

Young Muslims talk peace amid conflict

TWELVE years after the signing of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), peace has remained elusive in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

The upcoming ARMM elections on August 11, billed as a milestone for democracy and stability in the region, may be postponed to accommodate the peace agreement currently and feverishly being finalized by the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). As President Gloria Arroyo delivers her State of the Nation Address on Monday, the *Moro Times* has decided to catch up with Muslim youth living and studying in Manila to get their take on true state of the Muslims and on life.

Although the students' opinions varied on many issues, there was consensus on one: the upcoming

elections are not credible. In reality, say the young, the actual voters have become irrelevant.

ARMM elections

According to Arellano student Datu Arafat Kusain, "There is no such thing as a credible election," especially in ARMM, where the true power lies in the hands of the administration which can manipulate the outcome to their liking. Fellow Arellano student Aisha Mangotara agreed, saying that "cheating is a part of any election in the Philippines."

University of the Philippines (UP) student Tani Basman said, "It



■ Arellano student Aisha Mangotara believes that "cheating is a part of any election in the Philippines."

is not a safe bet that ARMM elections will be credible."

She noted that "violence is a way of life" in ARMM and will always be part of the election process. Another UP student, Yusoph Pangadapun 3rd, agreed, saying that "violence is



■ Khalid Gunting wants to study and practice law in Manila then go back to his homeland.

inevitable" in ARMM elections. UP Law student Johaira Wahab denounced the upcoming elections as completely illegitimate, going on to say that "people vote a certain way not because of free choice but out of fear of certain people... the deep

seated fear in communities [in ARMM] of certain parties renders the right to vote utterly senseless."

Students also had little faith in the Commission on Elections (Comelec) and local officials, saying that despite the introduction of voting machines there is still little protection against election fraud. Most people in the ARMM do not understand how the machines work and votes could be easily manipulated. Consequently, "automation could be used to legitimize election fraud."

When asked about which candidates they felt would best serve the interests of the Bangsamoro people, the students offered a wide variety of answers. Kamaruddin Mohammed felt that none of the candidates were very credible. Johaira Wahab's stance largely correlated with Mohammed's, saying that, "No candidate has volunteered to clarify to the electorate their visions and goals for the people of ARMM." She later added that none of the candidates truly understand the real problems facing ARMM.

Happy Dimahatang simply responded that she supports whoever believes in "equality and fairness."

Most students, however, were not familiar with the candidates—a sign of apathy toward the elections—as they felt, despite their hopes for the future, that they would not bring about any real change. Kusain even expressed his sentiments that rebel groups such as the MILF and MNLF serve the people of ARMM better than any politician.

ARMM government

Almost all of the students interviewed felt that the current ARMM government has been largely incompetent. UP student Adawiya Suwaib Ismael said the current ARMM government has accomplished very little in their three-year reign. She said she believed that most of the decisions made by the government did not benefit the masses, but only the politicians.

Mangotara expressed similar concerns that conditions have remained

► **ConflictBS**

Country's Muslim 'capital' celebrates 49th birthday

WHAT do *rockista* Bamboo (Marohombasar), ABS-CBN's *Singing Bee* lead singer Sue Castrodes and Genuine Opposition Spokesman Adel Tamano have in common? They are proud Maranaos of Lanao del Sur.

Lanao del Sur can stand proud of a culture that has been preserved despite the impact of pop culture in global media and cyberspace. Home of the Sultanates, *sarimanok* and Islam, visiting Lanao del Sur province in Central Mindanao is a walk back in time when women walked around gracefully in their *malongs* (wrap-around clothing) and men with betel-stained golden teeth played chess all day. Although being transported to a place that seems stuck in time could be soothing to a frazzled urbanite, the truth is Lanao del Sur is that way largely because it is one of the poorest provinces in the country.

As Lanao del Sur, the second-largest province in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) with a population of almost 700,000, celebrated its 49 years of being chartered on July 4, it faces security challenges due to recent kidnappings of non-natives, including a Mindanao State University Professor on June 26 in Saguayan town.



■ A smiling Maranao. Known as the "People of the Lake," they are famous for their artwork, sophisticated weaving, wood and metal craft, and their epic literature.

Where is Lanao del Sur?

Because of this negative image, few know about the tourism potentials of the province. Lanao comes from the word *ranao*, meaning "lake." On the basin of the majestic Lake Lanao, a mountain shaped like a lady called Sleeping Beauty catches visitors in awe. Lanao del Sur forms the western portion of Northern Mindanao. It is bounded on the north by Lanao del Norte, on the east by Bukidnon, on the west by Illana Bay, and on the south by Maguindanao and Cotabato.

Three hours away from Cagayan de Oro's Lumbia airport, the drive to Lanao is breathtaking. The landscape is dominated by rolling hills and valleys, placid lakes and rivers. The climate in the province is characterized by even distribution of rainfall throughout the year, without a distinct summer season. The province is located outside the typhoon belt.

Filipino's last samurai

Few also know the rich history of the province. When the Spaniards first explored Lanao in 1689, they found a well-settled community named Dansalan at the lake's northern end. In 1895, Lanao was created as a district of Mindanao. In 1903, Lanao was incorporated into the Moro Province by the American government. In 1914, the province of Lanao was born with the organization of the Department of Mindanao and Sulu.

Hundreds of natives, who use the traditional defense system building *kota* (fortresses), battled thousands of American troops in the bloody wars in the towns of Taraka and Bayang.

Because of the need for strategic American presence here, Americans set up the Amai Pakpak Fort in Marawi.

On May 2, 1942, the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Philippines Jose Abad Santos was killed by the Japanese Imperial forces by firing squad at Malabang.

Maranao guerrilla units used the infantry weapons together with



■ One of the beautiful mosques in the Islamic City of Marawi in Lanao del Sur.

the Maranao *Kris*, *Barong* and *Kampilan* swords against the Japanese forces during in the Battle of Lanao.

When Lanao was divided into two provinces (Sur and Norte) under Republic Act No. 2228 in 1959, Marawi was made the capital of the Muslim-dominated Lanao del Sur. Christian-dominated Lanao del Norte will also celebrate its 49th anniversary on the same day, July 4.

Lanao was also the site of several uprisings led by the Bangsamoro Liberation Organization in the 70s against the national government.

As a result of peace agreements between the Moro National Liberation Front and government, Lanao del Sur voted, in a plebiscite, to join the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 1989.

To this day, many Maranao senior citizens identify themselves as Filipinos and look to central government as *gobierno a sarwang*, (government of unbelievers). Wary of outsiders, activists mobilized the locals to rally against the presence of American troops two months ago. The American soldiers were conducting humanitarian medical missions in several towns of Lanao, part of the RP-US Balikatan Exercises.

Warrior-turned trader

The Maranaos are said to be the most conservative and religious yet the most mobile and business-minded among the 13 ethno-linguistic Muslim cultural communities. After martial law,

thousands of Maranaos migrated across the country and the Middle East to work and help their poor families back home. From Batacto Jolo, Maranao traders selling DVDs, jewelry and clothing can be found in all of the public markets

and shopping centers in the country. They have also set up mosques in the mostly Christian-dominated towns where they have settled.

SAMIRA GUTOC AND PHOTOS BY DARYL DE VEYRA



■ Young Muslim girls in hijab attend citizens' military training in their school.

► feature

Iranian female rower sculls to Beijing dream

TEHRAN: Growing up in Iran's western Kermanshah province and dreaming of becoming a basketball star, Homa Hosseini could hardly have thought she would one day make Olympic history for her country.

Yet when the first round of the women's single sculls starts in Beijing, Hosseini will become the first woman to represent Iran in one of the most physically demanding of all sports.

She will wear a headscarf and an all-covering outfit to abide by Iran's Islamic dress rules but her taking part marks another landmark in the growing participation of Iranian

women in high-level sport.

"I was in the basketball team in Kermanshah province where I lived," Hosseini told Agence France-Presse on the shores of Tehran's rowing lake before heading to Beijing.

"Then one day our coach said that the Iranian rowing and kayak federation is seeking women who are tall and eager to try a new sport for the national team."

It is only in the last years that Iran has started to push rowing for both sexes and the hopefuls chosen in the original search process were subjected to tough physical tests to

check their potential.

Only a half-dozen women made Iran's rowing team out of 400 who showed up at selection trials.

"I started my rowing without any prior knowledge or skill in the sport. But now after two years here I am representing my country to one of the most important international games," said Hosseini.

She secured the Olympic place for Iran in the Asian qualifying trials in China a month ago.

The 1.8-meter tall but slender Hosseini, 20, will row in Beijing wearing a headscarf and a sleeveless

apron over a long sleeved T-shirt, a very different uniform to the lycra all-in-ones favored by most rowers.

But she said it will not hinder her performance, "It's not a problem."

The fact that Iranian women are seeking to compete at a high level in a physical sport like rowing is a sign of increasing readiness in the Islamic republic to accept female sports-women in different disciplines.

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, it was impossible for women to compete in international sports competitions, where they would inevitably encounter men as judges

and spectators.

However, from the early 1990s, women began to compete again, helped by a cautious relaxation of dress codes and championing of their cause by Faezeh Hashemi—the daughter of then President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Initially, women began to enter more stationary sports where conservative dress codes could be maintained without problems—such as shooting or archery.

Iran's Olympics team also has two other women—Najmeh Abtin in archery and Sara Khoshjamil Fekri in taekwondo.

Hosseini is realistic about her chances in Beijing, where she will face vastly more experienced and powerful scullers like the perennial rivals Bulgaria's Rumyana Neykova and Ekaterina Karsten Khodotovitch

of Belarus.

"I know that it will be very difficult to get to next stage of the competition, other girls have been training for this game for the past five year, while we have just started the sport in Iran two years ago," she said.

"My goal is to be able to make it to the Asian Games in Guangzhou in 2010 and the London 2012 Olympics," Hosseini said.

Asked to whom would she dedicate any medal she won, a more somber tone emerged.

"I would dedicate it to my two brothers. They both were martyred in war," that Iran fought with Saddam Hussein's Iraq from 1980 to 1988.

"I asked for their help for this qualification, and thinking of them gave me hope and calm, I owe my qualification to them," she said.

AFP

The 2008 ARMM elections: In search of Yusop Tan!

UNLESS postponed by the powers that be, the elections for the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) will be held on August 11, 2008. Residents of ARMM will once again choose individuals to govern them as regional governor, regional vice governor and members of the Regional Legislative Assembly (RLA). ARMM covers Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Basilan, Maguindanao, Shariff Kabungsuwan, Lanao del Sur and Marawi City.

The elections will be held against the backdrop of the unflattering reputation of the region as the show window of graft and corruption, and dubbed as the "cheating capital of the Philippines." Will the elections prove this reputation wrong and result in the election of candidates who will truly serve the interests of the Muslims in ARMM? Or will the elections simply validate the notoriety of ARMM elections in subverting the will of the people?

The right Muslim leader

The previous ARMM administrations were headed by lawyers, by a state university professor, by a doctor of medicine and by an educated warlord. All arguably won the seat of governance as regional governors because they were the anointed candidates of the administration.

As Muslims troop to the polls, we

ask this important question: Who is the most qualified Muslim leader to lead ARMM as regional governor for the next three years?

To the Muslim faithful, the answer is really very simple! He should be one imbued with the qualities of a leader according to Islam, in deed and in spirit. Yusop Tan!

Who is Yusop Tan?

Yusop Tan was a native of Jolo, Sulu. An educator all his life, he was the administrator of the defunct Philippine Muslim College in the '60s and '70s; college instructor of Notre Dame of Jolo in the '80s; and the administrator of Southern Mindanao Islamic Institute until his demise in the 1990s. He was also Mayor of Jolo from 1952 to 1956.

As Jolo mayor, he served with devotion and honesty. Many stories abound about his moral fortitude. One time, arriving home from his office for lunch, he was surprised to see a new sofa set in his living room. When informed by his wife that it was a gift from one Chinese storeowner, he had it returned that same afternoon.

On another occasion, an elderly man visited his office asking for a janitorial job for his son so he could help their family's impoverished condition. Mayor Tan, seeing the weariness of the elderly man, told him to

BY BABYLYN KANO-OMAR



JIHADIST

let his son report to the Mayor's office. The next day, the same man visited the mayor at his house bringing live chickens as presents. Mayor Tan told the elderly man that he must be far richer than the mayor since he could afford to give presents while the Mayor couldn't. He instructed the elderly man to take back his chickens and to tell his son not to report to the Mayor's office anymore.

The good mayor, pressured by the lure of wealth through graft and corruption, and exasperated by his kin's clamor for a good life, resigned from his post with a vow never to return to politics—probably a first in the political history of the Philippines.

These coming elections, amidst the many promises of candidates seeking office, Muslims must search their conscience and their hearts. As the Glorious Qur'an invokes in Verse 188 of Surah Baqarra (on graft and corruption), "Do not misappropri-



More than 40 Ulama from Zamboanga City, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi endorsed the by-laws during the second Ulama Consultative Forum.

ate one another's property unjustly, nor bribe the judge, in order to misappropriate a part of other people's property, sinfully and knowingly" and in the Hadith, "Any man upon whom Allah has given the authority of ruling [a community of people] and does not look after their welfare and does not deal with them justly will never feel even the smell of paradise." Perhaps the noble Yusop Tan (Allah bless his soul) had imbedded in his mind such

Qur'anic verses and Hadiths, and acted on them all through his life.

Amidst the war, poverty and corruption, this is exactly what the ARMM regional government needs—another Yusop Tan!

Babylyn Omar-Kano is the president of the Electoral Reform Advocate in Tawi-Tawi and is the station manager of DXGD-AM. She is also the provincial coordinator of the election watchdog PPCRV.

Editor's Notes:

(1) The Supreme Court recently declared that the creation of Shariff Kabunsuan Province is void. *Sema v. Comelec*, GR No. 177597, July 16, 2008. (2) President Gloria Arroyo has announced that she is supporting calls for the postponement of the ARMM elections. Her press secretary said a bill seeking to postpone the regional elections is poised to be filed when Congress resumes session on July 28.

Sulu's power and culture central message at Yuchengco Museum exhibit

POWER is the central message of the exhibit *Beyond the Currents: The Culture and Power of Sulu* ongoing at the Yuchengco Museum in RCBC Plaza in Makati City.

Rare Tausug suits of body armor and weapons of power and defense highlight the strength and might of the Sulu Sultanate during the 18th and 19th centuries. This was the period when the Sulu archipelago was a major trading zone, as it bridged two worlds and lay at a most strategic point for maritime trade.

The exhibit tells the story of power wielded over European expansion and commerce (the Spanish, Dutch and British) in relation to the Chinese trading zone during

an era when the China trade was strong and profitable. In order to have goods to barter for Chinese tea, the British traded firearms to Sulu in exchange for its sea and forest products. The Chinese meanwhile bartered their goods for native products such as mats, yellow wax, lake wood, tortoise shell and the famous Sulu pearls. To Sulu went textiles and other imported manufactures and, of crucial importance, guns and gunpowder which contributed to Sulu's physical power.

The exhibit also presents the independent Sulu Sultanate's culture and geographical reach through kinship and intermarriages, and as the heart of a trade zone, market center, and regional power.

Through the Sultanate's alliance with other nations and successful engagements in both war and diplomacy with the colonizers, Sulu has survived attempts at colonization by the Spaniards for more than three centuries.

Beyond the Currents, curated by a team led by Abraham Sakili, PhD and Ramon Villegas, also presents the culture of the various indigenous inhabitants of Sulu such the Tausug, Sama and the Badjao. Highlighted are archival photos, prints, tradeware ceramics, maps, jewelry, textiles and ritual objects defense gathered from private collections and museum partners like the National Museum, Lopez Museum and Ayala Museum.

The exhibit gives an alternative picture of Sulu, and



A picture of a Royal Muslim family (inset photograph of Muslim sailors).

can help address, in the midst of the present volatile Mindanao situation, the urgent need to institute social justice, lasting peace, and meaningful development in southern Philippines.

Beyond the Currents: The Culture and Power of Sulu runs until September 24 and may be viewed Monday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Yuchengco Museum, RCBC Plaza, Corner Ayala and Sen. Gil J. Puyat avenues, Makati.



A banner made from cloth cut out and stitched together by Muslim women. The cut out is of a Y-shape sword.

CONFLICT FROM B4

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largely unchanged in the region, despite government promises.

Kamaruddin Mohammad added, "There have been improvements, but overall the situation has gotten worse."

Kusain's views were similar, conceding that there had been some minor progress, but that progress has been surpassed by setbacks—namely the government's "failure to fully implement projects and proposals." While Wahab felt that "if anything—[conditions] have gone from bad to worse."

The common consensus seem to be that the ARMM government has not made much of a difference in the region, and have only succeeded in securing personal fortunes and positions for ARMM officials and their family members.

National government

Most students were equally disenfranchised with the national government and the Arroyo administration. UP student Kamaruddin Mohammad said that "[President] Arroyo is not trustworthy" and expressed concerns that she is largely a puppet figure, controlled from behind the scenes. He added that despite promises of progress, many of her development programs and economic policies have failed miserably.

Datu Ararat Kusain expressed that he had some faith in the government as a whole, but none in the current administration.

Many students seemed to agree that

the government in Manila is not looking out for the best interests of the Bangsamoro, but is only interested in personal gain. Only Arellano students Happy Dimahtang and Aisha Mangotara had faith in the current administration. While Dimahtang stated "I always have faith in the government," Mangotara believes that the current officials are "competent."

Life in Manila for Moro 'savages'

Despite their academic excellence, many of the young Muslims admit to facing discrimination in Manila, though all of the UP students explicitly stated that there was none on campus. Some recalled the highly publicized protest of the officers of the Greenhills Village Association led by Unesco Commissioner Preciosa Soliven against the construction of a "musalah" or prayer room in Greenhills, several years ago. The Ortigas Corp. decided to include a prayer room in the parking building to accommodate the hundreds of Muslim traders in Greenhills, since a beautiful chapel existed across from the central courtyard of the shopping center. The village officers protested, claiming that the prayer room would attract criminals and lower property values. The Ortigas Corp. proceeded with the construction and property values have continued to rise.

Gunting said that the most common form of discrimination he runs

into is the misconception by his peers, who have been taught to view Moros as "savage" or "barbaric." Kamaruddin Mohammad recalled facing significant discrimination in the job market, where he said he has been turned down by companies just because of his name, and was once told by a receptionist "We don't hire Muslims". Many students agreed that discrimination, such as being refused service by taxi drivers, is a common experience. Residents of Maharlika, the Muslim village in Taguig, have gotten used to taxi drivers dropping them off at the entrance of the village instead of bringing them to their homes.

Basman lamented that many people think Muslims are uneducated or stupid, and assume that Muslims are illiterate and cannot speak Tagalog. Suwaib noted that Muslim women face discrimination when they choose to wear a *hijab* (headscarf) or *burqa* (one piece garment that covers from head to toe); admitting that she herself has been harassed and threatened while walking alone.

All students found it better to deal with discrimination diplomatically, choosing not to feed into people's stereotypes of Muslims.

Will they go back home?

These young leaders came to Manila for one reason: a good education. Arellano student Khalid Gunting came to study law, as did Kusain, who was attracted by the "peace and order" of Manila, which he felt would be beneficial to studying. Kamaruddin Mohammad initially came to Manila for work, but then decided to go back to school so he could better serve the Bangsamoro

people upon his return.

While these young Moros have a deep-seated desire to serve their people, they are concerned about the lack of opportunity in the region. Wahab, Suwaib, and Hasniyah plan to return to ARMM after graduation, like Mohammed who hopes to spread education in his homeland. Gunting would like to practice law in Manila for a few years before he returns home. Dimahtang also said she would like to go back, but would stay in Manila if a better opportunity arises. Mangotara plans to stay in Manila permanently, as do the Basman siblings, who were raised in Manila.

Peace in Mindanao

The youth are well aware of the lack of implementation of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement and the problems surrounding the current peace talks with the MNLF. There was near unanimous consent that the long-drawn out peace process in ARMM has become so stagnant, that it has become irrelevant to most people.

Mangotara decried the fact that there are no significant changes in the lives of the Bangsamoro.

Hasniyah corroborated this, stating that there has been no resolution or positive outcome despite over a decade of negotiations with the MILF.

Mohammad, Kusain, and Gunting all shared the view that although the peace process has moved forward, it is at a snail's pace, and often inconsistent. The situation improves and then worsens depending on the game plan of "Imperial Manila."

The future

All of the students dream of a more

peaceful and secure future where cultural pluralism will allow peoples of different faith and culture can coexist. Kusain, Mangotara and Dimahtang would like to see an end to the recurring cycle of violence so prevalent in Muslim Mindanao. UP student Anna Tajminah Basman hopes for a more open minded and tolerant Philippine society, where Muslims will not face discrimination based on their religion. Kamaruddin Mohammad hopes to spread and improve education in Bangsamoro—creating strong communities and a sustainable future for modern Muslims.

Several shared the hope of UP student Sri Hasniyah to wipe out corruption in ARMM, so the region can finally experience peaceful and fair elections. Tani Basman and Wahab, both wanting to see real democracy in ARMM, look forward to the day when the national government truly acknowledges the voice of Muslims. The youth leaders are dreaming of a future where democracy, stability and cultural plurality will be shared by the "ummah" or Muslim community here and abroad.

So speak our youth. Is anyone listening?

INTERVIEWS BY MATTHEW SUGAWARA LEVY AND JAMEL CAYAMODIN

ERRATUM

In the issue of the Jihadist published on June 27, the article entitled "Knowledge triumphant," was written by Anwar Ibrahim and not Aliah Q. Dimaporo.

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