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Creating Sulu: In Search of Policy Coalitions in the Conflict-Ridden Island

Criselda Yabes*

The island province of Sulu has seen a military presence for decades, the result of a failed rebel uprising in 1974, when the capital town of Jolo was burned to the ground. It has not been able to fully recover since then. This paper seeks to recommend possible policy coalitions for local transformation in Sulu. It reflects on how the military and civilians came together in a tacit and binding agreement to set the pace in changing the status quo. For the military, it meant doing more than what was expected of soldiers in a conflict area; it meant dealing with people face-to-face and learning local history. Over the years, it has been shown—though scarcely studied or investigated—that officers with a keen sense of leadership and a wide understanding of history, politics, and society are more likely to shake the ground for better results. For civil society, it was an opportunity to seek congruence from an armed unit that was going to be their friend, not an enemy as it had been in the past; civil society was going to find a substitute for the local government's lackluster performance (if not outright incompetence) to restore a semblance of normalcy. Lastly, a proposal for a military governorship is examined, and a set of crucial conditions to implement the proposal are presented, based on the findings on the ground.

Keywords: Sulu, military governance, whole-of-nation approach, civil-military operations, *bayanihan* model

Introduction

The island province of Sulu has seen a military presence for decades, the result of a failed rebel uprising in 1974, when the capital town of Jolo was burned to the ground. It has not been able to fully recover since then. Over the years the military has delivered a tough search-and-destroy approach and transformed it into a civil-military campaign attempting to develop basic services. But problems persist, with the complex dilemma of dealing with radical rebels involved in kidnapping, local leaders having their private armed groups, and a population trapped in a cycle of poverty. Because of persistent violence without the legitimate domination of physical force, some argue that politics in

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Sulu is characterized as “bandit politics,” which fits well with the framework of the weak state in the introductory chapter of this issue (Gutierrez 2003).

As we will see below, however, a one-dimensional label like “bandit politics” does not capture the dynamics on the ground.¹⁾ Over the years, it has been shown that officers with a keen sense of leadership and a wide understanding of history, politics, and society are more likely to shake the ground for better results (Yabes 2011). In line with this framework, Lt. Col. Antonio Mangoroban (2012) proposed a military governorship with a limited term. This paper sheds light on the people in Sulu who are making a difference on the conflict-ridden island, and examines Mangoroban’s proposal. Based on a thorough study of military officers and people on the ground in Sulu, this paper asserts that the proposal’s success depends mainly on vetting officers who can do the job. The chapter ends with lessons from Sulu that can be applied to other devastated cities, such as Marawi.

I A Path to De Facto Military Governance

Sulu (land area about 168,000 hectares) was once a shining example of progress and cultural cohesiveness between Muslims and Christians. It was the center of gravity in the southern fringes of the Sulu Archipelago, the home of the Tausug elites under a once-powerful sultanate. It is also a prime example of a tragic fate: it was destroyed after the 1974 uprising, leaving the victims in the hands of warlords, bandits, and extremist fighters who raised the stakes with kidnappings and other terrorist incidents. There was a brief spell of military rule after 1974, but it eventually gave way to the rule of political families who sought dominance by keeping themselves entrenched (Gutierrez 1995).

In the opinion of military commanders who were interviewed for this paper, something was wrong with the Philippines’ rehashing of previous doctrines borrowed largely from the American colonial campaign. Consequently, the Armed Forces of the Philippines went through a shift in its own strategy, a strategy that has been constantly modified over the years in search of a solution to the insurgency problem nationwide. The Philippine military implemented the *Lambat Bitag* (Fish net) strategy in the late 1980s, aimed at fighting Communist guerrilla fronts by deploying special operations teams to the countryside. Later the strategy included modules that had to fit in with the cultural traditions of Muslim Mindanao vis-à-vis the insurgency in the south.

1) Eric Gutierrez in his other article recognizes a “new concept of national security . . . in the military circle,” which encouraged a marine colonel, Ponciano Millena, to help the handicrafts industry in Sulu (Gutierrez 1995, 142).

After the democratization of the Philippines in 1986, there were various reform attempts in Muslim Mindanao, including Sulu. In the 1990s, trade with Indonesian and Malaysian neighbors was revitalized through an economic scheme for the Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). The United States Agency for International Development helped finance the economy of the country’s poorest provinces (Dañguilan-Vitug and Yabes 1998).²⁾

Commercial prosperity would wax and wane depending on the level of violence. Sulu has its cycle of violence that usually comes before the elections or when the rebels need money from kidnapping ransoms. In between the spates of violence is when commerce can thrive. The long-heralded Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) has been negligent, if not a failure, in serving the broad interests of Muslim Filipinos (about 15 percent of Mindanao’s total population of more than 20 million), who are victims of their own elected leaders. It has been described as nothing more than a “bureaucratic layer providing little” except power and privileges for Muslim politicians (Lara 2014).

Sulu’s eminent revolutionary who led the uprising in 1974, Nur Misuari, was the first ARMM governor when he accepted a peace deal offered by the Ramos administration in the mid-1990s. His leadership crumbled under the weight of nepotism, corruption, and ethnic divisions. The people of Lupah Sug, as Sulu is locally called, gravitated from traditional clan institutions to a shadow state fueled by an informal economy of the illicit drug trade, gunrunning, and the kidnapping business (Lara and Schoofs 2016). One way or another, Misuari’s ARMM leadership took the Muslim narrative on a downhill curve, an example of failing promises to ordinary people. Power and privileges of the old datu structure trumped the modern education, rights, and unity binding the region. Dissatisfaction among the Muslims funneled into the hands of religious leaders, who were often caught in a bind by radical forces or threats of violence. The idea, therefore, of a democratic style of governance was lost in the ensuing generations searching for a common good.

Sulu and other Muslim provinces are essentially run by warlords who are members of the political families elected by their own people. The leadership deteriorates when they fight (literally and figuratively) other political families or rivals. Civil-military operations (CMO) were a mere disguise for undercover work designed to unearth the ideology infecting a local population. By 2000, Sulu had become home to a group of radical rebels called Abu Sayyaf, which was linked to the al-Qaeda masterminds of 9/11. Then came the batches of American special forces teams under the Philippines–United States Visiting Forces Agreement, with the government taking part in a US-led global “War on

2) Then President Fidel Ramos, reducing political tensions with Malaysia and Indonesia, initiated a revival of the old trade and commercial routes.

Terror.”³⁾ Their presence harked back to the American colonial era of the early 1900s, during which the Sulu Sultanate abdicated. Sulu became a laboratory for counterterrorism strategy. There was a joint task force aimed at striking down high-value targets (HVTs), namely, the key leaders of Abu Sayyaf, whose strength peaked at an estimated 1,200 fighters around 2000. Almost three-fourths of Sulu was considered “threatened” in 2005 (Quemado 2017). The US-backed Oplan Ultimatum between 2006 and 2008 resulted in a setback for Abu Sayyaf, so much so that in the momentum a few years later, only one out of the five “original HVTs remained to be operationally active.”

While the government went back to the negotiating table for a peace deal with the dominant Muslim rebel faction, the largely Maguindanaoan Moro Islamic Liberation Front on mainland Mindanao, CMO became a standard necessity (even in demand in some villages) in Sulu simply because the rationale of governance had disappeared. A joke making the rounds was that Zamboanga, at the bottom tip of a peninsula in Mindanao, the nearest city to Sulu, in the cradle of civilization, was host to the village and town mayors of Sulu. The mayors had made their private homes in the Christian-dominated city, neglecting their jobs in Sulu and merely collecting their handouts in the form of Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA). At the grassroots level, in Sulu there were no infrastructure services; the military ended up providing such services by default.

In many places the only shadow left of governance was the military presence. It was the only government symbol there was. Criselda Yabes (2011) discusses the diversified and creative strategies employed by military officers to restore peace in Sulu and the islands as well as mainland Mindanao. About one of three brigades falling under an infantry division or the Marine Corps was led by commanders willing to initiate prospects of “nation building” with the civilian population. Each had their own creative ideas of what had to be done.⁴⁾

Following is an account on the search for possible policy coalitions for local transformation in Sulu. The narrative below reflects how the military and civilians came together in a tacit and binding agreement to set the pace in changing the status quo. For the military, this meant doing more than what was expected of soldiers in a conflict area; it meant dealing with people face-to-face and learning local history. For the civilian

3) This came during the early term of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who had initiated peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front as a result of the “All-Out War” on the border of Maguindanao and Lanao, carried out by her predecessor, Joseph Estrada (whom she had replaced in a popular coup).

4) The author spent about two years traveling to military camps in Sulu, Lanao, and Maguindanao. The brigades had in their command the battalion commanders, who were the front liners. The brigades, in turn, fell under the divisions. The military had a total of 10 divisions, 4 of which were in Mindanao.

sector, it was an opportunity to seek congruence with an armed unit that was going to be their friend, not an enemy as it had been in the past; it was going to find a substitute for the lackluster performance (if not outright incompetence) of the local government unit in a force that would lead them to a process of normalcy. Lastly, a proposal for a military governorship with a limited period is examined, and a set of crucial conditions to implement the proposal is presented based on findings on the ground.

II From Mount Bayog to Bud Datu, the Marines vs. the Army

The Philippine marines' campaign called for an "80-20" strategy: in the overall scheme of operations, the military would carry out 80 percent CMO and 20 percent combat. Sulu was going to be a template for the two other southern island provinces to follow, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. Known by their acronym BASULTA, they fall under the ARMM.⁵⁾

The strategy could have worked, but it did not, for a number of reasons—mainly that commanders had to adjust to each province, which had its own dynamics at play. CMO had some successes, however, and it is those that this paper will try to identify.

The template was to be a precursor to the *bayanihan* strategy crafted by the armed forces in 2010, and approved by President Benigno Aquino III when he took office. This alone was a turnaround from previous models, bringing in the framework of a "whole-of-nation" approach in search of peace and stability. For this strategy to work, the military needed the cooperation of key government departments and agencies to make the switch from lack of governance to development.

From 2008 to 2014, the Philippine Marine Corps was fully deployed over the BASULTA zone as part of the navy's master plan for a Fleet Marine Concept. Amphibious in nature, the marines were to have the islands as their ships, so to speak, in the absence of modern boats from which they were supposed to operate. Having the islands in their area of responsibility was a victory given the politics in headquarters: they were given the opportunity to do things their way (Yabes 2011).

From the early days of the rebellion, Sulu received the brunt of military operations, in a way that gave the appearance of martial rule. From the time the insurgency began in the 1970s, military commanders alternately deployed the army or the marines depend-

5) The two other provinces in the ARMM are Lanao del Sur, whose capital is Marawi; and Maguindanao, where 53 media workers were killed in 2009 (the Ampatuan Massacre) and 44 police commandos were killed in 2015 (The Fallen 44). The ARMM provinces are composed of different Muslim ethnic groups. Muslim scholars have so far refused to admit that the ethnic differences have caused strife among the groups, which makes it difficult to attain peace.

ing on the political circumstances or the personal judgments of top generals. That the marines were now given control of the islands was seen as a change to the pattern of ruthless fighting, one that had the bearing of a scorched earth policy. The marines' experiment of changing from combat to CMO was theirs for the taking. Not all commanders could see the sense in this, questioning their core competence.

In fact, not all the marines could understand the meaning of the 80-20 campaign. An internal survey of one marine battalion showed that almost 60 percent of the men did not even understand the Tausug culture. How could they then go about making peace with people targeted as the enemy? But a great majority of the men said they were willing to learn and that it was important to gain the trust of the local people (Quemado 2017).

From being men in uniform who were feared and hated, the marines began repairing bridges and building schools, using their trucks to ferry children to classrooms, augmenting the jobs of teachers, transporting agricultural produce that otherwise would have been impossible to do in a war zone. The atmosphere in some of the villages turned festive, though the local population was still wary of the new situation (Yabes 2012b).

CMO had been used in the Communist insurgency in the northern Philippines (Luzon) in the past, since the 1970s, and it was being used now to tackle the Muslim insurgency in Sulu and in other parts of Muslim Mindanao (depending on the military commanders). But recent leadership training in civilian and educational institutions gave potential up-and-coming commanders the wherewithal to create a brand of their own in a "bridging leadership" workshop.

It was, for example, a stunning move when a battalion commander in Sulu built a replica of the Astana in his camp.⁶⁾ The symbol of the Astana, the palace of the Sultanate of Sulu at the twilight of the sultanate's power, was arguably significant. Nothing much was left of the original structure, rotting in the jungle of Maimbung, opposite the coast of Jolo. The replica was set up on Mount Bayog, in the town of Talipao, where the camp was located. The camp, which had been the target of rebel attacks, was rundown, messy, and disorganized. The replica was constructed in 2013, restoring pride among the people of Sulu.

It was an innovative and clever idea on the part of the marine battalion commander, Col. Romulo Quemado, to allow local folks to visit the replica for weekend picnics, to feel at home in it, for soon enough even rebels in disguise and influential community leaders

6) The Asian Institute of Management spearheaded the Bridging Leadership program, where over the years key senior officers have attained their academic degrees. Likewise, the private sector helped craft the Army Transformation Roadmap, which began in 2010; it called for three phases over 18 years, to match the three six-year periods of a presidential term, with a long view of developing a respectable army "loved by the people."

befriended him. It was the replica of the Astana that helped to forge relationships, enabling the commander to obtain information from local folks—rather than forcing it out of them—and to deal directly with them.

Quemado also set up a radio station to promote the Tausug culture. He was aware of the volatile situation in early 2013, with his camp being not too far from the base of a Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) commander. Quemado was able to communicate with the MNLF commander through conduits who visited the Astana. He somehow prevented a plan by the rebels to march into the town of Jolo in a show of strength; instead, the rebels laid siege to a coastal community in Zamboanga that lasted 18 days in September 2013.

The effectiveness of Quemado's outreach was put to the test when, in April 2014, the head of the town's local militia—under the banner of the Barangay Peace Action Team—led a fight against Abu Sayyaf in the community. This was unprecedented. The military created militias as “force multipliers,” but in Sulu militias are normally on the payroll of an elected official or a political family. They could have gone either way, joining the rebels or working as guards for their employers (Yabes 2014).

The militia leader, who went by the nom de guerre Marlboro, recounted how the rebels had crossed a line by kidnapping children. A firefight ensued. Marlboro's men brought down the rebels in a surprising victory; and for the marines this was a tactical victory as well. It was also a matter of luck, for in the past something of this nature inevitably led to accusations of human rights violations. The attack against Abu Sayyaf had no civilian casualties, and it became the talk of the town (Yabes 2014).

By forging an alliance with the community, the marines had local people on their side, temporarily at least. This widened the military's scope of influence. One telling sign was that there were Philippine flags flying over huts—this had never been seen before. It was the symbol of the Astana that had opened the way forward.

The lack of doctrine or standard policy supporting civil-military affairs left commanders toying with their own ideas and limitations. A leadership framework was needed to guide CMO in the field. Quemado and a few of his fellow officers helped put some shape into Community Relations Training (CRT), producing a manual for others to follow. Workshop modules had a combination of community, i.e., academe, local government units, religious leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and others; and the security sector, namely, the military, police, and militias.⁷⁾

The workshops focused on Sulu's culture and religion. The traditional CMO was going to be transformed into a *bayanihan*, a collective community endeavor. The leader-

7) The CRT modules came with guidance, financial and otherwise, from the Asia Foundation.

ship was not aiming for a military end state but for a state in which power was going to be shared.⁸⁾ There was a thin line for the military to watch out for when playing the role of servant leader: were they soldiers or civil servants? It was hard work (Yabes 2011, 216–235).

It was time to reinvent the wheel, said Quemado, by co-creating the process for the goal of peace. He said the military could not help build bridges if the bridges were later going to be bombed; they could not build a school or a road without the opportunity of forging genuine relations with the people. After building the replica of the Astana, the military pursued other touristic and educational activities in historical places such as Bud Datu and Bud Daho, sites of the Moro wars during the American colonial years.⁹⁾

In a status report presented to a class of the Command General Staff College—those preparing for senior ranks—Quemado showed that the CRT years from mid-2010 to 2014 had reduced Abu Sayyaf’s strength to an average of 250 from an estimated 1,200. One crucial aspect in the CRT module was courting the youth, especially the orphans of the conflict. Having them on the military’s side could mean one less generation of fighters.

There was so much to do that patience for results could wear out; and it did, eventually. There were cynics and unsavory partners. Every approach had to be culture-fit. The military was there to listen to people, not tell them what to do. It was not about the security the military could offer, but the security people were wishing for. “By the end of the day, we shall leave, they stay,” Quemado recalled.

A commander’s tour of duty could be as long as two years, although it was often shorter. That was too brief a time to expect rapid changes on the ground; moreover, a military unit taking over from the previous one could change the flow of the campaign or even stop it. The problem lay in vetting officers for positions. Much of the decision making turned personal when claiming turf and loyalty among the officer corps, which inevitably upset the playing field.¹⁰⁾

The marines were held accountable for not delivering enough in terms of body count. It was alleged that under their watch the rebels had managed to quietly expand their base and had carried out a series of kidnappings of foreigners that had brought millions of pesos

8) *Bayanihan* is a sociological concept of a Filipino community whose members help each other; its symbol is of people carrying a typical native hut for a neighbor’s home. Despite the military’s shift to a *bayanihan* outlook, however, the headquarters remain focused on body counts and guerrilla fronts destroyed as a barometer for their successes in the field.

9) The author spent time in the replica of the Astana in December 2013 and April 2014.

10) Brigade commanders may or may not have the prerogative to choose their battalion commanders. Out in the field, especially in provinces dominated by warlords with direct connections to the national government, local leaders exercise their preferences; the same goes for members of the board of senior officers who vet promotions.

into their ransom booty (Lara and Schoofs 2016, ch. 4). The army units were let back in; they disrupted the status quo and fired more rounds of artillery than usual. Behind the scenes there was a quarrel among military academy classmates as to who should take command.

A new brigade commander had to be flown in, ostensibly to salvage the situation. Gen. Jose Faustino knew the terrain: Sulu had been an important part of his career when he was battalion commander during the years of the Oplan Ultimatum. Roughly one year into his tour from 2016, he was the first in his academy class of 1988 to be promoted to the rank of brigadier general. His camp was on the splendid Bud Datu, overlooking Jolo, the mosque, and the sea beyond.

Faustino's tack on CMO was to be "purposive" and not simply allow it to be a "stand-alone" campaign. What, he asked, would be the purpose of building too many schools if there were no teachers? He looked back on his past efforts and said he had to recalibrate, recalling a situation when his unit had provided 20,000 pesos for a water pipe in a village. He should not have done that, he said. He should have shown the village chief how he could use the IRA disbursed by the national government for his people's basic needs.

"Every activity has to be centered to a goal" was his mantra. And that goal was to defeat Abu Sayyaf. He would give CMO a ratio of 60 percent (instead of 80 percent) over combat operations of 40 per cent. Returning to Jolo, he saw much of what had not changed, not more of what had changed. In a meeting with mayors to gather a census, he saw the same what-can-we-do-to-help lip service, the lack of real action by local leaders in instilling the value of governance.¹¹⁾

It was key to let people know that *barangay* halls were there to serve the community centers. As for the CMO, the army's *bayanihan* team immersed in a village was armed with a checklist of what to do, to avoid mistakes in social relations and be sensitive to the traditions of Muslims. And once the community arrived at a sort of comfort level with soldiers, the team was scaled down to a platoon. The process was usually daunting even at the first stages, when rebels disrupted communities that cooperated with the military, once beheading a soldier who turned out to be a Tausug (a former MNLF rebel integrated into the army after a peace deal in 1996).

Above are profiles of two officers (Quemado and Faustino) in the theater of Sulu, one from the marines, the other from the army, as they saw the island from their own prism. They also reflected, one way or another, a long-standing rivalry between the two units, a rivalry well known within armed forces circles. But they had the same intentions

11) The author's interview with Faustino took place in May 2017, around the time when the Marawi siege broke out. Faustino was one of the key battalion commanders featured in *Peace Warriors* when he was in Sulu and Lanao.

for the good of Sulu, racking their brains to disentangle the complex mesh it had become. Their common denominator was that they were both trained in intelligence, in which they had the advantage of getting down to the roots of a cyclic history. In Sulu, they chose to wear the hat of a peace builder.

Sulu needs more than one solution to find peace, or at the very least an equilibrium to restore the essence of governance. It requires an *Avatar* logic (yes, the James Cameron movie). One has to dive in with empathy, to read history and calculate where one must stand, to play things by ear and observe meanings through the eyes of the people.

This is too demanding a task for an officer cut out for black-and-white orders. For those who are made like Avatars, they have a winning chance. They cannot force people to take their side, but when a voice of reason among the people is convinced of the change, it becomes germinal. In the following section, we will see the reasons to have hope for local transformation in Sulu. These are stories of civilians who took it upon themselves to find a way to set things right with little help from local agencies or leaders. Like the previous section, this section reveals the merging of common ideas and the steps taken, both serendipitous and calculated, by civilians to transform their own communities, even if they had to start with breeding cows or selling rice or making coffee. Above all, these are real turnarounds in the connection between military and civilians—a genuine partnership.

III The Voices of Lupah Sug

III-1 *Recalibration of Civil-Military Relations on the Ground*

In the five months of fighting in Marawi in 2017, government forces were the heroes for defeating the Islamist militants. This was not the case in Sulu during the 1974 uprising; more than anything, a man in uniform was never to be trusted. And even until today, people of that generation cannot forget the destruction wrought to their lives.

Mercia Salarda Alli would never have thought to find herself in the company of soldiers after what the military had done to her family, their home destroyed in the fire. Ms. Alli lives by the traditional value of the Tausug's *maratabat*, a strong sense of honor. As far as she was concerned, she and her surviving family members could live on their own despite the downward spiral of Lupah Sug. But by a twist of irony, it was the American task force that sought her out, and she relented.¹²⁾

12) The author has known Ms. Alli since 2012. Interviews with her as well as Muddazer Hailanie of the Kankitap Cooperative in Patikul were carried out in May 2017, in Jolo.

She was with the local office of the Department of Agriculture, which was barely getting by with a minimal budget trickling down from the ARMM office based in Cotabato City on the mainland. The Americans were offering veterinary services for their medical mission. This was a solution to saving cattle on the brink of perishing. Cows, carabaos, and goats were the only tangible source of income for poor peasants in the most far-flung of villages; they could easily be sold when required.

Relations between the Americans and local people was two-pronged: the American soldiers were making an entry into the heart of Sulu, close to the lairs of the rebels and the communities that supported them, while the local government office needed help that the state could not provide. The condition Ms. Alli had set for this arrangement was that there would be no military operations of any kind: no attacks, no raids. She was certain there were rebels among the people watching, but she did not fear them as long as she was there to help people.

In due time a community partnership was fostered through saving the cows and later other projects, with the Americans handing over the initiatives to Filipino marine officers to take forward. Ms. Alli was struck by the respect she felt for herself and her staff. The military did not make them ride in military vehicles; they made sure to provide them with civilian transport when going to the villages. All plans were made through consultation. The CRT workshops were held in camps, and the people involved in the workshops were all at ease with the arrangement after the CMO activities they had done together.

In addition to her job in the agriculture office, Ms. Alli formed a group of volunteers to help improve the livelihood of local folks. She called it Matawkasi, which means “going beyond”; the group branded themselves as advocates for peace. Ms. Alli’s influence grew among communities in the conflict areas. She traveled to nearly all corners of the island, doing what other local government units should have been doing in the first place, to get a firsthand view of the needs in remote hamlets.

The military had put the Matawkasi group in touch with civic groups from Manila extending help with the mainstream purpose of nation building. The military, on the other end of this partnership, also courted civilians and private companies for its outreach programs and civil-military campaigns. Small steps led farmers to Manila, where they met agribusiness experts who gave technical support. Fresh harvests of exotic fruit such as mangosteen and durian brought bigger profits when transported by plane to markets outside Jolo.

Sulu coffee was back in the limelight and being sold in high-end grocery stores in Manila. This was a breakthrough courtesy of a Muslim princess who returned to her hometown and saw her old neighbors living in an abject state. She decided to turn things

around in her village, which had once been a rebel camp. She found the basic equipment to help villagers mill coffee beans instead of leaving them to dry on the road, where they would be crushed when military trucks drove by (Yabes 2012a).

The local government code of 1991 decentralized power to the local government units by giving them the IRA, but this led to families fighting for government positions. Such positions became a family affair, so to speak, preventing potentially progressive leaders from running for office. This began a race among families who saw the IRA as their personal coffer if they were to run for office, and it triggered bloody fights just to win an election for a local seat.

The late Secretary Jesse Robredo of the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) of the Benigno Aquino administration (2010–16) knew the problem as he had been a mayor of Naga City in Southern Luzon for about 20 years and led a reform program for the seal of good governance and good housekeeping. His tragic death in a plane crash in 2012 put an end to the program, but it sowed the seeds for reform. In the two years that he was cabinet secretary, he was committed to training leaders in Muslim Mindanao to follow the same path and traveled to many places in Sulu to get his vision across. He felt that this was the right—albeit daunting—process for the political and social transformation of Filipino Muslims (Yabes 2018).

In Ms. Alli's opinion, the DILG should have been strict in carrying forward Robredo's legacy. The role of civil society could have tilted in favor of choosing the right leaders. Civil society organizations were not looking for someone perfect, Ms. Alli added; it was leadership that needed to be developed, with room for checks and balances, giving opportunities for Muslim youths to rise.

III-2 *Transformative Leadership in the Local Government*

In October 2016, the municipality of Jolo (population 125,000) was awarded the coveted Seal of Good Local Governance from the DILG, which oversees the local government code throughout the country. At first glance it seemed to be a fluke, or a joke, that a city as dangerous as Jolo could ever be given the thumbs-up for its administrative performance.¹³⁾

The colonial era-style municipal hall underwent a dashing makeover, turning it from a structure that was chaotic and on the verge of ruin to a renovated piece of bureaucratic order. The seal was prominently displayed in the lobby, showing the municipality's achievement after working so hard to obtain the award. A glass-encased bulletin wall

13) This award came less than six months after Rodrigo Duterte of Davao City was elected president. DILG instituted the "seal" during the term of the late Robredo, to replicate his style of governance when he was mayor of Naga City, breaking with traditional politics to give way to a citizens' charter.

had lists of budgets, procurement, programs, and a host of other procedures of a normally functioning municipality.

The mayor, Kherkhar Tan, was a little-known councillor who had served three terms before he found himself sitting in Jolo's higher office. He was a distant relative of the dynastic Tan family of Sulu and therefore secured the blessings of the island's strongman. His demeanor was down to earth, focusing on the basic undertaking of cleaning up the town, which had a horrendous garbage problem. He deployed at least 10 garbage collection trucks and dozens of new plastic bins with the slogan "I love Jolo."¹⁴

He blamed Patikul and other outlying towns for bringing violence to the capital. It is imperative for a mayor to get on well with the police chief—and he usually does—but a police chief who hails from Jolo is usually impeded from carrying out his duties if it means a threat to his family (there are no judges willing to serve in Jolo because of threats and the security situation at large; almost every household is armed).

Clan rivalries are rife, an endemic feature of life in Muslim Mindanao. The concept of rule of law was lost on the mayor, who had to deal with too many gray areas. Although the police was supposed to be the main vanguard in counterinsurgency, the task of Internal Security Operations was left in the hands of the military. Thus, Sulu saw more deployment of army and marine battalions than any other island in the archipelago.

III-3 *Private Initiatives to Govern a Village in Patikul*

The idea of setting up a cooperative was perhaps to wean away the youth from *hawa ng sakit*—the illness of falling prey to the temptation of getting quick cash and fancy cell phones from the rebels in the cottage industry of kidnapping for ransom. Nearly every segment of Sulu's population has had a hand in kidnapping for ransom, allegedly from politicians at fairly high levels, soldiers, police, and rebel leaders all the way down to unemployed, uneducated teenagers in remote villages. Classified military intelligence reports estimate that ransom amounts have reached millions of pesos, money that has circulated in the shadow economy of Muslim Mindanao and thereby determined political alliances and influence.

Against this backdrop are small success stories of people seeking to transform the island, especially people who left and then returned to relive their dreams from bygone years. The idea of working together was a sliver of hope to show people they could trust each other despite the poverty and violence. It was a difficult and personal crusade for

14) The Sulu political dynasty led by Sakur Tan has been around since the early 1990s with the alleged tacit support of the military trying to control the balance of power but which inevitably gives rise to a warlord. Such a *modus vivendi*—ostensibly intended to ensure an alliance against the insurgency—does not work out in the long run.

Muddazer Hailanie when he thought of bringing back the community spirit of people helping one another. When he returned in 2005 after years of working in Saudi Arabia, he saw how much had gone to waste.

The people in his village of Danag, in Patikul, where Abu Sayyaf rebels are said to have their base, were fed up of hearing false promises from the government as well as nongovernmental organizations that came and went. The water system was at risk of drying up, and Hailanie did not want that to happen. It was the villagers' only water source, and it was rare for villages to have a water system installed, as was the case with electricity. The villagers were leading a hand-to-mouth existence.

Hailanie had a plan. He asked each household to contribute 10 pesos per month to keep the water pump running. His efforts were not very successful, but a few people believed in him and worked with him to fix the pump. With this small group of people Hailanie decided to start a cooperative. With capital of less than 10,000 pesos, the villagers began what seemed like a small business. They purchased about a dozen sacks of rice to be sold among the villagers—this was cheaper and more accessible than going to the market in Jolo.

The undertaking grew into a full-fledged consumers' cooperative by late 2011, selling not only rice but also local produce and goods that would have made Sulu wealthy if it were not for the war. Patikul was the nearest and biggest town next to Jolo, the capital, and the military suspected that commerce was being financed by Abu Sayyaf's ransom money. Hailanie said the cooperative, named Kankitap, would dissuade others from joining the rebels and would show that business could be done through sheer effort and cooperation, a sign of *bayanihan* at work.

IV Military Rule?

In a master's thesis at the US Marine Corps Command and Staff College in Virginia, a Filipino marine officer who served 10 years in Mindanao offered a solution for both Sulu and Basilan: an outright military governorship for a limited period. Lt. Col. Antonio Mangoroban was one of the officers based in Patikul, where marines were frequent targets of Abu Sayyaf rebels. During that time he "observed how the lack of governance has alienated people further from the government" (Mangoroban 2012).

A military governor could unify both civilian and military efforts under a single authority, as Mangoroban's thesis outlined. As such, it could "force effective governance" to bring elusive peace to the islands. The current government overtures aided by the presidential office of the peace process, even if strengthened by civil-military operations

on the ground, would take time to bear fruit. This, he underscored, was not politically attractive. Impatience could succumb to restlessness, spreading once more the chances of violence.

This framework recalled the American colonial period, when the Sulu Archipelago and the mainland of Mindanao were separate departments under military rule. Mangoroban saw the compelling rationale of employing hard tactics (fighting) as well as soft tactics, which by helping the local people might get their support. A military governorship would have a unified order rather than a disparate or conflicting approach:

The position is for military commanders to assume as chief executives of local government units operating under the civil laws. The proposal is not the use of extraordinary powers but the integration of both the civil and military powers. The intent is to bring governance and break the cycle of transactional politics entrenched by the political elites. (Mangoroban 2012, 18)

Whether this approach or a variation would be the answer to a coherent peace strategy, the chances of success lay mainly in vetting the right officers who could do the job. Over the years, it has been shown—though never studied or investigated—that officers with a keen sense of leadership and a wide understanding of history, politics, and empathy are more likely to shake the ground for better results.

The armed forces headquarters, which formulates strategies, had this critical aspect to bear in mind. It may have had brilliant minds writing about doctrines and strategies, but what it needed was equally brilliant officers carrying out plans on the ground. This meant a careful selection from the officer corps, shuffling promotions, exercising vigor and discernment in choosing mid-level and/or field-grade officers ready and willing to take command in the complex swarm of Sulu and other provinces. Faustino of the army and Quemado of the marines were striking candidates.

The AFP's *bayanihan* strategy, now modified into *Kapayapaan* (Peace), had an overall plan of intersecting governance, development, and security. This challenged the military with the demands of nuances in leadership and dealing with elected local officials. Maj. Gen. Rafael Valencia, the architect of the strategy since its inception as *bayanihan*, said it could do well only if commanders took the time to read and analyze the classified operational directives given to the unified commands, which in turn should transmit the orders to the men in the field.¹⁵⁾

More often there appeared to be a lack of maturity in the job when the staff and command college provided higher education for battalion commanders only. There had

15) The military's area command in Mindanao is divided into Eastern Mindanao (the areas of Davao, Cotabato, Maguindanao, Agusan, Surigao) and Western Command (the areas of Sulu, Zamboanga, Lanao). Author's interview with Valencia, March 2017.

to be more training in leadership. Battalion commanders were on the front lines: their experiences in the field, such as what Faustino and Quemado underwent, could enhance strategy and help in the development of better doctrines.

In theory, however, they would have to wait until they reached higher positions, such as brigade or division commands, before they could widen their practice. That would invariably mean a much longer period for results, whereas top-level vetting would be quicker in pace for a campaign to see things through.

Mangoroban's idea of a military governor was one who should be in a position to fully implement *bayanihan*'s whole-of-government approach, should have served a minimum of nine years in the BASULTA area (therefore, someone who was in active service, not a retired officer who might exploit his political ambitions), and should have a term limited to only three years. The DILG secretary should lead an oversight committee on the performance of the military governor. This, his paper makes clear, was not tantamount to martial law. It was to emphasize the objective of governance, not punitive action.

The paper, submitted for a master's degree in military studies in 2012, could not have predicted the declaration of martial law for the entire Mindanao in the wake of the Marawi siege five years later. President Duterte extended martial law until the end of 2019. Since the siege, there has been minimal progress in the rehabilitation of Marawi. The president has not fulfilled his promise of rebuilding the Islamic city from the ruins of the battle.

The idea of starting from scratch under a new form of leadership rather than putting the blanket of martial law over the entire region—a political move that could trigger trauma from the past—could well set a precedent in Muslim Mindanao. It would take much more than a larger vision from the staff of the armed forces: it would need a commander in chief with a moral and decisive sense of duty to lift Mindanao out of its deep hole.

How would the entrenched political Tausug family in Sulu take it if a military governor were to be installed in the island province? Would it provoke violence from warlords that had worn two masks: one ascribing to a semblance of democratic rules and the other holding on to a feudal culture through weapons and money?

In an ideal setup, a combination of a municipality delivering the seeds of good governance and a military avatar of civil-military operations could make stability, if not peace, attainable. As it stands, it is the military pushing local leaders to perform, in their stead carrying out field operations as well as serving the needs of a civilian population, thereby producing a *de facto*, quasi governance. Sulu has a long way to go to attain peace. Violence cannot bring back the past, when Sulu was an island paradise. Even elected leaders

are unable to provide the people with necessary services. If the military is to be the hero in this field, it will have to carry out a mission worthy of a soldier.

Conclusion

The sociopolitical circumstances that led to Marawi's devastation in 2017—more than 40 years after the Sulu uprising of 1974—were widely dissimilar in context from Sulu's, as were the geographical distance and ethnic differences between the two. But in seeking to rise from the ruins, Marawi may well draw lessons from the aftermath of Sulu, the long dark shadow it has cast over the decades, an event already buried in history.

The history after the 1974 uprising in Sulu contains several lessons for considering possible policy coalitions for reform in conflict-ridden areas. First, we should recognize that local governments run by politicians who are isolated from local society failed to provide basic public services to the people. Second, despite this challenge, there were private initiatives to make a difference in promoting the local agro-process industry or providing public services such as water. These initiatives can be an asset to enable reform at a broader scale or in the long run.

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