

Philippines: Ethnopolitics and Party System in the Bangsamoro: Issues and Challenges

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The ratification of Republic Act (RA) No. 11054, otherwise known as the “Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao” (OLBARRM) or simply the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in the 21 January and 6 February 2019 plebiscites signifies the cessation of armed conflict between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and armed forces of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). It took 22 years of on-and-off peace negotiations between the MILF and GRP, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives and displacing millions of people in Muslim-dominated areas of Mindanao, before the GRP forged a final peace agreement, also known as the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), in 2014 with the MILF under then President Benigno Aquino III.

After more than four (4) decades of engagement in war and peace with the state, negotiating with six (6) presidents, the MILF now has the opportunity to govern an expanded Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) initially through the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA). As a transition government, the BTA governs the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) for three (3) years until the members of the BARMM’s parliamentary government are elected in May 2022. Headed by MILF’s Chair, Al Hajj Murad Ebrahim, as Interim Chief Minister, the BTA shall have 80 members.

In as much as the issue of participation is one of the key elements in good governance, the BTA faces a huge challenge to enjoining the maximum participation of the key actors in the Bangsamoro movement especially the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and other splintered groups which advanced the political autonomy movement in different forms. Aside from the major Muslim organizations, the BTA has the task to unite and draw the involvement of the 13 ethnolinguistic Muslim communities in the region.

The innate tribal divisions and rivalries among the Bangsamoros need to be substantially reduced, hence transforming conflict into a cooperative arrangement that will eventually build the Bangsa Moro (Moro Nation). Given the diversity of the region, the BTA has to be prepared in addressing the multi-faceted issues, concerns, and problems not only of the Muslim population but also of the non-Muslim, non-Christian indigenous groups (commonly referred to as the *Lumads*), as well as Christian communities in the region.

Against this backdrop, this short piece examines the key concerns and challenges confronting ethnopolitics of the Bangsamoro in relation to its task in furthering parliamentary democracy.

Bangsamoro Identity

The term “Bangsamoro” translates to “Moro Nation.” “Bangsa” or “bansa” is a Malay word that

usually denotes nations, castes, descent groups or lines, races or estates, while “moro” was originally applied to the Moors that ruled the Iberian Peninsula and the northern coast of the African continent in 711 A.D. When the Spaniards colonized the Philippines, they encountered ferocious resistance from Muslims. This reminded them of their ancient enemy, the Moors.

The collective term, “Bangsamoro” as defined by the BOL (Art. 2, sec. 1) applies to at least 13 Islamized ethnolinguistic groups as well as non-Muslim (Moro) indigenous peoples, estimated to be more than 25 distinct ethnic groups, and Christians who have identified themselves as Bangsamoro living in Mindanao, parts of Palawan, Sulu archipelago, and other geographical areas as defined in Article 3 of the BOL. Table 1 below shows the estimated population of Bangsamoros’ ethnolinguistic groups inhabiting in the Moroland. [1]

Bangsamoro Ethnolinguistic Groups and Estimated Population

Major Ethnic Group	Estimated Population	Estimated Population at 1.7% growth rate*	Percentage share to Total
	2010	2015	
Maranao	872,194	887,021	25.2
Tausug	854,347	868,871	24.7
Maguindanao	768,630	781,697	22.2
Sama/Samal	250,095	254,347	7.2
Iranon/Iraynon	211,838	215,439	6.1
Yakan	153,486	156,095	4.4
Teduray	81,782	83,172	2.4
Bisaya	65,510	66,624	1.9
Hiligaynon	152,183	154,770	4.4
Cebuano	47,571	48,380	1.4
Other	152,183	154,770	4.4
Total	3,457,636	3,516,416	100.0

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority 2010 Census of Population and Housing.

*Annualised population growth rate between the years 2010-2015 was 1.7% as estimated by the Philippine Statistics Authority.

The diversity of the region nevertheless is not squarely divided between ethnic groups. It is dominated by three (3) major ethnic groups – Maranao, Tausug, and Maguindanao. Together, they comprise over 70% of the Bangsamoros. The Moro armed independence movement likewise had been historically divided by two (2) major groups, the MNLF and MILF, which have been generally composed of the Tausugs and Sama/Samal on the one hand, and Maguindanaoan and Maranao on the other hand, respectively. Collectively, they constitute nearly 80% of all Bangsamoros.

Governing a multi-ethnic society as a nation

Moros’s sense of oneness and belongingness as a people have to be intensified and heightened by the regional government as the inalienable right to rule as self-governing political entity in a piece of land which they claim as their homeland irrespective of ethnic affinities and cultural differences, and ideologies embodied with the right to self-determination. The quest of Bangsamoros to exercise their right to self-rule is hinged on the continued definition and re-definition of their identity as a people by virtue of history, culture, religion, and way-of-life.

Tackling issues of poverty, inequalities and injustices, socio-cultural conflicts, and whole range of development concerns in the region necessitates a broad and systematic functioning of governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions. The transformation of poverty-stricken and violence-ridden environment to a prosperous and peaceful society is not the sole responsibility of the regional government but also of civil society and non-governmental organizations (CSOs/NGOs), private sector, academe, and other stakeholders. It is a collective responsibility.

Governance needs to be interactive. Collaborative patterns that emerge from governing socio-economic, political and administrative activities with non-state actors are sine qua non in safeguarding civil society's sovereignty, peoples' power, and authority of the governed over their elected officials. This co-operating and shared process does not only broaden institutional pluralism but also strengthen the centrifugal forces of social pluralism.

Party system and parliamentary democracy

Compared to the national government's presidential form of government, the BARMM adopts a parliamentary form, yet remains under the unitary state. Unlike the former where there is a clear division of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, in the latter, there is a fusion of powers between the executive and the legislative (parliament) branches. Executive powers are democratically and legitimately derived from the parliament, thus executive officials are accountable to the parliament. Article 7 of the BOL defines broadly the powers, functions, and responsibilities of the Bangsamoro Government - Parliament, Executive Officers, and Administrative Organizations.

Under a parliamentary system of regional government, the party system becomes a paramount vehicle in articulating the fundamental interests, aspirations, and hopes of the constituents. Political parties are expected to be defined by their platform of government and policy agenda rather than bank simply on candidates' personalities. Likewise, Art. 7, sec. 7 of the BOL stipulates the systems of election. For regional party representatives, it shall be through the proportional representation (PR) system [2] which tend to lead to the proliferation of smaller parties and consequently improve the representation of minority groups. On the other hand, district representatives shall be elected by plurality [3] which tend to lead to the creation of fewer parties.

Issues and challenges

The politics of ethnicity and new form of parliamentary government in the region is faced with daunting but surmountable challenges toward the fulfillment of the Bangsamoros' aspiration to self-governance.

One, the effectiveness of the combined PR and plurality electoral systems at the regional and district levels respectively is contingent primarily, among others, on how the BTA creates the legislative districts and the criteria adopted for such creation. Currently, the process in the "redistricting, merging, or creation of parliamentary districts" as provided in Sec. 10, Art. 7 of the BOL is in progress.

Moreover, the hybrid electoral system needs to satiate the requisites of ethnic autonomy of major ethnic groups which have some relatively well-defined physical jurisdiction on the one hand, and self-governance interest of other minority ethnic and indigenous peoples (IPs) which have smaller "homelands." Whether or not such rudiments are satisfied would depend on the identification or representativeness of the political party to its constituents, a form of social identity, and voting behaviour of the district's electorates.

In as much as the PR system encourages the participation of more electoral parties representing ethnic or sectoral interest while the plurality system fosters cross-ethnic conciliation and limits political parties, the determination of the balance between the two (2) electoral systems is significant in adapting it to the changing demographic and ethnic profile of the region and in inhibiting dominant groups from unduly tilting the balance power towards their favour.

Two, given that ethnic groups are territorially defined, the three (3) major ones – Maranao (Lanao del Sur), Maguindanaoans (Maguindanao), and Tausug (Sulu and Basilan) – may likely be the foremost regional contenders in BARMM politics while other non-Islamized IPs and Christian communities may be perpetually marginalized as they will never become the majority. Apparently, this threatens plural democracy and may instead tend to institutionalize the so-called “tyranny of the majority.”

Third, the standards that need to be met for regional party registration have yet to be defined. In addition, the mode of electing local government officials (LGOs) whether using the PR or plurality system has to be determined by the BTA. Given the peculiarities of the region in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, and voting behaviour, political parties have to be politically astute in advancing parliamentary democracy. On a similar vein, the mode of electing LGOs has to conform with the idiosyncrasies of the local population.

Conclusion

The challenges of nation-building and national unity through the BOL is difficult to surmise at this point, although the socio-economic and political initiatives in re-constructing the war-ravaged region have been moving in the right direction through its parliamentary government.

There will be no quick fixes and no shortcuts. Wounds that have festered for a long time cannot be healed overnight, nor can confidence be built or dialogue developed while fresh wounds are being inflicted. It is a process that requires special and extra effort on the part of the state to guarantee human rights and uphold the rights of people to their own development.

Hopes are high that the Bangsamoro succeeds in its endeavour to re-build its Bangsa that stands proud within the Philippine nation-state.

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Footnotes

[1] The figures are approximating of the actual number as some groups are isolated and cannot be accurately tracked apart from the inconsistency of Philippine census and other official data.

[2] Proportional representation is the idea that seats in parliament should be allocated so that they are in proportion to the votes cast.

[3] **Plurality** system, electoral process in which the candidate who polls more votes than any other candidate is elected.