

*Reflections from Scholars and Practitioners*

## Islam, Bangsamoro and Democracy

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*Despite its potential for growth and development, the Bangsamoro region has seen decades of demographic marginalization, repression, and underdevelopment. These social problems, which were attributed to colonialization, are further aggravated by armed conflict between rebel groups and the government, and weak legal framework for regional autonomy. In her speech, Amina Rasul-Bernardo argues that the Bangsamoro conflict can only be addressed with a better understanding of its history and context. Rasul-Bernardo urges the passage of a Bangsamoro Basic Law that strengthens regional autonomy and ensures genuine, sustainable development in the region.*

**Keywords:** *Bangsamoro conflict, Bangsamoro history, regional autonomy*

### Introduction

The topic that I thought I would like to discuss is called “Islam, Bangsamoro and Democracy,” because I am a democracy advocate. However, actually, it is really more about history and context. What matters in governance, for us in the minority areas, are history and context. Look at what has happened in Bangsamoro. Many mistakes have been made because people do not seem to pay attention to context. You get context through history. I think the Local Government Center (now the Center for Local and Regional Governance) should be at the forefront in making sure that people always know the context before they start developing government policy.

I will discuss four topics: (1) the history of Bangsamoro struggle; (2) autonomy versus independence; (3) what is going on in ARMM (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao), why people are calling it as experiment, and what is unique about Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL); and (4) whether autonomy is important enough to be strengthened.

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To begin, let me just say that I consider myself a very fortunate Muslim because I was born in the Philippines. Here in the Philippines, I grew up, I worked, I married, and I had children in a community where women have liberties, which are denied most of my sisters in the Middle East, the heartland of Islam. When people start talking about Islam and democracy and they say that Islam and democracy are incompatible, they only have to go to Southeast Asia, where, after all, you have most of the world's Muslims. Indonesia alone has hundreds of millions of Muslims. See how democratic we are in these regions, and how democracy has helped these regions develop multiethnic, tolerant, and peaceful communities that tend to resolve their conflicts in a non-militaristic fashion. That is, except in some areas of ethnic conflicts, mostly in Mindanao; we have it now in Myanmar, and we have it in parts of southern Thailand. Here in the Philippines, why do we have ethnic conflicts in the South? Let us take a very quick look and fly through centuries of Philippine history.

This presentation is an attempt from the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy (PCID) to provide our fellow Filipinos as well as those of different nationalities, especially the youth, with some vital information about the conflict in Mindanao. This is an attempt to bridge the gap of misunderstanding and misconception between and among Filipinos about the plight of the Moros.

While media frequently refer to it as the "Mindanao problem," the decades-old conflict in the Southern Philippines concerns every Filipino who envisions a country enjoying equitable progress and genuine democracy. On a similar note, this problem also concerns the international communities and fellow peace stakeholders, since paving and sustaining of peace is a global initiative. This is why it is important for us to engage in a national, and sometimes international, dialogue.

A good example of this misconception was the controversy brought about by the non-signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The problem was that misinformation, political posturing, and opportunism characterized the discussion. At the height of that controversy, many people were making judgments without having even read the document. Worse, many do not really understand fully the history and complexity of the Moro question.

We at the PCID believe that the solution is education and engagement. If we are to achieve lasting and genuine peace in Mindanao and in our country, we need to understand the problem fully and make informed opinions on the matter. This is the reason why we go around the country,

mostly in universities and colleges, discussing about our history, our problems, and our dreams of peace and development.

### **History of the Bangsamoro Struggle**

Why do we have this conflict? Why does it seem to be such an intractable conflict? To answer these questions, let us take the lesson taught by one of the Philippines' national heroes, Jose Rizal, who wrote, "[h]e who does not know how to look back at where he came from will never get to his destination."

Speaking of [Jose] Rizal, according to the venerable Cesar Majul, there are two theories about the etymology of the name Rizal. One is, the word "*rizal*" comes from "*roz*", the Spanish word for rice, or from Spanish "*ricial*," which means green field. The other one is Arabic word "*rijal*" (men), which is the plural form of "*rajul*" (man). In fact, the name "Rijâl" was popular among Malays, with the influence of Islam and Arabic language in Southeast Asia since the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

When Miguel Lopez de Legazpi wrestled Manila from a budding Islamic sultanate on 17 May 1571, Manila was already under the sway of Brunei, particularly the fifth sultan of Brunei, Sultan Seifu r-Rijâl (roughly translated as "valiant king of men" or "king of valiant men"), who was related to Muslim chiefs, namely, Rajah Matanda of Pasig, Rajah Sulayman of Manila, and Rajah Lakandula of Tanduh (later named Tondo).

If we want to understand the nature of this problem today with the hope of solving it in the future, we need to understand the past—the historical foundations of the Bangsamoro struggle. A historical audit of the Moro struggle can be divided into four historical periods:

- 1) the arrival of Islam in Sulu, 13<sup>th</sup> century;
- 2) the long period of Spanish colonization, which started with Magellan's arrival in 1521;
- 3) the transition of the Philippines as a colonized state of Spain to the hands of United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and
- 4) the declaration of Philippine independence in 1946.

#### **Arrival of Islam**

When Islam came to the Philippines, it was not through conquest. It was very peaceful—through trade. Islam arrived in Sulu in the last quarter

of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Natives did not have any monotheistic religion. Religious orientations at that time were more on ancestral, nature and animistic worshipping.

The Sulu sultanate was established in 1451. The Maguindanao sultanate was established in the second decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Each sultanate was independent, had sovereign powers, and had diplomatic and trade relations with other countries in the region. The sultanate started to expand to three major sultanates in the whole of Mindanao: (1) the sultanate of Sulu that ruled over Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, parts of Zamboanga peninsula, and, some say, as far as Cebu and Manila; (2) the sultanate of Maguindanao—the great empire of Maguindanao; and (3) the sultanate of the Maranaws.

Together with this political system called sultanates, what else did Islam bring us? It brought us to the first widespread system of education. Everybody had the same educational system. It was called Madrasah, the Islamic school, Islamic educational system based on the Quran. What else did it bring? It brought law—one law for everyone, the Sharia (Islamic law). It also brought with it international trade. As evidence of this, the Sulu sultanate had relations with China. In 1417, Sultan Paduka Batara of Sulu traveled to China, together with 340 others, in a goodwill mission and were received by Chinese Emperor Zhu Di during the Ming Dynasty. Unfortunately, the sultan died and was buried in China, given grand funeral rites befitting a sultan (Scott, 1983). The emperor put up a mausoleum for him and, up to this day, that mausoleum is there and was recently improved, making it a tourist attraction. Two of the sultan's sons stayed behind. The sultan's heirs visited Sulu in June 2005 (Banagudos, 2005).

What do these historical facts tell us? The early development of Islam, which predated the arrival of the Spaniards and the establishment of the Philippine nation, stands on record as the first political institution, the first institutional religion, the first educational system, and the first institutional legal system, and the first civilization in the Philippines. Its economy was far more advanced than that of the other indigenous communities.

We had a political system, a widespread Islamic judicial system, foreign trade, and education, which characterize a sovereign state. We need to understand this as this is the historical basis for asserting the independent existence of the Moros.

## **Spanish Colonization**

When the Spanish arrived in the islands in 1521, most of these islands were governed by Muslims. Spanish colonization of the Philippines commenced more than a century later in 1565. Superior Spanish forces pushed the Muslims to Mindanao, where the sultanates' resistance against colonization was strongest. When the Spaniards came and they saw all these Muslims fighting them from Manila to Cebu, what did they call us? Moros, after the Moors who occupied Spain for hundreds of years. They drove us back until they could no longer drive us further back. We were back to our own base in Mindanao: the sultanate of Sulu, the sultanate of Maguindanao, and the sultanate of Lanao. Because they could no longer overpower us in our home base, what did they do? The Spaniards decided to do treaties.

It is crucial to note that the Spanish government recognized the sovereignty of the sultanates, by entering into treaty arrangements with the latter<sup>1</sup>. Even when the sultanates were at their weakest, the Spanish government respected the treaty arrangements. Sultan Jamalul Alam signed the last treaty with Spain on 22 July 1878. This treaty had translation flaws. While the Spanish version stated it had sovereignty over Sulu, the Tausug version described the relationship as being a protectorate, and that Sulu customs, laws, religion were not subject to Spanish jurisdiction (Saleeby, 1908).

The Spanish colonization, which came after the existence of the Islamic sultanates and principalities, represented the beginning of a parallel yet separate historical development between the Muslims and the soon to-be-independent Filipinos. While Filipino nationalism was essentially anti-Spanish, the nation that was created after the 1896 Revolution remained Catholic.

## **Spain Cedes the Philippines to the Americans**

Then came the pursuit of independence. The Filipinos revolted against Spain. They had become allies with the Americans. The Americans were supposed to help us become independent but, instead, they became our next colonial masters. We had lost again our independence, with the Bangsamoro fighting for their freedom and sovereignty against the Americans.

The Americans still could not defeat the Muslim fighters of the South so they also did treaties. Again, even when the sultan was at its weakest, there was a little piece of paper called a treaty. Again we have a treaty granting sovereign power. But, unfortunately, the Americans gave

independence to the Republic of the Philippines. They gave the republic the sovereign of the South. This is the core of the Bangsamoro struggle.

When Spain turned over the Philippines to the Americans, through the Treaty of Paris, they illegally gave away the sovereign sultanates. In simple terms, Spain cannot cede what was not theirs. As a form of resistance, wars were waged by the Muslims against the American forces. Again, American troops forced the Muslims to retreat.

Mark Twain wrote about the massacres of the Muslims in Bud Dajo in Sulu (Clemens, 1906)<sup>2</sup>. In August 1899, Sultan Jamalul Kiram II reluctantly signed a treaty with General J.C. Bates, which included mutual respect, non-interference with religion, social and domestic customs or internal economic or political affairs. Under these conditions, the US would not give or sell Sulu or any part of it to any other nations, among others. The US probably signed this peace treaty as a way of stemming any resistance to its occupation in the South while it was suppressing the resistance in the North. This treaty was unilaterally abrogated by the US on 2 March 1904 (Gowing, 1968).

### **Philippine Independence**

As the Philippines was certain to gain its independence, Muslim chieftains gathered in Dansalan (now Marawi City) on 18 March 1935 and wrote the US President a petition not to be included in the new republic. The Muslims preferred to be under the US rule, recognizing that they would become second-class citizens if made part of the Catholic Philippines. Their petition was ignored. The Christian *ilustrados* gained their independence along with control over the Muslim territories (Rasul, 2009).

The inauguration of the Filipino Republic, therefore, presented a paradox. It was able to establish a state and a semblance of an identity. On the other hand, while the new republic tried to consolidate its newfound sovereignty, the Moros, reeling from decades of animosity with the Christianized Filipinos, leaned towards independence instead of integration. This historically parallel development of the Filipino nation and the Muslims gave the rebellion its ideological character in calling for the realization of a Moro nation separate from that of the Filipino nation.

But let me stress this: the Moros are not anti-Christian. What we are saying is that, when we look back at our history, we will discover that there was a Moro nation prior to the establishment of the Filipino nation. Our struggle is for the recognition of and respect for that historical right.

### Elements of the Struggle

The struggle for Moro independence has historical roots. This has become the basis for the peace process with the Muslim liberation fronts. What complicates this further? The threatened Moros again—the belief that the majority rule or government is out to eradicate the ethnic groups of the Muslims of the South.

#### Demographic Marginalization

Muslims now are rather politically marginalized. Back then, we were sovereign; we ruled all the way up to Manila. In 1918 Mindanao, who was the majority? There were Muslims (49%); Lumads (29%); and Christians (22%). But, less than a hundred years afterwards, the population has shifted dramatically. Now, the Muslims are the minority and even fewer are the Lumads. The country is now populated mostly by Christians who descended from settlers.

The term “*Bangsamoro*” literally means the “Moro nation” (or the “Moro people”). “*Moro*,” which is Spanish for “Moor,” was considered a derogatory term until it was adopted by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). It meant that a Moro is illiterate, poor, barbaric, and ignorant. But when Nur Misuari started to organize the MNLF, he took what was a very negative term and developed it into a political badge and an identity of a people. Eventually, more and more Muslims accepted it. Hence, the saying, “We are Moros, not Filipinos.” Technically, the term Moro includes Muslims who are born or who are related by blood to original Muslim settlers in Mindanao. They are settled in Western and Southern Mindanao, Sulu, and in Southern Palawan. They share a distinct culture, speak different dialects, and are varied in their social formation. However, they all share a common belief in Islam (Che Man, 1990).

The Bangsamoro is made up of 13 ethnolinguistic groups, including the Iranun, Jama Mapun, Palawani, Molbog, Kalagan, Kalibugan, Maguindanao, Maranao, Sama, Sangil, Tausug, Badjao, and Yakan. Among the 13 Muslim groups, the biggest are the Maguindanaoan, Maranao, Tausug, Sama and Yakan groups (Russell et al., 2004). Meanwhile, around 20% of Mindanao’s population is Muslim. Muslims are said to be around five percent of the total estimated population of 104 million (CIA, 2017), a figure that is contested by Muslim groups as too low. A 2012 estimate revealed that there were 10.7 million Muslims in the Philippines, or around 11% of the total population (National Commission on Muslim Filipinos, 2012, as cited in Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2014, p. 1).

## Muslim Underdevelopment

Aside from demographic marginalization, Muslims also suffer from underdevelopment. However, Muslims in the Philippines were not always poor and underdeveloped. It is important to consider measures of development: access to water and electricity.

For instance, in comparing years 1970 and 1990, Table 1 shows that, in 1970, Sulu's rank in terms of the number of households with piped water was comparable to that of Bataan (38<sup>th</sup>) and Pampanga (39<sup>th</sup>), while Lanao del Sur ranked even higher at 28. But by 1990, Sulu and Lanao del Sur plummeted to ranks 52 and 53 respectively. Pampanga, on the other hand, improved to 15<sup>th</sup> (National Statistical Coordination Board, as cited in Rasul, 2015).

**Table 1. Number of Households with Piped Water: 1970 and 1990**

Province	1970		1990	
	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
Lanao del Norte	19.7	27	19.3	21
Sulu	<b>15.5</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>11.0</b>	<b>52</b>
Lanao del Sur	<b>19.6</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>53</b>
Bataan	15.4	38	31.1	11
Pampanga	13.3	39	27.5	15

Source: National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB), as cited in Rasul (2015)

The same is true when we look at the data on access to electricity. In 1970, Sulu was ranked higher than Camiguin and Ilocos Sur. By 1990, Sulu was already ranked 73<sup>rd</sup>, while Ilocos Sur was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> (Table 2) (NSCB, as cited in Rasul, 2015). Some people would criticize us for "victimization" syndrome, which means we are paralyzed into inaction because we always complain about how we Moros are being marginalized. But let me tell you this: these numbers do not lie. Something happened in our communities between the periods of progress to marginalization.

**Table 2. Number of Households with Electricity: 1970 and 1990**

Province	1970		1990	
	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
Zamboanga del Sur	10	28	40.2	37
Sulu	<b>6.7</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>73</b>
Ilocos Sur	4.5	50	61.8	13
Bukidnon	4.4	51	31.5	48
Lanao del Sur	<b>3.7</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>34.9</b>	<b>43</b>
Camiguin	3.1	59	26.4	57

Source: NSCB, as cited in Rasul (2015)



We were not always poor. The poverty that our people experience now is not self-inflicted. Contrary to popular belief, our poverty and state of lawlessness were the product of years of war and neglect. We have not returned to the thriving years of the 1970s where we had active barter trades with neighboring countries like Malaysia. It was, then, a very progressive community.

### **Autonomy in Lieu of Independence**

In 20 years, the ranking of at least the two provinces in Muslim Mindanao drastically went down because of the war in Mindanao, and as a result of the declaration of martial law by former President Marcos. For the government to strongly justify its declaration of martial law, it had to prove that there was a serious threat to the state. This justification was the secessionist movement in the South and the communist threat in the North. The military implemented widespread operations against the secessionist movements all over Mindanao. With military operations in Muslim Mindanao came the destruction of physical infrastructures in the region: ports, factories, and mills, among others.

Martial law reduced the Bangsamoro to hamlets.<sup>3</sup> Our towns were bombed. With destruction of infrastructure, capital flight followed. Businesses left Sulu, Lanao and other provinces to go to Cebu, Zamboanga, Cagayan de Oro, Davao, and General Santos. Consequently, people lost jobs and found it difficult to find them in Bangsamoro, which led to brain drain. All the best and the brightest left the Bangsamoro homeland.

Unfortunately, we have not recovered from this “triple whammy.” No funds were given for infrastructure; capital has not been invested in provinces and, definitely, the best and the brightest had stayed in Manila. We have this very complicated picture. We were struggling and our sovereignty was stolen away from us. So, what did we do?

During the martial law period under the Marcos regime, the Muslim resistance materialized. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) became an organized group under Misuari, who was a lecturer at the College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines. The Marcos-led government and the military could not reduce the resistance of the MNLF. Instead, they had peace negotiations with the MNLF. Eventually, the Liberation Front accepted autonomy. “We will end our war for independence, we will have autonomy instead.” Until today, Misuari continues to gain support of communities, especially from the island provinces.

There was one group, though, that did not agree with the peace process that Misuari started. Disgruntled members of the MNLF organized the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Salamat Hashim, the late founding chair of the MILF, broke away from the MNLF hierarchy due to ideological differences and leadership squabbles with Misuari. In 1983, Hashim announced the separate presence of the MILF.

The MILF, dominated by the Maguindanaoans, is asserting Islamic ideology as distinct from the secular tendency of the MNLF. The MILF is currently the largest Muslim secessionist group in the country, with membership conservatively estimated at 15,000-20,000. Its original objective was to secede from the Philippine Republic and transform Mindanao into an independent Islamic state. MILF rebels are largely distributed in Central Mindanao, particularly in the provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur and, to a lesser extent, in Western Mindanao.

But, since then, they have realized they cannot survive a war for independence. Their people suffer. With the MILF, they continued to fight for independence but, later on, realizing they could not win, went into a peace process recovery. The Philippine government under former President Fidel V. Ramos initiated peace negotiations with the MILF. A government panel was created to explore terms with the MILF in September 1996. Meetings were held to discuss cessation of hostilities. The agenda included the following issues: ancestral domain; displaced and landless Bangsamoro; destruction of properties and war victims; human rights issues; social and cultural discrimination; corruption; and economic inequities and widespread poverty.

Former President Joseph Estrada later broke off negotiations and declared an all-out-war policy against the MILF, resulting in the displacement of some 500,000-800,000 Muslim civilians in Central Mindanao in 2000. The government's action to give up peaceful negotiations in favor of military action was widely criticized by Mindanao leaders, civil society, and the Catholic Church as a no-win situation. Today, a majority of the internally displaced persons have yet to be resettled in their original home villages.

The government of former President Macapagal-Arroyo resumed negotiation with the MILF. However, the negotiations proceeded in fits and starts. Under then President Benigno Aquino II, MILF dropped their demand for independence but sought the establishment of a substate under the central government in Manila. According to Marvic Leonen, then head of the government peace panel, "[t]heir proposal is that they be considered Filipino citizens but with Bangsamoro national identity" (as

cited in Bordadora, 2011, p. A6). The details of the substate proposal were presented to the government panel during formal meetings held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The result of that peace process is the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro which was signed March 2014. This should now be the basis for the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law.

### **ARMM: Failed Experiment?**

Given this history and context, is it so difficult to give autonomy to the Bangsamoro? In exchange, they are ending their struggle for independence. Why is it that our national leaders and legislators cannot accept that autonomy is a working solution? It is a pragmatic solution to end internecine warfare, which has killed hundreds of thousands, created millions of *bakwit*<sup>4</sup>, and led to the loss of billions of pesos and opportunities.

Unfortunately, the ARMM experiment is, according to President Aquino, a failure. Why? The region remains the most commonly affected. Its population has many of the poorest of the poor (Table 3). It fared the lowest in terms of human development indicators (Table 4). It has the highest illiteracy rate; more than a third of adults are illiterate (Table 5). The data tables cover years after the signing of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) with the MNLF that promised peace and development in Muslim Mindanao.

### **Strengthening Autonomy**

If we were given autonomy and already allowed self-rule, why is the picture as dismal as before? This is because the powers of autonomy that were given on paper are weak. This is why the Bangsamoro Basic Law is intended to correct the errors committed during previous congresses. When they pass the law, the Bangsamoro will be an autonomous region.

**Table 3. Comparative Poverty Incidence in Selected Regions**

Region	2000		2003		2006	
	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
ARMM	<b>71.30</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>53.10</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>55.3</b>	<b>+2.2</b>
NCR	11.50	15	7.30	15	7.1	-0.2
Bicol	61.90	2	47.90	4	41.8	-6.1
Eastern Visayas	51.10	6	43.40	6	40.7	-2.7
Western Mindanao	53.00	7	49.40	2	40.2	9.2
Northern Mindanao	52.20	4	44.30	5	46.1	+1.8

Source: NSCB (2002, 2008)

**Table 4. Human Development Index: Bottom 10 Provinces**

2000		2003		2006		2009	
Province	HDI	Province	HDI	Province	HDI	Province	HDI
Sulu	<b>0.35</b>	<b>Sulu</b>	<b>0.31</b>	<b>Sulu</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>Sulu</b>	<b>0.27</b>
Tawi-Tawi	<b>0.39</b>	<b>Maguindanao</b>	<b>0.36</b>	<b>Tawi-Tawi</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>Maguindanao</b>	<b>0.30</b>
Basilan	<b>0.43</b>	<b>Tawi-Tawi</b>	<b>0.36</b>	<b>Maguindanao</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>Tawi-Tawi</b>	<b>0.31</b>
Maguindanao	<b>0.46</b>	<b>Basilan</b>	<b>0.41</b>	<b>Basilan</b>	<b>0.43</b>	Zambo Sibugay	0.35
Lanao del Sur	<b>0.46</b>	Masbate	0.44	<b>Lanao del Sur</b>	<b>0.45</b>	Agusan del Sur	0.35
Ifugao	<b>0.46</b>	Zambo Norte	0.45	Masbate	0.46	Davao Oriental	0.36
Agusan Sur	0.48	Sarangani	0.45	Sanrangani	0.48	Sarangani	0.37
Samar	0.51	W. Samar	0.47	E. Samar	0.48	Zambo del Norte	0.38
Lanao Norte	0.51	E. Samar	0.47	Zambo Norte	0.49	Masbate	0.41
Sarangani	0.52	<b>Lanao del Sur</b>	<b>0.48</b>	Romblon	0.49	<b>Lanao del Sur</b>	<b>0.42</b>

Source: Philippine Human Development Network (2009)

**Table 5. Basic Literacy Rate of Population 10 Years Old and Over by Region, Philippines**

Region	Population 10 years old and over (in '000)	Basic Literacy Rate
<b>Philippines</b>	<b>70,818</b>	<b>95.6</b>
NCR	9,021	99.2
CAR	1,277	94.8
I	3,941	98.2
II	2,583	95.0
III	7,752	97.8
IV-A	8,951	98.0
IV-B	2,136	95.1
V	4,205	96.6
VI	5,819	94.5
VII	5,283	95.1
VIII	3,310	93.6
IX	2,534	94.0
X	3,234	93.9
XI	3,302	93.7
XII	2,991	92.1
CARAGA	1,899	94.7
<b>ARMM</b>	<b>2,578</b>	<b>81.5</b>

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (2010)

The 1987 Philippine Constitution says, “[t]here shall be created autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and in the Cordilleras consisting of provinces, cities, municipalities, and geographical areas sharing common and distinctive historical and cultural heritage, economic and social structures, and other relevant characteristics within the framework of this Constitution and the national sovereignty as well as territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines” (Art. 10, Sec. 15). As such, we should give autonomy to our indigenous communities and to the

Bangsamoro. The BBL used this grant of autonomy by the Constitution and created a better framework for autonomy.

The remaining members of the constitutional convention/commission have said that the intent of the Constitution is to be flexible, to accommodate what is needed by its citizens. If the intent is to create a real autonomous region for the Bangsamoro, to give them all its powers, which are in the BBL, then yes, it can be done. The Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), together with other groups, has looked at these issues, and they said, yes, the Bangsamoro can be established without constitutional amendments.

Why should we care? We should care because, even though we are the most affected, the least served, and with the highest illiteracy rate and lowest human development indicators, look at the contribution that we make to the nation (Rasul, 2015):

- More than 60% of the country's agricultural products came from Mindanao. ARMM contributes 11.46% in corn production; 11.43% in coffee production; 8.09% in coconut production; and 3.57% in palay production.
- ARMM had the highest contribution to national fish production, which accounts for 17.5%, but contributes only 6.5% of value (Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, 2010, as cited in Rasul, 2015).
- Seaweeds, an acknowledged export market winner, is largely cultured in Mindanao, accounting for 56.33% of national output from 2003 to 2008, growing at a rate of 12.18% within the same period. It is equally important to note that ARMM accounts for 70% of the Mindanao production.
- Region XI contributed about 41% of the Philippine banana production, followed by Region XII (11.2%), Region X (10.1%), ARMM (6.8%), CARAGA (3.6%), and Region IX (3.2%).

Imagine, if the region did not get affected by war, how much more can it still contribute? We can legislate on our own. We can provide business incentives for investors to come in and develop these areas in Mindanao. We are rich in natural resources, such as oil and gasoline. Remember, we share the continental shelf together with Brunei. Also, we must remember the sultanate of Sulu or in Sabah. I do not know why we are fighting over a small group of islands called Spratlys and then give up Sabah. Many disagree with me, but national leaders should think about it.

We have cultural trades with rich Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Because of the Bangsamoro region, we can now access new capital through

these countries. There are many reasons why we should care about the Bangsamoro region. But I think the best reason why we should care is the Bangsamoro children. What is the future in store for these young children from the Bangsamoro—future doctor, nurse, businessman, farmer, or rebel, terrorist, drug pusher, kidnapper?

This is why we should care. It matters what we do. It matters if we have the Bangsamoro Basic Law and real autonomy, because the future of our nation and our community rests in the future generation's being positive contributors to the community. Together, peace in Mindanao will be enriched if we work together.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Even when the sultan was a puppet, the Spanish government had the so-called treaty. This meant that, even as Zamboanga was open for colonization by Spain, it could not enter Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. They could not go to Lanao and Maguindanao based on the treaties.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Twain is the pen name of renowned American author Samuel Clemens, who wrote the article "Commentary on the Moro massacre" under his real name.

<sup>3</sup> Hamletting mainly refers to a strategy that involves ridding a community of alleged rebel presence and maintaining military presence to secure the area. This is to keep citizens away from contact with alleged rebels and deprive the latter of morale and resources (Tulfo, 2016; De Santos, 2016). Journalist Rigoberto Tiglao (as cited in De Santos, 2016) associated hamletting with torture and summary killings.

<sup>4</sup> Bakwit, which means "evacuate" or "evacuee," refers to internally displaced persons whose communities are caught in recurrent armed conflicts (Canuday, 2009).

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