

THE RISK OF MORE VIOLENCE IN THE SULU ARCHIPELAGO

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I. INTRODUCTION

One key to curbing terrorism and improving security in the Sulu-Sulawesi seas is to ensure that disgruntled elements from the Sulu-based forces of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) do not join forces with the Abu Sayyaf Group or form their own militant splinter. Discontent has increased since the death of Yusop Jikiri, the Jolo-based MNLF chairman, from bone cancer in October 2020, exposing new fault-lines and power struggles within the always fractious organisation. These divisions are unlikely to be affected by Sulu Governor Abdusakur (Sakur) Tan's program to promote reconciliation among rival political clans in the province. The Duterte government urgently needs to work on reconstituting Jikiri's Anti-Kidnapping Task Force (AKTF), his vehicle for partnering with the Philippines army to pursue top ASG fighters and encourage surrenders. At the same time, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), led by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), needs to make more of a conscious effort to ensure representation from the Sulu archipelago in its governing ranks so that the various political factions from the island provinces of Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi feel less alienated. The risk of a new round of violence remains high.

Jikiri's death came at a critical time.

- The ASG's many factions were weakened but not defeated as a result of military operations, with two of its top pro-ISIS leaders, Hajan Sawadjaan and Furuji Indama, having been killed in July and September 2020 respectively. Such killings have never stopped regeneration, however, and the incentive for revenge remains high. The AKTF was important in giving ASG fighters a chance to surrender and avoid military pursuit by joining Jikiri's forces as MNLF and using their knowledge against their former colleagues.
- Jikiri was key to preventing the political exclusion of the Sulu-based MNLF factions from the governing ranks of BARMM. With his death, the MNLF's mainland faction, led by Muslimin Sema, reinforced its control of leadership and resources, leaving many in the Sulu factions, represented by Jikiri and Misuari, marginalised and unhappy. They see Sema as having placed alliance with the MILF and his family's political fortunes over the protection of MNLF interests, including its irredentist claim to "North Borneo" (Sabah) and protection of Tausug immigrants in Malaysia.
- Jikiri had also played down the Sabah question, and like Sema, he was considered very close to Malaysian security, though his interests were different from Sema's: he was hoping to consolidate all MNLF fighters, some 5,000 in total, under his control to create an independent force for policing Sulu and the Sulu Sea. In Jikiri's view, this was the key to the MNLF's vision of its return to a position of influence, and the AKTF was the prototype. With financial support from Malaysia and the Philippine government, he may have hoped that he could attract new fighters and boost his position re other players in Sulu, including Gov. Sakur Tan, his long-time political nemesis. But however much the AFP was grateful for Jikiri's support against the ASG, it is difficult to see how the military or the Malaysians would ever countenance the kind of force that Jikiri envisioned.
- Instead, Gov. Tan became the arguably the biggest beneficiary of Jikiri's death and of the discontent in Sulu more generally. Tan, the veteran political warlord and opponent of BARMM, immediately began efforts to unify all Sulu factions against the mainland, and in particular, against the MILF's proposal to postpone elections to the regional parliament for another three years. Jikiri had long allied with another warlord family, the Arbisons, against Tan, but on 18 March 2021, following the

MNLF's 53rd anniversary celebrations, Tan announced that unity had been achieved, almost certainly with promises of political patronage to rival clans. The unity may be fleeting, but it could still spell trouble for BARMM.

II. BACKGROUND ON THE MNLF

The MNLF occupies an anomalous position in the politics of the Muslim south. It is at once the perpetual beneficiary of special treatment and the group that always loses out. Founded by Nur Misuari in 1972, it was the first of the Muslim insurgencies to emerge during the Marcos era, the first to sign a peace agreement with the government (the so-called Tripoli Agreement in 1976) and, after a revised "implementation" agreement in 1996, the first to lead an autonomous government. Misuari served as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) from 1996 to 2001 and proved to be incompetent, corrupt and largely absentee.

One of the major shortcomings of the Tripoli Agreement was the absence of a process for demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) of MNLF combatants.¹ Instead, there was a provision that 7,500 out of 17,700 registered fighters were to be integrated into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the police.² Many of those integrated, however, were not real fighters but their sons or younger relatives who could more easily pass the registration process and provide longer-term economic support for their families. Many fighters remained in limbo, not fighting but not disarmed and dependent on whoever could pay them.³

As the MNLF underwent splinter after splinter, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) moved into position from 2001 onwards as the government's main negotiating partner. The MILF, however, was dominated by ethnic Maguindanaon of central Mindanao, with an important minority of ethnic Maranao, also from central Mindanao. The ethnic groups of the Sulu archipelago were never likely to be happy under Maguindanaon domination. They divided their loyalties instead among three forces: the MNLF, with two rival leaders, Misuari and the late Jikiri both having strongholds on Jolo; the Abu Sayyaf Group, with important leaders in Jolo, Basilan and Zamboanga; and the major political clans of Sulu, exemplified by the Tan, Loong and Arbison families who maintained their own private forces and worked out a modus vivendi with the guerrillas.⁴

From the beginning, one option for disgruntled MNLF fighters was to join forces with other organisations. In 1996, unhappy with the peace agreement, many of the MNLF's ethnic Maguindanaon went over to the MILF. For the ethnic Tausug, the ASG, which had broken away from the MNLF in 1991, was the preferred option. Many top ASG leaders today, including

1 Then-president Fidel Ramos believed that the terms of such a process would have led to unresolvable impasse. "The strategic objective of having a final peace agreement signed – with its attendant political, economic, social and cultural benefits – was more important than belaboring any issue that struck deeply into the honor and prestige of the other party." See Fidel Ramos, *Break Not The Peace: The Story of the GRP-MNLF Peace Negotiations 1992–1996*, Manila, Philippine, 1996, pp.102-03.

2 Of the total, 5,750 joined the AFP, 1,650 joined the police. See Government of the Republic of the Philippines, "GRP Report on the SGRP Report on the Special Regional Security Forces and the Unified Command in the Autonomous Region," Submitted for the Joint Working Group Meetings of the GRP, MNLF, and OIC Peace Committee for the Southern Philippines, Indonesian Embassy, Manila, 3–7 January 2020.

3 Soliman M. Santos Jr. and Paz Verdades M. Santos, *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines*, Geneva, Switzerland, 2010.

4 For background on Sulu politics, see International Crisis Group, "The Philippines: Local Politics in the Sulu Archipelago and the Peace Process," Asia Report No.225, 15 May 2012 and IPAC, "The Sulu Archipelago and the Philippine Peace Process", Report No.20, 29 May 2015.

Radullon Sahiron, were originally MNLF commanders.⁵ A more recent example of crossover is the late Alhabsy Misaya who was once Misuari's personal driver and was present during the MNLF's 1992-1996 peace negotiations. By 2002, however, he had joined the ASG and was involved in a string of terrorist attacks in Jolo. His notoriety soared in the mid-2010s through his involvement in several high-profile kidnappings. He died trying to pull off what would have been the most spectacular kidnapping of all had it succeeded, a mass abduction of tourists on the resort island of Bohol during the 2017 Easter holidays. If Jikiri's successors fail to produce sustainable income for their fighters, the ASG could have a whole new pool of recruits.

A second option for unhappy MNLF fighters has been to turn to violence themselves. In September 2013, for example, some 180 fighters from the Misuari faction, led by the late Habier Malik, took over the city of Zamboanga as a protest against the government's peace agreement with the MILF, from which they felt excluded and which ultimately led to creation of the BARMM. By the time the military regained control, after 19 days, 300 were dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. The Jikiri faction was furious with Misuari. In light of the Marawi siege four years later, some have wondered whether the MNLF's takeover of Zamboanga served as a precedent, showing at least that control of an urban area was possible, if better planned and executed.

For all its involvement in violence, the MNLF never acquired the pariah status of Abu Sayyaf, in part because it never had overt terrorist links. It never allied with al-Qaeda, as ASG did in the 1990s; never joined with regional terrorists as the MILF did during its decade-long alliance with Jemaah Islamiyah from 1994 to 2005; and never joined a pro-ISIS alliance. Its support from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) gave it international respectability. In Indonesia and Malaysia, it also had important regional backers that could not be ignored, even though Malaysia's support reinforced suspicions in Philippine elite circles of ulterior economic and political motives. Indonesia's role in the 1996 peace conference generated hostility within the MILF, making it unlikely that the MILF would ever support another Indonesian mediating role.⁶

III. FACTIONALISM AFTER JIKIRI'S DEATH

Jikiri only became MNLF chair in 2017 but in the three years before he died, he managed to set the organisation on a very pro-government course, culminating in joint operations with the AFP against suspected ASG kidnappers, while at the same time ensuring that family members secured key political jobs to ensure a steady flow of resources and that internal rivalries were kept under control. All this is now open to question, as the MNLF's major fault-line, between the Mindanao mainland and the Sulu archipelago, widens further and Misuari remains an unpredictable spoiler.

5 Eduardo F. Ugarte, "The Alliance System of the Abu Sayyaf, 1993-2000," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol.31, No.2, pp.125-44.

6 Indonesia under then Foreign Minister Ali Alatas had brokered the 1996 agreement between the government of Fidel Ramos and the MNLF, designed to finally implement the Tripoli agreement. The MILF saw the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao with Nur Misuari as governor as a betrayal and have never forgiven Indonesia for its role. Later, under President Aquino, when Indonesia supported an effort to merge the MILF and MNLF peace accords in a process known as "convergence", some in the MILF took it as further evidence that Indonesia was not a neutral player. See Din M. Syamsuddin, "Muhammadiyah's experience in interfaith peace building and conflict resolution: The case of Mindanao," 2013. Link: <https://www.m-dinsyamsuddin.com/index.php/paper/148-muhammadiyah-s-experience-in-interfaith-peace-building-and-conflict-resolution-the-case-of-mindanao>

A. The Islands vs the Mainland

Jikiri and Muslimin Sema, head of the Sulu and mainland factions respectively, had been allies against Nur Misuari in 2001. As MNLF chief of staff, Jikiri had been one of fifteen senior leaders who rebelled against Misuari's mismanagement and engineered his removal as the organisation's chair. The dissident leadership group, known as the MNLF Executive Committee, or EC-15, was led by Muslimin Sema, an ethnic Maguindanaon from Cotabato. Sema maintained good relations with the MILF and was also known to have close ties to Malaysia. He was inoffensive, not pressing MNLF claims from earlier agreements, not attempting to obstruct the MILF's negotiations in any way, and not protesting very loudly when the MNLF was allocated only a few seats in Bangsamoro transition bodies. He may not have promoted anything risky during his long tenure as chair (2001-2017), but he also failed to exert any control over Nur Misuari's escapades or take any steps bridge the Maguindanaon-Tausug divide. In particular, he was seen in Sulu as having effectively abandoned the Sabah claim, which may have endeared him to his Malaysian patrons but infuriated many of the Tausug rank-and-file.⁷ Both Sema and Jikiri strengthened their access to resources by promoting family political dynasties, the Semas in and around Cotabato and the Jikiris on Jolo.⁸

Jikiri clearly intended to ensure that the MNLF continued to be Tausug-led and stay within the family, though he made clear on his deathbed that he expected a caretaker duumvirate of the islands and the mainland to run the organisation through the expiration of his term as chair in 2023. Power was to be shared between Sema on the mainland and Jalandoni/Alandoni Hassan in Sulu. Jikiri's last statement, delivered orally to three close associates when he was too weak to write, appointed Hassan as chair of the central committee and overall caretaker of MNLF affairs in Sulu; Tahir Sali (also seen as Tahil Sali) as head of military affairs; and his son, Albakil "Tong" Jikiri, as deputy for both political and military affairs "to ensure sustainability of MNLF partnership program and co-operation with government and the AFP." When the central committee met in Maguindanao in November 2020, however, Muslimin Sema was selected as caretaker chair, putting him in a strong position for the leadership election in 2023.

Almost immediately, disputes erupted.

- Tong Jikiri was unhappy with the outcome of the November meeting. He threatened to reject Sema's chairmanship unless Sulu was given more representation on the Central Committee and on the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), the body running BARMM until elections can be held.
- In particular, Tong demanded that Muslimin Sema's nephew, Romeo Sema, the BARMM Minister of Labor, step down as the MNLF vice-chair for political affairs, since his uncle was returning as chairman, albeit in a caretaker role, and there were already too many Semas in high positions. (The implied accusation of nepotism or conflict of interest was rather ironic, given that Tong got his position the same way.)
- At the time of his death Jikiri had been trying to replace the MNLF's Abu Amri Taddik as BARMM Minister of Trade, Investment and Tourism, allegedly on the

7 Sema issued a statement to the effect that the MNLF recognized Sabah's 1963 incorporation into Malaysia. "MNLF: Kami hormati keputusan Sabah sertai M'sia," www.malaysiakini.com, 13 March 2013.

8 Muslimin Sema became Cotabato city mayor from 1998-2010; and vice mayor from 2010-2013. His wife, Bai Sandra Sema is the current congress representative for 1st district of Maguindanao. His nephew, Romeo Sema, and son, Omar Sema, served in the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority interim cabinet and parliament, respectively. Jikiri was elected as Sulu governor from 2001-2004, and as Sulu's 1st district representative from 2007-2010. His heir apparent, Albakil Tong Jikiri, is a provincial board member in the 1st District of Sulu, and another son, Hermot Jikiri, is the current mayor of Indanan.

grounds that he was incompetent but more likely because he was seen as being too close to Sema and the MILF, even though he was an islander.⁹ Taddik, however, refused to step down, using his good relationship with Sema to retain his position. This has surely further alienated the islanders. Taddik, in turn, accused Tong of working with Sulu governor Sakur against BARMM.¹⁰

The depth of animosity within the Sulu MNLF toward Sema and the MILF was one factor that made Gov. Tan's self-serving unity effort possible.

B. The Misuari Wild Card

Nur Misuari continues to be a wild card who needs periodic injections of recognition and resources to keep him on side. He retains an estimated 300 to 400 armed combatants in Sulu as a personal force as well as sympathizers in many MNLF communities in Zamboanga del Sur and elsewhere on the Mindanao mainland.¹¹

President Duterte has gone out of his way to portray Misuari as a friend, restoring his status after he had been marginalised by former comrades. The president arranged for all charges against Misuari stemming from the 2013 Zamboanga siege to be dropped, despite local residents' demand for justice, and allowed him to return to public life without restrictions. Duterte's embrace of Misuari may have been partly to keep a perennial spoiler of peace processes in line; reinforce the president's Mindanao credentials as a politician with allies across the political spectrum; and keep the MILF off balance by bestowing favours on someone who publicly favoured Duterte's proposed "federalism" project as an alternative to BARMM.¹² In 2016, the Indonesian government also turned to Misuari for help when the ASG began kidnapping Indonesian fishermen and crew members in the Sulu sea, though many questions remain about how deeply he and his third wife, Tarhata Ibrahim, may have been involved in protecting the kidnappers. (In 2020, allegations surfaced that Tarhata was accused of hiding the ASG's premier hostage-takers, Mahan Sahijuan alias Apo Mike and Salip Mura – Tarhata's uncle – at Misuari's base in Kagay, in exchange for a cut of the ransom money.) When positions reserved for the MNLF in BARMM went to Misuari's rivals, Duterte appointed Misuari to a newly created sinecure as Economic Ambassador to the OIC in December 2019. Until the pandemic set in, he used the position mostly as an opportunity to make frequent overseas trips.¹³ On 5 January 2020 Misuari was invited to speak at the military change of command ceremony at AFP headquarters, an extraordinary honour for Duterte to bestow on someone with so many crimes to his name.

9 In his last statement, Jikiri had said, "With regards to MNLF partnership with the MILF in governing BARMM, I entrust the LSSRC Chairman Alandoni and his deputy to relay my decision to the Chief Minister, brother Ibrahim Murad [sic], to install and issue the official appointment to my recommended Minister for Trade Investment and Tourism, brother Edmund Ghumbahali, as soon as possible in lieu of the termination [sic] of brother Abu Amri Taddik. MNLF Lupa Sug State Revolutionary Committee decree letter titled, "Resolution Recognizing and Adopting the October 12, 2020 Verbal Statement of Chairman Yusop Jikiri as Official Declaration of Political Will and Authority as Chairman of the MNLF Central Committee is Final and Executory.", 12 October 2020.

10 MNLF internal report titled, "The Impact of Sudden Death of MNLF chairman Yusop jikiri on the Organizational Leadership of the Moro National Liberation Front-MNLF and its implications toward State of Philippine National and Sub Regional Security Stability," unpublished report made available to IPAC in February 2021. Sakur Tan from the beginning was leery of BARMM, seeing it as an unnecessary layer of regional bureaucracy and as another vehicle for extending Maguindanaon hegemony over Sulu without protecting the latter's interests. See also International Crisis Group, "Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro," Asia Report N° 306, 14 April 2020, p. 19.

11 Some of the prominent figures in Misuari's faction, among others are: Ustad Murshi Ibrahim, MNLF (Misuari) secretary general, Khaid Ajibon, the chairman of (Misuari) LSSRC, and Rolando Olamit, the chair of MNLF-Davao.

12 As someone who built his political career in Mindanao, Duterte believes that the key Philippine development and the way to break the dominance of Manila and the north is change unitarian form of government to federalism, though he has been vague on what this actually entails.

13 "Duterte names Misuari as Special Economic Envoy to OIC," www.mindanews.com, 15 December 2019.

In mid-2020, Misuari was involved in the “surrender” of one of the ASG’s most wanted men, Abduljihad “Idang” Susukan. At the time, there were 34 arrest warrants out against Susukan for ten kidnappings, 23 murders, and six frustrated murders. Susukan, a former MNLF subcommander under Misuari, reportedly had surrendered to his former boss in April 2020. He had been badly wounded in a 2019 battle with the AFP and had lost an arm. Misuari promised to get him medical treatment in Davao. (There may have been competition between Misuari and Jikiri to secure Susukan’s surrender, since it would be recognised as a major accomplishment and possibly earned major financial rewards.) From April to August 2020, Susukan moved freely around Misuari’s camp in Jolo. Then in August, Duterte had arranged to meet Misuari in Davao city and sent his private jet to Jolo to pick up Misuari’s sizeable entourage. Unbeknownst to the security forces, Susukan was on board, Misuari having promised to get him fitted for a prosthetic arm. The entourage arrived in Davao on 9 August 2020.¹⁴ On hearing an intelligence report that Susukan was in the group, Davao mayor, Sarah Duterte, the president’s daughter, instructed the police to raid Misuari’s house. Susukan was arrested, but there were no consequences for Misuari for failing to report his whereabouts. Later, Misuari denied that he was protecting ASG terrorists; he was merely aiding the government by safely delivering a known fugitive into its hands.¹⁵ Susukan’s family was furious at what they saw as Misuari’s betrayal and reportedly threatened to assassinate him.¹⁶

Duterte’s support of Misuari served to underscore how divisions in Sulu play into divisions in Manila. The military has not always seen eye to eye with Duterte on the south, and in this case, the military’s interests, up to a point, lay in backing Jikiri and the faction that controlled the most guns. With Jikiri’s death, it is not clear who succeeds him as the military’s strongest local ally against the ASG.

C. Jikiri vs Misuari

Jikiri’s influence over the MNLF’s armed combatants stemmed from his former role as MNLF chief of staff and his role in integrating 7,500 MNLF fighters into the Philippines armed forces as part of 1996 peace agreement. As the ASG threat rose with a rise in kidnappings and the support of some factions for ISIS, Jikiri saw an opening for carving out a new role. He was convinced that only his forces had any hope of fighting the ASG because unlike the average AFP soldier, the Tausug knew the language, the people, and the territory. He also presented himself as a more reliable partner than Misuari. In 2017, he therefore proposed the creation of an MNLF force – the AKTF – that could pursue the ASG. It would be initially funded by the local government units led by the Jikiri family, although the aim was presumably for additional financial and logistic support from the AFP. In June 2017, the then commander of Joint Task Force Sulu, Brig. Gen Sobejana, gave the green light to Jikiri’s proposal with one caveat: the MNLF-AKTF would be given a supporting role, tasked with restricting the movement of the ASG, but without the authority to act unilaterally.

14 “How a “wanted” Abu Sayyaf leader who flew to Davao with Nur on Sunday was arrested in his house on Thursday,” www.mindanews.com, 14 August 2020.

15 The notion of ASG members surrendering to the MNLF and then claiming benefits is not welcomed by all quarters in the Philippines government. The AFP and PNP do not consider that these surrendees are entitled to instant amnesty; the surrenders have no legal status and the PNP takes the position that anyone with an outstanding arrest warrant must face arrest and trial. Under the 2020 Anti-Terrorism Act, anyone protecting wanted terrorists in theory can be charged with aiding and abetting. Misuari’s cordial relations with Duterte, however, protect him from any intervention by Philippine security forces. “De Lima calls for Senate probe into Misuari’s dealings with Abu Sayyaf leader,” www.rappler.com, 10 September 2020.

16 Private communication with MNLF official, 8 April 2021.

In 2019, Jikiri appointed Tahir Sali to lead the AKTF. Sali is the son of a legendary MNLF commander, Usman Sali, whose forces killed then army chief Teodulfo Bautista and 35 soldiers during a battle in October 1977. Usman's first wife (and Tahir's mother) was a cousin of ASG chief Radullan Sahiron, and both families are from Patikul, Jolo. Because of these connections, some in the government questioned whether Tahir's loyalty was more to the ASG than to the MNLF, especially given his alleged involvement in ASG kidnapping, and terrorism activities. In 2007, he was reported to be one of the leading figures behind the abduction of Jordanian television journalist Baker Abdulla Atyani.¹⁷ He was also implicated in the roadside bombing in Indanan on 29 September 2009 that killed two US special forces and one Philippine soldier. The U.S. government posted a \$500,000 bounty for him as a result which still prevents him from travelling beyond MNLF territories in Jolo.¹⁸

But in his new role in the AKTF, Sali showed no hesitation to act against his former comrades. In 2016, he and the AKTF played a pivotal role in facilitating the release of Indonesian hostages kidnapped by the ASG; Sali's personal ties to the ASG were probably key.¹⁹ On 24 April 2020, his forces clashed with Misuari's in Parang, Jolo. The incident was significant because it was triggered by an AKTF rescue operation, not a clan feud (*rido*), the typical cause of inter-rebel conflict in Mindanao.²⁰ The AKTF had located the ASG fighters who were holding Indonesian hostages, and they were hiding within Misuari's MNLF camp in Silangkan, Parang. Misuari's men attacked the AKTF fighters in what appeared to be a pre-emptive move to deter them from entering Misuari's territory.²¹

In August 2020, Sali engineered the surrender of Tuan Annuh Annuar, the ASG subcommander responsible with Apo Mike for the kidnapping of five Indonesians in January 2020. He was able to convince Tuan Annuh (said to be the nephew of Misuari's secretary general Ustad Mursi Ibrahim) and his followers because Jikiri had promised of amnesty and protection as long as they remained in the MNLF camp in Indanan. Tahir Sali was able to play the role he did because he had the backing of Jikiri, who had a track record that the AFP respected and could move easily in top political circles. It is not clear that Sali will be able to manage on his own, and there is no one in Jikiri's inner circle to provide that political cover.

At the same time, in the ever-changing nature of Sulu politics, Misuari in early 2021 reached out to Tong Jikiri in the hopes of allying with him against Sali.²² It is not clear what Misuari brought to the table, but Tong, who is not particularly popular or respected within his late father's circles, may have been hoping for extra support for his political ambitions. Misuari's aim from the alliance was to get access to the Jikiri camp in Pasil, especially if things get too heated with the Susukans. As of April 2021, then, Misuari and Tong Jikiri were at least temporarily allied against Tahir Sali, the Susukan clan, and Tong's own younger brother, Iddih Jikiri. Both Tong and his other brother, Hermot, the current mayor of Indanan, Jolo, were said to be eying Tahir's stranded fighters as a possible additional security force for the family as the 2022 elections gear

17 Some news reports at the time referred to Tahir Sali as an ASG subcommander. See for example, "Drilon kidnap suspect nabbed," www.philstar.com, 13 October 2008.

18 IPAC interview with Yusop Jikiri, Manila, 13 February 2020.

19 The AKTF was also praised by the AFP for assisting in the rescue of three Indonesian fishermen kidnapped earlier in 2019 as well as the Jolo-based physician, Dr. Moreno. Jikiri also claimed that his force was involved intercepting ASG kidnappers off the Sulare island, killing two gunmen and arresting two others. "Who released the sailors? Untold story behind hostage rescue," www.thejakartapost.com, 4 May 2016.

20 See International Alert Philippines, *Conflict Alert 2020: Enduring Wars*, International Alert: Philippines, 2020.

21 2 MNLF fighters were killed, five were wounded in the incident. See "Abu Sayyaf member killed in Sulu clash, military says," www.news.abs-cbn.com, 28 April 2020.

22 On 28 March, MNLF Misuari's Facebook page announced, "We welcome our brother, Thong [sic] Jikiri, back to the fold of the MNLF Central Committee [Nur Misuari]. See <https://www.facebook.com/MNLFCC/>.

up.²³ These fears have eased somewhat, but as local elections draw closer, Tong's desire for a private force could return.

The AKTF was not just Jikiri's vehicle for pursuing the Abu Sayyaf. It was his answer to the absence of any real MNLF decommissioning process from 1976 onward. With his death, the options for MNLF fighters were all poor: try to link into the decommissioning process under the Bangsamoro Organic Law designed for the MILF; set up a separate process exclusively for the MNLF; or work as Jikiri did to try and incorporate fighters into a separate unit. The last looked better when compared to the bleak prospects of the first two, but without an obvious leader, this option also seemed destined for failure.

IV. THE INDONESIAN HOSTAGES

Some of these dynamics and inter-factional relations are illustrated in the saga of the five Indonesian hostages, kidnapped in January 2020 and four of them finally released in March 2021.

On 16 January, five Indonesian fishermen – four adult men and a boy – from the island of Kaledupa in Wakatobi district, Southeast Sulawesi, were seized from a Malaysian fishing boat in the waters off Lahad Datu, Sabah. All were part of an Indonesian immigrant community that has worked out of Sandakan since the 1960s.²⁴ The five were Arsan bin Dahlan, 41, the captain; Andi Riswanto, 27; Syarizal Kasta Miram, 29; La Baa, 32; and the boy, Khoirudin, 14, who had been substituted at the last minute for his uncle, who was ill. The kidnappers were from ASG and included Apo Mike, Salip Mura and Tuan Annuh. These three had been involved in most of the ASG's at-sea kidnappings-for-ransom from late 2016 onwards.

In early March 2020, the kidnappers brought the Indonesians and a Filipino doctor abducted on 4 February 2020 to Kagay, Indanan, on Jolo, just two kilometres from Misuari's MNLF camp. They were held in the house of a ASG member named Ben Wagas. The ASG demanded a ransom of PHP 50 million (about USD\$1 million). According to an Indonesian closely monitoring the process, Misuari's wife, Tarhata, requested the ASG negotiator to halve the price to speed up the process. The ASG, however, was also dealing with another facilitator based in Sabah who was in direct communication with the Malaysian employer of the Indonesians and wanted to keep the price high.

By late March, the negotiations seem to have collapsed. Apo Mike and Salip Mura were seen leaving Kagay with the hostages. On 24 March, a group of MNLF fighters led by Abraham Joel from Misuari's faction clashed with Tuan Annuh's men in Kagay in a firefight that lasted 40 minutes. Three ASG were killed and seven MNLF were wounded, according to the military.²⁵ A day later, the AFP and Jikiri's AKTF launched a rescue operation in Bangalan, a village in the district between Indanan and Patikul, and successfully rescued the Filipino doctor, but the kidnappers managed to escape with the Indonesians.

On 24 April, as noted above, Jikiri's AKTF clashed with Misuari's men as the latter attempted to enter Misuari's territory to rescue the Indonesians. The AFP with the support from Jikiri

²³ *Conflict Alert 2020*, op.cit, p. 51.

²⁴ For background on this community, see IPAC, "Stopping Abu Sayyaf Kidnappings: An Indonesian-Malaysian Case Study," Report No.63, 27 March 2020.

²⁵ "Abu Sayyaf member killed in Sulu clash, military says," www.news.abs-cbn.com, 28 April 2020.

men continued to pursue ASG kidnappers and engaged in another shootout on 28 April in Tumatangis, Indanan, killing one ASG combatant.

After several more ASG-MNLF clashes in Indanan, the kidnappers apparently moved the Indonesians to Patikul, the home base of the pro-IS faction, then still led by Hajan Sawadjaan. On 17 April 2020, a major clash between ASG and the army took place in Sitio Lubong, Barangay Danag in Patikul where the 21st infantry battalion encountered some forty ASG gunmen representing the joint forces of Radullan Sahiron, the nominal overall leader of ASG but increasingly removed from day-to-day operations, and Sawadjaan. Eleven soldiers were killed and fourteen wounded; no casualties were reported from the ASG side.²⁶ There were no AKTF fighters with the army because the military forbids it to fight in Patikul.

On 29 May, an unconfirmed report noted that a large gathering was taking place in Patikul, with many top ASG and pro-ISIS leaders present. Among those present, according to the report, were Radullan Sahiron, Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan; Mundi Sawadjaan, his nephew and heir apparent to the Sawadjaan clan's operations in Sulu; and the premier kidnappers, Apo Mike, Tuan Annuh and Ben Wagas. The report suggested that the central Mindanao pro-ISIS leader, Esmael Abdulmalik alias Abu Torayfe, was also present, although even then he was reported to be in ill health. The report suggested that the military ordered an airstrike that failed to hit the target or failed to detonate, although it seems improbable that ASG leaders would bring together so many top leaders in a single place. The leaders reportedly discussed two-pronged attacks against the government on the mainland and island provinces simultaneously – which never happened – and renewed collaboration between different ASG networks in kidnapping for ransom operation to help funding the new insurgency/terrorism campaign against the government. None of the above was ever confirmed. But it does highlight some possible deadly scenarios should the current level of factionalism remain unresolved.

After the ASG kidnappers moved to Patikul, the Indonesian hostages were transferred to the Sawadjaan camp.²⁷ At the same time, military operations intensified in Patikul, and in July, resulted in the death of Hajan Sawadjaan, although his body was not recovered. Then in August, Tuan Annuh and some of his followers surrendered to Tahir Sali and Jikiri at Camp Pasil, Indanan. They were not disarmed, as Jikiri had promised that they would be integrated into the MNLF rank-and-file as part of the normalisation process. The surrender did not affect negotiations for the release of the hostages, which all came down to money.

Hajan Sawadjaan's death was followed by the second Jolo suicide bombing on 24 August 2020, and the death of Indonesian fugitive Andi Baso, on 29 August. After the 28 September clash with the ASG, the AFP was able to confirm that the Indonesian hostages were at the Sawadjaan camp, and a rescue operation, mounted in Maligay, Patikul, ended with the death of one hostage, La Baa.

In the midst of these operations, Mundi Sawadjaan, Hajan's nephew, tried to mount his own kidnapping operation but his boat was spotted by AFP near Sulare island, off the coast of Parang, on 2 November 2020. It was chased by an AFP helicopter and subsequently rammed by a patrol boat, killing all seven passengers, including two Sawadjaan clan members.²⁸ Several other failed

26 "11 soldiers killed, 14 wounded in Sulu clash with Abu Sayyaf," www.rappler.com, 17 April 2020.

27 This came to light after the death of one Indonesian hostage, La Baa. The initial report stated that only Apo Mike and Tuan Annuh went to Patikul. The hostages were left in Kagay, under the custody of Idang Susukan and Raden Abu, who were protected by Tarhata in Misuari's MNLF camp.

28 The two were Mannul Sawadjaan and Madsmar Sawadjaan.

kidnapping attempts followed in Zamboanga City and Zamboanga del Norte respectively.²⁹

It was not until 17 March 2021 that the three remaining Indonesian adults were rescued by local fishermen near Pasigan Island, the westernmost island of Tawi-Tawi province near Tambisan, Sabah, after their boat capsized due to strong waves. One of their ASG escorts was Ben Wagas, who was arrested by local police. On 21 March, security forces finally rescued the Indonesian boy, Khoirudin, who was held separately by Apo Mike and two other gunmen on Barangay Kalupag island. In the process, Apo Mike was severely wounded and subsequently died, while two other ASG members managed to escape.

The AFP argued that the ASG moved the Indonesian hostages away from Sulu because of intensifying military offensives in Patikul. However, a source close to the Jikiri faction suggested that the hostages were moved to Tawi-Tawi because the ransom had been paid has been paid and they were about to be handed to the Tambisan-based group in Sabah for their release.³⁰

The case underscores the fluid nature of relationships among the clans and in particular the full participation of Sulu-based ISIS supporters like the Sawadjaans in the kidnapping. The lack of promised decommissioning funds could push more fighters into kidnapping, lead to more kidnapping attempts and raise the demanded ransom amounts.

V. THE POLITICS OF BARMM ELECTIONS

As these developments were taking place, Sulu politicians and community leaders were growing increasingly angry about the request of MILF leader Al Haj Ebrahim Murad to postpone elections for the BARMM parliament, scheduled for 2022, until 2025, on the grounds that the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), the preparatory government which he heads, needed more time to begin functioning properly. Sulu officials were sceptical of BARMM anyway, and a majority in the province had voted to reject BARMM in the 2019 plebiscite. On 17 November 2020, Gov. Sakur Tan gathered most of the province's elected officials together to issue a sharp protest against the proposed postponement.

The statement read in part: "Since its inception the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, which constitutes the so-called Bangsamoro Parliament and Regional Government, have not delivered even the most basic of government services as mandated to Sulu, and for almost two years all it delivered were the retrenchment and separation from services of regional employees causing a great distraught to the affected and their families.[...] The question should be asked to those who are in the seat of authority in the BARMM on why are they so hesitant to submit themselves to an election when even before the transition they have repeatedly boasted of their readiness and preparedness to rule and government?"³¹

29 On 25 November, PNP engaged in a shootout with a pump boat manned by ASG gunmen in the waters off Zamboanga city. Two gunmen were killed and one managed to escape. On 2 December, another shootout took place in Sibuco, Zamboanga del Norte, resulting in the death of one ASG gunman. The police claimed that the gunman was planning to abduct a local construction businessman in Sibuco.

30 E-mail communication, with source in Zamboanga, 17 March 2021. The amount of the ransom was said to be PHP 6.5 million (USD 134,494).

31 "Manifesto of Common Stand Against Any Contemplation of Extending the Tenure of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, BARMM, Through the Deferment of the 2022 General Elections for Members of Parliament of the Region", signed by Abdusakur M. Tan and thirteen other Sulu politicians. A similar manifesto was signed in the name of "United Sultans of the Royal House of Patikul, Sultanate of Sulu and North Borneo", 17 November 2020.

Sakur Tan parlayed unhappiness with BARMM into an unprecedented show of unity in March 2021, bringing together rival political families and different factions of the MNLF, including the sons of Jikiri and Misuari. He reached out to the Jikiri family after Yusop's death, helping to finance the funeral and pledged to take care of them in Sulu.³² Sakur Tan and Jikiri's relatives were seen together numerous times in 2021, including during the commemoration of 51st anniversary of the Jabidah Massacre on 18 March at Camp Pasil, Indanan. Not long afterwards, in February 2021, Sakur Tan signed a peace accord with one of his longtime rivals, Abdulmunir Arbison, the congressional representative for Sulu's 2nd District and later travelled with a large entourage to Arbison's stronghold in Luuk, Sulu to cement the deal.

In a telephone interview in April 2021, the governor was cheerily optimistic that Sulu under his direction was at last on its way to peace and harmony. The agreement on "power-sharing" with rival clans in his telling was little more than an agreement not to encroach on each other's turf in the 2022 elections. The Arbisons could do whatever they wanted to in Luuk, the Jikiris could keep control of Indanan, but the Tans would continue to rule Sulu.³³ The Abu Sayyaf surrenders would continue, not so much through the AKTF but directly to government security forces and to local government units, and the reconciliation between Misuari and Tong Jikiri would also contribute to the ASG's continued decline.³⁴

None of this solidarity is likely to last. The problem, however, is that whenever Sulu politicians are united, the one issue they have in common, in addition to the lack of attention from the mainland, is the claim to Sabah.³⁵

VI. THE CURRENT DANGERS

The MNLF is thus at a dangerous crossroads. The biggest concern is 200 fighters led by Tahir Sali who have been trapped since Jikiri's death in the MNLF's Camp Pasil on Jolo. They expected demobilisation and benefits resulting from their surrender, but have neither cash nor protection from military operations. They cannot leave because of outstanding arrest warrants; if they go outside, there is no guarantee that they will not be gunned down or arrested. Some could decide that their best option is to join (or re-join) their relatives in the ASG.

Had Jikiri been alive, he could have given them a role in the AKTF with the blessing of the AFP, but it is not clear that the AFP will have the same understanding with Tahir Sali, and it will take years to build the same level of trust. The immediate need, then, is for the AFP to sit down with the MNLF leadership and work out an amnesty package and monitoring program for the fighters stranded in MNLF camps out of their home territory.

The most logical option, but an unlikely one given political realities, would be for the fighters to be accommodated within the BARMM decommissioning process. But this would require working more closely with the MILF, which is having enough problems decommissioning its own fighters, let alone taking on the MNLF. Indeed, one reason the AKTF was such an intriguing idea was that it was a Sulu-based force for Sulu fighters, who worked out their own arrangements

32 See "Tan, Arbison friends again: Sulu, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi rejoice," *Mindanao Examiner*, 29 March – 4 April 2021.

33 IPAC interview with Gov Abdusakur Tan, 8 April 2021.

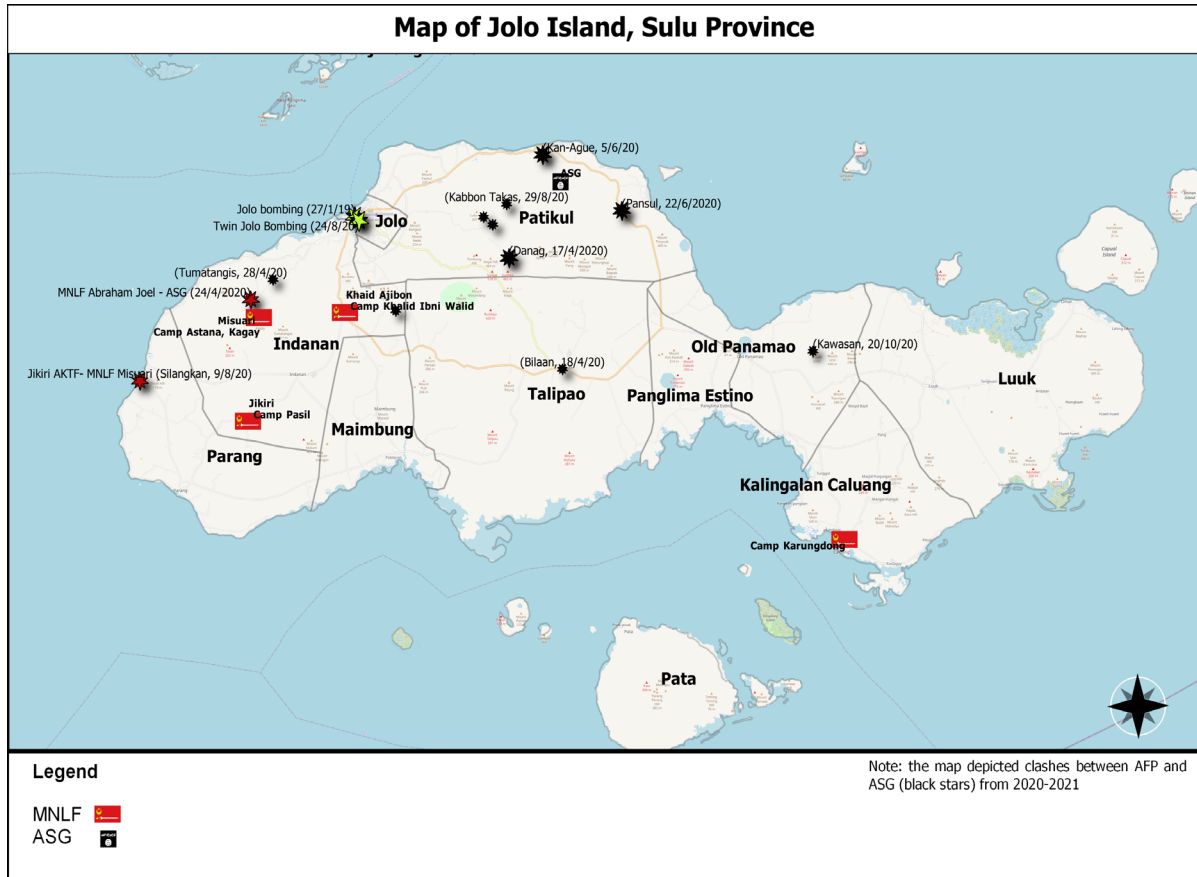
34 IPAC interview with Gov Abdusakur Tan, 8 April 2021.

35 For more on the Sabah claim, including background on the 2013 incursion into Lahad Datu, Sabah by the late Sultan Kiram and some 200 armed followers, see IPAC, "The Sulu Archipelago and the Philippine Peace Process," Report No. 20, 29 May 2015.

with the AFP without the need to involve any mainlanders. The problem is that there is no one at the moment who can replace Jikiri in the role of commander.

The Duterte government needs urgently to put an amnesty program together that will get Tahir Sali's men paid, while at least temporarily ensuring his personal protection, since any move against him will surely trigger retaliation. In the longer term, all parties committed to the success of BARMM need to work harder to ensure that the interests of Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi are better represented.

Appendix 1: Conflict incidents in Sulu 2019-2021



QGIS map edited by IPAC

INSTITUTE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT (IPAC)

The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) was founded in 2013 on the principle that accurate analysis is a critical first step toward preventing violent conflict. Our mission is to explain the dynamics of conflict—why it started, how it changed, what drives it, who benefits—and get that information quickly to people who can use it to bring about positive change.

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