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## Federalism within a unitary state: Institutional dynamics of BARMM and conflict resolution in the Philippines

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### ABSTRACT

The conflict between the Philippine government and the Muslim community in Mindanao stems from historical marginalization, ongoing violence, and the rejection of previous attempts to grant autonomy by various groups. This study analyzes the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) through the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) of 2019. By positioning BARMM as a form of constitutional asymmetry within the framework of the unitary state of the Philippines, this study highlights how BARMM operates as a federal dynamic that balances self-rule and shared rule without fully adopting a federal system. Using qualitative descriptive research, this study demonstrates that BARMM strengthens national integration through (1) constitutional asymmetry as an instrument for managing diversity, (2) the implementation of BARMM: self-rule and shared rule, (3) political legitimacy through symbolic and functional reconciliation, and (4) the need to mitigate structural challenges and risks within BARMM. This study concludes that constitutional asymmetry functions as a strategic mechanism in the construction of peace from within and provides an analytical paradigm to explain ethno-political diversity within the socio-political structure of the society.

**Keywords:** BARMM; constitutional asymmetry; federal dynamics; Unitary State; conflict resolution; peacebuilding

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most potent and complex internal conflicts in Southeast Asia is that between the Philippine government and the Moro Muslim community in Mindanao. This conflict has a long history, stemming from resistance to Spanish and American colonialism and continuing through the marginalization experienced by the Moro Muslim community following Philippine independence (McKenna, 1998). The Mindanao region has a history of sultanates and a strong Islamic identity, leading to a collective consciousness among the Moro Muslim community as a distinct group from other communities in the Philippines (Milligan, 2005). This became the basis for the Moro Muslim community's demand for political recognition and the right to self-governance. However, tensions arose when the Philippine government ignored or failed to meet these demands, and these tensions eventually escalated into a protracted armed conflict owing to the neglect of the Moro Muslim community's needs and identity.

The Moro Muslim community continues to feel dissatisfaction due to development inequities, social discrimination, and the lack of their participation in national politics. Furthermore, the centralized government structure in Manila tends to result in the Mindanao region receiving insufficient attention from the central government and inadequate funding for development. This has resulted in the Mindanao region being marginalized and lagging far behind other regions in the Philippines, which, in turn, has triggered significant disparities and made Mindanao a region that continues to suffer from underdevelopment in the fields of education, health, and infrastructure (Maboloc et al., 2024). The existence of structural injustice and ongoing conflict has led the Muslim community to continue resisting and has given rise to separatist movements such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (McKenna, 1998).

The Philippine government has undertaken various peace efforts, ranging from military operations to negotiations. If the central government continues to rely on a military approach or security forces to potentially mitigate conflicts without addressing issues of authority, institutional reform, and fair political space, conflicts will persist, and violence will continue to resurface due to unresolved root causes. This, in turn, leads local groups to feel unheard and excluded and that their rights are not recognized, thereby fueling a sense of alienation that makes them feel that the state does not care about their needs (Molasy & Febrina, 2023).

Therefore, the Philippine government's first significant peace effort was the signing of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, which opened the way for the establishment of an autonomous region (Agojo & Teehankee, 2023). However, the implementation of the agreement did not proceed as agreed, causing deep disappointment among the Moro Muslim community and reigniting armed conflict. By 1989, the Philippine government sought to fulfill the aspirations of the Moro Muslim community by granting autonomy through the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) via the Republic Act No. 6734 (Hutchcroft, 2016). However, the implementation of the ARMM failed to meet the aspirations of the Moro Muslim community; they felt that the autonomy granted was very limited and that financial support was dependent on the central government. The failure of the ARMM's implementation underscores the state's failure to accommodate and respect local identities, as well as its inability to build political institutions that are inclusive of groups with distinct identities, histories, and needs (Ilmawan et al., 2024).

The failure of the previous autonomy model and the establishment of the ARMM underscore that communities or groups with unique identities and distinct histories require more inclusive political institutions. Therefore, the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019 marked a paradigm shift toward a more comprehensive autonomy. However, the process of granting more comprehensive autonomy to the Moro Muslim community has faced several challenges and controversies due to widespread opposition from various parties in the Philippines. This has forced the Philippine government to renegotiate, reassure the public, and revise the draft legislation to ensure that it is acceptable to all parties.

By 2014, the situation had changed significantly when the Philippine government and MILF signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) (Koyama, 2025). This agreement is considered

a strong foundation for establishing a new, broader autonomous region that differs substantially from the ARMM. Subsequently, on July 26, 2018, the Philippine government officially enacted the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) as the foundational legislation for establishing a new autonomous region (Yusoph & Odoy, 2023). Finally, in 2019, the Philippine government officially established the BARMM, which possesses broader authority, encompassing a parliamentary system of government, fiscal autonomy, and Sharia jurisdiction (Yusoph & Odoy, 2023).

This study argues that the BARMM represents a sophisticated institutional design of constitutional asymmetry. Although the Philippines remains legally a unitary state, the relationship between Manila and Bangsamoro exhibits a quasi-federal pattern in which certain powers are exclusively delegated to the region to accommodate its unique identity and historical requirements. This asymmetry functions as a flexible tool to provide broad autonomy (self-rule) without having to alter the fundamental structure of the unitary state or threaten national integrity.

Therefore, this study is guided by two main theoretical premises. First, the theory of federalism dynamics is used to understand how the relationship between the Philippine government and the BARMM can operate flexibly through a balanced allocation of authority between self-rule and shared rule. Second, peacebuilding theory is used to examine how changes in the political structure and the granting of autonomy can provide a framework for deeper and more sustainable peace. From this perspective, the BARMM serves as a concrete example of federal principles operationalized through an asymmetrical institutional design. Through the BOL, these principles are applied to accommodate the political and identity demands of the Moro people without requiring formal constitutional amendments to alter the state's structure.

Thus, this constitutional asymmetry enables flexible “federal practices” within the framework of a unitary state, aimed at mitigating conflict and strengthening national integration through a more equitable and legally recognized distribution of power. By synthesizing these two perspectives, this study examines how constitutional asymmetry functions as a federal dynamic to strengthen Philippine national integration through the recognition of the diversity of Moro identities.

## **2. METHOD**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative methodological approach that focuses on document analysis based on a literature review to examine how the BARMM functions as a peace-building mechanism. In contrast to field research, which relies on primary data, this study is a literature-based qualitative review that prioritizes the analysis of academic literature, news, and official reports.

Data collection techniques were conducted through comprehensive documentation and literature reviews, including the BOL, journals, official reports from the BARMM government and Philippine ethnic groups, and physical and electronic books. The data obtained were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which encompasses data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Through this approach, the study produced an in-depth systematic review of asymmetric institutional arrangements in the Philippines without requiring direct field observation.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. Constitutional Asymmetry as an Instrument for Managing Diversity**

Compared to other regions in the Philippines, Mindanao is characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Prior to colonialism, the Moro Muslim community had a long history of Islam and lived in independent sultanates (Majul, 1973). However, following Philippine independence, the Moro Muslim community continued to face various forms of marginalization, including limited access to education, a lack of political representation, and economic underdevelopment. Therefore, the Philippine government has sought to manage the ethnic, religious, and identity diversity that has been the root cause of conflict for years by granting special autonomy to the Muslim community in Mindanao through the establishment of the BARMM in 2019 (Timberman & Moner, 2025).

With the formation of the BARMM, the Moro Muslim community has gained greater autonomy to manage its own affairs, such as in the fields of Islamic education, cultural traditions, Sharia law, and local governance. The existence of educational departments such as the Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education (MBHTE) and Sharia-based legal institutions like the Sharia High Court following the establishment of the BARMM demonstrates that the Philippine government is providing space for the Moro Muslim community to practice Islamic values that were previously undervalued and disrespected by the national system (MBHTE- BARMM, 2026; Lacson, 2024). Thus, strengthening local institutions is crucial for alleviating the sense of marginalization felt by the Moro Muslim community.

Within the framework of dynamic federalism, the delegation of authority to a region is an essential component of self-rule, that is, a region's ability to govern itself (Popelier, 2021). This can help maintain social unity in a country characterized by significant diversity. Popelier (2021) emphasizes that differences in the distribution of power among regions are not only natural but also necessary in a heterogeneous state; this falls under the concept of asymmetric autonomy. Thus, granting autonomy to the Muslim community in Mindanao provides them with the opportunity to manage their own institutions and affairs, thereby allowing the Philippine government to reduce identity-based tensions in the region. This policy also helps foster peaceful relations and stronger integration between the Moro Muslim community and the Philippine state.

This process of recognizing and empowering local institutions can gradually be seen as a means of reducing the sources of tension that previously fueled the conflict. When communities feel that their voices are heard and their needs are valued, the likelihood of conflict and dissatisfaction decreases significantly. This aligns with Johan Galtung's peacebuilding theory, which posits that peace does not merely mean the absence of war or violence (negative peace) but also the creation of fair, inclusive, and non-discriminatory sociopolitical conditions (positive peace) (Galtung, 1996). Therefore, in the context of Mindanao, granting special autonomy is a step toward positive peace because this autonomy helps address the underlying structures that have caused injustice, such as a lack of political representation and uneven development in the fields of education, law, and governance. By addressing these root causes, the peace process can proceed more stably and sustainably.

### **3.2. Operational Implementation of BARMM through the Dynamics of Self-rule and Shared Rule**

The establishment of the BARMM is a concrete manifestation of the application of constitutional asymmetry designed to address political tensions between the Philippine government and the Muslim Moro community. Although the Philippines is formally a unitary state, the relationship between Manila and Bangsamoro exhibits a quasi-federal pattern (Chaidar, 2018). This aligns with Popelier's (2021) theory of dynamic federalism, which explains that federalism is not merely a state structure but also a dynamic relationship between self-rule and shared rule, both of which can be flexibly adjusted to maintain and safeguard national stability.

The implementation of the BARMM through the BOL indicates that institutional asymmetry is an effective strategy for accommodating the region's unique needs without undermining the integrity of the unitary state of the Philippines. The consistency of this asymmetry is evident in several key pillars: the system of government and fiscal autonomy.

#### **3.2.1. The Parliamentary System as a Manifestation of Asymmetry**

Unlike other regions in the Philippines that follow the centralized presidential system from Manila, BARMM has been granted the authority to operate a parliamentary system. The presence of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) and local parliament is not merely an administrative change but a tangible form of institutional asymmetry. This provides space for more inclusive political representation for previously marginalized groups, such as the MILF, to transform from an armed movement into formal political actors. In this way, the governance structure is adapted to the socio-political realities of Mindanao without severing ties to the central government's sovereignty.

### **3.2.2. The 5% Block Grant Mechanism as True Autonomy**

Another concrete example of this asymmetry is the annual allocation of a 5% Block Grant from the national internal revenue, which constitutes an automatic appropriation. This fiscal mechanism is highly asymmetrical because it is not available to other provinces in the Philippines. Through these funds, the BARMM possesses the financial capacity to build local institutions, such as Islamic-value-based educational and health institutions, that address the specific needs of the Moro community. This financial autonomy ensures that development can proceed effectively through self-governance (self-rule) while remaining within the oversight of the national financial framework (shared rule).

### **3.2.3. Operation of Sharia Institutions**

The Philippine government recognizes the Sharia legal system in the BARMM region through the BOL. Empirically, this does not provide a framework for a fully separate judicial system but rather establishes specialized courts, such as the proposed Sharia Supreme Court, to exclusively handle personal, family, and property matters for the Muslim community. This allows the Bangsamoro to manage cultural and religious affairs while remaining integrated into the broader Philippine judicial framework.

### **3.2.4. The Real Limits of Self-Governance**

Despite this broad delegation of powers, BARMM's self-governance is subject to strict limitations, which reinforce the Philippines' status as a unitary state. The central government in Manila retains exclusive constitutional authority over national defense and security, foreign policy, monetary policy and citizenship. The dynamic between the BARMM's strong local autonomy in education, Sharia law, and internal governance, juxtaposed with Manila's continued authority over national sovereignty, embodies "federal dynamics." This allows for asymmetric flexibility without undermining a country's territorial integrity.

This parliamentary system and block grant arrangement indicate that constitutional asymmetry is not a step toward disintegration. Rather, this asymmetry is a strategy for strengthening national integration. By providing a governance structure tailored to the region's unique needs, the central government in Manila has successfully mitigated separatist aspirations through the recognition of special rights, thereby preserving the sovereignty of the unitary state while remaining adaptive to the diversity of identities within it.

Differences in the distribution of authority can help maintain national stability in the Philippines. By granting different regulations and authority to regions with asymmetric needs, the state finds it easier to adapt to diverse social and political conditions in the regions. Thus, asymmetry does not imply that a state is weak or lacks the capacity to govern its territory. Rather, it is a crucial strategy for creating a governmental structure suited to a region's needs, including those of groups with unique identities, histories, and cohesion, such as the Moro Muslim community.

Political structural changes through the implementation of constitutional asymmetry can also be viewed as a prudent step toward achieving positive peace. This implies that the state not only seeks to eliminate violence but also addresses the root causes of past conflicts, such as feelings of injustice, marginalization, and discrimination. However, when a nation's political system is designed to meet the aspirations of local communities, such as the Bangsamoro people, it reduces the likelihood of future conflicts. Simultaneously, this increases public trust in the central government because people feel that their voices and identities are heard and recognized by the state without exception. Thus, the implementation of an asymmetric system in the BARMM region demonstrates how flexible federal dynamics can function within a unitary state without diminishing the national authority of the Philippine government.

## **3.3. Special Autonomy as a Symbol of Political Legitimacy and Reconciliation**

Providing a framework for post-conflict peace is not sufficient to stop armed violence; thus, true reconciliation involves internal change, specifically within the political structure (Novitri et al., 2023). This underscores how the state can regulate power, representation and decision-making. Marginalized

communities are often ignored by the central government in political decision-making. Therefore, they must be given space to participate in determining the direction of politics rather than being treated as mere objects of policy.

Thus, the establishment of the BARMM serves not only a structural purpose but also holds symbolic significance for the peace process in Mindanao. For the Moro Muslim community, the conflict is not merely about a struggle for power or territory but also about the recognition of their identity, history, and right to determine their own future. For decades, the Moro Muslim community has felt that their goals have been misunderstood and ignored by the Philippine government. Therefore, granting special autonomy is not merely an administrative policy but also a symbolic gesture demonstrating that the state is capable of respecting the history and identity of the Moro Muslim community.

This symbolism is evident in the state's official recognition of the identity, aspirations, and political rights of the Moro Muslim community in the Philippines. First is the use of the Bangsamoro flag, a symbol of self-governance, and the local parliamentary system (Capistrano, 2021). This is significant because, for years, the Moro Muslim community has felt isolated from the Philippine national political system, which they perceive as failing to represent their identity. Second, the legal recognition of Sharia law in family matters and support for local cultural institutions further strengthens the religious identity and traditions of the Moro Muslim community (Jatmika et al., 2022). Thus, the state has demonstrated that it has officially recognized their identity, ensuring that they are no longer a marginalized community. Third, the establishment of several institutions, such as the BTA and Bangsamoro Parliament, serves as concrete evidence that the Philippine government has acknowledged the role and voice of the Moro Muslim community (Mitmug, 2021). This indicates a shift in the state's stance, which previously tended to disregard the political demands of the Moro Muslim community.

Special autonomy granted by the central government to a conflict-ridden region is not merely intended to quell violence but also serves as an institutional mechanism for building political trust between the state and marginalized communities (Molasy, 2025). This symbolic element plays a crucial role in restoring relations between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Muslim community, which have long been strained due to the prolonged conflict. This aligns with Galtung's view that peace does not depend solely on structures but also on the psychological and relational aspects of conflicting groups. Such symbolic recognition is part of reconciliation-building, the process of rebuilding shattered trust and relationships (Galtung, 1996; Galtung, 2000). Therefore, by providing space for the identity of the Moro Muslim community to be recognized within the Philippine national structure, the state has succeeded in establishing a framework for conditions that are more conducive to long-term peace.

Simultaneously, within the framework of dynamic federalism, this symbolic recognition can help strengthen national integrity. Political legitimacy is part of "shared rule", that is, how a region participates in the national system without losing its identity (Popelier, 2021). When local communities feel recognized and valued, their loyalty to the state increases. In other words, this symbolic recognition serves local communities and benefits the state by strengthening national stability.

Furthermore, political participation through BARMM institutions provides the Moro Muslim community with new opportunities to formally express their aspirations without resorting to violence, as in the past. The availability of legitimate political channels can prevent radicalization and reduce support for armed groups that oppose the peace process. Overall, the establishment of the BARMM functions as a mechanism for reconciliation and political legitimacy while also serving as an instrument to strengthen national unity. By granting recognition of identity and space for participation to the Moro Muslim community, the Philippine government has successfully provided a framework for a new foundation for a more stable, long-term peace.

Although the institutional asymmetry of the BARMM provides a far stronger framework than the ARMM, it is important to distinguish between the potential of the peace architecture and the actual outcomes on the ground. Currently, peacebuilding in Mindanao is in a crucial transitional phase. The institutional design outlined in the BOL has succeeded in significantly reducing conflict escalation at the macro level and integrating MILF elites into the government. However, this does not mean that sustainable peace has been fully achieved. Challenges such as the demilitarization (decommissioning) of former

combatants, resolution of local clan conflicts (*rido*), and ensuring the effectiveness of the transitional government remain significant tests. Therefore, the BARMM should be viewed as a promising institutional foundation rather than the final stage of the conflict resolution process.

### **3.4. Critical Challenges and Risks of Constitutional Asymmetry in BARMM**

Although BARMM's constitutional asymmetry offers a much more advanced framework for conflict resolution, a comprehensive analysis must recognize that the implementation of this autonomy remains characterized by structural tensions and risks. There are several critical challenges that have the potential to threaten the sustainability of peace building in Mindanao if not managed well.

#### **3.4.1. Implementation Vulnerabilities and Local Factionalism**

The transition period led by the BTA is vulnerable to factionalism. Although the MILF dominates the BTA, historical tensions with the MNLF faction and inter-clan political rivalries (*rido*) remain a threat (International Crisis Group, 2026). If this factionalism strengthens, BARMM institutions risk being paralyzed by internal conflict instead of focusing on public service. As a mitigation measure, the central government and BTA need to initiate a more inclusive inter-factional dialogue platform to ensure that political representation is not dominated by a single group, thereby preventing polarization that could hinder institutional consolidation.

#### **3.4.2. Elite Capture Threat**

There is a real risk that the decentralization of power and large Block Grant funds will only benefit a small elite of former combatants or local political dynasties (Yusoph, 2025). If the transition from armed resistance movements to civilian rule is not accompanied by transparency and accountability, this autonomy risks reproducing new social injustices at the local level (Kovács 2024).

#### **3.4.3. Ongoing Security Concerns**

Despite the signing of the peace agreement, the demilitarization (decommissioning) of former combatants' weapons has been slow. Furthermore, splinter armed groups that rejected the peace agreement, such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Abu Sayyaf, remain active and pose a significant security threat to regional stability (International Crisis Group, 2022).

#### **3.4.4. Concerns Regarding Christian Minorities and Indigenous Communities (Lumad)**

Strengthening Islamic identity through institutions such as Sharia courts and local values-based education raises concerns about the marginalization of minority groups in the BARMM, especially the Christian population and non-Muslim indigenous communities (Lumad) (Bayot, 2026). BARMM's success as an inclusive entity will be greatly tested by its ability to protect the political and cultural rights of non-Moro groups.

#### **3.4.5. Dependence on the Political Will of the Central Government**

Despite the automatic appropriation mechanism for funding, BARMM's autonomy remains within the framework of a unitary state that is highly dependent on Manila's political will. National political dynamics, such as changes in presidential leadership or shifts in majorities in national congresses, could pose the risk of policy changes that weaken autonomy or slow regulatory support for the Bangsamoro in the future.

Therefore, constitutional asymmetry in the BARMM should not be viewed as a risk-free solution. The success of this framework is highly dependent on ongoing negotiations between Manila and Bangsamoro, as well as the commitment of internal factions in Mindanao to run a transparent, accountable, and inclusive government.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The establishment of the BARMM is a major step toward resolving the long-standing conflict in the Southern Philippines. The Philippine government and Moro groups redesigned a broader autonomy model capable of meeting local communities' needs after the previous autonomy model established through the ARMM proved to grant no significant authority and failed to address the root causes of injustice. Rejection by separatist groups, local Christian communities, and the national political elite made the process difficult. However, after extensive negotiations, the Philippine government established the BARMM as a structural agreement. This agreement granted the Moro Muslim community greater autonomy to govern itself.

Research findings indicate that granting special autonomy helps manage diversity, reduce violence, and strengthen Philippine national integration. Through its authority in the fields of education, culture, Islamic family law, and local political governance, the BARMM provides space for the Moro Muslim community to manage their own affairs (self-rule) without leaving the Philippine state. This aligns with the theory of Federal Dynamics, which emphasizes that the relationship between the central and regional governments must be flexible. This means that regions are given the space to address their own needs (self-rule) while still cooperating with the central government (shared rule).

This study concludes that the establishment of BARMM is not merely a decentralization policy but rather a structural transformation that provides a strategic framework for sustainable peacebuilding efforts. Strengthening local institutions, recognizing identity, and providing formal channels for political participation in the Moro community are essential steps in the reconciliation process. However, this study also underscores the need for caution in equating the success of institutional design with the final outcome of peace itself. The BARMM currently offers far greater potential and a superior architecture for conflict resolution than in the past, but the sustainability of that peace (durable peace) will depend heavily on operational implementation during the transition period and the sustained commitment of both the central government and local elites. This constitutional asymmetry is a crucial tool that serves as the foundational basis for the Philippines to maintain national stability without negating the diversity of identities.

#### **Ethical Approval**

Not Applicable

#### **Informed Consent Statement**

Not Applicable

#### **Authors' Contributions**

MC contributed to the conceptualization, research design, data collection, formal analysis, and manuscript writing. MC managed communication and revisions throughout the review process and served as the corresponding author. HDM contributed to the development of the theoretical framework, interpretation of the results, and improvement of the Discussion section. AP supervised the overall research process, provided methodological guidance, and reviewed the manuscript for clarity and consistency. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

#### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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## Notes on Contributors

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### Adhiningasih Prabhawati

Adhiningasih Prabhawati is a researcher and lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the University of Jember. She specializes in conflict resolution in international relations. Her publications relevant to this field include “The Turkish Government's Efforts to Resolve the Conflict with the Syrian Democratic Forces in 2024” and “Failure of Myanmar's Democratic Transition in 2023.”

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