
DARIA PANARINA. MORO – A DESTABILIZING FACTOR IN THE PHILIPPINES: ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the problem of the Moro – Moslem minority in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. The author provides a brief historical overview of the internal conflict between the Philippine government and Moslem separatists and analyzes the latest attempt by the state to resolve this conflict through the formation of the Bangsamoro autonomy (BAARM).

Islam is the youngest world religion, and partly because of this factor, and partly because of its specificity, it has a great influence and is actively spreading in different parts of the world. The ideas and role of Islam in the internal situation and politics of countries where a sufficient number of Moslems live cannot be ignored. And if in some countries Islam is just gaining strength, in others it is part of the historically formed social picture, since Moslems settled in these countries in the Middle Ages.

A prime example in this regard are the Philippines, an island nation in the Southeast Asia region, a country spread over 7000 islands (2000 inhabited). The largest island, called Mindanao, in the southern part of the archipelago, became the habitat of Moslems in pre-colonial times.

Moro in the Philippines – political and social aspects

The peoples who inhabited the southern part of the Philippine archipelago adopted Islam from Malaysia and Indonesia even before the arrival of the Spaniards, around the 13th century. In the 15th century on the Sulu archipelago there arose the first sultanate, in the first quarter of the 16th century sultanates appeared in Mindanao. The sultanates exercised control over the southern part of Mindanao until the colonial conquest of the Philippines by the Spaniards, from which the local Islamic population received the name “Moro” (Moors).¹ It should be noted, that throughout the history of the Philippine state, the Moros were a separate community, which was to some extent a threat. It is indicative that the Moro themselves have never recognized and still do not recognize the Philippines as their country, hence the very symbolic name Moro, which Filipino Moslems themselves use in everyday life, identifying themselves as a separate people, but not as Filipinos.

Despite the fact that resistance to the existing Moro government in the Philippines was shown throughout the history of the country, their protests took a particularly active and threatening form starting in the 1920s, at the time when the Philippines was still actually a U.S. colony. It is important to note that one of the factors that triggered the process of a more active (initially peaceful, but eventually turned into an armed phase) struggle was the policy of the United States, which, in an attempt to assimilate the Moslem population of Mindanao and “include” it into the society of the rest of the country, incorporate it into “Western world” with its values and norms that are different from Moslem ones, encouraged the active settlement of Mindanao by Filipinos in every possible way. This process implied the seizure of “primordially” Moslem lands from the local population in favor of new settlers, which certainly could not but cause discontent on the part of the Moro. Let's say a few words about the demographic picture in Mindanao before the

start of the massive population of the island by the Filipinos and today.

Mindanao, as well as Sulu and Palawan, have historically served as home to more than 30 ethnic groups, 13 of which are the Moslems we know collectively as Moro. In modern realities, 3 main categories of the population of Mindanao can be distinguished, namely: 1) Moro (Moslems); 2) Filipinos (Catholic Christians); 3) the Lumad (non-Moslem and non-Catholic indigenous tribes). At the same time, the Moslem population in Mindanao numbers only about 20% and they do not live on the territory of the entire island, but in 5 provinces: Magindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, as well as in the municipalities of Katabato, Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga del Norte and Davao del Sur. In addition, there is a fairly high concentration of Moslems in the Kudarat Sultanate, South Katabato, Zamboanga del Sur and Palawan. Another 5% of the island's population is lumad, while the remaining 75% are Filipinos, who mostly moved here from the island of Luzon and the Visayas.

It is interesting how each of the three categories of the population on the island sees the current conflict in Mindanao. It is significant that the Moro consider the Christian population the source of all their troubles, i.e. Filipinos - they both helped the Spaniards in the fight against local Moslems, and took their ancestral lands from them, and were constantly fighting the Moslems, and are still fighting. It is the Filipinos who, in the eyes of the Moro, are the main obstacle on their way to self-determination. Of course, this is not an objective and balanced opinion, taking into account all the accompanying factors, but rather a general idea that is very tenacious in the minds of the Moslem population of Mindanao. For their part, Filipinos, forced to live side by side with the Moro, in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, describe their Moslem "neighbors" as traitors, kidnappers, land invaders, terrorists, belligerent and troublesome people. There is a lack of any mutual understanding or attempts to achieve it on both sides, and, according to the author's humble

conviction, in this case, the attitude of the Filipinos can be considered a consequence of the Moro's initial hostility and their refusal to integrate into Filipino society at any levels. Finally, the Lumad hold the position that the Moro and the Filipinos are equally guilty of the conflict that has developed in Mindanao, and they consider themselves to be victims of both peoples, since both the Moro and the Filipinos seized "their"² lands and actually forced the Lumad to move to the mountains.

Considering all of the above, the Philippine government is facing a difficult task that still requires a solution: to achieve peace and prosperity on the island, which should become a full-fledged part of the Philippines and Philippine society and contribute to the development and modernization of the country (Mindanao has fertile land and many minerals, but the region itself is underdeveloped and is one of the poorest in the country in terms of living standards), as well as resolve the internal conflict between different representatives of the population of Mindanao. In addition, it should not be forgotten that achieving peace and security in this region of the country is indisputably important for maintaining balance and security in the Southeast Asia region as a whole, given the fact that the Filipino Moros are also part of the larger Moslem world.

Each Filipino president made attempts to smooth out and resolve the conflict in Mindanao by creating autonomy on the territory of the above-mentioned areas of the island, which would allow the Moro to preserve their values, way of life, and, finally, gain the opportunity for self-determination, and the Philippine government does not lose a certain part of its state territory³ and get the opportunity to fully develop an economically promising region without regard to the need for constant security.

If on the part of the Filipinos the government of the country acts as the agent of the peace process in this situation, then on the part of the Moro it is the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), created in the mid-1970s by two leaders – Nur Misuari

and Salamat Hashim. The manifesto of this organization, in particular, reads:

“We, the five million oppressed people of Bangsamoro, wanting to free ourselves from the terror, oppression and tyranny of Philippine colonialism, which has caused untold suffering and calamity for us by criminally usurping our lands, threatening Islam by completely desecrating its places of worship and its Holy Scriptures, and killing our innocent brothers , sisters and people in a genocidal campaign of appalling proportions ... Striving to have the sole prerogative to determine and establish our national destiny in accordance with our own free will, to secure our future and the future of our children ... we hereby declare the formation of the Republic of Bangsamoro.” (MNLF, Manifesto, April 28, 1974).⁴

The MNLF became the first official organization in the Philippines whose leaders were inclined towards radical separatism and were initially not ready to enter into negotiations with the Philippine government. However, their position changed over time, which, on the one hand, led to a process of discussion of autonomy and attempts to actually organize it, and on the other hand, provoked the stratification of the organization itself, from which former supporters began to split off. They formed into independent organizations of more radical separatists, and the main and largest such organization is the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). In 1977, the MILF formulated the following reasons for separating from the MNLF:

1. The leadership of the MNLF was manipulated, led away from the foundations of Islam, methodologies, goals, as a result, the MNLF rapidly evolved in the direction of Marxist-Maoist ideology.

2. The Central Committee has become a mysterious, closed, secretive and monolithic body, whose policies, plans and decisions - political, financial or strategic - become the exclusive prerogative of Chairman Nur Missuari.

3. The secretive, one-man and arrogant policies of the MNLF leadership group have led to confusion, suspicion and frustration among the members of the organization.

The division of the MNLF into two independent organizations with different goals also led to the fact that they “divided” the Bangsamoro territory among themselves too. For example, the MNLF under the leadership of Nur Misuari found support among the Tausug people in western Mindanao in the provinces of Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Palawan. Hashim Salamat, who became the leader of the MILF, has won over the Magindanao people of the provinces of Magindanao, Lanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte and Zamboanga.⁵ Thus, in Mindanao there developed two strong organizations, from which smaller paramilitary groups subsequently split off, whose goals and methods were fully consistent with the concept of militant jihad, and whose actions in no way contributed to the successful resolution of the conflict. Omitting the description of numerous attempts to create autonomy, which have been repeatedly considered by other authors⁶, I would like to focus on the most recent “version” of autonomy in Mindanao, which is the result of the work of the current administration of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte.

After decades of war, the Bangsamor Autonomous Region in Moslem Mindanao (BARMM) is the latest attempt by Manila and the Moro rebels embodied in MILF to find a formula for self-determination for the region within the Philippine state. The new autonomy is the result of the 2014 peace agreement and is based on the Bangsamoro Organic Law, ratified by a referendum in early 2019.⁷ The new project seeks to correct the shortcomings of the previous project for the creation of an Autonomous Region in Moslem Mindanao (ARMM), which was deemed a “failed experiment.” BAARM is currently governed by the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA), which counts 79 members. The MILF leads the transitional government and holds the majority of the BTA seats.⁸

However, this does not mean that the MILF has full power in the BAARM, since there, as in the entire territory of the Philippines, clan influence are very strong. In the case of Bangsamoro, the provinces and municipalities are mainly ruled by clans. Thus, the political dynasties of Mindanao still remain an influential force in the local political arena. Until regional and municipal elections in May 2022, MILFs and local clans will share spheres of influence with varying degrees of success. The elections are intended to put an end to the peacekeeping process in Mindanao, so it is fundamentally important that the former separatists and local political clans⁹ can find a balance in the separation of forces, which would preserve the possibility of their peaceful coexistence within the government of the Bangsamoro autonomy.

Political clans in Mindanao are increasing their power and influence by maintaining order and security in the region with the help of private military police (each clan has its own police), gaining by this the favor of the population, as well as using the opportunity to push their candidates to government bodies as parliamentarians. They also use financial methods to strengthen their position, buying votes for themselves among the electorate or providing services and rewards to those who are ready to support them. Having reached a sufficient level of political influence, such clans draw from state resources and distribute the benefits obtained in the region in order to strengthen their position in politics, social sphere and business. Part of the responsibility for the difficult situation in the region lies with the clans, due to the fact that conflicts between them also constantly flare up, the so-called *ridos*, the reason for which may be a redistribution of influence, a struggle for power, revenge, insulted clan honor, etc. These conflicts are often resolved by the clans themselves with the use of their own “armies” (private police), including by violent methods, and are poorly regulated by the state. These phenomena also destabilize the already unstable and insecure situation in the region.¹⁰

The Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA) serves as an interim parliament and exercises the legislative function in Bangsamoro until 2022. This body was formed in February 2019 and has 79 members – 41 appointed by the MILF and 38 by the Philippine government. They include representatives from all categories of the population of Mindanao, thus reflecting the interests of women, youth, Christians, indigenous peoples, former Moslem separatists, traditional politicians and clan leaders.

The main task of the BTA is to complete the creation of the legislative framework that will form the basis of future autonomy by 2022. In addition, the BTA must prepare a platform for elections in 2022. The following system is planned: the Bangsamoro parliament should consist of 80 members, of which half will be elected by party lists, 40% from constituencies and another 10% from demographic groups such as women, Christians, youth.¹¹ Such a system will help redistribute (directly during elections) the percentage of influence between political parties, candidates from which will be included in electoral lists and political clans that will nominate their people through constituencies.

At the same time, the MILF, which largely assumes the role of a “governing body” in the BAARM, faces a difficult task, on the one hand, to minimize the possibility of conflicts with political clans, which naturally requires the latter to retain a rather significant role, and on the other hand ensure “moral governance” on the territory of Bangsamoro, which implies improving life in the region (and, first of all, the development of the service sector) and will require the MILF to strengthen, centralize its power, and, consequently, limit the influence of clans. Finding a balance between these diametrically opposite poles means truly achieving a position in Bangsamoro that can be called a successful experience in creating autonomy and conclusion of the peace process.

Moro as a threat to the security of the region: a militarized society

Another important problem in the Mindanao region is the need to ensure and maintain security both on the island as a whole and in the BAARM in particular.

The Moro is a largely militant people, and therefore the presence of numerous scattered paramilitary groups among the Moslems of Bangsamoro is a typical phenomenon for the region. Against the background of the struggle for the right to self-determination and independence in opposition to the government of the country, such groups look “justified”, and the delays of the Philippine official authorities in the course of the peace process, constant “rollbacks”, lengthy discussions of all nuances, including in the Senate, only inflame jihadist sentiments among the already dissatisfied Moslem population, thus strengthening the position of armed groups not involved in the peacekeeping process. Several such groups have declared their loyalty to ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2014 and 2015.

Local militant groups have always had a strong bond with separatists and Islamists outside the Philippines. Since the late 1980s the MNLF and later the MILF have provided support to Moslems of foreign origin, who took refuge in the Philippines in Bangsamoro, for one reason or another. However, loyalty to the Islamic State (an organization banned on the territory of the Russian Federation) and the support it provides to the Filipino Moslems (also accompanied by the implantation of the ideas of jihad) is a given fact of relatively recent times. According to a report by the Crisis Group, the existence of armed Islamist groups in the Philippines so far boils down to the following:

“Islamic State (Eastern Region), an alliance of groups associated with ISIS, which was formed at the end of 2015 with the aim of creating an ISIS wilaya (province) in Mindanao. It united militant groups dominated by three of the largest ethnolinguistic groups in Moslem Mindanao: the Abu Sayyaf

faction, consisting mainly of Tausugs and a number of Yakans; the Maute group in Lanao del Sur, represented mainly by the Maranaos people; and the Bangsamoro faction of Islamic freedom fighters dominated by Magindanaans.”¹² The leaders of all three groups swore oaths of loyalty to the leader of ISIS¹³, they formally support the idea of complete independence of the Moro from the Philippines and categorically reject the very possibility of a peacekeeping process and the need to negotiate with the country's government. In fact, they only recognize the military method of interacting with the official authorities, and, as the events of three years ago showed, they are militarily prepared and organized much better than Manila imagined.

We are talking about the siege of the city of Marawi, the capital of the province of Lanao del Sur, which began at the end of May 2017, a conflict that entailed extreme measures by the presidential administration - the introduction of martial law in Mindanao - and led to 5 months ¹⁴ of armed clashes in an attempt to liberate the city and at least temporarily stabilize the situation in the region.

Do not forget about the eagerness with which Moslem youth join the ranks of the armed formations in Mindanao for trivial reasons: this gives them the opportunity to “find their place”, to feel their importance and to partly provide relative welfare and help their families, to feel like heroes. This also complicates the situation as new militants, “fresh blood” appear all the time in the military groupings.

In this context, the so-called normalization and disarmament processes that are necessary to create and maintain peace in the region will be a challenge for MILF and will likely take a long time to be fully implemented. First of all, disarmament will affect the Islamic armed forces of Bangsamoro, that is, the military formations of the MILF itself. In addition, the normalization process presupposes socio-economic development, measures to ensure justice and dispute management systems

during the transition period, as well as building confidence in the entire process among the population.

The greatest difficulties, as expected, will be caused precisely by the disarmament process, and there are many reasons for this. In practice, the armed forces of the MILF should be disbanded, disarmed, and thus a significant number of men will find themselves “freewheeling”, who will need to somehow arrange their lives, including looking for other ways to earn money and support their families. This process involves 4 stages. The first stage - the surrender of 75 weapons and the return to civilian life of 145 MILF militants took place in 2015. The second stage - the removal of 30% of militants from the armed formations - was to take place after the signing of the Organic Law of Bangsamoro. MILF submitted a list of 12,000 militants for consideration by the disarmament body in March this year. It is planned that by November the process of their disarmament and disbandment will be completed. The last two stages are expected to be completed by 2022 - to withdraw another 35% of the militants from their groups (third stage), and then the remaining number (fourth stage).

According to forecasts, the militants themselves are unlikely to accept this state of affairs without resistance, since their weapons are a guarantee of their own security in the territory of Mindanao, where armed clashes at the level of clans and smaller groups flourish. In addition, as mentioned above, having lost their place in the armed formations, former militants will have to look for sources of income in the civilian environment, and, as the practice of the first phase of disarmament shows, the measures taken by the government to support these people may not be sufficient.¹⁵ Thus, the first 145 demobilized militants and their entourage were dissatisfied with the socio-economic measures of the government.¹⁶ In this connection, the MILF now expects that the presidential administration will take the necessary steps to adjust the social package, including using the help of foreign partners, and that

the results will be felt by the next phase of disarmament. For their part, officials say that scholarships will be offered to fighters and their families for training in civilian occupations, and support payments of 100,000 pesos (\$ 1,925) in cash per person are planned for fighters.¹⁷

It seems doubtful that these measures were sufficient and had the desired effect, however, how exactly the situation will develop will show time. At this stage, BAARM seems to be the most successful option for autonomy, especially in comparison with all the previous attempts of the Philippine government to resolve this conflict.

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