

The Struggle for Self-liberation of the Moro People: A Brief Historical Perspective

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Centered on the historical background of ongoing struggles in Mindanao, the following text is extracted from a longer contribution also available on ESSF website (article 26120), [The Struggle for Self-Determination of the Bangsamoro Revolutionary Fronts: A Historical Perspective and Current Realities](#).

The struggle against colonial power by the Moros has started more than five hundred years ago. The economic, political and social structures of the Moros then had reached higher level especially in the southern part of the Philippines vis-à-vis in the central and northern parts of the country. So the opposition against colonial powers specifically against the Spanish occupation was very strong in the southern part of the country. The Spanish colonizers gained footholds in key areas in Mindanao but they had never gained full control of the interior areas occupied by the fighters of the Moro Sultanate defending their territories. The colonizers had used religion and the religious Christian missionaries to help in the colonization of the inhabitants including the non Moros and Moros as well in these areas. During this period, monotheism was already predominant within the sultanate since Islam was already introduced centuries earlier by the Muslim traders and missionaries to the area. The Islamic faith had helped in the resistance against the colonizers who made use of religion (Christianity) to further their colonial interests. The remnants of the Spanish churches and fortresses can still be seen even today in key areas of Mindanao especially along the water routes e.g. Tamontaka in today's Datu Odin Sinsuat Municipality, Dulawan the present day Datu Piang both part of Maguindanao province and Pikit part of North Cotabato to mention a few.

The struggles against the Spanish colonizers were led by the Sultanate in the south and by the intellectuals in the North. The latter, was the generation that was the product of the new class which emerged in the new system of economic, social and political structures imposed by the Spanish colonizers e.g. encomienda and hacienda systems. Agricultural crop production intended for the needs of the colonizers and their countries and not for the local needs or the colonized inhabitants. Some families from such generation had sent their sons to study in Europe (the colonizing country such as Spain) and were influenced by the prevailing thoughts of equality, fraternity and liberty. These students and intellectuals brought back these new ideas to the country and led the struggles under the leadership of Katipunan against the Spanish colonizers at the same time of the struggles were continued by the Moros in the southern part.

At the eve of the defeat of the Spanish colonial power in the country at the end of 19th century, the new colonial power, United States of America came in to fill in the vacuum of the Spaniards in a historical buy off also known as Treaty of Paris in 1898. The defeated colonizer sold the territory they never fully subjugated to the new colonizer. And the rest would be a painful and bloody history of the new colonial brutality and occupation to neutralize and defeat the struggles for national

liberation of peoples from the north to the southern part of the country.

In the 1930's, with the Sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu effectively neutralized and rendered ceremonial and the leadership of the Katipunan and the local revolts literally decimated while the new working class movement (the Communist and Socialist Parties of the Philippines merged in 1938) had still on its early stage, the United States Imperialist power had consolidated the young national bourgeois class to form a colonial government. The first constitution of the country was formed in 1935 has been patterned letter by letter to the US constitution. The process was actively participated by representatives of the new ruling classes of the dominant nationality and the Moro people from the mainland of Mindanao as well as from the islands like in Sulu.

The life of a new national government was disrupted when the Japanese imperial power had tried to attack and subjugate the whole country and its people. A national united front for the defense for the fatherland was organized together with the defeated US army and also the Moro fighters who joined with the Filipino forces from the North and the central part of the country including the newly merged Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (Communist Party of the Philippines), to put strong and credible guerilla warfare against the Japanese occupying forces. It is important to note that the old Communist Party was playing an important role based on the call of the Third International (post Lenin/Trotsky period) to defend the Fatherland against fascism. The Hukbalahap (Hukbo ng Bayan laban sa Hapon or Army of the People against the Japanese) was formed on this purpose.

After the Second World War the new Republic of the Philippines (1946) was formed with the new bourgeois and ruling class from the North to the South participating. The US imperialist power had ensured its influence in all spheres of life of the Republic by enshrining it in the Constitution.

The development of industrialization of the country was ensured by the US imperialist to fit the role which the imperialist power would want the colonies to play. It had to make sure that it supplied the foreign colonizers with raw materials and to receive the goods coming from the latter. This kind of import oriented and export dependent economy made a one sided development for the foreign interest with the development of the new national bourgeoisie making sure that their policy is implemented and the development and orientation of the political superstructure - the nation-state had been tasked to do just this policy.

Peasant unrests and uprisings in the North and Central parts of the country were superficially solved by transferring these people to the South - Mindanao - the new place of hope and fulfillment of the peasants to own the lands they till become a reality according to government propagandists. In all these struggles which had happened mostly in the northern part of the country, the Communist Party of the Philippines (PKP) in most part were playing a decisive role against the US imperialist and the puppet government. In the 50s, the US imperialist thru the puppet government had made sure that the PKP would be defeated and annihilated if they refused to surrender. In response, the HUKBALAHAP was transformed into Hukbong Magpapalaya ng Bayan or HMB building a strong peasant army and almost defeated the puppet government if not for a direct but covert imperialist intervention.

Mainstreaming and integration of all peoples in this colonial set up by US imperialism was made possible thru Religion and Education. And the Moro and the non Moro peoples in Mindanao were not spared with this policy and program. Their political set up like the Sultanate and Indigenous Power Structure were in a subtle manner becoming powerless and the western concept and method of resolving conflicts and governance were taking over. In the main, the ruling class of the Moro and the non Moro peoples had participated in these explicit and implicit processes in the exploitation, marginalization and integration of their people to one nation-state framework of the dominant nationality and its own ruling class.

The ruling class of the Moro people reacted seriously when their interests (both economic and political) were directly threatened. In the late sixties, when the puppet Philippine governments were exposed and became unpopular, a new nationalist movement headed by the newly established Communist Party (CPP) in 1968 and intellectuals were fighting for the national and democratic interests. In some of these movements, the Moro intellectuals were actively involved.

During this period there was, somehow, a convergence of interest of the traditional political leaders and the intellectual Moro professionals and students to fight for the people's national interests. Thus they formed the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) in 1969. In the later period of same year the first batch of young Moro intellectuals and students were sent to Malaysia to have military training. It would be followed by several batches later. It is very important to note that the first batch of trainees was headed by the Nur Misuari a Moro professional teaching in the University of the Philippines and who got involved in activism together with Jose Maria Sison who became the chairperson of the new Communist Party of the Philippines.

The Islamic countries which financed the military trainings of the young Moro fighters hired British mercenaries and tapped Malaysia to host the activities. It should be remembered that a year before (1968), there was a Jabidah massacre where young Filipino Muslim recruits were massacred by the Philippine military when they refused to go on mission to infiltrate Sabah for the interest of the Philippine government. This mission is called as OPLAN MERDEKAH, which was intended to get back Sabah from Malaysia. Hence, Malaysia was more than willing to host the military trainings of the young Moros against the Philippine government.

Together with Nur Misuari were the sons of prominent ruling families of the Moro people. And with its Islamic connection in the Muslim countries the MIM got financial support notably from Libya and Saudi Arabia where Hashim Salamat was studying and became active in the national struggle.

The foreign donors were not actually at ease with the Moro traditional leaders leading the young movement because they might collaborate with the puppet government in the process as history would prove it. Obviously these donors were convinced by the argument of the young intellectuals and students to give the financial support directly to them. With this arrangement the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed in the late sixties and early seventies. It was mainly composed of young intellectuals who had studied in the universities inside and outside the country. At early stage, there were several sons of the ruling class of the Moro people but later they were the first ones to give up and go back to the mainstream or to the government. Revolutionary and guerilla lifestyles were too much for them to sustain.

During this period a consciousness for a truly national identity was beginning to form and consolidate. Before this, the Moro people were those independent ethnic groups found in different areas/territories in Mindanao. The territories which were once comprised the Sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu had effectively weakened, disorganized and disintegrated. The MNLF had started to help in consolidating a national consciousness among the Moro people and start a national political movement of the struggle for self determination. This was done outside the traditional political structure and led by the non-traditional intellectuals.

The political movement headed by the MNLF aimed at political secession from the Philippine nation-state arrangement. The national oppression perpetuated by the majority nationality referred as those Christians in Luzon and Visayas who controlled the national government personified this kind of oppression which the MNLF also called as Manila colonialism. The active role of US Imperialism in the puppet government and orientation of the bourgeoisie were never factored in.

The main form of the struggle which was directly and indirectly supported by the Islamic countries

(mostly numbers of the organization of Islamic countries - OIC) was armed struggle and had combined guerilla and conventional warfare on the ground.

President Ferdinand E. Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972 to effectively suppress and neutralize the young movements led by both CPP and MNLF. A loose coordination was established between the two groups in fighting the same enemy.

The massacres and massive dislocations of the Moro civilians made the OIC to aggressively help both overtly and covertly the MNLF. They even facilitated the escape and having a safe base of Nur Misuari in their respective counties.

The intervention of the OICs had dual effects to the MNLF. First, it helped the organization survived and be projected in the international level and second it also helped the MNLF became very dependent on them. In fact the impact of this arrangement was the neglect of the MNLF leadership of consolidation works of its forces and continuously raising of their political consciousness to understand their struggle for nationalism.

The MNLF leadership was literally forced to sit down by the OICs with the Philippine government to have peace talks in mid 1970s. The talk led to the so called Tripoli Agreement in 1976. Disagreements and divisions among the leaders of the MNLF broke up after the signing of the agreement. As a direct result of these political uneasy arrangements disorientation and demoralization sipped in among both leadership and rank and file within the organization. Surrenders of some of the leadership had occurred making easy for the dictatorial government to inflict serious damage to the organization. Never again did the MNLF reach the high level of struggle after the Tripoli Agreement. The main stress of the weakened leadership of MNLF became the peace negotiations where the Marcos government had an upper hand and controlled set up. It was a political trap which the bourgeois leadership of the MNLF took and the direction of the process from that time on is the mainstreaming of MNLF to the nation-state arrangement of the Philippine government. The 1996 final peace agreement was just the formalization of this process of political accommodation and mainstreaming.

MNLF DIVIDED

The division which had occurred within the MNLF was obviously the result of the serious weakness with regards to the internal organizational consolidation. It was also a direct result of external interventions both by the OICs and the Philippine government through massive and intensified militarization of the latter against the ground forces of the MNLF and peace negotiation with the foreign based leadership of the MNLF with the active cooperation of the host countries of the OICs. The abovementioned reasons made the divide and rule tactics of the Marcos dictatorial government a success in weakening and neutralizing the struggle for national liberation of the Moro people led by the MNLF. In fact, the basis for the MNLF division was along the ethnic differences and particularities. The national consciousness of a "bangsa" or nation was not consolidated and never consummated and ethnic conflicts and division had dragged down the Moro people once again. Eventually, the Maguindanao ethnic group formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) whose leadership was composed mainly by the intellectuals and professionals of the Maguindanao tribe. The MNLF reformist group formed their own separate organization and was headed by the Maranao professional and intellectual members of the Maranao ethnic group. And this made the original MNLF as headed by the ethnic group in Sulu called the Tausugs to negotiate with the government while other groups negotiating separately.

During this period the consciousness of national identity of Moro people and the national political movement started by the original MNLF for a national struggle for self determination was stunted

and co-opted and began to disintegrate again.

The formation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front which had started after the Tripoli Agreement but was only formalized in the late eighties was a manifestation of the failure of internal consolidation of the MNLF and the intense pressures from the other countries (OICs) and massive Philippine military assaults on the ground.

THE MILF: The Bangsamoro and Its Struggle Redefined

The stress put on the Islamic aspect was to differentiate the opposition of the MILF founder, Hashim Salamat (acted as foreign minister of the MNLF during the Tripoli Agreement) from the stress on the nationalist aspect put up by Nur Misuari who was accused as non-religious and very secular. This kind of orientation immediately attracted the support of OIC individual members like Saudi Arabia and the MILF because official member of the Muslim Brotherhood because MNLF was still recognized by the OIC as the only legitimate representative of the Moro people.

The MILF started a movement to unite the Moro people especially the 13 ethno-linguistic groups into one national consciousness and identity thru Islam and from the Sunni tradition like its principal patron, the Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood which recently won the elections in Egypt after Mubarak.

In the later stage, MILF defines the Moro people and their ancestral domain/homeland as those who are natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and its adjacent islands including Palawan and Sulu archipelago at the time of conquest or colonization of its descendants whether mixed or of pure blood. It is revealing here that the basis for Bangsamoro nationhood is on the superficial and mechanical aspects rather than the historical and collective experience of people whose consciousness as distinct people and identity is a result of the process of a national political movement towards achieving political objective. The definition does not even consider the individual and collective acceptance or non-acceptance of people to become or not become part of the nation and identifying themselves with the struggles for social and national liberation.

The abovementioned description was reinforced by its slogan of "one nation, one faith" the fear of external imposition of one's faith to others. In fact, it will be ironic to even think that the struggle for national liberation as led by the MILF to resolve the national contradiction and the national oppression with its own kind of oppression even during the period of its struggles.

It is worth noting that the MILF has never considered and recognized the rights of the Indigenous Peoples (IPs) as distinct people with distinct history and ancestral homeland and therefore a distinct aspiration. Their definition states clearly that the IPs are part of the definition of Bangsamoro and their ancestral domains are also integral part of the Bangsamoro homeland as mentioned above.

It is very obvious that the Philippine government through its negotiating panel does not point out this objective reality out amidst the most logical results of such framework will invite another level of conflicts. From its nation-state framework, this is favorable so the government can effectively rule the divided peoples. But most importantly, genuine struggle for the democratic right to self-determination and its direction will be determine by the broadest participation of the people in whose name the struggle has been launched and sustained. The respect and support of other democratic forces can be realized if in return their democratic rights and aspirations are respected and supported. The truth about a nation which oppresses other nation cannot be genuinely free will be tested in the concrete situation of the Bangsamoro and the Lumads.

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