

THE MUSLIM MORO CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES: EFFECTS ON PHILIPPINES-MALAYSIA BILATERAL TIES, 1970-2010

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the rebellion in the southern Philippines carried out by the Moro Islamic community and the impacts that have shaped bilateral ties between the Philippines and Malaysia between 1970 and 2010. Malaysia was brought into the turbulence of conflict as a large influx of Muslim refugees fled from the Philippines to Sabah, Malaysia due to the rebellion in Mindanao and in the Sulu archipelago. During the height of the conflict in the 1970s, Muslim refugees and illegal migrants predominantly comprising of the Suluk and Bajau ethnic groups entered Sabah in large numbers. Their influx sparked security, financial, social and economic problems in Sabah. The Philippine government accused the Sabah Chief Minister at the time for harbouring the Islamic separatists. This article also discusses Malaysia's commitment to negotiations as a third-party facilitator in the peace process between the government of the Philippines, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Keywords: Moro, MNLF, MILF, refugees, third party facilitator

Introduction

Diplomatic relations between the Philippines and Malaysia began since the time Malaya gained its independence from Britain on 31 August 1957, when

Philippine President Garcia sent a delegation to attend Malaya's independence proclamation ceremony (Laird, 1975, p. 41). Official relations began in 1959 when the Philippines opened a representative diplomatic office in Kuala Lumpur. Three years later in 1963, this office was reconstituted into the Philippine embassy. Historically, political relations between both countries can be traced as far back to the 16th century when the Malacca Sultanate had established links with the Sulu archipelago. Bilateral relations between the Philippines and Malaysia has had its share of highs and lows over the years. One of the major concerns of bilateral relations was the influence of non-state actors and the impacts of their transnational activities. Non-state actors, as far as the Philippines and Malaysia are concerned, are the Moro separatists whose insurgency efforts since the 1970s have greatly influenced Philippine-Malaysia relations (Werning, 2009, p. 8).

Although this was essentially a domestic affair in the Philippines, it did pose immense socio-economic and geo-security challenges for Malaysian leaders. The challenges were primarily due to the close proximity of the southern Philippines to Sabah. The mass migration of refugees and illegal immigrants led to the Sabah government bearing heavy costs incurred by providing livelihood, food supplies, accommodations, shelter and medical care. On top of these financial costs, illegal immigrants were involved in smuggling, drug trafficking, prostitution, extortion and counterfeiting. Criminal incidences involving illegal immigrants was rampant in major cities. The prolonged conflict in the southern Philippines also caused lawlessness and in turn, created security challenges in Sabah. Multiple armed groups posed considerable threats to the internal security of Malaysia. From the point of view of Malaysia, peace in the southern Philippines would ensure that refugees could be repatriated and the socioeconomic burden in Sabah could be resolved. The foregoing constituted the overriding national interests that Malaysia wished to achieve by playing a role in negotiating the peace process in the southern Philippines. By participating in the peace process, substantial progress was made in Philippines-Malaysia bilateral relations.

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the conflict in the southern Philippines and the conflict's impacts on bilateral ties between the Philippines and Malaysia. The discussion begins by highlighting the extent to which existing publications have provided the historical backdrop of the conflict in the southern Philippines and how Malaysia was brought into the conflict. The section that follows highlights the methodology employed in the study. The discussion in the subsequent sections are divided into three parts, namely the Philippine government's allegation that former Sabah Chief Minister Tun

Mustapha supported the Muslim separatists, the massive influx of refugees into Sabah with consequent socio-economic and security problems and Malaysia's commitment to negotiations as a third-party facilitator in the peace process between the government of the Philippines, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Literature Review

Muslims make up 5% or about four million people of the total population of the Philippine archipelago (Seekins, 1993, p. 5). Philippine Muslims primarily reside in Mindanao, the Sulu archipelago and the southern half of Palawan Island. Beginning in the 1380s, the process of Islamization in the southern Philippines led to the emergence of several sultanates including the Sultanate of Sulu and the Sultanate of Maguindanao before the arrival of the Spanish colonists (George, 1980, p. 13). During the four centuries of Spanish rule, Muslim inhabitants were referred to as "Moro" after the Muslims of North Africa (Tucker, 2009, p. 491).

The origin of the contemporary Moro conflict and separatist movements began during the American colonial administration that began in 1898 (Werning, 2009, p. 2). The Americans implemented a new political system that eliminated elements of Islamic governance and challenged traditional Moro community leaders (Seekins, 1993, p. 5). The Americans also enforced land laws that did not recognise the existing system of land ownership in the Moro regions. Since 1912, the Americans encouraged Christians from the areas of the central Visayas and Luzon to resettle in the south (Hernandez, 2017, p. 19). Thus, the demography of the population changed under American rule when landless people from the central Visayas and Luzon were encouraged to migrate to establish Christian settlements in predominantly Moro areas, and that were also ancestral lands (Magdalena, 1996, pp. 427-438).

Since the arrival of Spanish conquistadors in 1565 followed by American colonial administrators at the beginning of the twentieth century, animosity between colonisers and natives had plagued relations between colonisers and Muslim communities even after Philippine independence in 1946 (Anderson, Reed, & Sardalla, 1996, p. 191). By the 1960s, migrations of Filipino Christians to the southern Philippines had begun to threaten the political, economic and cultural interests of the Muslim population. When the Philippines achieved independence on 4 July 1946, the newly independent government did not address the Moro question but instead focused on threats posed by the Hukbalahap (the Huks) guerrilla army, later known as the People's Liberation Army which was led by Luis Taruc, a communist party member (Kerkvliet, 2002, p. 157). In order to address the problems of the guerrillas and to curb the

communist movement, President Elpidio Quirino implemented a policy of resettling the Huks to the southern Philippines, mainly in Mindanao (Hernandez, 2017, p. 38). The Moros effectively became a minority in their own land. Furthermore, during the Marcos presidency (1965-1986), a massive campaign was carried out to resettle people from other provinces in the Philippines to the southern Philippines.

New Christian settlers began to form paramilitary groups supported by the Philippine authorities (Penetrante, 2012, p. 89) and at the same time, the Moro people also established self-defence units and armed groups. The Philippine government insisted that a religious war was instigated by the Moro people to prevent progress in the south. However, the Moros believed that Christians moved to Mindanao to take over wealth and resources. In 1968, the Muslim uprising against the Philippine government began in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago when the ex-governor of Cotabato, a Maguindanao named Datu Udtog Matalam, began establishing an Islamic State in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago (Werning, 2009, p. 8). The Muslim uprising grew in the 1970s and was led by a group called the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

Though the conflict was largely a Philippine domestic problem, Malaysia was brought into the turbulence as a massive influx of Muslim refugees fled to Sabah, especially during the 1970s. The conflict in the Philippines resulted in over 150,000 lives lost from 1970-1976. More than 500,000 people became refugees with more than a quarter of the Moro population fleeing to Sabah (Ricardo Jr., 2003, p. 81). By 2010, there were 889,000 non-Malaysian citizens in Sabah, representing 29% of the total population in the state (Razali, 2017, p. 6). The situation became more complicated as the influx of refugees sparked unprecedented socio-economic problems for local Sabahans. Central to the ensuing problems that plagued Philippines-Malaysia relations was the Philippine government's accusation that the Sabah Chief Minister at the time, Tun Mustapha (Chief Minister of Sabah from 1967-1976), was the mastermind who provided support to the MNLF (Noble, 1976, pp. 405-424). Despite this allegation, Malaysia was unanimously selected by those involved in the conflict to become a third-party facilitator during peace negotiations between the government of the Philippines and the MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (Santos Jr., 2003).

Methodology

This paper employs qualitative historical analysis to analyse the impacts of the Moro uprisings in the southern Philippines on the development of Philippines-Malaysia bilateral relations from 1970 to 2010. Data and primary sources came

from a number of official documents including Foreign Colonial Office Records (FCO); official policy statements; commission reports such as the Commission of Enquiry on Immigrants in Sabah, official treaties, and records from the Philippine Senate that were mainly proceedings. The primary data is supplemented with secondary data in academic journals and books. Magazines and periodicals, namely the *Asia Research Bulletin*, *Foreign Affairs Malaysia* and *Foreign Relations Journal Philippines*, were consulted. In addition, the archives of leading newspapers in the Philippines were researched. *The Manila Times*, *Mindanews*, *Manila Bulletin* and *Philippine Herald* were important sources of information for this study. Articles from Malaysian newspapers mainly *Straits Times*, *New Straits Times*, *New Sunday Times* and selected articles from *The Star Online*, are also referred and contain extensive coverage on the subject of this paper.

Moro Resistance in the 1970s: Malaysia's Reaction and Philippine Accusations

The Corregidor Incident, also known as the Jabidah Operation or Jabidah Massacre, took place on 18 March 1968 on Corregidor Island. The Philippine military version of the incident was based on statements by Major Abdul Latip Martelino, head of Civil Affairs within the Department of National Defence to Mindanao, who headed the so-called Operation Merdeka during the administration of Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal. He admitted receiving a commission to create a private army aimed at capturing Sabah. Recruits were told that the operation was intended for them to be smuggled into Sabah (*Manila Times*, 4 April 1968) and Martelino testified that a guerrilla-led private army comprised of supporters of the Sulu Sultan was created to recapture Sabah (*Philippines Herald*, 1968a). Martelino said that the Philippine army had to create a secret camp on Corregidor Island as they feared that if the private army attacked Sabah, it would have triggered a nationwide crisis that would create a great deal of criticism towards the Philippine government (*Philippines Herald*, 1968b). Marcos denied the accounts as mentioned above and stressed that his government would never use force to pursue the claim for Sabah (FCO 15/309 DP ¾, Telegram No 228 from British Embassy in Manila to Foreign Office, London, 20 September 1968, Philippines: Political Affairs [Bilateral] with Malaysia). Official Philippine statements asserted that the purpose of the Corregidor training was to combat communist subversives in the southern Philippines.

This Corregidor Incident was the tipping point for massive anti-Marcos sentiment among the Moro people for the killing of Muslims (Noble, 1975, p. 456). This operation was said to have been Marcos' plan to retake Sabah using

military means (FCO 24/260/HQ 3/10, Letter by J. M. Addis British Ambassador in Manila to D. F. Murray, British Foreign Office, 1 April 1968, Malaysia: Political Affairs [Bilateral] with the Philippines). President Marcos himself believed that the cause of conflict in the southern Philippines was fundamentally due to the Philippine government's decision to file a claim for Sabah (FCO 15/2398/FAP 040/1, South East Asian Department: Philippines. Letter by S.B. Oliver, Southeast Asia Section, Research Department British Foreign Office to Kathleen Kazer, Southeast Asia Department, 24 May 1978).

The Corregidor Incident triggered the founding of the short-lived Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) on 1 May 1968 by Datu Udtog Matalam (Mercado, 1984, pp. 168-175) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1972. In March 1970, the media in the Philippines reported that Nur Misuari, the founder of the MNLF, received aid from Tun Mustapha, the Sabah Chief Minister (George, 1980, p. 235). The Philippine government alleged that many armed MNLF troops who were captured had admitted that they were trained in Sabah. Among the evidence presented by the Philippine government to support their allegations against Tun Mustapha included the statement given by MNLF members that since 1969, Malaysia provided training to them. According to a Philippine government report, five MNLF groups of ninety people including Misuari were brought to three training centres in Malaysia namely, Pulau Pangkor in Perak, and Lahad Datu and Banguay Island in Sabah.

However, the Malaysian government described the allegations as baseless. Marcos insisted that there was strong evidence that Malaysia had provided military training and assistance to MNLF fighters linked to Mustapha. He was accused of providing training grounds, hiding places and the main channel of financial assistance to the MNLF (Fernandez, 2013, p. 62). It is no secret that after the Corregidor Incident, Mustapha became increasingly vocal in opposition to the Marcos government. Moreover, Mustapha himself was from the Tausug tribe in Sulu. It is said that many of his family members had been involved with the Philippine insurgency and therefore had links with leaders such as datos in Mindanao and Sulu (Yusoff, 1999, p. 16; see also *Straits Times* [1973]). These links eventually made it possible for Misuari to make contact with Mustapha and in fact, Misuari was referred to as Mustapha's protégé by the Philippine Defence Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile (George, 1980, p. 235). Their relationship enabled the MNLF to obtain various kinds of assistance from Sabah.

Since 1972 it has been alleged that Mustapha supplied the MNLF with up to 200,000 bullets and many types of weapons. The Philippine government received a letter dated 3 June 1973 written by Rashid Lukman, one of the MNLF leaders, who said that Mustapha had given 700,000 pesos to Misuari to recruit

new members (*New Straits Times*, 1974; see also *Asia Research Bulletin* [1974, pp. 2535-2536]). Juan Ponce Enrile further alleged that Tun Mustapha had given an RM750,000 contribution to the separatist movement in the southern Philippines (FCO 24/1750/FWM 3/320/1, Briefing on Internal Security Situation in the Philippines Provided by Department of National Defence at Camp Aguinaldo for the New Zealand Minister of Defence, Hon. Arthur J. Faulkner, 29 March 1973). Enrile also mentioned that there was photographic proof of military camps set up in Sabah by Mustapha to train Muslim fighters. This allegation was further supported by a letter written by Kathleen Kazer, from the Southeast Asian Department to S. B. Oliver at the British Foreign Office. In the letter, it is mentioned that Mustapha offered Sabah to be used to supply arms and financing, and as a haven for MNLF fighters (FCO 15/2398 FAP 040 1, Southeast Asian Department: Philippines, Letter by Kathleen Kazer, from Southeast Asian Department to S. B. Oliver, 13 June 1973).

In February 1974, the MNLF and the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA) managed to secure Jolo town in Sulu island for two days and hoisted the MNLF flag. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) accused Malaysia of lending its support for both groups (Tasker, 1973, p. 12). The Philippine government stressed that the insurgency in the southern Philippines could not have continued if there was no support from Malaysia (*New Straits Times*, 1974). This latest allegation caused further tensions in relations between the two countries. The Philippine government was relentless in its accusations not only directed at the Sabah state government but also directed at the Malaysian federal government in Kuala Lumpur (Tasker, 1973, p. 12). Carlos Romulo, the Philippine Foreign Secretary, had a private meeting with the Malaysian ambassador in Manila to relay the Philippine government's dissatisfaction. The Malaysian ambassador disputed the allegation and responded to Romulo that the Philippine government should release any proof that it held on the allegation (*New Straits Times*, 1974).

Many political analysts argue that the Malaysian government was aware that there was truth in the allegations linking Mustapha to aid provided to the Philippine Moros. The Alliance Party needed support from Mustapha's United Sabah National Organization (USNO) to ensure its support and victory in Sabah elections. Stakeholders also worried that Mustapha might demand Sabah's separation from the Federation of Malaysia if it insisted and forced him to end aid to Islamic fighters (George, 1980, p. 236). However, what was often misunderstood by the Philippine government is that Malaysians were deliberately ignoring Tun Mustapha's every action. Additionally, there were suspicions that Mustapha had secret plans to form a Sulu government in Sabah

by making Mindanao and southern Philippines part of a new government with the intention to achieve this by breaking free from Malaysia (Yusoff, 1999, p. 16; see also *New Straits Times* [1975]).

In 1973, as the insurgency in the southern Philippines increased, Romulo called on ASEAN Ambassadors and accused the Malaysian government of being involved with the insurgency. The Malaysian ambassador admitted that there was sympathy in Sabah for Muslims in the southern Philippines but argued that the Philippine government could not expect the Federal government to do anything to restrain Sabahans until the claim to Sabah was dropped. The ambassador also pointed out that Mustapha occupied a very special position as Chief Minister and was influential among Sabahans. Zaiton Ahmad, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Ministry, clarified that the Malaysian Government itself was not involved in the insurgency. Ahmad also said that his government did not condone 'illegal activities' but stressed that one must take into account that there has been close contact between Muslims in Sabah and their neighbours in the Philippines.

In time, the Malaysian government finally took steps to weaken Mustapha's political position. Prime Minister Razak planned to weaken Mustapha's position and influence by removing him as Sabah Chief Minister. Efforts were made to weaken his support within the United Sabah National Organization (USNO). When the USNO broke up, many party leaders left the party in 1975 (George, 1980, p. 236-237). Party leaders who left USNO included Donald Stephens who established the Berjaya Party and changed his name to Muhammad Fuad. The split in USNO weakened Mustapha's position such that Mustapha lost the Sabah election in 1976. After the election loss, Mustapha and USNO no longer held power in Sabah. Donald Stephens (Tun Muhammad Fuad) won and was appointed the new Sabah Chief Minister. He gave assurances that his government would not allow Islamic fighters to use the state of Sabah for shelter nor as a centre of insurgency operations against the Philippine government (Yusoff, 1999, p. 18).

Effects of the Conflict in the Southern Philippines on Malaysia

The most significant impact of the revolt in the southern Philippines on Malaysia was related to security concerns in the southern Philippines that caused a massive influx of refugees and illegal immigrants to Sabah since the 1970s, bringing economic and demographic complications (Samad & Darualam, 1992, p. 559) particularly to the east coast of Sabah (Morrison & Suhrke, 1978, p. 261). When Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines in 1972, the MNLF mobilised a BMA army of 15,000-16,000 against his regime. Many Muslims fled

to Sabah to avoid the ongoing war and conflict in their homeland. Civilians were caught in the middle of battles between the MNLF and the AFP and their livelihoods and economic activities were totally destroyed. From 1972 to 1973 more than 40,000 Muslims from the southern Philippines became refugees in Sabah with the number of refugees increasing every day (*Foreign Relations Journal Philippines*, 1989, p. 177).

During the height of the conflict in the 1970s, Sabah became a destination for refugees and illegal immigrants. In 1974, Razak stated that Malaysia had allowed more than 22,000 Filipino refugees to receive protection in Sabah on a humanitarian basis. The Malaysian government considered Filipino refugees in Sabah temporary residents who could return to the Philippines at any time (*Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, 1974, p. 48). Refugees were given shelter, food aid, financial support and health services. Mustapha as Sabah Chief Minister allowed the entry of Filipino refugees without any restrictions. According to a report made in 1975 and early 1976, the Sabah Government spent RM50,000 a day to cover the Filipino refugees' livelihoods and food supplies (Lopez, 1982, p. 24). Razak informed President Marcos that the Malaysian government could not continue this policy as it poses many problems.

Statistics on the exact number of Filipino refugees in Sabah cannot be obtained. However, an unofficial figure puts estimates at 120,000 to 200,000 Filipino refugees in Sabah in 1981 and that by 1983, between 160,000 to 200,000 settled in Sabah (Caculitan, 2005, p. 71). In 1991, the total population in Sabah was 1.7 million, with 423,000 non-citizens mainly of Filipino descent (*Report*, 2014, p. 39). By 2010 the total population in Sabah was 3.3 million with 889,000 non-citizens (*Report*, 2014, p. 129). In the 1970s, the welcoming of refugees was based on humanitarian considerations, and the Malaysian government and Sabah provided accommodations to refugees. However, due to socio-economic and security issues related to the influx, the Sabah state government tightened its policies as the influx of refugees was difficult to control (Lopez, 1982, p. 24).

Aproximately 400 refugees entered Sabah each day through Gaya Island. According to statistics, the birth rate was 7% among refugees, and the number of Filipino refugees in 1990 exceeded 250,000. Thus the Malaysian government was forced to impose tight restrictions on Filipino refugees. Despite the signing of the Tripoli Agreement on 23 December 1976 between the MNLF and the Philippine government, the Agreement did not curb the influx of refugees into Sabah. In the 1980s, many arrived in Sabah to seek shelter and refuge due to the conflict in the southern Philippines. The report by the Commission of Enquiry on Immigrants in Sabah stated that from 1978 onwards the influx of illegal immigrants in Sabah was essentially due to economic reasons and therefore refugees were instead

considered economic migrants. There was massive unemployment in the Philippines while Sabah with its rich natural resources was expanding economically with ample job opportunities (*Report*, 2014, p. 255).

Rapid population growth among refugees created difficulties for the Sabah government, such as building shelters. Refugees then built cottages in towns such as Tawau, Semporna and Lahad Datu. "Filipino" squatter colonies were increasing in numbers reaching crisis proportions. By 1976, Sabah Chief Minister, Datuk Harris Salleh, who served from 1976 to 1985 had to overcome a refugee problem. He implemented a new policy and established special settlements in Tambisan, Silabukan, Banggi and Sahabat Tungku. In the 1970s, the management of refugees was conducted by the state government with the help of the federal government. Salleh also established a settlement division within the state government to handle refugees.

Local Sabahans saw the emergence of squatter colonies as unsightly and damaging to the environment and quality of life (*Report*, 2014, p. 271). More worrisome were the health problems due to lack of hygiene. In 1987, for instance, Sabah recorded the highest number of deaths due to cholera and malaria in Malaysia. The total number of deaths due to malaria in Sabah was 62 while in Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia there were only 12 deaths each attributed to cholera and malaria. The total number of malaria cases reported in Sabah was 25,000, while the number reported in Sarawak was 10,000 and only 1,100 cases in Peninsular Malaysia (Tan, 1988).

Health authorities described the squatter colonies as incubators with the potential to cause outbreaks of contagious diseases (*Report*, 2014, p. 271). Some Sabahans also saw refugees as "illegals" and the cause of filthy and unhygienic conditions through indiscriminate littering in towns and work sites. The squatter settlements did not have proper sewerage systems which resulted in rivers and drains being polluted. Furthermore, efforts by local councils to demolish squatter colonies and homes belonging to illegal immigrants and exercises to clean up problem areas were often met with stiff resistance by "illegals".

Health expenditures for immigrants and refugees incurred by the Malaysian government were substantial. According to Dr Maria Sulaiman, Assistant Director of the Health Department in Sabah, the total number of births among immigrants in Sabah was increasing (*Report*, 2014, p. 273). For instance, records showed that from 2001-2011 the total number of non-citizens seeking outpatient treatment was 1,010,333 while non-citizen in-patients numbered 295,053. Between 2007 to 2012, the cost for medical treatment of immigrants paid by the Malaysian government was RM21,672,031, which remained unpaid.

Infectious diseases among immigrants were on the rise due to poor hygiene and sanitation, which resulted in more costs.

The crime was widespread in Sabah, especially in major cities such as Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan and Semporna. This was mostly attributed to illegal immigrants (Castro, Jr., 2010, p. 238). The situation urged Datuk Harris Salleh to give official warnings to Filipino refugees that the Sabah government would take decisive action against them. The UNHCR also commented that refugees in Sabah refugee camps were involved in smuggling, prostitution, drug trafficking and illegal extortion (Lopez, 1982, p. 24). Research conducted on immigrant settlements in Sabah from 2002 – 2006 showed that most of the settlements were water villages that had high rates of criminal activities related to illegal drugs and that immigrants in these settlements were making counterfeit currencies (*Report*, 2014, p. 43).

The Police Commissioner of Sabah reported that in 1987, total crime reported in the state involving foreigners was 65% or 4,049 cases (*New Sunday Times*, 1988). In 2006, the acting commissioner of Police in Sabah reported that the mushrooming of squatter colonies was seen as the root cause of social ills and crimes in Sabah and that the prisons in Sabah were getting very crowded. During his testimony to the Commission of Enquiry on Immigrants in Sabah, the Deputy Superintendent of Prison, Kalbin Haji Mohd, said that there were three prisons in Sabah. The expenditures incurred by the prisons department for non-citizens in Sabah from 2006-2012 totalled RM604,080,840 (*Report*, 2014, p. 314).

The Malaysian government also suffered losses in revenue caused by rampant smuggling activities involving the illegal sales of cigarettes, alcohol, fireworks, tires, drugs and syabu. For example, smuggled cigarettes were sold at 50% cheaper than the market price. The Commissioner mentioned that 80% of cigarette peddlers were Filipinos. At the same time, refugees also demanded basic facilities such as health care, schools and employment. Filipino immigrants considered Sabah the land of their ancestors and that they had every right to be in Sabah. Some politicians and Filipinos refused to accept the status of Filipinos in Sabah as “refugees” or “immigrants”. According to evidence provided by Professor Ramlah Adam, historically the Sulu Sultanate had control over some parts of Sabah so that these immigrants living in Sabah did not consider themselves immigrants (*Report*, 2014, p. 38).

The increase in the number of Muslim Filipinos posed a threat to non-Muslim political parties, and many politicians in Sabah were unhappy with the increasing numbers of Muslim Filipinos in the state. Datuk Madius bin Tangau, a former Member of Parliament in Tuaran raised the issue at the Malaysian Parliament in 2006. During his testimony to the Royal Commission of Inquiry,

Datuk Madius bin Tangau mentioned the extraordinary increase of Muslims in Sabah's population (*Report*, 2014, p. 17). This matter was brought up again in the Malaysian Parliament in 2010 by then Tuaran Member of Parliament, Datuk Wilfred Mojilip bin Bumburing.

In 1987, Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan, Chief Minister of Sabah (from April 1985 to March 1994), initiated the formation of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) which conducted a study on illegal immigrants in Sabah and the consequent issues. He conveyed the findings to the Federal Government, and according to the findings, it was predicted that by 2006 the immigrant population could surpass the number of local *bumiputra* (indigenous) people and that by 2016 the immigrant population could be higher than the local population. Among the steps taken to alleviate this trend, stricter border control checks and arrests, deportations of illegal immigrants, and others were implemented. Arrests and large-scale deportations of Filipinos have also caused bilateral conflict. Illegal immigrants who arrived in Sabah after 1976 were arrested and deported and by 1989, 4,281 were deported while 11,912 were sent to detention facilities (Caculitan, 2005, p. 72).

An insurgency led to lawlessness in the southern Philippines, posing internal security threats to Malaysia. Since 1979, there have been several incidents of piracy and intrusions into Sabah by criminals from the southern Philippines. In 1984, pirates killed 33 Malaysians at sea, and there were also cases of armed robberies at a bank and at a Malaysia Airlines office. In these two incidents, 10 people were killed and 11 were wounded. Moros from the southern Philippines also posed a major security threat (Caculitan, 2005, p. 72). In 2000, the Abu Sayaf Group (ASG) carried out two kidnappings on island resorts in Sabah. In the first incident in April 2000, the ASG raided a dive resort on Sipadan Island. This was a daring attack where 21 foreign tourists and resort staff workers were taken hostage (Jeshurun, 2007, p. 303). Nine Malaysians along with German, French, South African, Finnish and Lebanese hostages were taken to Sulu Island. The ASG demanded a ransom amount of one million US dollars for the release of each hostage (Caculitan, 2005, p. 72). The ASG group struck again in Pandanan Island. Both incidents inflicted major damage to the Malaysian tourism industry. The Malaysian government became more concerned over security along the Sabah coastline so that steps were taken to address the issues. Furthermore, on the Malaysian domestic political front, opposition political parties criticised the apparent lapses in surveillance and security of the Sabah coast.

Prolonged conflict in the region and lawlessness created a vast illegal arms market in the southern Philippines. It is estimated that there were 1.5 million firearms in the Philippines in which a third were unregistered or "loose".

Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago were considered the epicentre of violence not only in the Philippines but also in the region. Gun violence was associated with insurgency and terrorism, and guns and arms from Sulu supported conflict and crimes in many countries, from Japan to Sri Lanka to Papua New Guinea. A countless number of guns and ammunition was brought to Mindanao, where it is believed that at one point, the AFP was outgunned by Moro rebels (Miani, 2011, p. 4). In the following years, the southern Philippines became a site for global terror networks where groups such as Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) were said to have links with ASG and MILF. After the attacks on New York City on 11 September 2001, the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) linked the arms trafficking industry to the Moro struggle. The proximity of Sabah to the southern Philippines was, therefore, a threat to the internal security of Malaysia (Miani, 2011, p. 4).

Malaysia's Role in the Peace Process

Since the 1970s, Malaysia has played a role in peace negotiations between the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front), the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) and the Government of the Philippines. Along with Malaysia, many external players such as the OIC, Libya, the UN, the U.S. and the World Bank committed to bringing sustainable peace between the Philippine government and the MNLF and MILF. Malaysia's role as a third-party facilitator in peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF was significant in defining bilateral relations. The resumption of the Philippines-MILF peace negotiations was made possible because there was consent between all parties for Malaysia to host as well as facilitate the peace talks since 2001. All the correspondences, signing of peace-related agreements and implementation of guidelines were held in Malaysia, except for one event that was held in Libya (Santos Jr., 2003, p. 3).

Since 2001, Malaysia played an important role as "crucial catalyst in developing supportive relationship" between the Philippine government and the MILF which led to progress in the negotiations and a decline in ceasefire violations (Caculitan, 2005, p. 71). Since 2004, Malaysia also headed the International Monitoring Team (IMT) in Mindanao, southern Philippines. As the Philippines' closest geographic neighbour in Southeast Asia, Malaysia played a positive role in promoting peaceful settlement through peace talks. The insurgency and conflict involving the Moros led by the MNLF was an important topic on the agenda in the yearly OIC meetings (Tasker, 1978, pp. 24-25).

By 1975, the conflict between the MNLF and the Philippine government reached a stalemate. Pressured by the enormous costs of military operations in

Mindanao and the possibility of sanctions by countries that controlled the world's oil supply, Marcos was forced to negotiate (Noble, 1981, p. 1110). The OIC recognised the MNLF as the sole representative of Muslims in the Philippines whereby the MNLF received observer status. OIC members including Malaysia pressured Marcos to start negotiations with the MNLF to end the violence. As the conflict escalated, Malaysia, together with the OIC members, established the Filipino Muslim Welfare and Relief Agency during the Fifth OIC Foreign Ministers Conference. This effort focused on bringing economic reform, social progress and prosperity in the southern Philippines as a way to end the conflict. However, Filipinos often doubted Malaysia's sincerity due to the allegation that Sabah's Mustapha supported Muslim groups in the southern Philippines (FCO 24/1750/M3/320/1, Letter from L.J. Middleton, British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur to W.K. Slatcher at Southwest Pacific Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office London, 2 February 1973).

In January 1975, mediation efforts by Malaysia with Libya and other OIC members in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia led to the first-ever series of negotiations between the MNLF and the Philippine government (Hernandez, 2017, p. 58). However, negotiations were not very successful as the MNLF demanded territorial integrity of the Bangsa Moro Homeland and complete sovereignty of the Bangsa Moro people over their ancestral homeland. The Philippine government was not willing to accept the MNLF's request for autonomy in a Moro homeland (Noble, 1981, pp. 1099-1100).

Ferdinand Marcos' twenty-one-year dictatorship as Philippine President came to an end in 1986 when the People Power Revolution ousted him. During Cory Aquino's presidency, Malaysia was not involved in the peace process nor negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF. On 30 June 1992, Fidel Ramos was elected as President of the Philippines. In an effort to establish national unity and reconciliation, Ramos was determined to move the peace process forward and return to the negotiation table. The National Unification Commission (NUC) was established to formulate programmes that would bring everlasting peace in the country. President Ramos also issued Executive Order No. 125, which aimed to promote the government's peace efforts ("Defining the Approach", 1993). By 1996, the OIC, President Suharto of Indonesia and the Malaysian government played mediating roles and pushed for the MNLF to prepare a peaceful solution to the conflict (Ricardo Jr., 2003, p. 97).

On 2 September 1996, the Philippine Government and the MNLF signed a historic peace agreement. This agreement was referred to as the Final Peace Agreement/Jakarta Accord (Final Peace Agreement/Jakarta Accord. Cited in Ricardo Jr., 2003, p. 97). President Suharto and other OIC members played an

important role in peace talks during the three years of negotiations while OIC pressure and mediation played a vital role in encouraging Misuari to compromise with the Philippine government. Upon the signing of the peace accord, Indonesia and Malaysia promised to support their “Muslims in Mindanao” (Ricardo Jr., 2003, p. 97). Ramos convinced Misuari to run for governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and on 11 September 1996 with government support, Nur Misuari ran unopposed and was elected governor. The Malaysian government offered to support Misuari with governance and infrastructure development and offered training courses for Muslim students from Mindanao. Yong Teck Lee, the Sabah Chief Minister, attended Misuari’s swearing-in ceremony to show his government’s support. In November 1996, the Chief Minister made an official trip to Mindanao to discuss trade and economic cooperation and also took the opportunity to discuss the issue of Filipino refugees in Sabah (*New Straits Times*, 1996, p. 19).

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo came to power in 2001. Immediately after taking office Macapagal-Arroyo declared a unilateral ceasefire and offered to begin negotiations with the MILF (“Policy Statements”, 2002, p. 2; see also Bacani [2005, p. 6]). The MILF dropped its demands for independence and instead wanted to achieve progress on rehabilitating Mindanao (Ricardo Jr., 2003, p. 107). Macapagal-Arroyo accepted the three conditions proposed by the MILF: First, talks would be mediated by the OIC or an OIC member country; second, both parties comply with terms that had been agreed upon in previous agreements; and third, talks would be held in a foreign venue. Arroyo also wanted to have third party participation in the peace talks (Bacani, 2005, p. 6).

Therefore, Malaysia took an active role as a third-party facilitator. The resumption of peace talks was made possible through the consent of all parties involved for Malaysia to host and facilitate peace talks. All rounds of talks and signing of agreements were held in Malaysia except for one meeting that was held in Tripoli (Santos Jr., 2003 p. 2). A key Malaysian official who played a significant role was Prime Minister Dr Mahathir, as the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) served as Secretariat for peace talks. During one of the meetings with Daim Zainuddin (Former Finance Minister of Malaysia 1984-1991) in December 2000, President Macapagal-Arroyo requested that Malaysia assist her in solving the Bangsamoro problem. Bangsamoro refers to “Moro Nation” which includes all to all Filipino Muslim groups in Mindanao” (McKenna, 1997, p. 55). This was essentially how Malaysia got involved as the third-party negotiator. Macapagal-Arroyo also conveyed her wish to Dr Mahathir that the Bangsamoro people be a part of the development she planned for the Philippines. She sent an emissary to

the PMO, followed by three letters to Dr Mahathir to cultivate better ties with him (Santos Jr., 2003, p. 21).

During his opening remarks at the resumption of peace talks, Zakaria Abdul Hamid, the head of the Malaysian Secretariat, mentioned that “this meeting is being held upon the personal request of President Arroyo” (Santos Jr., 2003, p. 2). As soon as Macapagal-Arroyo took office in January 2001, PMO officials in Kuala Lumpur visited MILF Chairman Hashim Salamat several times at Camp Abubakar to convey Malaysia’s willingness to play a third party role and to convince him to restart peace talks. Despite his initial hesitancy, Hashim Salamat and the MILF Central Committee were finally convinced to participate and agreed to resume talks.

As a negotiator, Malaysia relayed this breakthrough to the Macapagal-Arroyo government, which then led to the first round of talks (“Resolution”, 2002, pp. 1-2; see also Santos Jr. [2003, p. 2]). Malaysia took an active role in the exploratory phase of talks held in Kuala Lumpur from November 2000 to February 2003 that resulted in many agreements (Bacani, 2005, p. 6). On 22 June 2001, the Tripoli Agreement on Peace was signed providing the implementation of guidelines on the security aspects of negotiations (“Agreement on Peace”, 2001; Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process [OPAPP], 2010, p. 2). This agreement divided negotiations into three major clusters: security, humanitarian aid/development and ancestral domain (Bacani, 2005, p. 6). As a way to fulfil the first two clusters, the Bangsamoro Development Agency and the International Monitoring Team (IMT) was established. IMT comprised representatives from the OIC (“Agreement on Peace”, 2001).

During President Macapagal-Arroyo’s term, cooperation between the Philippines and Malaysia in dealing with insurgency in Mindanao reached a high note when both countries were confronted with an incident involving Misuari, the Governor of ARMM. In 1996, Misuari led the MNLF in signing a pro-autonomy peace settlement with the Philippine government. The ARMM was established through a referendum for autonomy in 1989, and the agreement resulted in another referendum for autonomy in 2001 (Dacanay, 2013).

Conclusion

The insurgency by Muslim groups in the southern Philippines had profound effects on Philippines-Malaysia bilateral ties. The Philippine government’s allegation that former Sabah Chief Minister Mustapha was the mastermind who provided support to the MNLF made matters worse for bilateral ties. Mustapha’s activities led the Malaysian government to take steps to weaken his political

position whereby Mustapha lost his power grip on Sabah when he lost the election.

Second, the large influx of refugees and illegal immigrants to Sabah created many economic and demographic impacts (Samad & Darualam, 1992, p. 559). Although the Malaysian government-provided housing and other assistance to refugees for humanitarian reasons during the 1970s, the socio-economic and security problems associated with refugees and illegal immigrants from the southern Philippines prompted the Sabah state government to tighten its policies eventually. Security in Sabah was compromised due to the lawlessness in the southern Philippines with increased piracy and intrusions by criminal elements into Sabah. Regional and global security was also jeopardised because of the reported links between the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf with international terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda, JI and other Islamic militant groups.

Third, Malaysia's role in the peace negotiations between the Philippine government and the MNLF and MILF as third-party facilitator was significant in defining bilateral relations. Malaysia's crucial role led to progress in the peace process and led to a substantial decline in ceasefire violations ("Minutes of Meeting", 2004, pp. 1-40). Along with Malaysia and the support of other external players such as the OIC, the UN, the World Bank and the United States, the door for peace between the Philippine government and MILF opened wider than ever before. Quoting MILF Chief Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, "Peace is partly at hand" ("Peace is partly at hand", 5 June 2005).

In 2010, negotiations continued under Philippine President Benigno Aquino III who took office on 30 June 2010. Prior to his inauguration, Aquino initiated the signing of the Declaration of Continuity for Peace Negotiation between the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, that took place in Kuala Lumpur on 3 June 2010. The Declaration aimed to encourage both parties to continue engaging with each other through peace efforts. Dato Othman Bin Abdul Razak also facilitated this declaration, the Malaysian facilitator ("Declaration of Continuity", 2004, pp. 1-40). Aquino personally met with MILF Chief Al Haj Murad Ebrahim in Japan to move the peace process forward (Hernandez, 2017, p. 44) and on 21 October 2012, the government of President Benigno Aquino III signed a historic peace plan with the MILF. For the first time, separatist group leaders stepped foot in Malacanang Palace, the seat of Presidential power in the Philippine capital of Manila. A Malaysian delegation was invited for this historical event led by then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (Razak Ahmad, 2012).

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