



The ARMM Roundtable Series brings together academics and leaders in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to a discussion and analysis of critical issues in the autonomous region. This paper builds on the output of the discussions. Views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of Notre Dame University and the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung.

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DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE ARMM

INTRODUCTION

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) is now "a fourteen-year-old youth", having been born with the approval of Republic Act 6734 on August 1, 1989. In the ensuing plebiscite, four provinces opted for this regional configuration—Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. In 2001, the province of Basilan and Marawi City joined in. In the span of these fourteen years, the Philippines has had four Presidents—Aquino, Ramos, Estrada, Arroyo. Each of these administrations can be said to have approached the ARMM question differently, at times contradicting and undoing whatever good the others have done. ARMM itself has had four governors, with one former governor languishing in detention on rebellion charges. In this period, too, countless wars have been waged in the region, thousands killed and displaced from their homes, the lives of whole societies interrupted, and large amounts of money gone down the drain.

It is not difficult then to imagine that this "youth" is a troubled one. Yet, it struggles to live. There are a lot of questions one can ask about this entity in the hope of helping it mature to a meaningful and productive existence. Democratization is just one of such issues. It is in fact one of the reasons it was conceived in the first place.

Thus, at a roundtable discussion on October 29, 2003 at Notre Dame University, Cotabato City, this issue of "Democratization in the ARMM" was precisely tackled. Resource persons were Ms. Amina Rasul-Bernardo of the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, and Dr. Diamadel Dumagay, Director of the Planning and Development Office of the ARMM. They were joined by other persons in the discussions on the topic, with the following questions as guide: How far has the ARMM gone in democratizing its institutions? How real is the participation of the ARMM's inhabitants in the region's affairs, especially in choosing their regional and local officials? Does religion play a role in promoting democracy in the ARMM? How robust is civil society in the ARMM?

The Center for Autonomy and Governance is grateful to the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for the grant in the conduct of the roundtable session and for the research and writing of this paper. It is hoped that the results of the discussion can contribute to the continuing discourse and practice in the ARMM towards greater democratization.

LIBERAL ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

Since the tragic event of September 11 in the United States, the discourse about Islam's relationship with the modern world has been growing, within Islam and outside of it. One chief aspect of this relationship that has been placed in close scrutiny has been the relationship between Islam and democracy. Amina Rasul acknowledges the growing sentiment among many Muslim communities, particularly in Mindanao, that these two spheres—Islam and democracy—are incompatible, and that democracy that does not fit our situation. This has given rise to the clamor among many Muslims for independence, and for the establishment of a so-called Islamic state. That this position has been mouthed by the MILF, the Abu Sayyaf, and other Muslim groups only adds to the urgency that more serious thought be given to this issue of Islam's relationship to democracy.

On a more global context, Rasul notes first of all the growing movement that is liberal Islam, which looks at the principles within Islam, which seem to point to some basis for accepting democracy. First, there is liberty, as enshrined in the Koran. It is about God making human beings free, and that we must remain free. Freedom of thought, freedom of religion, and freedom of movement are just some of the freedoms essential to life as envisaged by God. Such concept seems to be negated in practice by impositions and restrictions to freedom by, for example, groups like the al-Qaeda.

Then there is the concept of justice: equality before God that must translate to equality on earth. This equality applies to men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This justice demands that societies and governments treat all people fairly. An injustice committed against an individual is an injustice done to all, and is an affront to God.

The third pillar of liberal Islam is that of *shura*, a process by which all members of a community are given the opportunity to input their views regarding the affairs of the community, and that this process is binding on the rulers or office-holders. Muqtedar Khan, in another paper, develops this view that the principle of *shura* is the source of democratic ethics in Islam, while noting also that *shura* and the democratic process are not identical, and that much more thought and reflection are required among leading Muslim thinkers in order to dissect the nature of *shura* and its relationship to democracy.

A fourth pillar of liberal Islam concerns the rational interpretation of the tenets of the faith, and consequently for each individual Muslim to be able to understand the faith more completely, and voice out one's opinion individually and collectively, to those who would rule among them.

From these concepts, Rasul makes the conclusion that the spirit of democracy is clearly enshrined in the Islamic faith, and asks the question where the sentiments regarding the incompatibility of Islam and democracy, particularly in the Philippine context, are really coming from.

THE TRAVAILS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE ARMM

Rasul is of the view that the answer to this dilemma lies in how the Philippine Muslims have so far experienced democracy, Philippine-style. Simplistically put, Muslims in the Philippines have been oppressed, cannot fully live according to their faith, and that their institutions like the *shariah* and *madrassah*, are not supported by government. Thus, there is the feeling and perception that democracy, as portrayed by the Philippine government and experienced in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), does not allow for the prospering of the Islamic faith. This leads to the simplistic conclusion among Muslim communities that democracy and Islam do not go well together, and that Islam will

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only be repressed and oppressed in a democracy. Alternatively, the option of an “Islamic state,” even though it is not yet fully developed as a system within the Philippine context and not totally understood by many Philippine Muslims, becomes a viable and widely-supported battle-cry.

Democracy in the ARMM, she says, is ailing and not doing well. There is the general perception of a failure to deliver on the promises of autonomy. But she is quick to add that the responsibility for the problem lies more with the central Philippine government than just with ARMM itself. Since the creation of the autonomous region in 1989, it has always been hampered by structural defects, and a lack of resources and knowledge capability to effectively perform its functions. Rasul cites for example the difficulty of the regional government to be accountable to its constituents owing simply to the distance of the seat of government to its component provinces, and ergo, to their real needs and aspirations. She also asks the question whether the autonomous region has a “master plan” that is the product of widespread consultation among people it seeks to serve. She intimates that if ever there are programs for the region, very often these are dictated by the interests of the central Manila government, and not the expressed interests of the region’s inhabitants. She also puts responsibility at the feet of the national government when, come election time, it actively chooses or “anoints” the region’s officials but quickly leave them to fend for their own afterwards.

A key issue then for democracy in the ARMM is clarifying and straightening out the relationship between the national government and the regional autonomous government. One can argue that this is still a project-in-the-making, given that this “experiment” in autonomy is only about 14 years old. The situation is made even more complicated by the fact that even in just fourteen years, autonomy has had to deal with four presidents, each with his or her own concept of autonomy and approach to the Mindanao problem, very often without consistency of purpose, principles, and process.

An even more basic problem for democratization in the ARMM, and in fact in the whole Philippine context, is the lack of an effective, efficient, and truly democratic electoral system. While the whole country may go through the motions of electing its leaders, there is often severe doubt about the results of the process, owing to such practices as vote-buying, manufacturing of votes, manipulation of results, and inefficient counting, which leaves us with huge gaps in democracy at its most basic and essential level.

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CIVIL SOCIETY: A BRIGHT SPOT

There is however, a bright spot in the road to democratization in the region, and this is to be found in the growth and strengthening of civil society movements in Mindanao, especially those supported by established institutions. In a paper on the civil society and the peace process, Rufa Guiam describes civil society in Mindanao as “a complicated terrain of networks, coalitions and political alignments. Varying orientations and interests compete for popular attention, loyalty and sources of funding. The inherent tensions among some of these groups are rooted in their divergent political orientations.” Moro civil society groups are likewise fewer than their Christian counterparts. Yet all these groups have contributed immensely to peace in the region by preventing conflict from happening or escalating, by sustaining the peace gains, and by broadening the base of consultation for government and other institutions which have made Mindanao their focus of concern.

Still, a large majority of people in Mindanao are silenced and unable to have their genuine desires and needs expressed to those who can make a difference in their lives. Institutions, both public and private, need to support the growth of such civil society groups, and enable them to tap opportunities out there to participate meaningfully in the peace and development marketplace. Greater community participation, for example, in determining and implementing

development projects, works to ensure that:

- projects are implemented accordingly;
- democracy is promoted; and
- a developmental attitude is ingrained in the people.

The coming elections in 2004, the moves to shift forms of government, and the continuing debates on federalism, in the mind of Rasul, represent another opportunity for Mindanaons and other stakeholders, to deliberate thoroughly on these possibilities for further democratization. We can add to this the need to think out very well the options for Mindanao and the ARMM itself—independence, Islamic state or region, enhanced autonomy—so that democratization can truly take root and grow to its fullest potential.

“A VIEW FROM WITHIN”

Diamadel Dumagay, Director of the ARMM Planning and Development Office, offers an insider’s view regarding democratization in the autonomous region. He notes that the ARMM set-up is supposed to be patterned after that of the national government, with its three branches—executive, legislative, and judiciary. He believes that the functioning of these institutions falls short of the ideal, but all are trying their best. He cites ARMM’s dependence on the national government for resources and guidance as a hindering factor in the full implementation of its legal mandate. There is thus very limited fiscal autonomy.

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Despite limitations, though, he believes that democratization happens to some extent. He points out for example, the representation and participation of the governors, mayors and civil society organizations in the regional planning board, which draws up the master plan for regional development. Even then, problems arise because local government units enjoy some measure of autonomy and support from the national government. He also reasons out that ARMM has maintained a level of stability enough to run the bureaucracy through times of transition and crises.

SOME ISSUES ON DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE ARMM

The discussion which followed after the inputs from Rasul and Dumagay have centered around the following themes and issues:

- There is the continuing perception that the ARMM was more a form of political accommodation that was meant to appease a restive Moro population, rather than a well-thought out autonomy project. From the beginning, it had already been opposed by the Moro National Liberation Front, but was ardently pushed by the national government despite serious objections. This gives the impression that the ARMM was destined to fail right from the start. It has not been helped by the lack of real support from the national government, yet very often, the national leadership intervenes actively in the ARMM’s political processes, to the detriment of evolving a mature autonomy. It is, as one participant said, something of a “dictated democracy.”
- For democracy to take root in the region, there is a need for strong democratic institutions. As it is, however, the Regional Legislative Assembly is considerably weak, hampered by intramural politicking and a certain timidity which prevents it from actively pushing the agenda of genuine autonomy. With a weak legislative branch, it is the executive branch which tries to fill the vacuum. This does not augur well for a democracy of co-equal and co-responsible branches.

- At a deeper level of the issue, democracy suffers from the type of politics that is prevalent in the whole country—personalistic, patronage-based, and feudalistic. These and other cultural factors continue to impede the growth of genuine democracy which hears the will of the majority of the people and allows for the free and responsible election of credible leaders. With economic power residing mostly in an elite class, the vast majority of the poorer masses are left to depend on those wielding such power for whatever crumbs they can receive.
- Corruption is another issue which affects democratization in the region, though certainly not unique to ARMM alone. But corruption takes away whatever is left of an already-small “pie” to begin with. Thus, at the end of the day, very little becomes available for much-needed initiatives to address even the most basic needs of the region’s inhabitants.
- A bright spot remains that of a flourishing civil society. There is strong potential for non-government organizations and similar institutions to take up what is lacking in governance in the region. Civil society vigilance against corruption is essential. Non-government organizations also contribute a great deal to concrete initiatives to uplift the conditions of the poor, and respond to immediate crises, without the usual bureaucracy and corruption. They are also at the forefront of movements to nurture a culture of peace and dialogue in the region.
- Aside from just political democratization, there is the urgent need as well for social and economic empowerment, which in a real way, lies at the foundation of a truly democratic society. A major dimension of this concern is that of education. The ARMM region manifests the lowest education indicators in the country, and this translates to severe poverty and political immaturity at the grassroots level.
- The agenda of the indigenous peoples in the region needs to be included in the discourse on democratization in the ARMM. Their specific concerns include their claims for ancestral domain and tribal governance.
- Media in the region also needs to be robust, if the cause of democratization is to be helped. Aside from its informational role in society, media also serves to promote people’s intelligent participation in the affairs of society.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Towards the end of the roundtable discussion, the following policy recommendations were made, towards greater democratization in the ARMM:

1. Re-think the very idea of the ARMM, and explore other options which are more responsive to the sentiments of the Bangsamoro. Such options will include the calls for referendum, federalism, and the creation of an independent state, among others.
2. The national government should be the first to promote genuine autonomy and not be the one to hinder it. This will entail ensuring that the political processes in the region are free from undue interference. It also demands that the ARMM be given a realistic budget, as well as inclusion in the national investment priorities. Devolution of departments, with accompanying capacity-building, should be pursued relentlessly.
3. Support and strengthen the capacities of civil society groups for meaningful participation in democratic processes. Strengthen media as a vehicle of democratization.

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ROUNDTABLE SERIES SCHEDULE

- **“ARMM and the GRP-MILF Peace Process”**, October 6, 2003, 8:00-12:00 noon, NDU College of Law, Cotabato City
- **“Democratization in the ARMM”**, October 29, 2003, 1:30-5:00 P.M., NDU College of Law, Cotabato City
- **“Evolving an Effective ARMM Bureaucracy”**, November 13, 2003, 1:30-5:00 P.M., NDU College of Law, Cotabato City
- **“Corruption, Culture and Conflict”**, November 18, 2003, 1:30-5:00 P.M. NDU College of Law, Cotabato City.
- **“ARMM Development Framework: Issues and Concerns”**, November 27, 2003, 1:30-5:00 PM, NDU College of Law, Cotabato City.
- **“Federalism vs. Autonomy: Roadmaps to Peace”**, December 10, 2003, 1:30-5:00 P.M., NDU College of Law, Cotabato City

4. Generate popular support for programs by evolving various modes of consultation, and facilitating people’s informed decision on issues that affect them.
5. Give priority to education in order to cut the cycle of poverty and promote mature political participation.
6. Facilitate continuing cultural literacy, dialogue, and harmony among the region’s multicultural people. Study and promote Islamic and other cultural values that are also consistent with democratic principles.

CONCLUSION

Democratization in the ARMM continues to be a work-in-progress. Despite real and perceived difficulties, several opportunities are just waiting to be seized by stakeholders in the ARMM and by national government. The international donor community continues to be interested in helping the region towards genuine development and greater democratization. The region’s inhabitants are also increasingly aware that the road to peace and prosperity is also the road to democratization, and are thus more than willing to take up their responsible roles in this regard.

But democratization is also a long-term process that cannot be simply imposed from the outside. It has to be nurtured in people’s attitudes and behaviors. Structures that promote it need to be established, too. It is a multi-faceted endeavor that cannot make do with simplistic and short-term efforts. Patience and determination to achieve fundamental gains are necessary for all those with a stake in and outside the region.

The relationship between the national government and the ARMM can be likened to that of a parent and child. As a child that is still undergoing its birth pangs, the ARMM needs all the help it can get, especially from its parent. Just as the first few years and the teenage years are always crucial for a growing person, these years are crucial for the ARMM. One has to acknowledge that mistakes have been made during ARMM’s growing years. Remedies for these mistakes range from the radical to the compromising. Whatever remedies are resorted to, they must take into consideration the risks involved and the readiness of the people for change. But one thing is sure, people must not go back to the option of violence to address this issue. It amounts to throwing the child along with the bathwater.

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