



The Philippines and Bangsamoro Polity: Breaking the “Sisyphean Ordeal”¹

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RELATIONS BETWEEN the Philippine State and the Bangsamoro polity have been continually subjected to a cycle that can be referred to as a “Sisyphean ordeal.”² Every time a new development emerges, say, a vision of social order, political arrangement, policy reform and the like, it is always followed by a contrary development, leaving the whole relationship in tatters while the vision is left to cascade into irrelevance. When this happens, it would take another time before a new effort, another visioning is made once again. Ironically, Philippine-Moro relations has been punctuated by a series of such cycles in history.

The government’s lack of urgency and the utter failure of the State to address the ordeal have led the latter to rely on a traditional system of politics that is dominated by local traditional forces, political dynasties, warlords and other similar forces. As a result, it is easy for these local forces to become the new sources of power in Moro areas as they are driven to dominate and even exploit the unstable situation to their advantage.

This essay has three parts: (1) a discussion of the national-local relations in Moro areas, where the ordeal is vividly evident; (2) a brief exposition about the “unholy alliance” between the State and local traditional forces, such as the Moro political dynasties and the like, which brought forth a culture of excess and impunity, and brutal consequences such as the “Maguindanao massacre;” and (3) a recommendation for the new administration to hammer out a new form of relationship through a comprehensive peace process with ideologically based Moro fronts.

This paper is general in scope and, at times, may even be viewed as espousing a contradictory thesis. On the one hand, it creates the impression that nothing substantial has taken place in the effort to resolve the Mindanao conflict these past years as everything mainly happens in cycles; hence, the use of the term “Sisyphean” ordeal. On the other hand, it hints that there is actually a way out of the morass as it proposes ways to break free of the ordeal, so that a new and genuine start can address the Mindanao conflict.

As I was answering these two-fold concerns – exhibiting pessimism on the one hand and optimism on the other – I realized that the UP Academic Congress “intends to identify current issues, map the various approaches that have been tried in the past, provide some assessment of their gains and failures and draw out possible actions that must be done by the next administration.” Hence, I have decided to discuss this “Sisyphean” ordeal and reflect on the efforts done in addressing the Mindanao conflict.

First, my reference to the relations between the Philippine State and the Bangsamoro polity embraces the entire structural, political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of their relations and how these connect the two entities. The Philippine State refers to that specific entity, which possesses all the wherewithal of a respectable state: government, people, and sovereignty among others. Meanwhile, I purposely used “polity” to identify or characterize the Bangsamoro, and to signify their level of political development based on political identity, legitimacy, authority and autonomy; I also consider other elements that helped forge a unique form of relations, which other indigenous cultural communities do not have, with the Philippine State.

Second, I posit that the relationship of the two has long suffered from a “Sisyphean ordeal.” Although I am not an expert on Greek mythology, the term denotes the fate of the Greek king who was led to roll a stone uphill, only to see it roll back down. He pushes it up again, and the entire process repeats in an endless cycle. This illustrates the current state of affairs between the state and the Bangsamoro. The structural and political instrumentalities which were put in place to stabilize their relations have caused them, at times to work together, and at other times to struggle

against each other. More often than not, the relations suffer from the same fate as that of Sisyphus: a recurrent cycle of solutions and processes that rarely reaches the mountaintop.

My use of this term emphasizes the dramatic situation of the Mindanao conflict these past years, much like a Greek drama or tragedy. As previously mentioned, the relationship is extensive, comprising the totality of connections between the two in terms of social structure, political institutions, cultural relations, and so on. But for a dramatic portrayal, allow me to highlight a particular dimension of the relationship, situated in the realm of national-local relations that suffers from what I also call “malaise of tier-making and tier-changing in the Muslim South.”

Allow me to identify these tiers, which I mentioned in a short paper I wrote for the *Diliman Review* in 2000, and which was subsequently reprinted by the Center for People Empowerment and Governance (CENPEG):

FIGURE 1
American Period and Philippine Commonwealth

Tier/Unit/Office	Nature	Function	Year
1. Military District of Mindanao and Jolo	Military	To oversee US Benevolent Policy in Mindanao and Sulu	1899
2. Military Department of Mindanao and Jolo	Military	To rule via four districts: first and second, comprising Mindanao; third, Sulu; fourth, Palawan and other adjacent areas	1900
3. District of Mindanao	Military	To rule via two districts over Christian areas: one in the north through a headquarter in Cagayan; the other in the south and central Mindanao with headquarter in Zamboanga	1900

Tier/Unit/Office	Nature	Function	Year
4. Seventh Separate Brigade	Military	To continue the thrust of MDMJ after the latter's geographical department was temporarily closed for ten months	1901
5. Bureau of Non-Christian Tribe	Administrative	To investigate non-Christian peoples; ascertain tribal distinction, territorial limits, social organization, language, belief, manner and custom	1901
6. Department of Mindanao	Military	To carry on the missions of DM in 1900 and SSB in 1901	1902
7. Moro Province	Military	To initiate and organize American government policy of direct rule and interference on Moro internal affairs	1903
8. Department of Mindanao and Sulu	Administrative	To effect the Filipinization of Mindanao and Sulu in preparation for Philippine independence; to unify the structure and powers of provincial and municipal governments in Moroland with rest of the country; to institute "rapid amalgamation with the inhabitants of other islands"	1914
9. Office of Commissioner for Mindanao and Sulu	Administrative	To develop Mindanao for the immediate benefit of the Philippine Commonwealth	1937

Source: Julkipli Wadi "Tier-Making and Tier-Changing in Mindanao and Sulu," *Diliman Review* Vol. 48, No. 2, 2000.

As the data above reveal, up to the Philippine Commonwealth, the American- and Filipino-led government created political, administrative and bureaucratic tiers and offices for the administration of Mindanao and Sulu. The first was the creation of the Military District of Mindanao and Jolo in 1899 and the last was the Office of Commissioner for Mindanao and Sulu in 1937.

FIGURE 2
Post-Colonial Philippine Administrations

Tier/Unit/Office	Nature	Function	Year
1. Commission on National Integration	Administrative	To foster the moral, material and political advancement of non-Christian Filipinos	1957
2. Mindanao Development Authority	Administrative	To accelerate the development of the region	1961
3. Rehabilitation and Development Program	Administrative	To rehabilitate, reconstruct and develop areas ravaged by war in the late 60s and early 70s; to restore normalcy in the region; to assist evacuees; to repair damaged infrastructure; to expand agricultural production; improve education and health services	1973
4. Presidential Task Force for the Reconstruction and Development of Mindanao	Administrative	To implement the RPD; to assess damage on private property; to mobilize funds; to prepare an integrated program of full reconstruction; to restore peace and order	1973

Tier/Unit/Office	Nature	Function	Year
5. Southern Philippines Development Authority	Administrative	To promote economic development and social stability through cooperation and non-cooperation ventures	1975
6. Autonomous Governments in Region IX and XII	Political	To implement regional autonomy in accordance with the Tripoli Agreement (according to the Philippine government)	1977
7. Ministry of Muslim Affairs	Administrative	To ensure the integration of Muslim Filipinos into the mainstream Filipino society with due regard to their beliefs, customs, traditions, and institutions	1981
8. Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao	Political	To implement regional autonomy in accordance with Art. X Sec. 15 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution	1989
9. Mindanao Economic Development Council	Administrative	To promote and coordinate the active participation of all sectors to effect the socio-economic development of Mindanao through a holistic and integrated approach	1992
10. Southern Philippine Council for Peace and Development	Administrative	To oversee and coordinate peace and development in the Special Zone of Peace and Development whose area of jurisdictions covers the thirteen provinces mentioned in the Tripoli Agreement	1996

Tier/Unit/Office	Nature	Function	Year
11. Bangsamoro People’s Regional Autonomous Government	MNLF’s proposed political and regional unit in the phase 2 of the GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement	To implement regional expanded autonomy in accordance with the phase 2 provision of the 1996 GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement after the supposed amendment of the Organic Act of the ARMM	---
12. Maglanco-Socsargen Council	President Joseph Estrada’s proposed administrative council to the MILF (before the all-out war in 2000)	To implement peace and development in areas under the sphere of influence of the MILF, i.e., Maguindanao, Lanao, North Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sarangani, and General Santos	1991
13. Expanded ARMM	Political	To implement RA 9054 mandating the expansion of territorial coverage of the ARMM	2001
14. Bangsamoro Juridical Entity	MILF’s proposal to broaden political power and territorial coverage of the jurisdiction of the ARMM	To effect the establishment of State-sub state arrangement between the Philippines and the BJE	2009

Source: Julkipli Wadi, “Tier-Making and Tier-Changing in Mindanao and Sulu,” *Diliman Review* Vol. 48, No. 2, 2000. Unlike the old list, the table has been added with new tiers, namely: the expanded ARMM in 2001 and the proposed BJE in 2008 in accordance with the bungled Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD).

If we add the 9 tiers that were created during the American period and the succeeding 14 tiers from 1957 onwards, there have been 23 tiers of various natures – political, administrative, bureaucratic, office and otherwise – which have been created and abolished for more than a hundred years. Of the 23 tiers, the expanded Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), the Southern Philippines Development Authority (SPDA), and the Office of Muslim Affairs are the only ones left standing to address the political, administrative and cultural interests of the Bangsamoro people. While a new form of politico-administrative arrangement called the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) was contemplated recently, it was subsequently shelved after the bungled attempt of the MoA-AD in 2008. That year, to say the least, Sisyphus’ proverbial stone cascaded again dramatically.

What precipitated this malaise of tier-making and tier-changing in Mindanao and Sulu? Why did it become a Sisyphean ordeal of the nation? Allow me to recount what I wrote as the source of the morass:

The main source of instability is anchored on a century of unresolved contestation over the political status of Mindanao and Sulu. Moreover, the colonial mixture of Philippine political system that failed to address the “power vacuum” in Mindanao and Sulu reinforces intergovernmental instability. The unitary set-up of the Philippine government was a legacy of Spain... Yet, the set-up was institutionalized by the “Philippine Commission to facilitate the extension of American sovereignty to the Philippines” including Mindanao and Sulu. The separation of powers (executive, legislative, and judiciary) was copied from the US. The unitary set-up defines the “vertical” division of powers (structure of government) between the national government and local government units while the “horizontal” separation of powers defines the form of government (e.g., presidential or parliamentary).

In all indications, the colonial-political mixture is what creates a disjuncture between the “horizontal” and “vertical” relation of

powers because, from the point of view of governance, a unitary set-up requires a relatively homogenous society while an effective application of separation of powers presupposes a stable system of democracy... As a consequence, it emboldened inter-governmental problem and rendered futile the national government effort of tier-making and tier-changing and further worsened the “power vacuum” in southern Philippines (Diliman Review 2000).

Notwithstanding the historical relations between the government and Muslims in Mindanao and the results of the Mindanao peace process since 1975, the results of the MoA-AD and the 1996 Peace Agreement have seemingly thrown the stone into a downward direction, bringing the whole process back to square one.

There is probably no need to dramatize the elusiveness of peace in Mindanao and its impact on the critical dimensions of relations in Muslim areas such as the level of economic development, poverty, education, literacy, foreign assistance and its implications, among others. To say the least, many studies like the *Philippine Human Development Report* and others have shown vivid findings on how the Muslim Mindanao region, in practically all major indicators, have been relegated to the tail-end of development compared with other areas in the country.

What must be underscored, however, is the structural formation of the traditional system of Moro society, where political dynastic families were tolerated by the State as an alternative to Moro reform groups, such as the Moro Liberation Fronts, who demand substantial power and authority. Even a supposedly regional institution (e.g., ARMM) is being traded off to a strong political family, subjecting it under the latter’s behest and control. Hence, reform-oriented groups ought to ask why they should struggle to form and develop political institutions when in the end, these would eventually be controlled by traditional ruling elites and political families, consequently fossilizing the Moro society.

For instance, the “Maguindanao massacre” is an outright result of the unhealthy convergence of traditional structural formation and political institutional deformities in Moro areas. On the other hand, the political restructuring and vying for autonomy by Moro reform groups is viewed as inimical to long-term national interest. Unless the situation is reversed and expanded and real reform is undertaken, Mindanao will remain mired in the bungle of forces and deformities.

**Is there a way to break out of this ordeal? Is a new,
genuine start possible?**

Given the deepening and widening “political void” in Mindanao, the next administration will have to address the peace process with both the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The bungling of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD) on August 5, 2008 and the Maguindanao Massacre on November 23, 2009 were two major events that not only created a “black eye” in the image of the Philippines here and abroad, but also backpedaled the country, particularly Mindanao and the Muslim areas, into a stupor. While the two issues appear to be separate, they are undeniably interrelated in terms of their political and geographical aspects as they added new dimensions into the complexity of the age-old “Mindanao problem.”

In hindsight, the war between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the MILF following the non-signing of the MoA-AD and the Maguindanao massacre would have been avoided had the MoA-AD been allowed to proceed unhindered. Moreover, the “politics” of Moro political dynasties, including their propensity to election-related violence, could have been restrained and politically framed by a collective vision of reforms had the proposed Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) been pursued, the latter being the core of an envisioned peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF. Because of a politically expedient attitude that dominated the administration’s psychology and strategy in

handling the Mindanao peace process, the peace talks between the government and the MILF that started in 2001 has cascaded dramatically since August 2008.

Meanwhile, the 1996 Peace Agreement between the government and the MNLF was left to fossilize with many unimplemented provisions, including those which should have been continuously subject to bilateral negotiations between the two parties. As commitment to the MNLF was reneged, it was easy to trade off the control of the ARMM to Moro political dynasties, allowing the latter to lord it over while amassing wealth unhindered and to assume the garb of untouchables behind a worsening culture of excess and impunity. The government failed in its neglect in taking the peace process as a national agenda where major branches of government and critical sectors were left blind; this is a reason why a peace framework like the MoA-AD could become a source of legal wrangling and thus could easily be relegated to irrelevance.

The next administration should not simply address the issue by engaging in a hit-and-miss peace process as if the question of “process” were more important than the imperative of attaining “peace.” It needs to pursue a peace policy geared towards the forging of a comprehensive peace agreement with both MILF and MNLF as early as possible so that the remaining years of the new administration’s term would be concentrated on the implementation of the agreement and the institution of reforms in Moro areas. It cannot afford to waste another six precious years. Indeed, a peaceful Mindanao would ultimately mean development for the whole country.

(The last four paragraphs of this paper were shared to the “UP Forum” (February 2010 Issue) as answer to the question: “Should discussions with the MILF and/or the MNLF frame the next administration’s approach to the Mindanao issue?”)

Notes

- 1 A paper presented during Session 3: Backrooms, Battlefields, and Backhoes: The Mindanao Conundrum, on February 2, 2010, at the UP Academic Congress, “Beyond 2010: Leadership for the Next Generation,” Malcolm Hall, College of Law, University of the Philippines Diliman, February 1-5, 2010. The author is Associate Professor and Dean of the Institute of Islamic Studies, University of the Philippines Diliman.
- 2 Sisyphus is a mythic personality in Greek mythology who is condemned to roll a huge rock up a hill or mountain. But every time he is about to reach the peak, the rock cascades down, making him repeat this process forever.