The American Military in Sulu: Peacekeepers or Occupiers?

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Mindanao has had a long history of resistance against occupation by foreign colonizers. In recent history, the Moros or Muslims have struggled for self-determination against the predominantly Christian government. When the United States declared its global War on Terror, the Southern Philippines became the target of Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines. It was in this context that American soldiers were deployed to Sulu, Philippines, as part of the Balikatan or the joint US-RP military exercises. In this study, we asked ordinary people of Sulu how they viewed the presence of American soldiers in the region. What is the meaning of the Balikatan for the ordinary people of Jolo, Sulu? How can knowing ordinary people’s views of the American presence in Sulu help in our understanding of peace in the region?
Philippine History of Colonization
The Spanish colonization of the Philippines lasted for almost four centuries, from 1521 to 1928. Throughout this period, Moros have resisted Spanish colonization and have fought for their freedom and Muslim way of life; making the Moro resistance one of the most enduring conflicts in history (Schiavo-Campo and Judd, 2005). Upon the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1898, the United States began their occupation of the Philippines. During this period, the Moros continued to resist colonization (Collingwood, 1994). During the Second World War, the Japanese briefly occupied the Philippines only to surrender to Filipinos and Americans after the war. On July 4, 1946, the Philippines declared its independence from the United States and became the Republic of the Philippines (RP).

Despite the Philippine’s declaration of independence, the presence and influence of Americans in the country continue. The American government had established the liberal-democratic political system, the public educational system, and the socioeconomic infrastructure of the country (Radics, 2004). It also established military bases across the nation, the biggest of which were the Clark Air Base in Pampanga and the Subic Naval Base in Zambales. The Philippines became one of the United States’ strongest allies in Southeast Asia and the link to its continued military presence in Asia. Despite the withdrawal of the US forces from the Subic Naval Base in 1991, the last foothold of American colonization in the country, the US military presence in the Philippines continue, now in the form of the Balikatan (Radics, 2004).

The Balikatan: Joint US-RP Military Exercises
After 9/11 (September 11, 2001), the day the Islamic extremist group, Al-Qaeda, carried out the deadliest and most destructive terrorist attack to New York City, the United States initiated the Global War on Terrorism or the War on Terror. This was to be a global military campaign against terrorist groups, particularly the Al-Qaeda, and other Islamic extremists. The War on Terror also came after the Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic terrorist group in the Southern Philippines, kidnapped North American citizens in May 24, 2001, including the missionary couple Martin and Gracia Burnham.

As the United States’ strongest ally in Southeast Asia, the Philippines agreed to joint US-RP military exercises as part of the War on Terror. Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines began in early 2002 and is best known for Joint Task Force 510’s combined US-Philippine operations in Basilan or Balikatan 02-1 (Wilson, 2006). The joint anti-terror drill was coded as Balikatan, which means “shoulder-to-shoulder”. It is a series of annual events aimed at improving RP-US combined planning, combat readiness, and interoperability while enhancing security relations and demonstrating US resolve to support RP against external aggression (Ramos, 2005). It is also seen as the US government’s assistance to the Philippine military in its war against terror, including internal terrorist threats (Mindanao Examiner Website, 2008).

The presence of the US military in the Philippines is based on the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Philippines and the US.
Meaning Making in Mindanao

42

Research Process
This study examined local people’s attitudes to the American presence in Jolo, Sulu, particularly towards the concept of Balikatan. The study was divided into three phases: (1) developing a scale measuring people’s attitudes to the Balikatan using the Shah Scale method; (2) administering the attitude scale to different groups of people in Jolo, Sulu; and (3) conducting a survey interview on the meaning of people’s attitudes to the American presence in Sulu.

The quantitative part of the study found that people carry positive and negative attitudes to the American presence in Sulu. The qualitative part of the study sought to understand the meaning behind these positive and negative attitudes. For the qualitative phase, we conducted a survey interview with 80 participants – 40 males and 40 females. All of the respondents were presently residing in the areas of Sulu where Balikatan activities were actively held. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data gathered from the participants.

of 1951, the Visiting Forces Agreement or VFA which was signed under the Estrada administration, and the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement under President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The annual Balikatan exercises participated in by Filipino and American soldiers have been ongoing and the number of US soldiers in the country increase year after year (Mindanao Examiner Website, 2008).

Varying Views on the Balikatan in Sulu
Since 2002, US military troops have been regularly deployed to the Southern Philippines to provide training and support to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in its combat operations against the Abu Sayyaf. Sulu has been identified as the strategic location for the Balikatan exercises as the Southern Philippines has been known to be the breeding ground of Al-Qaeda-linked organizations including the Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah (Wilson, 2006).

The presence of American soldiers in Southern Mindanao has elicited varying opinions in the region. Strong support for the Balikatan has been expressed primarily by government authorities in the Southern Philippines (Jacinto, 2006). For instance, the Philippine military claimed that the aim of the Balikatan is to improve the lives of the people by providing humanitarian activities and community outreach programs (Mindanao Examiner Website, 2008). The Armed Forces of the Philippines also viewed the American presence as driving the Abu Sayyaf away from Basilan, and helping in the peacekeeping efforts in the region (GMA News TV Website, 2008).

On the other hand, activist groups have also expressed their strong opposition to the Balikatan. For example, Kawagib argued that the real purpose of the US military presence is in securing American economic and political interests (Kawagib Website, 2008). They also contended that US troops have engaged in human rights violations that have remained unresolved. Moro organizations have also perceived the joint military combat operations as a camouflage for making the Muslim region a permanent US military base (Suara Bangsamoro Website, 2008).

In this study, Christians, Muslims, and Badjaos residing in areas in Jolo, Sulu where the US military forces are deployed were surveyed. They were asked how they viewed the Balikatan exercises.
The survey questionnaire was composed of the following questions: (1) Balikatan is … (Ang Balikatan ay…); (2) What are your experiences in terms of the presence of American soldiers in your area? (Anu-ano po ang inyong mga karanasan kaugnay ng pamamalagi ng mga Amerikanong sundalo sa inyong lugar?); (3) In your opinion, do you approve of the presence of American soldiers in your area? __Yes __No. Why? (Sa inyong pananaw, sang-ayon po ba kayo sa pamamalagi ng mga sundalong Amerikano sa inyong lugar? __Oo __Hindi. Bakit?)

Pro-Balikatan vs Anti-Balikatan
How do ordinary people view the American military presence in Sulu? Among the Christians, Muslims, and Badjaos that took part in this study, some had positive attitudes while some had negative attitudes towards the Balikatan exercise. There are Christians, Muslims, and Badjaos who were in favor of the Balikatan. They believed that the presence of American soldiers in Sulu has positive consequences, including helping in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. On the other hand, there are Christians, Muslims, and Badjaos who were against the Balikatan. They questioned the intention or purpose of the American presence in Sulu and believed that it leads to negative consequences, including intensifying the conflict in the region.

The thematic analysis of the responses yielded four themes that are the basis of the differences in attitudes towards the Balikatan among the local people of Jolo, Sulu. The four themes are: (1) benefits versus costs of the Balikatan, 2) American soldiers as peacekeepers versus occupiers; (3) positive versus negative qualities of the American soldiers; and, (4) trust versus mistrust of the Balikatan exercise. The results also indicate that religion was not a factor in determining the differences in attitudes towards the American presence in Sulu.

Benefits versus Costs of the Balikatan
Those in favor of the Balikatan or pro-Balikatan saw the benefits of the Balikatan exercise, primarily in terms of the training and assistance American soldiers provide to Filipino soldiers: “nagbibigay kaalaman sa mga sundalong Pilipino” (provides knowledge to Filipino soldiers); “pagbibigay ng knowledge and skills” (provides knowledge and skills).

The Balikatan is also perceived as providing security and protection for local people. Some indicated that the agreement between the Philippines and the US is: “tulong sa problema ng bansa like terrorism and insurgency” (aid in the country’s problem like terrorism and insurgency); “jumalaban sa mga nagahari dito sa Jolo” (combats those who reign power here in Jolo); “nagbibigay ng sapat na proteksyon” (provides enough protection).
In addition, the humanitarian programs of the American soldiers are seen as benefitting the community. These services include “medical mission, libreng gamit sa school, infrastructure” (medical mission, free school supplies, infrastructure); “maraming tulong at proyekto... medical, infrastructure, everyday needs, transportasyon, education” (many services and projects... medical, infrastructure, everyday needs, transportation, education).

The Balikatan movement is viewed positively in terms of its benefits to the people of Sulu; particularly in training Filipino soldiers, providing security and protection for the local people, and undertaking humanitarian programs and infrastructure projects for the community.

On the other hand, those who were against the Balikatan or anti-Balikatan perceived the presence of American soldiers in Sulu negatively because of the costs of their presence to the community.

In particular, the presence of American soldiers are seen as a source of conflict and tension, instead of being a solution to terrorism. Among the negative consequences of the Balikatan exercise expressed by respondents are: “dumadami ang gulo dahil naghuhukay sila ng kayamanan” (more conflict ensue because they are digging up treasures); “balitang may mga binabastos at naaapakang dignidad” (there’s rumor about malevolent behavior and disrespect of one’s dignity); “paki-alamero, napapahamak sila sa gulo sa bukid” (they meddle with other people’s business; they get into trouble in the farms). For the anti-Balikatan, the presence of American soldiers in Sulu aggravates the conflict in the region.

The anti-Balikatan also noted that the presence of American soldiers in Sulu does not benefit the people as they claimed the contrary: “walang mabuting naidulot” (no positive result from the endeavor); “walang pagbabago / improvement sa kapulisan” (no changes/improvement in the police); “dala ay away” (they brought conflict); “sumisira ng infrastructure” (destroys infrastructure). As such, the Balikatan movement is viewed negatively in terms of the costs to the people of Sulu, primarily in terms of intensifying the conflict and tension in the region.

“...the presence of American soldiers are seen as a source of conflict and tension, instead of being a solution to terrorism.”
American Soldiers as Peacekeepers versus Occupiers

Attitudes towards American soldiers in Sulu were also divided between those who perceived them as peacekeepers versus those who saw them as occupiers.

The pro-Balikatan asserted that the American soldiers and the whole Balikatan endeavor help in peacekeeping and peacebuilding in the area: “tumutugis sa masasama” (contend with criminals); “maraming natutulungan” (able to help many); “para masugpo ang problema” (to solve the problem). The pro-Balikatan saw the agreement between the Philippines and the United States as one way of establishing peace in the region.

The anti-Balikatan, on the other hand, questioned the intention and purpose of the American soldiers in Sulu, arguing that their real motive is to occupy the region in the way that the United States had formerly occupied the Philippines. As some put it: “isang malaking katanungan kung bakit sila nandito” (it’s a big question why they are here); “natatakot at nagmumuni-muni kung ano ang ibig sabihin ng pagpunta dito” (frightened and concerned as to the real reason for their coming here); “layuning manakop” (they intend to occupy the land); “tumutulong sa mayayaman upang silang may kalayaan upang sakupin ang bansang Pilipinas” (they are helping the rich so that they will have the freedom to conquer the country); “may ibang layunin, minsan tayong linoko, ingatan ang sarili kaysa ipagkatiwala sa kanila” (they have different intentions; they have fooled us once, we should take care of ourselves instead of trusting them).

The American government and American soldiers were also perceived as having interests in acquiring the region’s rich resources: “layuning maghukay ng kayamanan/ginto na iniwan ng Hapon” (intend to excavate treasures/gold left by the Japanese); “nandito dahil sa mayaman sa kalikasan ang lugar/langis sa Sulu” (they are here because of the rich oil deposits in Sulu). Thus, for the anti-Balikatan, the Balikatan exercise is a cover-up for the real intentions of the American government and the personal motives of the American soldiers.

Positive versus Negative Qualities of the American Soldiers

The positive attitudes towards the Balikatan are also attributed to the positive qualities or traits of the American soldiers who were described as: “marunong maawa sa tao” (know how to be compassionate towards people); “hindi nagdadalawang isip tumulong” (do not think twice in helping); “mababait na tao” (kind people); “may pakisama” (know how to relate with people); “hindi naman nananakit” (do not hurt others). Thus, it seemed that the respondents who were in favor of the Balikatan have experienced positive relations with the American soldiers.

The anti-Balikatan, on the other hand, encountered negative experiences with American soldiers. They described American soldiers as: “walang respeto... nagpaputok sa labas ng Mosque... tinutukan ang mayor na wala namang ginagawang masama” (they have no respect... they fire outside the
mosque... pointed a gun at the mayor even though he did nothing wrong); “masasamang istorya tungkol sa pag-rape sa kababaihan” (there are stories about them raping women); “pakitang tao/cover up lang ang kabutihan” (all the goodness they manifest is just a cover up); “baliktaran” (two face). The negative attitudes towards the Balikatan are partly associated to the negative characteristics of American soldiers.

Trust versus Mistrust of the Balikatan Exercise

As a result of the perceived benefits of the Balikatan exercise, its role in peacemaking, and the positive qualities of and experiences with American soldiers, some Christians, Muslims, and Badjaos in Jolo are in favor of the continued presence of American soldiers in Sulu. Those who were in favor of the Balikatan manifest feelings of trust towards the American soldiers and support their continued stay in the region. As they articulated: “wala namang masama sa pamamalagi nila dito” (there is nothing wrong with their stay here); “proteksyon mula sa ibang lahi” (protection from other nations); “malaking tulong ang nagagawa nila” (they are doing a great help); “malaki ang utang na loob” (we owe them our debt of gratitude).

Those who were against the Balikatan assert that the Philippines does not need American intervention and that it is best for the country to discontinue the agreement: “hindi dapat mamalagi ng mahabang panahon upang maka-move on na ang Pilipinas on their own” (they don’t have to stay for long in the area so that the Philippines can move on on their own); “kahit wala sila, makakamit natin ang minimithing kaunlaran at kapayapaan” (we can attain prosperity and peace even without their help); “kaya natin pangalagaan ang sarili natin” (we can take care of ourselves). For the anti-Balikatan, the American presence in Sulu is a form of colonization.

Ways Forward

With the continued presence of American soldiers in Sulu, tensions between those in favor of and those against the Balikatan exercises remains unresolved. The Philippine government and the Philippine military need to address these tensions and change negative views among Muslims, Christians, and Badjaos alike, towards the American presence in Sulu. Addressing the concerns raised by the people who are against the Balikatan would entail not only the promotion of a positive public image of American soldiers and the American government. It
would also require that ensuring the security and safeguarding the human rights of the people of Sulu is the priority of the Balikatan exercises.

The framing therefore of the American presence in Sulu needs to shift from one of savior and protector of Sulu to that of equal partners to Filipino soldiers in the war against terror. This should lead to a policy and practice of respect among the tri-people of Sulu for American presence, and a policy and practice of respect among the American soldiers for the tri-people of Sulu.

References
Comelec OK’s expanded military role in Mindanao hotspots