

‘Mindanao Autonomy: A Historical and Constitutional Mandate?’

Speech of LTP Chairman Elnorita P. Tugung in the Conference on Autonomy in ‘Muslim Mindanao’, Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro City, March 11-13, 1988.

Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning.

Assalamu alaikum. Peace be with you.

Eighty-nine years ago, on May 18, 1899, Christian revolutionaries in Zamboanga City led by General Vicente Alvarez after a two-day siege overran the Spanish Garrison in Fort Pilar and captured the last Governor-General of the Philippines, Diego delos Rios. After hauling down the Spanish flag, the revolutionaries reportedly raised the banner of the Sultan of Sulu, not that of General Aguinaldo of Kawit, Cavite. Two United States warships anchored off the Zamboanga coastline but could not land troops to wrestle the city from the revolutionaries, and so they sailed on to Jolo and there signed a peace treaty with Sulu Sultan Jamal Kiram. They came back in November of the same year, or six months later, and after bribing a treacherous officer of the revolutionary troops to assassinate the commander on duty of the port, were finally able to occupy Zamboanga.

This episode in the modern history of Mindanao helps define our contemporary political problem in Southern Philippines. Our history is full of similar instances when Mindanao’s inhabitants displayed their sense of isolation from the central government. As you know, the Muslims of Mindanao have consistently opposed the Spanish colonial government. Later, American administrators were able to pacify the Muslims by granting them political and financial concessions and by saturating Mindanao with Christian settlers. Even then, the Muslims voice for independence was never ever really silenced. During the Commonwealth regime, some Muslim leaders continued the quest for independence in the halls of the National Assembly.

This historical tradition erupted into a full-scale conflict only 25 years after the Philippine Archipelago became a republic immediately after the Second World War. The Muslims in Mindanao, armed with modern weapons, with highly-educated and well-trained leaders, organized into a liberation front, and inspired by the nineteenth century Islamic hegemony now sweeping the world, clashed with the newer realities in Philippine nationhood, principally with the political assimilation and domination of Mindanao by the central government. Latent conflicts in cultural and economic areas are also threatening to break out in the open.

Most of us would be familiar with the government’s peace efforts since the MNLF went underground and pursued a war of attrition. The government, the front and non-combatant civilians sustained large casualties until the Tripoli Agreement was forged in 1976. A former member of the

MNLF Central Committee said this agreement was the severest blow Misuari's struggle ever sustained. Understandably, Misuari charged that the government of former President Marcos failed to faithfully implement the provisions of the agreement, twisted it and established the existing two autonomous governments in central and western Mindanao. Nevertheless, some 78 MNLF commanders returned to the fold of the law and as many as 20,000 — the military estimate was 40,000 — other fighters laid down their arms. Political autonomy, social and economic rehabilitation of returnees, accelerated development of communities and war exhaustion forced these rebels to give up the fight, yet a substantial remainder of the Bangsamoro forces and leaders, who broke up into three main but separate groups, stayed underground or in self-exile. The standing forces of the MNLF, Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the MNLF-Reformist Group, with recent increase through recruitment, are capable of re-opening hostilities in many parts of Mindanao, though Misuari himself has admitted that the prospect of a military victory by the rebels is quite dim at the moment.

In September, 1986, President Corazon C. Aquino met with Misuari in Jolo, Sulu to sign a new ceasefire agreement and to express her sincere intention to find a compromise agreement with the MNLF for an honorable settlement of the Mindanao problem. But the peace negotiations which went on for five months from January to May last year broke down over significant and major differences between the demands of the MNLF and concessions offered by the government. The gap consisted of matters in geographical area, scope of powers and implementation processes.

The MNLF later on refused as it continues to recognize the New Philippine Constitution in spite of its autonomy provisions. It recently opened up with a propaganda war which, it seems, is intended to sabotage the implementation of constitutional autonomy in Southern Philippines. I believe that, as with the effects of the Tripoli Agreement, the MNLF leadership fears that a new form of autonomy in Mindanao will greatly erode its quest for independence.

It appears that there are now a number of factors that prevent the MNLF from coming into terms with the government, aside from the divergence of positions that were demonstrated during the peace negotiations last year.

I am usually cautious to pin labels on individuals or organizations, but Chairman Misuari has over the last twenty years acquired a set of alliances and sponsors from whom he cannot easily disassociate himself. Misuari as a political science professor in the University of the Philippines was closely associated with Jose Ma. Sison and Norberto Gonzales, the former a Marxist and the latter a Socialist. All three of them came to organize their own revolutionary associations, for which they continue to solicit international support. The powerful military-industrial complex in both East and West

hemisphere always have a stake in revolutionary movements and will not let their clients off if they can help it. The standard firearm of the MNLF is the Russian-made AK-47.

Secondly, Islamic world hegemony which exploded with the discovery of oil in the Middle East in this century, has apparently imbued the Mujahideens with a sense of eternal struggle, if not invincibility. The opening lines of chapter one of the MNLF's fighter's manual, entitled "Objectives of Bangsamoro Mujahideen and the means to achieve them", reads: "Every individual Bangsamoro must realize that we are engaged in a life and death battle, a battle for survival, which poses formidable threats of extinction to our Islamic heritage and place our very existence at stake . . . all our endeavors and efforts to defend our religion, the dignity of the Bangsamoro people, and to regain our legitimate rights to self-determination fall squarely within the category of Jihad in the way of Allah deserving great rewards from Almighty God". The Bangsamoro war is not a lonely struggle along political and economic interest alone.

Thirdly, the inter-tribal dissension among Muslim Filipinos and the splintered Bangsamoro fighting groups prevent them from presenting a "Unified Front" to facilitate negotiations with the government. This was recognized by the New Government shortly prior to last year's peace talks. Anyone of these fighting fronts is inhibited from reaching an agreement with the government for fear of losing status and advantages in favor of rival groups.

Fourthly, the refusal of the MNLF to recognize the New Constitution or to submit any compromise settlement to constitutional processes eliminates a legal basis for negotiations. The government cannot be expected to exceed the mandate of the constitution on local autonomy.

Lastly, Christian and Muslim co-existence in Mindanao remains utopian proposition for as long as either group entertains a desire to dominate the other. This point is that the very apparent distrust between Muslims and Christians in the area, as far as autonomy is concerned as evinced by the controversy over the phrase "Muslim Mindanao" in the constitution, and which stems from basic economic and political conflicts, is not lost to the MNLF leadership. This tends to prevent the front from displaying a greater degree of trust in the Christian dominated government of Manila.

We now look briefly at the experience of the existing autonomous government in Western Mindanao since it was established in 1979. In passing, let me state that the scope of powers of the autonomous government as vested in Presidential Decree 1618 amounts to almost the same thing as provided for in the New Constitution, except that in the latter is added possible rights over the areas' natural resources.

In assessing the existing autonomous government, one's attention will always be drawn to the fact that the system's accomplishments have

not done justice to the degree of authority invested in it by its chapter. We trace this asymmetry to the fact that during most of the years of its existence, which is to say during the Marcos dictatorship, the autonomous government was not allowed to exert these powers. No tax measures, for example, ever prospered. Bills passed by the legislative branch, which is the Batasang Pampook, to stop destructive fishing operations in its seas, mostly committed by non-resident businessmen, were largely ignored by law enforcement agencies and ministries, all of whom were under the absolute control of the Manila government. Even mere regional development planning would turn into a farce when foreign-funded programs, which were all prepared in Manila, are dumped into the region.

If the Aquino government failed to correct this anomaly, it is, I believe, due to its overriding concern to first complete peace-making preparations, like writing a new law on autonomy, before letting political autonomy continue to flourish in the area.

What happened during its existence is that the autonomous government was confined to the implementation of what are called impact projects in the area, building mosques, schoolhouses, water systems and extending various forms of development and livelihood assistance to individuals, communities and local government units. A degree of political gain was achieved through the exercise of its administrative prerogatives over other government agencies and local government units, its contacts with Muslim countries and foreign embassies, and interventions with the national government and the military establishment over various local concerns.

What conclusions or prospects can we draw from the existing circumstances and conditions?

Secondly, the envisioned self-rule through the constitution should be one which will be able to answer the sentiments and aspirations of Mindanao's peoples, Christians and Muslims alike. An organic law which will only cater to the Muslims will not only isolate the Muslims from the nation's mainstream. It will tend to create a state within a state and judging from the warlike character of the Muslim tribes, will in later generations be a cause for fighting between Muslims and non-Muslims.

In this respect, it is equally imperative that the RCC explore the true sentiments and aspirations of all communities in Mindanao and truthfully communicate their findings to the Congress, who will draft and enact the autonomy law. A naive dependence on existing data and information to assess Mindanao and its population can be very counter-productive, for some of these information are unreliable.

To ensure the success and integrity of the consultation process, it is necessary that the people be informed first about the concerns, issues and problems of autonomy. Hence, a massive and sustained information and education campaign should be undertaken not only by the government

but other sectors as well, to raise the people's level of awareness, familiarity with the features and problems of political autonomy and related issues.

What I would, in closing, say most of all is that Mindanao today stands on the threshold of a new horizon in its political evolution and consequent socio-economic development, the going in the past decades has been rough, and it will continue to be that way for some time until a political system, tempered and perfected by our common trials, shall come into being, come into effect. Internal autonomy is the key, perhaps the only key, to Mindanao's survival and advancement without the loss of more lives, and most of all, of more of our fundamental rights.

I thank the Mindanao Development Studies Center, particularly Dr. Robert McAmis, for this opportunity to speak before the distinguished participants of this conference. I also convey the warm regards of the people of Autonomous Region 9 to their brothers and sisters in Cagayan de Oro City and other parts of Mindanao.

Thank you and may God bless us all.