

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politics of Ideas and Discourses: Understanding the Ideational and Discursive Struggles in the Formation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

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Abstract: Ideas and discourses matter in the development of institutions. In the context of the Bangsamoro people's struggle for self-determination, the myriad of ideas and discourses that were instigated, asserted, and contested by different actors catalyzed sporadic episodes of hostilities, co-optations, and settlements. These events, in turn, shaped their quest for self-determination and explained how, when, and why the Bangsamoro people, from initially clamoring for outright independence, have instead opted for a negotiated political settlement in the form of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). It is, therefore, the objective of this paper to discuss the impacts of ideas and discursive interactions between and among major actors vis-à-vis the development of the BARMM. The paper will trace and discuss Bangsamoro's history of statehood, public declarations for secession, the foundation of armed movements, and the acceptance of political settlements. A discursive institutionalist framework, along with archival research and content analysis of government documents, media reports, and scholarly publications, will be employed in discussing the abovementioned matters. Undertaking this study through these approaches will allow us to understand how the discourse on the Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination shifted from being defined as an aspiration for an independent state, to an armed struggle between secessionist movements and the national government of the Philippines, and ultimately into a struggle for genuine autonomy within the framework of Philippine sovereignty. The latter discourse eventually resulted in the formation of BARMM, a secular and democratic institution that recognized not only the Bangsamoro people's right to self-determination but also the territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines. Although the BARMM has been officially inaugurated, it is necessary to underscore that its degree of institutionalization will depend upon the realization or non-attainment of its objectives.

Keywords: Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, right to self-determination, discursive institutionalism, ideas, discourses, local politics

Ideas and discourses matter in the development of institutions. In the context of the Bangsamoro people's struggle for self-determination, the myriad of ideas and discourses that were instigated, asserted, and contested by different actors catalyzed sporadic episodes of hostilities, co-optations, and settlements. These events, in turn, shaped their quest for self-determination to a great extent and explained how, when, and why the Bangsamoro people, from clamoring for outright independence, have instead opted for a negotiated political settlement in the form of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), a secular and democratic institution within the framework of Philippine sovereignty.

Thus, this paper aims to discuss the impacts of the confluence of ideas and discursive interactions between and among major actors vis-à-vis the institutionalization of the BARMM, which is envisioned to allow the Bangsamoro people to exercise their right to self-determination. In explaining its development, the paper will trace Bangsamoro's history of statehood, public declarations for secession, the foundation of armed movements, and the acceptance of political settlements. Discussions on such matters will be provided by employing discursive institutionalism (DI), a framework that gives due importance on the impacts of ideas and discourses vis-à-vis institutional formation and changes (Schmidt, 2008). Archival research and content analysis of government documents, newspaper reports, and publications by key political actors will also be conducted to expound on such developments.

Ideas, Discourses, and Discursive Institutionalism in Institutional Development and Changes

As defined by Schmidt (2008), DI is a subfield of new institutionalism that underscores the impacts of two interplaying elements, ideas and discourses, in the realm of politics. Ideas or "the substantive content of discourse" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 306) are used in three different levels of generality: creating specific policies, encompassing broader programs that reinforce policy ideas, or undergirding programs and policies "with organizing ideas, values, and principles of knowledge and society" (p. 306). On the other hand, discourses are the "interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed" (p. 305). Discourses, as explained by

Fairclough and Fairclough (2016, p. 195), confer actors "with reasons for action, with beliefs and values that social actors can turn into motives for action." Hence, a discourse should not be understood as a mere reference to what a person says; rather, it encompasses "to whom you say it, how, why, and where in the process of policy construction and political communication" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 310). But how does DI define institutions and explain institutional change? Institutions in this framework are regarded simultaneously as structures that constrain actors and constructs that are formed and constantly altered by the same actors (Schmidt, 2008). They may be created, changed, and sustained through an endogenous process involving the agents' background ideational abilities (their capacity to make sense of and in a "meaning context") and foreground discursive abilities (their capacity to maintain or change institutions through deliberations and persuasions) (Schmidt, 2008, p. 314). To sufficiently explain claims about institutional change, one thus needs to take into account the "emergence of new ideas, related conflicts over meaning which evolve into new discourses, and the subsequent translation of these discourses into new institutional arrangements" (Barrett et al., 2021, p. 334).

By analyzing the discursive strategies employed by various political actors, one can understand and explain "why certain ideas succeed and others fail" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 309). It is thus unsurprising why a discursive institutionalist approach was utilized in studies concerning the impacts of ideas and discourses upon changes in different institutional contexts. These include examinations of how the emergence of concepts such as biodiversity, sustainable development, and governance has been shaping policies on forest governance (Arts & Buizer, 2009); the influence of discursive interactions amongst policy actors as regards the evolution of corporate social responsibility policies in the European Union (Fairbrass, 2011); and how ideas and discursive dynamics played critical roles during the British referendum on the European Union and the electoral victory of Donald J. Trump (Schmidt, 2017). More recently, discursive institutionalism has also been used as a framework of analysis in studying education reforms on local and transnational levels (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018); (de)legitimizing the shifting institutional arrangements on marriage equality (Mariani & Verge, 2021); and policies and planning relevant to environmental governance (Barrett et al.,

2021). There has not been, however, a recent study that utilized a discursive institutionalist lens on a research area that is as crucial and extensive as the politics of self-determination and development of a subnational political entity.

In view of the above, this paper will seek to employ this approach to scrutinize the ideational and discursive agencies of key actors in the development of BARMM. A thorough examination of the Bangsamoro people's protracted quest for self-determination through a discursive institutionalist framework is necessary to comprehend how, when, and why decisive shifts in their pursuit for self-determination transpired. Most importantly, such a lens will allow us to understand how the discourse on the Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination shifted from being about an aspiration for an independent state into an armed struggle between secessionist movements and the national government of the Philippines; and ultimately into a struggle for genuine autonomy within the framework of Philippine sovereignty. The latter discourse eventually resulted in a negotiated political settlement in the form of BARMM. This secular and democratic institution recognized not only the Bangsamoro people's right to self-determination but also the territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines. Extensive discussions on the genealogy of the Bangsamoro people's struggle for self-determination from the pre-colonial period up to the establishment of BARMM shall be provided in this paper.

Scrutinizing the Interplay of Ideas and Discourses in the Struggle for Self-Determination

Claimed History of Independent Statehood and Secessionist Aspirations

The Bangsamoro people's initial ideation of and aspiration for an independent state of their own is anchored in their claimed history of independent statehood, which can be traced as early as 1450 upon the establishment of Sulu Sultanate followed by the Maguindanao Sultanate in the early part of the 16th century (Abinales & Amoroso, 2005; Lingga, 2004a). According to Abinales and Amoroso (2005), the formation of the Sulu Sultanate was brought about by the alliance between Sayyid Abu Bakr, a descendant of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, and

Rajah Baginda, a Minangkabau prince. Baginda, who arrived in Sulu with a group of affluent traders, "lacked the spiritual credentials to become more than a paramount datu" (p. 44). On the other hand, Abu Bakr had the necessary eminence, given his ancestry. Hence, Abu Bakr married Baginda's daughter and became Sultan Sharif-ul Hashim. The Sultanate's religion and authority were then propagated to the people of Sulu through missionary activities and the formation of political districts. Within each district, a *panglima* was given administrative powers over tax collection and declaration of royal decrees, among other tasks. The establishment of the Maguindanao Sultanate, on the other hand, was equally significant in their statehood experience. Established in the early part of the 16th century by Sharif Muhammad Kabungsuwan, its strength peaked under Sultan Kudarat's rule in 1619, in which rituals such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and the teaching of the Koran were regularly observed. The engagement of Sultan Kudarat in international politics through its alliance with Dutch trading companies, cooperation with Sulu over joint raids in the Visayas, and successful offensive against Spanish invaders bolstered the Sultanate's standing. The establishment of these sultanates attested to the Bangsamoro people's experience in statehood and governance even before the arrival of Spanish colonialists in the Philippines. Although its colonial government attempted to conquer the Muslim states "to subjugate their political existence and to add the territory to the Spanish colonies in the Philippine Islands" (Lingga, 2004a, p. 5), they nonetheless failed given Bangsamoro's established maritime forces and armies.

The legitimacy of Bangsamoro's history of independent statehood, however, has not been without contentions. The Spaniards' acquisition of steam-powered gunboats in 1846 allowed them to patrol key trade routes, which heavily shaped Maguindanao Sultanate's economic viability. In 1861, the Spanish flag was "raised without resistance over the palace of the Sultan of Magindanao [*sic*]," thus becoming a colonial possession of Spain (McKenna, 1998, p. 78). In Sulu Sultanate's case, the Spanish naval forces' demolition of their shipments within the Sulu Archipelago, along with British and Dutch domination of Malay shipping and piracy in the region, forced the Sultanate to agree on a treaty of Peace and Capitulation with Spain in 1878. According to Gamas

et al. (2017), although the treaty granted the people of Sulu to freely exercise their religion and customs, it stressed their submission to Spanish sovereignty and acknowledgment of Spain's supremacy over the sultanate's territory. Other scholars offered different inferences on such matters. According to Lingga (2004a), Spain's action against the Maguindanao Sultanate only compromised the sultanate's sovereign status but remained uncolonized until 1898. Buat (2003) argued that the 1878 treaty between the Sulu Sultanate and Spain was a protectorate relationship with Sulu recognizing Spain's protection against potential foreign aggressions. Abreu (2008) also contended that Spanish colonialism failed to subjugate the Bangsamoro people completely, and what they gained was a mere nominal rule. For instance, Spanish troops in Jolo cannot "roam around freely outside their fortifications. At night, the fort would be stoned by Moros residing around it" (p. 21). Therefore, the two sultanates, as per Buat (2003) and Lingga (2010), remained de facto free and independent states, and they only lost their sovereignty upon their inclusion in the cession of the Philippines by Spain under the 1898 Treaty of Paris to the United States of America.

Hence, during the United States colonial period, the Bangsamoro people discursively framed their aspiration for self-determination as a right that must be bestowed upon them due to what they consider as an "illegal and immoral" annexation of their homeland to the Philippine state "since it was done without their plebiscitary consent" (Lingga, 2004a, p. 6). It is worth noting that their discursive strategy focused on their exclusion from a prospective independent Republic of the Philippines than having an independent Bangsamoro state. In the petition by the people of the Sulu Archipelago in 1921, they stated their preference to be an American territory. Three years later, the Bangsamoro leaders of Zamboanga forwarded a different idea as regards their quest for self-determination by proposing that Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan be declared as U.S. unorganized territories. It was also proposed that 50 years after the granting of independence to the rest of the Philippines, a plebiscite shall be held in these territories to determine whether they will be integrated into the prospective government of the Islands of Luzon and Visayas, remain as U.S. territories, or be independent. This resistance to being annexed to a post-colonial Philippine state persisted, and in 1935, a group of 120 datus of Lanao met in

Dansalan (Marawi) and appealed to the United States government to exclude Mindanao and Sulu in the granting of independence to the Philippines, citing differences in religious beliefs and customs. Known as the Dansalan Declaration, the petitioners also expressed their preference for United States rule.

American colonists, however, successfully co-opted traditional Muslim elites as part of their scheme to suppress possible resistance from Moro communities. Secular and public educational systems within Mindanao were introduced to produce leaders who could assist the Americans in "Filipinizing" their fellow Muslims. These policies significantly influenced the way Muslims viewed their place in Philippine society. According to Caballero-Anthony (2007), traditional Muslim elites who held distinctive status during the American occupation were the same elites who disapproved of being identified as Moros because recognizing them as such made them feel excluded from Filipino society. Education, therefore, was instrumentalized by American colonists not only to alter the ideas of traditional Muslim elites as regards their position in Philippine society but also to douse the potential formation of more effective discursive strategies built around a claimed history of Bangsamoro statehood.

Ideational Backdrop of the Bangsamoro Struggle in the Post-War Period

Still, the petitions forwarded by the Bangsamoro people in different periods shaped the ideational backdrop in the subsequently organized movements. Before elaborating on such matters, it is imperative to first expound on the integration policies enacted by the Philippine state in the post-war period and how they galvanized the increasingly marginalized Bangsamoro people.

In the immediate post-war period, widespread migration policies from the northern Philippines to the underpopulated Mindanao, which started during the U.S. colonial period, were continued by the newly formed republic to integrate the southern islands into the Philippine economy (Gross, 2007). In the study of Wernstedt and Simkins (1965), the migration policies of the colonial era National Land Settlement Administration (NLSA) were continued until 1950, when 8,300 families were resettled, mostly in Koronadal and Allah Valleys. In the same year, NLSA merged with other agencies to create the Land Settlement

Development Corporation. This office resettled 1,500 families, primarily in Bukidnon, Cotabato, and Lanao, before it was replaced by the National Resettlement and Rehabilitation Administration (NARRA). In 1963, the NARRA oversaw the resettlement of around 69,000 individuals in Tubod (Lanao del Norte), Wao (Lanao del Sur), Maramag (Bukidnon), Santo Tomas (Davao), and Carmen and Tulunan (Cotabato). These policies significantly transformed the local Bangsamoro population. As emphasized by Majul (1985), the settlement areas had better infrastructures and social services, thereby leading the Bangsamoro populations to believe that the “Christian government in Manila” was oblivious to their aspirations and that they had become “victims of government discrimination and of neglect by their own leaders” (p. 32).

Another state policy used to integrate the Bangsamoro people was education. In 1954, the Philippine Congress formed a special committee to investigate economic disparities between the Bangsamoro people and Christians (McKenna, 1998). Led by a prominent Muslim legislator from Lanao, Domocao Alonto, the committee redefined the Moro problem from being an issue concerning the illegal and immoral annexation of their ancestral domain to the Philippine state into an issue relating to the integration of the Bangsamoro populace into the Philippine body politic. As recommended by the committee, the Commission on National Integration (CNI) was established in 1957, which provided scholarships for Muslim students to attend universities in Manila. The scholarships gave the Bangsamoro population not only access to university education but also knowledge of political activism. They went on to spearhead the formation of activist organizations such as the Muslim Association of the Philippines, which made possible the assembly of an “articulately literate class” of Muslims from throughout the Philippines to acclaim their newfound ethnic identity as Muslim-Filipinos, advocate Muslim self-improvement, and deliberate the place of Muslims in the fledgling Philippine nation” (McKenna, 1998, p. 136). Aside from these state-sponsored scholarships, the impact of foreign scholarships on the postwar Islamic revivalist movement in the Philippines is also worth mentioning. Provided to over a hundred students annually during the 1950s–60s to study at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the scholarships led to the emergence of a new ulama or body of Muslim scholars renowned for their knowledge

of Islamic doctrines and laws (Majul, 1985). The rise of the university-educated Bangsamoro populace and new ulama provided leadership to the historic separatist movements which subsequently emerged.

Transforming Secessionist Ideas into Secessionist Armed Struggle

In 1968, 180 young Tausug-Muslims were clandestinely organized by the administration of then-President Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. into a unit code-named “Jabidah” in Corregidor Island for a military operation known as Operation Merdeka (Rivera, 2008; McKenna, 1998). The operation’s objective was to destabilize Sabah, which, in 1962, was ceded by the heirs of the Sultan of Sulu to the Philippines but eventually became part of Malaysia in the following year (Curaming & Aljunied, 2012). After months of arduous drills, non-payment of allowances, intolerable living conditions, and upon learning that they would be battling their fellow Muslims in Sabah, the conscript soldiers mutinied and were summarily executed to ensure their silence (Curaming & Aljunied, 2012; Gross, 2007; McKenna, 1998). According to McKenna (1998, p. 89), the Jabidah Massacre “had a galvanizing effect on the Muslim student community in Manila. Throughout the year, Muslim students demonstrated against the Jabidah killings.” In the aftermath of the massacre, the former governor of Cotabato, Datu Udtog Matalam, formed the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM). The *Muslim* in their name was subsequently changed to *Mindanao* to accommodate non-Muslim inhabitants of the southern Philippines (Kamlan, 2003; Gross, 2007). Their discursive strategy focused on clamoring not only for the secession of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan regions but also for a *jihad* or holy war to defend their homeland. Matalam, however, was not considered a credible standard-bearer of the Bangsamoro struggle. Matalam was a Cotabato-based Maguindanaoan politician, and his formation of MIM in response to the Jabidah Massacre was dismissed as a stunt, given that the victims were mostly from the Sulu-based Tausugs (Kaufman, 2011). There was also a question on the ideological foundation (or lack of which) of the MIM. As per McKenna (1998), MIM was created by Matalam to merely advance his political interests.

Although the MIM failed or, more aptly, did not genuinely attempt to struggle for the Bangsamoro people’s right to self-determination, it nevertheless

functioned as the precursor to major movements which articulated secessionist ideas and accordingly put armed struggle as the means to achieve their objective. The MIM trained progressive-thinking Moros, who eventually headed the succeeding movements, including Nur Misuari. A Sulu-born Tausug, Misuari was a CNI scholarship beneficiary who graduated from the University of the Philippines (McKenna, 1998). In 1967, he was one of the founders of the Muslim Nationalist League and became the editor of its official publication, the Philippine Muslim News. In one of its editorials, Misuari avowed his secessionist aspirations by writing that separatism is a “costly and painful process” that is neither within the control of people nor a product of their impulses but rather a creation of social conditions.

The ideational underpinning of this statement of Misuari, who was one of Jose Maria Sison’s comrades in Kabataang Makabayan, “borrows the language of revolutionary Marxism and reflects the political influences of the university-based activism of that period” (McKenna, 1998, p. 141). This rhetoric furthermore embodied the ideology of the Moro Nationalist Liberation Front (MNLF), a clandestine movement that was an offshoot of the MIM. Founded in 1971 by Misuari after assembling the “Top-90” guerrillas in Zamboanga City to disavow the reformist leanings of MIM, the MNLF adopted Misuari’s vision of a Muslim nationalist movement aiming to establish an independent and secular state for the Bangsamoro people (Buendia, 2007). Hence, MNLF’s discursive strategy, which tied secular and leftist ideas, can be understood as a result of Misuari’s educational and ideological orientations.

It should be emphasized that Misuari was also the proponent of the rethinking of Moro identity. The *Moro* in the Philippine context traces its origin in the 16th century when it was the name given by Spanish conquistadors to indigenous Muslim inhabitants around Manila Bay who fought foreign invasion (Mercado, 1999), thereby explaining why the Moros have been identified with struggle and opposition to the incursion. In rethinking such identity, Misuari urged his fellow Muslims to disclaim their identities as *Muslim-Filipinos* and instead identify themselves as *Moros*. Formerly associated with barbarity during the Spanish colonial period and co-optation during the American colonial era, Misuari succeeded not only in reverting the Moro identity back to its pre-colonial

identity as descendants of unsubjected peoples but also in recasting it into a symbol of unity and struggle against the Philippine state (Buendia, 2007). The vision of a nationalist struggle for the Bangsamoro people and the reinvented ideological underpinning of the Moro identity are manifested in MNLF’s declaration published in 1972:

... there shall be no stressing the fact that one is a Tausug, a Samal, a Yakan, a Subanon, a Kalagan, a Maguindanao, a Maranao, or a Badjao. He is only Moro.... In other words, the term Moro is a national concept that must be understood as all-embracing for all Bangsa Moro people within the length and breadth of our national boundaries. (quoted in Gowing, 1975, p. 32)

Misuari and the MNLF, hence, redefined the composition of the Bangsamoro people and ideationally framed a secular and pluralistic Bangsamoro society that embraces Muslims, Christians, and other indigenous peoples. Despite being the first major Bangsamoro secessionist movement, the MNLF eventually toned down their ambition and settled for a political bargain, much to the dismay of a faction within their organization, as will be discussed later.

From Secessionist Struggle to Accepting a Sovereignty Bargain

Upon Marcos’ declaration of martial law in September 1972, political organizations were banned. However, it brought the underground MNLF to the forefront of opposition due to their access to critical resources outside the Philippines. International pressure from Islamic states and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) also pushed the Marcos dictatorship to reach a diplomatic settlement with Misuari’s MNLF. According to Gross (2007, p. 189), the dictator was “highly subject to this pressure, because 40 percent of its oil imports came from these countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose influence in international affairs after the 1974 oil crisis had been substantially augmented.” Despite the differences in agendas, the MNLF and the government agreed to negotiate in 1973. Initially adamant about an independent Bangsamoro state, the MNLF changed its stance when it signed the Tripoli Agreement on December 1976 through the facilitation of the Libyan government. The ideological shift, as per Misuari, was

in line with a 1974 Islamic Conference resolution that called for “a just, peaceful, political solution within the framework of the Philippine Republic and sovereignty” to end the conflict between the Philippine state and MNLF (“Interview with Nur Misuari,” 1978, p. 298). The 1976 Tripoli Agreement benefited both sides: for MNLF, it gave them recognition as the Bangsamoro people’s official representative, whereas for the Marcos dictatorship, the agreement provided a break from the war-induced economic drain and pressures from external actors.

Initially considered a major step towards genuine autonomy for the Bangsamoro people, the Tripoli Agreement, however, was not fully realized. On the one hand, the Marcos dictatorship established separate autonomous governments for Central Mindanao and Sulu (McKenna, 1998). On the other hand, the MNLF rejected the said implementation and demanded a single autonomous region under their leadership. Believing that the Tripoli Agreement was violated, Misuari and the MNLF reverted to their original intention of seeking an independent state, asserting that it “is the only solution in bringing about the liquidation of Pilipino colonialism in southern Philippines” (“Interview with Nur Misuari,” 1978, p. 298).

Reverting to Secessionist Struggle

Although Misuari and his MNLF reverted to their objective of seeking independence, his earlier decision of settling for something less than what they originally aspired to made a schism within the organization and led to the development of a separate faction. Strategically accentuating in its name an idea of an Islamic state, Hashim Salamat’s Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) “vowed to pursue the original objective of the MNLF for separate state but this time only in areas where the Muslims are in majority” (Lingga, 2004b, p. 8). Salamat, who was from Maguindanao, was a beneficiary of foreign scholarships given to Filipino Muslims and was educated at Cairo’s Al-Azhar University, where, as per Chalk and Rabasa (2001), he established close relations with ulama leaders of fundamentalist Islamic organizations. Such a backdrop explains why Salamat’s MILF has a more Islamic ideological orientation compared to Misuari’s MNLF (which, in contrast, has a leftist leaning due to his ties to Sison and Kabataang Makabayan, as discussed earlier). Their respective base can also be traced to their leader’s ethnic roots: Misuari’s MNLF was primarily supported

by Tausugs while Salamat’s MILF was supported by the Maranaoans and Maguindanaoans.

Despite the emergence of MILF, Misuari’s MNLF retained its status as the foremost Bangsamoro front. This is evidenced when, upon the ascendance into the presidency of Corazon C. Aquino, she paid an official visit to Misuari in his hometown of Maimbung, Sulu Island, in September 1986 (Gross, 2007; McKenna, 1998). During the visit, they agreed to hold further talks to end hostilities. Aquino also accepted Misuari’s demand for a single autonomous region, and conversely, the latter acceded to the former’s demand for autonomy instead of secession. The agreement became a full-fledged diplomatic breakthrough in the form of the Jeddah Accord. Signed in January 1987 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, through the facilitation of the OIC, the pact assured the “discussion of the proposal for the grant of full autonomy to Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan subject to democratic processes” (Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front, 1987).

In the following month, the 1987 Constitution was unanimously ratified, and among its notable provisions is the institution of autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and the Cordilleras by virtue of an organic act for each region that will be enacted by Congress with the aid of a multi-sectoral regional consultative commission. In August 1989, Aquino signed into law Republic Act (RA) 6734, or the Organic Act for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A plebiscite in 13 provinces (Basilan, Cotabato, Davao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Palawan, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga del Norte, and Zamboanga del Sur) and nine cities (Cotabato, Dapitan, Dipolog, General Santos, Iligan, Marawi, Pagadian, Puerto Princesa, and Zamboanga) was held in November 1989. Only four provinces (Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi) ratified the organic act and voted for their inclusion in the new autonomous region. The following year, Aquino formally inaugurated the ARMM. However, the MNLF did not partake in the plebiscites or recognize the ARMM (Howe, 2014).

The succeeding administration led by Fidel V. Ramos also opened talks with Misuari, who was still recognized as the Bangsamoro people’s official representative. An agreement between the two parties, known as the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA),

was signed in September 1996 in Jakarta, Indonesia. The MNLF was fully supported by the Ramos administration to run the agreement's governance structures, and Misuari won as an unopposed candidate for the ARMM's governorship. The 1996 FPA, however, failed to bring peace and development in Muslim Mindanao. Allegations of bureaucratic mismanagement, subservience to the national capital, and incompetent leadership hounded the MNLF-led ARMM (Howe, 2014). A separate peace process was initiated between the Ramos administration and MILF after the signing of the 1996 FPA, but this procedure went awry in 2000 when Ramos' successor, Joseph E. Estrada, launched an all-out war against the MILF (Howe, 2014).

It is worth discussing that before and after Estrada's offensive against the MILF, the Bangsamoro people continued to be adamant in pursuing their right to self-determination. In a manifesto by the Bangsamoro People's Consultative Assembly, they reasserted earlier discursive strategies of framing self-determination as a right of the Bangsamoro people due to their claimed history of statehood and illegal annexation to the Philippine state. It was argued that the only path towards peace in Mindanao is by granting them "a chance to establish a government in accordance with our political culture, religious beliefs and social norms" (Lingga, 2004b, p. 9). In a separate manifesto titled Declaration of Intent and Manifestation of Direct Political Act, the involvement of either the UN or OIC was called upon to administer a referendum vis-a-vis determining the Bangsamoro people's aspirations and "decide once and for all: to remain as an autonomous region; to form a state of federated union; [or] to become an independent state" (Buat, 2003, p. 6). This redeployment of a discursive strategy anchored on claimed illegal annexation and history of statehood did not go unnoticed, as subsequent administrations sought to grant the Bangsamoro people's right to self-determination within the framework of the country's territorial sovereignty.

In January 2001, Estrada was toppled and replaced by then-Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. In contrast to Estrada's all-out war strategy, Arroyo revived the MILF-government peace talks with the intention of holding a referendum on autonomy and the election of new officials. But in the same year, Misuari's tumultuous five-year run as ARMM governor ended when, after being banished by the

Council of 15 from MNLF leadership (citing Misuari's incompetence), Misuari led his loyalists in a failed rebellion against the Arroyo government (Corvera, 2002). His opposition to a peace process under the Arroyo administration also triggered a rift within the MNLF's Executive Council, which, in turn, secured his expulsion from chairpersonship (Gross, 2007). As a result of the discord within MNLF, along with the Bangsamoro people's belief that Misuari has become a mere sellout due to his acceptance of a political settlement, Salamat's MILF became the leading Bangsamoro movement.

With MILF's emergence came the landmark agreements between them and the Arroyo-led government. The first major pact under the Arroyo administration was the "Agreement on Peace between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front" signed in June 2001 by the two parties in Tripoli, Libya. Known as the 2001 Tripoli Agreement, it emphasized the parties' commitment to "a peaceful environment and a normal condition of life in the Bangsamoro homeland" ("Agreement on Peace," 2001, p. 1). Also included was a pledge towards the Bangsamoro people's unrestrained participation in the "negotiation and peaceful resolution of the conflict" and reinforcement of their "fundamental right to determine their own future and political status" ("Agreement on Peace," 2001, p. 1). Succeeding actions and agreements, however, illustrated the MILF's ideational shift similar to the MNLF's. Initially formed to oppose MNLF's political settlement with the government, the MILF also toned down its stance and opted for autonomy. As argued by Taya (2007), Malaysia had the biggest influence in this ideational shift: the government needed Malaysia to bring MILF into the negotiating table as they believed that the MILF would listen to Malaysian leadership due to their religious, historical, and cultural affiliations. On the other hand, MILF understood that Malaysia would not support its struggle towards independence due to its adherence to principles of non-interference in the domestic issues of fellow Association of Southeast Asian Nations member-states. According to Islamic scholar Julkipli Wadi (cited by Taya, 2007), the toning down of MILF leadership from its original aspiration was due to their non-interest in jeopardizing the peace process. Al-hajj Ebrahim's ideological difference with their founding chair Salamat was also pivotal, as Ebrahim is a

modernist who is more open to negotiations compared to Salamat.

Another landmark treaty was the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain Aspect of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001 (MOA-AD) signed in 2008 which provided a delineation of their claimed homeland and formulation for the sharing of resources within the homeland, among other provisions (Lingga, 2010). It also sought the establishment of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE), envisioned to provide the Bangsamoro people with substantial autonomy within their territory, empowering them “to build, develop and maintain its own institutions [...] necessary for developing a progressive Bangsamoro society” (“Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain,” 2008, p. 10) In an 8-7 decision, however, the Supreme Court in October 2008 ruled the MOA-AD as unconstitutional. As per the decision, the envisioned associative relationship between the prospective BJE and the Central government was “unconstitutional, for the concept presupposes that the associated entity is a state and implies that the same is on its way to independence” (The Province of North Cotabato, et al. v. The Government of the Republic of the Philippines Peace Panel on Ancestral Domain (GRP), et al., 2008). The Supreme Court also argued that the panelists failed to conduct communicative discourses with the public, particularly in areas that will be affected by the prospective BJE. They also flagged the questionable discursive interactions that ensued among key actors when they guaranteed constitutional amendments to the parties involved, describing it as tantamount to “authorizing a usurpation of the constituent powers” (The Province of North Cotabato, et al. v. The Government of the Republic of the Philippines Peace Panel on Ancestral Domain (GRP), et al., 2008) that are vested only in Congress, a constitutional convention, or people’s initiative.

One More Time: From Secessionist Struggle to Accepting Another Sovereignty Bargain

The signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in October 2012 under the administration of Benigno S. Aquino III opened another opportunity for a political entity with a greater degree of autonomy to Muslim-majority areas within Mindanao and Sulu Archipelago (Hutchcroft, 2016). It served as the basis of the historic final peace agreement, titled Comprehensive Agreement

on Bangsamoro, which was signed in March 2014. Among the pertinent provisions stipulated in the FAB was the creation of a Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC). Its functions included the drafting of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) and coordination with development agencies to enact programs for Bangsamoro communities. The FAB also mandated that the BTC be an independent commission from ARMM and other government agencies. A total of 15 members composed the commission: seven were selected by the government and eight (including the chairperson) by the MILF. BTC’s compositional makeup thus enabled them to prepare a BBL that epitomized the ideas and interests of both sides. The BBL sought the provision of genuine autonomy for the Bangsamoro people by replacing the ARMM with a secular and democratic political unit within the framework of Philippine sovereignty. The BTC submitted the BBL draft to Congress in September 2014. In an unfortunate twist of fate, however, factors external to peace negotiations led to the non-passage into law of the 2014 BBL draft. In January 2015, a poorly strategized operation in Mamasapano, Mindanao, to arrest or kill high-profile terrorists led to the untimely demise of not only the draft but the entire peace effort. The clash provoked public antipathy as per the March 2015 survey of Pulse Asia Research Inc. (2015): 44% of the Filipinos opposed BBL’s passage, 36% were undecided, whereas merely 21% were in favor.

The succeeding administration, nonetheless, raised again the hopes of peace advocates and the Bangsamoro people. One of the foremost actions by Rodrigo R. Duterte, who is from Mindanao and has committed to a genuine change in the conflict-weary region, included BTC’s expansion. Six members were added from the original 15-member BTC, three of which were from the rival faction MNLF, thereby making it a more inclusive commission. In July 2018, Duterte signed into law the revised version. As per the results of the two-part plebiscite conducted in January-February 2019, the current composition of BARMM includes the ARMM, Cotabato City, and 63 villages within North Cotabato (Arguillas, 2019). In February 2019, Ebrahim was sworn in as interim Chief Minister of BARMM (Sarmiento, 2019). As the leader of the interim government Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), Ebrahim is tasked to lead the newly organized region until the first regular election of Parliament members originally scheduled for 2022.

Early budgetary concerns and the repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, however, hampered the BTA’s operational capabilities (Gregorio, 2019; Khaliq, 2020). Consequently, the BTA requested Congress in November 2020 to extend the BARMM transition period and afford them additional time to fulfill their mandate (Bangsamoro Transition Authority, 2020). The appeal did not fall on deaf ears as Duterte signed RA 11593 in October 2021, which reset the first BARMM elections from May 2022 to May 2025. Ebrahim lauded the decision and added that the clamor for extension “speaks the desire of our people in making sure that we have a strong regional bureaucracy that can address our decades-long challenges and make sure that a brighter future awaits them” (Fernandez, 2021). Thus, it remains to be seen whether or not the BTA can maximize the opportunities accorded by the extended transition period for the good of Bangsamoro people.

The Struggle for Self-Determination: From Independence to Sovereignty Bargain

The discourse on the Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination began as an aspiration for an independent state and secession from the post-colonial Republic of the Philippines, anchored in the Bangsamoro people’s claimed history of independent statehood during the pre-colonial period. But due to the ideas disseminated and discursive strategies employed by key actors and groups, the said discourse morphed into an armed struggle between various Bangsamoro secessionist movements and the central government of the Philippines. Protracted processes of warfare and peace talks between these parties, nonetheless, redefined this discourse into a struggle for genuine autonomy within the framework of Philippine sovereignty. This discourse ultimately resulted in a



Figure 1. Critical junctures in the Bangsamoro struggle

historic negotiated political settlement in the form of BARMM, a secular and democratic institution that respected both the territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines and the Bangsamoro people's right to self-determination, which also took into account "that the Bangsamoro comprise of both Muslims and non-Muslim indigenous peoples, including those who ascribe to the Bangsamoro identity" (Moner, 2021). By employing a discursive institutionalist approach, the paper, therefore, traced and discussed the ideas and discourses that were instigated, asserted, and contested by different political actors, which, over an extended period, catalyzed episodes of hostilities, co-optations, and settlements. These episodes, in turn, shaped the Bangsamoro people's struggle for self-determination and explained how, when, and why decisive shifts in their pursuit transpired before ultimately leading to the establishment of BARMM. Indeed, ideas and discourses have substantial constitutive impacts on the formation of and changes within political institutions (Schmidt, 2008, 2010).

Given that the BARMM was established only in January 2019, it is therefore recommended that scholars and students investigate how it has been delivering public services; how different its formal and informal institutional structures are compared to ARMM's; and how ideas and discursive interactions among its key bureaucrats are shaping Mindanao's path towards peace, justice, and prosperity. It is also necessary to underscore that its degree of institutionalization will depend upon the realization or non-attainment of its objectives. Should the provisions in its organic law remain as a mere collection of propositions and fail to provide genuine self-determination, it is highly likely that the Bangsamoro people will again clamor and struggle for their rights, whether it be on the negotiating table or through yet another return to armed struggle.

The Bangsamoro people's struggle for self-determination has undoubtedly been arduous and intricate. Fr. Eliseo Mercado (2015) asserted that there will always be dissimilarities not only between the content of negotiated agreements and related legislations but also between such legislations and their execution. Aspiring for a perfect correspondence in the said cases, he argued, is not rooted in reality. In a relevant insight, Moner (2021) explained that the peace formula that led to the BARMM is neither perfect nor "a panacea to the structural problems confronting the region." But instead of letting this reality obstruct

our aspirations for sustainable peace in Mindanao, one must consider it as part of the region's transition towards genuine change and development.

Declaration of Ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by our institution.

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