

CHANGES AND ADJUSTMENTS OCCASIONED BY THE AUTONOMOUS GOVERNMENT*

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By Proclamation No. 1628, dated March 25, 1977, President Marcos declared the existence of Regional Autonomy in Southern Philippines.

By Pambansa Batas Bilang 20, approved March 23, 1979, the Batasan Pambansa created the Regional Autonomous Government for Regions No. IX and XII in Southern Philippines and provided for the members of the Sangguniang Pampook and their election.

The first regional election having been held on May 7, 1979, President Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 1618, dated July 25, 1979, providing for the organizational structure of the Sangguniang Pampook and the Lupon and empowering the Sangguniang Pampook to legislate and the Lupon Tagapagpaganap ng Pook to act. The Pampook held its first session on July 27, 1979 at the Western Mindanao State University and the Lupon held its first session on February 13, 1980, its first three members having been appointed on December 8, 1979 and inducted into office on December 11, 1979.

By Presidential Decree No. 1639, the Autonomous Government was authorized to operate as Ad Interim government on October 3, 1979, with Pampook Speaker Nur-Hussein A. Ututalum acting as Ad Interim head.

Thus, one more phenomenal event was brought to pass in Southern Philippine history.

The Autonomous Government is extensive in its political and administrative jurisdiction. Five provinces, 4 cities, 96 municipalities and 2,339 barangay governments as well as 84 regional ministries are, in one way or another, under its influence or supervision. Two million four hundred thousand (2,400,000) people are its constituents and beneficiaries. Approximately, 1,733,611 hectares of land form its territory or area of autonomy.

To give you a fast view of the power and influence the Autonomous Government holds over the 2,444 local governments and 84 regional ministries or national offices under it, let me present a succinct summary of the number and nature of resolutions the Lupon

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passed in its first year of operation.

The Lupon passed 265 resolutions broken down according to the requesting agencies as follows: 92 resolutions were requested by the national line agencies or regional ministries in Region IX; 47 by the provincial governments, 40 by city governments, 35 by barangay governments, 26 by municipal governments, and 17 by government institutions, such as our state university.

The powers exercised by the Lupon are Presidential in their scope and were before exercised by the President himself or by one of his ministries.

The Pampook passes not local ordinances, restricted in their application but laws that bind the whole of Western Mindanao.

Having finished this factual background, let me proceed to the theme of my talk which is: *"CHANGES AND ADJUSTMENTS OCCASIONED BY THE AUTONOMOUS GOVERNMENT."*

CHANGES AND ADJUSTMENTS

1. Our perspective and view of Philippine history must change to integrate Southern Philippine history.

For much of the time that Philippine history has been read and taught in our schools, Southern Philippine history has been viewed as an irrelevance and annoyance. It was not part of Philippine history. What was Philippine history was what the Spaniards and the Americans were doing in the Philippines; and what Christian Filipinos were doing for them, under them, and against them.

The insistent, seething undercurrent of resentment and restiveness of the Muslim South against this partial and divisive view of Philippine history was simply ignored, let to sink deeper and aggravate. Until in the 70's, the Southern Muslims again rose up — and gave this revolt a historical continuum by calling it the revolt of the "Moro" or Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF); took the revolt to the Muslim Middle East. The Islamic nations, just then finding and using their omnipotent oil strength, identified with the Southern Filipino Muslims. And it just so happened that a large-minded President who is steeped in world and particular histories, sat at Malacañang and finally saw the whole truth of Philippine history; the truth of what was the true cause of the perennial restiveness and socio-economic malady of the Muslim South. And in a series of masterful Presidential decrees, proclamations, Instructions, Executive Orders and Memorandum Orders, President Ferdinand E. Marcos,

enacted and concretized his Muslim Policy, the epitome of which is the creation of the Regional Autonomous Government and its necessary twin, the Shariya-Courts.

What is the historical insight of President Marcos?

The beginning and the end of Southern Philippine history is a consistent movement towards regional autonomy. This historical movement first began with the landing of the barangay in Jolo and in the Philippine South; grew flesh and spirit with the implementation of Islam in the 1380's; and, finally, took formal organization in 1400s with the coming of Rajah Baginda and Sharif-ul Hashim or Abu Bakar who proclaimed the existence of the Sultanate of Sulu about 1450 A.D. In Central and South Mindanao, a similar movement was also developing that climaxed in the founding of the Sultanate of Maguindanao.

It was these two Muslim sultanates that formed the bone core of the Muslim resistance to Spanish and American colonizing and military efforts. Both sultanates divided Southern Philippines between them. They still exist in spirit, if not in form, today — something akin to the Holy Roman Empire that once and for long bound and united Europe.

The American governors also saw this insight or, at least, the practicality of governing the Muslim South in a sort of regional autonomous government. They established the "Government of the Moro Province" (in 1903-1914) that covered the territories of both Regions IX and XII, plus other provinces. Eventually, the Muslim leaders took this government as their very own, their leaders once proudly saying: "The Moro Province is ours."

For now, the President of the nation has accomplished the integration of Southern Philippine and Philippine histories. Let the Filipino intelligentsia and the *hoi-pol-loi* (masses) do likewise.

To re-state my thesis: *The Regional Autonomous Government is both a historical necessity and historical logic.* Its establishment makes order out of the mess of our historical development. It gives sense of our being one nation.

2. Our base of international diplomacy must emphasize our Islamic heritage and de-emphasize our exclusivist Western heritage.

If I were to name the single fact responsible for the establishment of the Regional Autonomous Government I would nominate the Tripoli Agreement signed at Tripoli, Libya, on December 23,

1976 between the MNLF and the Republic of the Philippines with the participation of representatives of the Islamic Conference.

Certain victories were definitely gained for us by the signing of the Tripoli Accords. This was the agreement that formally ended MNLF predominance in Southern Philippines and of MNLF sympathetic strength and support in the Islamic countries.

Our world today is feeling every pinch and prick exerted by the Middle East countries. Oil-rich Middle East is now the David slinging the Goliath of the world powers.

The main and salient item in the Tripoli Agreement is the demand for the establishment of regional autonomy in Southern Philippines, specifically, in the 13 provinces traditionally inhabited by Muslims.

While Iran held Americans hostage, the whole Middle East gave sanctuary to the MNLF leadership.

The Islamic Conference gave \$1 million to the Republic of the Philippines for use of the Muslims with a promise to give \$1 million more. In 1980, the first year of the Lupon's existence, we had some 75 foreign guests, coming from 20 countries, most of them from the Middle East and Indonesia. Several of the Lupon guests were Islamic ambassadors.

These are cues that Islamic Middle East, the Islamic Conference nations, are so very much concerned with and involved in the state and welfare of the Filipino Muslims.

For so long in our national history, it was our misfortune to ignore our historical Muslim heritage, to cut off the Muslims' historical efforts as irrelevant to what we were trying to build and accomplish in the Philippines.

If we are wise, large-minded and large-hearted as is our Philippine President, our Muslim heritage will now become our good fortune.

Our Islamic world neighbors are not yet convinced that President Marcos and his people are earnest and sincere in the avowed Presidential Pro-Muslim Policy. A supposed statement of Secretary General Habib Chatty of the Islamic Conference was published and circulated in an Arabic newspaper in the Arab world that President Marcos is still bent on Christianizing and annihilating the Filipino Muslims. Muslim Sabah is still giving sanctuary to the MNLF "stragglers."

Yet I still can say: we have won our war in Southern Philippines; we have begun to win our war in the Middle East, and in Asia too.

Let us pursue with all earnestness and will all honesty our Muslim-based Middle East Diplomatic Policies.

Like the Middle East nations who one day woke up to find there was oil wealth and oil power beneath their burning sands, we are finally waking up to realize that there are national riches and diplomatic power in our too-long neglected and deprecated Muslim heritage.

3. Our concept of local government must expand – from barangay government as root-base to regional autonomous government as central peak.

The Philippine Constitution does not explicitly mention the regional autonomous government as one of our local governments. Traditionally, our local governments are the: barrio or barangay, municipal, city and provincial governments. Conceived, delivered and supported by the President or the Executive Department, the regional autonomous government is similar to that of a national government or part of the Executive Branch and that of a local government.

The explosion of regional ministries in the countryside demands a centralizing force right at jobsite. And this can be best performed by the regional government, based at countryside and peopled by natives and residents. The inequality and inequity of development that centers only on the developed cities, such as Zamboanga City in Region IX, calls for a regional autonomous government, based here, that sees the whole pie and can equally spread the whole frostings or sugar-coating throughout. To date, the successes achieved by the Metro Manila Commission are proofs beyond doubt of the necessity and value of regional governments.

As stated in the beginning, there are 2,444 local governments in Region IX and 84 regional ministries or national line agencies. The Lupon's first and primary task was to make this umbrella of governments and government offices function as one. In our first year of operation we funded some 100 projects, small piecemeal projects, that were urgent and asked for by the autonomous communities. But our first impact and integrative project is that of the 92-hectare Government Center site at Cabatangan, Zamboanga City. Here we shall locate all the 84 regional ministries and the two branches of the autonomous government. We hope to put in one view the whole of our governmental set-up in Autonomous Region IX. We hope to let our guest or office-seeker accomplish in one visit to the Center all his government transactions.

I see as our first major task the selling of the Regional Autonomous Government as the culminating agency in the filling up of all our historic aspiration's and our socio-economic needs. Our first year's information campaign consisted of briefings on the regional autonomous government to our 75 foreign guests, 185 national guests and serving the immediate needs of some 4,000 locals from within Region IX who saw us personally. We held dialogues with the rebel leaders, dialogues with the local officials and local people in our provincial visitations. We held briefings and symposia for our students and local residents. We have distributed so far six publications on regional autonomy by thousands of copies.

I can say at this stage that we are making small victories; in our two-front propaganda "war": (1) the Muslim front with the message to them that the regional autonomous government is their government, born out of their own history and historical efforts at gaining recognition and appreciation from their leaders and their nation and therefore, they need not revolt anymore; and (2) the Christian and local government front with the message to them that the Regional Autonomous Government can be, with their support, their own "Little Malacanañg of the South" that acts on their requests with dispatch and with heart.

4. Our concept of Decentralization must change.

Even before Martial Law, there was already a slow and gradual movement towards Decentralization and Local Autonomy. Such laws as the Omnibus Law (Rep. Act No. 2259, passed June 19, 1959), the Local Autonomy Law (Rep. Act No. 2264, passed June 19, 1959) and the Decentralization Act of 1967 (Rep. Act No. 5185, passed September 12, 1967) were landmark legislations by our defunct Congress.

Immediately upon the declaration of Martial Law, Presidential Decree No. 1 (the Integrated Reorganization Plan) was passed ordering the reorganization of the national government with regionalization as the basic policy. It is in pursuit of this decree that the regional ministries in Zamboanga City mushroomed from a few to very many.

At this stage of the process, Decentralization was conceived as giving more powers to the national offices in the regions. And Local Autonomy was conceived as giving more powers to local governments.

Then, President Marcos created the Office of the Regional Commissioner and invested it with Presidential powers. It was the investment of Presidential powers and of some P 80,000,000 of development money in the Regional Commissioner, then, occupied by Admiral Romulo M. Espaldon, that turned the tide of the "Mindanao Revolt" to our favor.

These "Presidential powers and prerogatives" are now vested in the Lupon and in its Chairman by Presidential Decree No. 1618.

At this state of our political development, the Autonomous Government is the fecund matrimonial bed where the ascent of local governments and the descent of Central Government met and united.

And what an opportune, and fortunate, marriage it is!

Local Governments have, indeed, moved up; and Central Government has come down; and the happy offspring is the Regional Autonomous Government.

5. Our government bureaucratic SOP needs re-adjustment.

Section 39 of PD 1618 provides the following:

"Relationship with Service-wide Agencies. — The Ministry of the Budget, the Commission on Audit, the Civil Service Commission, the Ministry of Finance and other service-wide agencies shall make the necessary amendments and adjustments in their respective regulations and procedures in order to make them more consistent with the concept of regional autonomy and more responsive to the developmental needs of the Autonomous Region."

We are changing the usual bureaucratic red tape at Lupon. For instance, the 4,000 or so local Lupon guests in 1980 saw the Chairman directly and personally, so many of them presenting their requests in the dialects, many of them coming barefoot and in native attires. Requests for the hiring of personnel, for purchases of office equipment, for hazard pay and so on are acted the day they are presented. What used to take three months to accomplish are finished in three days, such as requests by governors for authority to enter into direct contracts with private constructors for public projects.

The local COA has liberated the movements of the Lupon Chairman from the usual auditing rules, thus enabling him to receive and entertain his foreign and national guests with generous grace, and with dispatch. The Civil Service Commission and its regional director have been commodious in passing upon our personnel appointments. And we understand that the Budget Commission, to whom we are immediately tied in our employment of personnel and disposition

of public monies, will soon issue a special rule that will free us from the other bureaucratic rules that bind and tie down other government offices.

But still the landmark administrative rules that will truly make us autonomous have not yet been issued by those service-wide ministries mandated by PD 1618.

For instance, our taxing powers vested by PD 1618 seems very extensive by direct Presidential grant. Yet, the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Finance has tied our taxing power down to the level of those of local governments.

And the Chairman still has to justify his appointments of personnel to the Ministry of the Budget and get approval from that office for his contractual employments.

President Marcos has created an administrative and political revolution as far as the governing of Muslim Mindanao and Sulu is concerned through some 50 Presidential acts which are organic in their depth and scope. Let his ministers and ministries follow suit!

6. There are vast changes in Muslimland too.

Finally, the long and lonely Muslim Revolution (that had its commencement with the first shot fired by the Spanish government in the 16th century) may be said to have its graduation in 1979 with the establishment of the Regional Autonomous Government.

What great changes this "revolutionary graduation" has wrought upon the Muslim scene!

Let me start with the participation of the Muslims in their government. As late as the 1950s, no less than the first Muslim National Artist Ibrahim A. Jubaira condemned the rank public discrimination against Muslims in government employment. Since the "Muslim revolutionary graduation" there has been an implosion of Muslim government employment.

Look at this record of Autonomous Region IX: We have three Muslim national assemblymen, 12 Muslim regional assemblymen; 4 of the five Lupon members; 3 of the 5 provincial governors; 38 municipal mayors; 300 municipal sangguniangs; 25 city and provincial sangguniangs and 630 barangay officials. Twenty three of the 84 regional directors and national officials in Region IX are Muslim. And 28.40% of the GSIS government members are Muslim! Be assured that this rich crop of Muslim government employment was never had before.

Look next at the traditional Muslim trade to Sabah and Borneo.

From smugglers, once chased and fired upon by the Philippine navy, our Muslim traders are now legitimate businessmen and their huge profits in barter trading have upgraded their quality of living.

Then look at the incorporation of Muslim culture into the national life: government capitols rise up in the Arabic style of architecture: the Sulu and the Tawi-Tawi provincial capitols are frontrunners here. The proposed regional capital at Zamboanga City will be an imposing Arabic structure, with domes and minarets. The prestigious Zamboanga Plaza Hotel represents the Sarimanok with wings spread out. Zambayan Hotel is like a Muslim cultural center. The roofs of several government buildings, in the city of Zamboanga exhibit the flying or lifting Muslim roof-style. The Muslim loose pant or kantiyo is becoming high society fashion and the Muslim folk songs are now rendered into violin and piano pieces.

For the first time, Arab money is used by high government to construct steel and cement Muslim mosques and strong-material madrasas — even, I suspect, in granting those quick and unsecured fishing loans of the mid-70s.

Muslims, high in government and in society, now fill and walk into government and social functions with the dignity of first-rate citizens.

Filipino Muslims have always been through the centuries the staunch and dauntless bearers of the pride of race and the price of place. Now, for the first time they are proud of being Filipinos and of their country, the Philippines.

Imagine what a tremendous revolution in Filipino patriotism and in Philippine nationalism will take root and happen should these changes of mind and heart and public construction and government involvement continue long after this era of tremendous material construction and human reform!

Like the "Magnificent Seven" that starred Yul Bryner, the Muslims of Autonomous Region IX may number only 700,000: but they fight like seven million! This is the lesson of Philippine history — if we care to learn it.

But, I fear, this is no longer formal paper-talk, but a flash of deep emotion from the heart.

I have been too long and too dragging in my presentation; you will accommodate me, please, in this beloved personal passion.

Thank you so much for your attention.