



## ***A Farewell to Arms in the 21st Century: The Case of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front\****

### **21. Yüzyılda Silahlara Veda: Moro İslami Kurtuluş Cephesi Örneği**

**Yunus Çolak<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Abstract**

This study examined the policy change of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) during the 21st century and offered an explanatory typology for changes in the secessionist movements' aims and/or means through which they pursue their aims. It is possible to find studies that analyze the disarmament of the MILF and renouncing its goal for independence as a policy change in the 21st Century with reference to the involvement of international third parties, the determination to the leaders of the parties for peace, and the military balance in the field. Although all these perspectives are very helpful to understand MILF's policy change, this study argues that the above-mentioned change has occurred as a result of the change in MILF leadership's perceptions of the international conjuncture and great power politics in the 21st century. In addition, C. F. Hermann's typology of changes regarding states' foreign policies adapted to secessionist movements with a few additions and exclusions to analyze MILF's policy changes during the 21st Century. Thus, according to this typology, during the 21st century, a "problem/goal change" has occurred in the MILF policy, which has renounced the goal for independence, settling for autonomy. The source of this "problem/goal change" is categorized as a "leader-driven change" under the influence of an "external shock."

**Keywords:** Philippines, Secessionist Movements, Separatism, Mindanao, MILF

#### **Öz**

Bu çalışma, Moro İslami Kurtuluş Cephesi (MILF)'nin 21. Yüzyıldaki siyasa değişimini incelemiş ve ayrılıkçı hareketlerin amaçlarındaki ve/veya amaçlarına ulaşmak için tercih ettikleri araçlarındaki değişimlere dair açıklayıcı bir tipoloji sunmuştur. MILF'nin 21. Yüzyılda silah bırakarak bağımsızlık amacından vazgeçmesi neticesinde yaşanan siyasa değişimini, uluslararası üçüncü tarafların devreye girmesi, tarafların liderlerinin barış konusundaki kararlılığı ve sahadaki askeri dengeye referansla analiz eden çalışmalara rastlamak mümkündür. Tüm bu analizler bu siyasa değişimini anlamak için önemli olsa da bu çalışma bu değişimin, MILF liderliğinin 21. Yüzyıldaki uluslararası konjonktür ve büyük güç siyasetine dair eskisine nazaran değişen algılamalarının bir sonucu olarak ortaya çıktığını ileri sürmektedir. Ayrıca çalışma kapsamında, C. F. Hermann'ın devletlerin dış politikalarındaki değişime dair tipolojisi, birkaç ekleme ve çıkarmayla birlikte ayrılıkçı hareketlerdeki siyasa değişimlerine uyarlanmış ve böylece MILF'nin 21. Yüzyıldaki siyasa değişimi analiz edilmiştir. Bu tipolojiye göre 21. Yüzyılda bağımsızlık hedefinden vazgeçip özerkliği kabul eden MILF'nin siyasasında bir "problem/amaç değişimi" yaşanmıştır. Bu "problem/amaç değişiminin" kaynağı ise, "dış şok" unsurlarının etkisi altında, "lider güdümlü değişim" olarak kategorize edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Filipinler, Ayrılıkçı Hareketler, Ayrılıkçılık, Mindanao, MILF

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## Introduction

Under what conditions would an armed secessionist movement aiming for independence give up this goal? This question first arose during a visit to Cotabato, Philippines, in January 2019 of the author of this paper. At the time, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a former secessionist movement, was campaigning for a referendum scheduled for January 21, 2019, and was preparing to participate in the state mechanism as a legitimate part of the Philippines.

Before addressing the above question, it is essential to define a secessionist movement. Although various definitions are applicable in the relevant literature (Cunningham, 2014, pp. 1–19; Radan, 2023, pp. 30–35; Sambanis, Germann, & Schädel, 2018, pp. 3–4; Sorens, 2012, p. 9), Coggins' definition of secessionist movements is preferred in this paper. According to her (2011, p. 454), a secessionist movement should be defined as a “nationalist group attempting to separate from one state in order to create a newly independent state for its people.” Furthermore, Coggins puts forward specific conditions, such as a declaration of independence, a unique national flag, and a sovereignty claim for a territory to be considered a secessionist movement. While Coggins (2014, pp. 42 & 225) includes groups seeking independence within the framework of decolonization in her definition of secessionist movements, she does not include movements aiming for autonomy.

The primary focus of this paper is to analyze why MILF gave up its fight for independence and chose to disarm in the 21st century. One of the most commonly cited explanations for this decision is I. William Zartman (2001, pp. 22–31)'s concept of “ripeness.” According to studies referring to Zartman's ripeness theory as an explanatory tool, reaching the “mutual hurting stalemate” is the main reason for the MILF to give up its independence and settle for autonomy (Caculitan, 2005 pp. 34-35; Tanrıverdi, 2018b, pp. 109–110; Taufik, 2016). While some studies explain this process with the successful involvement of third parties (Klimesova, 2016, pp. 214–226; Ochiai, 2016, p. 37) attribute this policy change to multiple factors. For example, Abuza (2016, pp. 111–112) lists these factors as the decrease of support for the MILF by the war-weary people of the region, the weakened military power of the MILF compared to the past, MILF leader Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim's leadership prioritized peace, and the international community's support for the peace process. Similarly, Santos (2010, pp. 76–81), emphasizes the internationalization of the issue and MILF's realization that it could not defeat the Philippine Army. Authors such as Abubakar and Askandar (2019, pp. 171–172) emphasize the effect of both internationalization and the leaders' determination for peace. In addition, Tanrıverdi (2017, p. 57) highlights the determining role of Philippine presidents in the process. According to Bertrand (2021, p. 3), the successful peace process between the MILF and the Philippine Government is the outcome of the Philippines' democratization movement, which has grown and solidified over time.

The primary deficiency in the literature analyzing MILF's aim and/or strategy change is the lack of analysis regarding the extent to which MILF decision-makers' perceptions of the structure and functioning of the international system, influenced their decision to make this change. The main claim of this paper is that this fundamental policy change of the MILF in the 21st Century should be analyzed within the framework of MILF's

decision-making elite(s)' perceptions of the functioning, characteristics, and great powers' politics of the international system.

The introduction part of this paper will be followed by a discussion about how policy changes in secessionist movements can be categorized. Under this part, the typology proposed by Charles F. Hermann for the analysis of the changes in the foreign policies of states will be adapted to the policy changes of secessionist movements. Then, in the following part, the historical process where the MILF gave up its goal of an independent state by disarmament will be analyzed regarding the explanatory typology developed within the framework of this paper. Finally, the main findings of the study and suggestions for further studies will be discussed in the conclusion.

### **Analyzing the Aim and Strategy Changes in Secessionist Movements**

How can the triggers and extent of the policy change in secessionist movements be categorized? As far as this study is concerned, no detailed typology or explanatory model categorizes the sources and extent of the change in the goals and means of secessionist movements. Thus, this paper argues that Charles F. Hermann's typology of the primary change agents and extent of change as presented in his explanatory model regarding the change in states' foreign policies could be adapted to secessionist movements. The reason for choosing Hermann's model among the models that assess the change in the foreign policies of states (Blavoukos & Bourantonis, 2014; Carlsnaes, 1993; Doerer, 2013; Goldman, 1982; Gustavson, 1999; Holsti, 2016; Lee, 2012; Legro, 2005; Rosati, 1994; Welch, 2005) is that, as argued by Haesebrouck and Joly (2020, pp. 2-4 & 7), Hermann offers a multi-layered, comprehensive and explanatory perspective compared to the other models or explanations.

In the scholarly work entitled "Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy" by Hermann (1990), the central focus lies on exploring the circumstances under which states determine that their existing foreign policy is "seriously inadequate, mistaken, or no longer applicable." He focuses not on a "foreign policy redirection" arising from regime change or state transformation, but on foreign policy changes exercised by the decision-maker, which Hermann calls "self-correction" (Hermann, 1990, p. 5).

Hermann argues that there are four primary agents of the change in the foreign policies of states, which are: "Leader-driven," "bureaucratic advocacy," "external shock," and "domestic restructuring." According to him, a leader-driven change can be realized by a leader who has "...the conviction, power, and energy to compel his government to change course" (Hermann, 1990, p. 12). Moreover, bureaucratic advocacy is a foreign policy change that begins when middle-level officials with access to the government persuade decision-makers to change. According to Hermann's typology, when a politically active community triggers a foreign policy change, it is categorized as domestic restructuring. He states that a foreign policy change within this framework occurs "...when elites with power to legitimate the government either change their views or themselves alter in composition-perhaps with the regime itself" (Hermann, 1990, p. 12).

While the above-stated three sources of the change in foreign policy are elements that can be considered internal to the state, Hermann also puts forward the concept of an external shock as an exogenous source of change to the state. According to him (1990, p. 12) "...external shocks are large events in terms of visibility and immediate impact on the recipient. They cannot be ignored, and they can trigger major foreign policy change..." In conclusion, these four primary agents of foreign policy change of the state might occur at different times or in parallel with each other, or even they can trigger each other.

Hermann has developed four typologies concerning the "extent of foreign policy change" as he calls it. He defined smaller-scale changes in foreign policy without a change in the goals or methods/means as "adjustment changes." Hermann further used the term program change to categorize the situation where the goal of foreign policy does not change but the methods or means adopted within the framework of such a goal change. He categorized the complete change of the foreign policy goal and the state's adoption of a different goal as "problem/goal change." Finally, according to Hermann, the rarest type of foreign policy change, which he categorizes as "international orientation change", refers to changing foreign policy to adapt to international cyclical changes. Hermann argues that this change is not limited to the change of a single policy but can lead to changes in multiple policies (Hermann, 1990, p. 5).

How can Hermann's typology be applied to secessionist movements? Firstly, Hermann's typology aims to understand the change in states' foreign policies. Naturally, the structural differences between states and non-state actors should be considered when adapting this typology to secessionist movements. In this sense, there are major differences between the states and the secessionist movements regarding structure, power capacity, and functioning. However, states and secessionist movements also have similarities, making Hermann's typology applicable to secessionist movements' policy changes. First of all, secessionist movements, just like states, have a decision-making mechanism, albeit smaller. There is even a bureaucratic structure with detailed procedures for decision-making, with a focus on technical issues within many secessionist movements. Besides, as another similarity with the states, secessionist movements are actors that follow and are affected by developments in the international and regional system. Moreover, Hermann's typology offers a holistic analysis at the level of the international system, the state, and the secessionist movement. When adapting Hermann's typology to secessionist movements, it is inevitable to make some modifications while preserving the essence of the typology.

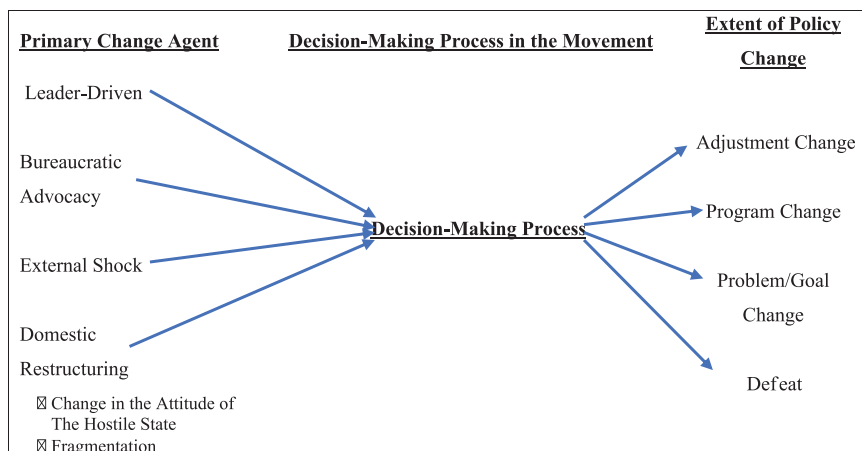


Figure 1. Typology for the policy change in secessionist movements based on Hermann's typology

Within the framework given above, the primary change agent in Hermann's typology applies to secessionist movements, as seen in Figure 1. A leader-driven change in the goals and/or means of a secessionist movement is a quite common among them because the perceptions of the leader, or more broadly, the members of the decision-making mechanism, are critical to policy changes in secessionist movements. As Doctor (2020, p. 6) argues, a complete understanding of the nature of the secessionist movement requires a complete understanding of its leadership. All the factors related to change can only have an impact by passing through the leader's or decision-makers' perception filter. Thus, many studies observe the change in the goals and means of the secessionist movement with regard to leader-related factors (Acosta, Huang, & Silverman, 2022; Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham & Sawyer, 2019; Doctor, 2020; Jadoon, Mines, & Milton, 2022; Prorok, 2018; Tiernay, 2015).

As mentioned above, many secessionist movements have a specific decision-making mechanism and a kind of bureaucratic structure. Some secessionist movements even regulate the social and economic lives of the civilian population in the regions where they have established territorial control through the governance system they have created within the framework of local bureaucratic structures (Arjona, Kasfir & Mampilly, 2015, pp. 1-20). But this structure, which is mainly divided into a military and political wing, is quite dynamic and more open to change compared to the states (Cunningham, 2014, pp. 30-31). Therefore, the bureaucratic structure of secessionist movements can significantly influence the movement's primary goals and means. When the agents of this structure drive a policy change of the movement, such changes can be categorized as bureaucratic advocacy. Additionally, the inverse of this situation is also conceivable. That is to say, the bureaucracy of the separatist movement may hinder the alteration of the movement's policies. For instance, as Smith argues, the peace talks between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Sri Lanka in 2002-2006 failed because the LTTE's military hierarchy did not allow the LTTE to transform into a political actor (Smith, 2008, pp. 216-221).

External shock, another element in Hermann's typology, can also lead the change in the aims and means of secessionist movements. For example, LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran

stated that they agreed to the ceasefire in 1987 due to Indian pressure: “When a mighty super-power has determined to decide the political destiny of our people, it is beyond our ability to anything” (Balasingham, 2004, p. 111). Moreover, the norms, rules, and especially the recognition regime in the international system have an impact on the change in the aims and means of secessionist movements as another type of the external shock (Caspersen, 2012; Griffiths, 2021; Fazal & Griffiths, 2014). As Griffiths (2023, pp. 207–217) argues, the international system is a “strategic playing field” with specific rules comprised of secessionist movements and states. Secessionist movements, which are involved in a “sovereignty game” in this field, may change their goals and means as the rules of the “game” change (Griffiths, 2023, pp. 207–217).

Finally, domestic restructuring as primary agent for policy change in Hermann’s typology can be adapted to the policy changes of secessionist movements with certain additions. Hermann considers domestic restructuring when the decision-makers are driven to a policy change for internal political reasons such as public opinion. Secessionist movements, on the other hand, similarly base their legitimacy, especially for the use of violence, on a group or community they claim to represent. Thus, Hermann’s domestic restructuring also applies to the secessionist movements. At this point, the community that Hermann defines as “politically relevant segment of society” (1990, p. 12) is the people who support the secessionist movement actively. In this sense, domestic restructuring as a source of policy change in secessionist movements has two main elements. The first of these elements is the fragmentation within the secessionist movements. It is possible to find many studies in the literature which reveal that fragmentation has a transforming effect on the policies of the secessionist movements (Bakke, Cunningham, & Seymour, 2012; Kathleen G. Cunningham, 2014; Austin C. Doctor, 2021; Krause, 2017; Smith, 2008; Walch, 2016). In this framework, fragmentation within the secessionist movement that occurs when a group breaks away from the movement may force the decision-makers to reconsider its central aims and/or strategies, as it will weaken the movement in every sense. For example, when Karuna, the commander of LTTE’s eastern troops, left the LTTE along with 6,000 others under his command, that led to an important reduction in LTTE’s human resources, resulting in a significant weakening of its military power (Bandarage, 2009, p. 198). Weakening of the LTTE military power was one of the factors that paved the way for the military defeat and the resulting policy change a few years later.

The second element in terms of domestic restructuring is the change in the attitude of the hostile state. This aspect, which is not included in Hermann’s typology, is essential for changing the policies of secessionist movements. Indeed, secessionist movements, first and foremost, try to persuade the hostile state to accept their demands. This makes the hostile state central to the secessionist movement’s policies within the domestic restructuring framework. Moreover, many studies show that parameters such as the hostile state’s regime, economic situation (Cederman, Weidmann, & Gleditsch, 2011; Collier & Hoeffler, 2006; Cunningham, 2014) and the form of government (Brancati, 2006, p. 52) impact the emergence, goals, and means of secessionist movements.

Based on Hermann’s typology, it is possible to categorize the policy changes of secessionist movements into four different groups, as shown in *Figure 1*. The “Adjustment

change” category is for the minor changes in the policies of secessionist movements, just like states. “Program change” can be used to categorize policy changes in which secessionist movements shift from peaceful means to armed struggle or vice versa without changing their goals. At this point, the ceasefire agreements frequently executed by secessionist movements can be categorized as a program change. “Problem/goal changes” can be used to categorize a fundamental change in the secessionist movements’ main aim. Since the main aim of the secessionist movements is to obtain independence, if any fundamental change occurs in this aim, it can be categorized as a problem/goal change. For example, the Free Aceh Movement’s signing of a disarmament agreement with the Indonesian Government in 2005 (Shea, 2019, pp. 28–30) is a problem/goal change for the movement. “Defeat” is another category that needs to be added to the typology of the policy changes of secessionist movements, as an addition to Hermann’s typology. Indeed, it is always possible for secessionist movements, especially those carrying out an armed struggle, to get weaker in military terms and eventually disappear by getting defeated. Since the secessionist movements would cease their activities under those circumstances, their basic policies would change, too. The main difference of this situation from problem/goal changes is that, unlike problem/goal changes, fundamental policy changes caused by defeat are not a choice but a necessity for the secessionist movement. The most obvious example is LTTE’s defeat against the Sri Lankan Army in the 4th Eelam War (Hashim, 2019, pp. 345–346).

Finally, it should be noted that the foreign policy change categorized by Hermann as international orientation change is not relevant for secessionist movements. According to Hermann, this change is the modification of all the goals and means of a state with multiple foreign policy objectives to adapt to the change in the international conjuncture. However, unlike states, secessionist movements have a single major policy objective, which is to achieve independence. Therefore, the most fundamental policy change of secessionist movements is the change of aim, which Hermann categorizes as a problem/goal change. As a result, international orientation change was left out when adapting Hermann’s typology to secessionist movements. Instead, defeat was added in reference to the extinction of the secessionist movement.

### **Establishment, Structure, Aim and Means of the MILF**

The Moro conflict, in essence, is the secessionist struggle of the Muslim minority living in the regions of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan in the southern Philippines, known as Bangsamoro, against the Philippine Government. While some scholars see this conflict as religious-based (Majul, 1973, p. 93; Stark, 2003, pp. 197–198), others emphasize the Philippines’ modernization process (Hui, 2012, pp. 5–15), the economic aspect of the conflict (Che Man, 1987, p. 39), and the effect of the different identities (Hernandez, 2014, p. 25).

It was only in the 1960s that the Moro problem produced its own organized secessionist movement. In this sense, the Muslim Independent Movement (MIM), founded in 1968 by Datu<sup>1</sup> Utlog Matalam, was the first organized secessionist movement to fight for

1 *Datus* are local leaders of settlements of about 100 people called *Barangays*. They were basically responsible for the safety and well-being of the people living in the *Barangays* they led. In this respect, serving as a Datu refers to both a political position and a social class (Scott, 1994, pp. 5 and 128–131).

independence in the Moro region (Mckenna, 1998, pp. 144–148). Then, in 1972, after the dissolution of the MIM, Nur Misuari founded the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which was more broad-based and organized than the MIM. The MNLF, led by Misuari, initially pursued independence and initiated an armed struggle to achieve that objective. However, the group later abandoned the secessionist struggle and embraced the concept of autonomy through agreements signed with the Philippine Government in 1976 and 1996, with mediation from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (UN Peacemaker, 1976, 1996).

Within this background, the MILF was initiated by Salamat Hashim in 1977, fragmented from the MNLF, and it was officially established in March 1984. Hashim actively participated in the struggle in Moro at a young age, took part in the movement's Central Committee with the establishment of the MNLF, and even chaired the foreign relations committee (Ferrer, 2020, p. 31; Macasalong, 2014, p. 7). Hashim defined the MILF's main goal as to “establish Islam in the Bangsamoro homeland...” (Mckenna, 1998, p. 208). Unlike the MNLF, the MILF used Islam as a unifying ideology, blending it with history, as Liow (2016, p. 97) argues.

Analysis of the MILF's organizational structure reveals a strict hierarchical structure. At the top of this structure are the Supreme Islamic Revolutionary Tribunal, the Kajles Shura, and the Central Committee. While Kajles Shura serves as a kind of advisory council, the Supreme Islamic Revolutionary Tribunal is a supreme court within the MILF that enforces Sharia law and is able to give binding decisions in this regard (Ferrer, 2020, p. 40).

On the other hand, the Central Committee, as the main decision-making body of the MILF, consists of approximately 12 members, including the MILF Chairman, Vice-Chairman for Military Affairs, Vice-Chairman for Political Affairs, and Vice-Chairman for Islamic Affairs. Members of the Central Committee are selected from MILF-dominated regions based on several criteria, such as tribe and profession. In addition, 11 subcommittees working under the committee secretariat provide technical and administrative support to the MILF leader and the Central Committee in their respective fields. There is also a similar structure at the regional, municipal, and even *Barangay* levels, provided that it is subordinate to the central administration (Che Man, 1987, p. 284). As a result, the Central Committee is at the core of the movement's decision-making structure. Therefore, while collective leadership and a culture of consultation are the hallmarks of the MILF as Hashim argues, the final decision is taken by the MILF leader (Haşimi, 2019, p. 43).

### **MILF's Policy During the Twenty-One Century**

The MILF and the Government of the Philippines signed a ceasefire in 1997 (UN Peacemaker, 1997) and although the parties started peace talks after that date, this situation could only last until 2000. In 2000, the Philippine President Joseph E. Estrada suspended the peace talks, and the Philippine Government launched an “all-out-war” against the MILF (Abuza, 2005, p. 455). In response, the MILF declared an “all-out jihad” on July 12, 2000, (Jeffery, 2021, p. 186) but could never make up for its military losses (Abuza, 2016, p. 75). It was only in 2001 that a ceasefire was restored between the



parties when G. M. Arroyo became President of the Philippines. In this respect, Arroyo declared the all-out-peace policy by emphasizing the necessity of achieving peace within the framework of constitutional processes based on the Presidential Order No. 3 that was issued on February 28, 2001 (GOVPH, 2001). In response, the MILF Central Committee laid down four conditions: (1) acceptance of the validity of the previous agreements between the parties; (2) holding talks in a neutral third country; (3) appointment of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) or a third country that is a member to the OIC, to serve as facilitator; (4) and the retreat of Philippine troops from areas that were under the control of the MILF before 2000. The Arroyo government accepted these conditions, and peace talks between the parties began in Malaysia (Jubair, 2007, pp. 35-36).

In this framework, firstly, the “Agreement on the General Framework for the Resumption of Peace Talks” was signed in Malaysia on March 24, 2001. Then the “Agreement on Peace Between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front” was signed in Libya on June 22, 2001. The ceasefire and peace talks included these agreements to cover the previous agreements, and it was agreed that peace talks would focus on security, rehabilitation, and the ancestral domain. Moreover, the concepts of the Bangsamoro homeland and the Bangsamoro people were used in an official treaty for the first time (UN Peacemaker, 2001a). As a result of these talks, the ceasefire was reaffirmed with the “Implementing Guidelines on the Security Aspects of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001” dated August 7, 2001 (UN Peacemaker, 2001b). Furthermore, with the “Implementing Guidelines on the Humanitarian, Rehabilitation and Development Aspects of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001” signed on May 7, 2002, it was agreed that the Philippine Government would make development investments in the Bangsamoro region (Peace Agreement Database, 2001).

While talks between the Philippine Government and the MILF yielded quick results on security and rehabilitation, the same cannot be said for the ancestral domain issue, which is one of the most important issues for the MILF. The Philippine Armed Forces’ attack in February 2003 on Camp Buliok, which was then the MILF’s headquarters camp, brought the parties back to a state of war, but on July 19, 2003, the parties signed a ceasefire again and resumed negotiations on the ancestral domain issue (Hernandez, 2014, p. 199; Klimesova, 2016, p. 207).

After five years of negotiations, the parties agreed to sign the “Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain Aspect of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001 (MoA-AD).” This memorandum of agreement was to create an autonomous Bangsamoro region in the south of the Philippines with all the powers and responsibilities of the state, such as education, infrastructure services, judiciary, police force, etc., which would replace the “Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)” that was created in 1996 (UN Peacemaker, 2008). However, one day before the scheduled signing of the memorandum, the Philippine Supreme Court annulled it on October 18, 2008, declaring that it was against the Philippine Constitution (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2008). Even though this annulment led to a short break in the peace talks, the ceasefire was mainly sustained, and talks were able to resume in 2009. This process accelerated further in 2010 when Benigno S. Aquino III took office. Indeed, as Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim stated, the

meeting between Aquino and Ebrahim in 2011 was a turning point for the peace process (Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, 2022; DPI, 2016, pp. 201–202). Finally, the parties signed the “Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB)” on October 15, 2012, followed by the “Comprehensive agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB)” on March 27, 2014, marking an important step towards successfully ending the peace process that faltered in 2008. With these agreements, it was decided to establish the “Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)”, which recognizes Moro identity and has broad military, economic, administrative, and judicial powers (UN Peacemaker, 2012, 2014). Indeed, with some amendments to the CAB and with the support of Rodrigo Duterte, the 16th President of the Philippines, the MILF officially renounced independence and started the disarmament process after acceptance by both wings of the Philippine Congress in 2018 (Bertrand, 2021, pp. 169–171).

### **Analyzing the Aim and Strategy Changes in MILF in the Twenty-One Century**

The MILF’s change of goals and means/strategies can be analyzed in light of the typology presented in this paper. Firstly, as it is given above, the MILF officially renounced its bid for independence by signing both the “Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB)” and the “Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB)” agreements. These pivotal agreements led to the establishment of the “Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)”, where the MILF assumed a leading role. This marked a dramatic shift in the movement’s primary aim from seeking an independent Bangsamoro state to accepting autonomy within the Bangsamoro region. Considering the profound nature of this change, it aligns with the category of “problem/goal change” as defined in the typology provided above. By reevaluating and redirecting its primary goal, the MILF underwent a fundamental transformation. Embracing autonomy over independence represents a significant deviation from their original objectives, warranting its classification within the problem/goal change category.

According to the typology presented above, the problem/goal change of the MILF in the 21st Century can be attributed to two primary change agents: “external shock” and “leader-driven change”. It should be mentioned that since the demand for policy change did not come from the MILF’s bureaucratic structure, the source of MILF’s policy change in 21. Century is not a “bureaucratic advocacy.” Moreover, since there wasn’t any fragmentation within the MILF and any meaningful change in the attitude of the Government of the Philippines during the 21. Century, “domestic restructuring” is not a source for the change of the MILF’s above-mentioned problem/goal change. The shift in the MILF’s goals and strategies was influenced by an external shock, which served as a significant trigger for this change. Simultaneously, the leadership within the MILF played a crucial role in driving and shaping this transformation.

The most influential “external shock” that affected the MILF was the radical change in the view of the Great Powers in the international system, particularly the United States (US), toward secessionist movements after the 9/11 attacks. This transformative event had a profound impact on the MILF’s outlook and interactions within the global political landscape. The “global war on terrorism”, led by the US, resulted in a notable reduction in the external financial resources received by the MILF (Abuza, 2016, pp. 77–78).

In addition to the economic impact, the 9/11 attacks and the global war on terrorism also brought about significant military consequences for the MILF. Following the 9/11 attacks, the Philippine Government announced in Memorandum Resolution No. 37 that it would fully support the global war on terrorism and put the Philippine airspace and military bases to the use of the US (Official Gazette of Philippines, 2001). The deployment of US special forces to the Philippines through this memorandum to train the Philippine Army, provide intelligence, and even organize joint operations against radical groups in the Philippines. Consequently, the Philippine Army significantly increased its military capacity with the training and weapons support it received from the US military (Bertrand, 2021, p. 165). Indeed, according to Ebrahim, the leader of the military wing at the time, "...The [US] real purpose is not just to fight the Abu Sayyaf, but the entire enemies of the government, and this includes the MILF" (BBC, 2003).

The US has also been politically involved in the Mindanao conflict at that time. In May 2003, US President George W. Bush demanded MILF lay down its arms, and declared that the US would intervene in the issue within the framework specified by the Philippine Government if the MILF continued to use "terror and force" (The White House, 2003). Immediately following these remarks by US President Bush, the leader of MILF, Hashim, sent him a letter (Moro Islamic Liberation Front Peace Panel, 2010, p. 349) on May 20, 2003 and the MILF announced an official statement (Martin & Tuminez, 2008, p. 4) on June 20, 2003, to state that the MILF is not a terrorist organization but a freedom movement (MILF Peace Panel, The Asia Foundation, 2010, p. 349). Furthermore, the MILF has even supported the Philippine Government's military operations against Abu Sayyaf, a radical group linked to the Al-Qaeda, in an attempt to demonstrate its stance (Quilala, 2007, p. 99). Despite these efforts, the MILF still struggled to convince the US that it had no ties with terrorist organizations (MILF Peace Panel, The Asia Foundation, 2010, p. 353-354). In conclusion, as Prof. Dr. Miriam Coronel Ferrer stated in the online interview with the author of this paper, it is very obvious that these international developments effected MILF's policy change in the 21st Century (Ferrer, 2022). The global atmosphere following the 9/11 attacks exerted political, economic, and military pressure on the MILF, leading the movement to adapt its policies to the new conditions.

The problem/goal change of the MILF in the 21st century can also be classified as a "leader-driven change" due to compelling evidence pointing to the impact of Hashim's death and the subsequent succession of Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim. Prior to Ebrahim assuming leadership, independence remained the core objective for the MILF. However, just after the Hashim's death, under Ebrahim's rule, the movement chose to abandon this goal. For instance, in a letter penned by Hashim to US President George W. Bush, about five months before his death, Hashim urged the application of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution No. 1514 (XV), which advocates independence for colonial countries and peoples, to be extended to the Moro people, thereby demanding independence (MILF Peace Panel and The Asia Foundation, 2010, p. 348). However, the subsequent leadership change brought about a pivotal shift. As Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim elucidated, shortly after Hashim's passing, the MILF chose to diverge from its pursuit of independence (Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, 2022). This transformation was primarily instigated by the MILF leadership's discernment of shifts within the international system

and alterations in the approach of the Great Powers to the secessionist movements. In this context, Al Haj Murad Ebrahim (2022) offers his perspective on the profound alteration in the stance of the Great Powers of the international system towards secessionist movements in the 21st century, articulating it with these words:

“...During the 21. Century, we see that there are some significant changes. You will see that in all secessionists and liberations movements, there are changes as far as the approaches are taken by the superpowers to them. They (Superpowers) seem to realize that those secessionist movements which still lays on the moderate the status. Therefore, there have been many secessionist movements during the 21. Century which progresses in as far as negotiate for peace is concern. One of them is Moro Islamic Liberation Front.”

It is clear from the words of Ebrahim that in the 21st century, the Great Powers are recognizing secessionist movements if they moderate their demands. According to him, this reality, as the main change for the secessionist movements in the 21st century, has enabled the transition of secessionist movements to moderate their demands. Ebrahim's emphasis that the MILF is one of the secessionist movements that has made a policy change within such a framework reveals the effects of the international system and the approaches of its actors on the policies of secessionist movements as an external shock in the 21st century.

Consequently, despite all the pressures for change in MILF policies exerted by the international conjuncture and that emerged in the 21st century especially after the 9/11 attacks, Hashim did not give up his desire for independence at all. Nevertheless, the MILF led by Ebrahim, had a different perspective on the international system and its Great Power's politics compared to Hashim's era. Thus, the MILF Central Committee adopted the above-mentioned “program/aim change” accordingly. For instance, in an interview conducted by Abuza (2005, p. 78), Mohagher Iqbal, who was appointed chief negotiator and spokesperson in the Central Committee after Ebrahim assumed leadership of the MILF, said that the war was mostly a thing that belonged to the 19th century and that the 21st century was declared the century for peace by the UN. While the external shock was the same, the MILF, which aimed for independence based on decolonization in mid-2003, did change its demand from independence to autonomy at the very beginning of 2004. Considering that the main element that changed during this period was the MILF leadership, which had a rather different perspective on the international conjuncture, it is understood that this problem/goal change in the MILF's policy was a leader-driven change accompanied by the external shock which occurred in the international system.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored the policy changes of the MILF during the 21st century and proposed an explanatory typology to understand the shifts in its aims and means/strategies. The case of the MILF holds significant importance in international relations literature, as it serves as a successful example of a peace process. In this sense, the success of the peace talks between the Philippine Government and the MILF, or in other words, the MILF's renunciation of independence and settling for autonomy, have been analyzed from many different perspectives by several authors in the literature. It is possible to find studies that analyze this transformation with reference to the involvement of international third parties, the determination of the leaders of the parties for peace, and the military

balance in the field. Although all of these perspectives are very helpful to understand the MILF's policy change, these studies often overlooked the perceptions of the secessionist movement's decision-makers concerning the international system and the politics of the great powers. In this respect, this paper argues that the primary reason behind the disarmament of the MILF and renouncing its goal for independence in the 21st century is the result of the new leadership's effort to align its perceptions of the international conjuncture and the great power politics with MILF policies.

The findings of this study support this argument. Particularly, in an online interview conducted with MILF leader Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim, he emphasized that the changing international landscape affected many secessionist movements, leading them to engage in peace processes, including the MILF. Additionally, the Central Committee's decision to relinquish the quest for independence soon after Ebrahim assumed leadership further underscores the role of leadership in shaping the MILF's policies. It is evident that Hashim, who sought US support for Bangsamoro's independence within the framework of decolonization in mid-2003, perceived the international system as conducive to such a request. Conversely, under Ebrahim's leadership and in the same international context, the MILF abandoned independence and opted for autonomy in early 2004. This illustrates that changes in the international system or the decision-making body alone may not trigger policy shifts in secessionist movements; rather, the perceptions of decision-makers, especially leaders, regarding the international system and great power policies are the primary determinants.

This paper further focuses on revealing the typology that would form a basis for the analysis of policy changes of secessionist movements. At this point, the study, which adapts Hermann's typology of changes regarding states' foreign policies to secessionist movements, has produced a meaningful typology with a few additions and exclusions. The MILF's policy change in the 21st century could easily find a place in this typology. Thus, according to this typology, during the 21st century, a "problem/goal change" has occurred in the MILF policy, which has renounced the goal for independence, settling for autonomy. The source of this problem/goal change is categorized as a "leader-driven change" under the influence of an "external shock" as given above. It is pertinent to note that given the absence of a proactive push for policy shift from the MILF's bureaucratic framework during the 21st Century, the MILF's policy change mentioned above cannot be characterized as a "bureaucratic advocacy." Moreover, considering the absence of significant fragmentation within the MILF and any substantial shift in the Philippine Government's stance throughout the 21st century, "domestic restructuring" is not applicable in elucidating the impetus behind the aforementioned problem/goal change.

The typology proposed here holds promise for future studies examining different cases. By applying this typology, researchers can focus on the decision-making mechanisms of secessionist movements in relevant instances, thus developing an explanatory model for understanding the decisions of such movements.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. One notable limitation of this study is the reliance on qualitative data from interviews, books, articles and official documents. While qualitative data provided valuable insights into the perceptions and decision-making processes of the MILF leadership, the absence of quantitative data

might limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the data could introduce potential biases or subjectivity in the interpretation of results. To enhance the validity and robustness of the findings, future research should consider incorporating quantitative data, such as statistical analyses or surveys, to complement the qualitative data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the policy changes in secessionist movements. Furthermore, the scope of this study is limited to the specific context of the MILF in the Philippines, which might restrict the applicability of the findings to other secessionist movements worldwide. To address this limitation, researchers should explore case studies of other secessionist movements and assess the extent to which the proposed typology applies to diverse contexts, thereby strengthening the external validity of the research.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the transformation of the MILF's policies and highlights the crucial role of leadership and its alignment with the international conjuncture. The typology presented here provides a valuable framework for analyzing policy changes in secessionist movements, offering avenues for future investigations on conflict resolution and secessionist movements.

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