

Regional Governance and Public Administration in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM): Evolution, Challenges, and Prospects for Peace and Development

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Abstract—This study examines the evolution of public administration and regional governance in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Philippines, with emphasis on how historical conflicts, cultural diversity, and peace-building initiatives have shaped administrative practices across the region. The research analyzes BARMM's unique administrative context, exploring how traditional governance structures interact with modern administrative frameworks in establishing genuine autonomy for the Bangsamoro people. Using qualitative methods including document analysis and literature review, this study traces the development of public administration in the Bangsamoro region from colonial times through the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to the present BARMM governance structure. Findings reveal that BARMM's public administration has been significantly influenced by centuries of armed conflicts, indigenous governance systems, failed autonomy experiments, and transformative peace agreements. The study concludes that effective governance in BARMM requires comprehensive integration of traditional leadership structures with modern administrative practices, sustained peace-building efforts, meaningful fiscal autonomy, and robust institutional capacity development. This research contributes to understanding public administration in post-conflict autonomous regions and provides insights for governance reform in culturally diverse, conflict-affected areas pursuing self-determination within a unitary state framework.

Keywords—BARMM, regional governance, public administration, Bangsamoro, peace-building, autonomy, post-conflict governance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) represents a historic milestone in Philippine public administration and peace-building, marking the culmination of decades of armed struggle, peace negotiations, and efforts to address the historical injustices experienced by the Bangsamoro people. Established in 2019 through the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), BARMM is the most significant experiment in regional autonomy within the Philippine unitary system, with powers and resources far exceeding those of any previous autonomous arrangement [64]. Understanding public administration in BARMM requires examining the intersection of formal government structures with traditional indigenous governance systems, the impact of prolonged armed conflicts spanning

generations, and the complex process of implementing a transformative peace agreement.

BARMM comprises the provinces of Basilan (except Isabela City), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, along with the cities of Cotabato, Lamitan, and Marawi, and 63 barangays in North Cotabato that opted to join the region through plebiscite [17]. The region's administrative landscape has been shaped by multiple factors including profound ethnic and religious diversity, with the Maguindanaon, Maranao, Tausug, Sama, Yakan, and other indigenous Muslim groups (collectively known as Bangsamoro) maintaining distinct cultural identities and governance traditions, alongside significant Christian and indigenous non-Muslim populations [62]. These indigenous structures have coexisted, and at times conflicted, with imposed Western administrative models introduced during colonial periods.

The region's history has been marked by resistance to colonial rule, marginalization under successive Philippine governments, armed insurgency by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the failed experiment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM, 1989-2019) [33]. These conflicts profoundly affected governance, public service delivery, economic development, and social cohesion across the region.

The establishment of BARMM through the BOL, following the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) signed between the Philippine Government and MILF in 2014, introduced fundamentally new administrative frameworks emphasizing genuine autonomy, parliamentary governance, ministerial government, and culturally sensitive administration [52]. This transition presents both extraordinary opportunities and formidable challenges for public administration in the region, raising critical questions about institutional capacity, resource allocation, the integration of traditional and modern governance systems, and the transformation of a revolutionary movement into an effective government.

This study addresses the research question: How has public administration evolved in the Bangsamoro region, and what factors have shaped the development of BARMM as an

autonomous governance structure? The research objectives are: (1) to trace the historical evolution of public administration in the Bangsamoro region from pre-colonial times to BARMM; (2) to analyze the unique challenges facing regional governance in BARMM; and (3) to examine prospects for strengthening administrative effectiveness in the context of peace consolidation, autonomy implementation, and sustainable development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Public Administration and Autonomy in the Philippine Context

Philippine public administration has been significantly influenced by colonial legacies, particularly American administrative models introduced during the early 20th century that emphasized centralized bureaucracy, English-language education, and uniform application of Western administrative principles [31]. Brillantes and Fernandez argue that Philippine public administration evolved through distinct phases: traditional/classical administration, development administration, new public administration, new public management, and governance-oriented approaches, each bringing different emphases from efficiency and bureaucratic rationality to participation, accountability, and good governance [11].

However, scholars have noted that public administration theory and practice in the Philippines often reflects a fundamental disjuncture between imported Western models and local realities, particularly in regions with strong indigenous governance traditions [21]. This gap becomes especially pronounced in Muslim Mindanao, where indigenous governance systems, Islamic legal traditions, and customary laws operate alongside—and sometimes in opposition to—formal government structures rooted in Western administrative paradigms [66].

The concept of autonomy within a unitary state presents particular challenges. Philippine constitutional and administrative frameworks have struggled to accommodate meaningful regional autonomy while maintaining national sovereignty and territorial integrity [12]. Previous autonomy experiments, including the short-lived Muslim Mindanao Autonomy Acts of the 1970s and the ARMM, demonstrated the difficulties of devolving genuine powers and resources within a highly centralized administrative system [65].

2.2 Governance in Post-Conflict and Transitional Settings

Research on governance in post-conflict regions highlights several distinctive challenges that apply directly to BARMM. Brinkerhoff identifies issues including weak institutional capacity, legitimacy deficits particularly where government has been associated with oppression, severe resource constraints, and the need to balance security concerns with development objectives [10]. In post-conflict settings, governance reform must address not only administrative efficiency but also reconciliation, transitional justice, inclusive participation of formerly marginalized groups, and transformation of conflict actors into peaceful political participants [51].

The concept of "hybrid governance" has emerged to describe situations where state and non-state actors share authority, particularly in areas where government presence has been historically limited or contested [9]. In the Bangsamoro context, this includes traditional datus, sultans, religious leaders (ulama), community elders, and formerly armed groups who exercise significant influence alongside—or sometimes instead of—formal government officials [29].

Transitional governance literature emphasizes the importance of sequencing reforms, managing expectations during transformation periods, and building legitimacy through early delivery of peace dividends [19]. Some studies focus on peace and development in the local settings such as the study of Sattar and Arriola [72] and the study of Harad and Arriola [73]. The BARMM transition represents a particularly complex case involving not merely post-conflict reconstruction but fundamental restructuring of governance arrangements, transfer of powers from national to regional government, and transformation of a revolutionary organization (MILF) into the dominant political force in the new autonomous government.

2.3 The ARMM Experience: Lessons from Failed Autonomy

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (1989-2019) provides critical context for understanding BARMM. Created following the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and 1996 Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF, ARMM was intended to provide self-governance for Muslim-majority areas in Mindanao [41]. However, extensive research documented ARMM's profound governance failures, making it one of the Philippines' poorest and most poorly governed regions despite autonomy [28].

Studies identified multiple systemic problems in ARMM: severely limited actual autonomy with most powers retained by the national government; inadequate fiscal resources with heavy dependence on national transfers and minimal revenue-generating capacity; weak institutional capacity with poorly trained personnel and inadequate systems; pervasive corruption and patronage politics; political dynasties dominating the regional government; continued armed conflicts involving MILF, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and other armed actors; and widespread poverty and underdevelopment [71].

Gutierrez et al.'s comprehensive study "All the King's Men" documented how ARMM was effectively captured by political elites who used the regional government primarily for patronage and personal enrichment rather than genuine development or service delivery [28]. Santos and Santos found that while ARMM provided a framework for self-governance, implementation was severely hampered by insufficient devolution of powers and resources, with the national government maintaining control over critical functions [65].

These failures contributed to the MILF's continued insurgency despite the creation of ARMM, as the MILF viewed ARMM as inadequate to address Bangsamoro aspirations for genuine self-determination [46]. The ARMM experience thus provides sobering lessons about the

challenges of implementing meaningful autonomy and the critical importance of genuine power devolution, adequate resources, institutional capacity, and political will.

2.4 The Bangsamoro Organic Law: A New Framework for Autonomy

The Bangsamoro Organic Law (Republic Act No. 11054), signed into law in July 2018 and ratified through plebiscites in January and February 2019, represents a fundamental departure from the ARMM framework [52]. The BOL was developed through extensive negotiations between the Philippine Government and MILF, resulting in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) signed in March 2014, which provided the framework for the legislation [56].

Key features of the BOL that distinguish it from ARMM include: expanded powers with exclusive authority over 61 areas and concurrent authority with the national government in 14 areas; a parliamentary system of government replacing the presidential system used in ARMM; ministerial rather than departmental governance structures; significantly increased fiscal autonomy including a larger share of national taxes, block grants, and greater control over natural resources; recognition of Shari'a law and indigenous governance systems; creation of new institutions including the Bangsamoro Parliament, regional cabinet, and specialized bodies for transition, decommissioning, and normalization; and provisions for inclusive governance ensuring representation of non-Moro indigenous peoples, settler communities, women, and youth [13].

The BOL also provides for a transition period (2019-2025) during which the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), an appointed body composed largely of MILF members and other stakeholders, serves as the interim regional government responsible for establishing institutions, developing legislation, and preparing for regular parliamentary elections [6].

Scholars have noted both the promise and challenges of the BOL framework. Bacani argues that the BOL provides a genuine opportunity for addressing historical injustices and implementing meaningful autonomy, but warns that success depends critically on political will, adequate resources, and sustained peace [3]. Buendia emphasizes that the BOL represents recognition of the Bangsamoro people's distinct identity and right to self-governance within the Philippine state, marking a significant evolution in Philippine constitutional and political development [13].

2.5 Indigenous Governance in the Bangsamoro

The Bangsamoro region encompasses diverse indigenous governance traditions that predate colonial rule and continue to influence contemporary governance [61]. The Maguindanaon and Maranao sultanates maintained sophisticated political systems involving sultans, datus, and advisory councils that regulated community affairs, managed resources, resolved disputes, and conducted external relations [48]. The Tausug sultanate of Sulu similarly developed complex governance structures that integrated Islamic principles with indigenous customs [70].

These traditional systems emphasize consensus-building, mediation, restorative justice, and community harmony, contrasting with the adversarial and bureaucratic nature of Western legal and administrative systems [44]. Traditional leaders derive legitimacy from lineage, religious authority, community respect, and demonstrated wisdom rather than electoral processes or bureaucratic appointment [14].

Islamic law (Shari'a) and customary law (adat) form the normative foundations of indigenous Bangsamoro governance, regulating matters of personal status, family relations, property, and community conduct [37]. Religious scholars (ulama) play important roles as interpreters of Islamic law and moral authorities in their communities [49]. Research by Manlupig demonstrates how indigenous governance systems successfully resolve conflicts and maintain social order in areas where formal government presence is weak or absent [44]. Canaday's work on the Yakan of Basilan shows how traditional leaders facilitate community cohesion and manage disputes more effectively than formal courts in many contexts [14].

However, scholars also note tensions between traditional and modern governance systems. Concerns exist about accountability, transparency, gender equality, and human rights in traditional systems that may not conform to modern democratic standards [23]. The challenge for BARMM is integrating the legitimacy and effectiveness of traditional governance with accountability and rights-based principles of modern administration.

2.6 Research Gap

While substantial literature exists on the Bangsamoro peace process, ARMM governance failures, and the BOL's legal framework, limited research examines the actual implementation of BARMM governance, the transition from ARMM to BARMM at the institutional level, or how the new regional government is functioning in practice. Most existing studies focus on legal and political frameworks, peace process negotiations, or conflict dynamics, with insufficient attention to administrative development, institutional capacity building, service delivery, and the day-to-day realities of governance in the new autonomous region. This study addresses this gap by providing comprehensive analysis of public administration evolution and governance challenges in BARMM, contributing to understanding how post-conflict autonomous regions can develop effective governance structures.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach using document analysis and comprehensive literature review to trace the evolution of public administration in the Bangsamoro region and analyze the establishment and early implementation of BARMM governance. Data sources include scholarly articles, government documents and official reports, policy papers and legal analyses, reports from international development organizations and peace-building institutions, historical records spanning the pre-colonial period to present, and BARMM transition documents and legislation.

The analysis follows a historical-structural framework, examining how political, social, economic, and cultural factors have shaped administrative institutions and practices over time. Key periods analyzed include: (1) Pre-colonial sultanates and indigenous governance systems; (2) Spanish and American colonial administration (1521-1946); (3) Post-independence marginalization and the rise of Moro insurgency (1946-1989); (4) The ARMM period and its governance failures (1989-2019); and (5) BARMM establishment and transition (2019-present).

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring challenges, institutional developments, governance innovations, and factors affecting administrative effectiveness. The study examines BARMM governance across multiple dimensions including institutional structures, fiscal arrangements, traditional-modern governance integration, peace-building and normalization, capacity development, and service delivery.

The study acknowledges several limitations including reliance on secondary sources without primary data collection from BARMM officials or communities; the rapidly evolving nature of BARMM governance during the transition period, which may affect the current applicability of some findings; and the complexity of assessing governance effectiveness during a transition period when institutions are still being established and systems are not yet fully operational.

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method. The instrument used in this study is an observation conducted by the author himself where the author will conduct a literature search that is in accordance with the topic of the problem discussed. The subject of research in writing this article is national journals from the results of research that has been conducted and published previously so that secondary data is obtained from the research. The procedure for this study is as follows:

1. Problem formulation

At this stage, the author determines the problems he wants to discuss according to the issues that occur and the author's interests.

2. Literature search

The author conducted a search for information sources in the form of research journals that discuss this problem.

3. Data evaluation

The author evaluates the contents of the research journal obtained so that the research data to be discussed can be in accordance with what is desired.

4. Data analysis and interpretation

The author analyzes the research data obtained so that it can then be summarized and rewritten in the resulting article.

The data analysis technique used by the author is the content analysis technique where the author will analyze the results of research that has been carried out based on suitability with the topic discussed and the time of implementation of the research.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Historical Evolution of Public Administration in the Bangsamoro

4.1.1 Pre-Colonial Sultanates and Indigenous Governance

Prior to Spanish colonization, what is now the BARMM region was governed through sophisticated indigenous political systems centered on Islamic sultanates. The Sultanate of Maguindanao, formally established in the 16th century but with roots extending earlier, governed much of central Mindanao through a hierarchical system of sultans and datus who controlled territories, collected tribute, administered justice, and organized defense [43]. The Sultanate of Sulu, established in the 15th century, controlled the Sulu Archipelago and parts of Borneo and Sulawesi, developing extensive trade networks and diplomatic relations with neighboring states [70]. The Pat a Pangampong ko Ranao (Confederation of the Four Lakes), the governing structure of the Maranao people centered around Lake Lanao, maintained a decentralized but coordinated system of sultanates and datus governing distinct territories [26].

These sultanates represented sophisticated political entities with defined territories, populations, governance structures, legal systems based on Shari'a and adat, economic systems based on trade and agriculture, military organizations, and diplomatic relations with other states including China, Brunei, Malacca, and later European powers [43]. Governance emphasized consultation and consensus among datus, with sultans serving as paramount leaders but typically acting with the counsel and consent of noble councils [38].

Islamic law provided the normative framework for governance, introduced to the region beginning in the 14th century [42]. The integration of Islamic principles with existing indigenous customs created distinctive Bangsamoro governance traditions that combined Islamic concepts of justice, social welfare, and moral authority with indigenous emphases on kinship, communal solidarity, and consensus decision-making [66].

4.1.2 Spanish Colonial Period (1565-1898)

Spanish colonization, beginning with expeditions in the 1560s and intensifying in subsequent centuries, had limited penetration in Muslim Mindanao compared to other Philippine regions [70]. The Spanish designated the entire Muslim population as "Moros" (Moors) and waged nearly continuous wars of attempted conquest and religious conversion spanning more than three centuries [16].

Spanish administrative control remained largely confined to fortified coastal settlements and military garrisons, with the interior and most of the Sulu Archipelago remaining under indigenous control [70]. The Spanish established military districts but never succeeded in implementing civilian colonial administration throughout Muslim Mindanao as they did in Christian-majority regions [26]. This resulted in Muslim Mindanao remaining effectively independent, with sultanates continuing to function and resist Spanish authority [43].

The prolonged Spanish-Moro Wars (1565-1898) profoundly shaped Bangsamoro political consciousness, creating a historical narrative of resistance to external conquest and a distinct identity separate from the Christianized lowland Philippines [66]. This period

established patterns of external powers attempting to impose governance on Muslim Mindanao while indigenous polities maintained autonomous authority—patterns that would recur throughout subsequent periods [46].

4.1.3 American Colonial Period (1898-1946)

American colonization brought more systematic attempts to impose Western administrative structures on Muslim Mindanao. The Americans initially negotiated treaties with the Sultanate of Sulu (Bates Treaty, 1899) and other Muslim leaders, recognizing their authority while asserting American sovereignty [27]. However, after consolidating control over the Christian Philippines, the Americans abrogated the Bates Treaty in 1904 and launched military campaigns to subjugate Muslim Mindanao [30].

The Americans established the Moro Province (1903-1913) as a special administrative region under direct military governance, separate from the civilian Philippine government [27]. This recognized that Muslim Mindanao required different governance approaches than Christian regions but also reflected American views of Muslims as "uncivilized" and requiring military control [36]. The Moro Province was governed by American military officers who established a bureaucratic administrative system including district governance, schools, infrastructure development, and resource extraction [27].

Following armed resistance and the eventual American military victory in the Moro Wars (1899-1913), Muslim Mindanao was gradually integrated into the regular Philippine administrative system, with provinces and municipalities established following the standard American-imposed model [66]. However, special policies continued, including restrictions on Muslim land ownership and encouragement of Christian migration to Muslim areas—policies that created lasting grievances and demographic changes [46].

American colonial administration introduced Western bureaucratic structures, English education, and secular governance that conflicted with traditional sultanates and Islamic governance principles [31]. The Americans systematically undermined traditional authority by creating alternative governance structures, reducing sultans and datus to ceremonial roles without official power, and promoting commoners who cooperated with American administration [26]. This created dual systems with diminished but still influential traditional leaders operating alongside formal government officials—a pattern that persists in BARMM today [61].

4.1.4 Post-Independence Marginalization and the Rise of Armed Resistance (1946-1989)

Following Philippine independence in 1946, Muslim Mindanao was fully integrated into the centralized Philippine state with no recognition of its distinct history, governance traditions, or Muslim character [66]. The post-independence period was marked by increasing marginalization of Muslim populations through several interconnected processes: massive government-sponsored Christian migration that reduced Muslims from majorities to minorities in many traditional areas; land grabbing and displacement as Christian settlers and corporations appropriated Muslim lands often

through fraudulent means; political exclusion with Muslims having minimal representation in national government; economic underdevelopment with minimal government investment in Muslim regions; and cultural discrimination with government policies imposing Christian-oriented education and legal systems [46].

These injustices led to the rise of armed resistance movements. The Jabidah massacre in 1968, in which Muslim military trainees were allegedly murdered by the Philippine military, catalyzed the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1972 under the leadership of Nur Misuari [16]. The MNLF launched an armed struggle for Bangsamoro independence, initiating decades of conflict that devastated Muslim Mindanao [69].

The Moro conflict escalated dramatically during the Martial Law period (1972-1981) under President Ferdinand Marcos, with major military offensives against MNLF forces and widespread human rights violations [69]. By the mid-1970s, the conflict had caused an estimated 50,000-100,000 deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands, while destroying governance institutions and economic infrastructure throughout Muslim Mindanao [47].

International mediation by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation led to the Tripoli Agreement in 1976, in which the Philippine Government agreed to establish autonomy for Muslim Mindanao [43]. However, implementation was delayed and diluted, with the Marcos government creating two separate autonomous regions (Regions IX and XII) with minimal powers rather than the unified autonomy envisioned in the Tripoli Agreement [16]. This perceived betrayal contributed to the conflict's continuation and eventual split in the Moro liberation movement.

In 1984, a faction of the MNLF led by Hashim Salamat broke away to form the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), advocating a more Islamic-oriented struggle and continuing armed resistance while the mainstream MNLF pursued negotiations [46]. The MILF gradually became the larger and more militarily capable of the two organizations, establishing significant territorial control in Central Mindanao and developing governance structures in areas under its authority [35].

During this period (1946-1989), formal government administration in Muslim areas operated under severe constraints, with limited presence in conflict zones, difficulty delivering services, and widespread perception among Muslim populations that government represented Christian-dominated oppression rather than legitimate authority [39]. This created space for armed groups to provide alternative governance, and traditional leaders to maintain influence in the absence of effective state authority [46].

4.1.5 The ARMM Period: Failed Autonomy (1989-2019)

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, created through Republic Act 6734 in 1989 and subsequently amended, represented the first formal attempt at regional autonomy in the Philippines [55]. ARMM was established following the 1987 Philippine Constitution's provisions for autonomous regions and as partial implementation of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement [20].

The initial ARMM plebiscite in 1989 saw only four provinces (Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi) vote to join, with other Muslim-majority provinces and cities rejecting inclusion [17]. Following the Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF in 1996, an expanded ARMM was created through Republic Act 9054 in 2001, adding the city of Marawi and eventually Basilan province [54].

ARMM's governance structure included an elected Regional Governor and Vice-Governor, Regional Legislative Assembly, regional executive departments, and regional government agencies (Republic Act 9054, 2001). The ARMM framework transferred certain powers to the regional government including education, agriculture, trade and industry, tourism, health, social services, administration of Shari'a courts, and regional planning and development [65].

However, extensive research documented ARMM's profound failure to deliver effective governance or meaningful autonomy. Critical problems included:

Limited Actual Autonomy: Despite nominal powers, the national government retained control over critical functions including natural resources, security, major infrastructure, and most significant policy areas. The regional government lacked authority to modify national laws or develop genuinely autonomous policies [40].

Severe Fiscal Constraints: ARMM was heavily dependent on national government transfers with minimal revenue-generating capacity. The region received inadequate funding relative to its needs and population, constraining development and service delivery [25].

Weak Institutional Capacity: ARMM suffered from inadequate numbers of qualified personnel, weak administrative systems, poor financial management, limited infrastructure, and lack of technical capacity across government functions [2].

Pervasive Corruption and Patronage Politics: Studies documented systematic corruption, with regional government resources used primarily for political patronage rather than development or service delivery. Political dynasties dominated ARMM politics, treating the regional government as private property [28].

Continued Armed Conflicts: Despite ARMM's creation, armed conflicts continued involving the MILF (which rejected ARMM as inadequate), Abu Sayyaf Group, rido (clan feuds), and other armed actors. These conflicts undermined governance and development throughout the region [33].

Persistent Poverty and Underdevelopment: ARMM provinces consistently ranked among the Philippines' poorest, with high poverty rates, poor health and education outcomes, limited infrastructure, and minimal economic opportunities [71].

Political Manipulation: The national government often interfered in ARMM affairs, particularly during the Arroyo administration when the elected ARMM government was replaced with an appointed caretaker government, undermining whatever legitimacy and autonomy ARMM possessed [28].

The ARMM experience convinced many stakeholders, including the MILF, that genuine autonomy required more fundamental reforms with greater devolution of powers, enhanced fiscal resources, stronger institutions, and genuine political will for implementation [64]. The MILF continued its armed struggle, arguing that ARMM demonstrated the Philippine government's unwillingness to grant meaningful self-determination [46].

Despite ARMM's failures, the period provided lessons that informed the later BARMM framework, including the necessity of enhanced fiscal autonomy, need for stronger institutional capacity, importance of inclusive political processes, recognition of traditional and Islamic governance systems, and understanding that autonomy requires genuine power transfer not merely formal structures [19].

4.1.6 The BARMM Transition: Toward Genuine Autonomy (2019-Present)

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao represents a fundamental break from ARMM, established through an entirely different process and framework designed to address ARMM's failures and provide genuine autonomy [64].

The path to BARMM began with renewed peace negotiations between the Philippine Government and MILF starting in 2001, accelerating significantly under the Aquino administration (2010-2016) [58]. Years of negotiations produced several key agreements including the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB, 2012), which outlined the basic parameters for a new autonomous region, and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB, signed March 27, 2014), which provided the complete framework for Bangsamoro autonomy [56].

The CAB included four annexes covering transitional arrangements and modalities, wealth-sharing, power-sharing, and normalization (addressing security, decommissioning, and socio-economic development) [56]. The agreement represented compromises on both sides: the MILF accepted autonomy within the Philippine state rather than independence, while the Philippine Government agreed to unprecedented devolution of powers and resources [58].

The CAB's implementation required legislation, leading to the drafting of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), which initially stalled in Congress following the Mamasapano incident in January 2015 (a botched police operation against terrorists that killed 44 police commandos and raised questions about the peace process) [34]. The BBL was eventually passed in substantially revised form as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (Republic Act 11054) in July 2018 under the Duterte administration [52].

The BOL was ratified through two plebiscites in January and February 2019, with voters in the ARMM provinces and cities plus Cotabato City and adjacent areas voting on inclusion in the new region [18]. The January 2019 plebiscite saw overwhelming approval in ARMM areas (85% yes votes), Cotabato City (63% yes), and 63 barangays in North Cotabato (67% yes), though Isabela City in Basilan voted against inclusion [18]. A second plebiscite in February 2019 saw Sulu province voters reject inclusion, but the BOL

provisions allowed provinces to be included even with a no vote if the entire region voted yes [18].

The BOL established BARMM with fundamentally different structures and powers than ARMM:

Parliamentary System: BARMM operates under a parliamentary system unique in the Philippines, with an 80-member Bangsamoro Parliament serving as the legislative body and a Chief Minister (selected from Parliament members) serving as head of government [52].

Ministerial Government: Instead of departmental secretaries, BARMM has Cabinet Ministers heading various ministries, with the Chief Minister appointing the Cabinet Bangsamoro [5].

Expanded Powers: The BOL grants BARMM exclusive authority over 61 areas and concurrent authority with the national government in 14 areas. Exclusive powers include: civil service within the region; creation of municipalities, barangays, and districts; ancestral domain and natural resources within the region; tourism; trade and industry; agricultural and fisheries modernization; environmental protection; urban and rural planning; regional economic zones; health services; social welfare; education policies and standards; Shari'a justice system; budget and financial management; and others [5].

Enhanced Fiscal Autonomy: BARMM receives substantially more fiscal resources than ARMM, including: an annual block grant from the national government (at least Php 63 billion in 2020 with annual 5% increase); 5% share of national taxes collected in the region; 75% share of revenues from metallic mineral exploration in the region; 50% share of revenues from non-metallic mineral exploration; special development fund; and authority to create regional government corporations and float bonds [5].

Recognition of Indigenous and Traditional Systems: The BOL formally recognizes traditional leaders, indigenous governance systems, customary laws, and Shari'a law. The Bangsamoro Parliament includes reserved seats for non-Moro indigenous peoples, women, settler communities, and other sectoral representatives [5].

Transition Period: The BOL provided for a transition period (2019-2025) during which the appointed BTA, composed of 80 members including majority MILF representation, serves as interim government responsible for establishing institutions, creating ministerial offices, drafting regional codes, preparing for regular elections, and implementing normalization programs [5].

Normalization Program: A comprehensive normalization process addresses security transformation including MILF combatant decommissioning (completed in phases with final decommissioning in 2022), policing arrangements, socio-economic programs for decommissioned combatants, transitional justice mechanisms, and psychosocial healing and reconciliation initiatives [57].

The BARMM transition has involved massive institutional restructuring, with the former ARMM agencies dissolved and new ministerial offices created, thousands of personnel transitioned or recruited, new legislation drafted, and governance systems established [7]. The process has been

complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which delayed implementation and strained resources, and the extension of the transition period through 2025, postponing the first regular parliamentary elections [53].

Early assessments of BARMM governance show both significant progress and continuing challenges. Progress includes the creation of functional ministerial offices, passage of important regional legislation including the Bangsamoro Administrative Code and Bangsamoro Civil Service Code, disbursement of substantial development funds, successful decommissioning of MILF combatants, relative peace in most of the region, and growing public support for the Bangsamoro Government [32].

However, challenges persist including remaining institutional capacity gaps, delays in service delivery improvements, concerns about inclusion and representation of non-MILF communities, security incidents involving non-MILF armed groups, questions about fiscal sustainability beyond transition funding, and the need to demonstrate peace dividends that concretely improve citizens' lives [32].

4.2 Unique Governance Challenges in BARMM

4.2.1 Post-Conflict Institutional Development

BARMM faces the challenge of building effective institutions in a post-conflict environment where governance has been severely disrupted by decades of armed conflict. Unlike regions with continuity in governance institutions, BARMM must essentially create a new regional government while managing the transition from an armed insurgency (MILF) to democratic governance [10].

This involves transforming former combatants into government officials and civil servants, a process unprecedented in Philippine history [45]. While this provides legitimacy among the Bangsamoro population who supported the MILF struggle, it raises questions about administrative capacity, technical expertise, and whether revolutionary skills translate to effective governance [64].

The institutional development challenge is compounded by the need to create entirely new structures—a parliamentary system, ministerial government, and regional civil service—without clear Philippine models to follow, as BARMM's governance system differs fundamentally from standard Philippine provincial and regional government structures [15].

4.2.2 Fiscal Sustainability and Resource Management

While BARMM receives substantially more funding than ARMM, questions remain about long-term fiscal sustainability. The current annual block grant of approximately Php 70-75 billion provides significant resources, but BARMM's needs are enormous given decades of underdevelopment and the high costs of building institutions, delivering services, and implementing normalization programs [5].

BARMM's internal revenue generation capacity remains limited due to poverty, limited economic activity, weak tax administration systems, and the concentration of economic activity in areas (particularly Cotabato and Davao regions) outside BARMM jurisdiction [25]. The region cannot rely

indefinitely on national government transfers and must develop economic strategies that generate sustainable revenues [71].

Financial management capacity presents another challenge. BARMM must develop robust systems for budget formulation, appropriation, disbursement, accounting, and auditing to ensure resources are used effectively and transparently [2]. Early reports indicate some delays in disbursement and project implementation, reflecting capacity constraints and the learning curve in managing large budgets [32].

4.2.3 Integration of Diverse Governance Systems

BARMM encompasses multiple governance traditions that must be integrated into a coherent system. These include: formal BARMM government structures based on the BOL; traditional sultanates and datu systems with continuing influence, particularly in rural areas; Islamic governance principles and Shari'a law; indigenous governance systems of non-Moro peoples (Lumad); civil law systems inherited from the Philippine state; and customary laws (adat) varying among different Bangsamoro ethnic groups [23].

The BOL recognizes these diverse systems and mandates their integration, but actual mechanisms remain under development. Questions include: How should Shari'a courts relate to regular courts? What authority do traditional leaders have in formal government structures? How are decisions made when Islamic, customary, and civil law conflict? How can indigenous governance principles be preserved while ensuring human rights, gender equality, and democratic accountability [44]?

The challenge is achieving integration that respects diversity, preserves valuable aspects of traditional governance, and creates coherent systems allowing citizens to navigate governance without confusion while ensuring rights and democratic principles are upheld [61].

4.2.4 Inclusive Governance and Managing Diversity

BARMM must govern a diverse population including various Bangsamoro ethno-linguistic groups (Maguindanaon, Maranao, Tausug, Sama, Yakan, and others), non-Moro indigenous peoples (Tedur ay, Lembangian, Dulangan, and others), Christian settler communities, and mixed communities [50]. Historical tensions exist between some groups, particularly regarding land, political representation, and resource allocation [62].

The BOL includes provisions for inclusive governance, including reserved seats in the Bangsamoro Parliament for non-Moro indigenous peoples (2 seats), settler communities (2 seats), women, and sectoral representatives [5].

However, ensuring meaningful inclusion requires more than formal representation—it requires policies, programs, and governance approaches that address diverse community needs and prevent discrimination [8].

Concerns exist particularly regarding non-Muslim communities who fear marginalization in a region designed primarily for Bangsamoro autonomy, and non-Moro indigenous peoples who worry about inadequate recognition of their distinct identities and rights [62]. Managing these sensitivities while maintaining the Bangsamoro character and

purpose of the autonomous region presents ongoing challenges [39].

4.2.5 Security and Armed Group Challenges

While the MILF has decommissioned and transformed into a peaceful political organization, other armed groups continue operating in BARMM territory, creating security challenges. These include:

Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG): An extremist organization engaged in kidnapping, bombings, and terrorism, particularly active in Basilan and Sulu [4]. ASG's criminal activities undermine security and economic development while complicating BARMM's relationship with national security forces [1].

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF): A faction that split from the MILF and opposes the peace process, conducting sporadic attacks in Maguindanao and surrounding areas [33].

Private Armed Groups: Various clan-based armed groups involved in rido (clan feuds), political violence, and criminal activities [60].

ISIS-Affiliated Groups: Small groups pledging allegiance to ISIS, demonstrated dramatically in the 2017 Marawi siege [33].

These security challenges require effective policing and security arrangements. The BOL provides for a Bangsamoro Police force under the Philippine National Police but with regional oversight, creation of police regional offices, and eventually greater regional control over policing [5]. However, implementing these arrangements while managing relationships with Armed Forces of the Philippines units operating in the region presents coordination challenges [24].

Balancing security needs with civilian governance and avoiding militarized approaches that alienated populations in the past requires careful navigation [39]. BARMM must demonstrate it can maintain security without relying predominantly on military operations, building civilian governance capacity and community-based peace-building instead [19].

4.2.6 Institutional Capacity and Human Resource Development

BARMM faces severe institutional capacity constraints affecting all government functions. Challenges include:

Shortage of Qualified Personnel: Limited pools of qualified personnel with appropriate education, technical skills, and experience, particularly in specialized areas like financial management, policy analysis, legal drafting, and technical fields [2].

Brain Drain: Many qualified Bangsamoro professionals work outside the region or abroad due to limited opportunities, security concerns, and better compensation elsewhere [71].

Administrative Systems: Weak administrative systems, procedures, and infrastructure inherited from ARMM or newly established but not yet fully functional [2].

Capacity Development Needs: The transition from ARMM to BARMM and the creation of new ministerial offices require extensive training, professional development, and capacity building for thousands of personnel [68].

Balancing MILF Integration with Merit-Based Civil Service: The need to integrate former MILF members into government while maintaining merit-based civil service standards and avoiding perceptions of favoritism or patronage [64].

Addressing capacity gaps requires sustained investment in human resource development, including education and training programs, competitive compensation to attract and retain talent, systems modernization, knowledge management, and partnerships with universities, development organizations, and other governments for technical assistance and capacity building [68].

4.2.7 Service Delivery in Challenging Contexts

BARMM must deliver services across a geographically challenging region including mountainous terrain, scattered islands, and remote communities with limited infrastructure and accessibility [71]. Conflict has destroyed infrastructure, displaced populations, and created communities with minimal government services for years [67].

Service delivery challenges include:

Infrastructure Deficits: Inadequate roads, bridges, ports, airports, electricity, water systems, telecommunications, schools, health facilities, and other infrastructure throughout the region [71].

Geographic Barriers: Difficulty reaching island and remote mountain communities with services, particularly during typhoons and monsoon seasons affecting transportation [67].

Limited-Service Delivery Capacity: Insufficient numbers of teachers, health workers, agricultural extension agents, social workers, and other service providers, particularly in remote or conflict-affected areas [63].

Poverty and Humanitarian Needs: High poverty rates and significant humanitarian needs including food security, livelihood support, housing, and basic necessities, requiring both immediate relief and long-term development [71].

Improving service delivery requires infrastructure investment, increasing service provider numbers, innovative delivery mechanisms including mobile services and technology, partnerships with local government units, and community-based approaches leveraging traditional structures and civil society [63].

4.2.8 Economic Development and Livelihood Creation

BARMM provinces consistently rank among the Philippines' poorest, with limited economic opportunities, high unemployment, and dependence on subsistence agriculture and fishing [71]. Decades of conflict have disrupted economic activity, destroyed productive assets, and deterred investment [39].

Economic development challenges include:

Limited Private Investment: Security concerns, poor infrastructure, weak institutions, and limited skilled labor discourage private sector investment [71].

Agricultural Productivity: Most of the population depends on agriculture and fishing, but productivity is low due to lack of modern technologies, limited access to markets, inadequate support services, and environmental degradation (Department of Trade and Industry [22].

Youth Unemployment: High youth unemployment and underemployment create potential recruitment pools for armed groups and drive migration out of the region [71].

Economic Integration: Limited economic integration with the broader Philippine economy and international markets, constraining trade and investment opportunities [22].

Resource Management: Need to develop natural resources sustainably and ensure revenues benefit local communities while avoiding environmental destruction and conflict over resources [5].

Economic development strategies must focus on sectors with strong potential in the region including agriculture and agribusiness, fisheries, tourism (cultural and eco-tourism), halal industry, and possibly natural resources extraction managed sustainably [22]. Creating peace dividends through economic opportunities and employment is critical for sustaining peace and building support for BARMM [19].

4.3 Prospects for Strengthening BARMM Governance

4.3.1 Sustained Peace Consolidation and Normalization

Long-term governance success depends fundamentally on sustained peace. The completed MILF decommissioning represents major progress, but normalization must continue including socio-economic programs for decommissioned combatants, community-based peace-building initiatives, addressing remaining armed groups through combinations of security, dialogue, and addressing underlying grievances, transitional justice mechanisms acknowledging past harms while promoting reconciliation, and psychosocial healing programs addressing trauma from decades of conflict [57].

Peace consolidation requires addressing root causes of conflict including historical injustices, marginalization, poverty, and inequality. BARMM itself represents addressing political marginalization through autonomy; economic development must address poverty and inequality [39].

4.3.2 Institutional Capacity Building and Systems Development

Strengthening BARMM governance requires sustained investment in institutional capacity development including:

Human Resource Development: Comprehensive programs for training and professional development of civil servants; partnerships with universities for degree programs in public administration, governance, and specialized fields; scholarship programs for Bangsamoro students in critical fields; recruitment strategies to attract qualified personnel; and competitive compensation packages [68].

Systems Modernization: Development and implementation of modern administrative systems for financial management, human resource management, procurement, project management, and performance monitoring; information technology infrastructure; e-governance systems for improved efficiency and transparency; and knowledge management systems capturing institutional learning [2].

Technical Assistance: Partnerships with development organizations, other governments, academic institutions, and technical experts to provide technical assistance, policy advice, and capacity building support [68].

Organizational Development: Strengthening ministerial offices, regional agencies, and attached institutions with clear mandates, adequate resources, appropriate structures, and effective coordination mechanisms [59].

4.3.3 Enhanced Fiscal Management and Economic Development

Strengthening fiscal sustainability requires:

Revenue Generation: Developing internal revenue sources through improving tax administration and collection, developing economic activities that generate tax revenues, attracting investment, promoting public-private partnerships, and possibly creating Bangsamoro government enterprises [25].

Financial Management: Strengthening budget formulation, appropriation, disbursement, accounting, and auditing systems; transparent financial reporting; effective internal and external audit; and anti-corruption measures [2].

Development Planning: Strategic development planning aligning budgets with priorities, focusing resources on high-impact interventions, integrating ministerial plans, coordinating with local government units, and involving communities in planning (PIDS, 2020).

Economic Development Programs: Infrastructure investment in roads, ports, electricity, water, telecommunications, and facilities; agricultural modernization and fisheries development; tourism promotion and development; support for small and medium enterprises; skills development and employment programs; and special economic zones attracting investment [22].

4.3.4 Participatory and Inclusive Governance

Strengthening democratic governance and social cohesion requires:

Inclusive Political Participation: Ensuring meaningful participation of diverse communities in political processes; special measures to enhance women's participation in governance and decision-making; youth engagement in governance; and civil society involvement in policy formulation and monitoring [8].

Inter-Community Dialogue: Mechanisms for dialogue and conflict prevention among diverse communities; platforms addressing inter-community tensions; collaborative problem-solving approaches; and recognition and respect for cultural diversity [39].

Accountability Mechanisms: Transparency in government operations; public access to information; independent oversight institutions; grievance redress mechanisms; and citizen engagement in monitoring and evaluation [32].

Integration of Traditional Governance: Meaningful incorporation of traditional leaders in governance structures; recognition of customary conflict resolution mechanisms; consultation processes engaging traditional and religious leaders; and balancing traditional governance with democratic accountability and rights protection [23].

4.3.5 Service Delivery Improvements

Delivering peace dividends through improved services requires:

Infrastructure Development: Prioritizing infrastructure that enhances connectivity, service delivery, and economic

activity; community-driven infrastructure programs engaging local participation; climate-resilient infrastructure given climate change impacts; and ensuring equitable distribution across the region [71].

Social Services: Expanding and improving education, health, social welfare, and housing services; culturally appropriate services respecting Bangsamoro and indigenous identities; special programs for conflict-affected communities; and innovative delivery mechanisms reaching remote areas [63].

Local Governance Support: Strengthening municipal and barangay governments through capacity building, fiscal support, and technical assistance; clarifying BARMM-local government relations and coordination; and promoting good governance at all levels [12].

4.3.6 Effective Regional-National Relations

Managing BARMM's relationship with the national government is critical for sustained success. This requires:

Intergovernmental Coordination: Regular consultation mechanisms between BARMM and national government; clear delineation of exclusive, concurrent, and reserved powers avoiding jurisdictional conflicts; coordination of policies and programs; and mutual respect for autonomy within the constitutional framework [15].

Fiscal Transfers: Ensuring timely and adequate transfer of funds from national government; implementing wealth-sharing provisions of the BOL; and exploring mechanisms for enhanced fiscal autonomy [5].

Political Support: Maintaining political will for BARMM implementation across national government agencies; defending autonomy against encroachment or dilution; and building broader Filipino public understanding and support for Bangsamoro autonomy [64].

V. CONCLUSION

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) represents the Philippines' most ambitious experiment in regional autonomy, emerging from centuries of resistance to external rule and decades of armed conflict between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Established in 2019 through the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), BARMM offers unprecedented opportunities for genuine self-governance and culturally appropriate administration that addresses historical injustices. Its evolution reflects a complex interplay of indigenous Islamic governance traditions, colonial impositions, post-independence marginalization, the failed Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) experiment, and finally the creation of BARMM—each phase shaping contemporary governance challenges while providing foundations for institutional development.

BARMM faces formidable challenges including building institutions in a post-conflict environment, transforming a revolutionary movement into effective government, managing severe capacity constraints, integrating diverse governance traditions, ensuring inclusive governance for plural communities, addressing continuing security threats, and generating sustainable economic development—all amplified

by decades of underdevelopment and conflict's lingering effects. However, the region also possesses significant strengths: the BOL provides substantially greater powers and resources than previous arrangements, the successful peace process created conditions for sustained stability, the government enjoys strong legitimacy among the population, and substantial development funding combined with international support enables meaningful infrastructure investment and technical assistance. The recognition of traditional and indigenous governance systems creates opportunities for culturally appropriate administration that respects Bangsamoro identity.

The BARMM experience offers critical lessons for public administration in conflict-affected and culturally diverse regions, particularly regarding autonomy arrangements within unitary states. Key insights include the necessity of genuine power devolution beyond nominal autonomy, the importance of adequate fiscal resources and institutional capacity, the value of inclusive governance that respects diversity, the need for culturally appropriate governance integrating traditional systems, and the requirement of sustained political will from both autonomous and national governments. Future research should examine implementation effectiveness, comparative analyses with other autonomous regions, citizen perceptions across diverse communities, and the integration of traditional-modern governance mechanisms.

Ultimately, BARMM's success depends on sustained peace, genuine autonomy with adequate resources, institutional capacity development, inclusive governance, economic development, effective service delivery, and political commitment to fully implement the BTA. The first regular parliamentary elections in 2025 will mark an important transition from the appointed Bangsamoro Transition Authority to an elected government that must maintain peace gains while addressing governance challenges. Beyond public administration, the Bangsamoro experience is fundamentally about recognition, justice, and self-determination for a historically marginalized people. BARMM represents not an endpoint but a beginning—a foundation for demonstrating that genuine autonomy can address historical injustices, accommodate diversity, and create pathways toward peace and prosperity in formerly conflict-affected regions.

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