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Unveiling Structural Poverty in Muslim Mindanao: Focus on Power Dynamics and Economic Injustice

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Abstract

The study examines structural poverty in Muslim Mindanao from the perspectives of Thomas Pogge and Iris Marion Young. It attempts to explain the critical aspect of the region's economic injustice and power dynamics in terms of how the same has contributed to the deprivation of its people. Three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to help explicate the structural nature of the problem of poverty. The study used primary data from the FGD and secondary data from texts for its analysis. The study explains the influence and impact of the shadow or underground economy in the Bangsamoro. Its predatory character defines the political economy of Muslim Mindanao. The influence of political clans and the lack of people empowerment have subjected the Muslim minority in the Philippines to an exploitative type of economic system that has made the region one of the poorest in the country. The paper argues for structural reforms beyond state-centric measures to sustain peace and development in Muslim Mindanao. Changing the power dynamics in the Bangsamoro is necessary if people are to benefit from authentic autonomy.

Keywords: power dynamics, political economy, structural injustice, Muslim Mindanao, Philippines

The problem of poverty is usually examined from the perspective of income and human capability (Sen, 1999). For Young (1990), understanding injustice necessitates looking into existing structures and how the same impacts the lives of people. The positional hierarchy affects the circumstances into which people are thrown. Systems and institutions become tools of injustice when designed by people positioned to control them. The reality of injustice results from historical actions that oppress, exploit, and marginalize people. As Young (2000) asserted, *justice* is not just a question of the redistribution of resources. It has something to do with power relations in the social, political, and economic hierarchies.

Pogge (2008) writes that global poverty is a result of unjust structures. Poverty is a result of the uneven situation of people. Historical injustices, as well as policy, can be blamed for the inability of poor societies to overcome the problem of poverty. Sachs (2005) calls the same as poverty traps. While economists and consequentialist philosophers like Singer (2001) advocate for the positive duty to help the global poor, Pogge argues that there is a negative moral duty not to harm people. The dire situation the people are put into is not natural. People are forced into difficult conditions in the past through colonialization and the hegemonic political order that favors affluent societies. One such structure includes high tariffs and unfair competition in global trade.

Severe poverty, for instance, makes people perpetually vulnerable (Pogge, 2007). Such is apparent in societies in which hunger and violence are a daily occurrence. Collste (2015) thinks that the problem of poverty can be solved by rectifying uneven structures and institutions. The recognition of basic human rights is crucial in terms of the respect people in poor societies deserve (Pogge, 2007). Nevertheless, Rawls (2001) thinks that no society is so poor that it cannot build its own basic structure. Such a claim appears naïve to the reality of colonialism that has caused systemic failures of governance in some states. Young (1990), for instance, rejects Rawls's ahistorical starting point, while Pogge (1989) expressed the inadequacy of the difference principle. Both perspectives can be fused to highlight the importance of structural reforms in removing the undue prejudice and bias in any society that impedes the development of people.

A case in point is Muslim Mindanao. This study provides a historical background of the region and explains the conditions of the people, their culture, and the biases that hinder the realization of a just, peaceful, and democratic society. The authors subsequently attempt to draw from the Focus Group Discussions conducted in three areas and fuse the same in Young and Pogge's thoughts to understand Bangsamoro's institutional failures. The study likewise attempts to address the issues and problems in the autonomous region to provide a framework for better policy and political reforms. It attempts to show the ramifications of the region's underground or shadow economy. The aim of this investigation is to understand the relationship between the power dynamics of a society and its political economy.

The problem of the Bangsamoro is rooted in a historical injustice. In terms of its aims, the paper first provides a historical background of the Bangsamoro, encompassing the struggles and aspirations of its inhabitants. Second, the paper offers a vantage point when it comes to the nature of the unjust economic and political structures and how these affect the lives of its inhabitants, who have been subjected to a patronage system. Third, the paper explains the predatory nature of the political economy of the Bangsamoro and how the same is driven by the power dynamics that characterize the rule of political clans and dynasties. Fourth, the authors try to show the importance and role of a democratic and grassroots-level political party building in order to thwart the threat from traditional power players who can jeopardize the regional government.

Literature Review

Sen (1999) is seminal in terms of differentiating the role of income and human capability when

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it comes to the problem of poverty. Sen affirms that the income approach is inadequate. Sachs (2005), meanwhile, explains the reason for the inability of some societies to overcome the poverty trap. The problem of poverty is arguably structural and systemic. Browne (2024) explains that structural injustice is present even in democratic societies. In addition, Pitts (2011) and Collste (2015) think that colonialism affects the socio-economic and cultural dynamics in society. Democracy and human development, nevertheless, should go together (Sen, 1999). One cannot speak of a true democratic system if people are poor.

As a matter of perspective, Pogge (2008) makes a distinction between interactional and institutional causal factors when it comes to poverty. The former has something to do with the actions of individuals, which make them blameworthy, whereas the latter concerns systems, laws, and policies that harm people (Browne, 2024). Young (2011) distinguishes between individual and collective responsibility. The first deals with human actions rooted in the person's autonomy. The individual should be held accountable for the outcomes of the decisions one makes (Maboloc, 2024b). Meanwhile, collective responsibility is structural in nature. Policy failures cannot be blamed on a single decision by any individual (Sen, 1981; Young, 2011). A confluence of factors results in the reality of injustice in society.

In understanding the situation in Bangsamoro, the work of Lara (2015) provides a deep context when it comes to its political economy and how it influences the lives of the people in the region. Abinales (2010) mentions the influence of colonial history in state building. Jubair (2007) suggests that self-determination meant a recognition of the struggle of Muslims against colonial rule. Gaspar (2021), moreover, says that Lumads are also marginalized within Bangsamoro. Malaya (2017) and Gloria (2014) analyzed the situation in Muslim Mindanao based on the exclusion of the region from the central government. Maboloc (2024a) thinks radical leadership was necessary to implement the peace process. The paper argues that the underground economy, as explained in Lara (2015), is one of the causal factors of the extent of poverty in Bangsamoro.

The patronage system that controls the politics in the region has given tremendous power to political dynasties, who, in turn, are the bosses that control its economy. In support of the statement above, Abinales (2010) reveals that mainstream economic and political structures of the Philippines have excluded the Bangsamoro region. In this way, human poverty has historical and political reasons (Maboloc, 2024a). Historically, Muslim Filipinos have been deprived of their rightful share of the country's wealth (Rasul, 2007). Agoho and Teehankee (2023) explain that the Moro struggle is rooted in the quest for recognition and state formation. Muslims are wrongly judged as incapable of governing themselves (Malaya, 2017). The paper aims to show the role and value of grassroots democracy in effecting structural change in the power dynamics of a region if it must benefit from authentic autonomy.

Materials and Methods

Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in the cities of Koronadal (November 12, 2023), Cotabato (November 18, 2023), and Zamboanga (January 14, 2024) to gather first-hand information from stakeholders. The participants of the FGDs were randomly chosen. They came from the academe, the bureaucracy of the Regional Government in Bangsamoro, and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), including teachers, students, peace advocates, NGO workers, local politicians, and bureaucrats. Primary data and information were collected from the three FGDs mentioned above. The authors intend to determine the sentiments of the people and their unique aspirations towards the peace-building process while recognizing the influence of the shadow economy in their everyday lives.

The first FGD was focused on the situation of Lumads in the region. According to the participants, Indigenous Peoples feel excluded from the plans of the Bangsamoro government. This is because they do not have enough representation in the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA). The second FGD expressed the positive impact of the regional government on the development of the region. This is understandable since the discussion was done in Cotabato City, the seat of power in the BARMM. The third and last FGD provided insights on the situation in the island provinces of Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Basilan, most especially on the reality and threat of extremism that can derail the future plans of the Bangsamoro government in terms of expanding economic and social opportunities.

Young explains that the problem of injustice is structural in nature. It is a result of systems and rules that put people at a disadvantage. The problem cannot be solved by blaming a single individual since it is rooted in a collective responsibility. Pogge argues that poverty has institutional and individual causal factors. The former has something to do with policy, while personal decisions influence the latter. To overcome poverty, the authors argue that both should be considered when analyzing the historical injustice in the Bangsamoro. The authors did a structural analysis of the reality of poverty in the Bangsamoro region using primary and secondary data acquired during the study. The present investigation has been careful when it comes to ethical considerations. The study did not involve human subjects. No experiments were done involving members of Indigenous Communities and other groups.

Results and Discussion

Brief Background on the Bangsamoro

The history of Muslim Mindanao can be traced to the earliest communal societies in the Philippines, even before the Spanish conquest (Hernandez, 2003). The territory already had a thriving economy and a political system that defined the way of life of its inhabitants. The earliest inhabitants traded with the Chinese in Zamboanga and Sulu (Gaspar, 2021; Hernandez, 2003). However, the region today is a sad picture of conflict and war, and as a matter of consequence, the persistent poverty of most people. Our interest in the Bangsamoro is addressing the institutional as well as political mistakes that have contributed to the difficult situation of Muslims, Indigenous Peoples, and Christians in the region. Abinales (2010) argues that seeing Muslim Mindanao as a land of conflict is wrong. Such is one of the many biases against Muslims. The extent of poverty in Mindanao is not just a result of the unjust redistribution of wealth in Philippine society. Much of it is rooted in the exclusion of Mindanao from progress and development, which has been concentrated in the capital due to a centralized form of government (Malaya, 2017).

Why is Muslim Mindanao poor? Lara (2015), in Insurgents, Clans, and States, argues that the problem is rooted in its underground or shadow economy. Historically, the island region has been reduced into a land resource from the 1920s until the1940s (Abinales, 2010; Gaspar, 2021). The central government in Manila failed to recognize the island's accurate and meaningful contributions to national development; as a result of the exclusion, a Muslim rebellion that began in 1972 further isolated much of Muslim Mindanao. While the region has a majority Muslim population, it never emphasized the use of Islamic economic principles. Such principles show the importance of social justice and the equitable distribution of resources. For instance, the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* both advocate for supporting the poor and eradicating injustices that perpetuate poverty. Concepts like *zakat* (mandatory almsgiving) and *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) are critical mechanisms to redistribute wealth and support people in need within the community.

Poverty in Bangsamoro has tremendous effects on education, health care, and the environment. The FGD suggests that within the Bangsamoro, traditional politicians have control over the resources in the bodies of water under their political jurisdictions. For example, the FGD mentioned the Tans

and the Hatamans in the Sulu Sea, the Manguda*datu*s (divided between the half-brothers *Datu* Puwa of Buluan and *Datu* Pax of Lutayan) over the Buluan Lake, Iranuan politicians over fish cages in the Illana Bay). This type of arrangement, brought about by a patronage system of governance, has consequences for the well-being of people. Our analysis hopes to shed light on the structural issues and the ethical dimensions of the problem, which can guide policymakers.

The paper points to the idea that committing to real democratic inclusion is important to address the problem of poverty. Feudal and patronage systems need to be dismantled. State-centric approaches have been criticized as ineffective when it comes to what is happening at the grassroots (Tanabe, 2019). The "top-to-bottom" approach of most liberal governments has been questioned since it lacks a clear means of genuinely empowering the poor, and the ones at the top of the hierarchy usually decide based on the perpetuation of their self-serving interests. People are excluded from the deliberative processes and procedures, which ultimately undermine human well-being. To address the issue, social and political institutions should be structured in a way rooted in the idea of inclusivity and good governance.

Unjust Structures, Predatory Economic System, and Muslim Identity

In Islamic teachings, justice or *'adl* is a foundational principle that transcends historical and social contexts. It requires that the needs of the poor and marginalized are met and that a few do not hoard wealth. Understanding their importance is relevant in accommodating the idea of different politics. Young (1990) says that a normative theory of difference has particular implications for political philosophy. Such a theory of difference cannot be independent nor universal. It has to be historically and socially contextualized (Young, 1990).

Furthermore, a theory of justice is "understood broadly in terms of the distribution of goods, duties, and benefits". Young (1990, p. 19) ascertains two problems regarding the present paradigm: "First, the allocation of resources ignores social structures, and second, when extended to non-material goods, the meaning of justice becomes static". The distributive paradigm is "focused on the fair distribution of benefits and the division of burdens in society" (Young, 1990, p. 25). The problem, however, is that there is a question about how equal distribution is given the evidence that there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor. This gap should not be understood as merely economic. In fact, it has something to do with power.

The second FGD points to the idea that one must consider the structural dimension of the problem of poverty. This will require an examination of systemic problems such as corruption and cultural imperialism. Such types of prejudice often result in exclusion and, consequentially, in violence and other forms of oppression. While some liberals call for a more egalitarian approach, the conception of justice when it comes to these paradigms is still limited to the distribution of primary goods. There is a lack of recognition of a more fundamental problem that pervades, say, the oppression that people suffer from due to systemic injustice. Young (2002) sees powerlessness as one of the five faces of oppression. In the case of the Philippines, political power comes from the authority of the Central Government in Manila (Malaya, 2017). Since the colonial period, Ilustrado politicians have isolated Mindanao, which is due to the latent and obvious bias that the majority have against Muslim Filipinos (Maboloc, 2022). The Americans reduced the whole of Mindanao into a Moro Province (Gloria, 2014) while using the local political elites in the Bangsamoro to prevent the ability of ordinary Muslim Filipinos to react against the exploitative colonial rule (Agoho & Teehankee, 2023).

During the third FGD, the structural context of the exclusion problem is relevant in the effort to find the root cause of the problem. Pogge (2008) mentions institutional causal factors that result in human poverty. The apparent fact about such is the inability of people to question the policies that undermine their well-being. Although the interest of the public is the supposed ground for all types

of legislation and law enforcement, the vested interests of politicians and their patrons are reflected in the types of laws they pass. Some of these policies can be oppressive.

An example is the Rice Tariffication Law in the Philippines, which has caused the price of the essential commodity to shoot up because local farmers cannot compete with rice imports. In this sense, the majority of Filipinos feel powerless when it comes to state policies that can harm their basic welfare. In the above issue of expensive rice, what makes the problem more difficult is the apparent lack of will of the government to prosecute smugglers and hoarders. Meanwhile, the shadow economy in Bangsamoro continues to operate despite the negative effects on the people deprived of the benefits of the economy in the region.

The first FGD also mentioned that the problem in Bangsamoro is due to the abuses of people who are in positions of power. The injustice is a result of the exclusion of people from governance, especially Lumads. Young points to the hierarchy when it comes to social and economic structures. She refers to the same point in terms of positional differences, which put people at a disadvantage (Young, 1990). The poor are isolated from important policy discussions and put aside when it comes to meaningful consultations. It is the same issue when it comes to the national government and the regions. In the history of the Philippines, Jonathan Malaya (2017, p. 217) explains that "through time, the disadvantages of a unitary system became apparent". The problem, indeed, is the fact that there are very few from Mindanao who hold national leadership positions. In fact, as a whole, Filipinos are represented by politicians who do not fight for the interests of the poor and powerless. In the Philippine Senate, only seven Muslim Filipinos have been elected since the republic was established more than a century ago. However, 6.9 million Muslim Filipinos comprise 6.4% of the population (PSA, 2023).

The third FGD noted the reality of political dynasties in Bangsamoro. According to Lara (2015), within the Bangsamoro region, the reality of the patronage system has enabled dynasties and clans to hold on to power with a sense of impunity for their many abuses. Lara (2015) argues about the unique phenomenon of a clannish system that has thrived in Bangsamoro, which has perpetuated the poverty of the people. He explains that the isolation of the region from the broader context of the Philippine economy and centers of power has made Muslim Filipinos dependent on their political patrons. In Bangsamoro, big mansions are surrounded by shanties, which bespeak and illustrate an age-old feudal system.

In the same way, the poor beg for help from the politicians in order to survive. Such economic protection is extended in terms of protecting them from physical harm, one rooted in the patron and client relationship. The patron is, certainly, the boss. He decides and dictates what is to become of the lives of the people. National laws are ignored in terms of transactions, and this has enabled powerful families to amass great wealth. Rich clans control local industries, and by implication, the people have no means to escape the predatory nature of unjust economic and political structures.

Two arguments can be made from the three FGDs. First, the autonomy of the Bangsamoro in terms of charting its political destiny is not enough unless the structural problems within the region are addressed. Second, solving poverty cannot be limited to distributive schemes and must include aspects of political change that seek to put an end to the bias and prejudice against Muslims, especially in the area of governance. The first argument has something to do with the moral dimension of the problem. It is important to build the Bangsamoro from the ground up. Grassroots political party-building mechanisms must be put in place to address the need for stronger political parties that intend to serve the people on the basis of programs and good policies. The second argument, however, is about the fact that Muslim Filipinos need to be empowered so that they can chart their destiny based on their competencies and aspirations for a just, equal, and democratic society. Such has something

to do with the question of power and how the lack of it can have severe repercussions regarding the intended goals and outcomes of any state. Muslim Filipinos must be allowed to determine by themselves their destiny as a people without interference from powerful interests in Manila.

There is a need to recognize the rights of Muslim Filipinos when it comes to governance (Ferrer, 2015). The state-centric approach of the Philippine Government is rooted in achieving one goal. It is founded on the desire to end decades of war. The first and third FGDs expressed such a point. However, one cannot achieve that if justice is not realized for Muslim Filipinos. Pogge (2007) explains that there are basic differences when it comes to rights and goals. Rights are fundamental and inalienable. Goals, meanwhile, depend on the practical ways people adapt to change. In the issue of historical injustice, for instance, the narrative is based on the goal of giving the minority financial resources; however, the same is not enough. People should be entitled to their basic rights to social and economic development and the right to enjoy their way of life. Young (1990, p. 25) asserts that "rights are not possessions but a matter of relationship", which means rights can be "intrinsically defined as something that depends on rules of what people can do". In this way, rights are about "doing" more than "having", suggesting that rights have something to do with "social relationships". The question in Bangsamoro is not just about resource redistribution. It is a matter of Muslim identity.

According to Pogge (2007, p. 3), "the very poor are typically unable to defend their civil and other legal rights effectively." For instance, Muslim society in the Bangsamoro is defined by a *datu* system in which a dominant elder often acts as a political and, at the same time, a powerful moral leader (Gaspar, 2021). In the past, the poor in the community depended on the *datu* to make agreements and fight for the safety of the tribe. The *datu*, in this regard, owes his power to the respect people give. Muslims trust that the *datu* will defend their interests and keep them from harm against the attacks of outside forces. The same has also strengthened the type of solidarity Muslim communities have through the years. Many Muslim Filipinos see themselves as a nation, *"Bangsa"*. The same *datu* system thrives today but has achieved a new status in terms of powerful clans and families who control the people in the many facets of their daily existence. It bespeaks the level of structural oppression that people suffer from, as Young (1990) explained. While local elections are being held regularly, the grip of political dynasties in the region undermines its growth since the lack of competition means that competent leaders cannot represent the people since they do not have the resources to run a decent campaign and win during elections. This type of omission means that the lives of the people are perpetually under the domination of local elites and the powerful few.

Political Economy, Corruption, and a Backward System
The third FGD provides a sense of the reality of extremism, especially in Mindanao's remote island provinces. One reason mentioned had something to do with the lack of educational opportunities and the continued influence of extremist groups among the young. Yet, despite this, it is suggested that there is a deep clamor for peace. The Bangsamoro people seek to exercise their right to self-determination and self-governance. Over the decades, the Bangsamoro people struggled for these aspirations (Gloria, 2014; Jubair, 2007). Men have been recruited to become members of the armed forces formed by the Bangsamoro insurgent groups, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), leaving their livelihoods and families behind. According to Jubair (2007, p. 9), the war in Mindanao "has killed more than 150,000". This sad reality has turned many wives into widows, making children orphans. The war, which adversely affected the state of peace and security in most areas in the region, made it hard for businesses, agri-fishery, and other means of livelihood to develop, contributing to its high poverty incidence. The constant displacement resulted in children quitting their schools (Rasul, 2007). With the threat to their safety, families needed to leave behind their means to earn a living. The resulting poverty meant sacrifices were made, resulting in poor-to-no access to healthcare and severe malnutrition. Further, the poor peace and order situation in the region has obstructed the government services to reach the people.

In addition, stories about *rido* (clan feud), which result in the killing of members from both clans involved in the conflict, are common in the Bangsamoro Region (Lara, 2015). The tendency to resort to *rido* is largely based on the principle of *maratabat* (family honor), which involves a way of thinking where one would prefer to die than be shamed. *Ridos* often result from conflicts involving land, politics, and personal/family relationships, seeing it as an alternative to obtaining justice, usually due to a lack of confidence in the judicial process and a lack of faith in the rule of law (Gaspar, 2021). The same is true because low-income families depend on powerful political clans to protect them from persistent family conflicts (Lara, 2015). The point is that local Muslim overlords exploit this mechanism in order to secure the support of the local Muslim population during local elections, thereby perpetuating their position and control of the political and economic life of the people. A participant in the third FGD felt that the peace in the region was artificial. This is because the threat from political clans and dynasties that might derail the peace process is real. Their influence comes from the patronage type of politics that uses guns, goons, and gold. This type of patronage system weakened the political culture in Bangsamoro and perpetuated the injustices against ordinary Muslim Filipinos who remained subservient to the influence of powerful political dynasties.

The FGDs expressed the need to empower Muslim Mindanao by making the distribution of resources in the country equitable. Malaya (2017), in a study, underscores the fact that Metro Manila and its neighboring provinces account for 62% of the Philippine Gross Domestic Product, whereas the rest of the country accounts for the remaining 38%. The clamor for regional autonomy is based on the unjust distribution of wealth in the country. Mindanao, since the Spanish era, has been left behind in terms of development. The Manila-centric approach to governance means that the capital is favored in development projects, whereas Mindanao only gets a pittance in funds. The problem, in this way, is political because decision-makers emphasize the urgency to provide for the growing needs of the metropolis before considering the needs of the rest of the country. However, the same does not give the whole picture of the problem. In this regard, the question is, what sort of institutional reforms would be needed to change the situation of the people below the poverty line in the Bangsamoro region?

Institutions play a very critical role in socio-economic progress. Lara (2015) says that the Bangsamoro economy operates in the purview of the patronage system of politics in the country. Historical events influence the attitude of Muslim Filipinos regarding their desire for self-determination. One such event was the Jabidah Massacre (Gloria, 2014). According to Gloria (2014), twenty-seven-year-old Moro recruits were massacred when they protested their living conditions while training in Corregidor Island, Bataan. Jabidah refers to the secret commando unit code-named "Jabidah," which was allegedly tasked to embark on an operation called "Project Merdeka" to destabilize and take over Sabah (Gloria, 2014). This happened in 1968. President Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., at the time, planned to infiltrate Sabah, which the Philippines claimed as part of its territory. Historical claims suggest that the island, rich in oil resources, was part of the Sultanate of Sulu. The massacre resulted in resentment against the government of Marcos and galvanized the struggle for Muslim independence by separatist movements (McKenna, 1998).

Most Muslims in the region do not identify themselves as Filipinos (Kamlian, 2012). According to Agoho and Teehankee (2023), it was Nur Misuari who "urged his fellow Muslims to disclaim their identities as Muslim Filipinos and instead identify themselves as Moro" (p. 6). The reason is that they do not feel being part of the country, having been isolated due to decades of war. But the reason runs deeper. Jubair (2007) recounts that Mindanao never became a subject of foreign invaders. The Moros fought to maintain their way of life. The struggle they are fighting for is meant to rectify decades of injustice. At present, Muslim Filipinos do not want to be subjected to the control of Manila (the Philippine capital and seat of power). While Muslims in Mindanao have never been the subjects of foreign rule, the bad side of the story has been the huge impact of the exclusion. It resulted in massive

poverty and imperialism from within (Maboloc, 2022). Elite Muslim families control a big chunk of the local economy, which means that poor Muslims had no recourse but to submit themselves to the whims of political dynasts and the elites in the region. Poor Muslim Filipinos have no choice but to develop a sense of dependency because it is their only means of economic survival. Lara (2015) argues that the lack of opportunities in Muslim Mindanao meant that the poor had to rely on the generosity of powerful clans, which meant they had to be loyal to receive economic favors.

The above serves as the background of the thriving but exploitative underground economy in Muslim Mindanao. Unlike a formal economy, a shadow or black economy is far from the sights of government regulators. The state does not benefit from the system because no taxes are remitted to the government (Lara, 2015). Legal contracts cannot be fully enforced. There is no transparency. This also means that powerful business interests in the region, usually aligned with political clans, impose their will on hapless workers, most of whom do not get the normal legal protection available in mainstream society. Poor employees do not get the minimum wage, thus contributing to a low standard of living. The data is glaring, especially when it comes to education. For instance, only four out of ten in the Bangsamoro finish elementary grade (Rasul, 2007). In healthcare, the whole autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao does not have a single tertiary hospital that can cater to major medical cases. The repercussions are severe from an economic viewpoint. The inefficiency of the system within the region manifests itself in the backward type of economy that is practiced by many.

In the context of the Bangsamoro, a shadow economy appears problematic since it first serves the interests of a powerful clan instead of the well-being of ordinary people. A shadow economy often leads to corruption (Lara, 2015). This is seen in typical transactions involving government projects and contracts. Contractors will buy government projects from politicians that are due to be implemented. They usually charge 10% to 20%. This dirty money goes to the politician in the form of kickbacks (Carlos et al., 2010). As a result, the projects become substandard. The same is a clear violation of the rights of people. The problem is that corruption is rampant in the entire Philippines. One of the main reasons why the country has remained poor is that a big part of the national wealth is stolen by politicians out of the budget allocations that are given to them. Consequently, millions of people remain impoverished, especially in rural areas. One of the regions that is most affected by this corrupt system is Muslim Mindanao.

Poverty incidence is the proportion of families or individuals with income less than the Poverty Threshold to the total number of families or individuals. Based on the latest available data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2023), among 14 regions in the Philippines, BARMM has had the highest poverty incidence rates among families over the years. In our analysis, the data suggest a big gap in progress and development in the Philippines due to the unequal distribution of wealth. Critics, for instance, point to historical exclusion and massive corruption (Lara, 2015). However, it should be pointed out that as we argued in this study, the reason for the poverty in the Bangsamoro region has historical roots, one that is brought about by the exclusion of Muslim Filipinos since the Spanish period and the type of political economy in the region which deprives its inhabitants of their rightful share of the goods that could improve their standard of living. Karl Gaspar (2020), for instance, mentions extractive industries that only benefit powerful interests but continue to make the lives of Indigenous Peoples difficult.

Addressing Poverty, Other Threats, and Policy
The three FGDs suggest that the Bangsamoro region's history of conflict and insurgency can undermine stability and hinder development efforts in the future despite the resources that have been given to them by means of the Block Grant in the annual General Appropriations Act. Justice is not just a matter of resource allocation. The problem is a question of "power relations" between within and without. From within, political clans control the political economy of Bangsamoro. From

without, the centralized system of government based in Manila dictates the terms of development in the region from a political end, with the present Marcos Administration, for instance, fielding their candidates to protect their political interests. As such, the situation of the people within the region makes them susceptible to political and economic manipulation. Due to influential power players, BARMM struggles to build and strengthen the institutions needed to govern the region and effectively deliver services to its people. According to Agoho and Teehankee (2023), "the American colonizers successfully co-opted traditional Muslim elites to suppress possible resistance from Moro communities" (p. 4).

Corruption in the past has eroded public trust in the Bangsamoro government. If the 2025 elections are to push through, powers-that-be have already positioned themselves so that they can take control of the Bangsamoro (Maboloc, 2024a). Suppose the political party established at the grassroots level and those that directly emanate from the organization of the Moro rebels lose in the elections. In that case, those who have struggled and fought against the government might feel politically disenfranchised. Therefore, a new wave of discontent will have a ripple effect in the region, especially because traditional politicians and clans have vested interests (Lara, 2015). Such can be seen as a catastrophic failure. Ordinary people perceive that the government diverts resources away from much-needed development projects. To address the problem of poverty, institutional and democratic deficits must be addressed (Carlos et al., 2010). Indeed, there is no argument that people must be empowered in a real way by making democratic processes inclusive through authentic and principle-driven grassroots political parties and ending decades of prejudice against Muslim Filipinos who have been isolated from a societal culture that unfairly judges others.

The threats to the success of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) are complex challenges and problems that are interrelated to political, cultural, and economic factors (Maboloc, 2024b). The prevalence of illiteracy among the people in BARMM has become a significant hindrance to their overall progress and development. It is fundamental in a society that the lack of primary education and literacy skills limits access to valuable information and opportunities for economic growth (Gasper, 2004). Moreover, it can lead to a deficient capacity for critical thinking and analysis, making it difficult for individuals to fully participate in governance and decision-making processes. Thus, governance is limited to the ruling class. This situation further exacerbates the challenges the grassroots communities face, preventing them from achieving their full potential and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment (Lara, 2015). This structural issue should be addressed from a legal and moral vantage point. The answer is in democratic inclusion. People must have a voice to escape the poverty trap due to the shadow economy brought about by an age-old patronage system.

In Bangsamoro, the extravagant lifestyles of the ruling class showcase the economic inequalities that foster social unrest that, in turn, contribute to instability and undermine the region's development (Lara, 2015). The existence of a significant wealth gap has resulted in the marginalization of disadvantaged communities, who feel neglected and, for this reason, resent the government (Rasul, 2007). This has created a breeding ground for grievances and conflicts, which violent extremist groups often exploit to incite further unrest and instability in the region. Currently, parties are structured around individual personalities, clan affiliations, or ethnic identities rather than ideologies or policies (Lara, 2015). This has led to the perpetuation of patronage politics, nepotism, and the exclusion of minority groups. This has impeded the development of inclusive governance and propagated conflicts and divisions within the Bangsamoro society (Rasul, 2007). The mindset that focuses on personal gain and self-interest rather than a commitment to the greater good of the community must be put to an end. When politicians and public officials prioritize their interests over the collective welfare of society, progress toward achieving peace, stability, and prosperity can be hindered.

Political parties play a vital role in poverty alleviation by promoting good policies and programs that aim to tackle the underlying causes of poverty. By advocating for these initiatives and working towards their implementation, they can help create a sustainable and inclusive socio-economic system that benefits everyone. In a region where political clans have ruled, Moro Front leaders (former rebels), and traditional politicians (those from royal families), the involvement of political parties can prove instrumental in the fight against poverty. These parties can take proactive steps to promote policies and strategies aimed at poverty reduction, allocate resources to marginalized communities, build capacity in the region's workforce, and foster collaboration among different stakeholders. By doing so, they can help create a more equitable and prosperous society where everyone has access to basic social services and opportunities for growth and development (Gasper, 2004). However, the way forward is to develop political parties from the ground up. If political families finance the establishment of political parties and other groups that can influence election results, then any type of progress would be stifled, given the problem of corruption in the region. Accordingly, Deinla and Engelbrecht (2019) state:

> How the BTA will perform in the coming months will largely depend on how it can sustain 'unity in diversity' and its capacity to drive BARMM through the different layers and levels of local governance. In terms of its relationship with the central government, mechanisms have been implemented, such as coordinating teams, etc., to iron out issues. The Intergovernmental Relations Body is a case in point. BARMM's relationship with local government units is more complex, given that these units have operated like a fiefdom of their own.

A grassroots political movement, in this way, is necessary. People-based political parties can take the initiative to develop and promote comprehensive policies that target various aspects of society. For instance, policies focusing on economic development can stimulate growth and create more job opportunities for the citizens. Education policies can help raise the literacy rate and improve the region's education standard. Healthcare policies can ensure that all citizens have access to quality healthcare services. At the same time, social welfare programs can assist those who are struggling with poverty and other socio-economic challenges. By implementing such policies, the Bangsamoro parliament can work towards reducing poverty and improving the overall standard of living in the region. With the current setup that the Bangsamoro is receiving the Block Grant (5% of the total revenue from the BIR and Bureau of Customs), political parties have the power to effectively allocate resources towards funding poverty alleviation programs and initiatives. This allocation of resources can significantly improve the living conditions of marginalized communities in the Bangsamoro region, enabling them to lead a dignified life with access to necessities and opportunities. Such will counter the opportunistic type of politics of political dynasties in Bangsamoro.

Another way grassroots political parties can contribute to the growth and development of local communities and individuals is by supporting capacity-building initiatives that aim to empower them. These initiatives could include programs focused on training, education, and skills development, which are critical elements that can enhance the economic opportunities available to the communities and individuals involved. By providing access to these types of resources, political parties can help to impact the lives of many people and support the growth of their local economies in the long run. At present, the collaboration among people-based political parties, government agencies, civil society organizations, and international development partners can significantly enhance the effectiveness of poverty alleviation initiatives. By pooling their efforts, resources, and expertise, these entities can develop more comprehensive and targeted strategies to address the root causes of poverty and improve the lives of the most vulnerable members of society. Looking forward, "the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) faces a tremendous task in reshaping the current state of local democracy, broadly, and specifically in facilitating inclusive participation" (Deinla & Engelbrecht, 2019, p. 3). Working together in terms of their aspirations for a just and democratic society, they can make a

meaningful impact and bring about positive change in the fight against poverty within Bangsamoro. Indeed, the truth is that the failure "to work towards self-determination is not an option given the high expectations on the ground" (Deinla & Engelbrecht, 2019, p. 7).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how the power dynamics in Bangsamoro can affect its political economy and, ultimately, the lives of the people. Young (2002) explains that powerlessness is one of the faces of oppression. In the case of Muslim Mindanao, the extent of the poverty of the people is caused by an uneven system that is driven by the vested interests of political families and clans that benefit directly from an underground economy. It is a problem of structure. The same is rooted in a patronage system brought about by colonial rule. The centralized form of government in the Philippines meant that power was concentrated in the center. As a result, real development is limited to a few places, and Mindanao has been excluded from growth and economic progress. The same is exacerbated by the presence of local elites who control the lives of the people through a patron-client type of relationship. The colonial regime reinforced the unjust power structures by using the ruling elite to help subdue any resistance. The poor have to depend on their patrons, and for this reason, they cannot escape the cycle of poverty because they are constantly being manipulated.

Following Pogge (2007), there is a clear moral obligation to rectify these mistakes. The injustice against Muslim Filipinos was exacerbated by events that fueled Muslim resentment. This is true in the case of the Jabidah Massacre. Given this, some Muslim leaders wanted to do away with their identity as Muslim Filipinos. Misuari urged his fellow Muslims to embrace their identity as Moros. But after ending years of war and fighting, the peace process during Misuari's leadership yielded no concrete results in uplifting the lives of the people in Bangsamoro. In this sense, there was no authentic autonomy in the Bangsamoro region. The study proposed that any structural change from a political vantage point must begin at the grassroots level. This is because it is the only way to thwart the threats from dominant political parties financed by political dynasties. Suppose the Bangsamoro were to achieve any valuable and meaningful economic development that can uplift the lives of the poor in the region. In that case, political reforms must be implemented based on the participation of the people from the ground in order to realize the benefits of authentic autonomy. It is a question of altering the power dynamics in the region. Hence, the issue is structural. Political dynasties can only be prevented from grabbing power in BARMM if real political parties rooted in democratic inclusion emerge. The empowerment of ordinary people and their effective participation in governance means correcting the injustice that Muslim Filipinos suffer from in the region.

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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