

Rebel network theory: The case of Moro Islamic Liberation Front

Conflict Management and Peace Science

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/07388942231222213

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Abstract

This paper explores rebel legitimacy building by investigating rebel network formation during civil wars. Through a longitudinal study of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, it examines various mechanisms through which a non-state armed group (NSAG) embellishes and enhances its legitimacy among domestic and international support networks. The research also theorizes the complex interaction between domestic and international legitimacy, when and why NSAGs prioritize politically prestigious network over initial resource-based one, and the impact of the shift on rebel behavior. The causal process explores how rebels' legitimacy consideration affects their lobbying and coalition-building efforts.

Keywords

Civil wars, Moro Islamic Liberation Front, non-State armed groups, rebel legitimacy

Introduction

Rules of Engagement in Islam (Nidhamul harn fil Islam) Article 34 (shall read):

2. Object of the fight—it is directed only against fighting troops and not to non-fighting personnel. (Al-Baqarah: 190)
6. Prisoner of war or captives—Be kind at all times to captives or prisoners of war. Collect and care for wounded combatants.
8. Treaties and international conventions—Abide and respect covenants, conventions, treaties, and agreements including laws of international and local application. (MILF General Order no. 2, 2006, excerpts)

The civil war between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the state of Philippines caused almost 120,000 civilian deaths and internally displaced almost 2 million people (Reuters, 2012). While engaged in an armed resistance against the state, the non-state armed group

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(NSAG) constituted the above wartime code of conduct, pledged to adhere to a total ban on anti-personal mines by signing a humanitarian agreement¹ and provided agricultural training to the farmers of their community (Rood, 2017, personal communication).² But why? Why did the NSAG build a positive power relation with its constituents and external actors? What sorts of symbiotic, wartime socio-political and economic relationships emerge from it? This article introduces a fascinating case of a viable and threatening alternative to state-centered legitimacy created by rebels—that of the MILF in the Philippines—to address these questions.³ Process-tracing the wartime governmentality practices of the MILF, a novel rebel-network theory is developed that captures the emergence and cultivation of statehood and legitimacy beyond the purview of the formal state. Concurrently, the theory aims to show the spectrum of domestic and international coalitions that NSAGs build to shape and sustain legitimacy, including the trade-offs and costs faced by the rebels while pursuing legitimacy.

Drawing on extensive range of evidence and triangulating interviews, statements of the MILF, national and international newspapers, and reports of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), the article charts the way that the MILF claimed legitimacy from different audiences, and the different strategies of legitimization that it adopted depending on the characteristics of the networks they intended to build. I interviewed seven individuals who participated directly or indirectly in the legitimacy building process of the NSAG, such as peace negotiators associated with the MILF-GRP peace process, civil society actors who drafted the humanitarian agreement that the MILF signed, and academics. Since a key dynamic of this theoretical model hinges on understanding why rebels desired legitimacy, their gradual attainment of legitimacy over time, the behavioral mechanisms rebels adopt in response to their need for legitimacy, and the rationale of the actors who granted them legitimacy, the interviewees who were part of the legitimacy network (explained on p4) of the NSAG provided important insights into how and when rebels reached out to the actors who could grant them legitimacy. Simultaneously, the point of view of the legitimacy networks is complemented by including various statements, press releases, interviews of the MILF that illustrated the rebels' priorities, and justifications of their action, in their own words.

Rebel governance, the quest for statehood and legitimacy, is becoming a central topic in the study of conflict and humanitarian studies. One branch of scholarship revolves around understanding rebel governance as an instrumental, objective concept. It looks at how rebels generate and maintain legitimacy through the provision of positive public goods. It posits that NSAGs often establish institutions such as aid centers, justice, and education systems to attain popular legitimacy for their movement. This legitimacy, in turn, generates support for their demand for statehood—understood as the status of being recognized as an independent state or autonomous region (Malejacq, 2017; Mampilly, 2015a, 2015b; Reno, 1998; Schlichte and Schneckener, 2015). In parallel, some scholars diversify the idea of governance and legitimacy by theorizing how ideas and norms construe a rebel support base. Here, the authors have addressed the ways in which NSAGs use ideological orientation and principles, displayed through discourses, symbols, shared social goals, and value, to generate belief in their legitimacy among the audience (Mampilly, 2015a, 2015b; Schmelzle and Stollenwerk, 2018). All in all, the scholarship, heavily influenced by Tilly and Olson, aptly recognizes the use of performative and ideological governance by NSAGs to legitimize their rule and negotiate statehood (Fazal, 2018; Huang, 2016; Stanton, 2016). Recently, a strand of literature pushed the critical argument of rebel governance even further by introducing the Foucauldian idea of governmentality. It argues that this positive enforcement of governance eventually generates biopolitical sovereignty. Scholars such as Hoffmann and Verweijen (2019) and Brenner and Tazzioli (2022) contend that NSAGs, through performative and

ideological governance, engender disciplinary power. This, consequently, cultivates a subtle, indirect relationship between the rebels and the constituents by disciplining the latter's self-conduct and future actions. My project picks up from the aforementioned attempts at illuminating the direct and indirect ways that NSAGs construct legitimacy and widen the scope in two ways. First, I analyse rebel governance and legitimacy relationally, meaning that I unearth the different socio-political and economic actors that inhabit the rebel space, trace their relationship with rebels and situate the purpose and necessity for establishing rebel governance, within the relational structure. Second, while the aforementioned scholarships have provided unparalleled insights into what rebel legitimacy looks like and how it is generated, only a very few have provided a comprehensive account of how rebel legitimacy is built in real time.⁴ In particular, this article aims to fill the gap by presenting a longitudinal study of the MILF's legitimacy building process through three phases: early insurgency and early international and domestic network and legitimacy building (1972–1997); semi-recognized legitimacy by the state at the domestic level (1997–2000); and the shifting of networks and pursuit of international legitimacy through statist and humanitarian networks (2000 onwards). To this end, it supplements the current understanding of rebel legitimacy through exploring the nuances of rebel network building in situations of conflicts. It does so by concentrating on three lines of inquiry: the formation and evolution of rebel networks, concrete consequences of the networks on rebel behavior, and what internal and external factors persuaded the rebels to consider such networks.

The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces the rebel network theory. It clarifies the main elements of legitimacy networks and mechanisms. The following section highlights the distinctions between resource-based and legitimacy networks while elucidating the dynamics of transition from one to the other. It also presents some internal and environmental factors that explain such trade-off. Finally, we trace the attainment of statehood by the MILF by tracing the rebels' quest for legitimacy at the community, national, and international level. This paves the way for discussing in-depth the impact of the networks on rebels. I end by reflecting on the implications of the findings for the study of rebel adoption of unarmed means of opposition.

Rebel network theory: decoupling the state from statehood

The recent academic engagement with the ideas of governance without government in areas of limited statehood has challenged the institutional ideas of Weberian states as the sole providers of order. The scholarship has crucially highlighted that, far from spiraling into chaos during civil wars, we often see that the absence or inadequacy of state institutions is supplemented or substituted by non-state actors (Raeymaekers et al., 2008).

Here, "statehood" is not performed by the state, but often by NSAGs through everyday acts of constructing and maintaining order in the spheres of local security, public services and provision of resources (Arjona, 2016; Kasfir et al., 2017; Kubota, 2017; Mazzei, 2009). The idea of these non-state performers of statehood contradicts the traditional understanding of legitimacy as well. Usually, discussions of legitimacy are erroneously centered around the state. However, at its core, the idea of legitimacy is much broader. Legitimacy is defined as "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber, 1964: 382). It is a two-way relationship between the government and the governed. The governed only give consent to an entity when it is morally justified to wield power, when it behaves in accordance with social norms and enacts its roles as established by the social and political system it is a part of (Buchanan, 2002; Chou, 2016). In the context of civil wars, which are famously defined by

Kalyvas as a process of competitive state-building and a crisis of legitimacy, we can envision a situation where NSAGs emerge as contenders for legitimacy vis-à-vis the state by virtue of the social and political order they create during war. This article adds to the broadening understanding of non-state statehood and non-state legitimacy by introducing the rebel network theory. The argument is built on three facets: the conditions that engender rebel legitimacy; who grants legitimacy to a NSAG; and the political and social cost and benefits of legitimacy.

Recent works have made important contributions to explaining the conditions that help NSAGs to claim legitimacy from different sources. They are multifaceted but can be broadly categorized into two facets: performance-based and symbolic. Performance-based legitimacy, in short, depends on the principle of transactional value utility (Stillman, 1974). This means that this type of legitimacy depends on the capability of an authority to give communities what they need and seek. In areas of limited statehood, since often non-state actors often perform the state and because legitimacy is dependent on the value utility of performing authority, it is possible to imagine a situation in which legitimacy shifts from the state to the non-state actor (Podder, 2013). However, we must note that in areas of limited statehood, legitimacy is not exclusively attained by actual capacity and output, but through actors' willingness to provide as well. The performance-based categorization of legitimacy goes beyond provision and includes the NSAG's ability to create and implement rules authoritatively (Furlan, 2020). Also, statehood and legitimacy are not exclusively operationalized through normative provisions of welfare services. Collective identity and symbolic goods tend to legitimize political positions as well. Appealing through autochthony discourse, narratives on heritage, and atrocities committed by the state lends legitimacy to NSAGs (Hancock, 2014; Hoffmann and Verweijen, 2019). Based on the different techniques of legitimacy as propounded by the aforementioned authors, I advance the rebel legitimacy theory, an informal social and political contract between NSAGs and the patrons, based on symbolic rightness and performance, that gives NSAGs the status of authoritative entities and rightful competitors for statehood vis-à-vis the state, their main competition. Yet who are the actors that legitimize a violent non-state group? A special kind of coalition actor, which I call legitimacy network, becomes important in this context. These legitimacy networks are defined as political and social elite groups that have the moral and political standing to grant acknowledgment to the NSAGs' struggle and to legitimize their objectives of statehood. NSAGs actively engage with these networks and are willing to adopt their demands and expectations to reap both tangible and intangible benefits. In addition, the NSAGs employ legitimization mechanisms, defined as an array of strategic behaviors to create a legitimacy momentum with the members of the legitimacy networks. Ultimately, I identify four categories of rebel networks: (a) domestic and international civilian legitimacy networks; (b) domestic, statist legitimacy networks; (c) international, statist legitimacy networks, such as foreign governments, inter-governmental organizations, or state-sponsored mediation groups; and (d) international humanitarian networks involving various INGOs (see Figure 1). Thus, NSAG networks are two-fold: bottom-up social networks and top-down political networks. The NSAGs negotiate legitimacy with these networks through legitimacy mechanisms which, I argue, are of four types: symbolic legitimacy through (a) ideological discourses; and performative legitimacy through (b) rebel governance, (c) rebel diplomacy, and (d) rebel humanitarian diplomacy.

I argue that NSAGs construct their initial base of support through an ideological legitimization mechanism. Nested in ideas of ethnic citizenship, autochthony and imperialism of the state itself, NSAGs consciously frame discourse, public statements and war objectives to articulate a self-standing identity that appeals to the individual and collective emotions of primarily their civilian networks, and secondarily to their international networks. The narrative serves two purposes: to

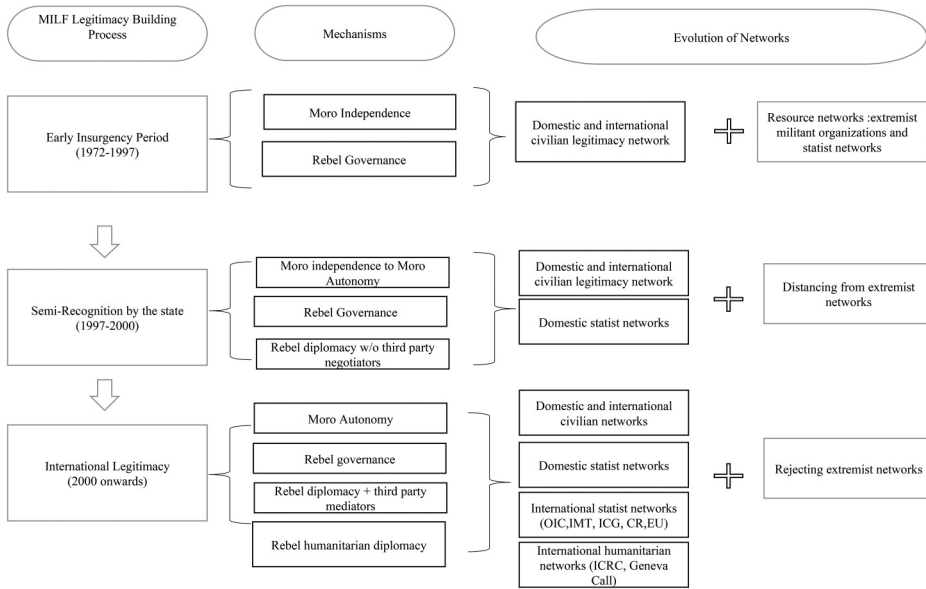


Figure 1. The MILF's legitimacy-building process: A timeline.

legitimize their existence to the civilian networks, including diasporas; and to simultaneously distance them from the state by pointing to the real and imagined oppression of the state (Berti and Gutiérrez, 2016; Hoffmann and Verweijen, 2019). However, while an identity-based mechanism may help at the outset, legitimacy requires that the social and political capital gained through their ideological repertoire be supplemented by tangible benefits to the networks. At this juncture, we see NSAGs invest in rebel governance, the second legitimacy mechanism, intended to generate mass support and used to signal the competence of the rebels to the international community. Rebel governance can be identified by several components, mainly defense of the populace through an active policing and security apparatus, an administrative system, provision of public goods such as education, aid, etc., a justice system based on codified rules and regulations, moral policing, some form of taxation, and lastly, some degree of participation for non-combatants (both civilians and external actors such as NGOs and diaspora) to take part in the decision-making structure (Stewart, 2018). In particular, NSAGs, like states, appeal to performative legitimization in seeking to justify their political aspiration and existence to the in-group networks i.e. civilians, and also to the external networks. The third legitimization mechanism is rebel diplomacy. Non-state armed groups often conduct a strategic form of diplomacy to reach out to outside states, media, and international actors to pursue their goals. This is not surprising given their long-term political aspirations of statehood and legitimacy. As discussed earlier, one of the most important components of legitimacy is external recognition from established states. Because civil wars are typically fought with the explicit goal of joining the community of states, perhaps it is the next logical step that NSAGs would conduct foreign affairs for the purpose of advancing their political objectives (Coggins, 2015). Rebel diplomacy is a wartime political tactic that helps NSAGs to attain visibility on the international stage which signals that “they are serious political contenders for state power, can adopt state like behavior, are amenable to peaceful talks, and champion causes that may have wider international appeal”. Economically, they can use their political credibility to appeal for

resources from foreign actors in terms of food aid, military trainings, and simply, funds. I extend this concept of rebel diplomacy to include the international humanitarian regime, the fourth legitimization mechanism. Non-state armed groups use humanitarian agreements to create their own pressure tactics through which they compete with the state, which is generally considered to be the flagbearer of humanitarianism. Thus, it creates a boomerang effect whereby legitimacy cultivated among one network (in this case, humanitarian groups) may contribute to legitimacy among other networks, namely international statist networks that are more likely to engage with actors with a positive image.

All in all, I see rebel legitimacy building as a centrifugal dynamic. It starts at the center with ideological mechanism that binds the NSAGs with members of networks with whom they already have a symbolic moral or normative connection, notably civilians. Rebel governance further bolsters their central legitimacy within their civilian networks.

Eventually, the NSAG moves outwards toward more formal statist networks through its rebel diplomacy and humanitarian diplomacy mechanisms.

Costs, trade-offs, and dilemmas of choosing networks

The theory propounded in this work illustrates a broader dynamic that goes beyond legitimacy. It shows that rebel networks are not exclusively built around legitimacy networks. In the initial phase of the movement, we see the development of two specific networks, often pursued in parallel by NSAGs: resource network actors and legitimacy networks. Resource networks are the initial networks that NSAGs created for their material needs. Even though this initial network can consist of politically formal, statist actors, it does not possess “political prestige” to affirm legitimacy to the rebels. On the contrary, legitimacy networks are the actors that can end their political marginalization and isolation. This means that NSAGs’ assessment of each network is contingent on the immediate and long-term needs. The immediate need while involved in an asymmetric war is, of course, manpower and war resources such as weapons, food, and shelter. The long-term need for statehood is political recognition for their aspiration, and to end political and diplomatic marginalization at the domestic and international level. The theory posits that a NSAG’s choice of networks is dependent on the types of resources they need at a particular juncture.

In making this argument, this article addresses three interrelated facets of rebel legitimacy. First, it analyses and visualizes patterns of and connections between rebels’ desired resources and their networks. Second, it addresses a substantial gap in the literature that competently engages with the theory of rebel legitimacy but has given far less attention to the trade-off required on part of the rebels between their immediate and long-term goals and networks. I argue that despite the object of statehood, NSAGs regularly engage with actors that can hamper their bid for statehood. This runs contrary to the literature on rebel legitimacy which tends to treat legitimacy as a monolithic, deterministic project. This means that the “type” and “objective” of NSAGs determine their future behavior. One famous example of such rigid categorization is Weinstein’s activist vs. predatory rebels classification. It says that NSAGs that emerge from resource-poor environments and are ideologically oriented toward secession or autonomy will seek legitimacy, which, in turn, will affect the actors they associate with and their behavior with the civilians. However, I find that despite an NSAG’s ideological standpoint, it might pursue both types of networks. Thus, this work moves beyond compartmentalizing rebels’ support networks to consider the implication of rebels facing multiple support networks simultaneously—and the dilemmas they face while shifting from a network whose support initially they cultivated. Third, it contends that domestic and international legitimacy are not dependent on each other. This contradicts a recent work by Jo

who looked at rebel compliance with humanitarian norms. According to her strategic legitimacy theory, there are two types of rebel groups: pro-compliance and anti-compliance. Pro-compliance groups are rebels that have greater incentives to comply with international humanitarian law when they seek international and domestic legitimacy. In contrast to pro-compliance constituencies, there are also “anti-compliance constituencies” that actively support the violation of humanitarian laws. These constituencies only care for military victory by the NSAGs and support them regardless of their behavior with civilians. The implication is that the rebels choose between these two types of support, that the pro-compliance and anti-compliance categories are pursued separately (Jo, 2015), whereas I contend that legitimacy, especially civilian, grass roots-level support, is possible even when NSAGs have connections with “anti-compliance” networks in other political areas internationally. Domestic constituencies might care less about links to unsavory international networks, but certain international networks might care a great deal about links to other, unsavory, international networks and the treatment of domestic constituencies, meaning civilians.

Domestic legitimacy can exist without international legitimacy, whereas international legitimacy with state or statist international actors is far less likely to occur without domestic, civilian legitimacy. We should not conflate domestic legitimacy with international legitimacy, but rather acknowledge that these are different arenas where the networks’ expectations and the NSAGs’ outreach strategies differ. They can occur in different spaces and times. However, at a critical juncture, the NSAG may switch from networks that are detrimental for legitimacy among international state and statist networks. The next section of the article elaborates on the theoretical arguments.

Capturing rebel legitimacy building in action

The periphery of the Philippines has witnessed one of the longest running civil wars in Asia. The separatist war between the state and the Muslim minorities, collectively known as the Moros, is slowly coming to an end. In January 2019, voters in the southern Philippines overwhelmingly voted in favor of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The BARMM signaled the creation of an autonomous, self-governing geographical entity for which the MILF had fought and negotiated for decades. The plebiscite started the work of a transitional government, known as the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, led by the chairperson of the MILF, Murad Ebrahim. With this, the MILF ostensibly morphed into a legitimate political actor. Below, I elaborate on the five legitimacy networks the MILF lobbied with: (a) a Moro, civilian network; (b) an international Islamic, religious civilian network; (c) an international Islamic, statist network; (d) an international Western, mediation network; and (e) an international humanitarian network. These networks were created by adhering to the following legitimization mechanisms: (a) a rebel objective based on a distinct ethno-religious identity; (b) the provision of rebel governance including security, jurisdiction, and training and education; (c) rebel diplomacy during the peace process without any third-party outside negotiators; (d) rebel diplomacy with third parties including international, Western mediation network; and (e) humanitarian diplomacy (see Figure 1).

In this empirical part, I trace these networks and mechanisms by first describing the historical process of state alienation and the state’s legitimacy gap that ultimately gave rise to the Moro separatist movement. I will then introduce the reader to the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front), the precursor to the MILF, and intergroup dynamics between the two NSAGs that later affected the ideological legitimacy mechanism adopted by the MILF. Next, I will introduce the initial domestic

and international networks that the MILF formed, and the effects of these networks on their conducts. Thereafter, I will describe the network shift and the legitimization mechanisms that aided the MILF in negotiating statehood.

Legitimacy deficit of the state and initial networks of the Moro movement. The causes of the Moro rebellion are rooted in the incessant direct and structural violence perpetrated by the state, and a distinct Islamic ethno-religious, economic, and political identity of the Moros that distinguishes them from the rest of the country. The state failed to integrate the Moros; at the same time, the Moros, owing to their distinct ethno-religious cultural and political identity, never accepted the Filipino state as their rightful authority. The religious clash was exacerbated by a widespread campaign, by both the colonial and independent states, to usurp the communal lands of the Moros. The repercussion was a complete economic devaluation of the Moro society. In 1912, Moros owned most of the land in Mindanao and Sulu. In 1982, only 18% of the southern land remained with them (Majul, 1988; Tuminez, 2007).

The unjust displacement and marginalization structured the way the Moros came to view the majority Filipinos and the state, as usurpers of lands and rights, a colonizer, a perception that eventually became a rhetorical strategy for the legitimacy of the MNLF, which was established in 1972 by Nur Musuari and Hashim Salamt, who eventually broke off from the MNLF to establish the MILF. Forcible usurpation of their ancient community-held land and complete disregard for the traditional politics featured heavily in their rhetoric as seen here:

The five-million oppressed Bangsa Moro people wish to free themselves from the terror, oppression and tyranny of Filipino colonialism which has caused them untold sufferings and miseries by criminally usurping their land, threatening Islām through wholesale destruction and desecration of their places of worship and their Holy book, and murdering their innocent brothers, sisters and old folks in a genocidal campaign of terrifying magnitude. (The MNLF Manifesto “Establishment of the Bangsamoro Republik”, April 28, 1974)

Their appeal towards collective grievance against the state resulted in a strong domestic, grass roots network. When the civil war was at its peak during 1973–1975, their military wing, the Bangsa Moro Army, was able to field 15,000 active armed forces with an additional 30,000 trained civilians from the community ready to serve the rebel armed forces if needed. The civilian network also contributed to the movement through non-military means such as rice or other food supplies, known as *zakat* (alms), provided to the Bangsa Moro Army (Abuza, 2005; Che Man, 1990; Muslim and Cagoco-Guiam, 1999; ICG, 2004; Nobel, 1976; Ressa, 2011). Concurrently, they attracted a strong sympathetic, Islamic, statist network. The domestic grievances of the Moro population were taken up by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The organization gave the MNLF with its first international political platform by granting it special observer status in 1977 and recognizing the group as the sole representative of the Bangsamoro people (The Philstar, 2003). The status in a state-membered organization elevated the political status of the MNLF to one that few active NSAGs can claim. The MNLF’s international political network was further strengthened by Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Libya. They were all part of the OIC, but each also reached out to the MNLF individually. Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi developed a personal interest in their cause after hearing about the Jabidah massacre in a BBC broadcast. Gaddafi gave Misuari refuge and reportedly contributed some USD35 million to the MNLF between 1972 and 1975 in the form of weapons, military equipment, and other supplies (Che Man, 1990). Militarily, Malaysia trained Moro fighters in guerrilla tactics in training camps located within its own borders. Politically, successive prime ministers of Malaysia raised the

Moro cause with the OIC members repeatedly. Pakistan and the Palestinian Liberation Organization also provided the MNLF with training and weapons (Conciliation Resources, 1999; Majul, 1999; McKenna, 1998). Ultimately, religion and ethnicity gave the MNLF an ideological basis for claiming international networks, and also served as a rallying point for their domestic, civilian network.

With the solid support of the civilian and international networks, the MNLF entered a peace process. The government of Ferdinand Marcos fielded a peace agreement under pressure from the OIC and the threat of an oil embargo by Libya, and the Tripoli Agreement was signed in 1976. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that the state never sincerely intended for this settlement to work. For instance, as a part of the agreement, the government appointed a few Muslims as regional government officials, but they sympathized and supported the state more than they commiserated with the Moro plight. Another issue, which finally broke the camel's back, was when the government held a plebiscite referendum in the autonomous regions without the consent of the MNLF. The plebiscite gave the inhabitants of the regions the right to decide whether they wanted to join the autonomous region. Considering that Muslims were a minority in eight of the 13 states owing to Christian migration, the referendum produced the result the state intended. Losing confidence in the governmental process, the MNLF broke the agreement in 1977 and returned to civil war. However, the damage was done. The failure of the Tripoli Agreement resulted in a massive scuffle within the NSAG, greatly undermining the movement. Misuari's decision to abandon the pursuit of Moro independence to settle for state-mandated autonomy was not accepted by many of his local supporters. Additionally, massive corruption and mismanagement of funds by Misuari's cronies led to the loss of faith in the MNLF. Ultimately, Misuari's inability to obtain meaningful autonomy for the Moros became a rallying point for more hardliners within the group, Salamat Hashmi being one of them. Salamat and 57 conservative leaders broke away in 1977 and created the New MNLF. In 1984, Salamat renamed the NSAG the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to emphasize the Islamic foundations of the new group, which they thought were lacking in the MNLF. They also took up the mantle of establishing a Moro-dominated independent state (Buendia, 2005; McKenna, 1998). This objective of statehood needed political, popular support from both domestic and international audiences, unlike other terrorist or criminal rebel groups. In other words, their moral and political stature mattered to them. Thus, in the first phase of the struggle, we see the MILF consciously building up their popular legitimacy through the distinct, Islamic Moro identity they promulgated.

The MILF's initial networks, ideological legitimacy mechanism, and rebel governance (1986–1997). The MNLF's idea of an independent Moro state was founded on the ideological principles of Bangsa (nation), Hulah (homeland), and Agama (religion). The order of these three suggests that although Islam served as a unifying force, the MNLF's principle objective was Moro statehood. Deviating from its predecessor, the MILF, under Salamat, firmly entrenched the movement in Islamic revivalism, advocating for the Islamization of every aspect of Moro lives. Unsurprisingly, Islam and historical injustices against the Muslims in Mindanao effectively formed the crux of their rhetoric. Salamat emphasized Islamic beliefs as the rallying point of Bangsamoro self-determination, noting the objectives,

to make supreme the word of Allah; to gain the pleasure of Allah; to strengthen the relationship of man with his Creator; to strengthen the relationship of man and man;

to regain the illegally and immorally usurped legitimate and inalienable rights of the Bangsamoro people to freedom and self-determination; to establish an independent state and government and implement Sha'riah (Islamic law). (Nida'ul Islam, 1998)

The Islamic rhetoric espoused by the MILF leadership attracted three specific networks. First, the Islamic identity of the movement helped the MILF to cultivate an international, statist network of conservative Muslim states such as Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, who supported the movement through providing military training and weapons (Che Man, 1990). Second, the emphasis of Shari'a law attracted emerging militant, extremist groups in the late 1980s. The Islamic identity adopted by the MILF interlaced with the objectives of terrorist organizations such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Al-Qaeda (Ressa, 2011). Salamat first met with the leaders of JI during his visit to Pakistan in the mid-1980s. His ties with Al-Qaeda went back to the Soviet war in Afghanistan, when the MILF sent 1000 soldiers to fight against the Russians. Osama bin Laden asked Salamat in the early 1990s to set up training camps for Al-Qaeda in the Philippines (Villanueva, 2003). The organization's broader agenda of creating a caliphate or Islamic state aligned with Salamat's quest for Moro independence (Chew, 2004). The terrorist connection was especially advantageous for the NSAG when Libyan support began to taper off. Libya was under immense pressure from the international community to forgo its ties to terrorists and insurgents after the 1992 Pam Am bombing over Scotland (Abuza, 2017, personal communication). Extremist networks took over the space left by the Libyans. Support from extremist groups came in the form of financial support, military training, and theological classes of MILF members in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's regional networks funded many development projects in the camps operated by the MILF. In return, the MILF provided bases and logistical modalities for Al-Qaeda and JI in the Philippines. One of the MILF basecamps, Camp Hudaibiyah in Mindanao, was opened up to militants from JI, who used it to train MILF cadres in assassination, bombing, and suicide warfare among other aspects of unconventional warfare. Although the MILF leadership never acknowledged their support for the foreign terrorist group working within their areas, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have claimed to have evidence proving linkages between the two groups. For example, in 2003, the Filipino police arrested two JI members who had reportedly trained in largest MILF camp, Camp Abubakar, before it was captured by the military (Villanueva, 2003). Third, the Islamic identity garnered monetary support from domestic and international ethno-religious civilian networks. Chief among them were conservative, Filipino Moro families, Moro workers overseas, and other individual Muslim supporters. Moro elite conservative families provided substantial amounts of economic support in the forms of zakat (alms). Remittances from Moro workers throughout the Middle East also formed a part of the NSAG's financial base. Infact, this diaspora was the most consistent international financial network for the MILF. In the 1980s, an active Muslim diaspora, disenchanted with the lack of social and economic opportunity for Muslims, pursued ideas of social reform through community development. Their ideas of social reform connected with the MILF's agenda of establishing a Muslim state (Lubang, personal communication, 2017), and assistance from this specific network became the backbone of the robust rebel governance structure that the MILF built over time.

The MILF positioned itself not only as an armed rebellion, but it was also an organization committed to embracing Islam as a way of life. Paramount to the MILF's vision of Moro independence was the establishment of Islamic governance. The leadership believed that emancipation of the Bangsamoro could only be achieved by securing "a place in Mindanao for the Bangsamoro people where they will be free to exercise self-governance in the light of their belief, historical experience, and acceptable prevailing democratic norms" (Luwaran.com, n.d.). He envisioned implementation of the agendas in phases over a 20 year period following the establishment of the first MILF camp or what he referred to as "liberated areas" in Maguindanao in 1981 (Nidual Islam). One of the liberated areas, Camp Abubaker in Maguindanao, acted as the first prototype of the Islamic state. The camp was their largest, with almost 10,000 hectares of land and its own

economic and commercial activities, including solar energy generation and a weapons factory. By the end of 1990, the NSAG had established six more camps in Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawim and Zambonga provinces (Keister, 2011; Nobel 1976; Soliman, 2010a, 2010b).

Overall, the MILF governance encompassed four major domains: administration, adjudication, security, and welfare. Administratively shadowing the government structure of the Filipino government, the NSAG stratified the liberated areas or “camps” into four categories: Central, Provincial, Municipal, and Barangay (villages). The leadership established political committees in each of the four levels. The Central Committee was the highest policy-making body of the MILF that was in charge of governing the administrative, political, and socio-cultural activities of the civilians living within their jurisdiction. It was inclusive, drawing its membership from all sectors of the Moro community, including students, elite leaders, and farmers, although the religious leaders outnumbered the others in the committee (Rood, personal communication, 2017). The next administrative level was the Provincial Committee, headed by a Provisional Chairman. The Chairman was selected by the MILF after consulting the respective areas and was finally approved by the Central Committee. At the municipal level, the Municipal Chairman was chosen upon recommendation of the Provincial Chairman after due consultation with different sectors of the municipalities. The Municipal Chairman, in turn, recommended the Barangay Chairman whose position was subject to the approval of the Central Committee.

The civilian network had a voice in the administrative structure. The ulemmas of the central leadership were revered within the community and considered opinions of the commoners while making decisions (Sam Chittik, 2017, personal communication). The leaders of the NSAG held frequent communal meetings with civilians about any problems they were facing and their immediate needs, and invited opinions on proposed solutions by the MILF. As a case in point, the MILF and the Government of the Republic of Philippines (GRP) created a ceasefire monitoring body known as the “Coordinating Committees on Cessation of Hostilities” (CCCH) in 1997. The Central Committee, while dealing with the GRP and CCCH often asked for additional time to consult with their larger constituencies, exhibiting a participatory decision-making system within the rebel group (Keister and Lubang, 2017, personal communication). This shared decision-making system and concern about the community was reciprocated through uncontested loyalty for the rebel cause. The state military often faced problems in gathering information about MILF activities because of the close relationship between insurgents and civilians (Scarpello, 2007).

Possibly the strongest among the governance structure system of adjudication (Keister, personal communication, 2017). The three-tier system included Courts of Appeals, regional Shari’a Courts, and a Supreme Court. The MILF frequently adjudicated cases ranging from property disputes to those involving criminal or personal behavioral issues. The NSAG also operated their own prisons within the compounds of their camps. The USDS reported executions by the MILF courts of military personnel, police, local politicians, and civilians for criminal activities (United States Department of State, 2002, 2003). The system of adjudication by the NSAG was in contest with the state-mandated judicial system. While the state had a unitary legal system operating under the aegis of constitutional laws, the MILF courts upheld Shari’a law that was not recognized by the state. Thus, the NSAG asserted the superiority of Islam, which the state continuously refused to recognize and respect (Abuza, personal communication, 2017). The death penalty is another issue on which the Shari’a courts of the MILF differed from the Filipino state-mandated constitutional laws. The MILF courts often issued death penalties for crimes in their camps even though execution is legally banned by the state of Philippines.

In the area of security provision, the MILF instituted two establishments: the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) and the Internal Security Forces. While the BIAF was the standing

army of the NSAG used for guerrilla attacks on the state, the Internal Security Forces was a community-focused security force working at the Municipal and Barangay levels. After the first security training academy was set up in 1987, the MILF trained around 122,000 men from the Moro community as a standing army that could join the BIAF if necessary. The rebel army provided protection from Rido⁵ characterized by retaliatory violence against kinship or ethnic groups, general criminals, and the state army (Sam Chittik, 2017, personal communication). However, it is difficult to categorize the cadre of the NSAGs into a civilians or soldier. “You may be talking about a guy with a gun but still [he] is a farmer. When not training, the soldiers returned to their normal lives in camps” (Rood, personal communication, 2017). In the academy, the trainees received political and spiritual lessons to enhance their understanding of Islam and jihad in addition to military training. Upon completing their training, the soldiers were even given diplomas certifying their achievements (Ressa, 2011: 129).

The MILF’s international civilian networks had utmost concern for the well-being of the civilians on ground. Resources from ethnic and religious diaspora were often ear-marked and specifically given to the MILF leadership with instructions for their use in the construction of mosques, madaris (Islamic schools), development projects, and other social welfare services (Lubang, 2017, personal communications). The rebels built concrete roads, farming pastures, an arms manufacturing center, and even a fruit nursery within their camps (Vitug and Gloria, 2000). They also encouraged the economic independence of their followers. The rebel administration also issued marriage and birth certificates to its community members. More recently, in 2011, the MILF established drug rehabilitation centers in Camp Abubaker and Camp Bushra in order to curb drug- and gambling-related activities in its areas. The NSAG thus took steps to establish its rightness of authority, in other words legitimacy, through state-like, performative action intended for the social and economic well-being of the population (Macasalong, 2014). The NSAG also tried to economically support its patrons. Rebel soldiers were paid Filipino Peso PHP100 (USD1.96 in 2018) per day and were encouraged to be financially independent through business or farming. The MILF worked to establish collective farms—Camp Omar had large clusters of crops such as maize and cassava (Che Man, 1990). The Central Committee requested the University of South Mindanao to assist farmers to open a one-hectare nursery in Camp Abubakar (Lubang, 2017, personal communication). The NSAG’s involvement in the daily lives of the population provides insight into the grass roots legitimacy-building process of a non-state actor (Dr. Miriam Colonel Ferrer, personal communication, 2018).

Evolution of networks and semi-recognition legitimacy at the domestic level (1997–2000). Although the civilian networks were a constant for the MILF since the beginning of their struggle, statist legitimacy networks only expanded with the advent of the rebel diplomatic stage in 1996. This time period signifies the transformation in the characteristics of the networks and the behavior of the MILF. It reached out to the state and the government in 1996, and thus began two-decade-long peace talks between the NSAG and the state. The peace talk timeline can be divided into two periods: the diplomatic stage at the domestic level pre-2000 and the post-2000 period of international diplomacy when Western legitimacy networks were invited by the NSAGs.

Owing to the historical precedent of peace agreements with the MNLF, the state still prioritized and considered the MNLF as the foremost negotiator of Moro problems. However, the failure of the MNLF leadership to achieve substantive autonomy for the community became an opportunity for the MILF to elevate their status as the only group that could fulfill the promise of Moro independence. The first breakthrough came in 1996, when the rebels signed the “Agreement for General Cessation of Hostilities”. Within a decade, the government and the MILF had entered into a total of 39 agreements, joint communiques, acknowledgments, and resolutions (Santos, 6).

The diplomatic stage produced significant changes in the behavior of the MILF. The first was the shift in ideological objective. For the first time, the objective of Moro independence did not feature in the negotiation proposals with the state. In place of “Moro Independence”, “genuine Moro autonomy” through lasting political, economic, and social solutions in the realms of Moro land rights, human rights, economic inequalities became the main point of negotiation with the state. This rhetorical repositioning of the MILF was evident in the “Position Papers of Technical Working groups on Six Clustered Agenda Items” (14 June 2000) by MILF. Instead of an independent Islamic Bangsamoro state, the NSAG showed interest in arriving “at a solution reflective of the system of life and governance suitable and acceptable to the Bangsamoro people” (Soliman, 2004). The subsequent Tripoli Peace Agreement signed in 2001 further demonstrated the change. The rebel leadership committed itself to “opening new formulas that permanently respond to the aspiration of Bangsamoro People” if the state agreed to “consult with the Bangsamoro people free of any imposition” (Tripoli Agreement, Part A, para 2). This change of objective had strategic importance. Firstly, the MILF did not want to jeopardize the peace process that the government had initiated with them by sticking to their hardened stance of independence. Second, the demand for independence, which was at the core of their rationale for splitting with the MNLF, ran afoul of their need for legitimacy and support from their international partners/supporters, most notably the OIC, who were strongly opposed to secessionism. As the International Contact Group (ICG) proclaims, “[i]n the absence of international mediation, the rebel panel saw this (agreement) as a form of embryonic Bangsamoro sovereignty, providing symbolic equality with the government prior to the discussion of a comprehensive settlement ... (the agreement) provided them with an additional line of defense”.

Beginning with this shift, the MILF changed their strategy of warfare from violent, guerrilla confrontation with the state to diplomatic legitimization mechanisms. It worked. The community-level legitimacy that the MILF built through rebel governance and ideological objectives was now supplemented by a broader national and political legitimacy of their struggle (Dr. Miriam Colonel Ferrer, personal communication, 2018). Throughout the 1997–2000 period, the MILF incrementally gained formal recognition of their camps from the state, thus achieving immunity from any government attacks on the camps and the civilians in them. The first camps that received government recognition were Abu Baker and Bushra, considered to be the MILF headquarters, in February 1999. Five more camps—Bilal, Rajamuda, Darapan, Omar and Badr—received official recognition in October 1999 (ICG, 2004). In exchange for cessation of hostilities, the state offered several goodwill measures to the rebels by building an irrigation system, a highway, a 15 km road to Camp Abubakar, and a water plant in other MILF designated camps.

This 1997–2000 period signifies the domestic stage of the NSAG’s bid for political legitimacy through negotiations and ceasefire agreements with the government. The environment changed in 2000 when President Estrada (1998–2001), threatened by the growing autonomy of the rebel groups, mobilized the AFP against the MILF. The NSAG lost control over 47 major and satellite MILF camps. For the first time in decades, the flag of the Philippines was hoisted over MILF areas. This all-out-offensive resulted in a complete breakdown of the peace process, as the MILF lost trust in the state. So, when Estrada’s successor, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (2001–2010), expressed her strong desire to resume peace talks, the MILF demanded foreign involvement as a pre-condition for restarting negotiations. Salamat proposed three conditions: that the talks be mediated by the OIC or by an OIC-member country, that the parties comply with the terms of past agreements, and that the talks be held in a foreign venue.

The MILF saw internationalization as the best way of promoting its cause and mobilizing the peace process. The presence of outside powers acted as a buffer against government assaults; it

also helped the MILF to gain access to support from politically powerful networks sympathetic to their cause and acted as a buffer against government assaults (Abuza, 2017, personal communication). From November 2000 to February 2003, with Malaysia as the third-party facilitator, the MILF negotiated three landmark agreements.²⁰ The peace agreements provided a framework with three foci: security, rehabilitation, and ancestral domains. With each agreement, the MILF progressively established its status as the party with the potential to politically solve the Bangsamoro issue. With the new-found international legitimacy, the MILF slowly started to shift from their resource-based networks.

Shifting networks: Islamic extremist network versus statist legitimacy network. Until 2000, the international community, except for the OIC and the a few Muslim states, were mainly indifferent to the Moro separatist movement. However, the 11 September 2001 attacks on American soil and the resultant War on Terror put Mindanao on the global map. Evidence of the links between the MILF, JI, and Al-Qaeda drew closer international attention. The US grew particularly wary of Al-Qaeda-linked activities in the Philippines. As the Philippines was an ally in the War of Terror, the government could not ignore the Islamic links of the NSAG either. The growing terrorist presence in south-east Asia led to increased US assistance to the Philippine state and the AFP. The US military deployed soldiers to Mindanao, first in Zamboga and then in Sulu and other regions during 2002–2004. The US military presence so close to their territory started to pose security concerns for the MILF. The leadership was also growing increasingly wary of the ongoing discussions between the government and the US administration to designate the MILF as a terrorist organization which could potentially derail the ongoing peace negotiation (Chittick, Abuza, personal communication, 2017). President George W. Bush in his remarks to the Phillipines Congress made it clear that the US could support the MILF only if they denounced the terrorist groups—“rejection of terrorism. Only that commitment to peace can bring a better future to the people in Mindanao” (United States Department of States, 2003). In addition to the legal ramification, being on the foreign terrorist organization list meant that any international organization, state, even diaspora population would be deterred from any material or expert assistance to the group. To save the peace process, safeguard themselves from potential government and US military assault, and to continue their effective transformation from a military organization to political elites, the MILF central leadership publicly started dissociating the movement from networks which were more terroristic and criminal in nature. On January 2003, MILF Chairman Salamat Hashim wrote to President George W. Bush urging the US to help resolve the conflict between “in view of current global and regional security concerns in southeast Asia” (Tuminez, 2007: 34). During President Macapagal-Arroyo’s state visit to the US in May 2003, President Bush stated that “the United States will provide diplomatic and financial support to a renewed peace process” if the MILF agrees to “abandon the path of violence ... and addresses its grievances through peaceful negotiation” (Tuminez, 2007: 34). Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage subsequently added that while “the United States absolutely supports the territorial integrity of the Philippines, ... we also recognize that the people of Mindanao have legitimate aspirations and some grievances” (Tuminez, 2007: 34). Chairman Salamat welcomed the words of senior American leaders and wrote again to President Bush on 20 May 2003, stating that the MILF “has repeatedly renounced terrorism publicly as a means of attaining its political ends.” Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly responded to Salamat’s letter, reiterating President Bush’s statement that the US “recognizes that the Muslims of the southern Philippines have serious, legitimate grievances that must be addressed [but the US] is concerned about the links between the MILF and international terrorist organizations and asks that those links be severed immediately. If they are [the US] stands ready to support, both

politically and financially, a bona fide peace process between the Republic of the Philippines and the MILF” (Tuminez, 2007: 35). On 20 June 2003, the MILF released an official policy statement in the name of its chairman, entitled “Rejecting Terror as a Means to Resolve Differences.” Therein, Salamat stated, “I hereby reiterate our condemnation and abhorrence of terrorist tendencies [and] reject and deny any link with terrorist organizations or activities in this part of the Asian region, particularly in the South Philippines, and elsewhere in the world” (Tuminez, 2007: 35).

The MILF’s decision to purposively cut whatever ties some of its units and commanders had with terrorist groups indicates the leadership’s conscious efforts to satisfy and gain support from important Western legitimacy networks. The internationalization of networks did not only guard the NSAG from government offensives; it also ensured a better position in peace negotiations. In the process used to legitimize their struggle in the eyes of Islamic and non-Islamic Western networks, the MILF convened a three-day consultation in June 2005. The consultation drew close to 500,000 of its unarmed members and sympathizers. The MILF political affairs chief, Ghazali Jaafar, said, “we are at the final stages of our peace efforts with the Philippines government, our people must know what we are doing for them”. The convention also welcomed diplomats from OIC as well as the World Bank, US, and Japan. In the convention, the MILF also reiterated that they are “very much against any form of terrorism” and had agreed to hunt down the most wanted terrorists as a good will measure during the peace process (Philstar Global, 2005). Thus the NSAG on the one hand cultivated popular support and legitimacy by allowing the populace to be a part of the peace process; on the other, they strengthened their position on the international stage.

Despite the fact that the MILF was actively trying to distance itself from extremist networks, peace was again derailed in 2003. In February 2003, the state launched another assault on the camps for violating the ceasefire agreement by sheltering members of JI and Pentagon, a kidnaping syndicate in the MILF camps. It halted the peace process. The impasse only ended when another new network actor emerged.

Pursual of legitimacy through humanitarian networks. The peace talks resumed when a Malaysia-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) joined the peace process as a part of the statist legitimacy network of the MILF. In September 2004, the MILF and the state agreed to the creation of the IMT to oversee the ceasefire and act as a neutral investigator of violations. With the deployment of the IMT, ceasefire violations in the contested territory decreased by almost 90% between 2004 and 2006 (Global Peace Operation report, 2014). However, talks broke down again in 2008 amidst accusations from both sides of ceasefire breaches. At this point, MILF chairman Alhaj Murad Ibrahim declared the need for an “international guarantee from states and association of nations” as a precondition for reopening the peace process (Missionary International Service News Agency, 2008). The MILF, in the following year, was joined for the first time by the ICG as the guarantor of the negotiations. The parties to the conflict invited four state governments: the K, Turkey, Japan, and Saudi Arabia, and four international NGOs, including the Asia Foundation (an INGO primarily working in Asia-pacific region), the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (an organization conducting mediation and mediation support), Conciliation Resources (an INGO focused on local peace building), and Muhammadiyah (an Islamic INGO), who joined the process based on their previous experiences working in Mindanao.

These international mediation actors provided significant help in the peace process. For example, in 2005, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) held a two-day workshop on the issue of ancestral domains in Davao City, attended by nearly 40 participants. In 2005 and 2007, Conciliation Resources held talks between the Philippines government and the MILF. In July and October

2009, Conciliation Resources organized visits for representatives of the MILF and government to travel Belfast and London to exchange experiences with individuals involved in the peace process in Northern Ireland. The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a private mediation group whose mission is to mitigate armed conflict through dialogue, in 2008, introduced constitutional and international law experts to the peace process after the Supreme Court of the Philippines blocked the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain Aspect to assist in managing legal crisis. The INGOs consulted with both parties and offered concrete recommendations for certain policies for the peace agreements. They also brought voices of different stakeholders to the fore, such as the local landowners who would be affected by the land-sharing policies embedded in the peace agreements, making it “more rooted in society and more focused on the underlying causes of the conflict and obstacles to peace rather than on the short-term interests to the parties in conflict, which increases the process’ legitimacy, its sustainability and its efficiency”—as proclaimed by USIP, in one of their peace briefs (Hoffman, 2014). The MILF, throughout their diplomatic legitimacy mechanism, started to build close relationships with human rights groups as well. The 2001 Tripoli Agreement between the MILF and the government included provisions for the respect of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL). The International Committee of the Red Cross approached the MILF about IHL and adhering to international humanitarian norms in their conduct of war (IRIN news 2013). In 2002, the MILF condemned kidnapping by proclaiming “noncombatants such as children, women, old people, monks or priests and the like are not [the] objects of war.” That same year, MILF leaders condemned the practice of kidnapping for ransom by their own commanders and vowed to take action against the perpetrators. In 2007, the MILF agreed to uphold the rights of children and women living in conflict-affected communities. In 2008, the group decided to completely halt the practice of using child soldiers by signing an action plan with the United Nations. In 2008, the MILF signed a new declaration with the Philippine Campaign to Ban Landmines. Under this declaration, the NSAG agreed to respect key norms, standards and undertakings of IHL on landmines, not limited to those of the 1997 Ottawa Treaty, which totally banned the use of victim-activated anti-personnel mines. In 2009, the MILF confirmed its obligation to respect humanitarian norms and human rights law by signing the Agreement on the Civilian Protection Component of the International Monitoring Team. This agreement included concrete and time-bound activities involving the unimpeded access of monitoring teams, preventing the recruitment of all child soldiers, the release and reintegration of all existing soldiers under 18 years of age and implementation of awareness-raising and capacity-building activities with respect to child rights and child protection mechanisms. With each humanitarian agreement, the NSAG reached out to new humanitarian actors and continuously engaged them to build up their political legitimacy and ethical image.

Prior to 2000, the MILF acted alone without much support from outside actors; post-2000, we see one of their key policies change to include international statist, international organizations, and humanitarian actors within its support network. By the time the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro was announced on 7 October 2012, which laid the foundation of Moro autonomous region, nine countries, five INGOs, and the European Union were involved in the MILF peace process. Their formalized inclusion in the peace process allowed fresh, new, and broader perspective to the resolution of the conflict that the two groups, the MILF and the state, were lacking.

Conclusion

Non-state armed groups can strategically seek non-state legitimacy through adopting various legitimacy mechanisms and legitimacy networks. Rebel legitimacy creates a tacit social contract with

the population. In the case of the MILF, the Moro civilians accepted the governance of the NSAG as legitimate as opposed to the Filipino state, which was seen as an oppressive and inhumane regime. The ethno-religious identity of the MILF and its Islamic objectives brought to them three quite distinct support networks: the domestic ethno-religious civilian groups, international ethno-religious civilian support, and Islamic extremist networks. The NSAG held on to the support of domestic and international civilian networks by adopting two legitimization mechanisms: rebel governance and specific ideological objectives.

This means that they pursued both legitimacy and resource networks that might adversely affect their legitimacy, concurrently. However, grass roots support and domestic legitimacy were not enough to win autonomy. They needed political legitimacy, which necessitated a shift from extremist networks to politically acceptable networks that could give the MILF the essential political acceptability. At a critical juncture, we saw the NSAG choosing their support network strategically, and shifting toward international statist networks. To retain this support, we saw the NSAG making several behavioral changes, such as opting for autonomy instead of independence, signing several humanitarian agreements, etc. This shows that NSAGs may modify a mechanism that is already in use for garnering domestic legitimacy to make it more palatable for their new networks when and if needed. Mechanisms are pliable and part of the strategic toolbox for NSAGs to gain legitimacy. Rather than treating this mechanism as a static objective, it should be understood as flexible and used to fit the need of organizations at a given time. Furthermore, it also posits that networks' preferences matter, and that the NSAGs are adaptable political actors willing to change their behavior in accordance with new needs and opportunities. To that end, they are no different from states trying to join a prestigious covenant of international organizations. Like states, NSAGs evaluate their current power relationships, proactively engage with potential partners, and take initiatives to appease them by making internal, structural changes in light of the networks' preferences and geo-political needs.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the Senesh Fellowship by the International Peace Research Association for financially supporting this project. I am also indebted to Dr Julie Mazzei, Dr Landon Hancock, Dr Patrick Coy, and two anonymous reviewers for their help and comments.

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Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. MILF was one of the first signatories of Geneva Call's Deeds of Commitment banning anti-personal mines, signed in 2002.
2. Steven Rood, Former director of Asia Foundation, which was a part of the International Contact Group, a MILF-GRP peace mediation support group.
3. I have used rebels and NSAGs interchangeably in this article.
4. For more information on the field of rebel legitimacy and future work, see Sarah et al. (2017).
5. Rido - hostilities between clans or kinship groups.

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