



YOUNG MORO LEADERS *Forum*

Special Report June 11, 2007

This report features the summary of highlights of a series of seven forums of Young Moro Leaders (YML), conducted in Davao, Manila, Marawi City, Zamboanga City, Cagayan de Oro, Bongao (Tawi-tawi) and Jolo (Sulu) from January 2006 to June 2007.

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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We must become the change we want to see.
— Mahatma Gandhi

The Bangsamoro Future: *Prospects and Challenges*

Overview

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), with the support of the United States government, the Philippine government (GRP), and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) launched its Philippine Facilitation Project (PFP) in June 2003. The project's mandate was to help expedite the peace process in Mindanao between the GRP and MILF. In the spirit of advancing the peace process, the Institute facilitated a series of forums among young Moro leaders (YML), aged twenty to forty. Seven forums occurred from January 2006 to June 2007. The forums had three goals: 1) to enhance dialogue and the candid exchange of views among YML on critical issues that will influence the chances for peace and prosperity in the Bangsamoro future; 2) to strengthen the operational network of YML so that they could more effectively help promote the welfare of the Bangsamoro; and 3) to solicit ideas for future collaborative activities between YML and other groups and organizations.

More than 150 YML participated in the USIP-sponsored forums. They were chosen primarily by their peers and through the Young Moro Professionals Network (YMPN). They represented different professions, political orientations, and ethno-linguistic backgrounds. Participants at the YML forums spoke with great candor, passion, and intelligence. Their energy, sincerity, and openness to ideas were evident. Truly, they embodied the best of the Moro new generation. GRP, MILF and other leaders in the Philippines need to hear the voices of the YML and integrate their best insights into building a brighter future for the Moro people and the Philippines as a whole.

What follows is a summary of highlights of the YML forums. A brief report cannot do justice to the nuances of numerous and lengthy discussions, but this publication hopes at least to convey the most salient points. The guiding principle of YML discussions was expressed by nineteenth-century Muslim intellectual and Aligarh Muslim University founder, Sayyid Ahmad Khan: “Truth does not possess any miraculous powers by which it may take possession of the mind by itself. It is only miraculous to the extent that it possesses *no fear of discussion.*” [Italics added.]

The Bangsamoro: Making and Defining A Nation

What are the ideas, experiences, and aspirations that unite the Bangsamoro nation? What is the locus of Moro identity? Do all Moros share the same identity? At the YML forums, defining the Moro nation was very much a process rather than a conclusive outcome. In fact, YML did not articulate a single exclusive and comprehensive definition of Moro identity. On one hand, commonalities among Moros were easily identified. Foremost, they share a common religion. Islam is a strong bond that supersedes differences, and a few YML even noted that they preferred to be known as Muslims rather than Moros. Islam came to Mindanao as early as the fourteenth century and the Moro identity is inextricably tied to Islam. In addition to religion, Moros share the common narrative of oppression and struggle against outside rulers. Historically, imperial Spain and the United States invaded Moro lands and inflicted great violence and injustice against Moro groups—up to the point where the structures, power, and culture of the old Moro sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu were destroyed. When the Philippines gained its independence, historical evidence shows Moro uneasiness about their impending incorporation into a majority Christian entity that did not understand or appreciate their culture. The Moro struggle for self-determination and independence over the last three decades has become a defining feature for many YML of what Moro nationhood is about. The idea that the Moros are an oppressed minority in the Philippines resonates with practically all YML. They identify with the Moro struggle and aspire to a more dignified existence than what currently holds for most Moros in the Philippines.

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Many factors unite the Moro nation. Yet, YML also highlighted differences that divide Moros and sometimes cloud the claim of a unified nation. One is ethno-linguistic divergence. The three main Moro ethnic groups—Tausugs, Maguindanaos, and Maranaos—do not always feel that they are the same people. Inter-marriage between Tausugs and Maranaos is rare. Non-Maranaos who visit the mosque in Greenhills in Manila may feel alienated by prayers in a language they do not understand. Each ethnic group may feel superior to other Moro ethnic groups. Another factor for disunity is political rivalry and competition over political positions and perks. Although outsiders historically and presently may be blamed for “dividing and conquering” the Moros, it is also a fact that too many leaders allow themselves to be divided and conquered—in the words of one participant, “too many Moro leaders are willing players in . . . the game.” Political and other rivalries tend to spill into violent conflict, and many YML are concerned about intra-Moro violence. Other YML noted the existence of hierarchies that divide common Moros from elite clans, and intra-Moro prejudices that lead to the persecution and poor treatment of smaller groups such as the Badjaos. A divide may also exist at times between Moros born and raised in Manila, and those who have grown up “locally” in Moro enclaves in Mindanao. Credibility may be thin between these groups, with those from Mindanao occasionally skeptical of the extent Manila-raised Moros really understand the Moro national struggle. At the same time, YML acknowledged that there is a role for all to play. The

strengths of those in Manila—e.g., access to media and credibility with elite and international opinion-makers and policy-makers—are assets to the Moro nation. It is also important to assess who is really serving Moro interests on the ground. Those who truly serve the people and strive for excellence in their respective fields are Moros with a reason to greet each day with energy, knowing they have a purpose in life larger than their individual selves.

“Do we really want a nation of our own?” When this question was posed to YML, the majority’s response was affirmative. However, forum participants also issued caveats. To have a nation, a group must have territory, an ideological foundation (which, for Moros, would mean true understanding of, and loyalty to, Islam) and political control. The Moros still have some distance to go to gain these attributes of nationhood. It is important to strengthen a positive agenda for the Moro nation—to define what it is *for*, rather than simply what it is *against*. Unity of the Bangsamoro during war is intense but short-lived. Moros need to have a greater sense of shared goals and must be more rooted in common ideals and aspirations. Some YML warned against over-emphasizing victimization, revolution, and struggle as pillars of Moro identity. Several participants and resource persons asserted that Moros need to focus instead on increasing Moro wealth, education, and other resources so that the core of Moro nationhood may be strengthened. Moros must examine their ethics at the personal, organizational, and community levels. Their faith and religious life must be strengthened. Years of Moro governance have not improved the quality of life of most Moros. If Moros were stronger in their communities and if they had hundreds of successful businesspeople and managers, they may be able simply to declare independence without having to ask anyone’s permission. Their freedom, based on strength and well-being, will be real and cannot be taken away.

One participant from a Moro-Christian family claimed that he was a Moro despite his Christian religion. A few, especially younger participants, spoke of their lack of awareness of being Moro and not knowing anything about the MNLF and MILF struggle even though their parents were part of this history. One learned only through his high school history class that he was not “Filipino.” Others suggested that a broader Filipino identity was possible—after all, Moros, as an oppressed people, should identify with the poverty and marginalization of millions of Filipinos. Moreover, if outsiders were to invade the Philippines, Moros are likely to fight in defense of the Philippines. As for the *lumad* (non-Islamic indigenous groups in Mindanao), many YML felt confident that they could live peacefully together. After all, Moros share a common parentage with such groups as the Subanen, Manobo, Teduray, and other tribes. In fact, Moros lived with *lumad* and Christians in relative peace before the conflagration in Mindanao started in the 1970’s.

The Peace Process: Waging the Moro Struggle at the Negotiating Table

Most YML were aware of ongoing GRP-MILF peace talks, but many did not know the details of the negotiations. Many expressed deep skepticism regarding the sincerity of the GRP and its ability to deliver an effective, durable solution to legitimate Moro grievances. Tausugs, in particular, seemed cynical of the peace process. Although willing to hear the details of proposals that have been tabled, they question whether the peace process will truly make a difference. In their view, Moro leaders of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), primarily Tausug, already signed the 1996 Final Peace Agreement with the GRP. And yet most Moros continue to live a dismal existence, occupying the lowest rungs of the country’s socio-economic ladder. The 1996 Final Peace Agreement and its predecessor,

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the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, have not made a big difference in improving Moro lives. Why should Moros believe, then, that a new GRP-MILF peace agreement will succeed where previous agreements have not? A GRP resource person encouraged YML to think of the GRP as undergoing its own process of gradual education and change in “levels of consciousness.” For example, in the past, the GRP would not use the term “Bangsamoro” or consider “self-determination” for the Moros. Today, both issues do not pose a problem for the GRP and its negotiators. The GRP’s challenge is how to maintain a balancing act on matters that involve the interests of many parties, while simultaneously being innovative and fair in responding to Moro grievances.

Yet, setting aside what might be warranted skepticism and cynicism about the peace process, most YML supported the MILF as representing the voice of most Moros. They also saw the MILF as a protective force against potential abuses of the military. Although MILF leadership is comprised mainly of Maguindanaos and Maranaos, their articulation of the Moro struggle for equity and justice resonates with all Moros. YML also passionately expressed their respect for Moros who have died in more than three decades of conflict with the GRP. To them, these martyrs or *mujahedin* should not have died in vain. But it is often difficult to show the fruits of the sacrifices made by those who have given their lives in the name of Moro interests. What has been done to lift the Moro nation? What gains have accrued to common Moros from past and current peace processes? These questions have yet to be answered fully.

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At several forums, YML expressed their concern about the exclusivity of the GRP-MILF peace talks and the scarcity of information on matters being negotiated such as “ancestral domain” or the implementation of *shariah* in a future Bangsamoro homeland. They feel that not all stakeholders in the peace process have been consulted or are given a voice by the MILF. They also acknowledge uncertainty regarding the goal of negotiations. Should the Moros seek real autonomy within the Philippines, a small independent Bangsamoro state, or an independent Mindanao populated by Moros, Christians and *lumad*? Many welcome the new GRP proposal of self-determination for the Moros but are anxious to hear how self-determination will be defined and implemented, particularly in a country where powerful forces have repeatedly shown their hostility towards accommodating Moro interests and addressing Moro grievances. Some were also aware of potential constitutional hurdles that must be overcome to make Moro self-determination real. If the peace process yields an agreement that gives Moros the chance to write their own charter, YML noted that this must be an inclusive process. All Moro views must be taken into account in framing a unified Moro vision of governance. Other concerns about the peace process include fractious rivalry and outright conflict between the MILF and traditional Moro political leaders. The latter may be afraid of losing power when the MILF gets a peace agreement. Who will rule the future Bangsamoro homeland? What will economic and political structures look like? Will the MILF pursue an exclusive or inclusive approach towards power and governance? How would the MILF integrate the MNLF and the 1996 peace agreement into any new arrangements with the GRP? How will new arrangements protect the interest of *lumad*, some of whom have overlapping ancestral domain claims with the Moros? The *lumad* also dream of self-determination, but have been pushed deep into the boondocks and have nowhere left to flee. Most are unarmed and peace-loving, and seek common ground and ways to share common land with their Moro brothers.

YML who were indifferent to the peace process argued that other positive agendas could be pursued outside the context of negotiations with the government in Manila. For example, Moros could work to enhance Moro welfare by engaging in constructive action in

depressed Moro communities. Moro professionals, including doctors, teachers, accountants, and others should find time to volunteer their services to their underserved brothers and sisters. More Moros need to work on protecting natural resources in Moro areas and managing their sustainability (e.g., the pristine marine resources of Tawi-Tawi). If Moros could protect their resources, they could prove that they are trustworthy enough to govern themselves.

In Sulu, YML noted that the peace process may be irrelevant because, even as the GRP is talking peace, its weapons are firing in Sulu. Many Tausugs are on the frontline of a war. Instead of focusing on development and “going global,” they are “going to the jungle” and feel that they have no choice. Some inferred that the peace process could be manipulative, a means used to divert attention from the failure to implement fully the 1996 GRP-MNLF peace agreement. However, if the GRP’s offer is real, particularly in giving Moros control over their political structure, territory, and economic resources, then Moros must take the offer. The guiding principle is to preserve the dignity of the Bangsamoro homeland. Finally, for peace to work, the GRP must be willing to include all armed groups in talks. Those who are excluded will likely continue to be motivated to fight.

Leadership: Facing Challenges within the Moro Community

Moro leadership proved to be a contentious subject. Many YML expressed dismay and disappointment at the quality of Moro leaders, particularly those who pursue their own personal interests and personal enrichment at the expense of common Moros. One participant noted that his own close relatives had been mayors and governors, but they were unprogressive in advancing Moro welfare. YML also noted that it is not easy to criticize those in power. Especially for the young, it is best to be discrete and refrain from overt criticism of senior leaders. A general sentiment was that Moro leaders themselves have failed to deliver better lives to their people. They were easily coopted by national government and many have failed to execute their responsibility.

What are the causes of poor leadership? YML debated this question, with one camp unequivocally convinced that the problem was with the structure or system, not the individuals. A common refrain, for example, was that the ARMM or Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was “designed to fail.” A structure that involves monthly disbursements of IRA (Internal Revenue Allotment) to local leaders guarantees and intensifies corruption. Although less than 1% of the national budget goes to the ARMM, it has a huge impact on patronage, cooptation, and corruption. The central government itself is to blame and no improvement can be expected unless the political system is changed. Another camp, however, argued that the problem was with individual leaders themselves. Many leaders do not listen to the people and play along with the central government. One participant said, “We are being corrupted but we can also choose *not* to be corrupted.” Others noted that the ARMM does not collect sufficient taxes to cover its budget. The budget is primarily a subsidy from Manila and where it goes is not always transparent. Leaders willingly play the role of mendicants. They cannot break the cycle of dependence. Cases have appeared of misusing and abusing funds, delaying salaries, and failing to remit teachers’ premiums to the GSIS. These indicate that there are problems with individual decision-makers, not just the system or structure. If Moro leaders were serious about independence and self-determination, they should stop the flow of IRA and prove that they can “get their act together” and survive on Moro resources alone.

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How can the quality of Moro leadership be improved? A number of YML asserted that Islam and independence are the only effective answers to corrupt, violent, and irresponsible leadership. Independence represents hope and change, while the current situation represents stagnation and hopelessness. An ideal seemed to prevail among a number of YML, who saw independence and stricter adherence to Islam as final solutions to problems of leadership. While none fully articulated how independence and Islam would operationally lead to responsible, transparent and good leadership, nonetheless the sentiment prevailed that these were the answers to Moro leadership dilemmas. A resource person representing Moro business urged the YML to think more concretely about education, teamwork, hard work, and “working with the culture” as key elements of good Moro leadership. He may be from Maguindanao, but when he goes to Lanao del Sur, he is a Maranao. What the Moros need is leaders who can spur an economic and educational “revolution” to equip Moros with the means to compete globally. Leaders must seek inspiration from Allah. When they have genuine success to show, even extremists will come to them for help or at least emulate their example.

What role do the traditional sultanates have in the Moro future? YML offered mixed opinions on the relevance and usefulness of traditional Moro leadership. Maranaos felt most strongly that their sultans still serve their communities and should be retained. Others questioned what entrenched clans and leaders have to show for all their years in power. Some voices noted that the problem is not in the institution of the sultanate itself, but in the quality of individuals occupying the positions. The sultan traditionally is the vanguard of the faith, the head of state, provider of the people, and mediator of disputes. Those of noble blood must follow a noble course, which means not being “more royal” or “holier” than others, but being just, honest, sincere and merciful. One of the effects of the Moro struggle has been to plant the seeds of meritocracy in contrast to traditional *datuism* or nobility and position determined by birth. In the MNLF and MILF, some Moros rose to the top despite their humble birth. Their own proven abilities made them leaders and commanders.

Some participants highlighted the Qur’an’s injunctions on leadership. The best leaders have to be strong, competent, and trustworthy. They must be knowledgeable and action-oriented. Their hearts must be totally sincere. They must be patient. They must be defenders of Islam and spread its message as Muhammad did. They must also be advocates of human rights, especially Bangsamoro rights. They must have a vision, fight graft and corruption, be accountable to the people and the *ummah* or global Muslim community, lead by example, and build ideal Muslim communities. Few leaders, Moro or non-Moro, could meet all these standards, but the sad fact is that many Moro leaders do not show a clear striving to live by these high ideals.

When queried as to which Moro leaders they admired most, YML answers included MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, the late MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim, businessman Datu Ibrahim “Toto” Paglas, NGO leaders, the *mujahedin*, parents and grandparents, and some mayors and members of congress. A mayor participating in one of the forums emphasized the need for leaders to be doers. In his own community, he partnered with local *ulama* as well as Christian organizations to build homes and repair the ravages of conflict. He noted that Moro leaders must do all in their power to help their communities. They must not be leaders for themselves only, but for the masses. They must build “farm-to-market” roads, not run “farm-to-pocket” operations. A resource person

representing Moro business urged YML to remember the primacy of the work ethic. He identified key Moro problems as ignorance and lack of education. In his view, as far as innate capabilities were concerned, Moros are as good as anybody else. Whatever big names in Philippine business can do, the Moros can also do. A civil society leader urged YML to think of leadership not only in the political and religious senses. Moros need vibrant social action centers that will work for adequate delivery of services, transparency and accountability, and better governance. This means that YML must think about nurturing their leadership skills in civil society because, as the holy Qur'an instructs, Allah (swt) will not change the condition of the people unless the people changed their condition themselves. Several participants underlined the need to open the doors wider for women to be leaders. Moros must do better in defending individual rights, especially women's rights. Some questioned whether the subject of women's rights was merely an advocacy of western standards, but others noted that assumptions of female inferiority, especially in local communities, will only stunt Moro development further.

In discussing the failures of Moro leadership, a senior resource person and former revolutionary underlined that the "struggle failed because Moros themselves made it fail." No one is immune to greed and the attraction of perks and power dangled by the GRP. The former generation might be "hopeless," but they have paved the way for the YML. It is now the YML's duty to cleanse and purify themselves and to espouse and oversee changes in their communities. One participant said that "sovereignty is a work-in-progress"; because it does not happen overnight, YML must patiently strive for improvement, however incrementally it comes. In Jolo, some argued that even the failures of the past mean progress, too. Lessons have been learned and the Moro struggle has remained alive despite numerous setbacks.

Religion: Living the Values of Islam

In all the forums, Islam and its role in the Bangsamoro future was a key topic. YML generally agreed that Islam is a pillar of the Moro nation and a critical foundation of the future. But who interprets Islam for the Moros? Should Moros be concerned about allowing extremists and fundamentalists to interpret their religion for them? The state of Islamic education in Muslim Mindanao is uneven, and what is taught on the ground often depends on where respective *ulama* were educated. Islam is a complete system or a complete way of life, yet most do not understand or agree on Islamic law or Islamic injunctions regarding democracy, secularism, women's rights, and human rights. A resource person reminded YML that *shariah* is divine, but human interpretation is not. Islamic reformist thought has been done by Muslim intellectuals around the world and a serious challenge is how to interpret Islam for problems of the present, not problems of many centuries ago. Moros must remember their own distinct personality and culture, and know that Islam is not the exclusive property of Arabs or Persians. Matters of *jihad* and *ijtihad* (independent interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah) must be pondered as Moros determine for themselves how their religion might best be reflected in their lives and system of governance. They must not be "drifters or swimmers against the tide, but must act as intelligent individuals, imbued with a sense of direction and united in a consensus about self-empowerment and seeking their own destiny." Muslims have the duty to be examples to humanity and their religion reminds them that life is short so it must be lived well and honestly. Muslims must pray five times a day and render strict accountability to God for their actions.

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In discussions of religion, a number of YML expressed concern about what a future

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Islamic Moro state or homeland might look like. A few mentioned Iran or Malaysia as potential templates, but others asserted that Moros must build their own model. A Moro homeland ruled by Islam should include rights for minorities, protection of non-Muslims, women’s rights, the rule of law, participation by youth and a potential religious advisory council who will offer advice to the Bangsamoro chief executive. The issue of enforcement of Islamic law is critical. Islam gives good guidelines, but will those enforcing Islamic law have sufficient judgment, fairness, honesty and integrity? Lessons can be learned from the Philippine system, where well-written laws are often poorly implemented. Can liberal Muslims live well in an Islamic state? Will dissent be protected? Will artists be able freely to practice their craft? Does *jihad* or struggle have to be limited only to Muslim or Moro issues, or should Muslims also fight for the larger humanity? Will the definition of a good Muslim depend entirely on such outward and easily measurable criteria as wearing of the veil? A participant representing the *lumad* urged his Moro brothers and sisters to engage in consultation with non-Moro tribes, some of whom are concerned about their welfare within a Bangsamoro homeland ruled by Islamic law. How much freedom will *lumad* have under such a system of governance? Most YML agreed that there should be no compulsion regarding Islam. One participant in Jolo offered perhaps an optimal way to put matters to rest. In his view, the essence of an “Islamic state” is its fruits, not the label itself. If a future Moro homeland could produce greater freedom, prosperity, peace, justice, and dignity for *all* the people living within its boundaries, that would be *Islamic* enough even without the label of an “Islamic state.”

In several forums, YML engaged in heated discussion about the role of war in the Moro struggle. Some argued that war is the only way to defend Moro interests and assure future peace. The Moro struggle is just because Moros, as a minority, have been deprived of their lands and have been oppressed in many ways. Others, however, questioned the idea of war. A just war, in their view, would be warranted if Moros are prevented from practicing their religion. But this is not the case in the Philippines, where Moros can wear the veil, pray five times a day, and practice other tenets of Islam. If there were a massive war, it would violate the Qur’an’s injunctions against the killing of children and women, and the destruction of the environment. Some further argued that it is easy to start a war, but always difficult to keep the peace. Can a middle way be found? For example, if the current GRP offer of self-determination were genuine, including a Moro referendum in twenty years or so on the final political status of the Moro homeland, then war may not be the only answer. A caveat to this is concern that in twenty years, Moro passion and commitment to the Moro cause might dissipate and, therefore, waiting such a long time has its own perils.

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Can Islam be lived more faithfully in daily life and mundane affairs? A resource person encouraged YML to remember practical advice from the holy Qur’an. Do Moros value time, respect it, and use it wisely? Do Moros espouse cleanliness? Visitors and potential investors have been discouraged from investing in Moro areas because of the problem of basic sanitation. Do Moros subscribe to “holier-than-thou” attitudes? Do they pray with sincerity five times a day so that they may not yield to anger, violence, quick-temperedness and illegal activities? These are tall orders for anyone to live, Moro or non-Moro, yet the challenge is real. The cultivation of real Islam in daily life and in individual hearts could be the true beginning of Moro nationhood. What happens at the local level may be more important than what happens outside. Moros can be law-abiding and at their best behavior in Manila, Zamboanga or other non-Moro areas; the challenge is to practice the same behavior locally. One participant who was a rare voice that did not favor independence for Moros said she would prefer to reclaim all Moro lands through the light of Islam. If Moros can make Islam an admired, shining religion;

remove fatalism and despair from it; use it as an instrument for building community instead of harsh judgment, then genuine triumph for Moros is possible.

The Outside World: Finding Friends and Allies

YML discussions of the Bangsamoro future tackled the role that outsiders might play, for good or ill. Many highlighted the historical role of the United States, whose decisions as a colonial power in Mindanao are at the root of present Moro predicaments. Specifically, Americans failed to heed Moro petitions not to lump them into a Christian-majority independent Philippines. They also inflicted great violence in their conquest of Moro lands, including such painful incidents as the massacre of hundreds of Tausug men, women, and children in Bud Dajo in 1906. Americans also started the policy of Christian resettlement of Moro territories, which culminated in Moro marginalization on territories they had dominated for centuries. What role remains now for the United States? Many YML would like to see American power engage more actively in resolving persistent Moro grievances. They would like U.S. policy-makers to view the Moro experience in its totality, and not from the narrow prism of counter-terrorism. In their view, even if Americans may be less cognizant than they should be of their historical role, nonetheless they possess now the power to increase the probability that the GRP will treat Moros fairly in current peace negotiations and in the creation of a homeland with new governance arrangements for the Moros. Some fear that American emphasis on military means, especially in counter-terrorism, might lead them to miss real opportunities for long-term peacemaking and security enhancement in Mindanao. A consensus among YML was that the United States had to be involved in Mindanao, especially in the implementation phase of any new agreement, because it wields the leverage needed to help ensure that all sides live up to their commitments.

In addition to the United States, YML welcomed the role of other institutions and powers, including Malaysia, Libya, Japan, the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference), and the United Nations. Many wondered why the United Nations has not taken on the Moro cause in the same way that it championed the East Timor cause. Clear differences exist between the Moro and East Timorese cases, but YML do advocate committed and sustained involvement by the international community in building the Bangsamoro future.

YML expressed uncertainty about the intentions of outside actors who are involved in Mindanao. For example, is Malaysia's facilitation of the peace process simply a means of protecting Malaysian interests in retaining Sabah? How much can Moros realistically expect from the OIC? Past experience also shows that outsiders sometimes take advantage of Moro problems. For example, after the signing of the 1996 peace agreement, many outside "experts" came to Mindanao. They reaped substantial consultancy and other fees, while Moros on the ground saw only a small amount of outside assistance trickle down to their communities. As far as outside allies and models, a handful of YML noted that the Taliban of Afghanistan, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iran could all be models for the Moros. A lively debate ensued regarding the methods of these regimes and whether or not such methods were in the interest of the Moro people. YML who objected to these models argued that Moros must blaze their own trail and determine for themselves how to live Islam and implement *shariah*. Moros must be pragmatic and look carefully at what works. They can have different allies in industry, business, politics, and religion. Malaysia could be a good model of a majority-

“Many highlighted the historical role of the United States, whose decisions as a colonial power in Mindanao are at the root of present Moro predicaments. Specifically, Americans failed to heed Moro petitions not to lump them into a Christian-majority independent Philippines.”

“Past experience also shows that outsiders sometimes take advantage of Moro problems. For example, after the signing of the 1996 peace agreement, many outside “experts” came to Mindanao.”

Muslim country that is also democratic and progressive economically. One resource person reminded the YML that Moros must treat outsiders better. For example, why are there not more foreign business people in Marawi? “Because we kidnap them!” One YML participant urged his cohorts to end the cycle of violence and not live in the past because there is no future in it. The Moros’ best allies are not outsiders, but themselves! Can Moros create a non-bloody history? Can they reach out to their enemies? Can they safeguard their communities from criminals and terrorists? Can they build their own nation and be an example to the outside world?

Conclusion

Perhaps the YML series raised more questions than it answered. But the value of this set of dialogues was precisely in the fact that it provided YML the opportunity to tease out and debate the ideas and values that should guide them as they participate in building the Moro future. In all the forums, the talking was done mostly by participants themselves. Lectures were kept short and few. Often, over days of discussion, participants were exhausted, but none ever felt that their insights and ideas were repressed. This forum series proved that there is no shortage of passion and ideas among young Moros. They represent a diverse array of experience. Their candid and energetic exchanges bode well for the ability of the Bangsamoro to hammer out a common vision, resolve differences, and build sufficient group cohesion. The YML have faith, inspiration, intelligence, and ideals. These are precisely some of the critical elements needed to build a peaceful and dignified Moro future.

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The dialogue begun by YML in this series needs to continue and expand. The United States Institute of Peace hopes that, by providing the initial spark, the flame of conversation and community among young Moro Leaders will grow. With or without external support, YML alumni need to continue strengthening their forums for debating and honing ideas. They also need to continue building networks through which intra-Moro cooperation can be facilitated. Further, they need to reach out to Christian and *lumad* counterparts. The shortcoming of this series is that limitations of time and resources led to extremely limited participation by Christian or *lumad* voices. In fact, only in informal discussions in Bongao, Tawi-tawi and Jolo, Sulu were Christians represented, and *lumad* only in one forum in Cagayan de Oro.

“Today, while relative peace prevails, all sides must seize the opportunity for clear thinking, honest dialogue, and competent policy-making with regards to the Moro people and their aspirations for a better life.”

Long-term peace and development in the Philippines have proven elusive for the Moros. Violent conflict over several decades has offered no lasting resolution of Moro grievances. Military means have repeatedly fallen short in resolving tension between Moros and the GRP. Some young Moro leaders are getting impatient with the status quo, but do not yet clearly see any end in sight. Today, while relative peace prevails, all sides must seize the opportunity for clear thinking, honest dialogue, and competent policy-making with regards to the Moro people and their aspirations for a better life.