By Macapado A Muslim
and Rufa Cagoco-Guiam

Mindanao
land of promise

The Philippines is made up of 7,100 islands (some 1,000 of which are populated) divided into three groups: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. With a population of 16 million, Mindanao is the second largest island and is seen by many Filipinos as a frontier — a dangerous place but also a land of promise. It evokes contrasting images of bounty and want, of war and peace, of rapid development amid the increasing impoverishment of its people.

Colonial rule started a process that was to alter Mindanao's demographic composition. It deprived the indigenous inhabitants of their land and spawned deep-seated prejudices among the different ethno-linguistic groups. It also marginalised an Islamised people with their own distinct history. In the early 1970s the Bangsamoro people (see box, p. 15) united in a struggle for self-determination which has invariably, although erroneously, been referred to as a 'Muslim-Christian' conflict.

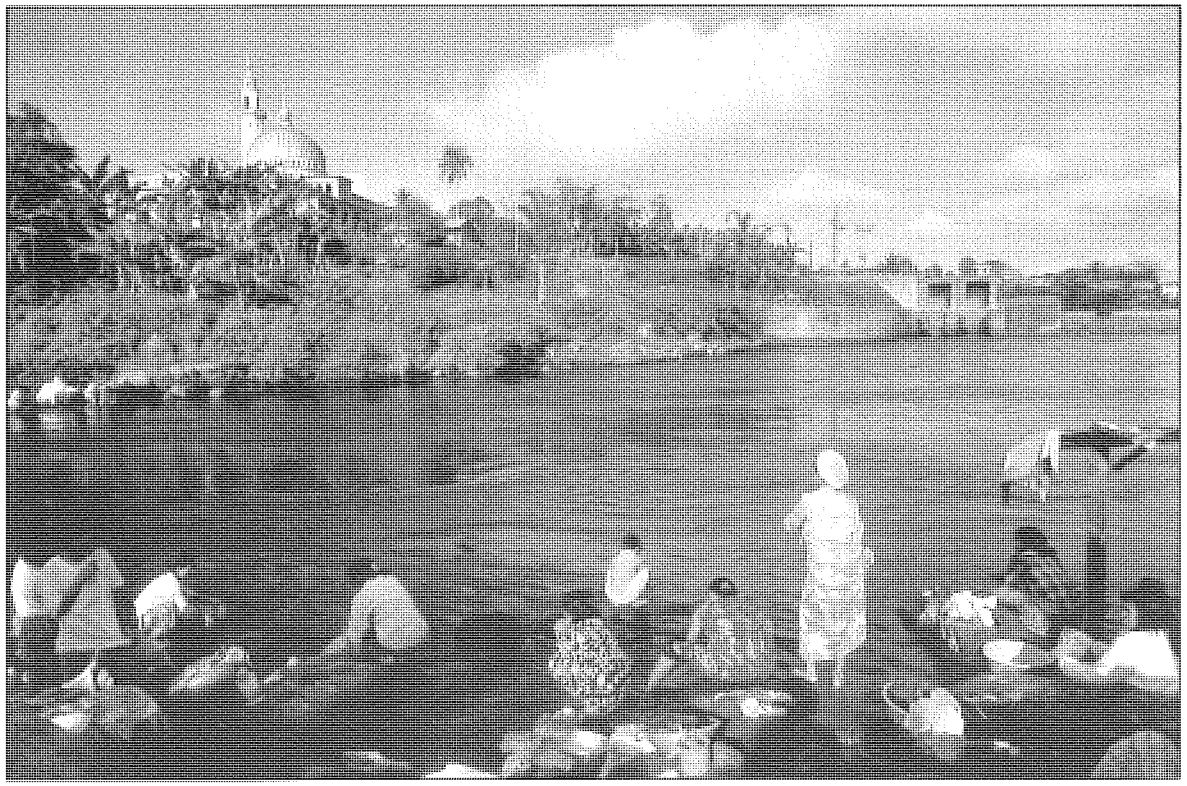
Spain and the sultanates

From the mid-16th to the end of the 19th century Spain subjected most of the archipelago to colonial rule. Arab traders had visited between the 10th and 12th centuries bringing Islam to the islands.

The Spaniards took possession of most of Luzon and the Visayas, converting the lowland population to Christianity. But although Spain eventually established footholds in northern and eastern Mindanao and the Zamboanga peninsula, its armies failed to colonise the rest of Mindanao. This area was populated by Islamised peoples ('Moros' to the Spaniards) and many non-Muslim indigenous groups now known as Lumads (see box, p. 14).

Mindanao Muslim society was organised, socially and politically, in 'sultanates' which had evolved as segmentary states whose territories increased or decreased depending on the overall leadership abilities of their sultan. In these quasi-states, lineage and kinship combined with more elaborate

Lake Lanao, Mindanao



Source: Mike Goldwater/Network

organisations for production and defence. Their wealth was based on maritime trade with China and the Middle East.

The sultanates provided Mindanao Muslims with an identity as peoples distinct from the inhabitants of Luzon and the Visayas. Islam was the anchor in their defiance of any group of colonisers.

For centuries, Spain used the Christians of the north in battles against the Moros of Mindanao, at the same time befriending some Moro rulers in their attempts to subjugate the more defiant. These tactics sowed the seeds of animosity among the various indigenous groups. Although Spain failed to establish political control, it caused the strategic decline of the sultanates, undermining their economic base through trade blockades and war.

In Luzon and the Visayas, the Spanish colonial government imposed land tenure arrangements, making local people tenants on lands their ancestors had tilled. Mindanao and Sulu were not covered by these systems, but this changed under the American regime.

US colonial rule

Under the Treaty of Paris, ending the Spanish-American war of 1896-98, the US paid $20 million to Spain in return for full possession of the Philippines, including Mindanao. By this time, however, a Filipino nationalist movement had ejected the Spanish authorities from all but a small enclave around Manila. Philippine independence was proclaimed and a revolutionary government established, which soon faced the might of the imperial US. The fledgling government sought an alliance with the Moro sultanates, who refused because of a lingering distrust towards Christians that resulted from the Spanish campaigns. The US military exploited this unease, came to an arrangement with the sultanates and concentrated their war of 'pacification' in Luzon and the Visayas. Having crushed the new Philippine nation, the US moved on to subdue Mindanao.

The US colonial government created a Philippine Commission which passed several laws formalising US dominance, especially with regard to land ownership.

Colonial land laws and policies

Customary law — *adat* among the Moros — is based on the notion that there can be no absolute ownership of land. Islamic principles hold that land and all creation belong to God and that human beings are trustees or stewards of God's creation. Thus among Moros land-holding was based on the right to the produce of the land.

The US colonial government passed several land laws which became the legal prop for dispossession of Moros and indigenous groups all over the Philippines. These laws provided for registration of land ownership through land titles and set limits on hectarage that individuals and corporations could acquire. Unregistered land automatically became open for exploration, occupation and purchase by citizens of the Philippines and the United States.

At first, very few Moros were sufficiently literate in English to understand the bureaucratic intricacies of land registration. Many refused or did not bother to register the lands they had been cultivating. However, several Moro rulers took advantage of the new law to register large territories in their own names. They became the ancestors of today's Moro landed elite.

The US authorities recognised land titles issued by the Spanish colonial regime for the lowlands of Luzon and the Visayas. In Mindanao, vast tracts of arable land occupied by Moros and Lumads were sold or leased to settlers and plantation companies.

Between 1913 and 1917 seven agricultural colonies were opened by the colonial government, where Christian settlers were mixed with the indigenous Muslims purportedly to promote 'good working relations' between the two groups. In fact, the government's aims were to defuse peasant unrest in Luzon and remove troublemakers from northern and central Philippines. Christian migrants were entitled to larger tracts of land: 16 hectares compared to the native inhabitants' ten (later reduced to eight). A predominantly Christian Philippine Constabulary was used to quell any Moro dissent.

Almost all titles granted under the Land Registration Act of 1902 were for large private holdings. By 1912 there were 159 major plantations (100 hectares or more) in Mindanao, 66 of them owned by Americans, 39 by Filipinos (mostly Christians), 27 by Europeans, and 27 by Chinese. The Moros and Lumads became impoverished squatters on their own land.

It also cultivated the development of a compliant local elite, first by limiting suffrage to property owners, then by pursuing rapprochement with the politicians who emerged claiming to represent the 'people'. The Moro leaders found a role in the new colonial order as brokers between state and society, sometimes defiant but often compliant. Although some were given token positions in the central government, few Moros saw themselves as members of the Philippine nation-state emerging under the US.

Marginalisation

Post-war independent Philippines provided the local elite, including some Moros, with the opportunity to participate fully in the politics of self-rule. But for most Moros, the creation of a nation-state dominated by Christian Filipinos simply reinforced their marginalised and minoritised status.

The establishment of a Philippine nation-state inevitably led to the entrenchment of a national identity based on the values of the majority group, the Christian Filipinos. Whether through gentle persuasion or outright coercion in the guise of nation-building, these values undermined the identity of certain population groups, relegating them to the political and economic periphery (until the 1970s the Philippine Constitution and jurisprudence completely ignored Muslim personal law).

Post-independence governments continued to encourage the landless poor of Luzon and the Visayas to settle in Mindanao in order to defuse rural unrest. Thousands of settlers arrived every week until the 1960s, and competition for land, aggravated by the clash of Moro and majority Filipino concepts of land tenure and ownership, fuelled social tensions. The government saw this as a manifestation of the 'violent' character of the Moros, and launched pacification campaigns against defiant Moro leaders. The Moros, however, felt they were asserting their right to self-determination as a formerly sovereign people under the sultanates.

Variety store, Ihan, Davao del Sur

Source: Sean Sprague

The creation of private armies by both native and settler elites further increased the tensions in Mindanao. The predominantly Ilonggo (people from Iloilo, in the Visayas) migrants in the province of Cotabato organised a private army called the Ilaga (Visayan for rat). To counter the terror of Ilaga attacks on Muslim civilians, members of the Moro elite organised their own heavily armed groups – the Blackshirts in Cotabato, and the Barracudas in Lanao – who responded in kind.

As a result of the influx of immigrants, the late 1960s had reduced Muslims to around 25% of Mindanao's population, from about 75% at the turn of the century. The most productive agricultural lands had been taken over by settlers growing rice, corn and coconuts, or transnational corporations producing rubber, bananas and pineapples. Wealthy loggers grabbed giant concessions and started to deforest the island. While Mindanao contributed substantially to the national treasury, little was sent back in the form of public infrastructure and social services, especially in the Muslim areas. Soon their leaders could no longer mediate and Moro defiance turned into open rebellion.

The Moro armed struggle

Moro resistance and assertion of self-determination were already widely established during and immediately after colonial times but it was not until the early 1970s that a revolutionary movement – the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) – was formalised.

The MNLF emerged in the wake of a resurgence of Islamic identity among Philippine Muslims who felt oppressed at the hands of a Christian-dominated government and marginalised in the Philippine body politic. This sentiment was exacerbated by a series of incidents that convinced many Muslim intellectuals and politicians that armed struggle was the only way to redress Muslim grievances.

Foremost of these incidents was the Jabidah massacre on 17 March 1968, when at least 28 young Muslim recruits to the Philippine Army were killed by their Christian superiors on the

Lumads and ancestral domain

'Lumad' is a Cebuano Visayan term meaning native or indigenous. For more than two decades it has been used to refer to the groups indigenous to Mindanao who are neither Muslim nor Christian.

There are 18 Lumad ethnolinguistic groups: Ata, Bagobo, Banwaon, B'laan, Bukidnon, Dibabawon, Higaonon, Mamanwa, Mandaya, Manguwangan, Manobo, Mansaka, Subanon, Tagakaolo, Tasaday, T'boli, Teduray, and Ubo.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Lumads controlled an area which now covers 17 of Mindanao's 24 provinces, but by the 1980 census they constituted less than 6% of the population of Mindanao and Sulu. Heavy migration to Mindanao of Visayans, spurred by government-sponsored resettlement programmes, turned the Lumads into minorities. The Bukidnon province population grew from 63,470 in 1948 to 194,368 in 1960 and 414,762 in 1970, with the proportion of indigenous Bukidnons falling from 64% to 33% to 14%.

Lumads have a traditional concept of land ownership based on what their communities consider their ancestral territories. The historian BR Rodil notes that 'a territory occupied by a community is a communal private property, and community members have the right of *usufruct* to any piece of unoccupied land within the communal territory.' Ancestral lands include cultivated land as well as hunting grounds, rivers, forests, uncultivated land and the mineral resources below the land.

Source: Philippines Resource Centre

Unlike the Moros, the Lumad groups never formed a revolutionary group to unite them in armed struggle against the Philippine government. When the migrants came, many Lumad groups retreated into the mountains and forests. However, the Moro armed groups and the Communist-led New People's Army (NPA) have recruited Lumads to their ranks, and the armed forces have also recruited them into paramilitary organisations to fight the Moros or the NPA.

For the Lumad, securing their rights to ancestral domain is as urgent as the Moros' quest for self-determination. However, much of their land has already been registered in the name of multinational corporations, logging companies and wealthy Filipinos, many of whom are settlers to Mindanao. Mai Tuan, a T'boli leader explains, 'Now that there is a peace agreement for the MNLF, we are happy because we are given food assistance like rice. . . we also feel sad because we no longer have the pots to cook it with. We no longer have control over our ancestral lands.' ■

island of Corregidor, off Luzon. Reports leaked out that the government was training these recruits to infiltrate the Malaysian state of Sabah (North Borneo) as a prelude to military invasion.

Investigations were unable to establish the truth and several versions of the story exist. Most Muslims believe that when the recruits learned that they were to fight against fellow Muslims in Sabah, they rebelled. Government officials vehemently denied the plan to use the recruits to invade Sabah and said they rebelled because of inadequate pay. Whichever is the truth, the incident provoked all Muslim groups in the Philippines to cooperate, kickstarting the creation of the MNLF.

In May 1968, Datu Udtog Matalam, a prominent Maguindanaon political leader, formed the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM). Matalam attributed the separatist goals of his movement to the Jabidah incident. The MIM's youth section was sent to train in Malaysia, and soon after some of the trainees organised the MNLF. Their leader was Nur Misuari, formerly a political science lecturer at the University of the Philippines in Manila, who returned to Mindanao after Jabidah.

Meanwhile, in Mindanao, the Ilaga and similar paramilitary groups launched attacks on Muslims in places where the number of northern Filipino migrants was growing and the Muslim population decreasing. Their aim was to evict all remaining Muslims.

There are indications that these squads were supported and coordinated by the Philippine Constabulary. Their attacks were systematic, methodical and widespread. Estimates put their membership at about 35,000 by 1975. Some sources suggest that aside from Philippine military support, these groups enjoyed the financial sponsorship of timber merchants who sought the rich forests of the Moros and indigenous groups for logging.

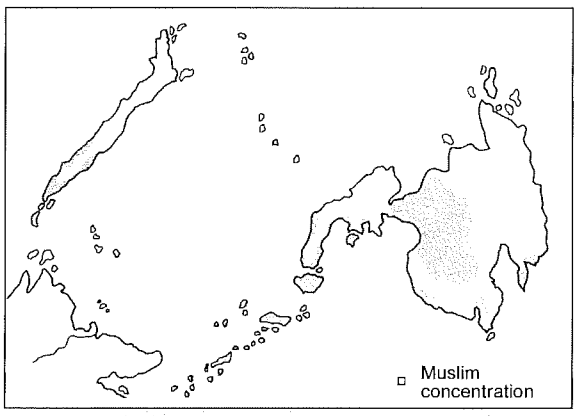
Muslims in the Philippines

There are at least 13 ethnolinguistic groups indigenous to Mindanao that have adopted Islam as a way of life. The three largest and politically dominant are the Maguindanaon (people of the flooded plains) of the Cotabato provinces (Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat, North and South Cotabato); the Maranaw (people of the lake) of the two Lanao provinces; and the Tausug (people of the current) of the Sulu archipelago. The remaining ten are the Yakan, Sama, Badjaw, Kalagan, Sangil, Iranun or Ilanun, Palawani, Melebugnon, Kalibogan and Jama Mapun. There is also a growing number of Muslim converts from various ethnolinguistic groups all over the Philippines.

In the Philippines, the terms 'Muslim' and 'Moro' have been used interchangeably to refer to the various ethnolinguistic groups. Whereas the term 'Muslim' refers to a universal religious identity, the term 'Moro' denotes a political identity distinct to the Islamised peoples of Mindanao and Sulu. The Spanish colonisers originally used the term for peoples of Mindanao who shared the religion of the Moors who had once colonised Spain. The term 'Moro' was used in the same derogatory way as the epithet 'Indio' for Filipinos whom they converted to Christianity.

With the rise of a self-assertive attitude expressed in the organisation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the early 1970s, the term 'Moro' gained favourable connotations among the Muslim youth. It expressed their distinctiveness as a people who had resisted foreign domination. Used together with a Malay word, Bangsa (nation) as in 'Bangsamoro'/'Bangsa Moro', it indicates a nationality distinct from that of the majority Filipinos.

Both the MNLF and its rival, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) apply the term Bangsamoro to all native inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu, whether Muslim, Christian or Highlanders (Lumad), who accept the distinctiveness of the Moro as a separate nationality from that of the Filipinos in Luzon and Visayas.



On 21 October 1972, a month after Marcos declared Martial Law in the Philippines, Maranaw Muslims staged a violent uprising in Marawi City. By this time, the conflict in Mindanao was approaching full-scale civil war, with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and its various paramilitary units conducting military campaigns against the Moros. In 1973, the newly formed military arm of the MNLF, the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA), openly emerged. The MNLF was to become the rallying symbol of the Moro struggle for self-determination, which aimed to defend the homeland and Islam as the way of life of its peoples. The MNLF made it clear that their target was the Philippine government, rather than the Christian population, and by 1975 they had become a popular revolutionary movement, enjoying almost universal support from Muslims in the Philippines and abroad.

The armed conflict was gory, brutal and costly: around 120,000 people were killed (government estimate), more than one million were made homeless and over 200,000 Muslim refugees fled to Sabah. During the mid-1970s about 80% of the AFP's combat strength was concentrated in Mindanao and Sulu. According to the late president Ferdinand Marcos, 11,000 Philippine soldiers were killed in the first eight years of the war (1972-80).

The war peaked in February 1974 in a fierce two-day encounter in the town of Jolo. The AFP shelled the town from the sea, then set it ablaze. Estimates of the numbers killed vary from 500 to 2,000, and 60,000 people were made homeless. Elsewhere, major military offensives were directed at Muslim settlements in Maguindanaon territory, while the Ilaga continued its attacks on Muslim civilians. The war dragged on and the death toll increased.

Attempts to manage the conflict

From the start of the war in 1972, the government approach has been one of 'carrot and stick', in which the stick – the state's superior instruments of violence – has received more emphasis. But the past 27 years demonstrate the inefficacy of a military approach which defines the armed struggle as the problem, rather than the conditions that brought it into existence. The government's use of military might has only sustained and intensified the armed struggle. The carrot, designed to entice the Moro *mujahideen* (fighters) and their sympathisers to return to the fold, included amnesty for the rank and file, offers of government posts to their leaders, and funds for livelihood projects. Occasionally, grandiose development programmes for Muslim Mindanao were announced.

In 1975, the Marcos government recognised that the conflict had reached a political and military stalemate. Moreover, oil-producing Muslim countries, which supported the Moros, were threatening an embargo. Marcos called for a ceasefire and opened the door to negotiations.

Marcos first organised panels to negotiate with the MNLF leadership in Jeddah and rebel commanders in the field. This was a direct response to calls from the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) for a peaceful solution to a conflict it had recognised as internal to the Philippines. At the same time, Marcos realigned his foreign policy to win over the Islamic world: recognising the Palestine Liberation Organisation, opening embassies in seven Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia, and upgrading relations with 13 others. The first lady, Imelda Marcos, was sent to the Middle East as a special emissary. She laid the groundwork for social and cultural exchange with Egypt, sought the Algerian president's advice on resolving the 'Moro problem', and consolidated other high level diplomatic contacts. Eventually, she met Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who played host to negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Tripoli Agreement in 1976.

The diplomatic offensive paid off. Under pressure from the OIC, the MNLF dropped its demands for independence and acquiesced to political autonomy.

MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari (3rd from left) and Agapito Aquino, President Aquino's brother in law (4th from left) meet in Jolo, 1986

Source: Filippijnemgroep Nederland

The Tripoli Agreement

The Tripoli Agreement provided for the grant of autonomy to 13 of the 23 provinces in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan islands, and the cities located therein. The autonomous regional government would have its own executive, legislative and judicial branches, and a regional security force independent of the AFP. However, the agreement left out many significant issues and implementation became bogged down in interpretation. In particular, the MNLF viewed the territorial coverage — 13 provinces — as a settled issue, while the government insisted on subjecting it to a plebiscite.

Several months after signing the agreement, Marcos implemented his own version of autonomy by establishing two separate regional governments which, as Senator Santanina Rasul later remarked, were 'regional but not autonomous'.

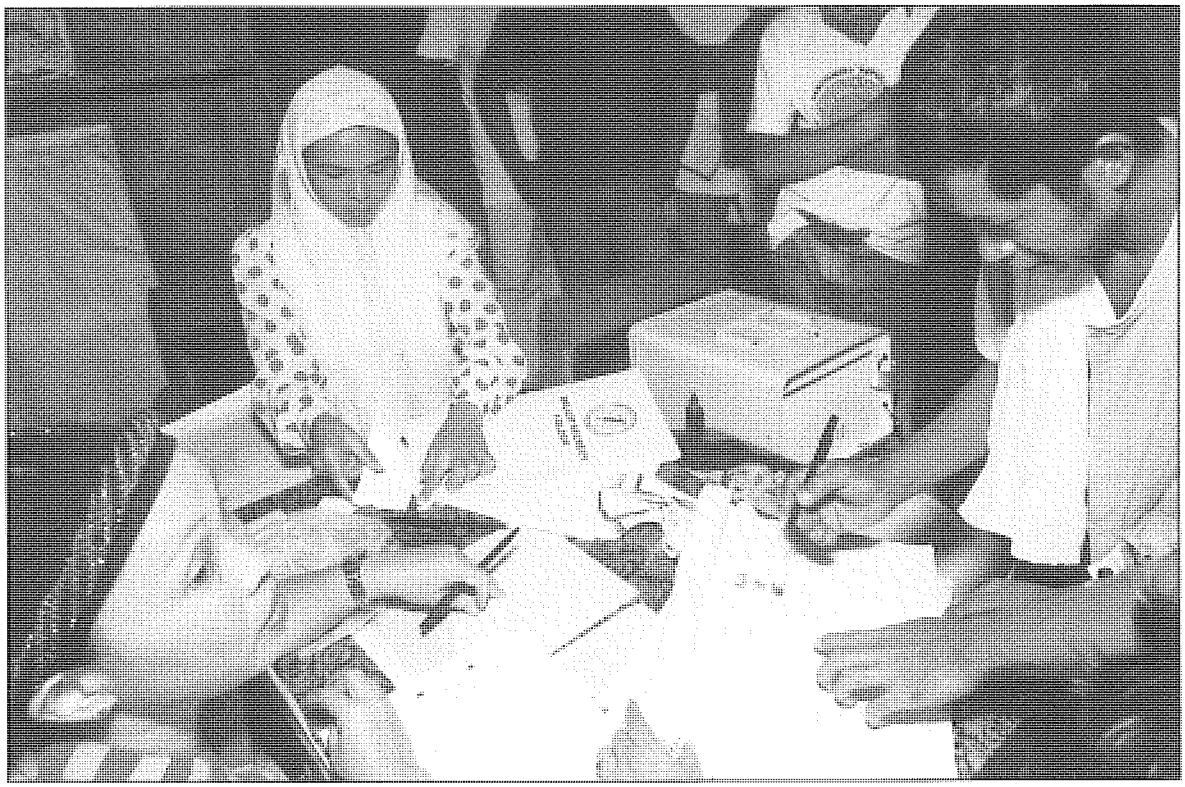
Hostilities resumed, with the MNLF accusing the Philippine government of insincerity in the peace negotiations. Some MNLF leaders argued that the agreement's primary objectives were to halt the MNLF's military successes, to gain time to factionalise the front's leadership and strengthen the AFP, and to pre-empt an oil embargo by OIC member countries dissatisfied with the failure to implement the agreement. The government claimed that it was merely applying constitutional processes in order to implement the agreement.

Fragmentation of the MNLF

The resumption of hostilities was accompanied by fragmentation of the previously united MNLF. Breakaway factions emerged: the MNLF-Reformist Group under Dimas Pundato, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) under Hashim Salamat.

The government capitalised on the resulting demoralisation of MNLF members by offering them amnesties and other forms of co-option. Marcos welcomed surrendering MNLF leaders to Manila like visiting dignitaries. Lumber concessions, barter market licenses, and export-import permits worth millions of pesos were given to those rebel commanders accepting amnesty, in addition to livelihood assistance projects and political positions in the new autonomous regional governments. MNLF organisational cohesion was sapped in a way that military force alone could not have done.

Election in the Autonomous Region, Jolo, September 1996



Source: Maria Suleiman

Because the root causes of the armed struggle (economic, political and cultural marginalisation) were not addressed, hostilities continued throughout the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

The Aquino government

The February 1986 People Power Revolution, ended the authoritarian Marcos era and provided an opening for peace in the entire country, especially in Mindanao. Corazon Aquino's new government launched initiatives designed to bring peace and development and to democratise governance. It started talks with the left-wing National Democratic Front (NDF), whose New People's Army (NPA) had grown during the Marcos regime from a small group in Central Luzon to a guerrilla movement operating all over the country (see *Profiles,* p. 83). To show her concern for peace in Mindanao, Aquino broke protocol and went to Jolo to meet MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari.

Aquino appointed a 50-member commission to draft a new constitution. The body, which had token Muslim representation, drew up provisions for the establishment of autonomous regional governments for Muslim Mindanao in the South and the Cordilleras in the North. A new Congress was elected in 1987 and passed an Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), that was subjected to a plebiscite on 19 November 1989. Only four provinces —Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi — voted for inclusion in this new autonomous structure.

The Aquino Administration viewed this legislation as its blueprint for peace in Mindanao and considered it to be in compliance with the spirit of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. The MNLF rejected it — not only had the front been excluded from the process of drawing up the autonomy law, but also the autonomous region had little real power and the plebiscite had reduced its territorial coverage from 13 provinces to four.

While these initiatives were an improvement on the past, they were an inadequate response to the conditions that caused the Moro armed struggle. The new autonomy law did not give the Moros the means to redress the suffering and insecurities arising from relative and

absolute poverty and political subordination. The government of the area of autonomy had very little financial independence, and there was no provision to enable Muslims to overcome the effects of past deprivation.

Like the Marcos-inspired autonomous structures, the ARMM failed as a policy response. Autonomy came to mean concessions for rebellious Muslims, not processes for democratic participation for the benefit of all. The ARMM became another bureaucratic layer providing little except position and privilege for self-interested Muslim politicians.

The peace process under Ramos

In 1992, the Moros welcomed a new president, Fidel Ramos, who turned peace with the different rebel groups — military, communist and Moro — into the cornerstone of his administration's policy. Mindanao was a primary component in Ramos's overall development vision, and he was determined to forge a comprehensive and enduring settlement, starting with the MNLF.

The Ramos Administration made serious advances on key dimensions of the Mindanao conflict. One was the need to return to the 1976 Tripoli Agreement as a framework, an indispensable move in ensuring the acceptance of the resulting agreement, not only by the Moro *mujahideen* and civilians, but also by OIC member states. This move was also calculated to ensure the support (especially financial) of OIC states for post-war reconstruction. After four years of tortuous negotiations, the Final Peace Agreement was signed in 1996.

Implementation of the Agreement was to come in two phases. The first phase was a three-year transition period of confidence building that included Nur Misuari running for the ARMM governorship. This was intended to make him 'official' with a clear mandate from a recognised constituency. The second phase was explicitly designed to meet Moro aspirations by providing for substantial autonomy. Transitional institutions set up under Phase I covered the area defined in the Tripoli Agreement (the 13 provinces had become 14, owing to a redrawing of local government boundaries in 1992). Phase II would go into operation after a plebiscite to determine which areas would join a new autonomous region with greater powers than the ARMM. (Full text of agreement on p. 41.)

Despite presidential backing, the Final Peace Agreement had a mixed reception. Christian settlers in the areas affected were particularly suspicious and feared the rise of Moro authoritarianism. Ramos assured them that 'there were no hidden motives, no secret agenda, no backroom deals'. Every decision, he maintained, 'redresses valid grievances in a manner consistent with our Constitution and our laws'. The negotiations were concluded in September 1996. 'We were well aware', said Ramos, 'that if a final agreement could not be signed before the ARMM elections on 9th September, and assuming that Chairman Misuari would win the ARMM governorship, we would be confronted with an absurd, yet entirely probable situation of having to continue to negotiate with a local official of our own Government!'

Even within the framework of the Final Peace Agreement, many key issues remain to be tackled: representation and rights of Lumads and Christians in a Muslim-led autonomous region, the balance between religion and secularism, reparations, economic redistribution, conflicting land claims, affirmative action policies, and the redefinition of relations with Manila. It remains to be seen whether the promises made to Mindanao can indeed be fulfilled. ■