



FROM MNLF TO ABU SAYYAF: THE RADICALIZATION OF ISLAM IN THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

The continuity of elites gave strong expression to the pre-Islamic components of Southeast Asian-Islamic civilization. In the regions of Indonesia and Malaysia an overwhelming majority of the population eventually accepted an Islamic identity while Muslims remained a minority in the Philippines.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

Historical Background

Just as Islam spread from the Middle East to Inner Asia and from Afghanistan to India, so it spread from various parts of India to the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago in the late thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. Islam was introduced into maritime Southeast Asia and flourished in conditions rather different from those of the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. While Islam was established in other regions by Arab or Turkish conquests, it was introduced into Southeastern Asia by traveling merchants and Sufis. Whereas in the Middle East and India, Muslim regimes were consolidated by new elites, in Southeastern Asia existing regimes were consolidated by conversion to Islam. The continuity of elites gave strong expression to the pre-Islamic components of Southeast Asian-Islamic civilization. In the regions of Indonesia and Malaysia an overwhelming majority of the population eventually accepted an Islamic identity while Muslims remained a minority in the Philippines.[1]

Muslims in the Philippines, also called Moros constitute 5% of the Philippines' population,[2] and are concentrated in the southern part of the country. These Muslims are Sunnis who generally adhere to the Shafii School of Islamic law (madhhab). For centuries, the Muslims in the southern Philippines constituted independent sultanates.[3] Successfully avoiding Spanish conquest, they gradually fell under U.S. sovereignty. The U.S. made them become part of an independent Philippines in 1946, a move the Muslims viewed as a betrayal of a trust. Prior to independence, the vast majority did not consider themselves Filipinos and retained their identity as a separate people.[4]

This identity was essentially religious and cultural in nature. Most of the Muslim leaders had wished to separate from the rest of the Philippines to form an independent state. For decades, the Muslims had vainly resisted the encroachment of Christian settlers (under government assistance) on their traditional lands. Years of economic neglect and political discrimination had reduced them to the lowest national literacy and economic levels. Unemployment was endemic; law and order had deteriorated in some areas. That Filipino national leaders in Manila viewed Muslims and their lands in much the same way as Spanish and American colonial authorities had done before them was met with deep suspicion and fierce resentment. Significantly, government programs to integrate Muslims into body politic were paralleled by growth of Islamic revivalism.[5]

After the establishment of the Philippine Republic in 1946, some members of the Muslim political elite aligned themselves with the policies of the new state, including state sponsorship of large-scale Christian migration to the Muslim South.[6] The principal leaders of the nationalist separatist movement that began taking concrete form in the late 1960's were young men from non-elite Muslim families who had attended universities in Manila on government scholarships expressly intended to integrate Muslims into the Philippine nation. In the Muslim South, those

separatist leaders were eventually able to attract popular support because established Muslim leaders failed to effectively prevent the massive Christian migration.

When the separatist movement seemed likely to achieve some success, certain of the established elites, who had opposed the separatist rebellion and collaborated with the state in 1960's, now joined the rebel leaders in overseas exile and attempted to gain control of the movement. At the same time the Philippine government followed the policy of integrating some of the prominent rebel commanders into the state bureaucracy. It simply offered them official positions allowing them to govern large numbers of Muslims on the condition of defecting from the separatist cause and activities. From their new positions, some of the defectors protected Muslim civilians from the attacks of the Philippine army. As a result they were viewed as heroes by many ordinary Muslims who remained nonetheless committed to the separatist struggle.[7]

Events in the late 1960's and early 1970's further alienated the Muslims and forced them to arm themselves. Examples include the massacre of Muslim trainees by the Philippine military in March 1968, communal clashes between Muslims and Christians (in which the constabulary and police often sided with the Christians), the gradual loss of Muslim communal lands to settlers. Added to this were the effects of the November 1971 elections, which led Christian politicians, with the help of Marcos and the ruling party, to capture many provincial and municipal offices in traditional Muslim areas, as well as the rise of well-armed Christian paramilitary forces. Beginning in 1969, scores of Muslim youth were trained abroad in the Malaysian State of Sabah in guerilla warfare. Their return has helped secure the defense of their communities.[8]

The Moro National Liberation Front

When martial law was declared in September 1972 by the authoritarian regime of President Ferdinand Marcos, government attempts to disarm Muslims, who feared Christian armed groups as well as military retaliation provoked open rebellion. Foremost in this struggle was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF),[9] whose founders were among those Muslim youth trained abroad.

A central committee whose original members crossed regional and linguistic lines guided the MNLF. Its chairman, Nur Misuary, was a faculty member at the University of Philippines. Even before his training abroad, Misuary had argued that only through a free and independent state could the Muslims free themselves from corrupt leaders and fully implement Islamic institutions. To him, the Moros constituted a separate people—the Bangsamoro people. Misuary's concept had a nationalistic connotation such that non-Muslims who cast their lot with Muslims were also to be called “Moros” and therefore as members of the future Bangsamoro Republic. Ever since the nationalist movement took concrete form it has been a movement directed toward self-determination and independence, defined as a prerequisite for the unhindered implementation and enhancement of Islamic institutions among the Muslim in the Philippines.

The war in the southern Philippines resulted in the death of thousands of soldiers and civilians and the flight of several hundred thousand refugees. Charges of genocide gained for the Moros the sympathy and concern of the international Muslim community. Libya provided sanctuary for some of the top MNLF leaders and did not deny that it had provided various forms of aid.[10] The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and other Muslim international organizations continually exerted pressure on the Philippine government to negotiate for a peaceful settlement with the leaders of the Muslim armed struggle, particularly the MNLF.[11]

The Tripoli Agreement

In December 1976, with the aid of Libyan intervention, and under the auspices of the OIC, Philippine government officials and MNLF leaders were able to negotiate a settlement in Tripoli, Libya. Called the Tripoli Agreement, the settlement called the cease-fire and the granting of autonomy to thirteen provinces where the majority of Muslims lived.[12] Marcos then set out in early 1977 to provide a form of autonomy in accordance with his government's own definition. Meanwhile, the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO) was formally organized by two traditional leaders living as expatriates in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Rashid Lucman, a former congressman and sultan among his people in Lanao Province, and Salipada Pendatum, an ex-congressman and member of the Maguindanao nobility of Cotabato Province. They proclaimed the BMLO to be the leader of the Muslim struggle in the Philippines.[13]

Rashid Lucman felt that he should have full control of the MNLF because of his claimed traditional prerogatives. This was not possible as long as Nur Misuary, who belonged to another ethno-linguistic group and a different social class, was chairman. Consequently, the BMLO conspired with Salamat Hashim, vice-chairman of the MNLF Central Committee, to claim or seize leadership of the MNLF on the grounds that Misuary had leftist leanings and had abandoned the collegial character of the committee. Salamat Hashim was a nephew of Salipada Pendatum and related to the Maguindanao nobility; he had received extensive religious training at al-Azhar University, in Egypt.

In December 1977, Salamat issued a declaration of takeover and informed the OIC accordingly. But Misuary with the aid of his loyal followers held fast to his position and expelled Salamat Hashim. In response, Salamat asserted his independence and transferred his base of operations to Cairo. Because the BMLO had failed to control the MNLF, by 1978 there were three groups claiming to head the Muslim movement in the Philippines: the MNLF-Misuary faction, the MNLF-Salamat faction (later renamed MILF – Moro Islamic Liberation Front)[14], and the BMLO.[15]

The Influence of Iran

When Iran's revolutionary government took power in 1979, both leaders of the MNLF-Misuary faction and the BMLO praised the revolution as a reassertion of Islamic principles.[16] The MNLF-Salamat faction avoided any statement since it was under the Egyptian influence. Rashid Lucman, as well as Nur Misuary visited Teheran in 1979. The case of the MNLF-Misuary faction attracted much attention. After the Misuary's visit, the Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian Revolution prayed openly for the success of the Muslim revolutionary struggle in the Philippines. He assured Misuary that "the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran would not be complete until the oppressed Bangsamoro Muslims in the southern Philippines won their victory."

The Iran visit was a serious morale booster for Misuary and his aides, particularly after what they had had to endure from BMLO intrigues, Salamat Hashim's breakaway, and the surrender of several top MNLF commanders to the Philippine government. One can speculate that officials of Iran's new regime might have been wary about dealing with the BMLO, whose leadership represented dynastic and vested interests in traditional Moro society.[17] Misuary and his delegation members, who were relatively young men, must have appeared as sincere and dedicated. At any rate, compared with the other factions, Misuary commanded the largest fighting group. This relationship eventually resulted in an Iranian oil embargo against the Philippines (about 4.16% of the annual oil import) in November 1979 in response to the continuing massacre of the Muslims by the Marcos regime and the refusal of the Philippine government to implement the Tripoli Agreement of 1976.[18]

The Iranian oil embargo represented a victory for the MNLF. It was the first international Muslim intervention in Philippines domestic politics. This provided the MNLF with greater confidence and led Misuary to revert to his original demand, as set forth in the Tripoli Agreement, for secession instead of autonomy. Meanwhile, the BMLO continued its agitation for full implementation of the Tripoli Agreement. Marcos denied all accusations by announcing to the world that the Agreement was in fact being implemented. Failing to convince the OIC, he countered with the argument that since there were three organizations claiming leadership of the Muslims, he did not know with whom to negotiate, in spite of the fact the OIC had recognized the MNLF with Misuary as its chairman.[19]

In November 1980, the MNLF office in Teheran was given official recognition by the Iranian government. A reception hosted by the director of the office to mark the occasion was attended by representatives of at least six embassies of Muslim countries affiliated with Iran. It was around this time that Iranian officials tried to bring about a reconciliation between Salamat Hashim and Nur Misuary. The former was invited to Teheran, but considering the strained relations between Iran and Egypt, Salamat's host country, he found it prudent not to accept.[20]

Separatism after the Ceasefire

Following the cease-fire agreement in 1976 the separatist struggle in the Philippines Muslim South gradually transformed itself into a popular-based, mostly unarmed movement. This was accompanied by an ideological shift away from traditionalism and toward Islamic renewal. That cultural project, however, received a mixed reception from ordinary Muslims, who resisted many of the social and ritual modifications promoted by movement leaders.

When strong antagonisms between the Philippine State and Muslim nationalists erupted into armed rebellion in the late 1960's, rebels rallied to the separatist cause, and the nationalist movement eventually received broad popular support. Muslim subordinates nevertheless evaluated the pronouncements of movement leaders based on their separate shared experience. Those evaluations were made independently of authorized discourse and led at times to actions that not only deviated from the official aims of the separatist movement but effectively thwarted them. Ordinary Muslims were equally skeptical of the hegemonic project of the State and its Muslim collaborators, measuring the ideological pronouncements against their own life experience.[21]

The peace agreement, which called for the establishment of a “Muslim Autonomous Region” in the southern Philippines, was never genuinely implemented by the Marcos administration. As a consequence, fighting broke out once more before the end of 1977, but did not again approach the level of intensity experienced prior to the cease-fire. The Muslim separatist movement entered a period of disarray marked by factional infighting and a weakening of popular support. By the early 1980s it had refashioned itself in the South into a mass-based and self-declared Islamic movement guided by Islamic clerics. With the fall of the Marcos regime in 1985, movement leaders (with the now-modified aim of genuine political autonomy for Philippine Muslims) fully adopted the practices of popular politics. They organized mass demonstrations to petition the government for political autonomy and formed an Islamic political party to contest provincial elections. In most of those endeavors they received substantial support from ordinary Muslims.[22]

The Emergence of Abu Sayyaf

In 1991, a radical group, which disagreed with the peace process between the Muslims and the State, left the MNLF and formed the Abu Sayyaf Group (Bearer of the Sword). Its main purpose is to establish an Islamic state, based on the Islamic law (Shariah) in the southern Philippines. The emergence of Abu Sayyaf is indicative of an important shift within the Muslim Nationalist movement of the Philippines. It represents a process towards the Islamization of the Moro identity and the formalization of the already existing Islamic trend within the MNLF. The

nationalist essence of the MNLF was incorporated into the Abu Sayyaf's protracted struggle for Islamization of the Moro community, entailing operational transformation of the movement.

The founder of Abu Sayyaf was Abduragak Abubakar Janjalani, who led the group until December 1998, when was killed by the police in the Lamitan village in Basilan Island.[23] Janjalani was a veteran of the Afghan war and during his participation in the war he developed close ties with other Islamic radical groups. He strongly opposed the peace process between the government of the Philippines and the MNLF, and demanded an independent Islamic state. After his death, his brother, Khaddafy Janjalani, emerged as the new leader.

Abu Sayyaf rejects the practice of the complementary non-violent mobilization (Dawa) since violent struggle (Jihad) corresponds to the group's ideological strategy, while moderation of the struggle constitutes an inevitable acceptance of the MNLF's "concessions" to the State. Since its inception, Abu Sayyaf has competed with the MNLF for the leadership of the Moros' national struggle. During the 1970's and 1980's, the Moros nationalist main-stream political force did not take any measures against the Islamists' increasing role in the arena of the armed struggle, acknowledging their contribution to the overall effort to drive the Philippines' government to make political and territorial concessions. During those years, therefore, the Islamists faced only pressures imposed by the state authorities to their course of action.

Abu Sayyaf at a Crossroads

Now however, both the state and the mainstream MNLF operate to limit the scope of Abu Sayyaf's growing influence. Under the changing atmosphere and circumstances in the Southern Philippines through the peace process, Abu Sayyaf's sensational terrorist activities may consolidate the basis for the continuation of Jihad, and turn the movement into an alternative political force to the mainstream MNLF. The resort to violence, through the conduct of the armed struggle against the State may entail Abu Sayyaf's increasing political influence among the Moros. Such a development would pose a serious threat for the Muslim nationalist movement, since criticism and opposition threaten to weaken it from within if the peace process fails once again to meet the expectations of the Muslim community of the Philippines.

Alternately, should Abu Sayyaf choose to conduct a non-violent struggle against the State, the group could find itself on a track of decline since such developments could be perceived as a diversion from the Islamic aim of its struggle. Therefore, the group's options are clear-cut.

Abu Sayyaf's Islamic ideology has guided the articulation of radical objectives and strategy. The group's choices of action have primarily reflected the search for policy shifts among those radical Muslims who perceive the ongoing peace process as a threat. Furthermore, the choice of sensational terrorist actions, like bombings and kidnappings of foreigners placed Abu Sayyaf's struggle on the international agenda. Against the backdrop of the evolving—albeit problematic

and shaky—peace process between the MNLF and the government, threading this fine line is a challenge to Abu Sayyaf’s survival.

Notes:

1 Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 467-470.

2 Out of total population of about 57 million, at least 5 million Philipinos are Muslims. Ten ethnolinguistic groups are identified as Muslim, the largest of these being the Maguindanao, the Marano, the Tansung, the Samal, and the Yakan. By comparison, 85 percent of the total population is Catholic.

3 Cesar A. Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985) p. 33.

4 *ibid.* pp. 132-141.

5 *ibid.*, pp. 150-155.

6 Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (University of California Press, 1998), p. 6.

7 *ibid.*, pp. 138-170.

8 Cesar A. Majul, *op. cit.* pp. 149-160.

9 For background information on the armed rebellion and emergence of the MNLF, see T.J.S. George, *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980); Peter G. Growing, *op. cit.*; and Cesar A. Majul, *op. cit.*

10 Cesar A. Majul, *op.cit.* p. 172.

11 *ibid.*, p. 122.

12 Moro National Liberation Front: MNLF Newsbriefs (Diplomatic Circulations, Office of the Director, Tripoli, Libya), no. 2, May 6, 1983.

13 See The Supreme Council of the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO), “The Bangsa Moro Struggle” (Paper submitted to the Tenth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, Fez, Morocco, 8 May 1979) pp. 15-17.

14. For more information on MILF see “MILF Leader to Nida’ul Islam”, (<http://www.islam.org.au>), April – May 1998)

15 Cesar A. Majul, op. cit. p. 180; also Husain Haqqani, “Factionalism Stalks the Moro Camp”, Arabia: The Islamic World Review, June 1983: pp. 37-38.

16 Nur Misuary, “The Bangsamoro Right to Self-Determination” (Address given at the International Conference on the Prophet Muhammad and His Message sponsored by the Organization of the Islamic Conference and organized by the Islamic Council of Europe, London, 11-15 April 1980, Pamphlet); also The Supreme Council of the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO), op.cit.

17 Cesar A. Majul, “The Iranian Revolution and the Muslims in the Philippines”, in John L. Esposito (ed.), The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact (Florida International University Press: 1990), pp. 262-263.

18 During that period of time, the Philippines received 75 percent of its oil from the Middle East, principally Saudi Arabia. Although the Saudis did not follow the Iranian example, they did cancel some contracts granting additional oil in response to Marcos’ obstructionism to fully implement the Tripoli Agreement. Saudis tried to exert pressure on Marcos in order to negotiate with Misuary.

19 Cesar A. Majul, “The Iranian Revolution and the Muslims in the Philippines” op. cit. p. 265

20 *ibid*, p. 266.

21 Thomas M. McKenna, op.cit. pp. 197-234.

22 *ibid*, pp. 234-269.

23 Reuters, December 19, 1998.