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Managing the Muslim Minority in the Philippines

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Abstract

This paper examines the history of Islam in the Philippines and contemporary developments, with a focus on Philippine state policies and practices with regard to the Muslim Filipinos, including security issues and foreign relations, especially with Islamic countries like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. More specifically, it touches on the following domains: (1) the history of Islamic development and how it changed the course of the Philippine state, (2) the Philippine state's traditional approach toward Philippine Islam and its adherents, and the mechanisms of religious control throughout history and in the contemporary era, (3) changing attitudes and policies concerning Islam, along with possible departures from traditional approaches of control, as may have been influenced by foreign relations with Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia and Libya, as well as actual or perceived attempts to use such relations as a legitimizing role, (4) Philippine-Saudi relations, and (5) conclusions or implications, along with policy recommendations for strengthening bilateral relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Other possible interventions in the evolution of Philippine state policy toward the Filipino Muslims will also be considered and analyzed. The most significant of these are the changes in actions or perceptions toward the Muslim Filipinos which are taking place as a result of the globalizing process and the increasing demand for democratization and access to a good life.

The History of Islam in the Philippines

The Muslims in the Philippines constitute the largest ethnic minority, and are estimated to comprise about 5 percent of the total Philippine population of 103,754,346 as of 2017.¹ This means there are 5,187,717 Muslim Filipinos, though this number is disputed by some sectors. The positionality and religious status of Muslims are influential, as they are separate from the mainstream Catholic nation, which is the first, and largest, Christian community in Southeast Asia. They have contributed much to the political and economic development of the Philippines. The Philippine Muslims have a unique history that antedates modern Philippine history by at least 100 years, based on available historiography centering on the Sulu sultanate as we shall explain below. This history is yet to be integrated fully to Philippine history instead of just brief mentions in some textbooks for a better appreciation that the Muslims are also part of the Philippine nation.

Let us recount how Islam began in the Philippines, and what factors shaped the construction of the Philippines as a nation-state. This study is divided into five major parts: (1) the history of Islamic development and how it changed the course of the Philippine state, (2) the Philippine state's traditional approach toward Philippine Islam and its adherents, and the mechanisms of religious control throughout history, (3) changing attitudes and policies concerning Islam, along with possible departures from traditional approaches of control, as may have been influenced by foreign relations with Islamic countries, (4) Philippine-Saudi relations, and (5) conclusions or implications, with some policy suggestions for strengthening bilateral relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The history of the Muslims in the Philippines (also called the Moro in earlier times and during the 1970s), is older and more entrenched than that of other Philippine groups or peoples. They directly helped shape the Philippine nation during the colonial periods (both the Spanish era, 1565–1898; and the US era, 1900–1946), as well as after its independence in 1946. In fact, Islam antedated

(1) World Population Review, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/philippines-population/>.

the formation of the Philippine state by about 100 years, as it was introduced around 1380 in Mindanao and Sulu by Islamic missionaries, who were known as the *makhdumin*, according to Philippine historian Cesar Majul.

Before the twentieth century, Mindanao and Sulu were largely under the domain of two groups of indigenous peoples: Islamized natives and heathens (the latter were designated as “pagans” in Western writings). The entire Sulu Archipelago had been wholly dominated by the Tausug Muslims, while at least half of western Mindanao was effectively united under the dominion of the Maguindanao and Maranao Muslims. The central and eastern side of this large island was inhabited by various non-Muslim tribal groups (called Lumad), who had trading relations with the Muslims. Some of these tribal communities gradually adopted the Islamic faith,² except for those in the eastern and western regions where Christianity was introduced during the 300 years of colonial domination by Spain.

This picture of the southern Philippines (Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago) is evident in the earlier writings of scholars such as Ferdinand Blumentritt, who made a thorough ethnography of the Philippines, including the south, with the help of Philippine national hero Jose Rizal. A map Blumentritt drew of that ethnography in 1890 (Figure 1) suggests the ethnic distribution of peoples in the Philippines. Here, one can see that the south is heavily populated by Muslims (green) and other indigenous peoples (yellow), with a small group of Christians (red) in the eastern section of Mindanao. The same is true for the island of Palawan, which is partly influenced by Islam by way of Sulu (Figure 1).

The first political entity that emerged is the sultanate in Sulu (1450), which was founded by Sayeed Abubakar Abidin, or simply Abubakar, an Arab who was better known as Sharif ul-Hashim (Majul, 1977). His father, Sayeed Zainal Abidin, was a direct descendant of the Hashim clan, of which the Prophet

(2) Those tribal communities that adopted Islam as a way of life include the Molbog (in southern Palawan), the Kalagan in Davao, and the Kalibugan in Zamboanga. The rest of the tribal communities have gradually adopted Christianity, though culturally they still maintain some of their important traditions, such as the rituals.

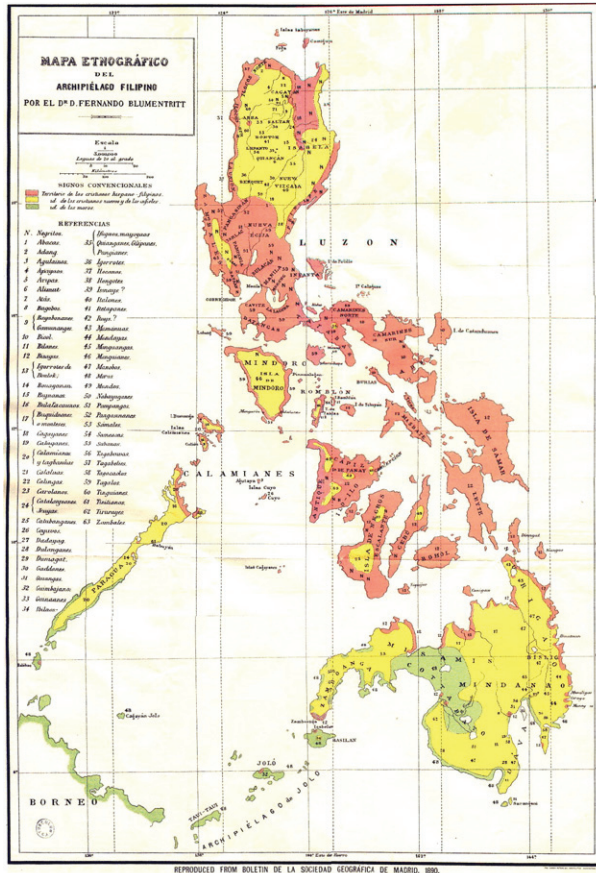


Figure 1: Ethnographic Map of the Philippines, 1890
 (reproduced from <https://www.univie.ac.at/voelkerkunde/apsis/aufi/blumen/blumap.htm>).

Muhammad was a part of. Abidin belonged to the 14th generation of Hussain, a grandson of Prophet Muhammad. Having been accepted to live with the Sulu people (Tausug), Abubakar married Paramisuli, a daughter of a local chieftain, and begot sons and grandsons as heirs to the throne. Several rulers of Sulu emerged,³ and they maintained a single, extremely powerful sultanate that

(3) The above map is originally published by Blumentritt (1899). A total of 32 sultans were enthroned from 1450 to 1936, when the last sultan, Jamalul Kiram, reigned under the aegis of the American colonial government, which effectively put a stop to the sovereignty of the Sulu Sultanate in 1915 under the Kiram-Carpenter Agreement. From 1936 to 1986, six more Sultans succeeded Sultan Kiram, who did not have a male heir and who no longer enjoyed the powers bestowed on the precolonial sultans (Majul, 1981).

reigned in the Sulu area from the 15th to the 19th centuries (Warren, 1980). Today, there are at least nine competing claims to the sultanate of Sulu from among the descendants of Abubakar.

The Sulu Sultanate once held sway over North Borneo (now Sabah) as part of his dominion. In 1878, Sabah was leased to the British North Borneo Company. When that company dissolved, it turned over Sabah to Great Britain, which then relinquished this vast tract of land to Malaysia on its way to full independence (see Magdalena, 2012). Until recently, Malaysia has been paying an annual lease to the sultan's heirs, sustaining the long-held claim that Sabah is still a property of the Sulu Sultanate, though it no longer holds sovereignty over it due to legal technicalities.

Another sultanate had emerged in Mindanao by 1520, established by Sharif Kabungsuwan from the Johore (now part of modern Malaysia) nobility. He was part Malay, as shown by his appellation *bungsu*, meaning “youngest.” Kabungsuwan's father was also an Arab, Sultan Betatar of Taif, Arabia, the ninth generation progeny of Hassan (son of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet). After marrying a daughter of a local *datus*, or chief, Kabungsuwan was later crowned sultan, the first Islamic ruler in Maguindanao, central Mindanao. Later, however, another contending sultanate emerged in Buayan, also part of Maguindanao, because of a power struggle. Today, these political dynasties centering on the sultanate are known by their location as “up-river” (locals refer to this as *sa raya*) and “down-river” (*sa ilud*) sultanates. The up-river sultanate has remained under the rule of the Sultan of Maguindanao, while the down-river sultanate is controlled by the Rajah of Buayan.

Many more sultanates sprung up in the Lake Lanao region in central Mindanao, largely through the influence of Sharif Kabungsuwan. Unlike the sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao, however, the system of political governance in Lanao is multifaceted and has multiple centers. The Lanao sultanates were known as the Four Principalities, or *Pangampong*, and each principality has ruling Royal Houses or *Panorogonan*, that number at least 16. These Royal Houses roughly

approximate that of an established sultanate in Maguindanao or Sulu. The leaders of these Royal Houses sport the titles “datu,” “sultan” and sometimes “rajah” (for a Hindu prince). Today, the Lanao sultanates have proliferated, especially the supporting villages, which also claim to have other sultans (*pegawid*).

All these sultanates from Sulu and Mindanao eventually lost their powers upon the establishment of a modern republican government set up by the Americans, and upon the birth of the Philippine state in 1946. Though many still claim to be sultans or descendants of these traditional leaders, they do not carry power as in the past except for the honorary title and symbol of prestige in the community.

Among the Moro, religion and polity are rolled into one. The political leaders are also pious persons who set themselves as examples to be emulated by their followers. Being a very organized and cohesive community, the Muslims defended their faith against all foreign intruders, Westerners and Filipinos alike, who came to their shores to subjugate them. They opposed the Spanish and American colonialists until the end of their colonial regimes, not having been colonized or converted to the Roman Catholic religion, which most lowland natives accepted with little or no resistance.

It is perhaps valid to argue that the more than 350 years of colonial presence in the Philippines were marked by conflict and violence between the Moro and foreign invaders, including the Christianized Filipinos, who were coopted by the colonialists. Majul (1977) described the Moro-Spanish relations as punctuated by “wars” that never went away. Though the Spanish reign in the Philippines was quite long, it did not leave a significant legacy among the Moro, who resisted all efforts to penetrate their homeland, and convert them to Christianity.

The coming of the Americans was the consequence of their victory during the US-Spanish war of 1898. Their entry into Mindanao did not appease the Moro, who continued their defiance as evidenced by the major conflicts in Mindanao and Sulu between 1902 and 1913, the period when most districts in Mindanao and Sulu were placed under the Moro Province government under the US

Department of the Military.⁴ Notable among these conflicts are the Battle of Bayang (1902), the Bud Dajo massacre of 1906, and the Bud Bagsak encounter in 1911, whose details we explain below. Aside from these major battles, there were scores of skirmishes and military operations against the recalcitrant Moro, who opposed colonialism and never yielded to American authority.

Government Policies toward the Moro

The current policies of the Philippine government toward the Moro, or Muslims, have been shaped by past experiences in governance, which started with the Spanish and continued under the American colonial government. The short interlude during World War II under the Japanese government also influenced Philippine policies, though it was not decisive and did not have significant effects. Then, the Philippine government took over as an independent state from the United States (1946), and carried out policies that basically replicate earlier colonial policies.

One way of putting the relations between the Philippine state and the Moro relations in broad perspective is that policies are molded in the context of a neocolonial administration that is still evolving under democratic governance. That is, the Philippine state looks at the Moro as one of the minority groups, who need to follow the laws like everybody else, and treats them accordingly.

Compared to the Spanish regime, the US colonial regime had a considerable impact on the Philippine Muslims in Mindanao. For the first time in their history, the Moro region was penetrated by US troops, who used a blend of force and persuasion to govern the Moro people, even against their will. At least three major wars engaged the recalcitrant Moro against the American military: the 1902 Battle of Bayang (Magdalena, 2002), the 1906 Bud Dajo massacre (Tan, 1977; Fulton, n.d.), and the Bud Bagsak encounter (FERENCE,

(4) The Moro province consisted of five out of seven districts or provinces: Cotabato, Davao, Lanao, Zamboanga, and Sulu (including the Tawi-Tawi and Basilan island provinces). The districts of Misamis and Surigao, however, remained under civilian control.

2009). The reasons: the Moro did not want any foreigners in their turf and they opposed colonial policies like taxation, compulsory education of their children, disarmament, and more.

On all occasions, the Moro fought valiantly but suffered a tremendous loss of lives, and ultimately the loss of their territory and sovereignty. However, the American generals who were appointed as governors of the Moro Province (1904-1913) tried all means possible to impose hegemony and the American way of life without converting the Moro to a new religion.

Native resistance set aside, however, the US left a lasting legacy on the Moro by way of modern education that provided them with better tools and skills to participate as citizens of a new republic. The US colonial administration also imposed a republican system of governance, where leaders are elected rather than appointed or empowered through family ties or dynastic relations. But for the Moros, it meant giving up traditional life under the clutches of the sultanate or datuship, and embracing a modern way of life. It also signaled their assimilation to mainstream Philippine society, politics, and culture.

The American presence in the Moro country has greatly influenced the inhabitants through its policies and practices. It altered the Moro identity as well as their social relations with others due to reforms that the Filipinos were not subject to from their former colonial masters, the Spanish. Through education, both the Muslims and the Christianized Filipinos were exposed to the Western concepts and principles necessary for the conduct of civil affairs and modern government. Education also united these two groups of people under one flag, despite the reluctance of the former to join them in their quest for independence.

Early on, American administrators saw to it that they extend the same benefits to the Moro as they have done to the Christianized peoples in the North (Luzon) and central region (Visayas). Public education was introduced as a matter of policy, compelling parents to send their children to school. American missionaries also established schools as a form of humanitarian relief, without trying to convert the Muslims to their Christian faith.

Perhaps the greatest legacy left by the Americans is the modern system of governance, which effectively replaced the ancient sultanate form of government. Slowly, from 1904 to 1936, the sultanate lost its sovereign power. The last to give it up was the Sulu Sultan, whom Governor Frank Carpenter, successor of the Moro Province administrator General John Pershing, persuaded to relinquish all his claims to sovereignty and power (Tan, 1977). In the Cotabato and Lanao regions, the sultans could no longer pose a strong opposition, as other Moro leaders began to participate in running their own affairs under the Americans.

The other significant change in the Moro areas is the fact that other people were now able to come to Mindanao and trade or live with the Moro. General Leonard Wood, the first governor of Moro Province, opened Mindanao for commerce and trade, inviting foreign investors to develop business such as plantations. A large number of Japanese, Americans, and other nationalities went down to establish business in Mindanao. The Japanese colonists were concentrated in Davao, where they established abaca plantations.

General Wood's successor, General John Pershing, inaugurated a new experiment whereby Christian settlers were invited to develop homesteads in Cotabato. Nine agricultural settlements were opened for these settlers to farm alongside their Moro neighbors from 1911 to 1913. Thousands of immigrants from Cebu and other areas went there with the support and encouragement of the Moro Province government. The successor government under the Philippine Commonwealth (1935–1946) began to consider opening up more lands for farmers from Luzon and the Visayas to develop Mindanao, ostensibly to increase rice production and thin the crowded population in Luzon the Visayas. From 1939 to 1965, large settlement projects were developed in Palawan and Mindanao for landless Christian farmers.

However, a hidden motivation behind this project was to dilute the Moro population and contain the rising agitation among its ranks. Some Moro leaders either wanted to be left alone or roused their followers to try to achieve the

annexation of Mindanao to the United States as a permanent territory. From 1909 to 1927, several petitions were sent to the US authorities in Manila, as well as to Washington, DC. The last effort in this unusual move was formalized in 1926 when New York congressman Robert Bacon filed a bill in the US Congress to parcel out Mindanao and Palawan from the Philippine Islands and permanently annex them to the US territory. The move, however, did not succeed. The significance of the settlements and the Bacon Bill is that they opened the floodgate of widespread immigration for others to come to Mindanao as a strategy to contain Moro restiveness and obstruct any possible quest for independence. The impact of this land policy began to show up in the distribution of Moro and Christian (also called “Filipino”) population in Mindanao as seen in the following table (Table 1). It is clear from this table that the Christian population saw a significant increase between 1903 and 1939, as compared to the Moro and the pagans.

Table 1: Population Distribution in Moro Areas, 1903–1939

	1903	1913	1918*	1932**	1939
<i>Moro Province</i>					
Moro	310,241	324,816	416,685	592,727	663,420
Pagans	--	103,355	137,353	183,504	200,000
Filipinos	46,220	69,204	129,243	274,375	516,882
<i>Rest of Mindanao (Regular/Special Provinces)</i>					
Moro	69,291	no data***	6,614	7,800	8,442
Pagans	--	no data	68,255	45,250	50,000
Filipinos	280,777	no data	361,975	62,504	832,882

Source: *Report of the Governor of Moro Province, 1913; Philippine Census, 1918; Philippine Census, 1939.*

* Palawan is not included in this table.

** Teopisto Guingona, 1934, Box 29-8, Hayden Papers. Numbers were population estimates given by provincial governors; figures for Filipinos and pagans were clearly underestimated for the Special/Regular Provinces.

*** No data: In 1903 the Pagans are included in the “Wild Tribes” category together with the Moro.

The Christian population generally doubled in less than two decades while the latter groups doubled over three decades. The latter two groups, however, were reduced compared to the Christian population. Between 1932 and 1939 alone, the number of Filipinos in the Moro Province almost doubled. The Pagan (Lumad) population in the Special/Regular Provinces appeared to have declined in absolute terms, not because of high mortality rate, but due to the growing rate of conversion to Christianity and undercounting in the census.

At the same time, Filipino leaders like Manuel Quezon and Sergio Osmeña worked for more settlements in Mindanao to be opened for Christians. The Philippine Commonwealth enacted several land laws that encouraged migration with financial and material support from the government.

While World War II temporarily put a stop to the migration fever, the tide of migration continued with more vigor following its end. By the 1960s, the Mindanao population soared to new heights: In fact, one out of four inhabitants in Mindanao were considered migrants (Wernstedt & Simkins, 1965). In 1939, the Moro population was still under one million people, but the Christianized population for all of Mindanao had already reached 13 million. The marked increase was between 1960 to 1970, when migration attained its peak. The Philippine census reported that in 1960, the Moro stood at 1.3 million inhabitants, while the Christians were already at 3.8 million. By 1970, the Moro had increased only to 1.6 million, while the Christians had almost doubled, reaching 6.1 million. These figures indicate one thing: Christian migration to Mindanao, including the Moro areas of Cotabato, Lanao, and Zamboanga, had been staggering.

According to Flieger (1977), of the top ten provinces in the Philippines in 1970 with the highest proportion of immigrants, seven are in Mindanao, including the island province of Palawan. The rate of population growth in Mindanao jumped to unprecedented levels during 1960–1970. Immigration was so widespread that it turned the Moro into a minority in their own lands. While this has lessened the continuing dominance of the Moro, this did not stop them from making more demands, which culminated in a secessionist movement.

They wanted to form their own Islamic government and live according to their customs as Muslims. By 1970, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was born under the leadership of Nur Misuari. Two other factions emerged from the MNLF, but only one has survived to this day, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), led by Hashim Salamat (deceased).

The Philippine government acted upon the Moro agenda of self-determination in predictable ways. Its military met MNLF attacks with similar or more aggressive responses. Later, it allowed peace talks with the Moro secessionist group that led to the 1975 Tripoli Agreement, but the agreement was never fully implemented. In 1996, the Final Peace Agreement was signed between Nur Misuari and the Fidel Ramos government. The implementation was shoddy, and Misuari resumed his rebellion not long after he tried running the affairs of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). In 2002, another Tripoli Agreement was signed, this time with the MILF as a proponent. The two parties came quite close to reaching another peace agreement in 2012, but it was not approved until President Benigno Aquino III ended his term. Shortly before the election of a new government in 2016, Congress adjourned without approving the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), which would have granted the Moro a presumably better form of autonomy.

Though the Moro have participated in politics, and also tried to improve their lives through modern education, they have insisted on educating their own children through the *madrasah* schools (Arabic; pl. *madaris*). While their children study the curriculum prescribed by the government, they continue to enroll them in the *madaris* during weekends, or during other times they don't attend public (or private) classes. This dual education seems to put a heavy burden on the Muslim children, who are exposed to two types of educational system. During regular days, they are in the public schools, and on weekends in the madrasah. The first prepare them to college or vocational pursuits, the latter binds them to their culture by keeping the Islamic faith.

At the same time, the Muslim-dominated areas have also implemented, with government approval, a judicial system dictated by Islam through the *shariah*

(Islamic legal system). The shariah only applies to Muslims. However, the shariah is limited to cases involving domestic disputes and personal relations. These include divorce, inheritance issues, and family matters. Criminal cases (murder, theft, land conflicts, etc.) are still brought to civil courts for adjudication. It is not uncommon, however, that some disputes like inter-family conflicts (called *rido*) are settled outside the reach of civil courts, through the shariah or religious leaders, to prevent the escalation of violence once it gets out of control. The police or municipal judges are ineffective in dealing with these matters.

These two Islamic institutions have been implemented in quite different ways in the Philippines. The Shariah was approved during the reign of past President Ferdinand Marcos, through his Presidential Decree No. 1083 (February 1977). Henceforth, it became part of the laws of the land. Many Moro believe that there is a need to strengthen the shariah. This matter is part of the advocacy for greater autonomy on political affairs, now covered by the Bangsamoro Basic Law, which the Moro leaders recently submitted to the Philippine Congress for approval.

But the madrasah schools have lingered on for some time, as these institutions were not integrated into the Philippine educational system until 2004. Their role is to impart knowledge and religion to the youth, who now have to attend two kinds of educational systems: the public and the madrasah (Boransing, Magdalena, and Lacar, 1987). They still struggle to this day, because many madaris have not been registered and accredited yet.

Furthermore, the madrasah system has had problems, not only in getting fully integrated into the dominant public school system of the country, but also difficulties involving financing, lack of highly trained or competent teachers, and above all, substandard facilities and infrastructure. Because of these problems, they have remained at the periphery compared to the sectarian private schools in the country. In addition, madrasah graduates are unable to get credits for those courses they took from Grade 1 through high school. Neither can they use their madrasah diploma to obtain jobs in the public or private sectors.

Perhaps the more difficult problem to overcome is the perception that the madaris are perceived to be breeding grounds for Islamic militants, jihadists, and terrorists. This perception came to the fore after the attacks against the United States of September 11, 2001, with the realization that Osama bin Laden had leveraged the madaris to train and recruit radical Muslims who then tried to subvert various states, mostly Muslim governments, in the belief that they are doing service to Islam (Moulton, 2008).

Recent events in Southeast Asia had also reinforced this perception. Recall that the imam and spiritual leader of Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah, Abubakar Bashir, was linked to terrorist activities like the Bali bombing in 2002, which killed 202 people, mostly tourists (BBC News, February 2, 2002). The Jemaah Islamiyah was also reportedly part of bin Laden's Al Qaeda network. Some Muslim clerics were also observed delivering sermons (*kutbahs*) in the mosques, encouraging activism and militancy in the ranks. But the large majority have remained obedient to national laws, and even denounced as un-Islamic those activities of extremists who crossed the line, such as the notorious Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

In 2004, however, the Philippine Department of Education started a process of accrediting the madrasah as a type of private school, provided they follow the standard imposed for all private schools. As a consequence of this order, hundreds of madaris were registered with the Department of Education in the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, many of which have received financial assistance from foreign sources like the United States, Australia, Japan, and countries from the Middle East.

At present, there are some (very few) madaris that offer a complete university or college degree, though many are making an attempt to provide complete college courses able to satisfy global demands for vocational skills, including proficiency in Arabic and English languages. The immediate goal of these madaris is to train religious leaders (*imam* or *ustadz*), who will translate and develop Islamic ideals in their own community. We may mention here the case of the Jamiatu Muslim

Mindanao,⁵ one of the largest and oldest Islamic madaris operating in Marawi City. Its curriculum has been updated with the help of Mindanao State University (MSU) faculty, including visiting professors from Cairo, Egypt.

It is important to look into these policies, particularly the land resettlement, as the factor behind the feeling of marginalization and displacement among Muslims. By the 1970s, pent-up demands and frustrations from the government broke into an open rebellion when the Moro National Liberation Front was born. The MNLF, however, split into several factions due to ideological differences. There are also other groups, like ASG and the Maute Group, that agitate for Moro welfare and political autonomy, but they take an extreme path. Reports have it that both the ASG and the Maute Group have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The Philippine government has only slowly adjusted to the realization that Muslims in the country also need assistance. Since independence in 1946, there have been no significant programs to ameliorate them. The Kamlon rebellion of the 1950s awakened the government, and followed the Congressional committee to investigate the so-called Moro Problem by creating at least two important agencies that would look into Muslim welfare. The first was the Commission on National Integration 1957, which provided grants and scholarships to young Muslims who desired to pursue a college education in Manila universities. This office is now known as the Commission on Muslim Affairs.

The second important government program was the establishment of the Mindanao State University in 1959. This is the only state university in the Philippines mandated to integrate Muslims into the mainstream. The university opened in 1961 with over 200 students and a few dozen faculty to offer quality education, with adequate scholarship grants. More than half of these students were Muslims. Today, the student population as well as the faculty are dominated by Muslims, and top university administrators are mostly of Muslim faith.

(5) "Jamiatu Muslim Mindanao," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamiatu_Muslim_Mindanao.

The government also declared a number of Muslim events as national holidays. In addition, nearly all ambassadors to the Middle East and other Islamic countries are Muslim Filipinos. Another project with an Islamic tenor established by the government is the Philippine Amanah Bank, which was created in 1975. The bank offered “interest-free” funding to business operating in the Muslim areas of Mindanao. It was modified through its charter in 1990 to become a fully Islamic bank, the Al-Amanah Islamic Investment Bank of the Philippines (AAIIBP), with the “mandate to promote and accelerate the socio-economic development of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) through banking, financing and participating in agricultural, commercial and industrial ventures based on the concept of Islamic banking.”

Finally, in 1989, the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao was established by law in accordance with the revised Philippine constitution. It was a response to the secessionist demand of the MNLF. And in 1996, the Final Peace Agreement was signed with MNLF to run a Moro autonomous government. This government, however, failed. Philippine President Benigno Aquino III observed that the Moro autonomy under ARMM did not achieve its objectives to promote the welfare of the Muslims. Poverty among Muslims has remained high with the Moro region staying at the bottom compared to all others. Conflicts have continued, and criminality remains unabated. The Philippine leaders have concurred on these problems and advocated for more realistic reforms through greater political autonomy for the restive Moro population.

A new round of peace talks was initiated by a Moro faction and the government in 2010. This is now the subject of the current peace process with the successor faction, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, to create a genuine Moro autonomy. The two parties intend to establish a new political entity called *Bangsamoro*. However, the bill to create a new autonomous government stalled in early 2015 due to the Mamasapano encounter, where 44 members of Philippine Special Forces died while trying to capture a Malaysian terrorist (Marwan) in

the area controlled by the MILF.⁶ There they met local armed bands including the MILF and other groups, and suffered deadly consequences.

This incident delayed the passing of the Bangsamoro Basic Law to create a new political autonomy for the Muslims. However, there is still hope to revive it. Efforts are now underway to resume the peace process and awaits the nod from the Philippine Congress under a new government. President Rodrigo Duterte has recently created a transitional mechanism that would finally put Moro autonomy in place. This mechanism is under the charge of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), a cabinet position that forms part of the Executive Department.

As of late, however, President Duterte expressed worry that “nothing may come out of this [peace process].” He cited the continuing rift between the two Moro rebel groups (MNLF and MILF), and said, “I was very optimistic before. But am a bit pessimistic now” (*Placido*, May 5, 2017).

Philippine-Saudi Relations

Bilateral relations between the Philippines and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were said to have formally began on October 4, 1969. Their relations centered principally on trade, as Saudi Arabia was the largest supplier of oil from the Middle East. Since then, these relations paved the way to labor deployment from the Philippines, known today as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW). Saudi is the top destination of OFWs to the Middle East, with about 674,000 OFWs working there as of 2013, according to the Saudi Ministry of Interior. This has increased to some 760,000 recently, according to the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs. This is the largest number, followed by 250,000 in Qatar, and 60,000 Bahrain (ABS-CBN News, April 11, 2017). The big volume of OFWs there also makes Saudi Arabia the second major source of remittances to the country next to the United States.

(6) See CNN Report, “Man Killed in Philippines Raid Was Wanted Terror Suspect Marwan, DNA Indicates,” <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/05/world/philippines-marwan-dna-positive/>.

In April 2017, newly elected president Rodrigo Duterte visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and signed several trade agreements, noting that Saudi Arabia is a strong trading partner as well as favorite labor destination for thousands of OFWs, including some 150,000 nurses.

The relations between the two countries also indirectly touched on security arrangements, though it was not quite clear how exactly they went. As they are both allies of the United States in the latter's fight against terrorism, they have agreed—at least in principle—to join hands in combating the rise of terror attacks.

In the past, a Saudi national (Mohammed Jamal Khalifa) and brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden was found to be involved in funding militant Moro to join the Afghans fighting the Russians.⁷ These young Moro later established the terror group Abu Sayyaf (ASG) in 1991 following the return to the Philippines. The ASG is responsible for the devastation of Ipil in 1995, the first of its terrorist attacks, and bombings of a commercial boat, buses, and rail in Manila. Most notably, they earned infamy for several kidnapping cases of foreign tourists, which earned them millions of dollars as ransom for their safe release and freedom. The United States helped the country run after the ASG, and put up large bounties for their capture, dead or alive. Although hurt, the ASG has not been decimated. It has figured in recent encounters with authorities in Bohol, where tourists were being angled for kidnapping.

Perhaps a stronger relation exists outside the level of state parameters. This is not usually reported in the press, but has repeatedly happened on the ground. On the individual level, many Moro and Saudis have engaged each other in cooperative agreements, ostensibly to propagate Islam in the Philippines. Many Moro professionals have gone to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, for the annual pilgrimage, and religious study. There, they have also sought ties with Saudis

(7) Khalifa was deported by the Philippine government. After 9/11, he was arrested in the US, Jordan and Saudi Arabia but was released for lack of strong evidence. He was reportedly killed in Madagascar by a gang of thieves (Roggio, 2007 http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/01/mohammed_jamal_khali.php).

for charitable and cooperative ventures. This author has documented many religious structures (mosques and madaris) which were built with the help of Saudi patrons and donors (Boransing, Magdalena & Lacar, 1987). Such relationships are founded on the fact that the Moro share with the Saudis similar religious convictions as members of Sunni Islam.

One edifice that still stands out as a monument of Saudi benevolence is the King Faisal Mosque (Masjed Malik Faisal), and the synchronous construction of the King Faisal Center for Islamic, Arabic and Asian Studies at Mindanao State University in Marawi City. MSU is the only state university where large numbers of Muslim students, faculty and administrators study and work. This university is a citadel of learning for Muslim youth who cannot afford to go to Manila for their college education.



Figure 2: The King Faisal Mosque on the campus of Mindanao State University in Marawi City.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Mindanao is a region of its own, quite different from the larger Philippine nation because of the presence of a significant Muslim population. This status makes it especially in tune with neighboring island countries in Southeast Asia which are predominantly Muslims, with the exception of Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam. This is why the Philippines has maintained strong diplomatic and trade relations with Islamic countries, including those in the Middle East.

Philippine Muslims always look up to Muslims from the Middle East due to various religious reasons, like participating in the annual Hajj to Mecca, attending Islamic studies in Cairo and other centers, and above all, in order to obtain assistance in developing mosques and madaris. In the past, Libya was quite instrumental in the Islamic secessionist movement that gave the MNLF strength and stamina to pursue its agenda.

There has been restiveness in the predominantly Muslim areas of Mindanao because of the Islamic revolt that began in the 1970s. Government attention is now focused on this problem in hopes of resolving it while maintaining the territorial integrity of the country.

The Philippine government has responded to the demands of Muslims and listened to their plea for reforms and development in their own communities. Its mechanisms of control for the Muslims center on the provision of programs (education, business, and political) that would placate Muslim secessionist demands. Thus far, the government has been successful, or perceived to be so, in these aspects particularly in public education (though somewhat wanting in how to deal with the madrasah) and in its intention to provide further political autonomy for Muslims in Mindanao.

However, the government has also been high-handed in dealing with the Muslims. In some occasions, this has led to violence when things spiralled out of control. The 1970s marked the period of heightened violence when the MNLF started pressing its demand for independence. The conflict has died down since then, and the succeeding faction of the MILF has generally preferred to use the strategy of peace talks, though there were episodes of armed encounters in 2000 and 2009. Some groups, however, utilized sustained terror attacks as their strategy, such as the dreaded ASG and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). This situation complicates the ongoing peace process, which calls for the two parties involved to observe caution and restraint until an agreement is finally put in place establishing genuine Moro autonomy.

Curiously, compared to Libya, Malaysia and Indonesia, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has not involved itself politically in any peace negotiation with the

Moro liberationists. The International Monitoring Team that oversees the implementation of the peace agreements and protocols has members from Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the European Union. No one from the Middle East is part of the team. Maybe it is time for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to take note of this lack, and consider participating in state discussions for peace or post-conflict arrangements in Mindanao.

Sympathetic Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia will have to see the situation in this light: that peaceful negotiation needs to continue until a permanent solution to the Muslim problem in Mindanao is achieved. Post-conflict assistance, especially to the emerging Bangsamoro autonomous government, is badly needed.

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King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies is an independent non-governmental institution founded in 1403/1983 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. As envisioned by the late King Faisal bin Abdulaziz, the Center seeks to be a platform for researchers and institutions to preserve, publish, and produce scholastic work, to enrich cultural and intellectual life in Saudi Arabia, and to facilitate collaborations across geopolitical borders. The Chairman of KFCRIS board is HRH Prince Turki Al-Faisal bin Abdulaziz, and its Secretary General is Dr. Saud bin Saleh Al-Sarhan.

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