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**TERRORISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE
IN BASILAN:
A CASE OF ETHNIC HATRED**

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INTRODUCTION

It is hard to accept that the weakening of the Philippine economy has been blamed on the peace and security problem in the small island of Basilan.

However, the critical issue lies not on how the situation in Basilan affect the rest of the country but on acceptance of what is really the problem depends on its correct diagnosis. True enough, any problem that we do not know would not bother us. On the other hand, refusing to know is a different question.

Anybody on the street in Basilan can aver with ease that the peace and security problem in the province is caused by ethnic and religious hatred. However, no one dares to say that in public that this so. Everyone feels that if this is done, it will be a Pandora's Box. Accepting the problem will do no good. It will just create another problem.

This paper says otherwise. I will argue that indeed, Basilan is facing an ethnic and religious problem. It is even apparent that there is a systematic and concerted effort among the Yakans – the indigenous people of Basilan – to cleanse Basilan of non-Yakans and non-Muslims, particularly the Christians.

It is of no wonder that the call for a separate state of Mindanao, to include Basilan, remains and has been a common vision for the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). My argument maybe provocative. True enough, truth hurts. However, doing nothing about this, much worse, not accepting that this is the situation in Basilan would perpetuate the problem.

I will prove my argument by citing important political and social phenomena. First is on the deliberate and forced alteration of the demography of Basilan. Second is the support and sympathy of the Muslim community for several rebel Muslim groups in the province. And third, the practice of local governance in the province which is drawn along ethnic lines. I will also highlight some thoughts, which are

contrary to my argument. This paper will conclude by way of stressing that Basilan is microcosm of what is happening between the contemporary western world and the Islamic community.

THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHY

Tuburan, one of the seven municipalities of Basilan – was once a bustling Christian community during the early 1970s. However, during the outbreak of the secessionist war, Christians were driven out of Tuburan who either took refuge in nearby Lamitan town or in Zamboanga City. During the early 1980s, the fifteen-kilometer road stretch out of the twenty-kilometer road from Lamitan town proper to Tuburan town proper, used to be inhabited by Christians and other non-Yakans immigrants like the: Tausogs, Samals and Visayans. However, today, only the four-kilometer road from Lamitan is the only area where non-Yakans stay. In spite of this, they feel that the place cannot still assure them of the security that they long for.

The demographic change in Tuburan and Lamitan is neither coincidental nor natural. It is a fulfilled vision for Basilan of a local politician who called for “Basilan for Yakans” as his campaign slogan during his candidacy in the 1990s when he ran against Christian candidates. This call has created a sense of nationalism and forged unity among the Yakans. However, the feeling of oneness among the Yakans has created a rift between them and non-Yakans particularly against the Christians. The belief that Yakans should solely inhabit Basilan has spread throughout the island. The Tuburan story has its own parallelism in Tumahubong and Manggal, both of Sumisip municipality, in Tipo-tipo (only five Christian families live at present in the municipality), Maluso municipality and in Santa Clara, Lamitan. The recent plebiscite for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) also became a litmus paper on the ethnic inclination of both Christians and Muslim Basilenos. Supporters and propagandists who call for the inclusion of Basilan in the ARMM even promised for the partition of the properties of the Christians in Basilan. A group of ARMM supporters even argued that autonomy means the return of the so-called ancestral lands from non-Yakans to the indigenous people. Even today, some Yakans still aspire that the properties of Christians will be subdivided among them as promised now that Basilan – except Isabela City – is a part of ARMM.

This threat has further alarmed Christians in Basilan where most of them have already moved out of Basilan. The movement of Christians has significantly changed the demography of the province. In Lamitan, the demographic distribution, which used to be 60% Christians and 40% Muslims in the 1980s, has reversed in favor of the Muslims. Now Lamitan is 60% Muslims and 40% Christians. The proportion is going worse to the detriment of the Christians.

ETHNIC SYMPATHY FOR BASILAN REBELS

The pestering security problem in Basilan is seemingly an enigma whose solution has been elusive. Among others, the low intensity conflict approach has been considered as a possible strategy. As a possible solution due to its relative efficiency in licking the local communist threat movement, the thought of using the same strategy of winning the hearts and minds of the Muslims, particularly the Yakans has been a welcome idea. However, this approach manifests the incomplete knowledge of the culture of the indigenous people of Basilan. Though there are existing factions among the Yakans themselves, which is commonly known as redo or family feud, or among the Yakans against other Muslim ethnic groups like the Tausogs and Samals, they merge with ease into one force if they find a common enemy. Sympathy and cooperation then are still drawn along ethnic lines as against believing in the approach of the Christian-dominated AFP that sympathy and cooperation can be completely achieved through psychological operations.

A clear case of this observation is the incident in June 2, 2001 when a group of Islamic fundamentalist, the Abu Sayyaf kidnapped three foreigners and number of Filipino Christians at Dos Palmas Resort in the province of Palawan and brought them to Basilan. The ethnic hatred against Christians has mustered support even among non-Abu-Sayyaf Muslims who joined the fray and supported the Muslim kidnapers.

Some Yakans residents of Tuburan municipality where the kidnapers brought the victims gave a safe haven to the Abu Sayyaf kidnapers. They provided food and information regarding the disposition of military troops who were pursuing the kidnapers. Non-sympathetic Muslim to the Abu Sayyaf in Tuburan have turned into willing supporters after learning that a big ransom money is at stake as a result of the kidnapping of American citizens.

The polarization of Basilenos between Christians and Muslims can also be blamed to the former. Christians have branded even moderate and peace-loving Muslims as Abu Sayyaf supporters. Caught between joining the Christians and the Abu Sayyaf, moderate Muslims were forced to support the Abu Sayyaf because Christians have already stereotyped them to be such. They have nowhere to go since Christians have closed their doors of reconciliation to these Yakan Muslims.

THE LOCAL GOVERNANCE OF BASILAN

With the vision of the national government to accommodate local rebels in the mainstream of Philippine society, the government invited the leaders of the rebel groups to run for public office and share power in running the government.

Indeed, some former rebel leaders of the MNLF, the Basilan Revolutionary Committee, and the Abu Sayyaf run for public office in Basilan. There was even a period when the Congressman, the Governor, and four out of the seven municipal

mayors were former rebels. However, this political phenomenon did not come without a criticism from the Christian community in Basilan. They felt that the government gave more importance to these former rebels than to the Christians community t who fought side by side with government forces during its military campaign against these rebels. Apparently, this perception is still very much prevalent among Christian communities in the province.

As a result of this political dynamics and the usual practice of patronage politics, services of these government officials were focused along ethnic lines. Funds and government projects – if there are any – were funneled into Muslim communities to the deprivation of the Christians.

It is not surprising to note that the Christian community made an accusing finger to the military for allegedly forging collusion with the Abu Sayyaf when the rebel group attacked Lamitan town on June 1, 2001. This was among others , has been aggravated by a belief that a number of provincial and municipal officials of Basilan who were former rebels have not completely renounced their membership with the Abu Sayyaf in spite of being elected in the public positions. With their status as public officials, they gained the support from the AFP for their programs. As a result of this political reality, the Christian community found a logical basis to entertain the perception that the “Christian” military is more inclined in protecting the Muslim community to include the Muslim rebel groups. This may be the reason why the alleged military-Abu Sayyaf collusion refuses to die down.

A COUNTER-ARGUMENT

The sensitivity of the issue on ethnic and religious conflict has caused the failure of both the government and the citizenry to solve the problem in Basilan. Because of this, the issue has not been thoroughly discussed or was just euphemistically articulated.

A greater majority of the people still refuse to accept that the problem is an ethnic and religious conflict. Some would say that it is a problem of economics and politics. However, having the kind of approach would not solve the issue. Unless the problem is accepted to be an ethnic and religious one, it would not lead to the application of the right panacea. Others would say that it is a battle between right or wrong. However, these labels would just make the issue more complicated and abstract since nobody would accept that he/she is the malevolent party. As such, the terms Christians and Muslims are still the accepted labels.

CONCLUSION

The peace and security problem in Basilan remains unresolved due to the application of shortsighted solutions. There is no short-term solution to the ethnic and religious problem in Basilan. What the government can do best is to deprive the

rebel groups of new recruits. This can only be done through proper education and allowing the youth the opportunity to be productive citizens in the society.

Indeed, ethnic and religious tolerance between Christian and Muslim is a key ingredient in solving the problem. However, this can only be done through a creation of a history that will be accepted by both groups. This should likewise go hand-in-hand with the prevention of unscrupulous personalities who exploit the differences of these two ethnic groups to advance their cause.

There is great logic to the belief that the Islamic teaching can offer a better alternative to good governance. This, then, should give every national and local politician a strong warning. Unless the democratic principles are adhered to religiously, then the Islamic solution could strengthen its ground that it is a better political alternative to what we have right now.

The political dynamics in Basilan offers a microcosmic example of what is developing between the United States and its allies against the Taliban. The ethnic hatred against the West has influenced Bin Laden's Al Qaeda to mount terrorism against the United States and its allies. Both sides have demonized against each other. Unless both parties try to understand each other, then trusting each other will be far-fetched. This explains the reason for the difficulty in managing the international system. It is near to impossibility to have a single idea. However, the problem is not the clashing of ideas, but rather on how one will accept that his/her idea is inferior to the other.

ENDNOTES

1 For a detailed discussion about ethnic conflict, see for example Ted Robert Gurr, "Peoples against states". *Ethnopolitical conflict and the Changing World*, "International studies Quarterly Volume 38: 347-377 (1994) Michael E. Brown. "Causes an Implication of Ethnic Conflict" in *Ethnic Conflict and Security*. Princeton University Press. 1993. and Mark Juergensmeyer. "The Worldwide Rise of Religious Nationalism" *Journal of International Affairs*. Summer 1996: 1-20.

2 For a detailed explanation of possible alternative solutions to ethnic conflict, see Ted Robert Gurr. "Settling Ethnopolitical Conflicts," in Gurr, Ted Gurr. *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflict*. The Institute of Peace Press. Washington D.C. 1993. pp. 290-314.

3 For an explanation of the role of the elites in provoking ethnic conflict, see V.P. Cagnon Jr. "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The case of Serbia," *International Security* 1994/1995 Vol 19: 3 pp. 130-166.

4 Fareed Zakaria. "The Roots of Rage: Islam and the West," *Newsweek* October 15, 2001. p. 22.

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