

# **The Political Strategies of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front for Self-Determination in the Philippines**

**Shamsuddin L. Taya\***

**Abstract:** This study analyses the political strategies pursued by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), over time, to liberate the the Bangsamoro homeland and its people from the control of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). Using data from policy statements, speeches, peace agreements and interviews with informed people, the study examines the strengthening of the organisation of the MILF and the widening of its diplomatic offensive and found these to be effective. The creation of committees served as vehicles for the MILF to reach the masses and thus ensure their support for the liberation movement. The diplomatic offensive through the peace talks internationalised the Bangsamoro cause as a legitimate liberation movement without being labelled a terrorist organisation.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the political strategies of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), over time, to liberate the Bangsamoro homeland from the control of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). Strategies are not simply pieces of papers or documents but are ways of thinking about how one's organisation works.<sup>1</sup> Political strategies are well-designed political plans in an effort to promote and advance the political interests of any organisation. This study examines the nature of the MILF strategies and their effectiveness in furthering the Bangsamoro cause. After a brief introduction to the origin and development of the Bangsamoro movement, the study analyses its political strategies which include the strengthening of the organization and the widening of its diplomatic offensive.

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\*Dr. Shamsuddin L. Taya is Lecturer, Department of International Affairs, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia. E-mail: shamsuddintaya@yahoo.com

## **Background to the Movement**

The Bangsamoro homeland is the second largest island of the Philippines. It has a total land area of 10,199,886 hectares, or 34 per cent of the Philippine's total land area. The Bangsamoro (the Moro nation) is a generic name for the 13-ethno linguistic Muslim tribes in the Southern Philippines. Their exact number is not known because of an apparent statistical genocide against them by the GRP. Nevertheless, their estimated population is about six million and they are found in every major island of the Southern Philippines. They share a distinct culture and speak different dialects. They are varied in social formation but share a common belief in Islam. They are the Islamised Malays of the Southern Philippines.

The main policy of the GRP regarding the Bangsamoro and other indigenous people in Southern Philippines is their political integration and cultural assimilation into the mainstream of the Christian-Filipinos national life. This policy, indeed, was initiated and implemented by the Americans (1898-1946) in the Bangsamoro homeland. Thus, the current policy of the GRP is an extension of the US policy towards the Bangsamoro people and their homeland which is fiercely resisted by the Muslims.

The Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination and freedom has had a long history dating back to the Spanish colonialism. The Spanish all-out war policy against the Bangsamoro was characterised by depopulation of settlements and the destruction of plantation. This was fiercely resisted by the Bangsamoro in every part of the Southern Philippines. Consequently, "the Bangsamoro was never totally conquered, with extensive areas remaining in their hands, free of alien control."<sup>2</sup> With pride in their cultural heritage, the Bangsamoro resisted foreign domination and continued their struggle when Spain ceded the Philippine Island (Luzon and Visayas regions), including the Bangsamoro territory to the United States in 1898. Finally, when the United States granted Philippine independence in 1946, the Bangsamoro continued to resist the newly born Philippine's rule that escalated into widespread conflict in the 1970s. The immediate reasons for the conflict was the increasing massacres, genocides and other atrocities committed against the Bangsamoro by the Philippine Government and its backed Christian Militia (ILAGA) in the Southern Philippines during the late 1960s.

The *Jabidah Massacre* was the starting point when Datu Udtog Matalam, a former governor of the Cotabato Empire, staged a rebellion in 1968 and eventually founded the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) two months after the incident in Corridor. The longstanding tensions between the Bangsamoro and the Christian communities escalated. Already in competition over land, economic resources and political power, the Bangsamoro became increasingly alarmed by the immigration of Christians from the north, which had made them a minority in their own land.<sup>3</sup> The resentment against the Philippine Government eventually led to the creation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).<sup>4</sup>

The MNLF as a movement for Bangsamoro self-determination survived for decades and resisted the forces of the GRP. In 1973, the GRP deployed 80 per cent of its combat forces against the Bangsamoro killing an estimated 50,000 people. From 1972 to 1976, an estimated 150,000 Bangsamoro were killed, more than 500,000 were forced to seek refuge in Sabah, Malaysia, and more than one million were rendered homeless and destitute in the Southern Philippines.<sup>5</sup> The MNLF leadership, however, succumbed to pressures from its foreign supporters, i.e., the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and, more specifically, the Libyan and Saudi Arabian governments. As a result, the MNLF signed a Peace Agreement with GRP known as the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. This sparked internal divisions among the MNLF splintering it in many factions. MNLF gradually lost its earlier vigour and momentum.

With the decline and even collapse of the MNLF, a new Bangsamoro independence movement emerged as a successor to the MNLF, known as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the MILF, led by Salamat Hashim, and after his death in 2003 by Murad Ebrahim. Initially, the MILF advocated a moderate and conciliatory approach toward the GRP but soon it hardened its position.

The MILF has multiple goals in its struggle against the Manila government and its agents. One, the MILF demands independence from the GRP. The movement insists that it will not accept any solution to the problems of the Bangsamoro short of independence. This goal is the result of the Bangsamoro's frustration and anger against the injustice, oppression and deprivation of the Bangsamoro by the GRP and the Christian-Filipino settlers in the Southern

Philippines. Two, the MILF aspires to establish an Islamic state and government. The Camp Abu Bakre As-Siddique, established during the three decades of struggle, serves as a model of an Islamic polity based on their religion and culture. The final goal of the MILF is to make the word of God supreme in all aspects of life.

To achieve the above goals, the MILF has adopted military, economic and political strategies. The political strategies include strengthening of the organisation by creating committees to reach to the grass roots. The other aspect of the strategy is diplomatic offensive to enlist support from the international political system.

### **Strengthening the Organisation**

The movement for independence and self determination in the Southern Philippines is generally attributed to the desire of many Bangsamoro to create their own institutions to replenish social, psychological, and cultural values that could not find fulfilment in the larger Philippine society. In the Bangsamoro separatist politics, distinct organisations and cultural practices were developed to compensate for disenchantment with the existing antagonistic socio-political and cultural order. Politically, economically, culturally and socially, the Bangsamoro were/are deprived and burdened with a deep feeling of socio-economic and political inferiority. Many Bangsamoro live in desolation and squalor, beset by every known kind of social pathology. To make things worse, the Manila political and military leaders went back on their pledges to grant the South an autonomous government (ARMM) which is responsive to the people's aspirations and free from corruption. The 2005 election for ARMM was characterized by vote-rigging, vote buying and political bullying by powerful clans like the Ampatuan and others.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in a Lanao del Sur town, armed personnel took the ballot boxes from helpless teachers and returned them later all filled up. The teachers, as revealed by Patricio P. Diaz, told a Commission on Elections that it was a choice between saving their lives and giving the ballot boxes to be stuffed in by the GRP agents.<sup>7</sup> Election rigging, corruption and other political vices are common in the Philippines generally, and Southern Philippines in particular.

ARMM proved to be corrupt in the post election period and thus contributed to the worsening of the situation rather than solving the

problems of the Bangsamoro. In this situation, critics said that the ARMM was irrelevant to the region's problems.<sup>8</sup> It was suggested from many quarters that the GRP must look for other political options to address the sentiments and aspirations of the people in the region for the sake of development and progress.

The Bangsamoro response to the lack of political dispensation, economic deprivation and social degradation was both non-violent and violent. One response was the establishment of its own governmental structure to replace the existing GRP's political organisation in the region. This called for the strengthening of the MILF's organization for a legitimate cause. According to Mohagher Iqbal, the legitimate causes of the MILF's struggle against the GRP are their grievances over the loss of their freedom, occupation of the Bangsamoro homeland and genocidal attacks against their very existence as people.<sup>9</sup> He claims that the MILF is a mass based organisation articulating and representing the sentiments and aspirations of the Bangsamoro.<sup>10</sup> The mass appeal of the MILF is due to its political strategy of creating systematic, task-oriented and friendly committees.

The MILF established political organisations from the Central Committee to the Barangay (village, the smallest political unit in the Philippines) levels in order to fulfil those socio-economic, cultural and political aspirations which were long desired, but long denied by the Manila regime and its agents. It was an attempt to control those areas that the MILF and the Bangsamoro claimed as theirs. The movement called this structure Political Committee Set-ups. It was headed by the MILF Vice Chairman for Political Affairs, Ghazali Jaafar. The Committee Set-ups were similar to the Philippine local government structures. These set-ups include the central, provincial, municipal and barangay committees, but these did not follow the GRP's political boundaries. Al Haj Murad claimed that the MILF organised committees covered about eighty per cent of the Bangsamoro areas.<sup>11</sup> However, on the ground, it seemed that the MILF's control over those areas was not well-defined. But the major issue here on the part of the MILF was not only a question of setting up committees, but a question of its effective control over those areas where the liberation movement established its structures of government or what it called Committee Set-ups.

The Central Committee is the highest policy-making body of the MILF. The members of the Central Committee represent all sectors of the Bangsamoro such as tribal, religious, professional, farmers and student leaders. The seven members of the Jihad Executive Council run the day-to-day affairs on behalf of the much larger Central Committee. Prior to 2000, most of the MILF's six-division standing forces occupied fixed positions in defence of its camps, the largest of which were the Camp Abu Bakre As-Siddique and the Busrah which stretched across several municipalities. These served both as models of the Islamic community to come and as symbols of the legitimate resistance spearheaded by the movement. This strategy provided for ease of communication and a relatively cohesive command structure. However, with the loss of the lower portion of the Camp Abu Bakre As-Siddique in July 2000 the large standing units previously based there, the General Headquarters and National Guard Divisions, became unsustainable and were reorganized into smaller formations, mostly re-assigned to positions in the provinces of North Cotabato, Maguindanao and Lanao del Norte.

The Central Committee usually meets at least twice a year. However, in case of emergency, the MILF could call a session to discuss issues confronting the movement. The MILF Central Committee emphasises the primacy of Islam as a guiding principle of the liberation movement and implements Islamic principles in all aspects. It argues that it is the duty of all the Bangsamoro to follow and support the activities of the MILF in its pursuit of establishing a *dawlah Islāmiyyah* in the Southern Philippines. Thus, the MILF is considered an Islamic oriented organization with Islamic courts to settle disputes, *shūrā* to arrive at major decisions and *jihād* as a collective responsibility of all Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Iqbal expressed these when he insisted that the MILF is an Islamic, mass-based organisation where *jihād* is obligatory for all the Bangsamoro.<sup>13</sup>

The MILF also has its provincial governments managing the affairs of provinces under its control or influence all over the Southern Philippines. Provincial Committees are created to implement policies and carry out the organisational programmes in the MILF controlled areas or areas of their influence, Iqbal argued.<sup>14</sup> The provincial committees that evolved over time include: Kotawato Provincial

Committee, Biwang Provincial Committee, Rajah Buwayan Provincial Committee, Basilan Provincial Committee, Sarangani Provincial Committee, Davao Provincial Committee, Sulu Provincial Committee, Zamboanga Provincial Committee, Lanao del Sur Committee and Lanao del Norte Provincial Committee. These committees are headed by provincial chairmen recommended by different sectors in the provinces after consultation and finally approved by the Central Committee. In the appointment of these provincial chairmen, the MILF would consult their respective areas. Those committees were accountable to the Central Committee.

At the municipal levels, the MILF also organised municipal governmental structures which were called Municipal Committees. These committees are patterned along the existing municipal government structures of the Philippine government. These Municipal committees are to replace the political structures of the GRP in areas under the control of the MILF or under its sphere of influence. In the creation of these structures, the MILF took into consideration the Bangsamoro's culture, traditions, practices and religion. The municipal chairmen are recommended by the provincial chairmen after due consultation with different sectors in the municipalities and are subject to the approval of the Central Committee. According to Dawan, this strategy aims at replacing the GRP's political, economic and military control over the Bangsamoro homeland at the grass roots level.<sup>15</sup>

The municipal chairmen are responsible to implement the policies of the MILF in their controlled municipalities or in their respective spheres of influence. They are assisted by the Internal Security Force (ISF). At every municipal level, there exists one ISF company assigned to maintain security and order in the respective municipalities. They carry out the intelligence gathering activities at the barangay levels and report them to the municipal committees, then to the provincial committees and finally to the Central Committee.

At the Barangay level, the MILF organised barangay government structures known as Barangay Committees. They are similar to the current GRP's government structures at the barangay level. However, as claimed by Atty Paduman, the MILF structures are based mainly on the principles of Islam.<sup>16</sup> The MILF leadership wants to make

sure that the word of God is implemented in areas which they claim to be under their control or sphere of influence in the region. The Barangay Chairmen are recommended by the Municipal Chairmen after consultation with the different sectors in those particular areas, and, are subject to the approval of the Central Committee. This is in conformity with their aim of establishing a state and government on the basis of Islam. Barangay committees are backed by the organization's military force, the ISF, which helps the committees in implementing the MILF's policies, programmes and other activities. In every barangay, there is one ISF platoon which is responsible for peace and order.<sup>17</sup> They carry out mainly police work. The MILF barangay officers, with the help of the ISF, try to ensure that the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* are implemented in their respective barangays.

The committee formation strategy apparently is successful in mobilising mass support for the MILF. Hence, it is justified for Iqbal to claim that the MLIF is truly a mass based organization.<sup>18</sup> One evidence of the mass support is the intelligence gathering activity carried out by the people voluntarily. The Armed Forces of the Philippine (AFP) faces serious difficulty in gathering information from the MILF controlled areas because most of the local population refuse to cooperate with them. The mass support enjoyed by MILF is largely due to its emphasis on Islamic symbols and substance of the liberation movement.

Another proof of the MILF's mass appeal comes from the three-day General Consultation gathering it organised from May 29 to May 31, 2005, at Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. It was attended by hundreds of thousands of Bangsamoro and some foreign dignitaries. Astonished at such a massive support for the MILF and its leadership, many foreign dignitaries wondered about the expenses incurred by the movement. Interestingly, MILF spent one million pesos (US\$ 18,000) for such a mammoth gathering.<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Ameen, Chairman of the General Consultation Secretariat, is of the opinion that the success of the three-day affair was due largely to the strong organisation of the MILF that had its foundation at the village level throughout Mindanao.<sup>20</sup> He also claimed that this was reflective of the strength of the leadership of the MILF under the chairmanship of Al Haj Murad Ebrahim.<sup>21</sup>

While it is true that there is relative unity within the MILF, however, differences and struggle for power did occur along tribal and religious lines. The struggle for power among the high ranking members of the MILF was observed during the chairmanship of Sheikh Salamat Hashim. While no one challenged Hashim as the chairman of the organization, the question of succession after his death was secretly discussed by some contenders for the leadership of the liberation movement. According to one analyst:

Hashim's death was soon followed by reports of growing factionalism in the MILF. There was a struggle for power along tribal lines (Maguindanaon versus Maranao). The Maranao wanted Alim Abdulaziz Mimbantas, a graduate of Al-Azhar University (B.A. 1974), to be Hashim's successor instead of Al Haj Murad as the chairman of the MILF. As Vice Chairman for Internal Affairs, Mimbantas, was one of the most trusted of Hashim's three key lieutenants, controlling the MILF's Internal Security Force (ISF), its local intelligence network, and the chairman's Praetorian Guard, the Internal Brigade. However, Mimbantas did not possess the extensive personal contacts in the Muslim world or depth of religious learning which were central to the founding chairman's prestige. Nor, as a pure ethnic Maranao, can he bridge the tribal divisions within the movement in the same way as Hashim, whose father was Maguindanaon, and mother Maranao/Iranun.<sup>22</sup>

In general, it seems that the Maguindanaon and Tausug tribes were reluctant to accept the leadership of the Maranao tribe whom they had ruled throughout history. The Tausug and the Maguindanaon tribes, unlike the Maranao, had all along supplied leaders to rule the Sultanate of Sulu and the Sultanate of Maguindanao, respectively. Despite tribal feelings, these tribes were united because of the common goal of liberation. Sheikh Salamat Hashim managed to strengthen the organisation, the MILF, on the basis of Islam.

Mimbantas had strong support among the Maranao '*ulamā*' – many led by Hashim's Al-Azhar classmate, Mahid Mutilan (former vice governor of the ARMM and a governor of Lanao del Sur) and from the more militant Maranao field commanders. However, his personal armed following was probably less than five thousand. This pales into insignificance when it is compared to not less than

20,000 freedom fighters loyal to Al Haj Murad.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Al Haj Murad was Hashim's long-standing Vice Chairman for Military Affairs and was supported by both religious and professional field commanders and rank and file of Bangsamoro Islamic Armed forces, especially those from his fellow Maguindanaon tribe. He was also fully supported by other tribes (such as the Yakan and Kalagan tribes). The Maguindanaon tribe was the most dominant force within the movement's Central Committee, in general, and the Jihad Executive Council in particular, which was the ultimate decision-making unit of the MILF.

Al Haj Murad's gradual elevation to the top position of the MILF began when he replaced Commander Ali "Cassius Clay" Sansaluna as military affairs chairman of the MNLF's Kutawato Revolutionary Committee (KRC). Commander Clay, who was in charge of procuring weapons through the Sabah-based MNLF chief Nur Misuari, was assassinated by a bodyguard in June 1974, probably as a result of rivalry with the KRC's political affairs chairman, Commander Amirel "Ronnie" Malaguiok, a Top 90 batch mate. When Malaguiok surrendered to the government in April 1980, scuttling nascent negotiations with the then Marcos regime and receiving a high political post in return, Al Haj Murad took his place as overall chairman of the KRC. Al Haj Murad's personal popularity did much to help Hashim and the organisation which suffered from Malaguiok's defection.

In 2003, on Hashim's death, Alim Abdul Aziz Mimbantas voluntarily withdrew from the chairmanship of the organisation in favour of Al Haj Murad and that made the transition smooth. Eventually, Mimbantas gained Al Haj Murad's former post of overseeing military affairs, while Al Haj Murad assumed the overall leadership with the support of other prominent and influential figures of the organisation, like Ghazali Jaafar and Sheikh Omar Pasigan, all ethnic Maguindanaon. Jafaar was in charge of Political Affairs and was thus very influential in the organisation.

As Grand *Mufti* of Kutawato, Pasigan was also an influential elderly figure in the Central Committee, handling *Da'wah* Committee or Islamic Outreach. This relationship helped bring many Maguindanaon '*ulamā*' into Al Haj Murad's camp. A significant check on Mimbantas' power as the new Vice Chairman for Military

Affairs that reflected ethnic-based factional manoeuvring was the separation of his position from that of Chief of Staff of the MILF armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). While these positions were concurrent throughout Al Haj Murad's tenure as Vice-chairman, the new Chief of Staff was Sammy Al-Mansour (Sammy Gambar), another ethnic Maguindanaon, who was previously Murad's Deputy Chief of Staff. Mimbantas's previous position as Vice Chairman for Internal Affairs, meanwhile, appeared to have been left vacant and the ISF was consolidated as an integral part of the regular BIAF, thus coming under the command of Al Haj Murad and Gambar.

### **Diplomatic Offensive**

The MILF leadership realised the importance of diplomacy in their struggle for the liberation of the Bangsamoro homeland. There was internal disagreement on this issue. Some members of the MILF Central Committee opposed the GRP-MILF peace talks. However, majority of the members saw peace negotiations as an opportunity for them to present their positions to the international community and thus clear those misperceptions and other adverse images portrayed by their enemies in general, and the GRP and its agents, in particular. To these members, according to Michael Mastura, isolation from the international community, more specifically, from the OIC would not serve the interest of the movement.<sup>24</sup>

The movement started its diplomatic offensive through peace talks from the 1990s. The MILF leadership took this opportunity to present its position in relation to the GRP and the world community. The first opportunity for the MILF to bring the Bangsamoro issue to the attention of the world was during the time of President Corazon C. Aquino. The Aquino administration tried to negotiate with the MILF, but that attempt was only short-lived because Aquino's administration was pre-occupied with the MNLF, the then dominant Bangsamoro insurgent group. The GRP at that time considered the MILF as a push-over group and, therefore, of not much significance.

However, President V. Ramos who succeeded Aquino, started engaging the MILF in his bid to solve the Bangsamoro problem. Ramos created the GRP peace panel to negotiate with the MILF. This peace process was intensified as a result of the Buldon tension

that frightened both parties (the GRP and MILF) lest the tension might develop out of control. The GRP ordered its peace negotiators to initiate contact with MILF in order to discuss those issues that have the potential of leading them to a dangerous and destructive war. The MILF responded positively to this peace overture by the Ramos administration.

However, President Joseph Ejercito Estrada's "Rambo Approach" brought the situation to a deadlock. Estrada, in his bid to resolve the Bangsamoro liberation movement, declared an all-out-war against the liberation movement and captured and occupied many of the MILF camps. According to Sheikh Salamat Hashim, the GRP attacked all verified MILF camps like the Camp Uthman in December 1999, the Camps Omar and Badre in January-February 2000, the Camp Bilal in March 2000, the Camp Abu Bakre in April 2000 and the Camp Bushra in May 2000.<sup>25</sup> The then Philippine Defence Secretary, Orlanda Mercado, justified these military attacks by the Manila government by saying that the problem in Southern Philippines was a military problem, and, therefore, it needed a military solution.<sup>26</sup> In the face of such adversary, the MILF had no alternative but to respond by declaring an all-out *jihād* policy in 2000.

The GRP strategy of all-out war was meant to weaken, and ultimately, destroy the MILF capabilities. Estrada's all-out offensive against the MILF caused unparalleled major displacement, greater polarization of the Bangsamoro homeland along confessional lines, and economic disaster. Dr. Tahir Sulaik, a Provincial Health Officer of Maguindanao, reported in May 2000 that in Maguindanao Province alone, there were about 180,000 individuals (belonging to 34,109 families) who were displaced, of whom 36,663 women, children and adults were suffering from different ailments in poor evacuation centres.<sup>27</sup> There was almost a total erosion of Bangsamoro's faith in the peace process. There was a deadlock because both parties adopted irreconcilable positions by setting conditions for the resumption of the peace talks, and consequently, trust and confidence which had been built through years were gone. At the end, both parties had set unnecessary conditions that served as a stumbling block to the already stalled peace talks. Peace advocates tried their best to bring the two parties to the negotiating table and resolve their differences but their efforts were of no avail.

According to Mercado, the MILF had set conditions that included a recognition of all previous agreements signed by the GRP and the MILF. It also insisted that all future GRP-MILF peace talks be held outside the country with third party's mediation. "The GRP insisted that the MILF must drop its secessionist goal, restrain its terrorist acts and surrender its guns. The MILF must also agree to autonomy as the political solution to end decades of rebellion in the region."<sup>28</sup>

However, Estrada was ousted and jailed by his own deputy, Gloria M. Arroyo, who replaced her predecessor's all-out-war policy with an all-out-peace policy. Arroyo called the MILF to resolve its differences with GRP by diplomatic and peaceful means. The MILF responded by setting conditions for the resumption of the stalled peace talks. As pointed earlier, those conditions included a full recognition of all previous agreements, holding the GRP-MILF peace talks outside the country and the involvement or participation of the OIC member-states such as Malaysia, Libya and others as a party to witness any future agreements that the GRP and the MILF would enter into. The Arroyo administration accepted those conditions which paved the way for the resumption of the stalled peace talks.

Since 2001, the GRP and MILF peace panels reached substantive agreements. The Agreement on the General Framework for the Resumption of the GRP-MILF peace talks was inked at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on March 24, 2001. In this accord, the two parties agreed on several points, the most important of which are:

the resumption of the GRP-MILF peace talks immediately after the signing of that agreement; commitment to honour, respect and implement all past agreements by the GRP and the MILF; both parties agreed to negotiate with sincerity and mutual trust, justice and freedom and respect for the identity, culture and aspirations of all peoples in the Southern Philippines.<sup>29</sup>

The MILF leadership considered these agreed upon points as a great achievement for several reasons. For one, it satisfied the MILF leadership demand for a third party or parties to mediate their peace talks with the GRP because they realized that without the involvement of a third party, the Manila government could easily renege and even violate all its past agreements with the MILF. President Estrada's non-recognition of all the previous GRP-MILF's peace agreements

that led to his all-out war policy against the MILF was GRP's failure to meet its commitments and obligations towards the international community in general, and the Bangsamoro in particular. This was a good lesson for the MILF leadership. Henceforth, the MILF leadership insisted on the presence of a third party to witness agreements that would be concluded in future. As a result, the OIC through some of its member-states like Malaysia, Libya, Brunei and others were actively facilitating the resolution of the conflict in the region. Since then, the MILF had intensified its diplomatic offensive in order to advance and protect its interests as a liberation movement.

Another significant development was the agreement concluded by the two parties that was signed in Tripoli, Libya, on June 22, 2001 known as the Agreement on Peace between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The GRP and the MILF's peace panels agreed in principle on three major points: security, rehabilitation and ancestral domain aspects. The great achievement in this agreement on the part of the MILF was the rehabilitation aspect. The agreement stipulated that the MILF "shall determine, lead and manage rehabilitation and development projects in conflict affected areas." This led to the creation of the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), an independent agency, free from government's interference.

The GRP wanted the BDA to be under its control but the MILF insisted on its independence. This was a very contentious issue, but in the end, the GRP conceded the MILF demand. Dr. Danda Juanday was appointed the Executive Director, Project Management Office of the agency. Thus, the BDA was a unique development agency controlled by the liberation movement or insurgents, but recognized by the international community, including the GRP. In fact, it is hard to find a precedent for this case. It is unimaginable for a sovereign state like the Philippines to have no control or authority over a development agency, BDA, on its soil run by the "insurgents," the MILF.

The BDA had grown to embrace the larger issues of community development and advocacy for the poor in its mission and vision of helping the Bangsamoro and other communities in the Southern Philippines to build sustainable future. Dr. Juanday revealed the plans of the BDA for capacity building, relief, rehabilitation and

development mandate and other priority concerns.<sup>30</sup> He also said that the priority of the BDA was to conduct values transformation training, using the recently development BDA module, in the locality and then to its partners in the conflict-affected communities.<sup>31</sup> For the MILF leadership, the establishment of the BDA was a great achievement because they could receive foreign funds and manage them for their own development without the GRP's interference.

Another significant agreement was Implementing Guidelines on Security Aspect of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement of Peace signed by both parties on August 7, 2001, at Putrajaya, Malaysia.<sup>32</sup> The agreement involved a third party (OIC) to observe and monitor the implementation of all GRP-MILF's peace agreements. There was progress because the GRP at least partially observed and implemented some of those agreements like cessation of hostilities. According to Maulana Alonto, the Implementing Guidelines of the Security Aspect of this Agreement provided the mechanism that clearly defined and outlined the preemptory Do's and Don'ts that both parties to the agreement must conform with to ensure that armed hostilities do not get out of hand or, at best, do not recur.<sup>33</sup>

As stated, Malaysia was involved in the peace process. Malaysia is keen to see a stable Philippines. Domestic problems in the Philippines would have regional spill over effect that would destabilise the region and affect Malaysia as it would be forced to deal with the influx of refugees pouring into the state of Sabah, neighbouring Philippines. An investment benefit was also a reason that encouraged ASEAN member-states to seek a stable and peaceful region. There were also several Joint Statements and Communiqués like the Joint Communiqué on May 6, 2002, at Cyberjaya, Malaysia and the Joint Statement on March 28, 2003, at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and others, but most of these were not implemented. However, what is important here is that both parties were ready to engage in diplomacy and thus solve their differences through peaceful means.

The MILF's diplomatic offensive had several advantages. First, though the problem was far from resolved, at least the movement managed to internationalise the Bangsamoro issue and thus exposed the GRP's insincerity and unwillingness to reach a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Southern Philippines. The

OIC through its member-states, particularly Malaysia, Brunei and Libya, witnessed the lack of political will on the part of the Manila political and military leadership to settle the problems in the Southern Philippines. Many times the GRP and the AFP refused to implement the provisions signed in agreements, joint statements and communiqués. To Lingga breach of the agreement in reality meant the GRP's denial of the right of the Bangsamoro to freedom and independence.<sup>34</sup>

However, the MILF leadership continued to intensify its diplomatic offensive. It tried to engage all international actors, including the United States. The Arroyo administration tried its best to brand MILF as a terrorist organisation. President Arroyo, had ordered the AFP to attack the MILF's position at Buliok Complex in Pikit, North Cotabato, before her scheduled meeting with President George Bush Jr. on February 2003. According to Dawan, the motive behind this attack was to convince the United States of the urgency to include the MILF in its list as a terrorist group.<sup>35</sup> To convince the United States about the alleged connection and cooperation between the MILF and the terrorist groups like JI, ASG and al-Qaeda, the GRP and its military agent, AFP, tried to fabricate evidences needed to bolster their claims. In fact, the Magdalo group, which staged a failed rebellion in 2003 against the government, accused Arroyo's administration and its top military generals, more specifically, former Defence Secretary, General Angelo Reyes, for a number of bombings, including the Davao bombing, which killed dozens of innocent people. They tried to attribute these acts to the MILF to destroy its image and credibility as a liberation movement in the eyes of the international community.<sup>36</sup>

In response, the late MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim sent a letter, in 2003, to the U.S. President, George W. Bush, explaining the MILF as a liberation movement and its stand on the campaign against terrorism spearheaded by the U.S. His letter had the salutary effect in that the United States agreed not to include the MILF in the list of terrorist organizations. As Lingga stated:

The GRP asked the United States to include the MILF in its list as a terrorist organization, but the Bush administration excluded it, because prior to President Arroyo's visit to the White House, the MILF wrote to President Bush explaining

its positions as a liberation movement with respect to the issue of the United States' campaign against terror.<sup>37</sup>

MILF continued to negotiate with the GRP through the involvement of the third party in order to avoid political isolation from the international community.

The leaders of MILF understood that isolation from the international arena would damage its image and credibility in the eyes of the international community as a liberation movement. Thus, instead of isolation, the MILF opted and thus started engaging with international actors. The MILF leadership wanted to show to the world community its readiness to settle its differences with the GRP through peaceful and diplomatic means. It responded positively in 2001 when the OIC (through its member-states like Malaysia and Libya), upon the request of the GRP, called upon the MILF to return to the negotiating table to resolve its differences with the GRP.<sup>38</sup>

One significant development for the MILF was the Fourth Round of Exploratory Talks at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on February 7 and 8, 2004. Here, the two parties agreed on Malaysian Advance Party Mission Preparatory to the Deployment of the OIC International Monitoring Team. The Malaysian Advance Team arrived on March 22, 2004 and toured the MILF's camps in the Southern Philippines. This signified the readiness of the GRP to implement the terms of agreement signed earlier. Prior to the deployment of the IMT, agreements signed by the GRP and the MILF were mostly violated with the two parties accusing each other for the violation. They would resort to media propoganda to malign each other. The GRP had an upper-hand because it had greater access to the local and international media. In this respect, Hashim stated that,

... from the Marcos' dictatorship to the Aquino and early part of Ramos' administrations, the GRP managed to conceal the untold atrocities perpetrated by the barbarous AFP against the Bangsamoro. These included: the burning of houses, schools and mosques; desecration of the Holy Qur'ān; killing of children, women and the aged; destruction and looting of the Bangsamoro properties and the destruction of plantations and farms, etc.<sup>39</sup>

The mediation of the OIC, more specifically, the active participation of Malaysia and Libya, in the solution to the conflict in the Southern

Philippines made the GRP and its military agent, AFP, realise the negative implications of their non-compliance of agreements signed by the two parties. The GRP was left with no option but to cooperate with the third party mediators. According to Iqbal, Malaysia took an active part in trying to resolve the conflict in the Southern Philippines largely because the conflict had the potential of disrupting regional political and economic development.<sup>40</sup>

Malaysia had a bargaining power in relation to the GRP. First, the GRP needed Malaysia to bring the Bangsamoro independence movements and the MILF to the negotiating table. It seems the MILF leadership trusted and listened to the Malaysian leadership. This is due to the identity of religion, shared historical experience and cultural similarities. The MILF also wanted Malaysia's involvement to prove the insincerity of GRP, should it renege on the agreement or promise it has made, to resolve the conflict.

However, the MILF leadership understood Malaysia's dilemma of supporting the Bangsamoro independence struggle and of adhering to ASEAN's principle of non-interference in domestic issues, especially if it involved the issues, of territorial integrity and sovereignty of the ASEAN member-states. Malaysia stated that it could not support any move of minorities in the region, including the Bangsamoro if it touches upon the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity of any ASEAN member-states. Knowing the possible implication of the ASEAN principle, on the very interest of the liberation movement, the MILF Chairman Al Haj Murad did not mention independence in his May 2005 speech opening the two-day MILF general consultation in Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. This is despite the knowledge of every one that the MILF was struggling for a separate Islamic state.<sup>41</sup> Wadi argued:

That the MILF leadership does not want to jeopardize the peace negotiations at a time when things are moving with relative ease. So, as far as the MILF is concerned, you don't go around saying such sensitive words as "independence" at this point of time. The GRP is known to prefer a solution to the Mindanao problem that falls within the framework of the Philippine Constitution.<sup>42</sup>

Wadi, however, described Chairman Al Haj Murad as a modernist compared to the late MILF founding Chairman, Sheikh Salamat

Hashim. “When you say modernist,” Wadi explained, “you are talking about someone who is more open to certain compromises.”

Thus, MILF compromised and the GRP responded likewise. For instance, the GRP earlier insisted that any negotiation with the MILF must be on the basis of the Philippine Constitution which was to be the point of reference. However, the MILF refused to negotiate with GRP under the framework of the Philippine Constitution insisting that it did not recognize the Philippine Constitution. The MILF insisted that the only viable and acceptable solution to the Bangsamoro problem is independence. It refused to talk about autonomy as it would never accept a resolution short of independence. The GRP, in turn, was willing to compromise on everything short of independence. However, the GRP kept silent on the issue of the Philippine Constitution and the MILF agreed not to bring the issue of independence during negotiation. The MILF, according to Hashim, “for the meantime”

agreed to continue the negotiation without exposing the issue of independence in lieu of the GRP’s silence on the Philippine Constitution as a point of reference on the negotiating table.<sup>43</sup>

The GRP was forced to compromise on the issue of third parties’ involvement in anticipation of achieving political stability in the Southern Philippines that might bring economic opportunities to the region. Such a compromise and the acceptance of foreign involvement or interference in resolving the conflict were due to regionalization or globalisation of the conflict.

The MILF, though engaged the international community and resorted to diplomacy in resolving their differences with the GRP, was prudent enough not to rely solely upon international support. They realised the necessity of conducting diplomacy and enter negotiation with the GRP on the basis of strength. They may be sidelined if they are not considered as a power to reckon with. Hence, while pursuing diplomacy, they strengthened their military capabilities and adopted the fight-negotiate-fight-negotiate strategy. In 2004, they intensified the fortification of their camps all over the Bangsamoro homeland.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, the MILF leadership realized that war was an extension of diplomacy. As Dawan puts it, “if you want peace, prepare for war.”<sup>45</sup>

However, the MILF's faith in the importance of diplomacy and political means in resolving its differences with the GRP is unassailable. In August 2005, Mohagher Iqbal, MILF chief peace negotiator, reminded the Bangsamoro that the best way to solve the conflict in the region was through a negotiated political settlement. He argued that "resolving the problem through negotiation is bloodless and everybody is a winner." He disagreed with the classical revolutionary argument that only armed struggle could offer genuine liberation to the people. He argued that freedom through war was suitable for the nineteenth century which was characterised by the culture of war to resolve conflict as in Vietnam and Cambodia. "The 21st Century is declared by the United Nations as era of the culture of peace."<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the MILF has to be vigilant and careful in dealing with the GRP, a government with a record of not complying with commitments made in various peace agreements.

### **The Future of Peace**

Generally, the MILF was satisfied with the results achieved through peace negotiations. Most of the agreed points were usually favourable to the MILF. In particular, the MILF was quite contented with the outcome of the exploratory talks with the GRP held at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on September 15 and 16, 2005. According to the MILF's peace negotiator, some 90 per cent of their talks revolved around the proposals of the MILF's Peace Panel headed by him.<sup>47</sup> In a joint statement in early September 2005, negotiators from the government and the MILF said they had agreed on how a Bangsamoro homeland would be governed.<sup>48</sup> But there was serious disagreement on the size of the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE). The GRP would give only more than six hundred villages, but the MILF rejected it. The MILF demanded more than one thousand villages.

However, Dawan was very cautious in the implementation of the peace deal because "the Manila government has a less than encouraging track record in implementing peace deals."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, given the growing unpopularity of President Arroyo it would be difficult for her to build a strong consensus on Bangsamoro's freedom and self-determination. A comprehensive deal on the Bangsamoro's ancestral domain requires legislation and

amendments to the constitution, which might be difficult for the weakened Arroyo's administration to push through.

Nevertheless, some scholars were optimistic that the GRP and the MILF might sign a Final Peace Agreement by 2007 ending decades of Bangsamoro liberation movement in the Southern Philippines. One of the high ranking officers of the MILF who talked on condition of anonymity said that implementing a peace deal was likely to prove at least as difficult as reaching the agreement given the complexity of issues such as land rights and governance of the Bangsamoro homeland. To these, if one adds the Manila government's poor record on implementing previous deals, optimism about an end to the nearly four decade-old conflict seems premature. It is clear that there are fundamental differences between the two parties that need to be resolved.

### **Summary and Concluding Remarks**

The MILF is an offshoot of the MNLF but has emerged as the most powerful movement struggling for freedom and self-determination of the Bangsamoro. To mobilise public opinion and endear itself to the people, it adopted the strategy of strengthening the MILF organisation through a hierarchy of Committee Set-ups. These committees were organized from the Central Committee to the Barangay levels, "to address the sentiments and aspirations of the Bangsamoro in order to bring them on board."<sup>50</sup> This strategy was effective in securing mass support for the cause for which the MILF was struggling. According to some commentators, this strategy made MILF rely upon the masses for its operation and survival and not the other way round which is usually the case in elite-based organisations.

The liberation movement also engaged in a diplomatic offensive in order to promote its interest and protect its image to the international community. The MILF leadership was aware of the negative consequences of isolating itself from the international community. This strategy effectively thwarted the efforts of the GRP to label the MILF as a terrorist group rather than a liberation movement. The MILF simultaneously engaged the international community to portray itself as a movement aimed at resolving the issue through peaceful negotiation and of ensuring that the GRP

abided by the terms of agreements arrived at various peace conferences.

However, efforts by the MILF leadership to engage the international community would not succeed if they negotiated from a position of weakness. Hence, they paid sufficient attention to strengthen its armed wing and fortify its camps with available arms and ammunitions. To MILF, war was an extension of diplomacy through a different means. They would respond to arms with arms. However, their faith in diplomacy and resolution of conflict through peaceful negotiation remains firm.

Indeed, much has been achieved by the MILF. They succeeded in impressing upon the international mediators and others the need for the creation of an independent Bangsamoro nation-state. The MILF needs to maintain the tempo and create a situation where both the international and regional actors feel that the MILF is not a force disrupting regional stability and development. They must convince the mediators (the OIC member countries, particularly Malaysia, Libya and Brunei) that their interest will not be impaired by supporting the MILF cause. The good offices of the international actors are of utmost importance if the MILF is to succeed in its quest for the freedom and self-determination of the Bangsamoro people.

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