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Kosovo in Mindanao

By Antonio C. Abaya, Manila Standard, The Philippines

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Some senators have been thinking aloud why some foreign countries have been pushing for the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain, initialed by representatives of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front on July 27 and scheduled to be formally signed last Aug. 5.

But because of widespread outrage over the terms of this MoA, from local government officials who were not told that part of their jurisdictions were going to be ceded to the MILF, from lawmakers in Manila who saw the agreement as a preliminary step toward the dismemberment of the Republic, from the media and the public at large who interpreted the charade as a prelude to Charter Change to allow President Arroyo to remain in power beyond 2010, this MoA is now in limbo, pending the decision of the Supreme Court on its very constitutionality.

In particular, the US and Malaysia are being asked why they are so interested in having this MOA signed, sealed and delivered.

When she flew to Kuala Lumpur for the (aborted) Aug. 5 signing of the memorandum, US Ambassador Kristie Kenney said to media that it was a “good” MoA. But when the controversy broke out over the details of the agreement, Ambassador Kenney, in another interview, said that she hadn’t read the document itself. So how could she classify the agreement as “good” when she hadn’t read it herself?

The probable truth is that she had indeed read the document and found it to be good, in the sense that it was good for American interests.

For her part, President Arroyo in her State-of-the-Nation Address made reference to this MoA in a glowing, positive light, referring to it as a “breakthrough” in the peace negotiations that had been dragging on for years.

But when all hell broke loose over the details, it was the President’s legal alter ego, Solicitor General Agnes Devanadera, who told anybody who cared to listen that President Arroyo had not yet read the document.

So how could President Arroyo refer to it—during the Sona, no less—as a breakthrough when she supposedly hadn’t read it at all?



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The probable truth is that President Arroyo did read the MoA—which was undoubtedly prepared by her own people—and pronounced it a breakthrough in the sense that it explicitly calls for a federal Bangsamoro state, certainly a breakthrough in the maneuver toward Charter Change, which would allow her to remain in power beyond 2010.

Do we have here a pair of jesuitical liars who think they can fool us all the time?

There is reason to believe that the US played a major role in encouraging this MoA because its national interests, as defined by the neo-conservatives as early as September 2000—one year before 9/11—call for increased US military presence in Southeast Asia.

This increased US military presence in the region is a response to a) the expressed plan of the Jemaah Islamiyah to create a pan-Islamic state that would encompass the entire territories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, plus the southern and predominantly Muslim provinces of Thailand and the Philippines;

And b) increased Chinese activities in the Spratly Islands, which are believed to be rich in petroleum and mineral deposits, especially after President Arroyo signed an agreement with Beijing in 2004 for the joint exploration for oil in the disputed islands.

Since this increased US military presence cannot be located in Indonesia, Malaysia or Brunei—where it would be resented by the predominantly Muslim populations—and Singapore is too small to host it, the most logical place for it would be in Mindanao-Sulu-Basilan.

But there is the problem of separatist Muslim minority groups who have been waging secessionist wars, off and on, against the stumblebum Manila government. For that matter, even against the US colonial government going back to the 1900s.

A policy was apparently adopted by the Americans to treat moderate elements of the Bangsamoro with restraint, even as they went whole hog against the reckless leaders of the Abu Sayyaf, whom the Americans decimated through selective assassination after electronic surveillance and generous bounty rewards to unidentified informants.

It is significant that the Americans never listed the MILF (and its rival, the Moro National Liberation Front) as terrorist organizations, thus leaving open the possibility of a modus vivendi to pursue their respective agendas. On the other hand, the communist New People's Army, which is much smaller than the MILF and the MNLF, is listed as a terrorist organization.

A federal Bangsamoro state, even if it eventually declares its independence from the Philippine Republic, would serve US national interests as long as it allows US troops to operate on its territory against the JI and/or the Chinese.



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Take that one step further, as American strategists have undoubtedly done, and think of a Mindanao Republic that declares independence from the rest of the Philippine Republic.

It would logically be a federal union, with both Christian and Muslim states, as well as guaranteed regions for indigenous lumads.

Both moderate Bangsamoro elements and even most of the Christian majority would welcome the existing American presence, the Bangsamoro because the Americans have treated them with deference (witness the aborted MoA), and the Christians because the American presence would be their guarantee that the Bangsamoro would not overstep their boundaries.

From the American point of view, this theoretical construct would be more benign to their national interests than their relationship with the quarrelsome politicians in Manila, who threw them out of their bases in 1991 and are now greedily selling their country to the Chinese.

The Mindanao situation is now at an impasse. Devanadera says the GRP will not sign the MoA “in its present form or in any other form.” The MILF says it is not willing to renegotiate the MoA and will wait for the next government in 2010.

Meanwhile, supposedly rogue MILF commanders attacked and occupied some villages, eliciting a response from the military. Some Christian communities have revived the Ilagas, self-defense vigilantes who committed atrocities against Muslim civilians in the 1970s, in retaliation for Muslim atrocities against Christian civilians.

I agree with former Senator Franklin Drilon: The stage is being set for a Kosovo in Mindanao.