The Philippines

From: Thomas M. McKenna

Armed Separatism and Muslim Autonomy in the Southern Philippines

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 perished in the interminable violence, which displaced another million internal refugees and caused more than 100,000 Philippine Muslims to flee to Malaysia. That war ended in a stalemated peace 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 1993 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 the Muslims of the Philippines. This article traces the remote and proximate causes of the Philippine Muslim (or Bangsamoro) rebellion and its consequences for ordinary Muslims.

The Muslim territories of the Philippines mark the perimeter of an inner belt of predominantly 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 veneration 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 ethnic, linguistic 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 that still exist 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 by a modern social stratum of various, a profound cultural gulf created by historical circumstance separates them. That gulf is the outcome of two inter-linked processes: the conversion of some regions of the Philippines to Islam, and the Spanish colonial occupation of other regions shortly afterward. Philippine Muslims hold that Islam was brought to the Philippines by a wandering prince, the son of a Malay princess and an Arab shahb, in the very early sixteenth century, Islam was introduced to the Philippines as part of the Reconquista of Muslim Spain, and Christian migration to the southern Philippines and the emergence of a new political culture for which the Muslim separatist movement, that had as its goal the establishment of an independent homeland for all Muslims in the Philippines. The remote causes of Muslim separation in the modern Philippines may be traced to the centuries-long relationship between the Muslims of the South, which was characterized by conflict with the Spanish and the gradual imposition of Spanish political and economic domination. The Spanish created two distinct political and social orders in the Philippines, the Christianized peoples of the North and the Muslimized peoples of the South, which were governed by the Spanish colonial authorities.

The Rise of Muslim Nationalism and the Armed Separatist Struggle

The Bangsamoro rebellion developed out of a regional political movement 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 Muslims in the Philippines. The remote causes of Muslim separation in the modern Philippines may be traced to the centuries-long relationship between the Spanish and the gradual imposition of Spanish political and economic domination. The Spanish created two distinct political and social orders in the Philippines, the Christianized peoples of the North and the Muslimized peoples of the South, which were governed by the Spanish colonial authorities.

Tensions brought about by massive Christian migration to the Muslim South 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 greatly at the hands of the Philippine military. The peace settlement, which called for the establishment of a ‘Moro 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 relaunched itself in Mindanao as a mass-based and self-sustaining Islamic movement guided by Islamic clerics. With the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986, and the movement leaders with the (now-modified) aim of genuine political autonomy for the Muslim Mindanos. Meanwhile, armed rebel fighters remained in fortified camps in the hills.

More Autonomy and the Aspirations of Ordinary Muslims

In 1996, seeking an end to more than 25 years of economic, political and social conflict, 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 Philippine 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 Philippine Muslims today are more peaceful than it has been in three decades and exhibits more potential for prosperity than any one 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 their 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 most powerful in the world and strengthened connections to the Islamic heartland, forming a foundation for the independence that many Muslims have rendered their struggles worthwhile.

The Author

Dr. Thomas M. McKenna is Associate Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama at Birmingham, USA. E-mail: Tommckenna@ub.edu

The Philippines

From: Muslim Advisers and Rebels. Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines (by Thomas M. McKenna, University of California Press, 1988)