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Land as Central in the Struggle of Mindanawons (1950's to the present): the Role of Philippine Populist Presidents Magsaysay, Estrada and Duterte, a Comparative Historical Study

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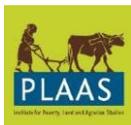


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Land as Central in the Struggle of Mindanawons (1950's to the present): the Role of Philippine Populist Presidents Magsaysay, Estrada and Duterte, a Comparative Historical Study

Faina C. Abaya-Ulindang and Lloyd B. Ranises

Abstract

Mindanao island is long considered as the Philippines' backwater and, a peace and order problem. Current data shows that, then as now, the most impoverished provinces are found in the ARMM (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao). Secessionism, insurgency and terrorism thus earned the island's most dangerous place in the country and, at the same time, the target for development assistance, particularly from the United States, Japan, Australia and the European Union. This study focuses on: First, the evolution of property rights as introduced by the colonizers, later codified, and eventually laid the bases for which to define public and private lands. History showed, thus, that the root cause for insurgency is inequality abetted by both external and internal colonialism. Land laws aided and legitimized Mindanao's exploitation of its virgin natural resources. Second, populist presidents whose "mass appeal" catapulted them to presidency such as Ramon Magsaysay, Joseph Estrada, and Rodrigo Duterte were marked by their Mindanao policy of land resettlement, all-out-war and anti-ISIS measures, respectively. This paper will compare how these three presidents responded to the challenges of Mindanao's underdevelopment as well as peace and order problems-central of which was the land-territory issue. Moreover, considering the nuance of responses coming from the tripeople Mindanawons: migrant settlers, moros/Muslims, and lumads, this paper will also tackle the differences on property rights as perceived by these three groups. Finally, from the comparative historical analysis offered by this study, it concludes with the problem of post-Marawi siege issues on land/property rights and their implications.

Key words: Land/Property rights, Mindanao, Philippines, populist presidents, comparative history

Introduction

Mindanao island, located in southern Philippines, is long-considered a backward, rural and impoverished area characterized by political instability where warlordism/militarization thrive as its elite answer to threats of the insurgent New People's Army, Moro secessionists, ISIS terrorists and Abu Sayyaf bandits, BIFFs, MNLFs. Studies on Mindanao problem abound, pointing to the contentious issue of what the Bangsamoro call as "marginalization through land dispossession", thereby effecting exclusionary injustice from political power that was historically monopolized by people from Luzon, the biggest island in the North, and the Visayas, a group of islands in Central Philippines. Thus, the emergence of a Mindanawon as President, Rodrigo Duterte, created a stir among Filipinos long used to predictable traditional and clientelists politics.

This paper would argue that Philippine populist presidents such as Ramon Magsaysay, Joseph Estrada and Rodrigo Duterte developed their own unique styles of governance that was nuanced depending on the perceived needs of the people. As elected presidents and authoritarian populists, their "... projects usually involve personal ties between a leader and the masses, sections of which are incorporated into the state through clientelist mechanisms, rather than via apolitical and durable institutions or bureaucracies." [Framing ERPI p.2] This will all be demonstrated in their choice of officials, as in the case of Estrada and Duterte, when during their first year of office they have appointed people considered to be left-leaning and thus, mass-oriented and pro-poor. Hence, in Mindanao, presidents would have to acknowledge that in order to proceed towards the entire country's development goals, pacification and peace process must be vigorously pursued. Mindanao constitutes the second biggest earner of agri-ventures and the country's food basket. In addition, mineral and timber resources were magnets to investors eager to make profit of the islands' yet undeveloped resources. How these three populists presidents tackled the land issue intrinsic to Mindanao politics would be this paper's theme. This will be approached by first, a discussion on the evolution of property rights and the dispossession of the Lumad's and Moro's land that ensued; second, how being a populist president effected a transformation on the relationship between the leader/strongman and their fragmented followers (fragmented because of the Us/Them that polarized people after their free exercise of suffrage), as well as their spatial strategies between the center and the periphery or urban and rural; and third, what over-all impact developed out of these populist president's land policies on the Mindanao rural landscape, in particular, how the incumbent president approached the Marawi siege and its subsequent rehabilitation where land issues would necessarily surface. By land policies in this paper means how the leadership or populist presidents view land either as a political capital or its issues as opportunities for economic growth, or the insurgencies ensuing from land-related problems as alibis to strengthen the state's police power.

Evolution of property rights and its effects on the Mindanawons

The people of Mindanao or Mindanawons are diverse. They are presently categorized into three: the Lumads-the indigenous people who are non-Christians and non-Muslims; the Moros, the indigenous people who adopted Islam as a religion and a way of life; and the migrant settlers who are mostly Christians. The settlement of the latter into what were considered public/government lands beginning the colonial period up to the present is a bone of contention that fuelled secessionist movements beginning the 1950's, with what the moros considered as "marginalization through land dispossession." (Please see WB-IOM Report for TJRC).

Clearly, while property rights of the lumads and the moros were based on their *adat* law and communal land or *pusaka* wherein the former "*adat* law" states "(The)Sultan has the right to dispose of state land. But as land and all creation belong to God, human beings are mere trustee or stewards and have no absolute ownership of God's creation such as land," (ibid.) and the latter "communal land" states that the Sultan has no right to alienate ancestral lands belonging to the tribe." Such rights were ignored when the Spaniards introduced their "Law of the Indies" where the Philippines and all what is in it, was considered a property of Spain by virtue of "discovery" and "conquest"; and the *Jura*

Regalia in which the state alone has the authority to distribute lands towards effecting these as private properties.

Despite the non-recognition by the Muslims of Spanish sovereign rights over their territory in Mindanao (in this paper, “Mindanao” would refer to both the islands of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan . The *moros* have claim for primordial right over what they call *bangsamoro* or morolands. The *lumads*(indigenous people) too, claim primordial territories or ancestral lands over some territories), the Treaty of Paris of December 10,1898 that concluded the Spanish-American War gave the United States the entire Philippine territory that included Mindanao. The subsequent war of pacification by the Americans that ended in 1913 finally completed what Spain failed to accomplish, i.e .the entire Philippines had now become an American territory. A series of Land laws introduced by the American civil government, chief of which were the Land Registration Act of 1902 (or act o.496); Act no.718 passed by the Philippine Commission in April 1903; and the Public Land Act of no.926 (October 1903) which provided for mandatory land registration for private, including moro lands.(LGSPA,2009 Non-compliance of these laws gave the State the right to declare such as public lands and are disposable and alienable.

Moros and Lumads, given their own customary laws, did not heed the colonizers’ mandate over their lands. It would be these land laws, and many more including the Commonwealth Act no.141 of November 1936 which provided for “lowered hectarage ceiling from 24 to 16 has. that could be purchased by non-Muslims, and 10 to 4 has by the Muslims” (ibid)became a clear indication of the state’s racist and discriminatory policy to Mindanawons. The Muslims and the Lumads, given their cultural minority status, being largely poor and untrained of the mainstream culture were further marginalized. Their property rights under their *adat* and *pusaka* were thus nullified and settlement of public lands by Filipinos from Luzon and Visayas became the order of the day beginning 1913, through the following legislations: Agricultural colonization act in the areas of North Cotabato and Lanao; the creation of National Land Settlement Administration (1939) that effected the settlement of South Cotabato; the Land Settlement Development Commission established in 1950, the EDCOR in 1951 and NARRA in 1954. The 1950’s thus, will be the watershed for Mindanawons’ violent responses due to their marginalization.

“Land to the landless program” of Ramon Magsaysay, the populist president(1954-1957)

Of the three populist Presidents in this study, it would be Ramon Magsaysay who invested in land redistribution for his political capital.

Magsaysay’s resettlement program through EDCOR was intended for former Huk insurgents as well as retired and trainee military officials; his NARRA broaden its beneficiaries to civilians in need of land. EDCor and NARRA settlements were public lands that were “previously unoccupied and uncultivated...marked by absence of any prior or existing landlord control” (Borras, 2007:137).

In Mindanao, however, there is at present a recognition that these lands where resettlement projects were located, actually overlapped those that are considered ancestral domains. Furthermore ,there were “dubious reclassification of public lands, including A&D (alienable and disposable) reclassifications; and land type reclassifications (timberlands,pasturelands,18 degree slope-landsand so on) to benefit the elite, are among the documented problems under the A&D and CBFM(community based forest management) ” (ibid.) Thus, as the last frontier in the Philippines, Mindanao was a virtual candidate for land problems among the Mindanawons themselves. Nonetheless, vigorous land redistribution through resettlement was preferred for developmental purposes. Pioneering into its vast natural resources would eventually be an invitation to later agro-industrial investors.

Ramon Magsaysay, although not academically inclined, was able to finish a course on commerce but worked as a mechanic for a living. He was the chief mechanic of Florida Bus company in the town of Castillejos, Zambales, After serving as a guerrilla soldier during the Second World War, he rose up in

rank and was elected as congressman of Zambales during the presidency of Quirino. He was eventually appointed as the Secretary of National Defense and gained popular support for having successfully ended the Huk problem. Huks were communists of Central Luzon who were able to gain a significant following with their “Land for the landless” program that promised land to landless farmers. Their growing numbers impacted on the newly independent Philippine Republic and the United States relations. President Quirino who inherited the problem of post-war rehabilitation program of his predecessor, President Roxas was pressured to cater to the demand of anti-communist stance of the United States. Needed aid from the United States was obviously dependent upon satisfactory compliance of this demand.

With the participation of JUSMAG under Edward Lansdale, Magsaysay was able to develop a psych war approach that would eventually undermine the Huks attraction to the masses. They stole the “land to the landless” slogan of the Huks.

Who are the Huks? Largely coming from the rural areas of Central Luzon, they were civilian militias or guerrillas who fought the Japanese during World War II. They found themselves discredited after the war by the returning landlords who abandoned their lands during the war, and escaped to the urban areas, particularly in Manila. In their absence, farming continued such that, for the first time, landless peasants enjoyed freedom in cultivating their lands, protected from the Japanese incursions by the Huks. (Ulindang, 2007, Kerkvliet, 1982) Thus, Central Luzon peasants were relatively hunger-free compared with those in the urban centers. The return of the landowners, however, created tension as they returned with the protection of the US liberation forces. Civil war became imminent. The *Hukbong Bayan laban sa Hapon* (People’s Army Against the Japanese) evolved into *Hukbong Magpapalayan Bayan*, (People’s Liberation Forces) communist-led and communist-inspired. The United States, in a cold war with the Union of Soviet Socialist Russia, wanted to contain its spread. A combination of military and civilian strategies was developed by Philippines’ Secretary of Defense, Ramon Magsaysay, and Joint US Military Agreement chief Edward Lansdale. Winning the masses was the civilian component of this strategy through land distribution in the Economic Development Corps (EDCOR) settlements in Mindanao, i.e. military settlements in Kapatagan, Buldon and Alamada of Lanao del Norte and Cotabato, and one in Isabela, Luzon.

The EDCOR agrarian strategy proved beneficial as an adjunct to the relentless military assaults on Huk-held territories and systematic pursuit of their key leaders. Huk rank and file who surrendered were given EDCOR lands while their leaders, such as Luis Taruc, Crisanto Evangelista et al. and their Politburo who were earlier captured in Manila (Ulindang (2007) were either incarcerated in prison, while the others perished in action. By 1954, on the eve of presidential election, the Huk challenge was no longer a force to reckon with. Ramon Magsaysay won a landslide victory over his rival and former boss, the then incumbent Elpidio Quirino. US supported Ramon Magsaysay was known as “The Guy. Man of the Masses”. He was loved by the people, and opened Malacañang palace to them. As he owed much of his popularity in his successful Huk campaign that touched the hearts of the agrarian masses, he pursued settlement projects i.e. the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Authority (NARRA) which covered much of the public lands in Mindanao, Visayas, and Palawan.

Land distribution through resettlement was thus President Magsaysay’s a centrepiece of his administration. However, his administration was short-lived. He met an untimely demise in an airplane crash in 1957. His successor Carlos Garcia did not pursue the agrarian reforms and it will be Diosdado Macapagal and Ferdinand Marcos who would give this land distribution as their priority. The former institutionalized land distribution through Land Reform while the latter saw the creation of the Department of Agrarian Reform.

President Joseph Estrada (1998-2001) and his “All-Out-War in Mindanao”

The second populist president in this study is Joseph Estrada, city born and bred but had won his *Erap para sa Mahirap* (Erap for the Poor) title through his movies as an actor who was typecasted as the defender of the poor and the downtrodden. He was the only president of the Philippines who did not

have a college diploma. When he sought the presidency, his local and national positions being former mayor of San Juan and then later the Vice-president became his political capital. He had loyal following among the masses and was extremely popular as a no-nonsense president of the country Philippines. Despite his unpopular and controversial personality he won landslide victory over his rivals who were lawyers and professionals.

Estrada wanted his administration projected as indeed pro-poor. He thus appointed in his cabinet men who were popular among the left and the radicals educated from the premier University of the Philippines. For instance he appointed Horacio Morales, Jr. as the Department of Agrarian Reform secretary. "Morales was a well-known figure among NGOs. He was the former chairperson of the underground revolutionary National Democratic Front (NDF) in the 1970's until his arrest and detention in the early 1980s. Released from jail during the 1986 regime transition, he then joined and headed the PRRM, a politically conservative NGO founded in the 1950s and transformed into an autonomous progressive organization. He also co-founded the Movement for Popular Democracy (MPD, or simply, "PopDem") which soon became a spinoff of the ND movement." (Borras,2007:249). "President Estrada thought that somebody who knew the left politics and social movement dynamics should head the politically contentious DAR bureaucracy and implement the land reform program."(ibid.) Morales accomplishments however did not impact much due to limited period as DAR secretary. With the departure of Estrada from Malacanang after thirty months, so too did Horacio Morales. (ibid)

However, his land and Mindanao policies caused to alienate him from the Muslims of Mindanao with his all-out-war. A week- long fiasco between government forces and the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Forces (MILF) In Estrada's "all-out-war", Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte was prominent.. The issue would be about land claim between a Christian landowner, Maximiliano Oliverio, and a Maranao claimant. Oliverio claimed he owned a twenty four hectare land in Brgy. Inudaran- a land which he had to abandon for several years due to peace and order situation. A Maranao, by the name of Paudak Somocor, claimed he has a title that gives him the right over five hectares, an area within Oliverio's claim of twenty-four hectares. The question was that Paudak could not harvest his crop for almost twenty years, since Martial Law, because he feared for his safety. From January until September of 1999, nineteen, mostly Christians were killed because of this land disputes. The construction of an MILF camp which used to be a school building while there was this ongoing land dispute, alarmed the people. It was called Camp John Mack and was known as the base of Moro Islamic Liberation Front of 303rd Brigade under Abdullah Macapaar (a.k.a) "Commander Bravo". A letter complaint by some municipal officials and some residents reached President Estrada and negotiations were made on March 10, 2000 that the camp would move one hundred meters away from their existing location. This was taken by the MILF as a legitimate recognition of their right over the area. Despite, the military's demand that they move and that they (MILF) were responsible for the terrorism that happened in the nearby area, particularly the bombing of buses in Ozamis City, they refused to relocate. On the part of the Christian migrants, they asserted that they cannot leave Kauswagan because they love the way of living and the simplicity of life there. Further, they added that amidst the increasing population, the marine resources could still sustain the daily subsistence of the people. Thus, though the height of conflict between Muslims and Christians during 1970's caused major setback, most of these settlers managed to return. In the face of this tension, the Estrada administration declared the government's militarist policy of confronting the MILF with force. Thus, there occurred a week-long pocket war in some towns of Lanao del Norte caused, for the first time since the return of democracy after the Marcos' Martial law, a major setback in the peace process that former President Ramos put in place. (Ulindang, 2015) However, for some of the migrant settlers of the people of Lanao del Norte, this militarist solution to the land problem that the Estrada administration pursued had for a while brought them relief that the government was on their side. (from an interview with an anonymous respondent)

The Duterte Administration (2016-present) and the Land Problem

Unlike the populist Ramon Magsaysay whose land redistribution program was through resettlement, Rodrigo Duterte, like Estrada, continued the land distribution scheme through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) that Corazon Aquino launched during her administration. However, the institution that carried out this program was the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) created during the Marcos administration that was decidedly landlord-influenced. This was shown with systematic conversions, exclusions and inclusions of lands to be made available to the landless. (Borras,2007). Estrada's short-term presidency hardly made a dent on land reform. On the contrary, his approach to the Muslim problem in Mindanao, ended up in fiasco. We have seen this on how the sensitive land disputes were handled.

The current administration, if we base on President Duterte's pronouncements at the opening ceremony of the Agrilink/Foodlink/Aqualink 2017, supports "more land for food crops" especially in Mindanao. However, he lamented that it was being obstructed by "serious security problems" including the communist insurgency. (PDI, 10/17/17) Liza Maza, head of the Anti-Poverty Commission underscored the "genuine agrarian reform" was the key to food security in the Philippines, as well as to resolving conflicts with communist insurgents. Maza was responding to Pres. Duterte's remarks at the opening ceremony of the Agrilink/Foodlink/Aqualink 2017, in which he expressed support for "more land for food crops" especially in Mindanao, but lamented it was being obstructed by "serious security problems" including the communist insurgency." According to Maza, "The President is correct in saying that vast tracts of land are being used to produce cash crops for export to other countries, at the expense of food crops for our own people's needs at the hands of a few landowner-oligarch families, who control its use." (PDI, 10/17/17)

Genuine Agrarian Reform

"For the country to attain food security, genuine agrarian reform has to be fully implemented in order for the land to be used first and foremost for the food needs of our farmers, and with the appropriate services to increase productivity and support sustainable food production, for the food needs of the whole nation," Liza Maza added. "If the government were to fully implement genuine agrarian reform, it would be a meaningful step towards a just and lasting peace in our country," Maza concluded. (ibid) With the Senate's recent approval of DAR's P10.27 billion budget next year, the agency also aims to distribute 53,841 ha of land that will benefit 46,072 farmers in 2018. In a statement, acting Agrarian Reform Secretary Rosalina Bistoyong explained that the 2018 budget included among others, a P2,86 billion budget for the DAR's Land Tenure Security Program, a P935.7 million budget for the Agrarian Justice Delivery Program and P1.87 billion budget for the Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Development and Sustainability Program. Moreover, it was under the DAR's Land Tenure Security Program that the Agency was able to distribute 4.74 million ha. to 2.8 million agrarian reform beneficiaries from 1972 to March 2017.

Peace and order and the economy.

President Duterte goes by the neo-liberal market-led economy that can spur the country's progress that would eventually end poverty. In his 2017 State of the Nation Address:

"I have learned that economy surges only when there is peace and order prevailing in places where investors can pour their capital and expertise. I have learned from my experience in Davao City that investor confidence is bolstered and fortified only if a potent force and mechanism for the protection of local and foreign investments are in place.pp.2-3

"That is why, I have resolved that no matter how long it takes, the fight against illegal drugs will continue because that is the root cause of so much evil and so much suffering that weakens the social fabric and deters foreign investments from pouring in. The fight will be unrelenting as it will be unrelenting .ibid.

"I will not allow the ruin of the youth, the disintegration of families and the retrogression of communities, forced by criminals whose greed for money is insatiable, as it is devoid of moral purpose. Neither will I be immobilized into inaction by the fear that I will commit an act that

will expose me to public condemnation or legal prosecution. You harm the children in whose hands the future of this Republic is entrusted, and I will hound you to the very gates of hell. (State of the Nation Address of Rodrigo Roa Duterte. 16th President of the Philippines , July 24,2017, p.4)

On land use

“I am appealing to all our legislators to immediately pass the National Land Use Act or NALUA to ensure the rational and sustainable use of our land and our physical resources, given the competing needs of food security, housing, businesses and environmental conservation.” (State of the Nation Address of Rodrigo Roa Duterte. 16th President of the Philippines. July 24,2017. p.7)

National Spatial Strategy. The Duterte Administration answer to the uneven development of both rural and urban economy is the NSS or National Spatial Strategy. It aims that by year 2022, the peripheral rural areas like Mindanao would be connected to urban centers thereby expediting their urbanization. This would answer the problem of the AFFs (agriculture, fishery and forestry laborers to have access to the labor market. The idea is to have centers called the metropolies which are supported by regional centers and their least developed peripheral rural areas all connected together. Connectivity via the digital technology such as the internet would facilitate the transfer of goods and service with the appropriate infrastructure set up. In Mindanao, for example, Davao will be the Metropolitan center; in the Visayas, Cebu, and in Luzon , Manila. The regional centers or growth areas will beef up the centers, following the Ramos Administration’s institutionalized growth areas which also embrace rural peripheral areas that will be seriously developed and given the attention they need so that they can sustain the growth of the regional centers. Thus, these peripheral areas will be eventually absorbed into the regional centers. This ambitious program laid down by the Duterte Administration for the next five years

Ambisyon Natin 2040: Matatag, maginhawa at Panatag na Buhay (Phil Development Plan 2017-2022). It defines the desired spatial distribution of human activity in the country based on economic, social, institutional and environmental conditions, through a National Spatial Strategy(NSS)- which among others aim for integration of leading and lagging areas and urban-rural linkages through transportation networks, that would improve access to social services and promote sustainable development and resiliency.p.31 Source: Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022. National Economic and Development Authority, 2017.

Implications: Authoritarian Populism and Rural Emancipation

1. Of the three presidents- Magsaysay, Estrada and Duterte, rural politics was taken invariably important to be able to make it to the presidency depending on the context of the times. Magsaysay supported US-led anticommunism stance.
2. The US versus Them worked well at a time when drastic changes need be made.Magsaysay supported the United States Containment of Communism policy, fearing the domino policy in Asia. Mindanao was a recipient of resettled Huks During Estrada’s time the All-Out-War policy was a response to the urgent peace and order problems during his time. This was blamed to Ramos’ conciliatory policy with the rebel MILF
Duterte came in when in Mindanao, corruption during PNoy’s time was deemed palpable brought about by disaster related policies.
3. Clientelism was the order of the day when these populist presidents came into power. The country was divided.
4. Spatial strategy was crucial in responding to the peace and order problems. All presidents acknowledged the importance of the rural periphery in relation to the center, Insurgent recruits are usually greater and more ready to fight the government in the peripheral areas, the long arm of the law could not reach. Anarchism is the luxury of the rural poor unless they are within the client circle of the landlord. As the economy here can be described as tribute-taking

economy, following Eric Wolf's mode of production model, Mindanao was and is always considered a backwater. The urban dominance over the rural is built intrinsically in the mind-set of the center and Imperial Manila was resisted by those in the periphery. Thus, The Duterte would respond to this based on its economic managers program, for the periphery to be absorbed by the center.

5. The centrality of military visibility was Magsaysay and Duterte's government economic development policies. All three presidents adhere to the notion of peace and development can only ensue after the peace and order problems are mitigated. Thus, strength of governance was basically placed on strong leadership backed by strong military.
6. The current rehabilitation of Marawi is a case in point of rural-urban dynamics. Land issues, in particular, the ancestral domain/military reservation issue is crucial.

The Marawi Siege and the Current Land Related Disputes.

The complexities of rural-urban dynamics is nowhere more seen than in the case of Marawi City. While being urbanized and considered the apple of the muslim maranao's eye, rural tendencies were largely nila, eh City of the South. Thus, it became vulnerable to the incursions of the ISIS when, in its desire to create an Islamic State in southeast asia having faced a certain debacle in Syria. While the Marawi siege ended after five long battle, the threat still remains. One of the vulnerabilities is the property rights of the victims, and suddenly there emerged the legal problems of land titling. It was discovered that large areas of Marawi were actually military reservations. There was apparent disconnect between what the Maranaos considered private and what the government assigned to be land exclusive for military use. In one study by the DAR PENRO Abas, most of the areas in ground zero were military reservations. Of this, President Duterte has to say:

"I am going to set a camp here but I will pay you. This is a military reservation *pero may mga may-ari naman ng lupa. O sige na lang, kung anong makuha e di bayaran na lang*(but there are landowners. Okey then, we'll just pay for whatever they will get)". A 1953 presidential decree showed that 6,000 hectares of Marawi and neighboring towns are part of a military reservation. Many Marawi families have occupied parts of the military reservation for years." (Manila Bulletin February 1,2018) The same report added that according to Harry Roque, the presidential spokesman, the President mandated the DENR to process the determination *of which public domain could be classified as alienable and disposable lands.* (ibid) (author's italics).

These developments suggest that dispossession of Maranao lands is in the offing. Recognition of their rights versus the right of the government. Duterte stepped in to avert a possible crisis that would add to vulnerabilities of Marawi.

Authoritarian Populism and Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative in the Philippines: a Reflection

As in the case of most Asian countries, being authoritarian is equated with being a strong leader that has the clout to impose his will upon the people, confident and assured of the loyalty of the military. Of the three presidents discussed in this study, only Erap, who lost the military loyalty which eventually led to his departure from Malacañang, the seat of power. However, he remained a populist, much like Magsaysay and Duterte. Erap retained the pro-poor image that he had cultivated that though convicted of the crime of plunder was elected as the mayor of Manila. Magsaysay and Duterte pandered upon the military. While Magsaysay and Duterte disciplined the military in order that their image will be enhanced as true protectors of the people, they saw to it that their benefits and other remunerations due them would be guaranteed by the government. Duterte had long been publicly praising and generously rewarding them for their peace and order accomplishments. Thus, the authority to rule implies a strong military backing.

The famous Mao Tse-tung's exhortation of "learning from the people" decidedly favors rural emancipation. Being one with the people means personifying them and reclaiming their rights to be part of the center and refusing to remain in the periphery-culturally and socially. What endeared the masses to Magsaysay and Duterte was their un-presidential persona, that was usually regarded as elitist and culturally apart from the people.

Thus in answering the core question on emancipatory rural politics- "how are new alliances built between progressive urban and rural movements, within and outside more formal organized movements and electoral and institutional politics? How have conflict and violence both closed down and opened up new spaces of politics?" (Framing ERPI p.9)

The youth as wellspring of dynamism and avant-garde for change were most visible in the current Marawi crisis demanding their voice to be heard as to how rehabilitation of their devastated city in the aftermath of Marawi siege (May 23 to October 23,2018). The most complex issue is the property rights of the Maranao. As expected, untitled lands where previous residents of the Ground Zero who intend to return face a dilemma. What to show for proofs that indeed it was their property? Young scholars of Mindanao State University(e.g Dr. Tirmizy Abdullah, who is the Director of Peace and Development Center, and an NGO consultant Rock Antequisa, who happen to be the authors' former graduate students) continue to be involved by putting up new studies regarding how the government had overtime claimed what they believed to be their primordial right. It was discovered that most of Marawi City is actually military reservation. From the Report of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao(ARMM) for the "Task Force Bangon Marawi" February 2018 of the total land area of Marawi City -8,407.905 hectares, there are 3,673.884 hectares covered by Presidential Proclamations that were actually assigned as military reservation. The land area of Mindanao State University which is 999.3560 was covered by a Presidential Proclamation 453 of December 23,1953 which established the former American military reservation of Camp Keithley.

Nonetheless, as mentioned above, Duterte wanted to avert a possible crisis in land/ property rights of the Maranao by having those affected compensated. Apparently, President Duterte recognized the complexities of property rights of the Maranao and believed that the government can solve this problem. Again, the Maranao youth whose sentiments are well-expressed on the social media, press for a more lasting solution to their property rights, i.e. recognition of their ancestral domain or bangsamoro.

Larger issues such as Federalism for the Filipino nation and the approval of the Bangsamoro Basic Law(BBL) which would grant, for its proponent-the Moro National Islamic Front, real autonomy, are still contentious issue that would involve amendments in the present Philippine Constitution. This recent commemoration of the People Power, EDSA 1986 Revolution student and professionals demonstration do not support the move for federalism. Mindanawons however, see that federalism maybe the answer to political and economic problems of Mindanao.

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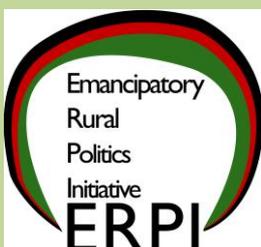
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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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