

A New Dawn for Bangsamoro: The Evolving Dynamics of Peace and War

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Abstract

The Bangsamoro region in the Philippines has long been plagued by conflicts and tensions arising from historical grievances, cultural differences, and political struggles. However, recent developments have provided a glimmer of hope for lasting peace and stability in the region. This study explores the changing landscape of the Bangsamoro peace process and the dynamics that shape the delicate balance between peace and war.

This study begins by delving into the historical context of the Bangsamoro conflict, highlighting the deep-rooted grievances and historical injustices faced by the Bangsamoro people. It explores the origins of the conflict, including the Moro struggle for self-determination and the complex interplay between different stakeholders such as the government, rebel groups, and marginalized communities. Moreover, this highlights the significant milestones and developments that have taken place in the Bangsamoro peace process. It discusses the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) as a result of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) and the subsequent ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2018. In addition, this study analyzes the evolving dynamics of peace and war in the Bangsamoro region. It explores the challenges faced by the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA) in consolidating power, managing expectations, and addressing the multifaceted issues of poverty, corruption, and political fragmentation. It also examines the role of various actors, including rebel groups, local communities, and external mediators, in shaping the trajectory of the peace process. Furthermore, the data used in this research was purely qualitative as it is gained from reliable and authentic books, journals, and first-hand sources such as Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). More precisely, the main aims of this paper is to examine the previous efforts in relation to post-conflict reconstruction and will delve into important issues and challenges in the Bangsamoro peace process that can impede peacebuilding.

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1. Introduction

The Bangsamoro region in the Philippines has long been a zone of conflict and unrest, rooted in historical grievances, cultural differences, and political struggles. However, recent developments have presented a glimmer of hope for a brighter future characterized by lasting peace and stability. This study sets the stage for examining the evolving dynamics of peace and war in Bangsamoro, exploring the historical context, recent milestones, and the challenges and opportunities that shape the region's path towards sustainable peace.

In addition, by acknowledging the historical complexities and deep-rooted grievances that have fueled the conflict in Bangsamoro. It recognizes the Moro people's struggle for self-determination and the impact of colonization, marginalization, and discrimination on their quest for peace and justice. By understanding the historical background, we gain insights into the multifaceted dynamics that continue to influence the present. Moreover, with the recent milestones that have contributed to the transformation of the Bangsamoro peace process. The establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) through the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014 and the subsequent ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2018 signify important steps towards devolution of power and recognition of the Bangsamoro people's aspirations. These milestones serve as significant indicators of progress and lay the groundwork for further exploration of the evolving dynamics of peace and war.

In the case of the Bangsamoro struggle in their right to self-determination, it has become a crucial reference of the Peace Processes in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao. Of the 59 armed conflicts that have ended in the last 30 years, 44 concluded with peace agreements [1]. The social, academic, and institutional capacities to analyze these processes and strengthen peacebuilding policies have thrived in parallel [2]. However, no peace process has been implemented without peculiarities. For this reason, peace process between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government have learned from previous experiences of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). It helped establish a more justified peace development while also advancing the field of sustainable peacebuilding internationally. The Bangsamoro peace process is currently being studied with great interest by other nations experiencing internal conflicts, including Myanmar, Thailand, and Turkey. [3].

Furthermore, since the Philippines has experienced foreign colonial rule, it is deemed important to note that the Bangsamoro people were never fully conquered nor were they Christianized. As stated by Abhoud Syed Lingga, "the Spanish colonial authority made attempts to subjugate the Muslim kingdoms' political existence and annex the region to the Spanish possessions in the Philippine Islands, but history teaches us that these efforts were never successful." [4] The armed forces and organized maritime forces of the Bangsamoro state were successful in protecting the Bangsamoro regions, maintaining their independence.

Moreover, the American colonizers took control of the Philippines from the Spanish in two ways: first, through

the Treaty of Paris in 1898, which cost twenty million Mexican pesos; second, through armed conquest, in which they separately crushed the resistance of the Filipino people and the Bangsamoro people. After the United States defeated Spain in the Spanish-American War, the treaty served as the political agreement between the two colonial governments. [5] It is imperative to stress at this point that at the time of the treaty, the Sulu and Maguindanao Sultanate and the *Pat a P'ngampong sa Ranao* (Four States of Lanao) were never colonized by the Spaniards, the Indigenous peoples also was not able to be subjugated by the Spaniards and thus remained free, they were not occupied by Spain at the time of the agreement. In this historical narrative, one of the root causes of the Bangsamoro struggle is that the Bangsamoro people was assimilated into the Philippines without their consent.

In addition, the Bangsamoro leaders publicly expressed their strong resistance to being a member of the Philippine republic when the US administration pledged to grant the Philippine Islands freedom. In order to prevent their annexation to Philippine politics, the Bangsamoro people continued to fight and used armed as well as diplomatic means. This has led to pleas the US government over the annexation, one of which was dated June 9, 1921, and stated that “the inhabitants of the Sulu Archipelago would prefer to be a part of the US rather than a separate Philippine republic.” [6] Additionally, the Declaration of Rights and Purposes, which was drafted during the meeting with Bangsamoro leaders in Zamboanga on February 1, 1924, endorsed this nonviolent resistance. The body 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 participation that in the event the US will decolonize its colonies and other non-self-governing territories, the Bangsamoro homeland would be granted separate independence.” [7] This opposition against annexation even continued on March 18, 1935 with the known ‘Dansalan Declaration of 1934’ which was prepared by Didato Amai Manabilang and one hundred twenty Datus of Lanao, with thirty sultans who signed a strongly worded letter to the U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Congress that in the U.S. grant of Philippine independence, Mindanao and its Muslim inhabitants should not be included and should remain under American rule to be granted separate independence at the right time but their request was rejected.

Hence, this is a manifestation that the Bangsamoro people used both diplomacy as to their struggle for right to self-determination. Had these negotiation successful, the Bangsamoro people would have regained its independence under the UN declaration of decolonization.

2. Theoretical Framework

In understanding this study, certain theories were used as its framework. The researchers used the Conflict Transformation Theory (CTT) of John Paul Lederach. This theory suggests that the transformation of conflicts requires addressing not only the immediate issues causing the conflict but also the underlying root causes [8]. In the context of Bangsamoro, this theory emphasizes the need to go beyond surface-level negotiations and focus on addressing historical grievances, cultural differences, and political struggles. By engaging in dialogue, promoting inclusivity, and addressing socio-economic disparities, conflict transformation can pave the way for sustainable peace and reconciliation.

Moreover, this study also used the Power-Sharing Theory (PST) of Theodor Hanf. This theory posits that the allocation and distribution of power among different groups can contribute to peacebuilding efforts. [9] In the case of Bangsamoro, power-sharing arrangements such as the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region and the inclusion of various stakeholders in the peace process aim to address power imbalances and ensure meaningful participation. By allowing different groups to have a voice in governance and decision-making processes, power-sharing can help build trust, reduce tensions, and foster a sense of ownership among the Bangsamoro people.

3. Navigating the Roadmap for Peace in Bangsamoro

In order for the Bangsamoro peace process to yield fruitful results, it is of utmost importance that a comprehensive plan be devised, taking into careful consideration the specific concerns of the Bangsamoro people, particularly those belonging to the common class. The attainment of peace through this process heavily hinges upon gaining the support of the majority.

It is incumbent upon both the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to extend their outreach to their respective constituencies and actively engage them in endorsing the peace process. Crucially, both parties must rise above their narrow self-interests and seek practical resolutions to the manifold challenges faced by the marginalized Muslim community within the nation.

To establish a shared understanding, it is imperative that the involved parties explore every conceivable option for a political arrangement capable of accommodating their divergent interests. They must diverge from the limited path of pursuing either independence or autonomy, which has constrained previous peace efforts, and instead, delve into alternative models and political structures that have proven effective in resolving separatist conflicts elsewhere in the world. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the injustices suffered by the Bangsamoro people. By doing so, both parties can formulate a sustainable framework for transforming the conflict, encompassing historical, socio-economic, cultural, and political reconciliation.

Viewed through an academic lens, reconciliation cannot be viewed merely as an abstract tool for fostering peace. Thus, at the core of my analysis lies the rational consideration of justice, particularly what has come to be known as transitional justice [10]. Theories of political science, particularly those pertaining to justice, often emphasize the indispensable role of transitional justice as a necessary step toward the establishment of stable societies, as articulated by scholars such as Kymlicka and Bashir. Consequently, much of the political groundwork undertaken prior to and during the transition to independence tends to be largely overlooked or discussed solely in the context of external intervention.

Therefore, we cannot genuinely invoke the concept of justice unless there exists a stable foundation of political, historical, social, and cultural reconciliation. Political and social trust must be present, and institutions ought to function not merely as representatives of the people but also as facilitators of their self-cohesion. This entails providing a space for direct participation and intervention in the peace process, thereby enabling individuals to actively engage and contribute to the overarching endeavor.

3.1. The Political Arrangements and Transitional Justice in the Bangsamoro Conflict

In the pursuit of peace, it is of utmost importance that the involved parties embark upon a thorough exploration of various possibilities for a political arrangement that can accommodate their conflicting interests. Breaking away from the narrow path of pursuing either independence or autonomy, which has limited previous peace endeavors, they should venture into different models and political structures that have proven successful in resolving secessionist conflicts in other parts of the world. Moreover, there must be a sincere recognition of the injustices endured by the Bangsamoro people, as this acknowledgment will lay the groundwork for sustainable conflict transformation that addresses the complexities of history, socio-economic disparities, cultural differences, and political reconciliation.

From an academic point of view, reconciliation emerges as a vital principle in the realm of justice, transcending mere conceptualization and serving as a crucial factor in building peace. Thus, my analysis focuses on the rational consideration of justice, particularly what scholars like Will Kymlicka and Bashir refer to as transitional justice [11]. Within political theory, the significance of transitional justice is often emphasized as a necessary step towards the establishment of what they term as "established societies." This viewpoint implies that much of the political work carried out prior to and during the transition to independence is often overlooked or discussed primarily in terms of external intervention.

Therefore, genuine discussions about justice can only take place when there exists stability in political, historical, social, and cultural reconciliation. Political and social trust must be present, and institutions should go beyond mere representation of the people by actively aiding them in finding self-cohesion. This can be achieved through creating spaces for direct participation and intervention in the peace process.

It is essential to note that a strong and meaningful conception of justice is closely tied to reconciliation. Only through reconciliation can justice be legitimately understood, and in turn, reconciliation becomes the catalyst for the realization of justice. As Nordquist pointed out, political reconciliation is a process that seeks to repair the harm caused by political violence, with the ultimate goal of reestablishing trust among victims, perpetrators, and society as a whole [12]. However, empirical studies in the field of political reconciliation remain scarce, and more research is needed to identify the challenges and successes associated with reconciliation efforts in the Bangsamoro region. Informed decision-making is necessary to strengthen reconciliation and prevent the erosion of fragile relationships. In this context, one of the most crucial aspects of political reconciliation is the transformation of relationships through local community efforts that foster trust and new social behaviors. This is necessary to replace failed peace agreements that perpetuate conflict through violent suppression, resulting in the suffering and devastation of innocent civilians. It is important to recognize that civilians often become targets in armed conflicts, seen as resources for protection or material support by one side or the other. As Nordquist affirms, the consequence of such circumstances is displacement, killings, and human suffering among civilians, rather than among the military [13]. This reality has evident implications for the peace process. Consequently, this paper suggests that considering the widespread impact of armed conflict, if hostilities affect everyone, then the peace process should equally affect everyone, particularly the grassroots or common people who bear the brunt of the consequences.

3.2. From Tragedy to Autonomy, a Long Road to Peace in Bangsamoro

On March 18, 1968, under the administration of Ferdinand E. Marcos, a tragic event unfolded. Twenty-six Bangsamoro trainees from Sulu were mercilessly killed by their military trainers, allegedly due to a mutiny. However, some accounts suggest that the trainees were merely demanding the payment of their delayed allowance. This event, known as the Jabidah massacre, took place during the military training codenamed Jabidah on Corregidor Island. It is believed that this incident played a significant role in the emergence of the Mindanao Independent Movement (MIM), led by Datu Udtog Matalam, who called for the independence of Mindanao and Sulu on May 1, 1968. Subsequently, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), under the leadership of Nur Misuari, was established as an organization that combined political struggle with armed resistance against the Philippine government [14].

In 1973, the Quadripartite Ministerial Commission, composed of representatives from the Libyan Arab Republic, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Senegal, and the Republic of Somalia, was formed to negotiate with the Philippine government regarding the situation of the Bangsamoro people. In 1975, the MNLF gained recognition from the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) as the representative of Bangsamoro people. President Marcos pursued peace and engaged in diplomatic efforts with OIC member states, leading to a ceasefire agreement and the initiation of peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF [15]. Finally, on December 23, 1976, the Tripoli Agreement was signed. This agreement granted a degree of autonomy to the Bangsamoro people, and President Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 1618 in July 1979 to implement the autonomy of Regions IX and XII.

However, despite the MNLF's acceptance of autonomy within the framework of the Philippine government, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) emerged and continued to fight for complete independence. This desire for independence was further fueled by the participation of Bangsamoro civil societies through peaceful and democratic means. As a result, the provisions of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement did not hold after a plebiscite in 1977, where only 10 out of 13 provinces voted for autonomy. President Marcos unilaterally divided the 10 provinces into two autonomous regions, which was not part of the original agreement. Consequently, hostilities resumed between the MNLF and the Philippine government [16].

After the EDSA revolution in 1986, Corazon Aquino became the president and resumed talks with the MNLF. This led to the signing of the Jeddah Accord in 1987, which aimed to further discussions on a democratic process for Mindanao. However, the implementation of this accord was hindered by the passage of the 1987 Constitution, which established regional restrictions. References [17] In August 1989, the government passed Republic Act No. 6734, providing an Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) following a plebiscite. The MNLF rejected the Organic Act after the plebiscite in 1989, as only four provinces voted for autonomy. This halt in negotiations resulted in another protracted war between the MNLF, MILF, and the Philippine government.

In 1992, President Fidel Ramos took office and resumed peace negotiations with the MNLF. After four years of interim ceasefire and exploratory talks, the Final Peace Agreement on the Implementation of the 1976 Tripoli

Agreement was signed in 1996 between the Philippine government and the MNLF. This agreement aimed to facilitate a two-stage process, with the first phase focusing on a transition period and socio-economic rehabilitation, and the second phase involving the devolution of powers and the repeal of the Organic Act.

Simultaneously, the MILF began peace talks with the Philippine government in 1997. Their first agreement, the Agreement for General Cessation of Hostilities, was signed on July 18, 1997. However, the peace process faced challenges, including allegations of the MILF's connections with terrorist organizations and accusations of ceasefire violations.

Most of the MILF-GPH peace agreements were signed between 2001 and 2019, during the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Notably, the Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain Aspect of the MILF-GPH Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001 (MOA-AD) was drafted and initialed in August 2008. [18] However, it was later deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, leading to renewed hostilities between the MILF and the Philippine government.

Negotiations resumed after the restructuring of the government's peace panel and a mutually acceptable agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF during the presidency of Benigno Simeon Aquino III in 2010. The peace process faced internal challenges as well, as the MILF split, with Commander Ustadh Ameril Umbra Kato breaking away and founding the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in the same year. The BIFF is now associated with the radical ideology of ISIS.

Nevertheless, the peace process continued, and after 32 rounds of negotiations, the MILF and the government signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) on October 7, 2012 and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in March 27, 2014. [19] This agreements paved the way for the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), replacing the ARMM.

However, the supposed signing of the Bangsamoro Basic Law in the congress in 2015, it was rejected by the congress for some important reasons: 1) the unfortunate Mamasapano incident which resulted to the death of 44 Special Armed Forces of the government, 18 MILF combatants and 25 civilians [20]; 2) due to this incident, the Philippine government questioned the sincerity of the MILF to the peace process, the same claim of the MILF towards the government also arose as they (government) violated the provisions in the previous agreements particularly on mutual collaboration and coordination.

Hence, the rejection of the BBL by the Philippine congress resulted again to another breakaway group from the MILF. This is now the Maute group who were former members of the MILF. With the expanding ISIS ideology, Abdullah and Omar Maute have sworn their *Bay'a* (allegiance) to the extremist group. Asserting and pronouncing through their videos in Youtube that they have joined with ISIS because that is the original plight of the Bangsamoro struggle to become an independent state and establish a Dawlah Islamiyyah (Islamic State) where they can rule the Bangsamoro through the Islamic way of government. This new group now have joined with the known terrorist organization, the Abusayyaf group of Isnilon Hapilon. Later in 2016, they have attacked Butig in Lanao del Sur that leds people to fled to various municipalities in the province. In 2017, they

besieged Marawi which resulted to a five-month long battle against the Armed Forces of the Philippines. This war has led to the displacement of more than 360,000 civilians. These victims of war were not able to come back to their destroyed houses after 6 years of the siege.

Moreover, on July 26, 2018, the Bangsamoro Organic Law (Republic Act No. 11054) was signed, a year after the Marawi siege. References [21] This law addressed the aspirations of the Bangsamoro people for self-determination and marked a significant step in the peace process. The establishment of the BARMM within the sovereign state of the Philippines provided the region with increased authority, power, and funding.

Furthermore, the road to peace in Bangsamoro has been long and marred by tragedy and conflict. However, through persistent negotiations, agreements, and legislative measures, significant strides have been made toward granting autonomy and addressing the aspirations of the Bangsamoro people for self-determination.

4. Findings

In analyzing the peace process, three key patterns emerge. Firstly, a recurring cycle is observed where both parties engage in negotiations when they are exhausted from war. However, if substantive agreements that satisfy their respective interests are not reached, they resort back to armed conflict. This pattern highlights the crucial factors of trust and sincerity in the peace process. An example of delayed autonomy is evident in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, which took 20 years to materialize in the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine government under President Ramos.

Similarly, the fate of the Bangsamoro autonomy's basic law under the MILF followed a similar trajectory. The Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) drafted the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) as outlined in the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB). However, the BBL faced rejection in 2015, marking another setback in the peace process. Significant challenges arose, such as the clash between the government's Special Action Forces (SAF) and the BIFF, alongside some MILF members, in Mamasapano in 2015. This incident resulted in casualties on both sides but predominantly affected the government forces. Additionally, clashes between different armed groups, including breakaway factions like the ISIS-affiliated Maute-Abu Sayyaf groups that besieged Marawi in 2017, further complicated the peace process.

Secondly, the experience of the MNLF's peace talks with the Philippine government revealed a trend of agreements being abrogated. In contrast, the MILF learned from these past mistakes and adjusted their approach accordingly. Notably, a significant factor influencing the success of peace agreements is the changing policies with each new presidency. The failure of peace agreements can be attributed to shifts from an "all-out-war" policy under President Estrada to an "all-out-peace" policy under President Arroyo, for example.

Lastly, the pattern of participation in the peace process is noteworthy. MNLF agreements were relatively exclusive and domestic in nature. On the other hand, the MILF's engagement involved a broader range of stakeholders, from the central committee to various sectors of society such as civil society organizations, educators, businessmen, Ulama (Islamic scholars), and international observers.

Looking ahead, the support for the MILF's leadership in the Bangsamoro region may face challenges depending on the stance of the new Philippine president, particularly if President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. does not align with their objectives. The upcoming parliamentary election in 2025 in the Bangsamoro region could be unfavorable for the MILF if they do not receive support from President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

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