

## **A History of Conflict, A Chance for Conciliation: Moro-Filipino Interfaith Relations**

**Atty. Ashyanna Alexine Adia Amira-Labi A. Bangcola**

Mindanao State University, Philippines

**Dr. Ashley A. Bangcola**

Mindanao State University, Philippines

### **Abstract**

'*Bangsamoro*' refers to the collective identity of Muslim Filipinos who currently reside in the Philippines, but most especially in the southernmost island of Mindanao. The Philippines has been the recipient of demands of secession from the Moro people since the 1970s. It is a political struggle but it also has its roots in religion and identity. Until the late 1980s, most wars were fought between nation-states. After the end of the Cold War, conflicts fueled by nationalism and ethnic identity arose within states that led to civil wars. The conflict in the Philippines falls under such a category. This paper is interested in understanding the historical plight of the Moro people. Through the use of conflict resolution theories, it aims to characterize the conflict and conflict resolution strategies of the different peace processes starting from the Tripoli Agreement, followed by the 1996 Peace Agreement, the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), and finally culminating in the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). The paper is a descriptive-explanatory study that reviewed primary and secondary sources of data to analyze the different peace agreements, determine where they failed, and where the signing of the most recent peace agreement, the BOL, succeeded. Furthermore, it is also interested in the role that interfaith dialogue played in bridging the gap between the two opposing parties. It was concluded from this paper that the main causes of the failure of previous peace agreements include the following: (1) There was a mismatch of the cause of conflict and conflict resolution strategy employed, such as the signing of the MOA-AD; and (2) despite knowledge of the compatible conflict resolution strategy, there was a failure to utilize the same due to outside interference.

**Keywords: Bangsamoro; Conflict resolution; Dialogue; Interfaith dialogue; Interreligious dialogue; Peace; Peace processes; Philippines**

## **1. Introduction**

The Bangsamoro struggle was one of the main conflict lines the Philippines needed to overcome. According to the CIA World Factbook (2021), the largest ethnic groups in the Philippines are the Tagalogs at 24.4% and the Cebuano at 11.4%. 'Others', which designate other ethnic groups, account for 26.1% of the total population. Christians account for 84 % of the total population while Muslims account for 5.6%. The Muslim groups are also known as Moros. They are further subdivided into fourteen (14) ethnic groups, not counting the Mindanao Lumads. The Moros had the longest history of rebellion in Asia, which lasted for almost 400 years (Gutoc, 2003). According to the 2018 Global Peace Index, among 30 countries in the Asia-Pacific, the Philippines ranked 26<sup>th</sup>. Attaining just and lasting peace remains one of the Foundations for Sustainable Development under the Updated Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022. This paper is thus interested in exploring in-depth the causes of conflict between the Moros and Filipinos and in determining the conflict resolution strategies employed throughout the various peace agreements negotiated in the Philippines.

## **2. Historical Development**

The history of the Moros is inextricably linked with that of the Filipinos whose history is deeply rooted in their colonizers.

1968 would see a watershed moment in Moro history. Twenty-eight (28) Muslims from Sulu were trained to be sent to Sabah. However, they were massacred by government troops in what later came to be known as the "Jabidah Massacre". This led to the birth of Islamic separatist movements in Mindanao, including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) helmed by Nur Misuari. There

were hearings in the Senate and Congress, but no one was convicted and held accountable for the Jabidah massacre (Vitug and Gloria, 2000). During the 1970s, Christian migrants gradually settled in Mindanao. There was fierce competition for resources. Land-grabbing was particularly rampant. The infamous Jolo burning in 1974 was among the violent incidents which occurred during that period. Armed forces clashed with rebels, burned mosques, and looted private houses and establishments. It was reported that around 120,000 people in Mindanao died during the Martial Law period (Gutoc, 2003).

There are three (3) major peace agreements negotiated between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moros, to date: (1) The Tripoli Agreement which led to the 1996 Peace Agreement because the Marcos administration was unable to comply with the terms; (2) the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD); and (3) the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) which led to the eventual passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL).

### **Tripoli Agreement**

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi mediated a deal in 1976 which resulted to the signing of the Tripoli Agreement, and which established an independent Muslim province in Mindanao. On 1 August 1989, the Philippine Congress passed Republic Act 6734 which authorized the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), as provided for by the newly promulgated 1987 Constitution. The provinces of Tawi-Tawi, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Lanao del Sur chose to join ARMM out of the thirteen (13) provinces and nine (9) cities which took part in the plebiscite. On 6 November 1990, the ARMM was constituted.

### **1996 Peace Agreement**

The Philippine government signed the Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF in 1996. This was supposed to signal the end of the Moro armed conflict in Mindanao. President Fidel V. Ramos sought the help of the international Muslim community to tackle the crisis. Due to Gaddafi's pivotal participation in the signing of the Tripoli Agreement earlier in 1976, President Ramos pressed for the latter's intervention. Unfortunately, other elements within the MNLF were dissatisfied with the peace agreement and considered it a departure from the Tripoli Agreement's framework. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was thereafter formed because of their desire for complete independence.

### **MOA-AD**

The GRP and the MILF finalized the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) on 27 July 2009.

However, local leaders in North Cotabato filed a petition before the Supreme Court three (3) days before the scheduled signing of the MOA-AD, requesting that the deal be blocked. The MOA-AD was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court on 14 October 2008, in a 9-6 ruling: *"The Constitution does not recognize any state within this country other than the Philippine State, much less does it provide for the possibility of any transitory status to prepare any part of Philippine territory for independence,"* wrote Justice Conchita Carpio Morales in the decision for the landmark case of *North Cotabato vs. The Government of the Philippines (G.R. No. 183591)*.

### **Ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL)**

Republic Act No. 11054 or the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was ratified under the administration of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte on 26 July 2018. The organic law sought to establish an autonomous political entity

that would allow for meaningful self-governance among its people. It later took effect on 10 August 2018.

The BARMM is composed of five (5) provinces which include Sulu, Tawi Tawi, Basilan, Lanao del Sur, and Maguindanao. It includes three component cities: Marawi, Lamitan, and Cotabato City, an independent component city. Although Basilan is part of the BARMM, Isabela City is excluded following the results of the plebiscite. Sixty-three (63) barangays in North Cotabato that voted to be included in the BARMM make up the Special Geographic Area (SGA) and were officially turned over by the North Cotabato Province to the BARMM on 20 November 2019.



**Figure 2.1. Map of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)**

The signing of the BOL commenced the transition period. The law provides for the creation of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) which would be the interim government during this time. Of the eighty (80) members provided under the organic law, forty-one (41) members were recommended by the MILF, with thirty-nine (39) having been appointed by the National Government.

The Bangsamoro Government as a regional government, and how it operates in cooperation with the National Government is a

unique one. It follows a parliamentary government that operates synchronously with the presidential form of government of the National Government.

The Bangsamoro Transition Authority was to act as the Bangsamoro Transition Authority Parliament only until the end of the transition period which covered only after the election and qualification of the Bangsamoro Parliament members in the first regularly held elections in 2022.

However, it could not be foreseen that in 2020, a global pandemic would sweep the world and cripple the institutions. The pillars on which the Bangsamoro Peace Process rests are the twin-fold political and normalization track. The success of the political track rests upon the successful setting up of the autonomous government. Meanwhile, the success of the normalization track involves the decommissioning of the former MILF combatants as well as legitimizing them as the police force in the region. The implementation of a transitional justice process also falls under the normalization track.

According to Chief Minister Murad Ebrahim (2021), the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) has implemented 60% of the political track. Meanwhile, it has only successfully achieved only 30% of the normalization track.

In the Senate, "An Act Resetting the First Regular Elections in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao" or Senate Bill 2214 was filed by Senator Francis Tolentino. During the interpellations on the bill last May 2021, Senator Tolentino clarified that the bill would retain the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) as the interim government beyond the 2022 elections. However, it would still allow the next President to re-appoint the eighty (80) members of the BTA. This proviso was retained in

Republic Act No. 11593 which was signed by President Duterte on 28 October 2021, thereby officially extending the transition period.

### **3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Competition was defined by Mack and Pease (1973) as “a form of opposition or struggle for securing a reward or goal like a prize, a position, prestige or power.” In different contexts, competition is synonymous with conflict. In the Moro-Filipino context, conflict arises due to competition over resources, reputation, and power.

Each individual has a unique history, character, and personality brought about by their inborn qualities and those that are acquired as they participate in the larger society. These are natural and acquired differences. Natural differences are those that we are born with or are born into such as sex or ethnic grouping. Acquired differences, also known as Achieved Status, are those we accomplish throughout our life, such as power or wealth. These differences motivate people to take certain actions and reject others. When people work and interact with others, they discover that they have different perspectives. Any conflict arising from these differences is not inherently harmful.

As noted by Rubin, et. al. (1990), conflict can bring forth progress. (1) Conflict is the seedbed for social change; (2) Conflict facilitates the reconciliation of people's legitimate interests, as most conflicts end up for the mutual benefit of the parties involved; and (3) By the first two functions, conflict can foster group unity. Tjosvold (1992) lists further benefits of conflict which include increasing psychological maturity by developing awareness of problems, and supporting essential changes.

Unfortunately, the best-case scenario is often not accomplished as illustrated in the case of the Philippines. When competition overturns harmony, or differences cannot be reconciled for the greater good, it leads to havoc in the individual and societal levels. Conflict can become violent.

This paper will employ the use of Conflict Transformation Theory by academics Johan Galtung and John Paul Lederach (2000). The theory asserts that the cause of conflict is the competing economic, social, and cultural frameworks between and among parties as is the case with the Moro-Filipino. Conflict Transformation Theory is also based upon the basic premises of world religions (Galtung, 2000).

This paper further asserts that conflict occurs between the two parties due to their natural differences (ethnic grouping and religion) and acquired differences (socio-economic status and power difference). Moreover, this paper emphasizes that this ongoing conflict is not merely latent nor surface, but it is an open one. According to Fisher (2000), an open conflict may be distinguished from a latent conflict and surface conflict. A surface conflict is visible and shallow while a latent conflict is one that has the potential to emerge. It is also termed as an 'unstable peace.' This happens when differences between groups exist, which serve as the potential spark or trigger. Latent conflict is rooted in economic and political inequity (Brahm, 2003). An open conflict is one that has already become very visible and has deep-rooted causes. Both of these characterize the longstanding Moro-Filipino conflict preceding the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL).

There are many strategies for conflict resolution. These strategies include the following: 1.) Facilitation 2.) Negotiation 3.) Conciliation 4.) Mediation and 5.) Adjudication. Facilitation is a private procedure in which the parties identify problems to be

solved, tasks to be completed, or contested matters to be resolved with the help of an impartial third person or facilitator.

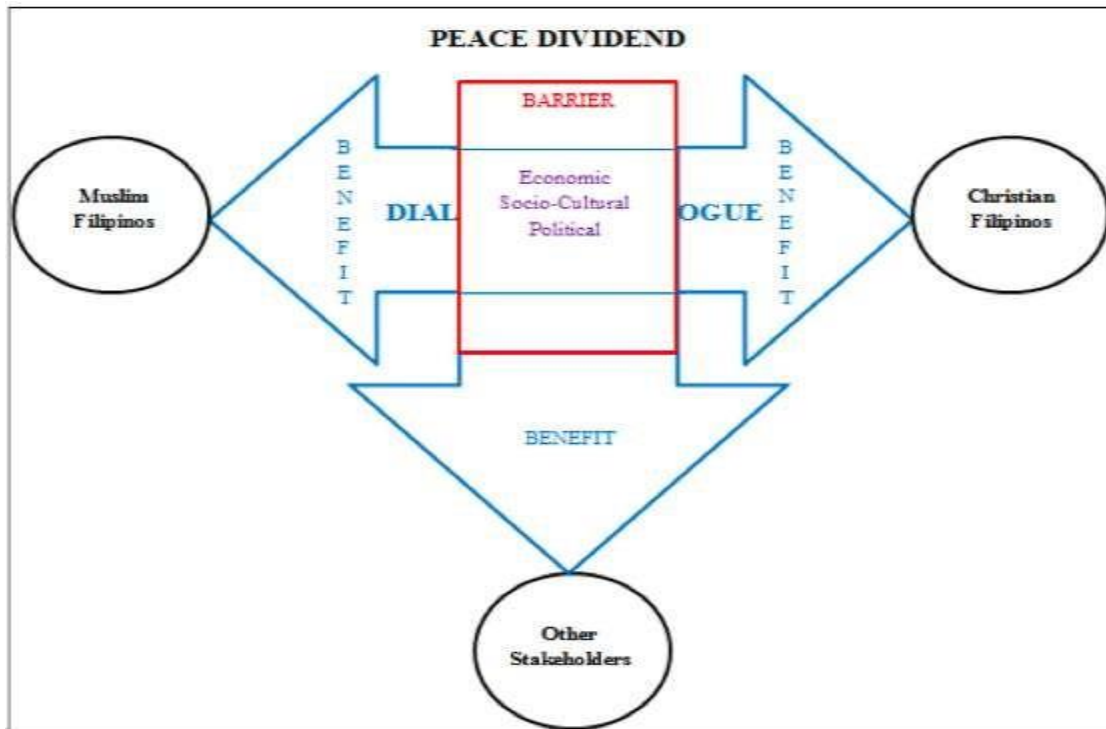
Negotiation is the most prevalent of conflict resolution processes. It involves an exchange between people to fulfill their needs and to create a "win-win" situation. Conciliation involves preparing and sustaining the groundwork for parties to engage in constructive communication relating to divisive issues and broken relationships. Mediation is generally an informal, private, democratic, and collaborative technique to resolve conflict, with a third party (mediator) in command of the process between the disputants and is in charge of the substance (what will be discussed) and outcomes (what is to be agreed upon). Adjudication is a public, formal, coercive, and adversarial process to determine judicially a case between two parties. The third party resolves the dispute in favor of one of the parties, and thus this type of conflict resolution strategy most often results in a "win-lose" situation.

This paper asserts that the long history behind the relationship between the Moros and their Christian counterparts, in itself filled with hurt and betrayal on both ends, renders it too complex to be resolved with simple negotiation. Conciliation is the most compatible strategy of conflict resolution with the kind of conflict presented in this paper. There are three requirements for conciliation to occur: (1) Befriending or building trust with the conciliator and subsequently taking steps to rebuild trust with the opponent; (2) Changing perceptions or the process of removing psychological barriers that block mutual understanding especially anxieties and fears accumulated from years of history in the conflict; and (3) Changing communication style or the process of creating a new flow of information and messages that provide a more accurate presentation of people's understandings, concerns,

and intentions. For this paper, these requirements were created to be similar and in line with the rules of dialogue.

These principles have a lot in common with dialogue. There can be no conciliation without dialogue. According to Swindler (1990), in *After the Absolute: the dialogical reflection*, the rules of dialogue include: (1) In dialogue, one must be ready to learn from partners; (2) Dialogue cannot be one-sided, it has to be both sided; (3) Participants must be true to the ideals of dialogue; (4) Participants must come with an open mind; (5) Dialogue must take place only between equals; (6) Dialogue should take place based on mutual trust; (7) Participants must be ready to be self-critical and accept genuine criticisms from others.

A dividend is a business concept that pertains to the income or return derived by shareholders from an enterprise where they have a stake. The Peace Dividend in this context refers to the benefits that will be derived by stakeholders or interested parties in an enterprise or undertaking in which they are involved, in this case, the Bangsamoro enterprise. This paper affirms that through true conciliation, the barriers that act as obstacles to peace will instead be transformed into frameworks which are beneficial. Furthermore, these benefits will not only extend to those parties directly involved but to other stakeholders as well. Other stakeholders identified apart from the Muslim-Filipino, Christian-Filipino, and Indigenous-Filipino communities would be the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the International Community.



**Figure 3.1. Peace Dividend Conceptual Framework**

#### **4. Methodology**

The study utilized explanatory and descriptive methods to analyze data from primary and secondary sources of data. A descriptive study is one in which information is gathered as it can be readily observed, without altering or initiating any form of interpretative or subjective application. It is not fully experimental and it is conducted to illustrate relationships and associations between distinct objects. It answers the “what” question in the study. On the other hand, an explanatory research design answers the “why” question, and it seeks to obtain a viable rationalization of the observable effects of a specific phenomenon. This paper employs both as part of its research design. The primary method of collecting data would be through the review of existing literature.

## **5. Results and Discussions**

This part of the paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the different barriers to Moro-Filipino conciliation. The second part characterizes the different conflict resolution strategies the GRP has employed. The third part is the conclusion.

### **Economic Barriers**

The Marcos Sr. administration was widely regarded as the lowest point in history for the Moros, and also for all Filipinos regardless of ethnicity or religion, due to Martial Law. However, even before its imposition, government neglect and exploitation were already present. Foreign nationals, corporations, miners, and loggers were awarded franchises to exploit the resource-rich Mindanao during the time of Marcos Sr. According to a study by the Senate Committee on National Minorities, there had never been a single irrigation project in any municipality in Mindanao where Muslims were the majority up until that point (Gowing, 1979).

The national government's benign disregard for Mindanaoans' welfare and rights became entrenched in the status quo, to the point where the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) essentially drowned in the weight of its inherited poverty and violence.

In 1991, 11.3 percent of the inhabitants of the ARMM lived below the poverty line. It grew to 25.1 percent in 2012. (Philippine Statistics Authority-National Savings and Consumption Base, 2012). The National Capital Region (NCR), on the other hand, was one of the few regions with the lowest rate of extreme poverty. Meanwhile, the majority of Mindanao's regions have a higher proportion of their

inhabitants living in poverty. (United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

To reiterate one of Swindler's rules of dialogue, the dialogue partners must be equal to each other. If only one learns from another, that is not a dialogue but a mere monologue. There cannot be any meaningful dialogue between one who has an undue advantage over another. The Moros and the Filipinos have been existing in an unequal power vacuum for centuries, and it is only by leveling the playing field that they can have an authentic connection.

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers**

Studies show that one of the causes of the breakdown of goodwill between the Muslims and Christians was the latter's attitude of rejection toward the former on a socio-cultural religious level (Milligan, 2005). The majority of both public and private discourse insist that it is a Muslim problem, hence why are interfaith dialogues and conferences often held in Muslim dominant areas and why do they use the term "the *Mindanao* problem" or worse, "the *Moro* problem" to describe the pitiful situation in the south of the Philippines (Rasul, 1984). The results of the studies made by Locar and Hunt (1972) on the *Attitudes of Christian Students towards Filipino Muslims* support this assertion as it was discovered that in some localities, it is the Filipino Christians who reject the Muslims. According to Judge Rasul (1984), in his paper on Muslim- Christian relations at the grassroots level, he contends that this asymmetrical relationship can be attributed to a majority-minority situation. However, he argues that it is not the crux of the conflict whilst comparing the Philippines to Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, both of whom have been successful in adapting multiculturalism policies.

There is a wide gap between Christians and Muslims at the socio-cultural level that exists until now. Notwithstanding that both are Abrahamic faiths and share many fundamental truths, ethnocentrism, being a sociological given, causes disunity. Ethnocentricity leads people to cherish what is familiar to them and treat what is not as the 'other' in a claim of obvious cultural superiority.

The goal of interreligious dialogue is understanding. It can only be achieved through communication. Ignorance is an obstacle that can only lead to misunderstanding.

Christian-Filipinos and Muslim-Filipinos may find it hard initially to relate to one another but this can be attributed to a difference in perspectives. Dr. Gowing (1977) in his paper, *Of Different Minds: Contrasting Muslim-Christian Perceptions* asserts that Muslims and Christians look at the problems in their interrelationship with one another through a differing lens. Christians see their relationship with Muslims in political terms. They do not understand their wish for secession thereby threatening territorial integrity. They dichotomize the reasons behind the Mindanao problem and believe that religion has nothing to do with it. For the Muslims, it is different. They see their relationship with their Christian counterparts in religious terms. Having been threatened to abandon their religion, ever since the regime of the Spanish Governor-General Francisco de Sande Picón and the Spanish Conquistadores in 1578, trust in the Philippine government takes long to manifest as they are still suspicious of their objectives.

Enshrined in the Philippine Constitution is the separation of Church and State (Article II, Section 6, 1987). This translates into the mindset of the average Christian Filipino. This is not so for Muslims practicing Islam which makes no distinction between private or

public life. For the Muslims, Islam is a way of life that provides guidelines in all aspects: social, religious, or political. Thus, what is considered 'religious' by Muslims is often divided into 'religious' and 'secular' by Christians. The struggle for self-determination, the Moros believe, is deeply intertwined with their religious identity.

Another presumed barrier that prevented peaceful coexistence and sharing of the national identity between Muslims and Christians is the hesitance of the Moros to be called 'Filipinos'. Because of their bloody history

of fighting with their fellow natives, most Moros do not necessarily feel any emotional kinship to the Philippines. Most Moro ethnic groups, if not all, are clannish due to tradition which they have fervently upheld in defiance and fear of their past colonizers.

The term 'Filipino' initially referred to full-blooded Spaniards who were born in the Philippines. Even Dr. Jose Rizal and his compatriots did not refer to themselves as 'Filipinos'. Their association was named 'Indios Bravos'. Dr. Jose Rizal believed that Filipino Christians should not have been ashamed to call themselves 'Indios' but rather they should have been proud to be identified as such if they were to change the condescending attitude of the Spaniards. Much in the same vein as how the term 'Moro' was embraced by those free inhabitants who remained faithful to Allah and Islam despite the derogatory connotation like 'traitor' imputed onto the term by the Spaniards (Rasul, 1984). Likewise, the term 'Filipino' should also be worn with pride because it is a collective brand of identity fully assimilated by our people. The Filipinos are neither Spanish, American, nor Japanese; they are a patchwork of influences and cultures fully come together to create a unique nationality. The term Moro, too, is uniquely Filipino.

'Muslim' can refer to all Muslims professing belief in Allah (SWT) regardless of nationality. The Moros take pride to be called as 'Moros' and they are similarly proud to be known as Muslim-Filipinos. As such, their fellow Filipinos should not hesitate using the term even with its presumed connotation as a separatist movement. At large, to transform socio-cultural barriers, widespread education is necessary through both government and school channels. This is where the third requirement of conciliation comes in, Changing Communication Style. If this can be accomplished, as well as the other requirements, true conciliation can commence.

### **Political Barriers**

The majority of the Moros have always considered themselves outsiders from the traditional political processes. They rarely become Senators, much less Cabinet Members. There has never been an elected President in the history of the Philippines who hails from Mindanao until the election of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte.

Muslims were entitled to self-rule and political autonomy under the conditions of the Tripoli Agreement, which was signed in 1976 between the Marcos Administration and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and facilitated by Libya. However, instead of one integrated 'provisional administration,' Marcos formed two 'independent areas' as part of the Tripoli Agreement's implementation. Marcos successfully split and diminished Muslims' desire to be governed by a single Muslim-defined authority. Furthermore, he skillfully leveraged the agreement to split the MNLF ranks and hand control of the 'Autonomous Region' to the Muslim traditional elite, the majority of whom belonged to his political organization, the Kilusan ng Bagong Lipunan or KBL (Buendia, 2006).

The ARMM was never the autonomous region that the Moros envisioned. After Marcos, it took another twenty (20) years and two presidents to come close to fulfilling the deal. The peace deal, and hence ARMM, failed to meet the Moro people's socioeconomic and political goals.

In his paper *Federal Government*, Professor Wheare (1950) wrote that people are bound together and marked off from others by common sympathies which arise usually from the profession of common religion. He did not mean that each religious group was to have its separate states. But he contends that the development of 'national will' is crucial. Conflicting ideals will arise in majority-minority situations, but the eventual goal should be assimilation without obliterating the identity of the minority group. Considering the situation of the Moros, they have consistently been disenfranchised in all areas.

### **Conflict Resolution Strategies in the Philippines**

The Philippines, since the time of Marcos, has tried to re-engage with the Moro community through conflict resolution strategies. The most prominent of these, besides individual interfaith dialogues among the civic community, would be the peace agreements with the freedom fighters in the South. In this part of the paper, each peace agreement will be analyzed as to the kind of conflict resolution strategy it employed.

First, the Tripoli Agreement may be characterized as Conflict Resolution through Facilitation. Libya and the other Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) acted as facilitators between the Marcos Administration and the MNLF. While they had an interest in the negotiations, they did not have much of a stake compared to the two parties. Initially, it might seem that they would be biased in favor of their Muslim counterparts in the Philippines, but in the end,

they never interfered even when the administration failed to adhere to the terms. The agreement failed largely in part due to political maneuvering on the part of the Marcos administration and a lack of political will to engage in dialogue with the Moro community.

Second, in comparison to its predecessor, the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain was more substantive. The planned homeland, also known as the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) was to have its own security forces, integrated banking, and finance system, education, civil service, as well as legislative and electoral institutions, and full power over the environment, mineral, and other natural resources, including their utilization and disposal. It was also supposed to have its basic law.

It failed as a conciliation because the parties failed to establish trust and erase preconceptions. The MOA-AD was struck down as unconstitutional due to fear of eventual secession, as under the 1987 Constitution, transitory status for eventual independence from Philippine territory is prohibited. The MOA-AD can be characterized as adjudication, or in other words a win-lose situation. The campaign for the approval of the MOA-AD did not prosper due to the failure to establish effective communication. Dialogue favors inclusivity and listening to everyone's opinion. The Arroyo administration at the time was too hasty in trying to get the approval for the MOA-AD without first consulting the different sectors of society.

Finally, the GRP and the MILF signed the Comprehensive Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), which resulted in the development of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) and the subsequent passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL).

During its first stages, the CAB could be considered a model of conciliation. However, two events derailed the peace process. The Mamasapano incident on 25 January 2015 led to the deaths of Special Armed Forces (SAF) members due to armed conflict with Moro combatants and it instantly vaporized the gradual trust built between the two opposing parties.

The other two requirements of conciliation of Changing Perception and Changing Communication Style were turned on their head. Perceptions worsened, and days after the incident, the media was used as a weapon to pin the blame on the other party. Following that, a lack of quorum hounded the House of Representatives. The CAB at the time can at best only be characterized as mediation, and not conciliation.

Fortunately, the setbacks had only derailed the peace process but had not halted it entirely. Three years later, the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) would be signed. One year after that in 2019, it would be ratified in a two-part plebiscite giving life to the agreements and annexes in the CAB. However, the Bangsamoro and the Philippines are not yet at the post-normalization stage, as it is still currently in transition. Although there is currently an interim government that is running the Bangsamoro, there are new challenges that obstruct the completion of the peace process, the greatest among them being the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic severely affected both the progress of the political, as well as the normalization track. As the BTA Parliament took months to adjust to the restrictions implemented due to the pandemic, this impeded the fast passage of all the priority codes.

The pandemic also slowed down the normalization process. During the Aquino administration, the Phase 1 of the decommissioning procedure involving 145 MILF combatants began

in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. Phase 2 began in September 2019 with 12,000 MILF members in the same town and ended in March 2020. The GRP and MILF peace panels, according to Undersecretary David Diciano (2021) of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), are attempting to continue normalization initiatives despite the hurdles given by the COVID-19 outbreak.

An exit agreement cannot be signed unless agreements under the CAB have been “fully implemented”. Considering the delays in both tracks, caused largely in part by the unforeseen pandemic, it is no wonder that rallying cries for the extension had been heard from all sectors such as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), vulnerable sectors, and the international community, among others. The fate and success of the peace process ending the decades-long conflict in the Philippines depended on it.

## **6. Conclusion**

The cause of the Moro people’s isolation from the rest of mainstream society is one deeply rooted in history. Injustices perpetrated against them had tangible outcomes. Unjust wars waged led to the hatred felt by both parties and the creation of prejudices. However, through dialogue, conciliation could occur.

It can also be concluded from this paper that there were two reasons which caused the failure of previous peace agreements. The first is that there was a mismatch between the cause of conflict and the conflict resolution strategy employed, such as with the MOA-AD. The second is that despite knowledge of the compatible conflict resolution strategy, there was still a failure to utilize it due to outside interference. Three types of obstacles can be deduced from their frequency throughout the history of the peace agreements: (a) Political ambitions get in the way of conflict

resolution as was the case during the Marcos administration. Marcos agreed to the agreement as a way to diplomatically neutralize the Moro rebellion without actually having the political will to see it through; (b) Apathy also counts as interference, for though it may be passive, it slows down progress. An example would be the continued absenteeism of certain political figures which only served to delay decisions concerning the BBL; (c) Uncontrollable events of such impact can also serve to derail conciliation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The signing of the BOL is the farthest that any peace agreement in the Philippines has gone. Failure to capitalize on the dividends already gained because of disunity and a repeat of obstacles plaguing past peace agreements would lead to a huge setback that would mar this historic achievement. Worse, it would have repercussions on future generations within the Bangsamoro region and in the Philippines. The extension of the transition period would give more time for legislators in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region to develop the institutional structures that would carry the region even after the interim government has been dissolved. It is stability that the region currently needs.

It is only when both tracks have been accomplished, and the final exit agreement has been signed can we conclude that true conciliation has been achieved. A truly harmonious relationship free from prejudice, ignorance, and hate can only commence once the foundations have been laid down.

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