

Mindanao in the Politics of the Philippine Nation-State: A Brief Sketch

P.N. Abinales*

Introduction

Three incidents that took place in Mindanao are worth highlighting to show the unusual politics in the southernmost island of the Philippines. In September 1990, Jolo city in southwest Mindanao became the focus of national attention when the city's rival political clans fought it out with heavy weapons in the city itself. Only after a third of the city's district was burned did Philippine marines—acting on Manila's belated orders—intervene to bring a temporary lull to the conflict. The fighting left 20 people dead, 800 homeless and about 10 million pesos (\$430,000) worth of damage. A tenuous peace was established in Jolo. But as the correspondent who covered the fighting had reported, the Manila government, concerned with far "serious problems" in the capital "to worry about a clan conflict in the far-flung south" has done almost nothing to settle it despite knowing that "blood debts remain and...the marines fear a renewed outbreak of violence."¹

A month later, a more serious disturbance was felt by the Aquino government when a leader of a military clique that has been trying to oust President Aquino since 1986 led a small mutiny in the province of Misamis Oriental, northern Mindanao. From his rebel camp, Col. Alexander Noble, drove with his followers over 226 kilometers to the city of Cagayan de Oro and seized the army camp there.² Government troops, most of whom were sympathetic to or had high

*Researcher, on leave from Third World Studies Center, U.P. Diliman, and PhD candidate, Department of Government, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

regard for the renegade colonel, did not offer any resistance. As soon as the mutineers consolidated their control of the camp, a group claiming to represent major political "movements" and armed groups in Mindanao announced the formal founding of a "Federal Bangsa Moro Republic of Mindanao" to signal the first phase of the island's secession from the rest of the country.³ Alas, the mutiny only lasted for a few days. The "fire of revolt" never spread to other military units in Mindanao and no uprising or coup attempt was ever made in Manila and other provinces. A more confident Aquino government immediately moved loyal units against Noble. Faced with a superior military force, the mutineers surrendered peacefully. The coalition for secession fizzled out as the other "members" never came to the rescue of the beleaguered mutineers. With the surrender came also the arrest of the more boisterous Christian politician-members of the coalition. The rebellion and the move for secession died a natural death. At least for the moment.

Finally, a rash of kidnappings was reported in the province of Cotabato in southern Mindanao. The kidnappers were reportedly led by a group consisting of former Muslim rebels and government soldiers headed by ex-MNLF rebel Abogado Gado who bears the nom de guerre "Kumander Mubarak." Mubarak's group has been accused of abducting for ransom several local Chinese businessmen, a French priest, and—surprisingly—a group of academics. Manila responded by sending marines to the area to flush out the gang from their hideout and rescue their victims. After two weeks of "military operations," neither Mubarak was captured nor any victim rescued. Without openly admitting its failure, the government had to appeal from its adversary, the secessionist, Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), for help. A joint military-rebel operation partially succeeded in forcing Mubarak to release the hostages.⁴ The gang, however, remained unapprehended and even expanded its operations to the adjoining province of Sultan Kudarat with the intention of driving people out and taking over their crop harvests. This caused panic among the local Christian villages and residents reportedly fled to "safer" towns. Local Christian leaders, sensing the failure of the government-MNLF drive and faced with the prospects of feeding a growing host of evacuees, threatened to revive a 1970 para-military anti-Muslim group, the Ilagas, to defend themselves against Mubarak.⁵

These incidents immediately bring to fore two major issues. First, they indicate the persistence of frontier-type processes in Mindanao, even at a time when communications, transportation, demographic

linkages and state intervention are said to have completely bounded the Philippine nation-state. Like a lot of other frontier areas, Mindanao is today the most politically volatile region of the country. Conflict in the island is incomparable to any in the other regions of the country in terms of its magnitude and complexity. Located within a single geographic location are an immensely diverse groups "cooperating", challenging, or fighting one another or the national State. Operating in the island are also a host of other bands and movements: regional commands of the communist movement which had shown an unusual temperament of deviating away from the directives and policies of the Luzon-based central leadership; anti-communist para-military groups organized out of Christian cult groups and ex-communists noted for their gruesome practices inflicted on their victims; private bands of ex-military men hiring themselves out either to businessmen fearful of the communists or to politicians wanting to consolidate their power vis-a-vis their rivals, or involved in running illegal gold panning around the mining areas; and, profitable smuggling networks organized by Muslim warlords and Chinese entrepreneurs that control a thriving smuggling network extending as far as Singapore.

Besides their numbers, these groups' make-up and the interaction among themselves and with the state equally reveal an interestingly distinctive form. Based on the above cases alone, one notices the unusual dynamics unfolding. On the one hand, the army and the MNLF, long-time enemies clashing with each other, join forces to bring peace; armed bands whose manpower are derived mainly from excreted personnel of the military and the rebel groups roaming freely and plundering with impunity; and clans, declaring cursory loyalty to the principles of "party politics" and the pre-eminence of national authority, and then proceeding to eliminate each other with perverse intensity which is uniquely post-war Mindanao.⁶ On the other hand, the Noble mutiny was singular for linking the revolt to the "larger" issue of secessionism. What was more interesting about the secessionist coalition was that separatism had now ceased to be just a Muslim issue but had spread to and captured the imagination of other ethnic groups in the island. Even as the coalition collapsed as fast as it was formed, what followed in its aftermath was a renewed interest as well as demands by Mindanao groups for a federal form of government, if not a serious decentralization of state power, particularly its extractive aspects.⁷

And how about the other groups? In late 1985, the Mindanao Commission of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) defied

the official military strategy of the revolutionary movement by developing its own strategy patterned after the Nicaraguan revolution. While the cadres were censured for "deviationism," the CPP's marginalization in the 1986 uprising against Marcos prevented the Party from organizationally censuring these "renegades." During the Marcos period, a colonel enlisted AWOL soldiers and other military miscreants to form a "Lost Command" which took on different roles. It was more notorious for being guns-for-hire for the highest bidder and as provider of "protection" for gold prospectors. In a very odd way, the government tolerated this group's activities. It was, after all, occasionally used for counter-insurgency purposes. The anti-communist groups were lauded by the Aquino government as the models of how "people power" is used to defend the regime. The government, however, found itself in a bind when charged by human rights organizations of condoning the gruesome practices and other human rights violations committed by the vigilantes. A year after they were founded, the leaders of these anti-communist groups were already fighting each other over resources availed to them by the Aquino government and rightwing organizations like the Moonies. While vigilantism became a vogue in the early days of the Aquino regime, no other vigilante group in the other parts of the island achieved such an idiosyncratic and ruthless character as the Mindanao groups.

The violence in Mindanao—the most intense, complicated and volatile in the entire country—is of relatively recent origins. It only came about two and a half decades ago when the Manila-based national state sought to actively reassert its power in the island. In earlier periods, the attitude of the state towards Mindanao could best be described as impervious; it was marginal to the politics of the center. Increased state "interest" came under the regime of Ferdinand Marcos, when a confluence of local, national and international factors propelled the island to national importance. But even as the state became serious in installing a meaningful presence in Mindanao, its "intervention" led to an opposite result, i.e., state authority remains fragile and fluid. Despite the coercive and other resources it possesses, the national state is unable to meaningfully exercise control and assert its authority in the island. To ensure that an appearance of its authority is at least maintained, the national state has to co-exist with and condone the presence of disparate non-state groups and movements and in effect "share" power and authority in Mindanao. This partly explains the lack of decisiveness in resolving the Jolo clan

battles despite the presence of the marines; the forced collusion with the enemy to run after roving brigands; and, the absence of any government opposition to the early stage of the Noble mutiny.

In short, the fragmented political landscape of Mindanao serves as another indicator—among many—of the weakness of the Philippine state highlighted by its inability to create a condition of political and social stability by containing the rampant violence in the island.

The Colonial and Pre-War Periods

During the colonial era, most of Mindanao remained outside the ambit of Spanish colonialism. Its Muslim Sultanates acted as adjoining independent states engaging in resolute "warfare" with the Spaniards as well as trading with colonial powers in the "Land below the Winds." Christian "provinces" that easily fell prey to Muslim slave forays were set up in the northern part of the island, mainly under the initiative of religious orders as private and government-sponsored settlements mainly failed to push through. While the 1898 Tagalog-led Philippine revolution did resonate in the Christian provinces, the Sultanates completely ignored feelers for support from the revolutionaries.⁸

The entire island was only formally integrated into the Philippine body politic during the period of American colonialism. Muslim Mindanao was placed under direct military rule in the process of subduing anti-American resistance while the northern Christian provinces were immediately placed under civilian administration with the transfer of loyalty by the *rebolusyonaryos* to the new regime.¹¹ Under the Americans, the political landscape seemed fairly stable attesting to the successes of the American colonial state in subjugating the Muslims as well as in integrating erstwhile Christian leaders who supported the revolution against Spain. During the transition to political independence when Filipino caciques took over the helm of power from the Americans the nascent Manila-centered state adopted what appeared to be an impervious attitude towards Mindanao even as the rhetorics of this budding cacique democracy occasionally referred to its geographic and economic import.⁹

The links between Manila and the emergent Mindanao political families—both "Christian" and Muslim—were marked by a degree of accommodation that worked to each other's benefit. Although Muslim complaints of "Christian" encroachment on Moro lands and

control of local offices were endemic, inter-clan or extended family conflict appeared to be, during the period, at a bare minimum. National state actors—concerned more with the politics in Manila and their respective regions and provinces—gave Mindanao a low political priority, preferring the status of things and men, and allowing these clans and extended families to go on their own autonomous ways.¹⁰ In the Christian areas, caciques who collaborated with the Americans as expected took over the helms of local power. Some created what became enduring family “dynasties” in certain provinces.¹¹

Manila showed some interest in Mindanao’s role as a demographic “safety valve” for the more populated northern islands of Luzon and the Visayas. Seen as an island with an extremely low population density, “empty” Mindanao became—in the eyes of the national state—the ideal “land of promise” for Filipinos from the north to stake a new life in. From the American colonial period up to the post-war era, the Manila government sponsored “colonization programs” where landless peasants, former military men and “aspiring small entrepreneurs” were transported to Mindanao to ease demographic tensions in the north as well as facilitate ostensibly the “integration” of the Moro to the nation. But these settlement programs remained half-hearted and in most cases were considered failures as State projects.¹² Migration was largely spontaneous with settlers using family and kinship networks to enable themselves to move, settle and re-establish their lives in Mindanao.¹³

Mindanao did not figure prominently as an economic asset to the state. Foreign and local capital had moderate interests in the island’s resources. While some agricultural, mineral and logging resources were tapped by Japanese and American small capitalists for export purposes, much of the island’s natural wealth remained untapped.¹⁴ This was partly reinforced by both the colonial and the transitional states’ lackluster efforts at creating the infrastructure for capital penetration in most areas in Mindanao. An economic activity that appeared to have thrived well in Mindanao was a “post-colonial” version of the Southeast maritime network wherein “smuggled goods” coming from trading ports like Singapore were transported to Jolo. These goods were then distributed to as far as Manila either through domestic shippers or long-ranged fishermen.¹⁵ Control of this network was effectively under the hands of local Chinese merchants closely allied with Muslim clans.¹⁶

Into the Post-War Period

Mindanao escaped the type of devastation Manila experienced during the Second World War even though there were major clashes between the invading army and the joint American-Filipino-Muslim resistance groups.¹⁷ Anti-Japanese guerrillas proliferated to harass Japanese units in the island and also acted as the security force to ensure that Mindanao remained a safety exit for those escaping to Australia. In the immediate post-war period things reverted back to the status quo ante with two exceptions. First, was the constant increase in spontaneous migration mainly to areas which were already known to be settlement zones. As Christian migration grew, the first signs of ethnic tensions surfaced in the 1950s with Muslim *datos* taking arms against the State. But even then, even as these revolts caught the headlines, they were still considered marginal to larger national concerns.¹⁸ Second, there emerged among the Mindanao caciques new "leaders" whose powers were based on the accumulation of arms and men during the Occupation. These leaders were to join the ranks of the older "elites" and played significant roles later when Mindanao began to catch the attention of the national state.¹⁹

The 1960s was the watershed decade for what eventually became a fragmented political landscape. The demographics of the island indicated a rapid increase in population density, suggesting a steady "closing" of the land frontier. Population growth consistently rose from 1948 to 1960, most of the settlers ending up in the province of Davao. As two social demographers pointed out:

Between 1948 and 1960, the eleven provinces of Mindanao increased their combined population by more than 2.3 million persons, of whom 1.25 were beyond that expected from natural increase... There have been six major active migration regions in Mindanao during the postwar period: 1) Cotabato Valley; 2) Agusan Valley; 3) Bukidnon plateau; 4) eastern Zamboanga del Sur province; 5) northern Davao province, and 6) the Digos-Padada valley in southern Davao.²⁰

The massive influx of "Christian" settlers severely changed the population between Muslims and non-Muslims, with the latter experiencing an increase in terms of the total population percentage in Mindanao at the expense of the former. Like other frontier zones, one of the results of this profound demographic transformation was the steady contraction of land accessibility and use. Land-related

conflict became prominent during this period, partly because of questions of ownership, but also as a result of the reproduction of stratified social relationships from the migrants' areas of origins. In these settlement areas, land concentration in the hands of a few families—one of the very reasons for leaving Luzon and the Visayas—began to take form in Mindanao.²¹ Where the Muslim areas adjoin Christian settler communities, this land-related conflict took on an ethnic-religious dimension, leading to—in the late 1960s and early 1970s—intense armed warfare between Christian and Muslim groups.²²

Certain parts of Mindanao were also beginning to assume an important role in the political economy of the nation, especially in the export crop sector where transnational capital was a major player. Participation in this sector, of course, entailed utilization and administration of contiguous land areas for purposes of economies of scale as well as controlled regulation of export crops. Transnational capital, establishing partnerships with either Mindanao- or Manila-based economic elites to tap the island's "export potentials," accelerated the process of land concentration in Mindanao. This, in turn, played a role in the growing tensions in the island as constitutional limits on land ownership, the prevalence of parcelled small-owner land plots, and conflicting interpretations of land ownership and exploitation between ethnic groups and "lowlanders" ran counter to the centralizing drive in agriculture.²³

These changes did not escape the attention of the State which in the 1960s came under the tutelage of a faction of Filipino caciquism with pretensions at state-directed, export-oriented "developmentalist" program. Sensitive to growing transnational capital interest in the island, as well as conscious of the financial and credit resources made available by the state, private and multilateral agencies to "Third World" societies moving in the direction of export-orientation, the Marcos regime began to take Mindanao seriously as a potential economic and political asset. Regime rhetoric were actually matched with concrete ventures at improving the island's infrastructure, sustained campaign to entice foreign and local capital to tap the island's resources and efforts at making Muslim integration work.²⁴

These demographic, political and economic changes precipitated a conflict which escalated to a scale that was unprecedented in the history of post-war Philippines. The dictatorship found itself embroiled in a war against a relatively united Muslim population

now under the MNLF flag.²⁵ What distinguished this contemporary movement against "Philippine colonialism" from earlier forms of Muslim resistance was the emergence of a young generation of educated Muslim leaders not beholden to or growing out of the "traditional" sources of local power. Typical in this student group is the background of Nur Misuari who eventually became the founding leader of the MNLF. The journalist T.J.S. George describes Misuari along these lines:

He came from an extraordinarily poor Samal-Tausug family. His father had become unemployable because of ill health and was never able to provide for the family; Misuari grew up in extreme poverty. A scholarship had sent him to the University [of the Philippines] but it barely saw him through; there were days when he skipped meals.²⁶

Sharing a common "educational pilgrimage" derived from their attendance at "national" schools like the University of the Philippines or "international" Islamic centers like those in Cairo, these young leaders were able to—at least initially—transcend tribal divisions within the Muslim community to shape the most vigorous Muslim resistance to the national state ever.²⁷ Ideology likewise figured prominently as these young Muslim rebels were of the same generation as student radicals who eventually "re-established" the Communist Party of the Philippines.²⁸

The MNLF conflict was costly and debilitating to the Marcos dictatorship in terms of manpower and money. The failure of the regime to completely destroy the MNLF eventually proved to be its bane, for out of its "Vietnam" would emerge the military faction that helped overthrow it in 1986.²⁹ After the dictatorship was able to proscribe Islamic support to the movement and the latter's unity broken up with the resurrection of inter-tribal animosities, the MNLF's resistance did decline. But another movement-type resistance quickly followed in its path with the phenomenal growth of the CPP in the Christian provinces.³⁰ The appearance of these two major movements, in a way, triggered the resurrection of private armies which now incorporated the miscreants excreted by these major antagonists. The proliferation of weapons also afforded the local caciques to re-arm themselves thereby reviving the periodic outbursts of ethnic-based and clan strifes that were prominent in the late 1960s.

Tentative Conclusions: The Frontier and the State

The decline of Third World authoritarianism has, among other things, prompted statist scholars to re-integrate factors that earlier were either overlooked or de-emphasized due to the inordinate attention given the state as a central variable. Scholars re-examining Third World regimes have noted that in accounting for state strength or weakness, the influence of power of societal forces and their interaction with the state need to be given due consideration.³¹ Others argue that certain Third World societies have the facility to resist and undermine the powers of their national states. Such power and influence are said to be most evident in state-society relations at the local level. Societal power takes on varied forms. It may be seen in what Africanists call "associational lives" that act as "buffer zones" between communities and the state.³² It may also be observed in local "strongmen" and other community-based actors who operate on behalf of society either within or outside the state structure.³³ Hitherto strong states are found actually to be weak when these societal forces are brought in as equally-important variables. The state is forced to compromise with society in order to achieve some part of its national goals.

What is not extensively discussed in this growing "strong societies, weak states" literature, however, is the role played by spatial and demographic factors in determining why societal actors are able to resist the centralizing energies of a given state. Geographic location of societal actors determine in a certain way the dynamics of state-society relations. But distance does play a role in the way in which states are able to assert or fail to assert their authority on society. The farther a certain community is to the center, the more attenuated a state's authority and presence is. In the peripheries of nation-state, what Africanists call the "precarious balance between state and society" is accentuated in society's favor. Conversely, being near to the center of power limits societal capacities to resist the state. This does not mean that societal actors are unable to counter the centralizing thrusts of states; but their actions are surely limited by the state's nearby presence.³⁴ What needs to be entered in as an important variable, therefore, is the role played by distance in the formation of states and the consequent relationships that states develop with societal groups.

Studies on state formation, in general, tend to assign peripheries a secondary or subordinate role; peripheries being considered only in relation to the dominating role of the state apparatus and state actors. Where frontiers are deemed significant, an underlying assumption by most works is its eventual subordination to the politics and/or economics of the center.³⁵ The state and/or the center's economy are still the decisive determinants when understanding the role of the frontier or the periphery. Political economists and historians argue that by virtue of the superiority of the center's productive processes and relation against the periphery's, the former's extension into the latter means either the integration or dissolution of the periphery.³⁶ Political scientists also come to the same conclusion, i.e., a central state, possessed with the economic and infrastructural resources, the "legal" basis, the bureaucratic apparatus and coercive powers, has the appropriately superior capacity to exploit its peripheries.

Given this frame of mind, peripheral power (or local power in the periphery) is understood as being in its pre-state forms. Considerably in private hands, or when ascribed an "official mantle", it is exercised patrimonially in actual terms. The central state's intervention into the frontier would, in the process, remove this power from its private sphere, de-patrimonialize it and make it congruent with that of "legitimate," i.e., the central state's power. Local power is thus transmuted, its privatized form disappears and is supplanted by a legitimized power derived from the legitimate state.³⁷

The violence which results as the state "reaches" into the periphery is also seen as a logical *but expected* outcome of the process of integration. As soon as the central state consolidates itself, with its army establishing "peace and order," its laws installed as the prime guidelines for social and political relations, and the divisiveness of the character either eliminated or steered to more "lawful" pursuits (mainly electoral), frontier conflict is expected to fade away together with the rest of the "pre-modern" features associated with the periphery.³⁸

Yet, the history of frontier zones yields a complicated picture than is generally suggested.³⁹ On the one hand, frontiers affect the manner in which states build themselves and establish their authority. The experiences of the Brazilian northeast, the American southwest and even South Africa show that establishing state presence in

peripheries involves a complex process of establishing "a system of rules by which the new society proposes to live."⁴⁰ This system, to some, eventually determines the general shape of the political set-up presided over by the state. A fair number of scholars have argued this line of contention. American historians and political scientists have used the frontier to argue for or against the exceptional character of the American "liberal tradition." The disagreements are manifold, but both sides have accepted the "frontier thesis" as the departing hypothesis and, more importantly, accept the proposition that the shape of the American system was as much the product of the frontier as by other factors.⁴¹ The same arguments are echoed by Latin American historians who suggest that the lack of a democratic tradition in Latin America is also as much the result of frontier processes as well as other factors.⁴²

On the other hand, being located in the outermost areas of a nation-state, frontiers are also a cause for apprehension by state actors. Firstly, these almost always also serve as borders with other states.⁴³ When the demarcation of "national boundaries" are disputed, frontiers become the most sensitive geographic spots for states. And in the event of conflict, these are the most likely arenas for two armies to slaughter each other.⁴⁴ Inter-national tensions in the frontier may be aggravated by the presence of communities which, even as they are arbitrarily cut from each other by the official map, nevertheless are able to preserve loyalty to the *ethnie* at the expense of fealty to the nation-state.⁴⁵

Centrifugal tendencies could also very well emanate from the nature of the frontier zone itself. Incessant migrations and mixed populations preclude any stable social structure from developing thereby creating fluid conditions which, when combined with contracting land access, eventually breed social friction.⁴⁶ Supple frontier conditions also become the occasion for variations of local power to emerge that do not conform at all to the expectations of a central state. This local power—either grounded on the use of violence enmeshed with a kinship-based patronage system or based on the use of "official" designations for patrimonial ends or non-state ends—finds its unfettered shape in the frontier.⁴⁷ It may not conform to what the state understands as the legitimate forms of political relationships. And it may develop its own political trajectories that may not only be autonomous of the central state but, in extreme cases, may end up seceding from the latter.

Frontier-bred local power and the social frictions produced by or co-existing with it entail a reconfiguration of a state's power and authority. A state with limited fiscal resources, a weak army, and an undeveloped bureaucratic apparatus could either transfer effective power to frontier groups who turn themselves into petty rulers, or it confers on these groups a mantle of legitimacy as "state representatives" but allowing them considerable freedom and autonomy to determine how best to exercise their power, even illegitimately.⁴⁸ Where there is resistance from indigenous communities, it is to these groups that the state would rely on to suppress that resistance. A *quid pro quo*, however, is to allow these groups more leverage at the local level.

What is, therefore, suggested here is that peripheries can shape the contours of a state. They have as much influence as other significant elements brought in in analyzing state formation and state-society relationships. Scholars who see the need to "bring society in" to better understand how states operate can discern the resilience of societal actors by looking at their spatial locations as well as the specific development of their "power." Frontiers provide us with that opportunity to look at the evolution of these actors, especially at periods when the state is building its presence in the periphery and, more importantly, when it sees the need to actively institute order in the extremities of the "nation."

Three factors distinguish Mindanao from other frontier zones. First, the Philippines' archipelagic geography makes it easily accessible to the global economy in general and the illegal arms trade in particular. The border is most porous in Mindanao which explains why the Southeast Asia trading system that flowered in the pre-colonial and Spanish periods continue to persist even in the American and post-colonial eras. In its pre-colonial stage, this system had taken the form of the smuggling of commodities.⁴⁹ It had remained uncontrolled up to this day largely because of the pathetic quality of the Philippine navy. Maritime accessibility also enhances the mobility of local groups or forces opposed to Manila, not only in eluding the military but also in keeping open arms supply lines originating beyond national borders.⁵⁰ In the more "legalized" aspect of international trading, Mindanao's political economy has been most accessible to transnational capital engaged in mineral, agricultural and fishing exploitation. Transnational capital could, as it were, proceed directly to the southern island and does not necessarily have to course itself

through Manila. Mindanao, in short, "trades" directly with economic centers like Japan, bypassing the national metropole. This direct linkage with the imperial metropolises has a profound impact on the island's relationship with the national center, especially in terms of the "benefits" derived from a more direct line to the metropole.

Second, the "closing" of the internal agricultural land frontier which resulted from the "filling up" of certain areas by settlers, increased tensions over access to land and other resources. The "closure" coincided with Manila's increased interest in Mindanao, as well as intensified exploitation of the island's resources (old and new) by Manila-based economic elites and their transnational allies. All these did not stabilize politics in the island (as in the case of the American southwest and Australia); instead, violence worsened and the landscape experienced profound political fragmentation. Thus, the frontier literature itself needs to be critically evaluated when used as a comparative guide to the study of Mindanao.

Third, as mentioned above, a partial integration of the frontier was indeed achieved under the aegis of the American colonial state. With a powerful state as overseer, the process of "filling" up empty Mindanao began, while the island's varied local clans were able to ensconce themselves in the political landscape. The frontier was, as it were, conquered. But once the Americans left, so to speak, this integration failed to last. The transitional Commonwealth regime, notwithstanding its rhetoric, was unable to replicate colonial successes. The imperviousness of the Commonwealth regime was followed by the breakdown of the transitional state during the Japanese period. The War also became the occasion for new local power to arise in Mindanao. The gap between the American colonial period (including the disintegration of the state as precipitated by the war) allowed the frontier, as it were, to reassert itself. When the national state attempted to duplicate what the Americans did, this time interval was enough for societal forces in the frontier to deal with the centralizing efforts of the state. The result is what we see today: a violent mosaic and a politically fragmented landscape that makes Mindanao quite a unique part of the country.

ENDNOTES

¹John McBeth, "Clans in Conflict," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 September 1990. pp. 27-30.

²Noble was a former military commander in Mindanao who, in 1986, was appointed deputy chief of the Presidential Security Group, the military unit in charge of protecting the presidential family. After being implicated in the 1989 coup against the Aquino government, Noble was arrested but managed to escape back to his old haunt in northern Mindanao. He sought haven with the Higaonons which—like the Montagnards in Vietnam—were drafted in the counter-insurgency drive during the Marcos period. Noble was said to have personally trained the Higaonons thereby obtaining their loyalty. An international press interview with the charismatic colonel prompted the government to run after Noble, but many believed the order was never seriously followed by local commanders, many of whom served with Noble while he was in Mindanao. His mutiny was believed to be a part of a larger rebel strategy which combined provincial and regional mutinies with a major coup attempt in Manila. The mutiny was launched a little after Noble had successfully eluded a major military operation to "apprehend" him. John McBeth, "All Honourable Men," *Far Eastern Economic Review*. August 30, 1990. p. 17.

³The coalition— whose membership purportedly included the two wings of the Muslim secessionist movement, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Independence Liberation Front (MILF), Noble's group which consisted mainly of the non-Muslim Higaonon tribe, local Christian politicians and also the sympathies of a renowned Muslim warlord—was formed a few months before the mutiny and was already reported in the media to have agreed to jointly fight for Mindanao's secession. See *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 4, 1990.

⁴Save for the academics and the priest, the others handsomely paid off Mubarak. It is worthwhile to note here that since the early 1980s, kidnapping of Chinese businessmen or their children has become widespread in Mindanao.

⁵*Philippine News*. May 8-14, 1991. p. 7; and April 24-30, 1991. pp. 1 and 11.

⁶While clan conflicts are not unusual in the Philippines, the ferocity of the Jolo firefight brought back memories of the 1970s when such bloody conflicts took place over most of Mindanao. The burned-down district brought back harsh memories of the burning of Jolo in 1974 when government forces tried to dislodge MNLF forces there. Except for two northern Philippine villages that were burned down in the early 70s in an election-related violence, Jolo was the only city that had experienced such massive devastation. See Walden Bello and Severina Rivera, eds. *The Logistics of Repression and Other Essays*. Washington. Friends of the Filipino People.

⁷These calls for decentralization or federalism—mainly by local politics—had been interspersed by “threats” of making separatism an electoral issue. See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 September 1990, and also Armando Doronila, “The Capital and the Regions,” *The New Chronicle*, 12 April 1991, p. 10.

⁸On the successful subjugation of the Muslims, see Peter G. Gowing, *Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos, 1899-1920*. (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1977); while on the shift from resistance to collaboration by Christian leaders, see Filomeno Bautista, “The Bautista Manuscript on the Philippine Revolution in Misamis Province, 1900-1901,” in *Readings on the History of Northern Mindanao*, Francis C. Madigan, S.J. (ed). (Cagayan de Oro: Xavier University, 1978), pp. 149-183.

⁹For fuller discussion of the Philippine variant of caciquism, see Benedict Anderson, “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams,” *New Left Review*, 169, May-June 1988, 3-33.

¹⁰One of the outcomes of American colonial success in the Muslim provinces was the cooptation of Muslim *datos* and their families into the “national state structure.” While dispossessed of the powers and influence they used to wield during the Spanish period, these Muslim clans were allowed by the Americans to retain control over their territories provided that they played the colonial game. Thus well into the transition period, most of the Moro *datos* formally shed off their traditional powers and became “legislators” and “congressmen.” I am grateful to Ben Anderson for this insight.

¹¹This was the case of the Capistranos in Misamis province and the Fortiches in Bukidnon. While the Capistranos later on moved aside in favor of new clans, the Fortiches—to this day—have remained in power. See Bautista, op. cit., for Misamis and Mardonio Lao, *Bukidnon*

in *Historical Perspective* (Bukidnon: Central Mindanao University, 1985).

¹²A policy-oriented discussion of the failure of government-sponsored settlement programs can be found in Margaret Pfanner, *Postwar Land Colonization in the Philippines*. (M.A. Thesis, Cornell University, 1958).

¹³See Peter A. Krinks, *Peasant Colonization in Mindanao, the Philippines*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1974).

¹⁴Serafin D. Quiason, "The Japanese Colony in Davao, 1904-1941," *Philippine Social Science and Humanities Review*, XXIII, 1958; and Grant K. Goodman, "Davao: A Case Study in Japanese-Philippine Relations," *International Studies*, (East Asian Series Research Publication, No. 1. Center for East Asian Studies, The University of Kansas, 1967).

¹⁵The persistence of this trade is suggested in A.V. Hartendorp. "Import Control, High Taxes and Smuggling," *American Chamber of Commerce Journal*, Vol. 34. May 1958. p. 197. I am grateful to John Sidel for pointing out this source to me. This network extends as far back as pre-colonial Southeast Asia and is discussed by Kenneth R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), pp. 225-227. A fascinating account of the Sulu Sultanate's role in this trade is James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898*. (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985).

¹⁶See Wilfredo F. Arce, *Before the Secessionist Storm: Muslim-Christian Politics in Jolo, Sulu, Philippines, 1961-62* (Singapore: Maruzen Press, 1983).

¹⁷Uldarico Baclagon. *Christian-Moslem Guerrillas of Mindanao*. (Manila, 1988).

¹⁸See T.J.S. George, *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in the Philippines* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹⁹Among the more notorious of these leaders are Salipada Pendatun of Cotabato and Ali Dimaporo of Lanao del Sur, Muslim warlords-par excellence. In the Christian communities, this "warlordist" phenomenon could be seen in the political beginnings of current Secretary of Local Government under the Aquino regime, Luis K. Santos.

²⁰Paul D. Simkins and Frederick L. Wernstedt, *Philippine Migration: The Settlement of the Digos-Padada Valley, Davao Province* (Southeast Asia Studies; Yale University Monograph Series No. 16, 1971), p.3.

²¹See Krinks, op. cit., and Paul D. Simkins and Frederick L. Wernstedt, op. cit.

²²George, op. cit.

²³See Eduardo Tadem, *Mindanao Report: A Preliminary Study on the Economic Origins of Social Unrest* (Davao City: AFRIM Resource Center, 1980. On the spectacular growth of a Mindanao export crop, bananas, see Randolph David, et al. *Transnational Corporations and the Philippine Banana Export Industry* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1980).

²⁴See Demigillo; Tadem.

²⁵For the Mindanao war, see George, see also Bello. Over 80 percent of the AFP was in Mindanao.

²⁶Op. cit., p. 197.

²⁷In contrast, most of the earlier generations of Muslim leaders barely completed a tertiary level of education. Their entry into the political arena was due more to their capitalizing on their "traditional" leaders of the different Muslim tribes, or later on, on either control over coercive resources like private armies or patronage ties with "national" leaders.

²⁸The MNLF's founder, Nur Misuari was a colleague of CPP founder Jose Ma. Sison at the University of the Philippines. Both were also among the first members of the nationalist-radical student organization, *Kabataang Makabayan*.

²⁹I am referring here to the Reform the Armed Forces of the Philippines Movement (RAM) whose core group consisted of officers who were veterans of the Mindanao war. A fine introductory discussion on the politicization of this military faction are Francisco Nemenzo, "A Season of Coups..." and Felipe Miranda, "The Military," in *The Philippines After Marcos*, Ron May and Francisco Nemenzo, eds. (Sydney: Croom Helm Publications, 1985).

³⁰See Gregg Jones.

³¹See among others, Alfred Stepan, ed. *Democratizing Brazil: Programs of Transition and Consolidation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³²See for example, Victor Azarya and Naomi Chazan, "Disengagement from the State in Africa: Reflections on the Experiences of Ghana and Guinea," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (29 January 1987), pp. 106-131; and, Michael Bratton, "Beyond the State: Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa," *World Politics* (41. 3 April 1989).

³³See for example, Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986); Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies, Weak States: State-Society Relations and Capacities in the Third World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988).

³⁴See the collection, Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan, eds. *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988). For a critique of statist studies on Africa, see Robert Fatton, Jr., "The State of African Studies and Studies of the African State: The Theoretical Softness of the 'Soft State,'" *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, XXIV (Nos.3-4), pp. 170-187.

³⁵Beyond the orbit of the nation-state, there is, of course, Immanuel Wallerstein.

³⁶See for example, Joe Foweraker, *The Struggle for Land: A Political Economy of the Pioneer Frontier in Brazil from 1930 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 106-127; 169-186; and 209-234. In the case of the American frontier, see Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), pp. 37-47.

³⁷There is, however, also a reverse to this. In Imperial China, the marauding tribes in the frontiers were used as deterrent to possible internal dissensions. Yet, the state was still the central actor in this reverse process. See Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989).

³⁸Joseph L. Wiczyński, *The Russian Frontier: The Impact of Borderlands upon the Course of Early Russian History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), pp. 47-58.

³⁹See for example, the diverse definitions of frontier zones, in Leonard Thompson and Howard Lamar, *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 11. Latin American historians also note the diversity of frontier zones. See Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), pp. 12-16, 83-86, 90, and 113-120.

⁴⁰Emilio Willems, "Social Change on the Latin American Frontier," in David H. Miller and Jerome O. Steffen, *The Frontier: Comparative Studies* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 259.

⁴¹For the influence of the frontier myth on the evolution of American liberal democracy, see for example, David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952); Ray Allen Billington. *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Slotkin, op. cit.; and Eric Foner, "Why is there no Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop Journal* (May 1983).

⁴²As Hennessy puts it: "The further a region was from the central power, the greater liberty was given to local landowners to dominate their work force and the underpaid, centrally-appointed, government officials. During the colonial period, in Brazil, for example, the powers of local policing were handed over to the *fazendeiros* who were appointed *coroneis* and undertook to police the areas under their control with private armies. For practical purposes, they were virtually autonomous. The weaknesses of national governments, crippled by financial burdens, indebted to foreign powers, and unable to raise income except by levying export and import taxes, limited their patronage resources to granting lands or franchises, in return for political support. The conflict between regionalism and centralism has been a major theme in the politics of independent Latin America." Alistair Hennessy, *Frontier in Latin American History*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), p. 130. See also Sue Branford and Oriel Glock, *The Last Frontier: Fighting over Land in the Amazon* (London: Zed Press, 1985), p. 4.

⁴³J.R.V. Prescott, *Boundaries and Frontiers* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

⁴⁴Pre-national political formations are equally not exempt from the precariousness of frontiers.

⁴⁵Anthony D. Smith, "State-Making and Nation-Building," in *States in History*, John Hall, ed. (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd.), 1978, pp. 252-263.

⁴⁶What is important is the control of land and people. See Catherine LeGrand, *Frontier Expansion and Peasant Protest, 1850-1936*. (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 1986), pp. xv-10.

⁴⁷See, for example, Silvio R. Duncan-Baretta and John Markoff, "Civilization and Barbarism: Cattle Frontiers in Latin America," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XX, 4. (October 1978), pp. 587-620; Peter Singelmann, "Political Structure and Social Banditry, in Northeast Brazil," *Journal of Latin American Studies* (Vol. 7. No. 1), pp. 59-83; Alfredo Wagner Berno de Almeida, "The State and Land Conflicts in Amazonia, 1964-88," in *The Future of Amazonia: Destruction or Sustainable Development?* David Goodman and Anthony Hall, eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 227-261; Bill O'Neal, *Cattlemen vs. Shepherders: Five Decades of Violence in the West, 1880-1920* (Texas: Eakin Press, 1989); W. Eugene Hollon, *Frontier Violence: Another Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁴⁸See John Thayer Sidel, "Beyond Patron-Client: 'Wardlordism' and Local Politics in the Philippines." Paper presented at the Third International Philippine Studies Association Conference, Manila, July 13-16, 1989.

⁴⁹The comments of Owen Lattimore regarding smuggling and the frontier are apropos, to wit: "Where...a frontier is emphasized by tariffs on goods exported and imported, it is normal for many people in both frontier populations to engage in smuggling." Owen Lattimore. *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928-1958*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 470. The persistence of this trade in the post-war period is suggested in A.V. Hartendorp. "Import Control, High Taxes and Smuggling," *American Chamber of Commerce Journal*, Vol. 34. (May 1958), p. 197. I am grateful for John Sidel for pointing out this source. The pre-colonial origin of this Southeast Asian trade is discussed by Kenneth R. Hall. *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), pp. 225-227. A fascinating account of the Sulu Sultanate's role in this trade is James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1985).

⁵⁰Arms supplied by sympathetic Arab nations to the MNLF is believed to be coursed through this Philippine "backdoor."