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Identity Politics and the Struggle for Peace in Mindanao[1]

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While in Manila for a conference two years ago, my writer friends and I talked about sundry things when the Mindanao issue cropped up. At that time, the terms Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) and Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) were just being floated around. But my Ilocano writer friend already had a definite position on it.

Said he: "For the first time in my life, I'm going to volunteer to serve our country. I've never done this before. Not even during the Second World War. But now, I'm going to do it."

"Volunteer to do what?" I asked.

He said he was going to volunteer to become a soldier and defend the Republic of the Philippines. The Moros, he said, want to dismember the country, and he will never allow it.

I asked: "Why, what's your interest in Mindanao? Do you have relatives there? Are you doing any business there?"

He said: "What do you mean do I have interests in Mindanao? I'm a Filipino. I'm protecting my country."

"Protect it from whom?" I asked. "Who's invading us?"

My Zamboangueño writer friend chimed in. He said: "We Zamboangueños have always considered the Moros our enemy. For centuries they've been trying to get Zamboanga and for centuries we've been fighting them off. Zamboanga is ours. We will never give it to them."

"How about the Ilocanos? Do you consider any part of Mindanao, yours?" I asked the Ilocano.

"As a Filipino, I do," he answered without hesitation.

Further questioning showed my Ilocano friend had no personal stake in Mindanao. He had no relatives in Mindanao, he had no business

concern in Mindanao, and he had no plans to settle in Mindanao. He was simply operating from the framework of being a Filipino citizen whose duty it is to defend the motherland from any threat.

But the Zamboangueño's reaction was gut level. Zamboanga was his home and he will not give it to anybody. He felt and knew deep in his bones that as a Zamboangueño, he owns Zamboanga.

So I asked, "What if the Moros don't include Zamboanga? What if they will claim only those that they own? That is, areas that have an all-Moro population, areas that have no other claimants except the Moros?"

He said that is difficult to determine, almost impossible. I cited Jolo Island, where the native population is Tausug Moro. "They're not stealing it from anybody, are they?" I asked. "If Zamboanga belongs to you, then Jolo belongs to the Tausugs. Agree or disagree?"

After some thinking, the Zamboangueño writer said: "Well, okay. That I will concede. The Tausugs do own Jolo."

But he resisted the idea of dividing the big island of Mindanao itself to give way to the Bangsamoro. He said the population is so mixed up it is impossible to separate the different tribes from each other, not to mention the settlers who have penetrated deep into the original tribal territories.

"You mean," I asked, "there are no areas that have Maguindanao or Maranao majority?"

He conceded that indeed there are still areas in Mindanao where the Moros constitute the absolute majority. But he feared they might demand more territory. What if, I followed up, they only want to get what is theirs? He said delineating the boundaries would be very difficult. To which I agreed. But I said, isn't it better to break our heads at the negotiating table rather than at the battlefield?

And he said, "Okay, I'm listening." So, at least he was now open to negotiate what is "theirs" and what is "his."

The Ilocano writer, meanwhile, merely listened as I probed into the Zamboangueño's positionality. I wondered what other framework, political theory, or social doctrine my Ilocano friend was going to cite to strengthen his resolve to bear arms and fight the Moros in Mindanao.

The Ilocos is too far away. The Moros are not claiming the Ilocos. But apparently the idea that he was a Filipino and that Mindanao is part of the Philippines was enough to stir up his nationalist sentiments, and so at age eighty or ninety he is ready to go to battle to save the territorial integrity of the country.

Not surprisingly, my students in Discourse Analysis had varied reactions to the text of the MOA-AD. One Davao-born student of mixed Lumad and settler parentage couldn't imagine dividing the Philippines, certainly not Mindanao! She wouldn't give an inch of territory to the Moros because, she was very sure, they would demand more. They might include Davao, where the Moros have an infinitesimal presence.

Kung ayaw nila sa Pilipinas, paalisin sila, paalisin![2] she said. When told that the Moros are natives of Mindanao, she seemed surprised. But her bottom line was that any arrangement with the Moros should be within the framework of the Republic of the Philippines, not outside it.

In that class I also had a mainland Chinese student whose position on the Moro issue mirrored his view on Tibet, which matched the view of the Chinese government – Tibet belongs to China, and the Tibetans are Chinese. I pointed out to him that the Tibetans do not consider themselves Chinese; they dress differently, they have a different language, and practice a different religion.

"No, no," he said. "They are Chinese. They are not Han Chinese. They're a different kind of Chinese. But still Chinese."

I said, "Okay, the Tibetans say they are Tibetans and not Chinese. And you say, they are Chinese. Who decides their identity?"

And my mainland Chinese student said, "Okay, you don't agree, then fight! Let's fight."

He didn't mean me and him, he meant the opposing parties – the Chinese government and the Tibetans.

"Fighting decides identity issues?" I asked.

"Of course," was his quick reply.

I was rather surprised by his hawkish stance and power talk, but on reflection, it's actually the same thinking that animates government policy on the Moro issue as expressed in the total war policy, all-out war policy, and what other war policy to defend such noble principles as constitutionality, territorial integrity, national sovereignty, etc. It's the same stance taken by my Ilocano friend.

But not all of my students had a statist, Filipinist position. Surprisingly, a Manileño was all for giving the Moros their own territory. He didn't worry at all about the constitution and other legal complications, the problematic territorial division, or the economic viability of a Bangsamoro republic. Or whether the new political entity should be merely autonomous, part of a federation, or completely

independent. What he worried about is whether or not that will buy peace in Mindanao. "If they're not Filipinos, then they're not Filipinos," he said. "And if it's their territory, then it's their territory," he added.

My Manileño student's attitude reminded me of an interesting incident at an international conference I attended several years ago. A hefty woman in her brilliant sari suddenly stood up when a diminutive man who looked southeast Asian – he could pass for a Filipino, Indonesian, or Thai – introduced himself as a Naga to the entire body.

"What do you mean you are Naga? You are Indian!" the woman boomed indignantly.

"I am not Indian. I am Naga!" the Naga man said defiantly.

This exchange went for about a minute or so, with the tall Indian woman getting more agitated, and the short Naga man standing his ground. "I am Naga. I am not Indian," he insisted with his chin up.

So we had this curious spectacle of a tall mixed Aryan-Dravidian, typically Bombay-looking woman glaring down at a small Tibeto-Burmese Naga man who proudly insisted he was not Indian but Naga.

Finally, the Indian woman said: "Okay, if you are Naga, show me your passport that proves you are Naga. Show me your passport."

The man, of course, could not show his Naga passport, and so the Indian woman sat down in triumph. But the Naga man said: "With or without a Naga passport, I am Naga."

Political scientists know the nature of the conflict between the Indian and the Naga. The Indian woman was working within a political framework – the framework of a legal, internationally recognized, citizenship identity as proven by her passport, while the Naga was operating within a social framework - his ethnic, minority nationality identity that has no legal, national, or state personality under international law.

Like the Nagas of northeastern India, the Moros have no passport to show they are Moros. But they insist they are Moros, not Filipinos. Who decides what their identity should be, and how is it to be decided? Do we insist that they are Filipinos because they live in a territory internationally recognized as part of the Philippine Republic? Do we want to go the way my mainland Chinese student has suggested? "You don't agree, then fight!"

In fact, our government has followed that route for a long, long time already, following a policy instituted by the Spanish and American colonial governments. For decades now, hundreds of thousands have been killed, and thousands upon thousands more have been displaced in

pursuit of that policy, adding to the misery of people already burdened by poverty and underdevelopment.

Government is an impersonal, almost abstract entity, but at bottom it is still composed of people who are supposed to represent the will of the majority. I wonder, does the government position on the Moro demand represent the thinking of the majority of Filipinos? Do majority of the Filipinos insist that Moros are Filipinos?

If so, how do we explain the fact that a lot of Filipinos themselves do not want to be Filipinos? Indeed, thousands have resigned as Filipinos or are planning to resign as Filipinos and migrate abroad. Why do they want the Moros to become Filipinos? It seems to me many Moros do not want to be Filipinos, but they do not want to migrate, either. They just want to stay in their own homeland and have control over it.

That Mindanao continues to bleed reflects the fact that all approaches and solutions that have been tried so far have failed to solve the fundamental issue of the Moro's demand for a homeland of their own. This is a centuries-old dream that refuses to die, and those of us who struggle for peace in Mindanao should confront it squarely if we want peace in our country.

The conference theme counterposing sovereignty and autonomy seems to do just that, but may I add another perspective? The term sovereignty carries with it a concatenation of weighty principles such as constitutionality, inviolability of territorial integrity, nationalism, etc. As we have seen, these principles are upheld not only by government, but also by a host of individuals who will volunteer to defend them.

On the other hand, autonomy is only one option of another fundamental principle: The people's right to self-determination. The concept of people carries with it a concatenation of weighty principles such as identity, ethnicity, homeland, and nationhood. As we know these principles act as powerful motivators to many people to volunteer to fight, not only in Mindanao, but also all over the world. Furthermore, we know that when conditions are ripe, these people will push the right to self-determination to its logical conclusion: Secession and the formation of a new, independent country.

Autonomy can be accommodated within sovereignty. But secession directly challenges an existing sovereignty because it seeks to become another sovereignty. As we know, that is the reason why the map of the world keeps changing. It is identity politics at work.

There are a thousand and one issues that can be discussed and explored about the Mindanao conflict. But I suggest that we should begin with confronting our own individual position on the core issue of the identity assertions of the Moros. The first question is, do you accept that the Moros are not Filipinos, even if they are inhabitants of the Republic of the Philippines? The second question is, if they are not Filipinos, are they entitled to their own homeland?

Obviously a negative answer means maintaining the *status quo*. In effect, it is taking the position of my mainland Chinese student: Fight. And like my Ilocano friend, it means willingness to volunteer to defend the constitution, national sovereignty, and the country's territorial boundaries. It means war.

I suggest that an affirmative answer, although fraught with many dangers, provides hope for genuine peace. Like my Zamboangueño friend, we must be willing to break our heads at the negotiating table to determine what is "theirs" and what is "mine." We must be willing to reimagine a new Philippines. And we must be aware how difficult that is. For one, we have to ensure that the rights of the Lumad communities and settler communities in the affected areas are protected. Our Moro brothers must be made aware that if Moros do not want to be Filipinos, many Filipinos, including Lumads, do not want to be Moros, too. Or to be precise, they do not want to acquire a Moro citizenship in a Bangsamoro Republic. If we respect each other's rights, there will be peace in our land and hopefully all of us can attend to the urgent tasks of eradicating poverty and breaking underdevelopment in our respective homelands.

Epilogue[3]

I went to the Conference of the Philippine Political Science Association (PPSA) in General Santos City on 03-04 April 2009 with some apprehension. I was going to talk about identity politics even as its most violent expression was being played out in the neighboring province of Maguindanao. A week before the conference, 27 March 2009 to be exact, a government patrol had been ambushed by fighters of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Barangay Bialong, Saudi Ampatuan town. The Army reported that seven of its soldiers were killed in the ambush; they were retrieved only two days later, their bodies badly mutilated. The Army accused the rebels of desecrating the dead, which MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu denied.[4]

In Davao, the war in Cotabato seems so far away even if Cotabato is just a neighboring province. The death casualties and the periodic displacement of civilians are things we only read in the papers or see on TV. But this particular piece of news brought the realities of war right in our neighborhood. One of the soldiers killed in the ambush was a neighbor, and his wake was held at his mother's house, just three houses away from the family compound. I did not know the soldier personally. I was told he was only twenty-five years old. Those who visited his wake could not see his face. His entire body was wrapped in a white shroud. "Mutilated," said the neighbors.

His mother was an ordinary housewife who augmented the family income by being a *sastre*.[5] She did the curtains of my mother. And so we knew her. We knew another son had died a year ago from some illness. In a span of one year she had lost two sons.

During the wake, soldiers would drop by our neighbor's house, but there were always two soldiers who stayed to keep watch. And so I was going to General Santos City (GenSan) to talk about identity politics even as a soldier's wake was still being held in my neighborhood and sporadic fighting was still erupting in Cotabato, displacing thousands of people.[6]

I knew, of course, that the GenSan PPSA Conference was a gathering of academics, but I could not be too sure about the passions of the participants. I wouldn't know the emotions I would arouse. But I said to myself that I would read my paper as a point for reflection, and not as a point for argument. I will not argue while in GenSan, while a hot war was going on, while our soldier-neighbor's dead body lay in state in his mother's house.

And so when I saw several hands going up after my speech, I decided to be more cautious in my answers. I do not know how I fared with my answers to the questions raised by some of the participants. They certainly had their own strong views on the subject. But now safely ensconced in Davao, perhaps I can also give a fuller explanation of my views.

One participant raised the point that the Philippines is actually composed of many *bangsas*. In Mindanao, you do not only have the Bangsamoro, but also the Bangsa Lumad, which is further subdivided into various bangsas – Manobo, Teduray, Mansaka, Mandaya, Bagobo, etc. – not to mention the Bangsa Migrante (settlers) each with its own history, culture, language, etc.

I don't remember making a comment on this observation. But I agree. We are a multinational country. Some bangsas are big, some are small. However, the issue is that in the case of Mindanao, the Bangsamoros have attained a national consciousness of identity separate from the other groups. They have political organizations and armies, and have fought for a separate homeland for decades. The other bangsas have no such national consciousness and for the moment, at least, are content with (or resigned to?) being a part of the Philippine body politic. On the part of the Lumads, many are satisfied with being given their ancestral domains.

In Luzon and the Visayas, no serious separatist groups have arisen so far among the Christianized bangsas such as the Ilocanos, Cebuanos, Bicolanos, etc. Many appear to consider themselves as Filipinos, although a lot are resentful of Manila imperialism and demand federalization to empower the regions or other bangsas. The idea of breaking up the Philippines into several countries based on ethnokinship lines as advocated by David Martinez[7] does not seem to be catching on.

One participant said that identity is not really that strong a bond. It only surfaces when a people feel they are oppressed and exploited. If their economic conditions improve, then the demand for secession will evaporate.

I don't fully recall our exchange. I felt though that since this appeared to be a "theoretical" issue, it was a safe topic, and I guess I said a mouthful, dropping terms like ethnicity, identity markers, kinship ties, ethnokinship. At the bottom what I wanted to say was that the strength of the bonds depends on how much the people have in common in terms of identity markers, such as color, bloodline, language, family, genealogy, tradition, language, religion, history, literature, etc., including a common territoriality. Of course, consciousness ties all these things up. The more identity markers match among certain people, the stronger their bond, and the strongest social bond is defined along ethnokinship ties.

I said that I have no problem if economic equalization succeeds in weakening the bonds, but I pointed out that prosperity is no guarantee. I cited the Basques and the Catalans who live in the most industrialized regions of Spain and yet, these are the places where there appears to be a strong secessionist sentiment.

On reflection, probably the best way to solve this issue is to cite specific cases where subordinated nations are bought off through prosperity. My observation is that this economic/development approach becomes possible only if the subordinated nations are completely

defeated militarily and are effectively minoritized to the extent that they can no longer mount any resistance. But to complete the conquest, many majority nations use an entire array of cultural and ideological weapons, such as education, to destroy the community bonds, wiping out the histories, cultures, traditions, and even languages of the subordinated or minority nations. (For those interested, I discussed in another paper the weakening if not dissolution of certain bonds wrought by American education in the Philippines).[8]

One young participant rose to say that he knew what ethnicity, identity, and kinship mean, but this is the first time he had heard of ethnokinship. I said I coined the word, but I did not elaborate anymore as it would take up time. (For those interested, they might like to read my explorations into this concept through a related seminal paper entitled "The ethnokinship theory of literature").[9]

One participant said that my idea of identity is dangerous. What would prevent any group of people from insisting that they are different, even if there are only five of them? I don't exactly recall what I answered. But identity is indeed dangerous. We cannot prevent any group of people from declaring that they are different. If their bond is strong and they have the means to become separate, well, then they might fight for it. If not, then they would remain subordinated nations, or be wiped out.

What is really the sentiment of the Moro people, somebody asked. Do they really favor the MOA-AD or secession? This time, my answer was safe. I said I couldn't answer that. Only the Moros could answer that. It's a matter the Moros will have to settle among themselves. I did not present my personal opinion anymore —that the protracted struggle of the Moros seems to me to indicate that majority of the Moros support an independent Bangsamoro.

Somebody took me to task for suggesting that the Luzonians should keep out of the Mindanao problem. Why should I exclude them if they want to help? Well, I had to retreat. I said it was a hyperbole. I cannot stop anybody from helping solve the Mindanao problem. But now may I add that it should not be by waging war, as my Ilocano friend wanted to do? Rather, they might like to join some Mindanawons who are now ready to accept the existence of a Bangsamoro Republic.

A young participant rose to say he was simply amazed at my obstinacy or was it my intransigence (?) in arguing about identity politics despite what all the other participants had said. He seemed to be saying,

who are you to argue with all of them? Anyway, his main point was why was I shutting out the possibility of a hyphenated identity?

I am not sure how I answered him. But I suppose he will be in for more amazement in the future. I have no problem with hyphenated identities for as long as the person concerned is the one who chose to have a hyphenated identity. It doesn't matter how many hyphens he puts in his identity for as long as it is his own act, and not imposed by others.

Which brings me to the point of my paper: We have to confront the identity assertion of the Moros. What is your own attitude towards the Moro demand for their own homeland?

Notes

[1] Translation of a paper read in Cebuano at the 2009 International Conference, Philippine Political Science Association, with the theme "Reimagining the nation-state: Consensus and conflict on sovereignty and autonomy," General Santos City, 03-04 April 2009.
[2] "If they don't like the Philippines, drive them out!"
[3] Written on 12 September 2009.
[4] See *Bandera*, 31 March 2009, 4.
[5] Seamstress.
[6] Estimates placed the internally displaced persons at 300,000. See Malang.
[7] For an exhaustive discussion on the nations within a nation, see *A country of our own: Partitioning the Philippines* by David C. Martinez.
[8] See "Return to community," an article which appeared in the December 2001 issue of *Our own voice*.
[9] This article appeared in the *Tambara* vol. 20 in both Visayan and English versions.

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