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The Good Imperialists? American Military Presence in the Southern Philippines in Historical Perspective

Patricio N. Abinales

This essay offers an explanation for a puzzle that appears to defy standard nationalist interpretations: the high level of support by Muslim Filipinos for the presence of U.S. troops in southern Mindanao. It examines the interactions of different actors during two historic episodes, the first during the early 1900s when the U.S. army governed "Moro Mindanao"; the second being the current period when, under the Balikatan agreement, U.S. forces have been welcomed by both national and local governments. The "localization" of national and international politics is a more fruitful approach to explain the phenomenon of pro-American Muslim Filipinos than the standard nationalist explanations of colonial mentality and a hegemonic America.

KEYWORDS: local politics, Muslim Mindanao, U.S. military, Muslim strongmen

In January 2002, 660 American troops stationed in Okinawa, Japan, arrived in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao to participate in "Balikatan 02-1," the annual joint war exercises involving the militaries of the United States and the Philippines.¹ Filipino nationalists charged that the real reason the Americans were in Mindanao was to go after the Abu Sayyaf since the inefficient and ill-equipped Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) had failed to eliminate this notorious kidnapping group (*Philippine Graphic* 2002, 2000). A broad range of critics—from leaders of the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, to cadres of the Communist Party of the Philippines, to some leading politicians—also censured President

Gloria Arroyo for allegedly violating a constitutional provision banning foreign troops on Philippine soil and being excessively supportive of American President George W. Bush's "war on terror" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 26 January; 13 February; and 1 March 2002). Criticism of Balikatan 02-1 was not limited to those in the capital. In Basilan province, where American soldiers were being deployed, the provincial board issued a formal statement opposing the exercises.²

History was invoked as a weapon of criticism. A leftist academic labeled Balikatan 02-1 as nothing but "the renewed phase of [a long history of] U.S. military intervention" that dated back to the early 1900s when the U.S. bought the Philippines from the Spanish, brutally crushed a fledgling nationalist government, and ruled the archipelago for the next forty years (Simbulan 2002). In Mindanao, accordingly, American colonial rule initiated the bloody "Moro-American wars" that subdued the hitherto fiercely independent Muslim communities but failed to extinguish the "anti-imperialist" sentiment that they shared with their Christian Filipino brothers and sisters. The "growing people's opposition" to Balikatan 02-1 in Mindanao, according to these critics, was also a rematerialization of that sentiment in response to the return of the hated imperialists (Simbulan 2002; Montalban 2002; Center for Anti-Imperialist Studies 2002). This line of argument was a powerful propaganda weapon especially in Manila, for it struck a sensitive nerve in the never-ending debate over Filipino nationhood and the country's "neo-colonial relationship" with the U.S. (Gershman 2002).³

As it turned out, nationalist criticism actually went against the grain of popular opinion. Government officials had no difficulty countering the attacks by simply citing poll surveys that showed a high approval rating of the American deployment (84 percent at the height of the debates) among Filipino respondents (Social Weather Station 2002a). Arroyo's position was further bolstered when the surveys revealed that over 60 percent of Filipino-Muslims supported Balikatan 02-1 (26 percent disapproved) (Social Weather Station 2002b). Business groups countered communist and nationalist criticisms by promoting Balikatan 02-1 as "a serious effort to address the peace and order problem of our country [and] restore and improve investor confidence" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 1 February 2002).⁴

The abovementioned Basilan provincial board turned out to be a feeble body as the province's powerful governor, Wahab Akbar, ignored its opposition, publicly declaring that, as the Americans were unloading road building equipment in his town, "my dream is now starting to materialize . . . I know I can die 10 times and not be able to purchase this equipment for my people" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 21 April 2002). Congressman Abdul Gani "Jerry" Salapudin insisted that, if the Americans were indeed in Basilan to join in the hunt for the Abu Sayyaf, then this would be good as it would put an end to the demonization of Islam.⁵ Salapudin, a former military commander of the once "revolutionary" Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), found an ally in the Sultan of Sulu, the "traditional political and spiritual leader of all Muslims in the Sulu Archipelago," who described the Abu Sayyaf as a group that had "deviated from the true tenets of Islam" (*Sunstar Zamboanga* 2 March 2002). Even the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) did not oppose Balikatan, simply declaring that its forces "would continue its defensive posture" in Basilan island (*Manila Times* 8 March 2002).

To this still unexplained gap between public sentiment and nationalist criticism we can add one more peculiar twist. In a debate at the University of the Philippines, anti-Balikatan advocates were surprised when invited Muslim academics and public intellectuals deviated from the script. One panelist criticized the "Moro-American wars" argument, saying that it had nothing to do with Philippine independence. The Muslims fought the Americans because the latter failed in their promise to grant "independence to the Moros of Sabah and Mindanao." Another panelist was more forthright. When asked if Muslims would join the opposition, Professor Abhoud Syed M. Lingga of Cotabato City's Institute of Bangsamoro Studies responded: "That is not sellable to the Moros, *sa* Filipinos 'yan, 'di naman *sa* Moro" (the opposition is for the Filipinos to deal with, it is not the concern of the Moros) (*University of the Philippines Forum* 2 February 2002).

Lingga did not stop there. When asked about Balikatan 02-1, his response was quite odd: he warned that the American presence would eventually be used by those in Manila who were "advocates of military intervention" in Muslim Mindanao, i.e., referring to the AFP leadership

which, a few months earlier, ordered an all-out offensive against MILF camps. Balikatan 02-1 was less a case of American intervention and more the pretext for increasing the presence of Filipino troops in Muslim areas. Professor Julkipli M. Wadi waded in, reminding the audience of “a cultural discrepancy” existing between the Philippine government and the “old Sultanate” which had undermined the latter’s power and influence in the Sulu area (*ibid.*). Wadi said nothing about the Americans and how they themselves further eroded the old Sultan’s powers.

Anyone familiar with Mindanao’s political history will find these arguments particularly interesting for it was the first time that Muslim academics questioned the long-held nationalist argument of a unity between Muslims and the rest of the Philippine population (Majul 1966). In fact, the Muslim academics’ insistence—that Balikatan 02-1’s ultimate beneficiary would be an intrusive Filipino Christian state—resurrected a fissure that scholars and public intellectuals in the Philippines had thought resolved, or at least minimized: the discrepant histories of the Filipino “nation” and its marginalized Muslim “periphery.” Instead of reconfirming nationalism, these Muslim academics’ use of history merely muddled what was thought of as a solid argument against the return of American troops.

What accounts for such discordance? The standard *and* popular explanation by Filipino nationalists and the Left is that this pro-Americanism is the result of a deeply embedded “colonial mentality” that prevents Filipinos to this very day from seeing the “reality” of American imperialism.⁶ The popularity of this argument notwithstanding, I find it actually unstable and increasingly unconvincing in recent years, principally because of its tendency to be ahistorical, indifferent to nuances, and generally patronizing. Apart from the difficulty of measuring the resilience of this colonial consciousness, the argument also fails to account for instances when Filipinos and their leaders went against American interests, a recent example of which was the public support for the Philippine Senate’s decision not to renew a military bases agreement with the U.S. (Salonga 1995). Moreover, the growing Filipino diaspora has complicated the never-ending local appropriation of cultural symbols, diluting the earlier “pro-Americanisms” with

expropriation and indigenization of cultural symbols from Japan, the Middle East and even Europe.⁷

This article will attempt to offer an alternative explanation, and suggest that the persistence of such contradictory positions may be related to (a) the manner in which American colonial rule was established and is remembered by those affected by U.S. presence in the southern Philippines, and (b) the relationship between the national and local states in the postwar period. It argues that the peculiarities of colonial state building in the early American period provided the institutional frame from which these opposing sentiments initially emerged, later to be nurtured by the decentralized politics of the postwar period. The attempt to centralize the nation-state through authoritarian rule did not eliminate the contradiction; instead, resistance to the Marcos dictatorship gave this contradiction a certain durability which accounts for its resurfacing in today's debates. State formation and its relationship to local strongmen may, therefore, give us a more plausible explanation to the positive reception given to *Balikatan 02-1* than a dubious, ill-defined, and slippery concept like colonial mentality.

The Distinctiveness of American Colonial Rule

Accounts of American colonialism in the Philippines generally regard it as a unitary experience. However, I have suggested elsewhere that not one but two distinct processes of colonial state formation occurred in the first decade of American rule (Abinales 2003). In the lowland Catholic-dominated areas already cleared of insurgents, a civilian regime emerged anchored in close collaboration between a nascent Filipino elite and American officials (Hutchcroft 2000). In the highlands of northern Luzon and in southern Mindanao—areas the preceding Spanish colonial regime had been unable to control effectively—Washington, D.C. allowed the War Department a freer hand in establishing authority, giving the U.S. Expeditionary Army sole power to determine how best to govern the regions' "wild tribes" (Jenista 1987).

The U.S. War Department created the "Moro Province," an autonomous regional structure covering almost two-thirds of the island—deemed "ungovernable" territory—and dominated entirely by

army officers (Thompson 1975). Resistance was scattered and unity never emerged among leaders of the different Muslim communities. Each ethnic group responded to American military occupation based on how its own locality was affected, not as members of a so-called "Moro Mindanao," as has often been argued by historians (e.g., Hobbs 1962; Cloman 1923; Hurley 1936). Having no prior experience with Muslims, U.S. army officers relied initially on Spanish accounts as administrative guideposts, but, to their credit, they rejected much of this clerical advice after realizing how easily religious prejudice could obstruct governance. American fidelity to the principle of separation of church and state likewise compelled top administrators to seek alternative ways to administer their "wards," taking a look at neighboring Dutch Java and British Malaya for possible lessons they could learn in handling religious matters (Amoroso 2003).

Broadening their vista enabled army officers to realize that local Muslim leaders could play an important role in consolidating colonial rule. While contemptuous of British and Dutch efforts to maintain Malay and Javanese "traditional authority," the Americans appreciated the manner in which local elites were integrated into the colonial order. Thus, beginning in 1906, Muslim leaders were recruited or invited to become heads of "tribal wards" whose responsibility was to facilitate tax collection and mediate between communities and the military authorities. The tribal wards became steppingstones for *datus* (traditional local leaders) and sultans willing to participate in the citizen-formation program the Army envisioned for the Moro Province (Funtecha 1979, 59). Finally, a "Moro Constabulary" was created to recruit Muslims interested in joining the colonial army and help police the province. The reception of these administrative measures by many traditional chiefs was positive, and army officers reported enthusiastic support from Muslim communities. Muslim backing was further cemented when those with proven records of collaboration were conferred additional official titles and made to join the basic administrative units, the district councils. By the second half of the first decade of American rule, southern Mindanao—reputedly the most turbulent area of the colony—was declared stable and peaceful (Report of the Governor of the Moro Province 1906, 348).

The administrative success of military rule, however, created a dynamic with long-term consequences for southern Mindanao's interaction with the rest of the Philippines. Because of the powerful influence of nationalism, Filipino and Filipino-Muslim scholarship on the American period tends to describe datu collaboration with the powerful Americans as just another instance of elite opportunism. This effectively places them in the same disreputable company as the Filipino elites who abandoned the revolutionary government in the north after realizing the power of American arms. This argument is politically popular; but it is empirically wrong. While there is no doubt that rational calculation played a role in the datu's decision to cooperate, their decisions were taken within a quite different political context (Tan 1982).

In associating datu collaboration with "acts of betrayal" by leaders of the nationalist revolution, scholars and policymakers ignore two fundamental facts. First, before the advent of the U.S. colonial state, Muslim groups never saw themselves as part of an evolving Filipino national polity. Second, their views of Filipinos and initially of Americans were colored by their participation in a much broader Southeast Asian world. It is important to remember that, throughout most of the Spanish period, Muslims were on the offensive against the colonial state, launching slave raids on communities north of Mindanao. If Filipinos and Spaniards disliked each other, their animosity was often mitigated by fear of these raids. The Muslims never had a high regard for Filipinos (or their Spanish masters), treating them mainly as sources of human booty to be traded for other resources and commodities in the profitable Southeast Asian maritime trade (Warren 1985). The tide only turned in the central state's favor once the Spanish acquired superior technology in the form of coal-powered gunboats in the midnineteenth century. This change in the balance of power, however, came in the twilight of Spanish rule; the Moro menace was soon replaced by a nationalist rebellion that would have ended Spanish rule had the Americans not intervened (Ileto 1971).

Datus and sultans regarded Spaniards, Filipinos, and Americans alike as threats to their already waning power, but used the occasion of "regime change" to preserve or recover some of that power. With the breakdown of Spanish rule, the brilliant Datu Piang of Cotabato

neutralized efforts by Filipinos to take over the towns where they co-existed with Muslims; he then presented himself to the U.S. as a reliable local ally. Attempts by sympathizers of the Filipino revolution to seize power in the town of Zamboanga (which eventually became the colonial capital of the Moro Province) were also deflected by Muslim leaders who swore allegiance to the American flag (Gowing 1977, 26–42). In this transition, Muslims reached out to the American military because they saw a potential protector of their regional trade. When the Sultan of Sulu agreed to “recognize American sovereignty,” he asked in exchange that his trading fleet be allowed to fly the American flag when it went to Singapore. The request was denied, but it is notable that the Sultan, whose fortunes had declined considerably, thought he could reverse the trend by showing competitors and partners in the British entrepôt who his new patron was (Abinales 2000a).

The obstacle to the *datus*' plan was the American commitment to ending the slave trade, limiting Muslim contact with the rest of Southeast Asia, and transforming them into colonial officials. Some *datus* rebelled at this realization, but many others, with their independent local power practically dissipated, began to explore other options. They were increasingly alarmed by the efforts of Filipino leaders to win American recognition of southern Mindanao as an organic part of the Philippines. To protect their gains from Filipino encroachment, *datus* and sultans agitated for the Moro Province's separation from the rest of the colony (Glang 1969, 16–17). In their efforts they found allies in the U.S. army.

The army had been granted the right to govern southern Mindanao on the assumption that its population was wild, backward, and unpacified. This condition and the history of enmity between Muslims and “non-Christian tribes,” on the one hand, and Filipinos, on the other, implicitly recognized that the former had never been part of Las Islas Filipinas. The army's responsibility was to pacify and “civilize” these communities prior to their being integrated to the rest of the Philippines. In the view of officers in the field, this would take at least a generation (Bliss 1909, 4). Significantly, the army's mandate allowed it to govern the Moro Province differently from other Philippine provinces. It was understood that the program's success depended on the army

being unhampered in its pursuit of civilizing the Moros (Wood 1904, 21).

As their administration stabilized, army officers took pride in their work, especially as they saw how unevenly the civilian pacified areas were being governed. The more they learned about “Moro history,” the more they realized how brittle were the ties between southern Mindanao and the Philippines. This attitude merged with their existing contempt for the growing practice of patronage politics being nurtured by American and Filipino local civilian governments in the north. They also strongly suspected that Filipino rhetoric calling for the full integration of Mindanao was prompted by a desire to get hold of the island’s rich natural resources at the expense of the Muslims and “non-Christian tribes” (*Mindanao Herald* 15 December 1906). These misgivings were soon validated by the attempts of Filipino politicians to control the Moro Province’s budget and to question military rule in southern Mindanao.

Thus, these two forces—disempowered Muslim datus and brash “progressive” army-bureaucrats—found common cause. In their resolve to keep Mindanao autonomous and shielded from Manila and the Filipinos, they deployed various political and bureaucratic weapons. On the army side, glowing reports of pacification successes were mixed with warnings that “Moro Mindanao” remained unstable and prone to explode in rebellion (Report of the Philippine Commission 1907, 342–43, 355–56). The most audacious of this army defiance was the proposal to separate Mindanao from the Philippines and create an American territory called “the Mindanao Plantations” to be administered by the army, populated by American settlers, and used by the navy as a coaling station. Acting governor Colonel Ralph Hoyt justified his proposal in these terms:

The mailed fist is the first law of the land—peace would be impossible without the actual presence of the troops—for this country is neither ready nor has it ever known any form of government. The civil-military government—in which the Governor controls the armed forces—is indispensable now and will be for generations to come. A purely civil government is quite impossible and at the

present time would carry with it untold misery and suffering, for outside the provincial officials, employees and the Army, there are not enough qualified inhabitants to form any kind of government, or who have the remotest idea of our form of representative government or institutions. (Report of the Governor of the Moro Province 1909, 3–4)

There is little written evidence of Muslim opinion at this time, but their constant appeals to make Moro Mindanao separate from the rest of the colony or to continue army rule suggested their support for the army's position. In fact, growing agitation by Filipino groups to "normalize" the Moro Province and give Filipinos a larger role in local administration was likely to have occurred in response to these Muslim demands.

In the end, no separatist movement came to fruition. Washington never envisioned the U.S. army engaging in nation-building, and Congressional mistrust of a standing army virtually eliminated the possibility of keeping it as a permanent force in Mindanao. American imperial policy was fundamentally grounded in the eventual expansion of Filipino participation in colonial affairs, and because of this Congress was never fiscally supportive of its colonial possession. A plan by army officials to recreate the American West in Mindanao fizzled out as early American settlements fell victim to settler inexperience, labor shortages, rivalry from better-organized Japanese settlers, and lack of support from provincial authorities (Hartley 1981–1982, 75; Gleek 1974, 107–8; Hayase 1984, 76–79). Finally, the victory of Woodrow Wilson in 1913 ended all possibility of separating Mindanao, for the Democratic Party was firmly committed to the integration of the "special provinces" to the colonial state.

A year later, the Filipino-controlled Philippine Assembly and newly appointed Governor-General Francis Burton Harrison agreed to create the Department of Mindanao and Sulu that expanded Filipino participation and top-level decision-making power in colonial administration. This was the opening Filipinos needed to extend their power and influence in the special provinces (Abinales 2000b, 30–40). Muslim leaders voiced their opposition and called on Washington to reconsider, but

not all remained passionate separatists (Kalaw 1931, 74). Some had already accepted the new political reality of Filipino dominance and Mindanao integration, and sought to accommodate themselves to the new order. Still, these evolving Muslim elites retained a certain loyalty to the U.S., especially to their army overlords; even the pragmatic ones hoped General Leonard Wood, past governor of the Moro Province, would return some day to save them from the Filipinos. This was an attitude that lingered below the surface even beyond the American period.

From 1914 to the end of American colonial rule in 1946, a basic structure of mutual accommodation evolved between Muslim leaders and Filipino leaders. In exchange for the former's allegiance, politicians like Manuel Quezon promised not to interfere in Muslim religious affairs and vowed to bring the *datus* or their progenies into the Filipino political orbit (Malcolm 1936, 45; Kasilag 1938). In contrast to their military mentors' disdain for patronage politics, the Filipinos also brought budding Muslim politicians into the patronage and spoils network that Quezon, Sergio Osmeña, and the Nacionalista Party created. Muslim leaders were handicapped, however, by their limited experience. However, because they were latecomers to the colonial game—isolated for ten years by the U.S. army—they had to catch up, acquiring basic knowledge from the public school system along with skills vital to a political career. The few who reached college were also the most qualified to ascend the social and political ladder (Beckett 1975, 60–61; Majul 1976, 91).

The Second World War temporarily derailed this educational and political journey, but war with the Japanese also created the opportunity to cement ties with the Filipinized colonial state. One course was to join the anti-Japanese resistance by forming an army or subordinating one's armed followers to the authority of a guerilla unit officially recognized by the Allied forces (Baclagon 1988). Others collaborated with the Japanese for reasons ranging from opportunism to the astute recognition that control of the administrative apparatus would be crucial when the Americans returned (Quirino 1984, 29–41, 43–44, 51–62).

In either case, by the Second World War few Muslim leaders held any separatist sentiments—they had become, for all intents and purposes, Filipinos.

The Weak Postwar State

In the last phase of prewar American colonial rule, the Philippine Commonwealth under President Manuel Quezon had evidenced a shift toward state centralization. After the war and Quezon's death, the leadership of the new republic shifted to a weak state underpinned by patronage relations between state leaders and wealthy provincial families and local strongmen (McCoy 1993, 10–19). Constitutional democracy came under the control of local elites, who managed elections in such a way that no significant popular threat to their domination could emerge via suffrage (Kerkvliet 1996, 137–47). “Cacique democracy” also tacitly condoned the presence and occasional interference of the U.S. in Philippine affairs, an element that persisted through the first three decades of the postwar period.⁸

In this decentralized political arena, Muslim leaders—already at ease with the new order—simply firmed up their authority over their local “bailiwicks.” But they were also aware that they were operating from a position of relative disadvantage. Most of Mindanao, especially the Muslim provinces, was still underdeveloped and backward.⁹ They lacked the wealth of their Christian counterparts and, although a number had private armies, their overall resources paled in comparison to the political clans of the central and northern Philippines.¹⁰ They would overcome this deficiency by making “ethnicity” and “religion” valuable political assets. The more successful among them became adept in mixing these “primordial ties” with the trappings of modern-day politics. A Muslim academic observed in 1962:

The Alontos of Lanao, the Pendatuns, Sinsuats and Ampatuans of Cotabato and the Abu Bakrs of Sulu are all of royal blood; although occasionally in distantly collateral lines. Their gradually waning traditional influence is now rather significantly buttressed, if slightly in nature, by the considerable resources of the constitutional system (such as patronage, public works funds, police systems, etc.) The datu class now controls sizable blocs of votes, which are often the basis of constantly shifting political alliances. It appears to be a fact that the most effective leaders are those who combine both traditional and constitutional authority. (Saber 1962)

This blending became especially crucial during elections, when Muslim politicians promised to deliver “the Moro vote” to their patrons or allies in the national center.

Given the history of internecine warfare between Muslim and Christian Philippines—the part of history most publicized—social tensions between the communities were never fully resolved in the postwar period. Filipinos remained suspicious of Muslims for religious reasons and past battles against “Moro slave raids.” The image of Mindanao as a volatile frontier reinforced this Filipino view, even as a massive influx of settlers from the Visayas and Luzon made Muslims fear that they would pretty soon lose their lands and livelihoods to the children of former slaves (George 1980, 114–15; see also de los Santos 1975). These anxieties fed a common Muslim view that the national government was insensitive to their interest and aspirations, and hostile to their attempts to be heard.

Muslim leaders anchored their ambitions in political brokering between the suspicious, increasingly aggrieved Muslim minority and the determined national state associated with Christians. Reaching some form of mutual accommodation between Muslims and settlers increased their power at the local level and brought prestige and influence in the national capital (Bentley 1985, 70). These political exchanges were most prominent during national and provincial elections, when Muslim politicians—as mentioned above—mobilized voters to ensure the victory of their allies. Voter mobilization was particularly important in electing non-Muslim candidates, or when the votes of a certain province had a crucial effect on a presidential or Senate election.

Throughout most of the postwar period, for example, the Muslim provinces of Lanao del Sur and Cotabato consistently voted for national and provincial politicians allied with local politicians Mohamad Ali Dimaporo in Lanao and Salipada K. Pendatun in Cotabato. In Lanao, Dimaporo ruled with an iron hand and delivered votes of “sizeable margins” in favor of his supporters and patrons, while Pendatun, whose province was a major in-migration zone, established electoral coalitions with emerging strongmen in the Christian settler zones to maintain his control of Cotabato and to deliver the votes to national patrons (Bentley 1994, 250).¹¹ These politicians were crucial in moder-

ating the unresolved tensions of the American colonial period; they were also responsible for an unprecedented twenty years of stability in the southern frontier, a phenomenon many scholars of Muslim Mindanao politics either ignore or fail to consider.

The success of this “Janus-faced gentry” also explains the persistence of pro-Americanism in southern Mindanao.¹² Heirs to families and individuals who governed Muslim districts under the Americans and fought side-by-side with them during the Second World War, politicians like Dimaporo and Pendatun remained loyal to the U.S. after independence. Pendatun was proud of his wartime collaboration with the American anti-Japanese guerrilla movement in Mindanao, and after the war fashioned himself the Magindanao Douglas MacArthur, demanding that everyone call him “General” when he was in Congress. A staunch anticommunist and one of the country’s top warlords, he became one of the most avowedly pro-American politicians and was a favorite of the American embassy.¹³ When President Ferdinand Marcos faced congressional opposition to his plan to assist the U.S. in Southeast Asia, Dimaporo—who was also a wartime guerrilla—“helped shepherd through Congress [the] controversial bill sending Philippine troops to Vietnam” (Bentley 1994, 251). Muslim Mindanao, therefore, remained in the hands of strongmen who were pro-American. There were no nationalist challenges to this sentiment and no debates over “neocolonial relations” in the frontier—unlike in the capital where students and nationalist senators were already questioning American interference and intervention in Philippine affairs.

Ironically, the absence of such debates in Muslim Mindanao was partly the result of the poor state of public education in the area. Whatever history textbooks were available were badly written, glossing over the American experience in Mindanao and saying very little about the Muslim communities’ place in the story of the Filipino nation. With scholarship detailing the American experience, especially the brutal first years of army occupation still to be written by radical and nationalist scholars, the only memory that lingered were those of elders who remembered the Americans as their protectors against the Filipinos.¹⁴ Additionally, the limited presence of American institutions and agencies in Mindanao blunted the effectiveness of nationalist rhetoric. There was

no concrete “imperialist” target on the island to which propaganda could be directed, and the minuscule representation of American presence—the Peace Corps volunteers and a roving movie-and-book program ran by the American cultural mission in Davao City—were received positively by communities starving for information and education which the Philippine government and its pitiable education system could not provide.¹⁵

A turning point came when Marcos sought to vigorously incorporate Mindanao to national development plans and his own ambitious political calculations (Salas 1961; Doronila 1992, 132–33).¹⁶ With its resources and growing electorate—over one million people settled in Mindanao from central and northern Philippines from 1946 to the mid-1960s—Marcos saw Mindanao as a means of breaking the hold of the “traditional elites” and old oligarchs on national political power. But first he needed to undermine the power of local Mindanao strongmen allied to his enemies and of those with independent power to obstruct his plans (Abinales 2000b, 163–71). Marcos accomplished this by using the technocracy and the AFP to implement his plans for Mindanao, even as he nurtured rivals of the Mindanao strongmen he wanted deposed.

The deployment of the technocratic model of development and military-imposed stability came at a time when the land frontier had filled up, and this proved devastating (Wurfel 1988, 13). Marcos broke the delicate balance between state and strongman by creating his own network of local allies, less autonomous and more beholden to him, whom he then unleashed on his enemies. When he sent the military to break up the “private armies” of his Muslim enemies and split Muslim ranks by encouraging his allies to establish rival Muslim associations and challenge those under the control of local opponents, the conditions were created for typical weapons of competition—patronage and elections—to be displaced by more coercive methods of political combat (Abinales 2000b, 163–71; George 1980, 129–77). Conflict then spread to the communities, involving Muslims and Christian settlers, with the latter receiving support from the military.

The breakdown of stability and the decline of Muslim politicians’ power opened the political arena to a new force: young Muslim

students, both moderates and radicals, who saw the need to organize “the Moro masses” for an inevitable confrontation with the state and its local strongmen allies. Under the leadership of former University of the Philippines instructor Nur Misuari, students joined forces with young warlords and young religious scholars like Hashim Salamat (who received his Islamic education in Libya and Egypt) to oppose Filipino colonialism and its colonialist (read: American) benefactors (Che Man 1990, 190). Initially, they propped up the weakened anti-Marcos Muslim elites, joining forces to build the skeletal structures of an armed separatist organization, and making their intentions known through a coalition called the Mindanao Independence Movement (George 1980, 200–1).

For the first time since the early days of American colonial rule, an anti-American sentiment had taken shape in the Muslim provinces through these “Moro activists.”¹⁷

Dictatorship and its Aftermath

When Marcos declared martial law, the stage was set for war to come to Muslim Mindanao. Misuari and his comrades established the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and launched a conventional war against the AFP when the latter moved to demilitarize provinces like Cotabato, Sulu, and Lanao del Sur (Madale 1984, 180–81). The MNLF, however, could not sustain its “struggle for national liberation.” The strength of its firepower, that gave the MNLF the ability to engage the AFP in conventional-type warfare in the mid-1970s—unprecedented in the history of anti-state movements in the Philippines—was mitigated by the inexperience of its military leadership. The battlefield impasse took its toll on both government and MNLF, steadily weakening their capacities and straining the unified command their respective political leaderships exercised when the war began.

Divisions became increasingly apparent in the AFP between those who fought in Mindanao and those who rose through the ranks through patronage ties with the political leadership (de Quiros 1990, 41–45). The classic tension between leadership-in-exile and field commanders inside the MNLF worsened as battlefield losses, deaths and injuries, and surrenders multiplied. Differences between the two domi-

nant ethnic groups—the Tausug and the Magindanao—were also never resolved (Abat 1993). The class contradictions between the conservative and traditional datu “politicos” and the radical non-traditional activists eventually returned. The tactical alliance between these two forces that had been instrumental in building the organization unraveled once the politicians decided to make peace with Marcos and recover some of their local power (Che Man 1990, 128–29). In exchange, they agreed to help weaken the radicals by organizing a “moderate alternative” to the MNLF and its radicalism. Salipada Pendatun would head one such alternative, the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization, which was declared a third force for the “Moro resistance,” and an anticommunist alternative to the left-leaning Misuari (Gonzalez 2000, 116–18).

The splits weakened Misuari’s power, and his leadership further eroded when his own comrades demanded his resignation, and appealed to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) to withdraw its support for him. When they failed to convince the OIC, they broke away and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (Vitug and Gloria 2000, 106–35).

The parallel deterioration of the military and MNLF reopened the space for traditional politics to reassert itself in the Muslim arena (Gutierrez 2000, 55–61). But there were also new faces who joined the likes of Pendatun and Rashid Lucman of Lanao—MNLF commanders who surrendered to Marcos in return for access to state patronage and AFP officers who entered politics after military service (Abinales 1998, 122). These new actors shared with the old guard a penchant for keeping politics local and limiting their dealings with external forces (whether state or MNLF) to those that helped consolidate local power. They also preferred a continuing impasse on the battlefield to an all-out war that could have devastating consequences for their own hold on power, especially since the presence of the national army could often complicate the conduct of politics in their localities (Vitug and Gloria 2000, 125).

This fragmentation and shift back to localist politics in the 1980s insulated southern Mindanao from the intensifying polarization of national politics after the assassination of leading Marcos opponent, former senator Benigno Aquino Jr. While there were demonstrations against the ailing Marcos in urban centers like Cotabato City, Marawi

City, Jolo, and Zamboanga City, these lacked the robust anti-Americanism being incorporated into anti-Marcos protests in Manila, despite the communist party's Mindanao Commission playing a role in the protests. Radical messages were muted or non-existent in these anti-Marcos rallies; instead, the protests were aimed at reasserting the presence of anti-Marcos politicians after events in Manila affected the hold of pro-Marcos rivals in local affairs (Turner 1991; Bentley 1991).

Thus, after the fall of Marcos, the only remarkable source of conflict between Muslim Mindanao and President Corazon Aquino was the extent to which her government "intervened" to replace pro-Marcos mayors and provincial governors with her own allies. This conflict did not prove lasting, as pro-Marcos politicians simply switched sides and declared fealty to Aquino or struck deals with the new government (Bentley 1994, 267–68). There was no rhetoric or politicking regarding American support for the new regime then or in 1991, when the Philippine Senate began debate on renewal of the U.S.-Philippine military bases agreement. None of the fiery exchanges riveting nationalists in Manila made an impact at the local level.

The dramatic decline of American interest in the Philippines after the withdrawal of the military bases and shift of strategic worries to China reinforced the inward-looking nature of southern Mindanao politics. The Aquino government's general weakness prevented it from pursuing peace talks with the MNLF with any consistency. It was left to President Fidel V. Ramos to complete the process.¹⁸ Again, negotiations with Misuari's dwindling force did not include discussion of the "American factor," even as Filipino leftists raised the alarm that Ramos's economic liberalization program would allow the U.S. to reassert its imperial interests, especially in Mindanao.¹⁹ The appearance of the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf in the 1990s, however, would alter this political setting considerably.

"Radical Islam" in Mindanao

In their exceptional book, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*, Marites Vitug and Glenda Gloria (2000) argue that the beginnings of the MILF and the more notorious Abu Sayyaf are more complex than

usually acknowledged. After splitting from the MNLF, leaders of the MILF first projected themselves as a moderate alternative to the separatists. This image led many to believe that the MILF was less of a threat; for much of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Philippine government virtually ignored MILF founder Hashim Salamat and his organization.²⁰ In this state of benign neglect, the MILF quietly built up power in the areas it controlled, creating a *de facto* autonomous Islamic community within Philippine territory, with its own army, Sharia courts, prisons, and even education system. Militarily, the MILF force grew from 6,000 in the early 1990s to 15,000 by the end of the decade (Vitug and Gloria 2000, 111).

While it never denied its intention of building an Islamic community, the MILF has always insisted it has no ambition to establish an Islamic state. According to Vitug and Gloria, this is partly because its leaders have regarded Islam as a moral question and partly because “the MILF leadership has not yet fully thought [the] idea of what constitutes an Islamic state” (*ibid.*, 114). Salamat and others also differed on the applicability of existing “models” of Islamic governance—from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia—citing their inadequacies for “our different culture.”²¹ They were unclear about how to interpret jihad. Some argued it meant declaring war on a government that was an occupying force of an area that was never part of the Philippines. Others saw the invoking of jihad as dictated by circumstances like, during the Marcos dictatorship, when the state declared war on the Muslims. But jihad might not be applicable in the post-Marcos period, with a more democratic regime open to negotiation over the issue of Muslim autonomy (Vitug and Gloria 2000, 115–16). Finally, Vitug and Gloria identified an “ideological gap between the leaders and the rank and file [which was] wide and palpable” (116). While its leaders might be devout and spiritual students of Islam, ordinary Magindanao, Maranao, Tausug, and other Muslims’ understanding of their religion was quite different—mainly folk Islam with some elements of scholarly Islam (McKenna 1998, 183–84, 191–96). Many joined the MILF for reasons that had nothing to do with religion—to avenge the death of family and friends at the hands of the military or because it represented one

of the few opportunities in one of the poorest regions in the country (Rasul 2003, 123–46).

Until President Joseph Estrada ordered a full-blown assault on the MILF's camp, there was no clear-cut antagonism between the state and the MILF. President Arroyo reversed Estrada's all-out war policy, preferring to pursue a two-pronged strategy of pursuing "peace talks" while allowing the AFP to undertake tactical offensives. She has not returned the bases that were captured during the "all-out war" of her predecessor. The MILF has responded in a similar fashion, agreeing to continue negotiations, while giving its local commanders flexibility to determine whether to fight. The image of an armed but open-to-negotiation movement has served the MILF very well, keeping the government at bay and allowing the separatist group to preserve its armed forces and mass base. Its accommodating stance also has enabled it to maintain selective contact with traditional politicians in its area of operation and use the latter as buffer between itself and the national state.²²

This balancing act is managed to keep the MILF off the American list of "terrorist organizations" compiled after 11 September 2001. Despite reports that it once received support from Osama bin Laden and that it sent fighters to Afghanistan, the MILF has been received positively by Islamic, American, and western European aid agencies now involved in rehabilitation programs in southern Mindanao. Endorsement by these agencies, in turn, have appeared to rub on American policy groups like the Institute for Peace and, ultimately, the American government (Vitug and Gloria 2000, 110, 118). But the MILF's options have also steadily narrowed since it failed to stop Estrada's military offensive. Its threat to revive the separatist war abandoned by the MNLF in the 1990s was seriously compromised by its weaker military position, its aging leadership (Salamat died of an undisclosed illness in August 2003), and the Malaysian government's post 9/11 policy shift from MILF haven to avid supporter of peace talks (Santos 2003). The relative weakness of the Philippine state and its enduring relations with local politicians, however, have meant that the MILF can still expect to be left alone. And while the U.S. is alarmed by the spread of Islamic radicalism in the southern Philippines, this impasse

has allowed it to concentrate on what is deemed a more serious threat—the Abu Sayyaf.

The story of the Abu Sayyaf and its connections with international Islamic terrorist organizations have been explained elsewhere, and this paper will simply focus on one unelaborated angle that may be of relevance to the main argument (Gutierrez 2001, 12–24). This has to do with its location. The Abu Sayyaf operates mainly on Basilan Island in the Sulu archipelago and in the Sabah-Borneo area; the farthest it has operated is Zamboanga City, north of Basilan. While it is reported to have links with Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist groups, the Abu Sayyaf's main source of largesse has come from its kidnapping activities and the protection racket it runs with warring local politicians and military commanders (Gutierrez 2000, 64–77). This live-and-let-live relationship with the two other forces in Basilan has led to the classification of the Abu Sayyaf as a local insurgency, which was nevertheless “containable.”²³

However, once the group began raiding communities outside Basilan (the most brutal of which was a raid in the town of Ipil in Zamboanga del Sur in 1995), expanding its kidnapping targets to include non-Filipinos, and establishing ties with suspected leaders of Osama bin Laden's group operating in Mindanao, the protective mantle of localism unraveled. The Ipil attack broke an accord with AFP units in Basilan, and gave the AFP command the justification to order active pursuit. The kidnapping of European tourists in the Sabah resort island of Sidapan, followed by another in a Palawan resort in the western Philippines (which included an American missionary couple among the hostages), also brought a powerful external actor into the picture. Even before 11 September 2001, the U.S. was increasingly concerned with “world terrorism, including what was happening in the Philippines Mindanao backdoor” (Mogato 2002). Thereafter, mutual accommodation between local politicians and the Abu Sayyaf began to unravel as the politicians increasingly saw the group as a liability.

In addition, the sudden inflow of kidnapping “revenues” to friends and kin of Abu Sayyaf members in the Basilan and Jolo communities caused a major disruption in the distribution of patronage. The Abu Sayyaf, in effect, became an alternative source of patronage and, hence,

a rival to local politicians. But increased American involvement in the Sulu archipelago also alerted the politicians to a new source of largesse and “development projects” that could be undertaken on their behalf. There was hope that the Americans would do what they, as politicians, could not do: eliminate this growing threat to their local power.

After the 11 September 2001 attack on New York City, the branding of the Abu Sayyaf as part of a global network of Islamic terrorist groups was inevitable. A few months later, the Balikatan exercises began, aimed mainly at containing the kidnap group. The Manila media reported that people in Sulu had mixed feelings regarding the American presence (Alipala 2003, 8–10). But there were no second thoughts among the various congressmen, governors, and mayors of the area (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 7 February 2002). They were solidly behind the two Balikatan 02-1 exercises, in part because they looked forward to the expected strengthening of their local power such intervention would bring—much as it did for their predecessors a century ago.

Conclusion

This article has been animated by a question which hardly anyone seemed interested to pursue, perhaps because the answers might not be to one’s political liking: why was the return of the U.S. military to the Philippines, and at the most volatile part of the country to boot, welcomed by Filipino Muslim communities that supposedly harbor to this day the most anti-American of Islamic groups in Southeast Asia? Not finding adequate answers in “national politics,” and doubting the value of “colonial mentality” as the end-all explanation, I have attempted to examine “the local level” where history and the political dynamics between the central state and local politicians, rebel groups, and other social forces present a more complex picture than what has been portrayed in national dailies and even international accounts of the Mindanao war.

This article has also placed the current discussions in comparative historical perspective, going back to the other time when the U.S. army was an active player in Mindanao politics. What it has discovered is that decisions in favor of or against American presence equally have been driven by calculations relevant and specific to the local political arena.

In this case, local politicians and rebel movements regard the U.S. military as a potential deterrent against the intrusions of the national state, and as a means by which local problems, which the national state is unable to solve, are given some attention.

All these have taken place with the national state performing an ancillary role. For, if there seems to be one enduring feature of Philippine politics, it is that all politics in the country is local. And even an external force like the U.S. military will inevitably be drawn into this restricted but politically potent arena, if it wants to succeed in its "war on terror" in the southern Philippines.

Notes

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1. See www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/balikatan.htm. The exercise was suspended in 1995 after the Philippine Senate rejected the new military treaty between the two countries, but was revived after 11 September 2001.

2. Basilan Provincial Board, "Resolution No. 02-025, Series 2002 Strongly opposing Balikatan Exercise of the Joint US Military Troops and the Armed Forces of the Philippines to be conducted in the province of Basilan," 2 February 2002.

3. For an overview of this issue, see Iletto 1998.

4. The head of Zamboanga City's "economic zone" announced that news of the deployment had already "drawn in \$60 million of investment commitments." *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2 March 2002.

5. "Balikatan 02-1 sparks heated discussions," *University of the Philippines Forum* 2 February 2002.

6. This position was originally argued by the late Senator Claro M. Recto, and was since then picked up by student radicals in the 1960s (Constantino 1965, 25-26, 38).

7. See the essays in Aguilar 2002. See also the Special Report on Japanese cultural symbols in the Philippines, *Newsbreak* 3 February 2003, 26-32.

8. For an overview of American presence in the Philippines, see Schirmer and Shalom 1987.

9. As one internal U.S. embassy report observed: "Despite widespread enthusiasm, Mindanao's development continued to be largely on paper ... Hydroelectric construction and road building had not progressed far by the end of the year, and

little new industry had come into existence. Mining also had indifferent success in Mindanao; new projects did not develop as rapidly as had been hoped and some companies, particularly those engaged in gold-dredging, reduced or suspended operations as a result of the minimum wage law" (Cuthell 1952, 2).

10. "Conditions affecting domestic order in the Moro Provinces of Mindanao and Sulu," prepared by the Philippine Research and Information Section, Counter-intelligence, GHQ, AFPAC, APO 500, 28 August 1945. The document can be found in the Joseph Ralston Hayden Collection, Bentley Historical Collection, University of Michigan, Box 42-20, 1.

11. Davao and Cotabato were consistently in the top fifteen vote-rich provinces between 1953 and 1961, periods when migration to Mindanao was at its highest. On Pendatun, see Abinales 2000b, 135-36.

12. The phrase is from Shue 1988, 89.

13. "Telegram from Myron Cowen to the Secretary of State, American Embassy, Manila, April 4, 1950," U.S. State Department Central Files, *The Philippine Republic: Internal and Foreign Affairs*, 1950-1954.

14. I encountered such resilient memories while doing field research in the Cotabato area. One of the elder respondents spoke nostalgically of the days of "Datu Wood," and remembers "his" promise to return to Cotabato to protect the Magindanaos from the Filipinos.

15. These two institutions—the Peace Corps and the U.S. cultural office's book-and-cinema program—were what I, as a child growing up in northeastern Mindanao in the early 1960s, associated with the United States.

16. Salas was Marcos's chief technocrat.

17. Misuari himself was a member of a nationalist youth organization at the University of the Philippines. Many of his fellow nationalists eventually became leaders of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

18. For a detailed account of the negotiation process see Joaquin 2003, 124-32. Torres was Ramos's personal mediator to Misuari.

19. See, for example, "Combat Mission for U.S. Special Forces in Mindanao Seen," *Kilusán: A Movement's News and Views* 29 April 2002.

20. A former senior military official confessed to Vitug and Gloria (2000, 113): "In 1989-1990, they (the MILF) were building up. Our bigger concern then was still the MNLF. We didn't see anything more than a small armed group, surviving after the [MNLF] split. Then, later, we saw how he (Hashim) built an Islamic community, with a *sharia* court and all. Then we saw they were a real threat but we were busy attending to the CPP (the Communist Party of the Philippines), with 25,000 members, and the coups."

21. MILF military command chief Hadji Murad, as quoted in Vitug and Gloria 2000, 115.

22. See the case of Zacarias Candao in McKenna 1998.

23. Vitug and Gloria (2000, 218–19) suggest that the Abu Sayyaf was a military creation aimed at forcing the MNLF to the negotiating table by presenting a more radical “alternative,” a group composed of militants who were also vehemently anti-Misuari.

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