

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO THE MUSLIM PROBLEM IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

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Since the outbreak of the Muslim rebellion in Southern Philippines, thousands of lives have been lost, hundreds of dwellings have been burned or destroyed, and countless dreams have been shattered. In its frantic effort to restore peace and stability in the South, the National Government has poured in billions of pesos by way of infrastructure, economic programs and rehabilitation activities, while at the same time it has maintained a great number of its military strength in critical areas.

This paper will document the varied government policies and programs calculated as a strategy to quell the continuing rebellion in the South. Impressions on the effects of such programs are also presented here, but they are not meant to be a conclusive evaluation of events that have taken place since the government introduced such programs in Mindanao.

Origin of the Muslim Problem

It is now an accepted notion among Filipino Muslims that their territorial domain is fast shrinking. In the early 19th century, the original Moro Province consisted of Agusan, Bukidnon, Cotabato, Davao, Lanao and Zamboanga, including Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and Sulu. In about seven decades or 75 years, the Moro territory except for half of Lanao, one-fourth of Cotabato, Sulu and Basilan have been "lost." It was placed in the control of the techno-

logically superior Christians. Only recently, in the late 1960's South Cotabato was lost. In 1959, Cotabato, the biggest Moro Province, elected a Christian Governor. In 1973, Cotabato was divided into three provinces; of the three, only one has a Muslim Governor. The tragic disappearance of Muslim lands in Cotabato is also true in some areas around Mindanao.

The Muslims value their land next to their religion. They believe that when they lose their land, they lose with it their economic resources including their political power. When this happens, they are ready to die as they did when they declared a *jihad* (holy war) to regain their lost territory.

Initially, as an outlet for their grudge against the intruders, the Muslims destroyed the latter's crops, burnt their homes and barns, smashed their vehicles, killed their domestic animals including anything that crossed their path. This, however, led the Christian settlers to take hostile activities against the Muslims and organized a "blackcoated corps."

In order to quell the armed conflict between these two rival groups, Philippine Army troops composed mainly of Christians, were sent to Mindanao. However, in the eyes of the Muslims, these troops were out to help the Christians oppress them. Thus, they directed their guns on the government forces.

It was at the height of this conflict that the Mindanao Independence movement grew in Cotabato. In June 1968, former Governor Datu Udtog Matalam organized the Muslim Independence Movement with three basic objectives, namely: 1) to work and agitate for the secession and independence of the Muslims inhabiting the islands of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan from the Philippine Republic; 2) to work towards the eventual creation, organization and establishment of an Islamic State to be known as the Republic of Mindanao and Sulu; 3) to conduct a sustained propaganda campaign within and outside the country to gain sympathizers and supporters. Other groups with the same objectives

were organized in other provinces, such as the Ansar El Islam in Lanao del Sur, Lam Aliff, Green Guards Organization, Kalimatu Sahadat, etc. which have Muslim followers all over Mindanao.

But the heart of the Muslim problem, as pointed out by the Minority Committee of the then Philippine Senate, "lies in the little progress made by the Moros regarding land ownership, life, education, medicine and transportation."

Then senator Manuel Manahan reported that "minority nationalities are the victims of insults and neglects. Their lands were taken illegally and their property appropriated. There are no road network and bridges to connect their reserves with the population centers of the government. There are not enough schools nor sufficient health care. But the most intolerable of all is the Christian Filipino's unreasonable prejudice towards them which often results in their regarding the minorities as enemies."

The enmity and prejudice between the Muslims and the Christian majority inevitably led to an armed struggle now known as the Muslim Rebellion. In the words of Dr. Alunan Glang, Muslim Filipino educator, "this sowed the seeds of hatred and contempt and barred the way to sympathy and understanding."

Current Developments

In view of the socio-economic upheaval resulting from the armed conflict and considering the grave threat to national security posed by the insurgency in Mindanao, the government, as a matter of public policy, renounces war as the ultimate solution to the problem. Instead, it adopted a policy of attraction, reconciliation and rehabilitation to its misguided constituents in the Southern Philippines.

To foster a meaningful and relevant peace-keeping campaign in the South the government believed that it is not only imperative to maintain a moderate military presence in these areas but most

of all it has to complement that with an ameliorative program for the Muslims. With this idea in mind, President Ferdinand Marcos launched a massive development program in the war-torn Muslim communities. The ultimate objective was to rehabilitate and uplift the living conditions of the people who suffered and survived from the ferocious armed conflict. With this approach, the President is hopeful to regain the trust of those disgruntled constituents who have defied the established order by taking arms against it or against those who symbolically represent the government.

In effect several presidential directives were issued by Malacanang. Most of these orders were intended to update, redirect and restructure the implementation of the various development programs. Notable among these decrees was the issuance of P.D. 690, later amended by P.D. 1703. This decree gave birth to the organization of the Southern Philippine Development Administration, which was soon renamed an "Authority" instead of merely an "Administration." With the new authoritative function bestowed upon it by the President, hopes are pinned on SPDA as a forerunner of progress that it will be more effective in its service to the community.

For the past six years since its creation, SPDA has served as the nerve center for coordination among other lead and support agencies involved in undertaking government programs in Southern Philippines. Sizeable aid funds have kept pouring in to finance the different welfare projects in this region. The quarterly publication of SPDA, *Intergrowth*, reported twelve ongoing projects, four proposed projects, and three projects to be implemented in 1981 for the four regions. The amount of P30.2 million was appropriated for these nineteen projects.

According to SPDA, the immediate thrust of these programs is to transform Southern Philippines into a food production base. Its latest report indicates that there is a plan to set up at least one agro-industrial project in each of the four regions in Mindanao

where Muslims are known to exist in large numbers. Since each region has its own potential food resources, projects are categorized according to their potentiality.

In the case of Region 9, the abundance of fish allows setting up of new ventures in marine production and culture. In Zamboanga City, a P 72 million Bagong Lipunan fishpond estate was launched in June 1981. This is going to be the country's biggest fishpond estate located in Vitali. When completed, the industry is hoped to accommodate 500 families and shall employ about 1,000 laborers, mostly displaced persons and rebel returnees. Other subsidiary industries will also be introduced to these settlers, such as goat-raising, poultry, backyard gardening and handicrafts.

Another food production-oriented project has already been launched in Lake Buluan, Maguindanao and in Sultan Kudarat last June 12. The Gintong Biyaya fish cage project is estimated to cost P 27.71 million. Recipients of this goodwill include 1,000 low-income families and a number of rebel returnees.

Just recently another aquaculture project was likewise launched in Lanao del Sur. It will engage in fish cage culture which will benefit 1,000 dislocated families and rebel returnees.

In a Letter of Instruction No. 1060, several government agencies were directed to lend support in the implementation of the 25 priority projects contained under the name "Project Ranaw." Some are non-food production projects like the development of public beaches in Marantao, Balindong, and Marawi City, as well as in Iligan City and Kolambugan (the last two are in Lanao del Norte). These projects will be launched in line with the current program of the government to promote tourism in the South. This explains why the Ministry of Tourism was selected to be the lead agency in undertaking the jobs. But the biggest food-based industry ever to be launched in Marawi City is the P3 million fishmeal dryer, whose construction is now underway. This project is spear-

headed by the Presidential committee for the Rehabilitation and Development of Southern Philippines (PCRDSP) and Mindanao State University (MSU). When completed, the project will sufficiently meet the demand for fishmeal in the two Lanao provinces and adjacent areas.

Region 11 has been eyed for light and medium manufacturing and production activities. A pilot project on rice production has been set up in Tagum, Davao del Sur. SPDA has assisted the Mindeva Agro-Industrial Development Corporation in the setting up of a 260-hectare rice farm. According to the information given by SPDA, this project has an average plant rate of 10 to 13 hectares per month and an average palay production of 882,812 cavans every month.

SPDA is not alone in undertaking development projects in Mindanao. Other institutions have similarly embarked on food related production. Two among such projects are the irrigation system in Agusan del Sur, namely the Agusan River Irrigation Project in Baguayan and Esperanza, and the Semulao River Irrigation Project located in Trento and Bunawan. Construction started in 1971 which was completed in 1979. The government, through the Cotabato-Agusan River Development Project (CARBDP) has provided P 56 million to finish this project while the Asian Development Bank put in a share of \$5.8 million. Potential irrigable area is 8,700 hectares. The second Agusan Irrigation Project was started in 1979 and is projected to be finished in 1984. Local counterpart provided P 210 million for the construction of the irrigation complex and a foreign loan of \$14 million. When completed, the project is expected to irrigate 8,000 hectares of rice farm.

Meanwhile, in Region 12 a network of irrigation systems called the Allah River Irrigation Project is projected to be completed in 1983. This will irrigate some parts of the town of Isulan and Sultan Kudarat and the three towns of South Cotabato, namely Banga, Surallah and Norala. Some 21,000 hectares of rice farms

will be irrigated sometime in 1983. A \$23.5 million loan from ADB and some P 178.3 million as government equity has been allotted to finance this enormous irrigation systems.

So far, CARBDP's biggest on-going project is the Pulangi Dam No. 4 in Maramag, Bukidnon. Construction began in 1979 and is hoped to be finished in 1981. It will cost the government about P 752.6 million and a foreign loan amounting to \$67.09 million. Report received from the AFRIM Resource Center, Davao City, revealed that this dam can generate a power capacity of 250 megawatt.

Other irrigation projects under the CARDBP program were already started in 1980 and will be in operation after four years. Among these projects are the two-component Bukidnon Irrigation Project, the Manupili and the Muleta River Irrigation Projects. Projected total cost of the entire projects will be some P 165 million in local funds and \$18 million in foreign assistance.

Although the current thrust in the South is focussed on food production, the government has singled out infrastructure projects as another vehicle of progress and development. Take the case of the existing concrete national highway traversing General Santos and Cotabato City. It has linked Regions 11 and 12, which road stretched as far as 207.9 kilometers. It is not surprising therefore that the government has incurred some P 205.20 million for the construction of the road plus a foreign fund support amounting to \$10.6 million. Another major road construction completed two years ago was the Iligan-Cagayan de Oro-Butuan national highway which spans a distance of approximately 298 kilometers. Total projects cost was pegged at about P 355.5 million, including a foreign loan.

Already nine major road construction projects were launched, two of them completed. Road construction of 357 kilometers now underway in Zamboanga del Sur is hoped to be the longest cement road ever to be put up in Mindanao. This major thorough-

fare will be funded by the Australian Government under the Philippine–Australian Development Assistance Programme (PADAP) for \$16.896 million and a Philippine counterpart of P 157.5 million. Another project, the Davao-Surigao road, is slated for construction at a cost of P 131 million. Part of this amount will be provided by the World Bank. But these are not all. There are a total of twelve major road constructions for implementation listed by the AFRIM Resource Center, not to mention the secondary and feeder roads.

In the field of education, the President has instructed the Ministry of Education and Culture to allow 1,000 scholarship grants to deserving rebel returnees and their families in order for them to pursue studies in agriculture, business, arts, sciences and engineering. This is in addition to the ongoing National Irrigation Scholarship Program and the training scheme for manpower skill development, cooperative, small-scale industry, and other vocational courses. It is obvious that the effort and money poured into the massive development program for the Southern Philippines has been tremendous. With these, the opportunities and benefits are expected to be of equal scope.

In another development, the Ministry of Muslim Affairs has been created, with Rear Admiral Romulo Espaldon as Minister. The installation of Rear Admiral Espaldon as Minister of the Ministry of Muslim Affairs is beyond question. Report has it that he was effective in instituting “peace and progress” in Mindanao during his capacity as Commander of Southern Philippines. This Ministry has two bureaus, namely: the Bureau of Muslims Economic Development Affairs and the Bureau of Muslims Cultural Affairs. According to Muslim Affairs Minister Romulo Espaldon the main goal of the first bureau is to launch economic projects to provide the people of the South opportunities for employment. The second bureau is “aimed at integrated customs and traditions of the South, while at the same time preserving the Islamic heri-

tage of the Filipino culture.”

As of April 1981, there are 32,720 known rebel surrenderees as recorded by the Southern Command. The biggest influx of surrenderees was recorded in 1975 when it reached 10,125. Last year's record has the smallest number of rebel returnees. This is attributable to the fact that the rebel force, in particular the MNLF, is getting thinner and thinner. Only few have remained in hiding. For one thing, the government has been lenient in dealing with them. Besides granting them amnesty, the government sees to it that they are provided some respectable means for their livelihood. Quite a number of them have occupied key positions or elected to offices like IBP member Hussein Leong who was formerly a rebel Cadre Officer. Some have occupied the seats as Municipal Mayors, Vice Governors or have been appointed as Manager or Executive Director in government owned corporations. Others have even joined the Armed Forces of the Philippines. A total of 702 former MNLF members have been drafted to active military service in the Armed Forces of the Philippines. About 70 per cent of this number joined the Philippine Army. More than one-half of them were commissioned as officers. There were those who were enlisted in the Constabulary, in the Navy and in the Air Force.

Since the onset of Martial Law, there have been dramatic changes in Moro Policy which demonstrate the sincere and benevolent attitude of the present government towards the Muslim Filipinos. In addition to the foregoing developmental activities, some major breakthroughs in Muslim Mindanao policy which were undertaken by the government include the following: 1) the institutionalization of Islamic (Shariah) Courts, 2) the promulgation of the Code of Muslim Personal Laws as part of the laws of the land, 3) the making of Arabic as a medium of instruction in Muslim-populated communities, 4) the promulgation of major Islamic holidays as legal holidays, 5) the establishment of the

Southwestern Mindanao Barter Trade Zones in Zamboanga City and Jolo 6) the organization of the Philippine Amanah Bank, 7) the establishment of the Maharlika Village and the building of Quiapo Mosque.

While government efforts are going on in the South, the MNLF based abroad has resorted to black propaganda and has gained the sympathy if not the support of such countries as Iraq, Libya and Syria. Nothing alarming, however, has been done by these Arab countries to openly and actively support the MNLF cause.

In the local level, the MNLF members who have not surrendered are left in a state of confusion. Because most of their leaders have put down their arms for apparent lack of financial support from their headquarters, some NLF members still in hiding have resorted to begging from the local folks for subsistence. However, there are splinter groups who have employed the tactics of harrassment, extortion, kidnapping, carnapping, and other forms of lawlessness. They, without doubt, have created a bad impression of themselves and have consequently weakened their position in the community.

Prognosis

There is no doubt that the government gradually gains grounds towards establishing peace. The peace effect of President Marcos has overwhelmed the members of the Islamic Conference although they have reservations as to the extent of autonomy of the present regional governments. The Islamic Conference will be sending its Secretary General to Manila within the next few months to prepare for the next round of talks. This, however, is a tangible sign that the Islamic Conference is anxious to see an end to the Mindanao problem.

The reported failure of Misuari to utilize the \$ 3 million aid fund for rehabilitation and development purposes in Min-

danao has undermined his campaign abroad. This is one reason why the MNLF fieldmen are slowly waning in number and some have resorted to banditry or lawlessness.

Meanwhile, there is a need to strengthen the two autonomous governments and to have strong representation of Muslim and other minorities in the national body politic in order to erase in their minds the feeling of "unreasonable prejudices" and oppression. When fully achieved, productivity will increase, happiness will prevail, as the South will turn out to be a better place to live in.

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