

AUTONOMY FOR MUSLIM MINDANAO: FINDINGS FROM
A SURVEY STUDYMarilou Palabrica-Costello
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The 1987 Philippine Constitution provides, not only that "there shall be created an autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao" but also that this process shall be undertaken in an orderly and democratic fashion. Whatever law will be enacted by Congress to this effect should be taken "with the assistance and participation of the regional consultative commission" and ought to be implemented only in those "provinces, cities, and geographic areas" which approve of the proposed autonomous region in a region-wide plebiscite.

It was in this spirit of democratic consultation that the Mindanao Autonomy Study was originally conceived. Members of the study team, which included Mrs. Magdalena C. Cabaraban, Dean Ofelia Durante, Dr. Heidi Gloria, Dr. Grace Rebollos, Dr. Datumanong Sarangani, and myself felt that it was important that the people of Mindanao--Christians, Muslims, and Tribals alike--be heard on this vital national issue which holds so much importance for their future and the future of their children.

The study surveyed opinions on the autonomy issue from a randomly drawn sample of over 2,000 residents of Mindanao-Sulu. Findings from that portion of this sample which consisted of local-level spokesmen (or "opinion leaders") will be summarized

in Dr. Sarangani's paper, whereas my task this afternoon will be to report on the perceptions held by the "man (or woman) in the street."

The survey's sampling design called for interviews with 891 Christians, 891 Muslims, and 198 tribal members, for a grand total of 1,980 respondents.¹ This means that Muslims and tribals were deliberately oversampled, to ensure that a sufficient number of respondents from these groups would be interviewed so as to allow for detailed statistical analysis. (According to the 1980 Philippine Census, approximately 77 percent of the population of Mindanao-Sulu is Christian, along with 17 percent Muslims and 6 percent tribal peoples).²

In selecting the study's respondents, a two-stage design was utilized. In the first stage each municipality and city in Mindanao was placed in one of three strata: majority Christian, majority Muslim, or majority Tribal. Statistics on ethnicity from the 1980 Census were used in assigning municipalities to one of these three strata. A list of all barangays in each stratum was then compiled and an equal number of majority Christian and majority Muslim barangays were selected into the sample.

¹ Actual sample sizes produced by the study were 885 Christians, 893 Muslims and 202 Tribals.

² Cf. Republic of the Philippines, National Census and Statistics Office, 1983, Table 7.

In all, 50 Muslim, 49 Christian and 11 tribal barangays were selected into the sample. In a few cases replacements were made for selected barangays when it was decided by the regional study team that the barangay selected originally was either extremely inaccessible or potentially unsafe.

Project supervisors visited the barangay captain in each chosen barangay, requesting from him a copy of the official list of all households under his jurisdiction. The barangay captain was also asked to identify whether each household on this list was Muslim, Christian or tribal. Copies of these lists were then made, brought back to regional headquarters, and pooled to form separate master lists of Muslim, Christian, and tribal respondents. The proper number of respondents for each region, along with a number of replacements, were then chosen randomly from these lists.³

Once a household had been drawn into the study's sample, it was visited by a member of the survey team who was to then select one adult member (age 18 and over) for interview. This selection process was based upon an equal probability of selection for four respondent categories: head of the household, spouse, oldest male in the household (other than the head) and oldest female (other than the spouse). Rules were provided for the

³For further details on the sampling procedure, cf. Palabrica-Costello, 1988, pp. 4-6.

selection of replacements in cases where no person was available in the designated category. This approach helped to ensure that both males and females and married and unmarried persons would be interviewed.

Interviews were conducted during May and June, 1987. Despite the potentially controversial nature of the study, no major problems were encountered in the field.

The purpose of this paper is to present simple descriptive statistics (percentage distributions) from the study, as broken down by the three major ethno-religious grouping--i.e. Christians, Muslims and tribals. Because no additional statistical weights have been given in this case to the Christian respondents (to compensate for the oversampling of Muslims and Tribals) it is important to emphasize that the results for these three groupings should not be simply added together uncritically to arrive at some estimate of the opinions about autonomy which are held in Mindanao-Sulu as a whole. The weighting problem, however, does not affect our estimates of opinions toward autonomy for each ethno-religious group taken individually.

Study Findings

Social and Economic Characteristics. The larger report upon which this paper has been based (Palabrica-Costello, 1988) gives a detailed description of the differences in socioeconomic

characteristics which exist among the study's Christian, Muslim and Tribal subsamples. For now I will simply point to two somewhat unexpected findings, the first of which concerns the commonly-held perception that Mindanao's Christian residents are largely in-migrants from the Visayan or Luzon regions. In contrast to this stereotype, however, the present study found that more than two-thirds (69.7 percent) of its Christian respondents were born in Mindanao-Sulu. Indeed, on one measure of migrant status Muslim respondents were found to be slightly more mobile than Christians.⁴

Another noteworthy finding was obtained with regard to socioeconomic status. As was expected, Christian respondents were somewhat better educated than Muslims and tribals. The difference between Muslims and Christians in this regard, however, was not large (e.g. 35.2 percent of the Muslim respondents had earned a high school degree, as compared to 45.5 percent of the Christians). More significantly, perhaps, is the finding that the levels of living experienced by Christians and Muslims are nearly identical, with neither group being particularly well off. The major contrast in this dimension is with the tribals, where poverty levels are truly acute and living standards clearly lower

⁴ Among Christian respondents, 18.8 percent had lived in their present municipality for less than 10 years. Comparative estimates for Muslims and tribals were, respectively, 20.4 percent and 10.5 percent.

than those found among either Christian or Muslims.⁵ This finding would seem to give little support to the simplistic assertion that Muslim-Christian hostilities in Mindanao are due solely to economic differences between the two groups.

Opinions and Awareness about Life in Mindanao. Before analyzing our respondents' views on the autonomy question, it may be of interest to see how they rate the Mindanao situation as a whole. Our data appear to show that Muslims are more dissatisfied in this regard than are either Christians or Tribals. Only 45.2 percent of the study's Islamic respondents said that they were satisfied "with life in Mindanao," as compared to 80.7 percent of the Christians and 83.4 percent of the tribals.

This is not to say that Christians and tribals view life in Mindanao as completely trouble-free. They, like their brother and sister Muslims, had no trouble citing one or more problems which they feel are now confronting Mindanao-Sulu. As shown in Table 1, members of all three groups tend to be most concerned about political and economic problems. Leading the list of issues in this regard are "peace and order problems," which are mentioned by over half of Christians and tribals and about a third of the Muslims. A large proportion (23.5 percent) of Muslims also cite

⁵ In terms of income, 52 percent of the Christians said that they were earning 1,000 or more pesos per month, as compared to 45 percent of the Muslims and 23 percent of the tribals. On a twelve-item scale of consumer goods ownership, however, Muslim respondents were found to own 2.9 items, as compared to 2.8 for Christians and only 1.2 for tribals. Muslims were also found to be proportionately overrepresented in white collar occupations when compared to Christians.

an additional political problem, namely, their underrepresentation in the government or their belief that a real system of autonomy has not yet been implemented in the region.

About a third of the respondents mentioned some type of economic problem as being the most important factor now facing Mindanao. These issues include complaints about their daily struggle with poverty and the high cost of living as well as references to the underdeveloped nature of the region's economy. Clearly, the type of government that is eventually implemented in the region must be one which is well equipped to face the dual issues of political instability and economic underdevelopment.

Respondents were also asked to nominate the course of action which they felt would be the best solution to their first-ranked problem. It is interesting to note that such oft-discussed solutions as land reform, increased support for the military, and more frequent appointments of Muslims to government positions (within a nonautonomous framework) are mentioned quite infrequently by our respondents. Instead, the most frequent response to this question--as made by Christians, Muslims and tribals alike--is a call for increased dialogue between conflicting groups. In that sense we can say that today's conference is very much in keeping with the wishes of the people of Mindanao-Sulu. Another approach given considerable support is the call for various forms of government-sponsored economic assistance programs. Indeed, some other data from the study indicate that there is a relatively

strong feeling among the people of Mindanao that their region has been neglected in that regard for too long now by the national government.⁶

As we shall soon see, Christians and Muslims hold strongly divergent opinions about the autonomy issue. The fact that these two groups agree on the two main solutions to Mindanao's problems (at least as defined in a very general sense) is therefore a source of some encouragement.

In general, Christians were found to be more politically knowledgeable than either Muslims or tribals.⁷ This is perhaps due to their higher levels of educational attainment and greater exposure to the mass media. An important exception to this general pattern, however, was noted for the case of political leaders, groups, or issues which relate directly to the status of Mindanao's Muslim groups. In all such cases the Muslim respondents were far more knowledgeable than either Christians or tribals. Particularly salient in this regard are the lower levels of awareness shown by

⁶Clear majorities (from 55 to 80 percent) of our respondents agreed to these three statements: "The provinces of Mindanao have been neglected in terms of development projects like roads and irrigation projects;" "The people in Manila don't really understand our problems here in Mindanao and Sulu;" and "People in Mindanao-Sulu should have more benefits from revenues from industries located in Mindanao." In general, Muslims were more likely to feel this way than Christians, but even among the latter group there was widespread support for these perceptions.

⁷For example, more Christians had heard of such political military leaders as Fidel Ramos, Nene Pimentel and Emmanuel Pelaez, as well as about such groups as the CHDF, the NPA, and the Mindanao Leader's Forum.

Christians and Tribals regarding the proposal to grant autonomy to Muslim Mindanao. Overall, 39 percent of the Christians and 58 percent of the Tribals had never been informed about this proposal. Even larger percentages (over three quarters) of the members of these two groups could not define what the phrase "autonomy for Muslim Mindanao" meant, while another 10 percent mistakenly assumed that this concept to mean that Philippine Muslims were to be granted political independence.

Muslim respondents were considerably more well-informed on these issues although even here a considerable segment were confused about or ignorant of the autonomy proposal. It is therefore evident that additional information campaigns about the topic are needed.

Attitudes Toward Autonomy and the Muslim Autonomous Region.

Table 2 provides data on the crucial question of attitudes toward the proposed Muslim Autonomous Region (hereafter referred to as the "M.A.R."). What is clear from these figures is that opinions on this issue are very sharply divided between Muslims and Christians and likely to remain so for quite some time.

Three questions were asked about the M.A.R., each one of which made the whole issue progressively more salient to the respondent. Parallel to this growing immediacy was a pattern of increasing polarization between Muslims and Christians.

The first question asked the respondent to state his or her feelings about the Constitutional provision for Muslim autonomy.

As we have seen, not all respondents really understood precisely what this meant, but a fairly clear pattern of Christian dislike for and Muslim support of the proposal does emerge in this case (see panel "A" of Table 2).

The second question was prefaced with a brief explanation of the M.A.R. proposal. Even though this explanation was posed in relatively favorable terms,⁸ it is interesting to see that Christian antipathy for the proposal actually increased in this instance (see panel B of Table 2). At the same time, Muslim agreement with the autonomy proposal appears to have become somewhat stronger, once it was properly explained. As a result, the cleavage between the two groups has now become more acute.

In the third question respondents were asked if they would like their own municipality to be incorporated into the proposed M.A.R. This, of course, raises the personal relevance of the issue considerably, insofar as the person being interviewed is no longer able to define the question as one which only affects other

⁸The explanation read as follows:

"Many Filipinos are concerned about the conflicts between Muslims and Christians here in Mindanao. The New Constitution has tried to solve this problem by saying that there should be a 'Muslim Autonomous Region' in some places of Mindanao and Sulu. These areas would still be part of the Republic of the Philippines, but the Muslim people there would be allowed to have their own government for local matters."

(This explanation, as was the case for all questions, was presented to the respondent in his own dialect and not in English.)

residents of Mindanao and not himself/herself. As a result, we get yet another shifting of opinion so that there is now a virtually perfect relationship between ethno-religious grouping and attitudes toward the M.A.R.⁹ In all, over 98 percent of our Christian respondents said that they did not want to live within the M.A.R., whereas 96 percent of the Muslims said that they did want to enjoy that privilege.

At least three important implications of these findings may now be noted. First, Filipino Muslims do support the M.A.R. proposal and would very much like to see it implemented. Secondly, Christians hold exactly the opposite opinion. Third, while information campaigns to explain the proposal are sorely needed in Mindanao-Sulu (see above) it should be understood clearly that such efforts will not, in and of themselves, be able to build a region-wide consensus on the issue. Indeed, Christian resistance to the proposal might ever increase in direct proportion to efforts to publicize it throughout the island.

Limitations of time and space do not allow me to discuss in detail the specific reasons why Muslims agree with and Christians reject the M.A.R. proposal. Briefly, though, Muslims tend to see in this proposal an opportunity to solve the two major problems

⁹After combining all Christian and tribal respondents into a single category, the Yule's Q coefficient is an extremely high .998.

(intergroup conflict and economic underdevelopment) mentioned earlier. Christians, on the other hand, tend to feel that Mindanao's peace and order problems would actually intensify once the M.A.R. was implemented or that they would be discriminated against under the new government.

Table 3 presents data on two hypothetical situations; namely, the interviewers' personal response in cases where (a) their municipality of residence became part of the M.A.R. and (b) their municipality did not do so. At least two negative reactions might be made in such cases: an increase in armed conflict between Muslims and Christians or an increase in refugee-like movements into or out of the M.A.R. It appears that a very large number (30 to 40 percent) of our Christian respondents would exercise the second of these two options if their home community were to become part of the M.A.R. Whether the Visayan-Northeastern Mindanao settings (which would undoubtedly receive most such refugees) are now prepared to cope with such a massive outmovement--which could involve more than a million persons--is a question which must therefore be posed to those who are advocating this type of political change.

It is also disturbing to note that a fairly substantial minority of the Christians (7.4 percent of all respondents, or about 15 percent of all male Christians if we assume that no females give this response) say that they would join an armed resistance movement to the M.A.R. if it were to be implemented

in their home community. This finding provides support for the prediction of increased violence as one possible consequence of the M.A.R.

This need not mean, however, that complete safety lies in a "do-nothing" stance on the autonomy question. For, while relatively few Muslims say that they would move away from their present residence if it were not to be incorporated into the M.A.R., a substantial minority of 17 percent say that they would "become a rebel" in the event of such an outcome. This would seem to imply that the proposal should definitely be implemented in the heavily Muslim areas and just as definitely avoided in the overwhelmingly Christian provinces. It is in the ethnically mixed areas such as Zamboanga, Cotabato and Lanao del Norte that our real problem would appear to lie.

Implementing the M.A.R.: Delegation of Powers and Boundary Setting. We have seen that Muslims and Christians hold diametrically opposed opinions about the proposal to grant autonomy to Muslim Mindanao. This, however, is a reaction to the M.A.R. in general, without resort to any of the specific decisions that would be involved in setting it up. It might be possible that agreement exists between the two groups on at least a few such questions, such as could represent a first step towards an acceptable compromise. For example, would there be some powers which Christians would be willing to grant to the M.A.R., or some which the Muslims would be willing to forego?

Unfortunately, the answer to this question appears to be "no." As shown in Table 4, very heavy majorities of our Christian respondents voice a negative reaction to the granting of each one of thirteen different powers to the proposed autonomous region. For example, more than 4 out of 5 Christians do not want the M.A.R. to enforce the public observance of Muslim holidays, while 90 percent would not want it to have its own flag and seal. It is therefore not surprising to see that even stronger opposition is voiced on the part of Christians to such controversial issues as ancestral land rights, the use of Arabic in the public schools, or the setting up of a regional security force.

For their part, clear majorities of the Muslim respondents do desire the M.A.R. to have all of these powers and more. Particularly popular among members of this group are the region's own flag and seal, public observance of Muslim holidays, the Shariah court system, special textbooks in the public schools, taxation, and regulation of natural resources.

A similar pattern prevails for the matter of just where the M.A.R. should be located. Approximately two out of every three Muslims feel that the M.A.R. should comprise all of Mindanao-Sulu, even including such heavily Christian locales as Surigao, Agusan and Camiguin (see Table 5). Conversely, the typical Christian respondent is willing only to allow the M.A.R. to be located in three small provinces: Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan, with another 40 to 50 percent expressing a willingness

to include Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur in this category. After that, the percentage of Christians willing to cede other territories to the M.A.R. drops off sharply. Among the provinces covered originally by the Tripoli Agreement, the strongest resistance is shown (on the part of Christians) to the inclusion of the two Zamboangas, South Cotabato and, in particular, Davao Sur.

Conclusion

A number of implications would appear to stem from the survey data discussed above. As a first recommendation, there is an apparent need for an accelerated information campaign, especially among Mindanao's Christian majority, concerning the meaning of autonomy and of the proposed Muslim Autonomous Region. As things now stand, most of Mindanao's inhabitants are very poorly informed about these concepts. It should not be anticipated, however, that the effects of such a campaign will necessarily be to build a uniform level of support for the proposal among Muslims and Christians alike. If anything, the polarization between these two groups on the issue may even increase as a result of such a campaign.

It is also important to emphasize that both Muslims and Christians have a genuine desire that peace and political stability will be established in the region. They want increased dialogue and understanding, not increased militarization. Clearly, though,

these processes will have to be accompanied by a willingness on the part of the Christian majority to accept at least some new ideas about political processes in heavily Muslim areas. Muslim Filipinos do want autonomy and they do want this to exhibit some clearly Islamic traits, such as publicly observed Islamic holidays, ancestral land rights, changes in public education, and the Shariah court system.

On the other hand, the strongly negative reaction to the M.A.R. proposal which has been manifested by the Christian residents of Mindanao-Sulu should also not be ignored. Imposition of a "Muslim" Autonomous Region upon such areas as Zamboanga or the Cotabato provinces will undoubtedly lead to a large-scale out-migration of Christians from these areas, along with the potential formation of armed Christian resistance groups designed expressly to fight against the M.A.R.

These considerations suggest that three types of governing bodies might be formed within Mindanao, based largely upon the current geographic distribution of Christian and Muslim groups. The first of these would be a truly Islamic autonomous region, set up in areas with large Muslim majorities. The second would comprise those provinces (e.g. the two Surigaos or the two Agusans) which are overwhelmingly Christian in composition. Relations between these provinces and the national government could remain unchanged or could be superseded by the formation of some type of autonomous governing body which is not based specifically upon ethno-religious considerations.

A third area could comprise those provinces in which a majority of residents are Christian, but in which there are substantial Muslim minority populations. While it would be difficult if not impossible to get the Christians from those areas to agree to such Islamic institutions as the Shariah court system, special provisions could be taken in these area to protect the rights and cultural traits of Muslim living therein and to ensure that Muslims are represented in all major regional policy-making bodies.

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