This case study explores the over 40-year conflict between Muslim separatists and the government of the Christian-majority Philippines on the country’s southern island of Mindanao, placing particular focus on the peacebuilding efforts of domestic and international faith-inspired groups. The core text of the case study addresses five primary questions: What are the historical origins of the conflict in Mindanao? How did domestic forces drive the conflict and efforts toward its resolution? How important were international religious and political forces? What role did socioeconomic factors play? What are the broader lessons of the Mindanao case? This case study also includes a timeline of key events, a guide to religious and nongovernmental organizations involved with peacebuilding in Mindanao, and a list of readings for further study.

About this Case Study

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The Philippines, the only Christian-majority nation in Southeast Asia, has experienced ethnoreligious conflict for decades in Mindanao. The island, the Philippines’ second largest, is home to three major groups: Muslims, Christians, and Lumads. Since 1969, fighting between Muslim separatists and the government has killed approximately 160,000 people and displaced two million more. After a decade-long peace process collapsed in 2008, fighting once again resumed between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government. This case study explores religiously inspired peace efforts, particularly by Catholic peace-builders engaging the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) as well as interfaith forums, demonstrating that faith-inspired peacebuilding can promote positive relationships across ethnic and religious divides due to the credibility of some religious leaders and institutions, their moral warrants to oppose injustice, their willingness to persevere over long periods of time, and other factors.
The Philippines is composed of 7,100 islands and islets. Of these, Mindanao makes up one-third of the landmass of the Philippines, and its 21 million residents represent a quarter of the Filipino population. At the southern end of the Philippines, Mindanao is close to Indonesia—the most populous Muslim nation in the world—and some distance from the national capital in Manila.

With Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, colonial rule influenced the ethnic and religious composition of the Philippines, in part by introducing Catholicism. (Islam had previously been introduced in some regions by Muslim traders.) Colonial policies, including land titles and patronage, created deep-seated prejudices among the different ethnolinguistic groups, particularly those who resisted conversion to Catholicism.

In 1565, Spaniards created the term Moro (Moor) to describe the Muslim population of the southern Philippines, in part by introducing Catholicism. This region was never fully controlled by Manila or integrated into the larger country. As a result, economic and political integration of Mindanao was slow and unsuccessful both during the centuries of Spanish rule and later during US rule after the Spanish-American War. After the Philippines achieved independence in 1946, the Muslim population became progressively more marginalized by the central government. Settlement of Mindanao by northern Christians, supported by what many southerners viewed as unjust property laws, contributed to the political alienation of the Moros.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Salamat Hashim led the secessionist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). This organization sought to unite the South’s disparate Muslim tribes and forge a new identity separate from the Philippine government. Full-scale civil war broke out when President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law following increased violence by the MNLF in 1972. At the time, Manila strategically divided Mindanao into three regions for the purpose of governance and security: Western, Northern, and Southern Mindanao. Over the ensuing decades, over 160,000 fatalities and untold destruction characterized the Mindanao conflict. Only in 1996 did the Philippine government and the MNLF negotiate a substantive agreement. The agreement recognized an Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, granting self-governance, but not independence, to some Moro areas. This did not prove to be an enduring settlement, however, as much of the promised aid failed to materialize, corruption and violence persisted on both sides, and the treaty was never fully implemented.

The accord and its aftermath furthered divisions within the MNLF between moderates and hardliners. The more radical Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) formally split from the MNLF in 1977, claiming that it wanted “an Islamic political system and way of life.” They put greater emphasis on autonomy and on Islamic governance, and placed the struggle against the central government under the banner of jihad.

In 1997, the government brokered a ceasefire with the MILF. However, by 1999, a new government in Manila, led by former film star Joseph Estrada, opposed further concessions to the MILF. In fact, President Estrada launched an all-out war against the group in 2000. Another splinter group from the MNLF called Abu Sayyaf, led by Muslim scholar Abdurajak Janjalani, emerged at about the same time with the goal of complete independence and establishment of an Islamic state in Mindanao.
Among the tactics of this extreme, Al-Qaeda-affiliated group were kidnappings and bombings.⁹

A return to fighting displaced more than 900,000 civilians.¹⁰ Following protests against government corruption, Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed the presidency in 2001. Over time, she began to implement a new policy of negotiations in Mindanao, although finding common ground proved complex and difficult.

Arroyo’s successor, President Benigno Aquino III (elected 2010), has continued efforts to forge peace in Mindanao. Over the last decade, efforts have been further complicated by the emergence of even more radical Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups like Abu Sayyaf. Simultaneously, however, religious actors have increasingly partnered with the government and the military in peacebuilding efforts, with some notable successes. Those successes have not led to outright peace in Mindanao, but interfaith efforts like the Bishops-Ulama Conference—an interfaith council of Christian and Muslims leaders—and active peacebuilding by the military and groups like the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute have fostered new relationships, dampened tensions, and improved security in some areas.

Mindanao
**Domestic Religious Factors**

The success of religious actors in contributing to peace is due both to their social legitimacy and to widespread skepticism of the goodwill and competency of the country’s primary peace brokers—the government and the military. Two of the principle domestic efforts at peacebuilding in Mindanao are discussed below: the partnership of the armed forces with the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute and subsequent changes to the military’s approach in the region; and the work of the Bishops-Ulama Conference.

**Peacebuilding and the Military**

Many residents of the Mindanao region have historically been suspicious of the AFP’s efforts to bring stability to Mindanao due to religious and cultural differences as well as past human rights abuses. Such anger was intensified by a 2007 UN report that found the AFP responsible for the systematic killing of leftist activists and journalists over the past decade. Since 2005, some military leaders have taken steps to improve relationships with the Muslim population. Some leaders of the AFP have abandoned traditional military doctrine by focusing more on winning hearts and minds. Raymundo Ferrer, chief of Eastern Mindanao Command, has been instrumental in engaging the military in the peace process and inspiring other military officers to use a new approach. He has encouraged military officers to participate in classes and discussions at the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, setting a precedent for the military to get more actively involved with civil society organizations.

Such participation has helped humanize military officers in the eyes of other actors participating in the discussions, contributing to more friendly relationships between the military and local populations. Realizing that the military can greatly benefit from such discussions, General Ferrer ordered other military officers to receive peacebuilding training. To date, almost 40 officers have completed the workshops, listening to local concerns, learning conflict resolution techniques, and trying to clarify roles and issues paving the way for mutual understanding. These efforts have been led, in part, by conflict resolution experts supported by the global NGO Catholic Relief Services (CRS) through the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, and are therefore informed by Catholic social teaching.

CRS has been working on development in Mindanao for more than two decades, but added a focus on peacebuilding and reconciliation to support the 1996 peace agreement between the government and the MNLF. Since then, efforts have included building bridges between families, clans, and communities in conflict; advocacy to ensure local government-funded development planning accounts for the most vulnerable members of the community such as women and indigenous persons; and forums and training in the form of the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute to train individuals in the theory and practice of conflict resolution. The Peacebuilding Institute builds on the lessons learned and expertise of the global Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

To apply this model to the military was not easy. More specifically, efforts to transform the role of the AFP away from a narrowly defined security mission toward one of peace and security have been incremental. As CRS’ Myla Leguro said, “It was very hard to engage the military in the peace process in Mindanao…but we had an international peace training program, and in 2005 we invited a military official
to attend. Soon, that official became an advocate for the peace process within the military structure… Our approach is to strategically target individuals…[to] help influence the system as a whole.”

Over time, forums have provided an opportunity for the military to engage with sympathizers of the MILF outside of security operations.

This engagement to foster more constructive relationships between the military and local population has been supported by religious and community leaders as well as grassroots activists. For example, some communities have worked with the military to create “zones of peace” to protect local residents from armed conflict. Other military officers have worked to build connections and contacts with various peace groups in their areas. In another example, religious authorities and NGOs in the city of Zamboanga have educated officers about the cultural sensitivities in Muslim communities. Additionally, Peace Advocates Zamboanga (PAZ) hosts interfaith dialogues that allow the military to discuss current issues with the local population in non-threatening forums. At one such dialogue, the head of the local military unit, Darwin Guerra, claimed that the military is shifting to a culture of peace in order to build the trust of communities and local leaders. One should not overestimate the impact of such dialogue, but on balance it appears to have had a positive impact on public perceptions of the military in the region.

Since 2006, the military’s Eastern Mindanao Command has trained its soldiers to be conflict managers. It has targeted 150 commanders and executive officers and 300 junior officers for training on the complexity of local conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Julieto Ando, chief of civil-military operations, stated that the goal of such training was to facilitate “winning the war by winning the people. A more in depth understanding of local needs and the factors of stability are necessary to advancing the peace process.” Ando also suggested that the military’s reward structure needed to be reformed. In addition to awarding medals based on traditional security activities (e.g. enemy casualties, insurgent destruction, and firearms recovered), rewards for military service should, according to Ando, also be based on human development and nation-building. Beyond traditional security concerns, an incentive system emphasizing wider notions of human security and conflict resolution can work to standardize these new initiatives into military behavior. Many of the elements of the peacebuilding training, such as emphasis on relationships, listening to the grievances of local groups, refocusing on development challenges, and accountability for the behavior of soldiers has permeated parts of the military. While the impact of actual infrastructure projects on resolving ethnic and religious issues is debatable, such activities are highly symbolic in reforming the poor military reputation in the South. In support of such missions, military forces are deployed and remain in particular villages during their service. This allows the soldiers to build relationships with local citizens and vice versa, thereby reducing the chance of military abuses, criminal activity, and insurgent violence.

The military has also instituted integration programs to break down the barriers between Muslim and Christian soldiers. The AFP have sought to suc-

Members of the MILF paddle across the marshy portion of their guerilla base somewhere in Maguindanao.
cessfully integrate former MNLF members following the 1997 peace accord, with some success. The military has tried to enforce tolerance and respect with new policies such as additional accommodations for soldiers observing Muslim holidays or participating in religious traditions like fasting. All such efforts have required new thinking in military commands as well as engaging religious and cultural experts to consult on such reforms. The program’s objective is to create a more unified army while simultaneously promoting a more secure country. However, it is not only peace activists and the military who have worked for peace in Mindanao; senior religious leaders have as well.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference

During the 1990s, a movement toward a peaceful resolution to the conflict began to emerge among local religious authorities in Mindanao. The best-known such initiative, founded in 1996 as the Bishops-Ulama Conference, was designed to support the national peace agreement.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference—a collection of Christian and Muslim churches, mosques, schools and sociocultural institutions in Mindanao—was established as a forum to discuss sources of conflict and a peaceful resolution. It works toward a moral conclusion to the conflict and stresses the need for reforms to overcome divisions between local and national leaders that contribute to the conflict in Mindanao.

The conference has had to respond repeatedly to contentious issues associated with the 1997 peace between the MNLF and the government. The agreement was considered at the time to be a breakthrough, giving MNLF leaders the opportunity to govern some Moro-majority provinces in an autonomous region. However, subsequent legislation passed by the national legislature weakened many provisions of the agreement. Furthermore, the MNLF leadership failed to be an effective governing force and had limited positive impact on Moro lives in Mindanao. The national government also created the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development. Most Christians decried the agreement as favoring the Moro community, as it pushed religious leaders to calm their respective communities during times of violence in order to prevent the situation from escalating. In view of the halting peace process, the Bishops-Ulama Conference has worked with the government toward peace and development in Mindanao. It meets two or three times a year and serves as a venue for upper-level religious leaders to dialogue and set an example of interfaith tolerance for their communities. It is partnered with other faith-based organizations, such as CRS and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines in promoting interfaith activities with community religious leaders and grassroots organizations. The Bishops-Ulama Conference also sponsors or participates in numerous events, from local peacebuilding seminars to marches for peace. Some of the issues discussed at ongoing meetings of the Bishops-Ulama Conference include: ensuring security for Muslims in Christian areas and Christians in Muslim areas; minimizing crime; eliminating marijuana plantations; integrating former MNLF insurgents into civilian life; maintaining the momentum of peacebuilding and establishing a culture of peace; changing deeply-held prejudices; incorporating education to foster peace in younger generations; outreach to the MILF; countering the media’s negative portrayals of Muslims; and sharing common beliefs, values, practices, doctrines, and traditions.

In August 2008, President Arroyo asked the Bishops-Ulama Conference to be the leader for developing a civil society framework for peace in Mindanao. Efforts such as the Bishops-Ulama Conference demonstrate the effectiveness of local religious actors as agents of peace capable of transposing conflict resolution efforts to the national level. In sum, be it through the work of religiously-inspired peacebuilders like CRS or clerics via the Bishops-Ulama Conference, faith-inspired peace efforts have reached across social and cultural divides, engaged and influenced government actors, and been a critical lever for local peace in many communities in Mindanao.
International Factors

Although violence, harassment, and kidnappings have occurred in Mindanao for decades, the international community did not get involved until the 1990s, and then only due to links between some Filipino groups and religiously inspired terrorism. In contrast, Catholic organizations—often led by laity—have worked for peace in Mindanao for years, often reaching outside the country for assistance and funding via CRS and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network. Religious organizations have tried to fight two enduring, interrelated problems in Mindanao: poverty and conflict.

CRS, for example, provides loans to help the poor start small businesses and expands healthcare and sanitation to rural areas. In tandem with the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, CRS was also instrumental in providing critical resources in support of the Mindanao Peace Institute, which facilitates conflict resolution and peacebuilding training for diverse sectors of society. The goal is to empower different actors to bring change to their local communities and thereby contribute to the national peace process.

As noted previously, the Philippine insurgency developed ties to terrorist organizations during the 1990s. Evidence demonstrated that Al-Qaeda tried on numerous occasions to establish a base in the Philippines and pursued plots to assassinate Pope John Paul II on a visit to Manila and bomb airliners heading to the United States. The United States began increasing military assistance to the Philippines and its military in an effort to pursue Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations exploiting the conflict in Mindanao.

Because the MILF is considered a domestic insurgency and not labeled as a terrorist organization by the US government, the United States has taken a complicated, nuanced approach to working with Manila. US policy ranges from assistance against groups like Abu Sayyaf to closed-door diplomacy on issues of human rights and military professionalization.

At the request of the State Department, and with Congressional funding, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) worked from 2003 to 2007 to facilitate a lasting ceasefire. USIP worked to not only address the underlying causes of the conflict, but also to educate the non-Muslim population on the underlying issues surrounding the conflict. Indeed, for many citizens in the North, the conditions on the ground in Mindanao are poorly understood. The USIP project, named the Philippines Facilitation Project (PFP), simultaneously worked with members of the Philippine military. Mid-ranked officers were offered six workshops on conflict management and negotiations. The officers who were selected to participate were deployed to high-conflict zones in Mindanao but had little previous exposure to the region and its culture. One senior military leader noted that, “the training broadened soldiers’ and officers’ perspectives on means other than force for resolving conflict.”

In short, the international significance of conflict in Mindanao has changed with the global rise of Islamist terrorism, and thus a variety of competing trends make efforts for peace challenging. However, outside assistance, from USIP funding to technical expertise in peacebuilding from the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, undergirds efforts for peace. Nonetheless, for these efforts to be successful, they must also take into consideration the longstanding differences of culture, economic status, and ethnicity in Mindanao.
The religious heritage of the Philippines corresponds with many of the divisions of the Filipino population today. First, the Muslim faith came to the southern islands, like Mindanao, replacing or supplementing indigenous religions in many communities in the fourteenth century. Later came the spread of Roman Catholicism with Spanish colonization beginning in the seventeenth century. Today, the overwhelming majority of Filipinos are Catholic Christians, particularly in the middle and northern regions of the country.

These processes of conversion were often conflict-ridden. Jeffrey M. Bale, associate professor of International Policy and Management at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, explains, “The historical process by which the Christians came to dominate the Moros politically, demographically, socially, economically, and to some extent culturally has created a legacy of bitterness that persists to this very day.”

The indigenous population identifies themselves culturally as Bangsamoro, indicating a separate nationality from the majority Filipinos. For this reason, “both the MNLF and the MILF apply the term Bangsamoro to all native inhabitants of Mindanao and Sulu, whether Muslim, Christian, or Lumad, who accept the distinctiveness of the Moro as a separate nationality from that of the Filipinos in Luzon and Visayas.” Particularly, the MILF has promoted the concept of Moro (Islamic) identity rather than Bangsamoro (cultural). The leaders, following the older MNLF, promoted Moro as an expression of distinction as a people that had resisted foreign dominion.

Religious, cultural, and ethnic divides in the Philippines tend to mirror—or reinforce—social and economic differences. Mindanao has long been the least developed of the major areas of the Philippines. This is due to at least two major trends: the historic resistance of the Moro to integration into the Catholic, Manila-based social or-
nder, and a policy of neglect by the federal government. Not only is Mindanao among the poorest regions within the Philippines, but the indigenous Lumads and Moros tend to be the poorest on the island, with Catholic settlers from other parts of the Philippines often ranking higher socioeconomically and in possession of government jobs and access to government programming.

In conclusion, the ethnoreligious conflict in Mindanao fuses grievances about political access, economic development, and autonomy with religious and cultural narratives about individual and collective identity, the role of religion in public life, and transnational trends of war and peace. In this way, there are similarities with other conflicts, such as in Sri Lanka and Lebanon. In the Philippines, religious factors for peace compete with religious justifications for violence, and religious individuals claim religious authority to prescribe or proscribe violence and exclusion. However, a relatively new factor in the conflict is the recent alliances for peace across different sectors: Catholic bishops with Muslim ulama and the Philippine military learning from Catholic peace-builders. In a highly religious society like the Philippines, religious factors must be part of the solution if enduring peace is to take root.

Christmas sculpture in Naawan.
Key Events

Late 1960s The MNLF is created in response to the killings of Muslim soldiers.

September 23, 1972 Marshal law is declared in response to unrest. Civil war breaks out.

1977 The MILF separates from the MNLF.

1990 Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue is created.

1991 Abdurahak Janjalani forms splinter group Abu Sayyaf from MNLF.

July 1992 National Unification Commission is created to provide amnesty and help with reconciliation.

September 2, 1996 Peace agreement is signed between Philippine government and the MNLF.

November 29, 1996 Bishops-Ulama Conference begins.

January 7, 1997 Government signs ceasefire with MILF; peace talks begin.

April 30, 2000 The MILF suspends talks with the government. President Estrada declares “all-out war” with the MILF.

August 4, 2008 Philippine Supreme Court issues restraining order, preventing the government and the MILF from officially signing an agreement that would begin formal talks between the two groups.

June, 2009 Army says it has captured a major MILF base on Mindanao, killing 30 rebels.

September, 2009 Army says it has captured a leading figure in the MILF, Camarudin Hadji Ali, as the yearlong campaign against the rebels continues in the South.

December, 2009 Peace talks resume between the government and the MILF in Malaysia.

March, 2010 Peace monitors return to Mindanao to oversee MILF-government talks.
Religious and Non-governmental Organizations

Bishop-Ulama Conference
http://bishop-ulma.page.tl

Their respective networks of churches, mosques, schools, and sociocultural institutions being the largest and most widespread in the region of Mindanao, the Christian and Muslim religious leaders, at the suggestion of the Philippine government and the MNLF, organized a loose association initially called the Bishops-Ulama Forum on November 29, 1996, two months after both parties signed their peace agreement. The organization later became the Bishops-Ulama Conference. The creation of the Bishops-Ulama Conference was inspired by the belief that the peace pact could only be satisfactorily implemented with the help of Muslims and Christians of moral integrity who would come under the influence of religious leaders demonstrating a united front in favor of peace.

Catholic Relief Services
http://crs.org/philippines/

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) sees the problems of Mindanao as being twofold: conflict and poverty. Their work addresses both through running programs in both peacebuilding and microfinance. The importance of grassroots support led CRS to join with a network of faith-based partners, nongovernmental organizations, and government agencies to implement various conflict resolution programs.
Further Readings


Sattar, Alzad T. The Contributions of Interfaith Organizations to Coexistence and their possible role in the Peace Process between the GRP and the MILF in Mindanao, Philippines. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.


**Discussion Questions**

1. What are the historical origins of the conflict in Mindanao?

2. How did domestic forces drive the conflict and its negotiated resolution?

3. How important were international religious and political forces?

4. What role did socioeconomic factors play?

5. What are the broader lessons of the Mindanao case?

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3. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 6.
9. Ibid.

For a practitioner’s viewpoint, see “Peace From the Ground Up: An Interview with Myla Leguro” at The Immanent Frame (October 12, 2010). Available at http://blogs.src.org/tif/2010/10/12/peace-from-the-ground-up/

For more on the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, see its homepage at the University of Notre Dame, http://cpn.nd.edu/.

Ibid.

Leguro, “Engaging the Military in Building Peace in Mindanao.”

Ibid.


W. wee, “Military Shifting Tack.”


Ibid.

Ibid.


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Ibid., 38.

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Ibid., p. 9.

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Ibid., 9-10.

Ibid., 10-11.