

LEGITIMISING MARTIAL LAW: FRAMING THE 1974 BATTLE OF JOLO (SULU, PHILIPPINES) IN THE *BULLETIN TODAY* NEWSPAPER

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ABSTRACT

After President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law on 21 September 1972, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a Muslim secessionist rebel group based in the Mindanao and Sulu archipelago waged war against the Manila-based government leading to armed clashes with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). One of their most violent battles happened on 7 February 1974, after rebels invaded the town of Jolo, the provincial capital of Sulu in the southern Philippines. With the help of state-controlled media like Bulletin Today, this battle became an avenue for the Marcos dictatorship to legitimise its authoritarian rule. Analysing frames of the Bulletin Today newspaper on the 1974 Battle of Jolo, this study argues that in an authoritarian regime where the government controlled the flow of information, media framing played a crucial role in suppressing the rebellion which aimed to generate support from the public. Through a close reading of Bulletin Today newspaper issues from February to April 1974, this study unpacks how the Marcos-controlled media filtered, fabricated, and censored news and editorial articles to frame the 1974 Battle of Jolo to strengthen the dictator Marcos' authoritarian legitimacy and image-making project. This study suggests that the Marcos government discredited the MNLF by labelling them as Maoist Muslims. Attaching such connotations to the secessionist group, the regime framed the group as bearers of harmful behaviour and a threat to the goals and values that Filipino society upholds. The Bulletin Today also underlined the competence of the Philippine military and the constabulary in

dealing with the crisis. However, the regime also censored pertinent information about the battle, including their role in the bombing and burning of Jolo.

Keywords: Martial law, framing, legitimacy, Ferdinand Marcos, media

INTRODUCTION

On 21 September 1972, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law to save the republic from the growing communist insurgency and the Muslim secessionist in the country's southern periphery. While the Marcos dictatorship started militarising various communities across the country, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) started gaining ground in the southernmost islands of Mindanao and Sulu. Founded by Nur Misuari, the MNLF aimed to liberate the Bangsa Moro people from the oppression, tyranny, and terror of Filipino colonialism (Misuari 2012). One of the most violent confrontations between the MNLF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) happened on 7 February 1974, after the rebels unexpectedly invaded the town of Jolo, the provincial capital of Sulu.

While the MNLF rebels were positioning themselves in buildings and houses, the military used gunships and armed helicopters to bomb and burn the town in the air and the sea. This is clearly articulated in the following CIA report:

As the fight for the airport proceeded, mortar rounds and house-to-house fighting touched off small fires in tinderbox Jolo city (sic). Napalm was dropped by Philippine Air Force and may have added to fire, which quickly destroyed most of the town. Govt officials have claimed that rebels set torch on city (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 1974a).

Supporting the narrative of the CIA, a mathematics teacher at a local high school told *The New York Times* that his house was “shelled by an army battery” (Lelyveld 1974).

The fighting between the rebels and the armed forces in Jolo resulted in the death of at least 300 civilians. Around 40,000 people were left homeless, and two-thirds of the town was left in ashes (Lelyveld 1974). A *New York Times* report compared the destruction of the town with what transpired during the Second World War (Lelyveld 1974).

If journalists from the *New York Times* were less susceptible to media censorship and control, the Marcos government attempted to conceal the

fighting from the local media and public eye, since it coincided with Prime Minister Gough Whitlam of Australia and then Spanish Prince Juan Carlos' state visits (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 1974a). But despite the efforts to hide the stories from the public, reports had already appeared in other publications. The rest of the country knew about this tragedy on 14 February 1974, roughly seven days after the invasion of the rebels, in a press conference conducted by the Marcos government. The details were covered by state-controlled television networks and newspaper dailies like the *Bulletin Today*. With the help of state-controlled media, the Marcos dictatorship framed the news in the battle to keep his good image to the public.

Various works on Martial Law studies like Raissa Robles' *Marcos Martial Law Never Again* (2016) and Teresa Custodio and Jose Dalisay's (1998) *Kasaysayan: The History of the Filipino People* (vol. 9) have talked about how the Marcos government repressed and silenced the media after the declaration of martial law in 1972. Epifanio E. San Juan's (1978) article "Marcos and the Media" focused on various policies that the Marcos dictatorship employed to tighten its grip on the media industry. Meanwhile, Joel Dresang's (1985) "Authoritarian Controls and New Media in the Philippines" dealt with the changing political economy of the media industry during martial law where Marcos' cronies dominated the media landscape.

Ma. Ceres Doyo's book, *Press Freedom under Siege: Reportage that Challenged the Marcos Dictatorship* (2019) narrated the lives of newspaper reporters during the height of martial law. Originally written during the waning years of the Marcos dictatorship, this collection of essays highlighted how journalists bravely confronted and resisted the repression of freedom of speech and expression. While Mila Astorga-Garcia's (2021) article "Surviving media repression before and during Martial Law in the Philippines" recounted how state authorities and landlords suppressed journalists in Negros Island, central Philippines through harassment, arrests, and torture. To make things worse, these journalists were even labelled as members of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) to justify the arrest and closure of newspaper publications. But only a few studies have tackled how the official framing of news content was able to justify the declaration of martial law.

Borrowing the framework on official news framing and legitimacy, this study argues that the media framing deployed by the Marcos dictatorship reinforced the legitimacy of the declaration of martial law and his authoritarian rule. Framing in media refers to the "process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an

issue” (Chong and Druckman 2007: 106). It arranges daily reality by offering meanings to unfolding strips of events (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) and “promoting definitions and interpretations of political issues” (Chong and Druckman 2007: 106). Thus, media outlets can frame news stories in such a way as to make certain aspects more salient than others, while putting a specific news angle or “spin” on these elements (Dimitrova et al. 2005) by selecting, emphasising, excluding, and elaborating news coverage (Tankard and Israel 1997). Framing uncovers the ideology behind narrations of news, thus, recognising media hegemony (Hackett 1984). But in the context of an authoritarian regime, one of the most essential functions of framing in news is strengthening the power of the status quo. This can be done through the exertion of political power that seeks to legitimise the mandate of political elites and gather continuing support for their regime (Finer 1997; von Soest and Grauvogel 2015).

In an authoritarian regime where government media is censored and controlled (Edel and Josua 2018), the official frame as transmitted in both state media and propaganda is the product of the internal hegemonic struggle for interpretative supremacy among the regime’s intellectual and political elites. Thus, with the help of official framing and legitimacy, an authoritarian regime can justify itself (Omelicheva 2016). With this framework in mind, media framing in crises such as the 1974 Battle of Jolo further strengthens the leader’s authoritarian legitimacy and image-making project. This article answers the following questions: What is the official narrative of the Marcos government regarding the 1974 Battle of Jolo? How did the Marcos dictatorship frame the official narrative in the *Bulletin Today* newspaper? And how did the framing of the official narrative of the 1974 Battle of Jolo further strengthen President Marcos’ authoritarian legitimacy and image-making project?

Utilising all collected news and editorial articles, this study uses thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to look at the Marcos government’s official narrative of the conflict. The *Bulletin Today* was selected for analysis because it was one of the largest circulation of newspapers in the country (Doyo 2019) and its accessibility and prominence can shape public opinion on martial law. These articles heavily relied on data from government agencies such as the Ministry of Public Information and the Ministry of National Defence. At the same time, on-the-ground updates were addressed by state bureaucrats and military men.

The period of analysis ranged from 1 February to 5 April 1974, which represented the escalation of conflict in the hinterland of Sulu province, the invasion of rebels in Jolo, the burning of Jolo town centre, and Jolo’s recovery

from devastation. But only a few articles were written on the said matter due to prevailing media censorship (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 1974b). In total, 23 news and editorial articles from the *Bulletin Today* on the 1974 Battle of Jolo were identified and analysed. Most of these articles were concentrated from 14 February (wiping out the MNLF to the hinterland of Sulu) to 15 March 1974 (government initiatives on rehabilitation).

Themes regarding the framing of the battle were selected by assembling the codes. These codes include: 1) Maoist “Muslim” rebels invaded Jolo; 2) the rebels burned Jolo; 3) the military regained control of Jolo; 4) authorities arrested the collaborators of the rebels; and 5) the government and military efforts in rehabilitation. Patterns and relationships in the codes and themes were analysed to determine how the framing of the 1974 Battle of Jolo could strengthen the dictator Marcos’ authoritarian legitimacy and image-making project.

Situating the southern Philippines in the discourse of the Cold War, this study examines the media framing of the 1974 Battle of Jolo within the long history of redbaiting in the Philippines, an activity where the state apparatus labels its perceived enemies as communists or sympathisers of communism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the first term of Ferdinand Marcos as president of the Philippines (1966–1969), he became the subject of many controversies that challenged the integrity of his leadership. Fresh from his re-election in 1969, Marcos faced growing opposition, especially from student activists, when he gave in to the pressure from the U.S. to participate in the Vietnam War (Abinales and Amoroso 2005). Student activists criticised the U.S. for intervening in the affairs of the Philippines and other nations. They were also fighting for issues that concerned marginalised sectors of Philippine society such as women, workers, and peasants. Driven by the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the rising prices of commodities, the students began to organise under the banner of the Marxist-Leninist Mao Zedong Thought. They argued that imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism were the main problems of Philippine society, and only a people’s democratic revolution provided solutions (Guerrero 1971).

Consequently, student organisations, such as the *Kabataang Makabayan* (KM or Nationalist Youth) and *Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan* (SDK

or Association of Democratic Youth) were organised and their members were integrated into the marginalised sectors of the society (Abinales and Amoroso 2005; Custodio and Dalisay 1998). These organisations spearheaded the First Quarter Storm (FQS) where students, together with various sectors, staged a series of demonstrations, protests, and marches against Marcos. Together with Bernabe Buscayno, Jose Maria Sison, who reorganised the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) on 26 December 1968, established the New People's Army (NPA) on 29 March 1969, as the CPP's armed wing (Abinales and Amoroso 2005). With the help of recruits, the NPA waged an armed revolution by launching attacks on Philippine state forces in the countryside. One of the founding members of KM was Nur Misuari, a former student activist and lecturer at the University of the Philippines who would lead the Muslim secessionist movement in Mindanao (McKenna 1998).

Martial Law and the MNLF

Post-war conditions such as mass migration of Christians from the north (i.e., Ilocos region) and central (i.e., Panay Island) part of the country and encroachment of transnational corporations marginalised the Muslim population (Abinales 2000; Abreu 2008). The Christians increased rapidly while the Muslims were displaced, especially in Cotabato and Lanao. However, competition for land, resources, and power further exacerbated their disparities. In self-defence, both Christian settlers and Muslim elites created their private armies that heightened tensions in mainland Mindanao. The Christians created the *Ilaga* (rats), a paramilitary group that inflicted some of the most violent massacres against the Maguindanao and Maranao Muslims (Abinales 2012, 2000; Abreu 2008).

Muslims' anger further heightened after trainees from Sulu were allegedly slaughtered on 18 March 1968, on Corregidor Island, while they were in military training to invade Sabah (Curaming and Aljunied 2012). The resentment resulted in the establishment of the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM). Countering the *Ilaga*, Muslim elites formed their armed groups called "Barracudas" in Lanao and "Blackshirts" in Cotabato. Then, with the help of the Malaysian government, ninety men from the MIM went to Pangkor Island, Malaysia in early 1970 to conduct military training (Stern 2012). The said training was led by Nur Misuari.

With the growing influence of CPP-NPA and Muslim secessionists, President Marcos placed the entire Philippines under Martial Law on 21 September 1972, in the guise of suppressing lawless violence in the entire

country (Navarro 2008). As an implementer of martial law, President Marcos heavily invested in the military, which became a locus of power in Philippine society. A ban on political groups after the declaration of martial law caused the dissolution of the MIM and the activation of underground MNLF and its armed wing, the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA) on 21 October 1972 (Abinales and Amoroso 2005).

Wishing to “free themselves from the terror, oppression, and tyranny of Filipino colonialism” (Misuari 2012), both the MNLF and BMA gained support among the Muslim population in Mindanao and Sulu archipelago. Led by Nur Misuari, the MNLF aimed to create a Moro nation or *Bangsa Moro Republik* as a response to a colonial and neocolonial rule that oppressed Muslims. According to the MNLF’s Declaration of Independence Manifesto, they wanted to disband “all their political, economic and other bonds with the oppressive government of the Philippines under the dictatorial regime of President Ferdinand Marcos to secure a free and independent state for the Bangsa Moro people” (Misuari 2012: 177). It was during this time that violence erupted between rebels and soldiers throughout the southern Philippines (Custodio and Dalisay 1998: 229).

The traditional leaders in Sulu who allied with Misuari began to see him as a threat to their authority and prestige. They propagated stories about the MNLF being a disguised communist group (George 1980). Although Misuari became a member of KM, he eventually left the group because “he had fallen out with other leaders representing the party’s extreme left” (George 1980: 197). Studying the works of Marx and Mao as a student of political science, Misuari became “anti-capitalist on a socialist mission” but unfortunately, “his religious faith always kept tugging at him” (George 1980: 197). Hence, in 1966, Misuari’s group decided to dedicate their energy to the cause of the Muslims than “to the downtrodden as a class” (George 1980: 197). But throughout martial law, Misuari was constantly red-baited or accused as a Maoist by the Marcos government. But despite the false accusation that they were Maoists, the Marcos government conveniently utilised it to discredit the secessionist movement.

The Marcos government used the “divide and conquer” strategy to split MNLF into “Maoists” and “Masses”; “Maoists” like Misuari adhered to the teachings of Chairman Mao Zedong while “Masses” or rebel returnees were traditional leaders and their allies who returned to the folds of the law after rebelling against the Marcos administration (Aliman 2021). The Marcos government incentivised the “Masses” by giving them large cash payments, timber concessions, and other export licences (McKenna 1998). As early as

January 1974, the military effectively neutralised the MNLF in the hinterland where the rebels started losing their bulwarks (Aliman 2021). To avoid the cordon and divert the attention of soldiers from the hinterland, the MNLF decided to invade the town of Jolo (Lelyveld 1974).

Martial Law and the State of Media

Throughout the Philippines, “some 70,000 people were imprisoned and 34,000 were tortured; over 3,200 people were killed” from 1972 to 1981 (Amnesty International 2018: 1). Meanwhile, Transparency International (2004) added that President Marcos also allegedly embezzled an estimated the USD5 to 15 billion, making him the second most corrupt politician in the world. Aside from widespread human rights violations and systemic plunder in the state bureaucracy, President Marcos also suppressed one of the pillars of democracy, the media.

After the declaration of martial law, the Marcos government accused the media of propagating news that discredited his administration and exposed his weaknesses. The Philippine government’s Department of Public Information then issued Department Order No. 1 which prescribed rules and regulations on the kind of reporting that reporters should do (Elemia 2020). As part of government regulations, journalists reporting sensitive topics were required to submit their news reports before publication. This was to ensure that the Marcos government had full control of what was written or aired to the public (Elemia 2020).

The government also expurgated all photographs and dispatches going into the country and banned material that could incite people against the government. Highlighting activities of the first family and accomplishments of the various agencies of the government, the Philippine media became “more passive, positive and, as some critics note, sycophantic” (Dresang 1985: 36).

Government intervention in the economy expanded due to crony capitalism, where Marcos sold and rented “privileges” particularly economic monopolies to favoured families and businesses (Chaikin and Sharman 2009). Crony capitalism also affected the media landscape of the country where newspaper companies, radio stations, and television networks were “put under strict government supervision and owned by either his (President Marcos) relatives or friends” (Coronel 2001: 114). For instance, Roberto Benedicto, a notable crony of President Marcos, confiscated both the *Kanlaon Broadcasting System* and *Daily Express* newspaper. Daily newspapers like *The Times Journal* and its sister publications, *People’s Journal* and *People’s*

Tonight, were owned and operated by President Marcos' brother-in-law and the Philippine Ambassador to the U.S., Benjamin "Kokoy" Romualdez (Dresang 1985: 36).

The cronies remained loyal to the president to maintain their existing business interests. This can be illustrated by industrialist and landlord Hans Menzi (Dresang 1985; Robles 2016). He acquired *Manila Daily Bulletin* in 1957 from Carlson Taylor who founded the newspaper in 1900. Menzi then served as president and chairman of the board of the Bulletin Publishing Corporation. Aside from that, he owned four plantations in Mindanao, including a paper mill. He also became board member of some of the country's largest corporations and civic organisations [United Press International (UPI) 1984].

Menzi also worked in the military where he held the rank of brigadier general in the Philippine air force. When President Marcos was elected in 1965, he became Marcos's military aide. But a few months after the declaration of martial law in 1972, Menzi was summoned by the president and at his request, he was reverted to inactive status in the military (UPI 1984). He was told by President Marcos to revive the newspaper under a different name. This prompted Menzi to change its name to *Bulletin Today* (Dresang 1985; Robles 2016). As seen in the *Bulletin Today*'s editorial page, Menzi himself served as the publisher when the 1974 Battle of Jolo happened.

MARCOSIAN GOVERNMENT'S NARRATIVE OF THE 1974 BATTLE OF JOLO

The Invasion

On 7 February 1974, the so-called "Maoist rebels" led by Hadji Misuari (Nur Misuari), Nikan (Nizam) Abubakar, and Bian Lai Lim invaded the town of Jolo. The armed clash in the town proper started when the military launched an operation against the rebels in the towns of Bilaan, Maimbung, and Parang, three towns surrounding Jolo (Zabala 1974a). Then-Defence Minister Juan Ponce Enrile said that Jolo has a big concentration of troops engaged in the operation in the three towns and pushed the rebels to the capital town of Jolo. The rebels started the encounter (Zabala 1974a) after a surprise attack with 200–400 of them (Mangawang 1974). Their initial plan was to "invade Air Force headquarters and the Jolo Airport" (Mangawang 1974: 20). The rebels then moved into strategic areas of the town and occupied buildings including

the Norte Dame of Jolo and sections of the Jolo Pier. The military also found out that the son of Jolo mayor, Aminkadra Abubakar, and local police cooperated with the rebels (Zabala 1974a; de Vera 1974a). Responding to the rebels, the government re-grouped its forces and launched counterattacks.

The then Minister of Public Information Francisco “Kit” Tatad revealed that the rebels used Belgium-made rifles, M-16, and two 81 mm mortars as their weapons which “were high-powered military hardware foreign-made” (Zabala 1974a: 24). Government troops moved their offensives to protect innocent residents and to drive out the “Maoist” rebels. Countering the attacks of rebels, soldiers regrouped their forces to get them out of the buildings and would force them to move to the hills. Tatad then claimed that as part of their diversionary tactic, “the rebels set fire to some buildings” in the battle area to cover their withdrawal (Zabala 1974a: 24). The rebels also withheld the Jolo Airforce headquarter and crushed the two SabreJets of the military. The result of fighting between MNLF rebels and government troops led to the burning of one-half to two-thirds of the town. The tragedy also resulted in 300 deaths from rebels, returnees, and government troopers, in which “only 26 deaths accounted for the government troopers” (de Vera 1974b: 6).

State Response and Aftermath

Defence Secretary Enrile presented over Channel 13 that the situation was under control. Giving assurance to the public, he asserted that the town “was not fallen into the hands of the Maoist Muslim rebels” (*Bulletin Today* 1974a). The government troops launched mopping operations in some towns outside Jolo including Balimbing, Maimbong (sic), and Bilaan. Despite that they used military operations, “the government continued to persuade peaceful means for the rebels to cooperate with the government” (*Bulletin Today* 1974a). By 14 February government forces repelled and drove some 600 to 800 Maoist rebels to the hill, including Misuari (Mangawang 1974). The government then organised all existing agencies such as the AFP and the Department of Social Welfare, to attend to the needs of evacuated civilians in the evacuation centres. The government troops also hastened the mopping operations. On 22 February, Sulu Provincial Treasurer Hamjan Usman, who was sent to Manila by Col. Pacifico de Leon, Chief of the National Disaster Control Coordinating Centre reported that Jolo and all the towns of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi have been cleared of the rebels (*Bulletin Today* 1974a).

On 16 February, Sec. Enrile ordered the arrest of Jolo mayor Aminkadra Abubakar and two of his sons because they were seen with the rebel groups (de Vera 1974b). Aside from the mayor and his sons, seven policemen

including the chief of police were “disarmed and taken into custody” (de Vera 1974a: 1). Enrile added that the mayor was hiding in the hills of Bud Datu with rebels who had entrenched themselves in Japanese tunnels. Several others, “out of the town’s 90 police officers, were also sought by the military” (de Vera 1974a: 1). Admiral Espaldon also released a statement that the majority of the town’s policemen participated under the command of the rebels. The rebels’ guns “were already in the houses of the mayor, policemen, and sympathisers when they launched an attack on rebel returnees” (de Vera 1974a: 6). By 26 February, the military captured Bud Datu from the hands of the rebels, the same day that the neighbouring town of Indanan was also retaken from their stronghold (*Bulletin Today* 1974b). After series of military operations in the hinterland of Sulu, more leaders and rebels surrendered to the military (*Bulletin Today* 1974c).

Admiral Espaldon airlifted an engineering outfit to undertake rehabilitation work for the restoration of electrical, telecommunication, and water systems. This initiative also helped rebuild the houses of residents that were burned by the rebels. The government also launched stabilisation programmes to encourage people to return and rebuild their homes. Six medical teams assisted doctors from the Department of Health to provide health and sanitation inside Jolo. During the same period, the Philippine National Bank, DXSM (one of the town’s three radios), Philippine Airlines, and Swift Air all resumed their operations (de Vera 1974c: 6). Heavy equipment was rushed from nearby Zamboanga City to hasten the rehabilitation of the town (*Bulletin Today* 1974d). The Armed Forces in Sulu also restored the communication services between Jolo and Zamboanga City (*Bulletin Today* 1974e).

To relieve the misery of the people and to aid the population resume its normal livelihood (*Bulletin Today* 1974f), the government mobilised all available agencies to attend to the needs of displaced civilians. ₱1 million were then released for the rehabilitation of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi (*Bulletin Today* 1974g). On March 13, the construction of buildings in Jolo would follow the concept of a modern community despite the inadequate lack of construction materials. In the meantime, the government created bunkhouses for returning evacuees (De Vera 1974d). By April, the Special Programme for the Rehabilitation of Evacuees (SPARE) embarked on a gigantic project to provide low-cost housing for displaced families (*Bulletin Today* 1974h). Meanwhile, the Muslim Christian Reconciliation Special Committee distributed 1,000 sacks of bulgur wheat, 54 sacks of clothing, and 500 kilos of medicines to the affected residents. More so, President Marcos suspended the filling of tax in Jolo as “the government began to massive funnelling of

funds to speed up the rehabilitation of the despoiled capital of Sulu” (Zabala 1974b: 1).

Donations such as food and construction materials from both national government and non-government organisations were also given to refugees in Zamboanga City (De Vera 1974c). The military asphalted the streets, installed the electrical and telephone lines, reconstructed the Muslim Mosque, cleaned the debris in the industrial district, and built contemporary school rooms for grade pupils (de Vera 1974d). Two months after the battle, the military accounted for some 12,000 Muslims returning to Jolo (Casayuran 1974). Despite the rehabilitation efforts of the government, the residents remain hopeful that trade and commerce in Jolo would go back to normal (Baluyot, 1974).

FRAMING AND LEGITIMACY OF MARTIAL LAW: THE 1974 BATTLE OF JOLO

The Muslim “Maoist” Burned Jolo

In an authoritarian regime where legitimation involved stability (Dukalkis 2017), a variety of goals or values that society upholds (e.g., national unity, security, sovereignty, and public order) can be summoned to rationalise repression (Edel and Josua 2018). By this, the government often labels their opponents’ activities as “harmful behaviour” (e.g., division of society, foreign interference, criminal behaviour, and violence). The framing of the 1974 Battle of Jolo by *Bulletin Today* presented this framework where Marcos’ government rebaited the MNLF as a Maoist Muslim group.

Asserting foreign intervention, the Marcos government also alleged that most rebels were Maoists, mostly trained in Peking (Beijing) (Ng 1974). For the pro-American Marcos government, “the principal conflict behind this armed confrontation was not only a political but also ideological, principally the unacceptability of communism as preached by the Maoists among the Muslim communities” (Mangawang 1974: 20). Maoist labels towards the MNLF in Muslim Mindanao connoted atheism and this stigma could tarnish the reputation of the rebels (George 1980). To justify the negative connotation of the label, the Marcos government also claimed that the rebels burned Jolo. The *Bulletin Today* interviewed Sulu Provincial Treasurer Hamjan Usman and he declared that “the people in the ravaged area were suffering and were angered by the Maoist rebels who sacked their homes” (*Bulletin Today*

1974g). Usman also said that “the Muslims in the area were angry because many of them are homeless, miserable, sick, hungry, and destitute because of the burning of Jolo by the rebels” (*Bulletin Today* 1974g).

When Admiral Espaldon announced the surrender of Mayor Abubakar whom the military considered a high-profile member of the rebel group, he also said that the invasion of rebels showed the true colour of the Maoists, that they are violent individuals (*Bulletin Today* 1974i). While encouraging them to rebuild the town, he also iterated that the Maoist rebels neglect the life of their Muslim and Christian brothers (*Bulletin Today* 1974i).

Allegations towards MNLF as a communist group reached the Arab world. Urging Arab countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to withdraw their support for the rebels, the Philippine Government informed them of their claims that the Maoist elements initiated the conflict (Mangawang 1974: 5). Informing the Arab countries, the government enumerated their efforts to curtail rebellion:

1. That the government took a restrained posture in fighting the Muslim Maoists, supporting the efforts of the Muslim rebels who joined hands with the government to avert fighting;
2. The government’s rehabilitation aid and programme for the civilian population was continuing despite Maoist efforts to disrupt it;
3. The main brunt of the fighting was waged by former Muslim rebels who decided to support the government programme;
4. The Maoist communist was not cornered in the mountains of Bud Datu and Puting Bato;
5. The principal conflict behind these armed confrontations was not only political but also ideological, principally the unacceptability of communism as preached by the Maoists among the Muslim communities (Mangawang 1974: 5).

In line with these points, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Omar Sakkaf of Saudi Arabia assured local Muslim leaders that President Marcos “was honest and sincere in his desire to promote the welfare of the Philippines’ Muslim population” (Ng 1974: 1). The Kingdom also guarantees the Philippine government to solve the conflict in Mindanao so that “Christians and Muslims (sic) can live together in peace and understanding” (Ng 1974: 1).

The redbaiting activity of the government on the rebels can be understood in the context of global Cold War politics. The red scare brought

by the alignment of the Philippines to the U.S. pro-West, and anti-Communism bloc in Southeast Asia (e.g., Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation) and the legacy of the Special Committee on Un-Filipino Activities (CUFA) already conditioned the anti-communist sentiments of Filipinos (Masuda 2015) even before the declaration of martial law. However, the relationship between Sison and Misuari as founding members of KM in 1964 made the government use the Maoist label against the MNLF.

As reported by the New York Times (Shamberg 1974), the objective of this label was to discredit the call for secessionist movement from the Muslim populace and the international community, especially the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Maoist stigma was rooted in the reliance of the Marcos government on oil extracted in Saudi Arabia and Iran. The government feared that if both Saudi and Iran sided with the rebels, it might deny the Philippines oil and could plunge the country into chaos. The euphemism of using “Maoist” could weaken the support of these countries for the secessionist movement (Shamberg 1974).

The frame that the MNLF burned Jolo validated that the Maoists were violent and brutal. This made them a threat to the security of the Philippine state and society. From the perspective of the Marcos government, the MNLF caused division among the Filipino people as they radicalised the Muslims towards fighting for their independence. Framing them as bearers of harmful behaviour (i.e., atheism) in Muslim Mindanao, the government insisted that the MNLF also used misguided ideology to inflict harm against their fellow Muslims. To curtail the influence of the rebels on the Muslim populace, the government needed to legitimise the declaration of martial law.

The Legitimacy of the Declaration of Martial Law

To affirm legitimacy in an authoritarian regime, “the main strategy is to define the entire state concerning common goals, to define the goals and aspiration as virtually constitutive of a nation as such, and to equate the regime with proper articulation and realisation of those goals through state apparatuses” (March 2003: 317). This framework is vital in understanding the need to legitimise the declaration of martial law and this legitimacy was strengthened during the 1974 Battle of Jolo.

As Muslim Mindanao was marred by violence, the Marcos government blamed the problem on the legacy of the rotten Old Society. In an editorial article in the *Bulletin Today*, it enumerated the root causes of the problems in Mindanao that the government wanted to address which includes land conflict,

legitimacy of political leadership which gained ascendancy through guns, goods, and gold, 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 system (*Bulletin Today* 1974j). But the government “introduced considerable effort to help the development of the southern region” that was considered “least developed” and “most neglected” (*Bulletin Today* 1974k). President Marcos already embarked reforms after the declaration of martial law in 1972. This includes removing the power of traditional politicians who had control over government funds which resulted in “so much waste in resources” (*Bulletin Today* 1974k). Public officials like Sec. Enrile mentioned in a press briefing that “much headway had been achieved in the months since martial law was declared but much still has to be done to bring about lasting freedom and progress under New Society” (*Bulletin Today* 1974l).

With the government’s failure to address these challenges, many Muslims were encouraged to join the Muslim secessionist movement. With the predicaments faced by Muslim Mindanao, this framing from the Marcos government further justified the declaration of martial law. The military also highlighted the support from the public, especially in Sulu. The “99 percent of the population not only of the town but also of the entire province blamed the AFP for their ‘neglect’ in delaying the imposition of martial law” (De Vera 1974c). Furthermore, they added that “[I]f only the military stuck to its mandate, the battle could not have happened at all” (De Vera 1974c).

Marcos’ Strongman Image: Government and the Military

With the help of the government and military, the image-making project of Marcos as commander-in-chief of the armed forces was strengthened based on how he handled crises like the 1974 Battle of Jolo. Portraying his competence in handling crises, the *Bulletin Today* also stressed that “[T]he President acted swiftly on the request for aid to the people of Sulu” (*Bulletin Today* 1974f). As an antithesis of the “Maoists” rebels who were framed as violent against their fellow Muslims, the *Bulletin Today* represented the military and constabulary as bearers of peace and order within the Sulu archipelago. As stated in the *Bulletin Today*, the “government’s rehabilitation and aid programme for the civilians was continuing despite Maoist efforts to disrupt it” (Mangawang 1974: 20). The newspaper also highlighted that “combat operations (mopping up) were continuing” (de Vera 1974a: 6) in the hinterlands of Sulu to counter the forces of the MNLF.

Interestingly, the article “Troops Repel Jolo ‘Maoist’” (Zabala 1974a) was the first to explicitly report the battle. It was published in the paper’s 14 February issue, seven days after the start of the battle. But the *Bulletin Today* had already informed the public that the soldiers have driven out rebels. To highlight their success, the said article made it to the cover page of the newspaper with its title having a bigger font size than the rest of the headlines. With the military’s efficiency in driving the MNLF to the hinterland and the government’s aggressive rehabilitation efforts, this framing was able to boost the credibility and trust of the public in the armed forces and the Marcos dictatorship.

Another way of looking at this framing was that Marcos projected himself as a father of the Filipino nation, disciplining his children so that they enjoy the long-term benefit of peace and progress. The urgent need to uphold order can be embodied in his political catchphrase, *Sa ikakauunlad ng bayan, disiplina ang kailangan* (for the nation’s progress, discipline is needed). The president’s strongman image can be seen in an editorial article that explained the invasion of Jolo:

A third postulate is also in order. It is that while the government seeks to preserve the peace and otherwise promote the general welfare, it has to defend itself and the people against crime. There is no state that can adopt a contrary position without imperilling its own existence. The basic philosophy from which all the reforms initiated by the President flow includes, of course, firmness against lawless violence (*Bulletin Today* 1974m).

When applied to the MNLF rebels, the frame affirmed the state’s actions to discipline the rebels as they caused chaos and distraction to Muslim Filipinos. Anchored on the competence of the military who drew the rebels back to the hinterland and their efficiency in rehabilitating the town, the framing from the *Bulletin Today* strengthened an admirable image of Marcos.

CONCLUSION

As seen in the frames of the 1974 Battle of Jolo in the *Bulletin Today*, the government labelled the MNLF rebels as Maoist Muslims to discredit the secessionist group. By attaching such connotations to the MNLF, the authoritarian regime framed the group as bearers of harmful behaviour and a threat to the goals and values that Filipino society upholds. With the continuing

threats from the rebels and problems left by the “Old Society”, the Marcos government was able to further legitimise the declaration of martial law. The *Bulletin Today* also highlighted the efficiency of the Philippine military and the constabulary in dealing with the crisis. However, the regime also censored pertinent information about the battle, including their role in the bombing and burning of Jolo.

However, framing became more relevant in analysing content that promoted disinformation, especially on various social media platforms like Facebook and Tiktok (Beltran 2022). Anchoring on the effective use of social media, for instance, the 2022 presidential campaign of Ferdinand E. Marcos’ son, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. utilised politics of authoritarian nostalgia where his well-oiled machinery frames his father’s regime as the “golden age” of peace and prosperity (Ratcliffe and Bayani 2022). Whitewashing Ferdinand Sr.’s crime through misinformation, Bongbong’s campaign sanitised his family’s image which was tarnished after the 1986 People Power Revolution.

But as a protest vote against political and economic elites that dominated the Philippines after the 1986 People Power Revolution, as well as the failure of liberal politics to provide a better life for the Filipinos, Rodrigo Duterte was catapulted to the presidency in 2016. During his campaign, he promised radical change through “stringent law and order measures” (Casiple 2016: 182). President Marcos Jr. vowed to continue the legacies of former President Duterte (Tamayo 2021), which is also reminiscent of his father’s administration 40 years ago. Going beyond examining institutions that censor and control information to the public, this study will hopefully encourage more scholars to venture into analysing news content and reports during the martial law (1972–1986) as well as the post-People Power Revolution period (1986–2016).

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NOTES

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