreement, was never fully honored by the previous regime. Although the Tripoli Agreement was concluded under the Marcos administration, the Aquino administration considers it as a commitment of the Philippine Government.

The Peace Talks with the MNLF

Why the Talks with the MNLF?

The Moro National Liberation Front, under Chairman Nur Misuari, has been at the forefront of the struggle for self-rule in Mindanao. It set aside its goal of independence in favor of autonomy when it signed the Tripoli Agreement. It is recognized by the OIC (whose membership consists of 46 Muslim countries and organizations) as the representative of Muslim Filipinos. For these reasons alone, the government had to deal mainly with the MNLF.

A series of events further enhanced the MNLF's role as the group the government had to negotiate with:

1) Following the arrangements made between MNLF Chairman Misuari and Agapito "Butz" Aquino, the President's emissary and brother-in-law, an agreement for cessation of hostilities between the Government and the MNLF was signed on August 8, 1986 in Maimbung, Jolo, Sulu. On August 24, 1986, Mr. Aquino and Chairman Misuari agreed in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to hold a peace dialogue and that Misuari would be allowed to return to the country.

2) At their meeting in Maimbung, Jolo, Sulu, on September 5, 1986, President Aquino and MNLF Chairman Misuari agreed to support the continued cessation of hostilities and to form their panels to carry out negotiations to resolve the Mindanao conflict.

3) Misuari was allowed to conduct consultative meetings in September and October 1986 in 12 of the 13 provinces mentioned in the Tripoli Agreement in order to ascertain the MNLF position in the anticipated peace talks with the government. In a few of these meetings, Butz Aquino joined Chairman Misuari.

4) On January 2-5, 1987, then Minister Aquilino Pimentel, Jr. of the Ministry of Local Government and Butz Aquino met with Chairman Misuari in the Ministry of Local Government, resulting in a Joint Statement which was also signed by OIC Secretary General Syed Shariffudin Pirzada, serving as a witness.

President Aquino's meeting with Chairman Misuari and her decision to conduct negotiations primarily with the MNLF drew criticisms from other Moro rebel organizations and from both lay and religious leaders and groups in Mindanao and around the country. The government received warnings from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the MNLF-Reformist Group that they would not be bound by any agreement signed by the government exclusively with the MNLF. To press their point, the MILF and MNLF-

Reformist groups, in fact, engaged in sporadic violence, destroying public buildings and bridges, because they had not been included in the talks.

In meetings held at the University of Life on February 9, 1987 and in Zamboanga City on February 19-20, 1987, attempts were made to include the other groups in the peace talks but these were dismissed by Misuari's group. The MNLF threatened to withdraw from the talks should the government further attempt to deal with other Muslim organizations.

While honoring its commitment for the MNLF, the government has also seen to it that the interests of the other Muslim groups, as well as those of non-Muslims in Mindanao, are protected. On October 20, 1986, the President hosted a consultative meeting in Malacañang for various Mindanao leaders. To accommodate other rebel factions, the government forged an agreement for a ceasefire with the MILF, headed by Hashim Salamat, on January 17, 1987, and with the MNLF Reformist group of Dimas Pundato on January 23, 1987. The government also secured a commitment from the MNLF that before any peace agreement is signed, the MNLF should be able to get the support of the other Muslim groups for the agreement.

This was the stage set when the Government Panel under Ambassador Pelaez took over the negotiations with the MNLF.

The Jeddah Accord

The Jeddah Accord is a joint statement issued by the negotiating panels of the Government and the MNLF on January 3, 1987 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It reads:

The two panels agreed to continue discussion of the proposal for the grant of full autonomy to Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan subject to democratic processes.

In the meantime, the MNLF proposes that President Corazon C. Aquino will issue an executive order suspending pertinent provisions of the draft constitution on the grant of autonomy to Muslim Mindanao in the scheduled plebiscite on February 2, 1987, to allow the MNLF to undertake democratic consultations with the people of Mindanao and its islands, and that the Philippine panel shall present this proposal to President Aquino for her approval.

The MNLF contended that the statement effectively commits the Government to grant autonomy to the area defined by it, insisting that the negotiations with the Government Panel were being held to discuss and draft the mechanisms and details of the grant of autonomy.

The Government asserted, however, that the statement represents an agreement only to continue discussions on the proposal. An agreement to

discuss a proposal is not to grant what is being proposed, Ambassador Pelaez had said. The summary of the discussions between the two panels in Jeddah confirms this position by repeating the words "proposal" and "proposed area of autonomy."

As it turned out, the President declined to grant the suspension. The whole Constitution was overwhelmingly ratified by the people.

The MNLF Demands

In the meeting on February 19-20, 1987 in Zamboanga City to pursue discussions on autonomy as agreed in Jeddah, the MNLF submitted to the Government Panel a document entitled "MNLF Proposal for the Grant of Full Autonomy to Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Palawan and Tawi-Tawi Submitted to the Philippine Government Panel in the RP-MNLF Peace Talks Pursuant to the Jeddah Accord of January 3, 1987." The proposal contained 1 "basic point" and 25 "basic proposals."

The basic point is stated as follows:

1.0 BASIC POINT AGREED UPON IN THE JEDDAH ACCORD OF JANUARY 3, 1987

1.1 The grant of full autonomy for the islands of Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Palawan and Tawi-Tawi.

Then followed the basic proposals, the main ones being:

2.1 Territory and its Name;

2.2 Provisional Government; and

2.3 Proclamation by the President.

Under "Territory and Name," the MNLF Proposal called for all 23 provinces of Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Palawan, and Tawi-Tawi to be included in the area of autonomy. The area itself is to be known as the Bangsa Moro Autonomous Region.

The Provisional Government would have the following features:

Immediately after the signing of the agreement, a Provisional Government shall be established to administer the area of autonomy and to prepare elections of the legislative assembly in the area of autonomy.

The Provisional Government shall exercise all powers granted to or inherent with the Autonomous Government in accordance with the agreement with the MNLF including apportionment of the seats in the legislative assembly. The Provisional Government shall continue to exercise powers until a government is formed by the

elected legislative assembly.

The first election of the legislative assembly shall take place simultaneously with the national elections in 1992.

The Provisional Government shall be headed by a Chief Minister, with three other Ministers representing the Muslims, Christians, and Highlanders and other indigenous cultural communities of the area of autonomy who shall all be nominated by the Moro National Liberation Front.

The Provisional Government shall undertake to consult with the people of the area of autonomy with respect to the grant of full autonomy.

As to the means of securing autonomy, the MNLF Proposal stated that the President shall "immediately after the signing of the agreement between the MNLF and the Government and before the Congress of the Philippines convenes in July 1987, issue a proclamation declaring full autonomy for Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan."

Other salient MNLF proposals include:

1) That the Chief Minister of the Bangsa Moro Autonomous Region shall be the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the region;

2) That at least 85 percent of the personnel of the Armed Forces of the Philippines within the region shall come from the Bangsa Moro Armed Forces of the MNLF; and

3) That a Regional Security Force shall be established in the region with an initial strength of 60,000, at least 85 percent of which shall also come from the Bangsa Moro Armed Forces of the MNLF.

The Government's Response

The Philippine Government's objections to the MNLF proposals⁶ amplified in the course of the peace talks since the MNLF position did not veer far away from them - are as follows:

On the question of the basic point of agreement, the MNLF Proposal not only failed to interpret the Jeddah Accord correctly, it also failed to mention the fact that the terms of autonomy would be "subject to democratic processes." This means that the government would be bound first of all, by the Constitution, and secondly, by popular will, as signified, in particular, through a plebiscite.

On the question of territory, the Jeddah accord indeed "laid new parameters for the talks," as the government later expressed it, because it

expanded the area of discussion for autonomy from 13 to 23 provinces. However, it was the government's understanding that autonomy, and not secession, was the issue: that Congress, as stipulated by the Constitution, would finally arbitrate on the establishment of autonomy; and that autonomy for all 23 provinces would be approved by a plebiscite. The government was willing to consider autonomy for a vastly expanded area, but within a constitutional and democratic framework.

On the question of government, the Philippine Government's view was that the MNLF, in effect, wanted secession rather than autonomy. With the assistance of the President, the MNLF would actually exercise authoritarian powers over one-third of the Philippine territory. Elections for the legislative assembly would not be held until 1992, and the Provisional Government would determine when local officials would be elected. The territory would have an army of its own, highly drawn from MNLF ranks. The Philippine Constitution as a whole would not apply to the "autonomous" area.

Finally, on the question of the mode of securing autonomy, the government would hold that the President cannot, constitutionally-speaking, decide on her own to establish autonomy in Muslim Mindanao. Since the Constitution has expressly provided that the autonomous region be created by Congress, such an act would expose her to possible impeachment proceedings for culpable violation of the Constitution.

The Government Proposals

In answer to the MNLF's proposed Provisional Government, the Government developed ideas which were all turned down by the MNLF.

Proposed Preparatory Commission. This shall be established for purposes of: a) administrative decentralization to strengthen the autonomy of the units therein; and b) to accelerate the economic and social growth and development of the units in the region. In addition, it shall conduct hearings and consultations and undertake studies in connection with its task of preparing the groundwork for the appointment by the President of the Regional Consultative Commission, including the preparation of drafts of an organic act for Muslim Mindanao. Its creation by executive order of the President shall be effective when approved by a majority of the votes cast by the constituent units in a referendum called for the purpose.

Proposed Preparatory Regional Council for Muslim Mindanao (PREP-CON). Presented on April 14, 1987, the PREP-CON would be a policy-making body under the general supervision of the President and to be composed of fifty (50) members headed by a Chairman/Executive Director. Its territory would be a fusion of Regions IX and XII. It would have ample powers delegated

to it by the President and the National Government departments and a wider scope of authority compared to the two separate regions. The underlying purpose of PREP-CON would be to enable the leaders in the area, particularly the Moros or Muslims and other ethno-cultural communities in Mindanao, to practice meaningful autonomy while preparing themselves for the governance of the more autonomous region to be created by Congress. As the MNLF rejected this proposal, it urged that the issue of territory be settled first before anything else.

Provisional Autonomous Council (PAC). Presented on April 24, 1987, this proposal called for the merger of the two executive councils already existing in Regions IX and XII. The ensuing entity, the PAC, will have nine (9) members to be appointed by the President. Well beyond the PREP-CON, the PAC's functions would include: a) running the affairs of the government in the area more effectively; b) actively participating in the socio-economic development of the area; and c) preparing the ground for the organization of the Regional Consultative Commission. The MNLF was offered a position of leadership and adequate representation in the PAC together with representation from other population groups. The MNLF admitted that the PAC Proposal was good and attractive but subsequently, they would abandon this idea and revert back to its position of calling for the immediate grant of autonomy.

The Bottom-Line Position

On May 5-6, 1987, the Government Panel met with the MNLF Panel in Maimbung, Jolo, Sulu, at the invitation of Chairman Misuari. There, the two panels exchanged their final positions. The MNLF presented its demands in a one-page document, foremost of which were:

- 1) The President of the Philippines must, within forty-eight hours (from May 7, 1987) issue an Executive Order declaring all of Mindanao, Sulu, Palawan, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan as an area of full autonomy;
- 2) The 13 provinces mentioned in the Tripoli Agreement must immediately be constituted as a Provisional Government by virtue of the Executive Order issued by the President;
- 3) The 13 provinces mentioned in the Tripoli Agreement shall be exempted from the act of Congress.

The MNLF would have the President, by means of an executive order, impose MNLF rule over the whole of Southern Philippines, 75% of whose inhabitants are non-Muslims, without any consultation with the people therein. The Government Panel made the observation that neither on moral

nor on legal grounds can she do this. As the head of a constitutional democratic government, she can act only in accordance with constitutional processes and the sovereign will of the people.

After three months of serious negotiations, the two panels reached a deadlock and agreed to suspend the talks.

The Autonomy Issue

Consultative Meetings on Autonomy

From June to July 1987 with the peace talks suspended, the Government Panel conducted a series of consultative meetings on autonomy with various groups - Muslims and Christians - in Mindanao. The consultations were designed to ascertain the views and suggestions of the people in Southern Philippines on how the constitutional provision mandating the creation of an autonomous region could be effectively implemented. Ambassador Pelaez attended all these consultations which were meant to provide another input to the effort to justify and effectively implement the Tripoli Agreement. MNLF officials, however, promptly criticized the consultations as an attempt by the government to preempt, by public opinion, the grant of full autonomy to the 13 provinces mentioned in the Agreement. The consultations proved to be enlightening to the participants and some MNLF members who attended, appreciated the government position afterwards. Generally, there was widespread public support for the government's efforts in solving the autonomy problem.

Opinion Survey on Autonomy

An opinion survey was conducted for the Government Panel by the Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP) in the 13 provinces included in the Tripoli Agreement from June 29 to July 9, 1987. The survey was made before the Government Panel started the series of consultative meetings on autonomy. Therefore, the people's perception of autonomy was most likely that of an autonomy under Nur Misuari and the MNLF because the government was negotiating only with this group.

Profile of Respondents. For the survey, 986 persons were interviewed in 13 provinces. Of these, 55.4% were men and 43.6% were women. Majority of the respondents (54.5%) were working and were rural dwellers (55.5%). About a third of all respondents were college graduates (32.8%) and almost as many have some college education (30.9%).

Of those polled, 66.2% were Christians and 28% were Muslims. By ethnic groupings, 9% were Maranaos, 7.6% were Maguindanaos, 10.9% were

Tausogs, 5% were Samals and 42.9% belonged to other groups (Tagalogs, Cebuanos, etc.).

The following is a summary of the findings of the survey:

1) *Question: If a plebiscite was held today, would you vote for the inclusion of your province in the area of autonomy?* Majority of the 986 respondents in the 13 provinces (59.5%) said they were against the inclusion of their province in the autonomous region.

2) *Opinion on Autonomy.* On a province-by-province basis, majority of the respondents in the five predominantly Muslim provinces were in favor of including their provinces in the autonomous area - Lanao del Sur (78.1%), Maguindanao (53.8%), Basilan and Sulu (72.7%), and Tawi-Tawi (62.3%). The vote for autonomy was apparently along religious lines. A large majority of Muslims (79.9%) were for inclusion of their province in the autonomous region, but most Christians (80.5%) were against it.

3) *Opinion on MNLF Position on Autonomy.* In general, majority of respondents disagreed with these MNLF demands: determining the territory through consultations (60.3%); the provisional government to be headed by Misuari for five years (71.7%); 85% of armed forces to come from the MNLF (69.7%); and for the autonomous region's Chief Minister to exercise the President's powers as AFP commander-in-chief (64.3%). Muslims were almost split on the demand for Misuari to head the provisional government: 38.8% agreed, 35.5% disagreed.

4) *Opinion on Government Position on Autonomy.* The respondents accepted two of three government proposals on autonomy: determining the territory through a plebiscite (62.7%) and step-by-step creation of the autonomous region, first organizing councils, with expanded powers for development (76.7%). They rejected (47.9%) the government proposal to give the autonomous region similar, but separate powers from the national government such as those pertaining to foreign affairs and budget appropriations.

5) *Opinion on the Area to be Included in Autonomy.* Majority (62.6%) disagreed that the entire Mindanao be made autonomous just as most respondents (54.1%) disagreed to making only the 13 provinces autonomous. A plurality (47.6%) however, agreed to having only predominantly Muslim provinces autonomous.

6) *Opinion on Peace Talks Prospects.* A plurality (41.9%) were pessimistic about the success of the peace talks, with Christians (48.2%) being more pessimistic than the Muslims (27.2%). Overall, 40.4% believed that the Christians would resist the government acceptance of the MNLF proposals.

Among Christians, 53.7% shared this view. On the other hand, the Muslims thought that people in the autonomous region would accept the arrangement and there would be peace: 54.7% of them shared this opinion.

But if the peace talks collapse and fighting breaks out, 61% preferred to get involved in efforts to solve the problem peacefully. Others (18.4%) said they will take up arms and join the side they believe in. In Zamboanga del Sur, 64.5% and almost half of those polled in Sulu (41.1%) took this view.

Majority of the respondents believed that other Muslim groups should be included in the peace negotiations. This indicated that people in the 13 provinces would prefer a broader Muslim representation in the negotiations with the government.

7. *Perceived National Affiliation.* To find out their political loyalty, respondents were asked where they belong. Majority (51.1%) affirmed they belong to the Filipino nation. Only 16.6% said they belong to the Bangsa Moro. By religion, 53.6% of Muslim respondents said they belong to the Bangsa Moro, but, among Christians, only one percent of respondents said so.

Quest for an Autonomy Model?

As part of the efforts to find a feasible solution to the autonomy problem, government negotiators and planners have turned to various sources in their search for a viable model of autonomy for the Philippine situation. This includes models of and approaches to autonomy found in other countries like Malaysia, the USSR, Spain and Canada. It is the Sudanese experience, however, which may yet serve as a model for our continuing search for the best possible framework for the autonomous region in Mindanao.

In Sudan, there are two identifiable regions based on ethnic factors. The northern part is populated largely by Islamic "arabized" people, while three provinces were grouped together into the Southern Region inhabited predominantly by Negroids (Africans). This case should be of particular interest to the Philippines because of certain similarities, particularly since the popular perception of the case of Sudan is that of a Northern Muslim majority dominating and oppressing a largely Christian minority in the South. While this view is rather simplistic, the fact that ethnic differences have led to an uprising in the south cannot be denied. This had then led to a reappraisal of how the central government should administer the southern part of the country. The Sudanese government did not identify incompatibilities but rather sought to recognize and entrench the separate interests of the North and South on one hand and their common interests (economic and political) on the other.

Conclusion

The government's claim to some success in the talks lies in holding war at bay rather than actually finding lasting peace for Mindanao. But how long will the "no war, no peace" situation last?

While the capacity of the military to deal with a war in the South is not in question, it must be recognized that renewed hostilities would have an immense social cost. The Aquino government, in the first place, symbolizes before the international community and the Filipino people the validity and potency of peaceful and democratic change in society. Unlike the communist insurgency which poses a threat to the very existence and authority of government, the MNLF problem is one where at least some common grounds exist between government and the rebels: the Tripoli Agreement guarantees that the MNLF will abandon the fight for secession. It is just the question of implementing autonomy.

More than any of these, however, a conflagration in Mindanao would set back its political and economic development by years, if not decades, and cause immeasurable suffering among the people Muslims and Christians alike.

But what other options are left for the government?

First of all, the government should continue, however dim the prospects are, to reach out to the MNLF leaders the hopes of finding a compromise on the autonomy question. The Peace Commission appears to be doing exactly that. To the extent that the MNLF has not actually taken war as an option, negotiations remain a distinct possibility.

Beyond the MNLF, contacts with other Muslim groups - the MILF, the MNLF-Reformist Group, as well as various civilian groups - should be pursued with particular vigor, especially in collaboration with the Congressional representatives from Mindanao. In this regard, Dimas Pundato's recent decision to end nine years of exile and to volunteer to mediate between the government and the MNLF is a most welcome one. Pundato's acknowledgement of the need to resolve the autonomy question through constitutional means should be particularly appreciated.

A point however, has been reached, in which much of the burden must now fall on the shoulders of Congress. With the convening of Congress, its mandate to frame an organic act on autonomy for Muslim Mindanao automatically took effect. The MNLF's refusal to undertake the implementation of the Tripoli agreement through congressional means had stemmed from the suspicion that Congress is elitist and bureaucratic. It is Congress' duty to prove that this is not true.

Finally, quite apart from seeking the reopening of negotiations and dealing with the other Muslim factions, the executive branch of government should itself continue to carry out the development of Mindanao. The autonomy question is also a question of development. Autonomy is not an end in itself; it is also a means for uplifting the economic, political and cultural conditions of Muslim Mindanao.

The only other - and unthinkable - alternative is war.

Endnotes

¹Section 18-19, Article X, *1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines*.

²"The Government's Commitment to Mindanao," August 20, 1986.

³Opening Statement of Ambassador Pelaez at the Government-MNLF Talks, Zamboanga City, March 10, 1987.

⁴There are 5 to 7 million Muslim Filipinos grouped by geography and way of life into major communities. The Maguindanaons, which comprise the largest group are settled along the Rio Grande de Cotabato. The Maranaons live around the lake "Ranaw" in Lanao. The Tausogs live in the smaller islands of Balabac, Cagayan de Sulu and Basilan. The Samals and the Tausogs are basically sea-faring people while the Maranaons and Maguindanaons are inland based.

⁵Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, North Cotabato, Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Davao del Sur, South Cotabato and Palawan.

⁶The Government Panel presented its Point-by-Point Reply to the MNLF Panel on April 8, 1987.

⁷This portion was excerpted from a paper prepared by Dr. Clarita R. Carlos and Mr. Herman S. Kraft entitled "Autonomy in the Philippines: Quest for a Model."