



## Editor's Note

### BACKROOMS, BATTLEFIELDS AND BACKHOES: THE MINDANAO CONUNDRUM

THE THEME AND TITLE of this special issue of *Asian Studies* is taken from a panel on Mindanao convened during the University of the Philippines (UP) Academic Congress in February 2010.<sup>1</sup> The UP Congress comprised panels on almost all aspects of Philippine society and was intended “to identify the current issues, map the various approaches that have been tried in the past, provide some assessment of their gains and failures and draw out possible actions that must be done by the next administration” in the light of the crucial May 2010 Presidential election.<sup>2</sup> Topics included jobs, debt, and deficits, health issues, the Filipino diaspora, secularisms and fundamentalisms, property reform, agrarian reform, urban policy, science and technology, trade and markets, education reforms, foreign relations, climate change and disasters, law and impunity, electoral politics, labor concerns, and Mindanao.

The Mindanao panel was convened on 2 February 2010 and was chaired by Associate Professor Miriam Coronel Ferrer, who later became head of the government peace panel negotiating with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The papers in this issue of *Asian Studies*, written by UP Islamic Studies Dean Julkipli Wadi, UP Professor Eduardo Tadem, Mindanao State University Professor Rudy Rodil, and Dr. Francisco Lara, were all presented in that panel.

Online definitions of “conundrum” appropriate to this issue’s theme include: “a paradoxical, intricate, confusing, insoluble, or difficult problem; a riddle, or anything that puzzles.” Having defied attempts at resolution for generations, conflicts in Mindanao indeed constitute a conundrum that challenges all concerned parties. “Backrooms” refer to the ongoing negotiations between the Philippine government (PH) and the MILF. The discussions are currently in their end stages, but the remaining issues are

still highly contentious and difficult to resolve. “Battlefields” denote the wars that have ravaged Mindanao and pitted the Philippine state against the Moro people, who have asserted their right to self-determination and social justice. “Backhoes” refer to the horrific Maguindanao Massacre of November 2009, a tragedy perpetrated by a warlord clan, who tried to bury the bodies by using backhoe excavating machines. The massacre left 59 people dead and mutilated, 34 of whom were journalists.

Tadem contrasts the popular belief that growth and development have bypassed Mindanao with the fact that the region’s economies have been primary contributors to the country’s productive capacities.<sup>3</sup> But the wealth generated has only resulted in a more distressed socio-economic condition for Mindanao than for the nation as a whole, an enigma exacerbated by internal colonialism - the transfer of wealth from the south to the nucleus of political-economic power in the north.

Wadi stresses that the relation of the Philippine State and the Bangsamoro polity has often been subjected to a “Sisyphean ordeal.” Each time a new development emerges - e.g., a vision of social order, political arrangement, or policy reform - it is always followed and oftentimes countered by subsequent developments, leaving the whole relation in tatters while the vision is left to cascade into dramatic irrelevance.<sup>4</sup>

Rodil draws attention to the plight of Mindanao’s 35 *Lumad* tribes - indigenous communities who live outside Moro areas.<sup>5</sup> Severely marginalized as a result of state resettlement programs, they now assert their own identity and right to self-determination by focusing on securing ancestral domain claims, a right that government and the other Mindanao sectors must recognize to allow the *Lumads* to create and develop their own social spaces.

For Lara, the Maguindanao massacre can be understood by looking at the interface between two types of armed challenges - “vertical armed challenge against the state,” (i.e., MNLF and the MILF), and “horizontal armed challenges” symbolized by “inter- and intra-clan and group violence.”<sup>6</sup> In this context, Lara asserts that an “exclusionary political

economy developed through contest and violence” has impoverished Muslims. Growth has been artificial while “the exploitation of lootable or non-lootable resources opens up new arenas of conflict, and a rise in violence.”

UP Professor Abraham Sakili analyzes and contextualizes the Bangsamoro Framework Agreement signed on 15 October 2012 between the Philippine government and the MILF. The Framework Agreement outlines, in general terms, the nature, structure, and powers of the Bangsamoro political entity, which aims to supersede the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Sakili contends that in the reactions to the Agreement, “the historical and cultural explanations of the causes of the problem in Mindanao” have been ignored. In pointing this out, Sakili reveals a properly nuanced view of Muslim history vis-à-vis Philippine history, which accounts for “a history of power and sovereignty of the Muslim peoples” and “how the incorporation of this once-sovereign community into what is now the Republic of the Philippines was facilitated through anomalous means.”

It is extremely doubtful whether the views and recommendations of the February 2010 UP Academic Congress in general, and the Mindanao Panel in particular, were ever seriously considered by the regime of President Benigno S. Aquino III that took power five months later in June 2010. Being ignored by the powers-that-be has been the sad and recurring fate of unsolicited contributions from the academe, other independent scholars and intellectuals, and civil society groups. Only when elements from these sectors opt to join government and take on high positions in the bureaucracy are their opinions accorded the proper audience and hearing.

The Mindanao conundrum, centuries after it unraveled, continues to puzzle government, civil society, market forces, scholars, social movements, and local communities. As this special issue of *Asian Studies* goes to press, a crucial annex to the Bangsamoro Framework Agreement on wealth sharing has been signed, the result of an unhappy compromise

on the part of the MILF. Other annexes on power sharing and normalization, however, remain on the negotiating table. In the light of these noteworthy, if fragile accomplishments in the PH-MILF peace talks, it might be worth asking: is a just and sustainable peace finally at hand, or will the Mindanao riddle still continue to baffle all concerned parties for many more years to come?

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### References

- 1 “UP Academic Congress challenges future leaders,” 27 January 2010. ABS-CBN News online. See <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/01/27/10/academic-congress-challenges-future-leaders>
- 2 View the podcast of the opening remarks of UP Academic Congress Co-Convenor and then UP Law Professor and Dean Marvic Leonen at <http://dile.upd.edu.ph/index.php/vodcast/eve/430-a-up-academics-congress-to-challenge-our-next-leaders>
- 3 View the podcast of Professor E.C. Tadem’s presentation at <http://dile.upd.edu.ph/index.php/vodcast/eve/431-development-and-distress-in-mindanao-a-political-economy-overview>
- 4 View the podcast of Dean Julkipli Wadi’s presentation at <http://dile.upd.edu.ph/index.php/vodcast/eve/428-the-philippines-and-the-bangsa-moro-polity-breaking-the-sisyphean-ordeal42>
- 5 View the podcast of Professor Rudy Rodil’s presentation at <http://dile.upd.edu.ph/index.php/vodcast/eve/429-magpuyong-malinawon-sa-yutang-kabilin-to-live-in-peace-in-our-ancestral-domain43>
- 6 View the podcast of Dr. Francisco Lara’s presentation at <http://dile.upd.edu.ph/index.php/vodcast/eve/432-development-and-distress-in-mindanao-a-political-economy-overview44>