

In Depth: The OIC Fix

# Three-cornered diplomatic battle in Kuala Lumpur

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A new peace agreement involving the government, the MNLF and the MILF, with the mediation of a credible entity like the OIC, has to be worked out. OIC participation in the GRP-MNLF/MILF peace process is not just inevitable. It is perhaps also desirable.

THE Estrada government has always treated the war with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front as “an internal matter” and it has brushed aside what it sees as attempts to “internationalize” the armed conflict.

To cite just one instance, in May last year, the government flatly rejected an MILF demand for formal peace negotiations to be held in a foreign venue, asserting that the Muslim separatist rebellion was an internal problem.

But after shortsightedly launching a major military offensive against the MILF more than two months ago and vowing to annihilate all MILF “camps”, the government now finds itself on the diplomatic defensive and facing precisely what it had sought to avoid: the internationalization of a supposedly mere civil armed conflict.

To be sure, the armed conflict with the MILF already has an international element to it: the material and moral support that the MILF has managed to solicit or mobilize from Islamic movements and sympathizers from around the world, including the Saudi billionaire Osama Bin Laden.

When it comes to soliciting international Muslim support, however, the MILF is almost completely boxed out by its rival, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). In May 1977, several months before Hashim Salamat broke away from the MNLF to form what eventually became the MILF, the Organization of Islamic Conference granted the MNLF, representing “the Muslim movement in South Philippines”, observer status in the inter-governmental organization of Muslim-led states.

To this day, the OIC continues to regard the MNLF as “the sole legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro people in Southern Philippines”.

With the recent developments in Mindanao, however, the OIC’s attitude toward the MILF appears to be changing. Largely ignored before by the OIC, the MILF has been invited for the very first time to the conference of OIC foreign ministers, the 27<sup>th</sup> Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) in Kuala Lumpur on June 27. The Philippine government, which had been invited as a guest to the ICFM conference in Burkina Faso last year, is courting Indonesia and Malaysia for support to get invited again this year.

In a diplomatic sense, the MILF, just by being in Kuala Lumpur, has arrived. That’s thanks in no

small way to the government's current military offensive in Central Mindanao.

The MILF will go to the ICFM conference armed with all the data, statistics and photos of the continued poverty and backwardness of Moro areas; of human rights violations, of casualties and evacuees, especially women and children, and destroyed houses and buildings (including a bombed mosque with gleeful government soldiers posing before it), after the recent attacks of government forces on Moro communities; of the anti-Muslim hysteria and the discriminatory actions (e.g., ID checks on Muslims) and warmongering remarks of President Estrada and other top civilian and military officials.

Few paid much attention to the MILF last year when it called for a United Nations-supervised referendum on the creation of an independent Moro state in Mindanao. Now it has the OIC as its forum and the entire Muslim world as its immediate audience for its referendum proposal.

A few years ago, the Philippine government was itself angling for observer status and even eventual full-member status in the OIC. The chances of getting that have dimmed. But what worries the government more now is that its "enemy", the MILF, might even beat it to OIC observership.

It's not just the Philippine government that's worried. MNLF chairman Nur Misuari, the governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, is anxious too. If the MILF gains observer status in the OIC, it would enjoy co-equal status with the MNLF in the organization, and the MNLF would cease to be recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Moro people.

To counter the MILF's moves to gain OIC observer status and OIC support for its referendum proposal, the government dispatched last week a six-member delegation headed by National Security Adviser Alexander Aguirre to hold "consultations" with key member-states of the OIC.

Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon Jr. has expressed doubt that the MILF would gain the support of the OIC, and surmised that the OIC would only come up with a resolution similar to that which it issued in 1974, at the height of the war with the MNLF. This resolution urged the Philippine government to find a political and peaceful solution to the plight of Filipino Muslims through negotiation with the MNLF within the framework of the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Philippines.

It is indeed likely that the OIC will go only as far as a 1974-type resolution — for now. But if the war situation in Mindanao worsens in the months or years to come, the OIC or some of its member countries could go further, just as they did after 1974.

When the OIC first called on the Philippine government to negotiate with the MNLF in 1974, it recognized that the separatist problem was "an internal problem". That was mere diplomatic euphemism.

>From 1974 up to the present, the OIC has always maintained that the Moro rebellion is "an internal problem" of the Philippines. But that did not prevent it from passing the 1974 resolution calling on the government to negotiate with the MNLF; mediating in the Government of the Philippines-MNLF talks in Jeddah (1975) and in the Tripoli talks and agreement (1976); blaming the Marcos government for the collapse of negotiations and recognizing the MNLF as the Moro people's representative and granting it observer status in 1977; persistently calling on the government to implement the Tripoli Agreement ever since; urging member states to assert economic, social and political pressure on the Philippine government to implement the Tripoli Agreement in 1980; mediating in the Jeddah talks and accord in 1987; and mediating in the series of talks between 1992-1996 culminating in the September 1996 agreement.

Among scholars of international humanitarian law, the GRP-MNLF conflict is referred to as an “internationalized non-international armed conflict”, a civil armed conflict with international elements.

Among these international elements are: the attention and concern in the Muslim world about reports of alleged massacres and atrocities; foreign support in the form of arms and military training; and the revelation in the wake of the Jaidah massacre in 1968 of a Philippine secret plan to invade Sabah, which would have been destabilizing for Southeast Asia.

Just like the war with the MNLF in the 1970s, the war with the MILF is becoming an “internationalized non-international armed conflict”. The presence of the MILF at the ICFM conference Kuala Lumpur would mark this, reinforced by the fact that the government has dispatched a delegation to the OIC countries to counter the MILF’s diplomatic offensive.

Misuari actually moved faster than the government in trying to blunt the MILF’s diplomatic offensive. By late May, he was already in Jeddah to attend a meeting of senior officials of the OIC. In a now controversial speech before the OIC senior officials, Misuari charged that the Philippine government had failed to honor the provisions of the 1996 peace accord. Because of the failure to achieve “genuine autonomy”, he warned that the MNLF might have to revive its fight for an independent Moro state.

The MNLF chairman demanded the “immediate” establishment of a 10-year “provisional government” in Mindanao provided for in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. And he asked the OIC to elevate the MNLF from an observer to a full-fledged member in the powerful body.

Was Misuari, as an INQUIRER editorial pointed out, delivering “a curve ball intended to knock down the MILF’s bid for observer status in the OIC”?

There’s actually more to it than that. In a published interview in 1994, an MNLF leader revealed the rebel movement’s game plan in the event of the collapse of talks with the Ramos government.

Citing this interview, academic Soliman Santos Jr. wrote in his research paper, “The Philippines-Muslims Dispute: International Aspects from Origins to Resolution”: “The next immediate step, spelled out by no less than Mohammed Mohsin, assistant secretary-general of the OIC, was for it [the OIC] to grant full membership to the MNLF. Thereafter, the MNLF would declare a state of belligerency and then ‘follow a circuitous road to independence ... petition the UN General Council [sic] for decolonization.’”

Misuari is pushing for the MNLF’s full membership in the OIC not just to block MILF observership. He is preparing the ground for the MNLF to lead the “decolonization” process, even if this would mean going to war again.

In his speech in Jeddah, he appropriated the MILF’s proposal for an East Timor-type, UN-sponsored plebiscite, declaring that the MNLF intended to undertake such an exercise.

That the OIC would sooner or later be drawn into some form of participation in the resolution of the GRP-MILF armed conflict was perhaps inevitable. The peace talks were going nowhere and had gotten bogged down over the controversial issue of the “MILF camps”. Without a credible third party coming to the rescue, the talks were bound to collapse and war to break out once again. In the ensuing hostilities, the OIC could not just have sat back and watched mostly Muslim communities being bombed and destroyed and mostly Muslim women and children fleeing war-torn areas.

But, in a deeper sense, there is no escaping an OIC role in a GRP-MILF peace process. If the GRP-

MILF talks had gone on to really tackle the substantive issues of the armed conflict, the negotiators would have run right smack into a brick wall: the 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreement, which the OIC itself had brokered and is legally and morally bound to uphold.

If the MILF had opened up to the idea of an autonomous region instead of a separate state, this would have necessitated amendments to the 1996 agreement, to which the MNLF would need to agree. The latter could have resisted or even vetoed anything it perceived to be diluting its functions or powers as “the sole legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro people”.

Only pressure from the OIC would have made the MNLF amenable to changes in the 1996 accord, or to the forging of a new accord.

When the government and the MNLF signed a peace agreement in 1996 with the mediation of the OIC, all three parties were hopeful that this would lead to a just and durable peace in Mindanao. The past few weeks, it should now be clear to all three parties that there can be no lasting peace without the inclusion of the MILF in the overall arrangement.

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