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# Fragmented and Frustrated: The Clamor for Cordillera Regional Autonomy, Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

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Regional autonomy is an arrangement used to accommodate a state's distinct population. This qualitative study investigates the failure to establish regional autonomy in Cordillera, Philippines, despite its inhabitants' distinct cultural identity and the autonomy provisions of the constitution. It examines the autonomy advocates' constructions of the clamor's history and justification. The study outlines the fragmented historical narratives and justifications for the three-decade-long autonomy claim. The historical narratives are divided by the issues of state-sponsored projects in the region and the involvement of communism. Also, additional decision-making powers, economic benefits, and the protection of indigenous peoples' rights and identity comprise the arguments for its justification. This paper provides an update on the current Cordillera autonomy efforts. It is useful for those interested in the establishment of autonomous regions and how fragmented constructions contribute to its continued frustration.

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## INTRODUCTION

States do not always have homogenous inhabitants. Most often than not, several socio-cultural identities, economic classes, and political affiliations divide the population. Driven by the belief that people with shared history, culture, and homeland have the right to self-rule, a nation emerges (Smith, 1979, 2009). Regional Autonomy (RA) is the recommended arrangement when a state's population involves one or a few nations. It involves the establishment of political structures with the authority to legislate and administer over a region occupied by a population claiming distinctiveness and wanting to exercise self-governance (Benedikter, 2009; Ghai, 2000; Lapidoth, 1996).

In the Philippines, the 1987 constitution recognizes the unique historical, cultural, social, and economic features of the inhabitants of Muslim Mindanao and Cordillera territories. However, while the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was established in November 1989 and was recently replaced by the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2018, the clamor to establish an Autonomous Region of the Cordillera (ARC) has been frustrated for more than three decades.

The first autonomy organic act (RA 6766) enacted by the Philippine Congress on October 23, 1989, was rejected by the regional voters through a plebiscite held on January 30, 1990, with only the province of Ifugao voting in the affirmative. The second organic act (RA 8438), enacted on December 22, 1997, was similarly rejected in a plebiscite conducted on March 7, 1998, with only the province of Apayao voting yes (Bahatan, 2008).

Explanations for the plebiscite rejections include the regional population's lack of information about the benefits of autonomy, the short campaign period before the plebiscite, and the delayed release of the budget for the autonomy information campaign (Bahatan, 2008). Additionally, the content of the previous organic acts has failed to accommodate the indigenous political institutions of the region and instead reiterated the dominance of western conventions and structures (Buendia, 1991; Casambre, 2001, 2010; Rood, 1989). Moreover, the fragmentation within and between the Cordillera resistance movements created disunity in the Cordillera identity constructions and autonomy discourse (Casambre, 2001, 2010; Coronel Ferrer, 2005, 2020).

Undeterred, the clamor continues as a government-funded and led activity. The Regional Development Council- Cordillera (RDC-CAR) launched the program Social Preparation of CAR into an Autonomous Region (SPCAR) which has an annual budget of nearly PHP15 million (Membrere, 2016). In 2019, it received PHP12.125 million for its Information Education Communication (IEC) activities (Lubguban, 2019). However, no valid third attempt has materialized so far.

Theoretically, this study aligns itself with the modernist approach to identity and nation formation. It stands on the premise that RA is not established simply because a group is inherently different from the state's mainstream population.

Smith (1979) emphasized two things in attaining the national ideal of self-rule. First is a common understanding of the group's historical land possession. Second is a common vision and action program for the soon-to-be-established autonomous region. He adds that this requires agents who can construct and articulate a unified version of the collective's history and a common vision of its autonomous status (Smith, 1979). Brass (1991) refers to these agents as the elite. They are the influential subgroups within ethnic categories responsible for transforming the distinctive features of the group into a unifying element and the articulation of the community's vision of self-rule. He points out that with the attachment of gains and rewards to the establishment of RA, elite competition occurs (Brass, 1991). Influenced by their own experiences, positions, and interests, autonomy advocates tend to have various framings of the clamor for self-rule.

With their crucial role in its establishment, the study of RA must involve an examination of its advocates. Hence, this qualitative research is framed around the following research questions: (a) How do the current Cordillera autonomy advocates construct the claim's history and justification? (b) How do these various constructions contribute to the continued frustration of the Cordillera autonomy claim? In answering these questions, this study adds valuable insights into why autonomy claims fail to get the support of the concerned population



despite their existing identity differences from the mainstream population and the constitutional entrenchment of the autonomy claim.

## METHOD

To answer the research questions, fieldwork for this study was conducted from December 2019 until March 2020. The researcher interviewed advocates who are currently active in the push for Cordillera autonomy. Active autonomy advocates were identified when the researcher attended a SPCAR partners' meeting and through the snowball technique. The advocates were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide with all of them consenting to the interview recording. All interview sessions lasted from 45 to 90 minutes.

Seventeen advocates were interviewed for this research. 10 of the seventeen advocates are active autonomy IEC speakers, while the rest serve as local government, private, and civil society partners. Also, 8 of the seventeen advocates have been involved in the early stages of the autonomy claim either as participants in the militant phase or in drafting and campaigning for the previous autonomy organic acts. In some instances, these profiles overlap such as a former participant in the militant struggle currently occupying elective positions or former local officials currently representing the private sector.

This study also relied on documents as secondary sources for additional information and to verify the interview responses. The four documents include the transcript of the 1987 Constitutional Commission proceedings, Executive Order (EO) No. 220, the 2018 RDC-CAR annual report, and the autonomy brochure released by SPCAR.

The interview results were reduced into categories using the qualitative content analysis (Saldana, 2016; Scheier, 2004). The process involved the descriptive, structural, process, and in vivo coding of the transcribed interviews and categorizing them according to the research questions. Focused on the Cordillera autonomy claim interpretations, this article includes direct quotes from its respondents.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A Divided Narrative of The Cordillera Autonomy Struggle's Emergence and Development

Located in North-Central Luzon of the Philippines, the Cordillera's landscape features mountain ranges and deep river basins. The administrative region comprises six provinces: Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, and Mt. Province. It also includes the two cities of Baguio and Tabuk. Cordillera is currently home to at least eight ethnolinguistic groups; the *Ibaloy* and Southern *Kankana-ey* of Benguet, the *Bontok* and Northern *Kankana-ey* of Mountain Province, the *Ifugao* of Ifugao province, the *Ikalunga* of the Kalinga province, the *Tinggian* of Abra, and the *Itneg* of Apayao (Prill-Brett, 1987). Smaller groups include the *Kalanguya* in the Ifugao province and the *Karao* of Bokod, Benguet.

According to Scott (1962), the *tribus independentes* of the cord-like mountain ranges of Cordillera have avoided the full effects of the Spanish colonization. While the Spaniards managed to penetrate the foothills and border areas, the inner tribal communities avoided Spanish rule (Bagamaspad & Pawid-Hamada, 1985). Afterward, the American colonizers combined the independent mountain communities into the Mountain Provinces administrative territory. The Cordillera American experience was heavily concentrated in Benguet as its first civilian government province and Baguio as its colonial hill station. American education, religion, and infrastructure efforts were intense in these areas (Bagamaspad & Pawid-Hamada, 1985; Tauli, 1984).

The research participants reiterate that the dichotomy between the Cordillera inhabitants and the general Filipino population has its roots in the Spanish colonial regime. They emphasize that the Cordillera communities have successfully resisted Spanish subjugation, enabling them to preserve their culture. Consequently, the Spanish colonial system produced a division of Christianized and subjugated populations and those who were unsubjugated and able to retain much of their pre-Hispanic way of life. This identity division created by the Spanish colonizers remains to be a relevant identity feature for the Cordillera communities. As emphasized by the respondents,



We were not colonized while they were colonized. To me, we are still a tribal people. When you say tribal, we have our own system of belief in terms of practices, and culture. (Advocate #6).

They are called indigenous people because they warded themselves from the influence of the mainstream culture. . . basically, they still have their culture intact, because if they submitted themselves to foreign colonization . . .our practices will be the same with the lowlands. (Advocate #15).

The same colonial resistance narrative was used to argue for the inclusion of Mindanao and Cordillera autonomy provisions in the 1986 Philippine constitution. In the sponsorship speech of Commissioner Benagen during the 1987 Constitutional Commission proceedings, he points out that the entire history of the Bangsa Moro and the Cordillera people is a history of oppression and discrimination. However, theirs too is a history of heroic resistance against subjugation, tutelage, and assimilation by the Spaniards, the Americans, the Japanese, and even against the uncaring Filipino.

Although considered collectively different from the mainstream population, the Cordillera indigenous communities exhibit varying degrees of development, political systems, conflict resolution mechanisms, and even temperaments. A respondent who currently serves as a consultant for the RDC-CAR, a participant in the 1987 Constitutional convention, and former head of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples' (NCIP) explains,

We are insisting that we are not all the same. Our laws are different, our governance systems are different, and our definition of people is not the same. However, we are all saying we are different from the national state. That although we are Filipino, we are Bontoc Filipino, or an Ifugao Filipino. That is what we are claiming. (Advocate #4).

Nonetheless, the existence of different ethnic categories in the region is not considered by the respondents as an obstacle to the establishment of an ARC. According to current IEC speakers who were former local government officials,

They have different views and values as well. But we are now doing the best we can to promote the fact that while we have this diversity, this is actually a plus factor for unity if we are able to appreciate it and put our differences aside. (Advocate #7).

While we belong to the same region, we have different tribes, different local cultures, and traditions. To me, this is not a serious stumbling block. (Advocate#16).

The region's traditional way of life was challenged by the entry of state-sponsored development projects in the area. First, in the 1950s, the Ambuklao and Binga dams in the Benguet province were constructed as part of the Agno River Basin Development Project (ARBDP). These dams currently supply electricity through the Luzon power grid. However, their construction came with the dislocation of numerous *Ibaloy* communities and the submersion of agricultural lands. To this day, just compensation and relocation remain unsolved (Allad-iw, 2011; Laking, 2007; Molintas, 2004).

Then in 1972, the Cellophil Resources Corporation (CRC), a crony corporation associated with the Marcos administration, was awarded a Timber and Pulpwood License Agreement (TPLA). It gave CRC the authority to construct and operate a pulp mill in the upland areas of Abra occupied mainly by the *Tinggians* (Dorral 1979). Opposition to the project was declared subversive, and CRC seemingly had the full support of the Provincial military command. In support of the *Tinggians*, the New People's Army (NPA) provided the community with arms and tactics against the military government. Before CRC's complete shutdown in 1983, NPA attacked Cellophil camps in Lamunan and Tineg, Abra (Bagadion, 1991).

Finally, in 1973, dams were proposed to be built in the areas of Kalinga and Bontoc. Funded by World Bank (WB), the Chico River dam was meant to buffer the effects of the 1973 global oil crisis by providing new energy sources (Carino, 1980; Guyguyon, 1979). The tribes of Kalinga and Bontoc, led by a tribal leader Macli-ing Dulag,



challenged the project since it came with the threat of dislocation and the submersion of their rice fields. The indigenous communities courageously defended their rights to live in the land where their ancestors have resided for centuries (Roldan, 2015). The death of Dulag on April 24, 1980, combined with the militarization in the Chico valley, fostered violent resistance in the Cordillera against the Philippine government. Marcos shelved the Chico River dam project in 1981 until it was permanently scrapped during the administration of Corazon C. Aquino. Most advocates argue that these projects caused the emergence of the region's autonomy claim. They accuse those in charge of the state and their cronies of exploiting the territory's natural resources and ignoring the mountain communities' cultural practices. In labeling the state-sponsored projects as acts of development aggression, an IEC speaker and an *Ibaloy* representative in the municipal legislative body lamented that,

Look at what happened to Ambuklao and Binga dam, these projects were as if there were no people in the area. Until now several families have not been compensated. What kind of compensation can you give for a lost culture? The dispersal of a community, how do you compensate for that? (Advocate #8).

Meanwhile, another IEC speaker and a former participant in the militant phase of the autonomy claim relates his own eyewitness account.

In the late 70s when the construction and protests against the chico river dam began. . . Although our village was not directly affected; the injustice became so apparent. . . there was a group of villagers who became internal refugees. They were driven out of their homes. I, in particular, remember seeing a young lady with a newborn baby and a toddler of about three years old following her and their grandmother. They walked for three days. (Advocate #17).

These advocates claim that the projects ignored the indigenous communities' attachment to their territory. The Cordillera communities considered the land the source of their existence and a container of their history and way of life. While the state claimed ownership based on state policies, the community grounded its defense on culture and tradition. They deem themselves as vanguards of these resources and perceive the entry of projects as a threat to their existence. Thus, the clamor for autonomy emerged from the communities' opposition to these state-sponsored projects. As explained by an IEC speaker, an incumbent municipal official, and a participant in the militant phase of the struggle,

This is our agenda, in fact, simple, oppose the projects, dams. While it was simple, it has evolved into the need for a regional government. Let us have a region because prior to that, there was no Cordillera region, there was only region 1 and region 2. . . Our struggle has transcended. It is more than just opposing these things. We need to have a regional government in the first place. (Advocate #6).

Conversely, a few autonomy advocates do not share the same view. For instance, a representative of one Cordillera province to the Philippine Congress claims that these projects brought development and progress to the region. Also, he frames the historical grievances against the Chico River dam projects as,

. . . these are irrelevant, as for me ah. The issue before on the construction of dams was that people perceived that they will be left out by the national government. (Advocate #9).

Also, other advocates pointed out that although historical grievances and narratives are important, they will not resonate with the current voters, hence it will not aid in the garnering of regional support to establish an ARC. Instead, attention must be given to the current regional issues.

The messaging should be what is the problem now and how can autonomy solve this. Historically you can identify the problem, the dam, Cellophil. How about right now. (Advocate #17).





So, something that we appreciate as an autonomous region. Because when they appreciate an autonomous region, they develop their interest until such time they give their active support about the autonomous region. (Advocate #1).

In the case of the dams built in the *Ibaloy* territories in Benguet, a provincial representative respondent says,

We have the Ambuklao dam which displaced people, but we are not making it as a reason to clamor for autonomy. Benguet people are peaceful people. Peaceful not passive. We sacrifice the property for peace. (Advocate #13).

The entry of the state-sponsored projects in the area brought about organizations and individuals claiming to represent the Cordillera communities. The Cordillera Peoples Liberation Army-Cordillera Bodong Association (CPLA-CBA) and Cordillera People's Alliance (CPA) are the two groups involved in the early stages of the clamor for Cordillera autonomy. Although initially united against the Marcos regime, they were eventually divided by the involvement of the Communist Party of the Philippines – National People's Army (CPP-NPA). As a result, the CPLA-CBA and the CPA provided diverse framings of the Cordillera problem and proposed different solutions.

The CPA, exhibiting communist influence, framed the Cordillera problem alongside the issues of the entire Filipino population. They claim that the issues of neglect and marginalization are not confined to the Cordillera region. Their proposed solution is an overhaul of the entire Philippine political system.

Alternatively, CPLA-CBA framed the Cordillera problem as a local issue. They emphasized the difference between the region's inhabitants and the mainstream population. They argue that the experiences of neglect and marginalization are unique to the Cordillera regional population.

These organizations exhibit the essential difference between communism and autonomy struggles. On the one hand, autonomy arrangements aim to maintain state sovereignty while accommodating clamors for self-governance. It is a compromise between the state and the nation. On the other hand, communism is concerned chiefly with challenging state sovereignty. It aims to overthrow the existing government and replace it with the rule of the communist party. Those influenced by communism have wrongfully interpreted the autonomy struggle as a form of class antagonism (Buendia, 1987; Coronel Ferrer, 2020).

The struggle for RA shifted from a militant a political activity with the downfall of the Marcos regime and the newly installed government's policy of reconciliation. On September 13, 1986, Philippine President Corazon C. Aquino exchanged tokens with the Cordilleran priest-turned-rebel Conrado Balweg in Mount Data, Bauko, Mountain Province. The act of exchanging a bible, a rosary, and an armalite for a shield, a spear, a head ax, and a bolo symbolized the cessation of hostilities (*sipat*) between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the CPLA. As described by advocates who participated in the militant phase of the struggle,

After we went there, since *sipat*, we now declare to stop shooting. Because we are now going to discuss and resolve this problem through dialogue, and negotiation. It was just a one-half coupon bond signed by Fr. Balweg and 6 more of us and two regional commanders of the PC noon. It only says there that during this period of negotiation, this is a ceasefire between CPLA and government forces. (Advocate #6)

You must understand the process of *sipat*. This is a step towards peace between two warring communities. They elevated it to approximate the peace between the cordillera represented by the CPLA and the government. The *sipat* is an exchange of tokens, a sort of an expression of interest to make peace. And since the *bodong* process or the peacemaking process is essentially transactional, they put in these demands as bargaining points. Meaning it was not agreed upon, these were simply talking points. (Advocate #13).

Meanwhile, the CPA's persistent lobbying from June to December 1986 resulted in the regional autonomy provisions of the 1987 Philippine Constitution (Solang, 2017). With the constitutional provisions on



RA in place, President Cory Aquino signed Executive Order No. 220 on July 15, 1987, creating the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and regional bodies responsible for preparing the region into an autonomous unit.

Although the current advocates acknowledge the connection of the region's autonomy claim with communism, there is disagreement regarding its contribution. For some, they assert that communism has strengthened the movement against the Marcos dictatorship. According to a former participant in the armed struggle,

There is something wrong with the system. We endeavored to find the reasons why this was happening. The organization that was available to provide us with such information was the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army. It was only the left that gave an organized opposition against the Marcos regime. (Advocate #17).

In addition, an IEC speaker and also a city government employee advocate stressed that the CPP-NPA helped educate the ethnic communities regarding the injustices committed against them.

Some of these ideas about autonomy basically started with them (CPP). The right to self-governance, self-identity, and the right to rule over our own domain. Not the same concept, similar, some more than the others. Communism played a relevant role in the concepts that we are talking about now. (Advocate #12).

Other advocates who are also officials of one of the CPLA- CBA factions explain that the association of the Cordillera movements with communism was a product of government branding and not necessarily because these movements agreed with the communist ideas.

All those who rejected the projects were identified as communists" (Advocate #3).

I do not believe that people from there joined the struggle because they would like to establish a communist party. But, while they were struggling, they were struggling under the banner of CPP-NPA. Okay, Why? because it was the government that branded everybody as CPP members. But for me, for example, when I joined this, I did know what communism is. My personal motivation when I joined this was because of the issue there in my place. (Advocate #6).

Moreover, they assert that the CPP-NPA has manipulated the Cordillera issue to further their interest while having no concrete plans regarding the Cordillera region.

It so happened there is an issue there, there is a problem for people and the problem was the problem of the people against the government, and at that time the leaders or intellectuals, operators of the communist party saw that as an opportunity, so they came and exploit it against the government. . . They used us and our issues. They see us as tools to advance their agenda and to fight against the national government. (Advocate #6).

Additionally, some advocates attributed the two failed autonomy attempts to the association of the clamor with the communist organization.

The group which started the struggle had a negative image, they were activists, and members of the CPLA. There was fear that the region's peace and order situation would be under the communist organization. (Advocate #2).

The government has been very effective in alienating the left. Thus, as a reflex action of those who were against the left, they voted no" (Advocate #17).

Ultimately, the Philippine government sided with the organization which supposedly severed its ties with communism. By entering the Mt. Data peace agreement, the Cory Aquino administration tipped the scale in favor of CPLA-CBA using its capacity to distribute rewards and punishments. Moreover, in issuing EO#220, the government has successfully co-opted former militant participants into occupying government positions. As a result, the region's autonomy struggle has become a concerted effort by the national government through



its regional agencies and the former CPLA-CBA members. Smith (1979) identified the common framing of a group's history as significant in pursuing self-rule. In the case of the Cordillera autonomy claim, a unified version of its past, its memories, and the value of its natural resources are important, especially so that the region is comprised of culturally independent ethnic categories and migrant populations. The shared memory of the struggle to protect the territory's resources can serve as an important historical narrative that can give its inhabitants a shared sense of attachment to the region. The identification with the struggle against the "others" can help harden the identity boundaries between them and the mainstream population. Solidifying the regional populace around a common history of struggle can translate into their support for the establishment of an ARC. However, the results reveal that advocates have framed the region's historical narrative in different ways.

For one, while some interpret the entry of dams, logging, and mining activities as development brought to the region, others see it as acts of aggression. The advocates who participated in the militant phase of the autonomy claim or have personally witnessed and experienced the entry of state-sponsored projects tend to highlight the development aggression which threatened the Cordillera community's physical and cultural survival. Usually financed by non-community members, these projects disregard the communities' beliefs and traditions. Also, these advocates stress that the acts of aggression triggered the region's autonomy claim. Meanwhile, other advocates argue that focusing on the militant phase and historical background does not benefit the autonomy claim. Instead, attention must be given to the advantages of being an autonomous region. These advocates, mostly former and incumbent local officials, claim that the current voters would rather hear how autonomy can resolve their everyday concerns rather than its historical background. Hence the emphasis on the state-sponsored projects as potential sources of regional funds for the region's infrastructure and basic services.

The other issue dividing the current autonomy advocates is the involvement of the CPP-NPA in the autonomy claim. While some choose to include the help provided by the CPP-NPA in their historical narrative, others decided to move the narrative away from its identification with the left. With the Mt. Data peace agreement, the CPLA-CBA dominates the historical narrative while the CPA continues to fight for its version of genuine regional autonomy. Nonetheless, the CPLA-CBA driven historical narrative is appraised as not inclusive of the experiences of the different Cordillera ethnic categories.

Overall, these fragmented historical framings weaken the foundation of the Cordillera autonomy claim instead of providing a solid historical background. Likewise, it can generate confusion and apathy among the regional population, especially those who rely on the advocates to provide a clear sense of its emergence and development.

### **Competing justifications for the Cordillera autonomy claim**

The research participants all cited the 1987 Philippine constitution as the primary basis for the Cordillera autonomy claim.

The autonomy struggle is simply the claiming of the autonomy provisions of the constitution. Cordillera autonomy must be passed since it is in the constitution (Advocate #5).

Because the 1987 constitution said there should be an autonomous region of the Cordilleras. The legal basis is the 1987 constitution. (Advocate #9)

When the 1987 constitution was drafted, the autonomous regions were included. That is where the claim stands. (Advocate #10).

Additionally, a long-time, local official advocate used the autonomy provisions of the constitution to justify his support for the claim.





I believe that this is the future of the Cordilleras, especially for our children and it is my constitutional duty to do it. It is a constitutional provision. (Advocate #12).

Despite standing on the same constitutional provisions, there is divergence in terms of the emphasized underlying principles behind the constitutional privilege afforded to the region. Several advocates emphasize that the core of the autonomy struggle is to gain additional decision-making powers and economic benefits for the region. Autonomy for the local government official advocates highlights the flaws of a centralized governance system. They complain about the national policies as inappropriate, inapplicable, unfit, and non-beneficial to the region's conditions. Advocates who currently serve as local legislative officials explain that,

Because of too- much-centralized government, that is why there are so many policies created at the central government level that are not actually applicable on our part. (Advocate #1).

National standards will have to be adjusted to the conditions of the Cordilleras. Schools are built depending on the number of students. Villages are far from each other, separated by mountains and rivers. Thus, no schools are built. We live in the mountains, separated by rugged terrain. The national government, they do not know what footbridges are, foot trails, or hanging bridges. It is terrible. So, when they allocate funds, they are talking about international standards. (Advocate #8).

Another provincial executive official adds that the current lawmaking process is a long and bureaucratic procedure and that RA would cut through the national government's legislative bureaucracy. For these advocates, RA is the solution to the flaws of a centralized governance system by providing the region with additional decision-making powers and economic benefits. As explained by participants in the drafting of the previous autonomy bills,

That is why I defined regional autonomy as an establishment of an autonomous region, without diminution of existing powers and benefits that they are receiving, that will enable the national government to devolve to the said autonomous region certain functions and responsibilities to be performed by them, for them to be able to come up with their plans and programs that really address the problems of the region. And with the understanding to continue to share with the revenues of the national government. (Advocate # 16).

Once this (autonomy) is created, we will have the regional assembly. They can come up with our own policies, and take care of our own finances (Advocate #2).

Similarly, the SPCAR brochure directly points out that Cordillera autonomy means responsive policies for the region especially in managing its natural wealth. Government official advocates underscore the need for regional officials to control the utilization, development, and exploration of the territory's natural resources.

The power to decide over our resources, we want that power to be devolved to us through a regional government. Even just for simple irrigation, why do we need to go and apply for a permit there in Manila. We own these resources. (Advocate #6).

We get to develop, take care of, and ask for fees for our own environment. Because there are details to show that we are rich in natural resources. We should be the ones to regulate the use of these resources (Advocate #13).

Amidst the claims that autonomy expands the lawmaking powers of the region, one advocate cautions that the proposed organic act does not contain provisions allowing the Cordillera region to create its own laws and policies. She notes that the autonomy bill clearly indicates that the general control and supervision over the autonomous region remains in the hands of the national government. Like the previously rejected organic acts where there was a failure to devolve substantial administrative and political powers to the autonomous regional government (Buendia, 1991; Casambre, 2001; Rood, 1989), the current autonomy bills have not



substantially changed. They still contain numerous provisions with the phrase “consistent with the constitution, and national laws and policies.” As such, the regional lawmaking body will still need to seek the approval of the national government.

Aside from the additional decision-making powers, the potential economic benefits of being an autonomous region are also underscored. The respondents point out that the inclusion of the autonomy provisions in the 1987 Philippine constitution implies the admission of the national government’s economic neglect of the region. They claim that autonomy is for the region to catch up with the other economically developed territories in the country. It aims to realize the region’s economic development as envisioned by the 1987 Philippine constitution. Among the stressed economic benefits of RA is the budgetary allocation for the autonomous Cordillera region, with several advocates envisioning where these additional funds could be utilized.

Apart from the Internal Revenue Allotment, if we become an autonomous region, we get the subsidy coming from the national government. We can use it as capital for us to develop. (Advocate #1).

Aside from our share of the national wealth, there is an additional subsidy. So, for every year, for the next five years, a 10 billion subsidy will be given to the autonomous region. And then on the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> year, another 5 billion every year. So 75B for the first ten years of being an autonomous region. So that, we are able to come up with so many hydro, so many power generating plants with that much money that will be given to us, maybe on the 11<sup>th</sup> year we could now sustain ourselves. (Advocate #9).

What we are saying is that with the additional funds, the development brought to the community will continue, and it will hopefully double. For irrigation, and reforestation. (Advocate #10).

With the funds that the cordillera region will get when it becomes autonomous, we can use it to encourage these young people to remain in the region. For women’s health issues . . . to render services to the people. Cordillera autonomy means development for the cordillera people. The money allocated should be for the cordillera people. (Advocate #11).

Over and above the Internal Revenue Allotment and the share in the national taxes, bearing in mind the purposes of the constitutional provision which is to speed up the national development of CAR, then the national government should give us a subsidy, of 10B per year for the first five years, 5B next five years. (Advocate #16).

Conversely, some advocates have expressed their discomfort with the autonomy IEC’s focus on the potential economic benefits of autonomy. They note that they have disregarded the cultural and historical aspects of the autonomy claim.

We should not be saying that when we become autonomous, we get to have 10B. Do not talk about the financial aspect of that. People will say “oh so they have a huge amount of money for their pockets”. (Advocate #3).

It lost its cultural aspect and now they are only talking about the billions and billions they expect to get. That is the problem now. And all they will talk about is for the next five years we will begin with billion this and it will become billion that. (Advocate #4).

That is where it should be anchored, historical injustices. Reclaiming the recognition for your identity. Now it is anchored on economic and political interests. Now, IEC on cordillera autonomy no longer talks about the history of CAR instead it is about how CAR is being marginalized in terms of budget allocation. Autonomy discussions are focused on economic and political interests. For politicians it is anchored on giving more power to them, they get to have power over resource management. (Advocate #15).

Other advocates insist that the protection of the IPs and the redress of the historical development aggression committed against them are central to the autonomy demand. For them, autonomy is the national



government's way of recognizing the IPs' distinct cultural, social, economic, and political systems. While these communities have been able to resist colonial influences, they have become victims of injustices perpetrated by the Philippine national government. Autonomy is the national government's way of making things right by allowing them to decide for themselves and determine what is best for their land and resources.

...because the basic notion of autonomy and self – determination is ownership, use, and management of natural resources. That is it, and the right to determine what you want to become. Those are the two most important things. That is why autonomy is the companion of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA). (Advocate #3).

Autonomy is for the identity of the IPs, as indigenous peoples. (Advocate # 8).

...autonomy is the expression of the right to self – determination. Autonomy was given to them as a privilege because through time they were not subjugated and they kept their culture. To give autonomy to the IPs is a recognition that they were subjected to different forms of injustices, marginalization, and land dispossession for more than 3 centuries. These are institutionalized injustices. They were able to ward off these injustices, thus the constitution gave them the privilege to choose whether they would go for autonomy. (Advocate #15).

Meanwhile, other advocates point out that the autonomy claim needs to consider that the regional population has been infused with migrant populations and non-Cordilleran IPs. As a result, the autonomy bill uses the term Cordilleran instead of the terms IPs and *Igorot* - a generic term used to refer to the different ethnic groups in the region. Those involved in the drafting of the autonomy bills explain,

...because of the increased number of lowlanders here. They fear they would be discriminated against. After consultation, they thought of a definition that does not focus only on the *Igorot*, so they considered the at least 1 year residency as a basic requirement for a Cordilleran. (Advocate #2).

Yes, the bill is very explicit regarding people who should be called Cordilleran. It says that at least you had 1 year of stay, domicile here in the region. . . For it to be consistent with the national law. Because when you vote for a mayor or other local positions, what you need is 1-year residency. (Advocate #9).

Simply, Cordilleran is a Filipino citizen domiciled in the cordillera. . . It removes the fear that there will be reverse discrimination. The fear is that we have been discriminated against for a long time, thus this is an opportunity that we will take revenge against them. . . You do not distinguish the *Igorot*, Ilokano, Tagalogs that are here, so long as they are here, domiciled in the Cordillera, they are Cordillerans. (Advocate #16)

According to Smith (1979), another important factor for the successful pursuit of self-rule is a common vision and program of action. It refers to how autonomy advocates foresee the region's priorities once it becomes autonomous. Articulating a common vision and program of action helps shape the voters' understanding and expectations of RA. It gives them a preview of the benefits and significance of an autonomy status. More importantly, it demonstrates the unity of the autonomy advocates toward working for something beneficial to the territory. Hence, convincing the regional population to support the clamor.

The results reveal that while commonly invoking the constitution, advocates have different visions for the ARC. Those with local governance backgrounds focused on RA's additional decision-making powers and potential economic benefits. They highlighted how RA can solve the flaws of a centralized governance system. Additionally, they do not distinguish between the region's IPs and non-IPs residents as evidenced in their use of the label Cordilleran instead of IPs or *Igorot*. Hence, they have placed the Cordillera problem alongside the generic issue of regional decentralization and have sidelined the unique demands of the region's ethnic communities.

Moreover, their focus on power-sharing relations and economic benefits paints a picture of traditional politicians and government officials arguing for an additional layer of government structure, which does not make a convincing argument for the grassroots benefits of RA. Instead, it delivers a strong message of



individuals wanting to gain additional political and economic powers. Finally, it must be noted that when the painted vision of autonomy appears to be more beneficial to its advocates and future leaders, it might repel potential supporters.

Meanwhile, advocates with experience in IPs rights stress the importance of RA to protect and promote the region's indigenous population. They frame RA as a tool to redress the grievances of the region's indigenous communities. Although their arguments still center on the increased regional decision-making powers, it highlights the use of indigenous political systems and practices. These advocates emphasize that the different Cordilleran ethnic communities dominate the region and that the constitutional provision on autonomy was meant for these populations.

However, advocates representing the IPs' interests admitted the concerns regarding reverse discrimination and their lack of influence over those in charge of the autonomy bills. Hence, they have expressed willingness, in the meantime, to forego the focus on IPs and just get the autonomy bill signed and ratified. Their acquiescence does not make the arguments aligned; it simply postpones the resolution of the issue. It becomes an issue waiting to happen once an ARC is established.

## CONCLUSIONS

Extending for more than three decades, the clamor for Cordillera autonomy in the Philippines is an interesting case demonstrating the importance of agents in instituting RA. Although its advocates have managed to entrench the autonomy claim in the Philippine constitution, the regional population has rejected the autonomy organic act twice. Despite the centralization of autonomy efforts and the allotment of public funds for its activities and programs, the third attempt to establish an ARC has failed to gain momentum. Focusing on the current individuals involved in the autonomy claim, this study examined their various framings of the clamor's history and justification. In examining the historical background and justifications highlighted by the Cordillera autonomy advocates, this study found that they have non-cohesive constructions. In terms of the historical narrative, they have various interpretations of the entry of state-sponsored projects in the region and the involvement of communism in the struggle. In terms of justifying the autonomy claim, although unanimously citing the 1987 Philippine constitution as the primary basis, advocates have diversely substantiated the claim. While former and incumbent local government officials underscored the flaws of a centralized governance system, IPs representative advocates highlighted the protection and redress of the grievances of the indigenous cultural communities in the region. The significance of cohesive framings is emphasized by Smith (1979) and noted as absent in the previous Cordillera autonomy efforts by Casambre (2001, 2010) and Coronel -Ferrer (2005, 2020). This study reveals that a united construction of the clamor for Cordillera autonomy remains lacking among the current advocates. Instead, it features individuals failing to consolidate their arguments, creating confusion, apathy, and suspicion among the regional populace. Hence, the fragmented versions of the autonomy claim's history and justification contribute to the continued frustration of the desire for self-rule.

At this point, this study suggests a rethinking of the IEC strategy for Cordillera autonomy. For one, the advocates might want to set aside their long-held excuse of the regional population's lack of information about autonomy and instead focus on aligning the information they are offering. The issue might not be the lack of information but the misalignment of the advocates' messages. The challenge is to look for a middle ground that could represent the region's political, economic, and indigenous communities' concerns. Finally, acknowledging that the current study is limited to one side of the communication process, an evaluation of the IEC sessions from the recipient's perspective can also help identify points of alignment.



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