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# **‘I am nobody’: grievances, organic members, and the MILF in Muslim Mindanao**

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## **ACRONYMS**

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
AHJAG	Ad Hoc Joint Action Group
CCCH	Coordinating Commission on the Cessation of Hostilities
CVO	Civilian Volunteer Organizations
JSRP	Justice and Security Research Programme
LPI-MAPAD Development	Local Peace Initiators-Mindanao Action for Peace and Development
MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
MILF-BIAF	Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces
MIM	Muslim Independence Movement
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
MWDECC	Moro Women Development and Cultural Center
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PNP	Philippine National Police
QRT	Quick Response Teams
TAF	The Asia Foundation
UNYPAD	United Youth for Peace and Development

## Introduction

Over the past ten to fifteen years there has been a remarkable shift in much of the literature on conflict in Muslim Mindanao. While traditionally, questions around violence and insecurity have focused on well-known armed groups such as the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) and the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) and their stance on questions of autonomy/independence,<sup>1</sup> more recently, a range of authors have shifted their attention towards everyday causes of violence within Muslim communities. These causes include a variety of issues such as local elections, land conflicts or adultery.<sup>2</sup> In particular one research project conducted by The Asia Foundation (TAF) has been pivotal in this regard.<sup>3</sup> In this research, it is demonstrated how the root causes of violence rarely concern large political questions about autonomy or independence but are instead rooted in everyday social interactions and tensions. The argument herein was not necessarily that previous research had it 'wrong'. Rather, what this body of literature pointed to is that it was crucial to study how different types of violence at different scales dynamically interact with each other and potentially reinforce each other. Next, this multi-level analysis inevitably drew attention to a new set of actors and organizations in the production of violence and insecurity, apart from the MILF and MNLF.

Yet, despite this renewed focus on the diversity of actors and organizations, the foremost groups that entered the limelight in these new analyses were the clans and their respective coercive organization.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that clans as a unit of analysis have been absent in political, historical and sociological work on Mindanao. On the contrary, a range of studies have pointed to the central importance of clans as powerful groups in the socio-political landscape in Mindanao and the remarkable historical continuity of this from pre-colonial through to colonial and post-colonial times.<sup>5</sup> However, this new body of literature clearly pointed out the highly coercive features of clan politics by putting emphasis on the issue of *rido* or clan feuding. It is argued by TAF that group formation and armed mobilization around certain disputes in Muslim Mindanao generally happens along these clan-lines. In another publication,

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<sup>1</sup> Che Man, W.K. (1990). *Muslim Separatism. The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Kreuzer, P. (2005). *Political Clans and Violence in the Southern Philippines*, PRIF-report No. 71. Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt; Kreuzer, P. (2009). Private Political Violence and Boss-Rule in the Philippines. *Behemoth*, 2(1), 47-63; Adam, J. (2013). A comparative analysis on the micro-level genealogies of conflict in the Philippines' Mindanao and Indonesia's Ambon, *Oxford Development Studies*, 41 (2): 155-173.

<sup>3</sup> Torres, W.M. (2007). *RIDO: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao*. Makati City: The Asia Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> An interesting and recent book discussing the position of clans in Muslim Mindanao: Lara, F.J. (2014). *Insurgents, Clans, and States. Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines*, Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Becket, J. (1993). Political Families and Family Politics Among the Muslim Maguindanaon of Cotabato, in: Alfred McCoy (ed.), *An Anarchy of Families. State and Family in the Philippines*, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 285-311; Abinales, P. N. (2000). *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State*, Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

the German political scientist, Peter Kreuzer, explicitly approaches clans as ‘*agents of violence*’.<sup>6</sup> Another important consequence of this overall shift in the focus of analysis is that it is now generally acknowledged that much of the violence in the region clearly has a strong intra-Muslim character instead of a Muslim minority versus Philippine state framing.

As has been argued elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> this refocusing of the literature has been welcome since it has not only enriched the debate on violence and conflict in Muslim Mindanao but has also provided a better insight into the functioning of the overall socio-political landscape in the region. Nevertheless, despite these important steps forward, some major *lacunae* remain. One of the most remarkable gaps in our knowledge of the region is that we still remain ill-informed about the one organization that is still considered to be the foremost Muslim armed group on mainland Mindanao, namely the MILF. Generally understood as a Muslim armed group expressing the deep-rooted grievances of a Muslim minority in a Christian dominated nation-state, there simply is no recent study which has systematically mapped the political and social development of the MILF over the past 15 to 20 years; the period wherein the MILF has come to trump the other major Muslim armed group, the MNLF. Hardly any literature exists wherein the MILF is discussed in relation to matters of governance and regulation, religion and the mosque, social activities and redistribution. Indeed, most of the data and information available still treats the MILF first and foremost as an armed organization.<sup>8</sup> As will be argued below, this assumption is highly reductionist and overlooks a wide range of activities in which the MILF is involved and where it has built up a direct and organic relationship with large parts of the civil population. Lastly, this lack of data and systematic research is all the more remarkable since the MILF still is the principal interlocutor in the current ongoing peace negotiations, which are explicitly framed as a consultation between the Philippine government and the MILF (not the clans!). Therefore, it is also clear that, at the moment, it is very difficult to predict what specific consequences a successful or failed peace agreement with the MILF will actually have on the ground.

With this paper, we do not have the intention, nor do we have the ambition, to complete all the missing pieces in this complex puzzle; let alone to provide some sort of definitive assessment about the strength or power of the MILF. Instead, our aims are much more modest. Within this paper, we will attempt to obtain a better understanding of the role played by the MILF in initiatives of reconciliation, dispute settlement and justice more broadly. The reasons for this are threefold. First, there was an explicit objective to study and understand the role of the MILF as a

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<sup>6</sup> Kreuzer, P. (2005), op.cit., p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Adam, J.; Verbrugge, B. and vanden Boer, D. (2014). *Peace Making and State-Society Interactions in Conflict-torn Mindano*, London: TAF-JSRP Paper 18 (Justice and Security Research Programme/London School of Economics).

<sup>8</sup> Abuza, Z. (2005). The Moro Islamic Liberation Front at 20. State of the Revolution, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 28: 453-479; Özerdem, A. et.al. (2010). Identity, Ideology and Child Soldiering: Community and Youth Participation in Civil Conflict – A Study of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, Philippines, *Civil Wars*, 12 (3): 304-325.

governance actor rather than just an armed actor. Second, within a region that is characterized by chronic insecurity, the provision of peace and justice is one of the prime avenues wherein political power and legitimacy is constantly being created. Thirdly, this arena is particularly suited to better understanding the relationship between clans and the MILF. As correctly observed by TAF and others, most of the violent disputes in Muslim Mindanao are framed and reproduced through clan lineage and therefore have an intra-Muslim character. It is therefore interesting to understand how an organization such as the MILF – that obviously wishes to be a binding force for all Muslims in the Philippines – attempts to deal with these clan-based, intra-Muslim tensions. With this objective in mind, we start from an analysis of a dispute settlement and reconciliation initiative in the municipality of Aleosan in North Cotabato. Methodologically, the data have been collected through a range of individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with a limited number of respondents (maximum 5). The respondents were selected based on their involvement in initiatives of conflict management and reconciliation. This group was then complemented with a broader sample of respondents consisting of politicians, (ex)-rebel members, and civil society leaders. Data collection took place during August and September 2014. For reasons of security, actual participant observation on site has been limited. Importantly, these specific data have been complemented with a variety of interviews, informal discussions and observations based on a wide range of research visits by the authors to different parts of the region over the past six years.

Based on these data, the argument that will be put forward is that we urgently need to redefine and approach the MILF as a broad social movement, instead of just an armed group. While this may seem evident at first sight, this has some far-reaching ramifications and implications. First, it is through this social component, in combination with a considerable coercive capacity, that the MILF has managed to build up support among large sections of the Muslim population. This support is exemplified by a wide range of grassroots organizations which believe in and have managed to profile the MILF as a credible governance and development alternative. More specifically, within the arena of reconciliation and dispute settlement, a wide range of loosely affiliated grassroots organizations have attempted to establish impersonal and neutral fora through which highly divisive intra-Muslim feuds can be settled. Thus, there exists a dynamic interplay between a ‘core’ MILF and a range of affiliated grassroots organization that has been pivotal to the growth of the MILF. Secondly, this positioning of the MILF as a credible governance alternative cannot be separated from the highly coercive and elite-based features of socio-political life in the region. Although the MILF is very cautious of openly challenging existing centers of authority, for many grassroots supporters, the movement obtains its relevance and legitimacy as a movement based on a founding principle of equality wherein religion trumps a divisive clan/ethnic identity. As such, in particular for those parts of the population not belonging to a powerful clan, the MILF has managed to present itself as a credible and legitimate alternative of transparency, equality and justice set against

what is considered to be a highly corrupt and elite-controlled system of electoral democracy.

## **Part 1: The multiple faces of the MILF**

### *Kinship affiliation and the state-rebel divide*

It is futile to try to understand ‘the MILF’ without embedding this organization into a complex network of broader societal relations. Whether an individual or a group will identify as MILF will depend on the circumstances; and overlapping identity labels – of which the MILF identity label is but one - are alternately deployed in a socio-political environment which is volatile and subject to rapid change. This also implies that one should be critical about widely used labels such as ‘MILF territory’ or ‘MILF community’. These terms tend to be understood as spaces where the state is largely absent and the MILF is the principal organization providing basic governance functions. First, this rests on a false dichotomy wherein ‘the state’ and ‘the MILF’ are represented as two separate and opposing organizations. For instance, the *barangay* of Luanan (municipality of Aleosan, province of North Cotabato) was described both by residents and non-residents alike as a true ‘MILF stronghold’. However, this did not imply that the state was absent or state institutions irrelevant. Rather what could be witnessed was a high degree of overlap. This is nicely captured when we asked a resident from the area how he judged the strength of the MILF in his village. The answer went: ‘100% MILF. Because even the *barangay* captain is a member of the political committee of the MILF. In this *barangay*, most of the people here are MILF’.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, what this quote points at is that the strength of the MILF is not understood as ‘overruling’ the state or statist institutions but its strength is explained through the strong symbiosis with the state and statist institutions. This also sheds additional light on how ‘strength’ or ‘power’ in this context needs to be understood. While in more classic accounts, the strength of a particular rebel is primarily analyzed through its particular coercive and infrastructural capacity in opposition to the state, in this particular case at least, it seems that an analysis needs to start from the specific linkages with the state.

When used uncritically, a label such as ‘MILF community’ or ‘MILF territory’ risks portraying the MILF as a homogeneous and unitary organization. This is also misleading. Our intention herein is not to measure in one way or another how far the MILF is a divided organization.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, what is clear is that the MILF cannot be understood as an armed organization disconnected from broader society. Rather, our empirical data strongly push for a relational understanding of the MILF, wherein different types of authority are linked together through intimate kinship connections. As a result, a question such as: ‘*is it the state, the MILF or the clans holding power in a particular region in Muslim Mindanao?*’ becomes irrelevant as these different

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<sup>9</sup> Focus group discussion with politicians Luanan, Cotabato city (03-09-2014).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on the supposedly fractionalized nature of the MILF, see: Abuza, Z. (2005). The Moro Islamic Liberation Front at 20: State of the Revolution, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 28: 453-479.



organizations can only be understood in relation to each other. The chances are hereby real (though not absolute) that power and authority are largely monopolized by a network simultaneously embodying these three fields.<sup>11</sup> This observation also sheds some light on the policy by the MILF that their members should not participate in elections. For a selection of higher-ranking political and military leaders, this policy is definitely being followed. However, this does not imply that the MILF is absent from the political field. As will be illustrated below, kinship connections bridge the supposed distinction between the MILF and formal state institutions and secondly, there exists a set of actors only paying partial allegiance to the MILF and being deeply involved in electoral competition.

An interesting illustration of this dynamic could be seen when attempting to reconstruct the life and family history of Jimmy Matalam,<sup>12</sup> grandson of the late Udtog Matalam, life-long governor of Cotabato province and founder of the MIM (Muslim Independence Movement), one of the precursors of the MNLF. While it would take too long to provide a complete reconstruction of this remarkable family history, some important points can be mentioned which are relevant for our argument here. First of all, Udtog Matalam himself, despite his credentials for being one of the founders of the Muslim rebellion in Mindanao, always maintained a close relationship with the Philippine state (Abinales 2010: 123). This ambiguous stance between state compliance and anti-state rebellion has always characterized the Matalam family. Even as a high school student, Jimmy Matalam became involved as a member of the MNLF and at a later stage as an armed commander. Interestingly, this position as commander did not hinder his employment as a civil servant in the mayor's office throughout the eighties (the mayor not coincidentally being his uncle). However, when a first demobilization program for MNLF fighters was organized after the peace agreement with the MNLF in 1996, Jimmy Matalam was among the first to join the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines). In the meantime, many of Jimmy's relatives had paid allegiance to the MILF, which at different moments was engaged in all-out war with the AFP. Even Jimmy himself was involved – albeit not in an immediate combat role - in the brutal siege on the MILF camp Abu Bakar in 2000. Interestingly,

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<sup>11</sup> Obviously, there are some cases where clans have resisted any connection with the MILF. The most well-known example is without doubt that of the Ampatuan clan that – at least up until the Maguindanao massacre in November 2009 – politically dominated considerable areas in Maguindanao province while at the same disassociating themselves completely from the MILF. Another interesting example is constituted by the Dimaporo clan in Lanao that has a long history of openly defying the MILF and the MNLF, see: Bentley, Carter G. (1993). Mohamad Ali Dimaporo: A Modern Maranao Datu, in: Alfred W. McCoy (ed.), *An Anarchy of Families. State and Family in the Philippines*, University of Wisconsin: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 243-285. This was also witnessed when interviewing some prominent members of the Dimaporo clan. This clan simply considered themselves at war with the MILF and literally stated: *'The MILF can only pass by in the municipality if they are being escorted by the military'* (Focus group discussion Municipality of Pantai Ragat, 24-09-2013). Although any systematic study is lacking in this regard, it is clear that cases such as these where the MILF is openly challenged and defied are exceptional. Therefore, it can be stated that in mainland Muslim Mindanao an overlap exists – albeit to varying degrees – between clan structures and the MILF and the two cannot be separated from each other.

<sup>12</sup> Interview Jimmy Matalam, 19-09-2014, Cotabato city; Focus group discussion with 3 members of AFP, Cotabato city (01-09-2014).

all this has not – at least in the words of the respondent – deeply affected the family relationship. One of the foremost reasons being that clan solidarity is still considered to be the key strategy for maintaining power in Mindanao. As explained by Jimmy Matalam in a remarkably open-faced manner<sup>13</sup>:

*These are established clans and if something develops or establishes, like the revolutionary groups like MILF or MNLF... it makes sense for them to join the group, right? (...) so it makes sense to say that, if you want power, you should be both: a member of the MILF and the established clan, and also maybe the government. So you can play, that's the dynamic. So you can influence the province. You're beginning to understand the dynamics, right?*

Question: So, in your family there are both MILF and MNLF... To whom are they loyal? To the family or to the armed groups they belong to?

*To the family, secondary is the group. But they use the organization as their shield. And also, some in our family, most belong to politicians. So we also use the government as a shield. And the MNLF, and the MILF.*

Question: And the AFP?

*(Laughter) That's how it is, that's the dynamics.*

Our point hereby is not necessarily a normative one wherein rebelling clans are being accused of 'collaborating' with the Philippine state. What is most important here is that these different fields of power and authority are not by definition understood as mutually exclusive. Another, rather funny example, which illustrates this point was encountered through an interview with a MILF member in the city of Illigan. Much to our surprise, when the actual person entered our meeting venue, this MILF member wore an official police costume (and turned out to be a local policemen) and introduced himself as a traditional leader.<sup>14</sup>

*Illustration: dispute settlement in barangay Luanan*

What interests us above all for this paper is the impact of this observation on matters of daily governance; more specifically on the dynamics of reconciliation and dispute settlement. To illustrate this point, we refer to a dispute which gravely affected the village of Luanan for almost one year and a half. This dispute started off with the killing of a member of the Dalandas clan on April 12, 2011. Despite the lack of any conclusive evidence, it was immediately alleged that the explanation for this murder was the issue of an unpaid debt owed by a member of the Dalandas clan to a member of the Dandua clan, although this accusation has until now always been denied by the Dandua clan. Shortly after the incident, the suspected perpetrator - who was also known as an MILF fighter - was taken into custody by his superior brigade MILF commander. This move needs to be understood foremost as a way to ensure the safety

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<sup>13</sup> Focus group discussion with 3 members of AFP, Cotabato city (01-09-2014).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with MILF member (Illigan, 16-09-2013).

of the suspect. Out of fear of further reprisals, the Dandua clan then decided to leave the village and settle in an evacuation center in Pikit. Yet, deprived of access to the agricultural lands that constituted the basis for their daily livelihood this community found itself in an utterly precarious situation. As a result, after about one year, they started making plans to return to the village of Luanan. Adding to the frustration of the Dandua clan and their willingness to return was the fact that members of the Dalandas had occupied parts of their farming lands. It was at this moment that rumors started spreading about the impending return of the Dandua clan and weapons were purchased by both clans in anticipation of this resettlement. As a result, different people expressed their concerns that the existing tensions could potentially escalate into open warfare.

Adding to this already tense situation were the intimate kinship connections of both clans with a range of MILF commanders. More specifically, the Dalandas clan had family ties with the MILF commanders Datu Andik and Datu Doton of the 118<sup>th</sup> base command of the MILF-BIAF (Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces). The Dandua clan on the other hand had a kinship connection with commanders Salungga, Johnny and Tidy of the National Guard Division of the MILF-BIAF.<sup>15</sup> The first problem was that an eventual confrontation between the two clans would drag in these commanders and their respective followers and coercive capacity, thereby considerably increasing the gravity and intensity of the confrontation. At the same time, the involvement of MILF commanders and fighters put heavy strains on classic third party mediation. Firstly, shortly after the displacement, the municipal political committee of the MILF in Aleosan had already attempted to reach a settlement but had failed to do so.<sup>16</sup> Evidently, a clash between rival MILF commanders was something the political committee tried to avoid at all costs but their leverage to reach a solution was limited, since commanders from within their own ranks were so deeply involved. However, it was not only the MILF which was related. Both clans also had obvious political connections at the level of the barangay. For instance, the acting barangay captain (who also had a seat on the MILF municipal political committee) at the time was considered to be indirectly connected to the Dandua clan through a kinship lineage. In short, it seemed that the situation had reached a dangerous stalemate, since one of the conditions for successful third party mediation – that of having a neutral party with no ties to the conflicting parties - could not be fulfilled.

It was at this specific moment that one particular civil society organization entered the picture, namely the Moro Women Development and Cultural Center (MWDECC).<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the assistance of the MWDECC was called in, both by the barangay captain and the MILF municipal political committee. As stated in one focus group discussion with MWDECC volunteers, due to the close kinship ties between the

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<sup>15</sup> The Asia Foundation (2012). *Conflict Mitigation Program. The Case of Dandua and Dalandas Clans. Narrative Report*, Manila: The Asia Foundation

<https://mwdecc.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/conflict-mitigation-terminal-report.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Interview with member MILF political committee, Cotabato City (21-09-2014).

<sup>17</sup> For more information, see: <http://mwdecc.com/>

MILF commanders and the clans: *'MILF is very powerful, we believe, but sometimes MILF is not effective'*.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, *Sharia* courts could not function as a plausible institutional forum to settle the dispute either, due to the very direct connection between *Sharia* courts and the MILF. In other words, the capacity of the MILF to act as a credible conflict mediator in this setting proved to be considerably curtailed due to the mediated nature of the organization wherein authority is often exerted through existing kin-based organizations. An observation that was – inter alia – confirmed by members of the MILF municipal political committee themselves. As a result, in coordination with another civil society organization called Local Peace Initiators-Mindanao Action for Peace and Development (LPI-MAPAD)<sup>19</sup> and with some financial assistance from TAF, this organization came to act as a neutral third party to start a process of deliberation and negotiation between the two conflicting parties. The main advantage of calling in these civil society organizations obviously lay in their impartiality. As indicated by one LPI-MAPAD volunteer who was closely involved in the deliberations:

*'Since they're relatives, that is why the local commanders highly support the clans (...) That is why they need our intervention, because the commanders themselves cannot solve the problem; meaning they're not eager to mitigate the conflict. That is why they need our intervention, our impartiality. We're only using their influence to help our quest to establish an atmosphere of peace in the area. Because they themselves cannot, that's why they need us. And also the barangay chairman was also involved, he also cannot solve the problem.'*<sup>20</sup>

The whole process of third party mediation that was then initiated concentrated on two contentious issues. Firstly, the terms for resettlement of the Dandua clan, and secondly, the amount of blood money to compensate for the killing of the Dalandas clan member. Interestingly enough, after the price of the blood money was set at 20.000 Ps. ( $\pm$  440 US \$), this was then paid by the MILF municipal committee and some of the commanders related to the disputing clans.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to observe that once some sort of organizational structure was set up to conduct the mediation, the commanders and their immediate following were among the most vocal protagonists pushing for a negotiated deal. Ultimately, after the deliberations were concluded successfully, a festivity (*kanduli*) was organized in November 2012 which officially corroborated the return of the Dandua clan and wherein both parties agreed to refrain from using violence, thereby symbolically ending the dispute. This *kanduli*, where security was organized by about 200 MILF-BIAF members, was attended by a range of public officials including representatives of the PNP (Philippine National

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<sup>18</sup> Focus group discussion with Quick Response Team, MWDECC members, Cotabato city (21-09-2014).

<sup>19</sup> LPI was a group of individuals who came together to address issues of Rido that were being tackled by MAPAD. Currently, it no longer exists as it developed into the 'Local Initiative for Peace and Development in Mindanao' (LIPAD MINDANAO). It now operates as an NGO independent of MAPAD.

<sup>20</sup> Focus group discussion, LPI-MAPAD and MWDECC volunteers, Cotabato city (18-09-2014).

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account of this whole process, see: The Asia Foundation (2012), op. cit.

Police) and the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines). So far, no violent reprisals have occurred between the two clans.

### *Conclusion*

In this first part, we have demonstrated how clan, MILF, and state cannot be understood as separate institutional fields. Instead, they are related through kinship connections and people display different allegiances depending on the specific circumstances. The authority that the MILF exerts in these places can therefore only be understood as one that is ‘mediated’ through existing centers of power and authority. Somebody can easily be a politician, clan-member and MILF sympathizer/fighter at the same time. In cases where these identities are not represented within one and the same person, links between these different organizations are maintained through intimate family connections. This observation has some important consequences in our understanding of complex conflict ecologies in the region and the manner in which dispute settlement and mediation is organized. First, one should be careful with the concept of *rido* or clan dispute, since this generally involves much more than just clan contradictions. These disputes have a tendency to absorb a wide range of social identities wherein clan/kinship affiliation acts as the crucial connection between the different identities. The specific escalation and group mobilization around these disputes can only be grasped when taking this notion into account. Secondly, this has some specific consequences for the manner in which conflict management/mediation is organized. As illustrated, impersonal institutional forums – both in the formal and the informal sphere – which can serve as the necessary vehicles for third party mediation are scarce. As a result, disputes have a tendency to develop into a deadlock where everybody is implicated and very few people or organizations can transcend the cleavages, including local MILF commanders and MILF political committees. In such instances, the last resort is recourse to specific types of civil society organizations that have developed an impartial ‘proximate distance’ to the conflicted parties. We will elaborate further on this crucial position of the Bangsamoro civil society in the section below.

## **Part 2: Bangsamoro civil society and its ‘organic members’**

### *Beyond an elite-driven framework*

There is a general tendency within TAF to link effective conflict management and dispute settlement with ‘powerful people’ or ‘elites’. Throughout different meetings where conflict management interventions by TAF were discussed, it was stressed how working through a coalition of elite actors is a rapid and cost-efficient way to settle

disputes.<sup>22</sup> The implicit assumption was that elites – more so than ‘common people’ – have the capacity to enforce a certain degree of compliance because of their elite status. Based on an analysis of a range of mediation efforts in Muslim Mindanao, it can indeed be confirmed that compliance and authority are central features in any attempt at sustainably settling certain disputes. However, the assumption that elites will get things done because of the mere fact that they are elites, is in itself short-sighted. Our discussion above, concerning the dispute between the Dalandas and Dandua clan in the barangay of Luanan, provides some indications that additional factors need to be taken into account. Above all, our empirical data clearly point at the need to install some sort of impersonal institutional forum/organization/institutional venue which acts as a medium of exchange between disputing parties. In this particular case, this proved to be as important as the establishment of an elite coalition which ‘overrules’ the disputing parties.

This observation brings to the foreground new actors who have not always received the attention they deserve. These consist of a wide range of Muslim civil society organizations, deeply rooted in society but at the same time maintaining a critical distance from contending centers of power. To a certain extent, one could state that our focus hereby shifts from ‘*hard power*’ (elites, compliance, power, coercion, blood money) towards an alternative type of ‘*soft power*’ (civil society, neutrality, deliberation, distance, women’s organization). One could hereby also claim that these groups remain purposefully invisible as their intervention is deliberately situated in the background. However, this background position does not imply that the organizations display no agency. On closer scrutiny, it is clear that such organizations have a carefully planned agenda, deliberate strategy and some ambitious ideological objectives they want to reach. Importantly, these ideological objectives are much more elaborate than a broadly defined ‘pro-peace’ vision. Rather, they are framed within a political project centered around the development of a just and democratic Bangsamoro. In this regard, we do not claim to cover all of Muslim civil society; not even those CVOs (Civilian Volunteer Organizations) explicitly working on issues of conflict and peace. As has been illustrated elsewhere<sup>23</sup>, Muslim civil society even in the field of conflict and peace interventions, comprises a wide variety of organizations involved in a diversity of activities including interreligious dialogue, lobbying for a peace agreement, and micro-level conflict management interventions. Within the report by Rood, this last type of organization seems to have focused especially on the establishment of so-called zones of peace. It seems that in recent years these initiatives have somewhat waned and made room for interventions rooted in models of third party mediation. Moreover, it seems that the issue of *rido* has recently taken greater prominence in these initiatives compared to ten or fifteen years ago when the

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<sup>22</sup> TAF-JSRP inception workshop, 12-02-2013, Manila: TAF office. Based on this introductory workshop, it seems that this view is widely shared among TAF personnel working on conflict management and peacebuilding.

<sup>23</sup> Rood, S. (2005). *Forging Sustainable Peace in Mindanao. The Role of Civil Society*. Washington: the East-West Center (Policy Studies 7).

focus was still very much on the classic ‘separatist’ conflict. However, despite these differences, what we would like to stress is the very politicized nature of the interventions we have been studying and the very tactical alliances that are emerging based on this political reading of the local landscape. However, before discussing some of these issues more in detail, we first need to delve a little deeper into the ‘proximate distance’ these organizations maintain against contending centers of power.

As has already been illustrated elsewhere, one should be very careful with the concept of *informal* conflict management for a number of reasons. First, what is understood as informal conflict management concerns above all a specific practice that is centered around mediation and consultation as opposed to punitive justice. Importantly, this mediation and consultation is organized both outside as well as inside formal state institutions (and all the grey zones in between).<sup>24</sup> Secondly, the involvement of CVOs or traditional/customary leaders does not by definition presume we are dealing with an informal type of conflict management situated outside the state. A range of state-sanctioned conflict management institutions exist, of which the ‘Peace and Order Council/Committee’ is probably the most relevant one. Within this institution, a representation of civil society is mandatory.<sup>25</sup> However, the Peace and Order Council/Committee is presided over by the mayor/barangay captain and he/she is also the one appointing the CVO representatives. Many of the CVOs working on conflict management are thus not only ‘dragged’ into the state but often obtain their legitimacy as conflict management CVOs through this explicit connection with the local state. When a new administration is appointed, a range of these CVOs are pushed out of these institutions and a new set of organizations/people are integrated. Because of their overt connection with the previous administration, there is a considerable chance these CVOs also become largely ineffective and irrelevant. Important for our argument here is the fact that, due to the discretionary power of the executive over these state-sanctioned mechanisms, these institutions are no longer considered as impartial and impersonal fora through which disputes can be settled. Rather, they are (rightly) understood as an extension of the power of the mayor/barangay captain and as a result often become paralyzed within a fractured socio-political landscape. This was also the reason why an institution such as the Peace and Order Council/Committee was never truly considered as an adequate vehicle to settle the dispute between the Dalandas and the Danduas.

Interestingly, both the MWDECC and the LPI-MAPAD were very much aware of this and it is exactly here that we have to understand the sort of ‘proximate distance’ we touched upon above. These organizations deliberately distanced themselves from

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<sup>24</sup> Adam, J. and vanden Boer, D. (2015). *Conflict mediation and traditional authority in the province of Lanao del Sur, Mindanao*, London: TAF-JSRP Paper 26 (The Asia Foundation - Justice and Security Research Programme/London School of Economics)

<sup>25</sup> Adam, J.; Verbrugge, B. and vanden Boer, D. (2014). Informal Conflict Management in Exclusivist Political Orders. Some Observations on Central Mindanao, *The Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 7(1): 61-74.

clan, clan politics and above all, electoral competition. At the same time, as a CVO, they managed to maintain a visibility in the community. For instance, in the case of the MWDECC, this visibility centered around a range of women's empowerment activities. Hence the 'proximate distance' they attempt to build up by carefully trying not to become absorbed in sensitive political conflicts while maintaining a presence and visibility in the community. At first sight, this retreat from electoral politics degrades these CVOs into organizing harmless leisure activities organized around a vague concept of empowerment and Bangsamoro identity. Yet, nothing is farther from the truth. As already illustrated, these CVOs have managed to transform themselves into the last impersonal institutional forum through which disputes can be settled. However, their political agency is much more pronounced than this. It is against the background of their specific reading of the socio-political landscape that we have to understand the supposedly 'accidental' alliance that emerged between these CVOs and the MILF political committee. In a context where elitist clan politics is being rejected and electoral democracy is no longer considered a credible opportunity to challenge this, the MILF comes to be imagined by many people as the sole alternative. As such, the MWDECC and LPI-MAPAD clearly understood their developmental work and specific conflict management intervention as part of a broader strategy of supporting and reinforcing a transparent and democratic MILF that transcends clan divisions and comes to act as a unifying force for all Muslims in the Philippines. We will return to some of these discussions in the following section.

#### *The MILF as a civil organization*

A close analysis of the daily functioning of organizations such as MWDECC and LPI-MAPAD sheds a new light on the complex and versatile character of an organization such as the MILF. In the first part of this paper, we argued that an understanding of the MILF can only be relational, outlining how MILF/state/clan identities are not mutually exclusive. Despite this argument for a relational analysis, membership of the MILF was still approached in a rather straightforward manner; either as actual commanders/fighters and/or members of an MILF political committee. Yet, narrowing down the MILF to just armed fighters or members of a political committee would be a grave simplification. What our analysis brings to the fore is a new group that can be defined as 'sympathizers' or 'volunteers' who identify with the organization in a much more implicit and hidden way. Importantly, we are not referring here to a particular percentage of the population who express sympathies for or identifies with the MILF. Rather, what we wish to draw attention to is a particular set of persons and organizations involved in range of social/developmental projects that are framed and represented as supporting the MILF as a civil organization. It is exactly this group of people who are being referred to as the '*organic members*' of the MILF. As somebody defining himself as an organic member explained, being an organic member implies that one '*endorses the aspirations of the MILF and provides*



*some help now and then*'.<sup>26</sup> In our opinion, these organic members and their support for the MILF have been crucial for the impressive growth of the MILF the past twenty five years.

As an illustration, we wish to refer to the recent history of the municipality of Midsayap, province of North Cotabato. As described in our earlier publication, this municipality was subject to intense periods of warfare between rival clan leaders-cum-warlords displaying to a varying degree allegiance to either the MILF or the MNLF or just nobody at all.<sup>27</sup> One of the major incentives for these violent clashes was control over state patronage funds at the municipal and barangay level which had considerably increased after the 1991 local government code. Much of the violence that happened should therefore be understood as electoral violence. Interestingly, all respondents from the area agreed that from the mid-2000's onwards, a gradual but notable decrease could be observed in the intensity of the fighting and the overall brutality of these warlord politics.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, the reasons for this are diverse. For instance one of the most notorious commanders/warlords died in April 2006. Nevertheless, our data clearly point to a considerable increase in the coercive capacity and - probably more importantly - the social legitimacy of the MILF as the prime explanation for the reduction of violence in this region. As indicated, the authority of the MILF should be understood as being mediated through existing centers of authority. This is still the case. However, one cannot deny that a central 'core-MILF' has attempted - and to a certain degree managed - to reinforce their control over these 'loose' commanders. In this specific context, this 'core-MILF' was being referred to as Darapanan, the name of an important MILF camp situated in the municipality of Sultan Kudarat about twenty kilometers away from Midsayap. For example, in instances where disputes erupted between rival MILF commanders, a more active intervention of BIAF forces stationed at camp Darapanan was noted. Also, pressure was put on local commanders/politicians to stop, or at least curb, the extortion practices that were very common at that time and that mainly comprised exploitative sharecropping agreements.<sup>29</sup> Without doubt, the capacity of this core MILF went hand in hand with the establishment of mechanisms such as the CCCH (Coordinating Commission on the Cessation of Hostilities) in 1997<sup>30</sup> and the AHJAG (Ad Hoc Joint Action Group)<sup>31</sup>. Simply put, these mechanisms need to be understood as state-

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Haji Gafor Ahmad, member Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), (Cotabato city, 03-02-2014).

<sup>27</sup> Verbrugge, B. and Adam, J. (2015). Questioning the State-Rebel divide in Mindanao? A Comparative Analysis of North Cotabato and Compostela Valley province, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 44 (1): 247-287.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Maks Mangadta, Minhrac (Mindanao Human Rights Action Committee) member, (Cotabato city, 28-01-2014) ; Interview Anwar Saluwang (UNYPAD member), (Cotabato city, 31-01-2014).

<sup>29</sup> Focus group discussion with UNYPAD community organizers, (Midsayap, 12-03-2013).

<sup>30</sup> Implementing Operational Guidelines of the Agreement on the General Cessation of Hostilities (1997) <http://www.opapp.gov.ph/resources/implementing-operational-guidelines-agreement-general-cessation-hostilities>

<sup>31</sup> Implementing Guidelines of the 2002 AHJAG Communiqué (2002) <http://www.opapp.gov.ph/resources/implementing-guidelines-2002-ahjag-communicue>

mandated institutions which acknowledge the MILF as a legitimate security provider. As such, they have helped the central leadership MILF to build-up symbolic state and coercive authority that clearly transcends divisive clan politics.

Importantly, this increase in the coercive capacity by the core-MILF cannot be understood without taking into account the crucial role, played by a proactive Bangsamoro civil society. First of all, in a similar manner as described for the Dalandas versus Dandua dispute, Bangsamoro civil society in the Midsayap case took up a position of proximate distance towards disputing clans. In this way, they managed to act as a neutral institutional venue through which different disputes could be settled. Meanwhile, they maintained vital links with the ‘core MILF’ and local MILF political committees. In this instance, we are specifically referring to the United Youth for Peace and Development (UNYPAD) that organized a range of so-called Quick Response Teams (QRTs) as vehicles through which conflict management interventions were deployed. In contrast to the position taken by MWDECC, these QRT’s needed formal approval by the barangay captain in order to function. Thus, their position was not one of absolute autonomy from local state institutions. On the other hand, a deliberate policy was instigated by UNYPAD wherein their QRT members were obliged to remain non-partisan in times of elections. There were also careful and ongoing deliberations between UNYPAD leaders and the barangay captain, stressing that the QRTs should never become vehicles in the hands of local politicians since they would lose their relevance as neutral venues of conflict management. Despite this, all UNYPAD members stressed that such political neutrality remained a difficult and careful balancing act.<sup>32</sup>

In this case too, the loose but strategic coalition between a Bangsamoro civil society organization and the core MILF is not coincidental. Rather, it is rooted in the UNYPAD leadership’s conviction that ultimately the MILF is the only credible organization capable of bringing sustainable security in the region.<sup>33</sup> This belief is based on an assessment of ‘warlord politics’ as being greedy, brutal and therefore unsustainable, as well as on disappointment in, and distrust of, formal state security institutions such as the AFP and the PNP. However, when looking specifically at the Midsayap case, this positioning of a core MILF in providing security in tandem with a Bangsamoro civil society of organic members needs to be situated within a wider attempt by the MILF to profile themselves as a credible and socially legitimate governance alternative. This alternative needs to be situated against the violent and exploitative clan politics that totally destabilized the municipality throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Importantly, apart from some specific attempts to improve the physical security of the residents of Midsayap over the past ten to fifteen years, a range of initiatives have been implemented that had a clear redistributive objective. These initiatives were often organized in collaboration with religious leaders and institutions. One notable example concerns the collection of taxes. As mentioned, the

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<sup>32</sup> Focus group discussion with UNYPAD community organizers, (Midsayap, 12-03-2013).

<sup>33</sup> Focus group discussion with UNYPAD leadership, (Cotabato city, 07-02-2014).

height of warlord politics in Midsayap was characterized by high levels of extortion. At a certain moment, the MILF attempted and ultimately succeeded in putting a halt to these practices. Mechanisms were deliberately set up where people could state their complaints if they felt they were being extorted by certain warlord politicians. This mechanism was understood as a crucial *'bumper'* to protect civilians against greedy warlord practices.<sup>34</sup> This was complemented by the establishment of an alternative taxation system which was set up by the MILF in coordination with religious leaders. A traditional Muslim institution such as *'the zakat'* was hereby revived and collected through MILF-appointed tax collectors. One of the purposes of this *zakat* money clearly was to reinforce the financial capacity of the MILF. However, equally important was the fact that this *zakat* money also served various social purposes, such as financial support for the elderly and widows or paying certain tuition fees for young people. This gradual transformation from extortion towards a tax with a redistributive purpose has become an important symbolic reference point for many people in Midsayap and has clearly added to the popularity and legitimacy of the MILF as a credible civil organization.

### *Conclusion*

In the second part of this paper we have attempted to shed light on the so-called *'organic members'* of the MILF. These organic members are hereby defined as that part of the population that not only has a certain sympathy for the cause of the MILF but that is also – albeit to varying degrees – engaged in the development of the MILF as a civil organization and credible governance alternative. We have attempted to illustrate this point by referring to some initiatives of conflict management in the municipalities of Aleosan and Midsayap (North Cotabato). In both municipalities, we see how a loose but tactical alliance has emerged between a Bangsamoro civil society and what can be referred to as a core-MILF. While this core-MILF provides a degree of coercive capacity, these CVOs or organic members provide some sort of *'soft power'* since they act as neutral venues through which disputing parties can settle their feuds. With this crucial observation, we have also attempted to nuance the view that successful conflict management and third party mediation depends solely on the incorporation of powerful elite networks. Importantly, conflict management is only one arena wherein the MILF has attempted - and in some cases managed - to profile themselves as a legitimate governance institution. As has also been illustrated, similar attempts have been made to install a system of redistributive taxation. These observations lead us to two crucial and related arguments. First, the (successful/unsuccessful) attempts by the MILF to profile themselves as a more just, equitable and legitimate governance alternative when compared to a type of brutal and exploitative warlord politics is key to understanding the growth of this organization over the past two decades. This also implies that too often, the MILF has been reduced or even misunderstood as a mere *'rebel group'* or armed organization

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Maks Mangadta, (Minhrac Mindanao Human Rights Action Committee) member, (Cotabato city, 28-01-2014); Interview with Anwar Saluwang (UNYPAD member), (Cotabato city, 31-01-2014).

while this coercive aspect is only one component of much more complex civil organization. Secondly, the role played by an active Bangsamoro civil society within the ‘social’ development of the MILF is key but is too often underrated. Having said this, we will now elaborate on some of the specific ideological features of this project.

### **Part 3: Religion, purity and equality**

In this final section we wish to put forward the argument that the proliferation of the MILF as a credible governance alternative cannot be understood without taking a specific religious discourse into account. We wish to illustrate this at two levels. First, it will be argued how the idea of equality in Islam functioned as a pivotal mobilizing discourse *vis-à-vis* an image of a feudalistic and elite-based democracy. Second, we will illustrate how an ideal of religious purity rooted in *Sharia* is systematically contrasted with an image of moral degradation, both in the political as well as the wider societal arena.

#### *Religion and equal citizenship*

In order to grasp the mobilizing quality of Islam as an ideology of equality, it is necessary to understand what this equality is being contrasted with. Obviously there is no single narrative or common assessment of the political landscape in Mindanao which is shared by everyone. As will be shown below, Muslim Mindanao is not an entity that speaks as a unified voice but is instead subject to deep societal and ideological divisions of different sorts. Nevertheless, based on a range of informal interactions and formal interviews with those who can be labeled as ‘organic members’ within the orbit of the MILF, we wish to highlight two important recurrent features that appear to be widely shared. First, there is the obvious issue of the clan-based character of politics and the manner in which a limited number of elite clans manage to monopolize political power in the region. In this view, clan politics distorts an ideal of electoral democracy as a system based on equal rights and wherein a fair and transparent assessment can be made of what constitutes credible and legitimate political leadership. Secondly, this ‘internal’ critique of power imbalances within Muslim society is often linked with a more classic ‘external’ critique of ‘Imperial Manila’. Simply put, the sort of divisive and corrupted clan politics is understood as an extension of national politics wherein politicians are integrated in patronage networks tying them to the capital and to national political parties.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, such

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<sup>35</sup> There are some interesting parallels to be drawn with the observation that the establishment of the MNLF in the early 1970s also needs to be understood as a reaction by Muslim youth to the ‘collaborationist’ tendencies of a historic elite network of Muslim politicians with Manila. For an detailed analysis of the emergence of the MNLF, see: ‘Chapter 7: Muslim separatism and the Bangsamoro rebellion’ in: Mc Kenna, T. M. (1998). *Muslim Rulers and Rebels. Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Although a systematic comparison of this argument in relation to the emergence of the MNLF and the MILF would lead us too far, and more systematic research would need to be undertaken in order to suggest definitive statements in this discussion, these observations do highlight how the emergence of both the

practices are understood as dividing a unified Bangsamoro political project. The case proving this point *par excellence* can be found in the Ampatuan clan. This was understood by many as the product of a deliberate ‘divide and rule’ strategy by Manila, whereby this particular clan is being actively supported by national political elites for their own benefit.<sup>36</sup> Not coincidentally, the Ampatuan clan is also considered to be among the most vocal and fierce opponents of the MILF.

All this can partly be understood as confirmation of the generally accepted view that political life in Muslim Mindanao still revolves very much around the institution of clan. On the other hand, these observations also point to a great deal of dissatisfaction among different sections of Muslim society about the way elite-based clan structures are being reproduced. While this may seem evident at first sight, this is a crucial observation that has not always been taken into account in much of the literature on Muslim Mindanao where there has been an explicit focus on a limited selection of prominent clans considered to be kingmakers in the socio-political landscape. The (often implicit) assumption is that politics in Muslim Mindanao is very much elite-driven and therefore one needs, above all, to study these elites. This is not necessarily wrong, both for Muslim Mindanao as well as for most other regions in the Philippines.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, this explicit focus on elites/prominent clans risks grossly underestimating the political agency of the majority of the population in Muslim Mindanao who happen not to have Mastura, Sinsuat, Pendatun or any other famous clan as their family name. This was well captured by a local, young, well-educated man who is a volunteer for UNYPAD and a couple of other Muslim CVOS. When informally talking about the prospects for making a decent living and obtaining a secure financial income in the town of Cotabato, the respondent somewhat abruptly mentioned: ‘*I am nobody*’.<sup>38</sup> When discussing this further, it appeared that this was not so much an expression of a profound existential crisis. Rather, what was being referred to was the observation that not being part of a well-known clan seriously

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MNLF and the MILF should not only be understood as a reaction against ‘imperial Manila’ but also as an indication of how generational and class-differences within Muslim society are of relevance.

<sup>36</sup> Different assessments have shown how this link between the Ampatuan clan and the regime in Manila (at least before the Ampatuan massacre in November 2009) were very real. For an elaborate report discussing this connection, providing an intriguing account of the specific center/periphery interactions in Philippine politics, see: Human Rights Watch (2010). *They own the people. The Ampatuans, state-backed militias, and killings in the Southern Philippines*, New York: Human Rights Watch, see also: International Crisis Group (2009). *The Philippines: After the Maguindanao massacre*, Brussels/New York: International Crisis Group; Rood, S. (2012) *Interlocking Autonomy: Manila and Muslim Mindanao*, in: Michelle Miller (ed.) *Autonomy and Armed Separatism in South and Southeast Asia*, Singapore: ISEAS (Institute for Southeast Asian Studies), pp. 256-277.

<sup>37</sup> As indicated by the Philippine political scientist, Nathan Quimpo (2005), political and historical analysis of the Philippines has always been characterized by a strong tendency to study the workings of elites and elite politics. In Quimpo’s view, this view has systematically underrated ‘*The long history of struggle of subordinate classes and marginalized communities for popular empowerment and social justice*’ (de Quimpo 2005: 243) and the way these struggles have also shaped Philippine history. Our own assessment of the role played by a proactive Bangsamoro civil society in the growth of MILF can partly be seen as a confirmation of this assessment. See: Quimpo, N.G. (2005). Review: Oligarchic Patrimonialism, Bossism, Electoral Clientelism, and Contested Democracy in the Philippines, *Comparative Politics*, 37 (2): 229-250.

<sup>38</sup> Informal conversation with respondent (anonymous), (Cotabato city, 25-08-2014).

impedes one's prospects for any type of upward social mobility or even just secure income generation. In other words, the clan as an institution is still very prominent in most parts of Muslim Mindanao but this should not divert our attention away from the very wide dissatisfaction and unease that surround this institution. This observation therefore nuances the widely held view that in Muslim Mindanao clan is everything. Clan is more important for some than for others and for many in Muslim Mindanao who do not belong to a powerful clan, the clan structure is often perceived as an oppressive institution with some very authoritarian features.

Religion - and more specifically an ideal of equality within Islam - has become one of the prime locations where dissatisfaction with clan politics is being expressed. To illustrate this point, it is interesting to refer to two different quotes. Tellingly, the first quote is by an elder, male leader of an important clan in the Lanao region. When discussing the meaning of traditional leadership, he stated:

*'If you are not descendent from the Sharif,<sup>39</sup> then you are member of the third class people. First class belong to the royal blood, second class people who are not slaves but not royal blood, third class people those are slaves. If you don't know where you belong you will become third class people. Even if you are very rich you cannot become Sultan if you are not first class.'*<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting to contrast this statement with a quote from a young, female CVO activist and member of MWDECC when she states:

*'Actually in Islam, it's not about, you're from the royal blood, from the blue blood or green blood, there is no high class, low class. As long you're practicing Islam, then, that's who possesses royal blood. Those who are educated in Islam don't think that 'oh, I'm the good one, because I'm from the royal blood or I'm the good one because I'm the daughter of a datu', no. If you are Islamized. If you're eligible of religion, then you will erase that idea. You will not claim that you're good. Because me, when I'm educated already, I don't have to say I'm from the royal blood just to gain respect, no. Because when practicing my beliefs, practicing Islam, I already gain the respect. I didn't ask for it.'*<sup>41</sup>

These are very contrasting political statements about the place of clan, lineage and religion in society. It should also be mentioned that an opinion on social stratification articulated as explicitly as in the first quote is rather exceptional; although the unease of many traditional clan leaders with democratic elections ran as a thread throughout many interviews.<sup>42</sup> In addition, we wish to be cautious with statements about the deep generational, gender- or class-based divisions in Muslim Mindanao and how these are ideologically translated. The largely qualitative nature of this research project does

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<sup>39</sup> Sharif Kabungsuwan; the first Sultan of Maguindanao and (supposedly) having a direct blood line with the Prophet.

<sup>40</sup> Focus group discussion with members Tara clan, (Illigan city, 16-09-2013).

<sup>41</sup> Focus group discussion, Quick Response team, MWDECC members, (Cotabato city, 21-09-2014).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with sultan Abubakar M. Ali, sultan of Baloi, (municipality of Baloi, 16-09-2013).

not provide adequate quantitative evidence to make such bold statements. Suffice to say that these tensions are clearly present at the moment. Yet what the quote above clearly points to is the crucial observation that religion/Islam - much more than any other ideological framework such as nationalism, liberalism, communism, or socialism etc - has become a space, even a particular language, through which a political critique is being articulated.

### *Religion and moral purity*

A second discussion that we want to touch upon in this section is the ideal of moral purity rooted in Islam, that is systematically contrasted with ongoing political practices of corruption, nepotism and sheer greed and a perception of a more general moral decay engulfing Muslim society. In projecting this ideal of religious purity, *Sharia* takes a central place. *Sharia* cannot just be understood as a judicial system - which it partly is - but gains relevance as a much broader guideline for moral conduct. In understanding the issue of *Sharia*, it is crucial to differentiate between so-called state-mandated *Sharia* courts and the informal *Sharia* courts that are generally considered to be close to the MILF. These state-mandated *Sharia* courts were created in 1977 through Presidential Decree No. 1083 entitled '*Code of Muslim Personal Laws of the Philippines*.'<sup>43</sup> The main areas covered by these state-mandated courts include: marriage and divorce, paternity and filiation, parental authority and succession. As such, the *Sharia* courts remain limited to the private sphere. Most importantly, there was a general assessment that their significance is limited, due amongst other things to their urban location that makes them rather inaccessible for the large majority of the rural population in Muslim Mindanao. A second type of *Sharia* courts are the so-called informal *Sharia* courts which in general are closely tied to MILF structures. For instance, one interviewed MILF commander of the 102th base command of the North Western Mindanao Front, also acted as a religious leader and presided at a specific *Sharia* court we will discuss later in this section. Based on our data, it is impossible to provide a general assessment on these informal *Sharia* courts and it seems that their reach and relevance is very context-dependent. However, what is clear is that these courts have a specific appeal as very concrete alternative institutions of jurisdiction and more general guides of moral conduct. Two related issues will illustrate this point.

First, this appeal is linked to the establishment of certain MILF camps as zones wherein politics was/is being conducted according to *Sharia* and religious principles. Interestingly, within these camps, the MILF did not have to resort to the type of mediated authority described above but these camps were (among the few) places where the MILF could exert some sort of full control. As such, these places became very concrete examples of how a true societal alternative, organized by the MILF, would look. Throughout different interviews, a specific importance was ascribed to camp Abubakar. Throughout the 1990s this was by far the most important MILF camp until it was overtaken by the AFP in 2000 through an all-out war between the

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<sup>43</sup> For a full version, see: [http://www.lawphil.net/statutes/presdecs/pd1977/pd\\_1083\\_1977.html](http://www.lawphil.net/statutes/presdecs/pd1977/pd_1083_1977.html)

Philippine government and the MILF. Remarkably, the camp is not just remembered as a symbol of fierce armed resistance against the Philippine government. The relevance of the camp is also understood as a showcase example of how a MILF controlled area could look if *Sharia* was implemented. For instance, we discussed earlier the gradual penetration of the MILF into the municipality of Midsayap from the mid-1990s onwards through the provision of social security services and successful attempts to curb inter-clan rivalry. An additional factor that was regularly mentioned for why the MILF considerably widened their circle of supporters in the municipality was the ‘*shining example*’ of camp Abubakar as a place of order and tranquility.<sup>44</sup> As constantly mentioned by people who resided in the camp or just visited the place, this was a beacon of peace and stability where clan feuding was absent and criminality non-existent.<sup>45</sup> Most important of all, this was understood as an example where *Sharia* proved its superiority over other societal systems, not only in providing law and order but equally in making sure no waste was dumped, business people were honest in their dealings etc. As a result, it is no surprise that people who resided in the camp put forward the opinion that: ‘*Tradition should follow Islam and this Sharia*’.<sup>46</sup> This was also pertinent among the network of LPI-MWDECC volunteers when they explicitly stated in a focus group discussion that the success of camp Abubakar was a direct inspiration for their grassroots social work. In fact, MWDECC was partly founded based on a network of women who went for regular annual ‘teaching sessions’ on Islam in this camp.

A second issue that should be mentioned here is the symbolic importance ascribed to the drugs trade.<sup>47</sup> Increasingly, the issue of drugs is considered to be a huge societal problem destroying the lives of many, in particular the young. It is also clear that much of the violence, for example in the city center of Cotabato but also in other places, is related to control over the drugs trade. The MILF is deliberately attempting to curb this trade by punishing so-called ‘drug pushers’ and setting up specific rehab facilities for drug users, in place such as the tiny islands on Lake Lanao. Within this endeavor to curb the drugs trade and drug use, *Sharia* is explicitly being put forward as a specific punitive framework and moral compass guiding people to refrain from using drugs. A telling illustration of these efforts was the establishment of a so-called ‘*Sharia mobile*’ with the explicit attempt to eradicate the drugs trade (and other forms of criminality).<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, when interviewing Alim Abu Halif, the

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Maks Mangadta, Minhrac (Mindanao Human Rights Action Committee) member, (Cotabato city, 28-01-2014).

<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to prove whether this was the case or not. However, most importantly, a discourse exists that many people believe to be true, even those who never visited the camp.

<sup>46</sup> Interview Haji Gafor Ahmad, member Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), (Cotabato city, 03-02-2014)

<sup>47</sup> For an assessment of the drugs trade, see: Cagoco-Guim, R. and Schoofs, S. (2013) A Deadly Cocktail? Illicit Drugs, Politics and Violent Conflict in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao, in: Steven Schoofs and Francisco Lara (eds.), *Out of the Shadows. Violent Conflict and the Real Economy of Mindanao*, London: International Alert, pp. 85-118.

<sup>48</sup> At the time of fieldwork, this project was still at an experimental stage and only ran in the territory controlled by MILF commander Bravo (102<sup>nd</sup> base command). However, it was stated that if the initiative was judged a success it would be extended to other regions in Muslim Mindanao.



aforementioned division commander of the 102th base command of the North Western Mindanao Front and one of the founding members of *Sharia* mobile, he argued that the main purpose of this initiative consisted of ‘*transforming misbehaviour*’ and showing people that the MILF is much more than just a military organization.<sup>49</sup> This mission in others words implied an ideological project wherein a ‘*dark situation*’ would be transformed into a ‘*bright path*’ or so-called *kalinitat* or peace. A fundamental component within this societal transformation is to prevent the further expansion of the drugs trade, so that the population see the MILF having a positive impact on the community.

### *Conclusion*

In this final section, we have illustrated how the ideological and political project of the MILF cannot be disconnected from its religious component. More specifically, based on a range of informal and formal interviews with organic members of the MILF and MILF commanders, we have argued how (1) religion has served as a discourse on equality through which power imbalances within Muslim society are being exposed and critiqued and (2) how the imposition of a new religious purity rooted within *Sharia* is systematically being contrasted with an image of broad political and societal decay. We have attempted to illustrate the second point by referring to the existence of (past) MILF camps being portrayed as places of stability, decency and good governance and by citing the explicit attempts undertaken by the MILF in curbing the trade in drugs and their use.

## **General conclusion**

This paper has put forward the argument that the growth of the MILF over the past two decades needs to be explained through its positioning as a legitimate, viable and concrete alternative to a flawed democracy wherein (clan-based) elites reproduce themselves. This observation draws attention to the ‘internal’ fault-lines and political discussions within Muslim society and therefore adds to a dominant narrative trying to explain the emergence of the MILF and the broader struggle for self-determination and an autonomous Bangsamoro. This dominant narrative is an ‘externally oriented’ one, since it puts great emphasis on the marginalized status of the Muslim population overall within the Philippine nation state. Our aim is not to say that this assessment is wrong. Rather, with this paper, we attempt to add another layer of understanding to the reasons behind the quest for self-determination and, above all, to point to different dimensions and scales of political grievances and how these relate to each other. It is hereby worth noting that for many MILF supporters, the failings of democracy and the systematic reproduction of unequal power relations in their own locality are intimately tied up with the workings of the larger national body politic that is

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Alim Abu Halif, MILF commander and member of the MILF judicial body, (municipality of Balindong, 01-10-2013).

considered as corrupted and nurturing local elites who preside over these quasi-totalitarian enclaves. It is also against this background that the specific religious ideology of the MILF needs to be understood. This religious ideology and the prominence of *Sharia* herein serve as an ideal of moral purity as opposed to a corrupted political and societal landscape. This religious discourse projects an ideal of absolute equality that is contrasted with the current unequal society dominated by feudal clans.

The manner in which the MILF opposes local strongmen is not always clear-cut and is often ambiguous. As extensively shown throughout this paper, the label 'MILF' covers a wide range of organizations, members, and identities. In particular, clan and other loyalties run right across the organization. In a political landscape that is heavily dominated by local strongmen and where the clan is still the dominant social institution bridging state and society, it seems that the MILF has followed a policy of slow and gradual incorporation rather than brutal confrontation. As such, an ambiguous picture emerges wherein local political strongmen, in some cases with highly authoritarian and undemocratic credentials, identify as MILF. It is clear that these local strongmen display a great deal of autonomy against the central political leadership and a delicate balancing act is maintained. Therefore, it is crucial not to portray or approach the MILF as a homogeneous group but to pay attention to the different fault lines, cleavages and sometimes contrasting political objectives that reside within this one organization. However, despite this complexity, and based on our data, we have distinguished three major social fields within the MILF: 1) a central leadership referred to as 'core MILF' and in general associated with MILF camps such as Abubakr or Darapanan; 2) a wide variety of local power-holders/local commanders who display varying degrees of allegiance to this core MILF; and finally, 3) a coalition of CVOs or 'organic members'. The main characteristic of this last group is that it consists of 'ordinary' citizens playing no direct role in the military organization of the MILF. These ordinary citizens can be either formal members of the MILF or people/organizations working in the orbit of the core MILF. Our classification of these three social fields does not pretend to be complete or definitive but is one that enables us to obtain a better understanding of the cases we have discussed in this paper.

When studying the interaction between these social fields, three important things stand out. First, based on an analysis of the recent history of the municipality of Midsayap, North Cotabato, it seems that some sort of core-MILF has managed to obtain increasing control over a range of local political leaders. In this particular municipality, the core-MILF was understood as those MILF fighters and leaders residing in Darapanan camp. Increasingly, a system of sanctioning has been implemented whereby local MILF commanders/political leaders and their respective followers are threatened with being taken into custody by the core MILF if they do not follow certain specific policies. Evidently, the implementation of a range of state-sanctioned mechanisms to curb violence and criminality where the MILF plays a

central role has also added to the capacity of this core MILF. This increase in coercive capacity has gone hand in hand with deliberate attempts by the MILF to present themselves as a sincere and legitimate alternative to a type of warlord politics that was clearly violent, exploitative, authoritarian and therefore unpopular.

Second, a wide network of Muslim CVOs has been crucial to the development of the MILF as a civil organization. It is precisely this network that often shares a negative assessment of the type of warlord politics that, in their view, hinders any true political and economic development in the region. Based on this frustration, this network sees a credible governance alternative in the MILF, which they wish to support in a variety of non-violent ways. Much more than might initially be imagined, this type of civil support has been crucial in a number of governance arenas and therefore in the growth of the MILF as a legitimate civil organization. One specific example discussed in this paper is the role this network plays in conflict management and reconciliation initiatives. The arena of conflict management also provides a good illustration of the manner in which the three social fields within the MILF interact with each other. Simply put, this network of 'organic members' has been pivotal in establishing a venue through which disputing clans could communicate with each other to find a solution to their violent dispute. It is also here that the limits of the MILF as a rebel group become visible. As local MILF commanders also display a great deal of allegiance to their clan, the MILF becomes dragged into this fractionalized landscape, heavily reducing its legitimacy to mediate as a neutral third party. It is at this point that a crucial tactical alliance emerged between the core MILF and a network of organic members. As illustrated, this particular network, aided by international NGOs such as TAF, proved effective in settling this particular dispute.

This brings us to a third and last point. This paper paints a picture of the MILF as much more than just an armed rebel group. Much of the literature on political developments in Muslim Mindanao over the past decades has explicitly focused on the actual motives and/or immediate causes of violence in the region. As a result, our understanding of an organization such as the MILF has been highly distorted and biased, since the organization has been mainly approached as merely an armed group. Our analysis has shown that this approach is wrong by illustrating how a group of organizations and people who are clearly not hardened fighters or involved in the upper hierarchy of the MILF, have nevertheless played an essential role in the development of the organization and ultimately, in the struggle for an autonomous Bangsamoro. The political agency of these subaltern populations and organizations has been fundamental to the development and growth of the MILF, not only as an oppositional alternative to 'imperial Manila' but equally as an oppositional alternative to local clan-based elites.

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### **Policy documents**

Implementing Operational Guidelines of the Agreement on the General Cessation of Hostilities (1997) <http://www.opapp.gov.ph/resources/implementing-operational-guidelines-agreement-general-cessation-hostilities>

Implementing Guidelines of the 2002 AHJAG Communique (2002)  
<http://www.opapp.gov.ph/resources/implementing-guidelines-2002-ahjag-communique>



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