# Theorizing How Ethnoreligious Conflicts Rise and Remain

## *By Michael I. Magcamit*

*Abstract:* Virtually all corners of the world have, at one point in history, experienced episodes of ethnoreligious conflicts. For many sovereign states today, however, intense clashes between competing ethnoreligious groups continue. This paper examines how ethnoreligious conflicts rise and remain entrenched over long periods of time. Although the current literature provides significant insights about the multiple factors that give rise to these conflicts and to what extent, what is mostly missing are explanations about the dynamics and processes in which these causes are crystallized and animated. Hence, in this paper, I develop and test a framework that identifies and explains the three key stages through which overlapping rationalist, non-rationalist, and instrumentalist causes develop into lasting ethnoreligious conflicts: cultivating ethnoreligious nationalism; securitizing the ethnoreligious others; and sacralizing territorial-cultural identities. The framework enables a more holistic appreciation of the contexts, actors, and motives underpinning these events in multiethnic and multireligious territorial communities.

*Keywords:* ethnoreligious conflicts, security, religion, nationalism, territorial communities, Philippines

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## *Introduction*

The contemporary international society is inhabited by hundreds of multi-ethnic and multi-religious states.  Out of all the existing sovereign states in the world, more than 80 percent consist of two or more ethnoreligious factions (Toft, 2003). For most of these units, religion is a salient aspect of ethnicity, especially if it serves as a characterizing feature that distinguishes a group in that group's own eyes and/or in the eyes of others (Fox, 1999). To paraphrase Ted Gurr (2000: 3), the key to identifying ethnoreligious groups relies on "the shared perception that the defining traits set the group apart", and not so much on the presence of a specific trait or combination of those traits per se. Given that religion's significance to ethnic identity is primarily anchored on perceptions, its centrality vis-à-vis a communal group can change over time (Horowitz, 2000). As Jonathan Fox notes, although religion might be the single most important aspect in some ethnic identities, to others, it might only play a miniscule role (Fox, 1999: 294). In short, the main factor which determines religion's relative position and importance is the perception of the group itself (Horowitz, 1985; Fox, 1999; Gurr, 2000).

    Be that as it may, in regions characterized by high levels of religiosity and ethno-cultural heterogeneity, the number of people who continue to pledge their lives for the protection of their faith and flag how ethnoreligious groups across the world perceive religion and nationalism. According to recent global surveys, on average, 54 percent of adults claim that religion is very important in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2018); whereas 57.1 percent of adults confirm that they are very proud of their nationality (Institute for Comparative Survey Research, 2019). In Southeast Asia, for instance, the share of population that agrees religion is very important in their lives ranges between 96 to 99 percent in all states except in Singapore and Vietnam. In South Asia, religious commitment is very important in predominantly Muslim states such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, where more than 90 percent of the population agree that it is very important. In sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of Botswana and South Africa, more

than 80 percent of people consider religion to be very important, netting a regional average of 89 percent.  In North Africa and the Middle East, at least 70 percent of the individuals surveyed in all states also believe that religious commitment is very important, except in Israel and Lebanon. Finally, in the Americas, religion is found out to be very important to people in Central and Latin America, with regional averages of 81 and 77 percent respectively, and to a less extent, the United States at 53 percent.

What is important to note here is the fact that most of the ethnoreligious factions found in these regions are frequently embroiled in conflicts and disputes with each other and/or with the state itself. While these clashes do not always end in bloody wars, nonetheless, as Monica Toft (2003: 18) points out, they usually do. Naturally, much of the available literature on ethnoreligious conflicts have focused on identifying the most relevant factors that led to their emergence and/or why some disputes turned violent while others were settled without carnage. These studies can be classified into three general strands: material/rationalist, nonmaterial/non-rationalist, and elite/instrumentalist.[1]

The first strand has explored the materialistic considerations of ethnoreligious groups within a state and emphasized the actors' "rationalist" behaviors that influenced the conflict. These studies have focused on principal issues such as the impact of economic modernization and political development on ethnoreligious loyalties;[2] competitions over resources among ethnoreligious enclaves;[3] and the security and wealth value of the territories being claimed by ethnoreligious units.[4] Some of the key findings from this strand of research suggest, for example, that disproportionate levels of development and modernization among groups could give rise to violent conflicts (e.g. Newman, 1991; Horowitz, 2000; Spohn, 2003); that perceptions of relative economic and political disadvantages could drive groups to forcefully mobilize against one another (e.g. Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005; Esteban and Ray, 2008; 2011); and that a group's loss of effective control over its claimed territories could fuel aggressive actions to counter the resulting insecurities (e.g. Rapoport, 1996; Stavenhagen, 1996; Toft, 2003; Huth, 2009).

Critics of material/rationalist explanations, however, have argued that such studies

overestimate the actors' economic and strategic motives and underestimate the influence of ideas and perceptions toward the individuals. Hence, they are incapable of answering, for example, why embattled ethnoreligious groups would be willing to die for their invisible gods and barren lands, or why they may choose to fight for their sovereignty even when the expected political, economic, and social arrangements would be significantly worse than the status-quo conditions. The implication here is that even if material inequality is completely eradicated through state-enforced redistributive mechanisms, those well-entrenched biases and long-standing hostilities between ethnoreligious cleavages might still remain.

Accordingly, the second strand has investigated the nonmaterial aspects of the conditions surrounding ethnoreligious groups and emphasized the actors' "non-rationalist" behaviors that motivated the conflict. These studies have focused on key issues such as the role of historical hatreds between the in-group and the out-group vis-à-vis the emergence of violent disputes;[5] and the role of fear on the creation of security dilemma between the "us" and the "them".[6] Some of the main findings from this strand of research suggest, for example, that ethnoreligious conflicts emanate from the psychological partitions simultaneously built by competing groups against each other (e.g. Juergensmeyer, 1993; Friedland, 2001; Kinnvall, 2004); and that an ethnoreligious group's attempts to enhance its own security and well-being cause the other cluster to think of the worst possible case by attributing offensive behaviors and aggressive motives to the former, ultimately resulting in rampant clashes (e.g. Posen, 1993; Roe, 1999; Rose, 2000).

Contrary to material/rationalist analyses, nonmaterial/non-rationalist explanations of ethnoreligious conflicts recognize the centrality of individual persons who, as members of collectivities, can be rallied to fight for their faith and flag. The implication here is that since identity is a matter of life and death for these groups, therefore, they are inherently predisposed to seek autonomy and independence, which then lead to violent struggles. Critics, however, reject the notion that ethnoreligious conflicts can be simply attributed to some intangible and unmeasurable elements of human nature despite the presence of concrete and quantifiable factors that motivate actors' interests and actions. Hence, third strand attempts to link the

material/rationalist and nonmaterial/non-rationalist theories together by examining elite roles in mobilizing ethnoreligious factions and emphasizing the instrumentalist functions of ethnicity and religion with respect to the conflicts. These studies have focused on main issues such as the elites' utilization of physical inducements to mobilize group actions;[7] and the exploitation of ideational incentives by powerful players to consolidate group support.[8]

Some of the core findings from this strand of research suggest that both the material and nonmaterial objects of ethnoreligious conflicts are a function of elite motives and interests (e.g. Brubaker and Laitin, 1998; Wimmer, 2002; Joseph, 2002); and that in effect, ethnoreligious nationalism is merely a tool for preserving and legitimizing these actors' power and authority (Juergensmeyer, 1993; Brubraker, 2012; Smith, 2013; Brubraker, 2012). The implication here is that individuals and groups are passive entities easily manipulated and swayed by the cunning elites to take up arms against the "enemies" whenever they are told do so. Such conclusions are rebuffed by critics who argue that ethnoreligious nationalism has a much real and deeper effect on people (whether they are part of the masses or the elites) who genuinely believe in the symbols and narratives of their identity. Moreover, even if ethnoreligious nationalism is only a byproduct of elite manipulation, nonetheless, they are still tactically bound to yield to this socially-constructed reality if they wish to retain their influence.

What is mostly absent in the literature are explanations on the dynamics and processes under which these factors have resulted in the eruption and continuation of ethnoreligious conflicts. Despite providing valuable insights, determining the various causes of these clashes has not necessarily clarified how they turn into conflicts that become embedded within certain locales. Hence, rather than explaining why these events occur in the first place, my main objective in this paper is to develop a framework that clearly demonstrates how they arise and remain entrenched. To do this, first, I adopt a part of Monica Toft's (2003) theory of indivisible territory to serve as the base premise of my framework, that is: because ethnoreligious groups consider their territories as indivisible to their core being and identity, their survival and continued existence depends on zero-sum control of these geographies.

From here, I propose that the competing security interests, religious motives, and nationalist aspirations of intersecting ethnoreligious enclaves, trigger a string of actions aimed at preserving the conceptual cohesion and material integrity of their respective territorial communities: (1) cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism; (2) securitization of ethnoreligious others; and (3) sacralization of territorial-cultural identities. I argue that this three-track interdisciplinary framework is important for identifying and understanding the stages through which the causes of ethnoreligious conflicts (be they material/rationalist, nonmaterial/non-rationalist, or elite/instrumentalist) are processed and animated until they crystallized into conflicts that remain entrenched within specific areas. The main rationale for advancing this framework is to provide a more systematic and nuanced examination of how underlying forces and mechanisms transform these causes into effects. This enables a more complete appreciation of the contexts, actors, and motives underpinning the enduring ethnoreligious conflicts in various regions across the world.

The paper proceed as follows. The first section has briefly examined the available literature on the causes of ethnoreligious conflicts, arguing that explanations about how these causes do, in fact, manifest and turn into conflicts are largely missing. The following section advances my own analysis of the process and procedures that generate and sustain ethnoreligious conflicts by constructing a framework based on the three-way nexus between security, religion, and nationalism. Overlapping security intentions, religious causes, and nationalist desires attached to specific borders and boundaries "that seemed fixed in time and in the imagination" (Toft, 2003:1), triggers a chain of events that are crucial for theorizing and explaining how ethnoreligious conflicts rise and remain. The final section demonstrates and tests the applicability and key assumptions of my proposed framework through a case study of ethnoreligious conflicts in Southeast Asia. Drawing on my theoretical and empirical analyses, as well as the evidences I gathered from my fieldwork in the region, I conclude that the emergence of disputes and entrenchment of clashes between the competing factions have been underwritten by the three-pronged process of cultivating ethnoreligious nationalism, securitizing the ethnoreligious others,

and sacralizing cultural-territorial identities.

## A framework for analyzing the emergence and endurance of ethnoreligious conflicts

The three-pronged framework that I develop here combines complementary theories on security, religion, and nationalism which have been developed by scholars and experts in the fields of Sociology, Anthropology, International Relations, and Political Psychology. This interdisciplinary approach to analyzing how ethnoreligious conflicts emerge and continue is rooted on Stuart Kaufman's (2019: 3) principle that "reality has separate psychological, sociological, and political layers, none of which can be reduced to the others." This means that while politics has embryonic features and properties distinct from psychology and sociology, nonetheless, politics transpires from and hinges on society and on individuals' psyches (Kaufman, 2019). The framework that I present here recognizes two intertwined assumptions consistent to the Kaufman principle: (1) that because reality is layered, actors cannot be simply assumed to behave in a unitary-rational fashion; and that (2) there are multiple causal logics that simultaneously operate at any given time. Exposing and examining these multifaceted contexts, actors, and motives in a more systematic and nuanced method is the main purpose of this framework.

STAGE 1: CULTIVATING ETHNORELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

A crucial step in understanding how the causes of ethnoreligious conflicts are crystallized and animated is the examination of the contexts, actors, and motives behind the cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism. Contrary to the modernist and secularist arguments that the rise of contemporary nation-states made primordial ethnicity, religion, and nationalism obsolete, these elements remain constitutive of modern cultural-territorial identity. The modernization of traditional ethnic locales via the process of globalization has not been exclusively accompanied by a movement toward secular civic nationalism (Pecora, 2006; Beyer and Beaman, 2007). Rather, secularization has developed in varying patterns that fused religious and secular elements

together, allowing national identity and territory to be continuously shaped and negotiated through ethnoreligious lenses (Brubaker, 2004; Pecora, 2006). Indeed, the resurgence of indigenous nationalism and particularistic religious fundamentalism underscores the mounting resistance toward a world system being shored up by globalization forces (Barber, 1992; Huntington, 1993).

These postulations have two key implications with respect to the cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism. First, ethnoreligious nationalism can be attributed to the tensions produced by secular nation-state formation amidst high levels of ethnic and religious heterogeneity and low levels of democratic pluralization (Baumann, 1999; van Der Veer and Lehmann, 1999; Steinmetz, 2018). This is based on the critic of globalization as a vessel that transplants western style modernity by spreading capitalist productions worldwide and homogenizing national cultures (Tomlinson, 1999; Holton, 2011). Second, ethnoreligious nationalism can be deemed as a form of social, cultural, and political protest against the imposition of a core–periphery order precipitated by a capitalist international system (Juergensmeyer, 1993; Beyer and Beaman, 2007; Smith, 2013). This is based on the critic that the global proliferation of the western model has altered the circumstances of territories across the world, emphasizing socio-cultural differences and inspiring counter-reactions (Barber, 1992; Huntington, 1993). Two further points can be inferred from these assertions: that western modernity is only one of multiple varieties of modernity evolving simultaneously across different civilizations around the world; and that non-western modernization is not simply synonymous with westernization (Baumann, 1999; Spohn, 2003; Kinnvall, 2004).

For this framework, ethnoreligious nationalism denotes the amalgamation of ethnicized religious identity and nationalism, generating a condition in which groups are compelled to create, advance, and secure their conceptions and narratives of their territories in ethnoreligious terms (Juergensmeyer, 1993; Hastings, 1997; Baumann, 1999; Kinnvall, 2004). On the one hand, nationalism can be thought of as a form with variable content. It stipulates the need to bind the state, territory, and culture together without defining the exact the methods for and contents of

this union (Smith, 2000; Friedland, 2001; Brubaker, 2012). On the other, ethnicized religion serves as an instrument that determines the content of this form. It determines the method and the content by creating "models of authority" and "imaginations of an ordering power" that regulate various aspect of life (Friedland, 2002: 390).

When combined together, the resulting phenomenon of ethnoreligious nationalism makes ethnic faith and the native land seem natural and permanent components of territorial group identity. It provides state and religious actors with a powerful device not only for masking materialist interests but also for ascribing identity by performing two vital functions: (1) creating a channel through which identity distinctions among collectivities are constructed, separating one group from the others; and (2) creating legitimacy base for power consolidation and enlistment of social forces to safeguard the "natural" rights and privileges of ethnoreligious groups over and within contested territories (e.g. Juergensmeyer, 1996; Friedland, 2001; Brubaker, 2012; Spohn, 2013). Ethnoreligious nationalism, therefore, is a powerful basis and a critical reservoir of identity: an expression of sovereignty signifying that the territorial identity of a state and the cultural identity of the people whose collective representation it claims are constituted as a singular, indivisible fact (e.g. Hastings, 1997; Smith, 2000; Friedland, 2001; Brubaker, 2012).

Consequently, manufacturing a language and a discourse that reinvigorate, reproduce, and re-ensconce this ethnoreligious identity becomes fundamental for group survival and territorial security. To this end, a variety of ethnic themes and religious symbols are constantly mined by competing groups to produce the necessary cultural and ideological tools that would enable them to seize and maintain control over their respective identities and territories (Hastings, 1997; van der Veer and Lehman, 1999). Conversely, revisionist elite actors demanding for sovereignty or equal constitutional rights from a discriminatory state, are also utilizing these ethnoreligious sources when framing and executing their agendas (Armstrong, 1997; Liow, 2016).

By generating a convenient and effective lexicon for exacting and justifying political actions that either strengthen or abolish existing identity differentiations and power hierarchies between the in-group and the out-group, ethnoreligious nationalism is an important vehicle for

constructing identities, shaping behaviors, and mobilizing (Giddens, 1987; Stavenhagen, 1996; Hughey, 1998; Ashmore et al., 2001). It establishes the "chosen glories" and "chosen traumas" that must be revered, the stories and narratives that must be retold, and the memberships and alliances that must be forged (Volkan, 1998). Engineering a homogenous ethnoreligious culture and a master tale of politico-territorial identity then becomes contingent on the relegation of competing forms and sources of collective memories, loyalties, and histories (Smith, 2003; Zubrzycki, 2017). Hence, group identity construction and territorial formation are not exclusively defined by modern-day charters or constitutions, but are embedded and expressed along deep ethnic and religious fault lines.

STAGE 2: SECURITIZING THE "THREAT" OF OTHER ETHNORLEIGIOUS GROUPS

With the cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism, these securitizing actors now have an overarching framework and narrative for characterizing and shaping group identities, values, and practices; as well as articulating and preserving their rights, duties, and privileges within the territorially bound political space (Fox and Sandler, 2004; Philpott, 2007). Triggered by the attempts of elite actors to identify their own ethnie and faith as the only legitimate "referent objects", rival ethnoreligious groups frame each other's members as "existential threats" to their survival and the security of the prevailing order. The underlying rationale is that "extraordinary measures" must be taken to protect and secure the referent group's ethnoreligious identity and the territory in which it is rooted, from the dangers and threats posed by all other "illegitimate" groups that are spreading "wrong", "immoral", and "corrupt" normative systems.

Such depictions of the other groups as progenitors of insecurities are then constantly repeated and reproduced by influential elites who are bent on preserving the ethnic composition and religious character of the territories occupied by their respective groups. The resulting condition resembles a security dilemma in which the relative security and strength of the referent ethnoreligious group necessitates insecurity and vulnerability on the part of the other groups within that territory. Despite their negative impact on inter-ethnic/religious relations, from the

elite perspective, these internal power imbalances sustain the cohesion and integrity of a group's identity and territory, particularly in ethnically and religiously plural spaces. Whereas traditional nationalism defines the "self" with respect to the external others (outside the bounded territory); a particularistic ethnoreligious nationalism defines the "self" not only with respect to the external others but also with the internal others (within the bounded territory).

In the words of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (1998: 24), security is self-referential precisely because "an issue becomes a security issue, not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as a threat." Put differently, security is better understood not in tangible terms but as an ideational process through which certain issues are identified and framed as threats to security and survival (Wæver, 1995). The Copenhagen School calls this a securitization process, while actors "placed in positions of power by virtue of being generally accepted voices of security" are referred to as securitizing actors (Buzan et al., 1998: 23). A securitization act does not simply represent existing security realities but actively deconstruct some of these realities to construct new ones (Balzacq, 2007; Floyd, 2011). As such, new approaches to self-understanding and group identity emerge, which in turn, alter individual perceptions about: (1) who or what "real" security threats are; and (2) who are the "legitimate" referents that must be protected from these threats. In effect, it is by articulating the security threats and defining the referent objects that they are brought into being. As Wæver (1995: 55) succinctly puts it, "the word security is the act", which is to say that security is essentially a speech.

Although virtually everyone can act as a securitizing actor, the Copenhagen School's understanding of security as a structured field implies that influential state and non-state elites (those who are commonly regarded as "holders of the collective identity") are well placed to formulate and disseminate legitimate security discourses given their social capital and knowledge of the contexts (Wæver, 1995: 55). Elevating issues as security matters justifies the securitizing actors' demands for crafting and implementing emergency measures that infringe on the already established rules and/or circumvent normal political processes. Indeed, by initiating

a securitizing speech act, dominant elite players are able to present and, if necessary, dramatize certain issues as supreme security priorities of the actors in question.

To securitize the issue of other ethnoreligious groups is to frame them as threats to the existence of the referent group which the securitizing actors claim to represent. This generates "us" versus "them" narratives that emphasize the "irreconcilable" distinctions between the insiders and the outsiders as a means of consolidating and mobilizing the referent group. How the "othered" groups are imagined and regarded is integral to how the referent group sees and understands itself. This, in turn, is influenced by the respective structural power positions that competing ethnoreligious groups occupy within a contested territory. In other words, defining and differentiating the in-group in relation to the out-group is shaped by the power dynamics underlying a specific political community. As the insecurities and anxieties confronting the referent group escalate, so does the impetus for adopting extraordinary measures that weaken the other groups' identities and claims over a territory. The more that the other groups are vilified and presented as security threats, the greater the hostility and discrimination they will confront within that territorial space, forcing them to reexamine and revitalize their own ethnies and faiths to help anchor and secure their own ethnoreligious identities.

Catarina Kinnvall's (2004) "abject-other" frame helps illuminate why securitizing the othered groups drives an internal security dilemma, particularly in ethnically and religiously heterogeneous territories. Transforming the others into enemies necessitates systematic debasement and dehumanization, resulting in their image and reputation as being "dirty, despicable and worthless nonhumans" (Kinnvall, 2004: 753). Such psychological constructions allow the referent ethnoreligious group to feel more secure about its own position, providing its members the assurance that they are fundamentally different and inherently superior than all other "abject" groups. By projecting all the unpleasant and menacing characters of the self onto the other, competing ethnoreligious groups are able to sacralize themselves while unceasingly demonizing other ethnicities and their religions (Kinnvall, 2004; Volkan, 1998).

With the effective diminution of the others into inhumanity, any security measure or

policy thought to secure the boundaries separating the "pure" insiders from the "dirty" outsiders is rationalized and defended (Kinnvall, 2004: 754). Hence, in painting these once familiar "others" as existential threats, the "abject" becomes a vital component of collective identity formation. To borrow Robert Robins and Jerrold Post's (1997: 94-95) words, "the movement must strengthen its walls against the enemy without and search for enemies within… true belief does not permit question and doubt." The resulting narratives and discourses based on segregation and exclusion enable responsible elite players to facilitate a certain level of consensus and attitudinal conformity among their groups, and as such, are powerful norm and discourse entrepreneurs (e.g. Hassner, 2003; Bosco, 2014).

Whereas political elites help their ethnoreligious counterparts supportive of their policies by providing the necessary hard power to secure the position of their ethnie and religion within a territory; ethnoreligious elites help their political allies by providing the soft power required to legitimize their authority and rule within a political community. This makes the perceived differences between members of rival ethnoreligious groups seem intrinsic and natural, thereby entrenching the divide separating the "legitimate" in-group from the "illegitimate" out-group. A securitization act, therefore, is pivotal to constructing and reconstructing individual interpretation and group understanding of reality. When these versions of reality reach an authoritative status via a securitization process, the security rhetoric and policy envisioned and developed by the elites representing competing ethnoreligious groups become socially powerful and taken as the only valid and useful perspectives.

TRACK 3: SACRALIZING TERRITORIAL-CULTURAL IDENTITIES
The securitization of other ethnoreligious groups using the fuel generated from the cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism reveal how elite actors are simultaneously exploiting and being influenced by nonmaterial substructures (i.e. ethnic/religious myths, doctrines, norms, and dogmas) when formulating material superstructures (i.e. security rhetoric, policies, strategies, and institutions) that sacralize territorial identities.  In regions characterized by high levels of

religiosity and ethno-cultural heterogeneity, most state leaders and other influential elites identify with the dominant ethnoreligious group within their respective locales. In Southeast Asia, for instance, majority of the population in East Timor and the Philippines are predominantly Catholics (96.9% and 82.9% respectively); in Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia, they are mainly Muslims (87.2%, 61.3% and 75% respectively); and in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos they are overwhelmingly Buddhists (87.9%, 94.6% and 64.7% respectively).

In these contexts, ethnoreligious elites are commonly perceived as the ultimate custodians of group identity and protectors of the territory. Such form of social power transforms these elites into divine authority figures, giving their discourses greater weight and credibility than the supposedly secular narratives of their political counterparts (Johnston and Sampson, 1995; Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003; Fox and Sandler, 2004). The concepts of right and wrong or ideas about good and evil, are largely understood by groups and individuals through the ethnoreligious substructures observed within their political communities. Because these belief and value systems are indispensable to individual thought process and collective consciousness, anything that threatens their infallibility is usually ignored or repressed (Robins and Post, 1997; Kinnvall, 2004). As such, political and civic elites from these locales could also be influenced by their groups' ethnoreligious substructures which they continue to venerate, resulting in the construction of security superstructures that legitimize and sustain the privileged status of the dominant group, particularly in cases where the ethnoreligious identity of the majority is conflated or becomes synonymous with cultural-territorial identity (Bagge-Laustsen and Waever, 2000; Fox, 2001;  Lucius, 2012; Fox, 2001).

On the one hand, the doctrines and myths of the dominant ethnoreligious group are defining the security rhetoric and policies being developed by state elites, which determine the legitimate referent objects of national security and necessary extraordinary measures to contain the identified existential threats. On the other, the security strategies and institutions which are eventually ratified by state officials are implemented in ways that further ensconce and naturalize the dogmas and norms being practiced by the core ethnoreligious group. In the words of Edward

Luttwak (2000: 182), national security is defined subjectively and pursued through a political process that owes little to the logic of strategy but a great deal to the logic of domestic politics.

Overtime, the nonmaterial substructures acquired by a particular ethnoreligious group, and the security superstructures created based upon them, become indivisible components of their perceived identity and claimed territory. Together, they underpin the cornerstones of a "home" – that bounded territorial space within which the "one stable identity" is secured and anchored, "giving both protection and safety from the stranger, the abject-other" (Kinnvall, 2004: 762). Resistance toward these apparatuses and the regime responsible for them could easily be interpreted as mutiny against the domineering faith and flag, or in short, a national security issue. Thus, while this arrangement reduces the anxieties of the "legitimate homeowners", nonetheless, it definitely aggravates the insecurities confronting the "informal settlers" (Robins and Post, 1997; Bauman, 1999). Whether these elite actors are genuinely motivated (i.e. substantively bound) by these ethnoreligious substructures or are only strategically exploiting them (i.e. tactically bound), drawing upon these sources is useful for sacralizing group identities and their claimed territories; as well as keeping their own power, authority, and influence within bounded political spaces.

Since sacred territories are indivisible in the eyes of ethnoreligious groups that claim them, they become gory rewards in "just wars" being fought to vanquish, if not, completely exile their rivals. Monotheistic religions, in particular, subscribe to some form of a just war theory (Elshtain, 1992; Hassner, 2007; Hassner and Horowitz, 2010). Despite their shared doctrine that humans are created in the divine image and likeness of god, devotees of these faiths accept that wars and bloodsheds are sometimes necessary to defend the sanctity of the home and the purity of its members from the enemies. This illusion of "pure identity" combined with the myth of "chosenness" (propelled by the cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism and the securitization of the othered groups) drive the pursuit toward an ethnically and religiously homogenous territory. Accordingly, determining who the true "chosen ones" are becomes a highly contested issue. To get rid of the impostors, a just war is set in motion, allowing the symbolic rejection and social expulsion of other ethnoreligious groups into the "zone of killing" (Stevens, 1997). Whereas

ethnoreligious nationalism provides the ideology for triggering just wars, the sacralized security superstructures provide the means and channels for executing the operations that these wars entail. As Michael Ignatieff's (1993: 95) has eloquently put it, sacralizing territorial identities is akin to a dream in which the whole territory "could be like a congregation; singing hymns, listening to the same gospel, sharing the same emotions, linked not only to each other but to the dead beneath their feet."

*How ethnoreligious conflicts rise and remain: Catholic-Muslim relations in the Philippines*

The Philippine case is particularly interesting because compared to other ethnoreligious minorities in Southeast Asia, the Moro Muslims[9] in Mindanao have been somewhat more successful in defending their own imagined community. I argue that this is precisely because of their capacity, albeit limited, to co-opt the very same mechanisms utilized by the elites of the dominant ethnoreligious group to cultivate their own Moro Muslim nationalism; securitize the "threat" of Filipino Catholics; and sacralize their own cultural-territorial identity. This has significantly enhanced their capacity to fight for the recognition of their ethnoreligious substructures and use these to skillfully mobilize for the institutionalization of their preferred security superstructures. Indeed, the prospect of a fully independent "Moro Islamic" territory being carved out from the existing "Filipino Catholic" nation-state, remains the primary cause of intense resistance and antagonism toward legislative efforts for establishing an autonomous *Bangsamoro* ("Moro nation") region. It is worth noting these oppositions do not only come from individuals and groups outside of this proposed territory, but also from the indigenous *Lumad* and non-Muslim localities within the *Bangsamoro* itself. The reactionary and counter-reactionary forces and movements which emanate from this cycle help explain how ethnoreligious conflicts erupt and remain active over long periods of time.

CULTIVATING A "FILIPINO CATHOLIC" NATIONALISM

As one of the only two predominantly Catholic countries in Asia (the other being Timor-Leste), the Catholicism in the Philippines is a powerful unifying force that binds the majority of ethnically and linguistically diverse communities. But for the others who do not share this ethnicized faith, specifically the Filipino Muslims who constitute five per cent of the country's total population, the cultivation of Catholic-configured nationalism has become a potent tool for oppression and alienation. By the time that the Spaniards arrived in 16th century, Islam was already well established in Mindanao and Sulu and in some settlements in Cebu and Luzon. Miguel López de Legazpi immediately started the process of Christianization by conquering and converting the rest of the Philippines. Yet, despite the eventual defeat of the Muslims in the late 19th century, Spain never fully succeeded at conquering and subjugating the south even after almost 400 years of colonization.

Nevertheless, popular texts chronicling Philippine history regularly featured the prevalent view among Filipino Catholics that their story and identity were intimately linked to the Spanish colonization era. The entire 377 years of colonial rule by Spain was conveniently interpreted by many as Christianity's crusade against the poisonous religion of Islam. Their steadfast loyalty to Spain and her Church led them to view the colonizers as protectors of the country's sovereignty and their vanguards against the real enemies: the Moro Muslims.[10] These negative biases were routinely justified and reinforced by state elites who propagated the notion that the "Moro problem" was linked to the "inherent" ignorance and religious fanaticism of the Muslims when developing socio-economic policy programs for Mindanao (Majul, 1999). In various public institutions such as schools, educational materials written about the people, culture, and religion of the south placed heavy emphasis on violent crimes committed by the Muslims against the Catholic settlers (Kaufman, 2013). The unspoken albeit recurring message was that peace throughout the archipelago could only be achieved if the Moro Muslims deserted the false religion of Islam and embraced Christianity.[11]

These factors naturally influenced how the Filipino non-Muslims came to understand the situation in Mindanao: that the poverty, violence, and disorder endemic to the region were all

rooted to the intrinsic nature of the *Bangsamoro* Muslim identity (Gowing and McAmis, 1974; Blanchetti-Revelli, 2003). Their portrayal as dangerous outsiders precipitated the construction and propagation of enduring derogatory stereotypes about the Filipino Muslims – cunning and cruel, treacherous and savage, lazy and unreliable.[12] The "Moros" had been reduced to a pejorative name and image. This generally chauvinistic attitude toward the Muslims remains prevalent among those who believe that Catholic nationalism is the key for a united Philippines and not Islam. The infamous Moro wars that were waged in attempts to integrate the south through Christianization did nothing to placate the relations between the two conflicting religions but only entrenched Muslim resentment and opposition toward the state and the Filipino Catholics (Stark, 2003).

Because religion was regarded by both sides as an intrinsic part of individual identity and a sacred collective signifier, neither was prepared to welcome and receive a foreign faith that would destabilize and disprove its own. With the production and proliferation of Spanish crafted idea of an existing Filipino unity anchored on Catholic nationalism, a form of spiritual bond emerged among those who accepted their affinity with Spain and its faith, thereby erecting boundaries that had since separated the Catholics from the Muslims. As the Catholicized Filipinos began to embrace their identities in their new imagined community, the Moro Muslims continued to endure their lives as bastards of a "barbaric" religion, pushing them to re-examine their past and give birth to a distinctive image of Muslim identity.[13]

Here, we see how the cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism in the Philippines has created and propagated "hostile predispositions" (Kaufman, 2019: 7) toward the others, which in turn, amplified the sense of threat and supportive attitude for aggressive measures. It did so by providing a medium through which identity distinctions between the Filipino Catholics and the Moro Muslims have been conceived and constructed to segregate the "illegitimate" others from the "legitimate" in-group. The state-led propagation of Catholic nationalism has provided the majority ethnoreligious group in the north with a potent lexicon for framing the otherness and strangeness of the Muslim minorities in the south. This has rationalized the dominant elites'

mobilization efforts against the Moro Muslim "enemies" in order to preserve the ideal "ethnic Catholic" identity of the Philippine territory, along with "natural" Catholic rights and privileges under this arrangement. Viewed this way, the emergence and spread of Catholic nationalism in the Philippines has facilitated a distinctive method for conjoining the state, territory, and culture together. Specifically, it generated institutions of authority and structures of ordering power for preserving and enhancing the cohesiveness and integrity of the hegemonic group, by suppressing the Moros' Islamic nationalism and their "foreign" imagined community in Mindanao (Friedland, 2002: 390).

This has opened up a vital channel through which grassroots support and popular sentiments are consolidated to maintain the prevailing Catholic-centric status quo. Attempts to produce a culturally and territorially homogenous Philippines on the basis of this "ideal" Filipino Catholic identity, have relied on the exclusion of the Moro Muslims' collective histories, memories, and loyalties. The case is made that the state has the obligation to protect the continued dominance of the majority ethnic group and defend its faith. In response, the "chosen glories" and "chosen traumas" (Volkan, 1998) of the majority ethnoreligious group have been used by powerful elites to reconstruct the Filipino identity; influence the perceptions and behaviors toward the Muslim "enemies"; and mobilize the Catholic ranks into actions against the "deviant" Islamic nationalism believed to discredit and undermine the "Filipino Catholic" identity and territory.

The Philippine case reveals how ethnoreligious nationalism is more than just a matter of personal adoration and conviction. It also provides social and political meanings and establishes communitarian relations in the same way that territories constitute not only physical spaces but also incorporeal claims about ancestral homelands and daughters/sons of the soil (Tambiah, 1996). Catholic nationalism, in particular, has served as an instrument for ascribing identity to a territorial space by determining the memories that must be preserved, the narratives that must be upheld, and loyalties that must be accepted. Accordingly, national identity construction and political territorial formation are not exclusively tied to the creation of a modern Philippine

charter, but have been historically and persistently linked to deep-seated ethnoreligious foundations and divisions. This whole process has triggered a securitization rhetoric vis-à-vis the Moro Muslim "threats", designed to stimulate, propagate, and secure this referent identity, using imageries and symbols that are mined from the ethnoreligious and cultural reservoirs of the majority Filipino Catholics.

SECURITIZING THE MORO MUSLIM "THREAT" IN MINDANAO

The securitization of the "problem" of Moro Muslims in the Philippines underscores how the cultivation of Catholic nationalism has resulted in their framing as "existential threats" to the security of the Filipino Catholics and overall stability of the existing Philippine territory. Attempts by dominant elites to assign the ethnic majority and their faith as primary referents of national security have been driven by perceptions toward the Moro Muslims as sources of ideations and narratives that are detrimental to the prevailing "natural" order. While Islamic nationalism has been consistently depicted as the progenitor of insecurity and instability, Catholic nationalism has been promoted as a source of national peace and unity. Recognizing that they are pivotal to the preservation of the overarching cultural-territorial identity of the Philippines, the members of the majority ethnoreligious group have been afforded special rights and protection.

This set-up could be traced back to the US colonial policy of assimilation through transmigration that facilitated large-scale relocations of huge numbers of Catholic settlers from Luzon to the relatively underpopulated regions of Mindanao. This strategy inevitably resulted in the gradual but steady displacements of many local Muslims that led to bitter rivalries over land and resources between the native Moro Muslims and migrant Catholics. The ensuing demographic shift that saw the once dominant Muslim inhabitants dramatically shrink to a mere 20 per cent of the region's current population. Ironically, rather than fostering the conditions necessary for creating a more integrated Philippines, the plan only ignited mutual suspicion and hatred that further polarized and divided the two factions.

The situations turned for the worse when the US began transferring administrative powers to Filipino bureaucrats in 1920. In preparation for the country's eventual independence, aggressive plans to "Filipinize" the *Bangsamoro* region came into view. This compelled the Muslims to redirect their opposition and animosity away from the American colonizers and toward the developing Philippine state. For the Moro Muslim communities, the policy of Filipinization was not only a direct assault against their indigenous culture and Islamic way of life. It was a device set up by the Catholic administrators from the north to seize ownership and control over their ancestral lands.[14] Many conservative Muslim leaders feared that the idea of Filipinizing the country was only being used by the Catholics to further entrench their own faith by evangelizing the Muslim Mindanao and transforming the entire archipelago into a Christian territory.[15]

The hardening refusal of the Muslims to be artificially assimilated into what they perceived as a burgeoning Catholic nation-state posed significant problems for nationalist leaders who saw themselves as the rightful ruling heirs of the entire US colony.[16] Indeed, once the Commonwealth of the Philippines was successfully established in 1935, the chief architects of the central government in Manila began implementing suppressive policies in Mindanao which they believed would nurture and fortify the infant state. But by facilitating the forceful and exploitative "assimilation" of the Moro Muslims (through unfair land resettlement and resource redistribution programs which disproportionately benefited the Catholic settlers) the new government came to be seen as their new colonial nemesis.

Here, we see how the securitization of the Moro Muslims in Mindanao has animated the construction and reconstruction of realities informing the conditions and relations found within overarching Philippine territory. Put differently, it is precisely by articulating the issue of minority Muslims as existential threats and assigning the majority Catholics as primary targets of those threats, that such security realities are brought into being. The direction of insecurity has been shifted from the outside to the inside, creating a scenario in which the once familiar Moro Muslims are now portrayed as the "abject others". By projecting these negative traits onto the strangers, and in the process dehumanizing them, the most zealous Filipino Catholics acquire

psychological security based on the perception that they are inherently different from those "vile" and "filthy" Moro Muslims.[17] This renegotiation of traditional understandings about the self and collective identity has altered the Filipino Catholics' views about the "real" threats to their security and existence, and also influenced their perception as "victims" of these threats.

Through this securitizing act, the dominant elite actors have been able to effectively present the Moro Muslims as a national security priority that required "extraordinary measures" to be resolved. This, in turn, has helped legitimize all emergency measures implemented to keep the boundaries between the "legitimate" Filipino Catholics and the "illegitimate" Moro Muslims. Such efforts at preserving the status and faith of the Filipino Catholics naturally weakened the position of those entities omitted from the overriding ethnoreligious discourses. The reduction of the Moro Muslims to national security threats has only aggravated the hostility and marginalization that they continue to experience, forcing them to retrace and rethink their own ethnoreligious substructures as a way of anchoring and securing their own cultural-territorial identity.

Indeed, the intensified feelings of threat and antagonistic predispositions generated by this condition have further increased the demand and support for more aggressive actions from both sides. As early as the 1960s, the Moro rebels were already prepared to take up an armed struggle against the "foreign government" in Manila to advance their goal of founding a separate and autonomous region for themselves that would comprise of Sulu, Basilan, and Zamboanga (McKenna, 1998; Cline, 2007). By 1968, the Moros succeeded in forming the Muslim Independence Movement (later renamed as Mindanao Independence Movement) which vowed to employ *jihad* in protecting the *Bangsamoro*. The Philippine government under the former dictator President Ferdinand Marcos responded to the threats posed by such secessionist groups by launching a string of brutally repressive policies that occasionally included massacres among the Muslims (Abinales, 2000). The enormous political violence and backlash which resulted from these measures ultimately escalated into a civil war that took on a markedly ethnoreligious character. Immediately after Martial Law was declared in 1972, a mixed group of modern and traditional

Muslim elites joined forces to form the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which heralded the beginning of the contemporary Bangsamoro separatist movement (Noble, 1976; Buendia, 2005). The group's primary goal was the creation of a *Bangsamoro* Republic which would give Mindanao absolute sovereignty after an estimated 250,000 victims were killed and more than one million people were displaced during the fighting. However, the signing of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and the 1996 Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF significantly altered the main thrust of the coalition. Chairman Nur Misuari's decision to abandon his group's aspiration for complete secession in exchange for Bangsamoro's political autonomy within the bounds of Philippine state sovereignty and territory caused deep polarization among the MNLF members (Bertrand, 2000).

These widening fractures within the organization eventually led to the establishment of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that was engineered and headed by Salamat Hashim, MNLF's former vice-chairman. Hashim accused Misuari of secularizing the MNLF by transforming it into a Marxist-Maoist platform stripped of Islamic interests and ideals.  In contrast, the leaders of the MILF made it a mission to highlight the Islamic roots and qualities of the movement as well as its members, and further bolstered their aspiration to deliver an independent Islamic state in the *Bangsamoro* region by rejecting the 1996 Peace Agreement.

The government's approach vis-à-vis the MILF has since been characterized by alternating cycle between bloody collisions and tentative ceasefires. The "all-out-war" campaign waged by former president Joseph Estrada back in 2000 was another example of how a state security apparatus had further entrenched the dominant Catholic nation-state by systematically stifling the germination of an Islamic alternative. Be that as it may, in 2002, negotiation channels were once again made available, enabling the two parties to recommence their talks and conclude the Memorandum of Understanding on the Ancestral Domain (MOU-AD) by 2008. Unfortunately for the MILF, the agreement was met with strong opposition coming from a large number of influential non-Muslim representatives and within two months after its initial signing the Philippine Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. The decision convinced those MILF members

who had long been skeptical of their leaders' appeasement strategy to completely desert the group and continue with their armed rebellion, thereby reigniting the periodic clashes between these Muslim rebels and the government's security forces.[18]

The Philippine case illustrates how the dominant elites' framing of the Moro Muslims as threats to its cultural cohesion and territorial integrity has led to proliferation of "us" versus "them" narratives that pulled the Filipino Catholics together by pushing the Filipino Muslims aside. Distinguishing the "legal" Catholic in-group from the "illegal" Muslim out-group has been linked to structural power positions underpinning the Philippines' existing territorial community. As such, Catholic-centric security superstructures have been employed as means of suppressing the Moro Muslims' ethnoreligious substructures and imagined community. To this extent, the survival of the dominant cultural and territorial identity in the Philippines significantly depends on the perpetuation of power hierarchies that favor the majority Catholics at the expense of minority Muslims. The dynamics emanating from this arrangement have generated a security dilemma in which the continued dominance of the Filipino Catholics necessitates the continued subjugation of the Moro Muslims. In other words, the persistence of a Catholic-configured territorial community rests upon the repression of an Islamic cultural-territorial identity. As the succeeding discussion reveals, these state-led efforts to sustain the conceptual cohesion and material integrity of a Catholic-defined Philippine identity and territory – by exploiting the power differentials and security inequities between the referent (the Catholics) and target (the Muslims) groups – are the culprits of enduring ethnoreligious conflicts in Mindanao.

SACRALIZING THE "FILIPINO CATHOLIC" CULTURAL-TERRITORIAL IDENTITY
The cultivation of Catholic nationalism and securitization of the Moro Muslims enable elite actors to sacralize the predominant "Filipino Catholic" cultural-territorial identity by implanting the majority group's ethnoreligious substructures into state security superstructures. To begin with, the clashes between the Catholic and Muslim communities have never been given appropriate

remedies, particularly in terms of self-determination on the basis of existing ethnoreligious divides. To a large extent, the problem has a do with Islamic concept of *Din wa-Dawlah* or the belief that Islam is not just a religion but also a matter of state and government. For many leaders in the north, the *Bangsamoro* struggle is a means to establish an independent Islamic state and, therefore, poses serious threats against the current form and structure of the Philippine territory (Bertrand, 2000; Buendia, 2005). Accordingly, the responses coming from the central government in Manila have been limited to the implementation of extractive security superstructures that further diminished equal participation and perpetuated the subordinate position of the Moro Muslims.

These failures to provide inclusive institutions underlines the unwillingness of the previous colonial rulers and the local administrators who succeeded them to genuinely integrate the *Bangsamoro* into the wider Philippines.[19] The resettlement programs implemented in the south were mainly intended to artificially forge a sense of national unity by propagating Catholic conceptions and narratives of the Philippine nation-state. In contrast, Islam and the Moro Muslims who see themselves more as members of the Islamic *ummah* rather than as citizens of the Philippines are perceived to erode this imagined Filipino national identity and territory. Military measures have also become regular features of Imperial Manila's strategy for restraining the growth and spread of Islamic territorial community, leading to the demise of traditional sultanate system and transfer of decision-making processes to non-Muslim dynasties with strong connections to the government (Neumann, 2010). The terror induced by widespread talks about state-led genocide operations in Mindanao made the *Bangsamoro* people more self-conscious of their Muslimness and, in turn, helped precipitate the revival of Islam and the ensuing Moro nationalist movement of the seventies (Cline, 2007; Liow, 2016). For example, the revelation that the Philippine army and the police actively collaborated with a Christian extremist paramilitary group validated their perception of government hostility and reinforced their belief that they were systematically being wiped out.

These longstanding attempts at forcefully assimilating the south have been at the crux of Moro Muslims' rebellion for a more independent *Bangsamoro.* The colonial policies exercised by the previous Spanish and American rulers, and later on re-utilized by Filipino administrators, generated a strong perception of unity and kinship among marginalized Muslim communities that resulted in the imagination and construction of a transcendent Moro Islamic identity (McKenna, 1998). After centuries of othering and being denied their role and place in Philippine nation-state building, the Moro Muslims have developed a profoundly distinctive sense of collective identity and territorial belonging.[20] To this day, a significant number of Muslims from various parts of Mindanao continue to see themselves as being Filipinos only on paper, preferring to be identified on the basis of their respective ethnic tribes and religious factions (Neumann, 2010). The deterioration of Moro sultanates as a whole, the rise of foreign-owned and controlled corporations, and the disintegration of traditionally hierarchic social structures in Mindanao have all greatly contributed to a deepening sense of Islamic nationalism and territorial community.

Here, we see how the conflation between the perceived national identity of a particular territory and the ethnicized religious identity of the majority affect the relational and power dynamics between the Filipino Catholics and the Moro Muslims. Whereas the doctrines and myths of the Filipino Catholics determine the form and substance of the security policies and rhetoric being developed by the state actors; the security institutions and strategies that are eventually espoused by the latter are built and employed to propagate and protect the former's dogmas and norms. Over time, the dominant ethnoreligious substructures and the prevailing security superstructures become mutually reinforcing and constitutive of each other, becoming intractable, axiomatic forces of Philippine "national" identity and territory. In effect, national security has become a continuation of ethnoreligious nationalism by other means – an instrument of statecraft designed to consolidate and mobilize the power and resources of the "sacred" Filipino Catholics vis-à-vis the "corrupt" Moro Muslims. The latter's marginalized status undermines the full capacity of their own ethnoreligious substructures to influence the content and shape of existing security superstructures, thus curtailing their rights and space within the

overarching territorial community. These dynamics make the given arrangement seem permanent and just, one that needs to be continuously defended in order to preserve the Catholic-influenced cultural and territorial identity of the Philippines.

Nevertheless, the Moro Muslims have been somewhat more skillful and effective in delineating and upholding their own imagined community compared to other ethnoreligious minorities in Southeast Asia such as the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar or the Indonesian Catholics in the Moluccas Islands and West Papua to name a few. Their relative success is due their ability to utilize the same mechanisms which have served the interests of the dominant ethnoreligious group. Specifically, their efforts to cultivate Moro Muslim nationalism; securitize the "threat" of Filipino Catholics; and sacralize the Islamic cultural-territorial identity have all been crucial to their struggle for greater autonomy. In particular, they have enhanced their capacity to push for the recognition of their own ethnoreligious substructures and use these to strategically mobilize for the institutionalization of their preferred security superstructures. A concrete evidence of this is the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (Republic Act No. 1105) which was signed by President Rodrigo Duterte on July 26, 2018. Following the agreements set forth in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) between government and the MILF, the BOL would provide the overarching structure of government by replacing the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BAR).

It is precisely the fear that such legislative actions would pave the way for the eventual formation of a completely sovereign Moro Islamic territory that trigger intense oppositions toward a *Bangsamoro* autonomy. This explains why despite the announcement of the Commission on Elections (COE) in January 2019 that the BOL was deemed ratified, the new law continues to be attacked on various fronts by various factions. For one, a significant chunk of the Catholic population and other Christian groups living in several major areas of the proposed BAR have vehemently denounced their inclusion in the *Bangsamoro* territory. Similarly, different indigenous communities which are neither Muslims nor Catholics have expressed their fears of being abused

and exploited under the new Islamic-controlled regional government. They have opposed the creation of the BAR due to lack of consultation with all the key stakeholders, particularly on issues concerning the possible adoption and enforcement of the *Sharia* Law.

Such strong antagonistic views toward Islam and the Moro Muslims in general remain prevalent among a significant number of Filipino non-Muslims, particularly in the aftermath of two major crises involving the state's security forces and Islamic insurgents. In January 2015, the Philippine National Police's (PNP) *Oplan Exodus* took an unexpected turn when the 44 members of its Special Action Forces deployed in Mamasapano, Maguindanao were killed by the *Bangsamoro* Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). Less than two years later, the Moro Muslims had once again found themselves at the center of a violent and bloody crisis when the Philippine government launched offensive operations against radical *Maute* Islamist militants and *Abu Sayyaf Salafi* jihadist group in Marawi City that lasted from May until October 2017. The severity of the ensuing clashes prompted Duterte to declare Martial Law in Mindanao which he then extended until December 31, 2019 (Cepeda, 2018). Despite the government's claim of a decisive victory, the Marawi crisis claimed more than a thousand casualties (978 militants and 168 government forces) and displaced nearly 1.1 million civilians, the majority of whom were Muslims (Fonbuena, 2018).

It is not difficult to imagine how such events are undermining the broader public support needed to provide government concessions to the *Bangsamoro* region and its people. Time and again, these historically regrettable interactions between religious and ethnic cleavages are brought to the forefront, misfortunes that were constructed on the basis of conceptions and narratives that have shackled societies for centuries. Trapped between two equally miserable choices – of having to take an extremist Islamist approach that lacks a vast backing from the majority, or reinstalling the traditionalist sultanate that only breeds corrupt elites – the Muslim secessionist groups in the southern Philippines are still grappling with a dilemma that continues to adulterate the *Bangsamoro* cause and struggle.

The Philippine case shows how the security interests of competing ethnoreligious groups

are often a function of political processes that are highly responsive to the logic of domestic politics as opposed to strategic logic. Given that the existing ethnic and religious divisions continue to guide the rules of membership and behavior within a territorially bound space, when confronted with "existential threats", neither the Filipino Catholics nor the Moro Muslims could afford to be too rational with their approach. The idea that sacred territories are meant to be pure and indivisible has resulted in intense and protracted conflicts designed to expel the "impure" others who have been "polluting" the sanctity of the home. This helps us understand how the concepts of "purity" and "chosenness" have enabled elite actors from both sides to engage in "just wars", as a means of securing the cultural identities and territorial communities of their respective ethnoreligious groups. To weed out the "impostors" from the real "chosen people", these "just wars" have been waged to symbolically reject and banish the latter into the field of killing. The intention is for either the Catholic or Islamic territorial community to resemble a congregation where the members all sing and waltz to the same tune, listen and live by the same gospel, feel and share the same emotion (Ignatieff, 1993: 95).

Hence, contrary to material/rationalist or elite/instrumentalist views that responsible actors use ethnoreligious substructures to simply rationalize their preferred security superstructures, their actual methods for conducting politics and the political channels through which they operate are also conditioned by nonmaterial/non-rationalist perceptions. Invoking ethnoreligious nationalism when identifying the primary referent of national security legitimizes the security superstructures developed to protect the home (in which the "pure identity" in anchored) from the intruders. With respect to Catholic-Muslim relations, regardless of whether the state elites are substantively or only tactically committed to Catholic nationalism, its presence has been instrumental in securing the preeminence of a "Filipino Catholic" cultural-territorial identity by preserving the influence, power, and authority of this dominant ethnoreligious group at the expense of the minority Muslims. The ensuing reactionary and counter-reactionary measures that emanate from this continuing cycle of cultivating ethnoreligious nationalism,

securitizing the "threats" of other groups, and sacralizing territorial-cultural identity, help explain how ethnoreligious conflicts erupt and remain active for long periods of time.

*Conclusion*

The three-pronged framework that I have developed and tested in this paper is designed to enable a more systematic and nuanced analysis of how ethnoreligious conflicts emerge and remain entrenched over time. As I have noted in the beginning of the paper, explanations on the dynamics and processes through which a variety of causes have evolved into ethnoreligious conflicts are mostly missing from the literature. Although they offer many crucial insights, determining which among the material/rationalist, nonmaterial/non-rationalist/ or elite/instrumentalist sources are the most significant predictors does not necessarily explain how they become actual and lasting conflicts. The framework rests on two basic premises. First, since ethnoreligious groups view their territories as indivisible components of their core being and identity, their survival and continued existence necessitates a zero-sum control of these spaces. Second, the conflicting security interests, religious motives, and nationalist aspirations emerging from this outlook, trigger a string of actions that are intended to preserve the conceptual cohesion and material integrity of the territorial communities being claimed and/or contested by the competing states.

The string of actions that arise from these two conditions comprise the three basic foundations of my framework, namely: cultivation of ethnoreligious nationalism; securitization of ethnoreligious others; and sacralization of territorial-cultural identities. Using this framework, I have examined the relations between the Catholic and Muslim groups in the Philippines to identify and understand the stages through which multiple and overlapping causes of ethnoreligious conflicts are continuously being crystallized and animated. The "hard case" evidences I have gathered from this study (including fieldwork) support the framework's principal assumptions that actors cannot be simply assumed to behave in a unitary-rational

fashion because the reality is layered; and that multiple causal logics simultaneously operate at any given time. To this extent, the framework enables a more complete appreciation of the contexts, actors, and motives that are underpinning some of the most enduring ethnoreligious conflicts in various territories across the world.

## Notes

[1] These classifications are based on Monica Toft's review of ethnic conflicts worldwide.
[2] For example, see, Newman, 1991; Horowitz, 2000; Spohn, 2003.
[3] For example, see, Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005; Esteban and Ray, 2008 and 2011.
[4] For example, see, Rapoport, 1996; Stavenhagen, 1996; Toft, 2003; Huth, 2009.
[5] See, for example, Isaacs, 1989; Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Muller, 2008.
[6] See, for example, Brown, 1993; Posen, 1993; Roe, 1999; Rose, 2000.
[7] For example, see, Bertrand 2004; Joseph 2002; Wimmer 2002; Kaufman 1996; Gagnon 1994; Brubaker and Laitin 1998.
[8] For example, see, Smith 2013; Brubaker 2012; Gerd 2002; Friedland 2001; van der Veer 1994.
[9] The term "Moro people" pertains to the 13 Islamized ethnolinguistic groups of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan, forming the largest non-Christian majority population in the Philippines.
[10] Author's interview with a key informant in Manila, Philippines on August 2, 2017.
[11] Author's interview with a key informant in Manila, Philippines on August 2, 2017.
[12] Author's interview with a key informant in Maguindanao, Philippines on August 8, 2017.
[13] Author's interview with a key informant in Maguindanao, Philippines on August 7, 2017.
[14] Author's interview with a key informant in Maguindanao, Philippines on August 8, 2017.
[15] Author's interview with a key informant in Maguindanao, Philippines on August 8, 2017.
[16] Author's interview with a key informant in Manila, Philippines on August 4, 2017.
[17] Author's interview with a key informant in Maguindanao, Philippines on August 9, 2010.
[18] Author's interview with a key informant in Maguindanao, Philippines on August 9, 2010.
[19] Author's interview with a key informant in Manila, Philippines on August 4, 2017.
[20] Author's interview with a key informant in Maguindanao, Philippines on August 8, 2017.

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