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Research Article

***Hula-Bangsa-Agama as Padduman:***  
**Reclaiming the Tausug Doctrine of**  
**Statehood and Islamic Political Identity**

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**Abstract**

*Hula-Bangsa-Agama* is a triadic indigenous principle of the Tausug that links *hula* (land), *bangsa* (nation), and *agama* (religion) into a holistic concept of statehood. Historically, it has served as a *padduman*, a guiding political doctrine, shaping governance, identity, and resistance. This study examined its origins and continuing relevance using historical-documentary research supported by content and thematic analysis of Qur'anic texts, classical Islamic treatises, Sultanate of Sulu records, and ethnonationalist discourses. The findings reveal that *Hula-Bangsa-Agama* integrated land, people, and faith into a coherent political vision while addressing challenges such as institutional decline, historical amnesia, and misinterpretations of *jihad*. As a political-theological framework, it provides indigenous legitimacy and a moral vision of governance rooted in unity, sacred responsibility, and cultural dignity. By challenging prevailing misrepresentations, the study argues that this principle offers a strong decolonial framework for reclaiming Tausug political agency and rethinking indigenous governance within contemporary contexts.

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Across the Muslim world, Islamic political thought has influenced various governance systems, ranging from early caliphates to modern nation-states, adapting religious principles to diverse political contexts. As Fuadi (2024) noted, contemporary Islamic political thought is experiencing a paradigm shift that stresses ethical governance based on prophetic tradition and culturally embedded practices. This shift emphasizes the importance of contextualizing the Islamic framework within local sociopolitical histories. In Southeast Asia, Muslim polities such as Aceh, Brunei, and Malacca indigenized Islamic values to legitimize authority and resist colonial domination (Müller & Steiner, 2018).

In the Southern Philippines, Islam fused with pre-Islamic customs to shape regional governance, especially in the *Tausug* Sultanate of Sulu (Ingilan, 2015; 2018). Central to this synthesis is *hula-bangsa-agama*. This term unites three core concepts: *hula*, meaning 'land' and referring to ancestral territories; *bangsa*, meaning 'nation' and denoting collective identity; and *agama*, meaning 'religion' and representing the Islamic faith. Together, *hula-bangsa-agama* serves as a *padduman* (political doctrine or guiding principle), envisioning unity, moral stewardship, and indigenous Islamic governance. Ethnographic literature confirms that *Tausug* political thought is grounded in cultural frameworks. Danial et al. (2024) examine *Partandaan*, a *Suluk* mediation system that encodes moral and communal values through symbolic acts. *Partandaan*, a set of customary rites, mediates conflict and maintains social harmony in the *Tausug* community.

Although *hula-bangsa-agama* remains a powerful symbol within *Tausug* consciousness, its doctrinal substance has yet to be systematically reconstructed. According to Warren (1981), much of the physical evidence was reportedly lost during the colonial period, which disrupted the continuity of this indigenous political epistemology. Historical evidence confirms that Spanish forces under Sebastian Corcuera occupied Jolo with a formally installed garrison in 1637-1638, following a siege of its fortress (Majul, 1999, pp. 133-135; Saleeby, 1908, p. 62; Bara, 2015). Similarly, Admiral Jose Malcampo's 1876 campaign resulted in the capture and extensive burning of Jolo town, after which a Spanish garrison was established (Malcampo, 2007). Despite this loss, the *aliyan* (slogan) endures in the collective consciousness of the people, embodying the principles that are integral to their daily lives and their sacred struggle. This is the *aliyan* of their time; a slogan of their ancestors during the days when they crossed waves of colonial disasters that plagued the collective life of the *Tausug* as a nation (Bara, 1989). Yet, to date, no scholarly study has approached *hula-bangsa-agama* as a structured *padduman*, presenting it as a coherent normative doctrine with ideological depth. The exact discourse that once articulated its principles has not survived to the present. It is believed that the key treatise was destroyed during the 1635 siege against colonial invaders and again during the 1876 Spanish assault on Jolo, which led to the brief occupation of the city and its eventual withdrawal by Spain in 1898 (Majul, 1973; Mawson, 2021; Suva, 2020).

While revolutionary movements like the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), heirs to the sacred struggle that began in 1970, have yet to systematically revive the foundational principles of this noble political vision, there is still a notable absence of materials addressing these crucial tenets (Kamlan, 2012). The *kamaasan* (*Tausug* elders) deserve recognition for their role in contributing to a political doctrine. This doctrine is essential for the rediscovery of a lost heritage and statehood that have been buried under layers of time. However, contemporary studies on Islamic governance often emphasize movements such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and global Islamic revivalism (Macasalong, 2013). This focus has resulted in a historical neglect of the *Tausug* concept of statehood within academic discourse.

The study addresses these gaps by reclaiming *hula-bangsa-agama* as a *padduman*. It considers this the only ideological link to the *Tausugs'* rich past of cosmology and Islamic ethics. It also aims to reconnect the younger generation with a lost ideological heritage, linking the past to present

aspirations for political identity, autonomy, and spiritual governance. For educators, institutions, and *Tausug* scholars, reclaiming this doctrine is a moral imperative to revitalize a once-dynamic vision of unity and sovereignty. Its recovery offers insights into Islamic governance through localized epistemologies. This, in turn, contributes to a broader discourse on decolonization, Islamic political thought, and indigenous sovereignty in Southeast Asia.

## Methodology

This study used a historical-documentary approach (Gottschalk, 1969) to trace the origins and significance of *hula-bangsa-agama* among the *Bangsa Sug*. Primary and secondary sources included Qur'anic scriptures, Hadith literature, classical Islamic political treatises, and Sulu Sultanate narratives, such as *Suluk al-Muluk* by Fadlullah bin Ruzbihan Isfahani, *khutbah* manuscripts, *tita* (royal decrees), and archival records from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. Following Scott (1990), these data—historical texts, theological pronouncements, and archival records—were examined through the historical-documentary method. This illuminated the development of the *Hula-Bangsa-Agama* concept within its historical, political, and theological contexts. Sources were selected according to three criteria: (1) historical authenticity and preservation, (2) direct relevance to *Tausug* governance and identity, and (3) repeated use in local traditions or prior scholarship. This ensured cultural validity and comparability across periods.

Data were examined through two steps. First, content analysis identified recurring concepts, symbols, and metaphors (Krippendorff, 2018). Second, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017) grouped these codes into broader categories. Open coding identified repeated ideas, which were then grouped into clusters, including the integration of land, people, and faith; Islamic governance and leadership; community mobilization; and the use of religious legitimacy in political action. These clusters were refined by constant comparison until stable thematic categories emerged. This process linked the evidence to the conceptual reconstruction of *Hula-Bangsa-Agama*.

To ensure reliability, coding decisions and thematic clusters were documented and cross-checked for accuracy. Ethical guidelines were observed throughout. Sensitivity to the cultural and religious significance of sources was maintained. When engaging with oral narratives and community accounts, informed consent was obtained, and the perspectives of all parties were represented in a respectful manner. The study followed ethical guidelines to prevent misrepresentation or decontextualization and ensured interpretations respected *Bangsa Sug* identity and heritage. The researcher's positionality was acknowledged, and findings were presented to uphold the community's dignity and values.

## Results and Discussion

This section clusters the key concerns that have long hindered the development of *Bangsa Sug* society and shaped incorrect ideas about its political identity. The roots of disempowerment in the *Bangsa Sug* Homeland stem from ongoing socio-cultural problems, the decline of core institutions, the distortion of history, the misinterpretation of *jihad fi sabilillah*, and the failure of past reforms. In turn, *Hula-Bangsa-Agama* serves as a political concept that embodies the *Tausug* vision of statehood, which unites land, nation, and religion under Islam, distinct from the Western model of the state. Looking at these themes together helps form a clearer and stronger understanding of the *Tausug* struggle and the way forward for *Bangsa Sug* society.

### In Focus 1: Unveiling the Roots of Disempowerment in the *Bangsa Sug* Homeland

To begin exploring these challenges, the first focus centers on the foundational crises that have weakened the moral, political, and social components of *Bangsa Sug* society. This theme traces the origins of these crises to spiritual erosion, institutional decay, historical amnesia, distorted Islamic

principles, and failed reforms.

### ***Moral Malaise and the Crisis of Iman***

What is *Iman*, or the Islamic faith? How can one truly understand and uphold *Iman*? These questions have guided longitudinal pedagogical observations over three decades at Mindanao State University-Sulu. Among thousands of college students observed, the majority struggle to articulate the six pillars of *Iman*. Most responses were often limited to vague notions such as fear, patience, and belief in Allah without substantive explanation. Only a small number of students could provide accurate and complete responses, and fewer still could recite the six pillars of Islam in order and with fluency. This concerns a systemic disconnection from fundamental Islamic teachings, which has three implications.

The first implication is that the fundamental teachings of Islam are not well integrated into the values education curriculum. Hadji Latif (2014) found that despite constitutional guarantees, Islamic education remains marginalized and underdeveloped. Values formation is globally recognized as a core thrust of higher education, yet in this context, the teaching of values appears disconnected from core Islamic concepts such as *Iman*, *taqwa* (consciousness), *ihsan* (excellence in worship), *khusu* (devotional humility), *Ikhlas* (sincerity), *sabar* (patience), and *ibadat* (worship). In studying the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education, Sali (2023) identified coherence, noting that Islamic values are not effectively transmitted in secular school settings. This observation reveals a major gap in the transmission of these three essential spiritual and moral principles to students.

Such a gap is not only reflected in scholarly observations but also in the perspectives of the *Tausug* themselves. Primary data gathered from field interviews reveal that the community once anchored its institutions in the concept of *padduman*. As explained by Tuwan Akmad Nudjang, a *Tausug* expert on Islamic law, *padduman* is the ideological system of the *Bangsa Sug*, grounded in the Qur'anic principle of *din*. Its essence is captured by the doctrine of *hula-bangsa-agama*, which signifies the inseparability of community, land, and religion. This understanding reflects the Prophet's establishment of the first *ummah* in Madinah, where Islam was both a religion and a state. The Qur'an affirms: "Verily, your *ummah* is a single *ummah*, and I am your Lord, therefore serve Me" (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 23:52). In this light, the weakening of *madaris* and *masjid* today illustrates how far these institutions have drifted from that original foundation.

The second implication is pedagogical. Many Muslim faculty members across academic levels, from elementary to tertiary, have unconsciously adopted secular or Western philosophies in their teaching. As argued by Gamon and Tagoranao (2022), Muslim educators often adopt secularized frameworks due to policy constraints and a lack of integration between government and Islamic epistemologies, resulting in a largely secularized educational experience for Muslim students. Without deliberate integration, students are not only disconnected from religious values but are also shaped by paradigms that may conflict with their cultural and spiritual identities (Ayoub, 1989).

A third implication concerns the role of the family. It appears that many parents either lack awareness of their Islamic responsibilities or have become neglectful in instilling Islamic principles to raise their children. Hadji Latif (2014) also emphasized that the weakened role of parents in transmitting Islamic principles is correlated with the underperformance of Islamic education. The Qur'an states: "O ye who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel is men and stones, over which are appointed angels stern and severe, who do not flinch from executing the commands they receive from Allah. But do precisely what they are commanded" (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 66:6). The lack of parental engagement in moral-religious education compounds the institutional gaps identified in schools. Moreover, Gamon and Tagoranao (2022) emphasize how the lack of culturally contextualized education contributes to detachment within Muslim communities like the

*Bangsa Sug* community, where historical identity becomes increasingly buried.

The loss of *Iman* in the *Bangsa Sug* has come to represent a critical moral and spiritual crisis based on the inability to establish Islamic faith as the epistemological center of education and leadership. With a myriad of young people unacquainted with the six articles of faith, this disconnection has resulted in weakened religious devotion and undermined Islamic identity. The crisis also manifests itself in the lives and attitudes of youth and professionals whose values and national consciousness were formed by colonial remnants and assimilationist forces. Colonial powers, according to al-Faruqi (1982), were successful in de-Islamizing the elite and demoralizing the masses, substituting Islamic awareness with secular ideologies. This assimilation process, utilizing Westernized cultural principles, progresses towards acculturation, in which individuals relinquish their original heritage and adopt other paradigms. Al-Attas (1979) attributes this to a loss of *adab* (morality) or correct knowledge of ethics, resulting in false leadership and ideological disorientation among the *Bangsa Sug* society.

### ***Institutional Drift and the Crisis of Islamic Education***

The survival of any society rests on the effectiveness of its institutions, the most important of which is the school, including *madrasas* and *masjids*. These institutions are the primary agencies responsible for educating the people and providing knowledge, values, and skills necessary for national development. In the *Bangsa Sug* context, these institutions have experienced a significant loss in their functions. The mainstream education system is heavily influenced by secular philosophies, contributing to the miseducation of Muslim youth who internalize colonial values and lifestyles different from Islamic teachings. According to Al-Attas (1979) and Majul (1965), this divergence is evident in their dressing, social behavior, and worldview, which are increasingly shaped by Westernized ideals rather than Islamic principles.

Even in an organized forum where *Tausug* elders and community leaders are part of the conversations, they reveal a consistent perception that the weakening of *madaris* and *masjid* has eroded their function as centers of moral and social leadership. Several respondents lamented that the *masjid*, once a venue for *tarbiyah* (holistic education) and *shura* (consultative governance), has been reduced to a space for ritual prayer alone. These testimonies affirm that institutional decline is not merely administrative but represents the disintegration of the very structures that once bound *Tausug* society into a unified *ummah*.

*Madaris* (plural of *madrasa*) in regions such as Sulu have historically faced institutional neglect. For decades, many operated in makeshift or informal environments, lacking formal recognition, adequate facilities, and qualified educators (Jundam, 2006; Saleeby, 1908). Despite the recent progress observed in certain regions, such as Basilan and Lanao del Sur, through the establishment of *quliyah* (collegiate Islamic programs), most Sulu *madaris* continue to be limited to elementary-level education. Similarly, rural *masjids*, which have historically played a central role in community leadership, have not been fully utilized as centers of spiritual and social enrichment. The poor management and underfinancing of such religious and educational institutions have also given rise to the *Bangsa Sug*'s wider spiritual and moral crisis (Warren, 1981; Yahaya, 2019).

To turn such institutional drift around, it is essential that Muslim educators, scholars, and policymakers critically evaluate the existing curriculum and structural patterns of Islamic education. The *ulama* and education leaders must champion a regionally contextualized and Islamically rooted curriculum that caters to modern needs without compromising *Tausug* values and Islamic identity (Al-Faruqi, 1982; Yamamoto, 2012). In accordance with the mandate of the *Bangsamoro* Organic Law, the curriculum now has the opportunity to be established by the *Bangsamoro* Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) legislative assembly for an all-encompassing educational policy that is consistent with religious requirements and local cultural realities. It is only through such

reformation that Islamic institutions in the *Bangsa Sug* homeland can regain their rightful place in shaping an ethically centered and empowered Muslim society.

### *Historical Amnesia and Distortion of Statehood*

The *Bangsa Sug*'s historical consciousness has been worn by centuries of colonial distortion and amnesia. Revisiting the idea of statehood from the *Tausug* perspective reveals that the Sulu Sultanate was the first model of a monolithic nation-state in the Philippine archipelago, driven by the indigenous concept of *hula-bangsa-agama* (Jundam, 2006). It was this early state system that once ruled lands ranging from North Borneo to Luzon, engendering a shared identity where various communities became identified as belonging to the *Tausug* polity (Kiefer, 1974; Majul, 1973; Warren, 1981). While some scholars see the Sultanate as an early nation-state, others caution that applying the modern concept of nation-state is problematic. It was only after Spanish colonization and the establishment of the Filipino identity following the execution of the GOMBURZA in 1872 (Majul, 1965) that the notion of *duwa bangsa* (two nations) was conceived.

The Sultanate of Sulu exerted maritime dominance over the *Dagat Lupa Sug* (Sulu Sea), enabling it to foster extensive diplomatic and trade relations with foreign powers (Warren, 1981), including treaties with external powers like the British and French (Majul, 1999; Mawson, 2021). This geopolitical control was complemented by deliberate efforts to consolidate linguistic and cultural unity within its territories. As part of a broader policy of national integration, the Sultanate institutionalized *Bahasa Sug* as the official and religious language. Decrees were issued mandating its use in formal communication and in the delivery of the *khutba* (Friday sermon), reinforcing its role as the *lingua franca* across the diverse communities under its rule. This linguistic policy not only promoted cohesion but also enriched *Bahasa Sug* through the incorporation of terms from various ethnic groups, further affirming the cultural hegemony of the *Tausug* (Kiefer, 1974; Saleeby, 1908).

Modern Filipino historical paradigms marginalize the Muslim story. The Zaide (Western), Agoncillo-Corpus (indigenous), and Saleeby-Majul (Muslim) frameworks explain how Philippine historiography remains contested (Majul, 1999). These paradigms differ in focus: the Zaide tradition privileges colonial and Western perspectives, Agoncillo and Corpus highlight Filipino resistance and nationalism, while Saleeby and Majul place the Muslim South at the center of historical interpretation. To correct this, the country needs to undertake peacebuilding activities that encompass historical redress, acknowledging *Lupa Sug* as the original political community influenced by the *Sultaniyyah* in *Lupa Sug*, and promoting the restoration of historical names and Islamic values in state rhetoric (Jundam, 2006).

The historical decline of the Sultanate and its subsequent colonization, along with its integration into the contemporary Philippine state, led to a weakening of this unifying identity. The division between the Islamic South and the secular North reflects the broader fragmentation of national consciousness (Majul, 1973).

Dr. Abraham Sakili, a cultural historian and art scholar, describes this as *masa duwa bangsa* (two nations), highlighting the divide between the Islamic South and the secular North. He is widely recognized for his influential book, *Space and Identity: Expression in the Culture, Arts, and Society of Muslims in the Philippines* (2003), and for designing the UP Sablay, the official academic costume of the University of the Philippines. His work underscores the importance of understanding the historical and cultural experiences of the *Bangsa Sug* to contextualize contemporary political and social issues.

Within this political paradigm, it is essential to directly address the country's history during the Islamic and Sultanate eras in Southeast Asia. This entails the need to decolonize the Filipino mindset,

promote the *balik Islam* movement, advocate for the slogan, *Isang Bansa, Isang Diwa* (one nation, one spirit), support the adoption of the ancient name of the country, and deeply explore the historical roots of our people. To end the divergence caused by *masa duwa bangsa*, the paradigm must change to *hambuuk bangsa*, which acknowledges the oneness and Islamic heritage of the archipelago. This re-orientation requires the modification of Filipino historical thought to reclaim the identity of the country as formerly governed by the *Sultaniyyah* sin *Lupa Sug*.

There is a need to reawaken a national identity rooted in Islamic historical consciousness. As al-Faruqi explained, colonization brought about the “de-Islamization” of elites and demoralization of the masses, depriving society of its ideological bases (Yahaya, 2019). Likewise, Al-Attas (1979) identified the confusion of knowledge and the loss of *adab* (morality) as the heart of the crisis facing Muslim communities. These constructs explain how many of today’s leaders and educators fail or refuse to bring Islamic-informed historical discourse forward.

Even within the rank of the *kaguruhan* (Islamic scholars), there is confusion about the political and historical relevance of the Sultanates, and their lack of active interest in major critical national issues demonstrates the extent to which historical amnesia has set in. The tendency to concentrate more on ritualistic Islam than on socio-political issues represents a constricted *da’wah* focus, detached from the community’s bigger problems (Jundam, 2006). This narrowing of *da’wah* contrasts with Qur’anic guidance that emphasizes community justice and collective leadership.

Furthermore, Dr. Al-Anwar Anzar, a lecturer in public administration at MSU-Sulu Graduate School, emphasized that the typology of civic participation reveals that few people are actively engaged in addressing social problems, while most remain passive or unaware of their role in these issues. This collective apathy, characterized by the *Tausug* concept of those who do not stand for principles, continues to reinforce the disconnection from historical consciousness (personal communication, December 15, 2006). National reawakening demands that leaders and people recognize the legacy of colonization, return to indigenous notions of statehood, and counter Western-imposed discourse (Jundam, 2006).

Historical distortion has disconnected the *Bangsa Sug* from Islamic heritage and national legacy. Reconnecting with this legacy involves advancing the initiatives Suggested earlier, among them federalism, Islamic ethics in administration, and reconsidering national symbols. These are moves not only toward historical restoration, but toward a future based on inclusive nationhood. The best commentary on the importance of history is the work of Abd al-Mun’im Majid, when he said that:

*“History is the feeling of the nation and its memory. Each nation senses its being and forms its personality through its history. The unity of history produces closeness in feeling and attitudes and similarity in customs and traditions, in the memory of former glory, of hopes, of suffering, and in the similarity of a desire for a renaissance in the present and hopes for the future. Historical memories bring the spirit of the members of the society closer and constitute among them a kind of closeness of essence. History in all its contents of events, heroes, victories, and memories gives life to the spirits of the sons of the nation ...”*

As Yahaya (2019) stressed, history is the soul of a nation, and without it, there cannot be any unified identity or sense of direction forward. It is time to reclaim this history and make it the basis for inclusive nation-building.

### **Misconception of jihad and Its Colonial Roots**

The *jihad* concept is still arguably one of the most misunderstood and politically mobilized tenets of Islam, particularly in colonial and postcolonial discourse about Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu. Throughout history, colonial powers—specifically the British and Spanish—perceived *jihad* as

an existence-threatening challenge to imperial domination. As a result, this perception created systematic misconceptions of its meaning, reducing it to simply an act of violence or insurrection. Building on this, Ahmad Ghulam Mirza, the polemic 19th-century Indian scholar, was allegedly funded by the British to propagate a peace-oriented rejection of *jihad* in contemporary times as a means of neutralizing Muslim opposition. This colonial mythology persists in the Philippine context: even educated Muslims perceive *jihad* as outdated, particularly when it is contextualized as *fitna* (religious anarchy). However, this interpretation dismisses the Qur'anic and prophetic instructions that establish *jihad* as both an individual spiritual test and a group obligation to defend Islam when the *ummah* is threatened by the *Kuffar*—aggressors against the Muslim *ummah*.

The Qur'anic command in Surah Al-Baqarah (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 2:216) puts *jihad* not in the form of an aggressive war but as a divine mandate:

*"Fighting is prescribed upon you, and you dislike it. But, it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knows and you know not."*

This is consistent with the initial prophetic era when Muslims suffered persecution and were told to exercise patience until they had to defend themselves. In the setting of modern Mindanao and Sulu, the military dimension of *jihad* has been defused to a significant extent by peace compacts between Moro revolutionary fronts and the Philippine state. These compacts deter the employment of armed struggle except when violated by the state. Thus, *jihad* is never a means of conquest but a means of justice, freedom from oppression, and protection of faith. In the present times, it is recontextualized as a moral, intellectual, and socio-political activity consistent with Islamic ethical standards.

Binocal and Dinampo-Lunzaga (2025) stress that contemporary Muslims, especially youth and scholars, should be involved in deconstructing colonial discourses portraying *jihad* as extremism. Rather, *jihad fi sabilillah* should be interpreted as an effort towards the reform of society, upholding Islamic values, and resisting all types of injustice, whether spiritual, social, or epistemological. Without this deeper insight, Muslim communities can fall prey to colonial propaganda, compromising their moral agency and historical awareness. As Yahaya (2019) noted, adopting foreign epistemologies uncritically may lead to the demoralization of Muslim society and the detachment of its leadership from Islamic foundations.

Given these challenges, Islamic leaders and educators in Sulu and Mindanao should take the initiative to revive the consciousness of *jihad* as a three-faceted obligation encompassing intellectual, spiritual, and social. Additionally, based on prophetic teachings and classical scholarship, this new realization enhances society's sense of justice and moral resilience. *Jihad*, in its proper sense, is essential to protecting Islamic identity and resisting ideologically caused decay brought by secularism and colonialism. Reclaiming *jihad* in its organic context is, thus, a communal effort toward cultural strength and political autonomy (Al-Attas, 1979; Binocal & Dinampo-Lunzaga, 2025; Majul, 1965).

### ***The Past Crisis of Islamic Leadership and Reform***

The crisis of Muslim leadership in the homeland of the *Bangsa Sug* is not a new problem. For centuries, leaders have struggled because Islamic values do not fit easily into colonial and secular systems that continue to govern many of our institutions. These systems were never meant to nurture Islamic reform. They were designed to preserve secular interests, and so they weaken the moral and spiritual foundations that Islam requires. As Al-Attas (1979) and al-Faruqi (1982) explain, Islamic reform cannot grow within structures that reject the metaphysical and moral principles of Islam. The result is that institutions often act as tools of control instead of instruments of justice, serving the interests of a few elites while leaving the people behind.



This crisis is made clear by a question often heard from the public: Why do Muslim-majority governments perform poorly even when the offices are filled with Muslims? The answer is painful. Many leaders do not practice true Islamic leadership. They lack *taqwa* (spiritual awareness) and fail to assume the heavy responsibility of leadership before God. As Majul (1999) and Yahaya (2019) argue, the gap between private belief and public governance blocks the rise of genuine Islamic reform. Leaders may profess faith in private, but their actions in public fall short of the values of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

The roots of this weakness reach far into our history. Colonial rule secularized the Muslim elite and pushed aside Islamic political thought (Jundam, 2006; Majul, 1973). Poverty and injustice in our land are not only economic problems. They are tied to corruption, the misuse of power, and the long shadow of domination that has kept the people poor and divided. As Maboloc et al. (2025) remind us, structural poverty is not simply about a lack of money but about unequal power and long-standing social injustice.

To heal this, leadership must return to its true meaning in Islam, which is *amanah* (moral trust), and *adl* (justice). Reform will not come from borrowed systems or empty promises. It will only come when leaders are re-educated with a *tawhidic* (totalizing worldview) vision. This vision sees the guidance of God as the foundation of both private life and public governance. Without it, the state will continue to fail its people, no matter how religious the leaders claim to be. True reform begins with leaders who fear God, who serve the people with justice, and who build institutions that unite faith with public responsibility.

### In Focus 2: *Hula-Bangsa-Agama* as a Political Concept

The ideological foundation of the concept of *hula-bangsa-agama* is rooted in the doctrine of the Islamic *Ummah*, which seeks to establish a unified global Muslim brotherhood. The term *Ummah* refers to those who adhere to Islam and follow the Sunnah, guided by the leadership of Nabi Muhammad (S.A.S.). Initially, the early members of the *Ummah* included the Muhajirin, primarily from the Quraysh of Makkah, who were later joined by the Ansars (the people of Madina), who embraced Islam and invited the Prophet and his followers to migrate to their city (Haykal, 1976). As Donner (2010) noted, the Muslims' *hijrah* (migration) to Madina marked the consolidation of the Muslim *Ummah*, laying the foundation of the first Islamic polity, which eventually expanded into a strong Islamic empire.

From that point onward, Muslims recognized that a Muslim *Ummah* necessitates the occupation and governance of a territory, often under Shari'ah law. Thus, the concept of *Ummah* encompasses not only the faithful community but also territory, governance, and *din*, or divine ideology (Al-Attas, 1979). Over time, these believing communities evolved into national groups, with Islam serving as a focal point for unity and brotherhood. The interrelationship between nation, territory, and Islam transformed into a political concept, ultimately leading to the formation of *hula-bangsa-agama* (Jundam, 2006; Majul, 1999).

The early Muslims in Sulu understood that the survival of their community hinged on their strong commitment to what is now referred to as the *Tausug* concept of state, which comprises three essential elements: *hula*, *bangsa*, and *agama*. In contrast, the Western notion of the state includes four elements: territory, nation, government, and sovereignty. The *Tausug* approach consolidates government and sovereignty under the framework of *agama*. As the fuqaha have stated, "*Al-Islam ad-din wa ad-dawla*," meaning Islam is both religion and state, emphasizing that sovereignty lies solely with Allah.

### ***Hula as the Political Foundation***

The first principle, known as *hula*, is a fundamental requirement for any nation to exist. It constitutes one of the essential elements of a state. Without control over *hula*, national life becomes impossible. The primary source of national vitality for any nation is derived from its own *hula*, the physical resources it possesses, the ideological framework that fosters unity among its people, and the unfettered exercise of its national sovereignty. Thus, the defense of *hula* is crucial; losing control over it can severely hinder a nation's existence. Furthermore, without effective control of *hula*, the practice of *agama* becomes increasingly challenging.

The concept of *hula*, as fatherland, homeland, and state, is foundational in Islamic and *Tausug* political thought. A highly conscious person always expresses deep love for the fatherland, saying:

*"I love my country simply because this is the land of my birth." When Allah commanded Nabi Muhammad (S.A.S.) to leave Makkah, he was sorrowful. The Qur'an assures: "Verily He who ordained the Qur'an for you, will bring you back to the place of return."  
(The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 28:25)*

Likewise, when the Prophet saw Mt. Uhud upon his return, he declared: *"This is the mountain that loves us and is loved by us,"* and then prayed for Madinah to be blessed and made a sanctuary. These expressions highlight that spiritual consciousness is intertwined with one's attachment to *hula*—which refers to land or homeland, regarded as *amanah* (trust) from Allah—not merely a physical space. The Qur'an affirms the land as:

*"The dwelling place for mankind and means of livelihood for a time."  
(The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 2:36)*

From the land comes sustenance, resources, and national wealth. Without control over land, there is no life, nation, or ability to fulfill divine duty. Thus, wealth from land is national strength. Strength brings progress, and true progress is measured not by materialism but by worship of Allah. The Islamic perspective on civilization centers on divine guidance, rather than secular goals. The first principle of the *hula-bangsa-agama* philosophy asserts that *hula* is essential to the survival of *bangsa* and *agama*. Losing the land endangers both national identity and religious practice. The Qur'an warns:

*"Do not do mischief on the earth after it has been set in order."  
(The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 7:56)*

This verse indicates that love and care for *hula* is a reflection of one's *Iman*. Allah also reminds people of the past:

*"And remember when He made you successors after the Ad people and gave you habitations in the land... so remember the ni'mat from Allah, and do not go about making mischief on the earth." (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 7:74)*

The righteous, who live with gratitude for the blessings of the land, are those who act as *khalaiifa* (trustees), seeking to establish justice, prosperity, and worship of Allah across generations. Therefore, love for the land is not nationalism in the secular sense. Rather, it is a divine duty to preserve a trust for which Muslims are accountable in both this life and the next stage of life called *Akhirat*.

In contrast to this sacred duty, *fasad* (mischief), including oppressive leadership, economic exploitation through *riba*, moral corruption, *fitna*, and false ideologies, corrupts the land and violates this divine trust. The Qur'an states:

*"Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned, that Allah may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return (by repenting to Allah, and begging His Pardon)." (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 30:41)*

During the golden era of the Sultanate of Sulu (1450–1882 A.D.), these principles guided the rule of the *Bangsa Sug*. The Sultanate's territories included the Zamboanga Peninsula, Basilan, *Lupa Sug*, Palawan, North Borneo, parts of the Visayas, and the waters of the Sulu Sea. Leadership was decentralized and carried out by *panglima* and *maharajah*, with *Lupa Sug* as the seat of power. Furthermore, the Sultanate was divided into *binaybayan* (districts)—such as Luuk, Lungan Gi'tung, Lati, Pansul, and Parang—reflecting the structured implementation of their responsibilities as *khalaifa*.

The unity of the Sultanate was symbolized by the five stars of its flag, each representing one of its major island groups. *Bahasa Sug* served as the common language, used in religious sermons, official decrees, and government records written in Sinug. These examples reinforce the view that the love for *hula* is not only a cultural aspect but a religious imperative. It is through protecting, cultivating, and leading the *hula* under divine guidance that a people fulfill their role as *ummah* and as *khalaifa* on Earth. Only by safeguarding this sacred trust can the *Bangsa Sug* restore its historical dignity and advance toward its rightful place among the community of nations.

### ***Bangsa as the Pillar of Leadership, Unity, and Responsibility***

The second principle emphasizes that *bangsa* (nation) serves as the guardian of *hula* and the foundations of *agama*. *Hula* holds little significance without *bangsa*, and neither *agama* nor *bangsa* can thrive without effective control of *hula*. However, *hula* and *agama* are inherently passive; it is the *bangsa* that organizes society, establishes leadership and governance, exploits and develops the resources of *hula*, and implements the directives of *agama*. A *bangsa* with weak nationalism is destined for ruin. Nabi Muhammad (S.A.S.) stated:

*"I bid you to do five things: remain attached to the jama'ah, or main body of Muslims; listen to and obey your ruler; migrate to other lands when necessary; and fight in the way of Allah. Anyone who distances themselves from the main body of Muslims by even a span of a hand effectively relinquishes the burden of Islam from their shoulders. Moreover, one who calls to the call of ignorance is among the denizens of Hell, even if they observe fasting, perform prayers, and consider themselves a Muslim."*

### ***Agama as the Spiritual Foundation of Unity and Governance***

The third principle, *Agama*, serves as the foundation for the unity of the various ethnic groups within the Sulu archipelago, forming a distinct *bangsa*. It is *Agama* that provides the strongest bond among the ethnic groups within the *Bangsa Sug* homeland. This bond is eloquently expressed in the call of Islam: "*Wa'tasimu bihabillillah jami'an wa latafarraku.*" This translates to: "Hold fast, all of you together to the rope of Allah, and be not divided among yourselves" (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 3:103). Abul 'Ala Maududi (1972) regarded this *ayat* (verse) as a cornerstone for an Islamic state. Much like a rope, an Islamic state creates an encompassing wall that protects its citizens; anyone who strays from this rope risks falling into misguidance and incurring divine wrath.

The *agama* is the only ideological system that projects global brotherhood for all Muslims throughout the world. Only *agama* can provide truth and divine guidance. Ibn Khaldun said:

*"Religious coloring does away with mutual jealousy and envy among people who share in a group feeling and causes concentration upon the truth. Then people with religious coloring come to have the right insight into their affairs, nothing can withstand them because their outlook is one and their object one of common accord. They are willing to die for their objectives."*

*"But, when hearts succumb to false desires and are inclined toward the world, mutual jealousy and widespread differences arise. But, when they are turned toward the truth and reject the world and whatever is false, and advance toward God, they become one in their outlook. Jealousy disappears. There are few differences. Mutual cooperation and support flourish. As a result, the extent of state widens, and the society grows." (Khalidun, 1975: 320)*

*Agama* serves as the foundation of *hula* and the leadership of *bangsa*. It is believed that when *agama* rests upon the leaders, it becomes the bedrock of governance, while the *bangsa*, along with their leaders, act as its guardians. Anything without a solid foundation is destined for destruction, and anything without guardianship is also vulnerable to ruin. In essence, *agama* represents the true foundation of society, with leaders serving as the genuine protectors.

Furthermore, *agama* is the foundation of the *mujtama* (society). The Qur'anic term for *agama* is *din*. The essence of Islam is submission to the will of Allah as Malik or Sovereign. All Muslims ought to believe that the sovereignty of the heavens and earth belongs to Allah alone (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 25:2) and that He does not share His command with any person whatsoever (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 18:26). Submission to Allah is expressed in the observance of the five pillars of Islam, acceptance of the Qur'an as the living guidance, and following the Sunnah of the Prophet. Submission to Allah also means refraining from shirk or polytheism. The Qur'an says:

*"Innas shirka la zulmun azim"—"Verily joining others in worship with Allah is a great zulm (wrong or injustice)." (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 31:13)*

Allah is One, and His *agama* is one. Today, there are many *agamas* and ideologies competing in the world. The Qur'an warns:

*"If anyone desires a din other than Islam, never it will be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost." (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 3:85)*

On the other hand, the Qur'an enjoins the Muslims:

*"O you who believe! Enter into Islam whole-heartedly and follow not the footsteps of the evil one, for he is to you an avowed enemy." (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 2:208)*

Finally, Allah in His last revelation to the final Prophet, Muhammad (S.A.S.), affirmed Islam as the official name of the *din* for all mankind:

*"Al-yawma akmaltu lakum dinakum wa atmamtu 'alaykum ni'mati wa radhitu lakumul Islama dina"(This day I have perfected your din for you, completed My favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your din). (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 5:3)*

### ***The Sacred Bond of Hula-Bangsa-Agama***

The concept of *hula-bangsa-agama* forms a triangular basis for the unity of the *Bangsa Sug* as a nation. With this framework in place, they can cultivate the political will necessary to advocate for their right to self-determination. The spirit of *hula-bangsa-agama* should function as a political shield against the forces of acculturation, assimilation, and the influence of nationalisms and ideologies that diverge from Islam.

*Hula-bangsa-agama* embodies the shared purpose of every individual Muslim residing in Mindanao and Sulu. This common cause signifies a collective desire to establish a society rooted in justice and guided by *agama*. Consequently, it is crucial for the *ulama* and intellectuals to actively participate in shaping effective governance and economic structures within the *hula*. Additionally, every *ra'ayat* must strive for the unity of the *bangsa*. The entire *ra'ayat* should rally behind the national

cause—the cause of *hula-bangsa-agama*—supporting, sympathizing with, and identifying themselves with the pursuit of liberation for *hula* and *bangsa* from all forms of oppression, including spiritual, intellectual, and physical oppression.

The concept of *bangsa* should be utilized solely as an instrument for fostering national unity among the diverse peoples of the Sulu Archipelago. It must not be perceived as an ideology that seeks to supplant Islam as the guiding force of *Bangsa Sug* society. From the perspective of Islam, there is no overarching national ideology. Nationalism should serve as a means to elevate Islam as the core ideological force. This perspective means that our commitment is not encapsulated by the mindset of “right or wrong, my country”. It should not entail loyalty to one’s nation driven by animosity toward others; rather, our national cause is fundamentally rooted in Islam.

*Bangsa Sug* nationalism must be anchored in Islamic principles. It should never pose a threat to other nations. Instead, it needs to be promoted and reinforced so that the *Bangsa Sug* community earns respect within the broader international community, particularly among the Muslim *Ummah*. Through national unity, the *Bangsa Sug* can assert their claims and defend themselves effectively against the aggressions of larger nations. Historically, powerful nations have always exhibited a tendency to dominate weaker ones, a dynamic that persists even among larger nations within the Muslim *Ummah*. The situations of the Kurdish people and the *Bangsa Sug* offer clear examples; Turkey, Iraq, and even Iran have expressed discomfort with the rise of a strong Kurdish identity. These comparisons are not intended as exact historical matches, but rather as interpretive parallels, and should be read within their respective historical and political contexts. Similarly, Malaysia and the Philippines are apprehensive about the emergence of a strong *Bangsa Sug*. Throughout history, oppressed nations have recognized the necessity of solidifying their national unity to safeguard their interests. In particular, the *Bangsa Sug* should not forsake their historical legacy, as their courageous resistance against colonial powers stands as an exemplary achievement in the annals of *jihad*. Understanding this context is essential for their continued advancement. History is a potential source of inspiration for the present quest for freedom and peace.

The *hula*, which we claim as our homeland, is a gift of Allah to us. With our acceptance, the land automatically becomes a trust for our nation, but with the condition that we have to make the land a better place to live.

*“Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned (by oppression and injustice). That (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds in order that they may repent (for their sins and ask Allah for His forgiveness).”*  
(The Noble Qur’an, 1996; 30:41)

This mischief or *fasad*, as the Qur’an describes, is the handiwork of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Following the tafsir of the *ulama*, *fasad* is the main tool used by the enemy to destroy the Muslims. *Fasad* takes in many forms, including *riba*-oriented institutions like banks, cooperatives, and pawnshops; promotion of sex slavery and prostitution, spreading violence and *fitna*, establishing a political system other than Islam, business curtailment, and direct invasion of Muslim land. Thus, the Qur’an calls all Muslims to eradicate *fasad* from the face of the earth. The oppressed Muslims can only survive in the midst of *fasad* except to rise up. The Qur’an has promised:

*“And we wished to be gracious to those who were being depressed in the land to make them leaders and make them heirs.”* (The meaning of the Holy Qur’an, 2004; 28:5)

In this case, we need to prove ourselves before Allah that we are worthy of the trust. We are only required to do true worship of Allah and to do righteousness. An ancient saying says, “*righteousness exalts a nation.*”

*Hula-bangsa-agama* has served as the foundation of *jihad* throughout the colonization period, spanning from the 16th century to the 21st century. This noble slogan continues to propel the spirit of *jihad* forward. Its relevance remains strong today; when properly understood and utilized, it has the power to awaken our collective consciousness from the deep slumber of negligence and indifference. Upholding the spirit of *hula-bangsa-agama* is essential to sustaining the *Bangsa Sug*'s current aspirations for freedom, justice, and development.

*Hula-bangsa-agama* acts as the social bond that has sustained our national struggle across the centuries. We must not allow any group, whether from within our homeland or beyond, to undermine the unity embodied in *hula*, *bangsa*, and *agama*. It is imperative that we maintain the correct order: *hula* must come first, followed by *bangsa*, and subsequently *agama*. This hierarchy can be likened to a ship on its journey toward its destination. We cannot navigate beyond the horizon and reach our ultimate goal unless we have first built a strong vessel to carry us forward. This vessel is our *hula*, our fatherland. The *bangsa* represents the passengers, the crew, and the captain of the ship, while *agama* serves as the map, the compass, and the engine that drives the vessel, enabling us to traverse the ocean of struggle. Eventually, national freedom is our final destination.

Certainly, the captain must possess a solid understanding of geography, proficiency in map reading, and competence in weather forecasting to ensure a smooth journey. Likewise, our expedition toward the final destination cannot commence unless our political ship is firmly secured. It is essential for the captain to clearly communicate the final destination of this sacred voyage to everyone aboard. Periodically, the captain should update the passengers on the status of the ship and any potential challenges that may arise. The captain's primary responsibility is to guarantee the safety and well-being of all those on board. If the ship encounters turbulent waters, the captain should prepare the passengers by instructing them to don their life vests, signifying the need to be equipped with *Iman*, *salah*, and *sabar* in times of political turmoil. This wisdom is why our ancestors structured the elements of the state into *hula-bangsa-agama*. Disrupting this order will make it impossible for us to reach our final destination.

Our journey, which we refer to as our political ship, remains intact. It is imperative that the passengers, crew, and captain all fulfill their respective responsibilities to ensure the ship's safety. None should engage in actions that could jeopardize its integrity. The bare minimum expected is adherence to the rules and a commitment to maintaining the ship's safety until we reach our final destination. This means that the entire *Bangsa Sug* must come together with a shared objective: to reach this destination. In our pursuit of freedom, the captain bears the critical responsibility. The captain must have full control over both the crew and the passengers, while also demonstrating a thorough understanding of the routes, ensuring that the ship arrives on schedule and safely docks at its political destination.

### ***Hula-Bangsa-Agama as the Core of Political Consciousness***

*Hula-Bangsa-Agama* is the ultimate expression of political conviction and national determination. As a unifying slogan, it is meant to remind every generation that mass movement and struggle must be directed towards the protection and development of *hula*, *bangsa*, and *agama*. This value is to be internalized profoundly, influencing individual and group consciousness invariably over time and space. It is expected to guide everyday reflection and long-term vision, becoming fundamental to planning, decision-making, and civic duty. Devotion to the cause of *hula-bangsa-agama* should be seen as an integral part of the political creed that is foundational to the identity and aspirations of the *Bangsa Sug*.

The findings in the second theme refine existing theories of Islamic governance in Southeast Asia by showing that *Tausug* political thought does not simply follow the classical model of *din wa dawla*

(religion and state), nor the modern frameworks adopted in Malaysia or Indonesia, which tend to separate religion into formal institutions or law. Instead, the *hula-bangsa-agama* doctrine fuses homeland, people, and faith into one inseparable foundation of governance. This offers a corrective to prevailing assumptions that Southeast Asian Islamic governance is only about Sharia regulation or state Islamization (Sidel, 2006). At the same time, the reconstructed doctrine carries important implications for contemporary Muslim polities. In BARMM, for example, it can strengthen autonomy by grounding policies in cultural identity, shared stewardship of land, and faith-based leadership, while still working within the Philippine constitutional framework. It can also inspire governance models for other Muslim communities in the region, demonstrating how indigenous Islamic thought can provide a balanced approach to unity, self-determination, and peaceful coexistence with a diverse population (Abinales, 2000).

### In Focus 3: The Sacred Political Cause

The *ulama* regarded the government system as an extension of the prophetic function. The Prophet stated that a corrupt government is preferable to no government at all. Accordingly, organizing a government is considered a sacred political endeavor. Political reformers should weave together symbolism, the sacred flag, and the noble cause to effectively engage the masses with the state's ideology.

#### Symbolism

*Hula-bangsa-agama* is the object of a political cause and the symbol of *martabat*. They are a worthy and noble political cause for which everyone must cherish and be ready to sacrifice. What a national life is, if it is deprived of its *martabat*. What an individual life is, if he has no *hula* to live with, no *bangsa* to count on, and no *agama* to depend on. The idea of *hula-bangsa-agama* as a political cause is putting their interest above personal interest. The Qur'an says:

*"And do not exchange the covenant of Allah for a small price, for with Allah is (a reward) far better for you if you only knew..." (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 16:95)*

Here, the Muslim or every citizen of the Philippines is not allowed to betray his *agama*, his own *bangsa*, and his own *hula*. The betrayal of any of these pillars of the state is tantamount to a betrayal of the whole *Bangsa Sug* or Philippine statehood. In any society, the act of betrayal is a grave sin against the state.

We must always remember that our *kamaasan* fought hard against foreign invaders in defense of *hula*, *bangsa*, and *agama* (Jubair, 2007). Our *kamaasan* had built up a strong edifice of the three great sultanates in Mindanao and Sulu in order to defend and to fight the political cause of *hula-bangsa-agama*. It is defending this political cause that gives us the authority, the power, and hope. If we cease to advocate this political cause, we shall become easily crushed, oppressed, and powerless. There is no better and higher value worth dying for than the political cause of *hula-bangsa-agama*. *Agama* is the precious garden of *hula*. *Hula* is nothing without its own garden, and the *Bangsa Sug* are its guards and defenders.

The dignity of *hula* will depend on the kinds of gardens growing on it. *Bangsa* will surely abandon *hula* if there is no garden on it. *Hula* becomes precious and beholden to its inhabitants because of the garden. *Agama* is actually the garden of *hula* that nourishes its inhabitants. But an *agama* like a garden needs to be fenced, protected, and secured. And this fence is referred to as *parinta*. In Islam, the purpose of *parinta* is to protect *agama* and to implement its laws. *Agama* and *parinta* are rolled into one. Neither of them is divorced from the other. The role of *agama* is to provide guidance for the operation of *parinta*. The common saying goes this way: "*In Islam amuna parinta, amuna agama.*" This is the very basis why *Bangsa Sug* seeks a kind of government that can guarantee the survival of

its garden and the people around it.

But what kind of government is most suited to us? The answer can be found in the experience of the past. Within the land of Darul Islam, there were only two political systems that evolved in accordance with the Shari'ah. These are the *khilafah* and the *sultaniyyah*. These are the systems that are relevant to the political life of Muslims anywhere in the world today. These are the only systems that recognize Allah as the Sovereign power. The rest of the political systems are man-made. They are not designed to implement Shari'ah and raise the banner of Islam.

It is the dynamic interplay of these three pillars of the state that will produce and sustain a strong *Bangsa Sug* or Philippine society in general. This can be illustrated by the early experience of the sultanate throughout the *Bangsa Sug* homeland from the 15th century until colonial times. Examining our material culture from the past reveals the level of social cohesiveness, leadership, trade, craftsmanship, farming, and adherence to Islam, which can speak to the strength of our society in the past. The fortitude of our society to withstand the 400 years of colonial aggression is unparalleled among the Muslims in Southeast Asia. Our colonial resistance during the Spanish period was a factor that saved the Malay world from Spanish colonization.

The social cohesiveness of our *kamaasan* was very strong because they were guided by what the Qur'an says:

*"ta'āwanu ala al-birri wa at-taqwa wala ta'āwanu ala al-ismi wa al-udwan."*  
(The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 5:2)

Their unity is evident in our popular social norms, such as the concepts of *pagdangin* and *pagsabi*. The sultan developed a strong political will. This allowed him to enforce unity in actions, from farming to observing the two annual festivals. Why did the sultan enforce his will? He did so because he possessed *martabat* before his *ra'ayat*. This *martabat* came from his strong adherence to the spirit of *hula-bangsa-agama*. The sultan then planted the spirit of *hula-bangsa-agama* as the political cause among his *ra'ayat*. Championing this cause is the key to strengthening our society.

### **Sacred Flag**

All nations look to their history for national inspiration. Their struggle for freedom, national aspirations, and cultural heritage is always held as sacred. The flag symbolizes these values. Today, every *Bangsa Sug* *ra'ayat* should see himself as the standard bearer of the sacred flag of *hula-bangsa-agama*. Regardless of our status, location, or circumstances, we should always raise high the dignity of this sacred flag, bearing the emblem of *hula-bangsa-agama*. We must each do our part to add to the shining glory of our sacred flag. We must not let anyone keep their light from the masses. This sacred flag should always serve as a source of inspiration in our struggle for freedom and peace. It must be planted at the bottom of our hearts.

Nabi Muhammad said: "...*wa'lamu anna al-Jannata tahta dhilali as-suyuf*" (Be known to you that Paradise is under the shades of swords). This is to be understood as a call upon the Muslims to defend their *agama*.

### **Sacred Cause**

The defense of *hula-bangsa-agama* is a sacred cause. It is the cause of Allah. To serve is a great privilege and a great pride before Allah and humanity. The defense of a sacred cause is the tradition of all *nabiyyin* of Allah, the *siddiqin*, the *shuhada*, and the *salihin*. This is the great highway towards *siratul mustaqim*. *Mujaddid* of today should facilitate the call upon the masses to come to this great highway. The four major roads linking to this great highway are the roads which were trodden by the



nabiyyin, the *siddiqin*, the *shuhada*, and the *salihin*.

This sacred cause also needs sacred methods. These must come from God's rules, proven over time, and used by those who loved truth before us. Ultimately, this translates to *jihad fi sabilillah*. *jihad* was the path of the Prophet and his followers. The *ulama* called *jihad* the stronghold of Islam; those inside it gain status now and later. The Qur'an says:

*"How many of the Prophets fought (in Allah's way) and with them (fought) large bands of godly men? But they never lost heart. If they met with disaster in Allah's way, nor did they weaken (in will) nor give in. Allah loves those who are firm and steadfast."*  
(The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 2:146)

*"All that they said was: 'Our Lord! Forgive us our sins and anything we may have done that transgressed our duty. Establish our feet firmly and help us against those that resist faith.'" (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 2:147)*

*"And Allah gave them a reward in this world, and the excellent reward of the Hereafter for Allah loves those who do good."* (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 2:148)

In our time, the art of war has evolved from the practices of the past (Wezeman et al., 2022). The enemy of Islam has possessed the technology of war, from missiles, aircraft carriers, to drones, including weapons of mass destruction (Kasapoğlu & Özkarasahin, 2022). According to Doherty and Kiley (2023), they have the capability to wage a war against Muslim nations or direct invasion, such as what happened in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali. In fact, today, most wars taking place in the Muslim nations are brought on by the enemy of Islam. Hence, the warning of the Qur'an to the Muslims:

*"Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power including steeds of war, to strike terror into the enemies of Allah and your enemies, and others besides whom you may not know but whom Allah does know. Whatever you shall spend in the cause of Allah shall be repaid unto you, and you shall not be treated unjustly."* (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 8:60)

*"Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you. But do not transgress limits for Allah loves not transgressors."* (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 2:190)

*"And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah. But if they cease let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression."* (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 2:193)

*"Those who believed and those who suffered exile and fought in the path of Allah – they have the hope of the mercy of Allah. And Allah is oft-forgiving, Most Merciful."* (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 2:218)

According to Fadlullah bin Ruzbiham Isfahani in his book, *Suluk al-Muluk*, *jihad* has four classes. The *jihad fi sabilillah* (striving in the path of Allah) is an eternal command for all Muslims (Tuban, 2020). Fadlullah bin Ruzbiham Isfahani, in his book *Suluk al-Muluk*, divides *jihad* into four forms: *Jihadun Nafs*, *Jihadus Shaytan*, *Jihadul Kuffar*, and *Jihadul Munafiqin*. *Jihadun Nafs*, or the battle with oneself, is a *fardhu 'ayn* (individual responsibility) on all Muslims. Prophet Muhammad (S.A.S.) once made a comment to his fellow warriors returning from war, stating that they had only completed the lesser *jihad* and were now entering the greater *jihad*, which refers to the *jihad* against oneself. Isfahani maps out four phases of this warfare: (1) pursuing Islamic learning, (2) living in accordance with Islamic doctrine, (3) calling others to Islam, and (4) practicing *sabar* (patience) in adversity. Parallel to this, *Jihadus Shaytan* deals with the battle against Satan. The Qur'an has said:

"O you who believe! Follow not the footsteps of Shaytan. And whosoever follows the footsteps of Shaytan, then, verily he commands al-fahshai (i.e., to commit indecency), al-munkar (disbelief and polytheism) ..." (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 24:21)

"The Qur'an further reminds Muslims that "Shaytan is the open enemy of mankind." (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 17:53)

Their leader is called *Iblis* (may the curse of Allah be upon him). *Iblis* works day and night to mislead people from the path of Islam. His best weapons are the sowing of *fitna*, false promise, music, poetry, women, liquor, astrology, and inculcating niggardliness so that mankind will fall into heedlessness and major sins.

*Jihadul Kuffar* involves the fight against the disbelievers who are against the teachings of Islam and want to propagate *fasad* (corruption) on earth using systems founded on *riba*, polytheism, and moral corruption (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 4:10). Such a *jihad* can be conducted intellectually, through words, in terms of money, and physically, according to necessity. *Jihadul Munafiqin*, the fight against hypocrites, is actually the most devious, for these people claim to profess Islam but deny it within themselves. They are defined by the words of the Prophet: "When they speak, they speak falsehood, when they are entrusted, they withhold it, when they promise, they break it." Like the Kuffar, they must be tackled through all the means at hand—mental, verbal, economic, and physical if needed. The four aspects of *jihad* summarize the integral and multifaceted roles of Muslims in protecting their faith, society, and moral fiber as guided by divine wisdom.

### **Sacred Goal**

In all societies, the role of intellectuals is to identify the causes of the backwardness of the society, provide solutions and direction, and eventually set the political goal for their people. Village leaders, administrators, teachers, *kaguruhan*, *duat*, and the *khatib* should be present to teach, motivate, inspire, and call people to unite for the sacred goal.

The question is, who will identify and decide our sacred goal? In this discourse, the sacred goal refers to the political goal. This is not an easy task. We can only identify our political goal if we can first remove the jungle of doubt and confusion in the minds of the people. Some of our people have captive minds. As Abinales (2000) argues, this condition is partly a legacy of colonial state formation in Mindanao, where Spanish and later American administrations deliberately dismantled traditional institutions of governance, thereby weakening historical and political consciousness. They cannot see historical reality nor find a solution to our present political suffering. Young people, who are the hope of the motherland, are not properly socialized and exposed to the culture and ideology of the *Bangsa Sug* society. Because the instruments of political socialization, such as the family institution, schools, the *madaris*, and the *masjid*, are not properly designed or oriented towards the task.

We are now in a situation where most of our people are isolated from their own culture. The immediate task is to transform their perceptions by re-educating them with the teachings of Islam and the historical lessons from our great past. Sidel (2006) reminds us that Islam in Southeast Asia has always been shaped by the interplay of power, political economy, and state formation, rather than purely by doctrine. This perspective highlights that the *Bangsa Sug*'s sacred goal is not only theological but also political, rooted in sovereignty and material governance. There is a need to refresh the minds of young people about historical facts. Fact number one is that the great Sulu sultanate was a symbol of *Bangsa Sug* statehood. This state was once an independent and sovereign state. Fact number two: the united alliances of the diverse inhabitants under the Sulu sultanate, in the face of colonial aggression from the 16th century to the 20th century, provided the climate for the emergence of *Bangsa Sug* nationalism, which was intentionally created to serve as the sustaining core of *Bangsa Sug*

statehood. Fact number three: *Bangsa Sug* nationalism was the first line of historical development of what is now the Philippines. The Filipino line of historical development was created by the Spanish colonialists. Filipino nationalism came formally only after the GOMBURZA execution in 1872. *Bangsa Sug* people are the first nation. The Filipinos belong to the second nation (Kamlan, 2012). This is what we mean: the Philippines today is in a state of *duwa bangsa* (a state of two nations).

These historical facts should serve as the basis for the *Bangsa Sug* people to establish their political goals. Any decision outside the parameters of historical experience is likely to be misleading. It is an act of injustice.

Taking historical reality, experience, and facts as a basis for setting our political goal, we can conclude that our political goal is simply to revive and restore *Bangsa Sug* statehood, either as a federal state or a separate state. The first effort is to rebuild the political structure of the Sultanate of Sulu, such as the *kawazilan*, the *ruma bissara*, and the *paghuhukuman*. At the bottom, the *lungan* or the traditional village used to be administered by the *maharajah*, and the *panglima* should also be restored. The second effort is to completely bureaucratize the BARMM and enhance its operational efficiency. The third effort is also to reform the two national fronts: the MNLF and the MILF. The purpose of strengthening these political machineries is to capacitate and empower our people for nation-building (Ingilan & Abdurajak, 2021).

These three leading political efforts are a long and arduous process. This will take us a decade to bring everything into place. Having a parallel movement with the three social movements is the best option and an effective legal way to attain our political goal. If we can prove to Allah, the Almighty, that we are capable of governing ourselves, to be the real *khalifa* in the *Bangsa Sug* homeland, then surely, Allah will set us free. But if we continue to be corrupt, neglect our religious duties, and rely on secular philosophy, there shall be no divine help for us. From generation to generation, our people will continue to live under the impact of oppression and injustice. Forever, the *Bangsa Sug* shall be deprived of its national *martabat* and *kalimayahan*.

The point here is that if the *Bangsa Sug* succeeds in reorganizing its political institutions to serve the needs of its people, the final step would be to seek political recognition of its national aspiration, which is the right to self-determination. This could mean restoring *Bangsa Sug* statehood, either as part of a federal arrangement or as a separate state. Other nations have already taken this path without resorting to armed struggle. Pakistan, Singapore, and the six Muslim-majority states of Central Asia, like Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, gained recognition by preparing their people to govern themselves and chart their own future. Following the collapse of the British Empire after the Second World War, Pakistan was recognized as an independent state in 1947. Similarly, when the Soviet Union fell apart after its war in Afghanistan, the six Muslim nations of Central Asia restored their independence. These examples demonstrate that, with strong leadership, preparation, and unity, political recognition and self-determination can be achieved without resorting to violence.

The *Bangsa Sug* war is over with the signing of the 1996 peace agreement between the MNLF and the Manila government. This is the period of rebuilding our shattered institutions. We must utilize the limited governmental power granted to us to organize our economy and social institutions while awaiting divine assistance. The Qur'an says:

“waman nasru illa min ‘indillah.” (The meaning of the Holy Qur'an, 2004; 3:126)

“There is no victory except from Allah.” (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 8:10)

We should always connect our national hopes to the divine decree of Allah, the Lord of the worlds. It is essential that all social movements within the *Bangsa Sug* homeland contribute to nurturing and cherishing the aforementioned political goal. Our political goal should become our struggle, the struggle of everyone, the struggle of all movements in our land. Our struggle is a struggle for Islam. The Qur'an has challenged us:

*"And what is wrong with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah, and for those weak, ill-treated and oppressed among men, women, and children, whose cry is: 'Our Lord! Rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from You one who will protect, and raise for us from You one who will help.'"* (The Noble Qur'an, 1996; 4:75)

## Conclusion

This study has shown that *hula-bangsa-agama* is more than a slogan. The *Tausug* concept of statehood unites land, people, and religion into a single framework of governance. Since colonization, it has been the foundation of *Tausug* identity and struggle, serving as both a political and spiritual guide. In this framework, *hula* represents the land as the source of life, *bangsa* stands for unity and leadership, and *agama* provides divine guidance for society. The cause of *hula-bangsa-agama* is seen as sacred, a form of *jihad* to defend dignity and continue the struggle for justice and freedom.

At the same time, it is not easy to apply *hula-bangsa-agama* in our present situation. The constitutional separation of church and state makes it hard to connect religion and governance. Globalization and modern ways of thinking sometimes weaken its influence. Divisions among leaders, weak institutions, and the decline of traditional centers of learning also limit its practice. In a society with diverse cultures and religions, care must be taken to ensure that it is not perceived as exclusive. Its revival requires patience, strong leadership, and inclusive dialogue to avoid exclusivity in a multicultural and multi-religious society.

Despite these challenges, upholding the cause of *hula-bangsa-agama* is crucial in addressing problems and represents a potential force to move the nation towards peace and national reconciliation. Struggling for this cause shall liberate us from political disunity. It simply gives us authority and power, which eventually become our tool for social reconstruction and transformation of the country from the state of *masa duwa bangsa* into *hambuuk bangsa*. If this concept is properly understood and applied, it can reawaken national consciousness and unite the country. Embracing *hula-bangsa-agama* shall bring the whole Philippines into a solid and dynamic nation-state, where Muslim and Christian histories merge into one.

*Hula-bangsa-agama* is the social bond that sustains the national struggle across centuries. *Hula* must come first, followed by *bangsa*, and *agama* in the third order. *Hula-bangsa-agama* can be likened to a ship and its journey towards its final destination. We cannot cross the horizon and reach the end unless there is a strong ship to carry us forward. This ship is actually our *hula*, our motherland. *Bangsa* are the passengers, the crew, and the captain of the ship. *Agama* represents the map, the compass, and the engine to make the ship run and cross the ocean of struggle. National freedom represents our final destination.

The findings suggest that *hula-bangsa-agama* remains a living doctrine that can serve as both a shared history and a decolonial framework, challenging misrepresentations of *Tausug* identity and history. It reclaims *Tausug* political agency, challenges misrepresentations of identity, and refines theories of Islamic governance in Southeast Asia by emphasizing locality, spirituality, and community alongside law and authority.

This study is limited by its reliance on historical texts and secondary sources, as it does not yet incorporate contemporary community perspectives. Future research that incorporates oral histories, ethnography, and policy analysis could make its relevance more concrete. Yet, at the practical level, the doctrine can guide reforms in BARMM by integrating traditional leadership with democratic systems, strengthening moral governance, and rooting institutions in culture while respecting pluralism. More broadly, it provides a moral compass for peacebuilding and inclusive governance, demonstrating that Muslim and Christian histories can converge into a shared nationhood. *Hula-bangsa-agama* stands as both a reminder of the past and a guide for the future, capable of rebuilding unity, supporting fair leadership, and inspiring inclusive governance in the Philippines and beyond.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

### **AI Disclosure**

We declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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