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Yazar(lar) / Writer(s)

Pınar KADIOĞLU

Rikard JALKEBRO

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Research Center for Defense Against Terrorism and Radicalization Association

Adres/Address: Beytepe Mah. Kanuni Sultan Süleyman Bulvarı

5387. Cadde No:15A D:58

06800 Çankaya/Ankara

Telefon/Telephone: +90 312 441 11 50

www.tradergisi.com

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THE BANGSAMORO IMPASSE: ISLAMIC EXTREMISM, STATE VIOLENCE, AND OTHER SPOILERS TO THE PEACE PROCESS

Pınar KADIOĞLU* and Rikard JALKEBRO**

ABSTRACT

The conflict between the Philippines government and the Moro people has been ongoing for over a half-decade, with no prospect of achieving sustainable peace. Although the international perception of conflict endurance appears to be fixated on violent campaigns of separatist Islamic extremist groups linked with larger Jihadist groups like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), al-Qaida, and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); the conflict has a much more complex reality on the ground stemming from the centuries-long socio-economic marginalisation, dispossession, displacement, discrimination, and lack of political representation.

Through a detailed historical survey, this article analyses the socio-economic and political developments that transformed the actors, and the nature of the clash between the government and the Moro insurgent groups since the Republic of the Philippines was established in 1946. In doing so, it highlights the negative impacts of the violent and corrupt governance culture, the influence of Jihadist ideals, and inconsistent state policies towards peace. Furthermore, it exposes the reason behind the peace impasse as a misadventure of Liberal peacebuilding that is incompatible with the local socio-cultural, political, and economic context.

Key Words: *Mindanao, Conflict, Terrorism, Islamic Extremism, State Violence, Peace Processes, Peace Spoilers.*

BANGSAMORO ÇIKMAZI: KÖKTENDİNCİ İSLAMİ GRUPLAR, DEVLET ŞİDDETİ VE BARIŞ SÜRECİNİ BOZAN DİĞER UNSURLAR

ÖZET

Filipinler hükümeti ile Moro halkı arasındaki çatışma, sürdürülebilir bir barışa ulaşma ihtimali olmadan, yarım yüzyılı aşkın bir süredir devam etmektedir. Çatışmanın sürekliliğine ilişkin uluslararası algı; İslam Cemiyeti (JI), El Kaide ve Irak Şam İslam Devleti (İŞİD) gibi daha büyük cihatçı örgütler ile de bağlantıları bulunan, şiddet yanlısı yerel kökdendinci İslami örgütlere odaklanmış olsa da; esasen çok daha karmaşık olan çatışmanın gerçekliği, yüzyıllardır süren sosyo-ekonomik marjinalleştirme, mülksüzleştirme, yerinden etme, ayrımcılık ve siyasi temsil eksikliği ile bağlantılıdır.

* Assistant Professor of International Relations, (PhD, University of St Andrews), Altınbaş University, Istanbul-Turkey, pınar.kadioglu@altinbas.edu.tr/pkadioglu@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-9704-3071.

** Associate Professor of International Relations (PhD, University of St Andrews), Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, Abu Dhabi-United Arab Emirates, rikard.jalkebro@eda.ac.ae, ORCID: 0000-0002-3555-0139.

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Bu makale, Filipinler Cumhuriyeti'nin 1946 yılında kuruluşundan bu yana süregelen Moro isyancı gruplar ile hükümet arasındaki çatışmanın öncelikle temel sebeplerini, sonra da çatışmanın aktörlerini ve yapısını zaman içerisinde dönüştüren sosyo-ekonomik ve siyasi gelişmelerin ayrıntılı tarihsel analizini sunmaktadır. Analiz ayrıca, bölgede cihatçılığın etkisi, barışa yönelik süregelen devlet politikaların tutarsızlığı, ve devlet yönetim kültürünün şiddet yanlılığı ve yozlaşma içermesi gibi önemli öğelere dikkat çekerken; Bangsamoro barış sürecinde çıkmaza girilmesinin sebebinin, yerel sosyo-kültürel, siyasi ve ekonomik gerçeklikleri gözardı eden Liberal barış inşaa süreci olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Mindanao, Çatışma, Terörizm, İslami Kökdendincilik, Devlet Şiddeti, Barış Süreçleri, Barışı Bozan Unsurlar.*

INTRODUCTION

The conflict between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro people has been ongoing for over a half-decade. Although being one of the most prolonged independence struggles in world history, the Moro conflict only drew significant international attention at the turn of the century, alerted by the rise of Islamist extremism in the area. The violent campaigns of insurgent groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Maute Group or Daulah Islamiyah that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the last decade, on the other hand, have transformed the perception of the conflict from an internal issue to an international security concern. Thus, from the early 2000s Philippines' efforts to counter terrorism have been supported by various international actors to aid the resolution of the conflict, particularly the United States of America (US). Nevertheless, these violent Islamist extremist groups are only a few among the many insurgent groups involved in the conflict. The Philippines' quest for sustainable peace in the region requires establishing a mutual understanding with various violent actors.

The current peace and reconciliation processes guided by the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) and its annexes predicate the core elements of the peace initiative and thereby reduce the space available for alternative approaches to peacemaking. Typical of the 'Liberal Peace' model, it frames the issue primarily as a political struggle between the Christian majority and Islamist Muslim minority of Mindanao through a top-down approach. However, contrary to such understanding, the long history of the Moro struggle shows that the reality on the ground is far

more complex than an explicit Islamism goal, as the root of the conflict lies in the perennial socio-economic marginalisation, dispossession, displacement, discrimination, and lack of political representation of the Moros.

The contemporary political reality in Phillippines is marked by the social, religious, ethnic, and economic frictions inherited from colonial era to the independence period. In this regard, the on-going complexities faced in the ground are signified by corruption, elitism, clientelism and state violence; along with the subsequent Presidents' approaches, or lack thereof, to peace and their capacities to unite the different arms of government, as well as their differing agendas, depending on the "needs of the times" (Ferrer, 2005, pp.125-26). Thus, the obliviousness to such dynamics of the conflict, makes the current peace process nothing more than a misadventure, as the in-group disagreements and lack of trust towards the GRP due to a lack of transparency, leader's unaccountability, and government responsiveness is not adressed in the peace process.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Islam in the Pre-Colonial Philippines

The recorded political history of pre-colonial Philippines demonstrates a hierarchically structured family system of governance in the form of small village chiefdoms known as *barangays* ruled by the local elites called *datu*. These chiefs were perceived as elders who held wisdom, wealth and strength, ruling in a manner made-to-order (Kemmerer, 1908, pp. 47-74; Benitez, 1954; Salamanca, 1968). Animism was widely practised in the barangays before the introduction of Buddhism and Hinduism in the ninth and tenth centuries, followed by Islam in the 13th century via increased interactions with traders and migrants from the neighbouring regions of China and India (Scott, 1982, pp. 99-126; Covar, 1998; Cannell, 1999, p. 10). The mass conversions to Islam were started only after the arrival of Muslim missionaries from the Persian Gulf and India in the 14th century, achieving success through persuasion and forceful means.

The first Islamic political organisation in the area appeared in the region in 1450, established by Sayyid Abu Bakar in the form of a Sultanate which embedded the system of *dat* and *sha'aria* (Milligan, 2005, pp. 24-26; Majul, 2009, pp. 59-69). Under the Sultanate, Islam spread swiftly and

quickly adapted and incorporated into the pre-existing structures of the barangays. The primary reason behind this rapid socio-political transition was the relatively egalitarian nature of the new system of governance, and its stabilising impact on the existing power holders (Means, 2009, p. 2) as the datuship and its traditional hierarchal power structure was not wholly removed. Instead, the local ruling elites were given the power and responsibility to ensure the new system's success by becoming moral leaders for their communities, creating a link between peasant life and royal authority as the basis of order in barangays. A popular loyalty to Islam and the Sultan was achieved by successfully creating a blend of religious/spiritual and secular/political systems that outlasted most rival authorities today (McKenna, 1998, pp. 46-48, Tan, 2009, pp. 37-40).

1.2. Colonial Oppression & Moro Struggle

Four decades after the Spanish 'discovery' of the Philippines, in 1565, Miguel Lopez de Legazpi was sent to the region to lead a colonial mission with the aim of expanding the Spanish imperial domains and the economic interests of the King, as well as introducing Catholicism (Zaide, 1950, pp. 142-157; Milligan, 2005, p. 25; Majul, 2009, p. 92). Upon their arrival, the Spaniards came across numerous barangays which were well-organised active independent political units. Ruled by local aristocrats that held the monopoly of executive, legislative and judicial powers, the barangays in Sulu, Mindanao and some of the northern islands were dominantly inhabited by Muslim populations that showed fierce resistance against the Spanish. Reminded of their historical enemies by this Muslim resistance, Spaniards employed the word 'Moro' in reference to the "non-hispanized Muslim inhabitant[s] in the unsubjugated southern Philippines" (Buendia, 2018, p. 435). The most significant Moro resistance of the era, known as the Battle of Manila, took place in 1570, when the *datu* of the Luzon, Rajah Sulaiman, formed a strong opposition to the Christian colonisers moving towards the riches of Manila. Nevertheless, the clash resulted in the victory of the *conquistadors* with the defeat of Sulaimans' three-hundred-man army. In 1571 De Legazpi conquered Manila, marking the beginning of 327 years of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines (Forbes, 1945, pp. 22-23; Gowing, 1964, p. 19; D. Kuhn & F. Kuhn, 1966, p. 59; Means, 2009, p. 34).

In the early years of colonial rule, Spaniards conducted 'aggressive Christianisation-campaigns' in the Muslim inhabited areas to maintain

control and prevent the spread of Islam, which involved burning villages and killing men, women and children that stood in their path. The Spanish aggression, however, had adverse effects in the long term (Gowing, 1964, pp. 21-22; McKenna, 1998, pp. 81-83). Thus, they adopted a more sustainable approach by sending missionaries to convert the Muslims to Catholicism in the ‘problematic areas.’ However, this assimilation campaign was not limited to religious indoctrination as it also utilised an organised internal immigration policy, resulting in a mass Christian settlement in Mindanao. The new migration policy favoured the Christian migrants to a large extent in socio-economical terms while causing Moros to lose land and agro-economic prospects.

The cultural oppression and purposeful discrimination against Moros created a sense of existential threat within the group leading to the formation of collective awareness and “enemy-other perception” (Murer, 2009) towards their Christian masters. The Moro perception of enemy-other towards the Christian Filipinos, however, only surfaced after the recruitment of Christian natives by the Spanish Colonial Army to fight against Moro resistance (Isidro & Saber, 1968, p. 37). It was only then that Moros started to develop ontological insecurity towards their co-inhabitants. The emergence of inter-group distrust also changed the nature of the Moro struggle, transforming it from a culturally resistant anti-colonial struggle into an overall Jihadist call (Canoy, 1989, p.30; Tan, 2009, p. 63). Soon, the Moro resistance transitioned into a systematic violent movement conducting guerrilla-type attacks on Spanish forces as well as raiding churches and Christian settlements (McKenna, 1998, pp. 82-83; Means, 2009, pp. 35-36). The Spaniards eventually managed to unify the Philippine archipelago and established a functioning centralised government composed of a national government and local governments that administered provinces, cities, towns and municipalities. However, the Moro resistance's endurance prevented Spanish sovereignty from extending over the Muslim sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao, which remained under de facto Moro autonomy until the end of US rule (Forbes, 1945, p. 27; Means, 2009, p. 36).

The 19th century was an era of recurrent political instability and territorial loss for Spain. In effect, with the troubles in the mainland and its other colonies, the colonial administration imposed harsh measures in the Philippines that increased exploitation and intensified the feudal abuse. This

development led to the emergence of a nationalist revolutionary movement called Katipunan in 1896, aiming to unify the Filipinos into one solid nation and gain independence through revolution (Zaide, 1956, p. 151; Guerrero, 2005, pp. 10-16; Thomas, 2012, pp. 88-89). In 1898, following the two years-long clashes, Spanish authorities offered a negotiated truce to Katipunan to end the revolt while sending their leader Emilio Aguinaldo to exile in Hong Kong. That same year, the Spanish-American War broke out. At the time, the US was not seen as a threat by the Filipino nationalists due to its traditional rejection of overseas expansion (Harris, 2011, pp. 182-83). Thus, they joined the US fight against Spain, striving for independence upon the defeat of their colonial masters. In the framework of this cooperation, US officials brought Aguinaldo back to the Philippines along with the arms and ammunition purchased in Hong Kong while also promising Moro independence (Benitez, 1954, pp. 286-88; Zaide, 1956, pp. 184-85). On 12 June 1898, five days after landing in the Philippines, Aguinaldo declared independence for the Philippines as the leader of the movement. Yet, this political success was short-lived since the Philippines was ceded to the US on 10 December 1898 with the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Spanish-American War.

In the early days of American rule, US officials declared a new beginning in the Philippines marked by a civilising mission to educate Filipinos and prepare them for self-governance (Zinn, 1980, pp. 305-6; Jentleson, 2004, p. 88). This racist tone, implying Filipino incapacity for self-rule, soon transformed into governance policies oblivious to the local dynamics. The Philippines, at the time, was the only Christian state in the region with the presence of an overwhelmingly Christian population, even in the traditionally Muslim-inhabited areas. The problems regarding the socio-economic inequality in favour of the Christian inhabitants and the inter-group political tension were also far from being resolved. The Filipino nationalist movement was also feeling betrayed by the US. In the face of all these troubles, US colonial administration changed the official language of the Philippines to English in order to kick-start an effective system for teaching American values to Filipinos. This policy was perceived as an existential threat by all groups and led to popular unrest across the country. The American response was vicious; between 1899 and 1902, US forces violently suppressed the Filipino resistance causing the death of 200,000 civilians with 4,200 US soldier deaths (Zaide, 1956, pp. 225-26; Abueva,

1976, pp. 114-33).

The early 20th century witnessed a rising Moro resistance against the US colonial rule in response to the US integrationist vision, which was largely dismissive of Islamic socio-cultural and political traditions and inspirations (Costello, 1992, p. 41). Between 1911 and 1915, US colonial administration carried out a two-fold campaign intending to incorporate the Moro areas into the Philippines. The first stage of the campaign was staging a military pacification operation in Moro areas to eliminate the armed resistance- which resulted in thousands of Moro deaths (McKenna, 1998, pp. 88-89; Murolo, 2011, p. 85). The second stage, on the other hand, was aiming to ‘civilise’ the Moro people by contagion. Over these four years, 15,000 new settlers moved to Mindanao from the northern parts of the country, which had become 34,000 by 1934 (Wernstedt & Simkins, 1965, pp. 86-88; McKenna, 1998, p. 114).

In 1935, with a claim of preparation for self-governance, the US adopted the presidential system and a structure for government closely patterned after American values to enable the integration of all Filipino groups into mainstream politics (Zaide, 1956, pp. 315-20; Abueva, 1976, pp. 115; 118-123). The replacement of the native law with the positive law, while being perceived as an anti-Islamist policy, created immense unrest among the Moro people. Christian Filipinos, on the other hand, integrated into the new system promptly, through which they not only kept their socio-economic privileges but also gained new political advances. Thus, the US policies that led to the Moro grievance were “forcefully incorporated, largely by the military forces of the United States, into a social and political system that was not only alien to their religion and political culture but also hostile to it” (Means, 2009, p. 38).

1.3. The New Republic & The Moro Question

During the Second World War, the Japanese Empire invaded the Philippines. Upon this development, the Moros in Mindanao and Sulu carried out a struggle against the Japanese occupation along with the US forces, with the hope of establishing their own political entity following the defeat of the Japanese Imperial Army. Nevertheless, at the end of the war, the Republic of the Philippines was declared an independent state, with the territories inclusive of the ancestral Moro lands populated with Muslim

inhabitants who felt no communal connection with the rest of the Filipino community. Thus, from the birth of the Republic of the Philippines in 1946, the Moro collective sense of civic nationalism was absent.

The new state system was identical to the pre-war US governance system, and the political vision of the first Philippine government was largely associated with American values and Christianity. Thus, the troubles ensued with the continuation of economic, socio-political, and cultural deprivation of the Moros. In the early years of the Republic, the primary concern of the GRP was preventing the spread of communist movements, which was attempted to be tackled with an internal migration policy aiming to establish control over the southern territories by encouraging the Christian Filipinos living in the northern provinces to settle in these areas. Between 1954 and 1963, the GRP launched a programme of Agricultural Land Reform through which all unregistered territories in Mindanao were declared as military reservations or public land to be resettled to landless farmers (The Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines [Official Gazette], 1954, 1963). The Muslim inhabitants, unfamiliar with the new procedures and unable to pay the required high taxes to register their historical lands to their names, labelled the programme as a 'land grab'. Additional disagreements over land also surfaced following the mass immigration of Christian Filipino farmers to Cotabato and Lanao, changing the demography further by doubling the number of Christians over ancestral Muslim residents (O'Shaughnessy, 1979, p. 277; Hunt, 1993, p. 83; McKenna, 1998, p. 117). Consequently, with the rising unrest, in the mid-1960s, the Moro question was brought to the GRP agenda for the first time. The GRP aimed to integrate non-Christian Filipinos into the mainstream culture; thus, they envisioned a Moro adaptation of Filipino identity while they continued to practice their own religion. Seen as a direct assimilation policy, the government reforms on the matter received a vast negative response that forced the GRP to provide certain exemptions to Moros from the Philippine law regarding the issues such as marriage based on their customs and traditions. However, the GRP backing out on certain cultural matters was not to affect the ongoing land and agricultural policies (Hunt, 1993, p. 84; McKenna, 1998, p. 117). Thus, the Moro people were exposed to cultural trauma and economic disadvantages by losing their lands and becoming a minority in their ancestral domain. Furthermore, these developments meant remaining a politically disadvantaged group in the existing majoritarian

electoral system. In the face of these government policies that highly resembled the previous colonial administrations, the early years of the new republic witnessed the formation of several Muslim political groups uniting under the idea of establishing an independent state.

1.4. State Violence & The Emerge of Moro Insurgency

1.4.1. The Marcos Era (1965-1986)

In 1965, Ferdinand E. E. Marcos assumed the Presidency of the Republic of the Philippines, which started the most violent period in the history of the state-Moro struggle and the most undemocratic period in the country's history. Taking the previous administrations' visions to the extreme, President Marcos carried out an intensive nation-building campaign, alarmed by the possibility of a rising Muslim separatist movement. However, his 'Philippinization' programme was not involving policies to improve the conditions of the Muslims living in neglect and facing discrimination daily. Under the Marcos government, the Christian settlement continued to the southern provinces, eventually making Muslims a smaller minority in their historical habitation. Furthermore, being a textbook example of how clientelism works, the influential economic and bureaucratic positions were all allocated to Christian Filipinos. The increasing cronyism also led to a more prominent governance role for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), thereby turning the democratic state into an oligarchic dictatorship (Francia, 2014, pp. 120- 122).

In March 1968, known as the Jabidah Massacre, the AFP allegedly killed eleven Muslim military trainees undergoing organised guerrilla warfare training. The GRP investigated the event, and following a few senate and congressional hearings, it was declared a hoax (Official Gazette, 1968), which led to the adverse political atmosphere in the country, which was preoccupied with economic problems, and quickly transitioned for the worst. The quick spread of the narrative of the event, informing the masses about the murder of young Muslim military trainees by the AFP for rejecting to attack 'their own people', triggered further political awareness and a desire for independence amongst the Moro masses (Banlaoi, 2009, p. 50). Soon after the incident, Muslim Filipino students started to organise mass political campaigns against the GRP. The scarce Muslim members of the government were also supporting the Moro student movement by calling for the

impeachment of Marcos, which was outright rejected by Congress.

In May 1968, Datu Udtog Matalam, then Governor of Cotabato, established the first Moro radical group named the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM), followed by another Muslim political elite, Haroun al-Rashid who formed the Bangsamoro Liberation Organization (BMLO) (McKenna, 1998, p. 164). However, Matalam and al-Rashid were both perceived as corrupt elites by most of the Muslim student groups, and neither MIM nor BMLO was seen to carry a strong will enough to “liberate Mindanao from ‘Filipino colonialism’ and to establish an independent Bangsamoro Republic” (Quimpo, 2016, p. 66). That same year, MIM was dissolved after a series of negotiations with President Marcos, and BMLO was demolished due to the differences between its members' visions. Between 1970 and 1971, inter-group violence broke out in Mindanao. Christian and Muslim armed gangs conducted violent campaigns against one another, mainly targeting unarmed civilians. The reported outcome of the incidents was 269 Christian and 305 Muslim deaths, along with 5,000 burned-down houses (McKenna, 1998, p. 250). In September 1972, President Marcos declared Martial Law to halt the events' progression (Official Gazette, 1972).

In October 1972, one of the leaders in BMLO, Nur Misuari, established Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The organisation was joined by all that broke away from MIM and BMLO. Misuari believed that the troubles that Moro people were experiencing were partially due to the actions of corrupt Muslim political elites. This new movement denounced the linguistic and socio-cultural differences amongst the Muslim Filipino communities while claiming the ‘Moro’ identity as a collective name for all ‘descendants of the unsubjugated people.’ From its offset, the MNLF called for equality for all in political, economic, social, and civil spheres, which was to be achieved by establishing an independent Bangsamoro state. The Bangsamoro state was desired to be established in the MINSUPALA region, the geographical area composed of Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan (Mercado, 1984). It is, however, essential to note that although appearing peaceful in political ideals, the movement was foreseeing a struggle to achieve them.

Between 1972 and 1976, the MNLF launched a violent campaign against the AFP in Mindanao, resulting in approximately 80,000 Moro and 11,000 AFP soldier casualties. During the events, almost 300,000 Muslims

were also forced to flee to other parts of the country (Noble, 1976, pp. 405-424). This disastrous end brought the Philippines to the international agenda in the mid-1970s. In 1976, backed by United Nations (UN), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) called for an immediate ceasefire and peace talks. By December 1976, the efforts of OIC paid back, and the first round of the MNLF-GRP peace talks started in Libya. At the end of the negotiations, Tripoli Agreement was signed by the parties, which promised the halt of insurgency in exchange for the recognition of Mindanao as an autonomous political entity to stay an integral part of the Philippines (Tripoli Agreement, 1976).

In the aftermath of the agreement, various members of the MNLF condemned Misuari for giving up on the independence ideal, and unrest started within the group. Thus, numerous MNLF members carried on their attacks against the GRP. According to the Tripoli Agreement, thirteen provinces of the southern Philippines were to enjoy political autonomy while being governed by an Islamic administrative and judicial system. The Tripoli Agreement lacked clear guidance on implementing the agreed terms (McKenna, 1998, pp. 165-166). President Marcos, in effect with this legal ambiguity, established only two autonomous regions instead of consolidating a provisional government. President Marcos's dilution of the peace process and the growing negative Moro perception of the MNLF's acceptance of autonomy created a convenient environment for the emergence of new political movements to represent the Moro will and work towards the independent Bangsamoro state. In 1978, a group of MNLF members led by Hashim Salamat formed Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Immensely disturbed by the MNLF's secular-nationalist stance and settlement for autonomy, the MILF declared Jihad against the GRP with the ultimate aim of creating a Moro Islamic State in Mindanao, ruled by Shariah law (Hashim, 2001, pp. 83-87; Banlaoi, 2009, pp. 53-54; Narciso et al., 2012, p. 109).

From 1978 until 1986, the Philippines witnessed President Marcos' struggle to hold on to power by launching several campaigns of violence, along with the collapse of the Filipino economy. His reign of gross human rights violations and corruption, however, was to end with a popular resistance triggered by the assassination of a former senate member and opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr. at Manila International Airport in

1983. In the years following the event, President Marcos was accused of diversion of US aid and public funds for personal use and calls for his impeachment. In 1985, facing ever-growing public unrest, he called a snap election to be held in February 1986. The election results were manipulated in favour of Marcos, which created turmoil in the country and eventually forced President Marcos to resign and flee to the US (Thompson, 1996).

1.5. Consolidation of Moro Resistance, Rise of Islamic Extremism

1.5.1. Aquino Era (1986-1992)

On 25 February 1986, Corazon Aquino, the widow of Benigno Aquino Jr, was installed as the duly elected president. Aquino was determined to end the undemocratic system in the country created by Martial Law in 1972. In 1987, the Aquino government ratified a new constitution, and pre-1972 democratic institutions were restored. Aquino was also determined to end the two-decade-long Moro conflict. Encouraged by this new spirit of reconciliation, the MILF and the MNLF leadership offered to hold negotiations with the GRP. President Aquino preferred to engage with the MNLF, formally establishing the MNLF as the sole Moros representative. This development was to marginalise the MILF from the peace process, and as a result, its leadership declared that any agreement reached by the GRP and the MNLF would not be honoured by them.

During the negotiations, the MNLF requested President Aquino to sign an executive order to create the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) as agreed in 1976. Although rejecting this demand, President Aquino signed the Republic Act 6734, which called for a plebiscite to be held in the areas covered in the Tripoli Agreement. The plebiscite was held on 1 August 1989, yet the results demonstrated the will of only four out of thirteen provinces and nine cities to join ARMM (Means, 2009, pp. 199-200).

That same year, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani trained and fought as a mujahid in the Afghan-Soviet War in the late 1980s established the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) (Chalk, 2001, pp. 241-69; Yoshihara, 2006, pp. 205-6). Janjalani was known to have close connections with the key leaders and members of Islamist extremist groups like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and al-Qaida, along with several members of the MILF who also fought in the same war (Abuza, 2005, pp. 40-2). Osama bin Ladin's brother-in-law Mohammed

Jamal Khalifa was also known to provide financial and logistic support to the ASG and the MILF during their violent campaigns against the GRP in the late 1980s (Jones et al., 2003, pp. 443-57). ASG, just like MILF, was composed of former MNLF members who did not believe in the MNLF vision. However, their aim was not just to establish an independent Islamic state in Mindanao but also to establish global dominance of Islam through armed struggle (Yoshihara, 2006, p. 206).

In 1990, the election of ARMM officials was held, and Zacaria Candao was elected governor. Candao's executive powers were limited to public works, labour and employment, local government, and social services. The GRP also authorised ARMM to initiate direct foreign investments for the growth and development of the area. The plebiscite subsequently creating the ARMM was perceived as problematic by many Muslim activists as they were held in the Moro lands, which were now populated with a Christian majority. Thus, there was no unity amongst the Moro people, and ARMM was not seen as a victory achieved by all, preventing it from functioning as a legitimate body. Despite these odds, with the Philippine Local Government Code of 1991, local mayors and governors of ARMM were given greater autonomy by the GRP along with the responsibility of providing socio-economic development in their areas (Official Gazette, 1991).

1.5.2. The Ramos Era (1992-1998)

The MILF carried out sporadic violent attacks from 1991 until 1997 against the AFP and its rival Muslim factions. The ASG, on the other hand, was engaged in 378 terrorist activities resulting in the death of 288 civilians throughout the 1990s. The attacks of the ASG were primarily towards the Christian Filipino groups in the form of church and inter-island ship bombings. Kidnapping for ransom and robbery were also signature criminal activities of the ASG, utilised to finance the organisation. Between 1991 and 2000, the ASG was engaged in 640 kidnappings victimising 2076 people, which led it to be described as a mere bandit group by the GRP (Banloi, 2006, p. 249). Fidel Ramos assumed the Presidency in 1992, in the face of the futility of GRP attempts to end the violence in Mindanao, resumed negotiations with the MNLF while hoping to resolve the turmoil in Mindanao and the political dilemma generated by the Tripoli Agreement once and for all. President Ramos' efforts towards peace received vast international support, primarily from Indonesian President Suharto, who

assumed the mediator role, and by the OIC, which was positively present with its push of MNLF to agree on a middle ground with the GRP. The negotiations between President Ramos and Misuari lasted for three years, resulting in a peace agreement signed in 1996, titled the Final Peace Agreement (FPA).

The initial demand of the MNLF at the negotiation table was the establishment of a 10-year provisional government in Mindanao, leading to an independent Muslim state, which was enough for GRP to call off the talks. President Ramos was determined to devise a plan to prevent the stalemate. Eventually, he proposed a plan that promised greater autonomy for the ARMM and established a commission titled Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). The proposed commission was the sole authority for implementing and supervising peace and development programmes in Mindanao's Special Zones for Peace and Development (SZOPAD), covering Palawan and thirteen provinces and nine cities in Mindanao. The plan foresaw a further territorial expansion through a plebiscite to be held in all regions covered in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. It promised full autonomy to those regions that desire to be a part of the ARMM.

Furthermore, Misuari was to be the first chairman of SPCPD, and the future chairmen were promised to be Muslims. In March 1996, leaving its demands for independence behind, the MNLF signed the FPA. The FPA also included a framework to enable MNLF forces integration into the AFP (Official Gazette, 1996a).

Following the agreement, Misuari was elected as the regional governor of the AARM and became the first chairman of the SPCPD to run for five years. Furthermore, although limited numbers, some of the MNLF forces joined the AFP and the Philippines Police Force, along with various MNLF commanders assuming administrative positions in the ARMM and the SPCPD. Although framed as a victory that ended the 25 years of conflict by President Ramos (Official Gazette, 1996b) and a turning point by Misuari, which freed the Moros in a socio-economic, cultural, religious and political sense (Official Gazette, 1996a), the majority of Christian and Muslim Filipinos were not happy with the agreement. President Ramos' reassurance regarding the plebiscite eventually addressed the Christian community's concerns. Groups such as the MILF, the ASG, and some MNLF

members outright rejected the new political arrangements and condemned Misuari for giving up the ultimate goal of the Moro struggle; hence, the violence continued. Misuari and Ramos hoped that the economic development in the conflict-ridden, poor areas to be achieved by SPCPD would end all opposition in the long term. Co-opted by GPA, SPCPD was given the great responsibility of resolving the socio-cultural, economic, and political problems in Mindanao and Palawan; but achieving such success in five years was proven to be nothing but a mere dream in these neglected areas.

President Ramos continued his efforts towards peace in the last months of his office by reaching out to the MILF. Although disturbed by numerous clashes between some of the fractions of the MILF and the AFP, the MILF and the GRP held several peace talks, which ended with an agreement for the general cessation of hostilities in July 1997. Following the agreement, President Ramos, despite the opposition from some government officials, withdrew the arrest warrants of leaders of the MILF and repositioned the AFP forces away from their camps. In return, the MILF agreed to provide information about the ASG to aid the government's efforts to halt its criminal activities (The United Nations Institute of Peace, 2005).

1.5.3. The Estrada Era (1998-2001)

In June 1998, when Joseph Estrada assumed the Presidency of the Republic of Philippines, the collective anxiety amongst the Moros resurged, stemming from the SPCPD's failure to improve the poor living conditions in Mindanao and Palawan despite reaching half of the allocated time. Furthermore, the irregular clashes between different Muslim rebel factions, as well as the ASG campaigns of terror through kidnappings and killings, were weakening the security of the area each day.

In March 2000, doubting the MILF's sincerity towards the peace process in the face of its continuing attacks towards both civilians and the AFP and its insisting calls for the establishment of an independent Islamic State, President Estrada halted the peace process through a declaration of 'all-out-war' against the organisation. Thus, the Ramos administration's progressive vision, which foresaw integration of the MILF into the peace process, was replaced by the aggressive, coercive policies of the new President Estrada.

By the summer of 2000, GRP had already taken over the MILF headquarters of Camp Abubakar, along with its thirteen major and forty-three minor camps. At the end of the campaign, the MILF's leader Salamat escaped to Malaysia, and the conventional methods of the MILF were reverted to guerrilla warfare. At the same time, the jihad calls against the GRP were renewed. The civilian casualties of the event were hundreds, and almost a million Muslims were displaced. President Estrada's overly loud and open celebration of his victory was also found offensive by many Muslims (Curaming, 2016, p. 130). While appearing as a successful counterterrorism campaign in Mindanao through weakening the MILF, Estrada's aggressive policies heightened the Moro anxiety by creating new trauma. In 2001, when President Estrada was removed from office due to corruption allegations, the country was amidst political turmoil.

1.6. Counterterrorism, Institutional Inconsistency & The Futile Peace Process

1.6.1. The Arroyo Era (2001-2010)

In January 2001, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo became President of the Philippines. During Arroyo's term, the 'all-out war' against the MILF was replaced with an 'all-out war' against ASG. President Arroyo, although facing the uncompromising stance of various government officials regarding the unrest in Mindanao, perceived the reason behind the Islamic opposition as the suffering of Muslim inhabitants under unfair socio-economic conditions. On the other hand, her understanding of Islamic extremism was an urgent matter of internal and external security. Triggered by the September 11 events and increased kidnapping incidents of the ASG known for having connections with al-Qaida, Arroyo's government requested assistance from the US to end the Islamic extremism in the Philippines. Upon request of the GRP, Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines (OEF-P) was launched in 2002 as a part of the global War on Terror (Curaming, 2016, p. 130). Known as the Joint Special Operations Task Force in the Philippines, the AFP was joined by US forces in their combat against terrorism targeting the ASG, which successfully weakened the organisation.

The first step towards achieving peace and reconciliation for President Arroyo was resuming the peace talks with MILF. Unaffected by a recent AFP operation against the group suspecting a MILF-ASG cooperation, GPA

and MILF eventually signed a treaty for the resumption of peace talks in August 2001. Arroyo's second act was calling for a plebiscite to realise ARMM's expansion from its four provinces in March 2001. Nevertheless, only two provinces in Mindanao and Palawan voted to be part of ARMM (Official Gazette, 2001). In October 2001, the MILF and the MNLF started talks for a possible reunification which was halted following an allegedly Misuari-led rebellion in Sulu and Zamboanga City to cause a hundred civilian casualties. Following the events, Misuari fled to Malaysia, only to be deported back to the GRP jurisdiction.

In 2002, the continuation of GRP-MILF talks resulted in an agreement to denounce groups that perform criminal acts such as kidnapping. The following year, the MILF leadership also declared that they had abandoned the path of violence and had no links with any terrorist organisation in Asia and elsewhere in the world (Martin & Tumines, 2008, p. 4). The MILF-GRP declared a mutual agreement on the secession of hostilities and started to hold exploratory talks for the possibility of independence. These talks were mediated by the Malaysian government and held in Malaysia. However, although both parties were willing to reach an agreement, the 'ancestral domain' concept to define the Bangsamoro territories was to bring a negotiation to a stalemate. On 27 July 2008, a Memorandum of Agreement on the Muslim Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) was finalised in Malaysia, which foresaw a plebiscite for 700 villages in Mindanao to determine their desire to join a Bangsamoro sub-state. The positive political atmosphere established with the MOA-AD soon changed into a conflictual one.

Upon the North Cotabato government officials filing a case against the MOA-AD, the Supreme Court of the Philippines declared the agreed terms for establishing the Bangsamoro state unconstitutional in August 2008, which discarded the anticipated agreement. This was a significant setback to the peace process. Several extremist groups also revived their violent campaigns against AFP, encouraged by the atmosphere of grievance.

1.6.2. The Aquino III Era (2010-2016)

In the period leading to the end of her term, Presidency Arroyo declared suspension of AFP operations against the MILF in an attempt to regain the lost confidence in the GRP. In a similar vein, to demonstrate the GRP's commitment to peace, her successor President Benigno Aquino III's

met with MILF leader Al Haj Murad on 4 August 2011 to discuss a new structure for the creation of a Bangsamoro sub-state (Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process [OPAPP], 2011). The MILF's leadership, in response, declared that they no longer seek separation to demonstrate their genuine intentions towards peace. Nonetheless, several factions within the MILF, including the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Maute Group (Daulah Islamiya, DI), rejected this new stance while carrying out violent campaigns against the AFP in the name of Jihad to establish the independent Islamic Moro state. In October 2011, following an ambush of an AFP contingent which resulted in the death of nineteen soldiers, the political atmosphere changed once again, leading the GRP to doubt MILF's intentions giving rise to calls for a new 'all-out war'. Despite the opposition to peace progression by various members of the GRP due to the continuation of violent confrontations between AFP and several MILF factions, President Aquino and MILF leader Murad carried on with the peace negotiations facilitated by Malaysia.

On 15 October 2012, President Aquino and the MILF leader Murad signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in Manila. On 15 October 2012, President Benigno and Murad signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) in Manila. The agreement foresaw establishing a new autonomous political entity to replace the ARMM and the MILF decommission. Several clauses of the agreement projected an official recognition of Bangsamoro as a distinct nation and acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Bangsamoro grievances arising from their marginalisation along with the unjust dispossession of their territorial and property rights in the past. The FAB also promised a transitional justice programme to correct historical injustices and address human rights violations, along with intensification of development programmes for rehabilitation, reconstruction and development addressing the needs of MILF combatants, internally displaced persons and poverty-stricken communities.

The anticipated Bangsamoro Government (BG) was designed as a ministerial system to function accordingly with the envisioned Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) to be ratified by its own people. The GRP and BG were to have an asymmetrical relation, where the GRP would hold authority over the matters of defence and external security, foreign policy, citizenship, coinage, common market and global trade and postal service, and BG would hold

authority over all other aspects of governance inclusive of the justice system. The justice system of the BG was agreed to be Shariah, yet it was designed according to customary rights and native traditions and applied only to Muslims. The law enforcement in the new autonomous area was agreed to be transferred from AFP to a BG police force. The FAB's economic arrangements included BG authority to levy taxes, to accept internal and external donations, along with a promise of obtaining a fair share of the revenues from natural resources and further GRP support until BG gains its full fiscal autonomy. The territorial area of the BG included the areas of ARMM with the addition of the 12 areas that expressed their desire to join in the 2001 plebiscite along with Cotabato and Isabela. Furthermore, the FAB was calling for petitions demonstrating at least 10% desire to join BG from all other areas, to be submitted at least two months prior to the ratification of BBL (Official Gazette, 2012).

On December 2013, accordingly to the FAB, President Aquino established the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, tasked with drafting the BBL. In January 2014, the annexes were signed, and the ratification of the FAB into the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB)_was scheduled for 27 March 2014, yet President Aquino could not succeed in pushing the ratification through Congress, and the fate of peace in Mindanao fell on his successor. In the later years of President Aquino, although small in size and limited in the impact of violence, new violent jihadist groups emerged, joining the existing ones in declaring loyalty to ISIS. One of them, the Ansar Khalifa Philippines, made its presence known by declaring its allegiance to ISIS in August 2014, just a month after the ASG leader Isnilon Hapilon swore his loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi, the so-called caliph of ISIS. The Maute Group, known to be affiliated with Jemaah Islamiyah, on the other hand, also pledged its allegiance to ISIS in April 2015 (Manyuan, 2014; Weiss, 2016; Allard, 2017).

1.6.3. The Duterte Era (2016-2022) & Current Presidency of Bong Bong Marcos (2022-ongoing)

On 30 June 2016, Rodrigo Duterte was installed as the new President of the Philippines. President Duterte, a lawyer by vocation, was a Christian native of Mindanao who was thought to have a better and more extensive understanding of the issue. Shortly after assuming office, he swore to 'fix Mindanao' to solve the 'Moro problem' while expressing his support for the

BBL, declaring a ‘war on drugs’, and promising to end crime and corruption across the country.

President Duterte’s first step towards peace and reconciliation in Mindanao was ordering AFP not to arrest Misuari, who was hiding in Sulu and inviting him to join the peace talks as the leader of MNLF (Glang & Ramos, 2017). Until May 2017, he held several meetings with the MILF and the MNLF leaders. During the talks, the Moro leaders’ demands for establishing separate armed forces and police became the most contested issue as President Duterte perceived the matter as unnegotiable. Agreeing on a federal system, President Duterte stated that realising such a model could only be possible if the police and military control stayed with the GRP (Ramos, 2016). In November 2016, President Duterte signed an executive order to expand the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, which was tasked with drafting the BBL according to the measures agreed upon in FAB. The same month, the ASG bombed a night market in Davao City, resulting in 14 deaths, followed by other bomb attacks in North and South Cotabato (ABS-CBN New, 2016).

In January 2017, President Duterte, who was concerned with the increase of the jihadist campaigns, was assured by the MNLF and MILF leaders that Mindanao would not become a ‘sanctuary’ for such organisations as the President stated in case of such an occurrence, he would launch an AFP campaign in the area (Ranada, 2017). On 23 May 2017, the ASG and the Maute Group sieged Marawi City, leading President Duterte to proclaim ‘a declaration of martial law and suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus in the whole of Mindanao’ (Official Gazette, 2017). The siege lasted until the death of the jihadist leaders Hapilon and Omar Maute in October 2017. the event, the members of the ASG and Maute group, allegedly along with foreign terrorists, occupied several official buildings inclusive of a hospital, Mindanao State University and Marawi State Hall; set fire to a cathedral along with several church-run schools; and took a priest and several civilians hostage, overall killing 87 civilians including the death of 40 hospital evacuees. The GRP later announced the casualties as 978 AFP soldiers and 978 militant deaths (ABS-CBN News, 2017; AlJazeera, 2017; DPA/Manila, 2017).

Under the Martial Law, Duterte’s ‘war on drugs’ was merged with his ‘anti-terror’ campaign linking jihadism with the drug trade in 2020 with the

enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act, which gave more surveillance power to AFP for countering terrorism while diluting the measures for the prevention of human right abuses. During this time of political turmoil in the country, many attempts to continue peace negotiations broke down. Nevertheless, in the summer of 2018, the draft of the anticipated Bangsamoro government, the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) ratified by the GRP and signed by President Duterte to be effective as of 10 August 2018.

On 21 January and 6 February, two plebiscites resulted in the inclusion of Cotabato and six towns within Lanao del Norte to the former territories of ARMM to the new Moro polity, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The ARMM was replaced with an interim government, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA). BTA was designed to be composed of 80 members appointed by President Duterte and the MILF. Despite the MILF demand for a total six-year period, BTA was tasked with carrying out executive and legislative procedures within three years until 2022 for the first BARMM parliamentary elections to be held in synch with the 2022 national elections (Official Gazette, 2018).

In the next two years, several members of the GRP filed recommendations for resetting the BARMM election to either 2025 or 2028, arguing for the shortness of the time frame to achieve a significant improvement and the necessary transition in the conflict-ridden areas along with highlighting the disruptive impact of COVID-19 pandemic in BTA's activities. In November 2020, BTA passed a resolution proposing an additional three-year extension period. On 28 October 2021, with the approval of the GRP, President Duterte issued a government act which postponed the first parliamentary elections of BARMM until 2025 and allowed BTA to continue until the end of this new transition period with 80 new members to be appointed by the President Duterte himself.

In July 2022, the daughter of President Duterte, Sara Duterte, assumed vice-Presidency under the new President-elect Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos, the son of the former dictatorial President Ferdinand Marcos. In August 2022, President Bongbong Marcos stated that as the new head of the nation, he would support the BARMM while expressing his belief in the newly appointed BTA officials 'to get the BARMM into the normal fold of life in the Philippines' by 2025 (The Republic of the Philippines Office of the Press Secretary, 2022).

3. BANGSAMORO IMPASSE AND THE SPOILERS TO PEACE

3.1. The Violent and Corrupt Culture of Governance & Institutional Inconsistency

The turbulent history of the Philippines is the key to understanding the contemporary reality on the ground marked with social, religious, ethnic, and economic frictions inherited from authoritarian colonial rulers to the independent clientelist Philippines.

The first system of political organisation known in the Philippines is the *barangays*, small chiefdoms ruled by the wealthy and respected elders of extended families that form the villages. The made-to-order structure of these hierarchical political units was further amplified by the colonial rulers in the form of 'perceived in-group' favouritism. Under this system of governance, the whole country was oppressed, but some suffered more than others, leading many of the population to have grievances. Throughout the colonial era, these grievances have led to numerous armed struggles between the Filipinos and foreign occupants, as well as Muslims and Christians.

The Spanish colonialists took advantage of the already existing family ties in *barangays* by strengthening them, which left an unequal land tenure system. The Americans, while not changing the existing structure, also allowed the elite to extend the family structures into politics, leading to the internalisation of clientelism as a natural system. The American in-group favouritism enabled the Christian communities to preserve their existent socio-economic advantage inherited from the Spanish era while also providing them new advantages in the political sphere at the expense of Moro communities' marginalisation. In this system of governance, the leaders (patrons) were supported because of their ability to satisfy the demands of their followers (clients) (Tarling, 1992, pp. 418-19). Thus, through their in-group favouring policies, Americans created a sustainable system for maintaining their authority.

The independent Philippines inherited the authoritarian political tendencies and clientelism of the previous colonial eras. The political power in the post-independence era was consolidated through clientelism, and the struggle over political power was now between elite families who controlled the local administration (Arcilla 2006, pp. 134-5; Tarling 1992, pp. 90-93). These elites are still present in today's Philippines, and they exercise their

political will and control over the Philippines' economy through the domination of massive agricultural, industrial and commercial empires (Doronila 1985, pp. 106-7; Dressel 2011, pp. 530-31). The political and social life in the Philippines is characterised by corruption, nepotism and elitism. Hence, the country was ranked 117th (out of 180) in the Corruption Perception Index in 2021, making it the third worst in its region, with only Laos and Myanmar trailing behind.

The apparent continuation of institutionalised discrimination and in-group favouritism indicates colonial inheritance. Due to the overwhelmingly Catholic domination, the central government largely ignored Muslims, which grants legitimate grievances for the five million Muslims in the Philippines. Several insurgent groups have fought for a Muslim homeland in the southern Philippines; internecine conflicts have plagued it in many cases. Furthermore, due to longstanding internal conflicts, many communities are not reached by government services and remain habitually neglected. As Ben Reid (2008, p. 7) argues, “the combination of precolonial and postcolonial relations have entrenched relationships of power that have entailed authoritarianism, clientelism, and persistently high levels of poverty and exclusion.”

3.1.1. Governance Issues and Problems Implementing the Bangsamoro

The next step after signing the CAB was that the GRP would push for passing a Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) to be ratified in the proposed areas of the Bangsamoro political entity. As part of the deal, and under the Annex on Normalisation, the approximately 12,000-strong MILF to gradually decommission in “a process whereby communities can achieve their desired quality of life, which includes the pursuit of sustainable livelihood and political participation within a peaceful deliberative society” (OPAPP, 2011). The Bangsamoro will establish its own Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), and the police force will be subject to the Philippine National Police (PNP) but with a primary function to enforce laws and maintain peace and order in the Bangsamoro. For a smooth transition and decommissioning of the MILF fighters, there will be a Joint Peace and Security Committee (JPSC) and Joint Peace and Security Teams (JPSTs) composed of the AFP, the PNP and the MILF's BIAF. A problem with the normalisation process is that the MILF is unlikely to put down all their weapons until the other active groups operating in Mindanao are defeated or demobilised. There are many

weapons in circulation in Mindanao, not only amongst the armed groups and insurgencies, which is the result of over five decades of conflicts and instability leading to a militarised rural population in the Philippines. This culture of violence reproduces itself in a vicious cycle, which needs to be broken before lasting peace can be achieved.

Several groups have been active in spoiler violence post-FAB. The MNLF demonstrated that they were still a reckoning force in Mindanao with several operations during 2013, including an attempt to fight the ASG, orchestrating the reclaiming of Sabah by sympathisers of the Sultan of Sulu, and the siege of Zamboanga City. A splinter group of the MILF rejecting the peace talks – the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM) or its armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) – has been active since 2010, the Maoist NPA has shown a reluctance to go back to the negotiation table and are still active and operating in different parts of the Philippines including Mindanao. While these groups are still fighting, as mentioned above, it is unlikely that the MILF will lay down their arms. I would argue that it is more likely that the cooperation between the AFP and the MILF in the JPSTs will lead to pacification operations aimed at the other insurgencies. Another obstacle to the normalisation process is the private armies under the control of families and clans, i.e. the political, dynastic elites in Mindanao.

3.1.2. Failed Peace Agreements and Spoilers

The framework is a preliminary agreement and far from a guaranteed peace accord. The FAB is up against momentous legal and constitutional challenges before it can be implemented. The agreement proposes the establishment of a transition committee/commission that will work out the details for the Bangsamoro unit – specifically, the basic law that would create Bangsamoro. The MILF has negotiated peace deals with other governments and failed before. Under the proposed Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), in 2008, the GRP and the MILF announced that they had reached an agreement to expand the ARMM. Christian politicians representing settlers in these areas then petitioned the Supreme Court in anger after not being consulted on the matter. The MOA-AD would be revoked as the Supreme Court would deem it ‘unconstitutional’, spurring a high level of violence that left 390,000 people displaced (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2008, p. 1; 13). Even though the

MOA-AD was shut down and the violence that accompanied that decision was positive for the peace process, it demonstrated that the MILF and the GRP could agree on contested issues and areas. It also demonstrated a willingness to make concessions on both sides, opening up for creative thinking and solutions to the incompatibilities. There are many similarities between the two agreements, although the most problematic parts of the MOA-AD have been omitted. With the most contested part – territory – both parties needed a specific set of language used to reassure corresponding local politicians/elites that their areas would not be affected and that it was a better ‘deal’ than that of the MNLF in 1996 (ICG, 2012, pp. 5-6). Reaching a negotiated peace has, however, increased with this initial step. Nevertheless, there is much work still; in the words of former President Aquino, “Promises must be kept, institutions must be fixed, and new capacities must be built nationally and regionally in order to effectively administer the Bangsamoro.” (Official Gazette, 2012).

One of the more formidable challenges was to have the deal brokered in time before President Aquino’s six-year term ended, which it was not. For a long time, it was being blocked in Congress under President Duterte as one cannot predict the willingness of the coming administration regarding peace. Since July 2022, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr, the son of the disgraced dictator, has inherited the peace process.

Other potential spoilers to an enduring peace are other armed separatists not seeing themselves as being represented by the MILF. Splinter groups such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM) and its armed wing Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), led by Commander Kato, have already used violence to protest the peace talks between the GRP and the MILF. Perhaps more severe is the MNLF’s stance, which opposes the FAB by referring to its own peace accord with the GRP from 1996. The former governor of ARMM, Nur Misuari, claims the government’s deal is illegal. MNLF is still the only Moro organisation recognised as the legitimate representative of Muslims and indigenous communities by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Echeminada 2012; Usman 2012). The OIC made efforts and proposed a meeting at the Council of Foreign Ministers conference in Djibouti on 16 November 2012. The OIC managed to convince Nur Misuari and Al Haj Murad to sit down to discuss establishing a Bangsamoro Coordination Forum (BCF) (Arguillas

2012). In 2013, several incidents increased tensions between different groups and factions of the insurgents in Mindanao. In February, an armed group of 100 followers of the Sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram III, seized a village in Lahad Datu, Sabah, in Malaysia. The siege lasted weeks when negotiations failed, and Malaysian security forces used what can be argued to be excessive force – including air strikes – to reclaim the village (Sidel 2014).

It remains to be seen if the proposed Bangsamoro political entity can address the longstanding economic, political and cultural aspirations of the poor and oppressed majority of the Moro people. There is a clear possibility that the proposed entity will be dominated by a different set of local elites than the ARMM, which in turn are pliable to the agenda of the ruling elites. It could also be argued that the peace deal is being stressed and forced forward, seeing that it has to be completed within the six-year term of President Aquino.

One of the concerns amongst local Mindanaoans is that the taxes on the region's natural resources and the profits rarely stay in the impoverished areas in Mindanao but instead go to the Makati business district in the capital Manila. The ARMM has been unsuccessful as an experiment in regional autonomy as it could be argued to have become synonymous with corruption and inefficiency. Furthermore, it has become a way for Manila to meddle in Mindanao's local politics, and it has failed to create regional cohesion between the regions in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. The proposed Bangsamoro entity is larger than ARMM, and it naturally had to be this way after years of negotiating and fighting; it was unthinkable that the MILF would end up with a smaller area than the MNLF in the 1996 accord. However, the GRP proposed that all the areas within the old ARMM and the 'new' additions to the Bangsamoro would vote in plebiscites to decide whether they wanted to join. This had to be agreed upon from a strictly constitutional argument

3.1.3. Governance in Mindanao

The ARMM was first established when President Corazon Aquino signed the Republic Act 6734 on 1 August 1989, and a plebiscite was held in the proposed area of the ARMM. However, only four out of the thirteen proposed provinces joined the ARMM. After nearly two decades of fighting and hundreds of thousands of casualties during President Marcos's rule,

Cory Aquino was eager to bring the Moro insurgency to a peaceful conclusion (Means 2009, pp. 199-200). The leader of the MNLF, Nur Misuari, who was chosen to lead the ARMM, condemned the result as he and the MNLF had expected to head a thirteen-province regional government. Further negotiations were needed, and in March 1996, the GRP and the MNLF signed a peace agreement establishing arrangements for a four-province ARMM and the integration of MNLF fighters into the armed forces of the Philippines (AFP).

Graft and corruption are widespread in the political life of the democratic Philippines, e.g. President Estrada was ousted in 2001 on corruption charges (See Kasuya 2005; Landé 2001). Likewise, the then governor of the ARMM, Nur Misuari, was removed from his position with alleged corruption and terrorism charges (Unson 2013). A former AFP Chief of Staff, Angelo Reyes, committed suicide after facing corruption charges. In 2013 a major scandal regarding a massive fraud scheme involving misuse of public funds was revealed involving fictitious companies, foundations and NGOs, which various senators and congress members used (Sidel 2014, pp. 66-67).

3.2. Islamic Radicalism & IS ideal

The split between Al-Qaida and ISIS impacted Southeast Asia, where it was estimated that around 30 regional militant groups pledged allegiance to ISIS. This would be apparent with the Marawi siege. In May 2017, the military launched an operation to apprehend Isnilon Hapilon, a leader of the ASG. However, when the army swooped in, Hapilon was protected by scores of armed men who quickly took strategic positions throughout Marawi City. Instead of capturing Hapilon, the military raid seemed to kick-start the group's plan to seize the city.

Vicious cycles of conflict tend to spur grievances and reinforce radicalisation. Hence, any peace agreement and peacebuilding efforts must be as inclusive and holistic as possible. The lack of development in these conflict-ridden and disaster struck areas of the Philippines remains an obstacle to any sustainable peace. The case of the Philippines fits well into the triple-nexus approach of humanitarian, development and peace. Kumar Ramakrishna (2018) writes that an ideological ecosystem maintains the radicalisation of Muslims in Mindanao. Ramakrishna (2018, p. 11) also

states that madrasas, individual preachers and places of worship have functioned as incubators for radicalisation. This in addition to the vicious cycle of three generations of foreign fighters in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria and decades of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns. These circumstances and the environment have been conducive to the radicalisation of Moro youths. In recent years, in the post-Marawi era, the Philippines have seen more radicalisation in terms of suicide bombers. This is not unusual in jihadist terrorism, but in the context of the Philippines, it is new and previously unprecedented. Moreover, some suicide bombers have been women or widows of ASG fighters, which adds another level of complexity and poses a more significant threat in the long-term perspective.

The challenge for the GRP and the BARMM lies in ensuring they address the longstanding grievances in the Moro areas of Mindanao while on a local and national level, the MILF and other leaders in Mindanao work on generating a counter-narrative to contest the extremist ideologies.

3.3. Liberal Peacebuilding & the Incompatibility with Local Context

The uncertainty of the coming administrations is, however, what is forcing this process to its quick implementation. History has demonstrated how much can differ between the presidents' approaches to peace and their capacities to unite the different arms of government; the legislature, military, and civilian bureaucracy, as well as their agendas, have differed depending on the 'needs of the times' (Ferrer 2005, pp. 125-6). This especially became evident with the Ramos administration that helped forge the 1996 Peace Agreement with the MNLF and agreed to the first ceasefire agreement with the MILF, where the successor Joseph Estrada had no peace on his agenda but instead waged an all-out war on the MILF and the ASG. Many of the grievances of the involved parties in the Mindanao conflict are rooted in socio-economic issues as well as poor governance.

The FAB and later the CAB is a peace accord in accordance with the heavily critiqued 'liberal peace' in that it is primarily based on a standardised way of managing the core elements of the peace initiative and thereby reducing the space available for alternative approaches to peacemaking. The conflict dynamics and the realities on the ground in the Southern Philippines are complex and are not merely a conflict between the Christian majority and the Muslim minority. There have been several clan conflicts within the

indigenous Tausug society, which in turn have been exploited and exacerbated by local politics as well as the underlying Bangsamoro struggle. This means dealing with the conflict with central, top-down methods will be challenging. There is a need for local peace initiatives of a hybridised form, including both local traditions with international third-party involvement. Hybrid forms of peace would encourage focusing on what is happening in the national capital region and on those forces on the ground in the local areas where the actual conflict and violence is or has been taking place (Mac Ginty 2011: pp. 10-11). The Bangsamoro entity needs not to be overly engaged with the interests of international and state-level actors above those of the citizens and local communities in Mindanao to succeed.

Although an arguable military success in the struggle with the Islamic terrorist groups in the Southern Philippines, the problem is far from over. Naturally, it is difficult to fully eradicate this type of threat. There have been few de-radicalisation efforts in the Philippines until recently, and there are also few pre-emptive measures and mechanisms. The MILF has no counter-narrative to the extremist ideology spread by radical preachers and elements in and around Mindanao. This is something that they, as the de facto leaders of the BARMM, need to address.

CONCLUSION

The protracted conflict and longstanding Bangsamoro issue in the Philippines remain unresolved. Ten years have passed since the signing of the FAB, and although the elements of the peace agreement are being implemented, there is still a long way to go. Nonetheless, peace is a long game and particularly building lasting sustainable peace. Although Islamic terrorism has been part of the conflicts, it has not been the predominant motivation of the Moros, nor is it an existential threat. However, it has been present and remains an underlying threat to sustainable peace and security in not only Mindanao but all of the Philippines. Albeit representing a minority within a minority group, the Islamic extremists have the capacity to derail the peace process. Just recently, in November 2022, there were clashes between the MILF and the AFP. The Philippines' many insurgent groups and local political clans with private armies alongside the AFP and the GRP make it a dynamic and complex conflict. As with many other protracted conflicts, there is much money to be made from maintaining the status quo and the numerous actors stand to gain from inaction. Correspondingly, all

parties must be convinced that lasting peace is mutually beneficial.

Radical ideologies and extremism add complexity to the already protracted conflict. Endemic corruption, elitism and violence are ingrained in the governance system whereby plaguing most Filipinos' lives. Therefore, spoiler violence is never distant from the realities on the ground in the affected conflict-ridden areas of Mindanao.

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