



## **Competition and cooperation for rebellion : Moro nationalist, islamist and jihadist insurgencies and terrorism in southern Philippines**



© Ted Aljibe

Jordi Bernal Fabra

Werra

November 2021



**Jordi Bernal Fabra** is a last-year undergraduate student of International Relations at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Interested in international security, ethnic conflicts and internationalized civil wars, he has undergone a semester at Sciences Po Paris, and he is currently working in an end-of-degree theses on the UN peacekeeping mission in the Malian Civil War.

The author's words imply only his responsibility

© All rights reserved, Paris, Werra, November 2021



# INTRODUCTION

---

Among the 7,641 islands of the Philippines, the greater one in the South of the country has suffered a violent conflict that has persisted decades long. As president Rodrigo Duterte recently announced he will not be running for the vice-presidency to remain within the government by-passing the constitutional limit to one term in office<sup>1</sup>, a total of seven presidents and more than half a century will have passed without stopping the political violence in the Muslim Mindanao region.

This violent conflict is located mainly in the eastern part of the Mindanao Island and in some adjacent smaller islands, where the local population has a distinct identity. Called Moros, due to the influence of the Spanish colonial period and the seen-as similarity with North African moors, they make up an important Muslim minority in the Christian Catholic-dominated Philippines. But not only religion is a component of their different identity. Being a marginalized people, far away from the political and economic center of the Philippines, the capital Manila, and its island Luzon, many of the Moros link their self-identification with historical roots of the Islamic Sultanates that did dominate parts of Southern Philippines: The Sultanate of Brunei and the Sultanate of Maguindanao, among others. Moreover, the Spanish colonization carried along an effort to convert and evangelize the indigenous peoples, however, even if this endeavor succeeded in most of the Philippines, many Muslims resisted conversion and even held armed conflict between the European empire and the remains of the Sultanates.

Among alleged grievances we can include the colonizers' preference for local Catholics in terms of economic and political power. These privileges were passed onwards during the United States colonial period (1898-1941) and, after the liberation from the Japanese Empire, the Catholic Filipinos were the dominant elites during the state and nation-building process. Afterwards, in addition to the religious-national factor, it has been claimed that center-periphery has played and continued playing a critical role: the Republic of the Philippines was conceived as a unitary and centralized state, marginalizing those remotely situated in relation to Manila and the North, in issues as political representation, anti-Moro outrage sparks and economic

---

<sup>1</sup> GUTIERREZ, J. (2021). Duterte Says He Will Retire Rather Than Seek the Vice Presidency. *The New York Times*. October 2, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/02/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines.html>



oblivion; plus, a succession of immigration waves of Christian northerners provided Moros with a sense of invasion and fear of losing their culture and ancestral lands and rites. Due to many of these factors, many Moros organized and fought the considered outsider forces: we can find some antecedents in the Moro struggle during the colonial periods, and also during the Filipino-American War (1899-1902), known as the Moro Rebellion (1899-1913) <sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, even if the conflict being analyzed here has the aforementioned roots, more coetaneous facts helped stimulate the modern struggle for Moro liberation. President Marcos in the 1960s was the visible head of a regime known for its state brutality, which allowed the massive displacements of Muslims committed by Christian armed militias<sup>3</sup>. Repression and marginalization<sup>4</sup> left Moro communities with little opportunities to develop, and many recurred to the informal economy: competition over drugs, weapons, and land black market <sup>5</sup>. Many of these groups intermingled with militias with nationalist ideals and conformed groups that will be analyzed here, such as the most relevant Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the islamist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), plus other ones as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Maute group, and minor tribal militias.

Therefore, having all this in mind, we will analyze the interrelations of either cooperation or competition for Moro rebellion that has been the cause for more than 120,000 deaths and 2 million displaced people up until 2016<sup>6</sup>, having an impact not only in the Philippines, but also in the regional security and stability, as maritime operations (mainly kidnappings) of Abu Sayyaf, for instance, pose a threat for neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia<sup>7</sup>. These interrelations are vital to understand how the peace processes and nationalist and islamist-jihadist armed groups can pose such a threat to the security of humans, states, and regions. And much more

---

<sup>2</sup> KAUFMAN, S. (2011). Symbols, Frames, and Violence: Studying Ethnic War in the Philippines. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (December 2011), pp. 937-958).

<sup>3</sup> ADAM, J. (2018). Bringing Grievances Back In: Towards an Alternative Understanding of the Rise of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 174(1), 1-23).

<sup>4</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>5</sup> ADAM, J. (2018). Bringing Grievances Back In: Towards an Alternative Understanding of the Rise of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 174(1), 1-23).

<sup>6</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>7</sup> ABUZA, Z. (2016). Can Duterte Bring Peace to the Philippines? Forging peace in Mindanao is a far more challenging task than many appreciate. *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2016.  
<https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/can-duterte-bring-peace-to-the-philippines/>



considering the fact that the current outgoing president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, is originally from Davao City, the biggest one of Christian Mindanao, who has made relevant efforts to continue the peace process despite Congress opposition. Hence, we can ask what kind of policies will follow the next Philippines president, after this fairly engaged but not enough determined head of state.

## Conflict evolution

---

During the Marcos' authoritarian regime several Moro pro-independence groups emerged and transformed into armed militias during the 1960s in front of Christian militias of Mindanao, among which many clashes occurred not only about religious or ideological affairs, but also for land control and clan power competition in an area where the state was acquiescent with violence. Finally, the next decade (1970s) saw the Philippine government establishing the martial law while the Marcos administration initiated a full-fledged war on the MNLF, a merge of Muslim militias with a certain degree of cohesion and coordination<sup>8</sup>.

This confrontation between the MNLF-led Moro militants and the Philippine regime came to a partial end with the Libya and Organization of Islamic Cooperation-brokered peace agreement of 1976. The deal assured the constitution of an Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) for the Moro people, on top of which MNLF leader would rule as governor. Despite this opportunity, the ARMM was widely regarded as a corrupt and mismanaged institution serving MNLF leader interests, and which was built upon an artificial division of the island directed from Manila, without popular consultation nor real power implementation<sup>9</sup>.

This breded discontent within the Moro communities and the MNLF militants, among which emerged an islamist and more radical faction called Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which, in their discourse, continued the struggle of the Moro Islamic people confronting the moderate MNLF, which had accepted a *non-existent* autonomy. After a period of construction, the MILF engaged in some fruitless talks with the Philippine administration during the 1990s, which resulted in disagreement and a full-fledged war with the change of century. A period in which frustration led a jihadist faction within the MNLF to convert into the Abu Sayyaf Group,

---

<sup>8</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



growing out of the discontent with a government-MNLF agreement of 1996<sup>10</sup>. But once again, circumstances led to a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in 2008 between the Government and the MILF, which was, as deemed by the Constitutional Court, outlawed among anti-Moro outrage, inciting another wave of inter-ethnic violence.

Partly as a consequence of the MOA outlawing and also because of MILF peace negotiations with the new Filipino president Aquino in 2010, a leader of the Front split into the later known-as Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). Still, new negotiations flourished in 2012 with the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (Moro Nation), an accord that provided the substitution of the ARMM by the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), as would be enshrined in a future Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), which came into reality in the definitive agreement of 2014, having to be ratified by the Philippines parliament among a heavy atmosphere of controversy and criticism all through 2015. It was in this year that the national special forces intervened without informing the MILF -as stated in the accords- against two South Asian jihadist terrorists located in a BIFF camp, ending with 44 officers killed in an escalated skirmish with BIFF fighters but also nearby MILF and local clan armed men alerted by the shooting. This was a vital point that brought hostility towards the MILF and the peace accords by many Catholic politicians and the public opinion<sup>11</sup>.

In this line, Aquino left office in 2016 without a conclusion of the peace process nor a binding agreement, although new president Duterte was committed to continue negotiations. Eventually, the Bangsamoro Basic Law was approved in 2019 establishing a transitional body made up of MILF and Government appointed officials, and a regional authority mainly enforced by former MILF militants<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>11</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>12</sup> KOVACS, M., HÖGLUND, K. & JIMÉNEZ, M. (2021). Autonomous Peace?: The Bangsamoro Region in the Philippines Beyond the 2014 Agreement. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 16(1): 55-69.



## Major rebel groups

---

### *Moro National Liberation Front – MNFL*

The first armed group we are analyzing is the MNLF, which was the first major Moro organization to pose a serious threat to the Philippine state. Beyond its particular idiosyncrasy, this front can be related to the movement of national liberation fronts fighting for self-determination in the form of independence around the Global South, mostly against colonial rule. Their ideological basis is a separatist and later autonomist Moro ideal in a secular and nationalist framework.

With the constitution of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, MNLF leader coped power being the governor of the region, but his power was much more dependent on the militias' position in the local communities rather than the formal and legal competences, which were minimal due to the opposition of a variety of actors in the center of the Philippines system, notably, funds were administered by the central government. Also, seen the rise of its archenemy, the MILF, the MNLF tried a last push to regain notoriety: in 2013 it declared the *Bangsamoro Republik* and, to enforce it, the front sieged Zamboanga City, after the MILF-Government negotiations ignoring the MNLF-Government agreement of 1996<sup>13</sup>. These acts are a perfect example of the spoiling method of a peace process, that, without succeeding, aspired to take the upper hand in the Moro struggle in the competition for power within a rebellion.

Concerning its activities, the MNLF carried out numerous political and peaceful methods through its political wing in local communities, whilst its armed wing has been engaged in the fight with the armed forces of the Philippines, and also, historically, against the Christian militias of the Mindanao Island armed by the government. Its tactics have temporarily included conventional warfare during the golden years of the organization, yet the majority of its actions can be classified within a guerrilla framework, in line with its capabilities and the jungle and

---

<sup>13</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.



mountainous geography of Muslim Mindanao. In addition, MNLF groups have sparsely conducted kidnappings, boat and airplane hijackings and attacks on civilians <sup>14</sup>.

### ***Moro Islamic Liberation Front – MILF***

The scission of the MNLF surged as a more Islamic oriented project, aimed at creating a seceded state or at least autonomy for the Bangsamoro or Moro nation, arranging a political Muslim community in southern Philippines, an Ummah. But despite these inclinations, the MILF understanding of *jihad* is that of spiritual renewal and strife <sup>15</sup>, placing them in the more moderate Islamist camp.

It was thanks to its Islamist views that its militants involved in the anti-Soviet resistance movement in Afghanistan, many of whom fought as mujahideens in Central Asia. The implication carried along broad support of Middle Eastern individuals and organizations committed to the mujahideens worldwide, including training of MILF fighters in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Eventually, this was replied with safe havens and trainings in MILF camps in Mindanao for international mujahideens<sup>16</sup>. All this foreign aid in part resulted in the MILF being the largest Moro armed group in the mid-90s and one of the most powerful separatist groups in Southeast Asia, arriving to 15,000 armed militants in 1999 <sup>17</sup>.

This Moro political-military organization has carried out peaceful political activities, allying with local and clan leaders, in combination with a nationalist-islamist mass movement struggle. Besides its armed war against the Philippine state, the MILF has endeavored in a progressive penetration of its members into local state institutions, rather than destroying them, such as provincial and municipal public servants and politicians and local security officers; even presenting the Front itself as a conflict mediation party between clans<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, the armed wing has used guerrilla tactics against the military and bombings of state infrastructure

---

<sup>14</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “Moro National Liberation Front.” Stanford University. Last modified May 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/moro-national-liberation-front>

<sup>15</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> ADAM, J. (2018). Bringing Grievances Back In: Towards an Alternative Understanding of the Rise of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 174(1), 1-23).





(e.g., power lines). While the MILF has constantly avoided the killing of indiscriminate civilians to maintain a certain level of legitimacy, it has undergone terror tactics for funding against local officials, Christians, and businesses, and also kidnappings and other bombings in cities<sup>19</sup>.

Concerning the relations of the group, the MILF was considered to have links with Abu Sayyaf, a fact rebated by the Front saying there were only rogue militants. But this nuance was not relevant for the Filipino government, which pushed for US intervention and financing under the Global War on Terror framework, provided the Moro organization assured training and safe haven to ASG members and allied jihadists, according to the official understanding. But still, within the same organization there was debate on whether they should maintain links or negotiations with such terrorist groups, but nevertheless it scarcely participated in purely terrorist acts.

Little did this matter regarding the direct threat of the Philippine government on an inclusion in the US terrorist organizations listing, menacing of a full targeting of the US war on terror, that would go much further than the secondary targeting had ever gone. In consequence, the MILF leadership decided to cut all ties with terrorist armed groups as ASG in exchange of the United States support to the peace process being negotiated along 2005<sup>20</sup>.

### ***Abu Sayyaf Group – ASG***

Being the most radical in terms of activities and ideology, Abu Sayyaf was founded in 1989 by Janjalani, a displeased member of the MNLF who had been training, learning and fighting in Afghanistan. Its main goal is to establish a separate Islamic state in Mindanao, abiding a strict orthodox sharia; even though, more recently some factions have pledged alliance to Daesh/ISIL, aiming to a Mindanao province of the so-called worldwide Caliphate<sup>21</sup>.

Created and grown as an alternative to the *moderate* MNLF and MILF, ASG gained momentum throughout the 1990s, when the two liberation fronts were incapable of achieving Moro

---

<sup>19</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. “Moro Islamic Liberation Front.” Stanford University. Last modified January 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/moro-islamic-liberation-front>

<sup>20</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



independence through political means and negotiation nor traditional insurgency<sup>22</sup>. Thus, many militant Moros saw Abu Sayyaf and the terrorist method as a window of opportunity to change the statu quo. Their activities include bombings, beheadings, assassinations and extortion, usually against Christian Filipinos and western foreigners like tourists; but also attacks with IEDs and larger-scale armed aggressions against civilian and police personnel<sup>23</sup>, including a raid and burning of a whole town<sup>24</sup>. Plus, it even led a full-fledged siege in 2017 to assault and control Marawi city along other groups such as the BIFF and the Maute group, aiming at declaring the caliphate, nonetheless, they failed in their goal<sup>25</sup>. Despite these violent peaks, when the terrorist group was not at its best, their many factions resorted to kidnappings for ransom as a way for survival and financing.

All these acts are mainly located in the Zamboanga Peninsula and the Sulu Archipelago of Muslim Mindanao, yet, ASG has carried out some news-relevant attacks in Manila and northern locations. And although these terrorist acts are sui generis in their purpose and context, we should consider the common framework of international jihadist terrorism: first, ASG was aided by Al-Qaida thanks to its bounds with the militant groups in Afghanistan, receiving funding and training<sup>26</sup>, later on, Jemaah Islamiyah of Indonesia also collaborated economically<sup>27</sup> and, as of 2014, the main factions of Abu Sayyaf consider themselves a province of the Daesh Global Caliphate, with the consequent political, economic and training benefits<sup>28</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> FELLMAN, Z. (2011). Abu Sayyaf Group. *CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies*, AQAM Futures Project, Case Study Series, Number 5, November 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations. "Abu Sayyaf Group." U.S. Department of State. Last updated January 20, 2017. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195553.htm#asg>

<sup>24</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>25</sup> SARMIENTO, B. (2017). Islamic State's new frontline in the Philippines. *Asia Times*, November 22, 2017. <https://asiatimes.com/2017/11/islamic-states-new-frontline-philippines/>

<sup>26</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>27</sup> FELLMAN, Z. (2011). Abu Sayyaf Group. *CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies*, AQAM Futures Project, Case Study Series, Number 5, November 2011.

<sup>28</sup> KALICHARAN, V. (2019). An Evaluation of the Islamic State's Influence over the Abu Sayyaf. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (October 2019), pp. 90-101.



Notwithstanding, international alliances are highly dependent on its leaders, for as fundamental issues as international funding, foreign support networks and training among others. What's more, leaders are also critical for Abu Sayyaf domestically: internal cohesion and the group's structure and organization diminished considerably twice in its history (1990s & 2000s), both when each leader at the time was eliminated by the Philippine Armed Forces, splitting ASG into factions headed by autonomous local chiefs abandoning terrorist political activities, surviving with pure criminal activity such as kidnapping for ransom<sup>29</sup>. Then, when those internationally linked ASG leaders were killed, money no longer poured into the Philippines ; still, when the group pledged allegiance to Daesh, it resurged thanks to it being provided with some financial margin.

Finally, in terms of data, the strongest moment in Abu Sayyaf's history is the year 2000, when it counted 1,300 militants in its ranks<sup>30</sup>, a point in which a few years later, due to the loss of its leaders, internal disorganization and ASG being the main target of the US-Philippines Global War on Terror after 9/11. Being an excuse for the Philippine administration to demand US funding and direct implication against jihadist groups, on top of which was Abu Sayyaf, shrinking numbers down to 400 members in 2014<sup>31</sup>, and related militias, allegedly MILF militants as seen above.

### **Interrelations: competition and cooperation for rebellion**

Competition and cooperation among rebel groups is not only consequence of the power struggles between group leaders, but they also come as ways to alternative answers to the multiple failed peace processes, many of whom have been under the rage of a radical anti-Moro sentiment of northern Christian Filipinos, whose elites understand Catholics as the legitimate center of the Republic of the Philippines. This has repeatedly created feelings of frustration among the Moro population, who do not find paths for politically conducting their national identity through negotiations. Therefore, it can be argued that anti-negotiations armed groups

---

<sup>29</sup> FELLMAN, Z. (2011). Abu Sayyaf Group. *CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies*, AQAM Futures Project, Case Study Series, Number 5, November 2011.

<sup>30</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



arise when those seem stuck, when Moros are discursively attacked by Manila politicians (e.g., BBL parliamentary approval) or when the armed forces or national police perform anti-insurgency or anti-terrorist acts while peaceful negotiation is taking place.

Here there is also a point worth making: despite the fact that the Moro struggle has its roots in a secular ethno-nationalist movement, some organizations, due to its links with radical Islamism abroad (in Afghanistan and Pakistan) and regionally (in Indonesia) have suffered a radicalization process in terms of ideology to more religiously-inclined objectives, see the MILF, with all its nuances. And furthermore, some militants that later on formed Abu Sayyaf, the BIFF, the Maute group and others have undergone a process of jihadization, inserted within the broader dynamic in Asia, like the Xinjiang, the Kashmir and Chechnya conflicts. Helped by the ties of some factions with Al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah and Daesh. Plus, this process of differentiation of the groups' ideologies are closely linked with its practices of either terrorism and/or insurgency. Rebel tactics carry along the corresponding state's response, though not always so accurately: combating with regular forces insurgent groups and trying to make peace with non-terrorist organizations, while fighting jihadist terrorists by (practically) all means available without any possibility of a negotiated way out<sup>32</sup>. This practice is broadly present in countries suffering from both insurgency and terrorism, for example the Malian case: nationalist Tuareg insurgents in the North and jihadist terrorists in the center and east of the Sahelian country.

Different degrees of moderation, which is fluctuating all along the Moro conflict in each armed group, allow intents of a negotiated settlement of disputes and, at the same time, allow competing factions within the Moro camp who dissent to break away from the negotiating elite and build a brand-new organization, or at least empower an already existing one. These dynamics push negotiating parties to moderate and become more pragmatic (like the MNLF and the MILF on each occasion), even nuancing their ideology from independence to a *mere* autonomy, hence radicalizing third parties.

The MNLF was created in 1972, but the peace accord and the later unilateral creation of the autonomous regions by President Marcos without taking Moro organizations into account left a vacuum for an anti-negotiation religiously-inclined faction, that is the MILF in 1977. Later on, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the peace process established the Autonomous Region of

---

<sup>32</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.



Muslim Mindanao with the MNLF on top of it, at the same time, the MILF started growing in a relevant manner and some factions of the MNLF seceded into Abu Sayyaf in confrontation with the supposed rendition of the National Liberation Front. Finally, in 2010 the BIFF was organized as such, once the negotiations with the MILF went further into the BBL and the BARMM. Evidently, this is not as linear as it may seem, even if peace negotiations and new armed groups are intertwined: not only new groups try to derail or disrupt the negotiating Moro organization, but also former hegemonic ones, it is the case of the MNLF declaring the 2013 *Bangsamoro Republik* when the Philippine Government was focused on the MILF. This backlash attempts to gain a lost notoriety and peace spoilers of more radical or even terrorist organizations may come as a way to cope with the fear of losing self-identity and control over lands, of both individuals and clans within armed groups. At the same time, the government of the Philippines tries to co-opt rebel militants and leaders, integrating combatants into the national armed forces or police, of which a paramount example would be the MNLF leader converted into governor of the ARMM after the peace accords<sup>33</sup>, or MILF members being part of local state institutions as it has been shown above.

In addition, it is vital to consider the importance of kinship in the Moro population. Leaders of armed groups are key to maintaining leverage with local leaders and clans, a great deal of whom are located in one concrete sub-region or island, having ethnic tensions among them. Armed groups make efforts to co-opt chiefs as much as possible to grow the individual commitment to the clan in relation to the specific militant organization, as well as leaders should have this local leverage to be able to coordinate different combatant groups in the ground, for the majority of the militants of the MNLF, the MILF and Abu Sayyaf are local armed groups that pledge allegiance according to clan politics and competition<sup>34</sup>, beyond pure ideological reasonings. For sure, the general framework of the Moro people is a myriad of drivers of militant or terrorist organizations too: including the political dissatisfaction with the peace process, the status of forgotten region in the Philippines' political and economic system, as well as the extended sentiment of lack of representation in Manila and in the successive autonomous regions of Muslim Mindanao under the bureaucratized and empowered Moro fronts.

---

<sup>33</sup> Mapping Militant Organizations. "Moro National Liberation Front." Stanford University. Last modified May 2019. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/moro-national-liberation-front>

<sup>34</sup> FELLMAN, Z. (2011). Abu Sayyaf Group. *CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies*, AQAM Futures Project, Case Study Series, Number 5, November 2011.



We can also recognize similarities between the MNLF-dominated ARMM and the MILF-led BARMM, which are or have been regional institutions ceded by the Philippine administration whose heads would only trust in public officials who would be former rebels. A factor that would reinforce the failure in the public management of the MNLF autonomous region, adding to the small expertise in governance<sup>35</sup>. In the case of the BARMM, will the MILF be able to deploy full autonomy in a correct manner? Only time will tell. For now, efforts to make an inclusive transitional authority in the Bangsamoro have not prospered: the central government, which was entitled to almost half of the seats of the transitional institution, offered positions to the MNLF - after disregarding the former peace accord - , which the MNLF declined as the Bangsamoro transitional authority was an organization of the MILF *traitors*<sup>36</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

---

The Moro conflict is clearly rooted in its colonial past: as a first step the Spanish Empire converted most Filipinos to Catholicism, and then favored those throughout the colonial period, when Spaniard conquistadors used Catholic-converted Filipinos against Muslim Moros in the south<sup>37</sup> , a similar pattern dominated the US period. Catholic Filipinos have been a privileged faction during the key state-building process. Afterwards, Christians clearly dominate the republic, and many of them emigrate to the southernmost islands where Muslims used to be the majority, being seen as *invaders*. When national liberation movements were starting armed struggles around the world, many Moros organized to stop the threat to their identity and integrity as a differentiated Muslim nation, many of whom begun a fight for an independent state to avoid the erasing of the Moro people, in the midst of a political and economic abandonment.

Beyond this, we have seen how continued failures of peace negotiations and the seen-as *treasons* of rebel groups coopted by the government considerably boost competition in two ways: the rise of new *purer* and more assertive rebel groups, changing their ideologies to more

---

<sup>35</sup> KOVACS, M., HÖGLUND, K. & JIMÉNEZ, M. (2021). Autonomous Peace?: The Bangsamoro Region in the Philippines Beyond the 2014 Agreement. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 16(1): 55-69.

<sup>36</sup> ABUZA, Z. (2016). Can Duterte Bring Peace to the Philippines? Forging peace in Mindanao is a far more challenging task than many appreciate. *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/can-duterte-bring-peace-to-the-philippines/>

<sup>37</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.



political and religious extremism; and more violent, even reaching the point of terrorism, bypassing the limits of armed insurgencies as the MNLF or the MILF, whose combatants usually have a “self-limiting nature” with “moral and ethical boundaries”<sup>38</sup>.

Moreover, this conflict shows once again the power of labeling. Designating an organization as *terrorist* can be a double-edged sword: the government can legitimately talk and negotiate with insurgent militants, but if the target group is targeted as terrorist, administrations such as the Philippine government will not be able to credibly continue the peace process. On the contrary, labeling a group as terrorist can become a power resource, as the Philippines had the option during the peace process of *warning* the MILF of an inclusion to the US terrorist organizations listing if it did not cut all ties with Abu Sayyaf, with all the subsequent implication of the Global War on Terror. Of course, this change in MILF’s politics was a cause for rage for MNLF and ASG militants<sup>39</sup>, an example of the dynamics of the competition among rebel groups : those who are preferred by the government to talk, basically the strongest ones, are the main obstacle for their own group's prosperity and siege of power in the Moro camp.

Therefore, it has been shown how the relations between rebel groups are confined within the restrictions of global politics and strategy (see the US-Philippines Global War on Terror role with the MILF). Yet domestic politics and strategy are also crucial : the preferred interlocutor of the Philippine Government will have more leverage than the competing factions, even if there once was cooperation, and the chosen one will have the upper hand in the future Muslim Mindanao in terms of both armed power and regional bureaucracy, state’s competences, and *legitimate* violence. Hence, to counter all this, third parties of the Moro camp have tried and will try to spoil the peace process to overrun the main faction, involving clan and kinship politics and internal competition of power among leaders to the equation.

## Future scenarios

---

In a transitional situation, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao will face its first regional elections in the upcoming year, 2022, a vote which will prove the MILF’s and the Philippine government’s capabilities of working together and of including the broader public. There is still the question on whether other armed groups and local communities will

---

<sup>38</sup> SANTOS, S. (2010, p. 140). Counter-terrorism and peace negotiations with Philippine rebel groups. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 3:1, April 2010, 137-154.

<sup>39</sup> QUIMPO, N. (2016). Mindanao: Nationalism, Jihadism and Frustrated Peace. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(I), 64-89.



recognize the new autonomous institution, or spoiling groups as it may be the case of Abu Sayyaf or the MNLF will be capable of either mobilizing the populus against the MILF going to vote or demobilizing it to avoid legitimization of a competing rebel group. Another direct threat to the peace process is the still violent militant factions, as ASG, the BIFF and the Maute group, but they have not engaged in direct fight with the MILF<sup>40</sup>; plus, the majority faction of the BARMM authority, the MILF, has not fully decommissioned its armed-wing<sup>41</sup>.

A further factor to keep in mind is president Duterte not renewing his position nor aspiring for vice-presidency after national criticism on his intentions. Duterte was a very proactive politician with the peace processes, will his successor be so too? Originally from Mindanao's Davao City, he was the only candidate to speak about the Moro struggle during the campaign, and even visited the MILF's headquarters<sup>42</sup>. Still, he focused his administration on the controversial *war on drugs*, and constitutional change into federalism, thus by-passing the agreed Bangsamoro Basic Law. However, neither federalism nor the complete application of the BBL would come during his term.

Nonetheless, progress is being made, unlike the mismanagement of the ARMM by the MNLF, the MILF is working to implement the accords and build up the BARMM institutions, carrying out a normalization through fighter demobilization, a transformation of militant's camps into "peaceful and productive communities (...), establish transitional justice process, and carry out a series of confidence-building initiatives"<sup>43</sup>. But the risk of frustration among Moro militants and civilians is on the rise: the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly slowed down this path (as the fact that even if the first great round of decommissioning of fighters was in early 2020, the sanitary crisis paralyzed the process<sup>44</sup>), and what is more, the MILF authorities are currently taking advantage of its position before the 2022 regional elections, in the midst of a possible new kind of competition for power within the Moro camp, perhaps a more peaceful one than the former.

---

<sup>40</sup> KOVACS, M., HÖGLUND, K. & JIMÉNEZ, M. (2021). Autonomous Peace?: The Bangsamoro Region in the Philippines Beyond the 2014 Agreement. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 16(1): 55-69.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> ABUZA, Z. (2016). Can Duterte Bring Peace to the Philippines? Forging peace in Mindanao is a far more challenging task than many appreciate. *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/can-duterte-bring-peace-to-the-philippines/>

<sup>43</sup> ENGELBRECHT, G. (2021). The Normalization Process in the Bangsamoro Faces Rising Uncertainty. *International Crisis Group*. 28 April 2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/normalization-process-bangsamoro-faces-rising-uncertainty>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



