Rizal G. Buendia

THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY AND MORO SECESSIONISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

The paper re-examines the Moro secessionist movement in the Philippines from the perspective of ethno-politics. Using a hybrid framework which combines Paul Brass’ and Abner Cohen’s instrumentalist approach to ethnicity on the one hand and Michael Hechter’s and Michael Banton’s rational choice theory on the other hand, the paper argues that the complexity of the current separatist war is not simply due to the weakness of the state but also due to the weakness of the Bangsamoro identity and notion of nationhood. This frailty allows the state to co-opt leaders of the movement and sabotage their legitimate quest to self-governance and political autonomy. The reinvention of the Moro struggle towards self-determination reflects another attempt to sustain the relevance of the Muslims’ effort to create its own nation-state. However, the prospect of this is not promising. Addressing the conflict in Mindanao requires not only the strengthening of the state but also the strengthening of the Moro national identity. Mutually re-enforcing these strengths can accelerate the process of Philippine nation-state building and establish co-governance mechanisms that would guarantee the unification of the country in spite of its diversity.
INTRODUCTION

The Muslim secessionist movement in the Philippines has been a continuing concern of the government. From the colonial to post-colonial period, regimes have tried to understand the deep underlying reasons behind the Muslim rebellion and attempted to confront secessionism in various modes, ranging from military to peaceful engagements.

This paper is another effort to examine the issue of Muslim separatism. However, unlike other approaches the study analyzes secessionism from the perspective of ethno politics. It appraises the significance of the politics of ethnicity in strengthening and weakening of Muslims’ idea of Bangsamoro identity and how such identity has served and continues to serve a political purpose.

As the Philippine state tries to unify its nation, other ‘nations’ assert their right to form their own state. The Bangsa Moro (Moro Nation) is the most forceful compared to others, Cordillera, for instance (Buendia; 1991). The conflict generated by the state’s ‘nation-building’ on the one hand and Moros’ ‘state-building’ on the other hand continues to unfold.

Under this purview, the complex relationship between the politics of identities, unifying nationalism and democratic governance is apparent. It is one of the vital areas that must be explored towards a better understanding of the dynamics and interaction involving state actors and independence movements.

The paper offers an alternative view in probing at the complexity of Moro secessionism. Apart from the weakness of the state in conclusively addressing the Moro national question, as argued by several scholars the weakness of the Bangsamoro identity contributes to their inability to negotiate with the state on the terms and conditions of Muslim political autonomy and self-governance in the Philippines. The paper argues that this drawback has allowed the state to exploit the ethnic cleavages between and among the Moros to frustrate their collective demands for a Moro nation-state.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In examining the Moro secessionist movement, the study utilizes the instrumentalist theory as its frame of analysis. In the interest of this paper, it adopts the ethnic and rational choice dimensions of instrumentalism. These are briefly discussed herein.

The instrumentalist approach to ethnicity has been propounded by Paul Brass (1994; 1991; 1979) and Abner Cohen (1969). Taking the case of India, Brass concludes that intra-élite competition for economic and political resources is the ultimate objective for the manipulation of different ethnic (linguistic and religious) symbols to arouse, organize and mobilize their respective constituencies.

While Brass admits that élites are constrained by mass cultures and ethnic or indigenous institutions, he argues that leaders of ethnic movements invariably select from traditional cultures those aspects that they think will be useful in their defined interest, disguised as the group’s interest. In the process, élites affect the self-definition of the group, its boundaries and social formation, to the extent that ethnic community or nationality, for that matter, would be completely different from its progenitor and what it used to before.

Using empirical evidences in his study of ethnicity in former British colonial states in Africa, Cohen on the other hand, concludes that: (1) contemporary ethnicity is the result of intense interaction between ethnic groups that operate not outside of the state’s framework but within the structure of the state; (2) mobilization of ethnic groups involves a dynamic realignment of relations and functions within the parameters of the new state that preserved and secured the power of the privileged class; (3) ethnicity is a political phenomenon which uses traditional customs as idioms and mechanisms for political rearrangement of state’s power; and (4) ethnic grouping is essentially informal that does not become part of the official framework of economic and political power within the state. Thereby, their formation is allowed as long as this does not threaten the power of the élite.

The ‘rational choice theory’ and ‘actor’s model’ version of the instrumentalist school has been explored by Michael Hechter (1996; 1986) and Michael Banton (1994; 1996). Both scholars refuse to acknowledge normative and structuralist explanations of ethnicity and nationalism and instead built models of group solidarity based on individual pursuit of public good. Nonetheless, they differ in the focus and approach in explaining the phenomena. Hechter attends on the role of ethnic
organizations in defining individual preferences while Banton chooses to analyze ethnicity at the micro-level.

Hechter’s rational choice approach is premised on the goals of an individual which are: wealth, prestige and power. In the achievement of such goals an ethnic organization or group can project itself to its members as the mechanism for attaining one’s goal. In the process, the organization or ethnic group can perform two vital purposes. One, it can motivate or discourage participation in a collective undertaking through a scheme of rewards and punishments, using individual’s interests – wealth, prestige and power – as the gauge. Two, it can control the flow of information or concoct explanations that will convince the members to take or not to take a particular decision or action.

Hechter theorizes that formation of preference in an ethnic group or community is highly contingent on the leaders’ interests. Élites’ systematic limitation and distortion of facts, information and alternatives can politicize or de-politicize an ethnic or nationalist movement. He suggests that preferences tend to be formed in ‘solidary communities’ whose transmission of information and knowledge is dependent on the élite. Finally, he says that the phenomena of ethnic boundaries, ethnic conflicts, racial assimilation and integration and movements of nationalism and secessionism are consistent with the rational choice theory.

Banton’s individuality-based group solidarity lies in his model of the social structure. He identifies two models – an actor and an observer model. In the latter, the ‘observer’ defines ethnicity based on one’s information, knowledge and concepts – what language, religion, color, physique or belief is ethnic or not ethnic. An observer, in the process of testing one’s assumptions, actually labels, categorizes and frames people based on a pre-conceived idea. While an ‘actor’, the person being observed, makes relationships, interacts and acts based on one’s decision outside of the observer’s parameters. His study on the cases of ethnics in Malaysia and Catalonia reveals individuals are guided by their self-interest rather than ethnic affiliation and identification. He infers that the processes and features of social relationships are defined more by personal preferences and not by ethnic norms and traditional cultures. Thus, Banton declares that ethnicity and nationalism are political constructs that are open and susceptible to manipulation.

The study adopts a hybrid framework that incorporates the ethnic and rational choice dimensions of instrumentalism. In the study, ethnicity is assessed as an
alternative form of organization and structure of identification that easily adapts to changes in particular political situations and social contexts in pursuit of advancing a particular political and economic interest. Ethnic identities may be shifted, ethnic ties may be severed and collective objectives may be compromised, if not sacrificed, for the benefit of securing or preserving one’s power. The mobilization of ethnic groups is seen as a reflection of the dynamic re-alignment of interests and relations as well as functions either to re-arrange state’s power or to demand more political, economic and social benefits for the key leaders of the movement.

The study further suggests that primordial interest is something that is malleable and negotiable rather than fixed. Motives of leaders and organizations are changeable and unpredictable and often adapt to given or proffered opportunities and threats as well as political moods of the time. In other words, in spite of the state’s dominant role in society, it is not entirely responsible or liable for the internal political dynamics that transpire within the organization of a resistance movement; in this case, the Moro secessionist movement.

The paper contends that even if the state’s policies may lead to the destruction, co-optation or subjugation of social forces and eventually transform peoples’ identities, the internal tussle among a movement’s leaders for power and control over the organization contributes to the weakening of its capacity to withstand the state’s pressure and makes it vulnerable to the latter’s political manipulation and maneuvers.

**The Politics of Identity in the Search for a Moro Nation-State**

In the early 1920s, Muslim leaders of Sulu and Mindanao began a peaceful movement that asserted their right to establish their own nation-state and form a government of their choice. Leaders petitioned and offered two options for the US Congress to consider: join the Federal Government of the United States, or be declared a separate sovereign state from the would-be Republic of the Philippines. The last option rested on the hope that Muslims would gain their independence in the event that the US finally relinquished its power over colonies and other non-governing territories in the future.

The denial of their petition and the inevitability of Philippine independence after an American sponsored 10-year transition period under a Commonwealth Republic led Muslim leaders to reconfigure their Moro identity in line with the forthcoming Philippine nation-state. Muslim leaders declared themselves as
‘Filipinos’ and considered Moro—pejoratively associated with piracy, savagery, slavery, treachery, amok and other negative connotations—a name that was unacceptable.

The last-ditch effort of Muslims to live separately from Christian Filipinos was made in 1935 (the year when the Commonwealth Republic was inaugurated) when Lanao leaders appealed to the US government and the American people to exclude Mindanao and Sulu from the proposed independence to the Filipinos.

In the 1934 Constitutional Convention that framed the 1935 Philippine Constitution (used as the fundamental law of the Commonwealth and 1946 Government of the Republic of the Philippines [GRP]), several elected Muslim Constitutional delegates, led by Alauya Alonto, called upon their fellow delegates not only to cease calling Muslims Moros but also to accept Muslims as part of the Filipino nation.

This turn of events is a classic case of shifting self-definition, attaching new value and meaning to one’s identity in the prospect of advancing its political interests and exigencies of power within the parameters of a newfound state. This is a clear case wherein ethnic identity is simply not fixed but malleable and shaped by one’s interest in preserving power and access to resources as expounded by instrumentalists Brass and Cohen.

What deepened in almost two decades from the 1950s was the ethnic self-recognition of the masses as Filipino-Muslims (foremost as a Filipino and second, as a Muslim). The legitimacy of the Philippine state to govern the Muslim areas of the country was neither questioned nor challenged by any of the Muslim elite.

The emergence of new intellectuals and counter-elite among the Muslims and the political events that transpired in the late 1960s until the early 1970s triggered the re-invention of Muslim identity. The massacre of about 28 Muslim military trainees (called ‘Jabidah commandos’) on Corregidor Island in March 1968 rekindled the quest of Muslims for independence, almost 50 years after it was first clamored for in the 1920s.

Although traditional Muslim politicians formed their own organization that appears to have secessionist intentions, like the Muslim (later renamed Mindanao) Independence Movement (MIM) set up by then Cotabato Province Governor, Datu Udtog Matalam, and the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO) founded by then member of the House of Representatives (HOR) Raschid Lucman, in 1968...
7 and 1971 respectively, they simply collapsed when then President Marcos offered their key leaders political and economic power and resources in and out of government.

The serious military challenge against the state came from the non-traditional politicos and intellectuals Nur Misuari and Salamat Hashim who bolted out of the BMLO and formed the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in mid-1971. The MNLF Chair Misuari assessed that the failures of previous movements were not wholly rooted in the discriminatory policies of the state that favor the Christian majority but also due to the ‘collaboration’ of Muslim leaders with the Manila ‘politico-economic elite’ who safeguard their interests rather than defend the aspirations of Muslims. Misuari set himself apart from the rest of the Muslim organizations. He conceived a rebellion that had two fundamental objectives: to set up a single independent homeland covering the 13 ethno-linguistic Muslim groupings in the Philippines inhabiting 13 out of 25 provinces of the Mindanao Island and Sulu archipelago; and to wage war against Muslim traditional politicians and aristocratic leaders who cooperated with the state.

The MNLF’s vision of a secessionist war was emphatically secular in orientation rather than Islamic. Its goal was to reclaim the Bangsa Moro (Moro Nation), the Muslims’ homeland, that had been ‘unjustifiably annexed by the Philippine state’. He called upon his brethren to renounce their identities as ‘Filipino-Muslims’ and declare their identity and nationality as ‘Moro’, a reincarnation of the pre-colonial identity as the descendants of the ‘unsubjugated’ and ‘uncolonised’ peoples. What looked to be the state’s prejudices against the Muslims had found a national expression. As Ernest Gellner says, it is more advantageous to set up a ‘rival nation’ when entry into the dominant nation is difficult if not impossible.

In retrospect, Misuari transformed the epithet ‘Moro’ into a positive identity of the Muslims and symbol of unity and pride in the course of national resistance against the Philippine state. The ethnicizing of Muslim identity was a consequence of the awakening of Muslim self-consciousness.

The Bangsamoro struggle is an expression of what David Brown calls ‘reactive nationalism’, (2000:64-66) articulated by the new and non-traditional counter-elite on a reactive basis and resonated with Muslim society which was undergoing some ‘crisis of self-confidence’. It demonized the threats of the state as the enemy and mobilized the masses to take collective action against such threats. It
had to appeal to an educated Muslim middle class and was invariably populist, intended to induct the masses into politics.

The Bangsamoro independence movement was nonetheless saddled with leadership crises and power struggles. The MNLF’s first major split occurred as early as 1977 when Salamat Hashim, a Maguindanaoan, broke away from Tausug-dominated MNLF. Hashim founded the ‘New MNLF’ which advocated autonomy rather than independence. This was in line with Hashim’s plan to negotiate with the then Marcos government for self-governance under the unitary state and woo the support of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) which had been sustaining the MNLF’s struggle. At the same time, Misuari became intransigent and threatened the collapse of the OIC-brokered Tripoli Agreement signed between the MNLF and GRP in 1976. Unsuccesful in his attempts, Hashim renamed his organization in 1984 as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and made Islam its official ideology to gain the attention of the Muslim World League (MWL) and the Muslim World Congress (MWC).

It was quite apparent that the decision of the state to open a peaceful political engagement with the secessionist movement triggered a serious conflict between key leaders of the MNLF. The contestation for power, wealth and prestige between the two contending leaders within the rebel movement emerged when the opportunity to share power and resources with the state became imminent. The experience suggests the tendency of leaders to re-create ethnic boundaries, ethnic affiliations and identification in pursuit of protecting and advancing one’s own political and economic interests.

The power play is not only seen at the ground level but also manifests itself among the patrons of the conflict. The GRP-MNLF 1976 Tripoli Peace Agreement was politicized to serve the interest of Libya and other organizations which stood to benefit from the prolonged conflict. In an interview provided by a senior Indonesian diplomat (requested to remain anonymous) who was part of the 1996 GRP-MNLF Peace Talks, it was confirmed that one of the more important reasons why the peace negotiation dragged for several years was:
Khaddafy wanted to highlight the Moro issue to buttress his propaganda offensives against the United States and its allies who were projecting his regime as ‘terrorist’ to the international community at that time. In as much as the US maintained an amiable relation with the Philippines, he wished to show that the US was an accessory to the carnage committed by Marcos against the Muslims. And in the spirit of ummah (the community of Islamic faith), Libya would be able to refurbish its image, (personified by Khaddafy), as defender of beleaguered Muslims being unjustly treated by so-called US surrogates (Vitug and Gloria 1999:32-33).

As the overseas sponsors of the MNLF harangued its leaders to surmount ethnic differences to effectively challenge the legitimate state, sub-national Moro identities were simply not easy to give up, even in the interest of a higher goal. In 34 years from the time the MNLF was established in 1971, the movement suffered four organizational fissures; clashes over leadership and power occurred around every eight years on average. Currently, there are five Moro organizations (varying in size and prominence) advancing the issue of self-determination in different forms, adopting dissimilar strategies and defining varied territorial limits of diverse Bangsas. The most recent spilter group emerged in February 2005 and engaged the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in a running battle in Sulu group of islands (Buendia:2005). Definitely, this would not be the last.

It is also instructive to note that the three major rebel fronts that contested state’s power since the Jabidah massacre of 1968 correspond to the three main ethnic groups among more than a dozen Muslim ethno-linguistic groupings. The BMILO was generally composed of the Maranaos, the MNLF by the Tausugs and the MILF by the Maguindanaos. It was also reported that Moro rebels prefer to fight with their fellow ethnic groups, e.g. Maranaos, Tausugs and Maguindanaos as the case may be, rather than with ethnic groups other than their own (Gutierrez:2000).

Factionalism in the Bangsamoro struggle, either among and between traditional political elite or new intellectual and counter-elite, has not only hobbled the quest of the Moros towards achieving their goal but, more importantly, highlighted...
the fundamental and continuing question of Moro identity and Moro national unity. From Matalam’s MIM to Hashim’s Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Muslim minorities find it difficult to unite under one self-identifying and all-inclusive banner. The notion of a Moro Nation is constricted by their assorted political and organizational agenda. As a consequence of constant divisions and splitting up of leaders in the Moro movement, the process of ethnicizing Moro identity as a nationality has been stunted and is a reflection of a crisis in self-definition.

Moreover, ruptures in the Bangsamoro movement occur whenever the state accommodates some of the political demands or acquiesces partly to certain grievances advanced by a particular Moro revolutionary organization. It appears that the shifting loyalties and interests of leaders as well as their respective organizational strategies and tactics is more of a response to the vagaries of political priorities and constraints which the state presents.

Notably the history of the secessionist movement is not only a history of conflict between the state and Bangsamoro people but also a history of sectarianism, betrayals and treachery. Muslim identity is fragile and vulnerable to the state’s political manipulation. Parochial interests and ethnic identities remain strong in spite of attempts to unify and train the Muslim struggle towards a single national liberation from the state.

The historical experience of the Bangsamoro struggle is not much different from Brass’ ethnic instrumentalist model as seen from his Indian case wherein leaders of secessionist movements invariably used their defined, particular and limited interest to represent the peoples’ interest. Likewise, it affirms Cohen’s concept that ethnic groups are mobilized in accordance with the re-alignment of relations and functions in line with the leaders’ intention to defend and advance their power and control over resources.

Re-invention of the Moro secessionism and Self-Determination: Quo Vadis?

As the secular MNLF integrated itself politically and militarily to the government as provided by the GRP-MNLF 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA), the sectarian MILF maintained its distance from the peace process and strengthened its own armed force, the Bangsa Moro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), instead. Its military might, in fact, led then President Ramos to initiate exploratory talks with the MILF that
eventually resulted in the signing of the GRP-MILF Agreement for the General Cessation of Hostilities (AGCH) on 18 July 1997.

Foreseeing the imminent demise of MNLF’s vision to create a separate nation-state from the Philippines, the MILF re-invented itself from its reformist beginnings to an ardent advocate of an Islamic state through armed struggle. The late MILF Chairman Hashim believed that what they resolved was the government’s problem and not the Bangsamoro problem, ‘the agreement never touched the core of the Bangsamoro problem which is the illegal and immoral usurpation of their (referring to the Moros) ancestral homeland and legitimate rights to freedom and self-determination’ (Hashim: 2006). The MILF, he argued, ‘would never agree to any solution other than the full independence of the Bangsamoro homeland… the establishment of an Islamic State’ (Crescent International: 1999:16). Apart from this broad pronouncement, the character and type of Islamic state envisioned to be set up in the Bangsa Moro has yet to be defined.

Indeed, the conclusion of the FPA did not terminate the Muslim secessionist movement. The FPA strategically co-opted Misuari to be part of government in addressing the complex problems of the Moros in a limited period. He became the third Governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and assumed the Chair of the Southern Philippine Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD), a transitory administrative arm under the Office of the President tasked to spur development in 14 provinces and 9 cities (as of 1996) in Mindanao and Sulu archipelago, known as the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD). Misuari’s three-year term (1996-1999), extended until February 2001, failed to yield the promised development and meaningful self-rule for Muslims and Christians alike in Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan.

The disappointing performance of Misuari led not only to his ignominious oustering as ARMM Governor and SPCPD Chairman but also as MNLF Chairman. Led by his own comrade-in-arms calling themselves the ‘Council of 15’, Misuari was declared ‘incompetent’ to remain as MNLF’s Chairman. The Council proclaimed itself the legitimate Central Committee of the MNLF, and was eventually acknowledged by the Philippine government and the OIC as the sole ‘representative of Muslim community in the Philippines’ (Nawal and Javellana: 2003). Parouk Hussin, the MNLF’s Foreign Affairs Committee Chair under Misuari and one of the leaders of the Council, became the new regional governor in November 2001 under
the new ARMM’s Organic Act (Republic Act 9054). Misuari’s expulsion from government was followed by his incarceration and he is currently facing trial for charges of sedition and corruption.

As political autonomy is hinged on the power dynamics of the state, any change in the configuration of state power has a direct consequence on the disposition of the autonomous region, especially under a unitary governmental structure. When MNLF was assigned to lead ARMM and SPCPD under the terms of the 1996 Peace Agreement, it was assured of the national government’s support. It was on the assumption that Misuari’s benefactor, then President Ramos, would remain in power. When Ramos’ term ended in 1998, Joseph Estrada was elected President. Estrada was never involved in the peace process and had trivial and superficial understanding of the Muslim issue. Moreover, unlike during Ramos’ presidency when the economy was recovering, Estrada began his term at the time when the region was hit by a financial crisis that made it difficult for the government to keep the funds flowing into ARMM and SPCD. These realities prevailed upon the commencement of ARMM and SPCD under MNLF.

While the MILF and GRP crafted its own version of FPA, the former used the internationally-recognized right to self-determination as its framework rather than the MNLF’s concept of an autonomous region under the current unitary state. ‘There can be no genuine peace and development unless the right of the Bangsamoro people to self-determination is adequately addressed’, said Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, Hashim’s successor (MILF: 2003). In pursuit of the ‘self-determination’ agenda, the MILF pushed the issue of ancestral domain. It hoped that governmental recognition of the right of the Bangsamoro over their ancestral domain would eventually result in the acknowledgement of Moros’ territory. ‘We just want a physical space where we can freely practice our religion and apply our ways-of-life. There is no need to seize power’, said MILF Information Chief, Mohagher Iqbal (Elusfa: 2002).

On 11 March 2007, it was reported that a breakthrough in the GRP-MILF Peace Talks had been made. The government had offered Muslims in Mindanao the right of self-determination (PDI: 2007). However, Rudy Rodil, one of the GRP peace negotiators, clarified in the same report that although Muslim self-governance has been provided in all areas, this excludes ‘defense, foreign affairs, [and] the monetary and postal systems. They will have to remain in the Philippines’. While the proposal is yet to be finalized in the GRP-MILF Formal Talks, the MILF has welcomed the
development, ‘We feel it is advancement in the search for peace in Mindanao’, declared MILF Chair Murad. Silvestre Afable, the government’s chief negotiator, further noted that the ‘issue of territory remained unresolved’ and some proposals need Congressional approval. Yet unsettled, a ray of hope has emerged. A new relationship between the state and MILF that could make continued territorial unity possible is most inspiring towards addressing the long-drawn conflict in Mindanao.

Nonetheless, given the general theory and common practice of self-determination in the world, it appears that the Moro struggle for external self-determination would not only be arduous and intricate but also unimaginable. If there is anything that the MILF has to learn from the experience of self-determination struggles of peoples in the world under the context of the international state system, it is the extreme difficulty of its realization. The right of self-determination, established in the late 1950s and 1960s as a decolonization instrument, was enforceable only in relation to a small number of governments that continued to cling to colonial rule at that time. It was conceived to restore justice to nations which had been subjected to colonialism. It was never intended to de-stabilize existing sovereign states or states which had been freed from colonial rule.

The doctrine of self-determination, more than ever, is to safeguard the territorial integrity (free from external invasion) and territorial unity (free from internal armed conflict coming from secessionist movements) of independent states. It offers a promise of independence and liberation to peoples from a state that marginalizes and discriminates against them. Nevertheless, states know for a fact that such a promise is plain illusion. The international state system established more than 60 years ago, after the Second World War, has historically rendered support to states challenged by secessionist movements and groups. Moreover the state is usually given a carte blanche in dealing with groups seeking to assert their separate identity. The state system thus gives supreme importance to ‘stability’ rather than justice, at least as seen by groups seeking independence from a state considered a purveyor of ‘internal colonialism’.

As discussed in the beginning of this paper, the notion of Bangsa Moro is quite new – less than 40 years. It emerged only in 1968 in the wake of the Jabidah massacre and has yet to be crystallized. Historical facts attest that the shifting of Muslim identities from the time the Republic gained its independence from the
Americans until the late 1960s indicates the hollowness of Moro consciousness and concept of a Bangsa Moro.

It took Misuari’s MNLF to remind his Muslim brethrens that they have to re-claim their homeland and redeem the Moro nation-state from the Philippine state. In a nationalist project such as the MNLF’s movement, the attempt to wrest control of a proclaimed national territory from the illegitimate seizure of another state regarded as alien, is the overarching feature. The MILF as well as other splinter groups is not an exception. They trace the historical roots of the Moro identity and Bangsa Moro centuries before the advent of colonialism.

Understandably, the Bangsa Moro requires a history, an imagined national past that is essential in the quest and process of nation-building. A nation is ‘an imagined political community – (one) imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ where people ‘not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings’ (Anderson 1991). For Anderson, the imagined community of the nation is a mass fiction. It is not clear, however, who, if anyone, imagines a particular community and if there is any difference in the resulting fictional community, depending on who imagines it and how one does so. Invariably, the history of the Muslims during the Spanish era, as narrated by some nationalist movements, culling uncritically from accounts of historians, is to a certain extent mythical.

Nevertheless, what is important for them is that stories should be generally believed or that there should be substantial convergence in the versions of a story that are to be believed. Stories are not only needed at the time during which a national identity is being created, it is also required for one to understand what it means to be a Bangsamoro and one has to accept a version or some versions of the common story to grasp the significance of one’s identity.

In other words, historical accuracy is not vital in constituting a nation since the story is told for the purpose of self-definition. And Bangsa Moro’s self-definition bears on the goals that its members will try to pursue in the future. Leaders of separatist movements have to defy the modern state in which they are found challenge their authority and confront their armed forces. They present themselves as rulers as well as rebels, in order to supplant the jurisdiction of the alienized state with their own localized version. History making or myth making is part and parcel an idea in the whole process of nation-creation.
External self-determination is an act that can be taken up only once and not a continuing action against the state. When a colonial territory has exercised the option of independence, ethnic groups living in the new state boundaries cannot invoke the right of self-determination against the newly declared independent state. There cannot be secession in a state that has already seceded from its former colonizer. The UN General Assembly 2526 (XXV) on the Declaration of Principles of International Law proclaims that the principle of self-determination ‘cannot be interpreted to connote the recognition of the dismemberment and fragmentation on ethnic and religious grounds’. Affirming the doctrine of territorial integrity, ethnic, religious and sub-national cultural entities and groups can only claim territorial and political autonomy within the new state boundaries.

An exception to this rule, as noted by Wellner (2005), would relate to a self-determination entity that does not opt to become independent but decides to associate, but not integrate, with another state. In such a case, the self-determination status of the entity is maintained or transformed into a situation wherein the right of self-determination can be asserted within the provisions of the state’s constitution. However, there is very little practice of this kind.

Against this backdrop, it appears that the question of decolonization would be a difficult process given that the entire Philippine archipelago, with its Muslim, Christian and non-Christian/non-Muslim population, has been under a single colonial ruler. The Moroland – Mindanao, Sulu archipelago and Palawan – has been part of the Philippine nation-state when the former American colonizers granted the Philippines its independence in 1946.

An alternative to external self-determination is to seek substantial and meaningful political and cultural autonomy within the Philippine state. However, pursuing internal self-determination in the long term necessitates the state to comprehend fully the root causes of Moros self-determination struggle. Unless the rationale behind secessionism is appreciated and resolved to its conclusion through sustained, comprehensive, coherent and appropriate national policies coupled with effective and methodical policy implementation, secessionism would continue to inspire the Moros in the search for valuable political power and social justice.

The Philippine unitary-presidential system as defined by the constitution may not necessarily be the best mode of operationalizing meaningful Moro self-governance. Its inherent structural centralism, despite existing laws on
decentralization and autonomy, limits the attainment of Muslim minorities’ desire to rule themselves. Conferring a semi-sovereign status, resembling a federal structure of governance, to Muslim areas of Mindanao would be a promising option that the state can contemplate to further the nation-state building not only of the Philippines but also of the Bangsamoros.

The peace process currently being undertaken jointly by GRP and MILF with the participation of OIC, in spite of some violations of ceasefire agreements, already provides a semblance of legitimacy on the part of the state to address the conflict within the confines of the Philippine state system.

**Synthesis, Conclusion and Remaining Issues**

As shown in this paper, the state chose to exploit the rift within the movement’s leadership by co-opting one or several of its leaders or factions through offers of power or material gain or both within the institutions of government. Co-optation not only damaged the organizational effectiveness of the secessionist movement but also proved that identities and interests of ethno-nationalists are pliable and can be shifted and altered in accordance with the opportunities and circumstances of the time. Obviously, the malleability of Moro identities has been influenced equally by the variability of the state’s policies.

Militarization and co-optation failed to completely secure the stability of the state. Instead, it activated society. The people were forced to resist abuses not because the separatists had a better political program or a clear national agenda or even an ideology, but for the reason of self-defense and survival. Identities gradually transformed and ossified defying the state’s nation-building policies as people neither felt part of the nation nor considered the state the protector and defender of their interests.

The Moro independence movement is inclined to use (wittingly or unwittingly) their idea of pre-colonial state status (claiming to be sovereign before the advent of colonialism) to strengthen their bargaining position vis-à-vis the state. Nevertheless, the passion and fervor of separatism and ethno-religious nationalism raised under the banner of a mythical nation can be easily extinguished after an acceptable compromise has been made between the leaders of the movement and the government. Yet, the bellicose slogan can be re-resonated and resurrected over time and space whenever they feel that the state had either ditched or sullied (rightly or
wrongly) the terms and conditions of the peace contract. This has been demonstrated most notably by Matalam’s MIM in the late 1960s and Misuari’s MNLF in the mid-1990s and early 2000s.

The history of secessionism further depicted that primordial interest remained a powerful factor in organizing and mobilizing the people against the state’s erroneous, skewed and incoherent policies, as well as its misuse and abuse of power. Ethnic and primordial concerns have been intermittently used or served as ready instruments in re-constructing and re-constituting a political imbalance between communal forces and the state. The politicization of identities can be designed as a political strategy to draw the state into the negotiating table.

The Bangsamoro identities have been formed not through spontaneous processes of self-definition but primarily according to the exigencies of power – the demands for political autonomy and independence as a consequence of the state’s domineering role. Their identities and communal interests are malleable and pliant as they interact with the state’s power. It responds to the political, economic or social needs of group members at any moment, depending on the contingencies of national politics.

Indeed, ethnic issues among Moro leaders have partly hobbled the separatist movement to achieve its purpose, but beyond ethno-linguistic divisions, Moro secessionism rests also on fundamental and legitimate socio-economic, cultural and political grievances.

Hence on the part of the state, it is essential that Moros be drawn within the domain of the state and made to feel that they are part and foremost a stakeholder of the Philippine nation. Although ethnic identities and affinities can serve as one’s refuge when the primordial culture of Moros is threatened by the state’s domineering power, the sense of Moros’ separateness as a people can be altered or modified. Perceptions are neither fixed nor permanent. They change as material conditions change.

The process of reversing outlooks and feelings of alienation and transcending ethnic boundaries demands a strategic approach of sustained and indefatigable efforts and the commitment of state leaders toward greater democratization, meeting the new challenges of mosaic democracy and heterogeneous development. It requires the state to redefine itself and adopt an institutional framework of governance that would allow the expression of democracy in kaleidoscopic forms.
It is the contention of this paper that the threat of national disintegration will continue until an appropriate institutional framework for political governance which can accommodate Mindanao’s social and ethnic diversity is ensconced. Apart from re-engineering political institutions in Mindanao, there is a need to lay emphasis, at least at the local level, on good governance, the rule of law, improved civil-military relations, accountability of public officials for corruption and human rights protection. These efforts would, to a large extent, facilitate the early conclusion of conflict, accelerate the process of peace and find a respectable and honorable final peace agreement between contending forces. More importantly, steps toward this direction would not only strengthen the Philippine nation-state but also considerably extirpate the cause of secessionism.

Whether or not the state would be able to meet the challenges of nation-building and national unity is difficult to surmise at this point. Although there are new emerging forms of co-governance within states and novel types of nation-building, there is no assurance that these would work in the long term. Finally, the failure of the state to secure these peoples’ basic rights and freedoms means that secession cannot, in the end, be ruled out.
Notes

1 Associate Professor at the Political Science Department, De La Salle University-Manila (Philippines).
   E-mail: <rgbuendia2001@yahoo.com> or buendiar@dlsu.edu.ph

2 The term ‘bangsa’ or ‘bansa’ is a Malay word that usually refers to nations, castes, descent groups or lines, races or estates. Informants in this study prefer to use it as one word, ‘Bangsamoro.’ For the purpose of this paper, ‘Bangsa Moro’ shall be used to mean the ‘Moro Nation’ and ‘Bangsamoro’ to refer to the Filipino-Muslims inhabiting the Philippines.

3 The MIM was organized less than two months after the Jabidah Massacre. It was accounted that its creation was Datu Udtog Matalam’s personal response to traditional corrupt electoral system in Cotabato that had been disadvantageous to his political ambitions rather than a reaction to the massacre and intention to carve a separate state from the Philippines (see McKenna 1998, 144-149). Matalam later joined the government when then President Marcos appointed him as Presidential Adviser on Muslim Affairs.

4 The word Moro was later dropped from BMLO as it remains unacceptable to many of the Muslims and Bangsa Muslimin Islamic Liberation Organization (BMILO) adopted as its new name in 1984 (Jubair 1999, 152).

5 There are conflicting versions on the founding of the MNLF. Jubair (1999) said that the MNLF was founded in 1969 (150) while Mercado (1984) noted that its founding was in mid-1971 (159). Interviews conducted by the author among former MNLF leaders who were then government officials of the ARMM declare 28 March 1968, MNLF’s Foundation Day. Obviously, 28 March was symbolically used by the MNLF as its Founding Day since it was the day when the Jabidah massacre happened. Mercado’s version is closer to reality as it was in mid-1971 when Misuari convened the ‘Top 90’ guerrillas in Zamboanga City to repudiate the reformist tendencies of MIM and BMLO leaders. This eventually led to the birth of the MNLF. Hence, 1971 is used in this article as the year of MNLF’s formation.

6 The 13 Muslim ethnolinguistic groupings are the Maranao, Maguindanao, Tausug, Sama, Yakan, Sangil, Badjao, Kalibugan, Jama Mapun, Iranun, Palawani, Molbog and Kalagan. Three of these are major groups occupying identifiable territories: Maranao in Marawi; Maguindanao in Cotabato; and Tausug-Sama in Tawi-Tawi and the Sulu group of islands.

7 The GRP-MNLF Tripoli Agreement was signed on 23 December 1976. The three-articled Agreement names the specific areas in the southern Philippines where Muslims shall enjoy political autonomy. It provides the establishment of Muslim courts implementing the Islamic Shari’a laws; a Muslim administrative system; a Muslim economic and financial system; a special regional security force composed of Muslim officers and men responsible for maintaining peace and order; and a legislative assembly as well as an executive council.

8 Interview conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia 12 March 2000. Interviewee requested to remain anonymous.

9 The FPA was signed on 2 September 1996 between the GRP and MNLF with the participation of the OIC. It laid down the process and framework in achieving peace and development in the Southern Philippines. (see GRP-MNLF Final Peace Agreement, 2 September 1996 for details).

10 Zacaria Candao, a Maguindanaano who have strong links with the MILF, was elected as the first Regional Governor in 1990 followed by Lininding Pangandaman, a Maranao, who served from 1993 until 1996.

11 ARMM was created on 1 August 1989 under Republic Act 6734 as a fulfillment of Article 10, Sections. 15-21 of the 1987 Constitution. It was initially composed of four (4) provinces (Lanao del Sur; Maguindanao; Sulu; and Tawi-Tawi) and increased to six (6) when the province of Basilan and city of Marawi joined ARMM after a plebiscite was conducted on 14 August 2001.

12 SPCPD was established through Executive Order 371 issued on 2 October 1996. The dissolution of the SPCPD under Executive Order 80 of 11 March 2002 transferred all its on functions, duties and responsibilities to the new ARMM under Republic Act 9054.

13 RA 9054 created the new ARMM and replaced RA 6734 of 1989. As provided under the law and in compliance with the provisions of the 1996 GRP-MNLF FPA, a plebiscite was conducted on 14 August 2001. This resulted in the inclusion of Basilan province and Marawi City as new members of ARMM, in addition to the four (4) existing ones.
In November 2001, while still serving as ARMM Governor and Chair of SPCPD, Misuari resurrected his call for an independent Muslim Mindanao. He led some armed MNLF guerrillas to attack the Army headquarters in Jolo, Sulu on 19 November 2001. This prompted the government to charge Misuari of sedition. He is now languishing in jail on charges of rebellion and if found guilty, he could face up to 20 years imprisonment.

It was also reported that Misuari pocketed funds allotted for the poverty alleviation program and allegedly spent some P42 million (US$840,000) to buy high-powered weapons.
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