

PHILIPPINES: THE IMPACT OF SULU'S EXCLUSION FROM BARMM

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I. INTRODUCTION

A Supreme Court decision on 9 September 2024 upended the politics of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), led to the exclusion of Sulu, strengthened the MILF in the short term and confirmed that the real power in the region remains in the hands of traditional clans. Perhaps the most significant impact of the decision is the total marginalisation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), an outcome that could have serious security consequences.

The BARMM parliamentary elections have now been postponed until October 2025, ostensibly to allow enough time for the management of the logistical consequences of the decision. Local elections in BARMM for governors and mayors will go forward with the rest of the nation in May 2025, with a probability of increasing violence. Those elected in May will have a major role in the outcome of the regional elections in October since they will be able to bring to bear the resources of local executives – as well as the resources of Manila in some cases – to ensure the victory of their chosen candidates.

The end result is a shrunken BARMM that can no longer claim to represent all of Muslim Mindanao and that up till now has largely squandered its opportunities for progress and reform. Whether the new parliament elected in October can turn this around remains to be seen, but all indications are that the outcome will be more of the same: violence, corruption and entrenched family dynasties.

This report is based on a visit to Cotabato, Zamboanga and Basilan in late January and early February 2025.

II. BACKGROUND TO SULU'S EXCLUSION

The law that brought BARMM into being, known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), had been signed into law by President Duterte on 27 July 2018. In December 2018, then Sulu governor Abdulsakur "Toto" Tan II submitted a petition to the Supreme Court, questioning the law's constitutionality and calling for a prohibition of the plebiscite scheduled for 21 January 2019. The essence of his claim was his rejection of the requirement that ARMM vote as a bloc. He wrote:

The law, in compelling Sulu to be part of the proposed Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, even if it votes for exclusion, has effectively erased the identity of indigenous cultural minorities in the said province, not only without their knowledge or consent, but also against their will. This constitutes a clear infringement of the Constitution.¹

In January 2019, the plebiscite went ahead as scheduled, with voters in ARMM asked, "Are you willing to adopt the Republic Act No. 11054 also known as 'Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao'?" Only Sulu voted no, but its rejection was not overwhelming: 54.3 per cent of the voters were against, 47.3 per cent in favor. Because the rest of the ARMM provinces – Basilan, Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, and Tawi-Tawi – were

¹ Institute for Autonomy and Governance, "Full Text: Sulu Gov's Petition on the Constitutionality of BOL," 26 December 2018, <https://www.iag.org.ph/news/1793-full-text-sulu-gov-s-petition-on-the-constitutionality-of-bol>.

overwhelmingly supportive, Sulu had to go along, and BARMM came into being the following month.

Most people forgot about Sulu's petition, but desultory hearings continued, with a two-year hiatus for Covid. Finally, six years after the petition had first been submitted, Justice Marvic Leonen wrote a decision that both accepted Tan's argument that Sulu had been forced against its will to go along with the ARMM majority, and affirmed the overall constitutionality of the BOL. The full court deemed the ruling final and executory in a ruling on 26 November 2024.

The decision was shocking to much of BARMM and raised questions about what the term "Bangsamoro" even meant any longer if it did not include Sulu, home to the ethnic Tausug, where the struggle for independence of Muslim Mindanao had started. It made BARMM an entity dominated by the ethnic Maguindanaon of central Mindanao that could not even pretend to represent Muslim Mindanao as a whole, but with the same huge block grant from the central government now going to a smaller number of recipients.

The immediate suspicion was that the Court must have acted on the wishes of President Marcos, since he had made it clear that he considered the continued rule of the MILF the best guarantor of peace and stability in Mindanao. Those who know Justice Leonen are skeptical that he would be swayed by the palace, but even some of his supporters believe he should have recused himself from the decision, given his role as chief government negotiator in the peace process with the MILF from 2010 to 2012. He used more than ten pages in the September decision justifying his refusal to do so.²

The BARMM government, led by Chief Minister and MILF chair Ahod Balawag Ebrahim, better known as Al Haj Murad, immediately submitted two motions to reconsider the decision and reinclude Sulu, arguing that when Sulu filed its petition in 2018, BARMM did not yet exist and on a decision so momentous, it should have been a party. A spokesman said the motion was "born by that desire of the autonomous region to defend the integrity of the regional territory, but more importantly [...] it is because the province of Sulu is very fundamental to the cause of the Bangsamoro."³

The motions were dismissed.

III. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE BARMM ELECTION

The decision led to a realignment of the main competitors for power in BARMM; a five-month postponement of the parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for May 2025; and more evidence of Manila's interest and likely interference in the outcome.

A. Realignment of political forces

The big winner of the decision was the MILF and its party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP), even if the result was a smaller territory than they had fought for or aspired to. Before the decision, the UBJP faced almost certain defeat at the hands of the alliance of traditional

² "Full Text: Supreme Court decision on Bangsamoro Organic Law and why Sulu is not part of BARMM," mindanews.com, 10 September 2024.

³ "Bangsamoro Gov't files twin motions before SC to re-include Sulu province to BARMM," bangsamoro.gov.ph, 7 October 2024.

politicians known as the Bangsamoro Grand Coalition (BGC). Led by the governors and clan leaders in BARMM's most populous provinces – Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte and Sulu – the BGC had turned itself into a party for the elections and had chosen Abdelsakur “Sakur” Tan, governor of Sulu, as its candidate for the all-powerful post of chief minister, the equivalent of prime minister in BARMM's parliamentary system.⁴ Without Sulu, the BGC lost its kingpin and its chance at outright victory. It continued to function as a party but many of its most prominent members quickly began negotiating new deals with both Malacañang – the name of the presidential palace in Manila and shorthand for the inner circle of the president – and the UBJP. A power-sharing arrangement between the BGC and the UBJP, which had been almost unthinkable before the decision, was now not only possible but likely.⁵

Key to the reconfiguration was Abdulrauf Macacua, better known as Sammy Gambar, the head of the MILF armed forces and secretary-general of the UBJP. Marcos had appointed him acting governor of the newly-formed Maguindanao del Norte province in 2023, and he was widely seen as Malacañang's choice for Chief Minister. Sammy would serve several aims of the Marcos government's aims: he would keep the MILF divided, as Sammy and Mohagher Iqbal, known as IQ, the MILF's chief negotiator, deputy chair and BARMM Minister of Education, were known to be at odds. He would be a force for reconciliation with the traditional politicians grouped in the BGC. And most importantly, from Manila's perspective, he would complete the long-delayed fourth phase of decommissioning of MILF forces, enabling the formal conclusion of the peace process and the signing of an “exit document”.⁶

To get Sammy selected as chief minister, he would have to be elected as a member of the BARMM parliament, which meant he could not run for governor of Maguindanao del Norte. Already declared as a candidate for that post was the powerful clan leader Suharto “Teng” Mangudadatu, a BGC leader whose clan was poised to control three provinces if he won: Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur where his wife, Mariam, was governor and Sultan Kudarat, governed by his son. It was in the interests of both Malacañang and the UBJP to break up this bloc. (It helped that Teng, once firmly in the Marcos camp because he had supported the Marcos presidential bid in 2022, had fallen out of favour.) They calculated that they needed a candidate whose clan ties, name recognition and patronage network could compete with Teng's. The man they came up with was 78-year-old Tucao Mastura, former mayor of the municipality of Sultan Kudarat, who had previously been aligned with BGC. Different sources had different stories of what carrots and sticks were used to persuade Tucao to run as a UBJP candidate.⁷ Tucao had the advantage that

⁴ Sakur Tan is the powerful father of Toto, who had submitted the 2018 petition challenging the BOL. As is the practice with many clans, father and son trade places when their term limits are reached. Sakur replaced his son in 2022, and Toto became vice-governor. In May 2025, Sakur will run for vice-governor and Toto will become governor.

⁵ See IPAC's earlier reports on the preparation of the BARMM elections to see how the political landscape looked before the Supreme Court decision: “Philippines: Avoiding a Zero-Sum Game in the 2025 BARMM Elections, Report No.97, 8 August 2024; “Philippines: Political Jockeying and Violence before the 2025 Elections in BARMM, Report No.93, 3 April 2024; and “Violence in the Southern Philippines in the Lead-Up to Local Elections,” Report No.88, 14 September 2023. BARMM politicians interviewed in Cotabato in January 2025 also said that power-sharing was likely.

⁶ The ‘Exit Document’ officially terminating the peace negotiations is to be drawn up by both parties when all agreements have been fully implemented. See “The Third Party Monitoring Team (TPMT) and its Terms of Reference,” <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/ph130125torthirdpartymonitoringteam.pdf>.

⁷ One source said that massive infusions of cash had poured into Tucao's campaign from Manila and BARMM but offered no hard evidence. Another, also without evidence, suggested that there had been threats to withdraw security details or file corruption charges unless Tucao ran under the UBJP banner. A third, more convincing explanation from a source close to Tucao said that his main aim was to preserve Mastura family rule in Sultan Kudarat, “the last bastion of the heirs of the Maguindanao Sultanate.” To this end, Tucao was willing to run for governor if the UBJP guaranteed that his personal choice to succeed him as mayor – his grandson, Shameem Mastura – could run unopposed. The UBJP agreed, and the man who had been its candidate for mayor and the only serious challenger to Shameem, Atty. Lanang

he could merge two major clans, the Masturas and the Sinsuats, in a way that might lure the Maguindanao del Norte mayors away from Teng; he could also merge the UBJP and PFP (the President's party). The result is that Teng's bid to become governor is suddenly in doubt, but many believe that when the dust settles, the Mangudadatus, the Masturas and the Sinsuats will find a way to patch up their differences in the interests of clan preservation.⁸

Sammy, meanwhile, is running as a UBJP candidate from District 3 of Maguindanao del Norte where one of his rivals is Ishak Mastura, Tucao's nephew, representing the smaller Pro-Bangsamoro Party. When he filed for candidacy, Ishak saw himself as an opponent of the UBJP, but with Tucao running for governor, he finds himself on the same side as Sammy, meaning the outcome – indeed, the state of the race itself – is open to negotiation. The same fluidity is apparent throughout BARMM.

Bombit Adiong, the governor of Lanao del Sur, was a founder and leading member of the BGC as an opposition party. Now, supported by Malacañang, he is fully behind Sammy's bid to become Chief Minister, as long as there is no interference with his party, SIAP, that controls all local government positions in the province.

In the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court decision, the UBJP was confidently predicting a landslide victory. In an interview with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, UBJP head Iqbal said:

If elections were to be held today, we will win 70% of the votes in Tawi-Tawi because the governor is with us. We will win 70% of Basilan because the governor is with us. We will win 70% or 50% of Cotabato City because the mayor is with us. Then we will win around 80% in Maguindanao del Norte because the governor is with us, and only two mayors belong to the opposition. Maguindanao del Sur will be fifty-fifty because the incumbent governor is running with another party. And then Lanao del Sur, I think, will be around 50-50 or 40-60 against us. If we look at the totality of that, maybe we can win 70% [of the regional party seats]. Plus the districts. Thirty-two minus seven is 25. I think we will win around one half that.⁹

With the local and regional elections now de-linked, Iqbal's calculations presumably would be less optimistic, especially when he suggested in the same interview that the UBJP could win without a coalition.

B. The debate over postponement

Ali Jr, withdrew from the race on 8 September 2024, the last day of filing for local candidates. Without this pact, Lanang Ali might well have won, because the MILF's main camp, Darapanan, is located within the municipality and the MILF leadership, backed by Malacanang, could have swung the race in their candidate's favour. IPAC interview with local politician, Cotabato, 12 February 2025.

⁸ Teng's wife, Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu, will likely hold her own against the UBJP's candidate, Ali Midtimbang, "the old man of Talayan", another traditional clan leader chosen in part for his ties to the Ampatuan clan, traditional kingmakers of the province despite their role in the infamous 2009 Maguindanao Massacre. Ali's daughter is married to Zaldy Ampatuan, who is serving a life sentence for his role in that massacre. The UBJP is apparently hoping that Ali's clan ties would dilute Mariam's, but she is also an Ampatuan and hers may be stronger. She will likely win again as governor. Ali, who some say is over 80, is another example of the MILF's decision to revert to clan elders to ensure political victory, thus perpetuating a corrupt patronage system that many had hoped might be reformed under BARMM.

⁹ Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, "Q&A with Iqbal: It's more advantageous for us if elections are held in 2025," 10 November, 2024, <https://pcij.org/2024/11/10/mohagher-iqbal-interview-pcij-barmm-elections/>.

The court decision excluding Sulu, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) immediately extended the deadline for filing of candidacy by a month so that everyone could adjust to the new circumstances. The decision meant that Sulu-based candidates could not run for the 80-seats BARMM parliament, and Sulu's seven district seats would have to be dropped or reallocated.¹⁰ The national and local elections would go ahead as scheduled in May 2025, and Sulu, like every other province in the Philippines would continue to field candidates for local executive positions: governor, vice-governor and mayor.

Voices for and against the postponement of the BARMM elections arose immediately. The arguments against were best articulated in a position paper by two leading NGOs, the Institute of Autonomy and Governance (IAG) and Climate Conflict Action (CCA). They argued that a postponement would mean that the BARMM elections could not be synchronised with national and local elections. Not only would this be unconstitutional, but the MPs elected would be forced to serve terms shorter than the requisite three years, assuming the next election cycle would be in 2028. The NGOs argued that a postponement would also increase violence.¹¹

On 17 December, the Philippine House voted to postpone the election until May 2026 on the grounds that it “would allow for more time for the promotion of broader participation from political parties and the electorate and enhance their understanding of new electoral processes.”¹² Members of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), the appointed interim parliament, would have to resign and it would be up to the president to appoint a new BTA to serve until the elections. Many, particularly in the MILF, argued that going through the process of appointment, even if all or most of the same members were reappointed, would be an unnecessary disruption, and it would be better to have a shorter postponement so that the current members could just be extended. The House bill also called for BARMM to support programs in Sulu from its block grant through 2025.

The Senate proposed a bill postponing the elections only for three months but after arguments that such a short delay was largely meaningless, eventually agreed on a delay until October 2025 with the current BTA remaining in place. This was confirmed in a bicameral caucus on 4 February 2025.

For Malacañang and for the police, an important goal was to delink the first BARMM elections from the national elections that will go ahead in May 2025, where 32 of the 38 hotspots across the nation identified by COMELEC are in BARMM.¹³ For security reasons alone, a de-linking was desirable, but some thought that if Malacañang got its choices for governors and mayors in place, they could use strategic alliances with local officials to fund the UJBP's parliamentary races and ensure that those elected were favorable to the national agenda (meaning primarily support for the speedy conclusion of the peace process). Elections would be resynchronised in 2028.

Some proponents of a longer delay argued that this could buy time for Sulu to come back into the fold, through a new plebiscite, though this was more complicated than it might have seemed at first glance. One lawyer interviewed said legally, it would actually require two plebiscites. The first would be to amend the BOL so as to permit the second, Sulu-specific referendum, and all of

¹⁰ The 80 seats in the parliament were to consist of 40 seats drawn up from party lists, 32 single-member district seats and 8 appointed sectoral seats.

¹¹ Institute for Autonomy and Governance and Climate Conflict Action, “No Legitimacy or Rational for Postponing the BARMM Regional Elections,” 12 November 2024, https://www.facebook.com/iagorgph/posts/966080665545712?ref=embed_post.

¹² “House approves rescheduling of BARRM elections to 2026,” The Daily Chronicle, 20 December 2024.

¹³ “Comelec names 38 places as areas under serious threats in 2025 elections,” inquirer.net, 9 January 2025.

BARMM would have to vote. The concern there is that if any new plebiscites are permitted, other provinces might see an opportunity to opt-out (Lanao del Sur was specifically mentioned.)¹⁴ In the second, Sulu voters would be asked whether they wanted to rejoin BARMM. Holding one plebiscite before the election is not realistic; holding two is simply not possible. One source was confident that Sulu would eventually return, but not for at least five years. In the meantime, Sakur Tan was adamant that he had no interest in a plebiscite, no interest in returning to BARMM, and was tired of people who weren't Sulu natives trying to determine the province's fate.¹⁵

The most practical reason for delay is logistical, simply that more time is needed to fairly reallocate Sulu's district seats, although if Sulu were to rejoin, the process would have to be done in reverse. Others dismissed technical considerations as a factor, saying if there were the political will to move forward, these issues could easily be solved.

IV. CONSEQUENCES FOR SULU

The SC decision was reportedly an unpleasant shock to Sakur. The political situation had changed dramatically from 2018 when he had led the "no" vote on the plebiscite to ratify the Bangsamoro Basic Law. Despite the Tans' constant grumbling about mainland domination of the islands and the marginalisation of ethnic Tausugs by Maguindanaons, Sulu had received some tangible benefits from BARMM – as shown by the consternation over the fate of the thousands of employees there on the BARMM payroll. Sakur himself, as the BGC's chosen candidate for Chief Minister, had a chance of securing the top post in BARMM that would not only have given him unprecedented power but would have also ensured attention to the island provinces – Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. In one fell swoop, he was left high and dry, though he is now running for vice-governor.¹⁶

Sakur's official position was that he welcomed the court decision.¹⁷ He said he hoped that Sulu would become a "pilot province" directly under the office of the president, rather than being administratively incorporated in Region IX, which is its likely short-term fate. President Marcos, in response to Sakur's appeal for special status, said he would consult his lawyers, but it seems unlikely to be granted.¹⁸

A major implication of the decision is that the ethnic Tausug MNLF on Sulu are basically left without political representation in the region. Galvez and Marcos had ensured that the Sulu-based MNLF were included in the second BTA (2022-2025), in the persons of Misuari's son Abdulkarim and daughter Nurredha, among others. Now, no one from Sulu will be taking part in the BARMM elections, so the only MNLF members likely to serve will be from a Maguindanao-based faction headed by Muslimin Sema, the BARMM labor minister -- and they are mostly ethnic

¹⁴ IPAC interview with BARMM politician, Cotabato, 28 January 2025.

¹⁵ "Sulu governor on returning to BARMM: '90% will say no,'" *Manila Bulletin*, 5 February 2025.

¹⁶ He was clearly hoping that the SC decision would be overturned before the deadline for registration, however, because both he and his wife filed for candidacy of the vice-governor position. If the decision had been reversed, Sakur could have gone on to run for parliament, the necessary stepping stone to the Chief Minister position, and the vice-governorship would have stayed in the family with his wife.

¹⁷ "Gov. Tan happy over SC's decision to exclude Sulu from BARMM," *mindanews.com*, 12 September 2004.

¹⁸ "Sakur wants Sulu to be a pilot province under the Office of the President," *mindanews.com*. 30 September 2024.

Maguindanaon. One source said the MNLF was more marginalised now than at any time since before the Tripoli Agreement in 1976.

The number of armed MNLF combatants in the government-recognised camps in Sulu is uncertain but believed to be around 2,000, massed in four large camps and several smaller ones.¹⁹ Beyond the 7,500 who were due to be integrated into the police and military as part of the 1996 peace agreement, there was no demobilisation or decommissioning process. The fighters retain their arms and with Sakur's support have resisted any inclusion in the "normalisation" process. They include many fugitives, wanted for a range of violent crimes, who have been safe so far in the camps. Sakur has largely kept the MNLF quiet, but this is a substantial armed force that could be mobilised if the political situation becomes unstable, particularly in the absence of any strong leadership.

Nur Misuari, who nominally heads the largest faction, is senile. His son, Abdul Karim, who is on track to assume his father's role, has no military experience, making him ineligible for leadership in the eyes of many of the MNLF elders. He studied in Egypt where he was briefly arrested in 2013 for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, an ideological orientation he retains, according to those who know him. The MNLF chief of staff, Abraham Joel, has no international experience, also making him less than ideal as a leader. The main rival to the Misuari faction, the group once led by Yusop Jikiri, is a shadow of its former self, with Jikiri's son Albakil "Thong" interested more in political power. He is aligned with Sakur and running for mayor of Indanan, his family's base. Sakur is thus the main glue holding the MNLF together.

He is also largely responsible for keeping the Sulu-based Abu Sayyaf out of sight, to the point that the military has declared Sulu "ASG-free". But they have not disappeared entirely. Some have taken advantage of financial incentives offered by the local government's surrender and reintegration programs. Others have become "blue guards", security guards for politicians and companies who can still carry firearms but now sport a bright blue uniform. A major political change, or sudden downturn in economic fortunes, could send some of these ex-ASGs back to their old ways. There are many reasons to explain the absence of any kidnappings-for-ransom by the ASG since 2020, and a major one is the decimation in their ranks from military operations. But another is the fact that there is no major need for the ransom income as long as alternative livelihood options, provided by the governor, are available.

Suddenly, people are beginning to become aware of Sakur Tan's mortality. He is 74 and while he is by all reports in good health, more and more people are beginning to talk about what happens to peace in Sulu when he dies. His two sons, one a Congressman, the other the current vice-governor, both see themselves as his political heirs, and they do not get along. Sakur's clout, long in the making; his iron fist; his wealth; and his good working relationship with the Sulu-based 11th Infantry Division of the Philippine army, have combined to keep Sulu largely conflict-free for the last three years. Once he goes, however, all bets are off.

¹⁹ See OPAPRU, "MNLF members in Sulu welcome positive developments in GPH-MNLF peace process," 25 January 2020. In 2022, the Department of Social Welfare and Development Memorandum Circular 6 cites "3000 verified and profiled former MNLF members" who were eligible to receive assistance. https://www.dswd.gov.ph/issuances/MCs/MC_2022-006.pdf. A press release from the Office of the Presidential Adviser for Peace, Unity and Reconciliation in August 2024 noted that the office had completed the profiling of 2,000 MNLF combatants but all were outside Sulu, in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, North Cotabato and Basilan. In 1996, the government estimated there were 14,000 MNLF fighters, of whom 5,750 were to be reintegrated into the AFP and 1,750 into the police. See Miriam Colonel Ferrer, "Armed to the Teeth", TWS Desk, 18 Sept 2008.

A final consequence of the SC decision is the heightened activity of those backing the Sulu Sultanate's claim to Sabah, Malaysia. While the claim seems like a twisted delusion to those outside Sulu, it is seen by some Sulu politicians as both a visceral part of Tausug identity and a potential bargaining chip. The fact that there is next to no international support for the claim has not stopped a new movement called the Mindanao-Sulu Unification Movement from being formed in December 2024.²⁰ Its outreach to the U.S. and China for support is more about publicity than anything else, but the Sultan has made several trips to China over the past year, even though he has not managed to see anyone influential. It is not impossible that at some point China could see the Sultan as a way of needling the Marcos government.

V. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE ISLANDS MORE GENERALLY

The removal of Sulu could strengthen the possibility of a de facto political confederation of Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. Much will depend on the outcome of the governors' races there.

In Tawi-Tawi, Sakur Tan is reportedly going all out to defeat the pro-BARMM governor Mang Sali by pouring resources into the campaign of Sali's rival, Ruby Sahali, former assemblywoman, vice-governor and congresswoman from Tawi-Tawi's lone district. Mang Sali was thought to be unbeatable before the SC decision; as of January 2025, the race could go either way.

In Basilan, the feud between half-brothers Mujiv Hataman, a member of the BGC, the well-regarded former governor of ARMM, and current Congressman, and Jim Hataman-Salliman, the popular current governor, is heating up, with an uptick of political killings in January and February 2025. Mujiv is running for governor of Basilan and if elected, which is likely, he could be a powerful opponent of BARMM and an ally of Sakur. Jim, who has aligned himself with BARMM, is running for vice-governor, while his son, Jimael "Jay" Hataman, is Mujiv's chief opponent for governor. Mujiv and Jim are both expected to win their races; Jim has reportedly said he will resign rather than serve under Mujiv.

The BOL envisioned three sub-regions of BARMM – southwestern Mindanao, Central Mindanao and south central Mindanao, with the exact boundaries to be determined by the parliament.²¹ The islands would fall in southwestern Mindanao, but some politicians from Sulu are already talking about a second autonomous region, sometime in the future, under which the islands would govern themselves and be free from the yoke of mainland Mindanao.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is hard to see how there are any positive consequences from the Supreme Court ruling on Sulu. The tragedy is that it was so unnecessary. The arguments used by Leonen were weak and could easily have gone the other way. Justified in terms of protecting rights and democracy, the decision is notable mainly for how much it benefited the MILF just as it was on the verge of losing control

²⁰ "Group pushes to revive US statehood movement for Mindanao and Sulu," Daily Tribune, 1 January 2025, <https://tribune.net.ph/2024/12/31/group-pushes-to-revive-us-statehood-movement-for-mindanao-and-sulu>.

²¹ Republic Act No. 11054, section 35, full text available at https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_11054_2018.html.

of the BARMM government. In addition to the MILF, the big winners are the traditional clans of central Mindanao who now see their role enhanced.

Sulu could be a big loser in all of this, despite Sakur Tan's positive spin on the decision, unless the president decides to grant it special status. The even bigger losers are the ethnic Tausug MNLF, now excluded from power, largely forgotten by the international community but still armed and potentially dangerous. The Marcos government needs urgently to work with Sakur Tan to ensure that disgruntlement does not lead to a new phase of the conflict.

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