

Reconnecting Traditional Links

A Contribution to Understanding the Sabah Crisis

Bas Umali

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Background: the Sabah crisis, also known as the “Lahad Datu standoff,” occurred in March–April 2013, when 235 militants claiming to belong to the “Royal Security Forces of the Sultanate of Sulu and North Borneo” occupied an area in the Lahad Datu district of the Malaysian state of Sabah. They had arrived by boat from the island of Simunul in the southern Philippines, sent by Jamalul Kiram III (1938–2013), who claimed to rule over the Sultanate of Sulu, which has not been officially recognized since 1986. After a six-week standoff, Malaysian security forces regained control of the area, killing sixty-five of the occupiers.

—the editor

The Tausūg by tradition are warriors. They have a history of resisting invasion with violent confrontation. They are known for being tenacious and would not easily back down in asserting their autonomy. Way back, during Spanish and American colonization, the Tausūg were among the fiercest enemies of the imperialists. During the Philippine-American War, the Americans invented the .45 caliber handgun and made it standard for its cavalry due to the .38 caliber handgun not being able to stop the oncoming Tausūg warriors, who were wrapped in cloth to prevent hemorrhage caused by bullets. Currently, Tausūg warriors are also involved in the armed struggle for autonomy in the southern part of the Philippines.

With this background, one could easily assume that the Tausūg came to occupy Sabah in order to settle the Sabah conflict by claiming parts of the island through armed confrontation. It could be assumed that through their long experience of combat they acquired the ability to prevent casualties on their part. Their experience in war instructs them not to attack the enemy where it has great military advantage and not to provoke an enemy powerful enough to crush them.

Based on public statements by Sultan Kiram III, however, they came to Sabah peacefully to claim the area as a part of their ancestral domain. They went there to establish their physical presence through nonviolent means and to join the thousands of so-called Filipinos already staying there. They did not attack and only prepared to defend themselves against hostile elements. Aside from historical links, the Kirams also possessed documents that reinforced their claims.

The Malaysian government intentionally sent a wrong signal to the public when it announced that the Tausūg “invaded” Sabah. It was a threatening statement to legitimize their military operations against the Tausūg and against the poor people of Lahad Datu and the surrounding communities. Worse, the Malaysian government issued a statement branding the Tausūg as terrorists, which provided the justification to slaughter them.

The Malaysian government overreacted and deployed tanks, helicopters, and even submarines. Since the crisis has broken out, sixty-three deaths and ninety-seven arrests related to the occupation have been reported.

Just like the with the Spratly Islands,¹ it is widely believed that Sabah has oil deposits. The Malaysian government is surely aware of this, so it is plausible to think that it is not the “invasion” that worries them most.

On behalf of the Filipino people, Benigno Aquino III, the current president, issued an order contradicting the interests of the indigenous Tausūg’s claim by ordering them to back down. He should be reminded that before the Spaniards came, the communities of the archipelago were part of a macrosociety tied together by kinship and trade—not only in Mindanao but also in the Visayas and on Luzon. The Philippine archipelago was tightly linked to Malacca, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and other communities in Southeast Asia. As the imperialists divided the Southeast Asian region, they disconnected these links and a network that had been established throughout a long indigenous process.

The current crisis is therefore a manifestation of a deeply rooted complexity that cannot be resolved by enforcing a nationalist framework and by coercing people into recognizing systems that are alien to the communities of the archipelago.

Traditionally, we were not bound by the limits of nation-states; the lifestyles of our ancestors were as fluid as the tide of the oceans that connect us. In fact, the families of Lakan Dula, Rajah Matanda, and Rajah Sulayman that formerly occupied Manila, Tondo, Bulacan, Sulu, and Borneo were linked by affinity and consanguinity.²

Sultan Kiram III and his followers have already been found guilty; the Malaysian government does not heed calls for a ceasefire and conducts more military raids instead. The Philippine government’s only effort is to offer a mercy ship, which is an insult to the direct action and courageous deeds of the Tausūg.

We do not agree with waging war, and we condemn those who cause hostilities; we condemn the Malaysian government for its decision to launch an all-out offensive despite calls for a ceasefire.

We also condemn the Philippine government because of its incapacity to handle the conflict. Its insensitivity and insincerity became clear when Benigno Aquino III asked the Tausūg to go home. Instead of preparing a lawsuit against Kiram, a dialogue could have been arranged to hear the Tausūg’s side. The government could have offered assurances it would explore all possible venues like the United Nations. That way, the betrayal of the Tausūg could have been avoided.

We understand the sensitivity of the issue, and we fear an escalation and an even bigger military confrontation. Careful negotiation is needed. The political advisers of PNoy, as Benigno Aquino III is known by many, are perhaps convinced of the inferiority of the Philippine military.

¹ The contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are claimed by various countries: China, Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

² Lakan Dula (c. 1503–1575), Rajah Matanda (1480–1572), and Rajah Sulayman (1558–1575) were precolonial political leaders in the archipelago that was to become known as the Philippines.

But no one is talking about a war. The Philippine government has plenty of peaceful options in dealing with the Malaysian government without putting the Tausūg in an undignified situation.

Seeking a long-lasting solution to this conflict is beneficial to many of us, as the thick layers of animosity and hatred caused by hundreds of years of coercion and exploitation have already claimed thousands of lives. Respect for self-determination and the recognition of the tradition of self-organizing are meaningful ways to start finding peace and development.

The organizational arrangement of the Tausūg in a sultanate is surely not perfect; it is characterized by social stratification and an unequal distribution of wealth. Leaders enjoy the same privileges as corporate leaders and other beneficiaries of hierarchical institutions. Changing these hierarchical systems is always a focus of our work and the desire of many communities aspiring to attain freedom and prosperity. But asserting rights over indigenous space and autonomy is a radical step against the hegemony of the nation-state. This is the most important aspect of the occupation of Sabah.

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