

Islam and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

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Introduction

The role of Islamic concepts and thinking in the long-running separatist insurgencies in the southern Philippines has always been contentious. Many peace and development workers emphasize that the conflict is not a "religious" one, in part to help mitigate the likelihood of communal conflict between Christian and Muslim communities. Such violence occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s but has been rare since then. Analyses tend to focus on "injustice" (Philippine Muslims historically had their own Sultanates but became subject to a majority Christian nation) or "deprivation" (after decades of conflict, Muslim-dominated areas in the south are among the poorest in the country). Even the Moro Islamic Liberation Front often does not emphasize Islam - the semi-official historical account is entitled "A Nation under Endless Tyranny" (Jubair, 1999), and it generally reads like any ethnonationalist justification for a separate political entity.

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Still, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) began by distinguishing itself from the Moro National Liberation Front (informally in the late 1970s, formalizing the split in 1984). And its founding chair, Salamat Hashim, was a student at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. So, it is worth examining the history and ideology of the MILF to see the extent to which Islam and its concepts shaped the movement.

It has always been hard to disentangle Islamic concepts and ethnonational elements in the history of the movement towards the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM: established after a plebiscite in January 2019). Often taken to be the beginning of explicit agitation for independence for Muslims in Mindanao was the May 1968 "Manifesto of the Muslim Independence Movement" (MIM) (Jubair, 1999, pp. 306-313). Section 3 of the accompanying "Constitution and By-Laws" has:

"That it is the duty and obligation of every MUSLIM to wage JIHAD, physically or spiritually, to change DARUL AMAN (present status of the Muslim Communities) to DARUL ISLAM (Islamic Territory) and prevent it from becoming DARUL HARB (hostile territory to the MUSLIM)."

The emphasis is in the original, and the definitions in the text also come from the original; *Darul Aman* can also be translated as "Abode of Protection" while *Darul Islam* is "Abode of Islam" and *Darul Harb* as the "Abode of War."

Reasons for discounting the actual impact of Islamic concepts on the MIM are easily multiplied. The moving force behind the Manifesto was former governor Utog Matalam, who had

been maneuvered out of office, and allegedly was using the Manifesto to reassert himself politically. And the name of the movement was quickly changed to "Mindanao Independence Movement" (also MIM) to try to attract non-Muslims discontented with the increasingly powerful national government of Ferdinand Marcos in Manila. Finally, just five months after issuing this call, Matalam met President Ferdinand Marcos, who designated Matalam as his adviser on Muslim Affairs. "In a statement issued by the MIM Secretariat, Matalam reasoned that he 'accepted the position as a gesture of sportsmanship on his part as the leader of the more than four million Muslims in the Philippines.'" (McKenna, 1998, p. 146)

In general, McKenna has argued (see also McKenna, 2002, p. 14) that "universal, scriptural Islam" has been overemphasized in analyses of Muslim separatism. Certainly, ethnonationalism, and local social and spiritual experience, can be seen to be powerful motivating influences. On the other hand, the self-understanding of the MILF is certainly that they are waging *Jihad*, "Struggle in the Way of Allah," and the leadership does seem to have been influenced by twentieth-century Islamist thinkers. Salamat Hashim is said (Nida'ul Islam, 1998) to have been influenced by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and Abul A'la Maududi (1903-1979), while to Salah Jubair's influences are added Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938). (Jubair, 1999, p. viii)

The analysis in this paper is based on documentary sources and a supplementary interview with a member of the MILF's Central Committee. The closest thing to a foundational document for the MILF is the 1985 publication by Salamat Hashim,

"The Bangsamoro Mujahid: His Objectives and Responsibilities" (Hashim, 1985). There are several interviews over the years where Salamat Hashim articulated his vision for the struggle. There are also two books by a member of the Central Committee that give an inside look into the MILF's view of the history of Muslims in the Philippines (Jubair, 1999) and subsequent interaction with the government through peace negotiations and violent upsurges. (Jubair, 2007)

In addition, there is the author's personal experience in the Bangsamoro Peace Process. Aside from more than 15 years of development work in Mindanao, from 2009 to 2013 I was a member of the International Contact Group created by the MILF and the Philippine government to assist with the peace process by attending the negotiations in Kuala Lumpur and frequent meetings in the Philippines. After the signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro in October 2012, from 2013 to 2017 I was a member of the Third Party Monitoring Team (TPMT), again appointed by both parties, that on a periodic basis conducts confidential missions assessing the implementation of all signed agreements between the government and the MILF. (The TPMT has on seven occasions issued independent Public Reports on progress towards peace.)

Establishing the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

In 1976 the first chapter of separatist struggle by an organized revolutionary front of Muslims in the Philippines, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), came to an end with the Tripoli Agreement between the Philippine Government and the

MNLF. Under the authoritarian government of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, the agreement was not implemented. (Rood, 2016) In its aftermath, Salamat Hashim, who from the beginning had been one of the Vice-Chairmen of the MNLF, and his supporters began to express to the Organization of the Islamic Conference and Muslim World League disenchantment with the direction of the MNLF and the leadership of Chairman Nur Misuari. In December 1977 Salamat Hashim issued an "Instrument of Takeover" to declare his chairmanship of the MNLF (Macasalong, 2013):

"The MNLF leadership was being manipulated away from its Islamic basis, methodologies, and objectives and fast evolving towards a Marxist-Maoist Orientation. ... The Central Committee has evolved into a mysterious, exclusive, secretive, and monolithic body whose policies, plans and decisions – political, financial, and/or strategic – became the exclusive province of Nur Misuari."

Misuari denied the allegations, did not recognize the "takeover," and stripped Salamat Hashim of all positions within the MNLF. After a period of being known as the "New MNLF Leadership," in 1984 the Moro Islamic Liberation Front was officially organized, with a core set of beliefs as articulated by Salamat Hashim, including (Hashim, 1985, p. 1):

"its avowed objective to make supreme the word of Allah Practicing Islam without governmental sanction is a truncated version of the faith and, therefore, un-Islamic. A government not founded on

Islamic Principles (Qur'an and Sunnah) is unquestionably un-Islamic."

And elaborating (Hashim, 1985, p. 9):

The meaning of making supreme the word of Allah is capsulized in the following:

1. The establishment of a true Muslim Community;
2. The establishment of a genuine Islamic system of government;
3. The application of a real Islamic way of life in all aspects of our life.

...

"The means to achieve our objectives are *Da'wah* (Islamic call) and *Jihad* (struggle in the way of Allah)."

Interestingly, the need for armed struggle is linked to *Da'wah* (Hashim, 1985, pp. 11-12):

"But if the conduct of *Da'wah* is not obstructed or repulsed by oppressive elements, justification for armed struggle does not exist. The existence of oppression and failure to administer *Da'wah* must both concur for armed struggle or *Jihad* to be justified."

As is so often the case in discussions of the role of Islam in political movements, the examination of *Jihad* must be nuanced. In this instance, we can note that the Manifesto for the Muslim Independence Movement (above) said in 1968 that the state of Muslims in the Philippines could be described as *Dar-ul-Aman*, "a non-Muslim country whose government allows Muslims to practice their religion without any fear." (Abu Hudhaifa, 2015)

Jihad (Struggle in the way of Allah)

Jihad is understood by the MILF broadly as "struggle in the way of Allah;" Salamat Hashim quotes from Maududi, "The nearest correct meaning of the word Jihad is to exert one's utmost endeavor in promoting a cause." (Hashim, 1985, p. 12) quoting from "Jihad in Islam" (Maududi, 2006, p. 5)

This means that armed struggle is not always the main focus of the MILF's attention. In fact, in the existence of the MILF, the call for armed *jihad* has only been issued three times.

"Use of arms in advancing the cause of the MILF is an exception rather [sic] the rule. It was only in January 1987 that the MILF had openly declared a "tactical offensive" against the government, which it described "fighting" as one of two weapons it can resort to against the enemy. The MILF also actively conducted war against the government in 2000 and 2003, but those were in the nature of counter-offensives after the government officially declared war on it, notwithstanding the ceasefire and the peace process." (Jubair, 2007, p. 18)

The first time was in mid-January 1987 (Salamat Hashim had returned to the Philippines in December 1986), in the aftermath of the "Jeddah Accords" reached between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front. This particular agreement, like many in the history of negotiations between the government and separatist fronts, was not implemented (Rood, 2016, p. 67). The MILF denounced the pact as a "cheap drama" and launched a tactical offensive. "Fighting was simply one of the

two weapons a revolutionary organization could use against the enemy [the other being negotiation]. The MILF also wanted to convey the message that it was not a pushover organization, but a power to reckon with." (Jubair, 1999, p. 186) This offensive only lasted five days, with an informal truce forged with the government.

Thus, as former member of the MILF Peace Panel Michael Mastura wrote in his afterword to *The Long Road to Peace*, "by 1987, the MILF appears to have downgraded attritional violence to 'a tactic' in favor of other forms of non-armed struggle 'on par' with the use of force." (Jubair, 2007, p. 184)

Instead, the MILF's overall program (Nida'ul Islam, 1998):

"covers all aspects of '*Jihad* in the way of Allah' and human endeavors, but it gives special attention to the following:

- Islamisation of all aspects of life of the Bangsamoro people
- Military build-up
- Self-reliance
- Strengthening and improvement of organizational, administrative and managerial capacity"

While there were skirmishes from time to time during the 1990s as the MILF and government forces jostled with each other, the MILF spent the decade growing in strength, particularly in central Mindanao in the southern Philippines, with its main base at Camp Abubakar in Maguindanao Province.

It is after this decade of build-up that the other two instances of "actively conducting war against the government" occurred. The first was in 2000, when President Joseph Estrada declared "all-out war" against the MILF, overrunning the MILF's fixed positions and camps (including Camp Abubakar), forcing it into guerilla-style warfare. (Jubair, 2007, pp. 31-34) The second came in early 2003 under Estrada's successor, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, when an assault on the "Buliok Complex" was ostensibly aimed at kidnap gangs but the MILF has always maintained was aimed at capturing Salamat Hashim who had retreated there after the fall of Camp Abubakar. (Jubair, 2007, pp. 34-38)

So, for the MILF, armed fighting is generally seen as secondary to other modes of "struggle in the way of Allah." Often in the discourse around the Moro struggle in the Philippines, a distinction is drawn between the Greater *Jihad* (struggle against self) and the Lesser *Jihad* (armed warfare). The MILF itself cites this distinction: "the Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon him) said [after a battle] ... that they were through with the "lesser jihad," which is the use of weapons, and they were approaching the "major jihad;" meaning the striving against temptations for worldly gain." (Jubair, 2007, pp. 90-91)

Another version of this hadith (saying of the Prophet) is (Haddad, 2005):

"Some troops came back from an expedition and went to see the Messenger of Allah *sallallahu `alayhi wa-Sallam*. He said: "You have come for the best, from the smaller jihad (*al-jihad al-asghar*) to the greater jihad (*al-jihad al-akbar*)." Someone said, "What is the

greater jihad?" He said: "The servant's struggle against his lust" (*mujahadat al-'abdi hawah*).

Further, the decision to engage in armed struggle, though it is seen as justified in Islamic terms, is taken for political reasons or out of military necessity.

Ideological Influences

The core of the MILF's organizational ideology, derived from its objective to "make supreme the word of Allah," is the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the Tradition of the Prophet). But as Salamat Hashim says, "some political colors ... is unavoidable. In Islam, affairs of the government and practice of the faith are inseparable." (Hashim, 1985, p. 1)

In this context, the MILF's "Political Islam," a term used by analysts (Maher, 2016, Chapter 10), can be seen as having been influenced by Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), Abul A'la Maududi (1903-1979), and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Iqbal lived in pre-partition India; Maududi lived to be part of the new nation of Pakistan and was in and out of favor with the government until his death of lung cancer; Qutb became very influential in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt before being executed.

Muhammad Iqbal's most noted contribution to the discourse was in laying the groundwork of the "Two Nation" theory of the Pre-Independence British Indian Empire. In 1930 he gave an address to the Muslim League in which he asserted "the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West

India." (Iqbal, 1930) This notion finds its echo in the book title, *Bangsamoro: A Nation under Endless Tyranny*. (Jubair, 1999)

Maududi was a prolific writer, concerned with Islam in the subcontinent, and popularized the term "Islamic State" in his writings, as opposed to the forces of secularism. A refinement of his thought with regard to *Jihad* was the need to have an institutionalized basis for it; he rejected a call for *jihad* in Indian-occupied Kashmir because "the *jihad* was declared by local religious leaders and was undertaken by volunteer fighters. Maududi rejected the validity of a *jihad* so declared, stating that it could only be proclaimed by a government." (Nasr, 1996, p. 74) This restriction is echoed by Salamat Hashim: "basically, *Jihad* is a collective duty and obligation. ... *Jihad* must essentially be the concern of an organized group. Such organized group may partake of the nature of an Islamic state or government, or in the absence thereof, an Islamic body (*al-jama-ah*) or organization." (Hashim, 1985, p. 24) In this case, "struggle in the way of Allah" is a communal obligation, not one taken up by isolated individuals.

Similarly, the target of *Jihad* is not a person or organization. Maududi says of Islam, "This system harbours no animosity against any human being. Our animosity is directed against tyranny, strife, immorality...." (Maududi, 2006, p. 17) Again, we have the book title that echoes this thought, *Bangsamoro: A Nation under Endless Tyranny*. (Jubair, 1999) as well as a direct thought by Salamat Hashim, "Stated simply, our enemy is OPPRESSION." (Hashim, 1985, p. 21 (emphasis in the original)

When we turn to the influence on the MILF of the Egyptian Qutb, it is well to remember that Salamat Hashim was in Egypt

himself, studying at Al-Azhar University from 1959 to 1970 where he got his Masters Degree (he was working on his doctorate when he returned to Mindanao, and the draft was destroyed in the separatist conflict in the aftermath of the 1972 Declaration of Martial Law by President Ferdinand Marcos). The works of Maududi were translated into Arabic just as Qtub became a leading theoretician of the Muslim Brotherhood. One thread that is easy to follow is the concept of *jahiliyyah* (the Age of Ignorance), that originally referred to the time before the Prophet revealed the Quran but was re-appropriated by Maududi to mean modernity. This concept was developed by Qtub who argued that in "modern ways of living ... the whole world is steeped in *Jahiliyyah*, and all the marvelous material comforts and high-level inventions do not diminish this ignorance." (Qtub, 1964 (2015), p. 6)

Analyst Joseph Chinyong Liow quotes Salamat Hashim from 2001, "this material world ... is a battleground between Islam and all the manifestations and forces of *jahiliyyah*." (Liow, 2016, p. 86) It is important to emphasize here that *jahiliyyah* refers to Muslim societies as well as Western ones, so in no sense is it parallel to the *Darul Harb* (Abode of War) or an unequivocal call for violent conflict. Rather it is a call for "Islamisation of all aspects of life," as in the first point of the MILF's four-point program.

Or, as Jubair writes (Jubair, 2007, pp. 173-174):

"For the Moros (or Muslims), as long as they live within and bounds of Islam and remain mindful that this great religion both conserves and progresses, alongside the march of science and modernity, they can be equal to anyone or any nation on earth. By the

same token, they must also shed off those faded "feathers," even if they are part of their tradition, that are contrary to Islam and to reason – especially those cultural traits and practices that are suited only to the 16th century."

In this admonition, he has in mind things like fortune-telling, but a broader array of "feathers" as discussed in McKenna's depiction of a new breed of ulama (often returning from Al-Azhar) trying to eliminate elements of a range of cultural practices (for example, wedding and funeral rituals) in Cotabato City. (McKenna, 1998, pp. 220-225)

Structure and Methods

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front emphasizes its consultative and collective leadership, and this seems to be a reality. "Essentially, this policy means that no major decisions could be formulated and implemented without first resulting to *Shurah* (consultations) in general meetings attended by Central Committee members in the homeland and representatives from different regions." (Hashim, 1985, p. 57) During negotiations leading up to the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro in October 2012, it was repeatedly obvious that considerable consultation was taking place internally, as witnessed by the need for time to translate documents and proposals from English or Filipino – there being members of the Central Committee who didn't understand those languages but only Arabic or one of the major languages of Muslims in the Philippines (Maguindanao, Maranao, Tausug).

While it is hard to know for certain, as the MILF has long been a clandestine organization, scholars tend to agree that the concept of *shurah* is indeed followed. The most visible "consultations" over the last 30 years are when hundreds of thousands gather (in 1986, 2005, 2012, and 2018) to hear the leadership discuss major policy directions, particularly in negotiations (see the discussion, below). These are far too large to constitute two-way consultation; this function is performed by the *Majlis al-Shurah* (consultative council), a body of several hundred individuals headed by a religious leader. Executive authority is vested in a Central Committee of some 70 individuals, with a core of some 20 very influential leaders, half of whom are *ulama* (Muslim religious leaders) or *asatidz* (teachers). (Santos & Santos, 2010, Chapter 19)

For important decisions, the *ulama* must be convinced; as Michael Mastura relates: it "is the responsibility of the *ulama* to avoid *fitna* [discord] explains why only they can legally declare *jihad* in extreme form of armed struggle." (Jubair, 2007, p. 185) As noted above, this has only happened three times (1987, 2000, 2003), and each time the actual implementation was undertaken by the military wing, headed by the Deputy Chairman for Military Al Haj Murad Ebrahim. A similar process of internal decision-making was undertaken in 2010-2011 when it became clear that Umbra Kato and his Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) were no longer following the directives of the MILF Central Committee: the *ulama* had to decide to declare him *bughaat* (rebel; political dissident) while the political structure implemented the ruling. (ABS-CBN News, 2011)

Al Haj Murad became the successor as MILF Chairman after Salamat Hashim's death in 2003. He had a secular background before joining the movement, as did the late First Vice Chair Ghazali Jaafar and the head of the MILF Committee on Information, Mohagher Iqbal. Currently, the highest-ranking cleric in the executive authority is Alim Ali Pangalian Solaiman, Vice-Chair (he succeeded fellow Maranao Alim Abdulazis Mimbantas after the latter's death from natural causes).

Despite any secular backgrounds, all the leaders tend to cite Islamic texts for various processes. For instance, discussions of leadership selection tend to echo Salamat Hashim's citation of a saying of the Prophet "One who aspires for position should not be given such a position." (Hashim, 1985, p. 57) Alternatively, "Anyone who wants to be at the top or to be appointed for any (high) position should not be granted." When Salamat Hashim passed away in 2003 without naming a successor, or a selection procedure, the three Vice-Chairs (Murad, Jaafar, and Mimbantas) each kept insisting that one of the others take on the role. (Jubair, 2007, pp. 40-41)

The religious leaders can issue *fatwa* (rulings) on any number of topics. A directive was issued, for instance, forbidding Muslims from using or selling tobacco products, based on the harm the substance causes users. (ABS-CBN News, 2010) In consonance with national campaigns against drugs, banners were posted in MILF territory about "Drugs: *Haram*." The MILF does have a system of Shariah courts entirely separate from the legally-instituted (under the Code of Muslim Personal Law of the Philippines) Shariah Courts of the government of the Philippines.

The MILF courts handle criminal cases as well as civil and personal law, while the government-mandated Shariah Courts handle only Personal Law. (Stephens, 2011) The MILF maintains detention centers (also used as drug rehabilitation centers). (Bacongco, 2018) In the extreme, after proper shariah trial, on at least two occasions the death penalty was carried out (Arevalo, 2017). However, it is unclear how much the central leadership of the MILF was involved as it was carried out by the Maranao Commander Bravo, who has on occasion gone his own way.

Negotiations

Given that during the 1980s and 1990s Salamat Hashim was quoted repeatedly as insisting on independence, it may come as a surprise that during 17 years of negotiation the MILF has reached so many agreements with the government of the Philippines, culminating in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in March 2014. And that the MILF urged its supporters to ratify in a January 21, 2019 plebiscite a new Bangsamoro Organic Law establishing an autonomous region in the southern Philippines. In fact, from the beginning, there was always a caveat: "Our concept of self-determination is complete independence, or in the least **a meaningful autonomous government....**" (Hashim, 1985, pp. 9, emphasis supplied)

In fact, the current leadership of the MILF has repeatedly quoted Salamat Hashim as saying: "the most civilized and practical way of solving the Moro problem is through a negotiated political settlement." This is in line with a verse from the Quran (VIII: 61)

"And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing."

In line with this, the MILF downplays the distinction between *Darul Islam* and *Darul Harb*. It is true that Camp Abubakar, before it was overrun by the Armed Forces of the Philippines in 2000, was informally referred to as *Darul Islam* (Abode of Islam), but this is a reference to the attempt of the MILF to demonstrate its ability to build an Islamic community. Rather than *Darul Harb* being a target of armed conflict, the "struggle in the way of Allah" is almost continually interpreted as organizational strengthening and negotiation with the government.

Almost at the beginning of negotiations between the government and the MILF, the MILF produced a document that outlined the movement's view of history, and what would be needed to solve the "Bangsamoro Problem." (MILF, 2000, p. 255)

"This problem involves a wide variety of social, cultural, economic and political issues and concerns that include, but are not limited to the following: ancestral domain, displaced and landless Bangsamoro, destruction of properties and war victims, human rights issues, social and cultural discrimination, corruption of the mind and moral fiber, economic inequities and widespread poverty, exploitation of natural resources, and agrarian related issues."

In this long litany of issues, it is in the section on "Social-Cultural Discrimination, Corruption of the Mind and Moral Fiber"

that topics that are typically seen as Islamic arise (MILF, 2000, pp. 267-268):

"the open mixture of men and women in love affairs, in workplaces, in recreations, entertainment, enjoyment and amusement, and the unlawful equality of sexes"

"production and selling of alcoholic beverages and other forms of intoxicants"

"Seductive dressing/attire"

"Drinking of alcoholic beverages (liquor and wines) and other forms of intoxicants"

On this list, in the section on "Economic Inequalities and Widespread Poverty," the MILF added "Imposition of monetary interest to bank borrowers."

In point of fact, however, the starting point for negotiations was the MILF's drive for independence faced with the government's insistence on the country's territorial integrity and following the Philippine constitution. This is not the place to recount the long winding process of negotiations but suffice it to say that in the approach to the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, and the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, the emphasis was on achieving what MILF Founder Salamat Hashim had termed (above) "a 'meaningful autonomous government.'" Thus, detailed annexes covered "Transitional Arrangements and Modalities," "Revenue Generation and Wealth Sharing," "Power Sharing," and "Normalization" (security and socioeconomic transformation). Some powers over a Shariah justice system (building on a 1977 national law) and halal certification are included, but the vast bulk of the negotiated

agreements are concerned with the details of autonomous governance.

There are some indications of recognition of the religious sensibilities of the MILF. Documents making up the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro always begin with "In the Name of God, the Beneficent and the Merciful," which echoes the first verse of the Quran with the English word "God" substituted for "Allah." And the progress in reaching agreements led to both Presidents Benigno Aquino III and Rodrigo Roa Duterte publicly acknowledging the Bangsamoro and their grievances and the Philippine government's responsibility to achieve peace and development.

Implementing Autonomy

The 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro called for a Bangsamoro Basic Law to be passed by the Philippine Congress to replace the existing Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao with the Bangsamoro (which literally means Moro Nation). A Bangsamoro Transition Commission drafted such a bill in cooperation with the Executive Branch, but Congress did not pass the law before a 2016 change of administration from Benigno Aquino III to Rodrigo Roa Duterte. Under President Duterte, a revived Transition Commission produced a new draft which was eventually (with some amendments) passed by the national Congress in 2018 as the Bangsamoro Organic Law and ratified in a regional plebiscite in early 2019.

Thus was established the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), initially to be governed by an MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), to manage a three-year

transition by passing various codes (administrative, revenue, local government, education, election). This BTA had its term extended until 2025, when the first BARMM elections, originally scheduled to coincide with the May 2022 Philippine national general elections, were postponed, the reasoning being that the BTA needed more time to accomplish its tasks (particularly in view of extensive 2020-2022 lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic).

As early as the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro signed in 2012, care was taken by the Philippine government and the MILF to separate the identification of the proposed governing entity with a particular religion. For instance, Bangsamoro identity was defined with no reference to Islam (FAB, paragraph I.5):

Those who at the time of conquest and colonization were considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago and its adjacent islands including Palawan, and their descendents whether of mixed or of full blood shall have the right to identify themselves as Bangsamoro by ascription or self-ascription.

A commentary on the Bangsamoro Organic Law summaries, "despite the heavy influences of Islam in governance, BARMM is not an entirely Islamic state but a secular autonomous government..." (Estrella et al., 2021, p. 70) An example is the BOL's provision in Article VIII of a ceremonial head of the BARMM government, a *Wali*. A first draft of the law implementing the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro included a provision that the *Wali* be a Muslim, but that would violate the

Philippine Constitution's separation of Church and State, so there is no such restriction in the BOL as passed and ratified.

Of course, the vast majority of inhabitants of the BARMM are Muslims so there are provisions that cater to their desire for governance that more closely suits their society and culture. For instance, as noted above, the "Imposition of monetary interest to bank borrowers" was cited as a grievance by the MILF at the beginning of the negotiations. Efforts at Islamic finance in the Philippines date back to the 1970s but have hitherto foundered (World Bank, 2016). Sections 32, 33, and 34 of the BOL address the issue of Islamic finance, and since the ratification of the BOL, the *Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas* (Central Bank of the Philippines) has been introducing reforms and regulations to provide an enabling environment for Islamic banking.

This delicate balancing act is necessary not just due to legal constraints but the reality that within the geographic territory of the BARMM are non-Moro Indigenous Peoples (often called *Lumad*) as well as other ethnicities that trace their ancestry outside of Mindanao (often mislabeled "settlers" but their Mindanao roots can go back several generations). As the BTA began operations, Interim Chief Minister Murad (Chairman of the MILF) articulated "moral governance" as the BARMM's framework:

... when people join the government we let them take oath to the constitution and take oath to Allah -- a noble oath -- to ensure that this moral governance will be the basis. So, we say we are not imposing Islamic governance, but we are imposing the moral virtues of Islam. Because if you look at the moral

virtues of Islam, it is for mankind, it is not only for Muslims. You will notice in the holy Qur'an that there are many verses which are addressed to mankind instead of only to Muslims. So, we are careful also because maybe they will be saying we are establishing Islamic government, which is not very popular among the other people in the area. (Alam and Ul Khaliq, 2019)

In fact, in the oath there is a choice to use the term "God" instead of Allah to accommodate such other people in the BARMM.

The exact content of "moral governance" is often vague, though repeated reference to corruption makes it clear that a motivating factor is worry about this issue, as noted by Murad: "Corruption is built already in the government. It is automatic. Because it's already built in. That's why our advocacy is moral governance." (*ibid.*) The 2020 Bangsamoro Administrative Code (BARMM, 2020: Section 4) defines the concept:

"Moral Governance" refers to the set of rules, practices, and processes completely devoid of all the evils of graft and corruption, and explicitly driven by the moral principles of utmost dedication, devotion, honesty, justice, and integrity

On the other hand, the 2021 Civil Service Code of the BARMM elaborates on the norms of Conduct of Civil Servants (BARMM, 2021: Article 170):

Adherence to Moral Governance. Bangsamoro Government officials and employees shall uphold the

set of rules, practices, and processes of governance completely devoid of all evils of graft and corruption, and shall be explicitly driven by the moral principles of utmost dedication, devotion, honesty, justice, and integrity. The application of commitment to moral governance requires a high sense of sincerity (*ikhlaas*), perfection (*itqaan*), excellence (*ihsaan*), and optimism (*tafaa-ul*).

This mixture of English secular terms (which are accessible to non-Muslims) and Arabic terms (more familiar to Muslims) allows the MILF-led BTA to navigate the tricky waters of a pluralistic (though Muslim dominated) Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao within the territorial boundaries and constitutional strictures of a Philippines that is overwhelmingly Christian.

Conclusion

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front, as its name implies, is indeed guided by Islam. But that does not specify much, inasmuch as most Muslims would say the same thing. It is essential to look into the specific details of what this means.

In ideological terms, the MILF is an organization advocating what can be termed a conservative version of political Islam. Key concepts were derived from twentieth-century writers in Pakistan and Egypt, but guidance is still sought from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Rather than focusing on violent conflict to advance its goals, it takes a broader view of *Jihad* as "struggle in the way of Allah," and has responded repeatedly over the years to negotiation

overtures from the Philippine government through six presidential administrations in the last 40 years.

The Bangsamoro Organic Law was ratified in a plebiscite in January 2019, and the MILF is now leading a six-year Bangsamoro Transition Authority to set up an autonomous government in the southern Philippines. Thus the efficacy of this negotiation strategy in solving the problems plaguing Muslims in the region will be tested. Since 1976 several peace agreements have been reached between the Philippine governments and Moro separatist fronts (first the MNLF and now the MILF). None of the previous agreements were fully implemented so a cycle of unrest and negotiation continued until the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014.

Both the Philippine government and the MILF believe the implementation of enhanced autonomy, influenced by Islam but fundamentally secular, will greatly improve the situation after decades of conflict in some of the poorest areas of the country, and finally bring this cycle to an end.

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