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**“If You Can Keep Your Head when All about You are Losing Theirs”! The Role of the
Abu Sayyaf Group in the Campaign against Islamic Separatism in Mindanao¹**

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Irascible old Rudyard Kipling was distilling pure wisdom when he cautioned his *fin de siècle* readers about keeping their heads in a world gone crazy. His adage retains a twofold relevance for those dealing with the war in the southern Philippines. In a situation marred by fear, hatred, and brutality, the calmer heads hold the only hope of achieving peace. Nothing has come from the posturing of *trapos* (traditional politicians). The process of negotiating a political settlement in the south requires clear-headed vision on the part of some honest brokers and a widely endorsed apparatus to ensure its application.

The actual physical loss of one's head still remains an awful possibility in a tumultuous and uncertain environment.² A moment's negligence can lead to a ghastly end.

¹ This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong, June 26 -29, 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

² Yet ASG leader Khaddafy Janjalani, the notorious Kumander Robot, and their psychotic henchmen did not introduce head-hunting to Mindanao. It was the right-wing cultists of the late 1980s who discovered that the US Central Intelligence Agency would only pay for dead guerillas if they could be shown to be truly dead; confronted by the exigencies of tropical heat, Alsa Masa, Nakasaka or TadTad, Kill a Komunist for Krist (KKK), and a score of other vigilante groups were encouraged by the American reward system to bring in only the heads of their victims – sacks of them! For a useful context, see Eva-Lotta Hedman, “State of Siege: Political Violence and Vigilante Mobilization in the Philippines” in Bruce B. Campbell &

Imperial Manila's response can seem very unhelpful. With no trace of irony, Secretary Eduardo Ermita recently declared: "In counterinsurgency, the most important thing is cutting off the head".³ The circumstances of life and death in Mindanao are very unforgiving. Overall, knowledge is power - and it can protect the keen observer in some dangerous situations. Violence remains a common recourse in a morally bankrupt environment. Force, intimidation, and coercion figure largely in the political life of the country, especially at the regional or provincial level. These forms of control arise essentially because of depoliticizing and disempowering mechanisms enlisted by local elites in a situation "where geography, history, the private armies of large landowners, and insurgency all limit centralized control".⁴ The violence of the ruling class is in turn resisted by countervailing violence from below. The authorities in Manila intervene to declare that rebels are bandits and guerillas are criminals. It becomes possible somewhere in this process for criminals to present themselves as rebels and for bandits to masquerade as guerillas – *pacé* Eric Hobsbaum.

The challenge is to make sense of this brutal reality. No less than three insurgencies have ravaged the Philippines in recent times – various coup attempts by putschist groups within the Armed Forces of the Philippines; an archipelago-wide challenge to the state by communist rebels; and the secessionist Moro struggle in the south. Complicating the story further has been the activities of warlords, local bosses, and an assortment of ruthless criminal elements.

In a concession to the Islamic separatists, the Philippine government [GRP] established the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao [ARMM] in 1990, but the desire for an independent *bangsamoro* homeland remains strong in the south.⁵ Truth of the matter is that ARMM politics are based upon the traditional patronage of the old sultanates while also having been subsumed into the graft and corruption that plagues the rest of the country. Despite debates about autonomy and constitutional reform, there is now virtually nothing Manila could offer which would placate the Moro *mujahideen*. And American observers always mistake inflexible commitment for extremism.

This paper examines the emergence of *Al Harakatul al-Islamiya*, better known as the Abu Sayyaf (an Arabic term meaning "Swordbearer of Islam"), as a way of assessing its threat to law and order, good governance, and the workings of the nation state. The group had a chameleon-like history through the late 1980s and 1990s. It has undoubtedly changed

Arthur D. Brenner (editors), *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pages 125-151.

³ Joe Cochrane, "Philippines: Ticking Time Bombs", *Newsweek*, May 17, 2006.

⁴ Jeffrey M. Riedinger, "Everyday Elite Resistance: Redistributive Agrarian Reform in the Philippines" in Kay B. Warren (editor), *The Violence Within: Cultural and Political Opposition in Divided Nations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 183.

⁵ For useful background, see Kristina Gaerlan & Mara Stankovitch (editors), *Rebels, Warlords and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in the Southern Philippines* (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000); Rolando Esteban, "The Mindanao Crisis" in Victoria Tauli-Corpuz & Joji Cariño (editors), *Reclaiming Balance: Indigenous Peoples, Conflict Resolution and Sustainable Development* (Baguio City: Tebtebba Foundation, 2004), 197-211. Also useful are Kit Collier, "Dynamics of Muslim Separatism in the Philippines" in Damien Kingsbury (editor), *Violence in Between: Conflict and Security in Archipelagic Southeast Asia* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2005), 155-174; & Miriam Coronel Ferrer, "The Moro and Cordillera Conflicts in the Philippines and the Struggle for Autonomy" in Kusuma Snitwongse & W.Scott Thompson (editors), *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006), 109-150.

its nature over time, but not nearly so much as a number of observers have claimed. My study attempts to locate the Abu Sayyaf in the story of Islamic separatism in Mindanao, examining whether it has been deployed as a convenient device for traducing that struggle and, if so, on whose behalf it is inflicting this damage.

Cause and effect are elusive here. The forces of action can too easily be confused with the forces of reaction. Who represents agency? What is the role of the polity itself? The Philippines has officially become a principal frontline state, a vague concept in a war with no clear demarcation of battle lines or the like. Herman Kraft has argued that the Global War on Terrorism [GWOT] comes at an inopportune time for the Philippines in that it is wracked by many deep and divisive problems. The prevalence of terrorist activity is an indication of a pervasive crisis.⁶

The debate continues about whether Philippines demonstrates strength or weakness in contesting insurgency in general. The issue seems very significant – but deeply problematic.⁷ The opposite is also important; that is, to what extent has insurgency weakened the state? Whatever else, collusion by dominant interests has set violence high on the political agenda. Too often the quickest and most effective way to argue a point – or stamp one out - is to kill a few people. The significance of a cause is then measured by the body count. Foremost among those who use violence to challenge authority and pursue their goals is the shadowy ASG, an ostensibly Islamic secessionist organization operating in the southern Philippines.

Whatever else, the ASG is an outlaw band composed entirely of thugs and criminals. Any claims about commitment to a higher cause, like the assertion that it belongs in company with the MILF as an Islamist force in Mindanao, is nonsense. The same is true in regard to the international *jihadist* movement. “From the point of view of the purist fundamentalists in the Taliban and al Qaeda, the Abu Sayyaf leaders are culturally corrupt”, Ciria-Cruz noted. “They are known for brutality but not suicidal sacrifice”.⁸

Abu Sayyaf has committed some of the most atrocious acts of recent times, often coldly and without apparent rhyme or reason. The ASG has pioneered a range of individual and communal acts of outright cruelty. Some members appear driven by clan and tribal rivalries; others by a sense of failure, disappointment, and high levels of hatred and self-loathing. Largely drawn from the rural poor, they live in an environment of violence and hopelessness. They respond accordingly. Nonetheless, the seeming lack of motive in many instances raises questions about their hidden agenda and the nature of their sponsorship. Some commentators ask who stands to gain from the ASG’s nefarious deeds, pointing to the need of the established order to contain, defuse, and discredit the separatist struggle in Mindanao.

The ASG grew from wider struggles. The first and most controversial part of its gestation occurred in Afghanistan, where the US Central Intelligence Agency engaged in a complicated and clandestine proxy war against the USSR as part of the Reagan administration’s distanced support for anti-communist guerilla formations fighting pro-Soviet

⁶ Herman J.S. Kraft, “The Philippines: The Weak State and the Global War on Terror”, *Kasarinlan: Journal of the Third World Studies Center*, vol 18, nos 1-2 (2003).

⁷ For relatively recent updates of the discussion, see Temario C. Rivera, *State of the Nation: Philippines* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996) & Benedict Tria Kerkvliet, “Land Regimes and State Strengths and Weaknesses in the Philippines and Vietnam” in Peter Dauvergne, *Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 158-174.

⁸ Rene Ciria-Cruz, “Life during Wartime: Risky business in Mindanao”, June 15, 2002; <sfbg.com.htm>

regimes in Kabul. After the Russian invasion in 1979, the CIA set up, equipped and armed various Islamic organizations in order to maintain the Afghan resistance. Abu Sayyaf was one such group. It was apparently created or inspired by Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Established in Peshawar in Pakistan, it was one of several Islamic groups formed with American backing to fight against the infidel in Afghanistan.

The *mujahideen* of Abu Sayyaf appear to have arrived in Mindanao in the mid-1980s. Little is known of these early years, but the small band was essentially preoccupied with the study of Holy Qu'ran while teaching in the *madrassahs* of the *bangsamoro* region. The driving force was Abdurajak Janjalani, who began engaging vigorously with the traditional *ulama* on a range of issues. He also became increasingly disaffected with the quietism and resignation which had overtaken Moroland. In public utterances and interviews, he asked: Where in the name of Allah was any resistance to the incursions of the Philippine state to be found?

Most commentators on the Muslim struggle in the southern Philippines date the current crisis from the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and the war between the Marcos government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which swept western Mindanao during the late 1970s, leaving no less than 60,000 dead. The secessionist struggle lapsed during subsequent years. The Bangsamoro army (BMA) was controlled by the MNLF, now identified as an excessively secular organization which was poorly led, ineffective, and surrenderist. While the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had broken away from the MNLF to promote a greater degree of religious orthodoxy, it was also weak and highly politicized. The MNLF and the MILF were inadequate responses to the disillusionment of Muslims in the south in their dealings with Imperial Manila.

The separatist conflict has been long and costly in terms of lives lost and resources destroyed. But it has also been very persistent, revealing great staying power. The revolutionary cause has certainly survived better than the Manila regimes it has opposed. Graham Fuller has noted: "A significant exception to the futility of force is Islamic armed struggle in the name of national liberation of Muslim minorities under non-Muslim rule". He specifically mentioned the Moro cause as an example. "Repression of Muslims by a non-Muslim state usually only increases discontent and determination of the population to separate", he concluded. "Armed struggle as a strategy will not likely entirely disappear from international politics as long as the state is either excessively repressive or feeble".⁹ The Philippines is both; consequently, open conflict in Mindanao is set to continue indefinitely.

Mainstream studies have emphasized the manner in which the ASG has worsened the threat environment. A vast amount of research has asserted that terrorism in the southern Philippines endangers the civil society, making the draconian measures introduced by the government both understandable and necessary. There are a range of viewpoints about Mindanao; observers accept or reject certain explanatory mechanisms according to the direction from which they approach the problem and according to the ideological and intellectual baggage they carry with them. Painstaking investigation and careful analysis of the issues could clarify the predicament, but these have been in rather short supply. Presently the situation is being reported to the outside world by a number of parachute journalists and self-proclaimed terrorism experts, raising a separate contention about manipulation of sources and media coverage in Mindanao. The underlying issues deserve to be much better understood.

Most of the world had not even heard of Abu Sayyaf only a decade ago. International notoriety came slowly. By the mid-1990s the ASG was merely a criminal element evolving

⁹ Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 126.

from a little-known Islamist cell. The ASG only seemed to make news as something which contributed to Mindanao's reputation as the Wild West of the Philippines.¹⁰ The worst incident involving the ASG was the raid on Ipil in Zamboanga del Sur during 1995. Yet it garnered only brief attention in the international media, probably because no foreigners were involved. Ipil was a large town with a population of 50,000, the sort of place ordinarily insulated from banditry by its size and importance. A predominantly Catholic community, it was attacked by 200 armed men on April 4. Over fifty residents were killed, including the police chief and the military commander. Dozens were hurt and even more traumatized by events.

Although the fortunes of the ASG have waxed and waned since, the group has maintained its widely publicized activities for at least a decade. Yet very little was known about it for some time. An article by Mark Turner in 1995, one of the earliest scholarly studies, attempted to explain the nature of the ASG:

While the Abu Sayyaf may be accurately described as “extremist bandits” by military and media personnel, the group is also the latest manifestation of a 300-year-old struggle between the Philippine state and the Moro peoples. This history, combined with persistent poverty and underdevelopment, plus a strengthening of Islam, provides a fertile context for the emergence of a group such as the Abu Sayyaf. International links give further encouragement and sustenance.¹¹

But what may have seemed apparent to Turner in 1995 is less obvious now. He touched upon a number of relevant points, but they have become highly problematic in the years since.

Recent commentators like Larry Nicksch rely heavily on journalistic reports.¹² Nicksch was trying to make sense of things for an official audience in the United States, of course, and the subtleties of the situation were not within his purview. Elsewhere, Peter Chalk was willing to concede that armed separatism has stemmed in part from neglect of local concerns along with military repression. But, like most think tankers and terrorism experts, his main focus remained how to neutralize “the contemporary force of militant Islam” - and his position hardened after 9/11.¹³

Meanwhile, newspaper reports form the substance of most analysis, despite the fact that groups like the MILF maintain impressive, up-to-date websites and their leaders are often

¹⁰ R.J.May, “The Wild West in the South: A Recent Political History of Mindanao” in Mark Turner, *et al* (editors), *Mindanao: Land of Unfulfilled Promise* (Quezon City: New Day, 1992), 140-141. A valuable corrective for a lot of normative Western nonsense is provided by Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Manila: Anvil, 2002).

¹¹ Mark Turner, “Terrorism and Secession in the Southern Philippines: The Rise of the Abu Sayyaf”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (June 1995), 17. Also still useful is Charles O. Frake, “Abu Sayyaf: Displays of Violence and the Proliferation of Contested Identities among Philippine Muslims”, *American Anthropologist* (March 1998), 41-54.

¹² Larry Nicksch, “Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-US Anti-Terrorism Cooperation” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 25, 2002). An early footnote is to my own work, however, and I cannot fault him for that!

¹³ Cf Peter Chalk, “Separatism and Southeast Asia: The Islamic Factor in Southern Thailand, Mindanao, and Aceh”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (July 2001), 241 – 269; & Kim Cragin & Peter Chalk, *Terrorism & Development* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003); along with Chalk's recent work on agro-terrorism and the like.

available for interview. Instead, concoctions and confabulations abound. Self-referencing, self-declared experts on terrorism like Zachary Abuza and Rohan Gunaratna engage in something even more pernicious – an elaborate sort of police-blotter research.¹⁴ Confessions gained under duress along with assurances from known Human Rights abusers in regional police and military forces are grist to the terror specialists’ mill. Not only is such information consequently unreliable, but certain elements in the intelligence services are undoubtedly using media outlets in their own black operations against separatist movements in the region. Philippine operatives are ruthless in this regard. Journalists are enlisted by the likes of oft-quoted Brigadier Roberto Delfin as conduits for information conveniently traducing opponents of the Philippine state.

A 2004 report by the International Crisis Group illustrates the problem. It actually criticized sloppy police work, hasty arrests, and the like, yet still fell back on material thus obtained as primary sources.¹⁵ It seems dubious to fault the unreliability of evidence even as it is being quoted and referenced. The story is dire enough, even with the plethora of qualifications throughout the report. Yet sooner or later, nearly every statement relies upon a confession extracted through tactical interrogation (torture), psychological abuse, or other reprehensible procedures.

If a fraction of the horrors recounted by the ICG are accurate, they still leave questions of culpability and sponsorship unresolved. As Greg Barton has cautioned regarding Indonesia: “There are clear limits ... to the issues that a police-style investigation can deal with. The sort of analysis that is required to anticipate the further development of jihadi terrorism in Southeast Asia is necessarily much more speculative. It certainly needs to be happening in the intelligence community, but it should also be taking place more broadly among academics and other observers”.¹⁶

Questionable sources lead to a loss of perspective, too. In discussing the slow progress of the GRP/MILF peace talks, another ICG study noted that negotiations with the separatist group “have repeatedly broken down over the issue of ‘lost commands’ and ‘lawless elements’ taking refuge in MILF territory”. Yet asserting that a series of Moro misdeeds have undermined peace efforts is an unsatisfactory way of examining the problem. The situation in reverse - that is, focusing on GRP depredations and the widespread terror inflicted by elite AFP units, along with specific incidents like ex-President Estrada’s genocidal attack on the *bangsamoro* homeland in mid-2000 - was not considered by the ICG. Its report also emphasizes the factionalism within the MILF, yet such has not apparently damaged the central committee’s ability to make policy decisions and have them enforced. Divisions within the AFP – about which the ICG says nothing – have led to a collapse of discipline and command breakdown, coup attempts, defiance of civil and legal authority,

¹⁴ See especially Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (New York: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003) and Rohan Guneratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ “Southern Philippines Background: Terrorism and the Peace Process”, ICG Asia Report No 80 (Singapore/Brussels: International Crisis Group, July 13, 2004), especially 1 – 12 *passim*.

¹⁶ Greg Barton, *Indonesia’s Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 76. For a discussion of the value to governments of repackaging pre-existing threats as terrorism, see Neil Hicks, “The Impact of Counter Terror on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: A Global Perspective”, in Richard Ashby Wilson (editor), *Human Rights in the ‘War on Terror’* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 209-224.

extrajudicial killings and other Human Rights abuses as part of a virtual military dictatorship in Mindanao. It is the adventurism of the AFP which has allowed the Abu Sayyaf to flourish.

An important aspect of this selective research has been to concede the ASG more significance than it deserves. Abuza argued, for example, that the group could become some sort of “magnet of dissatisfaction” in the south. In an alarmist review of the situation, he even pondered the possibilities if the ASG becomes the main voice of Moro radicalism.¹⁷ On the evidence, nobody could sensibly argue such likelihood and Abuza’s point reveals more about official intentions than Abu Sayyaf capabilities. An entire school of thought appears to be validating Washington’s specious argument that the ASG is a major player in the separatist struggle and that all Moro political formations are terrorist organizations. This line is represented locally by the AFP, but some civil authorities in Manila have adopted a more nuanced and flexible approach.

Perhaps the nature and trajectory of the ASG might be usefully compared with the *Kuratong Baleleng*, a gang of bank robbers which leapt to notoriety when police agents under then-PNP General Panfilo “Ping” Lacson summarily executed eleven members in 1995.¹⁸ KB flourished in an environment of terror, violence, treachery, and – too often – cannibalism and other ritual horrors. It actually began as a vigilante group in northern Mindanao, an outgrowth of the Citizen Security Force Anti-Terrorist Movement. From the late 1980s, the AFP’s Southcom ran such units as a means of containing Moro separatism and communist insurgency. As the law and order situation stabilized, however, KB turned to kidnapping, extortion, robbery, gambling, and other illegal activities. Like the ASG, it crossed an invisible line while still enjoying the protection of local politicians, police officers and similar highly-placed sponsors.

In the case of the Abu Sayyaf, elements within the military-dominated regimes of Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos encouraged it back from Afghanistan as part of a move to disgrace and weaken the Moro National Liberation Front. This was an important aspect of a counter-insurgency program based on black or clandestine operations. The device of running terrorist groups on the fringe of the mainstream resistance in order to discredit it was refined into a highly effective tactic during this period. By 1996 Ramos had persuaded the MNLF to surrender. The so-called Davao Consensus allowed a peace accord to be signed with the group whereby its leader Nur Misuari became head of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) as well as governor of ARMM itself. Various economic benefits were promised for Mindanao and most of the guerilla forces were integrated into the AFP.

Steven Rogers has sought to fit Abu Sayyaf into the broader context of the Global War on Terror, even as he painted the MILF with the same brush as the ASG. According to him, the two groups “have created an environment ripe for exploitation by international terrorists. But Washington’s flawed understanding of the problem has hamstrung the mission and lowered its chances of success”. Muslim grievances have been trivialized and ignored. Terrorists did not create the situation, which is “rooted in specific local issues that predate the war on terror by centuries, and neither soldiers nor money will end Mindanao’s war”.¹⁹ Like most American observers, Rogers comes at the problem from the wrong direction.

¹⁷ Simon Elegant, “The Return of Abu Sayyaf”, *Time Asia*, August 23, 2004.

¹⁸ A series of untested allegations includes the suggestion that Ping was godfather of the *Kuratong Baleleng*. See, *inter alia*, Aries S. Rufo, “The Kuratong Payoff”, *Newsbreak*, March 18, 2001, 8.

¹⁹ Steven Rogers, “Beyond the Abu Sayyaf: The Lessons of Failure in the Philippines”, *Foreign Affairs* (January/ February 2004), 15.

The Sipadan raid - wherein Western hostages were seized from a popular Malaysian holiday island - pushed the Abu Sayyaf Group back into the international spotlight in April 2000. What seemed shocking to the outside world was all-too-familiar to the people of Mindanao. Hostage-taking has long since become a way of life (and death) in the southern Philippines. It is a crude outgrowth of various factors; it is deeply rooted in the despair of poor and marginalized communities. The Abu Sayyaf rebels have confirmed their terrorist credentials in these circumstances.

In mid-2001, as puzzled observers were attempting to understand the motives and behavior of this nondescript organization, ghastly footage was released onto an Internet website of the beheading of Guillermo Sobero, an American tourist seized along with others from the Dos Palmas beach resort in Palawan. The southern Philippines remains under a near-permanent US travel advisory. Few visitors venture into the hinterlands or the far islands, including Basilan itself. For Americans at least, such places represent “complex environments of ethnic conflict” and “intractable zones of hostility”.²⁰

Although the ASG is now being subjected to much greater scrutiny, little more seems to be known about it and even less about its role in Mindanao affairs. The main reason for this logjam in understanding appears to be that observers come to a study of the situation in the southern Philippines with highly developed prejudices and their own inflexible agendas, now much compounded by the exigencies of GWOT. Practical problems abound, too. Conducting research in the jungle redoubts of Abu Sayyaf is breathtakingly dangerous. Much fact-finding takes place at a safe remove from those who kidnap and behead other people for cause, ransom, or whim.

The most dramatic reason for the rise of the ASG was the government’s sidelining of the two Moro fronts. The surrender of the MNLF in 1996 was a turning point in this regard. The Ramos administration subsequently provided little of the promised funding for rehabilitation projects. Later, with Estrada in charge, violations of the Davao consensus and general non-compliance by the GRP became the pattern until mid-2000, when the kleptocrat declared war on western Mindanao. The shocking number of civilian casualties along with the immensity and awfulness of the evacuee camps destabilized the *bangsamoro* communities. Something horribly close to genocide was being attempted in the south. As the MILF lost ground – and its bases – so it lost credibility and control in its own bailiwick.

The GRP also consistently sought to remove Chairman Nur Misuari and Ustadz Hashim Salamat from their leadership positions. Misuari languished in a prison near Manila and his organization broke into factions (though the OIC has refused to recognize the breakaway MNLF: Council of Eight or any subsequent incarnations). The death of Salamat in 2004 likewise led to government attempts to foment rivalries within the central committee of the MILF.

Confronted by such aggressive neocolonialism on the part of Imperial Manila, the MNLF and the MILF began to discuss reunification. But the damage to the political life of the *bangsamoro* was devastating. Whatever else, the crisis allowed the ASG to assume a semblance of legitimacy. It partially translated itself from a bandit formation of kidnap-for-ransom thugs into an Islamist group representing a disenfranchised minority which had been rendered largely leaderless.

²⁰ William A. Stofft & Gary L. Guertner, “Ethnic Conflict: The Perils of Military Intervention”, *Parameters* (Spring 1995). Cf Peter Chalk, “Militant Islamic Extremism in the Southern Philippines” in Jason F. Isaacson & Colin Rubinstein (editors), *Islam in Asia: Changing Political Realities* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction, 2002), 187-222.

This transformation of the Abu Sayyaf was a symptom of a larger problem, of course. Young men – the orphans of the late 1970s – had been repatriated from other wartorn areas like Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Chechnya only to loiter on corners in Cotabato City with no more than their assault rifles and copies of Holy Qu’ran. The lack of development funds aggravated the unemployment situation and encouraged general helplessness. With the fronts reeling and discredited, the nihilist message of Abu Sayyaf gained some traction.

The general problem was bluntly stated from the Muslim side by Akbar Ahmed. “Because orthodox Muslims claim that Islam is an all-pervasive, all-embracing system, this affects the way in which Muslim writers and academics think”, he explained. “... They will force Muslim problems onto the agenda where more sober voices have failed and because we live in an interconnected world, no country can isolate itself from – or immunise itself against – Muslim wrath”.²¹ Nonetheless, a case could be mounted using the same evidence to assert that the Muslim world has not dealt very intelligently with the postcolonial project. Ahmed insisted that violence and cruelty are foreign to Islamic teaching and tradition, yet he seems almost to excuse the apostasy involved in employing these as political weapons.

The challenge posed by Abu Sayyaf is to argue from the general to the specific; in this case, to learn the lessons of widespread grievance across the Muslim world and try to apply them to the situation in the southern Philippines. Does Mindanao fit into such a pattern? Is the barbarity perpetrated by the ASG better understood through the commonality of Islam? After reviewing the flimsy and conflicting evidence and studying Abu Sayyaf from several directions, a tentative answer can be given in the negative. The descent into hell which has overtaken southwestern Mindanao cannot be ascribed to the ASG or to Islamic fundamentalism – or, indeed, to any single factor at all. Perhaps more importantly, it remains highly problematic to present Abu Sayyaf as a driver in Mindanao affairs or an Islamic group at all.

The role of religion has fluctuated enormously in the recent history of Mindanao. As Ted Robert Gurr and Barbara Harff noted, “the relative significance of religious versus other factors in a particular conflict can change over time and can only be evaluated through detailed case studies”.²² If the ASG is to be enlisted in such a case study, then it is important to realize that the group itself has undergone various incarnations.

The ragtag bandits of the ASG do not deserve their transcendent position. Although they were ill-prepared for their moment on the world stage, they have milked their infamy for all it was worth. Outside interference created a monster. A vast number of analogies could be used. Pandora’s Box had been opened. The genie was out of its bottle. Whatever the imagery, the reality was – and remains – horrific. Where people once stood up to resist outside invaders, terror now stalks the towns and villages. A cause is being mocked and brought low. As prefigured by Eric Hobsbaum, a noble tradition of resistance and insurgency has been reduced to little more than thuggery, gangsterism, and other types of criminal behavior. Everything is resolved with the *bolo* and the gun.

The memberships of front organizations like the MNLF and the MILF are by their nature informal and porous. Individual *mujahideen* join or leave particular formations almost at will. Some belong to more than one group at the same time. Many arrive or depart

²¹ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.

²² Ted Robert Gurr & Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 25-26.

because of specific loyalties, frequently following a popular *kumander* or local warlord. A key to understanding the ASG lies in isolating the way that extremism – and, for that matter, terrorism - were introduced into the political equation.

A major part of the story is the imposition on Mindanao of a centrally-controlled form of developmentalism which is at once unpopular, exploitative, and culturally insensitive. There is a strong element of neocolonialism about the way in which government initiatives are imposed. The entire fabric of policy-making needs critical review. If a case can be mounted to show that previous initiatives have contributed to the mess in Mindanao, then another accusation might be that the Arroyo administration has not sufficiently changed the agenda to bring much-needed relief to the south. Seven of the country's ten poorest provinces are located in Mindanao, with a dramatically increasing trend in poverty incidence there. Official appraisals of the situation remain unhelpful. "The policy of the President (Macapagal-Arroyo) is having a trickle-down effect", declared peace adviser Jesus Dureza. "But it is not enough and we have to work some more".²³

Along with other specific criticisms, GMA has been accused of continuing the earlier favoritism shown to big business. A wide range of local interests fault her economic agenda for being too deferential towards the World Bank-IMF as well as Philippine and international corporations. At a practical level, Arroyo is simply playing the tired old game of *cacique* politics represented by her own congressional coalition. She has important debts to many clans and groups; given the conservative nature of her own economic package, she can ill afford to alienate the country's corporate elite. With industrialization as the main ingredient of sustained growth, some observers have claimed that government initiatives essentially do no more than extend previous experiments with processing zones, industrial estates, agribusiness plantations, and the like. According to this perception, recent administrations have merely fallen back on the inadequate panaceas of the past.

Critics have pointed out that, above all, recent developments are no more than an extension of the Structural Adjustment Plan (SAP) imposed on the country by the IMF-World Bank. Few studies have yet explored the close relationship between the SAP and government planning, though a context was provided by Walden Bello's *People and Power in the Pacific*, who maintained that "the traditional mode of colonial exploitation, which focused on the extraction of natural resources, has been gradually superseded by a process of export-oriented industrialization".²⁴ The Philippines fits into this picture at the most deprived end of the scale. No post-dictatorship administration has explored any new or innovative alternatives to the EOI strategy. Rather, Manila continues to link economic development with income concentration. It does not recognize the need for a more equitable distribution of wealth, only greater growth - what former President Ramos called "enlarging the pie".

The sustaining goal of the middle forces over a long period has been a sweeping transformation that would convert the backward rural sector into a complex and modern agrarian economy.²⁵ But a sharp dichotomy emerges at this point: First, does Manila hold the

²³ Data gathered by the National Statistics Coordination Board; see Mel de Guzman & Dennis Jay Santos, "Zamboanga Norte RP's Poorest", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 14, 2006.

²⁴ Walden Bello, *People and Power in the Pacific: The Struggle for the Post-Cold War Order* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1993), 49.

²⁵ See, *inter alia*, Rene E. Ofreneo, *Capitalism in Philippine Agriculture* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1980), Morris Miller, *Coping Is Not Enough: The International Debt Crisis and the Roles of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund* (Homewood, Ill: Dow Jones Irwin, 1986), and Vivencio R. Jose (editor), *Mortgaging the Future: The World Bank and IMF in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1988).

key to rehabilitation and progress for the shell-shocked country; second, does the Arroyo administration possess the legitimacy, moral will, and capacity to implement it? The conclusion in this respect is dismal. If the economic policies of previous administrations have helped to cause the Abu Sayyaf phenomenon, there is little to indicate that the present leadership in Manila will change the situation.

In fact, successive Philippine administrations have sought progress through collaboration with overseas conglomerates. This type of developmental cooperation has been particularly significant in the south. As a consequence, the Moro cause has in recent times fashioned a set of strong counter-measures to the incursion of foreign interests into Mindanao. Commercial activity in recent years has increased exponentially as more and more foreign corporations scramble to get aboard the gravy train provided by docile or complicit Philippine administrations.

Muslim and indigenous *lumad* protest has often provided the only voice against so-called developmental aggression, though the struggle for socio-economic justice in the countryside is informed and led by the powerful albeit clandestine Moro Resistance and Liberation Organization (MRLO). While not part of the story here, the role of the National Democratic Front and its member groups have been significant. On many occasions the NDF has been able to contain outbreaks of violence and communist cadres have done much to expose high-level AFP links with the bombers and extortionists.²⁶

Of particular significance in this respect is the crisis of the Philippine state itself. Bertrand Bradie has described a logic of disorder which

deprives the state of everything that could validate it as a reliable international actor and *a fortiori* everything that would make it an international actor hierarchically superior to all other actors. Three foundations of the state's diplomatic action are thus imperiled: its claim to sovereignty, its function as guarantor of security, and its demand for the exclusivity of international partnership. State sovereignty is breached at several levels: clientelism, economic dependence, cultural dependence, and the deficiency of citizenship already seriously affect the non-Western states; the rise of transnational currents hamstring all states indiscriminately, keeping them from any chance of power.

These circumstances, according to Bradie, “reflect social processes that are neither intrinsically modern nor essentially traditional”.²⁷

This raises the specter of the so-called failed state. Susan Woodward has drawn attention to “a new ideology – reminiscent of a colonialist discourse – that has emerged that talks of a resurgence of tribalism and unresolved historical (even pre-historical) conflicts and hatreds”.²⁸ Such thinking leads to despair and hopelessness. Bertrand Bradie has noted that

²⁶ Author interviews with CPP/NDF/NPA representatives throughout Mindanao. Unfortunately, *Pasa Bilis*, the organ of the NDF-Southern Mindanao, though informative, is not available in translation.

²⁷ Bertrand Bradie, *The Imported State: The Westernization of the Political Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 207-208.

²⁸ Susan Woodward, “Failed States: Warlordism and ‘Tribal’ Warfare”, *Naval War College Review* (Spring 1999), 56.

“the lack or absence of legitimacy in the political center, the fictitiousness or precariousness of its authority, the non-existence of the state’s real relations with the governed are at each step compensated for by an influx of international legitimation elicited solely by its identity as a state actor.”²⁹

The people of Mindanao have endured various ills. Something always seems to frustrate efforts to improve their situation, including a dramatic loss of agency in their own domain. It is difficult to perceive any way forward. Ethno-nationalist leaders talk of sustaining the constituency for autonomy. The more this goal is denied, the stronger becomes the secessionist movement. As economic and political demands are ignored so the level of violent resistance increases in the south. Whatever else, the Abu Sayyaf Group’s primary achievement – intentional or otherwise - has been to discredit the Islamic cause in the southern Mindanao.

Meanwhile, the Philippine state has stumbled in the face of Islamic extremism. The costs of war-fighting in Mindanao aggravated the financial crisis which has dogged successive administrations since the overthrow of Marcos in 1986. More than half the infantry battalions of the AFP and nearly all the elite forces are garrisoned in the south. More telling, however, is the way in which weak or corrupt leaders in Manila have been able to enlist the prejudice of the vast majority of Filipinos against their Muslim compatriots. Joseph Estrada, for example, offered the desperate *bangsamoro* people nothing but “All-Out War”. He launched his cruel campaign against the population of western Mindanao in mid-2000 and watched his plummeting popularity rally briefly as he sought to stave off impending impeachment and disgrace.

Worse still has been Washington’s crude compromise of Philippine sovereignty in its prosecution of GWOT. The United States has played a major role in the unraveling of Philippine independence over the hunt for the ASG. In what has been judged by some observers as a form of neocolonialism, Americans closely monitor events in Mindanao and exercise a right of veto over policies being implemented there. For a number of years, annual Fil-Am military exercises have been used to allow US penetration of the anti-ASG campaign. This hijack of local initiatives has shifted efforts away from curbing banditry and lawlessness towards contributing to a much wider agenda. The ASG has been invested with the mantle of Islamic terrorism in order to serve the global interests of the United States.³⁰

The justification for such activities is the exposure of the government’s ineptitude and lack of reach, yet the undermining of Manila’s authority remains a primary cause of the stasis of successive administrations. The United States must bear much of the blame for the appalling performance of its fragile ally. Any time President Arroyo demonstrated concern about transpacific dictates, she was hastily summoned to the White House to be reminded about the harsh realities of tutelage and dependence. A long series of separate disasters has been largely misread by both sides. While Washington was appalled at the ASG’s beheading of foreign tourists, it was US-trained and supervised troops who killed American citizen Martin Burnham during a poorly executed rescue attempt on June 7, 2002.

²⁹ Bradie, *The Imported State*, 79.

³⁰ Aspects of this theme are developed in Julian Go & Anne L. Foster (editors), *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* (Manila: Anvil, 2005). A broader discussion of the value to governments of repackaging pre-existing threats as terrorism is provided in Sherifa Zuhur, “A Hundred Osamas: Islamist Threats and the Future of Counterinsurgency” (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, December 2005).

An avalanche of material continues to be produced about Islamic terrorism. Fierce dispute has erupted over the nature of al-Qaeda itself and over the internal dynamics of terrorist organizations.³¹ Far too little attention, however, has been paid to the way in which the nature and functions of such groups may actually be influenced (or even determined) by official agencies motivated by everything from a need to understand and counteract them through to the promotion of perverse agendas of their own. Thus might Abu Sayyaf be several things at once; at least one of them has been created and put in place by the intelligence services of the Philippine state.

For the moment, then, there appear to be at least two Abu Sayyaf Groups. One is a fearful phantasm which requires the United States to regionalize its Global War on Terror. The other ASG is a nefarious organization nurtured by elements within the AFP not too far removed from ex-President Fidel Ramos and his US-endorsed cabal. This ASG has been deployed to compromise the legitimate forces of separatism in the south.

Speculation about the ASG has recently been intensified by the emergence of Balik-Islam and the mysterious Rajah Solaiman Movement, which is implicated in recruiting Filipino Christians to the Islamist cause. The RSM has provoked a host of sensitive issues. Its very existence is too convenient to be accepted at face value and its sudden appearance needs to be subjected to further scrutiny. Initial studies have been excessively cautious. In the absence of hard evidence, a lot of commentary has collapsed into conjecture.³²

In a relatively brief period, Abu Sayyaf became the inhuman face of Moro separatism. Both the MNLF and the MILF have distanced themselves from the ASG and they have provided no aid other than what is inevitable within and between front organizations. Yet the ASG remains amazingly successful, at least in sowing dissension and confusion throughout Moroland. It is obviously armed and assisted by local commands of the AFP, which perfected techniques of penetration and counter-intelligence when infiltrating the National Democratic Front during the late 1980s. It has become exceptionally skilled at such methods, which in turn strengthens the military in its struggle against the civil authority to such an extent that soon the tail is well and truly wagging the dog.³³

Yet many observers refuse to acknowledge such processes and insist upon blaming culprits of their own. Amitav Acharya criticized democratization – an overworked term and an attractive straw dog – to construct a very unsatisfactory argument about terrorism in Southeast Asia:

³¹ Especially useful in this regard is Carl Thayer, “Leadership Dynamics in Terrorist Organizations in Southeast Asia”, *Leadership Papers* 3 (Canberra: Centre for Defence Leadership Studies, Australian Defence College, July 4, 2005).

³² “Philippines Terrorism: The Role of Militant Islamic Converts” (ICG Asia Report No 110 (Singapore/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 19, 2005), 6. See also Zachary Abuza, *Balik-Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2005). It is worth noting that damning accounts of official complicity in monstrous crimes have been silenced by threats of libel and other law suits in a country where legal redress has become a weapon of the powerful to hide their calumny. Former Marcos torturer, Estrada police chief and Senator, Ping Lacson, has silenced many critics with threats of court action. Strongly evidenced allegations against him include complicity in the Rizal Day bombings - which have, of course, been attributed to the ASG!

³³ Cf Andres Rehana, “Abu Sayyaf is at Work Again – for the Government”, *Bulatlat*, March 2-8, 2003.

The response of Southeast Asian governments to terrorism provides ammunition to those who see democratization as part of the problem, rather than the solution, in confronting the terrorist challenge. The case for democratization is undermined when one compares the responses of Malaysia and Singapore (with swift detention under the ISA) with that of Indonesia and the Philippines.³⁴

This is a very Western viewpoint which blithely measures people's freedoms against a perceived advantage which might be provided for terrorists. And while it is difficult to comment on the maelstrom of Indonesian politics, anyone who discerns democratization as a factor in the Philippine nightmare simply has not studied the situation carefully enough.

Whatever else, the ASG is an outlaw band composed entirely of thugs and criminals. Any claims about commitment to a higher cause, like the assertion that it belongs in company with the MILF as an Islamist force in Mindanao, is nonsense. Abu Sayyaf has committed some of the most atrocious acts of recent times, often coldly and without apparent rhyme or reason. It has pioneered a range of individual and communal acts of despicable cruelty. Some members appear driven by clan and tribal rivalries; others by a sense of failure, disappointment, and high levels of hatred and self-loathing. Largely drawn from the rural poor, they live in an environment of violence and hopelessness. They respond accordingly. Nonetheless, the seeming lack of motive in many instances raises questions about their hidden agenda and the nature of their sponsorship. Some commentators ask who stands to gain from the ASG's nefarious deeds, pointing to the need of the established order to contain, defuse, and discredit the separatist struggle in Mindanao.³⁵

Most recent research has been extraordinarily convenient for the American interest, generally agreeing that the separatist struggle in the southern Philippines courts and encourages terrorism, that the ASG is an outgrowth of the MILF, and that the peace process would be helped immensely if Malaysia was replaced – or its role reduced – as third-party arbiter by the United States, which insists upon intruding into Mindanao affairs as both protagonist and umpire. The US Institute of Peace has particularly promoted this line. Its Philippine Facilitation Project monitors peace initiatives and promotes the American role in the south. The RAND Corporation has also endorsed findings rife with disclaimers like “reportedly”, “widely suspected”, “there is evidence, however”, and “according to a well-informed Philippine source”.³⁶ Whatever else, the voice of the subaltern has been silenced under the sheer weight of Western scholarship - and conjecture.

As a consequence, little is being examined or challenged outside the prevailing hegemony. A timely caution has come from Lyal Sunga, who has argued that “Asian governments would be well advised to strengthen and participate in genuinely multilateral

³⁴ Amitav Acharya, “State-Society Relations: Asian and World Order after September 11” in Ken Booth & Tim Dunne (editors), *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 200.

³⁵ For recent appraisals, see Kit Collier, “Terrorism: Evolving Regional Alliances and State Failure in Mindanao” & Rommel C. Banlaoi, “The Abu Sayyaf Group: From Mere Banditry to Genuine Terrorism” in Daljit Singh & Lorraine Carlos Salazar (editors), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2006* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2006).

³⁶ Cf, *inter alia*, “The Mindanao Peace Talks: Another Opportunity to Resolve the Moro Conflict in the Philippines” (United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No 131, February 2005) <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr131.html> and Angel M. Rabasa, “Southeast Asia: Moderate Tradition and Radical Challenge” in Angel M. Rabasa, et.al. (editors), *The Muslim World after 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 400-403.

approaches to fighting terrorism, rather than to rely primarily on bilateral approaches that place Washington at the centre of global anti-terrorism policy making”.³⁷ But this suggestion is not available to the Philippines, whose decision-making processes are too compromised by American meddling to allow any such choice by the struggling Arroyo regime. A pervading sense of frustration characterizes organizational work within the ARMM itself. The factor which gives this state of affairs its burning urgency is that the Mindanao crisis can never be resolved through existing initiatives. On the domestic front, the Arroyo regime and the AFP have effectively stifled debate. Internationally, the exigencies of the situation have been subsumed into GWOT. The tragedy is that, thanks to official efforts to achieve law and order, peace seems more elusive than ever in the southern Philippines.

³⁷ Lyal Sunga, “US Anti-Terrorism Policy and Asia’s Options” in Uwe Johannsen, et.al. (editors), *9/11: September 11 & Political Freedom: Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2003), 247.