

# **Impasse-Breaker? AN ISLAMIC STATE WITHIN A FEDERAL PHILIPPINES**

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The stage is set for another potentially stultifying political deadlock in Mindanao. This will stem from a classic situation that will pit “an irresistible force against an immovable object.”

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) established the “immovable object” around 1984 when it separated from Nur Misuari's original MNLF. Back then, Dr. Hashim Salamat declared the splinter group's intention to form an Islamic State in Mindanao, and expressed disapproval at the MNLF's apparent scaling down of its demands.

Well, Hashim Salamat was to shy away from public view for almost 15 years, even as his MILF continued to expand and gain political strength as a rival champion of the Moro aspiration for self-determination.

Then on December 1997 - at the height of frantic maneuverings and regroupings by traditional political parties in preparation for the following year's presidential election - the self-effacing MILF chieftain resurfaced in grand style.

Convening his troops and adherents to the MILF's 15<sup>th</sup> General Assembly at Camp Busrah in Butig, Lanao del Sur, Dr. Salamat pointedly reiterated his group's demand for an **Independent Islamic State**. He also stressed that this position is "non- negotiable."

On June 30, 1998, of course, a new president of the Republic of the Philippines was sworn into office. Given his macho background, it did not take very long for Joseph Ejercito Estrada to have the issue joined by throwing verbal bricks at the MILF's stonelike posture. President Estrada was to say, " Over My Dead Body" at Salamat's assertion.

Several frightening skirmishes later (including armed shootings and confrontations between the MILF and the AFP last December and January), the potential impasse became real. And President Estrada minced no words - and symbolic gesture (coming down in full fatigue uniform to visit ARMY soldiers in Cotabato last February) to make it known that he is not beyond unleashing the republic's military might to "settle" the issue.

The government's "irresistible force" is on short lease and is apparently ready to pounce on the "immovable object" anytime. Oh, if only this were a plain chess game or a college

debate - we could sit back, relax and enjoy the spectacle. But this is a real political game, with deep historical roots and deadly current ramifications.

But what exactly is the issue? It is this: Can the Philippine government allow the establishment and operation of an Independent Islamic State within its sovereignty? Can the President of the Philippines cede a portion of its territory without violating his oath to protect and preserve the integrity of the Republic?

This is precisely what President Estrada is asserting. That he will violate his mandate if he allows the dismemberment of the republic, and dismemberment is what will happen in this instance given the present constitutional framework upon which the government of the Republic of the Philippines is established.

So if the MILF insists on its demand as it most likely will, and the government stands pat on its position as it understandably must, will we have a full-blown war in Mindanao again, one that may put in final jeopardy the prospects for real economic development, one that will certainly and once again victimize hundreds of thousands of innocent Mindanawons whose lives will be unnecessarily scattered and derailed when they become forced refugees or get caught outright in the vicious crossfire?

This daunting and horrific scenario is no longer just a stuff for wild imaginings. Unfortunately, Mindanao is a certified, one can almost say patented, battleground where macho posturings are normally challenged with live bullets and real firefights (which, incidentally, cut down more bystanders and passerby than the armed combatants).

It is, therefore, extremely necessary to look for a viable alternative that can untangle the potential political gridlock. Here's a preliminary look at one such possible impasse-breaker:

### **Self Determining But Not Independent Islamic State**

This will require the MILF to move one step back (although it is a large leap) by dropping the demand for independence, and making "non-negotiable" only the establishment and full operationalization of an Islamic State for Muslims - a Bangsamoro homeland living in principled and working harmony with the other and more numerous Mindanao peoples, the Lumads and Christians.

Indeed, an Islamic State where Islam is the way of life and the basis of common law, where the natural and mandated Muslim culture of peace and basic righteousness will hold sway, and where religious tolerance and respect for cultural diversity is in effect - is the birthright of avowed and dedicated Muslims.

It is truly unpardonable that a people so steeped in a glorious religion that makes Koranic tenets the basis of community life and the full measure of their socio-political system be made to follow or be governed wholesale by an "alien" life-system.

Still, the Muslim brethren must realize and accept certain changed realities. The Islamic State as a 'birthright' no longer refers to the whole of Mindanao as its territory. While for centuries Mindanao was basically Muslim and/or Lumad, it is today predominantly Christian (no matter how nominal in practice the majority of them are). While for centuries, too, Mindanao remained unconquered by foreign colonizers, it has been for almost a century now, a "mental colony" of western (read American) thoughts and processes and the lode mine of foreign and Filipino (read Manila-based) vested capitalist interests. Well, include political interest groups there as well.

While it used to be Mindanao for the Muslims, it is no longer so today. (In fairness to the Muslim brethren, this stance has almost completely been discarded a while back). Owing to the incontrovertible reality of a shared present and common destiny, Mindanao residents or citizens have to expand the concept to encompass "Mindanao for Mindanaoans"

### **Mindanaowons As A Transcendent New Identity**

But this very assertion presupposes a new and common identity, that of Mindanaoans - persons born in Mindanao or who have made a conscious choice and commitment to make Mindanao home and live for it. Admittedly, this is a concept that has still to gain wider (and deeper) acceptance and conscious use among Mindanao residents, although the last decade has seen significant strides in promoting this idea of a transcendent identity encompassing all tribal, ethno-linguistic-religion-politico and regional distinctions. (By the way, I agree with friend Prof. Rudy Rodil that the more ethnic-derived term **Mindanaowons** is preferable to Mindanaoans to describe the Mindanao peoples as a collective and would use it henceforth.)

The broader distinction, on the other hand, is useful in the light of Mindanao's traumatic experience of neglect and abuse by central authorities and even private offices and their foreign patrons, partners or financiers. This unjust relationship is perpetuated by our peculiar brand of unitary and centralized government, patterned mostly after the US system but distinctly (and crazily) Filipino in its actual expression and operationalization. This skewed structure is characterized by a major decision-making process that almost completely is done in Manila and by persons in the central offices who have no clear idea about and sympathy for the local situation. For this reason, Mindanao has remained to serve the Philippine polity as a "cash cow that is served dog food."

Be that as it may, Mindanao cannot be for Mindanaowons only. For as long as we remain one nation and one country - and for as long as Mindanaowons would bear with the contradictions of this system (which are decidedly unfavorable to Mindanao), we are formally one people (Filipino) and legally one country (the Republic of the Philippines).

## Islamic State and the Federal Republic

But this is precisely where some serious rethinking of the national structure has to be made. When such structure has turned out to be unjust, rectification is imperative. And the more rational and empathetic and realistic the approach could be, the more assuredly stable, relevant and effective the change will be for all.

We would like to humbly submit as a core idea that should go through a process of enhancement and refinement through more extensive study and discussions, **the re-structuring of the Philippine government into a federal republic to be composed of several autonomous states (possibly with their own respective constitutions).**

Under this set-up, Mindanao could be re-formed and may constitute say five or six States, one of which would be the Islamic State to be composed of the predominantly Muslim provinces (and contiguous municipalities). At present and as per official census, these provinces are: Sulu (97% Muslim), Tawi-Tawi (96%), Lanao del Sur (94%), Maguindanao (75%) and Basilan (71%). Some municipalities of western Sultan Kudarat, southern Lanao del Norte and North Cotabato that are predominantly-Muslim and are contiguous to the above-named Muslim provinces, can be part of the Islamic State. The status of Cotabato City, whose population is almost evenly divided between Christians and Muslims, require further study.

Since all the component states of the proposed Federal Republic of the Philippines (say 5 or 6 in Luzon, 3 or 4 in the Visayas, and 5 or 6 in Mindanao) will presumably be governed by their own respective constitutions which, in turn, will be "guided" by a Federal constitution, an Islamic State may not even be a special concession but just a logical recomposition that is solidly based on socio-cultural and ethno-demographic considerations.

The matter of geographic distance of some of the Muslim provinces to the others may be addressed by a creative Sub-State arrangement that may, in fact, take into further consideration the major tribal formations among the Tausogs, Maranaos and Maguindanaoans.

In this proposed configuration of the Islamic State, it can be assumed that Koranic laws will apply only or mostly to adherents of Islam. Non-Muslims, however, will be covered and protected by minority rights, even as Muslims living in predominantly Christian states will enjoy said minority and basic human rights.

The important thing is that, under a federal republic system, virtual self-determination for component states is institutionalized. Indeed, division of powers is what Federalism is all about. Powers that pertain only to the Federal Government and those that pertain only to State governments are clearly defined by the common and basic law. Some other governmental powers, however, may be shared between the two components under what the Germans, for instance, would call concurrent laws or responsibilities.

By the way, some of the most politically stable and economically advanced countries in the world follow a federal set-up. These include Germany, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, Brazil, Mexico, Austria, Argentina and, closer to home, India and Malaysia.

While the co-relation with the federal political system still has to be established, it is interesting to note that seven of the top twelve countries in the world in terms of Per Capita Income in 1997 were federal, while six of the top twelve in Gross Domestic Product were likewise federal. (Note that there are only about 20 federal countries out of almost 200 countries in the world!)

### **The Challenge to Mindanawons**

The point we are trying to make in this initial write-up is that the Federal System is worth looking into as a more ideal set up for the Philippines. More importantly, it is one system that may be able to effectively address the current and peculiar situation of Mindanao not only as a victim of neglect but also as a unique island-region that harbors three peoples of diverse backgrounds, customs, culture and social systems. More specifically, it is a political option that may help prevent a stalemate that can lead to another Mindanao "war".

Clearly, what Mindanao needs is unity in diversity - not integration, not assimilation - or at least harmony in diversity. Admittedly, Federal is more friendly to this ideal than the unitary and centralized system that we have.

So the challenge to all of us today is two-fold. One, we should all begin to transcend our ethno-religious and tribal or regional origins and become **Mindanawons** (and think and act as such) and, Two, acting in concert, work towards the re-structuring of the country into the Federal Republic of the Philippines.

The first goal, although still difficult to attain, can be achieved (you may not believe it) by sheer clearness of mind and pureness of hearts of all concerned. But the second would require an amendment to the Constitution. In short, Charter Change or Cha-Cha.

Which is another still controversial matter. Which requires further discussions. Which is material for another follow-up article.

In the meantime, it is fervently hoped that this present one can provoke spirited though peaceful reactions and intelligent and principled discourse.