

Modernity and the Bangsamoro

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MANILA, Philippines—The Bangsamoro problem is entangled in so many historical, legal, cultural and political questions that it is irresponsible to talk about it in a simplistic way. Every attempt to capture the issues in a single frame is bound to inflame passions and exacerbate prejudices. Reason demands that we step back and attempt to sort out the issues. I shall attempt to do so here using concepts from sociology.

Sociologists like Niklas Luhmann view the emergence and development of human societies as the story of their growing differentiation—externally, from their environment, and, internally, into a system of specialized structures.

Early societies were the products of a process of differentiation by segmentation that produced small versions of the same entity, set apart from one another typically by religion, ethnicity, language, geography, etc. In these societies, the process of internal differentiation produced stratified social orders assigning distinct functions to social classes or castes.

In contrast, the trajectory of modern societies is toward functional differentiation. This mode of differentiation creates a system of autonomous functional spheres—like law, politics, religion, economy, science, art, etc.—that recognize the presence and contributions of the other spheres while jealously guarding their autonomy. Modernity is the emergence of these functionally differentiated spheres. Instead of one dominant system (like the Church or the state or the market) serving as a watch tower for the entire society, what emerges is a plurality of systems performing a variety of social functions. In this setting, human beings can be as different from one another in culture, family background, religion or ethnicity, but none of these attributes confers an advantage or a liability on anyone.

Societies in the developed Western world bear these features, though not to the same degree. But, clearly, the aspiration of all democracies today is toward this form of modernity, and the Philippines is no exception.

This is not to say that the early forms of social differentiation—segmentation and stratification—do not persist. Indeed separatist movements all over the world continue their struggles, and modern societies are far from being classless. But, it means that segmentation and stratification are becoming irrelevant as responses to the challenge of complexity in the modern world.

This challenge, if I may put it bluntly, consists of two problems: how to deal with the diversity of human experience in any community, and how to survive and grow as a nation in a rapidly shifting globalized environment.

The situation of the newly independent nation-state of East Timor today, almost a decade after its emancipation from Indonesia, shows how tortuous the road to operational nationhood can be despite all the pledges of support from the international community. After a long war, the legalities of building a state and asserting sovereignty may be accomplished by the signing of the appropriate

documents. The big powers may quickly recognize the new government's existence. But imagining a nation and one's membership in it, and participating in self-governance, are achievements that only the people themselves can make real. We know this only too well. For, we ourselves, after 62 years of being formally independent, are still in the process of "achieving" the Filipino nation.

Centrifugal forces are tearing apart many countries in today's world. They are often driven by historic grievances and fanned by habits of oppression and exclusion. More than the expression of the organic consolidation of separate national identities, they are actually instinctual responses to social injustice, mass poverty and unequal development. These forces tend to grow in strength during periods when, because of failed leadership, a country's economy is in crisis, its institutions are weak, and the national morale is low. It is these conjunctures that promote pressures for secession and federalization.

Having said this, however, one has to be blind not to recognize the powerful movement that the leaders of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have nurtured in the heart of Mindanao. They have succeeded in bringing the concept of a Bangsamoro homeland to a higher stage. They speak for the Bangsamoro people because they have shown that they can do so without any significant challenge from anyone. They dare to negotiate because they have proven that they can wage a determined war if they need to. Their quest for a peaceful rectification of what they regard as the erroneous annexation of their homeland into the Philippine republic appears to be supported by the United States, which they believe to be an original party to that historic injustice. We Filipinos must learn to overcome our instinctive refusal to listen, even if the ultimate goal of the MILF is an independent state.

But the MILF too has to realize that this will not bring the people of Mindanao any closer to modernity. Even as they begin to build their own institutional systems as a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, they will likely be faced with the same internal conflicts that are pulling the Filipino nation apart today: class, ethnic, religious, ideological, political, etc. It will not be long before the non-Muslim indigenous peoples of Mindanao will start asserting their historic rights as the "first nations" in that contested landscape, thus launching a new cycle of segmentation.

P.S.

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