

The Politics of Identity in the BARMM: An Analysis of how the Creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao has Reshaped or Reinforced Ethnic and Sub-Ethnic Identities and Bangsamoro Nationalism

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Abstract: The establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019 marked a significant political milestone in the long struggle of the Bangsamoro people for self-determination. While BARMM was envisioned as a unifying political project, its implications for ethnic and sub-ethnic identities within the region remain contested. This study examines how the creation of BARMM has reshaped or reinforced ethnic and sub-ethnic identities and how political structures influence identity representation and unity. Employing a quantitative research design, survey data were collected from 100 residents of Lanao del Sur using Likert-scale questionnaires. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were utilized to analyze identity perceptions, political representation, and unity across ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. Findings reveal strong ethnic pride and general agreement that communities are recognized within the broader Bangsamoro identity. However, perceptions of political representation remain mixed, with clan- and family-based politics continuing to influence leadership and decision-making. Chi-square analyses indicate significant relationships between identity perceptions, political representation, and unity, underscoring the role of governance structures in shaping social cohesion. While BARMM has contributed to increased optimism, peace-building, and intergroup cooperation, persistent sub-ethnic divisions and uneven socio-economic benefits highlight ongoing challenges. The study concludes that inclusive political representation and equitable development are crucial to strengthening Bangsamoro nationalism while respecting ethnic diversity within the autonomous region.

Keywords: Bangsamoro identity, BARMM, ethnic and sub-ethnic identities, identity politics, political representation, Bangsamoro nationalism, Muslim Mindanao.

1. Introduction

The creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989 and later the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019 is deeply rooted in the Bangsamoro people's long history of resistance and enduring aspiration for self-determination—first against colonial conquerors and later against the Philippine

state. Historical injustices, including massacres, the sale and transfer of Philippine territories during colonization, and the imposition of land laws under the American colonial government, dispossessed the Moros of their ancestral lands and fueled their demand for autonomy.

Prior to Spanish colonization, Muslim sultanates such as Maguindanao, Sulu, Buayan, and the Pat a Pangampong sa Ranao (the Confederation of Lanao Sultanates) had already established organized political and social systems. These sultanates resisted Spanish rule for centuries, preserving their distinct identity. Their opposition deepened under the United States, particularly after the passage of the Land Registration Act of 1902 and subsequent land laws, which declared vast Moro ancestral lands as public domain and opened them to settlers and corporations (Gowing, 1979; McKenna, 1998). The Bangsamoro also resisted incorporation into the Philippine Republic, most notably through the Dansalan Declaration of 1935, which petitioned the U.S. government to exclude Mindanao and Sulu from the Philippines (Lingga, 2004).

Although these appeals were ignored, resistance evolved from peaceful petitions to political and armed struggles, culminating in the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and later the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The first institutional outcome of this struggle was the ARMM, created by Republic Act 6734 in 1989 after the Tripoli Agreement of 1976. However, ARMM was widely criticized as a “failed experiment” due to its limited powers, weak institutions, and inability to address core issues of Moro self-governance (Abubakar, 2019). After decades of negotiations, the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) of 2018 replaced ARMM with BARMM, which was ratified through a plebiscite in 2019. BARMM promises greater autonomy and a stronger platform for Moro self-determination, but it also raises critical questions about identity politics in a multi-ethnic region.

BARMM is not a homogenous political entity. It encompasses diverse ethno-linguistic communities including

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the Maranao, Tausug, Maguindanaon, Yakan, Sama, and Iranun each with distinct histories and claims to identity. The recognition of a collective “Bangsamoro identity” was envisioned as a pathway toward unity, but it also raises questions about whether ethnic and sub-ethnic identities are being reshaped toward solidarity or reinforced as sites of division. Existing studies have examined BARMM’s legal and institutional dimensions, but less attention has been given to the politics of identity that underpins this new political arrangement.

This article argues that while the establishment of BARMM was designed to unify Moro communities under a shared identity, it has simultaneously reshaped and reinforced ethnic and sub-ethnic identities in ways that both strengthen and challenge regional cohesion. By analyzing how identity politics is expressed within BARMM’s political structures and social relations, this study highlights the dual role of identity as a resource for solidarity and a source of tension in the evolving Bangsamoro project.

2. Method

This study uses a quantitative approach to explore how the creation of BARMM has shaped ethnic and sub-ethnic identities in Lanao del Sur. A total of 100 residents from various communities such as Maranao, Iranun, Maguindanaon, Tausug, and Christian settlers participated in a structured survey with five-point Likert-scale questions about identity, political representation, inclusion, and social cohesion. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure fair representation, and surveys were conducted both face-to-face and online, with full respect for confidentiality and voluntary participation. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, and for clearer interpretation, responses were grouped into Agree, Neutral, and Disagree categories for certain analyses. By combining careful sampling, thoughtful measurement, and ethical research practices, the study provides insight into how BARMM governance is experienced across diverse communities in Lanao del Sur.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. Most participants belonged to the 32–36 age group (37.96%), indicating a predominantly in middle-aged, this group is significant because they have lived through both ARMM and the early stages of BARMM. female respondents slightly outnumbered males, suggesting balanced gender representation. The gender composition shows a relatively balanced representation between male and female respondents, with a modest predominance of females. This balance suggests that the findings of the study are likely reflective of both male and female perspectives, minimizing potential gender bias in the data. The slightly higher proportion of female respondents may imply a more active participation or willingness among females to respond to surveys, which is consistent with trends observed in educational and social research (Smith & Lee, 2020).

In terms of educational attainment, the majority reached college level or higher, this suggests that the respondents generally possess a strong foundation in political awareness, governance, and identity issues.

According to Delanty (2018), education strengthens individuals’ capacity to articulate political and cultural identity by providing conceptual tools and frameworks. This aligns with the findings where many respondents demonstrate nuanced understanding of identity politics.

Respondents with college and postgraduate training may be more aware of BARMM’s political structures and historical context, influencing how they interpret identity-related questions. Ethnically, most respondents were Maranao, (57%) consistent with the demographic composition of Lanao del Sur. The ethnic distribution found in the study aligns with what Abubakar (2019) explains about the Bangsamoro region: ethnic diversity does not diminish shared political aspirations but instead allows for a pluralized collective identity. The coexistence of Maranao, Tausug, Maguindanaon, and Iranun groups in one locality mirrors the broader diversity of BARMM.

Table 2 indicates generally positive perceptions of ethnic and

Table 1
Demographic profile of the respondents

	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	17–21	19	12.23
	22–26	14	10.49
	27–31	11	10.65
	32–36	35	37.96
	37–41	7	8.61
	42–46	13	18.45
	47–51	1	1.62
Sex	Male	46	46.00
	Female	54	54.00
Educational Attainment	High School Level	2	2.00
	High School Graduate	16	16.00
	College Level	26	26.00
	College Graduate	44	44.00
	Postgraduate	12	12.00
Ethnic / Tribal Group	Maranao	57	57.00
	Maguindanaon	20	20.00
	Tausug	17	17.00
	Iranun	6	6.00
Total		100	100.00

Table 2
Level of Identity perception among different ethnic and sub-ethnic groups after the creation of BARMM

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal interpretation	Rank
I feel proud to identify as a member of my ethnic group (e.g., Maranao, Tausug, Maguindanaon).	4.287	Strongly Agree	1
I believe that my ethnic identity is respected under the BARMM government	3.950	Agree	2
I feel that my ethnic or sub-ethnic identity has become stronger since the creation of BARMM.	3.822	Agree	4
I believe that BARMM promotes a shared Bangsamoro identity across different ethnic groups.	3.713	Agree	5
I think my community is recognized as part of the broader Bangsamoro identity.	3.941	Agree	3
I feel that Bangsamoro nationalism is growing stronger under BARMM.	3.505	Agree	8
The creation of BARMM has reduced discrimination among ethnic groups.	3.426	Agree	9
BARMM balances respect for ethnic identities and the promotion of a collective Bangsamoro identity.	3.574	Agree	6
Overall, BARMM has reshaped identities toward greater unity rather than division.	3.545	Agree	7
Overall	3.751	Agree	

Table 3
Level of Influence of the BARMM Political structure on the Representation of Ethnic and sub-ethnic Identities

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
BARMM provides equal political representation to different ethnic groups.	3.327	Neutral	4
I believe leaders in BARMM represent the interests of my ethnic group fairly.	3.386	Neutral	3
Clan or family ties still strongly influence political representation in BARMM.	3.901	Agree	1
Ethnic background affects who gets leadership positions in BARMM.	3.614	Agree	2
Decision-making in BARMM includes voices from diverse communities	2.574	Disagree	5

Table 4
Level of influence of the establishment of BARMM on unity and ethnic and Clan-Based division

Statements	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
I feel a stronger sense of unity with other Moro groups since BARMM was established.	3.465	Agree	5
My community cooperates more with other ethnic groups under BARMM.	3.485	Agree	3
Despite differences, BARMM helps strengthen peace among Moro groups.	3.663	Agree	1
Sub-ethnic divisions (e.g., Maranao vs Tausug) still affect unity in BARMM.	3.515	Agree	2
BARMM has improved opportunities (education, jobs, services) for my community.	3.277	Neutral	6
I feel optimistic about the future of BARMM.	3.475	Agree	4

sub-ethnic identity following the establishment of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Respondents expressed strong pride in their ethnic affiliation and agreed that their identities are respected under the BARMM government. This suggests that creation of BARMM has not diminished ethnic identity but has provide a context where such identities are acknowledging and valued. Participants also agreed that their communities are recognized within the broader Bangsamoro identity, reflecting a balance between ethnic diversity and collective belonging. While perceptions of strengthened identity and shared Bangsamoro unity were positive, low ratings related to reduction of discrimination and the growth of Bangsamoro nationalism indicate that challenges remain. These results suggest that identity consolidation is ongoing and requires sustained institutional and social support.

Implications:

The findings imply that autonomy can support both ethnic recognition and collective identity formation when inclusivity is prioritized. BARMM policy makers may strengthen these gains by promoting intercultural dialogue and addressing persistent concerns related to discrimination. Further research may examine how identity perceptions evolve overtime and how policy interventions can deepen social cohesion across diverse ethnic groups.

Table 3 shows mixed perceptions regarding how the political structures of BARMM has influenced ethnic representations. Respondents were generally *neutral* on whether leaders fairly represent the interest the interests of their ethnic groups. This neutrality suggests uncertainty or varied experiences among communities regarding political inclusion.

In contrast, respondents *agreed* that clan or family ties

strongly influence political representations and that ethnic background affects access to leadership positions. These findings indicate that traditional structures continue to shape political participation in BARMM. Notably, respondents disagreed that decision making in BARMM includes voices from diverse communities, pointing to perceived gaps in participatory governance.

To summed it up, the results suggest that while BARMM has introduced new political arrangements, existing power dynamics related to clan and ethnicity remain influential

Implications:

These findings imply the need for stronger institutional mechanism to promote inclusive and participatory governance in BARMM. Policy makers may consider reforms that reduce the influence of clan-based politics and ensure broader representation in decision- making process.

Table 4. examines whether the establishment of BARMM has fostered unity or reinforced divisions. The results indicate that respondent generally agree that BARRM has strengthened unity and cooperation among Moro and ethnic groups. Participants also agreed that BARMM contributes to peace-building despite existing differences.

However, respondents also acknowledged that sub-ethnic divisions continue to affect unity, suggesting that while progress has been made, internal differences remain relevant.

Neutral responses regarding improvements in economic and social opportunities imply that the perceived benefits of BARMM may not be evenly experienced across communities.

Thus, the findings reflect cautious optimism. Unity and cooperation are improving but structural and social challenges persist.

Table 5

Chi-Square and P –Value of the Relationship between ethnic and sub-ethnic identity perception after the creation of BARMM and the influence of the BARMM Political structure on identity representation

Variable	Chi-Square Test	P-value	Decision	Remarks
Ethnic and sub-ethnic identity perception after the creation of BARMM vs the influence of the BARMM Political Structure on Identity Representation	38.38	9.361×10^{-8}	Reject Ho	Significant

Table 6

Chi-Square and P –Value of the Relationship between ethnic and sub-ethnic identity perception after the creation of BARMM and the establishment of BARMM on Unity and Ethnic and Clan-Based division

Variable	Chi-Square Test	P value	Decision	Remarks
Ethnic and sub-ethnic identity perception after the creation of BARMM vs Establishment of BARMM on Unity and Ethnic and Clan-Based Division	42.84	1.115×10^{-8}	Reject Ho	Significant

Implications:

The result suggests that peace and unity initiatives under BARMM should continue to emphasize intercultural cooperation while addressing persistent sub-ethnic divisions. Development programs that ensure equitable access to employment and other services may help strengthen unity further. Future research could assess how long-term development outcomes influence perceptions of unity and belonging.

Table 5. present the results of Chi-square test examining the relationship between ethnic and sub-ethnic identity perceptions after the creation of BARMM and the influence of BARMM's political structure on identity representations. The results show a statistically significant relationship ($X^2=38.38$, $P<0.0001$) between the 2 variables leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis.

This finding indicates that differences in how ethnic and sub-ethnic groups perceive their identities are significantly associated with how BARMM's political structures shapes representation. The result suggests that political arrangement under BARMM play a meaningful role in influencing identity recognition and representation, rather than these perceptions occurring by chance. This supports the view that governance structures affect how groups see themselves and their place within the broader Bangsamoro society.

Implications:

The significant relationship implies that inclusive political structures are crucial in shaping positive identity representation. BARMM policymakers may strengthen identity recognition by ensuring fair representation across ethnic and sub-ethnic groups. The result also highlights the importance of political reforms that promote equity and participation to reinforce social cohesion.

Table 6 examines the relationship between identity perceptions after the creation of BARMM and whether BARMM has fostered unity or deepened existing ethnic and clan-based divisions. The Chi-square test results show a statistically significant relationship resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis.

This finding suggests that perceptions of ethnic identity are closely linked to views on unity and division within BARMM. It indicates that the establishment of BARMM has had a measureable impact on how communities interpret unity, cooperation and division. While many respondents perceive increased unity, the significance of the relationship reflects ongoing variation in experiences across different ethnic and clan groups.

Implications

The results imply that unity- building efforts under BARMM directly influence how ethnic groups perceive their identity and social relations. Programs that promote inter-ethnic cooperation and address clan-based divisions may further strengthen unity. For future research, qualitative studies may help explain why perception of unity differ among groups and how these differences can be address through policy and community initiatives.

4. Conclusion

The study found that the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has influenced how ethnic and sub-ethnic groups perceive their identity, political representation, and unity. Respondents demonstrated a strong sense of pride in their ethnic affiliation, indicating that ethnic identity remains resilient under BARMM. At the same time, most respondents agreed that their communities are recognized within the broader Bangsamoro identity, suggesting that autonomy has provided a political space where ethnic diversity and collective belonging can coexist.

In terms of political representation, the findings reveal mixed perceptions. Respondents were generally neutral regarding equal representation and fair leadership, while strongly agreeing that clan and family ties continue to shape political positions and influence. This indicates that despite new political structures under BARMM, traditional power dynamics remain influential in governance and decision-making processes.

With regard to unity and social cohesion, the results suggest cautious optimism. Respondents generally agreed that BARMM has contributed to peace and cooperation among Moro and ethnic groups, and many expressed optimism about the region's future. However, the persistence of sub-ethnic divisions and neutral perceptions regarding improvements in socio-economic opportunities suggest that unity is still uneven and that the benefits of autonomy are not equally experienced across communities.

Finally, the statistical analysis confirmed significant relationships between ethnic identity perceptions, political representation, and unity under BARMM. These results demonstrate that governance structures play a critical role in shaping how ethnic and sub-ethnic groups understand their identity, sense of belonging, and position within the broader Bangsamoro society.

The findings suggest that political autonomy can support

both ethnic recognition and collective identity formation when governance is inclusive. The persistence of clan-based politics and perceived exclusion from decision-making highlights the need for stronger institutional mechanisms that promote participation and equity. Unity and identity are also closely linked to development outcomes, indicating that social and economic inclusion remains central to strengthening Bangsamoro cohesion.

Thus, there is a need to strengthen inclusive political representation within BARMM. While respondents acknowledged the recognition of ethnic identities, uncertainty regarding fair representation and the continued influence of clan-based politics indicate gaps in participatory governance. BARMM institutions may therefore enhance mechanisms that ensure broader community participation in decision-making, particularly by creating spaces where diverse ethnic and sub-ethnic voices are meaningfully represented beyond dominant clans and families.

The findings also highlight the importance of sustaining unity-building and peace initiatives that address persistent sub-ethnic divisions. Although respondents generally perceived improved cooperation and peace among Moro groups, divisions based on ethnicity and clan affiliations remain influential. Programs that promote intercultural dialogue, collaboration among communities, and shared civic engagement may help transform coexistence into deeper social cohesion while respecting ethnic diversity.

Finally, the neutral perceptions regarding improvements in socio-economic opportunities suggest that the benefits of autonomy are not equally experienced across communities. Development efforts under BARMM may therefore prioritize

equitable access to education, employment, and basic services. Ensuring that autonomy delivers tangible and inclusive benefits can reinforce positive identity perceptions and strengthen long-term unity within the Bangsamoro region.

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