

Writing Malaysia and the Moro Identity: An Analysis of the Moro National Liberation Front's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT *Malaysia began supporting the MNLF when the group emerged in the 1970s. In recent years, however, the relationship between Malaysia and the MNLF has changed, especially when the MNLF repeatedly expressed negative comments about the Malaysian government. This study aims to explain the shift in the MNLF discourse on Malaysia and the ramifications of this new discourse within the Philippine state. To achieve these aims, this study approaches the issue through the lens of power relations and foreign policy. Moreover, this research employs the analysis of the MNLF's writings and speeches. Lastly, it argues that the discourse of the MNLF on Malaysia is related to its struggle for legitimacy within the Philippines.*

Keywords: Malaysia, Moro National Liberation Front, Dissident Groups, Philippines

Introduction

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), under the leadership of Nur Misuari, started the contemporary Moro rebellion in the 1970s. In its fight against the Philippine state, the group's early supporter was an external actor, namely, Malaysia. As the Philippine sources reported, Malaysia supplied the Moro fighters with weapons and ammunition to fight the Philippine army.¹ There was also evidence that Moro fighters were trained by the Malaysians in Pulau Pangkor and Sabah.² In addition, Malaysia became the initial conduit for internationalizing the plight of the Moro people and the struggle of the MNLF. In 1972, Tunku Abdul Rahman, then Malaysian Prime Minister and Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), raised the Moro case to the OIC members and convinced them to support it.³ Likewise, Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein, another Prime Minister of Malaysia, called for the same appeal during the Islamic Summit Conference in Pakistan in 1974. He stated, "We seek to give our Muslim brothers a rightful place in a peaceful world."⁴ In the same way, the Moros saw the Malaysians as their natural allies, a perception based on their common ethnic ties.⁵ Their shared religion served as another factor in establishing close relations.⁶ Accordingly, their bond served the MNLF in their battle against the Philippine state since it provided international support and legitimacy to the group.

However, the relations between Malaysia and the MNLF started changing in 2001. The MNLF began describing Malaysia as an accomplice of the Philippine state in colonizing and oppressing the Moro people. Particularly, Misuari accused Malaysia of illegally occupying Sabah, which he now claimed to be part of the Moro homeland.⁷ Moreover, he condemned Malaysia for participating in the conception of a peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the MNLF's main rival group. According to Misuari, the agreement formulated by the Philippine and Malaysian governments aimed at creating instability among the Moro people.⁸ Considering this situation, how can this shift in the MNLF's discourse on Malaysia be explained? What are the implications of the MNLF's new discourse on Malaysia within the Philippines?

There are several explanations for the change in the MNLF's discourse. One of them is revenge and according to this explanation, the MNLF retaliated against Malaysia for capturing its leader, Nur Misuari, in 2001. During this incident, the Philippine government accused Misuari of inciting another rebellion and ordered his arrest.⁹ For this reason, Misuari was said to have fled to Malaysia in the hope of obtaining political asylum or safe passage to the Middle East.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Misuari was arrested by the Malaysian police upon his arrival. He was detained for more than a month and was later deported to the Philippines where he was imprisoned for several years.¹¹ This incident

led Misuari to form a grudge against Malaysia.¹² Another explanation states that the MNLF's discourse on Malaysia demonstrates their opposition on Kuala Lumpur's support of the MILF.¹³ Analysts posit that Malaysia's assistance to the MILF pushed the MNLF aside from the peace negotiations. For this reason, the MNLF is trying to discredit Malaysia to prevent the fulfillment of the peace negotiations between the MILF and the Philippine government.

Either of these explanations could be possible reasons for the change in the MNLF's discourse on Malaysia. Nevertheless, there are gaps in these answers. For instance, the first explanation does not consider the criticisms made by the MNLF against the former leaders of Malaysia. Specifically, the MNLF is claiming that Kuala Lumpur had been conniving with Manila against the Moro people since the 1970s. Considering the MNLF's relation with Malaysia in the early years of its struggle, this accusation is unreasonable and implausible. In light of this new claim, the 'revenge explanation' is not enough to explain the shift in the MNLF's discourse. On the other hand, the second explanation fails to consider the transformation of the relation between the MNLF and the MILF. That is, the MNLF did not disapprove of the peace negotiation between the MILF and the Philippine government before 2001. In fact, the MNLF interceded for both parties, which led to the temporary cessation of hostilities between the MILF fighters and the Philippine army. Misuari even hoped for the success of the peace talks between the MILF and the Philippine state, which were assisted by the Malaysian government.¹⁴ Hence, the two explanations do not provide a complete understanding of the MNLF's new discourse on Malaysia.

These gaps, however, can be addressed by considering the issue through an examination of power dynamics. This approach posits that different actors including dissident groups are continually challenging each other's policy and identity, which is also called the battle of discourse.¹⁵ This means that actors are in a constant struggle to affix meaning about themselves as the center or the 'self.'¹⁶ By successfully creating a center which others can recognize or identify with,¹⁷ the actors are able to establish their hegemonic position, which also means the maintenance of their existence. Particularly, for dissident groups, engaging in a battle of discourse means the production or legitimization of their power, which also entails countering the existing hegemonic power.¹⁸ In subverting the current hegemon, the dissident group must construct it as the 'other.' This means that the dissident group produces itself as the inside, rational and civilized, while it constructs the 'other' as irrational and anarchic.¹⁹ Although the 'other' affirms the existence of the 'self,' it also threatens



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Philippines
President Rodrigo
Duterte (C) with
MILF Chairman
Murad Ebrahim
(L) during the
presentation
ceremony of
the signed
document on
the Organic Law
for Bangsamoro
Autonomous
Region of Muslim
Mindando,
Manila, August 6,
2018.
ALJIBE / AFP /
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the 'self'.²⁰ Thus, this provides the justification for the 'self' to continually rebuke the 'other' to secure and maintain its existence.²¹ This preservation of the 'self' and the rejection of the 'other' are made more legitimate and compelling through the practice of foreign policy. By engaging in foreign policy, the dissident group performs the second exclusion.²² In other words, the dissident group uses an external actor like a foreign state as its reference point in subverting the main state which tries to suppress its existence. By using an external actor, the dissident group exposes the policies of the main enemy state as mere fabrication and subsequently depicts it as an illegitimate representative of the group's people. Through this, the dissident group creates a closed community and emphasizes the boundary of its constructed community as separate from that of the enemy state. This corresponds to the construction of the boundary between the 'inside/self' and the 'outside/other'.²³ The creation of this boundary strengthens the dissident group's position and power over their constituents.²⁴

This paper posits that the shift in the discourse of the MNLF on Malaysia reflects the battle of position in the Philippines. Originally, the MNLF was the only Moro representative recognized by the OIC and the Philippine state.²⁵ The OIC's acknowledgment of the MNLF legitimized its position as the principal source of the Moro people's identity and the justification of their cause. However, the MNLF was gradually displaced by the MILF through the instigation of the Philippine government starting from 2001. Within this process, the

From being the recognized source of Moro identity and vanguard of the Moro cause, the MNLF was now treated by the Philippine government as “spoiler” of peace, especially with regards to the MILF-Philippine negotiation

MILF became the known representative of the Moro people, while the MNLF was excluded from the peace negotiations. This transformation in the power relations between the MNLF, MILF, and the Philippine government incited the MNLF to produce counter-narratives to maintain its power and existence. Accordingly, the MNLF used Malaysia as its reference point to regain its role as the central actor in the Moro's struggle against the Philippines. Therefore, this paper argues that the MNLF depicted Malaysia as un-Islamic, a colonizer, and a conspirator in order to delegitimize the MILF and to prevent the MILF-Philippine agreement from being fulfilled.

Within its depictions, the MNLF portrayed the MILF as a pawn of both the Malaysian and the Philippine state. As a puppet of the two governments, the MILF was constructed as an illegitimate representative of the Moro people which, as such, must not be supported by the Moros. Meanwhile, the MILF-Philippine peace negotiations, which were facilitated by Malaysia, are described as a mere pretense to hide the parties' real goals. That is, the two governments would offer a peace agreement as a means to keep the Moros under their control and obstruct them from regaining Sabah. By relating to Malaysia in this way, the MNLF can reassert itself as the legitimate representative of the Moro people and renew its struggle against the Philippine state.

The following parts of this paper explore how the MNLF used Malaysia as its reference point in re-legitimizing itself as the authentic Moro representative. This includes retracing the early relationship between MNLF and Malaysia, demonstrating the changes in the power dynamics within the Philippines starting from 2001, and finally explaining how the new MNLF's depictions of Malaysia discredits the MILF and the Philippine government.

MNLF-Malaysia's Early Relationship

The MNLF leaders and members established their first connection with the Malaysian government shortly after news erupted about the murder of young Muslim men in Corregidor Island. The incident was called the Jabidah Mas-

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Malaysian officials because it reopened the serious diplomatic issue between the Philippines and Malaysia, which is about Sabah. Sabah, now in Malaysia, was historically part of the Sulu Sultanate. After the death of the Sultan of Sulu in 1936, the Philippine Commonwealth government under President Manuel Quezon abolished the Sultanate, which signified that the sovereign power rests upon the Philippine state. However, the Philippine government assured the people of Sulu that the heirs of the Sultan would remain to be their religious head. When World War II erupted in Asia, the British military took the land and declared it part of the British crown colony until the formation of Malaysia in 1963.²⁷ Following a plebiscite, Sabah was incorporated into the Federation of Malaysia. This was protested by the Philippine government, which claimed that Sabah was rightfully part of Philippine territory.²⁸ Nevertheless, the Malaysian government repeatedly rejected this claim and, consequently, the two states were entangled in a diplomatic conflict for years.

With the disclosure of the covert operation and massacre, Malaysian officials were compelled to assist the Moros against the Philippines.²⁹ Accordingly, the Malaysian government presented the Moro issue to the members of the OIC, made it part of the organization's agenda, and suggested the investigation of the issue.³⁰ In addition, Tunku Abdul Rahman submitted a report, which exposed the Philippine government's oppression and expulsion of the Moros from their own lands during the 1973 Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) in Benghazi.³¹ Furthermore, in 1977, Malaysia sponsored the MNLF's admittance to the OIC as a non-state actor with permanent observer status. With Malaysia's support, the MNLF was elevated into becoming the primary representative of the Moro people and was given an opportunity to form connections with other Muslim nations.³²

This support for the Moros was presented by the Malaysians as a common humanitarian concern for people who share the same ethnic and religious ties with them. As stated by one Malaysian foreign minister, the Malaysians considered the Moros as one of them and this perception had been Malaysia's main motivation for securing the welfare of the Muslim people in Mind-

sacre. According to Jibin Arula, who was allegedly the only survivor of the massacre, he and his colleagues were trained by the Philippine army for a secret mission called Operation Merdeka. The mission involved the infiltration of Sabah to reclaim the land for the Philippines. However, the men mutinied against their army superiors and were later killed.²⁶ This news caused great consternation among Ma-

anao.³³ Likewise, the Moros understood the Malaysians as their ethnic and religious kin.³⁴ This was demonstrated in their conception of the reason behind the Jabidah Massacre. The Moros insisted that the event happened because the Muslim army trainees refused to do their mission of infiltrating Sabah, as it violates the Islamic principles of killing their fellow Muslims, especially their own relatives.³⁵ As Misuari clearly expressed, “If the invasion project succeeded... it would have made our people suspect before the eyes of their Muslim brothers in the world and caused their tragic isolation from the Islamic world.”³⁶

By constituting the Malaysians as the Muslim ‘brothers and sisters’ of the Moro people, the MNLF was able to construct Moro identity as part of the larger Islamic world. Through this, the MNLF was able to gain recognition from other Muslim nations and, with their acknowledgment, the MNLF was able to legitimize its construction of the Moros as a distinct nation from the Filipinos. That is, by using Malaysia as its reference point, the MNLF constituted the Moros primarily as Muslims, whom they differentiated from the Filipino-Christians. Since the Moros do not belong to the Christian identity, they can now reject the Philippines as their state and fight for the establishment of their own state. Accordingly, this made the MNLF the recognized central authority of the Moros and the leading figure in the struggle for the Moro cause.

Changes in Power Relations

However, the rise of the MILF challenged the legitimacy of the MNLF. The MILF members broke away from the MNLF in 1977 and underlined the importance of Islam in their struggle.³⁷ The MILF, which at that time was not perceived as a legitimate Moro representative, demanded for independence rather than autonomy. For this reason, it continued the rebellion against the Philippine state even after the MNLF had reached an agreement with the government in 1996. This MNLF-Philippine agreement enacted the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which permitted the Moros to have their own autonomous government. The MNLF was given the authority to lead and manage this autonomous region. However, in 2001 the Philippine government under the administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declared a ceasefire to end the fighting between the Philippine army and the MILF and persuaded the MILF to restart negotiations with the Philippine state.³⁸ Accordingly, Manila requested Kuala Lumpur to facilitate the peace negotiations.³⁹ The MILF, meanwhile, accepted the truce and later signed the ceasefire agreement with the Philippine officials in Malaysia to start the formal negotiation process.⁴⁰

In launching this peace process, President Arroyo signed a bill which enacted the expansion of the ARMM. This entailed the conduct of a plebiscite to iden-

The MNLF compared Malaysia to the Philippine state. Whereas the Philippines exploit the agricultural, mineral, and aquatic riches of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan, Malaysia is exploiting Sabah

tify which territories wanted to remain or be included in ARMM. Moreover, this called for an election of new ARMM government officials.⁴¹ This move, however, was opposed by Misuari. According to him, the plebiscite violated the MNLF-Philippine peace agreement and the OIC resolution and therefore must be suspended.⁴² Nonetheless, the Philippine government did

not heed Misuari's statements. Through the support of breakaway members of the MNLF, which was referred to collectively as the Moro National Liberation Front-Executive Committee (MNLF-EC), the government proceeded with its planned plebiscite. Subsequently, the government installed some of the MNLF-EC members as key officials of ARMM⁴³ and other government institutions.⁴⁴

The undermining of its power compelled the MNLF, under the command of Misuari, to stage an uprising in protest.⁴⁵ This led the government to place Misuari under "preventive suspension," which meant that he could not exercise his authority as governor of ARMM.⁴⁶ The authority of the MNLF was also discredited by the Malaysians when they refused to aid Misuari against the Philippine government. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stated that Kuala Lumpur could no longer assist Misuari and the MNLF because of their mismanagement of ARMM.⁴⁷

The MNLF's position was further weakened in the following years. It was once again sidelined in the peace negotiation led by President Benigno Aquino III, who once again asked Malaysia to be the third-party negotiator.⁴⁸ This time, the goal of the Philippine government and the MILF was to replace ARMM, which they considered a 'failed experiment,' with another autonomous political entity.⁴⁹ The MILF stated that they wanted to achieve an agreement better than the MNLF had before, an agreement which would really address the issue of the Moro people.⁵⁰ After a few years of discussion, the MILF and the Philippine government signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), which was witnessed by the Malaysian authorities. This agreement, however, received condemnation from the MNLF. Misuari claimed that the agreement downgraded the gains of the Moro people through the MNLF-Philippine peace treaty.⁵¹ Misuari also criticized the Philippine government and the MILF, stating that "the government does not want peace in Mindanao at all because they would rather deal with the traitorous groups like the MILF"⁵² Despite criticism from the MNLF, the Philippine government drafted the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL); when ratified this would execute the establishment

of the Bangsamoro political entity and provide the primary structure of its government.⁵³ The MNLF viewed this as an act of the government showing its favor for the MILF.⁵⁴

New Representation of Malaysia in the MNLF's Discourse

The recognition of MILF as the main negotiating Moro party by the Philippine and Malaysian governments displaced the MNLF from its position. From being the recognized source of Moro identity and vanguard of the Moro cause, the MNLF was now treated by the Philippine government as “spoiler” of peace, especially with regards to the MILF-Philippine negotiation.⁵⁵ For this reason, the MNLF tried to re-establish its identity as the legitimate representative of the Moro people and delegitimize the MILF and the Philippine state. This de-legitimization was made by depicting Malaysia as un-Islamic, a colonizer, and a co-conspirator. Through this, the MNLF enacted a second-layer of exclusion, which made the de-legitimization of the MILF and the Philippine government more natural and necessary.

Malaysia as a Colonizer of the Bangsamoro Land

After the expulsion of Nur Misuari from power and the exclusion of the MNLF from the MILF-Philippine peace negotiation, the MNLF started portraying Malaysia negatively. Specifically, the MNLF reignited the Sabah issue and used it as its counter-narrative against the Malaysian government. Accordingly, Zaidi al-Amir, a spokesperson for the Bangsamoro workers in the Gulf States, stated that the marginalization of the MNLF from the peace talks “has everything to do with the Sabah issue.”⁵⁶

Following this, the MNLF disseminated a discourse on how Malaysia colonized the Moro land. In its new discourse, Sabah and Sarawak are Moro territories which were usurped by the Malaysian government. As Ustaz Murshi, secretary-general of the MNLF Central Committee stated: “The territory you call Sabah belongs to the Taosug Bangsamoros –legally, rightfully, and historically.”⁵⁷ The group further narrated that Malaysia took Sabah from the Moros through a fraudulent referendum, wherein Kuala Lumpur allegedly bribed the Moro leaders to approve the staged election. Despite Malaysia's effort, the Philippine government continued to claim Sabah as part of Philippine territory. Unable to retrieve Sabah diplomatically, the Philippine government allegedly undertook the training of Muslim men for a secret mission. The mission was not accomplished because the men mutinied after learning their real objective, which was to invade Sabah. The subsequent killing of these men incited the contemporary Moro rebellion. When Malaysia heard about the news, it took advantage of the situation and acted as if it supported the Moro fighters against the Philippine state. However, the MNLF now believes that Malaysia's assistance was part of a

Head of MNLF Nur Misuari (R), head of the Philippines Government delegation Manuel Yan (L), and Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas during formal peace talks of Mindanao, November 1995.

JOHN MACDOUGALL / AFP / Getty Images



strategy to pursue its real motive. That is, Kuala Lumpur used the Moro people to weaken Manila’s claim on Sabah.⁵⁸ As Misuari stated, “Malaysia was in a state of war with Marcos. In order to survive, they needed us to divert Marcos’ ire from Sabah, from Malaysia.”⁵⁹ Subsequently, the MNLF asserted that during the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) in 1974, the Malaysian government first undermined the Moro people’s struggle by depicting the Moro war as an internal conflict that should not lead to the liberation of the Moros. Instead, Malaysia endorsed to the OIC that “autonomy within the territorial integrity of the Philippines” was the solution to the Moro conflict. Furthermore, the MNLF claims that this undermining scheme on the part of the Malaysian government continued until the recent years by using the MILF.⁶⁰

For the MNLF, Malaysia’s alleged colonial interest in Sabah stemmed from its rich natural resources. As Misuari said, “the Moro homeland is so rich... so that is why many people want to occupy this land.”⁶¹ Accordingly, the MNLF compared Malaysia to the Philippine state. Whereas the Philippines exploit the agricultural, mineral, and aquatic riches of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan (MIN-SUPALA), Malaysia is exploiting Sabah.⁶² The MNLF explained that through oil-drilling and timber plantations on Sabah, the Malaysian government earned billions of American dollars which they used for developing their federal capital Kuala Lumpur and other areas. Meanwhile, only three percent of the profits were said to go to Sabah. In addition, the MNLF claimed that the Malaysian leaders have benefitted from these lucrative businesses. This, according to the MNLF, is the reason why they did not want to give up Sabah as their territory.⁶³ In the

words of Misuari, “Malaysia does not want to budge an inch from our sacred land, Sabah and Sarawak... because they are earning a lot of money from here.”⁶⁴

Besides occupying the Moro land, the MNLF also accused Malaysia of expelling the Moros from Sabah in order to retain the land in its possession. According to this narrative, many of these Moros were refugees from the Philippine-Moro conflict in Mindanao. In 2002, Malaysian officials designated these people as illegal migrants and they were later deported to the Philippines. It was reported that the detained illegal immigrants were given ill-treatment, which includes whipping.⁶⁵ This massive crackdown in Sabah was condemned by MNLF members who stated, “We strongly urge the United Nations General Assembly to condemn this inhuman, barbaric, and atrocious mass deportation of Bangsamoro refugees, who in the first place have historic, legal and sovereign rights to dwell in that territory.”⁶⁶ In addition, the group perceived the deportation policy of the Malaysian government under Prime Minister Mahathir as a declaration of all-out war against the Moros.⁶⁷ Consequently, the MNLF leaders converged and formulated the Koronadal proclamation, wherein they declared that they would pursue the independence of their ancestral homeland, including Sabah, from Malaysia.⁶⁸

This claim on Sabah was once again emphasized by the MNLF after another critical event in 2013. It has become known as the Lahad Datu incident, wherein Muslims from Sulu had an altercation with the Malaysian authorities. According to the MNLF’s narration of the event, the crown prince of the Sulu Sultanate and some of his followers went to Sabah for a peaceful visit. For them, it was an ordinary journey to their homeland. However, the Malaysian authorities saw it as an infiltration and accordingly, they used full force to remove the crown prince and his followers. This led to the escalation of the conflict between the supporters of the Sultan of Sulu and the Malaysian authorities.⁶⁹ When news about the conflict was presented to the public, the MNLF argued that Malaysia had no right to expel the crown prince of Sulu because Sabah is a territory of the Moro people. As Nur Misuari stated, the Sultan of Sulu and his family have the right to claim Sabah as their own. He also said that the Tausugs, as one of the representatives of the Moro people, can declare ownership of the land.⁷⁰ Misuari thus urged the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak to practice constraint and prevent the persecution of civilians who are of Moro descent. Otherwise, the MNLF would be forced to engage in the conflict.⁷¹ Similarly, the MNLF Spokesman Emmanuel Fontanilla warned that a “long protracted war” could be initiated against Malaysia if it did not stop its hostility towards the Tausugs in Sabah.⁷²



Unlike the MILF, which does not see Sabah as a priority, the MNLF projects itself as a defender of Moro land including Sabah

The MNLF's portrayal of Malaysia as a colonizer of the Moro people has important functions in reinstating the legitimacy of the MNLF. First, it assists the MNLF in undermining the role of Malaysia in the peace process, thereby ensuring that the peace process will not be successful. In other words, depicting Malaysia as a colonizer casts doubt on the genuineness and sincerity of the peace talks. It also implies that the MILF is a pawn of the Malaysian government and is being used for the latter's agenda. Consequently, the dubiousness of Malaysia and MILF's character could lead to the failure of the negotiations and eventually erode the prominence of the MILF as the main negotiator for the Moro people. In this way, the MNLF can put forward its own case to the Philippine government and be perceived as the legitimate representative of the Moro people. This narrative creates an opening for another counter-discourse against Malaysia. That is, secondly, the MNLF can also depict Malaysia as a co-conspirator of the Philippine state. As such, the MNLF could demonstrate that the peace negotiation between the MILF-Philippine state, through the mediation of Malaysia, is merely for show. This will also delegitimize the status of the MILF in the eyes of the Moro people and strengthen the MNLF's rejection of the Philippine government. Third, it helps the MNLF in relaunching its fight against the Philippine state. In other words, the continued treachery of the Philippine state gave the group new justification to renew its struggle for independence, a goal which it claims the MILF has abandoned. Finally, its discourse reconstructs its identity and boundary, implying Sabah as a Moro national homeland. Unlike the MILF, which does not see Sabah as a priority, the MNLF projects itself as a defender of Moro land including Sabah. Therefore, the depiction of Malaysia as a colonizer assisted in reconstituting the MNLF as the true representative of the Moro people.

Malaysia as a Collaborator in Philippine Colonialism

The MNLF also describes Malaysia as a partner of the Philippine state in oppressing the Moro people. According to the group, the Malaysian and the Philippine governments are perpetuating their colonization of the Moro people by undermining MNLF's authority and legitimacy. As MNLF Secretary-General Ustad Murshi Ibrahim said, "the enemy of our fight for self-determination can hatch a hundred conspiracies to liquidate the MNLF and its leadership, as it had done in the past."⁷³

In the MNLF's new narratives, the Malaysian government used the Moro fighters to prevent the Philippines from taking Sabah. However, Malaysia learned that the MNLF also did not want to surrender Sabah. Following this, the Malaysian authorities proceeded to bribe the Filipino leaders to hide the Sabah issue.⁷⁴ Zaidi al-Amir said that the Philippine government under President Arroyo and the Malaysian government led by Mahathir have conspired together to achieve their own interests, wherein Philippines President Arroyo was said to benefit from the financial support offered by the Malaysians for her election

campaign. Meanwhile, Malaysia Prime Minister Mahathir hoped to finally end the Sabah issue with the Philippine government.⁷⁵ Besides this, the MNLF claimed that President Arroyo and Prime Minister Mahathir conspired to depose Misuari from his leadership and divide the MNLF fighters. Subsequently, they created the MNLF-EC to accuse Misuari of incompetency and to act as the recognized group.⁷⁶

The MNLF's portrayal of Malaysia as collaborating with the Philippine state serves the MNLF in re-establishing itself as the authentic representative of the Moro people

The MNLF further believed that the duplicity of the two governments did not end there. According to the group, the Philippine and Malaysian governments forged another conspiracy in perpetuating their colonization by using the MILF. The MNLF asserted that Kuala Lumpur bribed the MILF with its support on the MILF's peace deal with Manila in order to mine and develop the natural gas in Mindanao.⁷⁷ As such, the MNLF accused Philippine President Aquino III and Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Najib Abdul Razak of forging the FAB to replace ARMM and create another political entity supervised by the MILF.⁷⁸

The MNLF criticized the MILF-Philippine peace negotiation, facilitated by Malaysia, for several reasons. First, the group asserted that the Philippine government is not committed to ensuring the implementation of the agreement. For the MNLF, the agreement was aimed at making the Moros believe that the Philippine and Malaysian colonizers desired their peace and sought to create an atmosphere of hope like the formulation of peace agreements as they had done in previous years.⁷⁹ The group reasoned that if the Philippine government could discard the previous agreements it had made with the MNLF, it could do the same with the MILF. Second, the MNLF claimed that the FAB agreement was a mere front for the real motives of the two colonizing states. Misuari said that the two governments are motivated by greed and selfish interests. They merely want to create instability so that the Moro people can no longer focus on taking back Sabah and Sarawak.⁸⁰ Third, the MNLF suspected that Malaysia's involvement in the peace negotiation is to make sure that the Moro people would be under the leadership of the MILF, which does not have interest in Sabah. The MNLF claimed that Malaysian officials did not want Misuari because they knew that they cannot convince him to abandon Sabah. In other words, Misuari's continued leadership would obstruct the Malaysian government from its exploitation of Sabah.⁸¹ In this way, the MNLF criticized not only Malaysia's role in the peace talks but also the MILF's. As Misuari stated, the MILF "is not literate enough to understand the hidden agenda of Malaysia and the Philippines" and thus is the pawn of the two governments.⁸²

In order to establish its identity as the representative of the Moro people within the shifting dynamics of the negotiations for power, autonomy, and territory, the MNLF depicted Malaysia as a colonizer, a co-conspirator of the Philippines, and un-Islamic state

the legitimacy of the group. Furthermore, by revealing the conspiracy among the MILF and the Philippine and Malaysian governments, the MNLF can persuade the Moros to respect its authority and mobilize them to resurrect their struggle for independence against the Philippine state.

Malaysia as Un-Islamic

The MNLF countered Malaysia's proclamation of being an Islamic state by stating that the Malaysian leaders had forgotten that they are Muslim and act merely as Malays.⁸³ The MNLF's stance was due to several events which were interpreted by the MNLF as a violation of Islamic principles. First was the land-grabbing of Sabah by the Malaysian government. According to the MNLF, Malaysia, driven by its "economic greed and megalomaniac arrogance," staged a fake referendum in order to unjustly take Sabah from the Sultan of Sulu. Although they were able to take the land, Malaysia continues to pay an annual rental fee to the family of the Sultan of Sulu, which the MNLF describes as "treating a fellow Muslim like a low mendicant begging for his moral share of ownership."⁸⁴

The second event which the MNLF described Malaysia as un-Islamic was the arrest and deportation of Misuari by the Malaysian authorities. According to the MNLF, Misuari had the right documents to enter Malaysia and that he did not go there to escape the Philippine authorities. Instead, he merely accepted the invitation of the governor of Sabah, who asked him to visit.⁸⁵ For this reason, the Bangsamoro religious leaders declared Prime Minister Mahathir as "an apostate of Islam who should be held liable for violating the Holy Qur'an and the International Islamic Declaration of Human Rights."⁸⁶ Similarly, a spokesperson for Bangsamoro workers in the Middle East stated that Mahathir is "a bad example of a Muslim leader who can never be trusted by the Islamic Ummah to do justice to the oppressed humanity." The spokesperson also de-

The MNLF's portrayal of Malaysia as collaborating with the Philippine state serves the MNLF in re-establishing itself as the authentic representative of the Moro people. That is, by exposing the Malaysian and the Philippine governments as conniving together to continue their colonization over the Moros, the MNLF can then persuade the Moro people that the peace agreement is not genuine and therefore should not be supported. Consequently, this marked the MILF as a puppet of the two governments, thereby shattering its foundation and casting doubt as to



Nur Misuari (L), founding chairman of MNLF, raising the arm of the self-proclaimed Sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram III (R) during a visit to the ailing Sultan's home in Manila, March 5, 2013.

JAY DIRECTO / AFP / Getty Images

scribed Mahathir as an immoral Muslim leader who committed injustice to the Moro people.⁸⁷

The third event was the Lahad Datu incident in 2013. According to the MNLF, the Malaysian government used excessive force in responding to the peaceful visit of the crown prince of the Sulu Sultanate. The group said that the Malaysian government not only attacked the crown prince and his followers, it also committed violence and atrocities against the innocent Moros living in Sabah.⁸⁸ The Malaysian government also ordered a food blockade to force the crown prince and his men to surrender.⁸⁹ Although the United Nations (UN) called for a ceasefire and the Sultan of Sulu complied, the Malaysian government rejected it. This rejection prompted the Sultan of Sulu to say, "I don't know why they do not want a ceasefire. It's very un-Islamic."⁹⁰ Likewise, the MNLF concurred with the comment of the Sultan. The group stated that the Malaysian government had conducted an ethnic cleansing of Moros in Sabah to show that it has the power over that territory.⁹¹ For the MNLF, the incident would not have escalated if the Malaysian authorities, who considered themselves faithful Muslims, had practiced the Islamic values in dealing with the Sabah issue. In other words, if the Malaysian government had engaged in peace talks rather than violence and threats, the issue would have diffused much faster.⁹²

Finally, the MNLF also considered the MILF-Philippine government negotiation as another example of Malaysian un-Islamic practices. As Misuari

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Malaysia, were expected to respect the earlier MNLF-Philippine agreements and not support another agreement that the Philippine government has made with another group; not to do so would be a violation of the written laws of the Qur'an.⁹³

This portrayal of Malaysia as being un-Islamic is crucial in legitimizing the authority of the MNLF over its constituents. First, it stresses the contrivance between Malaysia and the Philippines against the Moro people. That is, the MNLF depicts the Malaysians as no longer Islamic but rather acting merely as 'plain Malays.' For the MNLF, the Malaysian leaders have abandoned their duties as Muslim and conspired with the Philippine state against the Moros. That is why, like the Philippine state, Malaysia has also committed genocide and maintained colonial rule over the Moros in Sabah. Second, the MNLF discredits the role of Malaysia in the peace process and its role as Muslim brothers and sisters of the Moros. Through these arguments, the MNLF has severed its connection with Malaysia and detached from its previous status as an ally. Lastly, the MNLF nullified the MILF's characterization of being the vanguard of Islam. In the reasoning of the MNLF, if the Malaysian government has abandoned its Islamic teachings, it is possible that the MILF, being the puppet of the Malaysian government, has also done the same. As Misuari said, the MILF "must be put into prison, they are pure and simple criminals."⁹⁴ On the other hand, the MNLF presents itself as the group of "genuine and fastidious believers."⁹⁵ This is the reason why they urge the Moro people to support them instead of the MILF.

Conclusion

The shift in the discourse of the MNLF regarding Malaysia is part of the MNLF's foreign policy practice. This practice of foreign policy by a dissident

pointed out, the peace agreements signed by the MNLF and the Philippine state under the mediation of the OIC are still active. Thus, they should have been respected by the Philippine government and other actors. That is why the agreement formulated by the Philippine government with the help of Malaysia is equal to a disregard of the previous agreements between the MNLF and the Philippines. Subsequently, Misuari appealed that it is the duty of the Islamic Ummah to uphold and commit to what it says. That is, the OIC members, including

movement is the same as the legitimization of its authority over its purported subjects. This entails constructing a Moro identity and differentiating it from that of the Filipinos. This construction and differentiation is made possible through the dissident group's analysis and the inclusion of foreign actors, particularly Malaysia. The inscription of Malaysia assisted in institutionalizing the MNLF's perception of Moro identity and normalizing its resistance against the Philippine state. For instance, in the 1970s, the MNLF described the Malaysians as the brothers and sisters of the Moro people. This familial tie served as its anchor in justifying that the Moros are primarily a Muslim nation, and the genocide campaign committed by the Philippine authorities made them reject the Philippines as their state. Moreover, the MNLF's positive description of Malaysia helped the group attach itself to the larger Islamic world, which subsequently provided it with international legitimacy.

From the 1970s until 2000, the MNLF emerged as the main actor in the Moro resistance against the Philippine state. Nevertheless, the MNLF's legitimacy was challenged starting in 2001 through the instigation of the Philippine state. That is, the MILF, another Moro secessionist group, became the recognized negotiating party on behalf of the Moro by the Manila government. In light of this development, the MNLF had to reconstitute itself as the authentic Moro representative and exclude the MILF from its domain. In this case, Malaysia is also being used to re-establish the MNLF's identity and power. Through these discourses, and in order to establish its identity as the representative of the Moro people within the shifting dynamics of the negotiations for power, autonomy, and territory, the MNLF depicted Malaysia as a colonizer, a co-conspirator of the Philippines, and un-Islamic state. In this way, the MNLF targets and seeks to dismantle the position of the MILF as the recognized representative of the Moro people. In other words, if Malaysia is a colonizer and a co-conspirator of the Philippine state, then the MILF is a mere puppet of the two governments. Moreover, the peace negotiation between the MILF and the Philippine government does not meet the desire and needs of the Moro people, but rather, serves the purposes of Malaysia, the Philippines, and the MILF. Finally, if Malaysia is un-Islamic, then, the MNLF also implies that the MILF could also be the same. This means that MILF does not truly protect the Islamic identity of the Moro people. Consequently, this provides an opening for the MNLF to constitute themselves as the only legitimate representative of the Moro people.

This study has shown that dissident groups are not only resistant movements, but they are also entities capable of constructing their own alternative realities. This means that they can construct their identity, delineate their own closed communities, and legitimize their own authorities over their subjects. Moreover, dissident groups are also capable of practicing foreign policy as a strategy to maintain their existence and counter other alternative powers which try to suppress them. ■

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