



THEME II: FEDERALISM, DECENTRALISATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Senator Aquilino Pimentel of the Philippines

Federalism as a solution to conflict in Mindanao?

Senator Aquilino Pimentel is one of the leaders behind the movement to create a federal system in the Philippines. The national movement spearheaded by Pimentel and others started in November 2000 and now has the support of 22 members of the 24-member Senate of the Philippines. Senator Aquilino Pimentel was first elected mayor of Cagayan de Oro City in 1980, and in 1984 was elected to Marcos' National legislature. When Marcos was deposed, President Cory Aquino made Pimentel Secretary of the Interior and Local Government. In 1987 he was elected to the Senate. His Web site, www.nenepimentel.org also shows his prison record under the Marcos dictatorship.

Forum staff member Carl Stieren interviewed Senator Aquilino Pimentel in Ottawa for *Federations* in May 2002.

Federations: What is your proposal for a federal system in the Philippines?

Pimentel: Basically we are proposing a 10 state federal system for the Philippines. Four of the states would be in Luzon, three in the Visayas and three in Mindanao. The actual territorial limits for each federal state would have to be defined by the constitutional convention or by a constituent assembly to amend our constitution. There is some linguistic content in the proposal for states.

In Mindanao, there would also be a state called Bangsamoro, for the Moros, or the Muslims as they are better known elsewhere.

Federations: Why do you support adopting federalism in the Philippines?

Pimentel: Two reasons: one is economic the other one is for law and order purposes.

The first purpose would apply to the entire federal republic that we are proposing to create because as of now we have a unitary system of government and getting development funds for the far-flung areas of the country becomes very, very tedious and difficult. And it would shame us if we were always reliant on the government in Manila to get things done for our respective constituencies throughout the country. And so we believe that to fast track the development of the country, it would be better if we got the federal system instituted in our land.

By doing that, the federal states could make use of their own resources, as they would see fit.

And for those areas which lack resources, because obviously not all areas are endowed with adequate resources, we'll probably have to learn from the experience of Australia, which has a so-called 'equalization fund'. I understand Canada also has an equalization scheme where the federal government has some funds that are allocated according to the revenue capacities of the different provinces.

A second reason for our call for the adoption of a federal structure is to

institute just and lasting peace in Mindanao, and better law and order in the entire country. We believe that the only way we can put an end to the recurrent, centuries old armed uprising of the Moros in Mindanao would be the institution of a federal system where they would get their own Bangsamoro state.

Federations: You were named Chief Negotiator with the Muslim rebels by President Cory Aquino in 1987. What did you have to do to carry out that assignment?

Pimentel: Meeting the first rebel group

Well, it was quite difficult. I had to travel to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to get to the Professor Nur Miswari, leader of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). We had a long discussion there, which led to a preliminary agreement to conduct further talks inside the Philippine territory, which was really my main purpose, that is, to try to get him back to the nation, rather than discuss things abroad. We got him to agree to that and he did send his emissary. He himself did not return to the Philippines at that time, but he sent one of his top generals to meet with us.

Then I had to go into Kuala Lumpur to convince a faction of the MNLF that had separated from the main body of the rebels and convinced him to give the government a chance by going back. And he did go back.

Meeting the second rebel group

Then I had to meet with the so-called 'Field Commander' of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Haji Murad. But he was easier to get in touch with because at that time he was based in Mindanao, so I talked with him also. And made the same plea to give the new government a chance, and not engage in violent action because I told him we could always talk things over with this new government. And as far as the MILF is concerned, our talks started in Manila, then we shifted the venue to Zamboanga, which is in Mindanao.

After that I had to leave the panel because I was running for the Senate at that time and a new negotiator took over - former Vice-President Emmanuel Pelaez.

The negotiations got bogged down after that, sort of broke off.

Federations: Have any of the rebel groups in the Philippines indicated that they might agree to some form of federal solution?

Pimentel: At the time (of my negotiations), there was no serious talk about federalism. There was talk about secession and independence, and we sort of tried to follow the formula that Marcos had proposed to the MNLF, which was the creation of an autonomous region rather than a federal state. And, as I said, the negotiations got bogged down soon after I had left it. Then by 1987 the new Constitution of the country was already in place and it called for the creation of an autonomous region for the Muslims of Mindanao. Since I was already in the Senate at that time, I filed the bill to create the autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao and flesh it out with some detail, and got it approved by both houses of Congress. And in 1988, the autonomous region was put in place and elections were held for the regional governor as well as for the regional assembly people.

Discussions with the first rebel group

That was the structure of government that we had for the Moros of Mindanao. But it became obvious as the years went by that this was not satisfactory to them. Nur Miswari was persuaded by President Ramos to give it a try, to give the autonomous region a try. As a matter of fact he was convinced to stand for

election as governor of the autonomous region and he was elected governor. But towards the end of his term, which was in 2001, he found out that he could not be re-elected any more as he had mismanaged the experiment - the original autonomous regional experiment - and of course he also raised some of his own complaints that the structure was inadequate for their purposes. So he rebelled again and took up arms against the government, and the government sort of crushed his rebellion and he was forced to flee to Malaysia where just now, recently, this year, he was extradited back to the Philippines. He's now facing trial for rebellion.

The second rebel group negotiates

While this was taking place, actually a few months earlier, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front also acted up under the leadership of Salamat Hashim, chairman of the MILF and the Front engaged the government in outright confrontation - armed confrontation - and the government, then under the presidency of Joseph Estrada, sent troops out to quell the uprising of Salamat Hashim. In effect, they drove them out of their so-called camps, forcing Salamat to go into hiding. Recently there was a... some kind of negotiation that was entered into by the government and the emissaries of Salamat Hashim and as of now they have come up with some agreements which I do not see, unfortunately, as ending the armed uprisings of the Muslims or the Moros in Mindanao.

The reason for my disaffection is that there seems to be no strategic formula being offered to the Moros of Mindanao to end their secession. I fear that, or am apprehensive that, what the government is trying to do is merely to buy time. We are not about to engage in another front against the Moros of the MILF faction, because we have so many problems in the country. And the MILF is also going through the motions of negotiating with the government, because it also needs time to beef up its own arsenal, probably for another round of violence. The main reason why I think that is so is that in my conversations with Nur Miswari, with Salamat Hashim, with Haji Murad, and all other Muslim politicians as well as their own traditional leaders and academics throughout the nation, they believe that the only solution is the one that I am

proposing: the adoption of a federal state of the Philippines where the Moros would have their own Bangsamoro federal state.

Federations: What groups are supporting the proposal for a federal system and what groups are opposing it? Does it split on party lines or along economic lines?

Pimentel: I don't think the proposal is being opposed on party lines. The resistance arises more from lack of knowledge or ignorance about how the federal system would actually operate to the advantage of the Filipino people and we have been getting support from politicians, some Senators, a number of Congressmen including the Speaker of the House of Representatives, notable businessmen, academics in both the Muslim world as well as the Christian world - if you want to put it that way - and we believe that we still need to get a lot of work done. We have a lot of work ahead of us because we have to penetrate the veil of ignorance that shrouds this issue in the minds of many of our people.

Federations: What effect did the September 11 attacks on the USA have on the chances for peaceful resolution of conflicts in the Philippines?

Pimentel: Well, the September 11 attacks drastically changed, I think, a lot of things including probably the world view of sovereignty. It looks like the dominant power in the world today, the US, feels free to define the extent of the sovereignty of other nations, to put it very bluntly. And of course they are now in my country with our permission because we earlier entered into the so-called "Visiting Forces Agreement" with them. That entitles them to deploy troops in areas agreed upon with the Philippine government.

So they are now in Basilan province, where the Abu Sayyaf bandit group is operating. However, and I hasten to add that one of the things I had suggested is being carried out in relation to the deployment of the US troops there: that they should not engage in any combat mission against the Abu Sayyaf. They should let the Philippine troops do their job regarding the Abu Sayyaf. ☺