

A COSTLY QUEST IN MINDANAO PEACE WITHIN GRASP?

by Terrence Lyons



The Philippines approaches elections in May 2004 shaped by the global struggle against international terrorism and a legacy of domestic conflict between the government and Muslim insurgents in Mindanao. Conflict resolution efforts have focused on efforts to create autonomy in Mindanao but these initiatives have failed to end tensions and strife. The United States recently re-established close bilateral military ties with the Philippines in order to combat what it perceives as terrorist threats in Mindanao from the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who has entered the race for re-election, has

stated that “peace is within grasp” and her record will be assessed in part by whether she can reach a settlement before her term expires.

Mindanao is the poorest region of the Philippines, has the largest number of Muslims and has been the site of a decades-long struggle between the Philippine state and several insurgent groups that advocate independence or autonomy for the province. The conflict springs from the general underdevelopment in the province and the inability of the central government to integrate Muslims into the political and institutional fabric. Historically inhabited by the Muslim Moro people, Mindanao currently has a non-Muslim majority due to high levels of migration by Catholics since the 1960s.

In the 1960s, conflict escalated between the Philippine military and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLFF). After a series of talks under the auspices of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), the two sides signed the Tripoli Agreement in 1976. The agreement called for regional autonomy and this framework has served as the benchmark for subsequent efforts. Not all Moro groups, however, accept this formula. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), for example, broke away from the MNLFF and demanded independence in 1977 and changed its name in 1984. The

small but violent Abu Sayyaf Group also rejects the autonomy framework.

The Philippine government conducted a series of plebiscites starting in 1989 to determine which areas should be included in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and the regional officials to represent them. The ARMM region was officially inaugurated on Nov. 6, 1990. The electoral processes were contentious, with Muslim groups claiming that authorities in Manila were imposing rules without adequate consultation and violating the Tripoli Agreement. Implementation was further complicated by splits within the Moro movement and between successive governments in Manila that choose different combinations of military pressures and negotiations to end the conflict.

Political participation by the parties involved was similarly dismal. In the 1987 plebiscite, only four provinces voted to join the ARMM. The MNLFF rejected the plebiscite and boycotted subsequent elections in 1990 and 1993. A 1996 agreement eventually enticed the MNLFF to participate in elections, in part by promises from Manila and international

donors to support a massive development effort in Mindanao. Nur Misuari, the MNLFF leader who won the elections for governor, marked his tenure by corruption rather than development. Misuari was deposed from the MNLFF and as elections to select his successor approached, he launched attacks on the Armed Forces of the Philippines in November 2001. He quickly fled to Malaysia where he was captured and returned to face trial. The November 2001 election went forward and leaders of the faction that had deposed Misuari

won with the support of Macapagal-Arroyo. The election, however, was marked by very low turnout due to the violence between MNLFF factions and the armed forces.

In the context of heightened concerns about global terrorism after Sept. 11, 2001, the conflict in Mindanao has become increasingly militarized and linked to international issues. Concerns regarding al-Qaeda activities in South-East Asia have led to a focus on the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). According to observers, while there is some evidence that ASG had connections to al-Qaeda in the early 1990s, such ties have faded and the group primarily engages in

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kidnappings for ransom and other forms of violence for profit. The MNLF and the MILF have condemned the ASG, although some claim that MILF continues to protect elements of the ASG. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Indonesian-based Islamist group identified by the United States as a prime terrorist threat, has had cells in the Philippines as well.

In February 2003, despite an official ceasefire, the Philippine military launched a major offensive against the MILF's stronghold near the town of Pikit. At first the military claimed it was seeking to break up another "kidnapping for profit" group known as the Pentagon Gang but later acknowledged that the MILF was the target. Over 400,000 civilians were displaced and large numbers of homes were destroyed. Philippine officials blamed the MILF for subsequent bomb blasts in the city of Davao and issued arrest warrants for top MILF officials.

Many uncertainties may force parties to the conflict in Mindanao to wait until after the May elections to re-engage the peace process. With its top officials facing arrest, the MILF announced that it would wait until after the May 2004 elections to pursue peace talks. "If the government isn't interested in peace talks anymore, we'll just wait for the next administration," said MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu. The MILF also awaits the withdrawal of government troops from Pikit. The MILF and MNLF have announced that they will work as partners to pursue peace in Mindanao but, after talks scheduled for October 2003 were cancelled, cooperation between these two rival organizations remains uncertain.

Despite these problems, President Macapagal-Arroyo is optimistic about peace. A number of critical ingredients for successful talks seem to be present, including a credible mediator in the Malaysian government and incentives in the form of promised aid to support the agreement from international donors. The United States has offered a \$30 million Mindanao Assistance Package for rehabilitating the conflict-affected areas once an agreement is signed. During his visit to the Philippines in October 2003, President Bush declared, "As we fight the terrorists, we're also determined to end conflicts that spread hopelessness and feed terror." Furthermore, the global context of the war on terrorism creates incentives for both the government and the MILF to reach an agreement. For its part, Manila hopes to isolate and thereby more effectively pursue ASG and JI that are seen as the major terrorist threats, while the MILF wants to distance itself from members of international terrorist networks.

Yet, the future of a peaceful ARMM remains in doubt. The autonomous region, a principal outcome of the Tripoli Agreement and the 1996 peace agreement, has disappointed those who hoped it would promote desperately needed peace and development. Officials in Manila have been more vigorous in their support than many in Mindanao, creating the impression that autonomy is being imposed from above with little local accountability. The elections may complicate rather than facilitate the search for peace. [E]

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CAMPAIGNING FOR A NATION

by *Marguerite K. Colston*



Dr. Paquiot at IFES.

A delegation of civil society leaders from Haiti met with IFES President Richard Soudriette on January 30 on a mission to seek international support to resolve the current political crisis. Dr. Pierre-Marie Michel Paquiot, President of the State University of Haiti, Dr. Gervais Charles, Secretary-General of the Federation of Bar Associations of Haiti, Ms. Yanick Lahens, representative of Group 184, a coalition of Haitian civil society groups calling for governmental reform, and Prof. Heberne Edmond attended.

A growing majority of Haitians have called for the resignation of President Jean-Bertrande Aristide in the aftermath of the tainted results of the parliamentary elections in 2000. Aristide has repressed opposition parties, rejected a Social Contract proposal put together by Group 184, and allowed pro-government gangs to violently disrupt demonstrators.

Dr. Paquiot, seriously wounded by anti-protest thugs during a peaceful student protest in December, has become a reluctant symbol of the national call for political reform in Haiti. "The university acts as a moral authority, not a political body," he told the IFES team, "and we are now fighting for citizens' right to speak." Without a strong parliament, army or political parties, no in-country alternatives to remove Aristide from power exist. "It is true that change ultimately must come from the Haitians," said Dr. Paquiot, "but we are getting to the point where there are no other actors left except the United States." When asked what form of support Haitians would want from the U.S. and other states, Dr. Paquiot stated unequivocally, "a clear, strong message and commitment" to remove Aristide. Sending troops would send Haitians the message that they have no political alternatives and might lead to violence.

As a result of the turmoil, "Haitians are now more united than ever," said Dr. Paquiot. Should Aristide resign, Group 184 and other opposition groups have a transition plan to prevent chaos from occurring, one that would allow a judge from the Supreme Court to oversee the building of political parties, institutions and constitutional reform as a precursor to fair elections. Haiti's history is marked by weak institutions and it is time to prepare the ground for leadership based on the constitution, commented Dr. Paquiot. This time, he said, "we are campaigning for a nation." [E] *January 30, 2004.*

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