

# THE MUSLIMS IN PHILIPPINE POLITICS

By Bayani Santos



**F**ROM integration to secession and back to integration — so goes the pendulum of the Muslim mood on their participation in the national life.

There has never been, of course, a concerted move to break away from the Republic but there used to be a feeling that the country's largest minority group — over a million Muslims — had been neglected by the government. They pointed out to the slow development of their region, their limited participation in national affairs, the acts of rapine committed against them by their Christian brothers. Their cry echoed the plaint of the American Negro who is very much a part of the American life but has been sentenced to live in the ghetto, receiving second-class citizen treatment in a climate of racial discrimination.

The long explosive summer of Watts broke whatever safety valve there was that contained the black anger. Watts has yet to find a duplicate here thanks to the responsive program of the Administration for the minorities. Those who would exploit the Jabidah issue have overlooked that enlightened policy for the amelioration of the minorities. The Jabidah case was, of course, a bungling of leadership at the low-echelon level. A military trial is in progress to determine who should answer for the deaths that took place at the Corregidor training camp. Jus-

tice, we are sure, will be meted out and meanwhile, those who would seize the opportunity to arouse Muslim fury would do well to wait until the responsible parties are asked to account for their deed.

On a second thinking, it is an error to call the Muslims a minority group as it would be erroneous to call the Ilocanos or Cebuanos a minority class. They constitute a distinct class of Filipinos by the sheer force of their number and their faith. They have a sense of history not enjoyed by other ethnic groups. They have color, tradition and a unique cultural background.



A becoming recognition of their importance was accorded recently by Labor Secretary Blas F. Ople when he said that the Muslim tongue should not be considered a dialect but a native language. Consequently, the labor secretary urged the teaching of Muslim and "other native languages" as optional language subjects in all colleges and universities.

Through the centuries, the Muslims have taken pride in themselves as warriors, hunters and children of the sea. Indeed, for three centuries they doggedly fought Spanish attempts to dominate their region. The Americans had as much difficulty trying to put down the "Moro" rebellion even as the rest of the country broke down under the Yankee onslaught. There is a legend that the .45 caliber pistol had to be invented especially against the "Moro" warrior. James Jones tells of this bit of folklore in his one-and-only successful novel, *From Here To Eternity*. The conventional sidearms and rifles were ineffective against the Muslim, it was said; the ordinance experts had to hassle up a special kind of artillery and they came up with the .45. This the Muslim respected.

Recognition of their fervid opposition to foreign domination is now being sought by a group of Muslim students. They feel that the eight rays in the Philippine Flag — representing the first eight provinces to revolt against Spain — is a distortion of history. The addition of a ninth ray to represent the Muslim revolt against two enemies would rectify this error, it has been contended. Says the resolution passed by an association of Muslims and a UP fraternity: "Surely we must begin to be concerned with the uneasiness of the Muslims each time they salute the Philippine flag... Surely it is time we desisted





President Marcos with Muslim leaders

from flaunting at them a symbol of our own stubbornness to take into consideration the one achievement the Muslims take pride in — the preservation of their freedom.”

The *Manila Times* however would rather have the flag explained than changed. The *Times* editorializes:

“As everyone must know, the rays of the sun represent the first eight provinces to rise against Spain in the Revolution of 1896. Obviously, it is out of the question to add the ‘Muslim ray’ for the simple reason that it is irrelevant to the situation represented in this instance.

“But the flag does take account of the geographical and cultural divisions of the country, represented by its three stars. Who knows but that the resistance to the idea of separating Mindanao from Luzon and Visayas, proposed by some American politicians as a prelude to Philippine independence, might have been less than it was were it not for these three stars.

“The flag as it is leaves nothing to be desired. It is a symbol of Filipino unity. That unity stands to be fragmented if changes are inserted which would emphasize ethnic or cultural differences.”

The Muslims have had more legitimate complaints as have been pointed out. There was a time for example when the mortality rate in Mindanao took place because of lack of medical care. This has been significantly reduced in the last three years with the medical aid program that has been

poured into that region. The Presidential Assistance for the Minorities (PANAMIN), which has been raised to cabinet level, has expanded much of its assistance on the region. The



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infrastructure program in Mindanao is one of the busiest in the country. The rate of growth is increasing with the development of industries in places like the cities of Iligan and Marawi. The full thrust of the administration’s social and economic programs in Mindanao is geared towards the acquisition of a better life for every man, woman and child in Mindanao, whether he be a Muslim or a Christian.

Another sore point is the degree of Muslim participation in the national affairs. We have, of course, a number of Muslims in the career service foremost among whom are Secretary Salih Ututalum of the Department of General Services and Commissioner Ma-

mintal Tamano of the Commission on National Integration. But what would appear to the Muslims as a rejection of their leadership is the absence of an authentic Muslim voice in Congress. True, there are a number of Muslim members in the House of Representatives but there is not one of their kind in the Senate. The last Muslim Senator to take a seat in the Upper House was Senator Domocao Alonto who terminated his term in 1959. Several attempts to seat a Muslim in the Senate has failed.

The established pattern in senatorial elections is the preponderance of more winning candidates from Luzon than from Visayas or Mindanao. The present Senate counts with nineteen members from Luzon and five from the Visayas, none from the Muslim region. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that every election offers at least six candidates from Luzon, two from Visayas and one from Mindanao. With the overwhelming Luzon vote, the candidates from the region have an easier time getting elected. There have been, of course, senators (Antonino, Almendras who have represented Mindanao in the Senate) but they do not belong to the Muslim group. This is the representation that the Muslims miss.

Will Mr. Mamintal Tamano make it this time? Tamano has personality, he is articulate, young, and is widely respected even outside of his region. A lot of people are keeping an eye on him.

Or will it come to a point when we have to seriously consider a proposal, again from the labor secretary, for a constitutional reform which would require the election of a Mindanao senator through a regional voting in that island? This would insure the place of the Muslims in the Senate, says Secretary Ople, who is a keen student of Muslim history and culture.

We do not have to go this far. The Muslim is fast becoming one of the articulate and assertive citizens of our country. Independent-minded and militant, he has a sense of history and a tradition of courage which has earned for him the respect of his fellow Filipinos. Perhaps what is needed is to forge a more cohesive Muslim unity. His representation in the major policy-making councils of government would also be desirable. In a time of quickening hopes and sweeping changes, the rise of Muslim aspirations has matched the tempo of development. His warrior spirit has been transformed to meet the new requirements of nationhood. His voice shall be increasingly heard. **FM**