

Featured Article

**Structural Injustice and Peace Building in the
Bangsamoro**

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Abstract

This investigation explains the situation in the Bangsamoro. The peace agreement, which has resulted in the cessation of hostilities between the Muslim rebels (MILF) and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP), has achieved what the Bangsamoro desired: wealth redistribution and autonomy. It is argued that the present condition can be described as a state of negative peace. Now, in order to sustain the peacebuilding process, there is a need to reform the institutions in the Bangsamoro. A truly inclusive system will require the integration of Lumads, Muslims, and Christians into a societal culture of a diverse region. This integral type of peace requires the sense of belongingness and the shared future among diverse groups. If the Bangsamoro must succeed, people should co-exist sans their prejudice against each other in establishing a just and equal socio-political order.

Keywords: Negative Peace, Bangsamoro, Integral Peace, Extremism, Inclusion

Introduction

Fort Pilar in Zamboanga City was erected in 1635. The year also marked the birth of the city. The fortification was built upon request by the Jesuit missionaries and Bishop Fray Pedro of Cebu. The stone wall was there to defend the territory from the pirate attacks coming from the sultanates of Sulu and the surrounding areas. It was abandoned by the Spaniards after it was also attacked by the Dutch in 1646. The stone wall was then rebuilt in 1719 and again, it was attacked by Moros. The pirates were repulsed by its brave defenders, although the British Navy also bombarded the fort in 1798. The fort still stands. Such is a testament to the resilience of the place, and of Mindanao as of whole, amidst all the troubles and violent conflicts that it has been entangled with. In fact, the Americans were not able to subjugate the island but instead excluded Mindanao from the colonial government.¹ And in the decades that followed, what came to be known as the Bangsamoro or Muslim Mindanao, dreamt of nothing but peace and prosperity for its people.

The present conflict in Mindanao is not a religious war, according to Patricio Abinales. It is an orthodoxy.² It is a prejudice painted by the elites in the capital. Indeed, the absence of peace has always defined the states of affairs in the world all throughout the history of human civilization. War appears to be an inevitable facet of human existence for reasons both obvious and not – the venomous hatred against the other, the struggle for liberation, or the very desire of the powerful for conquest. War is never spectacular. Violence is ugly. Global conflicts, e.g., the refugee crisis due to the Iraq and Syrian War, the US invasion of Afghanistan, and now, Israel's War on Gaza, manifest that the world has not overcome the problem of bias and prejudice against those who are considered as outsiders. Will Kymlicka explains that the issue is anchored in the question of identity.³ However, beyond the politics of identity, the problem rests

¹ See Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*. Manila: Tala Publications, 1974), 121-124.

² See Patricio Abinales, *Orthodoxy and History in the Muslim Mindanao Narrative* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 10-12.

³ Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 330.

on the reality of injustice.⁴ Armed conflicts arise due to socio-political exclusion. To justify their demand, minority groups appeal to the idea of rebellion as a justifiable course of action in view of the persistent injustices that they suffer from the dominant majority who decide law and policy in society.

Peace is not just about putting an end to physical violence. It is also concerned with addressing the reality of cultural violence.⁵ Peace as positive has something to do with people empowerment and good institutions. Negative peace is about the absence of violence. But the problem is that structural violence is latent. War is obvious. All the destruction can be seen. But unjust structures are not. In this way, the Bangsamoro is in a state of negative peace, to use the term of Johann Galtung.⁶

The pursuit of solidarity in society, which is crucial in sustaining peace, concerns one's moral precepts. Jonathan Haidt explains that our political leanings are not rooted in reason but "in gut feeling".⁷ This gut feeling is formed by our "associative relations". While individuals have interests, the concept of communal solidarity influences human behavior. It matters to determine whose side one is for, or against. The reality of antagonism often proceeds from the reality of our political prejudices. This reality divides groups and results to the exclusion of others. As a result, dominant groups dictate the terms and conditions of the societal culture. Mindanao is a diverse society. It is wrong, for instance, to label it as a violent region. Scholars like Asuna Yoshizawa and Patricio Abinales have studied the problem of co-existence among different ethnic groups. It is their conclusion that the Muslims and Christians share a peaceful relationship. The reality of conflict is more of an exception than the rule. However, the peace process in Muslim Mindanao, some critics say, has not been

⁴ James Gallen, *Transitional Injustice and Historical Abuse of Church and State*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 70.

⁵ See Al Quillope, "Peace Education and the Ethics of Peace," in *Ethics in Contemporary Philippine Society*, ed. Christopher Ryan Maboloc (Davao City: SMK Publishing, 2020), 157.

⁶ Johann Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969):169.

⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Book, 2013), 18.

truly inclusive. The Lumads, it can be said, have been ignored.⁸ There are factors to this sentiment. For one, the Lumads as a minority historically lack the type of political representation that will empower them to have a strong say when it comes to law and policy.

The problem is rooted in cultural imperialism.⁹ For Al Quillope, dominant structures mock the culture of the Lumad.¹⁰ Giving up the armed struggle for self-determination has diffused the many years of conflicts and violence. But minority groups only get symbolic political, social, and economic benefits, instead of a concrete type of autonomy. Such compromises their well-being in favor of the vested interests of the dominant majority. The political and economic elites continue to influence state decisions. Conflict and violence often emerge when the oppressed fight for their rights. Sometimes, it is the only way to get one's demands noticed. The struggle is a result of people having to deal with years of oppression. Injustices cannot be resolved by simply putting people into government positions and expecting the change to occur overnight. There must be an effort to rectify uneven structures that put a particular group of people at a disadvantage. Such is the harsh reality that the Lumad in the Bangsamoro and the whole of Mindanao is facing.

The Quest for Peace in Muslim Mindanao

The Grand Mosque in Cotabato City is a magnificent structure. It is an imposing figure, situated in a quiet area surrounded by hills and a river. The mosque, the second largest in the Philippines, next to the Grand Mosque of Marawi City, is a testament to what is beautiful and sublime. There is hope in the Bangsamoro. Muslims, Christians, and Lumads all want to co-exist in a just and progressive society under the principles of democratic governance. The people in the Bangsamoro are tired from the many years of war. They hope and aspire for peace and prosperity. The establishment of the Bangsamoro

⁸ Karl Gaspar, *Handumanan: Digging for the Indigenous Wellspring* (Manila: Claretian, 2021), 358-359.

⁹ See Iris Marion Young, "The Five Faces of Oppression," in *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy*, eds. Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 335.

¹⁰ Quillope, "Peace Education and the Ethics of Peace," 157.

Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is a testament to this.

The BARMM is composed of an 80-seat parliament. It is led by a chief minister and two deputy ministers. It is considered a devolved parliamentary system within a unitary democratic government whose seat of power is in Manila. The Bangsamoro region is composed of six provinces, namely Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, and Basilan (except Isabela City) and the cities of Cotabato, Lamitan and Marawi. Its seat of power is in Cotabato City (de facto). As of 2020, the autonomous region has a population of 4,404,488 according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.¹¹

The now decade-old peace agreement between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) was signed on January 24, 2014, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The GRP was represented by its chief negotiator, Dr. Miriam Coroner-Ferrer while the MILF was represented by its chief negotiator Mohagher Iqbal. During the time of President Benigno Aquino III, the proposed bill for the enactment of the Basic Bangsamoro Law (BBL) was scuttled because of the 2015 Mamasapano incident, a clandestine operation of the Special Action Forces (SAF) of the Philippine National Police to capture the terrorist Marwan that resulted in the death of 44 SAF members. At that time, mistrust between the two parties became apparent because of the tragic mis-encounter. The election of Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency in 2016 gave renewed hope for peace. The Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) was passed in 2018. The law gave the Bangsamoro region its autonomy and a share of the national wealth. It provided a development map for the tri-people in Muslim Mindanao.

What is the present challenge? The Bangsamoro must learn from the mistakes of the defunct Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), established after the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) had signed a peace accord with the Philippine Government under the watch of President Fidel V. Ramos. At this juncture, it is crucial to consider the sentiments of the ordinary people on the ground and investigate the tension between political factions. The clannish nature of politics in the region will have an impact on the future of the 2014 Peace Agreement between the MILF and the GRP.

¹¹ Philippine Statistics Authority. <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/population-and-housing/node/165013>.

The issue suggests that deep-seated issues affect the approaches to the pursuit of peace. It is crucial to look into patronage politics as part of the problem. It can be said that providing the socio-political framework for a regional autonomous government is not enough. The prejudice against Lumads and Christians in the region is an issue that should be looked into and immediately addressed. This is because to make peacebuilding truly inclusive, all stakeholders must not only have a real voice in matters concerning the state. They too must understand their role in terms of realizing the motives and goals of their government.

This is not to say that the Bangsamoro is incapable of governing itself. The threat comes from the embeddedness of traditional politics that has also been practiced by big Muslim clans and political families who control the territory, then and now, and consider the place they rule as their fiefdom. The Bangsamoro region is still one of the poorest regions in the country. Decades of war and conflict have prevented the development of the place. A subsequent shadow economy, partnered with the presence of large private armies, results to a volatile security situation that has discouraged investors from putting money in the region, resulting to unemployment and the lack of opportunities for its young population. The presence of extremist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf, meanwhile, portrays a bad image for the Bangsamoro region. The Marawi Siege in 2017 suggests that the security in the area is still fragile. The latest terror incident is the bombing of the Mindanao State University - Marawi Gym on December 3, 2023, during a Catholic Mass inside the building, which was meant to provoke and sow the image of a Christian and Muslim divide.

There are efforts to address the issue of exclusion. Structural injustice, according to Iris Marion Young, are hidden in institutional practices that promote bias and prejudice.¹² For instance, the fear of exclusion is not unfounded since minority groups can be susceptible to political and economic domination. The Bangsamoro government in Cotabato City is aware of the importance of cooperation, more than anything else. At present, the MILF leadership feel a sense of fatigue in fighting the government. But what the autonomy in the Bangsamoro

¹² Iris Marion Young, "Structural Injustice and the Politics of Difference," in *Multiculturalism and Political Theory*, eds. Anthony Simon Laden and David Owen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 63.

has done is recognize the struggle of Muslims. The government has given them the right to an autonomous government. The BOL, in fact, allows for the exercise and practice of the Lumad way of life. The law does not preclude the ability of a people to pursue their “concept of the good” nor does it intend to undermine their sense of identity and basic freedoms.

The 2014 Peace Agreement between Muslim rebels (MILF) and the Philippine Government is a result of dialogue and negotiation. The peacebuilding process involved bishops, ulamas, and individuals from civil society organizations. Former President Duterte realized the high stakes involved in achieving peace for the Bangsamoro. He was pivotal in implementing the final peace agreement.¹³ Trust was needed and the solidarity between Christians and Muslims, including Lumads, had to be forged. In the not-so-distant past, the tragic all-out war policy during the administration of President Joseph Estrada shattered the dreams of peace. The mindset changed when President Duterte came into office. The President campaigned on a promise that the moment he wins the presidency, he will represent Muslim Filipinos.

The Peace Agreement was preceded by the Zamboanga Siege in 2013. It was led by Nur Misuari and the members of the MNLF. The month-long crisis resulted in a hundred fatalities. Misuari is currently holed up in the hinterlands of Sulu, with a warrant of arrest that has not been served. For years, there are recorded skirmishes between government troops and radical groups, like the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), but the region is advancing towards a more liberal type of progress characterized by openness and the desire to establish a democratic society anchored on principled governance. For instance, 7,000 members of the MILF have been integrated into the Philippine National Police (PNP). The decommissioning of more than 13,000 MILF fighters was crucial in maintaining peace and stability in the region.

For Juichiro Tanabe, peace is a political as well as a “spiritual or moral experience.”¹⁴ While the peace process in the Bangsamoro is a state-centric model, civil society has actually played a crucial role in

¹³ See Christopher Ryan Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte* (Cotabato City: Elzstyle Publishing, 2022), 23-27.

¹⁴ Juichiro Tanabe, “Beyond Liberal Peace: Critique of Liberal Peacebuilding and exploring a Post-Liberal Hybrid Model of Peacebuilding for a more Humane World,” *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (2019): 20.

ending the conflict. The liberal model is based on representation rights and wealth redistribution. But the pursuit of peace is not just invested in the “politics of identity”. It concerns rectifying the mistakes of the past by dismantling unjust structures and global hegemonic systems. Providing “equal rights” and “opportunities” for a marginalized people requires the establishment of fair mechanisms that will secure their ability to choose well. For Karl Gaspar, peace is that “conscientization process” founded on social justice.¹⁵ So, the right thing to do, given the presence of economic and social inequalities, is to institute inclusive policies that reach out to the margins of society. The Bangsamoro is not an abstract entity. It is about a people who desire permanent jobs, security and freedom of religious practice, and a future lived in dignity for their children. The reality of political oppression is often preceded by systemic pathologies that are beyond the capacities of the state to remedy.

Addressing the Roots of the Problem in the Bangsamoro

For Patricio Diaz, Christians and Muslims are different.¹⁶ This is apparent not only from the religious perspective but also in terms of the economic, cultural, and social character of a people. The poverty in the Bangsamoro, for instance, makes manifest the injustice suffered by Muslims in the South in terms of resource allocation and autonomy. The type of historical injustice committed by the Manila-centric type of governance is colonial in nature.¹⁷ The very foundation, character, and image of what Mindanao is today was laid in the early part of the 20th century. The historical unfolding of a region that was to be mired in Muslim and Christian conflict beginning in the 70s was a result of years of neglect by the Commonwealth Government and triggered by the Jabidah Massacre during the Marcos regime.¹⁸ The insurgency that was the Moro rebellion is a result of structural violence caused by the

¹⁵ Karl Gaspar, “Patterns of the Mindanao Catholic Church’s Involvement in Social Issues,” in *Making Civil Society*, ed. Miriam Coroner-Ferrer (Quezon City: Third World Studies, 1997), 166.

¹⁶ Patricio Diaz, *Understanding Mindanao Conflict* (Davao City: MindaNews Publication, 2003), 5.

¹⁷ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte,” *IQRA: Journal of Al Qalam Institute* 4 (2017): 7.

¹⁸ Heidi Gloria, *History from Below* (Davao City: Research and Publication Office – Ateneo de Davao Univeristy, 2014), 194.

patronage type of politics that only favored the landed elites and the economic interests of powerful political clans and Ilustrado politicians.

Going into the cause of the problem means understanding that the issue is more than social or economic. For Sen. Amina Rasul, peace is concerned with putting food on the table, which suggests that the root of conflict is essentially economic.¹⁹ But such a view is limited. To fully address the problem of violence, social and political institutions must be transformed. Their sincere and efficient functioning is what “positive peace” is about, which implies that democratic and inclusive practices are interwoven in the lives of the people. Integrated peace seeks to address the fundamental issues. The problem has something to do with the way people are treated. It is about how minorities are demeaned, their identity shattered by oppressive laws and practices. The damage to the individual is irreparable. The disrespect fuels the hatred. Bias and prejudice are deeply entrenched in colonial history. Oppression can also be found in the imposition of values that consider other cultures as inferior.²⁰ Justice requires ending all the positional advantage of the elites in society.²¹

The discrimination against the Lumad is systemic and structural. It is systemic because it has become part of the way people treat the Lumad. It is structural because societal norms and practices reinforce this mockery. The problem cannot be solved by legislating laws alone. “Positive peace” will require concrete efforts on the part of people to eliminate the prejudices and negative norms. It will require more than a recognition of the difference in people. What is actually needed is to put an end to a politics of exclusion. In fact, there is a hierarchy among Christians, Muslims, and Lumads. The Lumads are always considered as the least. The Lumads are the “least educated”, the least in terms of rights, the least in terms of getting the respect for one’s way of life. The Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) has not protected the Lumad. Indigenous peoples are still being “exploited”. The Lumad is labeled as ignorant. They are judged as “illiterate”. As a result, they suffer. In this way, the cessation of hostilities between the government and rebels is felt as an artificial form of peace. Integral

¹⁹ Amina Rasul, *Broken Peace: Assessing the 1996 GRP-MILF Final Peace Agreement* (Makati: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2007), 81.

²⁰ Young, “The Five Faces of Oppression,” 337.

²¹ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “What is Structural Injustice?” *Philosophical Quarterly of Israel* Volume 47, no. 4 (2019): 1186-1187.

peace can only be realized the moment the people feel that sense of belongingness in a society in which institutions serve the ends of justice.

Peace agreements are efforts to end hostilities and begin the hard process of peacemaking and peacebuilding. The inhumane treatment of minorities triggers resistance and as a result, the advent of conflict and violence. Wars happen because the powerless are stripped of their dignity as humans. The Lumads are not interested in waging war. They only want to live in peace. What is the prospect for the Lumad? Indeed, the respect for diversity is crucial in the “holistic pursuit of peace” and “justice in society”. Tanabe argues that peace should be understood in an integrated way, one that does not only concern what is political or economic.²² The land of the Lumad is sacred to them. To take it away from them is an “injustice”. In the 1920s up to the 1940s, there was a Great Migration to Mindanao, on orders of the colonial government of President Manuel L. Quezon. This is why Mindanao is called the “Land of Promise”. This caused the marginalization of the Lumad in places where the migrants from Luzon and the Visayas were resettled. As a consequence, the Lumad was displaced and pushed into the margins.

Dialogue is important to sustain the peace process. This dialogue is based on a sense of harmony of the people. The aim is a peaceful co-existence. Co-existence will require a true sense of belongingness and mutual understanding. The problem, however, is that the state-centric approach of the Philippine Government is to simply put money on the table. The basic framework of peace-making in the Bangsamoro in this regard is based on “satisfying” the need for “equitable growth”. This is, however, understandable. For the longest time, Muslim Filipinos have been deprived of their share of the national wealth. This has fueled their “separatist sentiments” in the past. Yet, it cannot also be denied that Indigenous Peoples (IP) have also not felt whatever progress the country may have achieved after the Marcos regime was toppled. “IPs are exploited to this day,” says Karl Gaspar.²³ This is the case while from a historical and cultural vantage point, the IPs were actually the first true inhabitants of the island, long before the establishment of the Moro Sultanates in Sulu

²² Tanabe, “Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding,” 26.

²³ Karl Gaspar, “Extractive Industries,” in *Ethics in Contemporary Philippine Society*, ed. Christopher Ryan Maboloc (Davao City: SMK, 2020), 112.

and Maguindanao. IPs were simply dominated by a “chauvinistic religion that demeaned the traditional practices of babaylans,” according to Gaspar.²⁴ If the Bangsamoro must succeed in sustaining peace and growth, then the people must learn to live with each other despite their diversity.

The Danger from Extremist Groups

But the peace situation in the region, as it has always been in the past, also appears volatile. The bombing of MSU Marawi, as mentioned above, is a primary example. It appears that some groups just want to provoke the sense of antagonism between the Christians and Muslims. The problem is not gone. Corruption still persists and for this reason, some officials lack the moral ascendancy to promote peace and justice. Some groups even feel coerced. Thus, if the majority has accepted the BARMM as a form of self-government, this does not quell the desire of fundamentalists to continue with their ways in pursuing violence as a course of action. Being realistic about the situation means that leaders must not turn a blind eye to the seriousness of extremism. The whole region is still considered by other countries as a security threat. The inequality fuels hate and violence.

To realize peace, there must be justice for all. What this means is that those who are in positions of power who are abusive must be held accountable. To be realistic about peace means that one cannot deny the reality of bad governance. It has stifled the Bangsamoro for many years. The truth on the ground is that the “danger of extremism” still persists. During the Marawi Siege, some of the fundamentalists who joined the Maute Group were “foreign students” who were enrolled at a local university. The Maute, in direct connivance with the Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah, wanted to establish an Islamic caliphate in Marawi. The same is due to the intent of Al Qaeda and JI to expand their influence in Southeast Asia, using Marawi City as their launching pad in the southern region of the Philippines. But the point is that the problem of extremism is not just about the lack of opportunities in terms of work and education. There is an attempt by influential elders, according to one informant in this study, to teach the youth radical Islamic teachings in some Madrasahs.

²⁴ Gaspar, *Handumanan: Digging for the Indigenous Wellspring*, 358.

The reason for the presence of extremist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group is that people actually sympathize with the agenda of terror groups like ISIS. The leaders of these fundamentalist organizations have been trained abroad. They have been radicalized in their exposure to terrorist organizations while working or studying in Arab countries or as in the case of Abdurajak Janjalani, by joining the mujahideens who fought in the war between Russia and Afghanistan. It is not totally that recruits are enticed to join the Abu Sayyaf because of money or due to the fact that opportunities in the provinces are limited. It is a question of brainwashing. This explains why terrorism persists in some part of the region. The BARMM must pay attention to it because such can put to waste all their peacebuilding efforts.

Conclusion

This investigation is an attempt to address some important issues in Muslim Mindanao. First, it argues that peace in the Bangsamoro can only be sustained if the root causes of the problem are addressed. The problem goes beyond the politics of identity. Representation rights as well as wealth redistribution will not solve the structural issues. What is needed is to correct the historical injustice against the Moro people and this will require establishing just systems and structures for the whole region. It is in this regard that the reality of the Lumad must also be considered. For the most part, the Lumad has been put on the sidelines, muted, and rendered powerless. They are a big part of the Bangsamoro as much as all the Muslims and Christians who live in the region. Respect for their ancestral domain is an essential requirement for peaceful co-existence. In this regard, the Lumads must become an integral part of the peacebuilding process, their basic rights protected as well as their dignity as a people.

The situation in the Bangsamoro is still volatile. This is the reason why one peace advocate calls peace “artificial”. This is because of the presence of “extremist threats” that can jeopardize the peacebuilding process. The presence of fundamentalists in the region, as well as the “upheavals” and “turmoil” around the world, can be a source of worry. Recent incidents suggest that there is a “clear danger” that can thwart the path to sustained peace. The second threat comes

from within the Bangsamoro itself. It has something to do with the presence and huge influence of powerful clans who control the economy and politics in the Bangsamoro territory. To this end, it is crucial that inclusive and democratic systems must be put in place even before the Bangsamoro Transition Authority hands power to an elected parliament that will determine the destiny of more than four million people.

The way forward for the Bangsamoro is to achieve integral peace. The situation in the region is what is called the state of negative peace. Cultural violence is being addressed. The region has achieved what it desired – wealth redistribution and autonomy. The promise of growth and social integration is apparent. However, it is important to sustain these efforts. The only way to do so is to reform the basic institutions in the region and for its people to co-exist despite the diverse cultures that define the Bangsamoro. To achieve democratic inclusion, Lumads, Muslims, and Christians must develop a sense of belongingness to end decades of resentment and hatred against each other. Integral peace is about pursuing a just way of life. The task at hand for the Bangsamoro in building its society is to give a voice to all stakeholders. The future of the Bangsamoro depends on it.

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