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Contesting Sovereignty: How Palawan Nearly Became Part of the USA

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the 1926 Bacon Bill, introduced by U.S. Congressman Robert L. Bacon, which proposed separating Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan from the Philippines and placing them under direct American administration. The bill arose from petitions by Moro leaders seeking continued U.S. protection amid resistance to integration into a predominantly Christian Filipino state. Using a historical approach grounded in archival analysis, the study situates the proposal within broader debates on Philippine independence, sovereignty, and decolonization. It argues that while the bill was framed as a protective measure for Moro communities, it also reflected American strategic and economic interests.

In particular, Palawan's inclusion revealed motivations beyond humanitarian concerns, including its potential for a naval base and source of natural resources such as rubber. The proposal challenged Philippine sovereignty and provoked strong opposition from Filipino nationalists like Emilio Aguinaldo, Manuel Quezon, and Sergio Osmeña, as well as local leaders who favored national integration. Ultimately, the bill failed due to combined resistance from Filipino politicians, American critics, and divided Moro support. Although its defeat preserved territorial integrity, it left unresolved questions of regional identity and Moro self-determination, issues that continue to shape political discourse.

KEYWORDS

Bacon Bill,
Moro/Muslim,
Palawan,
Separatism,
Sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

A recent *Daily Tribune* report (“Statehood movement revival eyed,” January 1, 2025) states that proponents of the defunct Movement for the Independence of Mindanao (MIM) are seeking US Congressional intervention to restore Mindanao and Sulu as US protectorates—a move echoing events of 1926.

For informed readers, this development is hardly surprising. It mirrors a significant event from nearly a century ago that threatened the separation of the South from the Philippines. In 1926, Congressman Robert L. Bacon of New York submitted a bill (HR 12772) to the U.S. Congress to remove Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan “from the jurisdiction of the Philippine government and confer upon them a separate and distinct form of administration under the direct authority of the United States” (Bacon, 1926: 8830). He called this group of islands “Moro Province,” not to be confused with the five districts (Cotabato, Davao, Lanao, Sulu, and Zamboanga) with the same name, ruled by the U.S. military from 1903 to 1913.¹

This study employs a historical framework drawing on primary source materials from the United States. This includes visits to the National Archives and Records Administration, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, to scan records about the American colonial administration of Mindanao. These physical archives were complemented by digital repositories, resulting in a hybrid research environment that integrates on-site and online sources.

In addition, the study adopts an ethnographic approach by incorporating the researcher’s lived experience as a resident of Narra, Palawan—a community shaped by internal migration since the 1950s. This perspective provides contextual depth and highlights the historical analysis within broader social and demographic transformations.

Although the bill was primarily concerned with Mindanao and Sulu, Palawan’s inclusion in this article had far-reaching implications, both politically and economically. Palawan was partly Islamized due to the influence of the Sulu Sultanate in the southern part of the island. Hence, it widened the arena for debates about Philippine sovereignty, American imperialism, and the future of the Moros.

Background and Purpose

The Bacon Bill emerged during the period of American colonial rule in the Philippines, when Filipino leaders were actively pressing for independence (see Figure 1). Following the consolidation of U.S. control after the Philippine-

¹ Robert L. Bacon, ‘The Moro problem in the Philippine Islands,’ [Exhibit II] in *U.S. Congressional Record – House* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 6, 1926), pp. 8830-6, in <https://www.congress.gov/69/crecb/1926/05/06/GPO-CRECB-1926-pt8-v67-12-2.pdf>. In that exhibit, the Moro leaders signed the “1924 Declaration of rights and purposes addressed to the Congress of the United States of America” proposing that the islands of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan be made an unorganized territory of the United States of America,” pp. 8835-6.

American War, colonial policy gradually shifted toward limited self-government. The Jones Act of 1916 expanded Filipino participation in governance by establishing a largely Filipino-controlled legislature and formally committing the United States to eventual independence, although no specific timetable was provided.

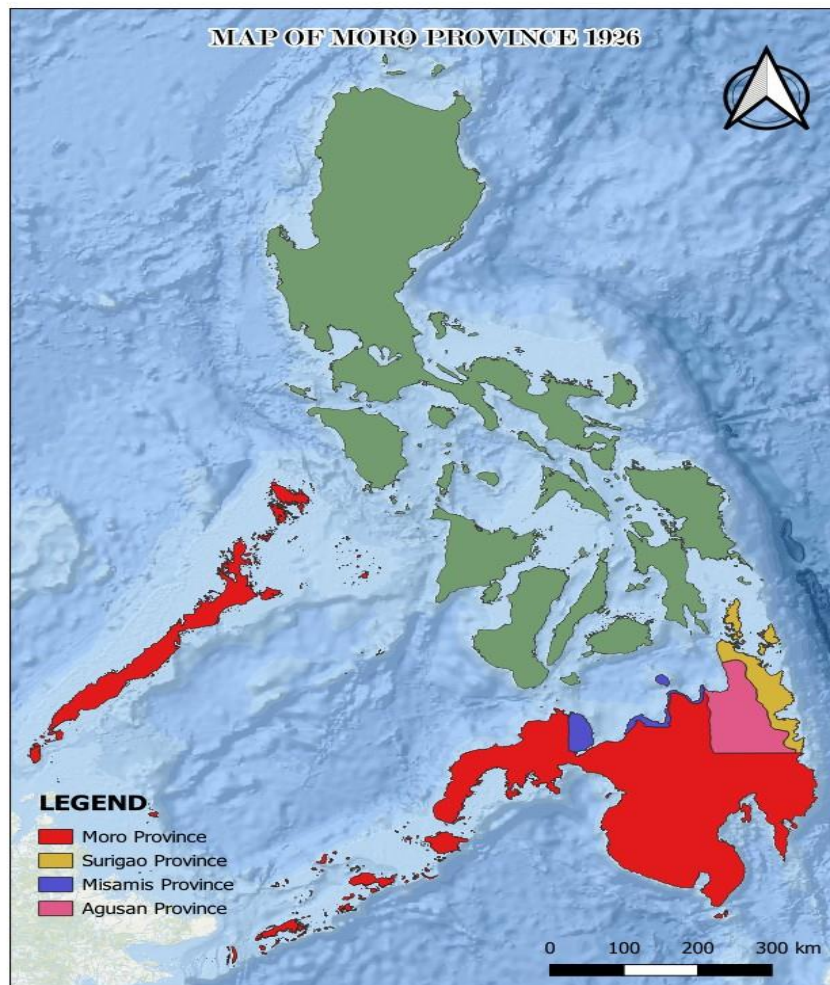


Figure 1: Map of Moro Province, according to the 1926 Bacon Bill

Moro Province (red) and the excluded provinces of Misamis (blue), Agusan (pink), and Surigao (yellow). Image courtesy of Prof. Elizabeth Edan Albiento.

Subsequent official assessments, however, tempered these commitments. The Wood–Forbes Mission and the Thompson Commission concluded that the Philippines was not yet prepared for full self-government, reinforcing arguments within the United States for the continuation of American oversight.

At the same time, in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, the Moro population (Muslim Filipinos) resisted integration into the predominantly Christian Philippines. The Moros felt alienated and were disenchanted with the Philippine government, advocating for continued U.S. protection or a separate political status. In 1924, Moro leaders petitioned the U.S. government, requesting that Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan become separate territories under American control. However, no Moro from Palawan signed this document. The Bacon Bill was a direct response to this petition.

The bill, proposed by U.S. Congressman Robert Bacon, sought to remove these regions from Philippine jurisdiction and create a U.S. territory with an autonomous government. This separate territory would include Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, and Palawan, with Zamboanga as its capital. In his speech to the House of Representatives on May 6, 1926, he argued that his proposed bill addressed the so-called "Moro problem" by allowing the Moros to remain under U.S. protection while also offering them a degree of participative governance under a "special government administered by Americans and Moros" (Bacon, 1926: 8833). While Bacon argued that the bill would protect the Moros, the underlying economic and imperial motives were evident, particularly in Palawan.

Conceptual Premise

Here lies the central argument of this paper. The basic question that confronts us is whether Bacon is justified in his stated objective: to "remove Moro provinces from the jurisdiction of the Philippine government, and confer upon them a separate and distinct form of administration under the direct authority of the United States." Embedded within this formulation is the framing of his Congressional address, "*The Moro Problem in the Philippine Islands*," upon which the proposed bill rests. Bacon's project, therefore, is hypothesized as not merely administrative but discursive. He sought to resolve what contemporaneous literature constructed as the "Moro Problem." Within this framework, his proposal was purportedly a humanitarian intervention, one that claimed to liberate the Moro population from the political and cultural dominance of the Christian Filipino majority.

The bill carries with it a strange idea of decolonization, that a colonized people are freed, but at the same time placed under the cage of the former colonizer. This appears to contradict the traditional meaning of decolonization, as it suggests an ostensibly imperialistic measure of "recolonization." In this case, history unsettled, provoked, and reoriented our knowledge of decoloniality as a process of dismantling and reconfiguring the structures of neo-colonial rule.

A closely related line of argument—indeed, one that may be regarded as the most decisive—lies in Bacon's economic rationale. Beneath the language of protection and governance lay a discernible strategic interest: the expansion of American economic influence through access to, and potential development

of, the natural resources of Mindanao and Palawan, particularly rubber. Central to this ambition was rubber production, a commodity of critical importance to the United States at the time, driven by the demands of both military infrastructure and the rapidly expanding automobile industry.

From the perspective of U.S. policy, the bill appears to contradict its stated position regarding the Philippines. The Jones Act of 1916 formally committed the United States to eventual Philippine independence and advanced this objective by expanding Filipino participation in governance, including the establishment of a predominantly Filipino legislature. Measures that would partition the archipelago, therefore, stand in tension with both the spirit and the stated aims of this policy.

We will match these arguments with qualitative information available in the virtual literature.

Population and Economic Initiatives

The inclusion of Palawan in the Bacon Bill had significant economic and imperial implications. At the time, the U.S. was interested in the rich natural resources of the South and its surrounding regions. According to the 1890 ethnographic map by Ferdinand Blumentritt (1899), Mindanao and Palawan were sparsely populated (see Figure 2). There was just a handful of Christianized population, as most of the inhabitants were Muslims and tribal communities.² The land was vast and claimed as part of the public domain when Spain and the USA colonized the Philippines.

According to the 1903 and 1918 censuses of the Philippines, Palawan was sparsely populated (see Tables 1 and 2). Although Christians were the dominant demographic, the Moro and other tribal groups were nonetheless increasing in numbers. The two tables show a notable shift in how the population of Palawan was classified between 1903 and 1918, particularly in the proportions labeled as “Civilized/Christian” versus “Wild/Non-Christian.”

In the 1903 census, a large majority of Palawan’s population, 80.8%, was categorized as “Civilized,” while only 19.2% were labeled as “Wild tribes.” By contrast, the 1918 data present a significantly different picture: the proportion identified as Christians (equated with “civilized”) drops to 65.8%, while those classified as Non-Christians (or “wild”) rise to 34.2%. This represents a substantial increase in the share of the population considered outside the “civilized/Christian” category over 15 years.

² The map’s colors indicate the predominant type of inhabitants in each area: orange represents Christian communities, yellow denotes tribal groups, and green signifies Moro populations. These colors reflect the category of inhabitants, not the number of people living there

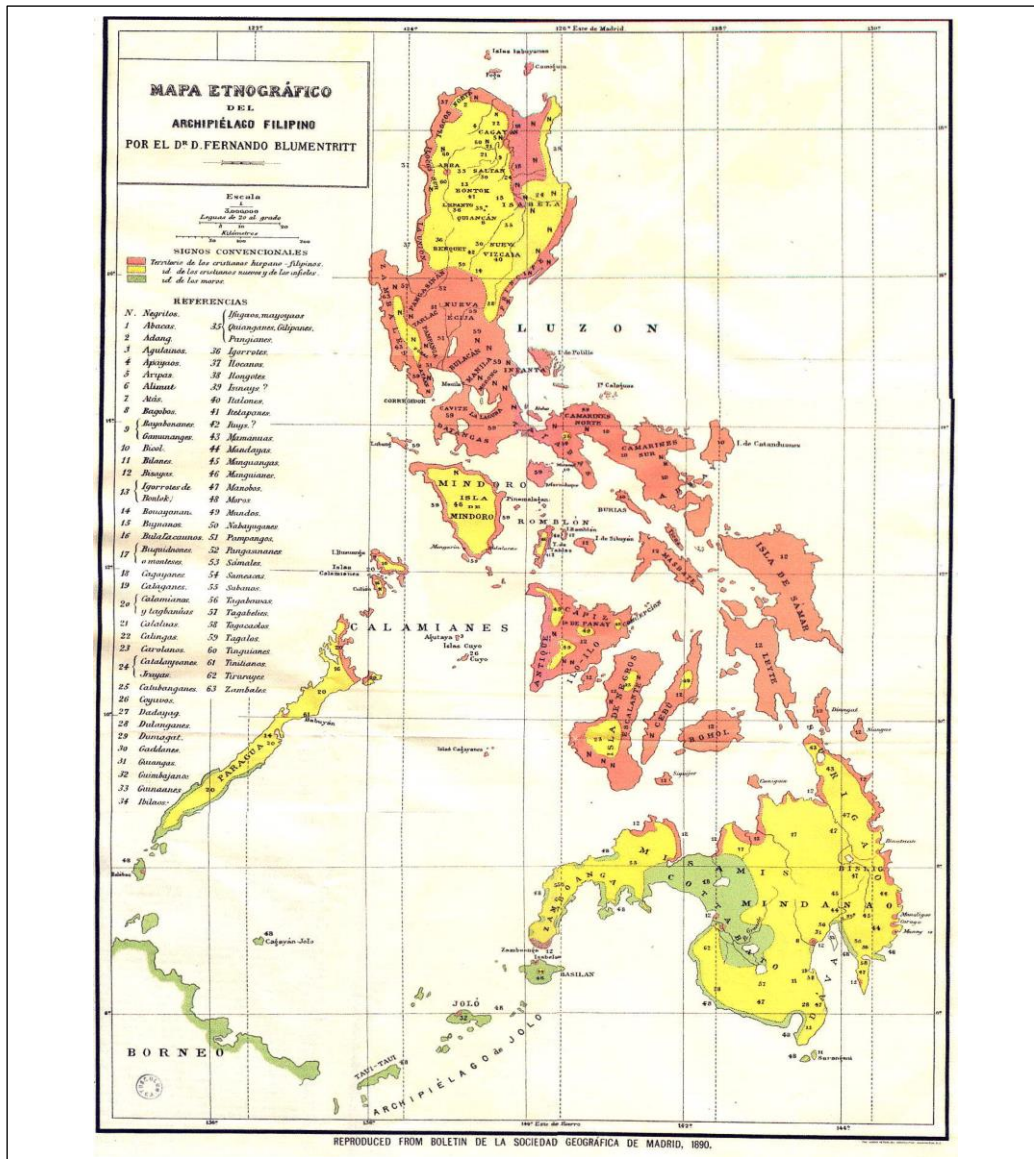


Figure 2: Ethnographic Map of the Philippines, 1890

Source: Ferdinand Blumentritt, *Versuch einer Ethnographie der Philippinen*, 1889.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blumentritt_-_Ethnographic_map_of_the_Philippines,_1890.jpg

Table 1: Palawan population, 1903

District	Total population	Civilized	Wild	% Civilized	% Wild
Paragua	29,351	27,493	1,858	93.67	6.33
Paragua Sur	6,345	1,359	4,986	21.42	8.58
Total	35,696	28,852	6,844	80.83	19.17
MINSUPALA	706,529	326,997	379,532	46.28	53.72

Source: *Census of the Philippine Islands, 1903*. Washington, 1905.

Table 2: Palawan population, 1918

District	Total population	Christian	Non-Christian	% Christian	% Non-Christian
Palawan	69,053	45,440	23,613	65.8	34.2
Total	35,696	45,440	23,613	65.8	34.2
MINSUPALA	976,269	34.2%	65.9%	34.1	65.9%

Source: *Census of the Philippine Islands 1918*. Vol. 2. Manila, 1921

This shift does not necessarily indicate a dramatic demographic change. It reflects possible changes in colonial classification practices and possibly improved enumeration of indigenous groups. The terms “Civilized” and “Wild” were colonial labels used by American authorities in the Philippines, carrying cultural and religious biases. “Civilized” typically referred to lowland, Christianized populations integrated into colonial administration, while “Wild” referred to upland or indigenous groups who maintained their traditional beliefs and were less incorporated into colonial structures.

The increase in the proportion of “Non-Christians” in 1918 may suggest that earlier counts underrepresented indigenous communities or that later censuses adopted more systematic methods of identifying and classifying them. It also highlights how census categories were shaped by colonial perspectives, rather than neutral or purely demographic distinctions.

Even with a growing population, density is still low. Large areas of land remain uncultivated and unexplored.

In the 1920s, Palawan possessed fertile land suitable for rubber cultivation, while its vast forests offered high potential for crops such as hemp and tobacco, alongside valuable timber. Rubber, in particular, was in high demand worldwide among industrializing countries like the U.S., which suffered from shortages. The U.S. reportedly consumed at least 70 percent of the global rubber production, which was then controlled by the United Kingdom through its colonial plantations in Malaysia and India.

The U.S. was also strategically focused on Palawan's location in the Philippines. Situated between Southeast Asia and the Pacific, the island was seen as a crucial military outpost that could enhance U.S. influence. As tensions increased with imperial powers like Japan, Palawan's potential for a military and naval base became even more significant. U.S. control over Palawan, alongside its economic resources, could bolster American power in the Pacific.

Though framed as a solution to the Moro problem, Bacon's bill was driven by the broader goal of securing U.S. dominance over Palawan and Mindanao and their natural wealth. At the same time, it ensured a strategic foothold on the global importance of rubber as a commodity.

The global rubber market, however, was then largely monopolized by British colonial enterprises, placing the United States at a significant disadvantage. Bacon's proposal could thus be read as an attempt to circumvent this dependency by securing a direct and controlled source of rubber within American-held territories. In this light, the separation of Moro provinces appears less as an act of benevolent governance and more as a calculated move within a broader imperial economic strategy.

Nationalist Opposition

Filipino nationalists strongly opposed the Bacon Bill, arguing that the proposal threatened Philippine unity and sovereignty. Emilio Aguinaldo, former president of the Philippine Republic, immediately sent US President Coolidge a telegram, stating that Filipinos are incensed over the Bacon Bill: "The Bacon bill hurts the feelings of the Filipinos" (*The Philippine Republic*, June 1926: Vol. 3, 7). Furthermore, he said: "We regard it as a blow to our national integrity and a departure from the traditional American policy." Finally, he argued: "The people here consider the bill to be inspired by a desire for economic exploitation."

Many Filipino leaders, including Manuel Quezon and Sergio Osmena, believed that the U.S. used the Moro grievances as an alibi to divide the Philippines and maintain control over the archipelago. They saw the separation of Palawan, Mindanao, and Sulu as an affront to a unified nation.

For these nationalists, the Philippine flag, which represented Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao, symbolized the unity of the islands. Separating Palawan and Mindanao from the rest of the Philippines would weaken the country's integrity and delay its journey to full independence. This view is dramatized by a cartoon depicting a lady being cut by Bacon, while the Philippine national hero, Jose Rizal, admonished Juan dela Cruz to do something (see Figure 3).



Source: The Philippine Republic (1926, Dec. 1, 3):11:16. Retrieved from <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acc6198.1926.011>

Figure 3: How Filipinos regard the Bacon Bill

Source: Source: *The Independent*, republished in *Philippine Free Press* Editorial, 1926

Opponents of the bill, such as Governor Perfecto Abordo, argued that “the solution to the Moro problem was not division but integration.” He believed the Moros could be integrated into the broader Filipino nation with adequate infrastructure and development.

The Filipino opposition to the Bacon Bill also had a cultural and nationalistic component. For them, the bill represented a political setback. It also undermined the Filipino identity and the dream of a united, independent country. By drawing attention to Palawan’s separation, the opposition emphasized that such a move would further distance the Moros and disrupt unity in the Philippines.

Abordo’s Opposition Against the Bill

Perfecto Abordo, then the governor of Palawan (1925-1926), was a serious opponent of the 1926 Bacon Bill. His opposition was rooted in several key arguments, based on his commitment to national unity, economic and political stability, resistance to extended colonial control, and promoting

integration and development within the Philippines (*The Philippine Republic*: Vol. 3, 16):

1. **National Unity:** Abordo argued that the separation would undermine the national unity of the Philippines. He believed that all parts of the archipelago, including Mindanao and Sulu, should remain part of a unified nation.
2. **Economic and Political Interests:** He emphasized that the proposed separation would be detrimental to the economic and political interests of the Philippines. Mindanao and Sulu were rich in natural resources, and their detachment would significantly impact the country's economy.
3. **Colonial Control:** Abordo saw the Bacon Bill as an attempt by the United States to extend its colonial control over part of the Philippines. He argued that this contravened the Filipino people's aspirations for independence and self-governance.
4. **Integration and Development:** He believed that the best path forward for Mindanao and Sulu was integration into the broader Philippine society. Abordo supported policies promoting development and integration, rather than separation and segregation.

Unfortunately, Abordo was unseated by the Supreme Court in 1927 (G.R. No. 28320, September 20, 1927), following a petition filed by Rufo San Juan to disqualify him because he was not a legal resident at the time of the election.³ The votes were close; Abordo had garnered 1,444 votes compared to San Juan's 1,406. Abordo was proclaimed the winner by the provincial board of Palawan acting as canvassers. Governor General Leonard Wood favored San Juan, and the case reached the Supreme Court, dismissing the appeal of Abordo. San Juan became the Governor.

How was the Moro voice echoed in this narrative, below?

Moro Perspective

Moro history is rich in data, and basks in an older self-government based on the sultanate that antedates Philippine history by at least 100 years. They have strongly opposed all colonial powers, from the Spaniards to the Americans. However, they capitulated to the American colonial government and drew a number of their leaders toward the "benevolence" of the USA in a petition addressed to the President of the United States in 1921. This document is tangential to the 1924 petition, as mentioned earlier. Known as the 1921 Sulu petition, Tausug leaders expressed dissatisfaction with the Philippine government ruled by Filipinos and desired to be "made a permanent American territory of the United States" (Jubair, 1999: 293-297).

³ <https://jur.ph/jurisprudence/summary/san-juan-v-abordo>.

Overall, the Moro responses to the Bacon Bill were divided. Some leaders, particularly those in positions of power within the colonial system, supported continued American control.⁴ They believed that U.S. governance offered more protection and autonomy than rule by Filipino leaders, whom they regarded with suspicion. These leaders argued that the Philippines was not ready for independence and that continued U.S. protection would safeguard the Moro interests.

However, many grassroots Moro leaders opposed the Bacon Bill, believing that separation from the rest of the Philippines would only perpetuate division and conflict.⁵ These leaders felt that the Moros were not so different from the Christian Filipinos and should remain part of a unified Philippine nation. They saw the bill as a dangerous step toward disunity and potential conflict.

In Palawan, the Moro people were few but appeared involved in local politics. According to the 1903 Census, the total population of Palawan was 35,696. Of this number, the Christianized population (“civilized”) comprised 80.83 percent, while the Moros (e.g., Molbog, Sama, and Tausug) and tribal peoples, such as the Tagbanua, Palaw’an, and Batak (“wild tribes”) constituted only 19.17%. The former was concentrated in Balabac Island in Southern Palawan.

Close to the time of Bacon, the demographic picture in 1918 changed with the coming of more Muslim migrants to Palawan (*Philippine Census 1918*, 1921: Vol. 2, 13). This change consequently reduced the Christian population to 65.8% out of a total population of 69,053. The Moro people, classified as “Non-Christians” by the Census, constituted about a third or 34.2%.

Today, many Moros live on mainland Palawan, particularly the surrounding villages of Bataraza while others live in Aborlan. The author visited the village of Tagpait, in Aborlan, on October 10, 2024, but found few Muslims. The mosque was in disrepair and appeared abandoned, having been hardly visited by Muslim traders. Tagpait was reputed to be a Muslim village in the part.

During the Spanish era, the Moro leader of Palawan was Sultan Harun ar-Rashid,⁶ an exiled Sulu leader who settled in Bono-Bono (now

⁴ They included the Piang patriarch (Amai Minka) and Gumbay Piang from Cotabato (Abinales, 1998, 2000). The 1924 Moro petitioners were mostly not officials of the Philippine government. Ten years later, in 1934, dozens of Lanao leaders also wrote a petition known as the “Dansalan Declaration,” opposing the inclusion of Lanao in a looming independent Philippines, in Joseph Ralston Hayden Papers, July 13, 1934, Box 28-11.

⁵ In a conference with Moro leaders (Thompson, 1926: 6) noted that: “Not a single Moro spoke in favor of the division of the Philippines and the creation of a separate Moro Province... One, Sultan Rambin (likely Sultan sa Ramain), said ‘Mindanao will fight and die rather than lie separated from the Philippines.’” Also, Hayden Papers, “Interview with Datu Piang of Dulawan, 1926,” Box 28-24, quoted Datu Abdullah Piang publicly proclaiming that he “would choose to live in Manila if the Bacon Bill is passed by the US Congress into law” because “I do not want to separate from you... Look at my skin! The blood that runs in my veins is not different from that of you Christian Filipinos.”

⁶ “Municipality of Bataraza,” https://municipalityofbatarazablog.wordpress.com/history_Sultan_Harun_ar-Rashid is commonly misspelled as Harun Narrasid in many sources, except Majul (1973) who writes his name correctly.

Bataraza). Harun was at odds with Jamalul Kiram II, who was favored by the Americans. The former was granted authority by the Spanish to govern the Muslim communities in Balabac, Brooke's Point, Rizal, Quezon, and Espanola.

After he died in 1899, he was succeeded by his son, Datu Bataraza ar-Rashid, who became a prominent leader in Palawan (Saleeby, 1908). The young datu is remembered for bridging the gap between tradition and development, ensuring that the Muslim population in Palawan had a voice in the island's history and growth. His leadership contributed to the peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and indigenous Palawan groups. The municipality of Bataraza was named in the datu's honor in 1964 as a unifying figure for helping integrate Islamic traditions into the diverse cultural landscape of Palawan. Its first mayor is Datu Sapiodin ar-Rashid, son of Datu Bataraza, and previously the mayor of Brooke's Point.

Bacon Bill Failed

The Bacon Bill ultimately failed to gain sufficient support in the U.S. Congress, largely due to a concerted lobbying effort by Filipino politicians, opposition from American critics, and protests from Moro groups. Filipino legislators. According to Pedro Guevarra, Resident Commissioner to the US Congress:⁷

“The bill misrepresented the Moro situation and that the differences between Moros and Christian Filipinos were the result of colonialism, not inherent cultural divides... both Mohammedans and Christians are of the same racial stock, homogeneous in character, the term ‘Moro’ being used in a popular sense to distinguish those of the Mohammedan faith from their brothers.”

The failure of the Bacon Bill was a significant victory for Filipino nationalism. However, it did not resolve the underlying issues of Moro integration and the political status of the southern regions, including Palawan. While the bill's defeat preserved the territorial integrity of the Philippines, it also highlighted the ongoing tensions between Filipino nationalists, the Moros, and the Americans about the future of the Philippines.

What If the Bill Were Approved?

Several compelling scenarios can be considered. In a survey conducted in 2023 by Dr. Juvanni Caballero among MSU students, a majority expressed

⁷ *The Philippine Republic* (June 26, 1926: Vol. 3, 6). Guevarra cited several Moro leaders from Zamboanga who wanted to “unite their fortunes with those of their Christian brothers” in their quest for independence. He also presented petitions by more than 100 signatories (many done using thumbmarks) of Panglimas, Imams, and a Kabugatan from Taraka, Lanao, who were “against segregation of their land from Luzon and the Visayas.” These petitions were written when Col. Carmi Thompson was conducting his investigation in the area, while Bacon, accompanied by Gov. General Leonard Wood, was making rounds in Mindanao and Sulu to gather support from Moro leaders for his forthcoming bill.

support for the Bacon Bill—marking a stark contrast to its reception in 1926. Additionally, during our presentation on this topic at Western Philippines University on October 9, 2024, discussions turned to the West Philippine Sea. It was suggested that the ongoing harassment of Filipino officials and fishermen by Chinese forces around the Scarborough Shoal and Ayungin Shoal, both of which lie within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), might have been prevented under different geopolitical circumstances.

The student survey and reactions to the WPU lecture lead us to some theoretical scenarios. First, it brings back to memory the demands of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) for secession under different circumstances. Second, would Bacon's Moro Province restore sovereignty to the Muslims, under the reign of the hegemonic United States?

These are all possible events that may or may not happen, depending on current realities.

Implications of the Bill and the USA

The Bacon Bill represented a crucial moment in Philippine history, particularly for Palawan. Although it ultimately failed, the bill's inclusion of Palawan highlighted the regional importance to the U.S. and the Filipino people. Palawan's natural resources and strategic location made it a key player in the geopolitical landscape, and the U.S. was keen on maintaining control over the island. The bill's failure, however, ensured that Palawan remained a part of the Philippines, contributing to the national unity.

The Bacon Bill's legacy continues to influence the political dynamics of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan. The challenges of integrating these regions into the broader Filipino state, along with the tensions between the Moros and the Filipino majority, are issues that continue to shape the political landscape today and are integral to the larger conversation about national history and unity.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Dr. Magdalena is an Associate Specialist at the Center for Philippine Studies, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, and a faculty affiliate in the UHM Department of Asian Studies. He hailed from Palawan, where his family moved to when he was a young boy. This article is extracted from his presentation at Western Philippines University in Aborlan, Palawan, on October 9, 2024. He has published feature articles in *Positively Filipino* and *Hawai‘i Filipino Chronicle*, where he wrote a short, popular version of this article, “The Day Palawan was Nearly Lost to the USA”, and “Mindanao – Almost the 50th State of USA,” among others.