

**Book Review****Death and Other Endings**

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Gaerlan, Kristina and Stankovitch, Mara, eds. *Rebels, Warlords and Ulama*. Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD) 2000, 366p.

The problem with stories, even those with happy endings, is that when you keep them going long enough they will eventually end in death or some other tragedy. In the long story of Mindanao, death was only the beginning.

*Rebels, Warlords and Ulama*, the Institute for Popular Democracy's reader on Muslim separatism and the war in southern Mindanao edited by Kristina Gaerlan and Mara Stankovitch, presents seven writers taking on the issues surrounding the conflict. In 12 chapters, the book weaves together events from the conflict is traced back the Spanish defeat of the Sultan of Manila in 1511, and projects into a future with new and enterprising new players in the field of southern violence.

Eric Gutierrez opens with a brief chronology of more recent events, beginning with the infamous Jabidah massacre of Muslim army recruits in March 1968 and the establishment of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) three years later, and ending with the coming into being of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and the fall of Camp Abubakar. The chronology points out the highlights of the violent saga which now enters a new era under the presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Two papers were originally written in 1981 by Pakistani scholar, Aijaz Ahmad. In "Class and Colony in Mindanao" he traces the origins of the war from the failure of Spanish efforts of colonization and the entry of multinational capital and migrant settlers in Mindanao. The brutal clashes of the MNLF and the Marcos government are recounted in his chapter on "The War Against the Muslims."

Ahmad tells of a feudal Muslim Mindanao deeply fragmented despite a religious commitment that thoroughly frustrated Spain's plans for expansion. Defiance would later seal the region's fate as the relatively more advanced North would 'colonize' the battle-weary South, paving the way for a "partnership between North American corporate capital and the northfilipino elite." (p.7) Today, the multinationals are able to do business in the midst of a full-scale war while thousands of Muslims have become landless and homeless..

According to Gutierrez's chapter "In the Battlefields of the Warlord" and the article "Sultans of a Violent Land" by the late activist and writer, Francisco Gonzales, there was actually a time when the provinces of Sulu and Lanao were not arms dealers' haven. Of course the Badjaos, Tausugs and Maranaos clashed with neighbors before taking on the Spanish, American and government troops and the settling of differences of opinion with deadly weapons was a way of life. As belligerent as the people were, they followed tradition and respected a council of elders. There was honor and dignity in their violent ways whether in becoming *juramentado* (amok) or declaring *rido* (fued).

Soon the majestic seats of Islamic power in Southeast Asia deteriorated into the human wastelands of Jolo and Lanao. The wielders of power were no longer the sultans and datus but the landowning dynasties of the Alontos, Lucmans, Dianalans and Andiongs of Lanao del Sur and the Loongs, Tulawies, Tans and Annis of Sulu to name a few.

"Religion and Politics in Muslim Mindanao" (Gutierrez) displays the phenomenon of religious organizations leading their flock into and out of the political wilderness. According to Gutierrez, "religious institutions can be seen not only as emerging critics, but also as key players in their own right in both local and national politics." (p.149) This interplay of politics and religion has resulted in two types of Moro leadership. The secular-modernist MNLF and Islamic-fundamentalist MILF, both with devout Muslim leaders, do not always see eye to eye.

In "Historical and Political Perspectives for a Tri-People Approach to the Mindanao Conflict," Joel Racamora, IPD executive director, assesses the problems facing the MNLF leadership. The MNLF, he says, is the key to the peace process in Mindanao for it had successfully embodied for

the past 25 years the political aspirations of Muslims in Mindanao. He explains:

"Political instability has roots in a violent past and an intractable social and economic present. It is not difficult to sympathize with Mindanao Muslims. As a group, they are poorer and have less political power in the government than Christians. Their resentment at being discriminated against feed on more than four centuries of accumulated slights." (p.166)

Against 400 years worth of slight, the government presented the 1996 Peace Agreement. If there is to be peace and prosperity in Mindanao, the MNLF, must lead both Muslim and Christian communities. There should also be an understanding of "how all Mindanaons feel they have been discriminated against by the central government in Manila."

From its humble beginnings of four provinces, the ARMM has become the complete showcase of ways not to run an autonomous government. In "ARMM After the Peace Agreement" Gutierrez and Marites Danguilan Vitug explain how this happened right under the nose of the government. Too much money and incompetence and so very little planning combined for an administrative nightmare to rival the worst of Metro Manila even without the garbage problem. There is also the problem with the local leadership, the datanship and the patrimonial aspect of politics.

"The Unfinished Jihad" (Gutierrez) stays unfinished as the MILF continues to pursue its solution to the Bangsamoro problem, even as the AFP stands ready to thwart this with a creative military solution. "Peace and Development: The MNLF and SPCPD Experience" by Eliseo R. Mercado Jr., a Catholic priest who has done extensive studies on Muslims in the Philippines, argues that the best possible scenario is a reconstituted Autonomous Region in Southern Philippines (ARSP) which would include the 14 provinces and 10 cities of the SZOPAD instead of the present four included in the ARMM.

In "New Faces of Violence in Muslim Mindanao" (Gutierrez), there is the Abu Sayyaf which may very well be the worst mutation in the 30 year history of the modern Moro struggle. The group allegedly responsible for



the destruction of Ipil, a town in Zamboanga del Sur, remains a reliable source of real and imagined civilian terror and government embarrassment.

*Rebels, Warlords and Ulama* forms the opinion that the complexity of the issues disallows a simple solution. After three decades, the secessionist movement is still mired in debate and in-fighting over the Moro concept. Secession is out of the question during negotiations and a difficult course of action for the secessionist.

"And even for the Moro rebels who wish to separate from the Philippines, is not an easy option to push either. They will first have to unite their constituency and leadership, defend their case and provide for the mess that a break up will create." (p.341)

The Philippine government and its agents, too, are still searching for a decisive military victory or even a turning point. In 'The Reimagination of the Bangsamoro: 30 Years Hence', Gutierrez states that there certain realities both parties must grapple with but that ultimately a negotiated secession may be the last test for the emergence of the Moro nation.

He reminds us that Philippine independence was won through a negotiated process that took almost half a century to complete. Concessions were won piece by piece until a Commonwealth government was established in 1935. Absolute independence came 11 years later. Given the opportunity to bring their arguments to the table, the Moros should let their differences ruin their case for independence.

The book provides a substantial background to the first-time reader, while the serious researcher is directed to a list of more in-depth studies on Mindanao found after the final chapter. It enlightens as much as it disheartens. Most of the articles, written a good two to three years before today's events, offered a pessimistic view for the future of the region, particularly the ARMM, and were correct in their negativity especially when one read's today's papers. The matter of a new president will not stop bullets until Malacañang steps into the picture with an idea better than soldiers, rebels and civilians dying on a daily basis.

When he was still the president Estrada clearly did not fancy the role of arbiter and instead guaranteed a perpetual state of war when he re-stated his administration's policy on the continuing demand for secession.

"Not an inch (of territory) will be ceded," he said, and he might have also been seriously referring to his personal properties.

Gutierrez and Vitug, in "ARMM After the Peace Agreement", leave a note of optimism, that with exemplary local leadership in young politicians namely Abdullah Dimaporo, Lanao del Norte governor, and Nabil Tan, ARMM vice governor, perhaps all is not lost in Muslim Mindanao or at least in the ARMM.

The question is, however, if there is in Malacañang a leadership that inspires.

A good ending is hard to find. The Mindanao story so far reads like George A. Romero's 1968 zombie classic, "Night of the Living Dead" where the one character who does not get eaten by self-centeredness and flesh-hungry ghouls, is shot dead by trigger-happy members of the civilian population who have come to the rescue.

For now *Rebels, Warlords and Ulama* serves as a dim prologue to the story rather than an hopeful epilogue. It tells of a sad truth about the war in Mindanao: that there is no present or future, only the past happening over and over again.●