The Politics of Neglect: Philippine Ethnic Minority Policy

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In a previous paper (Okamura 1988), I reviewed and evaluated the policies and programs of PANAMIN, the Presidential Assistant on National Minorities, the Philippine government agency previously responsible for fostering the socioeconomic development and protecting the rights of the country's non-Muslim ethnic minorities. I argued that rather than serving those functions, PANAMIN engaged in repressive activities against cultural minorities, such as counter-insurgency operations and relocating minorities onto reservations, and facilitated the dispossession of their ancestral lands by state and corporate interests. In short, ethnic minorities did not benefit substantially from PANAMIN "development" programs implemented on their behalf; instead, they may be considered the victims of those and other development programs.

In this paper I continue the analysis of Philippine ethnic minority policy through an evaluation of the specific provisions for Muslim and non-Muslim minorities in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, in particular, those that pertain to declarations of state policy regarding minorities and to regional autonomy for the Cordillera people in northern Luzon and the Muslims in Mindanao. I also review and discuss the policies and programs of the Office of Muslim Affairs and Cultural Communities (OMACC), the government agency that succeeded PANAMIN and the Office of Muslim Affairs in 1984, and its own recent abolition and division into three separate offices for ethnic minority affairs in 1987. Despite those constitutional and bureaucratic changes, I contend that Philippine ethnic minority policy still continues essentially the same policies, programs, strategies and activities of PANAMIN much to the detriment of Muslim and non-Muslim minorities and despite the widespread opposition and criticism that had been directed against PANAMIN in the past, especially from the minorities themselves. Following the approach of Davis (1977) in his excellent analysis of Brazilian Indian policy that gives emphasis to the wider political and economic context of such policy, I argue in particular that Philippine ethnic minority policy has been and continues to be compromised by national economic development policies, that is, the export-
oriented and foreign capital dependent development policies of both the Marcos and Aquino administrations, with the inevitable result that minorities continue to occupy a marginal and subordinate position in Philippine society. Thus, agencies such as OMACC and the newly created offices for ethnic minority affairs perform no more than social welfare functions for minorities since by design minority policies and programs are not intended to alter in any significant way the historical relations of inequality between Muslim and non-Muslim minorities and the majority lowland Christian population.

Constitutional Provisions for Ethnic Minorities

The recently ratified 1987 Philippine Constitution contains several provisions that are intended specifically for the benefit of “indigenous cultural communities” in contrast to the single provision in the previous 1973 Constitution. A declaration of state policy affirms that “The State recognizes and promotes the rights of indigenous cultural communities within the framework of national unity and development” (Article II, Section 22). Another significant constitutional mandate, which appears to be very similar to a provision in the 1973 Constitution (Art. XV, Sec. 11), maintains that “The State shall recognize, respect, and protect the rights of indigenous cultural communities to preserve and develop their cultures, traditions, and institutions. It shall consider these rights in the formulation of national plans and policies” (Art. XIV, Sec. 17). Accordingly, it is provided that the Philippine Congress may create a consultative body to advise the President on policies that affect cultural minorities, the majority of the members of which should be from such minorities (Art. XVI, Sec. 12). Other major provisions for ethnic minorities in the 1987 Constitution pertain to protection of their rights to their ancestral domain from agrarian reform and to the creation of autonomous regions in “Muslim Mindanao” and in the Cordillera region in northern Luzon.

While seemingly laudatory, those provisions and others for the benefit of cultural minorities tend to contradict one another or to be contradicted by other constitutional provisions to the ultimate detriment of minorities. For example, while the state policy cited above appears to give broad recognition to the general rights of minority peoples, another provision on “national economy and patrimony” contends that the state shall protect the rights of ethnic minorities to their ancestral lands “subject to the provisions of this Constitution and national development policies and programs” (Art. XII, Sec. 5, emphasis mine). Based on the past experiences of minority groups, such wider economic development policies and objectives generally are given priority over those intended specifically for cultural minorities because the former are said to be in the national interest or at least in the interest of the