

# MORO MUSLIMS

Dr. Seraj Ahsan



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The Philippines government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) reached a peace treaty in 2014 after a long run dispute since 1970's. The new period was considered as a great opportunity for Moro Muslims to build their own future. During their long history, the Muslims of the region showed perseverance in maintaining their identity despite being faced with many problems. The last peace treaty and the referendum in February 2020 brought normalization in the region. So, carrying the heavy burden of the past, Moro Muslims are now trying to determine their own destiny.

Moro Muslims are made of different ethnic groups of Muslims numbering approximately 6-10 million; they are the indigenous inhabitants of Southern Philippines. Since the ninth century, Muslim merchants used Southern Philippine to reach China for trade, these traders preached Islam to the local population and this was the

first introduction of Islam in the region. There were several small kingdoms situated in the island of Mindanao; however, some islands near North Borneo were also under the kingdom of Sulu, regions of the original Moro Muslim inhabitants. Therefore the history of Muslim Mindanao cannot be separated from the history of insular Southeast Asia.

Historically, Malaysian and Indonesian societies have been under the influence of ancient Indian culture; later Islam and Western colonization made a deep impact on them. Today's Muslim society of Mindanao also manifests the same cultural trend of their neighbors. Contemporary ethno-religious conflict on Moro land is the outcome of Spanish and American colonization. The colonizers broke the cultural and geographical continuity of Moro land as they have done in other parts of the world.



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Impacts of Islam on Moro Muslims are reflected in every sphere of their life. Since the seventh century A.D., Muslims started to come to insular Southeast Asia in search of trade opportunities. They also settled on Moro land. The majority of the local population accepted Islam on the hand of the new settlers, their number grew with time; they built Islamic institutions such as Mosques and Islamic seminaries, Islam transformed their life and they became part of the greater Ummah.

Islam spread almost in the entire region and gained the deep roots in the Tausug, Maguindanao, and Maranao ethnic communities. Usually, kinship, common language, and common culture are perceived as the basis of national identities. Islam brought the idea of the Ummah that created a powerful spiritual bond that helped to establish a new social and political structure. Due to these factors, new kind of kinship ties emerged, reshaped the identity of different communities, brought them together, and gave them a sense of kinship with other Muslim groups. This also helped generate a common Muslim identity in the region.

In the beginning of the sixteenth century, Western imperialism also occupied Southeast Asia. Europeans started to come to different parts of Southeast Asia. In the mid-sixteenth century, Spaniards also began to colonize the Philippines. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, they had colonized the entire region; major parts of the coastal areas came under their control and finally Western powers transformed the entire maritime trading system in their own favor.

European colonizers not only expanded their areas of jurisdiction and drew new international boundaries that were previously unknown, but they also transformed the social and political structure of the land completely. However, the process of colonization damaged every element of Muslim societies. The Moro Muslims felt that their existence as a Muslim religious group came under threat. They faced new challenges due to colonialism, particularly the challenge to protect their religious and cultural identity.

Due to Spanish colonization, the Moro Muslims were face-to face with an entirely different culture, they also felt alien to the new socio-political structure. The Spaniards introduced a new legal system that had no respect for the locally known Shariah and adat and they made new social groups that nullified the taritib. The Spaniards also used the state power to propagate Christianity in the region. Three centuries of Spanish rule was full of tension, the relations between Spaniards and Muslims were hostile, there was no peace at all; there was a nonstop conflict between the colonizers and the colonized.

In 1898, the war between Spain and the USA broke out. The Spaniards were defeated in the war, after that the Paris treaty took place. As per this treaty, Spain had to leave the Philippines for the USA. This war brought a new turn in the political history of the Moro Muslims. In the beginning of American colonialism, the Moro Muslims suffered a lot. The colonial government introduced some administrative reforms to integrate the local Moro Muslim population with the newly established system; the government inaugurated a public school system and a local constabulary for policing. After American colonization, internal migrations took place in the Philippines; Christian Filipinos started to migrate from other Islands as civilian officials and agricultural settlers to Moro land. The aim of the migration was to allow the colonial power to transform the demography of the Muslim majority land.

The majority of Moro Muslims avoided participating in the Philippines nationalist movement, which aimed to gain independence from the USA. Before the formation of the Commonwealth government in 1935, several prominent datus (Moro Muslim leaders) tried to convince the colonial government not to integrate Muslim provinces with the new republican state that was about to be created in 1946. The Moro Muslims basically wanted their own separate state; therefore they preferred to remain under US tutelage until they succeed to gain independence so they could form their own state.

The Moro Muslims clearly expressed their demand to the colonial government that they didn't want to be ruled by Christian Filipinos. They didn't see themselves as Filipinos; in their view Filipinos mean Christians and they insisted to be identified separately from the general Filipinos. The colonial government did not accept the Moro Muslims' demand; they had been made part of the Commonwealth without their consent and finally, the Moro Muslims were forced to be part of the Philippines Republic in 1946.

Massacres and genocides of Moro Muslims took place several times in the history of the Modern Philippines during the Cold War era. Events such as the killing of 30 Muslim soldiers in 1968 on the grounds of disobedience to their superiors and the burning of 70 Muslims alive during the mosque arson act in 1971 led the tension between the two sides to the ground of conflict and armed struggle. Thus, the armed struggle of the Moro Muslims for independence started in the late 1960s.

Within the scope of the Moro Muslims' struggle for independence against the Philippines central administration, the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) was first established in 1968. Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), founded under the leadership of Nur Misuari in 1969, after acknowledging MIM's inability to bring serious success, has made important contributions in reaching a certain basis and gaining awareness in the national and international arena with its struggle both in the political and military fields. MNLF, which signed two peace treaties with the central government in 1976 and 1996, was an important actor in the process of the evolution of the struggle from full independence to autonomous administration.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), founded under the leadership of Salamat Hashim as a split-faction of MNLF in 1977, came to the fore as an Islamic movement whose religious references prioritize on its struggle. Over time, the MILF, which has become the real and true representative of the Moro Muslims

and the Moro struggle, has been a party to the negotiations with the central government and played an important role in the process that resulted in the acquisition of autonomy. Hacı Murad İbrahim has been leading the MILF following Salamat Hashim's death in 2003.

It is not possible to pinpoint the balance of pressure and violence policies of the Philippines central government's targeting of the Moro Muslims for about half a century. However, independent non-governmental organizations reveal that more than 120 thousand people have died, more than 2 million Muslims have fallen as refugees, more than 200 thousand houses have been destroyed, hundreds of mosques and schools have been destroyed. During this long period, Muslims were deprived of basic human rights and freedoms, civilian settlements were destroyed by armed operations; political arrests and executions were carried out. The country's Muslim children and youth have not been able to access basic education, thousands of women and girls have been raped, Muslims have been prevented from doing business, and the region has not been able to take appropriate contributions from state investments in areas such as health and transportation.

A new wave of peace talks between the Philippines central government and the Moro Muslims began in 1996. With the framework of the 2012 treaty, it was decided to establish a Bangsamoro autonomous region on the island of Mindanao, and on 28 March 2014, the Bangsamoro Comprehensive Treaty was signed. Thus, the process leading to the semi-independence of Moro Muslims became official.

Overwhelmingly Muslim majority of Southern Philippine approved the peace deal and voted in favor of creating a new autonomous region that includes five provinces and three cities; the present Philippines government plan is to create a federal structure that gives Moro Muslims' provinces more power and resource, it is expected that this policy will give Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) more autonomy.