Kemanusiaan Vol. 33, No. 2 (2026), 127–151

Disaster Nationalism and Media Framing: The Case of the 1976 Moro Gulf Earthquake

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Published online: 30 October 2026

To cite this article: Elgin Glenn R. Salomon. 2026. Disaster nationalism and media framing: The case of the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake. *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 33(1): 127–151. https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2026.33.2.7

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2026.33.2.7

Abstract. Examining the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake that struck southwestern Mindanao in the southern Philippines, this article explored how President Ferdinand Marcos packaged official nationalist rhetoric to affirm order and stability in the region already besieged by the conflict between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a Muslim secessionist group and the Philippine state forces. Using news and editorial articles from the *Times Journal*, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* newspapers, this study argued that media representations of the earthquake reinforced Filipino nationalist rhetoric, inclusive of the Muslim population of southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, which would further legitimise President Marcos' authoritarian rule. Consequently, the study found that nationalist rhetoric from the government and the media could serve as a framework for post-disaster recovery and development initiatives of Manila in Muslim Mindanao.

Keywords and phrases: disaster nationalism, media framing, Ferdinand Marcos, Muslim secessionist movement, earthquake

Introduction

On 17th August 1976, at 12:11 a.m., an 8.0-magnitude earthquake struck Mindanao, a southern island of the Philippines (Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology n.d.). The epicentre of the earthquake was in the Moro Gulf, around 60 miles offshore from Cotabato City. It produced a deadly tsunami that destroyed more than 700 kilometres of coastline bordering the Moro Gulf, including the coastal communities of the provinces of Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato, Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao (including Cotabato City), the Sulu archipelago and the Zamboanga Peninsula region, including Pagadian City and

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Zamboanga City. After the deadly quake, a 15-foot tsunami followed for one to three minutes and overwhelmed the houses along the coastline. Aftershocks were felt across Mindanao for the next couple of days. Each day, the number of casualties increased as relief operations continued across the coastal areas of the Moro Gulf. Government buildings, residential homes and bridges collapsed or suffered extensive damage. Over 8,000 were killed or missing, 10,000 were injured and 90,000 were left homeless (Bangsamoro Information Office 2022).

Against the backdrop of this disaster was an ongoing Muslim secessionist war between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). When Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law on 21st September 1972, the dictatorship militarised various communities across the country, including many areas in Muslim Mindanao (Misuari 2012). The MNLF intended to liberate the Bangsamoro people from the oppression, tyranny and terror of Filipino colonialism. The rebels recruited Muslim civilians to join the secessionist group and launched offensives against the growing military presence in Muslim Mindanao.

Newspaper outlets such as the *Times Journal*, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* comprehensively described the situation of southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, where it captured the Marcos government's official narrative of the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake. The media representation of the disaster then reinforced Filipino nationalist rhetoric, inclusive of the Muslim population, that would legitimise President Marcos' authoritarian rule.

Media and Disaster Nationalism

Media plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of destruction and catastrophe through narratives, tropes and visualisation and ultimately shapes the transmission and interpretation of events as construed by cultural values. The research group Dealing with Disaster, led by cultural historians van Asperen and Jensen (2023), affirms that after an event is labelled as disastrous and turned into a narrative, the narrative allows producers, reproducers and consumers of media "to relate to the events and identify themselves with (parts of) the representation" (van Asperen and Jensen 2023, 23–24). The process of nation-building, therefore, thrives on emotional experience (Meijer 2023). Historian Greg Bankoff (2023, 461) points out that media would then bring out a sense of shared identity or nationalism through collective feelings of suffering, such as grief, loss and shared suffering and "a sense of common purpose and identity". The Philippines is located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, making it one of the world's disaster hotspots. The state's volcanic and seismic activity became

more frequent (Bankoff 1999). With this reality, the social systems of Filipino society (i.e., political structures, economic system, social order and history), vulnerability and the culture of resiliency have shaped how Filipinos make sense of these disasters. With the media's role in shaping a nation as an imagined community, Filipino nationalist discourses affirm order, stability and common Filipino identity (Bankoff 2004; 2003a; 2003b).

News coverage and editorials present how disasters create a common experience of togetherness among Filipinos, drawing them closer as they seek mutual comfort, unity and support. Media coverage of disasters often fosters bonds of kinship, community building and a sense of common identity among people, commonly embodied in the cherished value of *bayanihan* – the enduring spirit of solidarity, civic unity and cooperation (Bankoff 2023). In the parlance of sociologist Emile Durkheim, this solidarity cultivates a profound sense of collective responsibility toward the group's or community's well-being, especially a heightened concern for protecting or supporting its most vulnerable, underprivileged and disadvantaged members (Bankoff 2023). Disasters could simultaneously spark widespread outpourings of help, support and humanitarian aid.

The ruling elites and political orders impose and reproduce a dominant understanding of national identity to safeguard the population from crises brought by disasters (Zhang 2022). In an ethnically heterogeneous state, disasters propel the political elites to promote nationalism that shapes the population into a centralised, unified and homogeneous entity. According to anthropologist Vivian Choi (2015), disaster nationalism often reasserts state practices and power, including the execution of disaster management and reconstruction programmes that pave the way for a nationalist imagination. In already war-torn regions, for instance, natural disasters and rebellion may cause further instability, and post-disaster reconstruction efforts were refracted as nation-building projects, enabling new forms of population and territorial management (Choi 2015, 287). Ruling elites' nationalist rhetoric functions as a framework not only for post-disaster recovery programmes and initiatives but also for promoting the inclusion of ethnolinguistic groups situated on the nation's margins.

As early as the late 19th century, the media played a role in disaster nationalism in the Philippines by uniting Filipinos in a shared sense of togetherness and solidarity during disasters. The publication of daily newspapers, the establishment of a postal system and the construction of a telegraph system made timely accounts of what was happening in the provinces and rural areas outside of Manila. The reporting of typhoons, floods, fires and other disasters

contributed to shaping a collective sense of the Philippines as one unified nation, set against the backdrop of the waning power of Spanish colonialism and the birth of the Filipino nation (Bankoff 2023).

The articulation of nationalist rhetoric during disasters continued during the early years of the American colonial period, especially at the height of the 1911 Taal Volcano eruption (on Central Luzon Island) and the El Niño Southern Oscillation. While the nationalist press criticised the Americans for their poor response to the crises, they also framed the problem as Filipinos' shared endurance in the face of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, typhoons and drought. These experiences forged Filipinos into one unified people who transcended geographical distances and linguistic differences (Ventura 2022). The nationalist press turned disasters into symbols of unified national suffering and resistance to foreign rule. Disaster nationalism, amplified by the press, amplified the push for self-sufficiency in rice production. When a series of powerful typhoons hit Manila during the initial years of Ferdinand Marcos' administration (specifically in 1970–1972), the media manufactured the values of resilience and communal cooperation as part of Filipino identity and morality (Guyton 2022).

Although existing studies have discussed seismological assessment, environmental impact and the situation of the victims and survivors during the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake (Beck and Ruff 1985; Haas 1978), there are few studies that tackle how the ruling elite, like President Marcos and state bureaucrats, used nationalist politics as a tool to affirm order and stability (Hossain 2018) in southwestern Mindanao and Sulu, a region considered a periphery within the Philippine nation-state. Unlike in other instances of disaster nationalism in the Philippines, the Muslim secessionist movement, which seeks independence for Muslim-majority areas, complicated how the Marcos dictatorship articulated nationalism. More so, in the context of authoritarian rule, President Ferdinand Marcos took on a more overtly propagandistic and authoritarian form where disaster nationalism became a tool for political control and legitimacy.

Using collected news and editorial articles from the *Times Journal*, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* from 18th August 1976 to 31st August 1976 on the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake, this study examines the Marcos government's official narrative of the earthquake. Locating the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake in the development of Filipino nationalism, this article argues that media representations of the earthquake reinforced Filipino nationalist rhetoric, inclusive of the Muslim population of southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, which would further legitimise President Marcos' authoritarian rule. Consequently, these nationalist rhetorics from the government and the media would serve as a framework for post-disaster recovery and development initiatives in Manila in southwestern Mindanao.

In total, 45 articles from the *Times Journal*, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* on the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake were identified and analysed. Most of these articles were concentrated from 18th August (the day after the earthquake and tsunami) to 30th August 1976 (government initiatives on rehabilitation). Themes regarding the framing of the battle were selected by assembling the codes. These codes include:

1. Initial information about the earthquake.
2. Immediate response of the government.
3. Nationalist rhetoric of the Marcos administration.
4. The First Couple visiting the disaster zones.
5. Long-term rehabilitation by the government.

The identified patterns and relationships across the codes and themes were examined to understand how the framing of the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake helped reinforce President Marcos' nationalist rhetoric and advance his authoritarian rule's image-making agenda.

Times Journal, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* newspapers were selected in this study because they were among English-language newspapers with the largest circulations in the Philippines during that period. Also, their accessibility and prominence shape public opinion on martial law and the Marcos administration (Doyo 2019; United Press International 1984). Hard copies of the *Philippines Daily Express*, *Philippines Sunday Express* and Philippines Evening Express were consulted at the Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University, while those of *Bulletin Today* and *Times Journal* were retrieved from the University of the Philippines Main Library. The target audience for English-language newspapers in the Philippines consists primarily of educated, urban-based Filipinos, business professionals, policymakers and intellectuals (Dayag 2008). This was crucial in the context of this study since the English-language press often sets the tone for national discourse, including the articulation of Filipino nationalism.

Historical Background

Martial law and the Moro National Liberation Front

After the Second World War, the mass migration of the Christian population from the north (i.e., Ilocos region) and central (i.e., Panay and Negros Islands) parts of the country accelerated. Moreover, transnational corporations displaced and marginalised the Muslim population of Cotabato and Lanao due to land grabbing (Abreu 2008; Abinales 2012). Tensions escalated when both

Christian and Muslim elites raised their private armies. The Christians created the Ilaga (from Filipino word – rats), a paramilitary group that caused massacres against Maranao and Maguindanao Muslims (Tan 2003; Vitug and Gloria 2000; McKenna 1998; Majul 1998; Rodil 1994).

President Ferdinand Marcos recruited young men, mainly from Sulu, to invade Sabah and regain its sovereignty from Malaysia. However, a total of 28 men were executed on Corregidor Island on 18 March 1968 after some conflicts with military superiors and unmet expectations by the conscripts. This incident was popularly known as the Jabidah Massacre. Malaysia helped the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM, later renamed the Mindanao Independence Movement) by sponsoring 90 men to participate in military training and this was led by Nur Misuari (McKenna 1998). However, President Marcos declared martial law on 21st September 1972, in the guise of suppressing lawless violence in the entire country. As an implementer of martial law, the military became a locus of power in Philippine society. The president also envisioned creating a new society where "every individual Filipino could be free to fulfil their potential as human beings" since "poverty, hunger, corruption, mass deception and violence" were already eradicated (Ateneo Martial Law Museum n.d.).

Political groups were banned after the martial law declaration that caused the dissolution of the MIM and the activation of the underground MNLF and its armed wing, the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA) on October 21, 1972 (Abinales and Amoroso 2005). Led by Nur Misuari, the MNLF envisioned creating a Moro nation, or *Bangsa Moro Republik*, as a response to colonial and neocolonial rule that oppressed the Muslims. As part of Moro's "national consciousness", the MNLF deployed the notion of collective victimhood to strengthen their legitimacy to form a separate nation-state.

> The decision to become free and independent has been deeply embedded in our national consciousness, as we have inherited such consciousness from the three centuries of the continuous struggle of our forebears for the preservation of our national freedom, our homeland and Islam. (Misuari 1973)

Foreign countries morally and financially supported the secessionist rebels, who planned an all-out attack to overpower government military bases throughout Mindanao. By December 1972, the MNLF had established its first logistical base in Mindanao in Lebak, Cotabato (now in the province of Sultan Kudarat) (Vitug and Gloria 2000).

The president recognised the vulnerability of the Philippine Republic in the Muslim areas of Mindanao due to the presence of MNLF rebels (Marcos 1973). President Marcos' book *Notes on the New Society of the Philippines* (1973), a piece of propaganda that justified the declaration of martial law, described Mindanao as the least developed and most neglected part of the country (*Bulletin Today* 1974a). He claimed that to address the grievances of the Muslim population, he already embarked on reforms "to alleviate social and economic conditions in the Muslim areas" (Marcos 1973, 136). President Marcos also wished that the "Muslim brothers must be integrated into the national community" (Marcos 1973, 137). But the Marcos administration also committed various forms of human rights violations while confronting the forces of the MNLF in the hinterland of southwestern Mindanao and Sulu (Salomon 2022a). The military's abuses led many Muslims to support both the MNLF and BMA. They joined the secessionist group, which had a force of 14,000 regular fighters by 1973. On the other hand, the Marcos government deployed 70 to 80 per cent of its combat forces in Mindanao despite the island having less than a fourth of the country's population (Custodio and Dalisay 1998). Violence erupted in certain parts of Mindanao and Sulu between rebels and soldiers. One of the most infamous episodes during this conflict was the AFP's burning of Jolo town to purportedly save it from occupying MNLF fighters, an event that became known as the 1974 Battle of Jolo (Salomon 2022b).

An editorial article in the *Bulletin Today*, published during the 1974 Battle of Jolo (or two years before the earthquake and tsunami happened), enumerated the root causes of the problems in Mindanao that the government wanted to resolve. Categorised as remaining vestiges of the "Old Society", these problems include the legitimacy of political leadership, which gained ascendancy through guns, goods and gold, conflict, lack of public support for some of the members of political leaders in the Muslim regions, disruption of commerce and other economic activities, economic crisis and absence of visible transport and communication systems (*Bulletin Today* 1974b). But public officials like Defence Secretary Enrile believed that "much headway had been achieved in the months since martial law was declared, but much still must be done to bring about lasting freedom and progress under the New Society" (*Bulletin Today* 1974c). However, confrontations between the military and the growing forces of the MNLF continued in southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, areas that would later experience the damage brought by the earthquake and tsunami. Accordingly, the Marcos administration capitalised on the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake, where they used the disaster to legitimise the integration of Muslims into the so-called Filipino nation. The framework of New Society served as the Marcos administration's guiding principles for this integration to materialise.

Martial law and the state of media

While the authoritarian rule of President Marcos confronted many challenges in Muslim Mindanao, the government's economic intervention drew significantly on crony capitalism. Economic privileges, especially monopolies, were sold or leased to a select group of favoured families and businesses. The same crony system extended to the media sector, where newspapers, radio stations and television networks came under tight government control and were placed in the hands of Marcos's relatives or close associates (Coronel 2001). Roberto Benedicto, a prominent crony of President Marcos, confiscated both the Kanlaon Broadcasting System and the *Philippines Daily Express* newspaper. Enrique Romualdez, a relative of First Lady Imelda Marcos, served as the editor-in-chief of the newspaper. The *Philippines Daily Express* also published the *Philippines Sunday Express*, the Sunday edition of the newspaper and the *Philippines Evening Express*, its evening tabloid edition. Meanwhile, President Marcos' brother-in-law and the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, Benjamin "Kokoy" Romualdez, owned and controlled daily newspapers such as the *Times Journal* and its affiliated publications, such as *People's Journal* and *People's Tonight* (Dresang 1985).

Marcos loyalists like industrialist and landowner Hans Menzi stayed supportive to protect their business interests. Menzi bought the *Manila Daily Bulletin* from its founder, Carlson Taylor. He served as president and chairman of Bulletin Publishing Corporation, owned Mindanao Plantations (including a paper mill) and sat on the boards of major corporations and civic groups. Following martial law in 1972, Marcos ordered him to inactive status and tasked him with reviving the newspaper under the new name, *Bulletin Today*. In an authoritarian regime, representation and framing in the media function to reinforce and preserve the existing power structure through the exercise of political authority aimed at legitimising the rule of political elites and sustaining favourable public opinion and support for the regime (von Soest and Grauvogel 2015). Aside from reporting the situation of southern Mindanao during the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake, the *Times Journal*, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* would play an active role in gathering updates on the affected regions in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, echoing the nationalist rhetoric of President Marcos and, most importantly, legitimising his rule.

Framing The 1976 Moro Gulf Earthquake

Earthquake, tsunami and the state's immediate response

News articles from the *Times Journal*, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* comprehensively and vividly described the situation in southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago during the 1976 Moro Gulf Earthquake that resulted in heavy loss of life and damage to property. It was considered the "most powerful tremor to hit the Philippines in recorded history" (Casayuran 1976b). Journalists Artemio Engracia and Manuel Silva (1976) of the *Philippines Daily Express* even labelled the earthquake as the worst in Philippine history. The newspapers actively fostered a sense of national solidarity by publishing news and feature stories highlighting the plight of devastated communities and the struggles of survivors.

On 17th August at 1:00 a.m., President Marcos appeared on national television from the Executive Office in Malacañang Palace and immediately proclaimed a state of calamity in the regions of Mindanao, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan. President Marcos disclosed that both civilian and military agencies "engaged in an all-out rescue, relief and rehabilitation effort" (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976a, 1). While cautioning the whole nation that possible quakes may follow, he also warned the public of the aftershocks, especially in affected areas. President Marcos also instructed the AFP to coordinate with the National Disaster Coordinating Council and Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration so that people in the affected areas could receive the assistance they needed (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976a). The coverage by the three newspapers a few days after the earthquake mainly focused on the reports on the extent of damage experienced by affected areas and the search and rescue efforts led by government agencies and the military.

The newspapers prominently incorporated personal narratives from both journalists on the ground and earthquake survivors. For instance, in the *Philippines Daily Express* article "Like Hell it was. And God What a Way to Die", published two days after the earthquake, journalists Artemio Engracia and Leslie Santos (1976, 2) not only captured the experiences of the survivors but also their emotional distress: "How can a thing like this happen to us? What have we done to deserve this fate? …I saw their house crumple under the waves and I never saw any members of that family again", a fisherman in Pagadian City said. Molina and Elbanbuena (1976, 2) of the *Times Journal* captured the fear of the residents of Cotabato City after they experienced multiple aftershocks. The resident said, "Why do earthquakes keep on occurring? It's risky to stay

here". Meanwhile, Carpio's article, *Day of the Coffin Maker*, narrated his desolate condition in Cotabato City and its residents: In Cotabato City, the gloom was echoed by the closed stores and the weather. It was not raining, but the sky was dark, a dark grey kind of melancholy that was hard to shake off as we went around the crumbled city (Carpio 1976, 1).

The newspaper also documented distressing images from the earthquake's impact sites. For instance, journalists Leslie Santos and Manuel Silva documented the condition of earthquake survivors in Cotabato City. Their photos appeared on the cover of the *Philippines Evening Express* on 19th August 1976. The larger image showed cloth-covered bodies of the dead being prepared for relatives for burial in the cemetery, while the smaller one depicted a woman bottle-feeding her granddaughter in a refugee centre (*Philippines Evening Express* 1976a). Providing firsthand accounts and images of the suffering of fellow Filipinos in the southern Philippines, these newspapers served as key mechanisms for conveying the extent and human impact of the seismic damage to the broader populace. The experiential testimonies, such as survivors' descriptions of intense ground shaking and post-event displacements, facilitated a more tangible visualisation and empathetic understanding of the disaster's physical destruction and psychosocial toll among distant readers. The survivors' testimonies, detailed observations from journalists, and distressing images captured by photojournalists encouraged the public to emotionally connect with the victims' pain and suffering, gave form and significance to these compassionate feelings, and in doing so established the emotional foundation for deep national solidarity and a sense of belonging (Meijer 2023). The advent of a catastrophic event frequently stirred profound emotions, including grief, fear, compassion and gratitude, ultimately reinforcing feelings of unity and national solidarity (Zhang 2022). After reading about and seeing the suffering of the survivors, newspaper readers would develop compassion for their compatriots. This would later mobilise them to help the survivors. As part of the rhetoric of disaster nationalism, the media narratives then transformed the tragedy into a shared national burden that acts as a glue that would hold the nation together during a disaster.

The three newspapers comprehensively discussed the initial response of the local and national governments. Cotabato City suffered heavy damage from the earthquake and tsunami (Consing and Aguilar 1976). Meanwhile, in Zamboanga del Sur, Governor Jose Tecson said that 95% of the buildings and houses in all coastal towns of the province were destroyed, "with an estimated total property damage provincewide of P60 million" (Rimando 1976, 12). He further stated that the decomposition of some of the retrieved bodies in the province had already advanced (*Philippines Evening Express* 1976b). In the provincial capital of Pagadian City, hospital capacity was full of the injured and funeral parlours

were full of the dead. Pagadian City Mayor, Filemon Pajares, declared a state of emergency and suspended all offices and classes (*Philippines Evening Express* 1976b). He also encouraged government employees to help with rescue and relief operations.

As the chief of staff of the armed forces of the Philippines, General Romeo C. Espaldon ordered airlifting and rescue and recovery teams in various places in Mindanao and extended public assistance to the survivors. Relief supplies, including medicine, as well as rescue tools, compressors, jackhammers, picks and shovels, were also transported to Mindanao (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976b). While conducting search-and-rescue operations and massive relief efforts, the military, as ordered by Brigadier General Romeo Gidday "placed provincial commanders in Mindanao on alert to prevent any attempt by disgruntled elements to take advantage of the situation", most especially in the so-called "troubled areas" (Casayuran 1976b, 5).

Department of Social Works Secretary, Estefania Aldaba-Lim, also added in a press conference that the military immediately buried the dead bodies while cleaning and sanitising brigades to prevent possible epidemics from happening. More so, to prevent looting, profiteering, hoarding of prime commodities and price manipulation, elements of the Philippine Constabulary and the integrated national police force were fielded in the disaster area (Casayuran 1976a). The Department of Social Works also led the mass feeding of the survivors. Highways Secretary, Baltazar Aquino, sent bridge panels and bridge construction experts to repair destroyed or damaged bridges, particularly in Cotabato. President Marcos also drafted all 75 provincial governors and 61 city mayors throughout the Philippines to help in the relief operations. The president also created a 12-man national task force committee to ensure smooth operations in the relief efforts (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976b).

The 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake, Muslim Mindanao and the Filipino nation

Disaster nationalism emphasised the significant role that collective disaster experiences and their associated narrative play in reinforcing prevailing conceptions of national identity (Zhang 2022). The 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake became an opportunity for the Marcos administration to call for national unity among Christian and Muslim populations. Appealing to the Christian communities around the country two days after the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake, President Marcos persuaded the Christians to express their empathy for the Muslims, who suffered the most from the calamities (Mangawang 1976a). The president also added that the disaster could weld together the various ethnic groups in the country.

The media played a crucial role in articulating disaster nationalism as it turned disastrous events into potent narratives of unity. Journalists from *the Bulletin Today*, *Times Journal* and *Philippines Daily Express* also empathised with the Muslim survivors. Although the pictorial section of the 19th August 1976 issue of the *Philippines Daily Express* titled "Killer Quake", primarily depicted the survivors of the disaster in Pagadian City, it also promoted nationalist rhetoric by claiming that the earthquake "mobilised country and people into one-ness, as brother helped Filipino brother on to the road of recovery" (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976c). Facing the consequences of disaster as a nation, the editorial article "A Time to Help" of *Bulletin Today* (1976a, 6) persuaded the public that "If the country can be thus mobilised for the entire rehabilitation effort, it will not probably take too long a time for things to return to normal". The editorial article in the *Philippines Daily Express* (1976d) dated 19th August 1976, titled "Quake Victims Need Help, Badly", encouraged more fortunate Filipinos to pitch in, since recovery entailed tremendous work in both manpower and resources. This was further elaborated in the said article: "Luzon was spared of the earthquake. So were the Visayan islands. Filipinos being traditionally known for their strong kin ties, now is the chance to pitch in, to help brother Filipinos in their time of needs" (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976d, 4).

The article used the Filipino tradition of strong kin ties to encourage Filipinos, especially those from Luzon and the Visayas, to help their "brothers" in southern Mindanao, the survivors. This response powerfully exemplified Anderson's (2006) notion of horizontal comradeship, as Filipinos from various parts of the archipelago expressed solidarity and stood in fraternal equality with those in the earthquake-stricken areas of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, where they were bound by the common national experience of enduring and overcoming disaster-related hardships. The word "brother" signified that their fellow Filipinos were not *ibang tao* (outsiders), even though they had not known or met each other (Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino 2000). Instead, survivors ought to be regarded as *kapwa* (fellows or people with a shared identity) who carry a moral expectation and a cultural imperative to mutually support and stand by one another during times of crisis. Showing *malasakit* (empathy) entailed sacrificing comfort for fellow Filipinos. This was further manifested in "Quake Victims Need Help, Badly": "Perhaps, therefore, that pleasure trip, that joy ride, that extra meal, or dinner our could be cancelled and the funds appropriated for such purposes be given instead to the needy earthquake victims" (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976d, 4).

The article further encouraged Filipinos from all over the Philippines to donate to agencies such as the Philippine National Red Cross and the Department of Social Welfare. Both the private and public sectors should also show "their

brotherly concern by giving generously" (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976e, 4). The editorial article, "Everyone Must Show Brotherly Concern for Quake Victims", also from the *Philippines Daily Express*, echoed the same message as the previous article. However, it stressed that social responsibility toward the common good should outweigh unnecessary personal luxuries, such as showing off wealth through extravagant events, but through genuine concern and accountability for the welfare of the suffering fellowmen (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976e). The editorial article "A Time to Help of *Bulletin Today*" persuaded the public that "If the country can be thus mobilised for the entire rehabilitation effort, it will not probably take too long a time for things to return to normal" (*Bulletin Today* 1976a, 6).

Throughout the coverage, the newspapers featured the *bayanihan* spirit, where Filipinos all over the Philippines were united to help the survivors in Mindanao. A news article, "Public Response: Overwhelming", also from the *Philippines Daily Express*, for instance, used the so-called age-old Filipino custom *damayan*, which roughly translates to "community's solidarity through compassion" (Barrameda and Barrameda 2011, 138). With its root word *damay*, which means empathy and participation, *damayan* served as the driver of the Filipino public to flock to relief centres and to donate used clothing, heavy equipment and money that would help rebuild communities affected by the earthquake (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976f).

Later, President Marcos praised Filipinos for their enduring resiliency and ability to rise above the calamity. In the wake of the disaster, overwhelming help poured in from across the Philippines (*Philippines Sunday Express* 1976a). Jaime L. Cardinal Sin, the archbishop of Manila, led the Roman Catholic Church in calling on the Catholics in Metro Manila to donate money to the stricken Muslim-majority areas of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. Meanwhile, the newspapers also underlined various individuals and organisations who spearheaded fundraising campaigns. Public schools in Makati, Metro Manila, collected contributions from approximately 35,000 students after asking them to donate the equivalent of one day's worth of their allowance (*Times Journal* 1976a). In a show of solidarity, police officers and firefighters in the same town agreed to voluntary salary deductions to support their contributions. Similarly, employees of Makati Hotel initiated a donation drive by contributing an amount equivalent to one day's pay, raising a total of PHP10,000 (*Times Journal* 1976a). Organisations of journalists, such as in Negros (in the Visayas) and Iligan (in northern Mindanao), also launched their respective donation drives. Businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also donated their money to charitable institutions (*Times Journal* 1976a).

Addressing the marginalisation of Mindanao

During the post-war period, economic opportunities remained limited in the southern Philippines. The neglect of Manila of the plights of Muslim Mindanao and Sulu led to the emergence of Muslim secessionist movements like the MNLF. The Marcos administration viewed the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake as a chance to address the salient issues of Mindanao, especially regarding the condition of Muslim Mindanao and the Muslim secessionist movement. The newspapers framed the earthquake and tsunami as a prospect for the Christian community to show their concern and sympathy to the Muslim population, a rare instance since the Philippines became an independent nation-state (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976e).

The print media then highlighted the capability of the Filipinos to unite in facing disaster and other threats to the security of the nation, including the presence of a Muslim secessionist movement (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976e). Supporting the Marcos government's rhetoric, these journalists anchored their discourse on the Filipino nation, where "Muslims consider themselves a part of the Filipino nation and that the Christians consider the Muslims no less Filipino than themselves" (Batalla 1976a, 6). Of the three newspapers examined, the editorial articles of the *Bulletin Today* explicitly discussed and connected the earthquake as an opportunity to improve the condition of Mindanao, which was affected by marginalisation and conflict. The series of editorial articles was written by Apolonio Batalla. Although Batalla earned a law degree from Manuel L. Quezon University, he chose to join the *Manila Daily Bulletin* (the predecessor of the *Bulletin Today*). He worked his way up through the ranks and eventually became a daily columnist and editorial writer. While some of his colleagues who were critical of the Marcos administration were arrested at the height of martial law, he served as one of the leading editorial writers of *Bulletin Today* (Mariano 1995). This clearly implied that during the height of martial law, Batalla was never critical of the Marcos government.

In the editorial article "Quake Disprove Discrimination" (1976a), Apolonio Batalla of *Bulletin Today*, for instance, attempted to disprove the idea that the Philippine government discriminated against the Muslim population in Mindanao. Batalla, who wrote his editorial articles in Manila, also blamed the remoteness of Mindanao (and other areas of the Philippines, like the northeastern corner of Luzon and Bicol), which made it less developed compared to the rest of the Philippines. However, he emphasised that the Philippine government tried its best to redress these difficulties, including the problems faced by the southern periphery of the country (Batalla 1976a). This was to promote inclusivity, with the Muslim population as part of the Filipino nation.

The next day, Batalla published another article, "The New Stress on Mindanao" where he highlighted that the secessionist movement and the earthquake made the rest of the Philippines more aware of the pressing problems of the island and that "the peculiar conditions obtaining in Mindanao should have given the development of Mindanao a special urgency" and "given Mindanao a much higher priority than before" (Batalla 1976b, 6). Stimulating empathy and understanding in the people of Mindanao, Batalla also encouraged the rest of the Filipinos to relate to the plights of their fellow Filipinos who were affected by the ongoing war and disaster. He remained hopeful that the rest of the Filipinos would understand the heavy spending on the damages brought by the earthquake, just like how they understood the heavy spending on Mindanao at the height of the Moro secessionist movement. Batalla then suggested that there's a need to unlock the economic potential of the island through re-education of the Filipinos of Luzon and Visayas on the relevance of Mindanao to the Filipino nation (Batalla 1976b).

While confronting all these challenges, Batalla's article "Final Solution in Mindanao" presented the benevolence of the government not only to the survivors of the earthquake but also to "those that have shown hostility to the authorities in the past" (Batalla 1976c, 6), which then pertained to the MNLF rebels. Batalla recognised that the problem in Mindanao was not religious or cultural but economic, with poverty forcing people to join the MNLF. The government should carefully plan out rehabilitation plans by employing as many people as possible. In the long run, these rehabilitation efforts in the devastated areas served as the ultimate solution to the Mindanao problem (Batalla 1976c). If the government succeeded, "it will no longer be possible for the agitators in the south to hold on to the thesis that the government is discriminating against and oppressing the Muslim population" (Batalla 1976c, 6).

Conjugal dictatorship, disaster and the Filipino nation

The 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake presented an opportunity for President Marcos and the First Family to spearhead initiatives that brought Christian and Muslim Filipinos together. Portraying their dedication and hard work to help the victims, the president and the first lady went to Mindanao on 19 January 1976 to inspect and assess areas damaged by the earthquake. Despite inclement weather and the unsafe conditions of the region, the couple first visited Cotabato City and Zamboanga City. Later, both parted ways, with the president proceeding to Tawi-Tawi Province while the First Lady went to Pagadian City (*Philippines Evening Express* 1976c). Showing support and sympathy to the survivors, President Marcos made clear their intention when they visited Mindanao and

the Sulu archipelago: "Our visit here is for the purpose of clearly demonstrating to you the concern and affection of the rest of the Filipinos for their Muslim brothers. Your Christian brothers grieved over your suffering and stand ready to help" (*Philippines Evening Express* 1976c, 2).

The newspapers consistently underlined the role of the president and the first lady at the forefront of various government recovery initiatives. Tañedo (1976b, 4) used a narrative in his article in of *Bulletin Today*:

> Last Saturday, the President and Metro Manila Gov, Imelda Romualdez Marcos and their children undaunted by inclement weather, flew to the Mindanao disaster areas. The fact that the President brought his entire family with him showed official as well as personal anxiety for the victims of the tragedy that has befallen the region. The visit also conveyed the truth that Mr President Marcos is not only the worried president of the Christians but also that of the Muslims.

Historian James Warren (2013) pointed out that politicians used media coverage of the disaster as an opportunity to display their relief activities and thus government effectiveness. The *Times Journal* framed President Marcos and the First Lady as the patriarch and matriarch of the Filipino nation (Rafael 2000), portraying their conjugal rule as competent in addressing the aftermath of the calamity. Most importantly, they are projected as compassionate and benevolent to the victims of the earthquake: "[T]he country's leaders, headed by the President and the First Lady and the people themselves, will work together to build from the ruins of the catastrophe. This they are already doing" (*Times Journal* 1976d, 4).

When the defence secretary attempted to pull the president out of the field due to security reasons, the president decided to pursue his survey since he was determined to know how the people fared with the prices of goods. But to the president's surprise, the First Lady was already in the market ahead of him (Tañedo 1976b). Imelda Marcos, known as the "Iron Butterfly", wielded immense influence during martial law. She was designated as the governor of Metro Manila in 1975 and minister of human settlement by her husband in February 1976 (Ellison 2004). Utilising her charm and charisma, she organised public events to reinforce her and her husband's public image. Performing femininity, she projected her power through her benevolence, like a caring mother to her children. Portraying this image, Allan and Pena (1976, 2) in *Philippines Daily Express*, exemplified her compassion and charm for the survivors:

> Mrs Imelda Romualdez Marcos, First Lady and Metro Manila governor, her usually radiant face visibly saddened by the sight of the destruction and suffering, walked among the people to sympathise with them and assured them of the help of her office.

The First Lady also distributed housing aid in affected cities. After the first couple landed at Nichols Air Base, they went to the Imelda Relief Centre (obviously named after the First Lady), where supplies and equipment were stockpiled and ready for dispatch to the disaster area. The First Lady oversaw the transportation of essential supplies, particularly water containers, water purifiers and medicine, to Mindanao (Mangawang 1976b). Supporting the projection of the First Lady, the *Philippines Daily Express* even offered to pick up and shuttle people who wanted to donate to the Imelda Relief Centre. As governor of Metro Manila, she distributed a total of PHP6 million from various *barangays* (neighbourhoods) in Metro Manila (Mangawang 1976c). The First Lady also donated PHP250,000 to Zamboanga to purchase materials for the new relocation centre (Lu 1976). She also offered the metropolis's resources in creating a new community from the earthquake's ruins and directed the National Housing Authority and Conrado Benitez, deputy in the Ministry of Human Settlements, in planning and development programmes for the resettlement of residents (Yap 1976). While Imelda Marcos embodied a feminine image through her empathetic engagements with the survivors, her husband projected a masculine image of authority by enforcing stability and security.

From the vantage point of the Marcos administration, the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake united most of the people in Mindanao and the rest of the country. Moreover, the chaos and insecurities caused by the disaster, as well as threats from the MNLF rebels, justified the military's presence in the area. In their family's visit to Mindanao, President Marcos was received by former MNLF rebels and even active rebels in some towns he visited (Tañedo 1976a). The president also said that the former MNLF rebels were at the forefront of the rehabilitation efforts and were "facing up to the challenge and meeting the responsibility like mature leaders" (Giron 1976, 28). Interestingly, the newspapers framed that he was able to mobilise former rebels in administering rehabilitation efforts in some areas of Muslim Mindanao, like Tawi-tawi, Sulu, Basilan and Lanao del Sur (Mangawang 1976b).

When the president visited Bongao in Tawi-Tawi to check the heavy damage to fish corrals and fishponds in the area, the *Philippines Sunday Express* (1976a, 10) emphasised the warm reception of the Muslim majority towards the president, which served as "an index of the state of peace and order in the southernmost province of the country". President Marcos easily mobilised the military, who were already stationed in the war-torn areas in southwestern Mindanao, to counter the MNLF rebels. The military spearheaded the search and rescue operations as well as the rehabilitation efforts of the government in various communities across southwestern Mindanao.

Amidst a crisis where Muslim Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago might disintegrate from the rest of the Filipino nation, the president was projected as a defender of order. The *Times Journal*'s editorial article, "Rehabilitation Thru Self-Reliance", even affirmed that the visit of the first family in Mindanao "can make the rebellious and sceptical elements in the Muslim ranks trust the president more" (Tañedo 1976b, 4). Taking advantage of his visit to Zamboanga City, the president also asserted that the military had already enforced his order "to give no quarter to terrorists and has cleared a major part of Tuburan, a lair of kidnappers and hijackers in Basilan" (Fernandez 1976). The president said that "[t]hey (rebels) are meeting the challenge and bearing the responsibility like mature leaders," which implied that they were already reintegrated into Filipino society (Fernandez 1976, 1). Despite the imminent threats of the MNLF, the government and the armed forces maintained that they remained alert and were able to cope with the crisis (Tañedo 1976a).

The post-disaster initiatives of the government made it easier for the newspapers to frame the First Couple as the leaders in post-disaster recovery and their benevolence was worthy of emulation by all Filipinos. In fact, in an editorial article by the *Philippines Daily Express* dated 21st August 1976, it stated that the leadership of the president in manning the disaster relief efforts should be emulated "down to the barangay level, until the man in the street shall have been conscious of his moral obligation to help his Filipino brothers in the south" (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976g, 4). President Marcos projected a strong masculine image that positioned him as an active and ideal defender of the nation against the threats posed by the MNLF. While responding to the devastation caused by the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake, he performed masculinity through the display of bravery, patriotism and willingness to sacrifice for the nation.

The 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake further legitimised the conjugal dictatorship of President Marcos and First Lady Imelda Marcos. More so, with the help of government officials and the AFP, the image-making project of Marcos as commander-in-chief of the armed forces was strengthened through his successful handling of the crisis. Apolonio Batalla of the *Bulletin Today* clearly articulated this rhetoric.

> The rebellion and the formation of a crisis government had the effect of giving the President a far greater responsibility in Mindanao, but they also gave him (President Marcos) the opportunity to take direct action, unencumbered by the local political considerations of the region. (Batalla 1976c, 4)

In the context of the Moro secessionist movement, the disaster became an opportunity for the Philippine government to show its good faith to help the survivors and even the MNLF rebels.

Post-disaster rehabilitation as a long-term solution for Muslim Mindanao

During the war between the MNLF and the Philippine military, practical infrastructure had been neglected or damaged, which scarred some areas in Muslim Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago's social and political landscape. Even though the Marcos government had already identified the root causes of the issues in Muslim Mindanao, the earthquake served both as a catalyst (Aguilar, Pante and Tugado 2016) and a critical opportunity to address them. The post-disaster programmes created by Manila address the immediate needs of survivors; they also intend to tackle the marginalisation that made Muslim Mindanao more vulnerable to the threats posed by the MNLF. As pointed out by anthropologist Vivian Choi (2015), a state's technologies of disaster nationalism aimed not only to protect and maintain existing infrastructure but also to build new ones.

After the First Couple returned to Manila, President Marcos launched the five-year development programme worth P1 billion for rehab programmes for resettlement and rehabilitation programmes in Mindanao on 22nd August 1976. Some of the agencies, like the Department of Public Highways, the Department of Labour, the Department of Agriculture, and the Bureau of Public Works and Transportation, were directed to mobilise and help implement the massive rehabilitation (Magallanes 1976). The government also allocated a total of PHP216 million for the housing and rehabilitation of Mindanao earthquake victims on 23rd August 1976 (*Times Journal* 1976b). Some of the programmes that were included were the building of resettlement areas for the survivors, the reconstruction of schools and other infrastructure and a survey of survivors to find immediate employment (Genovea 1976). The president required government agencies to submit the list of damaged facilities to the National Economic and Development Authority and the Budget Commission to fund infrastructure projects in Mindanao (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976h). The president also approved the conversion of a 24-hectare military reservation into a temporary resettlement and relocation centre (*Philippines Daily Express* 1976h).

The national government assisted local governments, including an initiative led by Imelda Marcos. President Marcos also authorised the National Housing Authority to provide permanent settlement in urban centres (*Times Journal* 1976b). The said agency allocated PHP145 million (or PHP29 million per year)

over five years to rehabilitate the damaged area. President Marcos also issued Letter of Instruction No. 452, which directed the Budget Commission to initially release PHP6 million as direct housing aid to the homeless survivors. Each affected family received PHP500 in cash and in kind to build their temporary shelter out of light but durable materials (Modena 1976). Meanwhile, the First Lady envisioned rebuilding Pagadian City through scientific planning to enhance its liveability and reduce vulnerability to future disasters (*Philippines Sunday Express* 1976b). The Secretary of Labour, Blas F. Ople, met with representatives from Landbank of the Philippines to move for the condonation of the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) loans amounting to PHP27 million. Meanwhile, DPB Gov Jose Tengco not only condoned but also granted new loans to the survivors so that they could finance and open their small-scale businesses (*Times Journal* 1976c).

Conclusion

Using news and editorial articles from the *Times Journal*, *Bulletin Today* and *Philippines Daily Express* newspapers regarding the 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake, this study argues that media representation of the earthquake reinforced Filipino nationalist rhetoric, inclusive of the Muslim population of southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, which would further legitimise President Marcos' authoritarian rule. While the initial coverage by the three newspapers mainly focused on the extent of damage in affected areas, as well as search-and-rescue efforts by government agencies and the military, it also featured the testimonies of survivors who witnessed the earthquake and tsunami.

Together with the images captured by photojournalists, the media framing of the survivors and the condition of affected areas would foster empathy and compassion among distant readers throughout the Philippines, thereby mobilising them to help their fellow Filipinos affected by the earthquake. The newspapers then featured the unity of Filipinos as manifested in the spirits of *bayanihan* and *damayan* from all sectors of Filipino society. The 1976 Moro Gulf earthquake provided newspapers with an opportunity to highlight significant issues, such as poverty and lack of development, that the region of Muslim Mindanao had faced for decades, amidst the ongoing conflict between the military and MNLF. The earthquake raised a promise that the Christians all over the country would sympathise with the Muslim population.

The post-disaster initiatives of the government made it easier for the newspapers to frame the First Couple as the leaders in post-disaster recovery and their benevolence was worthy of emulation by all Filipinos. While the

newspapers portrayed the First Lady's charisma through her compassion for the survivors, the president was projected as a defender of peace and order who united the Muslim population and mobilised former MNLF rebels to help the government in post-disaster recovery. Hence, the first couple were able to project an image that they could stabilise the situation in Mindanao and further legitimise their rule. Materialising the nationalist rhetoric by the government and media, the earthquake served both as a catalyst and a critical opportunity to address the problems that Muslim Mindanao experienced by launching the five-year development programme to alleviate the condition of the survivors in the long run.

While most existing studies on disaster nationalism focus on disasters in relatively homogeneous or non-secessionist contexts, this study shows how it operates in a peripheral, Muslim-majority context amid armed conflict, where the media and the state used disasters to promote inclusion of marginalised ethnoreligious groups into the "Filipino nation". This study also demonstrates how state-influenced media transformed disaster into shared narratives of national unity, shared suffering, resilience and Christian-Muslim solidarity. It also shows anti-insurgent disaster nationalism as a tool for political legitimacy by turning tragedy into an opportunity to weaken the secessionist narrative. Most importantly, this study connects disaster response directly to state-building and integration of marginal populations. Overall, this shows how overt authoritarian control over media and the explicit use of disaster to manage an ongoing Muslim secessionist movement.

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