

REAL AUTONOMY: THE ANSWER TO THE MINDANAO PROBLEM

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Throughout the centuries, the Muslim cause seems to have remained essentially the same – the desire to preserve ancestral territory and with it, religion, culture, social values, and political and judicial institutions. But the milieu of traditionalism and conservatism which once had been a source of strength and freedom of the Moro has now become an obstacle to their own progress – they have been lacking in the education and skills needed to cope with an increasingly competitive world. Moreover, peace negotiations like the Tripoli Agreement were bogged down by differing interpretations of documents and the mutual distrust and suspicion that hovered over the proceedings. Whatever the autonomous set-up may be, the important thing is that the areas of autonomy must have the power to manage their own affairs within the framework of Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In accepting your invitation to this seminar, the thought occurred to me that the search for peace in the Southern Philippines is a theme that, perhaps, ought to be adopted on a more or less permanent basis. For like Indo-China, Mindanao is an unfortunate land where peace seems to be an elusive goal. Just as when we appear to be on the threshold of achieving it, like a wild bird it flies beyond our grasp.

I believe you asked me to come, not as a member of the Interim *Batasang Pambansa* but as one among many who care deeply and personally about the future of this island. Although it is difficult to assign one's private concerns and official duties to separate compartments, the control exercised by President Ferdinand E. Marcos over the *Batasan* compels me to say that I do not think this body will play a very important role in resolving what is now popularly referred to as "the Mindanao problem."

On the other hand, it is in the unceasing and patient efforts of the people of Mindanao themselves, in constant soul-searching and self-examination, that the ultimate answer to all our agonies and suffering will one day become discernible on the horizon. For history provides ample evidence that without external influences or interference, we might have retained the

ethnic, cultural, and religious unity of a single nation.

But where colonial powers once sought to confuse and divide us, today the various obstacles to peace in this region would seem to be strewn on our path by those in government who presume to know what is best for the people of Mindanao. In the sense that they are alien to our unique situation and background and thus lack insights vital to a real understanding of our problem, these government decision-makers have contributed in no small way to prolonging the agony of the South.

There is no quick and easy way to end this tragic state of affairs. The approach adopted by President Marcos and those to whom he has entrusted the fate of the South is so obviously self-defeating that Muslims and Christians alike are beginning to wonder whether he is truly interested in bringing the Southern conflict to an early end.

Since he has set the termination of hostilities here as a condition precedent to the lifting of martial law, and since it is becoming increasingly clear that only by maintaining martial law will it be possible for him to hold power for an indefinite period of time, those who in the past were inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt no longer feel like doing so.

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There is a growing suspicion that the government's seemingly inept handling of the Mindanao

situation may be a calculated move to justify the claim that crisis exists in the country. Citing the valiant resistance put up by the Muslims for 300 years, through the periods of Spanish, American and Japanese occupation, critics of the administration facetiously predict that President Marcos probably intends to remain in power for another 300 years.

The Moro Problem, Before

What exactly is the Muslim or Moro problem on which political normalcy and the restoration of basic rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution have been made to depend? One writer defines it as "the fact that the Moros constituted a nationality distinct from, and older than, that of the Christian Filipinos."

In trying to drive the foreign intruders and their mercenaries, in defying conquest and integration, the Moros of Mindanao became a serious problem to the colonizers who wanted to form a nation state of the archipelago. The confrontations and bloody encounters between Christian soldiers and Muslim warriors were thus the offshoot of a *political*, not a religious, struggle.

We know that the Spaniards came not to Christianize the islands but to search for a new route for the thriving spice trade, and to establish yet another colony in order to expand their political and economic boundaries and fulfill the tantalizing dreams of the empire.

Islam, however, had already arrived in Mindanao via the Arab trade route. As the first Spanish ships made their appearance on these islands, the conversion of the people of the South to Islam, both as a religious faith and as a way of life, was quietly taking place.

I am often fascinated, as I am sure many of you are, by the thought that if this convergence of Islam and Christianity had not taken place at the time that it did, if by some sudden change of wind direction Magellan and his crew had been driven slightly off course, the Arab missionaries and the religious teachers from Mindanao would have been able to carry on their work without interference.

And today, we might have had a Muslim President and an Ilocano problem. But with the coming of the Spaniards, a kind of 38th parallel was established at those points where the colonial government, with the aid of Christianized conscripts from Luzon and the Visayas, could not overrun Moro territory.

Thus, in a political sense, two nations came into existence in the group of islands that the Spanish colonizers claimed in the name of King Philip — one professing Christianity and allegiance to the King of Spain, and the other remaining loyal to the tenets of Islam as well as to the political system that its own native genius had evolved. The problem then was not that the Moros threatened to acquire the rest of the islands or to extend their politico-religious system beyond their traditional domains, but that the colonizers would not rest until they had succeeded in bringing the so-called rebellious people of Mindanao and Sulu to heel.

The Moro Wars were principally waged over territory, with the Muslims of Mindanao fighting not so much in defense of their faith as of their homes and loved ones, and the Spanish *conquistadores* determined to overcome them, also not so much for the Cross of Christ as for the Crown of Spain.

In trying to rally the Maranaw *datus* against the Spaniards, the great Sultan Kudarat appealed not to their religious sensibilities but to their patriotism, as a free people. Dr. Cesar Majul reconstructs the Sultan's speech as follows:

Do you realize what subjection would reduce you to? A toilsome slavery under the Spaniards! Turn your eyes to the subject nations and look at the misery to which such glorious nations had been reduced to. Look at the Tagalogs and the Visayans! Are you better than they! Do you think that the Spaniards trample them under their feet? Do you not see everyday how they are obliged to work at the oars and the factories with all their rigors? Can you tolerate anyone with a little Spanish blood to beat you up and grasp the fruits of your labor?

It would seem that Kudarat's speech hit a responsive chord in the hearts of his audience,

for it emphasized freedom, liberty and human dignity — rather than the imminent loss of their religion through forced conversion by victorious Spaniards.

Then, as now, it is impossible to sort out the intricate web of reasons that drive a man to desperate action. Whether the Moros' fear of becoming a slave played a more important role in his decision than his fear of becoming a Christian, one cannot say.

But just as Kudarat could not be said to have waged a true *Jihad* (Holy War) against the Spanish invaders, neither are the people of Mindanao, Christians and Muslims, of today, ranged against each other in a holy or religious war.

The Moro Problem, Now

It is significant to note that through the centuries the Muslim cause seems to have remained essentially the same: the desire to preserve ancestral territory, and with it religion, culture, social values, political and judicial institutions — with the central Philippine government under President Marcos falling into the frustrating role once played by former colonizers.

In the impassioned statements of the Misuaris, Salamats, Abbases, Candaos, Lucmans, Alontos and other young Muslims, one hears echoes of Sultan Kudarat's stirring speech to the Maranaw *datus*. The Jeddah-based Bangsa Moro Liberation organization, for example, flaunts the slogan — Islam, Homeland, Freedom.

Until 1979, when the Tripoli Agreement was forged between representatives of the Marcos government and the leaders of the Moro National Liberation Front, the MNLF's revolutionary thrust was for the Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan provinces to secede and to constitute themselves into an independent Islamic republic.

It is the contention of the leaders of the disparate Muslim revolutionary groups that the cession of the Philippine archipelago by Spain to the United States was without basis in international law, since the Moro people and their lands had always remained free and independent of Spanish control and domination. But history

has rendered this argument moot and academic. With greater fervor than their predecessors, the Americans embarked on a Moro pacification campaign which, mercifully, was tempered and later supplanted by a policy of attraction.

Without going into the merits or demands of this type of colonization, let me just say that the new approach encouraged the belief, especially among young Muslims, that in the new Philippine state comprising all the lands that the Americans were supposed to have acquired under the Treaty of Paris, the Moros would attain a better social, political and economic status.

But for one reason or another, this was not to be. Through the historical metamorphosis of the country from colony to commonwealth and finally to an independent republic under the auspices of the United States, the Moro felt oppressed, deprived and disadvantaged. Denied the opportunities for advancement, his home in Mindanao remained a museum of neglect and poverty. Lacking in education and skills to cope with an increasingly competitive world, he became more and more withdrawn.

The milieu of tradition and conservatism which once had been a source of strength and freedom, has now become a prison, an obstacle to his own progress. With development came a stream of people from the North, better equipped, better educated, better "connected." Before his eyes and those of his underprivileged children, the strangers—most of them Christians—acquired land, prospered, became wealthy.

In the memory that human beings are said to preserve in their genes rather than in their brains, the Moro relived past encounters and past battles. Once again he saw himself as the victim of a new invasion.

The first to sense and to come to grips with this incipient alienation were the young Muslims. Not only were they moved by the spirit of radicalism that pervaded the campuses of schools and universities in Manila and throughout the world, but like their counterparts in the larger Christian communities they too had become aware of the moral failure of their leaders, many of whom had crossed the line

from poverty to affluence by betraying their own people.

One interesting phenomenon of the Mindanao rebellion, when it first erupted, was that it was obviously directed not solely against the central government but against the established and traditional Muslim leadership as well. It was a revolution against Muslims, by Muslims who wanted to cleanse and renew their own society while seeking to recover the lost dignity, opportunity, and the freedom and independence that their people had once enjoyed. But even while proclaiming their pride in the previous existence of a Moro nation, the young Muslims could not ignore their Filipino nationality.

In 1966 I had an opportunity to meet with some students enrolled at the Al-Ashar University in Cairo. Their names elude me now, but I can still remember with what pride they would tell me of their achievements and victories in various athletic or scholastic competitions against young people of other nationalities coming from countries in the Middle East and Africa.

They were Muslims from Lanao, Cotabato, Zamboanga, Basilan, and Sulu; yet, in Cairo they were proud to be called Filipinos and they accepted me not as a Christian but as a Filipino. We felt bound by a strong sense of brotherhood, by the idea that we were the same people from the same country.

Whenever I read about another ambush or bombing somewhere in Cotabato or Basilan, I often wonder what had become of those young students—now older men. Did they join the government, or go into business for themselves? Or were they in the mountains, Filipinos no longer but Moros with a historical burden to shed off and a nationality to reassert?

In any kind of war—and Mindanao is in the throes of a war—the stronger party has the advantage of being able to present the situation from its point of view. Through the eyes of the Spaniards, the Moro whose fierceness in battle sprung from a determination to preserve his homeland was portrayed as a savage who needed to be tamed and civilized. Through the

eyes of the Americans; the Moro was a *juramentado** who could be stopped dead in his tracks only by the Colt .45 which was specially designed for him.

Today through the eyes of the Marcos government, the Moro who dares to oppose the martial law regime is pejoratively branded a terrorist, with all the criminal attributes that such a name implies. The fact that he may be dedicated to a larger cause than stealing chickens or kidnapping persons for ransom is thus rejected outright by those who feel threatened by his demands.

This is not to say that all who bear arms are true revolutionaries. Just as there are criminals wearing the uniform of the army, so there are bandits and killers masquerading as members of the Muslim revolutionary groups. It is the presence of this type of men that has further complicated our search for peace in Mindanao.

But while the legitimacy of Muslim demands and grievances, as articulated by the Muslim youth, cannot be ignored by President Marcos and his government, or for that matter by the Filipino people as a whole, neither can right-thinking and peace-loving citizens permit the continuation of hostilities that have brought untold suffering to Muslims and Christians in Mindanao. To the dying, the suffering, and the displaced persons, the nature of the confrontation has become immaterial.

The knowledge that the war in the South is a political, not a religious, struggle is of no consolation to the hapless civilian whose home has been set to the torch or whose suckling child has been killed by a stray bullet.

At the national level, however, a far greater destruction has been wrought upon the psyche of our people by the propaganda of both sides. As government soldiers—mostly from the North—develop a hatred for the Muslim fighters as treacherous adversaries who strike only in ambush, and as revolutionary leaders accuse the government of genocide in order to rally the Filipino Muslims to their cause and at the same time gain the material support of other Islamic

*One who runs amok, go-for-broke fighter.

nations, all of us are being made to relive the past and all the imagined and actual horrors that the Muslim leaders and the colonial masters had implanted in the minds of their subjects, to fuel their respective war efforts.

Before real polarization takes place and negates the work of sincere and farsighted elements in the government and the private sector to bring about real understanding between Christian and Muslim Filipinos, the conflict must be ended as soon as possible. The reason why this must be done is that each day of delay not only inflicts new wounds but reopens old ones. Moreover, if the rising tide of Pan-Islamism should reach our shores, compromises and accommodations would be much more difficult to achieve.

Tripoli Agreement and the MNLF

The 1976 Tripoli Agreement was a turning point in the Mindanao situation. With good faith, the government and the Muslim revolutionary forces could have proceeded from there to a lasting settlement of the war. But the peace generated by the cease-fire in January of 1977 was a fragile and uneasy one. A mistake encounter or a shot fired in the air was all it would take to break it. And so it happened.

But what prevented the Tripoli Agreement from becoming a landmark instrument for peace was the obvious lack of communication between the signatories. Like most diplomatic documents, it was couched in imprecise language that was open to different interpretations, depending on the side making it.

In 1977 I happened to be in Jolo, when the members of the cease-fire commission representing the Organization of Islamic Conference arrived. In a brief talk with Dr. Hussein Farouk who served as spokesman of the Moro National Liberation Front, I gathered the impression that the MNLF believed it would play a leading role in the provisional government and in the election of the legislative assembly. As it developed, this was at variance with the thinking of President Marcos who wanted to limit MNLF representation in the provisional government to two out of nine members. Moreover, the MNLF assumed that President Marcos had

agreed to creating the autonomous area in 13 provinces in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan, and that a referendum would be held only to approve administrative arrangements.

Without settling these crucial points, the Philippine Government insisted on a step-by-step implementation of the Agreement over the vehement objections of the MNLF that the terms were not being correctly observed. In the meanwhile, hostilities resumed, with both sides accusing each other of violating the cease-fire, and the Tripoli Agreement became a mere scrap of paper.

Tight government control of local media and the sweeping propaganda claims of the foreign-based Muslim rebel groups render it difficult to form a judgment on where the blame for this breakdown should be laid. But charges that the Marcos government has not been earnest in its efforts to end the bloodshed in Mindanao cannot be lightly dismissed.

Before leaving the government in 1976 with the intention of retiring from politics and public life, I was privileged to serve it in several concurrent capacities, principally in the various activities concerning Mindanao. As Undersecretary of Public Information, I took part in the first peace talks held in Zamboanga in April of 1975. There I was disturbed by the fact that it was essentially a show, stage-managed for the benefit of the Organization of Islamic Conference which was scheduled to meet in May of that year. The "rebels" who were supposed to come down from the hills or from across the sea in pumpboats were actually young Muslims recruited around Zamboanga and provided with guns. Some members of media saw through the charade but having no choice, covered it as a real event.

Also in 1975, President Marcos appointed me as Chairman of the Southern Philippines Development Administration (SPDA), with the following members of the Board: Nombraan Pangcoga of Lanao del Sur; Michael Mastura of Cotabato; Farouk Carpiso of Sulu; and Gov. Sergio Morales of South Cotabato. This mixed Christian-Muslim Board functioned smoothly and enjoyed the best of relations, especially since on the subject of Mindanao development

there could be no disagreement. But for the Administrator, President Marcos chose his own nephew, or rather the nephew of the First Lady. Not being from Mindanao and obviously unfamiliar with conditions obtaining in the region, the appointment of Abdul Karim Sidri, who is really Domingo Abella, Jr. of Bicol, has been criticized by Mindanao Muslim leaders as indicating that the SPDA, like many of President Marcos' actions in regard to the Muslim problem, had been created merely to impress the Arab world.

When I left SPDA after a few months, it was still in the organizational stage, not with development, but with rehabilitation and reconstruction. This task it had inherited from a special agency which had been abolished upon creation of the SPDA. But I know that it has never been able to carry out its mission successfully as a catalyzer of progress in Mindanao, for the reason that the President has not seen fit to provide it with sufficient funds. This, more than the appointment of a relative from Luzon as administrator, supports the belief that the President was never serious about the SPDA as a means of promoting the economic development of the South, particularly the Muslim areas.

With this as a background, it is not surprising why foreign-based rebel leaders openly question the President's sincerity in implementing the terms of the Tripoli Agreement, which called for:

The establishment of autonomy in the Southern Philippines within the framework of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines;

Recognizing the right of Muslims to have the right to set up their own courts which implement the Sharia laws, and the right to be represented in all courts including the Supreme Court.

The right of authorities in the South to set up schools, colleges and universities;

The organization of a legislative assembly and executive council, to be constituted through direct election;

The grant of complete amnesty, release of political prisoners, return of refugees to their homes, and guarantee of freedom of movement and right of assembly.

Other terms to be the subject of further negotiations included the proposal by the MNLF to set up special regional security forces, arrangements for the integration of MNLF fighters into the Armed Forces of the Philippines, retention of part of the revenue to be derived from mines and the exploitation of mineral resources in the region, and the administrative relationship between the central and autonomous government.

Disagreement, however, centers on the virtual exclusion of the MNLF from the provisional government which President Marcos, understandably, wanted to pack with his own men. It also stems from the broad provision that "The Government of the Philippines shall take all necessary constitutional processes for the implementation of the entire Agreement."

This was invoked by Marcos to call for a referendum by which the terms of the Tripoli Agreement, as understood by the MNLF, were substantially changed. Not only were the three Davao provinces, and Palawan excluded from the agreed area of autonomy but instead of a single legislative assembly, there were to be two assemblies in Region 9 and 12. Where the legislative assembly was supposed to appoint the members of the powerful executive council, they would now be named by the President.

In a letter which amounted to a protest on the procedures and questions of the referendum, Libya's President Ghaddafi gave support to the MNLF stand. He told President Marcos on March 18, 1977 that the referendum should concern "the administrative arrangements within the areas of autonomy . . . and this means that the people be asked how to organize themselves administratively."

Marcos' reply to Ghaddafi on the 19th expressed "wholehearted accord and approval by our government as well as ourselves." This exchange of notes followed the visit of Mrs. Marcos as presidential envoy and was supposed

to clarify the letter and spirit of the Tripoli Agreement. The MNLF therefore believed that nothing was left but for the government to implement it.

In retrospect the negotiations were probably doomed from the very start because of the cloud of suspicion and distrust that hovered over the proceedings. The involvement of Libya was resented by certain quarters in the Marcos government as foreign interference in a purely domestic affair, and Libyan officials, among them Foreign Minister Treki, were regarded as "handlers" or "managers" of the MNLF. Members of the Barbero mission to Tripoli have claimed that in several instances, Misuari and his associates could not make any commitments at the conference table without securing prior Libyan approval.

The Muslim revolutionary groups, on the other hand, charge President Marcos with bad faith, with entering into the Agreement without any real intention of abiding by it and only for the purpose of securing an immediate cease-fire to gain a tactical advantage in the conduct of the war. They have therefore spurned his efforts to renew the negotiations and refused to return to the conference table unless new conditions are imposed.

President Marcos apparently no longer considers the foreign-based revolutionary leadership relevant or essential to the Mindanao question. He probably believes the government should instead deal, as it has been dealing, directly with MNLF units in the field. But so long as the revolutionary groups outside the country continue to exist and operate, the danger of renewed hostilities remains. These groups not only serve as rallying points for the disenchanted and the adventurers but have succeeded in articulating nationalistic Muslim aspirations and establishing a link with the sponsors of the revolution.

Autonomy: Solution to the Problem

On the basis of what they have presented as their position before the Philippine government and before the world, it appears that they no longer espouse the cause of Mindanao secession or dismemberment of the republic

but are one in demanding that President Marcos demonstrate his sincerity in the creation of a truly autonomous government. I for one believe that if the government would only consider meeting this demand, peace would eventually come to Mindanao. Against the background of their proud history and the richness of their culture, the Muslim Filipinos are, I also believe, capable of resolving a situation that baffled the colonizers for centuries and continues to bewilder the Marcos government which has adopted their methods and policy, including the policy of divide-and-rule and the large-scale bribery and purchase of loyalties.

Whatever the autonomous set-up may be, whether along federal lines or the regional government model which leaves foreign relations, defense and security, currency, and overall economic planning to the decision of the central government, the important thing is that the areas of autonomy must have the power to manage their own affairs within the framework of Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity.

This, unfortunately, is not what President Marcos has done. True, he has created an autonomous government purportedly in compliance with the Tripoli Agreement. But what can we expect of an autonomous government that cannot even operate for lack of adequate funding, that responds not to the will of the people but to one man, a President and Prime Minister who governs by remote control; an autonomous government that subordinates itself to local military commanders, and whose representatives, some of whom may be capable, were elected in a rigged election? An honest examination of the present regional set-up will disclose that what President Marcos has, in fact, established is not an *autonomous* but an *automation* government, not much different from the interim *Batasang Pambansa*.

It would be presumptuous for anyone to reduce the Mindanao or Moro Problem to a simple proposition or formula. As has been pointed out time and again, the Southern conflict is an awesome and explosive mix of historical, sociological, cultural, political and economic factors. Still, a beginning has to be made somewhere, and I dare to suggest that

the establishment of real autonomy in the Muslim areas would eventually lead to the attainment of peace not only for the Muslims of Mindanao but for all Filipinos. It will not be an easy transition, for internal rivalries for leadership will ensue. But it is a road that must be travelled with patience, understanding and accommodation. In the process, the non-Muslim people of other regions and provinces

will derive lessons from this unique political journey and discover that in the search for peace, for freedom and human dignity Christians and Muslims who call themselves Filipinos indeed have much in common.

And on this we will be able to build, strengthen and ensure the unity of our people.