

**VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES
IN THE LEAD-UP TO LOCAL ELECTIONS**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Political violence linked to village (*barangay*) elections in October 2023 is already unsettling Mindanao and is likely to get worse. The 2023 elections will shape the much more important poll in 2025, the first to choose members for the parliament of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). That in turn will determine whether the long, laborious peace process between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government will end in a system that changes the feudal status quo or reaffirms its endurance. All indications point to the latter. But violence in Mindanao will continue under either outcome unless serious efforts are made to control guns, depoliticize the police, and reform the dysfunctional criminal justice system. Ironically, the most peaceful areas during the October elections may be those where local bosses use their power to ensure that their candidates run unopposed.

BARMM, which came into being in 2019 under MILF control, was supposed to herald a new era of peace and prosperity in the southern Philippines. MILF leaders faced enormous challenges, not just in transforming themselves from insurgents into administrators but also in turning their first chance to govern into a solid electoral base. Their party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP), fared poorly in the May 2022 general elections and faces a bigger test in 2025. The only way it can hold on to control of BARMM is to make alliances with the clans it initially hoped to displace.

This report looks at the political dynamics ahead of the *barangay* elections in two key areas of BARMM, Sulu and Maguindanao. It looks at the relationship between old-time political dynasties and the BARMM government and explores some of the tensions. It looks at sources of conflict that could be exacerbated by electoral contestation, including the process of carving up provinces and municipalities into smaller units for electoral gain. It examines two episodes of political violence in June 2023 – in Maimbung, Sulu and Datu Paglas, Maguindanao del Sur – that not only do not bode well for peace but are also a reminder of how heavily armed the BARMM region is and will continue to be, even after the decommissioning of MILF fighters is completed. Finally, it compares the elections in BARMM with the 2006 elections in Aceh, Indonesia, the first to be contested by the former guerrillas of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM), to understand why the UBJP finds itself in such straits. It concludes with recommendations about what might be done to try to prevent more violence.

The report is based on research conducted in August 2023 in Zamboanga, Sulu and Cotabato, including interviews with BARMM officials, provincial governors, and civil society representatives as well as on extensive secondary sources.

II. THE LINKS BETWEEN THE BARANGAY ELECTIONS AND THE 2025 ELECTIONS

The barangay elections will be held on 30 October 2023 to elect a chief executive - the barangay captain or village head - and an eight-member barangay council. They are supposed to be non-partisan but inevitably reflect the influence of political bosses linked to family or clan dynasties.¹ It is in the interests of mayors of municipalities to control as many of the barangays as they can, so they can deliver the votes up the chain of command to the provincial level. It is not unusual for political clans to test their younger members out as barangay captains or members of a barangay council and gradually move them higher in the political structure. The family links give the clan leader, usually at the provincial level, a good sense of what is going on at the grassroots. Without the barangay captains at the bottom, the control structure of the clans would collapse. The October election thus constitutes an important first step to winning the BARMM parliamentary elections in 2025.

One Sulu politician put it this way:

If I am the mayor and I have 30 barangays and 28 out of 30 of my barangay captains are supporting me, do you think you will challenge me in the 2025 elections? You will think twice!²

As of September 2023, the election prospects of the MILF in 2025 looked grim. The 2022 elections showed that its UBJP party was weak and no match for the traditional politicians.³ They simply did not have the depth of personnel to challenge local political machines. In one town in Maguindanao, the man tapped to run for mayor was a successful businessman who happened to also be the nephew of BARMM Chief Minister Murad. He had never been interested in political office and was uncomfortable campaigning. His family ties and wealth were of little use in challenging the tried-and-tested clan leader running against him. He got just under 32 per cent of the vote to the clan leader's nearly 65 per cent.⁴ The same story was repeated throughout BARMM.

This means that to retain control of the BARMM parliament in 2025, the MILF leadership will have to cut deals with clan leaders and political bosses. It will also have to limit the electoral battles it chooses to fight. The MILF needs allies from among the governors of the six BARMM provinces – Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, and

¹ The classic study of family dynasties in the Philippines is Alfred W. McCoy, *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines*, Manila, 1994. A ban on dynasties had been included in a draft of the Bangsamoro Organic Law that laid the legal foundation for BARMM; it was then scrapped in the final version. The issue came up again when the BARMM electoral code was being debated, with traditional clan leaders arguing that political dynasties were an Islamic tradition beginning with the Prophet Muhammed. See Macabangkit B. Lanto, "Anti-dynasty in BARMM draft law", *Daily Tribune*, 10 February 2023. There was no reference to dynasties in the final version.

² IPAC interview with Abdulsakur "Toto" Tan, Jolo, Sulu, 21 August 2023.

³ See Cheng Xu and Jacques Bertrand, "Barangay Elections in the Bangsamoro: A Crucial Test for the Future of the BARMM," *thediplomat.com*, 23 June 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/barangay-elections-in-the-bangsamoro-a-crucial-test-for-the-future-of-the-barmm/>

⁴ This was a race in Sultan Kudarat municipality in Maguindanao province that pitted Esmael "Teng" Ebrahim, the businessman, against Datu Tucao Mastura who ran as a member of the PDP-Laban party.

Lanao del Sur. Yet in early June 2023, these governors joined forces as the BARMM Governors Caucus and threw down the gauntlet to the BARMM government. While saying they were only interested in improving the rule of law, peace and security and “inclusive governance”, they petitioned the Supreme Court to declare the March 2023 BARMM electoral code unconstitutional; called for the postponement of the barangay elections until the MILF finished decommissioning its fighters, so as to reduce the possibility of violence; and urged that MILF forces be “shut down” in areas that have been marked by conflict, especially in Maguindanao, Cotabato and North Cotabato.⁵

The driving force behind the Caucus’s actions was Bai Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu of Maguindanao del Sur. Not only has Maguindanao seen a high level of political violence since 2022, but Bai Mariam and her husband, “Teng” Mangudadatu, are especially antagonistic towards BARMM. “Teng” was hoping that newly elected President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr would appoint him BARMM Chief Minister in 2022, displacing the MILF’s Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim, since he had delivered a Marcos victory in the MILF heartland while the MILF leaders had supported Marcos rival Leni Robredo. Murad kept his post.

A BARMM official told IPAC that for 2025, the MILF will need at least three of the five governors on side. If the governors have done their work, their mayors will have a stable of loyal barangay captains elected in October 2023 who can get out the vote in 2025. The official believes that BARMM has secured the support of Gov. Yshmael Sali in Tawi-Tawi and Gov. Hadjiman Hataman-Salliman, better known as Jim Hataman, in Basilan. He knows they have no chance with Bai Mariam or Gov. Sakur Tan in Sulu, although the MILF has been in talks with Tan since June 2023.

This makes Gov. Mamintal “Bombet” Adiong Jr. of Lanao del Sur the critical swing player. Adiong, the target of an assassination attempt in February 2023, is a business partner of Sakur Tan’s, supplying oil across Mindanao.⁶ He told the BARMM official, “My relationship with Sakur Tan is so deep that if I join you in BARMM, my family will blame me for having betrayed him.”⁷

Adiong also has his problems with the MILF, particularly after the February ambush of his convoy in which four of his bodyguards (three of them police) were killed. The attack took place in Maguing, an area known as an MILF stronghold, and some sources suggest that the MILF could or should have done more to prevent it or to provide immediate assistance afterwards.⁸ One of the rising stars of the MILF and the BARMM government is also a potential challenger to Adiong and his family for the governorship.⁹

⁵ “BARMM Electoral Code questioned,” *Manila Times*, 16 June 2023.

⁶ The attempted assassination may have been drug-related. Shortly after the assassination attempt on 17 February, which killed a driver and three police escorts and wounded Adiong, three criminal suspects were named: Lomala Baratomo, Oscar Gandawali and Acsanie Hadji Salic. They were apparently involved with illegal marijuana cultivation in the area. Police killed Oscar in May in Maguing, Lanao del Sur, and later that month arrested Baratomo. Salic’s fate is unclear.

⁷ IPAC interview with BARMM official, Cotabato, 25 August 2023.

⁸ IPAC email correspondence with two independent analysts in BARMM, 10 September 2023.

⁹ This is Dr. Marjanie Macasalong, son of the late MILF vice-chair Aleem Mimbantas. A graduate of the International Islamic University in Malaysia where he received degrees in political science and Islamic thought and civilization, he is chairman of the Bangsamoro Youth Commission and chair of the BTA’s Committee on Trade, Investment, and Tourism.

Nevertheless, BARMM officials are committed to an alliance with Adiong's party, Serbisyong Inklusibo Alyansang Progresibo (SIAP), forged just before the 2022 elections.¹⁰ The financial rewards could be substantial. Lanao del Sur's capital is Marawi, site of a pro-ISIS occupation for five months in 2017 and now the focus of an international reconstruction effort, and Adiong could use any additional funding that BARMM could provide. Under the terms of the BARMM-Adiong agreement, all the mayors will run as SIAP in 2025, and UBJP will agree not to field candidates at that level. If UBJP tried to put up its own candidates there, a BARMM official said, "it would be a bloodbath".¹¹ SIAP and UBJP will then divide up the Congressional districts and agree on who will run in each.

Basilan Governor Jim Hataman is securely pro-BARMM, but will face stiff competition in 2025 from his brother, Mujiv. Both men are popular: Jim has been a good governor who has brought a semblance of security to Basilan. Mujiv, now a Congressman, was an equally effective governor of ARMM, the regional government that preceded BARMM. Mujiv reportedly has Sakur Tan's backing and access to Tan's deep pockets for the 2025 race. He is putting up his own candidates for the barangay elections. Mujiv's wife is the mayor of Basilan's capital, Isabela, and can also wield influence in the barangay elections. The sibling competition may prove to be fierce, and several sources expressed concern about an uptick in violence as a result.

III. SULU, BARMM AND THE ELECTIONS

From the beginning of the Mindanao peace process, the islands (Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, sometimes abbreviated BaSulTa) and the mainland of Muslim Mindanao have had different political agendas. Sulu, under the control of Gov. Abdulsakur ("Sakur") Tan, voted against the creation of BARMM, both because Tan and his family were doing quite well through his direct contacts with Manila and did not want another political entity coming between them, and because he did not want Sulu and its ethnic Tausug population coming under the domination of the ethnic Manguindanaon who constitute the MILF leadership.¹²

Tan's political control of Sulu is absolute. In the 2022 elections, Tan and his son Abdulsakur "Toto" Tan II, ran unopposed for governor and vice-governor respectively, as did seventeen of Sulu's nineteen mayoral candidates. Sulu's two Congressional races were also uncontested. They were secured by Tan's second son, Samier Tan, and Munir Arbison Jr, a former rival turned political ally. In the presidential race, Bongbong Marcos, whom Sakur Tan supported, received over 95 per cent of the vote. One result of the lack of opposition, the Tan family claims, was that Sulu was entirely free of violence during the campaign, voting day, and the immediate aftermath. Many others agreed that Sulu was unusually peaceful and

¹⁰ The English would be "Inclusive Service – Progressive Alliance".

¹¹ IPAC interview with BARMM official, Cotabato, 25 August 2023

¹² IPAC, "The Sulu Archipelago and the Philippine Peace Process, Report No.20, 29 May 2015, + pp.11-14.

attributed it to the lack of opposition, although the military's systematic suppression of the Abu Sayyaf Group was clearly a factor as well.¹³

A. Sakur Tan and BARMM

In the four years since BARMM's establishment, Sakur Tan and his family members have made no secret of their disdain for BARMM's leaders and performance, including the lack of benefits to the islands and the slowness of the decommissioning process. The governor said BARMM was not reaching the people and if they were hoping to make a decent showing in 2025, they would have to do better.

If I were in their shoes, I would make the BARMM government felt in every corner of the provinces. They should go to the villages. They should make themselves felt. Like building school buildings. I told [the BARMM Minister of Education], why do you want to build two classrooms, three classrooms, all scattered. Make the schools attractive, so you make people like to come. Maybe BARMM would like to reach the people, but they don't know how.¹⁴

His son, the vice-governor, gave a similar assessment:

We in the islands were not demanding that much. We wanted good governance, in terms of delivering basic services for education, for health. These are the basics. These are the rights of the people in Mindanao. This so-called Bangsamoro Autonomous Region was created not to make the people suffer but to bring good things to the people of Mindanao. But they are not making people enjoy their governance. For example, in education, they sent 4,000 computers to Sulu for the benefit of our students, and yet more than 3,000 were broken. They didn't function. How can that be? Maybe they were not brand-new when they purchased them. This is just one example of their failures. Most of them were intellectuals, very well-educated, but they don't have experience in running a government.¹⁵

Both sides acknowledged that talks with the MILF were underway. The Tan side portrayed it as Murad and the MILF belatedly realizing they needed partnerships with the clans.

¹³ IPAC, "Decline in Violence by the Abu Sayyaf Group and Ongoing Risks," Report No.80, 23 December 2022. One source suggested that in addition to the government's programs to encourage the surrender and reintegration of the Abu Sayyaf Group (and other militants), one reason the ASG was no longer involved in kidnapping for ransom was because it had a new source of income – the governor had given them a cut in the lucrative cigarette smuggling business.

¹⁴ IPAC interview with Sakur Tan, Jolo, Sulu. The reference to the minister was to Mohagher M. Iqbal, a member of the MILF Central Committee and BARMM's first minister of Basic, Higher and Technical Education. Iqbal, a nom de guerre, was a founding member of the MILF when it split from the MNLF in 1977 and became chair of its peace panel in negotiations with the Philippine government. If anything happened to the current chair of the MILF and BARMM Chief Minister al-haj Murad, Iqbal would likely succeed him.

¹⁵ IPAC, Interview with Abdulsakur Tan II, Jolo, Sulu

They're starting to reach out, because they can never win without the support of the politicians. That is what happened to Chairman Misuari.¹⁶ That is what happened to every other previous regional governor. You've got to reach out to the local officials. You've got to reach out to the local chief executives.

The clear implication was that BARMM leaders had failed to do this and were only now realizing the consequences.

Many in BARMM are convinced that Sakur Tan is aiming to displace Murad as Chief Minister of BARMM and is building his own alliances, including in the Governors Caucus, to ensure this happens. He denied it in a June 2023 meeting with a BARMM official, saying he was too old, and in any case, he was not interested in regional government. "You don't have to treat me as a threat," he said.¹⁷ To IPAC he stressed his ties to his province, saying he had lived in Sulu without interruption since 1972 when war – the MNLF rebellion—erupted, as if to dismiss any regional ambitions. In fact, his extensive business connections stretch across Mindanao, so despite his protestations, no one is counting him out.

B. Sakur Tan and the Barangay Elections

When the BARMM Governors Caucus appealed to the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to postpone the barangay elections, it was widely assumed that Sakur Tan was behind it, especially as he was the most forceful personality of the five. He says he only went along for the sake of consensus and later told the COMELEC chair to please allow the elections in Sulu to proceed, even if they are postponed elsewhere.¹⁸ Why? Because the governor has ensured that all incumbent barangay captains will run unopposed.

The uncontested elections in 2022 were seen as such a success for peace and security that Tan on 22 August 2023 summoned the mayors of all municipalities in Sulu and told them to talk to all possible adversaries and "arrange" for no contest in October. The specific means of "arranging" was left up to the imagination of the mayors. The point was to convince all village leaders to agree among themselves before the polls so that the elections were "as credible and peaceful as possible." Asked why have elections at all if there was no choice, the governor said that leaders still needed a mandate from the people.¹⁹

Having such a solid bloc at the barangay level will ensure continuation of the Tan family's control in 2025. As with other major clans, the family is everywhere in the political structure.²⁰

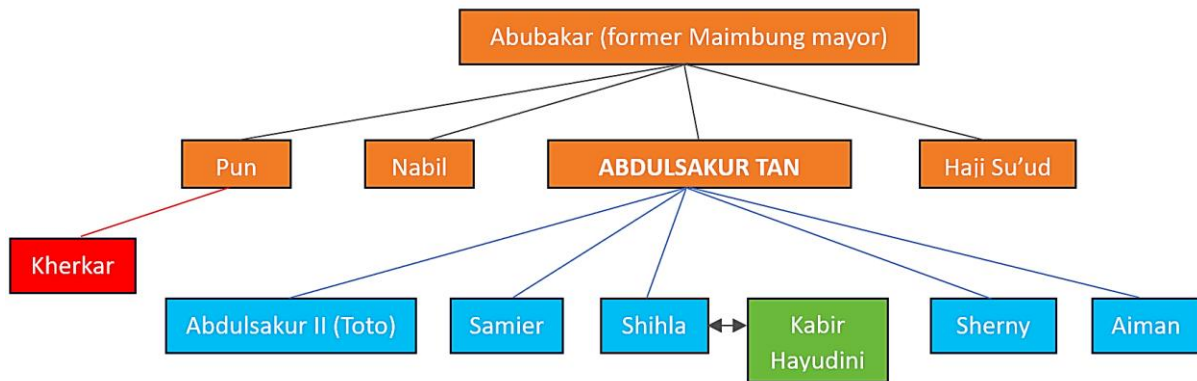
¹⁶ This is a reference to Nur Misuari, originally from Sulu, who founded the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1972 and in 1996 became the appointed governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Amid charges of corruption and rebellion, he fled to Malaysia in 2001 only to be extradited shortly thereafter. He has been free since 2008.

¹⁷ IPAC interview, BARMM official, Cotabato, 21 August 2023.

¹⁸ IPAC interview, Sakur Tan, Jolo, Sulu, 21 August 2023.

¹⁹ IPAC interview, Sakur Tan, Jolo, Sulu, 21 August 2023.

²⁰ Sakur Tan was governor from 1995-2001 and again from 2007-2013. Toto took over as governor 2013-2019, with his father as vice-governor for his first term and his mother for his second term. Sakur became governor again in 2019 and was re-elected in 2022. Samier was mayor of Maimbung 2013-2016 and was elected to Congress in 2019 and reelected in 2022. His sister,

Fig.1 The Tan Family

One of the commanders of the 11th Division of the Armed Forces stationed on Jolo believes that for all his flaws, Sakur Tan deserves credit for helping make Sulu peaceful. “We couldn’t have done it without him,” he said. “He gets things done, and he listens.”²¹

C. The Maimbung Incident

An episode of violence on 24 June 2023 in Maimbung, Tan’s hometown and the old seat of the Sulu sultanate, underscores the fragility of the peace, however, and provides an example of how political fault lines develop. It also illustrates the ruthlessness of the Tan family when its interests are challenged. In the daylong clash, five people were killed, 14 wounded and 5,000 people briefly displaced when police came to serve a warrant of arrest against Pando Mudjasan, a longtime thorn in the side of Sakur Tan. The warrant cited murder, arson and illegal possession of weapons relating to a series of events in 2018. Mudjasan surrounded himself with armed men (some of them rumored to be ex-Abu Sayyaf) and fought back.²² He managed to escape and as of August 2023 was believed to be hiding in an MNLF camp in Indanan, together with his wife, Hajja Faujia. The police raised concerns that the Mudjasan’s men constituted a private armed group that could be used to destabilise the barangay elections.²³

The deterioration of Pando Mudjasan’s relations with the Tan family began in 2016 but the lead-up to the story begins much earlier. Pando is a former MNLF commander and politician.

Shihla is currently mayor of Maimbung and married to the mayor of Patikul, Kabir Hayudini. Aiman is the vice-mayor of Maimbung, married to Kathleen Tan, daughter of Kherkar and herself a barangay captain. Kherkar, Sakur’s cousin, is the mayor of Jolo.

²¹ IPAC interview with Christopher Tampus, Commander 1103rd Brigade, 11th Division of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Camp Bud Datu, Indanan, Sulu, 20 August 2023.

²² “Ten-hour fierce clash between gov’t troops, ex-Sulu vice mayor’s group leaves 2 dead, over 13 wounded,” *Manila Bulletin*, 25 June 2023. The director of the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) is quoted as saying that Pando “is a supporter and coddler of ASG sub-leaders, the late Apo Mike who’s formerly operating in Maimbung, Indanan, Parang, and Patikul provinces and of Kadafy Sali. He is also the coddler of Alganer Dahim, the late Juko Dahim and his cohorts, all ASG members who served as the accused’s reinforcement during the armed encounter.” He also accuses Pando of having been involved in firearms smuggling and illegal drug activities. The problem for the credibility of these charges is that the local CIDG officer who led the effort to serve the warrant is a known operative of the governor.

²³ “Mudjasan seeks President’s help, denies crimes,” *Manila Standard*, 1 July 2023.

Originally from Karawan, Indanan, he married Faujia and moved to her family's village, Bualo Lipid, in Maimbung, where she became barangay captain and he rose through the ranks of local politics to become a three-term municipal councilor, providing services to the Tan family along the way. In 2010, he won election as vice-mayor of Maimbung with Sakur's son Samier as mayor. They won again in 2013 and again in 2016, when they ran unopposed.

But shortly after the elections, Samier was suspended for six months by the Philippine Ombudsman over improper declaration of assets. According to the local government code, Pando, as vice-mayor, should have been named officer-in-charge (OIC). Sakur Tan, however, wanted another son, Aiman, then a municipal councillor, to succeed as acting mayor and pressed Pando to resign, including by offering to reward him handsomely if he did so. He refused, thus incurring the governor's lasting enmity. While Pando continued as acting mayor, Tan reportedly ensured that municipal government ground to a halt. Eventually he managed to get Aiman in anyway.

Then in May 2018, around the time of the barangay elections, a firefight erupted in Pando's compound in Bualo Lipid village between his forces and a group led by the brother of Maimbung councilor Abubakar Tan. Two of Pando's relatives were killed, and three MNLF members were wounded, together with seven civilians.²⁴ The media depicted this as another example of a traditional clan feud, but there was more involved.²⁵

According to one widespread rumour, Sakur Tan had been trying to buy Pando's wife's land in Bualo Lipid, an area with white sand beaches. It may have been because he wanted to build a resort; it may have been to force them off the land and ensure that the family firm took over the barangay. Pando and his wife refused to sell, according to one version. According to a police officer, Pando did sell the land but then denied it and refused to move, further angering the governor. Both versions are unconfirmed. The governor, who was clearly aware of the story, said he had no reason to acquire any more land, instead he was donating it right and left, especially to the police. He gave 1.5 hectares of his father's property for a municipal police station and then persuaded former president Rodrigo Duterte and Senator Bong Go to donate 382 million pesos (about US\$6,700) for construction. He wants it to be big: "You know, when you have a law enforcement headquarters, it must be imposing."²⁶ While his explanations shed no light on the land dispute, it is worth noting the governor's stress on his close relationship with the police.

An arrest warrant had apparently been issued for Pando in 2019, but nothing happened, perhaps because of Covid restrictions. It was reportedly about to be served in January 2023, but Pando was out of reach in Indanan. Instead, Pando's wife, Hajja Faujia, was arrested as an accessory to her husband's alleged crimes dating from the 2018 firefight. Gov. Tan made a point of saying not only that she was well treated, but that thanks to the pressure from the daughter of MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, he agreed to release her and even contributed to

²⁴ One account said one of the victims was Pando's brother, killed when a grenade exploded.

²⁵ "Troops, police sent to Sulu town as clan feud brings violence," Philstar.com, 21 May 2018.

²⁶ IPAC interview, Sakur Tan, Jolo, Sulu, 21 August 2023.

the bail money.²⁷ Detractors of the governor say she was only released after she promised to sell the land, but then she reneged. She returned to her duties as barangay captain until the incident on 24 June when she fled with her husband, reportedly to one of the MNLF camps in Indanan. Her prolonged absence will enable the Tan family to put an ally into that post.

A senior police officer said there was no politics involved. This was a straightforward police operation to serve a warrant. But the degree of the governor's control over Sulu makes it unlikely that an operation of this magnitude, against a known rival, would take place without his approval, if not on his orders. The fact that it was led by an officer from the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) known to be a Tan henchman raises additional questions. The police say they moved in to serve the warrant when it was learned that Pando had returned to Maimbung with heavy weapons and some 50 armed men.²⁸

The fact that Pando managed to escape after the firefight and apparently find shelter in an MNLF camp led some to suggest that the army, whose relations to the MNLF are generally good, may have helped him out. If he and his wife are in fact in one of the big MNLF camps around Indanan, they will be safe for the moment. But the ease with which Pando was able to assemble a heavily armed group raises issues about the sustainability of peace in Sulu.

D. The Problem of the MNLF: Who Succeeds Nur Misuari?

The firefight is also a reminder that the MNLF in Sulu remains a potential danger. While many have expressed concern about the pace of decommissioning of the MILF and the poor quality of the guns its fighters have turned in, it should be remembered that the MNLF never went through any decommissioning process at all and retains a substantial arsenal, particularly in Sulu. Under the 1996 peace agreement with the government, several MNLF camps were recognised as the organisation's territory and effectively became off limits to the government, including two in Indanan, Camp Astana Mt. Dragon Bakud in Kagay and Camp Yusuf Jikiri in Pasil. In addition, there are several "unrecognized" camps, including one that Pando founded on his wife's land in Bulao Lipid that he named Camp Mudjasan after his father, also an MNLF commander. The Philippine military has tried to dismantle some of these "unrecognized" camps, but it has to choose its battles with care. A senior officer of the 11th Division in Jolo said he would not dream of seizing MNLF weapons in Sulu any more than he would try to seize those of Sakur Tan's private force. "Our goal is not to seize the guns, it's to make them irrelevant through peace and prosperity," he said.²⁹

Meanwhile, any politician in Sulu can draw on old connections, whether in the MNLF, MILF or ASG, to bolster his or her forces as needed. The military is confident that it has the strength and political backing to take care of any conflict that might arise. The one they are worried about, more than any election dispute, is a power struggle within the MNLF after Nur

²⁷ IPAC interview, Sakur Tan, Jolo, Sulu, 21 August 2023.

²⁸ IPAC interview, police official, Jolo, Sulu, 22 August 2023.

²⁹ IPAC interview with Gen. Christopher Tampus, commander of the 1103rd Brigade, 11th Division of the Armed Forces, Jolo, Sulu, 20 August 2023.

Chairman Nur Misuari dies. Misuari is widely reported to be senile, but it is not clear who an acceptable successor would be. The obvious choice would be his son, Abdulkarim, now a member of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) and BARMM parliament. A member of the MNLF Central Committee, however, decried Abdulkarim's participation in BARMM, saying an MNLF leader could not be both a government functionary and a revolutionary – and the organisation needed a revolutionary.³⁰ Abdulkarim also lacks military experience. Another possible candidate, Muslimin Sema, now the BARMM Minister of Labour, is also rejected by many MNLF leaders because of his ethnicity. Sema is a Maguindanaon, and a true MNLF leader, in eyes of supporters in Sulu, can only be a Tausug. Thong Jikiri, son of the late MNLF commander Yusop Jikiri, is also sometimes mentioned as a potential leader, but like Abdulkarim, he is also on the BTA, and both sons lack the charisma of their fathers. In the meantime, the Maimbung incident serves as a reminder of how easily the peace in Sulu can shatter.

IV. POLITICAL MACHINATIONS IN MAGUINDANAO

Central Mindanao has displaced Sulu and Basilan as the most violent area of the Philippines and many of the attacks appear to be politically inspired, raising particular concerns about Maguindanao – now divided into two provinces, north and south - as the elections approach. The police imposed gun bans for a month in August 2022 as the plebiscite on dividing the province loomed; in February 2023 after the assassination attempt on the governor of Lanao del Sur; and from August to November 2023 to cover the barangay election period. They seem to have had little effect. When the BARMM governors asked for the postponement of the elections, it was Maguindanao they had in mind as a likely trouble spot.

The tensions go back to the 2022 elections in Maguindanao, in which Bai Mariam Mangudadatu - mentioned above as one of the hardliners on the BARMM Governors Caucus - ran against her husband's cousin, Esmael "Toto" Mangudatatu for governor. She represented the Nacionalista Party, Toto represented the UBJP, and she trounced him, 60.38 per cent to 38.59 per cent. Ainee Sinsuat, running for vice-governor, beat former Congresswoman Bai Sandra Sema representing the UBJP, also by a hefty margin (56.2 per cent to 42.87 per cent with several other candidates receiving a handful of votes). The weak showing of the UBJP here and elsewhere in BARMM raised fears that the MILF could well lose the first direct elections for the BARMM parliament in 2025. This was the setting for the division of Maguindanao four months later.

³⁰ IPAC interview with MNLF Central Committee member, Zamboanga, 14 August 2023.

A. The Maguindanao del Norte Dispute

In September 2022, the province of Maguindanao was split into Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte. What followed illustrates the ongoing power struggle between the traditional clans and the MILF leadership of BARMM.

The election of Bai Miriam and Ainee Sinsuat had been a political pairing of two of the powerful clans in central Mindanao. Ainee is the wife of Lester Sinsuat, who himself served three terms as vice-governor of Maguindanao before being elected mayor of Datu Odin Sinsuat, the town named after the clan patriarch, now the capital of Maguindanao del Norte. Bai Mariam is married to Suharto “Teng” Mangudadatu, former governor of neighboring Sultan Kudarat province who reportedly was hoping to be appointed Chief Minister of BARMM as a reward for his campaigning heavily for Bongbong Marcos in the 2022 elections. Despite MILF leaders having voted for his opponent, Marcos reappointed MILF leader Murad to the post, although he gave Teng a large consolation prize.³¹

The aim of the division, which had first been proposed in 2017, was to create a new post that would give the local political elite additional electoral clout as the new autonomous region took shape, although it was justified, as such divisions inevitably are, as bringing government closer to the people.³² The MILF leadership, possibly hoping that it could use its connections in Manila to benefit from the division as well, supported the split through its party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP).

The law authorizing the division, Republic Act 11550, provided for a plebiscite in Maguindanao to approve it. A somewhat delayed vote took place in October 2022, producing a near unanimous vote in favor. Bai Mariam then became acting governor of Maguindanao del Sur, pending local elections scheduled for 2025, and Ainee became acting governor of Maguindanao del Norte. In April 2023, however, President Marcos appointed a top MILF official, Abdulraof Macacua, better known as Sammy Gambar, former head of the MILF’s military forces, as governor of Maguindanao del Norte, displacing Ainee. This was a major olive branch to the MILF and reassurance that its past support for a rival would not affect relations. It was also a significant blow to the Sinsuats and Mangudadatus.

Initially, Ainee refused to step down.³³ She was bolstered in this defiance by a 19 April Supreme Court preliminary order to the Region 12 government to process the appointment of a man she had named as provincial treasurer while in her acting governor capacity. But in May 2023, she allowed herself to be sworn in as vice-governor and posed for a photograph with President Marcos together with other officials from the two provinces. Sammy lost no time in posting large posters of himself all over Cotabato, showing him initiating new projects. In June, however, the Supreme Court reinforced its earlier injunction, ordering the

³¹ On 9 June 2023, Teng was appointed head of the Technical Education and Skills and Development Authority, attached to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). This is a Cabinet-level position with a large budget and outreach to major corporations, foreign and domestic.

³² In Indonesia, this is the standard rationale given for *pemekaran*, the process of administrative division by which new provinces and districts are created. In fact, ethnic dominance and political spoils are the real drivers, especially in eastern Indonesia.

³³ <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1759561/maguindanao-norte-has-2-governors>

appointment to go forward because “the Court cannot allow the newly created Province of Maguindanao del Norte to be crippled without its provincial treasurer as the same affects the entire operation of the local government unit.”³⁴ Ainee read this as reaffirmation of her acting governor status, stepped down as vice-governor on 14 August, and proclaimed herself governor.

BARMM’s Interior and Local Government Minister, Naguib Sinarimbo, known to be close to Sammy, disagreed. He argued that the ruling only said the appointment of the treasurer should go through, while saying nothing about Ainee’s status as governor. On 16 August, Sammy convened a meeting of the provincial council to fill the vacancy that her departure as vice-governor had created.

As of August 2023, Maguindanao del Norte had two rival governors, and the question was whether the dispute would be resolved peacefully or violently. The possibility of violence was real, because the province is no stranger to political killings. On 30 September 2022, Jamael Sinsuat, Lester Sinsuat’s uncle who had run against him for mayor the previous May, was shot and killed around noon as he was leaving Friday prayers in Datu Odin Sinsuat. Jamael had been the local UBJP leader. The UBJB later issued a statement noting “with concern the continuing harassment and attack against its officials and party leaders since the elections and immediately thereafter.”³⁵ The suspected gunman was found dead later on the day of the murder. He was never identified, in part because he was shot in the face.

On the same day that Jamael was killed, another Sinsuat - Jamael’s nephew and Lester’s cousin Darius - was also shot and wounded, but he survived. Darius’s father Bimbo claimed that the police had failed to respond to the shooting of his brother Jamael, which was odd because the police station was close by.³⁶

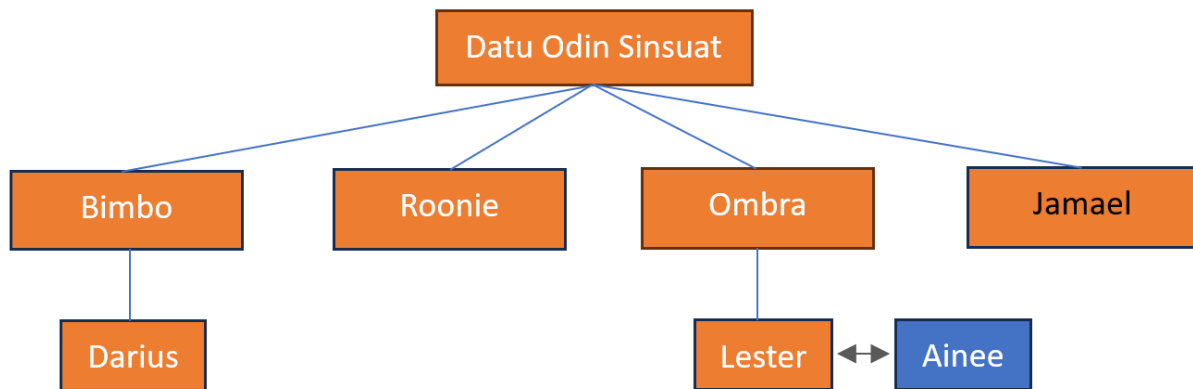
Jamael’s family later filed a murder charge against Lester and Ainee, as well as against the man who was police chief at the time and some 30 others, mostly police. The police in turn filed a charge against Jamael’s widow and her two children, accusing her of obstruction of justice for taking the handgun found near the body of the gunman and refusing to turn it over.³⁷ Eventually the case was dropped for lack of evidence. Given the close ties of police and local politicians, this is one case that would have benefited from an independent investigation.

³⁴ Ministry of the Interior and Local Government, “Re: Province of Maguindanao del Norte v. Bureau of Local Government and Finance, Regional Office No. XII, et als. (G.R. 265373; June 26, 2023)”, 18 August 2023, p.2.

³⁵ “Tension grips Maguindanao town after killing of defeated mayoral bet, attack on nephew,” *rappler.com*, 1 October 2022.

³⁶ “Murder complaint filed vs. Maguindanao del Norte governor, mayor,” *rappler.com*, 17 November 2022.

³⁷ “Cops file obstruction of justice complaint vs kin of slain Maguindanao politician,” *rappler.com*, 6 December 2022.

Fig.2 The Sinsuat Clan

B. The Datu Paglas Incident

Maguindanao del Sur has also been marked by political violence that does not bode well for the upcoming elections – although Gov. Mariam Sangki-Mangudadato, like Sakur Tan, is trying to ensure that the races in as many barangays as possible are uncontested. There are several different versions of what happened on 18 June 2023 in the town of Datu Paglas, when seven men were killed by a joint police and military team, and an officer of the police Special Action Force was wounded. One version says it was a straightforward law enforcement operation, although perhaps with excessive use of force. Another suggests it was an act of political retaliation designed to discredit the MILF and disrupt the peace process.

The police version is that they were attempting to serve a warrant for the arrest of two brothers, Nasser Yousef Husain alias Tutin Usop, 34 and Norjihad Husein alias Datdat Usop, 29.³⁸ The men were said to be involved in several attacks attributed to the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), an MILF splinter that has several factions.³⁹ The warrant cited the men for violation of the Comprehensive Firearms and Ammunition Regulation Act (RA 10591) and police said they were involved in attacks including the 2016 bombing of electrical towers belonging to the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines and a six-hour occupation of the market in Datu Paglas in May 2021. They said when they reached the men’s village around 2 a.m., they were met by gunfire and a firefight then ensued which lasted an hour and a half.⁴⁰ The mayor of Datu Paglas rejected the idea of a clash and pointed to bullet

³⁸ The others killed were Nasrullah Mamay Singkala, 38; Ivan Pumpugay, 18; Izrael Laguib, 42; Morsid Madidis, 50; and Mama Karim, 53.

³⁹ BIFF was formed in 2010 from an MILF splinter group that broke away in 2008 as a protest against the MILF’s concessions in peace negotiations. For background on BIFF, see International Crisis Group, “Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro”, Asia Report No.301, 27 June 2019 and “The Philippines: The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao,” Asia Briefing No.83, 23 October 2008. ³⁹ BIFF’s three major factions are led by Esmael Abdulmalik alias Abu Toraife, Mohiden Animbang alias Karialan and Ismael Abubakar alias Bungos. The lines between the factions are fluid, and they have sometimes cooperated on operations. The Husein brothers were reportedly part of the Karialan faction.

⁴⁰ “7 killed in Datu Paglas raid; mother of 2 victims appeals for justice,” mindanews.com, 18 June 2023.

holes and other damage suggesting that the gunfire was overwhelmingly from the security forces.⁴¹

The mother of the men named in the warrant said the police opened fire first and Nasser Yousef fired back in self-defence. He had a gun, she said, since he was the Brigade Commander of the MILF in the area. She said he was wounded in the exchange of fire, surrendered and was handcuffed. It was only after he was handcuffed and removed from the house that he was killed. The wife of Norjihad Husein claimed that police had restrained her husband with a plastic tie and a metal handcuff around his hands. She said she clung to him until she was forcibly separated, and then he was taken outside and shot. She claimed the police also took cash and jewelry.⁴²

Two other men were killed by a grenade lobbed into a mosque in the Husein family compound. The MILF claimed all seven killed were legitimate MILF members, not BIFF and that they had filed applications for amnesty under the terms of the “normalization” phase of the peace process. Mohagher Iqbal, the chair of the MILF peace panel, said that according to a mechanism known as the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG), any operation against its members suspected of criminal or terrorist activity should have been coordinated with them. The military said it had complied with the terms of AHJAG and informed the MILF of the impending operation.⁴³ The MILF vigorously denied this, saying they had received a letter covering operations from 1 to 15 June, but there was no mention of any operation in Datu Paglas on 18 June. If there had been, a spokesman said, they could have verified whether the targets were “lawless” elements or legitimate MILF members.⁴⁴ A special meeting of the MILF leadership on 20 June called on President Marcos to allow an independent third party to investigate the incident, and a civilian-led fact-finding mission visited the site on 28 June. There are several questions about the Datu Paglas incident that have implications for the upcoming elections and the peace process more generally.

1. How were the targets chosen?

According to the military, Nasser Yousef Husain was No.42 on its wanted list - what used to be called the Order of Battle and is now called the Periodic Status Report (PSR). The search and arrest warrants accused the Husein brothers of illegal possession of firearms, but Mindanao in general and Maguindanao in particular are awash in unregistered guns. It then becomes a political decision, rather than an objective law enforcement matter, as to who becomes the target of an arrest operation. That decision can rest with local political bosses whose influence sometimes extends to individual police officers from the CIDG, as well as other parts of the criminal justice machinery.

⁴¹ “Datu Paglas mayor: “Does it look like an encounter happened here?” mindanews.com, 28 June 2023.

⁴² “Relatives of 7 men killed in Maguindanao del Sur raid decry brutality, seek justice,” Philippine Post, 20 June 2023.

⁴³ Commander of the 6th Infantry Division Maj.Gen. Alex Rillera said the Philippines government Ad Hoc Action Group had been informed on 15 June that an operation was imminent, and the government on the same day conveyed this to its MILF counterpart. “Army official maintains Datu Paglas operation was legitimate,” mindanews.com, 24 June 2023.

⁴⁴ “No coordination on the law enforcement operation at Datu Paglas’: MILF AHJAG Chairman”, bangsamorotoday.com, 25 June 2023.

One explanation offered by a BARMM official was that the initiative for this action came from disgruntled members of the Mangudadatu clan with grievances against BARMM stemming from the 2022 elections. According to this version, the politicians in question, knowing this was an MILF stronghold, were hoping to spark an incident like the January 2015 incident in Mamasapano, also in what is now Maguindanao del Sur, where an operation to arrest a terrorist in an BIFF/MILF area, without informing the MILF leadership, led to the deaths of 17 MILF and over 40 police, some of them killed execution style, and the near-scuttling of the peace agreement. In this case, according to the BARMM source, the aim was to provoke the MILF into a similar overreaction, thereby discrediting the BARMM leadership and its strong ally, Gen. Carlito Galvez, Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity. Unfortunately for the would-be provocateurs, the source said, the MILF in fact did not put up any armed opposition, so the fallout from the raid was quickly contained.

The problem with this version is that the victims were relatives of the locally dominant Paglas clan whose members are political allies of the governor, so it makes little sense for these men to have been targeted. The question of how and why the Husein brothers were chosen above others on the PSR list will be up to the various fact-finding missions to answer. If election violence is to be avoided, however, it is important to find those answers, since even rumours of politically-motivated actions can trigger lethal retaliation.

2. Were the victims MILF or BIFF?

The military claimed the Husain brothers were BIFF and involved in several incidents of violence. The MILF said all seven victims were legitimate members of the MILF, part of the National Guard Front, 11th Brigade, Inner Guard Base Command.⁴⁵ One longtime observer, a Zamboanga resident active in neither the government nor BARMM, said the men could easily have had both identities. Both organisations are dominated by ethnic Maguindanaon, and fighters move in and out of the two groups as local political shifts take place. Support networks in Maguindanao can also serve both, depending on the circumstances. In a way, he said, BIFF was the “exit strategy” for the MILF, especially if they lost control of BARMM and its parliament after the 2025 elections. There is little danger that the MILF as a whole would give up on peace if it lost the elections, but joining a militant organisation from the same ethnic group would be an option for some unhappy fighters – especially those who have received less than their expected peace dividend.

3. Could the use of AHJAG have averted the firefight?

Police have always been worried that their ability to make arrests of “lawless” elements could be compromised if the MILF used AHJAG to alert the targets to imminent action against them. In the past, circa 2005, AHJAG worked as a mechanism for intelligence exchange because the MILF realized it was in its interests to distance itself from terrorists.⁴⁶ In this

⁴⁵ “Padilla seeks Senate probe into killing of BIFF leader, 6 followers, in Maguindanao clash,” *Manila Bulletin*, 26 June 2023.

⁴⁶ See International Crisis Group, “The Philippines: Counter-insurgency vs Counter-terrorism in Mindanao”, Asia Report No.152, 14 May 2008, p.10-11.

case, had the BARMM leadership been informed of the impending arrests, they might well have objected, in part because of the brothers' pending amnesty applications. But they also might have been able to negotiate a peaceful surrender. The storming of Datu Paglas in this fashion served no one's interests: the MILF is angry, the police look trigger-happy, and seven people are dead. Both the police and the MILF should go back and look at how AHJAG worked when the mechanism was first created, when the government presented a list of the people it wanted, and the MILF provided information in return. Then it was a means for the MILF to protect itself from charges that it was harbouring foreign fighters, Abu Sayyaf or the occasional rogue commander. It will clearly be harder to apply when the targets are, or have been, MILF fighters. But the danger of not using AHJAG is greater and could lead to possible conflict escalation when political tensions are already high. The smooth operation of AHJAG is also dependent on a non-politicised police force.

V. TERRORISM AS AN ISSUE IN THE ELECTIONS

The chance that the southern Philippines will degenerate into a new cycle of terrorism if the MILF loses in 2025 is sometimes overstated, including by the MILF itself. The terrorist groups that were active at the height of the 2017 Marawi siege are significantly weaker, in some cases to the point of impotence. The bigger danger is that individual extremist fighters, whether once linked with pro-ISIS groups in Lanao del Sur, central Mindanao, or the island provinces of Sulu and Basilan, will join politicians as guns-for-hire or use violence as a form of extortion. Some BARMM figures have also asserted that their political enemies are goading the police into making false charges of terrorism against legitimate UBJP candidates. All that said, violent extremism has been part of the political landscape in Mindanao for a very long time, and some groups still pose a risk. They include BIFF, the Maute group, IS-Sulu and IS-Basilan and their ad hoc partners.

Most of the focus has been on the BIFF factions, but it is very hard to tell which of their actions are ideologically based. The leaders of two of three factions pledged allegiance to the ISIS leadership: Esmael Abubakar alias Bungos, who took over leadership after the death of the founder, Ameril Umbra Kato; and Esmael Abdulmalik alias Abu Turaife/Turaife/Torayfe. Several attacks, however, have involved collaboration between the Turaife group and the faction led by Mohiden Animbang alias Karialan, who explicitly disassociated himself from ISIS.⁴⁷

A widely circulated article August 2023 claimed that Abu Turaife, who has both religious and military credentials, had been anointed the new head of ISIS for Southeast Asia after the Philippine military killed Abu Zacaria of the pro-ISIS Maute Group in Lanao del Sur in June

⁴⁷ An unconfirmed report published online said that Abu Turaife had surrendered in Datu Piang, Maguindanao on 6 August 2023, but other sources discount the story. See Zam Yusa, "Alleged Islamic State East Asia's Filipino leader surrendered in August," <https://seamilitancy.substack.com/p/is-east-asias-filipino-leader-surrendered>, 10 September 2023.

2023.⁴⁸ But Abu Turaife, a Maguindanaon, is unlikely to carry much weight with ethnic Tausug, let alone non-Filipino extremists from Indonesia or Malaysia, even if he can still mount attacks in central Mindanao. For much of 2021 and 2022 he was said to be seriously ill. He is now said to be recovered, and pro-ISIS media continue to claim responsibility for attacks on a regular basis.

One such attack in Shariff Aguak, Maguindanao del Sur on 14 June 2023 killed two policemen and was said to be in revenge for the killing of Zacaria. ISIS claimed responsibility in the name of the “East Asia Wilayah” on its online news agency, Amaq.⁴⁹ Four other attacks were claimed in August in Ganta and Tuayan, Manguindanao del Sur. One of these was a bomb that killed a barangay captain and injured a village councilor.⁵⁰ The attacks justify the concern of Philippine authorities that terrorism is still a threat, and that threat could increase as elections draw nearer, as ISIS propaganda has long called on its followers to disrupt elections in democratic states.⁵¹ All this adds to the nervousness in Maguindanao.

Remnants of the Maute group continue to operate in Lanao del Sur, although the attempted assassination of the governor in February appears to have been related to drugs, not terrorism. Lanao remains fertile ground for extremist recruitment, however. Not only has the reconstruction of Marawi after the 2017 siege proceeded at a glacial pace, but the ethnic Maranao have been largely marginalised in the BARMM leadership, notwithstanding a few stars.⁵²

And while the military in late July 2023 declared Sulu free of Abu Sayyaf, one of the Philippines’ most wanted extremists, Mundi Sawadjaan of ISIS-Sulu, remained at large with a group of followers. His small band had hosted a few of the dwindling foreign fighters in Mindanao, but in June 2023, two were caught in Basilan, where Mundi had fled.⁵³ Mundi escaped that operation; as of September 2023, it was not clear whether he was still on Basilan or had managed to return to Sulu.

VI. A COMPARISON WITH INDONESIA’S ACEH

In looking at the electoral woes of the MILF as it approaches its first parliamentary elections, it is instructive to examine Aceh’s first election after the 2005 peace process, when the guerrilla movement called the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) stood for elections for the first time. Its party, Partai Aceh, was not yet formed, so its candidates mostly

⁴⁸ Zam Yusa, “A New Filipino Leader for Southeast Asia’s Islamic State,” *the diplomat.com*, 9 August 2023. Abu Zacaria, an ethnic Maranao, was a rather pathetic example of an amir. He had no significant religious training and had only been in the Marawi siege for a week before being assigned elsewhere.

⁴⁹ “Cases vs BIFF suspects in ambush-slaying of Maguindanao cops strong – prosecutors,” *Manila Bulletin*, 9 July 2023.

⁵⁰ “Blast kills barangay captain in Maguindanao Sur”, *Mindanews*, 16 August 2023.

⁵¹ “Islamic State electoral disruption,” *S&P Market Intelligence*, 8 May 2018.

⁵² One of these is Marjanie Macasalong. See footnote 8.

⁵³ One of the two was 15-year-old Indonesian Ahmad Rullie, son of the Indonesian couple who killed themselves in the suicide bombing of Jolo cathedral in January 2019. As of September 2023, he remained in military custody in Basilan and was expected to be deported in October 2023. His younger sister Aisyah was expected to be deported first, while his older sister Cici remained in Sulu Provincial Jail, awaiting trial on terrorism charges.

ran as independents. Any comparison is imperfect because Mindanao and Aceh are so different, but Aceh's relative success was seen as a model for Mindanao, both by donors hoping that some positive lessons could be transferred and by many within the MILF itself. In Aceh, before the 11 December 2006 election, the conventional wisdom was that GAM would not do well, because the old national parties had established structures and lots of money. Instead, GAM, which like the MILF had no experience campaigning or governing, captured almost all posts it contested by huge margins.⁵⁴ Could the MILF do better than expected? As of August, it seemed unlikely for several reasons.

Timing

Aceh held its first direct local elections less than a year and a half after the peace agreement and two years after the devastating tsunami that killed more than 160,000 people. The guerrillas were down from the hills, but they were not governing and had been given no chance to show whether they could. Under-performance was therefore not an issue. By 2025 when the BARMM elections take place, the MILF will have governed for six years, with many complaining already of failure to deliver and corruption.

The 2006 elections were also Aceh's first after the peace agreement. There was real excitement, and the reaction to the results was euphoric. By 2025, BARMM residents will already have participated in a plebiscite on joining BARMM; one round of barangay elections in 2018; the May 2022 general elections; and the October 2023 barangay elections. The novelty of voting for MILF candidates has long worn off – and many of the UBJP candidates in any case have been old politicians with new labels. There is no euphoria left.

Get-out-the-vote machinery

In 2006, GAM, and particularly the GAM armed wing, was the only organisation with a strong presence in rural Aceh. National parties never had structures there; it was too dangerous. GAM therefore had no competition in areas that could constitute large vote banks. In BARMM, the traditional clans have their patronage networks down to the sub-village level. Outside their own camps, the MILF cannot compete, except where its commanders double as clan leaders. But even in clans with strong MILF representation, many leaders saw BARMM as a threat to the established power structure and chose to run against the UBJP in 2022.⁵⁵ This situation produced many provinces and municipalities within BARMM where members of the same clan ran against each other, one representing the old power structure and one representing UBJP – and the old power structure usually won.

⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, "Indonesia: How GAM Won in Aceh," Asia Briefing No.61, 22 March 2007.

⁵⁵ Some of the complexities are illustrated by the story of Tucao Mastura, a member of the Mastura clan of central Mindanao and former mayor of Sultan Kudarat town in Maguindanao. Tucao was a member of the BTA when he ran for mayor in 2022. He had been nominated to the BTA by the MILF to which his family had long-standing ties (Michael Mastura, an historian and for many years an MILF negotiator in the peace process, is his older brother). In the 2022 election, however, he supported the incumbent, Mariam Sangki-Mangudadato, against the UBJP candidate, Toto Mangudadatu, who had served as governor from 2010 to 2019 and wanted his old job back. The MILF chose to see Tucao's support for Mariam as a betrayal and thus fielded their own candidate – the nephew of Murad described in footnote 3. Tucao, as part of Mariam's machine, won with 64.5 per cent of the vote.

Message

GAM had a powerful message: it's either us or a return to conflict. They portrayed their opponents as responsible for GAM's suffering and themselves as the bringers of peace. At the time, many Acehnese believed that a return to war with the government was a real possibility, especially when the peace was so new, and they voted for GAM in droves. In Aceh, there was only one real conflict, GAM vs the state. In Mindanao, there are multiple conflicts, many of them at a local level, that the peace process has not solved. The UBJP cannot promise that a vote for the party will prevent conflict or provide security. What then is a credible, compelling message for the party? It is less and less clear how a BARMM government will be able to rise above traditional clan politics, or at the local level, how a UBJP governor or mayor will be any different than his or her predecessors – maybe just less experienced.

Decommissioning

In Aceh, the process of decommissioning GAM fighters was completed by late 2005, before the first elections took place. In the Philippines, it is still ongoing four years into the transition process, although it was significantly hampered by Covid restrictions.⁵⁶

Any decommissioning process necessarily involves a certain suspension of disbelief: guerrilla organisations never turn over all their arms and tend to downplay their numbers before or during peace negotiations and inflate them afterwards, when reintegration or post-conflict economic packages become available. But the process provides a point of agreement and confidence, from which both parties can move forward.

The Aceh agreement provided for the disarming of 3,000 fighters and the turning in of 840 weapons. Many suspected the numbers were too low but both sides agreed to these totals for the sake of peace, as well as to the numbers of military and police who would remain in Aceh. The MILF was far bigger and more complex; the 2014 peace agreement planned for the decommissioning of 40,000 fighters and turning in of 7,200 weapons. It was originally planned that the process would be completed, as in Aceh, before the BARMM local elections, initially scheduled for 2022. Covid got in the way as did a host of other factors, but in late July 2023, presidential peace adviser Gen. Galvez announced that the final phase had begun, and the last 1,301 fighters would be decommissioned before 2025.⁵⁷

The Aceh agreement specified that the guns turned in had to be “organic”, i.e. factory-made – no junk weapons allowed. In BARMM, not only have most of the guns turned in been of poor quality, including many homemade ones, but the agreement differentiated between guns

⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, “Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro,” Report No.313, 15 April 2021.

⁵⁷ In early September, the Turkish head of the Independent Decommissioning Body said the process was 65 per cent complete and would be finished by 2025. Anadolu Ajansi, 8 September 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/decommissioning-of-combatants-in-southern-philippines-to-be-completed-by-2025-idb/2986347>.

owned by the MILF as an organisation and those owned privately by MILF members. Fighters could keep the latter.

In Aceh, the decommissioning process was helped by the fact that GAM was the only non-state armed group, not counting army-backed militias that operated at the height of martial law but that were more or less under state control. The BARMM process is complicated by the fact that even after the MILF decommissioning is complete, the MNLF, the ASG and a host of private armed groups will still ensure that guns and violence continue to plague the region.

Nationalism and Identity Politics

Partai Aceh successfully played on Acehnese nationalism during the 2006 campaign. The winning candidates dressed in traditional Acehnese dress and addressed crowds in the Acehnese language. GAM was far more homogeneous ethnically than the MILF ever was, and it could play up the heroes of Acehnese history and the glories of the Acehnese past. One of the MILF's biggest challenges in BARMM has been to forge a regional identity that goes beyond ethnicity – it has had to embrace not just Maguindanaon, Maranao and Tausug but various non-Muslim indigenous groups as well. Islam was an obvious identity marker, but it was not exclusive to the MILF in the way Acehnese identity and GAM were intertwined. The MNLF, BIFF, the ASG and a host of smaller groups relied on their Islamic identity as well. In terms of using identity politics to appeal to an electorate – a dangerous but sometimes effective strategy - GAM started out on a stronger footing than the MILF and the UBJP did. Taking all these factors into consideration, there is little chance that the MILF will be able to replicate GAM's success.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The MILF has not been able to translate its negotiating success into political strength. It seems to have accepted that its only hope if it wants to retain power in 2025 is to pick and choose allies among clan leaders and traditional politicians. The dream that BARMM could build a meritocracy, break the old clan stranglehold, and use new revenues to achieve never-before-reached levels of prosperity, has largely vanished.

In fact, more has been accomplished than meets the eye. Even if its candidates lose in 2025, there is little likelihood that the MILF would return to insurgency. Too much has been invested in peace, even if the peace has not come in the ideal form envisaged by negotiators. BARMM will survive. The MILF will have to work harder at strengthening its party and demonstrating that it can govern competently and cleanly in the areas it controls.

The sources of conflict within BARMM need to be addressed. One is to ensure that the link between police and local politicians is broken. It is easier said than done – patronage of the police is a long-entrenched aspect of clan culture. Just as MILF members can slide in and out of BIFF, police can slide in and out of private armed groups. Any chance of breaking that link would have to start with depoliticizing the PNP and getting a committed reformer at the top. It would also need a detailed study of how the CIDG works at a local level. It could involve a new incentive system or having a regular system of rotation to ensure that no officer stays too long within the sphere of influence of a political boss. Without major reforms of the police, however, the other mechanisms on which the peace process relies, like AHJAG, are not going to work.

The Marcos government needs to speed up the amnesty process and extend the application period, so that another Datu Paglas incident is avoided. It would be important to ensure that both the government and MILF AHJAG committees are immediately apprised of amnesties granted. In Aceh, the original amnesty was originally for specifically political crimes such as rebellion, but there was gradually a recognition that many ordinary crimes, including murder, were committed as part of the political struggle. Eventually, almost the only crimes not eligible were rape and terrorism, and there was even some flexibility on the latter. Once the current batch of applicants is assessed, the National Amnesty Commission might want to work with the MILF to expand the scope of crimes covered.

The Philippines has made little headway in dealing with private armed groups (PAGs) in BARMM. One way to start would be to address the crossover into PAGs from the official civilian auxiliary of the armed forces known as Citizen Armed Force Geographic Unit (CAFGU); extremist groups; and the insurgencies. The government in particular should come up with a better plan than it has now for collecting unregistered firearms. Many sources on this trip referred to the surrender and reintegration programs for former terrorists or insurgents as an economic venture, where the surrenderees turn in a junk firearm, get an economic package, and use the funds to buy a better gun. “Peace is a business,” said one source. It might be best to start in a small geographic area and experiment with different approaches. Given the

goodwill established by the military's 11th division in Sulu, it might be possible to start there with ideas for how to approach the MNLF about its remaining guns.

The government has imposed a gun ban for the barangay election period but under the circumstances, it might be useful to impose a moratorium on serving arrest warrants as well, while still encouraging surrenders.

BARMM is not going to turn into a model of democratic autonomy overnight, but it is less conflict-wracked than it has been in the recent past. There are serious signs of trouble on the horizon, however. All levels of government need to ensure that there is no backsliding between now and the 2025 elections.

INSTITUTE FOR POLICY ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT (IPAC)

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In areas wracked by violence, accurate analysis of conflict is essential not only to peaceful settlement but also to formulating effective policies on everything from good governance to poverty alleviation. We look at six kinds of conflict: communal, land and resource, electoral, vigilante, extremist, and insurgent, understanding that one dispute can take several forms or progress from one form to another. We send experienced analysts with long-established contacts in the area to the site to meet with all parties, review primary written documentation where available, check secondary sources and produce in-depth reports, with policy recommendations or examples of best practices where appropriate.

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