

## Is Sulu a Philippine province?

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MANILA, Philippines—Or, is it a colony? The question may seem preposterous to those who are content to see reality purely in legal terms. But, it is one that must be asked with all seriousness in the light of events like those triggered by the recent abduction of broadcast journalist Ces Drilon and her ABS-CBN Broadcasting crew by an armed group in Indanan, Sulu.

The authorities are satisfied that the group that seized Drilon and her group is not a unit of the al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah “terrorist” networks. They are plain cutthroats and amateur bandits, perhaps with peripheral links to the Abu Sayyaf. They had no political statements to read nor did they care to soften their demand for money with any reference to the poverty around them. Indeed it was Ces who—careful not to express sympathy for her captors, some of whom, she said, were children who should be in school—noted their deprivation and despair.

I wonder if these Moro youths pose a lesser threat for being less ideological and fanatical than their older counterparts. Their emergence could signify something grim about the future not just of Sulu but of the whole of Muslim Mindanao. This dark scenario is bolstered by reports that as soon as they released their captives, this amateur band of armed criminals more than doubled their ranks. It is clear to me that the problem they pose will not end here. They will merely melt back into the communities that produced them, waiting for the next opportunity to strike, until new leaders give form and discipline to their latent resentments.

The truth of the matter is that the Moro pacification campaign first launched in Mindanao by the foreign colonial powers, and, subsequently by Filipino troops in the name of a unified independent Filipino nation, has not ceased. That is why the principal enforcers of order here are not the local police but the soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The authority of the Philippine State in this region does not reside in the nomenclatures and offices of the local governments. Indeed, most of the occupants of these offices live in nearby Zamboanga City. Rather, the Philippine state, by way of a steady military presence, rides an uneasy tandem with the feuding traditional clans and their respective patronage networks. The widening gaps within these networks are filled over time by all kinds of armed groups known as “lost commands.” Once in a while, these “commands” are consolidated by a charismatic figure who weaves their basic resentments and survival needs into narratives of hope, emancipation and self-respect. This is what Nur Misuari did for the Moro National Liberation Front, Hashim Salamat for the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani for the Abu Sayyaf.

The nine-day ordeal of Ces Drilon’s crew in Sulu so shocked the nation that it hogged the front pages of the major dailies for over a week. No one could tell how the quiet negotiations for their release would end. Freedom came on June 18, and finally, on the 19<sup>th</sup>, the happy faces of the freed captives graced the front pages of Metro Manila’s newspapers. It was Jose Rizal’s 147<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I was reading a compilation of Rizal’s political and historical writings, and wondered if the national hero wrote anything about the political situation in the Muslim provinces of Mindanao during his

time. I could not find any in this particular volume. Rizal was aware of the many differences that set apart the various provinces of the country from one another, but he always held on to the promise of a unified nation. He wrote in "The Philippines a Century Hence": "It is true that their union is not as yet complete, but the measures of good government, the deportations, the oppression suffered by citizens in their towns, the mobility of government officials, the scarcity of schools, which brings together the youth of all the islands, who thus get to know each other—all these lead to national unity."

Because his reference point was that of a Filipino nationalist, it was easier for Rizal to see the contradictions between the Spanish colonial power and the Filipino nation he imagined, than those between the peoples of Luzon and those he referred to as "the inhabitants of the South."

Would Rizal have seen today's Moros as being in the same place that yesterday's Indios occupied when they were fighting for self-determination against Spain? I don't know, but I found it unsettling to read Rizal's famous essay in relation to the present Moro struggle in Mindanao.

"In short, the Philippines will remain Spanish if she enters the path of rightful and civilized life, if the rights of her people are respected, if they are granted others they should have, if the liberal policy of the government is carried out without shackles or meanness, without subterfuges or false interpretations... We who are now fighting on the legal and peaceful ground of discussions understand it thus, and with our sight fixed on our ideals, we shall not cease to advocate for our cause, without going beyond the limits of the law; but if violence will silence us or we have the bad luck of falling (which is possible, for we are not immortal), then we would not know what road will be followed by the numerous shoots of better sap who will rush headlong to take the places that we shall leave vacant."

Substitute Bangsamoro for Philippines, and Philippines for Spain, and what you get is a powerful manifesto for Moro self-determination.

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## **P.S.**

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