

Causes of “Terrorism”: The Philippine Case

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Introduction

A. Regional Context

Is terrorism real in Southeast Asia? The Bali blasts and Philippine kidnappings have focused attention on a region once perceived as relatively peaceful with political violence merely domestic in scope. There used to be no cause for worry – after all, the region hosts a ‘moderate’ form of Islam. But all that has changed as Southeast Asia is touted as the second front for the US-led war against terrorism. The events of 11 September were a ‘wake-up call’ to Southeast Asia as its regional grouping, ASEAN balances the need for stabilizing the terrorist threat and the demands of Islamic militants against crackdown on Islamic radical individuals and groupings.

Southeast Asia is home to the most populous Muslim state – Indonesia - and contains an aggregate population more than that in the Middle East. Stretching from the borders of India and Bangladesh to the Western frontier, China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are amongst the states of mainland Southeast Asia. Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore straddle the islands between the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. The Philippines sits out in the margin. This region contains hundreds of ethnic groups, a similar variety of languages, representatives from most of the world’s historic religions and numerous tribal and localized traditions.¹

Zachary Abuza, a professor at Simmons College, mentions Al-Qaeda’s penetration of Southeast Asia because of the following ‘attractions’: All of Southeast Asia is awash in weapons. Nearly all Southeast Asian countries produce weapons which are traded freely and cheaply, legally and illegally; Some countries have weak governments with lax intelligence and enforcement institutions, offering places of easy access for meetings and areas for training or

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¹Robert Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (eds), *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1991)

lying low; Most areas have active trading, banking and ease of financial exchange with the Middle East.²

Terrorism has now assumed high priority on the agenda of ASEAN, which once brushed aside intervention in political matters. “Terrorism has put regional economic security at risk,” says the Sultan of Brunei. “As an association we succeed or fail on the durability of peace and stability in Southeast Asia. That has always been the pre-requisite for lasting cooperation. Unless it exists, we cannot bring economic and social benefits to our people. That is where I see terrorism’s greatest threat.”³

Alleged Al-Qaeda links to local radicals have also given terrorism an ‘international character’. Some research posits that local ‘terrorist’ groups are homegrown and thus the need to see them on a case-to-case basis from whence they emerged. The ten-nation ASEAN grouping admitted that the region was riddled with terror cells and agreed to tighten borders formerly open to Muslim travelers and freeze the flow of Muslim funds.⁴

B. Country Context

A major Catholic country and strongest US ally in Southeast Asia, the Philippines was feared to have become the second front of the war against terror after Afghanistan. Its homegrown Abu Sayyaf group (ASG) is allegedly linked to the Al-Qaeda ‘network’ and Ramzi Yousef, who was arrested for the 1993 New York WTC bombing.

The Philippines has been host to long organized bids for secession from the Moro (a politically coined term for Muslims in the Philippines) rebel movements since the 1970s. A local lawyer proclaims the Moros to have had the longest history of rebellion (for 400 years) in Asia. Mainly concentrated in the Mindanao Island, rebel groups, including communists, have operated in a region already beset by sporadic criminalities and economic underdevelopment. In the light of peace talks (that have spanned almost 2 decades with different Muslim factions), the utility of negotiations between government and rebel groups has been challenged. This is because of sporadic gruesome activities by the Abu Sayyaf, which include beheading of hostages and the kidnapping of civilians, prominent among whom are foreigners, children, women and priests.

²Excerpt from USINDO Open Forum, *Terrorism in Southeast Asia and International Linkages*, Washington DC, December 4, 2002

³Chris Folley, *Terrorism seen as Threat to ASEAN Future*, Agence France Presse, July 29, 2002

⁴Ong, Aihwa, *9/11 and the Risks of Hegemony: Global Emergency or False Alarm?*, AAA meetings, New Orleans, Nov. 21, 2002

As a policy, the ASG and the Communist Party of the Philippines are branded terrorists by the government (with media following suit with respect to the ASG). But their numbers and influence are supposedly reduced, the former's alleged members detained and the latter's leader's assets frozen. Yet recruitment to these organizations is purportedly still ongoing. The leaders of the Abu Sayyaf continue to operate with a small band of males, mostly young and from the economically depressed islands.

Terrorism's impact whether on the economy, peace and order, and on civilian lives cannot be discounted. Its effect spills over in civilian communities and metropolitan centers. The media's sensational reportage of terrorist acts has turned off potential investors. High-profile kidnappings in the South, giving a bad image to the Philippines, have been claimed to have been committed by the ASG in the name of establishing Islam in the Southern islands. In 2000, suspected Muslims have been arrested for the railway and shopping mall bombings in the capital, Metro Manila.

This study focuses on the Abu Sayyaf group and the province of Sulu where it operates, the ASG having merited international attention and been classified as a terrorist organization even by the United States government. This study would be relevant in the light of finding ways whether in policy or program to address the root causes of terrorism so as to sustain (ongoing) confidence-building measures (i.e. peace talks, development projects, poverty alleviation programs) among affected communities. Ambivalence or even fear among communities where such 'terrorist groups' operate has prevented the curbing of their growth.

It further seeks to establish the context in which 'terrorist groups' have emerged in this region, particularly in the Philippines. What constitutes terrorism? How do external factors, i.e. government systems, foreign policy, affect the agenda and methodology of terrorist groups? What are the causes espoused by these terrorist groups? How are they perceived by their supposed constituents (which the terrorists claim to represent)? What role (if any) do religion and ideology play in strengthening the said group's vision and methodology?

To understand the ASG, there is a need to delve into the broader context that paved the way for the group to organize. Certain factors have been identified in this study to explain some of the reasons for the rise of such a group. These factors include history, ethnicity, poverty, protest, transnational network and government policies.

Anti-terrorist wars are costly: in the Philippines, local authorities estimate that it would cost 30 million pesos (37,000 dollars by other's estimates) a day to

fund military operations in the island of Mindanao where most of the “terror” groups operate.⁵

Philippine civil society groups have rallied against the traditional military solution to address the “Mindanao problem,” one that has historical, socio-cultural dimensions to it. The Philippine capital’s elite, the Makati Business Club (MBC), says government must address issues of inequity and poverty before anything else. “Like any other country we face certain risks and our risks are exacerbated by our domestic social problems. It’s not purely an international terrorism network, there are problems of poverty we need to address, which makes our problem a local issue.”

An examination of the Mindanao problem would help us then to understand that the causes of terrorism are complex, and cannot be boxed in alignments of “we versus they.” In a region that has seen nations built from recently ended colonial rule, so-called terror groups have emerged from local rules that have not adequately addressed self-determination demands, as in Aceh and Muslim Mindanao.

Conceptual Framework

“Terrorism” in the Philippines did not occur in a vacuum. Rebellion has long been in existence in this particular region. But what gave way to a particular radical group using terrorist tactics, which has captured the public’s imagination? Such is the query that this paper seeks to answer. A terror tag labeled on a group is particularly relevant in the country setting of this study because legitimate engagement with state authorities is curtailed. The categorization of a group sets a policy prescription – if the government adopts a line such as labeling the ASG as terrorist, a policy of non-negotiations follows.

A multi-factoral analysis will be used in this study. Several factors are cited to explain the emergence of the ASG. “In the context of an Islamic revivalist call, a systematic study of the group necessitates an inquiry into its psychosocial, political, economic and socio-cultural roots – the milieu that acts as the incubational environment for fundamentalist beliefs and actions.⁶ A recurrent pattern in history is the cause-and-effect relationship between social crises and the rise of religious, revolutionary or revivalist movements that seek to transform the established order to build a new society on the basis of their ideological prescription.”⁷ Consequently, the ideologies of these movements tend to be both comprehensive and strict, reflecting the responses of typically charismatic leaders and their followers to situations of crisis. In conditions where fundamentalist

⁵ Arguelles, Carolyn, “*The Cost of War*,” *Mindanews*, March 26, 2003

⁶ Dekmejian, HR., *Islam in Revolution*, University of Syracuse Press, California, USA, 1995

⁷ *ibid*

movements will have 'spiritual and socio-political potency', it appears that two inter-related conditions meet – the appearance of a leader of charismatic propensity and a society in deep turmoil.

Crisis factors that generate fundamentalism also create both distinct and amorphous constituencies of opposition to state authority.⁸ Certain categories of individuals and social groups are more sensitive to the realities of the existing order than are others, by virtue of their socio-economic position, psychological makeup, age, education, and occupation.⁹ Youth, lower strata, newly urbanized malcontents and nativist traditional elements are receptive to the Islamist alternative.¹⁰

But it is not enough to be a fundamentalist movement. What makes for a radical agenda explicitly endorsing the use of terrorism? 'Inert' templates, lines of cleavage of an economic, social-status, ethnic, religious or political sort can manifest themselves.¹¹ Typically it takes some precipitant, shock, trigger, to turn these inert potentialities into 'live' ones.¹² It might be a depression; deteriorating economic conditions among particular groups; sharp changes in government policy; governmental interventions in education, culture, religion, and the like. In this case, personal experiences of being aggrieved, alienated and economically deprived, entice followers to the radical movement. "These chance events have the effect of mobilizing people – people looking for safety and security; and the choice of their religious leaders offering fundamentalist ideas, organization and programs to meet this powerful need."¹³

Personality traits of the Islamic 'radical type', on the basis of certain recurrent personality traits in the population that seem to constitute the typical pattern of psychological expression may include (for purposes of this study):

Alienation – direct consequence of the secular crisis environment, followed by a self-imposed separation from the larger societal milieu and counterbalanced by his induction into the Islamist belief system;

Premature integrity – dogmatism – the neophyte's discovery of the new faith is typically followed by his total commitment to it as a true believer. In the case of younger 'converts', intense commitment produces 'premature integrity'

⁸ ibid

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

¹² Almond, Gabriel, Sivan, Emmanuel and Appleby, Scott, *Explaining Fundamentalisms*, Fundamentalism Project, 5th vol. University of Chicago Press, 1995.

¹³ ibid

at an early age, marked by an extreme rigidity in beliefs and refusal to reintegrate new values into their ideological framework;

Inferiority-superiority – these feelings are a direct consequence of their alienation and inability to find a niche in society; these feelings are transformed into manifestations of aggressive superiority as soon as the neophyte is co-opted into the Islamist faith;

Activism – aggressiveness – fundamentalists tend to be aggressive in their dealings with unbelievers (*kuffar*) and often with mainstream Muslims, in compensation for their deprivations in society and in their convictions that non-communicants are following the wrong path. In their quest to impose their own beliefs and behavioural codes on society, Islamists display a high degree of activism as both ideological propagators and potential revolutionaries.¹⁴

Small, clandestine groups use covert and terrorist methods that create an impact. A high statistical association was discovered between small size, high militancy, clandestine status, recent nascence and charismatic leadership.¹⁵ The smaller, clandestine and violent groups tend to be heavily male.

Although these factors are relevant, the analysis must go beyond to cover socio-political and economic factors, which may even be more important for policy-makers.

Among the major conditions influencing the strategy, growth and decline of fundamentalist movements are the “nature of the political regime under which they compete for influence and power, and the ethnic heterogeneity or homogeneity of the society in which they emerge.¹⁶ The regime, whether it is authoritarian or democratic – sets the operating rules of political competition, thereby determining whether the struggle is overt or covert, the methods peaceful or violent and the approach gradualist or integralist.¹⁷ The ethnic character of a society may determine whether a primarily religious form of fundamentalism emerges or whether it is subordinated and intermingled with ethnic and nationalist purposes.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Dekmejian, *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Almond, *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

"In many settings of ethnoreligious confrontation, a strong nationalist element is evident. In cases of ethnic or religious minorities fighting back, the group resents being dominated or marginalized. Ethnic group identity comprises powerful religious elements, so much so that it is quite difficult to disentangle the nation-building component from the fundamentalist one. The ethnoreligious minority must sustain and fortify its niche in society to defend itself from alien, penetrating forces; but it also strikes out violently at the enemy, in the absence or weakness or inattention (or calculated policy) of the otherwise restraining state."¹⁹

In a democratic setting, the openings for fundamentalist growth provided by urbanization and migration are greatly enhanced, in this case by public policies which provide a minimum economic support to would-be social movements.²⁰

The Philippine Case Study

As this paper will show, several armed organizations are pushing for 'self-determination' and an Islamist/nationalist agenda (whether it be autonomy or secession). The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) is the pioneering rebel front (formed in the 70s) which has internationalized the Bangsamoro agenda before the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Its main faction has now gone mainstream as its leadership is at the helm of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is a breakaway from the MNLF and bats for an Islamic state, without the constraint of territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Philippines, as compared to government-MNLF agreements. The Abu Sayyaf, on the other hand, is a recent phenomenon but very much connected to past occurrences.

Group Profile: ASG

The Abu Sayyaf is considered a foremost security threat in the region and listed by the United States government as a 'foreign terrorist organization'. Former University of the Philippines College of Law Dean Merlin Magallona cites it as a "threat to the comatose peace process."²¹

Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes defines the Abu Sayyaf group's objective to be to establish an independent theocratic Islamic state in Mindanao through

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Quoted in a forum, "Exploring Constitutional Structures for the Muslim Community" Round Table Discussion, University of the Philippines Law Center, August 23, 2000

armed struggle.”²² Its strategy includes “terrorism and other acts of violence and cleansing of territory of non-Muslims.” It once demanded the removal of crosses and the stopping of Catholic missionary work in Sulu Island.

History professor Samuel Tan refers to a 1994 ASG document that narrates the group’s founding. The group categorically denies that it was the creation of the military, as is popularly alluded to. It instead traces its beginning to August 1991 when a big foreign ship docked in Zamboanga City carrying Christian missionaries and literature for sale. “Accordingly, in a convocation, at Western Mindanao State University (WMSU) before faculty and students, Christians and Muslims, the missionaries spoke against Islam and called Allah a false God, Muhammad a liar and the Quran a man-made book. The desire to avenge the insult against the sacred values of Islam started the motive force of the ASG.”²³

The ASG was founded by a charismatic theologian, Ustadz Abdurajak Janjalani, a half-Christian (by parentage), who studied Islamic law in Saudi Arabia, received military training in Libya and fought and trained at a commando post near Khost, in Afghanistan, in a camp run by Islamic professor Abdur Rab Rasul Sayyaf (thus the name of the group).²⁴ The group started as a *dawah* movement called *Harakatul Islamiya* with a publication entitled, *Suara Kasabunnalan*, in ethnic dialect, meaning, Voice of the Truth.

Governed by an Islamic Executive Council, the ASG has two major operating groups in the Mindanao provinces of Basilan and Sulu. The current titular head is Khadaffy Janjalani, the brother of the ASG founder, Ustadz Janjalani, who was “killed” in 1999. The group is loosely organized and key personalities operate independently. Most members are male, mostly in their teens or early twenties, unemployed. The group’s total strength is pegged at 1,100 with 400 firearms. Significant activities include the 1995 raid on Ipil town, Zamboanga which killed 68 with 500 million pesos worth of lost property and the kidnapping of 80 students and 21 tourists from Sipadan Island, Malaysia in 2001.²⁵

Leaders and members also draw inspiration from memories of human rights violations against their families by military officers. The martial law regime during the 70s saw the Jolo burning and heavy militarization in the Tausug enclaves, where the Abu Sayyaf’s families were. Philippine Daily Inquirer correspondent Noralyn Mustafa in her feature about the group mentions that

²²General Angelo Reyes, “The Mindanao Peace Process: What’s The Future”, speech delivered before the Makati Business Club on 27 June 2000, Hotel Intercontinental, Makati

²³ Tan, Samuel, *Jumaah Abu Sayyap*, paper presented before the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) Strategic Studies Group, Philippines, May 2, 2000

²⁴cited in an interview with bangsamoro.info publisher, Deen.

²⁵ “Experience with International Terrorists,” paper Sent by NDCP and presented in a Cabinet Oversight Committee Meeting, 2001

some members are former MNLF fighters and sons of MNLF fighters.²⁶ Janjalani was reportedly frustrated when the MNLF signed a peace agreement with the government. There are unsubstantiated reports that ASG leaders include children of MNLF guerrilla leaders killed in the 20-year war to create an autonomous Muslim state in resource-rich Mindanao.²⁷ One leader vowed to avenge his father's death on men in uniform.²⁸

Some members are dropouts, but many are local high school and college graduates. The ASG leadership undertook studies, some of it in the Middle East. In a September 1995 interview with the Indonesian Forum Keadilan, MNLF chairman Nur Misuari said of the ASG leadership, "They were students that received scholarships from us to study (religion) in Libya. After they completed their studies, however they changed their mind." They were disillusioned by the MNLF's entering into a peace agreement with the government.

The ASG further gained notoriety in its financial 'banditry'. For instance, journalists covering the Sipadan hostage-taking were 'billed' by as much as a thousand dollars each, before they could enter the *kota* (hideaway) of the ASG. Government in its effort to negotiate refused to pay hostages' ransoms but had to relent anyway. In an interview aired on the Radio Mindanao Network on June 1, 2001, ASG leader Abu Sabaya said, "Well, the government is stingy. Do you know how much damage we are causing the Philippine government? Billions. All I can say is why we are banking on ransoms. Because if we talk about our rights, we won't be heard anyway..."²⁹

History Factor

Foremost Philippine historian Cesar Majul maintained that Islam was central to the historical development of Moro identity. It provided the framework for the emergence of well-developed native states in Southeast Asia and centuries of resistance to Western imperialism, colonialism and Christianity.³⁰ Moro history, a key and important element in the development of a Moro identity today, simply laid claim to the scattered resistance of Islamicized communities and made a new sweeping generalization to consolidate a political basis for the project.³¹

²⁶ Mustafa, Noralyn, "From Sipadan to Palawan: Abu Sayyaf strikes again," Philippine Daily Inquirer News service, June 1, 2001

²⁷ Billington, Gail, "Afghansi-linked Terror in the Philippines" published in Executive Intelligence Review, October 13, 1995

²⁸ Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) report, *ibid.*

²⁹ Interview transcript published in the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) on June 1, 2001

³⁰ Majul, Cesar Adib, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines*, Mizan Press, USA, 1985

³¹ Gutierrez, Eric, *The Re-imagination of the Bangsa Moro: 30 Years Hence. Institute for Popular Democracy* (Manila, Philippines), http://www.ipd.ph/pub/wip/reimagining_bangsamoro-e_gutierrez.shtml

Islam in the Malay Peninsula, particularly in the Philippine isles, came by way of informal exchange of trade between and among Arab and Malay missionaries and traders. The geographical location of the islets caused it to be drawn into the international maritime trade that extended from the Red Sea to the China Sea from the 9th century to the early 6th century.³²

In 1380, Sheikh Makdhum was said to have built a historic structure in the far southern isle of Sulu. In 1450, Sulu genealogy tells of a Sumatran prince who married a native lady, after becoming a Rajah, and established a formal governing institution, the Sultanate.³³

Muslim *datus* ruled principalities not only in what is called Mindanao Island but also in the North. Manila, the present capital, was once a principality led by the famous Rajah Sulaiman. The word, Moro, was first applied by the Spaniards to the Islamized natives of Manila in 1570. Later in 1578 it was applied restrictively to Muslims of Mindanao and Sulu.³⁴

Islam was adopted alongside indigenous and spiritual traditions in the geographically divided communities. Folk Islam combined communal, clannish and fatalistic traits. Principalities comprising a Sultanate were relatively autonomous and retained their own political and social structures. Leadership was vested principally in the Sultan, who was viewed as both a spiritual and political entity. He had a functional Cabinet of officials, which implemented a Code of Laws or customary traditions among its constituents of pagans and Muslims.³⁵ Each Sultanate governed a particular cultural community.

The Spaniards in 1565 would pave the way for 300 years of Moro-Spanish wars, which were fought on a regional basis. This was to belie an emphasis on Islam as a rallying and unifying cry between the divided Sultanates. While Islamic appeals were certainly employed to mobilize opposition to Spanish aggression, there is little historical evidence to suggest that indigenous resistance to the Spanish threat led to a heightened Islamic identity.³⁶ This religious rhetoric is most often inlaid in texts that also enunciate more mercenary objectives related to monopolizing trade, controlling resources and collecting tribute.³⁷ Spanish-led conversions would take place and Muslims would have to fight the Christianized *Indios* (natives) as well. The period would see Christian migration to Muslim areas.

³² Majul, *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ McKenna, Thomas. *Muslim Rulers and Rebels*, University of California Press, USA, 1998

³⁶ Majul, *ibid*

³⁷ McKenna, *ibid*

Americans would take over the colonization process paving the way for a Filipino-led governmental structure. Laws would legitimize land-holdings of Christians in Mindanao, while Muslims and the highlanders would consider ancestral domains theirs without need of documentary application. Some Moro leaders would petition the American government that they would rather be an American state than be part of the Philippine nation.

Forward to 1950s when Muslim youths were sponsored to go to educational institutions in the Middle East, particularly Al-Azhar University. As a consequence, religious and political activists arose such as the MILF leader Hashim Salamat. Secular elite would also be born from the government's national integration project in its scholarship program, foremost of whom would be the MNLF chairman Nur Misuari.

1968 would see a pivotal event that galvanized a Bangsamoro consciousness. With an impending martial law period, a covert military operation, which led to the massacre of some Muslim soldier recruits, angered the Muslim populace and triggered the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). In the Sulu archipelago, immigration of Christian settlers and land grabbing were most prominent in the 1970s. The infamous Jolo burning saw military clashes with rebels, burning of mosques, lootings, and a virtual no-man's land in the island. Documented memories by some ethnic Tausug of the period speak of hostility and trauma. The 70s were a "horrible period for particularly the ethnic group, Tausug, because the military and rebel forces clashed. 120,000 people in the South reportedly died during the martial law period. Clashes between paramilitary groups, military and Moro rebels were most prominent in the 70s." Currently, there are at least 34 extremist Christian groups in Mindanao, most of whom were originally formed, armed and trained by the Philippine military as anti-Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and anti-Communist vigilantes in the 1970s.³⁸ The Hajj and overseas workers phenomenon and sending of scholars to the Middle East spurred Islamization in the South in the 1970s.

The MILF group were to break away from the Marxist influenced-led MNLF, with an ideological orientation that focused on Islamic doctrine as the basis for the struggle. Further breaking away from the MILF fold, the Abu Sayyaf would be born in 1991 as a reactionary band of youth, who did not believe in negotiating with government in peace talks.

The 1996 peace agreement would seal the MNLF's position as the representative of the Bangsamoro aspiration as it led to the creation of an autonomous government. But it bred incompetence, corruption and ensuing leadership struggles within the MNLF. Then upheld the prominence of the MILF,

³⁸Jose Torres, *Into the Mountain: Hostaged by the Abu Sayyaf*, Claretian Publications, Philippines, 2003

which currently sits in peace negotiations with the government, renewing a call for genuine self-governance.

Ethnicity Factor

Ethnic nationalism is a species of nationalism for it seeks to enhance ethnic autonomy and in some cases to gain political independence and self-determination.³⁹ Ethnic nationalism often arises in communities with political grievances or discontent, resulting from the dominance of ethnic minorities on the periphery by the core group.⁴⁰

Muslims in the Philippines are an estimated ten percent of the population, and are a minority in the Mindanao Island. They compose 13 ethno-linguistic groups and converts, spread all over the Philippines in pocket communities, but are mostly concentrated in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

The Abu Sayyaf are concentrated in the islands of Sulu and Basilan, with some operating in Zamboanga City, all Tausug-speaking and of Tausug and Yakan ethnic grouping. Ethnicity is a primary basis of affiliation. Even today, a Maranaw, a fellow Muslim Filipino, is as foreign and frightening to a Sama as is a Christian Filipino.

The distinctions between the three main Muslim ethnic groupings (each with their own dialect) – Tausug, Maguindanao and Maranaw are also reflected in the main rebel fronts. Within the Mindanao society, an individual is recognized primarily for his ethnic affiliation rather than religion, which weakens the Bangsamoro identity. “The splits that have plagued the Bangsamoro project lie almost parallel to these ethnic boundaries.”⁴¹ MNLF-Misuari is sometimes considered the Tausug branch of the Moro movement. The MILF, despite their efforts to de-emphasize ethnic identities, is universally associated with the Maguindanaos. Another group that broke away earlier was the MNLF-Reformist associated with the Maranaos. The three-way factional split between Nur Misuari, Salamat Hashim, and Dimas Pundato also reflects ethno-cultural background and personal loyalty.⁴² “Even during the height of war, a pan-Moro MNLF unit never gained prominence. Maguindanaos for instance, would generally choose to fight alongside fellow Maguindanaos than with Tausugs or Maranaos.”⁴³

³⁹Che Man, WK, *Muslim Separatism The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*, Oxford University Press: Oxford Singapore and New York , 1990

⁴⁰ibid

⁴¹Eric Gutierrez in the “*Re-imagination of the Bangsa Moro: 30 Years Hence (Work in Progress)*”, ibid

⁴²Che Man, ibid

⁴³Gutierrez, ibid

Personal loyalties seem to have been dominant; leaders and followers have fought and surrendered together.⁴⁴

The Abu Sayyafs are mostly Tausug and Yakan operating in smaller islands and islets in Southwestern Mindanao. According to a police source, the island of Pata (surrounded by six islets) is the most likely place for the Abu Sayyaf, or at least the group of Andang and Susukan (ASG leaders), to bring the hostages...⁴⁵ Infamous as the village where hundreds were killed in 1981 by the Marcos military in what is remembered as the Pata Massacre, it has a history of *parang sibil*, a cultural tradition dear to the heart of the Tausug warriors, which the two leaders and their followers wish to think of themselves." *Parang sibil*, literally meaning 'martyrdom,'⁴⁶ is an act of sacrifice for the sake of preserving one's culture and identity.

A domestic factor such as culture is a complicating factor in understanding the local Muslim society, but is essential to understand why violence exists. In Moro culture, blood is settled with blood, says a local leader. So if you kill a Muslim, even an Abu Sayyaf, all his brothers and relatives may take his place to avenge the death of a relative.⁴⁷

The Tausugs, among all the Muslim groups, having first received Islam and established a Sultanate, the most durable at that time, distinguish themselves with characteristic traits of bravery and courage. By virtue of these achievements, the Tausugs regarded themselves as superior to other Moro tribal groups; they believed they were the 'chosen ones,' asserting their sultan was a descendant of the Prophet.⁴⁸ They were also the most aggressive and militant, especially in opposing Spanish and American rule.⁴⁹

Poverty and the Economic Factor

Philippine Defense Secretary Angelo Reyes acknowledged the problem in Mindanao to be a "complex, multi-dimensional security situation..."⁵⁰ Military solutions then are not enough. Pulverize the Abu Sayyafs (many of whom have been detained) but newer ones are added. An Iranian social scientist argues that "the roots of Islamic radicalism must be looked [at] outside [of] religion, in the

⁴⁴Che Man, *ibid*

⁴⁵Philippine Daily Inquirer report

⁴⁶ interview with Tausug analyst, Ahmad Musa, 2003

⁴⁷Roland Simbulan, *A Personal Account from the Basilan War Zone*, <http://www.boondocksnet.com/centennial/sctexts/rgs0203.html>, March 2002

⁴⁸ Bauzon, Kenneth, *Liberalism and the Quest for Islamic Identity in the Philippines*, ACORN Press, USA 1991

⁴⁹ *ibid*

⁵⁰ Cited in a speech before the Makati Business Club, June 27, 2000

real world of cultural despair, economic decline, political oppression and spiritual turmoil in which most Muslims find themselves today.”⁵¹ Israel’s Foreign Minister Shimon Peres asserts that “fundamentalism’s basis is poverty and that it offers a way of protesting against poverty, corruption, ignorance and discrimination.”⁵² Philippine’s business elite’s Guillermo Luz said that more than its support of the US war on terror, the risks of attacks from Muslim groups faced by the Philippines could be pinned on domestic insurgency problems, which are in turn rooted in poverty.⁵³ Philippine Stock Exchange president Ernest Leung said the country’s security is part of a ‘very complex’ problem of a lack of opportunities for poor Filipinos, particularly Muslims in the South.⁵⁴

The World Bank (WB) notes that the root causes of conflict in Mindanao were the lack of the government to deliver basic services to the Muslim population.⁵⁵ A Mindanao-based NGO MINCODE notes the regional disparity in poverty rates between the North (where the governing capital is) and South (where Mindanao is). Functional literacy ranges from a low of 40% in the province of Basilan (ARMM) to a high of almost 93% in Cavite in Southern Luzon. Enrolment rates in primary and secondary schools range from 43% in the province of Sulu in ARMM to 99% in the Mountain Province of the Cordillera Administrative Region. And life expectancy ranges from a low of 52 years in the province of Tawi-Tawi in ARMM to a high of 71 years in the province of Pampanga in Central Luzon. Moreover, functional literacy, school enrolment rates and life expectancy are all significantly correlated with poverty: Poorer provinces in the Philippines also have significantly lower educational attainment and worse health outcomes.⁵⁶ This situation prompted the University of the Philippines’s (UP) Dean of Islamic Studies to say, “Peace agreements reach a state of absurdity, as they are never realized in the lives of people.”⁵⁷

Poverty in Sulu province is stark. Professionals are wanting. The Sulu Governor Yusop Jikiri said 5 out of the 19 poorest of the poor provinces in the Philippines are inhabited by Muslims.⁵⁸ Sulu was one of the five provinces mentioned.

A WB paper notes that in the Muslim Mindanao region, an inverse correlation is observed between education and poverty. In areas where insurgency

⁵¹Pipes, Daniel, God and Mammon: *Does Poverty Cause Militant Islam*, published in www.danielpipes.org/articles/article.php?id=104, winter 2002

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Philippine Daily Inquirer report

⁵⁴ Philippine Daily Inquirer report

⁵⁵ World Bank paper, Red Transition, 2000

⁵⁶ 2001 Philippines Poverty Assessment, World Bank contained in MINCODE

⁵⁷ cited in a Speech presented in lecture, “The Crisis in Mindanao and Alternative Solutions, held Sept. 2000 at the University of the Philippines

⁵⁸ cited in Speech presented before the Leadership Training Seminar for Youth, March 1, 2003 in Jolo, Sulu

is rampant, this factor was deemed to exacerbate the inverse correlation between education and poverty, i.e. increasing the incidence of poverty due to disruption of classes.⁵⁹ Limited education in minority areas, it further noted, discourages foreign investments in these areas, hence increasing poverty in these areas.

The immense resources of Mindanao were also another cause of conflict. Mindanao was a frontier to be exploited by Manila's businessmen and global capital.⁶⁰ The political economy of Mindanao demonstrates how the power elite and the multinational and national entities have developed the mining and agro-industrial potentials of the region through the years and yet have reserved for themselves the greater part of the resources and benefits of development, leaving a very small portion to the indigenous people to divide among themselves.⁶¹

Mindanao's 'measly' share in the national budget continues to drop. Mindanews reports in 2001, Mindanao's share was P100.7 billion or 13.90 % of the national budget; in 2002 it fell to 92.93 billion or 11.90 %; and in 2003, the share is only 84.86 billion or 10.55 % of the national budget.⁶² This is without sensitivity to the costs of war and hostilities that are ongoing (even to this time), with 400,000 evacuees presently needed to be fed.

Another aggravating problem in the South is the refugee crisis, one that has strained relations between Malaysia and the Philippines. Malaysia of late has enforced regulations to drive former Filipino migrants, mostly Tausug, back to the Southern Philippines. Filipinos in Sabah, mostly working Muslims and who number almost 600,000 are slowly coming in droves to the already poor provinces of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Some of these already unemployed are potential recruits to the underground movements.

Poverty may not generate militant Islam but it may provide the conditions or environment that cause disgruntlement and grievance against a government that further polarizes due to a 'war policy' in the South.

Beyond Poverty

Professor Julkipli Wadi of the UP Institute of Islamic Studies points to the need to go beyond poverty as an explanation for 'Islamic radicalism'. Wadi talks of 'unarticulated reasons' for radicalism.⁶³ Philippine Daily Inquirer columnist Michael Tan points to a sociological analysis, that of alienation from the

⁵⁹ Paper by Edicio dela Torre for the World Bank

⁶⁰ Gutierrez, Eric, Reimagining the Bangsamoro Project

⁶¹ Tan, Samuel, Understanding the Mindanao Conflict

⁶² Arguelles, Carolyn, "The Cost of War," Mindanews, March 26, 2003

⁶³ Tan, Michael, "Two Mosques," an opinion article published in the PDI, Feb. 20, 2002

mainstream. “Think of our young Muslims without a mosque,⁶⁴ and seeing themselves demonized in the media (especially with the government’s video showing the Abu Sayyaf beheading soldiers).” Social deprivation occurs when individuals are not able to fulfill expectations and needs, as compared to others (in this case, the well-off Chinese entrepreneur or landed Christian). When these disadvantaged aspirants are made aware of their plight, they react. As alienation intensifies, the marginalized search for an identity drifts toward radical fundamentalist ideologies where the ‘axis of evil’ is now composed of those Christians, who control resources and American soldiers in the Philippines to train Philippine troops to fight Moro ‘terrorists’.

As a result of ‘socio-economic marginalization’, the tragedy of a missing Moro middle class is ironic when originally Sulu contracted with European leaders in what was once a flourishing maritime commerce.⁶⁵ Sulu lacks a professional base to manage its development. The province has not seen a regional trial judge holding court in years.⁶⁶ Lawyers in government are a handful. Peace and order enforcement then is threatened by an intimidating organized group as the ASG.

The growth of Christian settlements in Mindanao has been a contentious issue. In Mindanao, migration and competition for land in the 70s had been the major elements aggravating unrest, also leading to bloody conflicts between paramilitary groups and Moro communities.

As indicated in the graph below, Christian migration to the South had negative consequences for the Moros. The newcomers were active commercially and politically. The economic disparity between Moro and Christian settlers would soon surface. The Philippine Senate Committee reported that up to 1971, there was not a single irrigation project in any municipality where Muslims constituted a majority.⁶⁷ The Moros, thus, argued that they “suffered not only from cultural genocide but also from some kind of what can be called today as ethnic cleansing.”⁶⁸ The table below exemplifies the MINORITIZATION claim – how Moros lost their homeland through the years.

⁶⁴in reference to a referendum in one city in Mindanao whose residents voted down the proposal to build a mosque

⁶⁵Gutierrez, *ibid*

⁶⁶*ibid*

⁶⁷Che Man, *Muslim Separatism*

⁶⁸Gutierrez, *ibid*

Estimated Moro and Non-Moro Populations in Mindanao, 1903-1980

Year	Mindanao population	Moro Population of Mindanao		Non-Moro population of Mindanao	
		Number	%	Number	%
1903	327,741	250,000	76	77,741	24
1913	518,698	324,816	63	193,882	37
1918	723,655	358,968	50	364,687	50
1939	2,244,421	755,189	34	1,489,232	66
1948	2,943,324	933,101	32	2,010,223	68
1960	5,686,027	1,321,060	23	4,364,967	77
1970	7,963,932	1,669,708	21	6,294,224	79
1975	9,146,995	1,798,911	20	7,348,084	80
1980	10,905,243	2,504,332	23	8,400,911	77
1990	14,269,736	2,690,456	19	11,559,280	81

Source: National Economic Development Authority (1980a); Gowing (1977, 1979); Abbahil (1983) 1990 Census of Population and Housing⁶⁹

"To a significant extent, the MILF, MNLF, and the Abu Sayyaf have derived their base support from the idealist youths and displaced elements of Muslim society called by Janjalani in the "Ummat Akhir Jaman" who have no credentials or opportunities to be absorbed in the Christian or non-Muslim dominated employment field, especially in the institutions, and business of government."⁷⁰

In Sulu history, disturbances, which were common in the post-war period, were stimulated by factors related to socio-economic ills. The restriction of trade to Borneo, the occupation by Christians of available agricultural land, and strong competition from Christians in fishing resulted in limited opportunities for employment (Philippine Senate, 1963). It forced some desperate Muslims to turn to illegal employment such as smuggling and banditry.⁷¹

Grievances

In 1935, Muslim leaders passed "A Declaration of Rights and Purposes," pleading to the United States Congress not to include Mindanao, Sulu and

⁶⁹ from Miriam Colonel Ferrer, ed., *Peace Matters: A Philippine Peace Compendium*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Peace, Conflict Resolution and Human Rights Program and the UP Press, 1997, p. 197

⁷⁰ Paper Presented by Dr. Samuel Tan, *Understanding the Mindanao Conflict: Mindanao, at the Crossroad at the Cotabato City Peace and Development Forum*, July 20, 2002

⁷¹ Che Man, *ibid*

Palawan in the independent Philippine Republic but instead to give them 50 years after independence to decide whether to join or not join the republic. The Muslim leaders candidly told the United States Congress their grievances against the Americans: (1) their dissolution of the Moro Province and turning over of the Muslims to the Manila government; (2) their many petitions having been ignored by the United States President and Congress; and (3) the failure of the Americans to protect the Muslims from alleged injustices and oppression of Christian Filipinos.⁷²

Current Muslim-organized conferences and rallies have been convened to highlight the poor plight of the Muslims. In a Commission on Human Rights consultation,⁷³ Muslim groups listed “a lot of human rights violations committed against Muslims,” which include among others seventeen factors – militarization, intrusion and encroachment of ancestral domains of Muslims and discrimination in employment.

The Abu Sayyaf refers to some historical grievances that have not been addressed. Rightly or wrongly, it only required subsequent incidents and recall of historical antecedents involving what they called injustices committed against the Muslims to finally shape the structure of the movement.⁷⁴ The first of the incidents was in July 1992 when the *kafirs*, referring to the Christians, in Zamboanga burned Muslim houses and business establishments and killed Muslims including a pregnant woman. The statement continued to say that nobody answered the call for help and justice and the *Abu Sayyaf* took the step by writing the SouthCom (military command) in August 1992 to ask them to stop the oppression against Muslims in Zamboanga. The document refers to the incident as similar to the Pata Massacre in Sulu and the Malisbung Massacre in Sultan Kudarat, which were marked not only by the killing of several Muslims but also by the rape and disappearance of Muslim women committed by the army. Thus, the *Abu Sayyaf* struggle, according to the document, is to seek *kaadilan* (Justice) for Muslims. It, therefore, calls the Muslims to “unite and lay aside their differences and feuds.”

The ASG’s position (at least from its inception) judging from their “etiological and ideological sources,” can be generalized according to the following:

1. The missionary zeal and recklessness of Christian missions (Protestant or otherwise) that attack or insult Islam tend to provoke not fear but violent response.

⁷²Diaz, Patricia, “*Understanding Muslim Grievances*,” published in Mindanews.com, February 2003

⁷³in a national consultation convened by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) with Non-government groups to draft the National Human Rights Framework held July 12, 1995, Manila

⁷⁴ Paper Presented by Dr. Samuel Tan, The Juma’a Abu Sayyap : A Brief Assessment of its Origin, Objectives, Ideology and Method of Struggle at the NDCP Strategic Studies Group meeting; May 2, 2002

2. The initial objectives for redress of grievances or attainment of justice ultimately end in the demand for a purely Islamic state as the surest guarantee of justice and prosperity for Muslims. The present state of Muslim Mindanao and the seeming inability of the state to sufficiently or satisfactorily deal with the nagging problem justify from the Muslim view the elevation of "*Jihad Fi-Sabil-lillah*" (the lesser *Jihad*) to the paramount duty of every Muslim especially those who desire martyrdom and Paradise in the cause of Allah."⁷⁵

The University of the Philippines Director of the Third World Studies Center, Miriam Coronel Ferrer says though that the ASG is a criminal group. "There is a potent mix of a group of criminals who justify their activities on a set of grievances and a set of beliefs that find distinction from the rest of the Muslim population of the Philippines."⁷⁶

Ideology

The significance of a mobilizing ideology in relation to collective action has long been recognized.⁷⁷ In Southeast Asia, for instance, religion played a dominant role in campaigns against intrusion of different foreign powers. "If we examine the rhetoric of revolt, it appears that what is at issue, at least in the mind of the dissidents, is not so much one economic system versus another, but one culture or way of life versus another (Snow and Marshall: 1984)."⁷⁸

"Islamism," say the French political philosopher Oliver Roy, "is above all a socio-cultural movement embodying the protest and frustration of a generation of youth that has not been integrated socially or politically" into stable and progressive societies."⁷⁹

Philippine History professor Samuel Tan studies the etiological and ideological foundations of the Abu Sayyaf on the basis of its oral and written literature. Since the founding of the movement, charismatic ASG leader Ustadz Abulrajak Janjalani had delivered 8 *khutbas* (discourses) in Tausug dialect, within a "radical framework based on the Quranic theory of Jihad Fi-Sabil-lillah." The first, delivered during Ramadhan, is entitled and maybe translated as "Upholding the Qur'an in present-day Muslim Community." The discourse identifies the enemies of the Qur'an: 1) the Jews and Christians who

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ Bobb, Scott, "Are Abu Sayyaf linked to Bin Laden?", VOA News, October 28, 2001

⁷⁷ Che Man, *ibid*

⁷⁸ *ibid*

⁷⁹ quoted in a speech presented by Former National Security Adviser Jose Almonte in the International Conference on "Enhancing Regional Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region," Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Hilton Hawaiian Village, Honolulu, Hawaii, July 17, 2002

will never accept the Qur'an; 2) the Muslims who do not read the Qur'an but other materials such as comics, magazines etc; 3) the *ulama* who quarrel against the Qur'an.⁸⁰

The third point may reflect a diversion from the other rebel fronts in that the group categorically attacks *ulama* who in their mind are "enemies." Fellow Muslims then may be subject of their violent actions. This may also be a reason why the group does not take into consideration that its hostages may be Muslim or Christian. The group does not also claim to be a representative of the Bangsamoro people, as the other rebel fronts would. It recognizes the leadership of the MILF and MNLF but is a breakaway since Janjalani questioned the peace engagement with government by the rebel fronts. The ASG operates autonomously.

ASG leader Ustadz Janjalani issued a public proclamation (undated), in English, and addressed "to all the people of Mindanao and those in the Republic of the Philippines." It opens with an expression of hope for peace "after the liberation of Mindanao from the clutches of oppression, tyranny, and injustice." It categorically says that the aim is simply to tell the truth as told by Prophet Muhammad however bitter it may be and not to refute or criticize others' beliefs," especially those of the Muslims. The document underlined four basic truths about the Abu Sayyaf:

- a. It is not to create another faction in the Muslim struggle which is against the teaching of Islam especially the Qur'an but to serve as a bridge and balance between the MILF and MNLF whose revolutionary roles and leadership cannot be ignored or usurped.
- b. Its ultimate goal is the establishment of a purely Islamic government whose "nature, meaning, emblem, and objective" are basic to peace.
- c. Its advocacy of war is a necessity for as long as there exist oppression, injustice, capricious ambitions, and arbitrary claims impose on the Muslims, and
- d. It believes that "war disturbs peace only for the attainment of the true and real objective of humanity— the establishment of justice and righteousness for all under the law of the noble Qur'an and purified *sunnah*."⁸¹

⁸⁰ Tan, *ibid*

⁸¹ *ibid*

Janjalani believed that the term 'revolution' was not mentioned in the Qur'an.⁸² He believed that the "command of Allah is to wage a jihad and NOT a revolution. The political aim of the ASG was to set up an Islamic state and implement the Shariah. They don't have a concept of nationalism although they usually issue statements to reflect their supposed nationalist views."

The ASG draws distinction between the mainstream *ulama* in that the traditional mainstream *ulama* (Cairo graduates) espouse jihad as fard-al-kifayah idea while Ustadz Abdurajak espoused that in "our area (Mindanao), jihad is now "Fard-al-ayn."⁸³ The ASG follows the rulings that the disbeliever's life and property is "*haram*" since we are in the state of actual *Jihad* with them. Their battlecry is that "if we don't do something now, we and our children will [be] Christianized and Islam will [be] completely erased in our homeland" like what is happening in many so called Islamic countries invaded by '*kuffar*.'⁸⁴

Strategy

The ASG's organizational set-up is led by an Amir who heads the *Harakat*. It operates on the process of 'mashuara' (consultation). "If you happen to seat with their usual *ijtima*, you won't find any difference with the *mashuara* of the tableegh, except that in their case they focused on *Jihad al-qital*," says a local observer.⁸⁵ A charismatic and militarily-trained leader such as Aburajak Janjalani influenced the expansion of the group. A recruit Basier Hamja, 29, remembers those days a decade ago. Only 18 when he joined the Abu Sayyaf, he was mesmerized by the preaching of its founder, Ustadz Janjalani. "I fell in love with his beliefs and convictions," Hamja, who carries the aliases Abu Teng and Abu Ateng, tells Newsbreak in the local dialect. "He and the other leaders said they were fighting to put an end to our oppression."⁸⁶

What makes the ASG successful in recruitment is that it primarily 'targeted' the youth who are either studying in *madrasa* or reformed youths who have gained sound enough knowledge in Islam.⁸⁷ The original ideology-based group was said to have degenerated because of the ASG founder's death in 1999, one that now survived by bombings and kidnappings. Nonetheless, the current members' use of religion to justify their means remains a strong force. This has not avoided analysis from academics: "We may say that because of the methods they use, they are basically a criminal group," Ferrer said.

⁸² in my interview of journalist Joe Torres, author of *Into the Mountain: Hostaged by the Abu Sayyaf*, Claretian Publications, Philippines, 2003

⁸³ interview with Deen, webmaster of www.bangsamoro.info

⁸⁴ *ibid*

⁸⁵ *ibid*

⁸⁶ Julie Alipala, *Executioners Once*, Newsbreak, March 18, 2002 issue,

⁸⁷ *ibid*

A government Cabinet Paper on Terrorism says homegrown terrorist groups often have “significant adherents among the populace.”⁸⁸ The ASG enjoys mass base and support in some parts of Basilan, Jolo and Tawi-Tawi, which have been used as a source of intelligence and logistics. ASG leader Sampang said, “People were supportive of us because when we got ransom money from the kidnappings we gave them money. When they asked for pump boats (motorized outriggers), we gave them. We gave it to them for their livelihood.” In the town of Lantawan, Basilan, people are ‘very supportive’ of the Abu Sayyaf, adds Sampang. “They would hide our firearms, that’s why the military could not catch us or follow us.” In exchange, the ASG gave the people livelihood projects like goats and chicken to take care. “If a landlord would threaten tenants, we would kill the landlord, day or night.”⁸⁹

The ASG also enjoys the advantage of familiarity with the rugged terrain they usually operate in. They have also engaged in high-impact activities in recent years with full coverage of local and foreign media. “Their best propaganda/publicity is kidnapping to attract media attention.” This has “not only emboldened local terrorists to commit more atrocities but also become unwitting tool of terrorists to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty all over the country to drive away investors and drag down the economy.”⁹⁰

As compared to the MILF, its strategy is laid down in a 20-year program, whose components include: (1) Islamization, (2) Strengthening of Organization (3) Military build-up and (4) Self-reliance. The professional base of the MILF is seen in its organized hierarchy of functional and territorial based-committees and a community that functions as a semi-Islamic ‘state’, one that has its own currency, academy, economy and even passport.⁹¹

The ASG compared to the MILF does not enjoy popularity among vocal Muslim organized groups, even meriting a *fatwa* against it from Saudi Arabia for its beheadings. Among its fellow Tausugs, it operates on an isolated basis. Strong indications of undergoing drug use is evident, says a military source.⁹²

Transnational Networks

Islamization resulted in an ideological bond, one that serves a defining identity and linking the Muslim community with a larger Muslim world. The

⁸⁸ Paper Presented at the (Presidential) Cabinet Oversight Committee, Philippines, 2002

⁸⁹ Joe Torres, An Abu Sayyaf guerrilla's confession, excerpt from Into the Mountain: Hostaged by the Abu Sayyaf www.abs-cbnNEWS.com

⁹⁰ *ibid*

⁹¹ in Defense Sec. Reyes' speech, *ibid*

⁹² in an interview with a military head in Sulu province, March 1, 2003

general resurgence of Islam since the end of the Second World War in the Philippines has raised Islamic consciousness among the Moros and bridged ethnic barriers.

Much academic scholarship has stressed that there seems to be a plurality of Islamic politics in the Southeast Asian region, especially with proponents of democracy and their neofundamentalist rivals, suggesting that local struggles should not be viewed through the prism of 'clash of civilizations' (Hefner: 2002). Local observers stress loose coalitions, flexible networks between autonomous groups focused on local issues but that are sympathetic or ideologically linked to the notion of an international jihad.⁹³

Libya, Indonesia and Malaysia have remained peace brokers between the Philippine government and rebel factions in the span of the Philippine peace process – Libya in the past with the MNLF, Malaysia currently with the MILF. With the Abu Sayyaf, Libya's former Ambassador negotiated the release of foreigners in a much highly publicized hostage-taking in Sipadan, Malaysia. What the MNLF, MILF and Abu Sayyaf have in common is combat experience in the war in Afghanistan, either personally or by training, and an overlay of political and financial ties to Libya and Saudi Arabia, said the Executive Intelligence Review.

Controversial is the point that the ASG is linked to Al-Qaeda. Former Presidential spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao says there is evidence of contacts between the ASG and Osama bin Laden 10 years ago but says there has been nothing since the mid-1990s.⁹⁴ Voice of America (VOA) reports that the ASG founder Janjalani studied in Afghanistan and fought with Osama during the Afghan war with the Russians. "There's been some firm data in the early 1990s, operatives of bin Laden managed to first finance some of their (ASG) operations, and second to undertake trainings for explosives," Tiglao said. "But that was way back in the 1990s and our intelligence report is that even bin Laden's group felt that the Abu Sayyaf weren't really that much [of] an international terrorist group."

Suspicious of Al-Qaeda and other foreign terrorist links have arisen, due to ASG's proclamations. An Asian Studies professor at the University of the Philippines (UP), Asiri Abubakar, recalls that during a kidnapping in the late 1990s, the ASG demanded the release of a man convicted in the first bombing of the New York World Trade Center. "The members of the ASG claim they have indeed maintained their links with rebel elements in Afghanistan or in other Muslim worlds." UP Islamic Studies professor Julkipli Wadi says there is a

⁹³ Ong, Aihwa

⁹⁴ VOA report, October 28, 2001

shared sympathy among Muslim movements. He says there is a tension between Islamic movements, which appeals to less privileged sectors of society, and the governments of many predominantly Muslim nations. Many of these governments, he says, are seen as undemocratic and unresponsive to their people. “The countries have the Organization of Islamic Conference, so they ally amongst themselves. On the level of Islamic fronts, or Islamic movements, they have this network of Islamic movements. And this is where the Abu Sayyaf may be linked,” he said.

Government Policy

Past and present administrations have banked on a peace process to reconcile rebels’ separatist demands to a legal framework. With the Abu Sayyaf, the previous and current presidents have declared no-negotiations and declared it a criminal group, using military confrontation as its policy towards the group. The ASG’s overwhelming activities however have reinforced government policy to militarize affected areas that have resulted in a vicious cycle of conflict leading to poverty and vice versa. With only hundreds of members, the ASG is combated with several battalions of military personnel, even involving US troops in ‘training’ local troops. Sporadic hostilities give way to communities driven out of their homes, thereby intensifying feelings of frustration and helplessness among the masses.

A paper published by the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) debunks directly the link between Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. Comm. Francisco Tolin (ret.) writes, “Our own rebel groups, while espousing some rather extreme Islamic demands, should not be seen as part and parcel of a terrorist network. They are first and foremost, trying to secede, not to superimpose an Islamic state over the archipelago.”⁹⁵ Tolin also points to non-governmental Islamic groups (mostly *dawah* organizations) that are ‘cultural-minded’. “They should be left alone.” This rationalization is probably in the light of arrests and detention of Muslim missionaries, mostly Arabs, and surveillance of propagation centers which have been operating in the Philippines for more than a decade, for charges of support to terrorist activities.

In a foreword written by Dr. Cynthia Bautista for Dr. Samuel Tan’s “Internationalization of the Bangsamoro Struggle,” she propounds: “To date, state policies and programs to counteract the secessionist movement are based on religious premises, which categorize the Moro struggle as a purely Islamic phenomenon. As a consequence, the people in Mindanao have been polarized into Christians and Muslims.”

⁹⁵ Tolin, Comm. Francisco, *Is there a Direct Link Between Islamic Fundamentalism and Terrorism?*, published in the National Defense College of the Philippines website, 2002

President Macapagal Arroyo in her speech before the graduates of the Philippine Military Academy listed five elements of her envisioned end state for Mindanao: "The presence of peace and the absence of ideologically-motivated conflict, and the renunciation of the use of force to pursue political ends; development based on political stability, economic strength and good governance; the complete acceptance of national sovereignty and territorial integrity based on the Constitution and the rule of law together with the maintenance of external peace with all our neighbors; a multi-ethnic society with social justice for all and institutionalized accommodation of ethnic traditions; and the total defeat of terrorism."⁹⁶

Clearly government is not open to a secession of any territory. But this runs contrary to the ASG's non-negotiable demands. The independence imperative is one that remains common as the "underlying essence of autonomy for all Muslim social movements (MNLF, MILF, etc.) regardless of difference."⁹⁷

Several factors corroborate this. First is the inability of the State through the government and its agencies to adequately or substantially meet the basic and ideal needs of the Muslim community.⁹⁸ Although autonomy was granted and *Shariah* partly implemented with respect to (persons and family relations), this was not enough to disengage the ASG from demanding a full Islamic state.

The much-ballyhooed US-Philippine joint military exercises took hold in one Abu Sayyaf stronghold in Basilan province. During this period, hundreds of ASG suspects were detained in Zamboanga and Manila jails. Yet, the military says it has not completely exterminated the ASG. They remain strong and transferred hold in the Sulu province. Critics of the US military entry say, such will internationalize the conflict, complicate domestic policy and is a short-term response primarily to gain military funding from the US.

Definition

What does terrorism really mean? The definition and elements that compose terrorism are hotly contested both at the international and domestic level. After all, the region hosts long standing-rebel movements and government opposition groups that fear state intimidation by way of being tagged as terrorists.

A Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, which might include a clear definition of terrorism, has so far been elusive in the UN, as shown most recently in the November 2001 sessions of the General Assembly's

⁹⁶ Mindanews, "Arroyo to PMA grads: help me make Mindanao a region of peace," March 20, 2003I

⁹⁷ Tan, *ibid*

⁹⁸ Tan, *ibid*

Sixth Committee (Legal Affairs) and Ad Hoc Committee tasked to elaborate an international convention for the suppression of terrorist bombings.⁹⁹ This has been attributed, among others, to “diverging political interests and contradicting normative perceptions” especially between Islamic and Western states.¹⁰⁰ Notwithstanding the fact that the UN has 12 existing multilateral conventions on terrorism.¹⁰¹ Even within the Southeast Asian region, there has been little agreement on a definition. During the two-day meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 2001, the 10 ASEAN members agreed to disagree on what constitutes terrorism, instead focusing on forming a united anti-terror front and pledging to set up the strongest regional security framework agreement to date.¹⁰²

In the Philippines, a proposed definition is “the use of violence, threat or intimidation or destruction of lives or properties with the objective of creating fear in the public mind to achieve a purported political end and to coerce or influence their behaviour to undermine the confidence of the general public on the government.”¹⁰³

Despite the lack of a definition, terrorism is considered a transnational crime, of the same seriousness of but not similar to war crimes. Specifically, terrorism is classified as an international crime.¹⁰⁴ Yet the Philippines has no enabling and domestic legislation in place. ASEAN countries are still drafting anti-terror legislation. According to a CNN report, the drafting of anti-terrorism laws to fight ‘terrorists’ in Southeast Asia is being hampered by the lack of a definition of ‘terrorism’, and concern amongst Muslims that it is being linked to Islam. The Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia in their Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures signed in May 2002 define terrorism as “any act of violence or threat thereof perpetrated to carry out within the respective territories of the Parties or in the border area of any of the Parties by an individual or collective criminal plan with the aim of terrorizing people or threatening to harm them or imperiling their lives, honour, freedoms, security or rights or exposing the environment or any facility or public or private property to hazards or occupying or seizing them or endangering a natural resource, or international facilities, or threatening the stability, territorial integrity, political unity or sovereignty of Independent States.”

What is punishable in Philippine law are the crimes constituting terrorism, which may be rebellion, hijacking, kidnapping, murder, and all heinous crimes, punishable by death.

⁹⁹ Santos, Soliman, *Terrorism: Towards a Legal Definition, Philippines*, September 2001

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

¹⁰¹ *ibid*

¹⁰² *ibid*

¹⁰³ Proposed 1995 Philippine Anti-Terrorism Act

¹⁰⁴ Gatdula, Jeremy, “*War, Terrorism and International Law*”, Arellano Law and Policy Review (Arellano University School of Law, Philippines, 2002)

The dilemma that revolutionary movements can be lumped together with 'terrorist' groups is apparently possible to be reconciled. According to Austrian Professor Hans Koechler, in his Fourteenth Centenary Lecture at the Philippine Supreme Court on 12 March 2002: "Through such a comprehensive codification effort it could be made clear that resistance or national liberation movements must in no way resort to terrorist tactics and that a (politically eventually legitimate) aim does not necessarily justify the means (or any means for that matter). In the general framework of a unified system of international humanitarian law, terrorist methods will be punishable irrespective of the specific political purpose and irrespective of whether those acts are committed by liberation movements or regular armies."¹⁰⁵

Lawyer-academic Soliman Santos develops this point further: "In other words, *as a rule*, no national liberation movement or rebel group should be *a priori* exempted or condemned for culpability for terrorism by mere reason of its status as national liberation movement or rebel group. Each and every *act* in question of the organization must be examined on a case to case basis whether it qualifies as a terrorist act. As an exception, only if there is a clear and consistent *pattern, plan or policy* (in short, something *systematic*) of terrorist acts or methods by the organization would it be justified to designate it as a "*terrorist organization*." One terrorist act does not necessarily make a terrorist organization, unless the act is based on a policy of employing terrorist acts (for example, a policy of suicide-bombing targeting innocent civilians, or a policy of reprisal aerial bombing or artillery/tank shelling targeting the civilian mass base of the enemy).

Anthony Clark Arend and Robert J. Beck, in their book *International Law and the Use of Force: Beyond the UN Charter Paradigm* (1993), which notes 109 definitions of terrorism, proposes "a working definition, one which characterizes both the terrorist *act* and the terrorist *actor*" rather than terrorism.¹⁰⁶ They said a terrorist *act* is distinguished by at least three specific qualities:

- a. *Violence*, whether actual or threatened;
- b. A '*political*' objective, however conceived; and
- c. An *intended audience*, typically though not exclusively a wide one.

There are many proposed definitions of terrorism. Schmidt and Young (authors of the book *Political Terrorism*) surveyed leading academics in the field, and found some 109 different definitions of terrorism. They have isolated from

¹⁰⁵ Santos, Soliman, *Terrorism: Towards a Legal Definition*, September 2001

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

these definitions, the following common elements: **violence/force** (recurring in 83.5% of the definitions); **political** (65%); **fear, emphasis on terror** (51%); **threats** (47%); **discrepancy between the targets and the victims** (37.5%); **intentional, planned, systematic, organized action** (32%); **methods of combat, strategy, tactics** (30.5%).¹⁰⁷

Some academics say, “states are just as capable of committing terrorist acts as are non-state armed groups.”¹⁰⁸

The Philippine Army in Sulu (35th IB Macamandag) province has the following indicators in its framework of “Knowing the Terrorists:”

Short-term goals:

- ransom
- cause the Philippine Government to overreact
- instilling vengeance in the area
- creating atmosphere of dissatisfaction and contempt
- discrediting the Philippine government
- gain international support from Islamic countries
- create a climate for revolution

In the light of eventful bombings in public places, the government is reinforcing a clampdown policy on ‘terrorist’ groups by giving ultimatums to them. One mode is labeling such groups as terrorists. “A terrorist tag, in the Philippine context, mainly implies ‘all-out war’ and dropping the peace negotiation option.¹⁰⁹ And the trend is to use more the anti-‘terrorist’ rather than the peace process framework in dealing with rebellion.¹¹⁰ The ‘terrorist’ tag is used to downgrade and stigmatize even established rebel groups which do not have a terrorist tradition (like the NPA and MILF), aside from more effectively countering or suppressing them.” “You are likely to be treated as an extraordinary kind of criminal, and therefore not be granted the human rights that even criminals are entitled to,” said UK academic Michael Freeman.

Proposals

As of this writing, the government is considering labeling the MILF a terrorist organization. The Abu Sayyaf is currently low profile, but not altogether neutralized. The peace option must not be altogether abandoned. Case studies show some long-standing organizations like PLO and IRA (which have

¹⁰⁷ Alexander Aguirre, *Legal Definition of Terrorism*, published in National Defense College of the Philippines website, 2002

¹⁰⁸ Santos, *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ interview of Atty. Soliman Santos

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

employed terror tactics) have "embraced political dialogue instead of violence to pursue their aims."

The Abu Sayyaf problem is mainly a domestic problem, thus its solutions must also be local in scope. Governmental approaches to addressing the problem must be holistic, multi-dimensional and not limited to military strategy. The discourse against military strategy is framed as follows:

1. Military options are counterproductive (i.e. they do not work; they lack utility);
2. Military options subvert respect for law (including our respect for law) and encourage the flouting of the very principles that civilized societies profess to stand for;
3. Military options encourage the escalation of violence in a spiral of futility;
4. Innocent bystanders frequently are hurt in counter-terrorist operations (terrorists being very elusive targets);
5. Counter-terrorism often embraces such ethically objectionable tactics as assassination or kidnapping, and the military pursuit of terrorists runs headlong into problems of sovereignty and contested claims for extraterritorial rights.¹¹¹

Pursuing solely a military offensive further alienates potential intermediaries and the community (where terrorist groups operate) to support peace initiatives. While employing the criminal justice system against terrorists would be important to emphasize that 'crime does not pay', it is equally relevant to use confidence-building measures to 'neutralize' the hostile positions of the 'terror' group. State actions such as the raising of bounty on the 'heads of rebels' only elevate the position of rebels or terrorists to a greater importance than they warrant.

Policy prescriptions must look at internal factors affecting the 'terror' group: i.e., how does the organization make decisions? Is the organization divided internally? Is the group ethnically or profit-motivated? External factors consider the socio-economic environment in which they operate.

¹¹¹ Colin Gray, *Combatting Terrorism*, Parameters, Autumn 1993 pp 17-23

The nature of the grievance matters. Ethnically-based ‘terrorist’ campaigns can be harder to end decisively than politically-based ones, because they often enjoy broader support among a population they seek to represent.¹¹² Peace overtures must be well timed. Ideally, they should come at a time when the government is strong and the ‘terrorist’ organization is undergoing a period of introspection.¹¹³

Short-term and long term-responses to the ASG problem would be proposed. Short-term policy responses are intended to deal with the immediate situation and to attempt to defuse the atmosphere of crisis. As they are intended as confidence-building measures and thus to lower the temperature as it were, they are political by their very nature. But they have implications for broader considerations such as the economic and socio-cultural. These short-term policy recommendations are:

1. The convening of a local peace panel, composed of respected *ustadz*, *aleems*, indigenous leaders, retired local politicians, that would act as the intermediary between the national government and the ASG. Using Islamic processes such as *mashuwara* (consultation), this peace panel would formally identify the demands of the ASG, such as setting up of a Sabah Commission,¹¹⁴ and, in exchange, ask for their commitment to abide by the results of the “mediation” by this panel;
2. Conduct a study by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process on the viability of inclusion of the ASG in the peace process. A broadly inclusive peaceful settlement must include groups with a long and brutal terrorist past that lack a genuine commitment to democratic principles;¹¹⁵
3. Expand the taskforcing of the peace panels to include socio-economic rehabilitation and development planning as part of the agenda. This committee would involve Muslim Tausug and Yakan professionals, executives of the multi-national corporations operating in Southwestern Mindanao;

¹¹² *How Terrorism Ends*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report, May 25, 1999

¹¹³ *ibid*

¹¹⁴ the ASG demanded this to address the plight of the refugees coming in from Sabah to the Sulu, Basilan Island and Zamboanga

¹¹⁵ Paul Wilkinson on the IRA, USIP Special Report, 2001

4. The organizing by government of a fact-finding commission, headed by a respected national figure, in coordination with the Commission of Human Rights, the Military tribunal and the judiciary, which would investigate claims of human rights violations on Muslims since the 1970s Martial Law period;
5. Consider a serious investigation of alleged collusion between the military and the ASG.

Long term responses

As productive as these short-term policies may be, the longer-term situation requires addressing on several levels simultaneously. As we saw earlier in this paper, the ASG feeds off a number of wider and entrenched problems in southern Philippine society, and the distortions of this milieu in which it operates need to be considered as determinants of future policy. As the current ARMM governor states, "The socio-cultural (including religious) components of the peace process have also been neglected. Aside from the economic and political reasons for waging war, these overlooked socio-cultural factors would help explain the emerging popularity of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Abu Sayyaf and other movements that are advocating the Islamic cause."¹¹⁶

1. Political

Bring governance to the people

Manila, with its centralized form of governance, is 1000 kilometers away from the programs it implements in Mindanao, further from the Sulu and Basilan Islands, where the terrorist acts are on high. Without a field presence, the World Bank notes, it can be difficult to calibrate program implementation decisions. It is then important to strengthen the presence of government at the local level by institutionalizing grassroots consultations and community-based groupings.

Study the viability of federalism and the "shortcomings" of autonomy

To address the self-determination demands common among the rebel groups, a government-supported study must be undertaken to examine the feasibility of a federal state and the practicality of continuing the autonomy program. As the proposed federalism "project" would entail more resources in convincing the

¹¹⁶ Parouk Hussin, *Challenge of War and Search for Peace*, in the Road to Peace and Reconciliation: Muslim Perspective on the Mindanao conflict, AIM Policy Center, Philippines, 2003

whole population, an experiment can be conducted, starting with the proposed Moro areas as one federal state.

2. Economic

Affirmative Action/Access to Opportunities

Incentives for displaced young people, who are potential recruits to the ASG, must be available. There must be a quota system, particularly in island-based companies, to hire jobless youths from the island of Sulu. Job-providers must consciously seek out young Muslim applicants. Local internship programs and international and local scholarships/fellowships must also be offered. Livelihood opportunities should be expanded and micro-financing training launched in the area.

Increase state support for Mindanao and Sulu Islands

This would entail more budgetary appropriation for the economically depressed islands in Mindanao, particularly Sulu.

3. Socio-cultural

Institutionalize peace and interfaith dialogues in the grassroots

An ethos of trust must be built from decades of sporadic hostilities in the Mindanao Island. The peace process, instead of limiting itself to negotiations between the government and rebels, must encompass the broader community it seeks to represent. This is possible by expanding the scope of activities of the peace process to Mindanao-based events such as tri-people cultural celebrations, trainings in indigenous ways of conflict resolution. Civil society engagement must be ensured to assure “ownership” of the process and regain confidence, especially amongst war-affected communities.

The military and police must develop links in the grassroots to bridge the mistrust by Moros against them, by engaging in community discussions and peace education among their ranks.

4. Transnational Networking

Develop an ASEAN response from among the civil society networks, which include the ulama, aleems, ustadztes and respected local indigenous leaders.

This would engage religious leaders in bridging the communication gap between radical groups and authorities.

All these hopefully in the light of preventing witchhunts of alleged terrorists mostly Muslims and addressing social deprivation.

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