Discourses of Defiance: 
Framing Muslim Self-Determination in the Philippines (with particular reference to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front)

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ABSTRACT
Using the concept of framing, this paper explores discourses behind the move for greater self-determination on the part of the Moro of southern Philippines. It discusses the shifting referents of ethnic identity and demonstrates how coherent narratives of resistance have taken shape over time and against changing social, political, and economic contexts to frame the collective action of resistance movements over the last four decades.

INTRODUCTION
The celebrated political scientist Benedict Anderson argued in his classic study on the rise of nationalism, Imagined Communities, that in Southeast Asia, “the model of official nationalism assumes its relevance above all at the moment when revolutionaries successfully take control of the state, and are for the first time in a position to use the power of the state in pursuit of visions.”¹ This view provides a persuasive account of the origins of the nationalisms and the visions that drove anti-colonial movements and created the modern nation-states of Southeast Asia, with the state thence in possession of

the wherewithal to transform visions into realities. Yet this account leaves little room to consider the existence of competing visions among outlier communities located on the peripheries of the imagined community of the nation-state that have become entangled in the process of nation and state building. As Bertrand and Laliberté observe:

> In Asia . . . nationalism provided the ideological tool to further strengthen state identities as belonging to particular groups, however defined. These changes . . . swept away former empires while many sections of previously ungoverned territories fell under the purview of centralizing state structures. Notions of unified states and strong single nations clashed dramatically with the existing landscapes of complex group identities.”

Indeed, while the nation-states of Southeast Asia have in many respects come far since decolonization paved the way for the realization of independence on precisely the terms that Anderson outlined, the region at the same time continues to experience the centrifugal forces of resistance on the part of ethnic and religious minorities to the national narratives and visions that underlined the creation of the post-colonial state.

Resistance taking place in the southern Philippine islands of Mindanao and Sulu has been illustrative of how struggles are putatively predicated on the “irremediable particularity” of ethnic identity, and the deep attachments that flow from it serve as a stark reminder of the imaginative powers of nationalism, though perhaps not quite in the fashion Anderson intended. In fact, the persistence of this resistance despite a raft of carrot-and-stick measures for successive governments to quell it constitutes a robust riposte to current intellectual trends that argue a paradigmatic shift in the study of

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intrastate conflicts away from “cold war and post-cold war frameworks about the legitimacy and hegemony of the nation-state” to the proliferation of non-state actors that have been shaped by new global economic practices and international networks where “the new spatiality of non-state armed action forms the basis for new imagined communities of allegiance and new forms and scales of sovereignty.”

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate how the power of the centripetal state used to subdue these contending and alternative visions has been resisted in the case of the Bangsamoro movement in the southern Philippines. It does so by borrowing the concept of framing that has been popularized by the literature on social movements, and applying it to the study of indigenous discourses and narratives. The paper argues that the key to understanding the remarkable resilience of indigenous resistance to the state – both armed and unarmed – lies in the manner in which resistance is framed. That is to say, the discourses and narratives that are constructed, nourished, and perpetuated over generations continue to lend credibility to the spirit and act of resistance.

The Framing of Resistance

Scholars working on social movements have posited that the interactive process of meaning construction, articulation, and dissemination is central to movement mobilization, and framing provides useful conceptual tools to study these processes. While a copious literature has emerged that attempts to investigate the phenomenon of framing, the broad consensus is that frames are interpretive frameworks or schemata that function to allow agents (or recipients) to determine how the words and actions of others

should be understood, and in a way that “enable(s) participants to locate, perceive, and label occurrences.”\textsuperscript{4} In this connection, frames can be understood as the condensation of symbols of meaning through a process that fosters shared understandings of events, experiences, and histories.\textsuperscript{5} Put simply, frames help individuals make sense of events taking place around them.

In the study of social movements, these shared understandings are designed toward one end – to justify, inspire, and legitimize collective action on the part of the insurgent (or potential insurgent) by facilitating their excogitation of their current situation. This process of meaning construction is known in sociological parlance as framing. In brief, framing entails the identification of a problem and the offering up of solutions to it. Hence, while many sociologists describe framing colloquially as depicting “the world out there,” on closer inspection it is perhaps more accurate to say that framing depicts, from the perspective of the agent, the world both “as it is out there” as well as “as it should be.” The salience of frames to the creation of meaning for an individual has been described by one scholar in the following manner: “in one’s scope of experience, frames indicate what to look at and what is important, and thereby indicate what is going

\textsuperscript{4}David Snow, E. Burke Rochford Jr., Steven Worden, and Robert Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization and Movement Participation,” 

on. A frame may also indicate, by directing attention away from other things, what is not important.\(^6\)

As an analytical framework, framing is perhaps useful on at least two grounds. First, it allows us to take into account non-material factors. This speaks to the “greed versus grievance debates that have emerged in the literature on internal conflicts and civil wars. The point to make here is that internal conflicts are more often than not driven by multiple causes and hence are not given to monolithic explanations. Framing, in particular, allows us to take into account cultural constructs that inform a communities’ understanding of conflict, which may not be rooted in instrumentalist and materialist logics.

Second, framing allows us to account for change through “re-framing.” As Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch contend: “to reframe . . . means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the ‘facts’ of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changing its entire meaning.”\(^7\) Hence, as the discussion later establishes, the transformation of the “nationalist” resistance under the Moro Nationalist Liberation Front to the “Islamic” resistance under the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and the accompanying re-framing of the resistance narrative as one that now focuses on the liberation of Islamic lands from non-Muslim occupation. Similarly, the shift in frame reference from “Moro” to “Bangsamoro” demonstrates yet

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another facet of the pliability of the conflict narrative, particularly, as the paper will soon unpack, the matter of the “immutability” of ethnic identities.

Frame Articulation and Amplification: Narratives

In the case of the well documented insurgency in the southern peripheries of the Philippines, the struggle against central authorities is not merely limited to political violence and armed clashes; it also involves deeper, more abstract struggles over meaning and identity, which are often captured in history, folklore, and even mythology that arouse deep attachments. Even in the case of armed resistance groups, as it is with nations and nationalism, a significant ingredient to their cultural and ideational framing process is the role of narratives that nourish frames by stirring emotions and evoking symbolisms that resonate with a community. Anderson notes, to that end, “awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity . . . engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity.’”\(^8\) This hews closely to Tarrow’s elaboration on the role of emotions and symbols in collective action:

“The culture of collective action is built on frames and emotions oriented toward mobilizing people out of their compliance and into action in conflictual settings. Symbols are taken selectively by movement leaders from a cultural reservoir and combined with action-oriented beliefs in order to navigate strategically among a parallelogram of actors, ranging from states and social opponents to militants and target populations. Most important,

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they are given an emotional valence aimed at converting passivity into action.”

Through narratives, events and experiences are aligned and connected in a way that makes them unified and compelling (though not necessarily novel) for an audience, and, where necessary, amplified through the accenting of particular events and beliefs to render them more salient.

For present purposes, narratives can be understood as “analytic constructs . . . that unify a number of past or contemporaneous actions or happenings, which might otherwise have been viewed as discrete or disparate, into a coherent relational whole that gives meaning to and explains each of its elements and is, at the same time, constituted by them.” Yet not only do narratives create experiences for its audience; it also demands responses from them. It does so by drawing the audience into the narrative itself. In the study of ethnonationalist resistance movements, it is often the case that narratives not only map out the history of resistance by relaying the struggles of previous generations, it asks the current generation: “what are you going to do about it?” When narratives are used in framing in this manner, they configure experience through a process of infusing a pattern of events with significance and exploiting them for specific ends, and elicit responses by way of drawing the audience into the narrative.

The narratives of resistance promoted by ethnonationalist movements are often predicated on familiar themes such as repression, depredations of “internal colonization,” victimization, marginalization, and injustice. To generate narratives of resistance, insurgent groups construct meanings that provide intelligibility, and articulate and

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9 Tarrow, Power in Movement, p.112.
disseminate these meanings through frameworks that resonate with potential participants in order to motivate collective action. Indeed, if we accept that framing can be defined as “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action,” then it follows that it is resistance narratives that produce and reproduce precisely such ideas, discourses, and meanings that constitute resistance narratives.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{The Role of Narratives}

Conceptually, narratives illuminate issues of agency, context, and language that provide an important complement to structural and interest-based explanations. By virtue of their control over the state, governments possess vast resources to bring to bear on an insurgency. In comparison, armed resistance groups often have considerably fewer material resources at their disposal that can be used to entice participation, not to mention the dim prospects of success and high costs of participation. Hence on the grounds of structural and interest-based explanations alone, this means that there would be little incentive for individuals to resist.

What insurgents potentially possess however is the capacity to weave narratives that are central to the negotiation of meaning and identity for local communities, and that resonate with their experiences and those of their community or “people.”\textsuperscript{12} It is in this manner that ethnonationalist resistance groups share much in common with social

\textsuperscript{11} Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, “Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes – Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements” in McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (eds.), \textit{Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings}. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.6.

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movements, especially where the latter “are not viewed merely as carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically out of structural arrangements, unanticipated events, or existing ideologies. Rather, movement actors are viewed as signifying agents engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers.”

Clearly then, for insurgents a resilient resistance narrative is a central component of the framing exercise. When constructed in ways and language that resonate with an intended audience by making reference to everyday experience and encounters, narratives of resistance can “bring out the identity that will dispose individuals to support the movement and weld together different support bases.”

**Master Frames: Ethnicity, Identity, and Discrimination**

Many contemporary insurgencies in Southeast Asia adopt the master frame of a marginalized ethnicity. Pivotal to this frame is the idea that ethnic identity is sacrosanct. Ethnic identity plays to all sides of frame creation: it is the reason for marginalization by an ethnic majority, the solution is armed struggle to protect ethnic identity, and the motivation is national liberation or autonomy for the ethnic group.

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13 Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol.26, 2000, p.613. While some have preferred to treat frames as a psychological phenomenon consistent with the cognitive concepts of “schema” and “schemata”, this neglects the processes of construction and negotiation that, as this discussion has described, are integral to the framing process. For a discussion of framing and schema, see Bert Klandersman, *The Social Psychology of Protest*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

14 The centrality of narratives to the framing process has been argued by Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*. Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Polletta draws attention to the need not only to consider the narratives themselves, but also how the story developed, who tells the story, the language through which the story is transmitted, the audience, and the audience’s relationship to the storyteller.


16 Master frames are frames that are sufficiently broad in interpretive scope, inclusivity, flexibility, and cultural resonance
It has already been established that frames function to create a sense of identity and belonging, and framing narratives are critical to this process of identification and meaning making in social activism. They form the first step in mobilization towards collective action, and are imperative to the sustaining this action over time by virtue of being “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization.”

In ethnic master frames, two especially compelling and recurrent themes (or constituent frames, as it were) are identity and marginalization. Together, these frames are an important point of entry for understanding ethnonationalist resistance, whether armed or unarmed, as collective action as they set the context for agency; for the decision by individuals to act on their misgivings towards central authority and to mobilize. The significance of that for our present inquiry follows.

The discourse of ethnonationalism is often given to dogmatic and atavistic narratives that reinforce the perception of deep attachments, for which the claim of “immutable” ethnic affiliation has proven deeper than most, precisely because of its paradoxical tendency towards ascription. As Donald Horowitz avers in his seminal study: “the putatively ascriptive character of ethnic identifications imparts to ethnic conflicts its intense and permeative qualities. It also accounts for some special difficulties ethnic conflicts pose for democratic politics. And ascription is what makes interethnic compromise so difficult in divided societies, for those who practice compromise may be treated with the bitter contempt reserved for brothers who betray a

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cause.”¹⁸ This view is further accented by Tarrow, who notes that the deep attachments they inspire “is almost certainly why nationalism and ethnicity or religion have been more reliable bases of movement organization.”¹⁹

By focusing on the emotional and instinctive pull of ethnic identity, often cast as “indigenous people” frames, movements draw on the emotive powers that flow from the in-group notion that members of a nation are united by blood.²⁰ Brubaker and Laitin have observed that “even without direct positive incentives to frame conflicts in ethnic terms (there has been) a marked ethnicisation of violent challenger-incumbent contests as the major non-ethnic framing for such contests has become less plausible and less profitable.”²¹ They further note that the increasing significance of diasporic social formations and the growing number of international and non-governmental organizations has meant that support for ethnic group claims has increased, and this constitutes an incentive for groups to frame conflicts in ethnic terms.²² Because ethnic identity helps illuminate and set priorities, it augurs that while ethnicity may not always be the source of conflict, these conflicts nevertheless tend to be “ethnicized” and framed in ethnic terms.²³

Yet one should be cautious when approaching concepts such as “ethnicity,” keeping in mind that they are constructed and hence given to modulation and adaptation according to circumstances and exigencies. In other words, identity markers like

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²⁰ In this sense, ethnic and “indigenous people” frames are underlined by the belief in primordial identities. For a study of this and other aspects of ethnic conflict, see Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*.
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid.
ethnicity can be given to manipulation by entrepreneurs and opportunists, including movement groups. Nevertheless, we should appreciate that what is subjective to the scholar is oftentimes “real” to the actor, and “it is not what is, but what people believe is that has behavioural consequences.” Therein lies the currency of communal identity boundaries, and it is this that explains the certitude often evident among participants of ethnonationalist movements, especially among movement leaders.

Ethnonationalist groups also often construct frames of marginalization on the grounds of ethnic discrimination. Their narratives contend that their communities are denied political representation in national affairs, a local voice in local governance, and a share of economic wealth on the ground of their ethnic identity. The significance and implications of this reside on two levels. First, there is a material alienation, whereby minorities are denied access to political and economic goods. Second, there is also the matter of an ideational alienation. This pertains to the hegemony of a central state-defined discourse and the rejection of alternative and contrarian versions of cultural (or even national) history.

With these concerns in mind, the paper moves to consider how identities and resistance narratives have been constructed by local movements in southern Philippines, particularly the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, for purposes of framing and legitimizing the Muslim minority’s struggle against the Philippine government.

**Southern Philippines**

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The Moro areas of southern Philippines have widely been defined as the territories of Mindanao as well as the surrounding islands in the Sulu Archipelago. It includes the five provinces where Muslims remain a majority of the population: Maguindanao, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Lanao Del Sur, and Sulu. These areas stand out on at least three counts. First, they are where the vast majority of Filipino Muslims are concentrated, even though Muslims in actual fact form numerical majorities in only the five aforementioned provinces. Second, these are areas identified as among the poorest in the Philippines, if not the entire Southeast Asian region. These areas lack basic infrastructural and institutional pillars necessary for the proper functioning of society – education, transport, healthcare, sanitation services, etc.\(^{26}\) Third, the indigenous population, known in the lexicon collectively as Bangsamoro – a term that has come to be used synonymously with Moro even though there is nuanced difference between them, have been waging protracted armed rebellion against central authority since the time of Spanish attempts to colonize the region. In fact, some have point out that the Bangsamoro struggle of today had antecedents traceable almost five centuries earlier when the Spanish arrived in the Philippine archipelago and waged what is popularly known as the “Moro Wars” on the Muslim sultanates in the southern islands of Mindanao and Sulu.\(^{27}\)

Because of the persistence of conflict in contemporary times and the region’s current state of abject poverty, there is a tendency to assume a causal relationship between these two factors. This, however, caricatures a complex set of dynamics by


over-emphasizing what is in truth only a marginal factor in a conflict that has cost an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 deaths and more than two million people displaced, and that has seen the failure of repeated attempts at dialogue and resolution.\textsuperscript{28}

Most observers agree that the Moro rebellion peaked in the 1970s when the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) – formed in 1968 -- managed to mount and sustain armed struggle in the wake of the Marcos administration’s policy of martial law instituted in 1972. There is, of course, a long and painful precedence to this conflict. Historians have traced the genesis of conflict to the sixteenth century and the arrival of the Spanish in the Philippines, even though region itself was, in truth, was hardly tranquil and devoid of violence prior to this.\textsuperscript{29} Driven by objectives of establishing and expanding their trading empire in the Philippine archipelago on one hand and Christian zeal to “save souls” on the other, the Spanish moved to gradually subdue pockets of the Muslim populations of southern Philippines. What resulted was 350 years of warfare between the Spaniards and Moros, and Spain’s failure to subjugate the entire region and place it under its formal colonial control.

For Moros, the struggle against Spanish colonization eventually transformed into one against American colonization. This shift took place in 1898 when Spain ceded control over its Philippine territory to the United States with the Treaty of Paris. Moros vehemently resisted the inclusion of the southern territories in the treaty on the grounds that the Spanish never exercised control over them in the first place. A series of


\textsuperscript{29} It is generally recognized that Islam had arrived about three centuries prior to the Spanish. By the time the Spanish set foot in the Philippine Archipelago, there were already well-established Muslim sultanates in Mindanao and beyond (further north).
skirmishes beginning in 1902 marked this “Moro Rebellion,” and culminated in the Battle of Bud Bagsak on the island of Jolo in 1913 when severely outnumbered Moro militia were decisively defeated by American forces.

American colonization of southern Philippines took the form of various attempts to integrate the region and peoples of “Moro Province,” as the region became administratively known, into the wider Filipino colony. One of the primary instruments of integration were policies of immigration which saw people from more heavily populated islands such as Luzon migrate to Mindanao, partly a consequence of colonial policy but also in search for economic opportunity given the region’s vast untapped resources.\(^\text{30}\) This led not only to a dilution of the indigenous populations -- indeed, scholars point to this as the genesis of demographic transformation that witnessed the Muslim majority in the southern Philippines eventually dwindle into a mere 20% of the population today -- but also a tussle between locals and migrants for finite land and resources. This was particularly pronounced in new settlement areas where conflicts between Christian settlers and Moro landowners proliferated.\(^\text{31}\)

At the same time, Moro sentiments riled against Filipino administrators of the southern provinces who populated the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes, to whom the United States passed on governing powers in 1920 as part of preparations for eventual independence.\(^\text{32}\) Frustrations at prejudice and discriminatory practices of these

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\(^\text{30}\) We should note though, that there were at the time also opinions in American quarters that the heavily populated Moro areas in the south of Mindanao should be made autonomous or even independent of the rest of the Philippines and governed as a new territory to be known as the “Mindanao Plantations.” See Patricio Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000, pp.22-24.


administrators from the north led Moros to clamor for a return to direct American rule as opposed to being a part of a sovereign Philippine territorial state. Needless to say, this set them at odds with the Philippine nationalists who looked to inherit the American colonies in their entirety.

Following the formation of the Commonwealth of the Philippines in 1935, attempts by the central government in Manila at assimilation of the Moro communities accelerated. The pace of resettlement programs, in particular, accelerated in earnest, as did the reallocation of resources away from Moro majority districts to settler areas. These programs continued apace after the interregnum of the Japanese occupation, and catalyzed further strains in relations between the indigenous population of the south and the central government authorities in Manila. This led to a number of Moro insurrections against the Philippine central authority such as the Sulu based rebellion of the early 1950s and the Hajal Ouh movement of the early 1960s that sought to establish an independent Moro territory consisting of Sulu, Basilan, and Zamboanga by means of war. Nevertheless, it was in the 1960s that Moros managed to mobilize in a more organized fashion with the formation first of the Mindanao Independence Movement in 1968 and a year later, the MNLF, against a Philippine government that was viewed as “gobirno a sarwang a tao” (foreign government).

The MNLF would soon be followed by the MILF and a host of other splinter organizations. The number of armed groups operating in southern Philippines has proliferated over the last two decades with the emergence of smaller groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group, Al-Khobar, the Pentagon Gang, and the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM). With the possible exception of RSM however, these groups have for the most
part been engaged in criminal activities, and their support base pales in comparison to more broad-based social movements like the MILF and the MNLF. More recently, new groups have emerged that have splintered from the MILF, namely the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM) and its armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIF).

To be sure, armed conflict has not been the only recourse for the Bangsamoro community seeking to assert their claims to greater political and cultural freedoms. More recent years have witnessed the emergence of several civil society groups and religious institutions that have been actively involved in the promotion of peace and development in southern Philippines as alternative means through which to realize the political aspirations of the Bangsamoro. More prominent among these initiatives are the Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF) formed by the Mindanao Catholic bishops and the Ulama League of the Philippines in 1996 (following the 1996 Peace Agreement), and the Mindanao Peoples Caucus that brings together grassroots leaders and activists from all ethnic and religious backgrounds from the region to work towards peace. Others include the umbrella civil society organization, Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society (CBCS) and Mindanano Peaceweavers (MPW). Underlying the growth of these initiatives is both war weariness on the part of many Bangsamoro, as well as the opinion that the articulation of the Bangsamoro cause was in no wise the exclusive domain of major insurgent groups, regardless of how powerful and influential they are.

Insofar as the MILF is concerned, arguably the foremost preoccupation for scholars and analysts who study the conflict in the southern Philippines today are several

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33 The Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society brings together more than 160 Moro NGOs under one umbrella. It is the largest such organization in the southern Philippines and has been active in fostering peace and inter-faith dialogue among the local communities throughout Mindanao.
iterations of peace talks and negotiations between the MILF and the Philippine government. Talks between Moro insurgent groups and the Philippine government can be traced back to the GRP-MNLF talks that began in 1976 and that culminated in the 1996 final peace agreement leading to the formation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Talks between the MILF and the Philippine government were initiated in 1997 focusing on cessation of hostilities in order to lay the groundwork for more substantive negotiations. Since then, there have been several iterations of talks and agreements, including a seemingly successful conclusion of a Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domains in 2008 that was eventually nullified by the Philippine Supreme Court. After a bout of violence between the MILF and government security forces following the Supreme Court’s decision, both parties have returned to the table but the new round of talks have reached an impasse on the matter of the MILF’s proposal for the creation of a Bangsamoro “sub-state” in Mindanao.

Identity Frames: Who is a Bangsamoro?

Whether the MILF or the MNLF, the official goal of major Bangsamoro armed organizations has been the creation of an independent Moro state in southern Philippines. This objective is underpinned by an interpretation of history that sees the current struggle through the lens of the longue durée of Moro resistance against imperialism, whether Spanish, American, or Filipino. As one observer put it, “the present Jihad Fiy Sabilillah waged by the Bangsamoro people is a continuation of the struggle which had been fought

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by their ancestors and forebears demanding for freedom and independence.”\(^{36}\) In the case of the Bangsamoro struggle, the master frame has been the identity of the people, or, as some would describe it, Bangsamoroism. Diagnostic frames are historical narratives of discrimination as a result of imperial intent, and the loss of what Bangsamoro consider their ancestral lands. As with all armed self-determination movements, prognostic frames have centered on armed resistance (certainly on the part of the MILF), but also an openness to dialogue. Motivational frames have primarily turned on religious narratives and symbols, especially in the case of the MILF, where the struggle against various forms of colonialism is perceived not only as necessary for the freedom of the Bangsamoro people, but also for the liberation of Islamic lands from occupation by non-Muslim imperialists.

Master Frames: From Moro to Bangsamoro

For a self-determination movement that prides itself on its struggle for an independent state defined foremost by a unitary local indigenous identity, the tapestry of “Bangsamoroism” is actually remarkably diverse. For starters, the concept of “Moro” or “Bangsamoro” is not an ethnic one in the sense that there is no single ethnic group that can be defined as “Moro” or “Bangsamoro.” As a matter of fact, Moro people derive from at least thirteen separate and distinct ethnic groups, which can be differentiated by their language. What binds them together into this entity termed “Moro” was their religious affiliation – these are Muslim societies. This unity in religious faith is further

supplemented by the historical and demographic fact that even though Moro people consist of different ethnic groups speaking their own language, they have enjoyed extensive interaction over time through inter-marriage, trade, and warfare. It is this record of interaction, coupled with their religious faith, that underpins the construction of Moro identity by nationalists. Even then, it should be noted that the term “Moro” itself is according to conventional wisdom not a local one, but was instead a pejorative identity marker ascribed them by the Spanish. Likewise, the term “Moro” was first used by the Spanish not to describe the indigenous people of Mindanao, but rather the Muslims whom they met in Manila upon their conquest of the city in 1570, who shared religious faith and customs with the Moors back in Spain and also in North Africa.  

Yet, in order to demonstrate that the Moro resistance and self-determination movements possessed the credentials to govern the multiethnic and multireligious society that Mindanao had become over time, there was a need for an inclusive and all-encompassing identity marker (of the indigenous peoples). In other words, there was a requirement for a “national” identity that would also embrace non-Moro (non-Muslim) inhabitants of southern Philippines. Concomitantly, borrowing from a cognate language, “Moro” was prefixed with the word “Bangsa”, meaning “nation” in Malay, in order to expand the hitherto restrictive boundaries of Moro (i.e. to be a Moro one had to be a Muslim) into a national identity that could conjure images of solidarity among those born in the land regardless of their religious affiliations. On these pragmatic and egalitarian grounds, the concept of Bangsamoro was born. Accordingly, the MILF leadership has adumbrate that: “our definition of Bangsamoro people is those who are native inhabitants

37 Email interview with an MILF leader, 7 December 2011.
38 The term “Bangsamoro” is believed to have entered into the lexicon of Moro struggle in the late 1960s when MNLF leaders started making reference to it. Ibid.
of Mindanao, who have been living here since before the Spaniards came—regardless whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims. The Muslim Bangsamoro people we refer to as Moro. The natives (or Lumads) are included in our definition of Bangsamoro people.”

Hence, it is on this basis that the MILF, and MNLF for that matter, proudly proclaims theirs to be a struggle for the collective rights of Bangsamoro—be they Muslim, indigenous Christian, or members of tribal groups. This view is further articulated in documents signed between the Philippine government and the MILF:

> It is the birthright of all Moro and all indigenous people of Mindanao to identify themselves and be accepted as “Bangsamoro”. The Bangsamoro people refers to those who are natives or original inhabitant of Mindanao and its adjacent island including Palawan and the Sulu archipelago at the time of conquest or colonization whether mixed or of full native blood, inclusive of all indigenous people living therein, subject to their freedom choice at the appropriate time.

With the above considerations in mind, it is not readily apparent that the Bangsamoro struggle is grounded in ethnic unity. Rather, the creation of Bangsamoro identity was in many respects a historical, social, and political construction on the part of Bangsamoro nationalists. The result of this process of identity construction however, has been remarkable. What makes the Bangsamoro struggle an ethnonationalist one is the fact that it is anchored to a primordialist frame premised on the existence of a totally

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40 Indeed, non-Muslim voices allegedly also have representation in the MILF’s Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Assembly), which serves as an intermediary between the organisation’s legislative and executive branches. Interview with senior MILF officials, Cotabato City, 16 July 2005.

distinct culture and identity from the rest of the Filipino population, not to mention a shared collective memory of victimization. In other words, inasmuch as we can speak of a Bangsamoro “ethnicity,” it is grounded on distinction and difference from what is otherwise known to be Filipino culture, as well as a shared colonial experience, more so than any self-evident similarities that Bangsamoro communities enjoy. Further underpinning this frame is a narrative, shared by nationalists of all strains, that the Bangsamoro nation predates the Philippines and includes both the Muslims and non-Muslim indigenous peoples and were possessed of an ancestral homeland that encompasses the whole of Mindanao and its surrounding islands, despite the fact that as an explicit identity Bangsamoro did not exist prior to the birth of the Philippine nation, nor did the collection of sultanates that the Spanish encountered on their arrival resemble anything of the modern unified territorial entity that Bangsamoro nationalists and romantics are wont to declare.

Yet, notwithstanding the seeming egalitarian benchmarks of Bangsamoroism enumerated above, it remains a fact that a key feature of Bangsamoro discourses of history and identity is religion. Among Moro Muslims, Christians, and Lumads, those who have accepted and imbibed the Bangsamoro master frame and engaged in resistance on those grounds have by far been the Muslims. This fact has not been lost on the Philippine central government, and hence it should hardly be surprising that “it is striking that these people (Moro) were mishandled, not as ethnicities, but as religious deviants.”

Notwithstanding these attempts to frame the Bangsamoro struggle in transhistorical and transcultural terms, the myth of a united monolithic Moro resistance to

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colonization propounded by many nationalist leaders valorizes the Bangsamoro frame but downplays local diversity in the construction of identity and, more significantly perhaps, belies empirical evidence. Before the late 1960's, the Islamized tribes in the Philippines were not a unified group, and they not only battled the Spaniards as separate sultanates; but they also fought against each other. This process of re-conceptualizing Moro history away from the “hegemony” of Bangsamoro discourses and narratives have been aptly described by Miriam Coronel Ferrer in the following manner:

“Other voices are coming out emphasizing the diversity among the 13 Islamized ethnnolinguistic groups in Mindanao. They are concerned that official Bangsamoro history has downplayed the diversity in local histories and practices in the effort to compress Moro-ness into a single, historical timeline with attributes(events, features, personalities) largely drawn from the numerically and politically dominant Moro ethnic groups, namely, the Tausug, Maguindanao, Maranao. They are raising questions on the preeminence given to the sultanate as against the many more autonomous datus and councils of elders that shaped the evolution of Moro polities, and that could inform the charting of alternative political processes and arrangements.”

following remarks of a Bangsamoro youth leader that betrays a mood of despair: “We don’t believe we are Filipinos. That’s the essential problem. . . . The struggle of the Moro people has been going on for 500 years now. So this problem can’t be solved in our time.”44

From this historical vantage, it is clear that what united otherwise disparate Moro clans and ethnic groups despite their long tradition of enmity towards each other was a deeper enmity towards external occupiers. Put differently, historically the sultanates of Mindanao and Sulu shared one thing in common that could later be mobilized for purposes of collective identity construction – their encounters with and defiance of foreign rule. Not only that, as noted above, this collective resistance is also portrayed as a seamless struggle that has been ongoing for centuries, despite the fact that in truth, “over past 40 years the Philippine government and Muslim separatists have spent far more time talking to one another than in active armed conflict. It has, in fact, been primarily a history of long, slow peace negotiations punctuated by brief but fierce armed clashes.”45 Narratives not just of subjugation but also of extermination often accent historical frames of violent resistance in representations of Bangsamoro history as well. Referring to the slew of failed agreements between the MNLF and the Philippine government, a Bangsamoro scholar decried: “all agreements entered by and between the MNLF and GRP (Government of the Republic of the Philippines) are only a showpiece of the Philippine government in order to smokescreen the oppression, colonization,

exploitation and extermination of the Bangsamoro people.” These frames are reinforced through references to events such as the Jabaidah massacre, which precipitated the formation of mass-based armed separatist organizations, and the “all-out-war” policies of several Philippine administrations that have become a part of Bangsamoro “national” and resistance narratives.

Another equally important historical myth was the assertion that the Muslims have never been conquered, either by the Spaniards or the Americans, and that the Bangsamoro homeland had been unjustly annexed by Manila after independence. Historically however, it is known that in 1878, Sultan Jama ul-Azam of Sulu signed a peace treaty with the Spanish government, and in so doing agreed to bind his subjects to the Spanish king in exchange for autonomy. Likewise, Datu Utto of Cotabato had capitulated to Spain in 1887 and recognized the rule of the king of Spain. Clearly too, Mindanao was colonized by the United States after 1898. Indeed, it is precisely colonialism that the Bangsamoro armed struggle was pitched against. As the MNLF spokesman Asani reiterated: “Colonialism is the root cause of the Moro problem in the

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47 The Jabaidah Massacre, which took place in 1968, involved the execution of Tausug trainees who were recruited by the Philippine Armed Forces for covert special operations training for the purpose of agitating among the people of Sabah and North Borneo in order to set the stage for annexation of the territory by the Philippines. When the Moros refused to undertake the mission, they were summarily shot for mutineering.

48 The following except from a pro-Bangsamoro website exemplifies this perspective: “There was neither rhyme nor reason for the Americans to give the Moro province to the Philippines to form a Philippine Republic in 1946. The Moro Province was NEVER a part of the Philippine Revolution of 1896 or 1898 or the Philippine Republic of Aguinaldo. A cursory glance at history -- real history not the fiction of Most Filipino historians -- show that the Moros and Indios were never one people. Never until 1946. But the various Moro rebellions and the MNLF and MILF wars show that the Moros are not satisfied with being a second-class citizen in the Philippine Republic.” See http://bangsamoro.wordpress.com/category/mnlf-milf/page/2/. Accessed 12 November 2011.

Draft. Not for citation.

southern Philippines – a phenomenon that is not after all an exclusive preoccupation of Western nations. The present fighting in the area may be a fight against established but repressive government.”

Notwithstanding the narratives highlighted above, perhaps the most important feature of the Bangsamoro diagnostic frame is the matter of the loss of ancestral lands. In pre-colonial Philippines, the sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao had exercised political sovereignty over Moro communities. Traditionally, Moros owned land communally, allowing *datus* or clan chiefs to govern and dispose of land considered to be under their control. Because of the implementation of the Regalian doctrine during Spanish colonial rule however, Moros and other indigenous peoples were denied of what used to be free communal access to lands, forests, bodies of water, and other natural resources as these were solely and deemed Spanish property. During the last two decades of Spanish rule, moreover, the sultans of Sulu and Maguindanao were forced to recognize aspects of Spanish sovereignty. Spanish colonial rule inevitably disrupted Muslim maritime commercial activities and systematically destroyed, depopulated, and isolated Muslim settlements, farms, and orchards from neighboring Muslim Malays colonized by the British and the Dutch. All of these consequently led to the demise of the sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao.

The situation was further compounded during the course of American colonial administration. Already excluded from administrative power – both national and regional – when Filipinos gradually assumed control of the state after 1920, Moro ownership of

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territory in Mindanao was compromised by policies emanating from the Bureau of Lands, which was in charge of issuing land titles. Arriving on the back of a policy of migration from Luzon to Mindanao which gathered pace under the administration of Manuel Quezon, Christian settlers began commandeering Moro lands made “public” by the Bureau of Lands. Among other things, these lands, previously owned and occupied by Moros by virtue of customary land rights, were lost because of the unfamiliarity on the part of the Moros with the new regime of land registration.

With the establishment of the Philippine Republic in 1946, socioeconomic conditions in Mindanao worsened with the influx of large multinational corporations which, with the government’s help, managed to gain extensive control and monopoly of the Mindanao economy, particularly in the export of pineapples, bananas, rubber, sugar cane, and later in the mining industry as well. Land conflicts between settlers and Bangsamoro escalated in the 1950s and 1960s as a result of further government policies that systematically transmigrated tens of thousands of settlers to traditional Bangsamoro lands. Further compounding the strains was the fact that traditionally it was common for Moros to own lands without title deeds. This made it that much easier for the government to define huge portions of hitherto Bangsamoro-owned lands as public property. Resettlement programs such as the National Authority for Reforestation and Rehabilitation Administration (NARRA), Land Settlement and Development Corporation (LASEDECO), and the Economic Development Corporation (EDCOR) paced the way.

52 In order to integrate Moro territories into the larger framework of the Philippines, the American colonial authority passed the Land Registration Act in 1902 to determine the extent of private holdings in the country. This was soon followed by a series of Public Lands Acts (1911, 1913, 1914, and 1919). These legislations allowed the central government to commandeer Moro lands and claim them to be state property. At the same time, individuals were allowed to apply for private ownership. However, while Christian Filipinos were allowed to apply for private ownership of up to 24 hectares, non-Christians could only apply for a maximum of 10 hectares. Thus began led to phenomenon of legalized land grabbing in Mindanao.
for massive and uncontrolled migration from northern Philippines to Mindanao and led to the establishment of Christian majorities in towns once dominated by Moros and Lumads. Summarizing this gradual erosion of Bangsamoro sovereignty over their traditional lands, a Bangsamoro media platform averred: “What began in Mindanao as ‘agricultural colonies’ resulting in the unjust loss of the Bangsamoro ancestral domain are population transfers legitimized over the decades by political gerrymandering and plantation economy.”

Prognostic Frames: Armed Struggle and Negotiation

Bangsamoro prognostic frames can broadly be categorized into two essential trends: armed rebellion and negotiations with the Philippine state. While violence has been a definitive feature of politics in Mindanao even before the arrival of the Spanish, it has evolved over time and taken on various forms of armed resistance to attempts at subjugating the local populations to foreign rule. At the same time, there were also various attempts at conflict resolution through negotiations.

The Muslim Independence Movement (MIM), organized in 1968, was the first movement that demanded outright secession of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan regions. It insisted on defending the Bangsamoro homeland through jihad. In order to accommodate and gain support from non-Moro inhabitants in the southern Philippines, the leadership of the MIM later changed the name of the movement to the Mindanao Independence

The MNLF, meanwhile, came to prominence soon after the declaration of Martial Law in 1972. It aimed to mobilize general Moro support, to recruit, train, and equip armed cadres to oppose Philippine “imperialism,” and procure international support for its cause. Through its military arm, the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA), the MNLF was successful in launching well-coordinated attacks against a number of military and police outposts in the provinces of Sulu, Cotabato, and Lanao. This was followed by an all-out war in southern Philippines. The MNLF wanted complete independence of the Bangsamoro people and Mindanao through the establishment of a Bangsamoro Republic. The objectives of the MNLF were explicitly stated in its manifesto:

“We, the five million oppressed Bangsamoro people, wishing to free ourselves from the terror, oppression, and tyranny of Filipino colonialism, that had caused us untold sufferings and miseries by criminally usurping our land, by threatening Islam through wholesale desecration of its places of worship and its Holy Book and murdering our innocent brothers, sisters and folks in genocidal campaign of terrifying magnitude. Aspiring to have the sole prerogative of defining and chartering our national destiny in

55 The MIM wanted secession on four grounds: “(1) The establishment of the provincial and municipal governments undermined the status of the traditional leaders, dislocated the authority and communications set up, and negated the existing coalition formation patterns, so necessary in the cooperative and communal ventures that the Muslims were accustomed to. In operation, these governments were disruptive and not functional. (2) The imposition of a new legal system negated the judicial functions of the village elders. This caused a breakdown in social order and give rise to a lot of social problems which exist up to this day. (3) It was in the field of education where irreparable dislocations were created. The public school organization systematically alienated the school children. They were forced to learn new sets of values that put down the cultural milieu in which they grew. (4) The transportation of settlers and land grabbers to Muslim provinces and the creation of agricultural colonies out of Muslim lands caused a lot of resentment in Muslim circles. In effect, this reduced the economic base of the Moroland. See Alunan Glang, Muslim: Secession or Integration? Manila: Cardinal Book Store, 1971, pp.91-92.
accordance with our own free will in order to ensure our future and that of our children.”\textsuperscript{56}

The insurgency movement fed off grievances built on the central government’s transmigration policies as well as national integration policies that sought to incorporate the southern islands into the Catholic nation. Encroachment of new non-Muslim settler populations in Mindanao, much of it through fraudulent manipulation of legal means, sewed the seeds of discontent among the Muslim community.\textsuperscript{57} Recourse to Muslim political elites who had been co-opted into the prevailing structure of national power failed to address many of their concerns. Because of this, the legitimacy of their traditional elite, the datus, waned in the eyes of the Muslim community. Others have ventured to argue that the Mindanao conflict is rooted as much in the various levels of contestation within the structure of Muslim society as it is a function of relations between them and the Filipino state, which in turn “exemplifies the political complexities found in similar political movements formed in postcolonial situations”\textsuperscript{58}. On the growth of popular Moro self-determination, Eric Gutierrez observed:

“The youths launched into a frenzied construction of images of their own “nation” radically different from the “homeland” offered by their untrustworthy, aristocratic and egocentric elders . . . . The fresh, new faces of non-traditional, youth-based leadership stirred the Moro re-awakening – Misuari, the intellectual; Salamat, the Islamic scholar and cleric; and Alonto, the aristocrat’s son who found common cause with his generation. They set aside their differences, imagined and

\textsuperscript{56} MNLF Manifesto, 1974.  
\textsuperscript{58} This argument is made convincingly in McKenna, \textit{Muslim Rulers and Rebels}, p.5.
successfully engineered their own project, and broke away from traditional elite leadership. In so doing, they firmly established themselves as the alternative.”

Further describing the dynamics that drove this rift within the Bangsamoro Muslim society, Syed Serajul Islam argued that “(F)or traditional leaders, Muslim autonomy meant the recognition and reinforcement of their power. Misuari’s vision of Muslim destiny, on the contrary, was to eliminate the old leaders and to install himself in their place.”

However, with the signing of the Tripoli Agreement on 23 December 1976 as well as the 1996 GRP-MNLF Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the MNLF, under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the MNLF reduced its demand from secession to political autonomy in Mindanao within the realm of Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity. The signing of the Tripoli Agreement also resulted in the fragmentation of the MNLF. Former vice-chairman of the MNLF Central Committee Salamat Hashim founded the MILF, claiming in 1977 that the MNLF was moving away from its Islamic ideals and objectives and was transforming into a Marxist-Maoist movement and that chairman Nur Misuari was personally dominating policy planning and decision-making.

At its creation, the MILF declared its intent to continue the armed struggle for an independent home state for the Muslims of southern Philippines, but to bring a more Islamic flavor to the movement as the MNLF was deemed to be too secular in its outlook.

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At the same time, it also criticized the MNLF for abandoning the struggle in favor of the central Philippine government’s offer of the creation of an autonomous region, the expanse of which was determined by constitutional mandate and plebiscite. Later, the MILF would also reject the 1996 Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF, this time brokered by Indonesia.

Since its formation, relations between the MILF and the Philippine government have fluctuated between ceasefires and military clashes, the most notorious of which was President Joseph Estrada’s 2000 policy of “all-out-war” against the MILF. Dialogue however, resumed in 2002, and culminated in the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain. Building on the ARMM model, the agreement expanded the scope and depth of Muslim self-rule in the south. Nevertheless, intense lobbying by non-Muslim politicians and local interests contributed to the nullification of the agreement by the Supreme Court on grounds that it was “unconstitutional,” thereby setting the stage for a resumption of armed clashes between the MILF and Philippine security forces. Even as the MILF central leadership tried to salvage the situation by agreeing to a new round of talks, factions within the organization, frustrated at the failure

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61 Estrada justified his policy of “all-out-war” on the grounds that the MILF had never been serious about negotiations. He asserted: “One would think that with all these peace talks and ceasefires, a lasting peace would have been achieved already. But the MILF, with all due respect, has proven to be an organization that does not remain true to its word; a group that only uses ceasefires to regroup and strengthen their forces. We saw this in 1999, when the MILF, in spite of a peace agreement, took over the Talayaan Municipal Hall in Magindanao. We saw this again on January 10, 2000, when the MILF, in spite of a peace agreement, took over the Talayaan Municipal Hall in Magindanao. We saw this again on February 25, when the MILF, in spite of a peace agreement, bombed a ferry in Ozamiz City, killing 25 people. We saw this again on March 16, when the MILF, in spite of a peace agreement, occupied the Kauswagan Town Hall. And these are only a few of the hostilities initiated by the MILF in a period of less than six months. So after all these peace talks and ceasefires, it became clear that this was an organization that would neither respect the Philippine government nor salute the Philippine flag.” See “Speech of former President Estrada on the GRP-Moro Conflict” at the UP-HDN Forum on the GRP-Moro Conflict, 18 September 2008. Available HTTP http://hdn.org.ph/speech-of-former-president-estrada-on-the-grp-moro-conflict/. Accessed 16 October 2011.

62 “MILF warns SC ruling could lead to more clashes,” Agence France-Presse, 15 October 2008.
of the talks and the conciliatory position of the MILF leadership, broke ranks in order to continue armed struggle.

The MILF’s Motivational Religious Frame

Given the protean character of Bangsamoro identity as described above, religion takes on greater currency in providing meaning and intelligibility to resistance. Indeed, as researchers of recruitment practices of the MILF have pointed out: “Religion, political ideology, and issues of Islamic identity, especially duty to Allah were all advanced as a strong motivational variable.”

The objectives of the MILF were articulated in decidedly religious terms: “All Mujahideen under the Moro Islamic Liberation Front adopt Islam as their way of life. Their ultimate objective in their Jihad is to make supreme the word of Allah and establish Islam in the Bangsamoro homeland.” Salamat Hashim, the late founder-leader and in many respects the ideologue of the MILF, further expressed that “some personalities in the revolution advocate the idea that the sole and singular objective in our struggle is simply to liberate our homeland, giving no importance to the system of government that shall be established. We want an Islamic political system and way of life and can be achieved through effective Da’wah, Tarbiyyah, and Jihad.” More recently however, the MILF leadership appears to have watered down their objectives, and have opined that the formula for governance of an independent Mindanao will be decided by Bangsamoro

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64 McKenna, Rulers and Rebels, p.208.
through a constitutional convention. While the common perception is that the MILF was essentially a breakaway Islamic faction of the MNLF, it should be noted that not all of its senior leadership were religious clerics. Though the founding chairman, Salamat Hashim, and others like foreign affairs chief Abu Zahir, were recognized Ustadz, others such as Al-Haj Murad Ibrahim, Vice-Chairman for Military Affairs and later successor to Salamat Hashim as MILF chair, were not. Nevertheless, it is in Salamat Hashim’s ideology, which, that the nature of the MILF’s Islamic diagnostic and prognostic frames are best captured.

Despite the fact that he passed away on 13 July 2003, the ideology of the Bangsamoro struggle today continues to be encapsulated in the worldview, thought, and ideology of the founding chairman of the MILF, the late Ustadz Salamat Hashim. Salamat was a student of Al-Azhar University, where he graduated in 1969 with a Master’s degree in religion and philosophy. To the Bangsamoro people, he is popularly known as Ustadz Salamat and Amirul Mujahideen (Commander of the Resistance); his ideology comes from him being both an Islamic scholar and a Mujahid.

Despite Salamat’s Islamist credentials, it is interesting to note that to his mind, the root causes of the Bangsamoro rebellion was both historical and political. He noted on previous occasions that, to that end,

> When the Philippine government was granted independence by America in 1946, the Bangsamoro people felt that instead of becoming

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66 Interview with senior MILF official, Cotabato City, 15 July 2005.
67 I was informed by a Muslim scholar that the MILF Central Committee, which has about 20 members, has a roughly equal breakdown of leaders with religious and secular educational backgrounds. The interview was conducted in Manila, 20 July 2005.
68 This was confirmed by several members of the MILF, including Central Committee members, during the course of my fieldwork in Cotabato in July 2005.
free, they instead lost their freedom. Before the establishment of the Philippine government by western imperialists, the Bangsamoro people were independent. They had their sultanates or independent principalities in Sulu and Maguindanao which were united by alliance and cooperation. The Bangsamoro people felt that when their homeland was annexed to the Philippine government, the freedom they enjoyed was entirely lost. So this is the problem we want the Philippine government to address.69

In 1985, Salamat Hashim published “The Bangsamoro Mujahid” as a guide for the conduct of the MILF Jihad. In it, he argued that Jihad was necessary “to defend their (Bangsamoro) religion, the dignity of the Bangsamoro people, and regain their legitimate right to self-determination.” Furthermore, the ultimate objective for the Bangsamoro resistance was to “make supreme the word of Allah, which means – the establishment of a true Muslim community and a genuine Islamic system of government and the application of real Islamic way of life in all aspects of life.”70 Accordingly, Salamat proposed that it was through dakwah (proselytization) and Jihad that the MILF Islamization agenda, which comprised of the transformation of every Muslim in MILF “into a true and real Muslim whose beliefs . . . and his entire life is in conformity with the teachings of Islam derived from the Quran and Sunnah,” of every MILF home into “real

Islamic homes where the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah prevail,” and the community “into a truly Islamic one governed by the Sharia” would be realized.\footnote{Ibid, 9-11. To justify his arguments, Salamat cited the Quran, Surah 2:193 and 4:74.}

Salamat’s conceptions of Jihad rested on a belief that the world was divided between a \textit{Dar al-Islam} (abode of peace) and \textit{Dar al-Harb} (abode of war). To him, “this material world is an arena of combat between \textit{haqq} and \textit{baatil}, between \textit{imaan} (faith) and \textit{kufir} (apostasy), between \textit{taqwa} and \textit{kibr}, between justice and injustice, between the oppressed and oppressors. . . . (I)t is a battleground between Islam and all the manifestations and forces of \textit{jahiliyyah}.\footnote{Salamat Hashim, ‘Id el Fitr Message to the Bangsamoro Nation, Mindanao, 16 December 2001.} Further, in an address to the MILF youth, he issued the clarion call to that effect: “Are the Bangsamoro youth ready to join the Global Islamic Revival and Renaissance (GIRR)? . . . Either you are with Allah, His Messenger and the believers along with the GIRR, or with the enemies of Allah.”\footnote{Salamat Hashim, “Either you are with Allah, or with the enemies of Allah”, address delivered at the Bangsamoro Youth National Peace Summit, Cotabato City, 21 October 2001.} This perspective was indicative of the influence that radical Islamic scholars such as Syed Qutb (Egyptian Brotherhood) and Syed Abul A’la Maududi (Jamaat I Islami) exerted on Salamat Hashim.\footnote{This was the view of Abhoud Syed M. Lingga, who was a close associate of the late Salamat Hashim. See Abhoud Syed Mansure Lingga, “The Political Thought of Salamat Hashim”, M.A. dissertation, Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Philippines, 1995, p.26.}

Salamat Hashim’s conceptions of \textit{Jihad} however, are distinguished from that of the other militant Islamist group operating in southern Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf Group. While he noted that the Bangsamoro \textit{Jihad} included other aspects beyond militancy, the latter has argued that Muslims must engage in \textit{Jihad Qital} (offensive \textit{Jihad}) as it is \textit{Fard ayn} (personal obligation).\footnote{Julkipli M. Wadi, “State, Religion and Post-Nationalism in the Philippines”, paper presented at the International Conference on “State, Religion and Post-Nationalism: The Southeast Asian Experience, University of Malaya, Malaysia, 23-24 February 2001, p.9. For a more detailed study on the Abu Sayyaf Group.} That said, Salamat has in fact explicitly
called for armed Jihad against the Philippine government on very few occasions, the most prominent being his response to the Estrada administration’s policy of “all-out-war” from April to July 2000 and the February 2003 Buliok offensive of the AFP.

There should be little doubt that Salamat was also a proponent of the Islamic state, and this, to his mind, lay at the heart of the tension between the MILF and MNLF: “MNLF is more inclined to secularism, while MILF adopts the Islamic ideology and way of life . . . and believes in the Islamic concept of state and government.”76 He justified this belief on the basis that while a Muslim can and should perform his Ibadah (obligations), if “the political authority to whom he owes obedience and allegiance does not recognize the supremacy of the Law of God, he has not perfected his worship to God.”77 The belief in Islamic governance has been given institutional expression in the context of the MILF structure of authority in the role of the Majlis Shura. Even so, Salamat’s position on the Islamic state has not been consistent. Elsewhere, Salamat noted “we have to accept the fact that most of the provinces here in the area are now dominated by non-Muslims. We can be satisfied with the provinces where the Muslims are still the majority. Regarding this Islamic State which people talk about, this idea did not come from us. What we want is to become independent. Regarding the system of government, that can be decided later.”78

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More recently, MILF leaders have taken a more cautious stance on the matter of the Islamic state, and have instead suggested that the specific type of administration for an independent Mindanao would be “decided by the people.”\textsuperscript{79} To understand this inconsistency, one has to look at the politics surrounding the MILF struggle. As alluded to earlier, MILF leaders are fully aware that the demographics in Mindanao work against their objectives (hence the transformation of the nomenclature of resistance from a Moro struggle to a Bangsamoro struggle). Decades of resettlement have relegated the Muslim population to the status of minority.\textsuperscript{80}

The MILF’s emphasis on Islam as the essence of their struggle however, did not preclude the participation of non-Muslims. As noted earlier, in their definition of “Bangsamoro” for instance, they have indicated that this will include non-Muslim indigenous tribal communities as well as indigenous Christians. Likewise, MILF leaders have asserted that upon independence, they would not prejudice against non-Muslims, including settlers, who will be permitted the freedom to choose either a Bangsamoro identity (without any need to convert to Islam) or that of settlers.\textsuperscript{81} At the heart of this seeming anomaly is the fact that despite the heavy use of religious references and the undoubted centrality of Islam as a motivational frame, the Bangsamoro struggle has to ultimately be appreciated against the context in which it evolved. As McKenna wisely cautioned: “The Muslim nationalist struggle for territory and a separate national identity has shaped (and continues to shape) what it means to be a Muslim in the Philippines, and has led to a search for a rationalized, self-conscious, and oppositional Islamic identity.

\textsuperscript{79} Interview with MILF member, Cotabato City, 14 July 2005; interview with MILF officials, Cotabato City, 15 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{80} This also likely explains the early reluctance on the part of Salamat Hashim and other MILF leaders for a plebiscite.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview with MILF officials, Cotabato City, 15 July 2005.
But that more universal and rationalized identity has, in turn, been principally directed toward what is, in essence, a highly pragmatic political effort at nation-building.”

Conclusion

This paper has sought to outline the contours of the struggle on the part of the Muslim minority in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, relying on ideas drawn from framing that stresses the production and reproduction of discourses and meaning. In terms of the diagnostic frames employed by agents of Bangsamoro “nationalism,” frustration about the loss of land has given rise to a Moro self-consciousness where local history was investigated and invented, national myths constructed, decay of local and religious culture deplored, and the glory of the pre-Spanish history celebrated. This in turn led to prognoses that turned on the need to regain loss land, not to mention pride and identity, which included the use of armed insurgency and rebellion. This has certainly been the case with social movement organizations such as the MILF, for whom jihad resonates both in terms of political violence and political dialogue. For the MILF too, the use of Islamist ideology has provided an effective motivational frame that served to reaffirm Moro commitment to the cause by generating meaning and intelligibility for the struggle and cementing solidarity. Furthermore, by making the motivational frame readily accessible through reference both to Islamic history as well as local Moro historical experiences, the MILF has successfully tied their struggle to historical memory and everyday life in Mindanao.

At the same time, the paper has also identified the contours of change and how reframing has taken place in order for conflict narratives to remain pertinent and effective

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82 McKenna, “The Endless Road to Peace,” p.13.
as vehicles of mobilization. This was evident in how discourses on Bangsamoroism – chiefly, what and who is a Bangsamoro – were framed and reframed in order to enhance its appeal, as well as how Islam became an increasingly salient feature of the narrative of local struggle.