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THE STATE OF MORO SELF-DETERMINATION: AN UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF AMERICA

By Ishak Mastura

In 1928 during the American Colonial Period in the Philippines, Ralston Hayden wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs Magazine* (6 *Foreign Affairs* 637 1927-1928), which posed this dilemma in its title: "What next for the Moro?" In that article, Hayden concluded that "[W]hether it proceeds in agreement with Filipinos or solely upon its own authority, the United States cannot escape responsibility for the fate of the ... Moros whose country is rapidly being brought within the limits of Western civilization." Also, Hayden recognized that, "The conditions under which they [the Moros] are to be brought within the limits of Western civilization seem likely to be controlled, therefore, not by the Moros, but by whatever outside authority dominates their territory..."

One other important point as provided in Vic Hurley's famous book on the American Colonial Period in the Moro homeland of Mindanao, "*The Swish of the Kris*", which is not a work of fiction but an actual account of American dealings with the Moros, is the fact that during the latter part of the American Colonial Period the Moros looked to America for Justice and Redress of Grievances, to wit:

"The Moros laid down their arms and surrendered to America, with the understanding that America would protect them from aggression. Data Mandi, one of the finest of the Moro leaders, indicated this plainly in a speech before Secretary of War Dickinson in 1910:

"I am here, El Rajah Mura Mandi, representing the Moros. Here they are, the whole crowd of them, come to honor the Secretary of War. As I look about, I see far more Moros than Filipinos, that is the reason it is called the Moro province.

"When America first came here, from the very beginning, whatever they asked me to do, I did. I was loyal to them ever--now I hear a rumor that we Moros are in the hands of the Filipinos.

"In the Spanish times, I was a Datu. Then I saw and found out that things did not go well. When a man had two measures of rice, one was taken away from him; when a man had two head of cattle, one was taken away from him.

"If the American government does not want the Moro province any more, they should give it back to us. It is a Moro province--it belongs to us."

During the same meeting, the Moro Sacaluran came forward to address Dickinson:

"I am an old man. I do not want any more trouble. But if it should come to that, that we are to be given over to the Filipinos, I still would fight."

Ulankaya then arose and addressed the Secretary of War:

"I am not a civilized man but I have learned that slavery, killing and stealing is a bad thing. But if we are given over to another race, we had better all be hanged."

Thirteen years later, the Moro attitude had not changed. During the famous Rizal Day parade at Zamboanga in 1923, the Moros carried placards announcing:

"We Moros are not with the Christian Filipinos in their asking for Independence."

"We are not ungrateful to the United States."

"The voices of the Moros are not heard in Manila except by our friend General Wood."

"Whether Independence be given the Filipinos or not, we wish our Moro country to be segregated from Luzon and the Visayan islands."

The Wood-Forbes Commission, sent out to study the situation, heard the same expression of desire to remain under American rule when Ami Binaning spoke for the Maguindanao Moros:

"We Moros wish the protection of America. We wish to stay under the American flag."

Fast forward to 2006, the burning question "What next for the Moro?" has still not been answered. When American forces entered Mindanao again after 9/11 in late 2001 and called Mindanao, its Second Front on the War on Terror (among other Second Fronts on the War on Terror, such as the Sahel Region in North Africa), they came full circle to the unfinished business having to do with the Moros and Mindanao, which the Americans had hurriedly left for the Filipinos to sort out, when they granted independence to the Philippines in 1946 soon after the end of World War II. American forces and American Diplomacy re-engaged with the Moros, the very first Islamic or Muslim peoples to be under American occupation. Perhaps, in the travails of the Moros today are lessons for America in Iraq and Afghanistan not to leave unfinished business there because they have a nasty habit of turning-up again to haunt you making things more complicated and more difficult in the future.

Today, America must recognize that in the case of the Moros, it could never say "Mission Accomplished" paralleling what President George Bush said for the Iraq War. The truth of the matter is that the Mission with regard to the Moros has remained the same, i.e.

bringing the Moros to the "limits of Western civilization". Only now the Mission is couched in terms of globalization.

According to one article and I quote:

"The conceptual basis of U.S. military enforcement of globalization has been elaborated at length by Thomas P.M. Barnett, an analyst who lectures at the U.S. Naval War College, in his two books *The Pentagon's New Map* and *Blueprint for Action: A Future Worth Creating*. Barnett divides the world into two spheres, a "functioning core," and what he calls "the red zone," or "the gap." The "functioning core" is that portion of the world where globalization has taken hold, and "the gap," which encompasses Africa, the Middle East (except for Israel), Central Asia, and portions of East Asia and South America, is that portion of the world where it hasn't. The late Adm. Arthur Cebrowski, a collaborator of Barnett's and the one-time head of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's Office of Force Transformation, said in 2003: "Our business is exporting security from the core into the gap." The purpose of exporting that security isn't to strengthen national governments of countries within the gap, however. Barnett has written that "The integration of the Gap will ultimately depend more on private investment than anything the Core's public sector can offer." (Counterrevolution in Military Affairs Ambushes U.S. Military by Carl Osgood, Executive Intelligence Review, November 17, 2006 and from www.larouchepub.com).

Hence, the Mission in the modern sense excised of its colonial tinge, is to bring security to "the gap" in Mindanao and in the future to integrate the Moro areas in Mindanao into the functioning core. But that is not to say that the Philippines in general is already part of the functioning core. In fact, the Philippines is viewed by security experts as a weak and ineffective state. According to Kit Collier and Malcolm Cook in their article "The Philippines' Sanctuaries of Terror" (from Project Syndicate, May 2006):

"The presence of insurgent or terrorist sanctuaries in non-belligerent countries is one of the most intractable, explosive issues in international relations. It was a central fact of the Vietnam War, brought about the destruction of Lebanon, and continues to plague the coalition in Iraq. It is also key to the present war on terror in Southeast Asia.

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Like previous host countries, the Philippines is a weak state, at peace with its neighbors and the West. But, since 1994, its lawless southern islands have replaced Afghanistan as the main training ground and refuge for Southeast Asian jihadists. Most are Indonesians belonging to Jemaah Islamiyah, Mujahidin Kompak, and other Darul Islam factions.

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Mindanao is not Cambodia or Lebanon, but the essential dilemma is the same. How does one separate the terrorist parasite from its unwilling host, without doing fatal violence to the patient?

In the Philippines, the diagnosis is complicated by the fact that terrorists are embedded in a volatile Muslim insurgency with which the West has no quarrel. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is Southeast Asia's strongest separatist group. It enjoys popular support, expresses legitimate grievances, and peace talks are underway. Like the Palestinians, however, the MILF is riven by factions, and its leaders cannot, or will not, exclude terrorists from areas that they control.

In part, this reflects political hedging by the MILF in the face of Manila's incapacity to make meaningful concessions.

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So what is to be done? American forces are probing the sanctuaries in the guise of training exercises, and they are backing targeted air strikes. But they must tread lightly, lest they be drawn into a shooting war, which would catalyze new alliances among local and foreign militants. A conventional military approach failed in Cambodia and Lebanon. It would fail in Mindanao, too.

Instead, surgical military strikes based on an expanded intelligence effort should complement the peace process, prying extremists away from the MILF mainstream. A crucial, if embryonic, mechanism in this campaign is the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group, established by the Philippine government and MILF negotiators to facilitate cooperation against "lawless elements" in MILF territory. The Group's mandate should be widened, and resources should be provided to allow it to tackle terrorism explicitly.

In return for MILF cooperation, the US, Australia, and other interested countries must pick up political slack and build the government's capacity to deliver a sustainable peace agreement for Mindanao. Prompt, substantial infusions of post-conflict aid will be indispensable ingredients for peace."

On a larger and broader strategic sense, the Mindanao or Moro Conflict lies at the fault lines of the current debate regarding a putative Clash of Civilizations between the West and Islam. Mindanao is the farthest extent of the spread of Islam in the world and it is here that Western civilization through Spain confronted the ramparts or the vanguard of Islam in East Asia, the Moros. However, for the Muslims in the encounter with Western colonizers, there was really no clash of civilization to speak of, because as one Muslim author has said "More broadly, however, the fault line lay between Europe and the rest of the world, which it deemed an "other" that could be freely dominated, exploited, and

subjugated.” (What’s Right with Islam is What’s Right with America by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Harper-Collins 2004, p. 4). Worse for the Moros, the nascent Filipino Nation defined itself as a Christian Nation with the Moros as the self-affirming “other”. Hence in the words of Peter Kreuzer, a German academic, “The Christian self-image of the Philippines Nation could come to terms with the Moros only by either making them disappear physically (by state-engineered demographic marginalisation) or by making them disappear culturally in a process of assimilation. The Muslims thereby became the significant other of the Christian self-imagery of the national political elite. They were needed as the other, because only by taking recourse to them, could the ethnically disparate Christian Filipinos construct a unified collective identity.” (Framing Violence: Nation- and State-Building by Peter Kreuzer and Mirjam Weiberg, Asian Perspectives, PRIF Reports No. 72, 2005, p. 16).

While Barnett has stated that ultimately private investments are needed to bring “the gap” into the “functioning core”, and Collier and Cook have asserted that the security issue can be addressed through surgical military strikes against terrorists while simultaneously encouraging the peace process between the MILF and the Philippine government, I feel that their solutions are merely stop-gap measures or “band-aids” to a conflict as intractable as the Mindanao Conflict has proven to be. Paraphrasing Andrew Mango in his book *The Turks Today* (London, 2004) on the Kurdish struggle for self-determination, “There are no easy solutions to the [Moro question] – neither liberal democracy nor repression will conjure it away. Experience in other countries suggests that **economic development**, far from reducing nationalist disaffection, increases it as people whose energies had formerly been taken up by the struggle to survive find time to worry about their identity.” (p. 223). Conflict resolution through peace and development work is really more than just promoting the “absence of violence” and “economic development.” Peace and development means taking time to understand the “roots of conflict.” Often, we hear the mantra from governments, international donors and aid agencies that economic development will take care of the ethnic conflict in Mindanao and that as people grow more prosperous the ethnic conflict and violence will just go away. But as pointed out in the quoted passage, economic development may actually *increase the aspirations of ethnic peoples for recognition of their distinct identity with all that it entails including secession, autonomy, federalism, etc.* If economic development is actually the panacea for ethnic conflicts that some would like to promote, then the Basque and Catalonia regions in Spain would have long stopped demanding for more and more freedoms including a potential Free Association with the Spanish state because these two “autonomous” areas are already the most economically developed regions in Spain, being its wealthiest and most industrialized.

Hence, America rather than using a “carrot and stick” approach for peace-building in Mindanao has to re-engage with the Moros through a larger framework of security and that is Human Security. Human Security is a people-centered approach to foreign policy which recognizes that lasting stability cannot be achieved until people are protected from violent threats to their rights, safety or lives (from the Canadian government website on human security). In approaching the Mindanao or Moro Conflict through the lens of Human Security, America would be answering the haunting echo down through the long

years of the prescription of Hayden in his article that "The most urgent need is for the establishment by the United States of a stable Moro policy, one which will be recognized as permanent by interested Americans, and by Filipinos and Moros." The key word in his statement is the word "Moro" because while America might have a generalized Philippine policy it does not currently have a Moro policy.

The framework of Human Security as a modality for Ad Hoc International Intervention is now being used in the context of the Mindanao or Moro Conflict by Japan since it joined this year in the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team and possibly soon other countries like the U.S., Australia and Canada will join in the Ad Hoc International Intervention in the Mindanao or Moro Conflict through this framework. The U.S. Armed Forces have been conducting "hearts and minds" campaign and humanitarian relief assistance in the Sulu Archipelago so it is not far-fetched that the U.S. State Department may graduate to Ad Hoc International Intervention in Mindanao within the framework of Human Security, especially since the late Chairman and founder of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Hashim Salamat, wrote U.S. President George Bush in January 2003 asking for U.S. Government assistance or intervention to resolve the Mindanao or Moro Conflict. Perhaps it is time for the U.S. government after its initial response to Salamat acknowledging that the Moros have "legitimate grievances", to reach out more to the MILF considering that as observed by one academic writer "[T]he MILF leadership has not echoed, the pan-Islamic agenda of regional terrorists organizations such as the JI, even if some of their leaders were involved in the meetings of the Rabitatul Mujahideen (League of Holy Warriors) conglomerate of regional radical *jihadi* groups during 1999-2000 that hoped to bring a region-wide Islamic state. It is clear from the articulation of their leadership that the MILF's objectives are fundamentally local and political in nature – the return of what they perceive to be the rightful homeland of the Bangsamoro. Consequently, the issue of ancestral lands, for the MILF, is the cornerstone of the ongoing MILF-GRP (Government of the Republic of the Philippines) negotiations, and will ultimately determine success or failure of the talks. (Muslim Resistance in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines: Religion, Ideology, and Politics by Joseph Chinyong Liow, p. 24).

Clearly with the increased international attention, the current framework of the peace negotiations in the Mindanao or Moro Conflict has gone beyond the traditional low-level mediation of the Organization of Islamic Conference and has now reached the level of International Diplomacy and application of International Law Framework since as explained below in one article on Human Security:

"The international political architecture of the Cold War was defined by the respect for territorial integrity together with the principles of sovereign competence and noninterference. The architecture of the post-Cold War period has changed, however, especially in relation to ineffective states. While respect for territorial integrity remains, with regard to non-interference, sovereignty over the noninsured populations living within such states has become internationalized, negotiable and conditional.

Interventions in Kosovo, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, have not challenged the territorial integrity of the states concerned; indeed, its principle has been upheld. What is in question is how populations within such territories are governed and maintained. Re-territorialization within the existing borders of ineffective states, based upon external oversight and control of core budgetary and human security functions, is not only seen as good in itself, it is has been cast as essential for the security of mass consumer society." ([Human Security: Development, Containment and Re-territorialization](#) by Mark Duffield, Chatham House ISC/NSP Briefing Paper 05/02, "The Globalization of Security", October 2005).

With that last passage, I leave you to draw your own conclusions as to the future directions of the Mindanao or Moro Conflict especially as regards re-territorialization of a Bangsamoro homeland with the current Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao as the core keeping in mind Hayden's remarks that "The conditions under which they [the Moros] are to be brought within the limits of Western civilization seem likely to be controlled, therefore, not by the Moros, but by whatever outside authority dominates their territory..." within the context of a weak and ineffective Philippine state.