

The Geo-History of a Proto-State: Nusa Island as the Operational and Ideological *Kota* of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Lanao del Sur

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Abstract: This paper uses a geo-historical approach to explain the enduring processes of Nusa Island, Lanao del Sur as the main *Kota* (fortified camp) and power center of radiation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The island, being in the strategic location in Lake Lanao, the geographical peculiarities of the island, such as its size, stability in year-round conditions, and isolation gave the MILF a stronghold against the forces of the state across decades of the armed clash. In the study, the researcher explains how the island evolved between 1969 and 2010 as it evolved into a formal training base of the *Mujahideen* into the Nusa Base Command. Additionally, the article gives an exhaustive analysis of the proto-state system of governance of MILF, the application of the rigid four points program (Islamization, organizational strengthening, military build-up as well as self-reliance) and the functional effectiveness of the Al Mahakim Al-Shari'yyah (Islamic Court) which has been settling local conflict including *Rido* (family feuds). Although confining that the island plays a geopolitical role in the stability of the MILF and that it possesses the attributes to govern itself in an orderly manner, the results also underscore the inherent contradiction to the same in that the continued existence and the ability to extract resources of the movement play a direct role in destruction of the environment including deforestation to the sustainability of the *Kota* (Ariong, 2000).

Keywords: Geo-History, Nusa Island, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), *Kota*, *Sharia* Law, Bangsamoro Homeland, Lake Lanao, *Dawah*, *Mujahideen*, *Rido*.

1. Introduction

The analysis of armed non-state actors tends to devote a significant portion of attention to ideological causes and combat operations, vital to overlooking the role of geographical physical distribution that contributes into the long-term existence and successful accomplishments of insurgent movements (Rodil, 2003). The Nusa Island located in the South Philippine in Lake Lanao offers an interesting story of convergence between geography, history and radical political ideology to create a steadfast and perennial military stronghold (Tocalo, 2000). The officially barangay of the municipality of Wato, Balindong, Lanao del Sur, this island community is special because of its popularity as the recognized *Kota*

(fortified place or a camp) of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) across the Lanao. Nusa Island has been given a

central role as a power radiation center of MILF group over many years and retained a visible presence and operational capacity that is worthy enough to be documented exhaustively by the scholars (Tocalo, 2000).

A. Statement of the Research Problem

This study attempts to fill a vital gap in the current literature of both historical and geopolitical history, that is, by presenting a critical excursion into the Geo-History of Nusa Island as the main *Kota* of MILF in Wato, Balindong, Lanao Del Sur. The necessity of the present research is due to the fact that, up to the present moment, no specific documentation related to the geo-history of the Nusa Island, with references to the actions of the MILF and their form of government, is formalized. The research aims at investigating and addressing a few of such crucial questions namely, the geo-historical facts that characterized the island; the mechanism by which the MILF disseminated influence in Wato, Balindong; the geo-strategic peculiarities that preconditioned the emergence of Nusa as a *Kota*; the nature of MILF life and governance on the island; and the quality of life and development contribution, as the result, to the civilization community.

This paper is worth more than its weight since it contributes to the field of geo-history on the specialized field especially in developing the complex history of Lanao del Sur in the past. The need to catalogue the role of Nusa Island culture encourages historical consciousness among the people of Lanao Del Sur as well as availing useful reference material in the future study of history of Lake Lanao, the second largest lake in the Philippines. In the end, the study will inform the reader about how the Nusa Island is relevant to the MILF, how the group used the natural benefits of the island, adopted its unique system of governance, and exploited local resources. It is hoped that by documenting these aspects a greater appreciation will be developed towards Lake Lanao that will result in more being done to ensure its environmental protection.

B. Theoretical Frameworks

The methodological basis of the study is Geo-History which is essentially history viewed directly through the lens of geographic factors hence bringing together the rigor of

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analytical spheres of geography and history (Carr, 1961). This is because the present as Edward Carr argues "the present is intelligent to us only in the light of the past," and this implies that in order to have a proper visualization of past events we ought to understand the geographic setup, which determines where human events will be flowing. Geography, as the science of the relationship of man with the natural world, such as the allocation of these relationships, is regarded not as a backdrop, but as an active process that contributes to creating culture and conflict. Geographic interpretations believe that the behavior of individuals cannot be completely comprehended and properly explained out of the context of their physical surroundings (Bergosa Jr., 2015).

It is a mutually beneficial relationship, which implies that geography forms the foundation of the historical process and largely determines civilizations, cultures, and societies: that geography is at the heart of history and that the latter is largely predetermined by the former has been advanced by such great experts of the discipline like Fernand Braudel (1972), Lucien Le Febvre (1958), and Alfred Crosby (1986) (Braudel, 1972). Within the framework of a military strategy, geography has been recognized as a determinant of the direction of a fight and the war logistics. More so, the analysis employs the usually contrary notions of Environmental Determinism (Ratzel, 1891) and Possibilism (Febvre, 1932). Although determinism holds that physical geography especially climate determines the psychological mind and culture of a society, possibilism believes that though the environment establishes explicit boundaries, culture and action is ultimately the domain of human agency. In this instance of Nusa, the island geographical situation created the environment, yet the MILF ideology and activities gave it an image of a historic Kota which was a revolutionary one.

C. Literature Review on Moro Resistance and Geo-History

Historical understanding of the Moro struggle in the Southern Philippines is enriched significantly by considering the role of geography, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between people and space (Funtecha, 2002). Early geo-historical studies established the importance of natural elements in shaping regional history, such as Earl Jude Paul Cheope's work (2001) on the role of the sea in the development of the Visayas region and Henry F. Funtecha's analysis (2002) of the Iloilo River as an artery of commerce (Cheope, 2001). More locally relevant works, such as Melodia S. Udtohan's attempt (1998) at environmental history concerning Illana Bay, and Emmalyn T. Catubig's (2012) and Jobert B. Bergosa Jr.'s (2015) geo-historical explorations of the Lake Lanao Region, have already established that geography played a vital role in both societal development and in providing an advantage against colonizers. These studies provide the context that the primary role of the region's terrain and the lake itself was central to the Maranao resistance against both Spanish and American forces (Bergosa Jr., 2015).

The concept of the Kota is central to understanding Nusa's military importance (Catubig, J. B., 2007). Jonathan Catubig's work (2007) on "The Moro Kota (Fort) in Lanao" provides a

baseline Jonathan Catubig's work (2007) on "The Moro Kota (Fort) in Lanao" gives a baseline understanding of it, noting the historical significance of these forts as being very much central to the Maranao martial tradition. Kotas were parts of the defense, historical accounts reveal that fortifications were often made of bamboo and nipa with thick walls of tree trunks packed with earth in order to resist the siege and safeguard the people's love for territory, loyalty to his faith and freedom (Catubig, J. B., 2007). The military history of the region has recorded that Moros often fought fiercely "from and in defense of their Kotas", and their capture often meant the downfall of the resistance in that locale (Catubig, J. B., 2007). The continuity of the Kota tradition is reflected in the MILF's continued use of the major camps, namely Camp Abubacar and Nusa Island, which has proven that this martial tradition still exists among the MILF (Mama, 2009). The works of Macapado Muslim (1994) and Salah Jubair (1999) together documenting the grievances and events (such as the Jabitah massacre, the rise of the Ilaga, and Martial Law) that led to the start of the Moro struggle for self-determination and the formation of the MILF add another anchor to the present scenario in Nusa in a century-long story of resistance and the quest for political status (Muslim, 1994). The MILF's emphasis on Jihad, Sharia, and Islamic life, as researching authors such as Lualhati Abreu (2002) and Widad Mimbantas (1991) document, gives the ideological background for the model of governance that is followed in Nusa (Abreu, 2002).

2. Research Methodology

This research used a qualitative design which is suitable for documenting communities where there are very limited written documentation and rich oral history. Scholars of the Bangsamoro struggle note the need to avoid an ethnocentric revisionism by undertaking a direct engagement with the narrators, local leaders and memory of communities. Qualitative inquiry enabled the researcher to collect rich experiences from the MILF members, Shariah officials, barangay leaders and women auxiliaries, and the civilians who lived through trying historical events.

Purposive sampling was employed to select a sample of thirty-five respondents who know Nusa Island's history directly or the activities of MILF or the governance of the community. This approach follows methodologies in previous studies on MILF communities and Maranao political culture in which insider accounts give depth that is missing in most official records Interviews were carried out in Meranaw for accuracy and sensitivity to local culture Following methodological practices in Maranao and Bangsamoro ethnographic research.

Field observations were carried out on the island and responses from interview data were written in notes and audio documentation. Triangulation was done through cross-verification of interviews with municipal profiles, barangay documents and earlier studies on Maranao geo-history and MILF ideology. Limitations included the sensitivity of speaking about conflicts in the past, restricted access to confidential MILF documents, and the natural reluctance of former combatants to talk about operational details with

constraints identified in previous studies relating to MILF.

3. 3. Result and Discussion

A. The Physical Geography and Ancestral History of Wato-Balindong and Nusa Island

The choice of Nusa Island as a major military and ideological base was not arbitrary and accidental but rather it was a choice heavily prescribed by virtue of the strategic geography and also local ancestral history (Radiamoda, 2000). The examination of the physical and historical background helps in unveiling inherent features which helped the island to sustain prolonged insurgency and served as a quasi-state entity (Catubig, E. T., 2012).

1) Geographical Profile and Environment

Nusa Island is strategically situated in the middle of the Lake Lanao and is one of the thirty-eight Barangays that make up the Municipality of Wato, Balindong, Lanao Del Sur (Wato-Balindong Municipal Profile, 2007). The municipality itself is bounded by Piagapo to the north, Masiu to the south and Tugaya, Bacolod Kalawi and Marantao in the east and west respectively (Wato-Balindong Municipal Profile, 2007). Nusa Island is within reach of major centres geographically speaking as it is situated seventeen kilometers away from Marawi City and fifty-four kilometers away from the nearest major seaport, Iligan City (Wato-Balindong Municipal Profile, 2007).

The physical dimensions of Nusa Island are hefty and lend itself to having a sizable resident and military population (Nusa Barangay Profile, 2007). The island covers a total estimated land area of 700 hectares. Land use is addressed by partition, with the majority, sixty-five percent (65%) saved for forest, and thirty-five percent (35%) which is devoted for agricultural activities. Only five percent (5%) of the total land area is covered by residential, commercial, and other uses. The topography of the island is dominated by a coastal plain of maximum two square kilometers, surrounded by mountains that are not very high. This large, habitable and resource-rich environment, in an isolated lake environment, makes it uniquely qualified out of the islands in the region to be a command center for the military.

Climatically, Nusa Island is blessed with a Type IV climatic classification, which is characterized by no clear indication of wet and dry seasons resulting in agricultural stability all year round (Naga, 2002). The temperature is always moderate, with the coldest temperatures, on rainy days, standing at fifteen degrees Celsius, or fifty-nine degrees Fahrenheit, while average temperatures climb to twenty-seven degrees Celsius, or eighty-one degrees Fahrenheit, during the dry season. Crucially the geographical position of the island lies outside the common typhoon belt which reduces environmental disruption from the strong wind disturbances common to areas northeast of Surigao. Furthermore, the soil composition, mostly Aduyan La Castellana Complex and Undeferential mountain soil both clay loam type is quite suitable to sustain the population (Socio-Economic Profile of CAAM, 2009). The Aduyan soil type which occupies 88.55% of the total area supports the production of corn, upland rice and vegetable species, permanent cropping

and pasture, important to the MILF for their long-term Self-reliance Program (Mimbantas, 1991)

2) Historical and Mythological Origins

Nusa Island is significant not only geographically speaking, but also in terms of its cultural and ancestral heritage to the Lanao region (Radiamoda, 2000). The name of the island is derived from the Malay word "Nusa" which means "Island". Oral tradition attributes its name to Mahammad Katy, a Malay missionary who visited the land of Lanao during long-ago times with the goal of spreading the teachings of Islam to the native population. Nusa is the largest of the four islands (Sulangun, Mala Balut Big Balt and Maito a Balut Small Balt) of Lake Lanao. Maranao mythology provides a dramatic version for the existence of the islands, by which islands are the rocks thrown in great anger of mythical character Rajah Indarapatra and Giant Omaca-a reverberating in their ancient battle.

The Municipality of Wato, Balindong, which includes Nusa, has a long and rich history (Mama, 2009). The area was known as Uato or Wato in the native tongues of the people literally meaning a rock or a stone and this is due to the rocky terrain from 1918 to 1948. It was renamed Balindong in 1956 to commemorate a great ruler from the Pangampong of Masiu. The local inhabitants are descending from Bataraan di kilaten, the supposed founding ancestor of the Masiu Pangampong. Ancestral lineage connects with personalities such as Thopapan to Potri Kaizadan, daughter of Aloyodan who was descended from a man named Sarip Kabunsuan of Johore as a descendant from the Islamic Prophet Muhammad. This complex lineage reflects the importance of this area in the traditional Maranao sultanate system. The territory of Nusa Island itself was historically part of the Wato Sultanate and this fact disturbs the local political structure, as it places it above the neighboring Raya and Malaig Sultanates (Tawagon 1989).

3) The Transition of Ownership and Early Militarization (1935)

Prior to the 20th century, the Nusa Island was relatively isolated and historically under-documented to the point that it was mentioned repeatedly only in passing pages as a general part of Lake Lanao (Catubig, E. T., 2012). Its historical course changed substantially during the American colonial period. In 1935, a respected figure, Sultan Marmay Radiamoda from the famous clans of Wato-Balindong and the first Sultan of Balindong was appointed by the American government as the deputy governor of undivided Lanao (Radiamoda, 2000). As part of his authority, Sultan Marmay had the right to create his own private army and he preferred the island of Nusa as his private camp.

This singular act set the precedent for Nusa Island as a place of military specialty and political control (Radiamoda 2000). Before this time, this island was described as empty, with no basic community structures such as mosque, *madrasah* or public school because of the prohibitions of the local Sultan of Wato. But upon his enthronement, Sultan Marmay planned and embarked upon the establishment of a *Masjid* (mosque) which triggered the initial infrastructural and socio-political "alterations" or socio-political changes of the island (Ariong, 2000). This early history of the island shifting from an

underdeveloped, peaceful place to a political space sanctioned for military purposes by a powerful local leader laid out the essential groundwork for a later role as the MILF's modern Kota, and linked the revolutionary movement to a tradition of local Maranao authority and military speciality (Radiamoda, 2000).

B. The Evolution of the MILF Kota: Conflict, Militarization, and Formalization (1969–2010)

Nusa Island was not immediately turned into a huge MILF Kota, but rather a long development over several decades that was characterized by the increasing conflict and the establishment of the presence of the revolutionary organization (Tocalo, 2000). The Barangay Lumba Ranao and Barangay Malayog a Kayo which were the original barangays of the island in the Martial Law Regime were amalgamated and combined, becoming Barangay Nusa under the Corazon C. Aquino presidency (Tocalo, 2000).

1) The Genesis of Armed Struggle and Early MILF/MNLF Activity (1969–1972)

The historical grievances and the atrocities meted against the Bangsamoro people in history are the seeds of the modern moro struggle, which eventually brought about the militarization of Nusa Island (Muslim, 1994). These were monumental events, including the Jabitah or Corregidor Massacre on March 18, 1968 of killing Moro youths trained as guerillas which was an “eye-opener” and rejuvenated the fears of insecurity under the Filipino rule (Jubair, 1999). This tragedy together with the subsequent mass killings and military atrocities enhanced by the formation of vigilante groups such as the Ilaga, heightened the cause of armed self-defense and self-determination (Muslim, 1994). These discontents gave the ideological and practical motivation that the establishment of movements such as the Mindanao independence movement (MIM) and the Moro National liberation front (MNLF) had the necessary grounds (Jubair, 1999).

Nusa Island in Lanao del Sur also started to be an active part of this developing movement in 1969 (Radiamoda, 2000). It was physically isolated and secluded which made it an ideal and secure place to train the early *Mujahideen* who were the Islamic fighters preparing to go to *Jihad* (Radiamoda, 2000). At first, the movement comprised a minimal number of armies in the process of training. Nevertheless, as the motive of the island became clear to most of the regions in Lanao, most of the regions began to back it up as the locals began to realize the cause and the religious undertones to their struggle. The island hence rapidly became a forgotten landmass to become an essential logistical and human resource center to the increasing Moro armed movement.

2) The Martial Law Attacks (1977 and 1979)

The main change that occurred due to the declaration of the Martial Law by the President Ferdinand E. Marcos on September 21, 1972, was that Nusa Island found itself in the crossfire of the government military force (Jubair, 1999). Marcos ruling wanted to calm down the riots and arm the citizens, but the Moro people, a threatened tribe, stirred up and openly disobeyed the command and engaged in direct hosting

(Muslim, 1994).

The 1977 Assault (Tocalo, 2000): In November 1977, the Philippine government had the first clash against Nusa Island. According to government intelligence, the Island was largely occupied with about 300 *Mujahideen* who had a general meeting of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The violence was so intense that it had a composite force consisting of the CHDF, Cagayan, police, Philippine Army, Marine forces, and the Philippine Air force. The attack lasted the whole of the week, Monday to Saturday, with incessant air attacks and dropping of bombs. Despite the bombardment, the *Mujahideen* did not retreat and started assaulting the government, which had been entrenched and retrieved weapons and finally brought about the surrender of 43 to 44 soldiers, police and CHDF members). The opposing MILF forces treated the overrun GRP force personnel in a very humane way so that their safety was maintained prior to them withdrawing themselves off the island on November 16, 1977. This first bloody battle in which hundreds perished on both sides cemented the reputation of the island of a competitive, fierce fortress, making the permanence of the *Mujahideen* presence.

The 1979 Siege (Tocalo, 2000): The second large offensive by the government came in 1979. This was the occasion when the military modified their approach as they did not rely on air power instead opted to lay a siege using the navy. Philippine Army troops surrounded the Nusa Island in boats and positioned huge artillery pieces with broad ranges based in various brigade locations in the distant area of Masiu, Tamparan, Lumbatan, Binidayan and Ganassi. The direct aim of the military was to slow down the *Mujahideen* to starvation. This siege was successfully sustained three days after which the *Mujahideen* had to surrender and leave the island. As the Philippine army landed and set camp, they would only provide the presence until ten days later and go, leaving the *Mujahideen* to retaliate a little after them. This capability of the *Mujahideen* to come home and reestablish the island with the withdrawal of the state forces after both the direct offensive in 1977 as well as the siege in 1979 really acted as a testament to the village support and the strategic strength back at Lanao of the movement. This success of persistence was one of the factors that deepened the position of Nusa as a lasting Kota.

3) The Formalization of Nusa Base Command (Post-2000)

The MILF which has its origin in 1977 when the group broke off because of differences with the MNLF formalized its presence on Nusa Island following rejuvenated military campaigns (Hashim, 2001). Salamat Hashim, a supporter of the ethnic Maguindanaos, claimed a less radical stance against the government in comparison to the MNLF under Nur Misuari, which finally caused the MILF to change its name to MILF on March 1, 1984, which indicated the use of Islam as its philosophy (Jubair, 1999). The MILF is the front of the Islamic movement in Bangsamoro homeland, a resultant repercussion of the ingrained dissatisfaction of the Bangsamoro freedom being usurped (Shamsuddin, 2006). Their fundamental goals are concerned to the total submission to the will of Allah and to put His word first (MILF Website, 2004).

Strongholds that were resilient and dispersed were important

towards the fight considering that the major MILF bases such as Camp Abubakar had been breached by the declaration of “all-out war” by President Joseph Estrada in 2000 (Mama, 2009). There was a post-dispersal following the Municipality of Wato, Balindong and Nusa Island in particular which became an even more significant refuge of members of the MILF under the rule of Azis Mimbanta (Mimbanta, 1991). This issued order had a considerable popular following with the rural population as it stressed on *Jihad*, *Sharia*, and the Islamic way of life. The central committee of MILF officially recognized the importance of the island and in 2010 gave its permanent status as the Nusa Base Command which is the special unit under the North Eastern Mindanao Front (Tocalo, 2000). In the Lanao region, Nusa is known as the stronghold and the center of power radiation of the MILF today (Tocalo, 2000). A huge responsibility falls under this command which includes the Municipality of Wato, the Municipalities of Balindong, the Municipalities of Tugaya, the Municipalities of Bacolod-Kalawi, the Municipalities of Marantao and the Municipalities of Madulum.¹ The island thus transitioned from an informal training ground to a vital, institutionalized military and administrative center for the entire Lanao region.

To contextualize the island's evolution within the broader conflict narrative, the timeline below summarizes the key geo-historical periods and events.

C. The Strategic Geopolitics of the Kota

There are certain, beneficial, geopolitical factors on which the choice of Nusa Island as its Kota was based, which increases the operational security and logistics of the MILF and its command of ideology (Tocalo, 2000). Armed or military men who have a clear vision prefer the most appropriate location to survive and fulfill the mission.

1) Defensive and Logistical Superiority

The geographical position of the Nusa Island gives it considerable defensive benefits and the area is “not easy to penetrate” (Bergosa Jr., 2015). The history of the world has proved many times that Lake Lanao is a safeguard, and the mountains that stand around it, combined with the thick growth of the vegetation, have always been hard to penetrate by the military. The island takes advantage of this defensive force of nature. More so, its physical size as the largest island in the lake makes it specially adapted to habitation and necessary densities of operation (Tocalo, 2000). The sheer size will be necessary to house a population of Base Command which when including local membership as well as those comprising the surrounding areas of responsibility may be as many as 5,000 individuals.

The topography of the island also enables it to be used by a number of military activities at the same period. It can be used as a watch tower and a surveillance post against any possible

intrusions providing an ideal and clear view of the lake that is around it (Catubig, J. B., 2007). More importantly, the fact that the island itself is an archipelagic formation, although endowed with certain vulnerability, does allow a safety system: all of the sides of the island are open, which leaves several exit options in the event of necessity in terms of running to other distant areas of the lake. This withdrawal and repositioning was a historic tactic, which was used by the M'ranos when fighting against colonizers (Catubig, J. B., 2007). Those other minor islands that are situated close enough and nearby which are Sulangun, Mala Balut, and Maito a Balut that may be used to disorient the invading armies engaged in military activities.

2) Military and Ideological Training Hub

MILF needs special room to train and enhance the capacities of their armed men (Tocalo, 2000). The land area in Nusa is substantially undeveloped, comprising of hills and forested areas; which are strategically invaluable since the area could be used as the permanent, military training grounds. Enhancing the spiritual and moral body of the military is not a sole purpose of the operational objective of the military build-up program in the Nusa that revolved around physical training of the armed troops. The fortification is done by great faith in Allah and strict following by the Sunni (deeds) of prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The remote site plays a significant role towards ensuring security and community relationship in the mainland areas surrounding (Ariong, 2000). This is due to the isolation and distance of Nusa to the main coastal towns by which the disturbances caused by military practice and activities like weapons training or the movements of a large number of troops cannot be transferred to other areas of Wato and Lanao (Tocalo, 2000). This aspect maintains peace and order in the mainland which is one of the factors in the popular control that the Nusa Base Command enjoys.

3) Fiscal and Logistical Autonomy

Insurgency sustainability in the long term is based on its capacity to maintain its own economic and logistical sustainability (Mimbantas, 1991). Ancestral history of Nusa Island contributes to the fiscal autonomy of the movement; as the island belonged to Sultan Marmay Balindong historically (Radiamoda, 2000), and the command over the island presumably transferred to the MILF, a “tax free” operation base is provided to the organization.

This is legalized by the Self-reliance Program of MILF, an important element of ensuring that the individual members and the entire organization is economically and militarily self-dependent, without the support of the foreign countries (Abreu, 2002). The resources available on the island will play a key part towards this objective. Its endowment with the limitless resources of the coast permits fishing activities, and this is a prime source of income to both members of the MILF and the

Table 1
Strategic geo-historical timeline of Nusa Island

Period	Key Event	Significance to Nusa Island
Pre-1935	Origin of Name (Malay) and Mythology	Island defined by cultural and oral tradition; largest of four Lake Lanao islands.
1935	Sultan Marmay's Private Camp	First documented utilization of the island as a military/political specialized base.
1969	Mujahideen Temporary Training Center	Transition to armed insurgency, becoming a training ground for <i>Jihad</i> fighters.
Nov 1977	First GRP Attack (Martial Law)	Nusa identified as a key MNLF stronghold; sustained bombing and large GRP force deployment.
1979	Second GRP Siege (Starvation Strategy)	Confirmed defensive vulnerability to logistics disruption; temporary withdrawal of <i>Mujahideen</i> .
2010	Nusa Base Command Established	Permanent institutionalization as the MILF's primary <i>Kota</i> and "power radiation center" in Lanao.

civilians. Moreover, the fertile and expansive land is favorable to agricultural efforts such as planting of corn, banana and other cash crops that are essential in addressing the basic subsistence requirements of the *Mujahideen* and their families. Such a mixture of positive political background and natural resources guides that the existence of MILF is pegged on local output, a testament to the success of its self-reliance requirement (Mimbantas, 1991).

4) *Vulnerability Assessment*

Although Nusa has strong defensive potential, the geographical features bring certain weaknesses to the island particularly in the face of a well-organized conventional assault (Tocalo, 2000). The discussion of the historic conflicts especially the siege of 1979 shows that it is the inherent vulnerability with its nature of an archipelagic that makes the island to be "weak if there are invasions," especially the "well-planned" invasions (Catubig, J. B., 2007). The application of the artillery and siege strategies, which succeeded in 1979 to destabilize the logistics system and evict a retreat of the enemy, demonstrated that the island could never sustain a prolonged fight that relied solely on the natural resources (GRP, 2000). Thus, its geographical position is an exceedingly tactical retreat and training camp, but its main military power does not reside in its impregnability to an extended and advanced military assault but, instead, in its imperviousness and its ability to evacuate and recover.

D. *Governance and Ideological Framework: The MILF's Islamic State Model*

Nusa Base Command is not just a military installation, it is a material expression of the MILF's aspirant Islamic state and actively pursues their vision of political, social and economic life under their own Shariah (Abreu, 2002). The camps, including Nusa, were especially set up to become models for this ideal society, which the leadership considers as the "modern version" of the ideal society for the Bangsamoro (Hashim, 1985).

1) *The Islamic Polity and Dual Governance Structure*

The basic goal of the MILF is to run a government system in which the Word of Allah is supreme, and there is no ultimate sovereignty outside of God's (Shamsuddin, 2006). The MILF shares the vision of all its members, that is to liberate the Bangsamoro homeland from the control of the GRP to develop an independent state with principles of Islam (Hashim, 2001).

The methodology of the MILF is defined as total submission to the Will of the Allah. The political structure in Nusa exists in a sort of singles. The set up in the Philippine government Barangay system is unique because it is hardly the only thing kids & the internal political bodies of the MILF (Abad, 2000). But the MILF retains *de facto* sovereignty and administrative control. This control is institutionalized by the composition of the local governance structure since all local officials including the Barangay Chairman are confirmed members of the *Mujahideen* (Ariong, 2000). This integration is to ensure the official state apparatus operates within the MILF's ideological framework. The Nusa Base Command is the top most command, and follows the form of the Jihad Executive

Committee (JEC), which is responsible for internal affairs, military actions and public policy. The political structure is generally patterned after a republic form of government, and has Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branches (Tocalo, 2000).

2) *The Four-Point Program in Practice*

The governance model and activities of the MILF are based on the long-term strategic blueprint called the Four-Point Program of action, which the central committee designed to be implemented over a number of decades, beginning in the 1980s (Hashim, 2001).

a) *Islamization (Dawah)*

The highest program is *Dawah* (calling to prayer or appeal for invocation) the absolute adoption and implementation of the Islamic law in every aspect of life on the island (Abreu, 2002). For the MILF, *Dawah* is of practical importance: to help to build up the ideological commitment of the membership; to provide members with a clear sense of the religious rationale for waging *Jihad*; and to propagate the message of Islam to the non-Muslim community. Implementation is rigorous and systematic with monthly "Islamic awareness" events for military personnel, officials and the participating civilians held by the Nusa Base Command itself (Tocalo, 2000). To institutionalize this program, infrastructures such as Mosques, the *Madrasah* (religious school) and the public school are used which are often established with the cooperation of the local officials and the MILF's members for spreading Islamic teachings. Furthermore, all command levels of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) have their respective Murshid (Guides) appointed as the designated spiritual guide and Islamic teacher in order to ensure uniformity and adherence of the ideology within the armed troops (Tocalo, 2000).

b) *Strengthening of Organization*

The second pillar concentrates on organizational cohesion, unity and the development of competent Muslim leadership as it is recognized that a sound organization is one of the preconditions for the victory (Mimbantas, 1991). The MILF's mandates that the ultimate leader should be a practicing Muslim who gives the good example in matters of faith, piety, discipline and ethics. To develop these qualities the MILF conducts regular schooling and seminars that concentrate on leadership and managerial qualities. This developmental accent has made possible for organizing the Base Command successfully into its four essential components, namely, executive, judiciary, legislative, and military.

c) *Military Build-Up*

In addition to basic combat preparedness, the military build-up program stressed the spiritual and moral strengthening of the military. The MILF holds that military power is necessary for the successful struggle, but that this power must be supported by the belief in Allah and strict adherence to the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The military structure does include the Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Battalion (BIWAB) which exposes the female members to the mild military training and performing them to the roles of the critical auxiliary (Pumbaya, 2000). These roles include medical work such as first aid, treating minor gunshot wounds and traditional

medicine, which stretch their services to both MILF members and the civilian populace. Furthermore, internal security is handled by special units such as the National Guard Division and Headquarter Division, which are deployed within the camp to regulate day-to-day security throughout the island.

d) Self-reliance

The last pillar is the Self-reliance Program which is essential to survival of the group against the outside pressure in the long run (Abad, 2000). This is aimed at attaining economic and military independence, so that the movement will not be dependent on foreign aid. The plan involves mobilization of the members into useful economical activities; half of the members in MILF are present in farm within the camp, serving the organizational purposes as they await mobilization (Mimbantas, 1991). The program informs the Bangsamoro that they have to rely solely on their local assistance in a fight to liberate them. This will promote the members to participate in the economic activities such as small-scale business, cooperatives and farming, hence maintaining the logistics and financial demands of the freedom fighters and offering resilience of external financial limitation (Abad, 2000).

The practical application of these four programs determines how Nusa Island is a successful prototype of the desired Islamic state where all spheres of life are shaped by the MILF ideology (Abreu, 2002).

E. The Administration of Justice: The Al Mahakim Al-Shari'yyah

A functional system of judiciary in the Nusa Island that has been established is the strongest indicator of the ability of the MILF to institute institutionalized governance, in which they have provided an alternative legal system according to the Islamic jurisprudence (Ulama, 2000). This system is deemed to be key in ensuring that peace and order is maintained (Tocalo, 2000).

1) Judicial Mandate and Shariah Application

The MILF regime is founded on the philosophy that Allah is the only true sovereign who necessitates the introduction of the Shariah Law (Divine Law) as the sole foundation of managing the organization and controlling all spheres of life within the camp (Hashim, 1985). The Shariah Law, which does not sanction the acceptability of man-made laws, has its power source mainly based on the *Qur'an* as well as the *Sunnah* (practices of Prophet Muhammad). Where such a circumstance of action, lacking any explicit references in these primary sources, appears, then the court utilizes the supplementary principles: *Ijma* (communal consensus), *Qiyas* (reasoning by analogy), and *Ijtihad* (invoking a personal ruling, taking into consideration the welfare and needs of the people) (Ulama,

2000).

The Al Mahakim Al-Shari'yyah (Islamic court) of judicial system is administered by the Nusa Base Command (Ulama, 2000). This court acts as the highest Moscow court in Lanao del Sur with powers of hearing both criminal and civil cases in this island and her jurisdiction. The court has jurisdiction over the North Eastern Mindanao Front that includes various base commands outside Nusa, such as the 101 st, 103 rd, Jabidah, INBC, Bushra and Unayan Base Commands. The Shariah court passes legislation and issues decree strictly in reference to the Shariah principles.

2) Conflict Resolution and Judicial Efficacy

The Al Mahakim Al-Shari'yyah is essential in ensuring stability especially in the delicate socio-political cases, which in the region, the conventional state courts find it difficult to resolve (Suhaimin, 2010). The court presides and adjudges on significant criminal actions as well as kidnapping, rape, murder and theft and important societal disputes like **Rido** (family feuds) and intricate family and marriage issues (Ulama, 2000). The hearings are set to be held on Sundays, where petitioners in Lanao del Sur would gather.

The effectiveness of this legal system is great: the respondents prove that the Shariah court is effective to provide justice in over 75% of cases involving Rido, family matters, and other disputes presented before it in Balindong and the Lanao region in general (Tocalo, 2000). Such a high rate of success at the local conflict resolutions is an interesting foundation to the popular legitimacy and endorsement of the MILF, which shows that the organization is actually offering a real-world good due to its effective and well-regarded conflict resolution that the state cannot replicate (Ulama, 2000).

3) Penal System and Rehabilitation

A judgment that results in a verdict, particularly in major cases, should initially be checked by the council of Ulama before the Central Committee of MILF gives an authorization to execute (Ulama, 2000). The fact that, despite the rigid legal system, since the creation of the Nusa Base Command, not a single execution has been conducted is important as it shows more realistic interpretation of law based on the relations within the community and local context.

Convicted ones that are sentenced to incarceration are incarcerated in special prison cells established within the camp (Tocalo, 2000). The prison ideology incorporates a sound rehabilitation program that focuses on teaching the Islamic faith and performing the five daily prayers (Ulama, 2000). The community highly respects this system, as it has been seen that at times parents who have children addicted to drugs go out of their way to send their children to the MILF camp in the hope

Table 2
Components of the MILF four-point program in Nusa base command

Program Pillar	Core Objective	Key Implementation Strategy
Islamization (<i>Dawah</i>)	Total adoption of Islamic principles and strengthening ideology	Monthly Islamic awareness sessions; institutionalization of Mosques and <i>Madrasah</i> .
Strengthening Organization	Develop competent, practicing Muslim leadership and sustain unity	Regular leadership seminars; structuring Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary branches.
Military Build-Up	Achieve organizational power and spiritual fortitude.	Training (including BIWAB); moral strengthening based on <i>Sunnah</i> ; deployment of National Guard.
Self-Reliance	Economic and military independence from external aid.	Promoting farming, fishing, and small-scale business (e.g., cooperatives) for subsistence and funding.

that they might be rehabilitated and alleviate the burden of worry. The MILF takes care of basic needs of such inmates, which is usually augmented by the families of inmates. MILF has also aggressive anti-crime efforts by conducting special efforts to fight crime (Tocalo, 2000). Later the MILF Task Force Against Shabu (MILF-TFAS) was renamed Task Force Against Criminality (TFAC) to expand its field and this showed the organizations desire to stabilize the region by dealing with the crime aspects. This commitment of order, justice and rehabilitation creates a fear and reverence of the MILF which helped much to the upkeep of peace and order in the *Kota*.

F. Socio-Economic Dynamics and Community Development

The lives of the civilian community living in Nusa Island is firmly entrenched and molded by the appearance and beliefs of the MILF that forms an atmosphere of security, religious rigor and localized-resource-based economic action (Nusa Barangay Profile, 2007). Among the approximate 1, 013 population (as per the census of 2007) they are believed to have about 85 percent of the residents as members or active followers of the MILF (Abad, 2000).

1) Community Life and Social Order

The Nusa Island demographic profile shows that it has had a special community formation, in terms of high density of residents being members or ardent supporters of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Carim, 2000). This assimilation guarantees the existence of the civilian population, whereby the *Mujahideen* and the local Barangay authorities are MILF members themselves (Abad, 2000).

According to the inhabitants, everyone testifies that there is a drastic difference between life within the Nusa and that of other places in the Lanao (Carim, 2000). The availability of the MILF makes the level of peace and security high, and there is no known history of thieves in the vicinity or significant criminal groups. The stringent policies and measures of the MILF towards drugs, crime and disruptive conduct are highly observed and this has created stability (Ariong, 2000). Socially, the community does not just practice the Five Pillars of Islam alone but also the moral teachings of *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* in their day to day lives and thus results in a religious and well-organized Islamic community. Tourists, even tourists who are attracted by tourism spots must comply with the regulations set by the MILF as well as the Barangay (Carim, 2000). This is the sense of community and the high level of social control that the residents mention as a major advantage of residing within the *Kota*.

2) Economic Activities and Self-Sufficiency

Structural connection of the economy of the island with the MILF Self-reliance Program would make sure that local production is in charge to maintain the local community and the military operations (Mimbantas, 1991). The needs of the regular members who guard the MILF defensive perimeters against the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) are also sustained using this program.

a) Military Build-Up

Agriculture is a key economic activity and the large fertile land in the island can be used in agriculture (Socio-Economic

Profile of CAAM, 2009). The farming activities are based on the use of the traditional approach in cultivating the staple crops such as white corn, upland rice, and the vegetables such as cabbages, sweet potato, cassava and bananas. These crops play an important role in provision of adequate food to the population and even lead to commercial surplus which is exported to the outside world. In the case of the MILF, farming has become a commercial and sustenance endeavor, and it has a direct relationship with the requirements of the regular standing armies that are involved in defence perimeter guards. There is also a problem of infrastructure constraints, where Farm-to-Market Roads (FMR) provide services to approximately half a million hectares of farmlands (Gao 2009, p. 3), thus making transportation of perishable products expensive, which in many cases has resulted in the workers earning more than the members of the planting farms do during harvesting.

b) Fishing

Fishing is also crucial considering that it is an archipelago and is also a primary source of income to the civilians and the MILF members due to its strategic location, which is surrounded by Lake Lanao (Socio-Economic Profile of CAAM, 2009). Various fish species are available in the lake, and they include *Tilapia*, *Katulong*, *Arwan* and *Bongkaong*. These are the areas where these resources are harvested in and around Nusa and other neighboring barangays in the form of Lilod and Borakis, which proves to be witness to the fact that the community depends on the coastal resources within the Lake Lanao. The resource in general under discussion, such as coastal resources, is considered as renewable resources (Nusa Barangay Profile, 2007).

3) Infrastructure and State-Insurgency Cooperation

The process of modernization in the Nusa Island demonstrates the availability of a practical partnership between the non-state MILF and the Local Government Unit (LGU), which is an indicator of a tactical embrace of state development to the *Kota* (Bagul, 2012). The LGU is the major source of funding of major developments in infrastructure, whereas the MILF can offer help in implementation and support of minor finance. It is also not known that the group is financially qualified to finance such giant projects on its own.

Between 2014 and 2016, there was a lot of infrastructural development that led to the availability of concrete roads, a permanent Barangay Hall, a school building, and a foot-walking bridge (Bagul, 2012). In 2012, the island was electrified as a result of Sitio Electrification Program, which was financed by President Benigno S. Aquino III. This project, which would also tie Nusa to the Lanao del Sur Electric Cooperative (LASURECO) grid through a 2-kilometer line, as a "milestone in the enduring quest for peace and development in Mindanao," by local leaders in Lanao del Sur when the power was switched on at Nusa in January of 2012 (Framework Agreement with the MILF) (Philippine Star, 2012). This innovation made it easy to install more street lamps all over the island to replace the previous solar powered streetlights. With how resources of the state can be transferred to an insurgency stronghold when the political conditions are present and this is

Table 3
Governance efficacy and demographic profile of Nusa Island

Metric Category	Key Data Point	Analytical Significance
Land Area	700 hectares total	Largest island in Lake Lanao, enabling large-scale camp and agriculture.
Civilian Population (2007)	1,013 residents	Official LGU recorded population; fifth largest Barangay in Wato, Balindong.
MILF Population Estimate	Up to 5,000 members/supporters	Indicates massive regional mobilization and commitment to the <i>Kota</i> .
Judicial Efficacy	75% of cases (Rido, etc.) settled	Confirms high legitimacy and functional capacity of the <i>Al Mahakim Al-Shari'yyah</i> .
Environmental Status	65% forested; documented bombings and deforestation	Strategic resource base under threat; environmental cost of sustained conflict.

what triggers development which benefits the community yet at the same time, in recognition of the territorial control of the MILF.

G. Environmental Challenges and the Cost of Conflict

Although the MILF enjoyed the necessary edge due to the geography of Nusa Island, the advanced military and human presence in Nusa Island has come with its own environmental prices, which will pose a sustained challenge on the sustainability and resource base of the island (Carim, 2000). The larger problems of climate change have not spared the island as has been shown by drying of some of planted agricultural areas.

1) The Physical Scars of War

The environment of the island carries a strong scar of the extreme battles of the past especially during the Martial Law administration (Carim, 2000). The war that happened in the late 1970s caused widespread environmental damage. Residents explained that the damaging effects in the use of high-caliber weaponry and bombs by the Philippine soldiers was very severe hence cutting down the trees and civilian homes (Carim, 2000). The devastation caused on the environment by these military campaigns on the island is still being felt to date.

The environment is inherently clean in certain ways despite these historical wounds because heavy, pollution causing industries have been lacking in the area (Nusa Barangay Profile, 2007). Besides, the island boasts a potable water supply, 95% of households have fair access to a secure supply of water. Nevertheless, new stressors to the ecosystem have been brought about by the ongoing human activity and the physical remnants of war.

2) Deforestation and Sustainability Paradox

There is a critical contradiction when examining the dependence of the MILF on the natural resources of the island and how their presence actually affects the environment of the island (Ariong, 2000). Nusa has been experiencing serious environmental issues and the main one is deforestation despite the fact that 65 percent of the island is considered to be forested (Macalantong, 2000). Its destructive factors can be seen as having multi facets such as illegal logging and improper cutting of trees to provide the materials needed in building of houses and other facilities that the expanding population needs.

Their degradation is also a result of the military operating demands of the MILF; the intensity of military training activities has been mentioned as the cause of changing forest rampages into “grassland and bald hills” (Macalantong, 2000). Moreover, the rise in the number of government infrastructure projects such as concrete roads and houses also add to the

changes in the landscape of the island. This is intensely paradoxical in regard to sustainability: the MILF can only achieve self-sufficiency by having a healthy, resource endowed environment (forests, fertile land), but the presence and sheer existence of the enormous command center also play a direct role in the destruction of the island in an obvious manner (Ariong, 2000). This realization implies that even though the MILF facilitates the role of a protector of the homeland, present residents, the organization among them, practice inadequate activities in the area of environmental protection, which leaves the prospects of the future when the island and Lake Lanao become a miserable habitat.

3) Community Environmental Efforts

Localized waste management is another aspect that has been introduced into the community, in an effort to combat the extensive situation of solid waste (Macalantong, 2000). These systems are created to be in conformance with the overall intent of the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000 (RA 9003), even though a formal Ecological Solid Waste Management program is not fully realizable. There is also the exercise of community service days, where barangay officials, MILF members, and students of the Nusa Elementary School come together and segregate solid wastes in great numbers (Ariong, 2000). Garbages are not dumped carelessly in Lake Lanao but they are burnt in a proper area. These collective actions are considered by locals to be essential to the sustainability of the environment, whereas more structural issues, such as widespread deforestation, demand more concerted action.

4. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The geo-history of Nusa Island has been exhaustively analyzed attesting to its central and multi-layered significance as the main MILF Kota in Lanao del Sur (Tocalo, 2000). The geographic factors inherent in the island such as large size, Type IV climate stability, fertile soil and remote location to Lake Lanao played a significant role in determining the presence of the island as a continuing stronghold. History shows that the island served as a MILF a long-term haven a training base required to bring about ideological and military indoctrination, and a vital base of “power radiations center” to coordinate operations in the Lanao region.

These geographical resources enabled the MILF to convert a decentralized resistance organization into a proto-state (Ulama, 2000). The MILF had a strong administrative ability by uniting their ideological imperatives that is Islamization, Shariah rule and self-reliance into a workable two-system political structure

(Abad, 2000). The fact that the *Al Mahakim Al-Shari'yyah* was highly effective in resolving community conflicts and preserving security is another means of affirming that MILF has the capacity to rule over a stable, well-organized, and well-religious community. This triumph makes Nusa Island a realistic possible scenario of what the MILF could have become as a rule making body, assuming they attain their ambition of becoming larger, encasing our autonomy or self-rule.

The research points to a very important conclusion on the conflict resolution and governance in the Southern Philippines, which is that geopolitical strength of the MILF in Nusa was on the one hand much better than the weakness, which enhanced the standing of the organization in the region and have placed them "fearsome" in other parts of Lanao (Tocalo, 2000). The possibility of incorporating state-approved infrastructure (such as electrification) and still enjoy de facto ideological and administrative leadership poses a thorny problem before the Philippine government and shows that the MILF has successfully localized its power (Bagul, 2012).

However, the results also are very informative in terms of very important warning within the scope of long-term sustainability (Macalantong, 2000). The indications strongly point to the fact that the island, which is our most vital to the survival of MILF, is indeed actively being degraded by the influences of past damage to the conflict as well as the pressures of the large, perennial population. The statement which suggests that the island and lake Lanao as a whole are on the brink of destruction should existing trends of deforestation and resource exploitation continue suggests that there needs to be a reassessment by the group regarding the protection of their homeland not only through military means (Ariong, 2000). This contradiction emphasizes that a place can be both "useful at the same time changed and abused by the people or its inhabitants".

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