

# The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao as a Contemporary Issue in Public Management Education

SAIRA RAKIN UMPA\*

*Autonomy in Mindanao is viewed as a unique sociopolitical arrangement evolving in the Philippines. The violent confrontation in the past is now shifting to consultation of the citizenry and participatory decisionmaking. The national government hopes to solve the historically determined multidimensional conflict in Mindanao through the passage of the Organic Act creating the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which in turn triggers a series of necessary changes in the educational sector of the area. However, its actual implementation seems long in coming thus bringing to fore the pivotal role Public Management education can assume in terms of strengthening research and the role of higher institutions of learning in studying new institutional arrangements and workings concomitant with the creation of the Autonomous Region, thereby closing the gap between practitioners and academicians in nurturing participatory democracy.*

## Introduction

This paper aims to present an organic view of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, as linked to the future changes in the educational system and goals of these new political enclaves. While educational innovations and changes have already been institutionalized with the passage of Republic Act 6734, the actual implementation of these changes await the reorganization of the political and administrative structures in the Region. The new arrangements and workings of such structures would be an interesting study in the field of administration to students as well as practitioners.

While the establishment of regional autonomy for Muslim Mindanao is guaranteed under the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the sociopolitical arrangement whereby autonomy is granted is truly a unique one. The shift from violent confrontation to a consultative participatory decisionmaking is a new strategy in politico-administrative affairs. While there is today a strong worldwide tendency for people to band together and chart their regions' or nations' destinies, no other country has experimented on a democratic process as intensively exemplified by the formation of the Mindanao Autonomous Region.

Essentially, autonomy means the sharing of power, responsibility and resources to enable the regional government to enhance its capability to direct its own destiny.

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\*Former Member of the Regional Consultative Commission for Muslim Mindanao and Professor, College of Community Development and Public Administration, Mindanao State University.

The sharing of responsibility means, in the final analysis, that the regional government would really be accountable to the people. But the formation of the autonomous region, as a result of people's participation, has indicated that people are no longer mere bystanders or passive observers of their own development. Instead they have now assumed the role of activators and initiators of the development process.

### **Historical Basis**

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao is first and foremost a product of historical forces of regional and national character. These historical forces are in turn a result of the manifestation of events, since the pre-Spanish times, when the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao were well-entrenched governments and were acknowledged commercial and cultural centers. These and other significant events, combined with the ethnocultural transformations in Mindanao, interlinked with the overall social, political and technological progress of the nation spawned the emergence of significant parameters, among which are:

- (1) The rise of a secessionist movement in the late 1960s;
- (2) The signing of the Tripoli Agreement in 1976 and consequent events: (a) the referendum-plebiscite approving autonomy for the 13 provinces of Mindanao-Sulu-Palawan; and, (b) the establishment of experimental autonomous governments in Regions 9 and 12;
- (3) The EDSA Revolution leading to the enactment of the 1987 new Philippine Constitution, with the Constitution specifying how an autonomous region should be created;
- (4) The organization of the Regional Consultative Commission (RCC) that formulated the draft Organic Act;
- (5) The enactment of the Organic Act by Congress and the passage of Republic Act 6734, which is the law of autonomy;
- (6) The result of the referendum-plebiscite of 1989 that specified the provinces that voted for autonomy; and,
- (7) The implementation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

### **Autonomy For Whom and For What**

Regional Autonomy is broadly defined as self-governance for regional development. It is also the empowerment of cultural groups in recognition of their right to a

measure of self-determination within the larger national framework as enshrined in the Philippine Constitution and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

The National Government's official definition of autonomy as disseminated during the 1989 information campaign goes:

Regional Autonomy is the grant of basic internal government powers to the people of a particular area, with the least control and supervision from the country's central government, and which therefore means a greater freedom for the local government to respond to the needs of the people for the promotion of their well-being through a more equitable distribution of resources and services. It is a politico-administrative strategy towards decentralization of state powers. The prime purpose of autonomy as a form of decentralization is to make government accessible to the affected area in order to facilitate more efficient, more responsive, and faster delivery of services to the people. It is a means of empowering the people of a particular area to govern themselves within the framework of the constitution and the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country (Philippine Information Agency 1989).

One important aspect of autonomy is its thrust for the promotion of peace and development, not merely pacification. Autonomy cannot also be used simply to formulate a policy of attraction because it is a fundamental sociopolitical need and therefore an integrated component of the economic and political development process. In a politico-administrative sense, centralization of powers in the Philippines is highly evident; therefore autonomy requires the sharing of power and resources. Excerpts from the records of the 1986 Constitutional Commission show the following justifications for regional autonomy, which are:

- (1) The unitary system of government has been a failure in the Republic of the Philippines. Therefore, political power must be shared with the autonomous regions, because decentralization enlightens the access of the people to decision- or policymaking process;
- (2) Autonomy is in pursuance of the right to self-determination of indigenous people;
- (3) There is a need to rectify the imbalance in the development of different regions, particularly the regions of Muslim Mindanao, and the Cordilleras, and the neglect that these communal groups suffered through centuries;
- (4) It is urgent to remedy the usual weaknesses of local governments;
- (5) People power in its pure form can never be attained in a unitary government. There should be devolution of power towards self-management;
- (6) In contemporary times, the present claims for autonomy arise essentially from the strained relationship between a dominant group and a subordinate group; and,
- (7) It is necessary to strengthen unity as one people having one country, one government and one flag.

Autonomy has already come of age since we observe that decentralization is becoming a worldwide phenomenon from certain countries in Europe to the Russian republics. In the Philippines, the local government units, such as the League of Governors and Mayors have demanded for more autonomy for their respective provinces. Other regions have also expressed their desire for regional autonomy. And Senator John Osmeña is now spearheading a move towards federalism. Even in the regional offices, the officials have been asking for more powers and responsibilities to enable them to effectively deliver the necessary government services. Because of the built-in advantages of autonomy, the concept is now spreading at a fast rate. But in terms of the formal granting of autonomy, Mindanao is the starting point.

### **The Organic Act and Public Management Education**

As a former member of the Regional Consultative Commission, the author had the opportunity to directly observe the educational problems of the regions, and gather people's thoughts and feelings about the things needed to improve the educational sector.

The RCC came out with an original draft of 18 sections on Education, under Article 19, entitled "Education, Science and Technology, Arts and Sports." The entire article comprises seven subheadings, namely: Educational Policies; Curriculum; Regional Education Structure; Madrasah Education; Science and Technology; Physical Education and Sports Development; and, Cultural Heritage (Regional Consultative Commission 1988). The Congress version of the approved RCC draft (Republic Act 6734) had almost the same number of sections and only slightly varied from the original version.

Among the provisions of the law of autonomy significant to our discussion, and which may be considered as change-inputs to the general educational trend in Mindanao, are the following:

- (1) The development of a curriculum relevant to the economic, social, political, cultural, moral and spiritual needs of the people in the Region;
- (2) The designation of all state colleges and universities in the Autonomous Region as regional centers for tertiary and postgraduate education, assisting and supporting the full development of the people;
- (3) The establishment of a tribal state university system in the Autonomous Region;
- (4) The creation of a Department of Education, Culture and Sports for the Autonomous Region;
- (5) A system of scholarship programs, grants, student loans, subsidies and other incentives to be made available to all poor but deserving students;
- (6) The development of a regional language from the different dialects in the region;

- (7) The use of Filipino and English as media of instruction, and the major languages of the region as auxiliary media of instruction;
- (8) Arabic language as a compulsory subject for Muslims and optional for non-Muslims in all schools in the Region;
- (9) The participation of private institutions of learning, including the Arabic schools, in providing quality education to the people in the Region;
- (10) The enjoyment of academic freedom and fiscal autonomy by state colleges and universities in the Autonomous Region;
- (11) The development of Madrasah education;
- (12) Vocational, nonformal and special education programs relevant to the manpower needs of the Region;
- (13) The priority given to science, research inventions, technology, including incentives, and the protection of the rights of gifted citizens to their intellectual properties, including the full participation of all sectors in technology researches, and the application of science and technology for development.
- (14) The development of an integrated and comprehensive physical education program, and training for regional, national and international competitions; and,
- (15) The recognition, protection, preservation, revival, development, promotion and enhancement of the culture, customs, traditions, beliefs and practices of the people in the area of autonomy, including the recovery, collection, and restoration of historical and cultural properties for posterity.

Minor (1988), a former member of the RCC, conducted a survey of eleven municipalities in Zamboanga del Sur, and gathered the following recommendations from the respondents:

- (1) Regionalize the system of education to conform to regional demands and realities;
- (2) Increase government appropriations for facilities and infrastructures, and higher subsidies for government-run schools, specially colleges and universities;
- (3) Improve the curriculum to make it attuned to regional realities and address problems like unemployment and underemployment;
- (4) Implement free secondary education, and offer more vocational courses geared towards agro-industrialization;
- (5) Eliminate cultural bias in school (whether for Muslims or Christians), and include cultural tradition in the social studies curriculum; and,
- (6) Upgrade the standard of education.

As mandated by Republic Act (RA) 6734, the autonomous regions are already empowered to introduce educational innovations and changes. Most of these

changes are enumerated as provisions in Article 15 of the Act mentioned above. Thus, the Organic Act may be said to be the legal basis by which these changes would take place in the Region.

### **The Autonomous Region as a Contemporary Issue in Public Management Education**

The relevance of autonomy to public administration is characterized by the novelty of the sociopolitical arrangement, as a new strategy—the only strategy, in fact—that is truly unique from the standpoint of political process. The policies and principles as operationalized in RA 6734 also permit a wide latitude of effective action, especially for the practitioner in public management in areas denied of regional autonomy.

RA 6734 was conceived within the domain of public law and order as a constitutional mandate that germinated in a consultative forum through the RCC. Public participation in terms of large numbers of multisectoral groups was encouraged, followed by the formulation of a draft Organic Act which was reformulated and approved by Congress, the Senate and the President then validated by the people in a referendum-plebiscite before it was finally implemented.

The people's demand for autonomy has led to the shaping of a policy that would later have a strong impact, not only in the autonomous regions, but also in the national scene. This is especially true in the field of education where innovations are about to be introduced and changes or improvements about to occur.

Lavine (1976) has identified at least five conditions or states of the environment that support change. First is when there is a crisis in the environment; second is when people have a shared self-interest in change; the third state is when there is power imbalance; the next condition is when there is structured change in the environment; and the fifth is when change is consistent with the spirit of the time. In terms of the development of the Autonomous Region, we may find a chronology of events that reflect a form of environmental support for the new changes in Mindanao. The Mindanao problem as a whole, may be said to be caused by a crisis in the environment. And when people, both Christians and Muslims alike, mobilize themselves for effective action, this showed an attitude of shared self-interest in change. Later, this attitude would manifest in a larger national setting, popularly known as the EDSA Revolution. Power imbalance is best exemplified by the successful signing of the Tripoli Agreement between a small but influential insurgent group, the MNLF, and the National Government itself, which had to accept in principle the reality of autonomy as a viable sociopolitical arrangement in 1976. And when a new autonomous region was operationalized by the 1987 Constitution leading to the reorganization of the provinces that voted for autonomy, this could refer to the structured change in the environment. The last condition also holds true, that is, autonomy is consistent with the spirit of the time.

The educational policies built into the law of autonomy includes a policy on curriculum improvement and change. However, there is a need to distinguish change from improvement.

Curriculum change involves the transformation of the entire curriculum scheme, including design, goals, content, scope, learning activities, etc. (Taba 1962). It is different from improvement which concerns the changing of certain aspects of the curriculum without changing the fundamental conceptions of the curriculum or its organization. Therefore, individuals who engage in curriculum change should expect to assume the risks that accompany any attempt to reorder society and its value structure, since this involves change in values, people, society and culture, and the basic assumptions about what constitute education and the good life (Zais 1976).

Therefore, development follows change since planning and implementation are basic steps in the change process. Any curriculum change or improvement must respond to significant historical, social and political changes in the Region. The development of a suitable curriculum will have to take into consideration several factors:

- (1) The state colleges and universities (SCU) in the Autonomous Region have been designated by law as regional centers for tertiary and postgraduate education in their respective areas of competence. This greater dependency on the public education sector in matters of higher education means that the present SCUs will have to strengthen their current programs that are found to be supportive of the socioeconomic demands of the region;
- (2) The Autonomous Region reflects a blend of historical, economic and cultural aspects. The design of an attractive as well as effective curriculum must consider the differences as well as commonalities of these aspects;
- (3) Mindanao-Sulu-Palawan is replete with dialects. The law of autonomy stipulates that:
  - (a) A regional language may be evolved and developed from the different dialects in the region;
  - (b) Filipino and English shall be the media of instruction in all schools in the Region. Major languages in the Region shall be auxiliary media of instruction;
  - (c) The Arabic language shall be a compulsory subject for Muslims in all schools in the Region, and optional for non-Muslims.

The possibility of four major languages operating in the Autonomous Region, would certainly require great skills and creativity in designing an attractive and effective curriculum.

- (4) While Mindanao is generally agricultural in character with a high potential for agro-industrial development, each province in the Region has its specific demand or particular need for economic development. An SCU located within each province covered by autonomy will have to consider fully how its curricular offerings would approximate this changing need.

### Concluding Statements

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao has paved the way for the shaping of a policy on development and peace. Ideally if policies are legitimized and substantiated by popular will, it would not be difficult to achieve the expressed and desired goals of the people.

Some people are pessimistic about the Autonomous Region. They ask how development and peace can be attained in Mindanao when the principal initiators of autonomy—the MNLF—are not accepting the kind of autonomy granted by the National Government. Also, Congress's final version of the Organic Act removed and altered substantial provisions in the original draft of the RCC, and added controls that limit meaningful autonomy expected by the Autonomous Region. Overall, however, the implementation of the Organic Act commences the operationalization of a novel idea never before experienced by any part of this country. It is a major event in the political process and in governmental management. The Region will also have its own administrative apparatus. As a consequence, accountability in the Autonomous Region could easily be pinpointed because power-authority centers are precisely located, and bureaucratic red tapes would be greatly minimized. In a sense, autonomy would lead to efficiency, effectiveness and a responsive local government administrative system.

The Organic Act of the Autonomous Region spells out provisions for a relevant and client-oriented type of education. Simply, curricular planning and implementation should be attuned to regional demands, problems and concerns. It must be able to evolve training programs that are need-oriented yet visionary in outlook. Educational institutions, therefore, must alert themselves to future changes in the political and administrative spheres of the government. To cope with these changes and problems, fresh data and innovative methodologies are necessary. It is also important that the higher institutions must strengthen their research units. The results of the researches must be convertible to applications in diverse areas, examples of which are: the governmental activities, ethnic minorities, intraregional relationships,



and organizing effective tribal university. In this way, there will be a closer link between the practitioners who have the experience of the realities of government operations, and the academicians who remain in the universities.

In the near future, the infusion and influence of the teachings of Islam in the educational system and in all government activities would become evident considering that the Autonomous Region is heavily populated by Muslims. The Muslims as a people cling to the Holy Koran as the primary source of guidance in their everyday life. Islamic values strictly enjoin rules of conduct that regulate the dealings of every Muslim with God, with other individuals, and with oneself, as well as with society, government and the environment (Poingan 1981).

Finally, we expect participatory democracy to be a continuing strategy in resolving conflicts of a socioeconomic and political nature. Participatory democracy does not only mean the representation of the population in the legitimate channels of political power, but of great importance attached to it is the initiation by all multisectoral groups of policies and programs deemed necessary to public welfare. It must continue to be the method or strategy for reconciling divergent views and achieving common goals.

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