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www.pipvtr.com

**RETHINKING STATE POLICIES AND MINORITY RIGHTS:
GETTING THE MINDANAO PEACE PROCESS MOVING**

By

PROF. ABHOUD SYED LINGGA

This paper argues that to resolve the problem of the Philippine government with the Muslim minority in the South there is need for new political thinking for the reason that the problem is sovereignty-based. The Bangsamoro representative organizations, like the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) assert sovereign right over a territory that the government is exercising sovereign power and consider it part of its national territory. The political arrangement that can accommodate these contrasting positions is what this paper attempts to explore.

Minority Communities

Nowadays we find minority communities within the borders of many countries including the Philippines. These minority communities can be classified broadly into three major categories. The minority migrant populations are one category. During the colonial period, workers were recruited from other colonies to work in plantations, mining and other industries. In recent years, migration of peoples who are induced by pull factors like economic opportunities and liberal policies of countries of destination and the push factors in their own countries like violent conflicts, lack of economic opportunities and repressive government policies are observable. The migrant populations have no attachment to any portion of the territory of the host country. Their concerns are the acceptability by and equal rights with the dominant majority, and equal access to social services and economic opportunities.

Another category is the indigenous peoples who became minority in their homelands as the result of colonial settlements. There are around 300 million of them in more than seventy countries. These peoples have retained their social, cultural, economic and political way of life but face the threat of being assimilated with the majority populations. The aspirations of the indigenous peoples are to 'exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life and economic development and to maintain and develop their identities, languages and religions, within the framework of the States in which they live'.

Peoples who were incorporated into the new nation-states after the departure of the colonial powers are one more category. Before colonization these peoples had their political institutions, administrative system, and trade and international relations with other countries. Colonial intrusions in their territories were not welcomed and often met with resistance. When the colonial powers granted independence to their colonies the homeland of these peoples were incorporated into the new nation-states. In some cases, their territories became parts of more than one country. With their history of political independence and distinct way of life, these peoples claim they belong to different nations from the majority. Their identities are always link to their traditional homeland. They feel uncomfortable living within the borders of the new nation-states, which they perceived as successor-in-interest of the colonial powers, and relish the memory of their long history of political independence that they want to revive in order to establish system of life in accordance with their world view, culture, religion and social norms.

The Bangsamoro

The Bangsamoro are people who have advance experience in state formation and long history of independence before the coming of colonial powers, and were incorporated into the new Philippine nation-state after the American colonial power decided to grant independence to the Philippines Islands.

The Bangsamoro are the Muslim populations who traditionally inhabited Mindanao, the islands of Basilan and Palawan, and the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi archipelago in the south of the Philippines. The name Moro was given by the Spanish colonizers to the Muslims in Mindanao whom they found to have the same religion and way of life with the Muslims of North Africa who ruled the Iberian Peninsula for centuries. The Malay word bangsa, which means nation, was prefixed to suggest distinct nationhood. The name Bangsamoro has find place in official documents of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and agreements between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and MILF.

The Bangsamoro people consist of thirteen Muslim ethno-linguistics groups: Iranun, Magindanaon, Maranao, Tao-Sug, Sama, Yakan, Jama Mapun, Ka'agan, Kalibugan, Sangil, Molbog, Palawani and Badjao. The indigenous peoples of Mindanao who were once protectorate of the sultanates are also considered Bangsamoro, though adoption of this identity on their part is a matter of free choice.

The traditional homeland of the Bangsamoro people consisted of the territories under the jurisdiction of their governments before the formation of the Philippine state. At the height of its power, the Sulu Sultanate exercised sovereignty over the present day provinces of Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Palawan, Basilan and the Malaysian state of Sabah (North Borneo). The territory of the Magindanaw Sultanate included the present day Shariff Kabunsuan province,

some parts of Maguindanao province, the coastal areas of the provinces of Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato, Sarangani, parts of Lanao provinces, Davao del Sur and Davao Oriental, and the eastern part of Zamboanga del Sur. The Datu Dakula who ruled Sibugay, an autonomous region under the Magindanaw Sultanate, exercised jurisdiction over Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga Sibugay, Zamboanga City and some parts of Zamboanga del Sur. The Rajah of Buayan ruled North Cotabato, the upper valley of Maguindanao and the interior areas of Sultan Kudarat and South Cotabato and some parts of Bukidnon. The Pat a Pangampong ko Ranao (confederation of the four lake-based emirates) ruled the interior parts of Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, and parts of Bukidnon, Agusan, and eastern and western Misamis provinces. The small sultanate of Kabuntalan separates the domains of Magindanaw and Buayan.

As the result of the colonial policies and programs of the Philippine government that encourage Filipino settlers from the north to settle in the Bangsamoro traditional homeland, the Bangsamoro are now confined in the provinces of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao and Shariff Kabunsuan, and some municipalities of Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay, Zamboanga del Norte, Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato, Sarangani, Davao Oriental, Davao del Sur, Davao del Norte, Compostela Valley and Palawan. Although their territory was significantly reduced the Bangsamoro people continuously assert their right over their homeland, which gain implied recognition from the government.

The historical experience of the Bangsamoro people in statehood and governance started as early as the middle of the 15th century when Sultan Shariff ul-Hashim established the Sulu Sultanate. This was followed by the establishment of the Magindanaw Sultanate in the early part of the 16th century by Shariff Muhammad Kabungsuwan. The Sultanate of Buayan and the Pat a Pangampong ko Ranao (confederation of the four lake-based emirates) and later other political subdivisions were organized.

By the time the Spanish colonialists arrived in the Philippines the Muslims of Mindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi archipelago and the islands of Basilan and Palawan had already established their own states and governments with diplomatic and trade relations with other countries including China. Administrative and political systems based on realities of the time existed in those states. In fact it was the existence of the well-organized administrative and political systems that the Bangsamoro people managed to survive the military campaign against them by Western colonial powers for several centuries and preserve their identity as a political and social organization.

For centuries the Spanish colonial government attempted to conquer the Muslim states to add their territories to the Spanish colonies in the Philippine Islands but history tells us that it never succeeded. The Bangsamoro sultanates with their organized maritime forces and armies succeeded in defending the Bangsamoro territories, thus preserving their independence.

That is why it is being argued, based on the logic that you cannot sell something you do not possess, that the Bangsamoro territories are not part of what were ceded by Spain to the United States in the Treaty of Paris of 1898 because Spain had never exercised sovereignty over these areas.

The Bangsamoro resistance continued even when American forces occupied some areas in Mindanao and Sulu. Though the resistance was not as fierce as during the Moro-Spanish wars, group-organized guerrilla attacks against American forces and installations reinforced what remained of the sultanates' military power. Even Bangsamoro individuals showed defiance against American occupation of their homeland by attacking American forces in operations called *prang sabil* (martyrdom operation).

When the United States government promised to grant independence to the Philippine Islands, the Bangsamoro leaders registered their strong objection to be part of the Philippine republic. In a petition to the President of the United States dated June 9, 1921, the people of Sulu archipelago said that they would prefer being part of the United States rather than be included in an independent Philippine nation.

In the Declaration of Rights and Purposes, the Bangsamoro leaders meeting in Zamboanga on February 1, 1924, proposed that the "Islands of Mindanao and Sulu, and the Island of Palawan be made an unorganized territory of the United States of America" in anticipation that in the event the US would decolonize its colonies and other non-self governing territories the Bangsamoro homeland would be granted separate independence. Had it happened, the Bangsamoro people would have regained by now their independence under the UN declaration on decolonization. Their other proposal was that if independence to be granted would include the Bangsamoro territories, a plebiscite would be held in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan fifty years after the grant of independence to the Philippines to decide by vote whether the territory incorporated by the government of the Islands of Luzon and Visayas, would be a territory of the United States, or become independent. The fifty-year period ended in 1996, the same year the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippine government signed the Final Agreement on the Implementation of the Tripoli Agreement. The leaders warned that if no provision of retention under the United States would be made, they would declare an independent constitutional sultanate to be known as Moro Nation.

In Lanao, the leaders who were gathered in Dansalan (now Marawi City) on March 18, 1935 appealed to the United States government and the American people not to include Mindanao and Sulu in the grant of independence to the Filipinos.

Under the Philippine Republic

In 1946 the Bangsamoro became part of the new political entity called the

Republic of the Philippines. Their incorporation in the new state was not welcomed for they continuously consider themselves a separate nation. The Bangsamoro claim that they belong to a separate nation by virtue of their distinct identity is articulated by Muhammad al-Hasan in these words:

We [Moros and Filipinos] are two different peoples adhering to different ideologies, having different cultures, and nurtured by different historical experiences.

We have contradistinct conceptions of sovereignty. The Filipinos believe that sovereignty resides in them, but we believe that sovereignty belongs to God alone. The political, social, economic and judicial institutions they inherited from the colonizers, organized on the basis of the separation of spiritual and mundane aspects of life, are incongruous with ours which are established on the postulates that life is a unity, God is the Sovereign and man is His vicegerent.

Our culture, imbued with Islamic beliefs, tenets and principles, is diametrically in contrast with what is known today as Filipino culture which is the amalgamation of the residues of the colonizers' cultures. Our art, architecture, literature and music have retained their Asian character [which] is not true [of] theirs.

Under the Republic of the Philippines, the Bangsamoro complain that they suffer discrimination and oppression. Some of these complaints are cited below.

1. Christian majority are biased against Muslims as shown by studies. These prejudices lead to exclusion of the Bangsamoro from jobs, education, housing and business opportunities. These are evident in the personal experiences of Muslims on how they were shut out of jobs, housing and study opportunities recounted in the Philippine Human Development Report (PHDR 2005).

The PHDR 2005 study reveals that a considerable percentage (33 percent to 39 percent) of Filipinos is biased against Muslims. Exclusion from job opportunities is very high given that 46 percent of the Christian population would choose Christian male worker and 40 percent Christian female domestic helper. Only 4 percent will choose a Muslim male worker and 7 percent Muslim female domestic helper. Majority of the Christians cannot even accept Muslims as neighbors, as the study shows that in Metro Manila 57 percent opt for residence with higher rent but far from a Muslim community.

2. Because of government policies and programs the Bangsamoro lost big portions of their lands and became minority in their own homeland.

The Philippine government opened the whole of Mindanao to resettlement and corporate investments. So, in 1903, the Philippine Commission declared as null and void all land grants made by traditional leaders like sultans, datos, and tribal leaders if done without government consent. And through the years the government implemented public land laws which are discriminatory to the

Bangsamoro and other Indigenous Peoples of Mindanao, and favorable to Filipino settlers and corporations. The introduction of public land laws, which were based on the Regalian doctrine, “became an opportunity for the colonized north-Filipino elites to own or lease substantial landholdings as well as a chance for the ‘legal’ or systematic landgrabbing of traditional lands” of the Muslims.

The discrimination against Muslims and indigenous peoples in land ownership is evident in the following table that shows the number of hectares people and corporations may own under the Philippine public land laws.

Hectares Allowed
Year For Homesteader For Non-Christian
(Moros and Wild Tribes) For Corporation
1903 16 has. (no provision) 1,024
1919 24 has. 10 has. 1,024
1936 16 has. 4 has. 1,024

In 1954 the National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Administration (NARRA) was established. Under this program, from 1954 through 1958 close to 23,400 Christian Filipino families were resettled in Cotabato.

The consequence of the state policies on land ownership and encouragement of Christian settlers to settle in Mindanao is the minoritization of the Bangsamoro in their traditional homeland. The lands that remain to the Bangsamoro are those located in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and small areas in other provinces.

3. Government failed to deliver basic services and needed development to Bangsamoro communities. In the ARMM, which comprises provinces where the Bangsamoro are majority, poverty incidence was the highest in the country. In 2000, poverty incidence in the ARMM was 66 percent while the national average was 33.7 percent, and it worsened compared with the 1997 poverty incidence which was 57.3 percent. Incidence of families below the per capita food/subsistence threshold was also highest in the ARMM, 33.5 percent in 2000 while the national average was 16.7 percent. Life expectancy for women was 59.3 years and 55.5 years among men.

4. Government also failed to protect the persons and properties of the Bangsamoro people. There were reported massacres of Muslims and destruction of their properties but the government failed not only to give them protection but also to give them justice. No serious investigations were conducted and no one was held responsible in many of these incidents of human rights violations. For example, the incidents cited below, which are just few of the many incidents of human rights violations against the Bangsamoro people, happened three decades ago but no investigation was done and no one was held responsible.

- On March 17, 1968, Muslim military trainees were reported missing in their training camp in Corregidor Island.
- On December 21, 1970, three Muslims were killed and 147 houses were burned in the barrios of Ahan, Limpugo and Montid, in the municipality of Datu Piang, Cotabato.
- On January 19, 1971, seventy-three Muslims were killed in the municipality of Alamada, Cotabato.
- On June 19, 1971, seventy Muslims were killed and 17 were wounded at a mosque in barrio Manili, Carmen, Cotabato.
- From April 6, 1971 to July 22, Muslim houses were burned
 - 55 houses in Carmen, Cotabato
 - 18 houses in Pikit, Cotabato
 - 25 houses in Kidapawan, Cotabato
 - 22 houses in Buldon, Cotabato
 - 52 houses in Wao, Lanao del Sur
- On September 8, 1971, ten Muslims were killed in the municipality of Sapad, Lanao del Norte.
- On October 24, 1971, sixty-six Muslims were killed in Magsaysay, Lanao del Norte.

Continuing Assertion for Independence

The Bangsamoro consider the annexation of their homeland as illegal and immoral since it was done without their plebiscitary consent. On this basis and with their sad state of affairs under the Philippines, the Bangsamoro people continue to assert their right to independence. Their assertions manifest in many forms.

The armed resistance of Kamlon, Jikiri and Tawan-Tawan were protests against the usurpation of their sovereign right as a people. Those who joined the Philippine government used the new political system to pursue the vision of regaining independence. Congressman Ombra Amilbangsa, for example, filed House Bill No. 5682 during the fourth session of the Fourth Congress. The bill sought the granting and recognition of the independence of Sulu. As expected, the bill found its way into the archives of Congress since there were few Muslim

members of Congress. Then on May 1, 1968, the then provincial governor of Cotabato, Datu Udtog Matalam, made a dramatic move when he issued the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) manifesto calling for the independence of Mindanao and Sulu to be known and referred to as the Republic of Mindanao and Sulu.

When it became evident that it would not be possible to regain independence within the framework of the Philippine nation state system, the MNLF was organized to wage an armed struggle to regain independence. When the MNLF accepted autonomy within the framework of Philippine sovereignty a faction of the MNLF separated and formed the MILF to continue the armed struggle for independence. The MILF is still fighting the government forces.

The clamor for independence is not only among the liberation fronts but also among other sectors of the Bangsamoro society. The delegates to the First Bangsamoro People's Consultative Assembly (BPCA) held on December 3-5, 1996 in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao were unanimous in calling for reestablishment of the Bangsamoro state and government.

The hundreds of thousands of Bangsamoro who participated in the Rally for Peace and Justice held in Cotabato City and Davao City on October 23, 1999, in Marawi City on October 24, 1999 and in Isabela, Basilan on December 7, 1999 issued a manifesto stating, "we believe that the only just, viable and lasting solution to the problem of our turbulent relationship with the Philippine government is the restoration of our freedom, liberty and independence which were illegally and immorally usurped from us, and that we be given a chance to establish a government in accordance with our political culture, religious beliefs and social norms."

Bangsamoro leaders headed by Sultan Abdul Aziz Guiwan Mastura Kudarat IV of the Sultanate of Magindanaw meeting in Cotabato City on January 28, 2001 expressed their strong desire to regain the Bangsamoro independence. The Declaration of Intent and Manifestation of Direct Political Act they issued states: "As sovereign individuals, we believe that the Bangsamoro people's political life, as matters stand, call for an OIC-sponsored or UN-supervised referendum in the interest of political justice to decide once and for all," whether to remain part of the Philippines as an autonomous region, or to form a state of federated union; or to become an independent state.

The Second BPCA held on June 1-3, 2001 attended by delegates from all over the Bangsamoro homeland, including representatives of non-Muslim indigenous communities, unanimously declared that "the only just, meaningful, and permanent solution to the Mindanao Problem is the complete independence of the Bangsamoro people and the territories they now actually occupy from the Republic of the Philippines."

Government Responses

Government position in responding to the grievances of the Bangsamoro people has always been on the premise that they are Filipino citizens, including those fighting the government, and that any solution to resolve the conflict has to be within the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippines.

To reinforce these policies government takes on three elemental approaches to its conflict with the Bangsamoro people.

1. To deflect the underlying political issues of the conflict, government admitted neglect. The government is insistent that the problem is the absence of economic development. That is why within the span of the administration of five presidents, government efforts are always focused on development of Mindanao.

Earlier, the Philippine government pursued vigorously its national integration program. The Commission on National Integration (CNI) was established “charged with carrying out within ten years a broad range of program designed to attend to the economic and educational phase of cultural minority problems.” In June 1955 Congress passed a law establishing the Mindanao State University to promote government program of education to accelerate the integration of the Muslims into the body politic. In 1961, the Mindanao Development Authority (MDA) was also established to hasten the economic development of Mindanao.

After the conflict flared up into armed confrontation between government and MNLF forces in early 1970s, the government created a Presidential Task Force for the Reconstruction and Development the purpose of which was “to pool all government resources from its economic development, financial, welfare, and health agencies as well as military units” in order to assess the damage caused by the conflict, to prepare integrated plan for full reconstruction and rehabilitation of Mindanao, and restore peace and order.

To appeal to the religious sense of the Muslims, the Code of Muslim Personal Laws of the Philippines was decreed into law in 1977. These laws were extracted from Islamic jurisprudence on person and family. Shariah courts were subsequently organized in Muslim communities and Shariah judges were appointed to adjudicate cases involving marriage and inheritance. The Philippine Amanah Bank, with mandate to operate in accordance with Islamic banking principles, was also established.

2. The government invoking its sovereign right to maintain its territorial integrity unleashed its military might against the Bangsamoro. The military campaign has been very costly. Base on the revelations of former Congressman Eduardo Ermita, MindaNews reported the following:

In a privilege speech in July 1996, then Rep. Eduardo Ermita, now Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process ... citing data from the Armed Forces of the Philippines, showed how over a period of 26 years since 1970, more than 100,000

persons had been killed in the conflict in Mindanao, 30 per cent of that government casualties, 50 per cent rebels and 20 per cent civilians.

Ermita said 55,000 persons were injured, not counting those from the rebel side. From 1970 to 1976 alone, he said, an average of 18 people were slain everyday. All in all, Ermita said, the AFP spent P73 billion in the 26-year period, or an average of 40 per cent of its annual budget.

A government think tank reported that “The toll on human lives and property was heavy on both sides. Independent estimates came out with these numbers: 50,000 deaths, 2 million refugees, 200,000 houses burned, 535 mosques and 200 schools demolished, and 35 cities and towns destroyed.”

The World Bank assessment of direct economic costs of the conflict is \$2–3 billion, and the human and social toll since the 1970s have been heavy. The World Bank report shows an estimate of 120,000 deaths, and uncounted numbers of wounded and disabled; and more than two million people were displaced. In the year 2000 when government troops attacked the MILF camps, around 932,000 civilians were displaced from their homes. The World Bank report shows that “Majority of people who were displaced as a result of the conflict in Mindanao that erupted in 2000 were Muslims.” Around 390,000 people were again displaced when government troops attacked MILF enclaves in Pikit and Pagalungan in February 2003.

3. In negotiating peace with the MNLF the government, with the prodding of the OIC, agreed to the establishment of autonomy for the Muslims in Southern Philippines but insisted that it would be within the realm of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippines. That is why the government panel negotiating with the MNLF asserted vehemently on the inclusion of the provision in the Tripoli Agreement of 1976 that the establishment of autonomy in the Southern Philippines is within “the realm of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines”, and that implementation of the entire agreement is contingent on constitutional processes.

The bottleneck (as of this writing, June 2008) in the on-going negotiations between the GRP and the MILF is primarily because of the attempts of government to reverse its recognition of the right of the Bangsamoro people to self-determination by introducing in its draft of the proposed agreement on ancestral domain that implementation of any agreement shall be subject to constitutional processes. There is also an attempt on the part of government to alter its recognition of the Bangsamoro self-determination that the exercise of that right shall be within the context of Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity. The proposed modifications, if adopted, will water down the substance of Bangsamoro self-determination and will not resolve the problem.

Government acknowledgment of the Bangsamoro right to self-determination is contain in one of the provisions of the Tripoli Agreement of Peace of 2001

between the GRP and the MILF, which states that “the observance of international humanitarian law and respect for internationally recognized human rights instruments and the protection of evacuees and displaced persons in the conduct of their relations reinforce the Bangsamoro people’s fundamental right to determine their own future and political status.” (Emphasis supplied) This was affirmed by Secretary Silvestre C. Afable, Jr., Chairman of the Government Peace Negotiating Panel in the talks with the MILF, in his letter to Mohagher Iqbal, Chairman of the MILF Peace Negotiating Panel, dated November 9, 2006, which stated that the GRP would like to explore with the MILF “the grant of self-determination and self-rule to the Bangsamoro people based on an Organic Charter to be drafted by representatives of the Bangsamoro people.” In Tokyo last May 2007, he again reiterated the Philippine government position: “On the negotiating table, we have offered a political settlement based on self-determination that strives to unify the Bangsamoro people rather than divide them, for them to finally live in a homeland rather than a rented territory paid for in blood and suffering. We are crossing bridges of understanding that others have never ventured to do in the past.”

Rethinking State Policies

Undeniably, the problem confronting the government in its relations with the Bangsamoro people is rooted in the latter’s continuing assertion of their right to self-determination. The quest for self-determination is what propelled most conflicts in the world today. Harris and Reilly observed that “Between 1989 and 1996 . . . , 95 of the 101 armed conflicts identified around the world were such internal conflicts. Most of these conflicts were propelled, at least in part, by quests for self-determination”

Since independence government has been confronted with this problem and tried various ways of addressing it but the conflict lingers on taking different forms at various stages of history. Probably, the reason why all the previous attempts failed because they did not address the root cause of the problem. So government has to adopt new political thinking in addressing the problem with its relationship with the Bangsamoro people.

The UNESCO experts suggested that “the peaceful implementation of the right to self-determination in its broad sense is a key contribution to the prevention and resolution of conflicts, especially those which involve contending interests of existing states and peoples, including indigenous peoples, and minority communities.”

The self-determination approach has been used in other countries facing similar problem in addressing their conflicts with their minority populations. In Southern Sudan, for example, under the 1997 Peace Agreement, the central government agreed that the people of Southern Sudan shall determine their political aspirations and to pursue their economic, social and cultural

development through a referendum to be held before the end of the interim period. The national government of Papua New Guinea promised, under the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement, that it will move amendments to the

Allowing people to enjoy the right to self-determination does not automatically result in the separation of the claimed territory from the parent state, as feared by government, although this may be one of the possible outcomes. Referendum on Puerto Rico's political status was held in 1967 but 60% of the voters preferred continued commonwealth status. Leaders of the province of Nivis wanted to separate from the federation of St. Kitts and Nivis but the citizens of the province voted to stay with the federation. Although not binding, the two referenda in Quebec illustrated that referendum does not inevitably translate to separation. On the contrary, denying a people the opportunity to exercise this right, or failing to make available the mechanism to exercise the right to self-determination, will make peaceful resolution of armed conflicts more difficult.

Recommendation

To keep the GRP-MILF negotiations moving towards its conclusion and resolve the problem it is recommended that government shall abide with its commitments under the 2001 Tripoli Agreement of Peace and the consensus points agreed by the GRP and MILF peace panels. It is also important on the part of government that it shall honor the assurance given by Secretary Afable to the MILF to resolve the conflict within the self-determination framework. Constitutional and institutional barriers should not be made the excuse to renege on these commitments. For any attempt on the part of government to undo all these commitments will only embolden the Bangsamoro people to pursue secession.

The best guarantee that the government can have that the Bangsamoro people will not secede from the Philippines is when they are given the opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to determine their political status, and their welfare and security are guaranteed. Our experience with the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and 1996 peace accord is instructive that to water down the expression of their right to self-determination will not stop the Bangsamoro in their quest for freedom and justice.

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