

## **The Rohingyas in Myanmar (Burma) and the Moros in the Philippines: A Comparative Analysis of Two Liberation Movements**

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, the relative success of the Moros in the Philippines and the tragic failure of the Rohingyas in Myanmar raise important questions: what are the reasons behind the Moros' liberation movement being a success and the Rohingyas movement being a failure? What has led the Moros to achieve at least partial regional autonomy vis-à-vis the failure of the Rohingyas? In the light of Huntington's theory of revolution, this paper argues that despite the fact that Myanmar and the Philippines have nearly the same percentage of Muslims, the Moros have been successful at least due to three reasons: First, the political conditions have been much more conducive in the Philippines compared to Myanmar for liberation movement. Secondly, the Moros' movement has been led by a strong organization under a capable leadership while the Rohingyas' movement lacks a strong organization and an able leadership. Finally, while the Moros have successfully mobilized mass support both at home and abroad, the Rohingyas have failed to internationalize their movement and, consequently, they have become "stateless" and "political refugees."*

According to two prominent sociologists—Max Weber and Emile Durkheim—in a multi-ethnic society, religion plays a dominant role, among many other factors, in the formation of ethnic identity. In many instances, religion is either an important source of cleavage or a convenient rallying point for a minority group with a perceived grievance. Two countries of Southeast Asia—Myanmar (Burma) and

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the Philippines—are glaring examples of this scenario. Muslims in these two countries constitute religious minorities. Buddhists form the dominant religious group in Myanmar as do the Catholic Christians in the Philippines. In both of the countries, however, Muslims are concentrated in a defined geographical area. While the Muslims in Myanmar, called Rohingyas, are located in Arakan, a western province, the Muslims in the Philippines, popularly known as Moros, are concentrated in the Mindanao-Sulu region, the southern part of the Philippines. Both are bordered by a neighbouring Muslim state—Myanmar by Bangladesh, and the Philippines by Malaysia. Since independence both the Rohingyas and the Moros have demanded independence for their respective states; in order to achieve the goal both have initiated guerilla insurgency movements. After fifty years of struggle, the Moros in the Philippines have shown success, of late, in achieving a partial "autonomy," if not independence. The Rohingyas in Myanmar, on the other hand, have become political refugees and stateless. In the last few months, negotiations between the Ramos government and the Moro rebellious group indicate that further concessions may be forthcoming.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the apparent success of the Moros in the Philippines and the failure of the Rohingyas in Myanmar has raised important questions. What is wrong with the Rohingyas' movement in Myanmar as compared to the Moros' movement in the Philippines? What has led to the success of the Moros in the Philippines vis-à-vis the failure of the Rohingyas in Myanmar? In his book *Political Order in Changing Societies* Huntington states that a revolution or a violent separatist movement occurs in a political system in which there exist certain political and social conditions.<sup>2</sup> A movement is unlikely in a system in which political institutions are capable of providing channels for the participation of separatist groups. Thus, the great revolutions in history, according to him, have occurred only in "undemocratic" systems. If a well-defined group does not find means for participation in a system, the group and its leaders become frustrated and feel alienated, which tends to make them revolutionary. However, in order to be successful, a movement must possess three conditions. First, the political conditions must be conducive for the movement; secondly, there must exist a strong political organization under a strong leadership to lead the movement; and thirdly, this organization must be able to mobilize mass-based support both internally and externally.

In the light of these theoretical assumptions one may raise the question: does this apply to the cases of the Rohingyas and the Moros? In order to examine this question, it is essential first to look at the roots of separatist movements historically and then to the nature of contemporary resistance movements in both Myanmar and the Philippines. It is against the backdrop of historical and contemporary developments that one can best examine the relative success of the Moros in the Philippines and the failure of the Rohingyas in Myanmar in achieving their desired goals.

### **BACKGROUND: THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT**

The Southeast Asian region has been influenced by different external forces in the course of its long history. In the first centuries of the Christian era the Indian and Chinese civilizations appeared in the region. Subsequently, the Arabs and the Europeans entered the area. The arrival of various external groups contributed to the growth of heterogeneity in these societies. Until the arrival of the Portuguese and the Spanish, the Arabs were the undisputed masters of trade in Southeast Asia. The initial contact of Southeast Asia with Islam is undoubtedly a by-product of Arab trade in the region. Once Islam had spread in Arabia, Arab traders brought the religion to this region as early as the eighth century.<sup>3</sup> It was around this time that Islam took root in both Myanmar and the Philippines as well as in other countries of Southeast Asia.

#### **Arakan in Myanmar**

Arakan, now a state of Myanmar, had been an independent kingdom until 1784. Arab traders had been in contact with Arakan since the third century and they had introduced Islam to Arakan around 788 C.E.<sup>4</sup> During that time, a dynasty, Chandra, was ruling the Kingdom of Arakan. The Arab merchants carried out missionary activities by spreading Islam side by side their trade. In the process, a large number of people were converted to Islam. Many of the early Arabs married local women and settled there permanently. Due to conversion, intermarriage and immigration, the Muslim population grew to large numbers during the subsequent centuries. These Muslims came to be known as Rohingyas, a term derived from the Arabic term *Raham* (God's blessing).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the Arabs called those Muslims "God's blessed people," Rohingyas. Until the 15th century, the country was

ruled by a non-Muslim king, Naramekhla, who himself embraced Islam in 1404 and adopted the Muslim name of Solaiman Shah.<sup>6</sup> After the conversion of the Arakanese king to Islam, Arakan became a Muslim-majority kingdom since a large number of people had accepted Islam as their religion.

Arakan remained an independent Muslim kingdom for more than three and a half centuries. With the death of Salim Shah II, the last Muslim king, in a palace intrigue, the kingdom became politically and militarily weak. By then, Buddhism had arrived in the region from Tibet-Mongolia. By the middle of the tenth century "the Mongolian race Burmans, mostly Buddhists, had established their seat of power in Burma proper."<sup>7</sup> Buddhists were still immigrating to Arakan at this time. During the decaying years of Muslim rule in Arakan, a Burman king of Ava, Bodaw Phaya, invaded Arakan and gained complete control of it in 1784. Thus came the end of independent Arakan.<sup>8</sup> In 1824, the British East India Company invaded Burma and through the Anglo-Burmese War, Arakan came under the sway of the British. The whole of Burma, including Arakan, was brought under the Indian system of administration.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Mindanao Region in the Philippines**

The Mindanao region in the Philippines, once an independent kingdom, consisted of indigenous tribes. Islam came to this kingdom around the same time as in Arakan, i.e., in the 8th century.<sup>10</sup> Since then Arab traders had preached Islam in this land but had established their settlements permanently only at the end of the 13th century. By the next one hundred years, the Muslims had established a Sultanate and by the end of the 14th century the process of Islamization had reached a stage at which simply being a Muslim became a passport to acceptance in the community.<sup>11</sup> Since Islam became an important component of the Mindanao society, it introduced many of its features to the local people. In 1565, the Spanish colonialists arrived and launched a series of attacks against the Muslim sultanates, which continued for the next three and a half centuries. The Spaniards began to call the Muslims Moros, for the religious practices of the latter reminded them of the "Moors" who had once ruled Spain for several centuries.<sup>12</sup>

During the 19th century, however, the Sultanate of Mindanao allowed the Spaniards to maintain colonies in northern and northeastern Mindanao provided that the Spaniards did not encroach upon the

Sultanate's traditional spheres of influence. By then, Spanish missionaries had been successful in converting the people of other parts of the Philippines to Christianity. In 1899, when Spain sold the sovereignty of the Philippines to the United States of America, the American government attempted to incorporate the Mindanao region into the Philippines state. The Moros fought and resisted these attempts but failed to retain sovereignty. In 1915, the King of Sulu was forced to abdicate his throne but was allowed to remain as the head of Muslims.<sup>13</sup> Thus B.N. Pandey writes, "The Muslims were the only Filipinos never to be totally brought under the control by the Spaniards, who ruled the country for nearly 400 years. Even the Americans succeeded in extending their rule over them only after engaging in two fierce and memorable battles in 1906 and 1913."<sup>14</sup> In April 1940, the American government abolished the Sultanate completely bringing Moro territories under the administrative system of the Philippines. Independence in 1946 left the Philippines with two major religious communities: the Muslims and the Catholics.

### **RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: RELIGIONS AT WAR**

During the colonial period, the rulers were not interested in the national integration of diverse communities. On the contrary, these divisions were used for prolonging colonial rule, with its policy of "divide and rule." All attachments or loyalties to sub-national groups were carefully subdued. Once the decolonization process began, the new states were faced with the problem of possible alienation of one or more groups in the country's political system. These groups demanded greater participation, more autonomy and/or secession. Myanmar and the Philippines were no exceptions to this pattern.

#### **Myanmar**

There are more than one hundred ethnic groups in Myanmar. The Burmans are, numerically, the largest group and the ruling elite. Fearful of the Burman majority, all the ethnic groups, particularly from Shan, Kachin, Karen and Arakan demanded from the nationalist party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, an assurance of regional autonomy for the provinces in an independent Myanmar.<sup>15</sup> The nationalist leader, General Aung San, convened a conference of all ethnic groups at Panglong in 1947. It was agreed that all states would be given regional autonomy with the provision of seceding after ten

years of independence.<sup>16</sup> Soon after independence, however, the constitution which was adopted after Aung San's death declared that the new state, called Burma, would be unitary in character, with no autonomy for the provinces. The constitution caused immediate ethnic insurrection which became worse after 1958, even though Prime Minister U Nu had declared Buddhism the state religion of the country to appease the ethnic groups, as a great majority of them were Buddhists.<sup>17</sup>

It was not only the question of denial of autonomy to the provinces, but also a number of specific measures were taken in Arakan to dismiss a great many Muslim officers and replace them with Buddhists. An all out effort was made to transmigrate Buddhists from Burma proper to Arakan in order to diminish the Muslim majority.<sup>18</sup> In these circumstances a Japanese-trained Rohingya, Jafar Kamal, started organizing the people, calling them *Mujahids*. However, against the trained Burmese soldiers, the *Mujahids* could not last long. Jafar was assassinated. Many of his supporters were captured and killed. By 1962 the civilian government had also collapsed and the army took over. The military regime abolished the constitution, dissolved the parliament and banned the activities of all organizations. The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) inflicted heavy casualties on the Rohingya masses. The immigration authorities imposed limitations on the movement of the Rohingyas from one place to another. Thus they were virtually imprisoned.<sup>19</sup> The brutality of the regime reached such an extreme level that a group of Rohingyas, mainly university graduates, secretly organized a resistance organization, *Rohingya Independence Front* (RIF), with the objective of achieving independence for Arakan. Many former *Mujahids* joined the organization but could not do much under the tight control of the regime.

The regime exercised tyranny over all ethnic groups, and over the Rohingyas in particular. General Ne Win launched a major offensive under the code name of "King Dragon Offensive," against the Rohingya liberation force.<sup>20</sup> In order to control the movement of the villagers, the regime ordered the small villages to be abolished and their populations concentrated in large villages, which were fenced and provided with only one gate. Subsequently, hundreds of villagers were uprooted by force and driven into the stockaded villages.<sup>21</sup> At the end of 1975 some veteran RIF activists and young university graduates formed the Rohingya *Patriotic Front* (RPF). But confronted with the might of the "King Dragon" operation, the guerillas could not survive.

Hundreds of Rohingya men and women were thrown into jail; many of them were tortured and killed. Rohingya women were raped freely in the detention camps. In fact, one Buddhist scholar wrote, "they have even the names of the victims of rape and murder. In some cases even the names of the army officers who committed the crimes are available with dates and places."<sup>22</sup> Terrified by the ruthlessness of the operation and the total uncertainty surrounding their lives and property, nearly 200,000 Muslims fled to Bangladesh in 1978. The UN High Commission for Refugees began relief operations. The government of Bangladesh negotiated with the government of Burma for taking the refugees back. Eventually, succumbing to international pressure, the Burmese government agreed to take them back.<sup>23</sup>

Once the refugees were back in Arakan the Ne Win regime developed a new tactic for limiting the number of Muslims in Arakan. A new citizenship law was passed in 1982 in which it was said that all ethnic groups who had settled in Burma before 1823, the year of the British occupation, are "nationals" of Burma. Rohingyas were excluded from the list of nationals on the ground that they are post-1823 settlers, in utter disregard of their millennium-old history of the establishment of Arakan.<sup>24</sup> They were called *Kalas*, a word used derogatively for foreigners. Thus the Rohingyas were turned into a stateless people. In the meantime, a countrywide democratic resistance movement led by Aung San Suikyi against the military regime mounted tremendous pressure for the transfer of power. A Rohingya organization, *Rohingya Solidarity Organization* (RSO), also gave support to this democratic movement. In the face of popular pressure the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) announced elections to be held in May 1990; all parties were asked to register. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suikyi, won the absolute majority, power was not transferred; rather, the regime arrested Aung San Suikyi and other leaders of the NLD. The refusal of the government to transfer power to the NLD and the arrest of Aung San Suikyi initiated a tremendous mass uprising against the regime.<sup>25</sup>

Without any alternative, the regime decided to use the old tactic of diverting mass attention from the real burning issue to the communal issue. It was propagated that "Arakan would be swallowed up by the Muslims with the backing of neighbouring Muslim country, Bangladesh, and the International Islamic Organization."<sup>26</sup> In addition to this, the regime started patronizing Buddhists by giving favours to elder monks and by building a *wizaya Pagoda* in conformity with the

traditions of Buddhist rulers of the past.<sup>27</sup> This aroused religious fervour all over the country. Muslim-Buddhist riots broke out in many areas of lower Burma. The SLORC committed barbarous atrocities against the Rohingyas. Tens of thousands of refugees once again began to pour into Bangladesh in 1992. Eventually, a bilateral agreement was signed by Bangladesh and Burma for the safe return of the refugees. However, given the fear of repression, most of the refugees did not go back. They are still in Bangladeshi refugee camps. The repression of the regime and its violation of human rights are continuing to this day throughout Burma. A famous historian, Irwin, has commented, "they (the Rohingyas) are living in a hostile country, and they have been there for hundreds of years and yet survive. They are perhaps to be compared with the Jews: a nation within a nation."<sup>28</sup> In recent years Arakanese Muslims have appealed to Amnesty International, the United Nations, governments of the ASEAN countries, and to the OIC countries with fruitless results. A freelance journalist, Andrew Dedo, wrote on April 5, 1997 that, "whether sparked by outrage or designed for agitation, Buddhist-Muslim unrest in Burma refuses to go away."<sup>29</sup>

### **The Philippines**

The post-independence period in the Philippines saw the Moros continuing their struggle for the independence of Mindanao. However, the regime attempted to assimilate the Moros in the larger framework of the Philippines. From the beginning, the government encouraged large scale migration of Christians into Mindanao. The massive influx of settlers from northern and central Philippines and a substantial inflow of domestic and foreign investment made the Moros virtually a minority by the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> Many had lost their lands to the Catholic settlers. Violent clashes became a regular feature of their lives. Riots broke out in various parts of the region. In order to survive as a group with an identity distinct from the rest of the Catholic population, an organization called *Muslims (Mindanao) Independence Movement* (MIM) was founded in 1968. MIM declared the independence of Mindanao as its goal.<sup>31</sup>

In response to the MIM Declaration the Christians launched the ILAGA Movement against the Moros which led to the Manila Massacre, the worst riots in the history of the Philippines.<sup>32</sup> The regime then tried to coopt the top leaders of the MIM by providing them high positions in administration. The long, half-a-century struggle of the Rohingyas in Burma and the Moros in the Philippines has resulted in



the Moros' success in achieving at least partial regional autonomy, and the Rohingyas' loss of both citizenship and state. This disappointed many young cadres of the MIM who later formed a militant organization, *Moro National Liberation Front* (MNLF), led by a university graduate, Nur Misuari. The MNLF sought the support of Muslims overseas and reported their grievances to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).<sup>33</sup> The main objective of the organization was the complete liberation of Bongso Moro homeland. The MNLF attracted the support of a large number of Filipino Muslims who considered the movement a *jihad* against the Marcos regime. The MNLF founded its armed wing, Bangso Moro Army (BMA) consisting of militant Muslim youths who began guerilla warfare against the Philippines Army. President Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972. However, the MNLF continued its activities underground.<sup>34</sup> Thousands of people lost their lives and properties in the armed struggle in Mindanao.

In spite of the Marcos regime's tactics, the armed struggle of the MNLF aroused the concern of the OIC countries over the condition of Muslims in the Philippines. A delegation of four foreign Ministers from Libya, Saudi Arabia, Senegal and Somalia visited the Philippines to discuss with the Marcos government the Muslims' situation in the Philippines.<sup>35</sup> The involvement of the Muslim states eventually culminated in the signing of the Tripoli Agreement on December 23, 1976 in Tripoli, Libya. This agreement was between the Philippines government and the MNLF as the sole representative of the Moros with the OIC acting as intermediary. It provided for the creation of an autonomous region in Mindanao consisting of 13 provinces and 9 cities.<sup>36</sup> The MNLF was forced to water down its demand for complete independence to autonomy, settling for a peace that would keep the Bangsomoro homeland part of the Republic of the Philippines. Soon after, however, the Marcos government started interpreting "autonomy" in its own terms, claiming that the Mindanao problem, being an internal matter of the Philippines, should be solved within a framework of national sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>37</sup> Marcos made the attainment of autonomy to constitutional process which dictated that a referendum be held in order to determine which of the 13 provinces and 9 cities claimed in the Tripoli Agreement, would be included in the autonomous region.<sup>38</sup> The MNLF seriously objected to this plan of the Marcos regime, and consequently, the cease-fire that had been declared in the Tripoli Agreement eventually collapsed. Fighting resumed in late

1977 and Nur Misuari left his home for the Middle East.<sup>39</sup>

The breakdown of the Tripoli Agreement greatly undermined the credibility of the MNLF's leadership, allowing the cleavage which had always existed within the Front to emerge. Misuari's leadership was challenged by the Chairman of MNLF's Foreign Affairs Bureau, Hashim Salamat, who accused Misuari, of being corrupt, a failure, and a communist sympathizer.<sup>40</sup> Shortly after, he broke away from the mainstream MNLF and established the *Moro Islamic Liberation Front* (MILF). Salamat claimed that, "some personalities in the Revolution advocate the idea that the sole and singular objective in our struggle is simply to liberate our homeland, giving no importance to the system of government that shall be established. [We want] an Islamic political system and way of life, and it can only be achieved through effective *da'wah*, *tarbiyyah*, and *jihād*."<sup>41</sup> A further split occurred in the Front's leadership when an insurgent group known as the Abu Sayaff, presently led by Abdul Razzak Jan Jalani, broke away from the MNLF, demanding complete independence from the Philippines and the establishment of an Islamic state in Mindanao.

In the 1980s, while the MNLF, MILF and Abu Sayaff's group were active in guerilla warfare against the Marcos regime throughout the Philippines there was a mass upheaval for democratic government led by Corazon Aquino. During the peoples' power revolution Mrs. Aquino promised that, if elected, she would grant autonomy to Mindanao. After assuming office in 1986 President Aquino declared a new constitution which provided for the creation of the Autonomous Regions in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).<sup>42</sup> This resulted in the establishment of ARMM but the MNLF remained dissatisfied with it, as it did not include the 13 provinces and 9 cities indicated in the Tripoli Agreement. It granted autonomy to only four provinces. Misuari called on the various factions of the MNLF to unite in a renewed armed struggle for a sovereign Bangsamoro Republic.<sup>43</sup>

The ascendance of General Fidel Ramos to the office of the Presidency of the Philippines in 1992 gave Nur Misuari, the exiled MNLF Chairman, renewed hope to recoup his losses and shattered prestige. As a result of the Jakarta-held "peace" talks with the Manila government, Misuari entered the Philippines in December 1993. President Ramos opened negotiations and after three years of efforts an agreement was signed between the MNLF and the Ramos government.

The agreement was that the MNLF will oversee economic development projects in all provinces in Mindanao for three years. The Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) was established with Misuari as Governor of the region, directly under President Ramos. The Ramos-MNLF agreement apparently brought peace in the Philippines by ending the armed struggle in Mindanao. Many Southeast Asian leaders felt great relief, for as Indonesian President Suharto commented, "the peaceful solution to the conflict in the Southern Philippines could serve to prove before the international community that conflicts within the region could be solved by the region or the community of nations concerned using their own resources, their creativity and their determination to achieve peace. In fact I would not be surprised if analysts of international politics would see in the peace process in the southern Philippines valuable lessons with possibly some applications elsewhere."<sup>44</sup>

Despite all appearances that Manila's Moro problem was under control in 1996, the MILF Chief, Hashim Salamat, declared that, "autonomy in the Bongsomoro region as a first step to independence is feasible but its effectiveness will depend upon the type of autonomy and the personalities that will be involved in running it. Since the setting up of the autonomy is meant only to appease and pacify the Muslims, it is not expected to give any benefit to them."<sup>45</sup> To him, it seems, the ARMM is a pawn of the Ramos administration to serve government interests and to counter the Bangsomoro struggle for freedom. To Salamat, as well as to the MILF, the only viable solution to the plight of the Moros is complete independence and the establishment of an Islamic state.<sup>46</sup> Thus, despite the MNLF's seeming breakthrough, the MILF once again engaged in armed struggle. Since the resumption of the armed struggle President Ramos has opened negotiations with the MILF and in his sixth State of the Nation Address, on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1997, admitted that steps have been taken for peace talks between the MILF and the government.<sup>47</sup> The regime has assured that "all legislative measures aiming to promote economic and social conditions of the Muslim indigenous cultural group in the country will be given priority. These include measures to recognize the ancestral domain of Muslim and cultural minorities."<sup>48</sup> The MILF claims that, "creating a satellite Islamic state through government and congressional initiatives will only legitimize and make the MILF a potent partner of the Philippine

government in achieving economic social, political and spiritual development in the region."<sup>49</sup> However, President Ramos hoped that a peace agreement will eventually be signed in the near future to end the decade old social unrest in Mindanao.<sup>50</sup>

## **THE RESULTS : SUCCESS AND FAILURE**

The long, half-a-century struggle of the Rohingyas in Burma and the Moros in the Philippines has resulted in the Moros' success in achieving at least partial regional autonomy, and the Rohingyas having been uprooted from their homeland, lost their citizenship and became stateless. What factors are responsible for the relative success of the Moros and the tragic failure of the Rohingyas? In the light of Huntington's theory, this can be examined by looking at the political climate of both countries, the organizational strength of the revolutionary organizations, and the mobilization of political support both at home and aboard.

### **The Political Climate**

In both Burma and the Philippines, no doubt, the regimes remained oppressive for a long period of time. However, looking at Burma, it appears that the regime there is far more repressive than that of the Philippines. From the very beginning, though there was a parliamentary democracy and a promise was made to provide autonomy to all regions, calculated efforts were made by the regime to exterminate the Rohingyas. During those years the Burma Territorial Forces (BTT), which comprised 90% of Buddhists, were stationed in Arakan in order to streamline the Rohingyas.<sup>51</sup> The democratic regime even declared Buddhism the state religion of Burma. After the military takeover, General Ne Win regime made systematic attempts to quash all democratic forces in general, and the Rohingyas in particular. First, the whole administration was centralized by adopting "Burmese Road to Socialism" and introducing one party, BSSP. Second, a long-term plan of "Buddhanization" was put into effect in which Buddhists from other parts of the country were settled in Arakan. Third, through the "Dragon King Operation" in 1978 the government managed to force many Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. Fourth, even though many of them came back, the government passed the new Citizenship Act in which Rohingyas were denied nationality and were labelled as *Kalas* (foreigners). Finally, when in 1990 there was nation-wide agitation

against the military regime, the government diverted the attention of the masses to a communal issue which led to another exodus of refugees to Bangladesh in 1992.

All these points indicate that Burma's extremely oppressive political system did not leave any room for the Rohingyas to negotiate with the regime. Thousands of Rohingyas were put into prison, hundreds of them were killed, and many women raped. The genocide resulted in the Rohingyas' fleeing from their ancestral land to seek shelter and security in neighbouring Bangladesh.

While Burmese society consists of six major ethno-linguistic groups, in terms of religion, Buddhists are the majority. The British had intentionally sought to avoid any conflict during the colonial rule by constitutional means and by favouring the religious minorities in recruitment to the state machinery. However, after independence, a great many of the Muslim officers were dismissed and replaced by Buddhists.<sup>52</sup> The mobility of the Muslims was restricted as they could not move from one place to another without prior permission from the government authorities. Hugh Tinner notes that, "government policy aims at emphasizing the unity of Burma through an extension of Buddhism."<sup>53</sup> The Burmese state's attempt at assimilating minorities through coercion and through adaptation of a "centralization model" has made it impossible for the Rohingya Muslims to enter into any kind of dialogue with the regime. The result, Steinberg notes, is that "in so far as members of the minorities have a role in power structure, they have performed that function in a Burman context."<sup>54</sup>

In the Philippines, the political system, democratic or nondemocratic, has always opened doors for dialogue with minorities. In terms of the composition of state machinery, patronage has remained the major basis for recruitment and promotion in the Philippines. This has prevented Christian-Muslim division. Thus when the MIM was founded, its top leaders were coopted in the state structure. Marcos even acknowledged Rashid Lucman, the BMA Chief, as "the paramount Sultan of Mindanao and Sulu" in May 1974.<sup>55</sup> Challenging the traditional elite-led MIM, the youth-led MNLF was born in 1972. Initially, the Marcos regime did not care, but it did eventually come into dialogue with the MNLF leaders. The Tripoli Agreement was a by-product of this dialogue. Although the agreement was not eventually implemented, it did not completely close the door for further negotiations. In fact, Marcos gave referendum to the people for deciding the autonomy of the provinces. After the fall of Marcos, the

Acquino regime included the provisions for autonomy of Mindanao in the constitution which legitimized the claims of the Moros and extended the possibility of eventual autonomy. The Ramos government finally made peace possible in Mindanao, much to the displeasure of the MILF, by reaching an agreement with the MNLF for the partial autonomy of all provinces in the Mindanao region. The Filipino government never had the kind of assimilationist policy that the Burmese government had. Rather, the government has always tried to develop the infrastructure of Mindanao. The 1957 Commission provided educational scholarship for the Moros. In brief, the political system of the Philippines was conducive for negotiations which resulted in the achievement of autonomy in Mindanao.

### **The Organizational Strength**

A successful movement, Huntington points out, requires stable, complex and adaptable institution.<sup>56</sup> No movement can succeed if it is led by a weak organization. Both the Rohingyas and the Moros have been led by guerilla organizations but the mouthpiece of the liberation movement in Arakan has, all along, remained weak as compared to the organization in Mindanao. Since 1947 the Rohingyas have established a number of organizations to fight for their cause. The prominent among them are the Rohingya Patriotic Front, the Muslim Liberation Organization, the Rohingya Independence Front, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front, and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO). However, all of them are weak. The first one, led by Jafar Kamal, was very short-lived, the leader himself was assassinated, and there was no successor. It collapsed within a very short span of time. The Rohingya Independence Front, which was formed during the 1960s, remained primarily an organization of the intellectuals and it was nipped in the bud. In the mid-1970s another organization, Rohingya Patriotic Front, was born, which was stronger compared to its antecedents as it was able to create a few hundred guerilla cadres. Later, this organization was functionally merged with the RSO in order to establish an Islamic Rohingya state in Arakan. But, in reality, it has no record of serious activity, apart from writing a few letters to some international organizations. In order to secure stability an organization needs to survive for a significant period of time. In the absence of any mobilizing organization within the community, the inchoate minority consciousness at a mass level can not be ideologized. History testifies that this did not happen in Arakan.

The Moros liberation movement, on the other hand, has always been led by a strong organization. Thus, after the *Jubaidah Massacre*<sup>57</sup> Datu Udtog Matalam, who had been defeated as Governor of Cotabato province in 1967, founded the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) with other Muslim elites in order mobilize Muslim support and to articulate calls for Muslim unity and autonomy for the state. Later, the MNLF was born and it was led by young radicals. Despite the factions that existed in the MNLF, there is no doubt that the MNLF was a very strong organization with 30,000 armed civilians. In its long struggle for freedom the MNLF survived until it achieved its goal in 1996. The MNLF had opened several wings—foreign affairs, social welfare and defence. It is true that the MILF is not satisfied with mere autonomy as it demands complete independence and the establishment of an Islamic state in Mindanao. The MILF, too, is a relatively strong organization with the support of nearly 60,000 armed civilians. Therefore, the Ramos government has been compelled to open negotiations with the MILF. In brief, strong organization has always provided a cohesive force in the Moros liberation movement.

### **Mobilization of Support**

A revolutionary movement requires not only strong organization, but also the support of social groups. The Rohingyas in Burma have failed to mobilize support both internally and externally. At a local level, the Rohingyas share a common consciousness and a sense of identity, but this consciousness needs to be translated into real terms. The lack of a strong organization made it impossible to galvanize the support of the masses. First of all, in Arakan, leadership has always remained in the hands of the elite; secondly, they could not provide the masses an alternative source of security in the face of the Burmese army. Finally, the Buddhists have been used by the regime as an "insider" instrument. Regionally also, the Rohingyas have not been able to draw the attention of ASEAN countries. ASEAN would have been in a better position to check the Burmese regime because Burma was seeking entry into ASEAN. The Rohingyas have failed to exploit the situation. Internationally, they have failed to draw the support of the OIC countries. The neighbouring Muslim state, Bangladesh, is not strong enough to defend or to support the Rohingyas. It has its own plethora of problems. Other Islamic countries have not extended any serious support to the Rohingyas, although there are reports that Libya is providing some help to them. The major powers, especially the US.

and the UN are concerned about the general violation of human rights in Burma, but not about the Rohingyas in particular. Rohingyas are, thus, left to solve their problems by themselves.

On the other hand, from the history of the Mindanao liberation movement, it is evident that the Moros have been fairly successful in mobilizing mass support both at home and abroad. In the first place, the Moros are quite well organized. They gave whole-hearted support to the MNLF until it achieved regional autonomy. Secondly, not only at the national level but also at the regional level the MNLF drew the support of its two strong neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, which are quite strong financially and militarily. The Ramos government, in 1996, had to relent to the mounting pressure from Malaysia and Indonesia to convene peace talks in Jakarta, since a large number of Filipinos are working in Malaysia. Finally, the Moros also received support at the international level from the Western countries, the UN, Amnesty International, as well as from the OIC countries. Consequently, other Muslim countries came forward to help the Moros. At the sixth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers held in Jeddah in July 1975, the MNLF under the leadership of Misuari was given formal recognition by the OIC.<sup>58</sup> Muslim countries urged the Filipino regime to negotiate with the representatives of the MNLF; the Manila government could not ignore this because 80 percent of its oil, as well as a huge amount of foreign exchange earned by the Filipino workers, was coming from the Middle East. Due to the pressure of the OIC, the Manila government implemented the Tripoli Agreement partially.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude the tale of relative success of the Moros and the failure of the Rohingyas, one has to recognize that no movement is likely to run its full course without foreign support. No group can be successful in carrying out a movement in isolation. All the major movements in the world have been subject to foreign intervention. However, a movement can only sustain itself if there exists a strong political organization with mass-based support. In both Burma and the Philippines the institutional and social conditions have given rise to separatist movements. Despite favourable institutional and social conditions, the Rohingyas have been unsuccessful. They have, for centuries, lived in Arakan which, after the Burman occupation in the 18th century, was ruled within an integrated Burma. In independent Burma they claimed their right of self



determination, but in return received only torture and repression. They have become stateless and political refugees, because organizationally, they could not stand on their own feet. No cause for hope seems imminent for the Rohingyas in Burma.

The success story of the Moros in Mindanao, on the other hand, testifies that revolution needs strong organization which is able to mobilize local as well as foreign support. The Moros never completely surrendered to Spanish colonial rule. The Americans were successful in forcing the Moros to surrender their sovereignty but allowed them to participate in the political system. So, during American colonial rule, the Moros were not very aggressive in their demands. However, when America was withdrawing, Moro leaders asked the American government to give them the right of self-determination. In independent Philippines, the lack of democratic institutions (which could have provided avenues for Moro participation in the political system), and the desire of Moro social groups for autonomy led to the formation of a strong Moro National Liberation Front. The latter enjoyed the consistent support of the Moro people and was also able to mobilize support in the region as well as in the OIC countries. Finally, local, regional, and international support enabled the Moros to realize their goal, at least partially. The relative success of the Moros in the Philippines could perhaps be the torchlight of the Rohingyas. Most importantly, only the return of democracy is likely to break the age-old repressive rule of the Burmans over the Rohingyas of Burma.

## Notes

1. See *Mindanao Kris* (Catabato City) August 1, 1997, p. 1.
2. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 275.
3. Lukman Thaib, *Political Dimensions of Islam in Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: National University of Malaysia, 1996), 50.
4. *Ibid.*, 51. Some historians suggest that Arabs brought Islam into this area even before this date. For details see Abdullah al-Ahsan, "Spread of Islam in Pre-Mughal Bengal," *Intellectual Discourse* 2 (1994):46.
5. Mohamad Yunus, *A History of Arakan* (Chittagong: Magenta Colour, 1994), 7.

6. Ibid., 34.
7. Ibid., also see D.R. Sardesai, *Southeast Asia: Past and Present* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1988), 105.
8. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 51.
9. Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).
10. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 75.
11. C.A. Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers 1973), 63-64.
12. Peter Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1979).
13. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 75.
14. B.N. Pandey, *South and Southeast Asia, 1945-1997: Problems and Prospects* (London: The McMillan Press, 1980), 137.
15. Shwe Lu Maung, *Burma: Nationalism and Ideology* (Dhaka: University Press, 1989), 23. He wrote, "The British government asked for a sound proof of their willingness to form an independent state together. [Thus] all nations conference was held at Panglong in Shan State."
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 39. "This Bill gave birth to protests and riots, especially in Kachin State where Christians were in the majority. The Muslim community also put up a strong protest."
18. Yunus, *A History of Arakan*, 132. See also, *The Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 1992.
19. Maung, *Burma*, 62.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., see also, Syed Serajul Islam, "Who are the Rohingyas: Why are They Refugees in Bangladesh," an unpublished paper presented in a seminar in Montreal organized by the International Society of Bangladesh on March 29, 1992.
22. Maung, *Burma*, 64. Also see, Amnesty International, *Burma: Extra-Judicial Execution and Torture of Members of Ethnic Minorities* (London, May 1988).
23. David I. Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of Southeast Asia* (Boulder: West View Press, 1982), 141.
24. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 55-56; also see, A.S. Bahar "Rohingya of Arakan", an unpublished paper presented in a seminar organised by New School of Social Research, New York, November, 1992.

25. Syed Serajul Islam, "Myanmar's (Burma) Road to Socialism and Indonesia's New Order: A Comparative Analysis," *Asian and African Studies* 5 (1996): 187
26. Maung, *Burma*, 66.
27. Ibid.
28. Cited in A.S. Bahar, "Burma's Indigenous Peoples: The Thin Edge of the Wedge in Burmese Society," a paper presented in the International Seminar on Indigenous People, Kuala Lumpur, 1993. Also see *The Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 1992. It was reported in the *Journal* that "the regime has been resettling Burmese Buddhists, confiscating property and rounding up people for such projects as forced labour and road works."
29. "Eye Witness Recalls Recent Unrest in Burma," *The Nation*, April 5, 1997.
30. R.J. May, "The Religious Factor in Three Minority Movements: The Moro of the Philippines, The Malays of Thailand and Indonesia's West Papuas," *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 12 (1991) 2: 308.
31. Lela Nobel, "The Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines," *Pacific Affairs* 49(1976), 405.
32. D. Sukarno, *Muslim Autonomy in the Philippines* (Marawi City: Mindanao State University Press, 1993).
33. *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), June 26, 1974.
34. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 87. Also see, W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of the Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), 11-12. It was reported that at least 10,000 wives of former MNLF fighters were widowed and 50,000 children orphaned, see *The New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), September 8, 1997.
35. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 87.
36. Abu al-Baydr, "Filipino-Moro Conflict: Its Final Solution," *Mahardika* 14 (1993) 2: 9.
37. Ibid.
38. The 13 provinces included the five (Maguindano, Lanao Del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi) which had an absolute majority of Muslims though the total population of the two regions had a large majority of Christians. Now there are 14 provinces; see, Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 123.
39. Nur Misuari, "The Bongsomoro Revolution: Clamor for Self-determination and Independence," Paper submitted to the Third Islamic Summit Conference at Makkah in 1981.
40. May, "The Religious Factor," 309.

41. Rogiberto Tigalo, "Peace in His Time," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Sept. 5, 1996, p. 24.
42. Cardina G. Hernandez, "The Philippines in 1987: Challenge of Redemocratization," *Asian Survey* 28 (Feb 1988)2: 299. Also see James C. Wang, *Comparative Asian Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1994), 269.
43. David G. Timberman, "The Philippines in 1989: A Good Year Turns Sour," *Asian Survey* 30: 2 (Feb 1990): 26.
44. Farish A. Noor, "Hopefully The End of a Long Crusade," *Impact International* (London), October, 1996, p.7. Inside the Philippines, of course, there were mixed reactions. Some were happy and some were unhappy. However, an intellectual said, "only time will tell if Southern Council for Peace and Development is truly the window of opportunity that Nur Misuari seeks or yet another poisoned chalice. But at least the Muslims in the Philippines do not seem to be going into the negotiations blind folded with their hands tied behind their back," *Ibid.*, 8.
45. Bongsomoro People's Consultative Assembly, *Report from the Ulama Professional Executive Committee*, December 1996.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Mindanao Kris* (Cotabato City), August 1, 1997, p. 1.
48. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 2, 1997, p. 8.
49. *The Mindanao Cross* (Cotabato City), August 2, 1997.
50. *Mindanao Kris*, August 2, 1997.
51. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 54.
52. Yunus, *History of Arakan*, 131.
53. Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, 77.
54. Cited in David Brown, "From Peripheral Communities to Ethnic Nations: Separatism in Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 61 (1988):200. 55. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 84.
56. Huntington, *Political Order*, 275.
57. In March 1968 Muslim Military trainees, engaged in secret commando style training called *Jubaidah*, were massacred. These commandos were allegedly being trained to agitate among the People of Sabah and North Borneo to demand annexation by the Philippines Republic. When the *Moro* trainees refused to undertake this mission they were summarily shot for mutineering.
58. Thaib, *Political Dimensions*, 85.