**MUSLIM WOMEN LEADERS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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*Introduction*

In the debate in Islam between conservatives, moderates and progressives about whether women should take political leadership positions, there is no sign of consensus yet. Rafiq Zakaria, in his book *The Trial of Benazir* (1989), has compiled all relevant verses and statements from the Qur’an and hadith referred to by supporters and opponents of women in leading positions. Arguments against include, that men are superior to women, that the sexes have by nature differing roles, that women’s salvation depends solely on fulfilling their marital and maternal duties and that a society led by a woman cannot grow and prosper, an assertion that religious leaders often equate with divine intervention and destiny. Supporters of the opinion that women may accept positions of leadership, though not in the highest levels, assert that in view of the merciful attitude of the Prophet and Islam, the Qur’an and hadith should be interpreted humanely. They also claim that the *sunnah* of the Prophet makes a case for women to be politically active.

The present contribution will investigate the course taken by the above-mentioned debate in the Philippine setting where Muslim women have a status as a minority group in an environment characterized by Christian dominance. In order to gain a better understanding of the situation of Moro women, one first needs to grasp the underlying historical, social, and

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1 The name ‘Moro’ was given to the Muslims of the Philippines by the Spaniards, alluding to the Moors of Spain and North Africa. This ancient label, now widely used by media and in scholarly publications, does not necessarily reflect the self-designations of Muslims in Mindanao and Sulu. Besides the term ‘Moro’, which is, for example, used in the context of the independence movement as ‘Bangsamoro’, other designations exist: people may refer to themselves as Mindanawans, Bangsa Iraanon, Tausug, Maguindanaoan, and so on, or just as belonging to the Malay race at large (see also Blanchetti-Revelli 2003). Other categorizations such as ‘Muslim Filipino’ are rejected by some Muslim Mindanaoans because, according to
economic conditions. These will be summarized in the beginning, whereas the subsequent focus of this contribution is on the Moro rebellion. Within this context, those factors that have an impact on the political participation of women will be discussed in some detail, such as the rebellion, Muslim feminism, the national political system, adat (decorum), and clan politics. In particular the latter factors play a key role in granting women in Muslim Mindanao certain privileges that enable them to assume leadership positions within the national or the traditional system, or in both, as these systems are by no means mutually exclusive.

The main focus will be on the ethnic group of the Maranao in Lanao del Sur, where I conducted research from August 2007 to August 2008. Since the situation of instability did not allow a permanent stay on the countryside, most of the data were collected in the Islamic City of Marawi, in Iligan City, and in Manila. The majority of the interview partners were members of the educational, royal, or political elite.

The Moro Rebellion: An Historical Overview

The Muslim regions in Mindanao are heavily impacted by an ongoing Moro rebellion that aims at more self-determination, and was triggered chiefly by colonial and neo-colonial land and assimilation policies. The catalyst for insurgency in Muslim Mindanao was the 1967 Jabidah Massacre, committed by the Philippine Army on Muslims who had been recruited in a conspiracy that aimed at infiltrating Sabah and instigating a rebellion. The massacre evoked an outcry in Malaysia and Muslim Mindanao against President Ferdinand Marcos who was accused of being the mastermind behind the plot. It also gave rise to the formation of the Union of Islamic Forces and Organizations (UIFO), as well as of Ansar el Islam and its armed wing, the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO), which began to train guerrilla fighters in Malaysia. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) later split off from the BMLO and became the biggest Muslim rebel group. Part of the MNLF structure were the Bangsa Bai Women’s Auxiliary Forces. These were first

them, they evoke memories of King Philip II of Spain, who ordered the extermination of Muslims in Spain and Mindanao in the sixteenth century. Rather than being a homogenous group, the Muslim Filipinos comprise 13 ethno-linguistic groups: Maranao, Maguindanao, Tausug, Sama, Sangil, Iranun, Kalagan, Kalibugan, Yakan, Jama Mapun, Palawini, Molibog and Badjao. Rodil notes that the Badjao are not necessarily Muslims, and the Kalagan only to some extent. However, the Badjao are often considered part of the Muslim world because of their integration in the historical Sulu sultanate (Rodil 1993:9; Asian Development Bank 2002a).