

The Philippines

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From 1972 to 1980, a ferocious war raged throughout the southern Philippines between Muslim separatist rebels and the Philippine military. An estimated 120,000 people died in the fighting, which also created one million internal refugees and caused more than 100,000 Philippine Muslims to flee to Malaysia. That war ended in a stalemate and for the next 18 years an uneasy and fragile cease-fire existed – one periodically broken by armed clashes between the military and separatist fighters who remain under arms in remote camps. A 1996 peace agreement between the Philippine government and the main rebel faction represents the first real progress towards a genuine settlement of the conflict and substantial political autonomy for Philippine Muslims. This article traces the remote and proximate causes of the Philippine Muslim (or *Bangsamoro*) rebellion and its consequences for ordinary Muslims.

#### A wedding procession near Campo Muslim.

From: *Muslim Rulers and Rebels. Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (by Thomas M. McKenna, University of California Press, 1998)

The Muslim territories of the Philippines mark the periphery of the Eurasian Islamic world. Indeed, with the exception of a few Muslim groups in easternmost Indonesia, no indigenous population of Muslims in the world lives at a farther distance from the Islamic heartland than do the Muslims of the Philippines. There are approximately 3 million Muslims in the Philippines, the only predominately Christian country in Southeast Asia. Though they represent only about 5 percent of the Philippine population, Muslims are geographically concentrated in the south of the country, and are distinguished from Christian Filipinos not only by their profession of Islam but also by their evasion of 300 years of Spanish colonial domination. They thus comprise the largest un-hispanicized population in the Philippines. At the same time, Philippine Muslims have always been separated from one another in this archipelagic nation by significant linguistic and geographic distance. They are divided into three major and ten minor ethnolinguistic groups and dispersed across the southern islands.

Philippine Muslims share their religious culture with the neighbouring majority Muslim nations of Indonesia and Malaysia. They also retain aspects of an indigenous pre-Islamic and pre-colonial Philippine culture – expressed in dress, music, political traditions and a rich array of folk beliefs and practices – that are similar to those found elsewhere in island Southeast Asia, but are today almost entirely absent among Christian Filipinos. Thus, while Philippine Christians and Muslims inhabit the same state and are linked together by various attachments, a profound cultural gulf created by historical circumstance separates them.

That gulf is the outcome of two inter-linked events: the conversion of some regions of the Philippines to Islam, and the Spanish colonial occupation of other regions shortly afterward. Philippine Muslim tradition holds that Islam was brought to the Philippines by a wandering prince, the son of a Malay princess and an Arab sharif, in the very early sixteenth century. Islam may in fact have arrived somewhat earlier or later but, whatever the date, it seems clear that Islam was introduced to the Philippines as part of the last phase of a conversion process that swept across Southeast Asia from west to east beginning in the late thirteenth century. It is also well established that the Islamization process was still under way when the Spaniards gained their foothold in the northern Philippines in 1571, defeating the fledgling Sultanate of Manila to do so. After consolidating control of the northern tier of the Philippine islands, they failed, despite repeated attempts, to subdue the well-organized sultanates of the South. Little historical evidence exists to support claims that the southern sultanates mounted a sustained, unified Muslim resistance to Spanish aggression. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, sultanates just as often fought with one another, sometimes forging temporary alliances with the Spaniards to do

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so. Nevertheless, the ability of southern sultanates individually to withstand Spanish hegemony for more than 300 years is a testament to their military and diplomatic prowess.

With their Reconquista of Muslim Spain a recent collective memory, the Spaniards assigned to the unsubjected Muslim peoples of the southern sultanates the label previously bestowed on their familiar Muslim enemies from Mauritania: *Moros* (Moors). The term *Moro* was applied categorically and pejoratively with scant attention paid to linguistic or political distinctions among various *Moro* societies. The American colonizers who succeeded the Spaniards and eventually subdued Philippine Muslims in the early twentieth century by means of overwhelming force, continued the usage of the term *Moro* even though it had become an epithet used by Christian Filipinos to denote savages and pirates. In a bold piece of semantic alchemy, Philippine Muslim nationalists during the late 1960s appropriated the term *Moro*, shook it free of its colonial and pejorative roots, and transformed it into a positive symbol of collective identity – one that denominated the citizens of their newly-imagined nation. For Philippine Muslim nationalists, *Moro* denotes the descendants of those unsubjected peoples whom the Spaniards and their colonized subjects feared and distrusted. The 'Moro National Liberation Front' was formed to direct the struggle for an independent political entity proclaimed to be the *Bangsa Moro* or Philippine Muslim Nation.

#### The Rise of Muslim Nationalism and the Armed Separatist Struggle

The *Bangsamoro* rebellion developed out of a political movement for Muslim separatism that originated among a small set of Philippine Muslim students and intellectuals in the late 1960s. That movement had as its goal the establishment of a single independent homeland for all the Muslim peoples of the Philippines. The remote causes of Muslim separatism in the modern Philippines may be traced to Western colonizers. The Spaniards created two distinct populations in the archipelago – the colonized and Christianized peoples of the North and the unsubjected and mostly Muslim peoples of the South. American colonizers yoked those two populations unevenly together in a colonial, and then national, state. A more proximate cause may be found in the policies and practices of the postcolonial, Christian-dominated Philippine State. Until the 1950s, Muslims formed the majority population of almost every region of the southern Philippines. In the early 1950s, the Philippine government began to sponsor large-scale migration from the poor and politically troublesome regions of the north and central parts of the country to the agricultural frontiers of the sparsely populated southern islands. The large, fertile, and under-populated island of Mindanao became the primary destination for Christian migration to the southern Philippines and by the late 1960s, Mindanao Muslims found themselves a relatively impoverished minority in their own homeland.



Tensions brought about by massive Christian migration to the Muslim South eventually led to the eruption of sectarian violence in Mindanao in 1970. That violence, which in many cases was initiated or exacerbated by government soldiers, was a primary justification used by President Ferdinand Marcos to declare martial law in 1972. One of the very first actions of the martial law regime was an attempt to disarm Philippine Muslims. In response, the underground Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was activated as an armed separatist movement. Muslim separatist rebels, numbering as many as 30,000 armed insurgents, fought the Philippine Armed Forces to a stalemate, obliging the Philippine government to negotiate a cease-fire and peace treaty in 1977. Muslim civilians overwhelmingly supported the separatist insurgents and suffered cruelly at the hands of the Philippine military. The peace settlement, which called for the establishment of a 'Muslim Autonomous Region' in the southern Philippines, was never genuinely implemented by the Marcos administration. As a consequence, fighting broke out once more before the end of 1977, but did not again approach the level of intensity experienced prior to the cease-fire. The Muslim separatist movement entered a period of disarray marked by factional infighting and a weakening of popular support. By the early 1980s, it had refashioned itself in Mindanao into a mass-based and self-consciously Islamic movement guided by Islamic clerics. With the fall of the Marcos regime in 1985, movement leaders (with the now-modified aim of genuine political autonomy for Philippine Muslims) fully adopted the practices of popular politics, organizing mass demonstrations to petition the government for political autonomy. Meanwhile, armed rebel fighters remained in fortified camps in the hills.

#### Moro Autonomy and the Aspirations of Ordinary Muslims

In 1996, seeking an end to more than 25 years of political instability in the southern provinces, the Philippine government finally signed and implemented a new peace treaty with Nur Misuari, the founder of the MNLF. Misuari became

governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, consisting of the four provinces in the southern Philippines that retain Muslim majorities. He also heads the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development, a three-year experimental body designed to channel development funds to all of the southern Philippines and, in doing so, to convince majority Christian provinces to join the autonomous region. Though many political uncertainties remain, the Muslim Philippines today is more peaceful than it has been in three decades and exhibits more potential for prosperity than anyone might have hoped for just a few years ago.

By the standards of modern ethno-nationalist movements, the *Moro* struggle for self-determination has achieved considerable success. Originating as a largely defensive rebellion to protect communities and cultural practices, the movement has produced not only a significant measure of autonomy for Muslim leaders but also some substantial new benefits for ordinary Muslims. The rebellion drew the attention of the Muslim world and strengthened connections to the Islamic heartland long attenuated by physical distance and disrupted by Western colonialism. One result has been an unprecedented flow of external resources for Islamic education. New institutions established by the separatist leadership allowed Philippine Muslims for the first time to register births and marriages with a formal governmental authority they felt they could trust. However, the most pressing need of ordinary Muslims remains mostly unmet. As a result of decades of governmental neglect and the economic toll taken by the rebellion, the Muslim provinces of the Philippines remain the very poorest in the country. Without improving the economic well-being of the majority of its citizens, the autonomous government for which ordinary Muslims fought and suffered will not have rendered their struggles worthwhile. ◆

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