

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Republic of the Philippines BID for Observer Status at the OIC: Motivations, Challenges and Opportunities

Henelito A Sevilla Jr.*

Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman.

*Corresponding Author: E mail: junior_sevilla@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (called the Organization of the Islamic Conference until 2011), has played a significant role in helping to maintain contact and mediate between the Government of the Philippines and Muslim (Moro) rebel groups in the southern Philippines for more than four decades now. In 1977, the main insurgent group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was admitted to the OIC as an ‘observer organization’, a unique status that gave it de-facto diplomatic clout and recognition as the premier international representative of the ‘Bangsamoro’ community. In 2003, the Philippines government began exploring how it could gain similar status within the IOC, an aim it has pursued every year since. However, the MNLF has successfully lobbied against Philippines accession. Since this time, the Philippines Government has entered into a comprehensive peace process with the MNLF-breakaway Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), again brokered by the OIC, in cooperation with Malaysia. By some accounts, only a few OIC member states now oppose admitting the Philippines, although such a move continues to draw opposition from both the MNLF and the MILF. The Government of the Republic of the Philippines continues to pursue observer membership as a matter of diplomatic priority. This paper considers the following questions:

- Who and what motivates the Philippine government to apply for the observer status at the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), in other words, what do we want?;
- Why has the OIC rejected the Philippine government application several times? What are the challenges to this application? And,
- What opportunities and benefits would the Philippines expect to gain by observer membership of the OIC?

Introduction

The Conflict and the Historical Role of the OIC

The four-decade long Mindanao insurgency (1970-2013) has resulted in the destruction of properties, loss of lives and displacement of local people, and had huge opportunity costs for economic and social development in affected regions of the Philippines. It has also been a constant irritant and obstacle to the Government’s efforts to project and expand its interests in the international community, especially among states that are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where many expatriate Filipinos work and from where they repatriate billions of dollars to the homeland every year.

The “internationalization” [1] of this domestic problem, by the involvement of the IOC, occurred very early in the conflict (1970s), when the OIC

was able to mediate a ceasefire and an unsuccessful peace agreement between the Marcos government and the MNLF in 1976. In some ways, OIC involvement has been indispensable to the Government of the Philippines; in other ways it has been a complicating factor that has undermined our other interests. This is especially the case concerning the granting of OIC ‘observer organization’ status to the MNLF, which occurred in 1977, following the failure of the 1976 Tripoli Peace Agreement.

The OIC is the world’s second largest international organization after the United Nations, comprising 57 mostly Muslim-majority countries. The organization includes a number of members that are major energy exporters. In addition, many of these countries host millions of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), which means

that preserving their stability and maintaining the friendship of their governments is of utmost importance to Philippine national interests. These two considerations informed the Marcos-era Philippine foreign policy decision to accept OIC mediation to find a resolution to the Mindanao Muslim insurgency.

OIC mediation and good offices between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Muslim groups in the Southern Philippines in the search for a lasting resolution to the conflict in Mindanao is in line with that organization's mandate to help Muslim communities around the world establish their political identity as Muslim peoples, within the territorial sovereignty of their existing countries. The OIC conceives of itself as representing the "collective voice of the Muslim world and ensures its interests are protected in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world." [2] This principle is a codification of the concept of "Ummah" which asserts that all Muslims, regardless of geographical distribution, political affiliation or ethnicity, are essentially brothers and sisters with fraternal obligations to one another. The OIC's role is to help "safeguard and protect the common interest and support the legitimate causes of member states," in the context of existing "challenges faced by the Islamic world in particular, and the international community in general." [3] This statement of intent does not however legitimate the use of force by OIC member states to impose resolutions in conflicts involving Muslims, or offer political guarantees to Muslim minority communities around the world. Full membership of the OIC is limited to nation-states. As members of the international community of nations, they are protected by the principle of sovereign inviolability and are committed to reciprocal non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries.

In practice, this position restricted the OIC role in the Mindanao conflict to mediation and providing good offices to facilitate contact and negotiations between the government and insurgent groups. In addition, the OIC has also recently actively sought to reconcile the two main Muslim groups – the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). It believes their reconciliation would allow the Moros to present a unified front in the negotiations (making a resolution easier), and resolve the anomaly of MNLF observer membership of the OIC at a time that it is not the

most active (relevant) Moro combatant faction in the conflict [4] In this endeavor, the OIC has not been successful and the MNLF and MILF remain at odds with each other as much as with the Philippine Government. However, despite the much more Islamic emphasis of the MILF, both the MNLF and MILF share "the same [core] narrative of Bangsamoro identity that views Muslims in Mindanao as a marginalized national ethno-religious minority – Moros, not Filipinos [5].

An OIC resolution in 1989, endorsed MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari as the "rightful representative" [6] of Muslims in the Southern Philippines. Upon acquiring OIC observer status in 1977, Misuari actively pursued a strategy of "two-pronged diplomacy in the Muslim world" to strengthen the MNLF's international campaign against the Philippine government and to solicit political and financial support to sustain MNLF operations in the field. One prong was directed at individual sympathetic Muslim countries and the other one was directed towards securing recognition and support from international bodies such as the OIC [7]

Obtaining observer status at the OIC requires a unanimous vote by the Council of Foreign Ministers, accompanied by a set of agreed criteria for accession by the same council. So far, OIC observer status has been granted to two categories of entity: first, international organisations; and second, interested non-Muslim majority countries. The United Nations joined in 1976, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1977, the League of Arab States in 1975, African Union (AU) in 1977, and recently the Russian Federation in 2005, the Kingdom of Thailand in 1998 and Great Britain in 2011. This makes the granting of observer membership to the MNLF-a non-sovereign national (not international) organization-an undeniable anomaly. The nearest analogue is the OIC membership of the Palestinian Authority, a still non-sovereign, though internationally recognized entity exercising control over a determined territory. Thailand's 1998 observer membership is doubly anomalous when compared to the Philippines non-admission, in that Thailand too is struggling with an active Muslim minority armed insurgency in its south, while the two main insurgent groups, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) and the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) have been denied the same status that was accorded to the MNLF in 1977.

Motivations and Support

The Philippine government has been pursuing Organization of Islamic Cooperation observer membership since 2003. Such a strategy, pursued so dogmatically for ten unsuccessful years, suggests that decision-makers in the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila believe that something very important is to be gained for the country by attaining observer member status. What could this payoff be?

The Philippines is by no means a Muslim country. The Muslim minority is proportionately quite small (about five percent to the total Philippine population), however, this is concentrated in a defined area in the southern part of the country, where some provinces are home to a Muslim majority. This Muslim population is not a homogenous entity. It is divided not only in terms of geographical distribution, but also in terms of ethno-linguistic groupings, and political inclinations. These Muslim groups are also made distinct by their traditional lifestyles and occupations. Some groups, such as the maritime Tausug and Samals historically maintained extensive contacts with other Muslim nations in Southeast Asia, while others such as Maranao had a self-contained, settled subsistence agricultural lifestyle [8]. In the regional and national political arenas, parties and blocs corresponding to the three dominant Muslim ethno-linguistic groups, the Maranao, Maguindanao and Tausug, vie for political power. Although they are all adherents of Islam, Cesar Majul observes, "it did not prevent them from fighting each other for political, economic, dynastic rivalries and conflicts in the collections of tributes [9]."

Although the OIC officially recognized the MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari as the one official international representative of the Muslims of the Philippines, this has not deterred the rival Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from seeking observer status in the same organization. It is a tribute to the advantage the MILF perceives the MNLF to have gained over the years from its status as an OIC observer organization. Understandably, the MILF wishes to secure the same privileges for itself. However, as with the Philippine government's effort to secure observer membership, the MILF's lobbying has so far met with failure.

A Caution: Stepping Back

This focus on the OIC by all parties to the Mindanao conflict suggests that the organization has become a fetish object in Philippine diplomacy

and it may be worthwhile for us to take a step back and assess what it is we want, and ask ourselves a few timely questions:

- Have we lost our perspective concerning the OIC?
- Are we overestimating the significance of the OIC in the world?
- What will we really gain from becoming an observer member?
- Now that the Mindanao conflict is winding down, will the OIC be as central to Philippine strategy as it has been in the past?
- In terms of long term strategy, are there any possible unintended consequences of acquiring observer membership? For instance, how will this be perceived by the world outside the OIC?
- What does this commit us to, if anything?

To answer these questions, we must begin with the context and initial reasons the Philippines Government adopted the strategy of pursuing OIC observer membership. By 2003, when observer membership began to be pursued, the MNLF leader Nur Misuari had already been in a Philippines Government prison for two years. The administration of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, taking advantage of the post 9/11 United States-led 'Global War on Terror,' was conducting a concerted campaign to delegitimize, undermine and militarily defeat the Muslim insurgency in the south of the country. This is the background against which the Republic of the Philippines began to press for observer membership of the OIC. At this point it is sufficient to observe that the strategic and political situation has moved on considerably since 2004.

In the 2000s a number of observers sought to justify the Philippines effort to secure OIC observer membership, arguing that it would be a natural outgrowth of the OIC's long involvement in mediating our internal conflict. The organization was also held in high respect and is generally trusted by all parties to the conflict, so 'what possible objections could we possibly have to accession to the OIC as an observer?' ran the argument. The reasons the Philippines Government has so doggedly pursued membership may in reality be categorized as 'tactical' and have been part of a concerted diplomatic effort to counter MNLF influence and activism overseas.

The central theoretical problem for the Government came about as an unintended consequence of involving the OIC in the early 1970s in efforts to mediate a resolution to the

conflict. The 1976 Tripoli Peace Agreement failed, and a year later the MNLF was admitted to the OIC as an observer organization (the OIC punishing Marcos?). This confronted the Government of the Philippines with a remarkable long term irritant concerning the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The problem is that the MNLF's OIC observer membership gives Nur Misuari such a degree of de-facto diplomatic recognition and international influence that his organization constitutes a challenge to the Republic of the Philippines' own claims to sovereignty over large areas of the south of the country.

Strategically, the ideal solution to this problem would be for the MNLF's membership to be cancelled and for it to be replaced by the Philippine's Government as the sole legitimate recognized representative of all Philippines citizens in the OIC. Since this is unlikely, at least in the short to medium term, the next best scenario would be for the Philippines to become an observer member of equal status with the MNLF. This would at least allow the government to neutralize and watch MNLF activities in the OIC.

The initial 1970s decision by the Marcos government to formally invite the OIC to mediate the conflict was also based on sound tactical considerations. In short, involving the OIC in mediating peace talks had the effect of formally committing potential spoilers (Libya, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia among others) to a constructive role in resolving the conflict – thus, having a positive normative effect on the governments of OIC members. The calculation was that had actors such as Qaddafi not been bound by the constructive role they were forced to play within the OIC, they would have considered themselves free to arm, train, and extend partisan international support to the MNLF insurgents without limitation. This would have further weakened the position of the Government of the Philippines in the early years of the insurgency.

It is a paradox that at the time, a number of commentators saw involving the OIC as 'selling out,' or interpreted it as a sign of the weakness of the Philippine State. The negative unintended side-effect of the MNLF becoming an OIC observer in 1977 certainly tilts the cost-benefit analysis of the decision towards the negative side of the ledger. However, this paper contends that history may judge the Marcos Government's decision to involve the OIC to have been a successful, subtle and essentially adaptive episode in Philippines diplomatic history. This strategy

may be interpreted as the Philippines putting into practice Sun Tzu's famous dictum of 'keeping your friends close and your enemies closer' (this also goes for agreeing to Malaysia's participation as a 'third party observer' in the final rounds of peace talks currently underway with the MILF). This logic may provide a sound argument for why the Philippines should continue to pursue OIC observer membership in spite of the repeated rebuffs.

The OIC and the Philippines

This does not automatically mean that we should conclude that the Philippines has anything important to gain in future by seeking further integration with the organization. This has become especially true since President Benigno Aquino's administration began transforming the conflict in 2011 by entering comprehensive final status peace negotiations with El Haj Murad Ebrahimi and the MILF. Will the OIC be as relevant in a post-conflict Filipino world as it has been throughout the conflict? Before entering the analysis of what we can hope to gain from observer membership and what the barriers to our accession are, one further point should be made about the OIC's involvement in the Philippines.

It is important to acknowledge that OIC involvement in the Mindanao conflict has been of *mutual* value to OIC members and the Philippines Government. What is less commented on, is that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has itself benefited from its engagement with the conflict in the south. OIC involvement has not been devoid of self-interest.

The Mindanao conflict was in many ways a fortuitous development for the OIC. It involved a non-member early in its existence, through which it was able to establish its legitimacy and prove to the citizens of its own Muslim member countries that it had the capability to do something tangible to protect and improve the lives of Muslims living in non-Muslim majority states. It has been ineffective in playing similar roles in the numerous conflicts that afflict its own member states (an example is its abortive attempt to intervene in the early stages of the Syrian civil war in early 2012), because OIC member states guard their independence and sovereignty jealously, and OIC intervention would consequently bring member states into dispute, undermining Islamic solidarity – the main purpose of the OIC.

In a real sense, the OIC has been a beneficiary of the Mindanao conflict's political economy, quite

apart from the good offices it has occasionally been able to render on behalf of the Government of the Philippines in furthering the cause of peace. Mindanao has allowed the OIC to burnish its own corporate interests at times, allowing it to portray itself as a dynamic, Islamic international good citizen. In addition to the MNLF's continued veto on the admission of the Philippines to the OIC, this may be an important reason why the OIC has turned down the Republic of the Philippines observer membership application since 2004 – the intractable Mindanao conflict had simply become too important to the OIC's own institutional interests.

This critique does not deny the important role the OIC has played in mediating between the two sides for nearly four decades; however, it is important to acknowledge that after over 40 years, the OIC is an actor that is not without its own interests in the Philippines. We need to be conscious of this when weighing the cost and benefits of further engagement with the OIC.

Analysis

The following section provides an analysis of internal and external variables that have bearing on why the Philippine government should be given observer status by the OIC.

Internal Variables

Internally, the application is influenced by:

- The current Philippines government's political will and determination to pursue peace, security, economic growth and development in the Southern Philippines. If the Philippine government is granted observer status at the OIC, it will be better able to set the agenda rather than remain hostage to the agenda setting of the MNLF at the OIC. This will enable it to effectively present and defend its programs and initiatives for peace and development in Mindanao. The current situation leaves us constantly on the diplomatic defensive with the OIC concerning issues affecting Muslims communities in the southern Philippines. It is even possible that observer membership will open up further insights and opportunities for the Philippines in its interaction with the wider Muslim world and specifically building peace and development on Mindanao.
- The Philippines government's foreign policy imperative to protect the welfare and well being of its Overseas Filipino Workers in OIC member states. The Philippines has at least 10 million Filipinos working overseas, with more than 2 million of these working in OIC countries [10] The security and wellbeing of these workers is a

paramount concern of Philippine diplomacy in the MENA region, one of the most politically unstable parts of the world. Overseas Filipino Worker (OFWs) dollar remittances are an indispensable pillar of the national economy. By contrast with many labor-receiving countries in America and Europe, which recruit highly skilled Filipino workers, OIC labor-receiving countries recruit Filipino workers from much wider range of backgrounds, including large numbers of unskilled workers. A persistent problem is that many of these countries do not have well developed labor protection laws compared to countries in North America, Europe and Japan. Some OIC states have even legislated laws hostile to foreign workers, such as the “*Saudization policy*” in Saudi Arabia. However, these countries are forecast to remain dependent on foreign workers including Filipinos for the foreseeable future, due to lack of competitiveness of the local labor market, and an unwillingness of locals to do sensitive and dirty types of work. It is argued that OIC observer membership will assist the government lobby for the rights and welfare of OFWs in OIC countries.

- The Philippine government's policy of promoting trade and investment with OIC member states. It comes as a surprise to many that the three pillars of Philippine foreign policy in much of the Islamic world are known as the “three Os”: **O**il; **O**rganization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the problems of peace and development in Mindanao; and, **O**verseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Bilateral trade and investment between the Philippines and individual OIC member countries remains at a very low level. The Philippines has always suffered from a trade deficit because it is heavily dependent on imported crude oil, mainly from OIC member countries. Its limited industrial base only permits the Philippines to export a limited range of relatively low value products to these countries in return. OIC observer membership might give the Philippines further leverage and opportunity to persuade other OIC member states to invest directly in the Philippines economy, particularly in the war-affected, Muslim dominated areas in Mindanao. This would facilitate job creation and increase the productivity of the Muslim peoples of Mindanao. OIC members have the capacity to play a significant role in “bringing peace and investment in reconstruction [11] to Mindanao.
- The Philippines government's determination to

represent other Muslim minorities in Mindanao. Although the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has recognized the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) as the official representative of the Bangsamoro people, the leaders of other Muslim ethno-linguistic groups have stated that they do not share the same sentiments as the MNLF leadership. The creation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was one manifestation of this diverse range of views and priorities in the south. The MNLF leadership is overwhelmingly dominated by members of the Tausug, who have preferred to pursue a struggle for autonomy underpinned by secular, nationalistic principles. However, the MILF leadership is of mainly Maguindanao extraction and they have pursued a struggle colored by narratives of Islamic emancipation. However, these two groups are not the only Muslim communities in the southern Philippines and the Philippine government can fairly claim to the IOC, that it is the legitimate representative of other Muslim minorities in Mindanao.

- The Philippines government's determination to tackle terrorism in Mindanao by collaborating with members of the OIC. Addressing the issue of terrorism in Mindanao requires the Philippines to collaborate not only with the Western allies such as the United States, but more importantly with neighboring countries in Southeast Asia and OIC member countries in general. Terrorism and the use of violence to meet political ends have been denounced by both the Philippine government and OIC as crimes against humanity. Both agree the phenomenon should not be tolerated and must be addressed from the grass roots, in a holistic manner. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) can play a vital role in partnering with the Philippines to address poverty, unemployment, education, including infrastructural development in Mindanao. Anticipated inward direct foreign investment from OIC member countries can help ameliorate if not totally eradicate the aforementioned problems. The establishment of intelligence-sharing contacts between the Philippine government and OIC members is another important avenue that can help tackle the problem of international terrorism.

External Variables

The policy of pursuing observer status in the OIC by the Philippine government is also informed by external variables. These variables are:

- The trust accorded by many members of the OIC to the Philippine Government as a reliable and

serious partner. In its 36th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of OIC in Damascus Syria, Foreign Minister Nur Hassan Wirajuda of the Republic of Indonesia proposed that the Republic of the Philippines be granted observer status in OIC [11] citing Philippines "cooperation" with the OIC which resulted to the signing of the 1996 peace pact with the MNLF [12]. The Indonesian proposal was supported by Malaysia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates in their plenary statements. Other OIC member states such as Syria (the host and chairman of the 36th CFM), Saudi Arabia; Pakistan; Morocco; Libya; Bahrain; Kuwait; Jordan; Oman; Iraq; Turkey; Uganda; Bangladesh; and Brunei Darussalam also expressed support for this proposal [13].

- Others non-Muslim countries with Muslim minority populations have been accorded observer status by the OIC. OIC observer status may be accorded to the following categories: non-Muslim States with a significant Muslim population but not a majority; Muslim organizations or communities, Islamic institutions, or international organizations [14] Since the Philippines is a non-Muslim state, yet has a significant Muslim minority, it qualifies as a candidate for observer status.

Countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central African Republic (CAR), Northern Cyprus, Thailand, Russia and recently Great Britain have been accorded observer status. Also, international organizations such as the League of Arab States, the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of African Unity, and the Economic Cooperation Organization, have also been granted observer status.

The Philippines can consider the example of Thailand, which during the Chuan Leekpai government in 1998 gained "permanent observer status [15] During the 10th OIC Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed interest in acquiring observer status at the OIC. Russian interest in joining the OIC was based on several factors. First, more than 20 million of its citizens are Muslims; second, Islam is one of the country's state religions; and third, most of the Russian Muslim population is not composed of immigrants but peoples and communities indigenous to the country [16] There was also a tactical calculation in the Russian decision to pursue OIC observer membership: It would "help weaken support for Russian Muslim rebels [such as Chechens and Dagistanis] in the Muslim world," and that its "partnership" with OIC could "strengthen the unity of the

international community in combating terrorism, and confronting other global threats and challenges in the 21st century [17] It was also the stated intention of Russia to use its observer membership to promote inward direct investment from OIC member states. These are all arguments that should be familiar to Philippines policy makers.

Russia's application is unique in that it was warmly welcomed by all member states of OIC, who wanted to further improve relations with Russia. OIC members unanimously agreed to grant Russia observer status. Aside from this, Russia has a lot of leverage and influence that may be employed in the settlement of many Middle East problems [18] As such, many OIC member states appear to have concluded that excluding Russia might have meant losing opportunities to find systemic solutions to various problems in the region. At the OIC's Foreign Minister's Conference in Sana'a, Yemen, Russia was accorded observer status. However, even for Russia, it had taken two year for President Vladimir Putin to succeed in winning this place at the OIC's table.

Another example that the Philippines may consider is the OIC's granting of permanent observer status to Great Britain [19] Other countries that have pending applications for observer status include Brazil [20] Belarus, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Serbia and Nepal [21].

- The OIC has promised admission to the Philippines once the framework Peace Agreement is properly implemented, which benefits the Muslim population in the southern Philippines. At the 39th OIC Conference of Foreign Ministers in Djibouti in 2012, the OIC issued the following statement:

We welcome the Framework Agreement between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as a first step towards fulfilling the legitimate demands of the Muslim Bangsamoro people in Southern Philippines; call for the full implementation of previous agreements, particularly those of 1976 and 1996; welcome the meeting between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the MILF on the sidelines of this Session in the presence of the Chairman of the Session, H.E. the Foreign Affairs Minister of Djibouti, and H.E. the Secretary General of the OIC; and call upon the two fronts to unify efforts and coordinate positions for the benefit of the Bangsamoro people, asking Allah to grant success to these efforts [22].

And the last one is 4) *Optimism*. OIC member-states have not yet come up with a definitive roadmap for Philippines accession to the organization. However, the Philippine government believes there is an improving chance that the country's application will be considered favorably in the near future. Philippines negotiator to OIC, DFA Undersecretary Rafael Seguis, observes, "With the framework [peace] agreement signed, we have a better chance [23].

Grounds for Deferment or Rejection

A decisive decision on the Philippines government application has deferred every year since 2003 by the OIC. Unlike Russia and Great Britain-two non-Muslim states with significant local and expatriate Muslim populations – the Philippine application is complicated by numbers of reasons that fall within and beyond the realm of the OIC member states' capabilities to resolve.

The first can be attributed to the lack of consensus among major member states of the OIC on whether to accept the Philippines government's application. The absence of consensus among the member states on the fate of the Philippine permanent observer member application clearly indicates the lack of a common appreciation among these countries of the way the Philippine government has handled the implementation of various peace agreements in the Southern Philippines. Indonesia, a neighbor and traditional ally of the Philippines has strongly endorsed the Philippines' application, whereas Turkey has led the group of countries opposed to the application [24]. At the Baku, Azerbaijan meeting, the Philippines, together with other applicants (Congo and South Africa) were invited to attend. However, no less a figure than the Secretary General of the OIC himself opposed the approval of the application until after the Philippines has 'delivered the peace agreement [25].

Second, OIC member states have yet to come up with 'procedures and criteria' for admitting new observer members [26]. In the past, the applications were 'approved or rejected' without considering any standardized criteria. The OIC charter is very clear on the criteria for full memberships-applicants must have certain qualifications. One is that an applicant state must "have Islam as the predominant religion, and Muslims must constitute the majority of the population [27]. And under the new rules, 'only sovereign states can be granted observer status [28]. However, it is obvious that another set of criteria should be applied to the different category of *observer* state applications. Up to now,

“observer seats have been granted by consensus [on an ad hoc basis] to the non-Islamic-majority states of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Central African Republic, Thailand and Russia [29]. It is not clear whether the criteria considered by the OIC for whether to accept these non-Muslim majority observer countries was the same as will be applied to future applicants. Given the OIC’s extensive engagement with the Philippines over a prolonged period, it seems clear that in our case, another individualized set of criteria will have to be adopted and approved by OIC consensus before we are admitted.

In the OIC’s 36th Conference of Foreign Ministers (CFM), the following recommendations were made known to all members and applicants: 1) The OIC General Secretariat has to come up with a proposal on the criteria for granting observer status to states in accordance with the OIC charter; and, 2) the proposal shall be submitted to an preparatory Expert Group Meeting before the 37th Session of the CFM, and that the 37th CFM Meeting shall consider these proposals, adopting them by consensus [30].

The third reason no progress has been made on the Philippines application is that a state applying for observer status should have no dispute with an OIC member state. The OIC Charter’s Article 3(e) of the Conditions for Accessions to Observer Status at OIC states that, “[a] state applying for observer status shall not be in conflict with any of the OIC member states.” One example where this condition has prevented a state’s accession is the case of the Indian application for observer status, which was vetoed by Pakistan [31]. The Moro National Liberation Front, while it is only an ‘observer organization,’ is opposed to the Philippines’ application and has successfully lobbied for it to be vetoed in the past.

The MNLF’s opposition leads us to consider variables outside the control of the OIC. Both the *MNLF AND MILF are on record as strongly opposing the application of the Philippines government for the OIC observer status*. The OIC’s recognition of the MNLF as the sole legitimate international representative of Filipino Muslims, and its denial of the Philippine Government’s application could fall under this consideration. Does the OIC consider concurrent MNLF and Philippines government observer memberships to be mutually exclusive?

This is not certain, as 57 foreign ministers of the OIC at the 2012 Djibouti conference welcomed the “framework agreement” between the Philippine government and the MILF as “step towards

[meeting] the legitimate demands of the Bangsamoro people,” they also “reiterated their call on the Government of the Republic of the Philippines to fully implement the 1976 Tripoli Agreement (TA) and the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) which the GRP and MNLF signed [32].

By contrast, MILF opposition is centered on the premise that there are still ongoing problems between the government and the country’s Moro Muslim minority [33] which it argues disqualifies the Philippines from membership until these issues are resolved. In a letter sent by the MNLF Secretary General for Foreign Relations Alhag Abdulbaki Aboubakr to the OIC Secretary General Ekmelledin Ihsanoglu, the MNLF cited 14 reasons why it is opposed to the application. The letter argues that the recognition by the OIC of the Philippines as an observer “will duplicate the role of the MNLF as the sole and legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro People in the OIC.” In addition, the letter argued that the Philippine government is “committing acts of violating human rights of Muslim citizens,” and, “the territories of the Bangsamoro people have shrunk tremendously” due to government sponsored migration of Filipinos from northern part of the country. It concludes that the Muslim Bangsamoro people had been “minoritized” in the own homeland as part of a deliberate policy of the Philippines government. Furthermore, the letter contends that, “The (proposed) entry of RP as observer in the OIC will degrade the honor and dignity of the Bangsamoro Muslims in the arena of the Islamic *Ummah* and will deliver a death blow to their struggle for freedom and self-determination. [34-35]. In response to this, government negotiator Seguies clarified that the Government’s application is not intended to dislodge the MNLF from its position.

Second is the conflict of interests and leadership among the Muslims in the Southern Philippines concerning who represents the general interests of the Muslim population, given that recently the MILF has pressed for permanent OIC observer status on par with that accorded to the MNLF. The OIC argues that to maximize the chances that peace and development in Muslim Mindanao are sustainable and become institutionalized, it is crucial that the MNLF and MILF share the same stance as to how the peace process is conducted and implemented. Current trends however, suggest that the two major groups are moving in different directions, with both claiming to be the sole authentic voice of the Bangsamoro people of Mindanao. The divergence of ideas on how to bring peace, and the conflicting interests of MILF

and the MNLF has not only divided opinion amongst the Muslims of Mindanao, but has also made implementing the peace process in those areas quite complex. The MILF move to apply for its own observer status at the OIC has created confusion and uncertainty within that organization about which group most authentically represents the interests of the Bangsamoro people as a whole. The MNLF leadership continues to represent Bangsamoro interests in the Organization of the Islamic Conference, although as events have evolved since 1977, this role has become more of a 'legacy of the past'. Moreover, the submission of the MILF's "legitimate" application to observer membership in this international body also raises the question of whether the MNLF can really continue to be considered the preeminent international representative of the Bangsamoro people. This internal fractiousness illustrates not only the disunity of the Muslim communities in the southern Philippines, but also the damage they themselves are doing to their common interests in international bodies such as the OIC. This competition threatens the very idea of Muslim unity and solidarity that the OIC is trying to advance. The OIC may therefore seek to reconcile these two groups, before it is willing to consider approving either the Philippines Government's or the MILF's application.

Conclusion

The Philippines' government views its application for OIC observer membership as a move that defends the interests of the entire country in any future deliberations and final status negotiations conducted under the auspices of OIC concerning the Mindanao conflict. This policy of pursuing membership is justified as a measure that will strengthen and protect the Republic of the Philippines' claims to exclusive sovereignty over the whole of the southern portion of the archipelago. In more positive terms, it also has the potential to advance understanding and cooperation with other OIC member states that are important for the Philippines' economy and other national interests, such as ensuring the welfare of OFWs.

The Philippines' official position is that the country's application should not be viewed as a threat to the MNLF's membership, since the MNLF is a non-state actor and therefore, its OIC observer status is no threat to the Republic's sovereignty. Furthermore, the Philippines government believes that once it has acquired permanent observer status at OIC, it will be easier to secure the cooperation of OIC member

states regarding the implementation of peace agreements in Mindanao, for securing 'peace dividends' such as direct inward foreign investment, job creation for Muslim people, improvements in the quality of education provision and the implementation of a sustainable economic development package for Muslim Mindanao. In addition, the government has hoped that such developments will contribute to securing the welfare and security of millions of OFWs working in OIC member-countries, particularly in the Middle East and North African region.

However, the Government has failed to convince not only the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), but also some members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) of its good intentions. The OIC has "deferred" the Philippines' application since 2003, until agreed criteria for admission are approved by consensus of all members of the OIC. Furthermore, it can be argued that the opposition of other OIC member states is derived from a fact that there have been no 'significant improvements in the lives of Muslims' in Mindanao, as stipulated by the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, and the 1996 Peace Agreement with the MNLF. Muslim communities in Mindanao continue to suffer of the repercussions of security encounters between the Philippine government security forces and the Moro rebels, a running sore that colors perception and public opinion about the Philippines Government in many OIC member states, not to mention major Muslim groups in Mindanao. The campaign by the MNLF and MILF to oppose the Philippines' application for observer status has hardened the inclination of many OIC states to defer the Philippines application, pending the adoption and approval of a new rules or criteria for the Philippines. This is a diplomatic way of 'hitting the application into the dead ball area.' Clearly, the OIC has to make sure that its decision to grant the Philippine government observer status does not permit harm to, or further marginalize the Muslim population in Mindanao. The OIC would like to see the full implementation of the previous agreements it has facilitated or mediated before it will fully accept the Philippines application. In the longer term, it would probably welcome a situation in which the Philippines Government is truly accepted as the legitimate representative of Muslim Filipinos, and not their enemy.

The latest signing of the Framework Agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro

Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) may be a positive step towards building trust between the MILF and the government. This possibility was welcomed by the foreign ministers of member states at the OIC's 2012 CFM conference in Djibouti. However, the MNLF has accused the two parties to the agreement of conspiring against it by not inviting the MNLF and other smaller Muslim groups to participate in the negotiations. This allegation was dismissed by both the government and the MILF as baseless and self-interested. The newly signed framework agreement allows for the participation of all groups in the Bangsamoro community in Mindanao (except the Jihadist extremists such as Abu Sayyaf), in the attainment and preservation of peace and security in order to build an economically progressive and developed Mindanao.

The new framework agreement means not only new hope for peace for the people of Mindanao and an opportunity for all Muslim ethno-linguistic groups in Mindanao to take part in its implementation, but also for the Philippine government to build trust and burnish its credibility among member states of the OIC. It also reaffirms to the international community that President Benigno Aquino's administration is committed to finding a lasting solution to the

problems in Muslim Mindanao. Although the MNLF leadership is still distrustful of the latest agreement and will continue to campaign against the Philippine government in the OIC for as long as it enjoys the status of sole official representative of the Muslims of Mindanao, it will not be able to further diminish the credibility of the Philippine government in its efforts to press for the acceptance of its application. Alongside MNLF opposition, the variable that has the potential to delay admission is the current Sulu Sultanate-Sabah crisis. It is possible Malaysia may use it as a reason to further delay approval, but even this will not close off hope for future Philippines' observer membership.

Finally, if the Government of the Philippines is serious about securing OIC observer membership, it is important that it strives hard to implement the agreements of 1976, 1986 and 1996 and ensure the proper implementation of the details of the new Framework of Agreement it signed with the MILF in 2012. This will serve as proof of its good intent, and build confidence among the parties and OIC members. To achieve success, consultations between the Philippines Government and the Muslim groups on implementation must remain frequent, open and transparent.

References

1. The Lucman Initiative" It appears from sources that Haroun al-Rashid Lucman, a prominent Maranao leader from Lanao del Sur was the first to take steps to internationalize the Moro struggle. He established contacts with Malaysian leaders, especially Tun Mustapha of Sabah, enabling the training of Moro youths and leaders abroad for the cause of Moro Liberation. However, the most important step taken by Lucman was to establish enduring ties with Arab countries in the course of his visits to the Middle East in 1971. One of the results of these visits was direct Libyan involvement. Aside from the Islamic obligation to assist oppressed Muslims, Lucman invoked a conspiracy theory of there being Zionist influence behind the Philippine government's treatment of the Moro people, to help mobilize the passionate support of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi for the MNLF. See, Samuel K. Tan (1993), "Options and Conflict Resolutions", Internationalization of the Bangsamoro Struggle, The Center for Integrative and Development Studies, University of the Philippines, pp77-78.
2. The Organization was established in an agreement reached at the historic summit which took place in Rabat, the Kingdom of Morocco, on 12th Rajab 1389 Hijra (25 September 1969). It was triggered by the 'criminal arson' of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 'occupied' Jerusalem. (http://www.oic-oci.org/page_detail.asp?p_id=52)
3. OIC Charter. http://www.oic-oci.org/page_detail.asp?p_id=52
4. Samuel K. Tan (1993), P. 41.
5. Rommel C. Banlaoi (2012), 'Bangsamoroism and the Nexus of Identity Politics and Violent Extremism in the Southern Philippines,' Policy Brief, August, p.4.
6. Samuel K. Tan (1993), p.46.
7. Julkifli Wadi. "The Philippines and the Islamic World". Philippine External Relations: A Centennial Vista. Foreign Service Institute. Aileen Bavierra and Lydia N Yu-Jose (eds.)1998. Pp46-47.
8. Cesaar Adib Majul (1976), 'Some Social and Cultural Problems of the Muslims in the Philippines,' Asian Studies Journal, Vol. XII, No. 1, April, pp. 83-99. See also Cesar Adib Majul (1983), paper on 'Ethnicity and Islam in the Philippines' delivered at the Rothko Chapel Colloquium on Ethnicities and Nations, October 28-30.
9. Ibid
10. Pia Lee-Brago and Edith Regalado (2012), Gov't execs to face Nur at OIC meet, the Philippine Star, 23 October, <http://ph.news.yahoo.com/govt-execs-face-nur-oic-meet-173430804.html>.
11. Christian V. Esguerra (2009), Egypt backs Philippines' OIC bid, Philippine Daily Inquirer, 4 May. <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/breakingnews/view/20090504-203061/Egypt-backs-Philippines-OIC-bid>
12. Philippine Daily Inquirer (2009), Syria Backs RP bid for OIC Observer Status, 6 May, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/breakingnews/view/20090506-203390/Syria-backs-RP-bid-for-OIC-observer-status>
13. Joseph Holandes Ubalde and Al Jacinto, (2009), RP's OIC observer status hinges on peace in Mindanao, 29 May, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/163421/pinoyabroad/rp-s-oic-observer-status-hinges-on-peace-in-mindanao>
14. Ibid
15. <http://en.reingex.com/Organization-Islamic-Conference.asp>; <http://www.medea.be/en/countries/islamic-world-general/oic-organization-of-the-islamic-conference/>

16. Editorial (2012), Is there a genuine desire for peace in the deep South? *The Nation*, 1 November 1, (accessed February 25, 2013) <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Is-there-genuine-desire-for-peace-in-the-deep-Sout-30193405.html>
17. Russia Keen to Join Pan-Islamic Organization. August 7, 2003. <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/030807/2003080719.html>
18. Vladimir Radyuhin (2005), Russia Welcomes OIC Offer, *The Hindu*, 3 July. <http://www.hindu.com/2005/07/03/stories/2005070303331200.htm>.
19. (DIP) Russia Willing TO Get Closer to Islam World. March 28, 2009. <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/%28DIP%29+RUSSIA+WILLING+TO+GET+CLOSER+TO+ISLAM+WORLD.-a0196614580>.
20. Organisation of the Islamic Conference Admits UK as Observing Member. *Islam Today*. 06/17/2011. <http://en.islamtoday.net/artshow-235-4102.htm>. See also Organisation of the Islamic Conference welcomes new UK special envoy appointment" *Gulf News* June 17, 2011. See also "UK - MFA - Foreign Secretary meets with the Secretary General of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference" *ISRIA* June 15, 2011.
21. Raymond Chickrie. Brazil seeks Observer Status in OIC. *Caribbean Muslim*. 06/14/2011. <http://www.caribbeanmuslims.com/blogs/147/Brazil-seeks-Observer-status-in-OIC.html>
22. Ibid.
23. OIC/CFM-39/DJIBOUTI-DEC./FINAL, The 39th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Session of "Solidarity for Sustainable Development") Djibouti, Republic of Djibouti, 15-17 November 2012 (<http://www.oic-oci.org/english/conf/fm/39/DJIBOUTI%20DECLARATION-FINAL.pdf>).
24. Pia Lee-Brago and Edith Regalado (2012), Gov't execs to face Nur at OIC meet, *Philippine Star*, 23 October, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2012/10/23/859777/gov%E2%80%99t-execs-face-nur-oic-meet>
25. OIC rejects Philippines bid for observer status over Moro Muslims. *Ahlulbayt News Agency*. <http://abna.ir/data.asp?lang=3&id=159374>.
26. Qudssia Akhlaque, Six countries seek observer status in OIC. *Dawn*, 23 December 2006. <http://archives.dawn.com/2006/12/23/nat2.ht>.
27. Syria Backs RP bid for OIC Observer Status, (for technical and procedural reasons) *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5-6-2009, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/breakingnews/view/20090506-203390/Syria-backs-RP-bid-for-OIC-observer-status>.
28. Gambia Backs Philippines' Bid for Observer Status in OIC. 20-24, June 2005. <http://www.statehouse.gm/asia-visit-phlpines-june20-24.htm>
29. <http://66.29.208.5/nation/10/25/12/ph-ready-attend-oic-council-meeting-next-month-dfa>
30. Jerome Aning (2009) Odds of RP getting OIC observer seat better, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 03/12/2009. <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/news/news/view/20090312-193806/Odds-of-RP-getting-OIC-observer-seat-better>
31. Pia Lee-Brago (2009), Indonesia supports observer status for RP in Organization of Islamic Conference 27 May. <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/471366/indonesia-supports-observer-status-rp-organization-islamic-conference>
32. Hamid Ansari (2006), The OIC and India: signals of a re-think. *Observer Research Foundation*. 02 February. <http://www.observerindia.com/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=2480&mmacmaid=731>
33. Francis T. Wakefield (2012), Implement Past Peace Deals, OIC Urges PH. *Manila Bulletin*, 18 Nov, <http://ph.news.yahoo.com/implement-past-peace-deals-oic-urges-ph-120212975.html>
34. Philippines Denies Observer Status in OIC, *The Bansamoro Blog*, June 8, 2009, (Accessed Feb. 23, 2012). <http://bansamoro.wordpress.com/2009/06/08/philippines-denied-observer-status-in-oic/>
35. Mindanao Examiner (2009), Philippines says Observer bid in OIC supported by member states, 26 May, <http://zamboangajournal.blogspot.com/2009/05/philippines-says-observer-bid-in-oic.html>