

The Philippine Government's decades-long neglect of Mindanao, coupled by the rising expectations borne out of modernization led to a variety of subsequent calls for autonomy, secessionism or federation.⁴⁶

There have earlier attempts of the part of Mindanao leaders to distinguish the island from the government in Manila. In 1935, Muslim leaders in Dansalan (now Marawi City) forwarded a strongly worded manifesto to the United States Congress objecting to the inclusion of Mindanao and Sulu in the Philippine territory.⁴⁷ In 1949, the Muslim Association of the Philippines (MAP) was organized to promote the welfare of the Filipino Muslims. Consequently, in 1959, then MAP President expressed their desire to establish a separate government with Pakistan as a model.

Initially, the demand for Bangsamoro independence followed a peaceful path, including the 1968 Muslim Independent Movement [later known as the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM)]. Led by Cotabato Governor Udtog Matalam, it invoked an ideal Islamic state.⁴⁸ From 1968-1969, at the height of the Philippine-Malaysian dispute over Sabah and the 1968 "Jabidah massacre"⁴⁹, some members of the MIM underwent guerrilla training in Sabah. These men

⁴⁶ Samuel K. Tan "Islam and Christianity in the Philippines," *Mindanao Studies Reports 1995/No. 3* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines (UP) Center for Integrative and Development Studies and UP Press, 1995, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Abdurasad Asani, *Moros: Not Filipinos* (Manila: MNLF Secretariat, n.d.), p. 16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ A secret project code-named "Operation Merdeka" with unspecified links to the armed forces recruited young Muslims for a private army. In December 1967, some 180 trainees were transferred to Corregidor (the last stand of Gen. Douglas MacArthur against the Japanese during World War II) and were trained in techniques of infiltration, sabotage and jungle survival. Administered by the Civil Affairs Office, it was so secret that most top brass of the armed forces were unaware of its existence. It dominated the headlines when reports spoke of a mutiny in the camp, during which 14 trainees were shot dead and 17 were missing. A survivor, Jibin Arula said the trainees protested about the non-payment of the P 50 monthly allowance and wanted to resign. Told they could resign but not leave the island, they were later shot while being escorted to the airstrip below the camp. Four separate Congressional and military inquiries failed to unearth the real story. Official witnesses said "Operation Merdeka" was a pre-emptive manoeuvre to prevent an international incident and possibly war in Sulu. Senate investigators received a document from an unknown source saying Merdeka was conceived as a plan to take Sabah by a contingent of civilian volunteers but under armed forces control. Another version in a newspaper said that it was a counter-insurgency move against Chinese-backed guerrillas in Sabah led by a master spy trained in Nanning. The Muslims had their own explanation, conjuring images of wily politicians in Manila trying to split the Islamic ranks and provoke a war between Sulu and Sabah. According to this theory, the recruits realized the nature of their mission and refused to fight fellow Muslims across the Sulu Sea, and thus precipitated the mutiny and the subsequent shooting.

The Jabidah massacre was damaging to the psyche of the Muslims; the secular, religious, modern and backward sectors all began to reconsidered their future with the Philippines government. Jose Crisol, 'then President Marcos' highly regarded technocrat said that, the Civil Affairs Office bungled its job so badly that the Muslims practically lost its faith in the government, as well as inflicted deepest wounds in Tawi-Tawi and Sulu. Then Senator Benigno Aquino in a fact-finding mission found scores of families weeping inconsolably for their dead or missing folk. All over Sulu communities considered this event an intensely personal tragedy. Nur Misuari was among those who participated in the demonstrations in Manila before Congress and Malacanang. Quoted from T. J. S. George, pp. 122-8.