

**PHILIPPINES: POLITICAL JOCKEYING AND
VIOLENCE BEFORE THE 2025 ELECTIONS IN BARMM**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The first-ever parliamentary elections in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), scheduled for May 2025, could have a major impact on the ongoing peace process, the risk of violence, and the degree to which unity can be maintained between the Mindanao mainland and the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Much hinges on whether the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the government's partner in forging a comprehensive peace agreement in 2014, will hold on to control of the regional government or lose to a coalition of traditional politicians. The prospect of an MILF loss could increase the risk of violence; the prospect of a victory could increase disgruntlement in the islands where the MILF leadership is seen as favouring those of Maguindanaon ethnicity. A few preventive measures could help ensure a smoother path to a fully elected Bangsamoro government.

The elections will create a regional elected parliament, based on proportional representation, within a national presidential system. Originally scheduled for 2022, they were postponed once, and they are unlikely to be delayed again, even if there is no shortage of factors that some players would like to use as an excuse for another postponement. The failure to complete the fourth and final phase of decommissioning MILF combatants is one. A petition to the Supreme Court, arguing the unconstitutionality of the BARMM electoral code under which the elections will be held, is another. But neither these nor other factors are likely to shake the determination of major parties, including President Marcos, to push forward and finally end a transition government that has been in place since 2019.

A huge amount of money and power is at stake, and the lead-up to the elections, if not carefully managed, has the potential for serious violence, as politicians representing different parties, clans, and power blocs, use fair means and foul to maximise their chances of winning. A rift in the top leadership of the MILF adds to the tensions. The last round of elections, in October 2023, for village executives and council members saw an uptick in political assassinations, particularly in central Mindanao where about a dozen killings took place. That poll was widely seen as a dress rehearsal for 2025, since village heads will be critical to the get-out-the-vote machines of parliamentary candidates. Candidates wishing to intimidate or eliminate rivals will have a large pool of guns-for-hire to draw on, including everyone from decommissioned fighters with grievances to out-of-work violent extremists to police moonlighting as the security detail for politicians.

Between now and May 2025, the task of all stakeholders should be to try and minimise this risk. The MILF should move forward quickly with the last round of decommissioning. It should also try to reconcile the divisions in its own ranks. The national government should extend and expand the amnesty program. The mainland candidates should ensure that their parties heed islander concerns. The police should avoid serving warrants of arrest on former MILF, MNLF or Abu Sayyaf members without first consulting or negotiating with relevant officials in those organisations or politicians who may be protecting them. Security measures to protect candidates, poll-watchers and other election officials should be put in

place from the beginning of the campaign. And a task force should be put in place to monitor and address threats conveyed over social media. There is little chance that violence will be eliminated, but it can be reduced.

The peace process itself does not hang in the balance with these elections, but the quality of the peace does. Like many former insurgents turned politicians, the MILF has not shown itself to best advantage as administrators, and the combination of a sense of entitlement with the need to ensure the well-being of thousands of former combatants and supporters has been a deterrent to good governance. The alternative, an alliance of traditional clans, would be a return to patronage politics based on primordial ties, with the added danger of many unhappy ex-fighters denied access to spoils. The best option is probably an inclusive coalition that can pursue a minimum reform agenda, including curbing corruption and completing the unfinished business of the peace agreement, without so antagonising its rivals that it sets off a new round of problems.

This report is based on field research in Zamboanga, Basilan and Cotabato in February 2024.

II. ELECTION MECHANICS AND STAKES

Eighty seats in the BARMM parliament will be contested in May 2025, when nationwide elections for legislative and local executive seats will also be held. The parliament will replace the appointed Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) in which the MILF holds a slight majority.

According to the Bangsamoro Electoral Code, 40 seats in the new parliament will go to regional party representatives and 32 to representatives of single-member districts, with an additional 10 per cent of the seats reserved for sectoral representatives (women, youth traditional leaders and ulama), non-Moro indigenous peoples, and Christian settlers. The elected representatives will then elect a Chief Minister.

As of late March 2024, eight regional parties had registered with the Bangsamoro Registration and Accreditation Committee, subject to approval from the national Commission on Elections (COMELEC).¹ Under the Bangsamoro Electoral Code, each party must have at least 10,000 members and offices in every province and city of BARMM, as well as in a majority of the municipalities making up a province.² This requirement was designed to encourage parties to transcend traditional fiefdoms, but most of the registered parties still reflect the ethnicity and territorial base of their founders. Parties must submit

¹ The eight parties were United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) led by the MILF; Bangsamoro People's Party (BPP, led by Amir Mawallil but associated with Mujiv Hataman); Bangsamoro Party (BaPa, led by Sema faction of MNLF); Rayyat Development Party (RDP, led by Atty. Jose Lorena); Al-Ittihad Mindanawe Darussalam-Ungkaya Ku Kawagibu Bangsamoro (Ittihad UBK, led by Teng Mangudadatu); SIAP, led by Mamintal Adiong Jr; Mahardika, led by Nur Misuari faction of MNLF; and Indigenous Peoples Democratic Party (IPDP, led by Froilyn Mendoza). Several other parties were in the process of formation, including Party Ako Moro, composed of young professionals and civil society leaders.

² For the text of the electoral code, see <https://officialgazette.bangsamoro.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BAA-35-ao-04282023-1155AM.pdf>.

their lists of candidates by October 2024, with at least 30 per cent of the nominees being women. On election day, they must receive 4 per cent of the valid votes to get a seat, one of several provisions that has been challenged in the Supreme Court as unconstitutional on the grounds that it sets too high a threshold.³

As of 28 February 2024, BARMM had been divided into 32 election districts, with three in Basilan, three in Tawi-Tawi, seven in Sulu, four in Maguindanao del Norte, four in Maguindanao del Sur, eight in Lanao del Sur, two in Cotabato and one in the “Special Geographic Area” carved out of North Cotabato province.⁴ The SGA consists of 63 barangays that had opted to join BARMM in the 2019 plebiscite when the rest of the province voted against it. In August 2023, the 63 were merged into eight municipalities, and, when the combined population reaches the required level under the Bangsamoro Local Governance Code, these eight will eventually constitute a new province.⁵

The economic stakes are high. BARMM, with a population of 4.4 million, receives an annual block grant of PHP 70.5 billion (about USD 1.25 billion); a Special Development Fund of PHP 5 billion (about USD 88 million) and income from taxes and fees. Its budget for 2023 was PHP 85.3 billion (about USD 1.52 billion), climbing to PHP 98.5 billion in 2024.⁶ Whoever becomes Chief Minister will control enormous resources, with an equally enormous scope for patronage.

III. THE POWER BLOCS

With fourteen months to the election, BARMM’s fate rests with six blocs, all of which are trying to expand their mass base:

- The MILF leadership, headed by Ahod Balawag Ebrahim, better known as El-Haj Murad, Chief Minister of the BARMM transition government, and Mohagher Iqbal, affectionately known as “IQ”, Minister of Education. Murad and Iqbal head the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP), the MILF political party.
- Abdulraof Macacua, better known as Sammy Gambar, head of the MILF’s armed wing (Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, BIAF) and concurrently acting governor of Maguindanao del Norte. The other key figure in this bloc is Naguib Sinarimbo, former BARMM Minister of Interior and Local Government and the UBJP’s top electoral strategist, removed by Murad in December 2023.⁷ Their base is in Maguindanao and

³ “Group challenges legality of new Bangsamoro election code before SC”, *rappler.com*. 16 June 2023.

⁴ “BARMM Parliament approves bill establishing 32 single-member districts”, BTA parliament, 3 March 2024, <https://pia.gov.ph/press-releases/2024/03/03/barmm-parliament-approves-bill-establishing-32-single-member-parliamentary-districts>

⁵ The new municipalities are Pahamuddin, Kadayangan, Nabalawag, Old Kaabakan, Kapalawan, Malidegao, Tugunan, and Ligawasan. See Bangsamoro Transition Authority, ‘BARMM approves bills creating eight new municipalities in the Special Geographic Area,’ 17 August 2023.

⁶ TPMT Eighth Public Report, October 2023, p.28. <https://tpmt.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/TPMT-8th-Public-Report-Final.pdf>.

⁷ Murad had asked for courtesy letters of resignation from 15 ministers “to give a free hand to the Chief Minister to reorganize his cabinet and improve their service delivery.” All were reappointed except Sinarimbo. See “BARMM Interior Minister Naguib Sinarimbo steps down,” *rappler.com*, 7 December 2023.

the Cotabato area. Macacua, who was appointed acting governor by President Marcos in April 2023, has close ties with Manila.

- The power couple of Suharto “Teng” Mangudadatu, a quintessential traditional politician or *trapos*, and his wife, Bae Mariam-Sangki Mangudadatu, currently governor of Maguindanao del Sur and openly opposed to the MILF leadership. A former governor of Sultan Kudarat province, following in the footsteps of his father, Teng also heads the regional party al-Ittihad and by many accounts has ambitions to become Chief Minister of BARMM, replacing Murad.⁸
- Abdusakur “Sakur” Tan, governor of Sulu province, who wields absolute economic and political power in the province. He is widely credited with having reduced violence in Sulu, partly by working closely with the army to weaken the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and partly by ensuring, since 2022, that most elections have been uncontested.⁹ Many people believe that he too has ambitions to become Chief Minister, though he denies it. He was and remains an opponent of BARMM and believes the island provinces, which are largely ethnic Tausug and Yakan, have received a raw deal at the hands of the BARMM government. That said, he is open to alliances when it suits his interests.
- Mamintal “Bombit” Adiong Jr, current governor of Lanao del Sur, the capital of which is Marawi, site of the 2017 occupation by pro-ISIS militants. He is another traditional politician, clan leader, and head of a Lanao-based party, Serbisyong Inklusibo-Alyansang Progressibo (SIAP). He is also a business partner of Gov. Tan. Lanao del Sur has become one of the region’s most violent areas, and Gov. Adiong was the target of an assassination attempt in February 2023.
- Mujiv Hataman, congressman from Basilan and last governor of ARMM (the regional government that preceded BARMM). He is a founder and senior figure in the Bangsamoro People’s Party (BPP), a party that is trying to project a progressive image and attract young, educated professionals. Many of BPP’s top officers served in the ARMM government under Mujiv. The party does not have the numbers to win on its own, but it could be a useful ally for one of the blocs. Mujiv is the estranged half-brother of the current governor of Basilan, Hadjiman Hataman Salliman, better known as “Jim” Hataman. In the game of musical chairs that is Mindanao politics, Mujiv in 2025 will likely run for governor of Basilan against Jim’s eldest son while Jim will stand for vice-governor.

While the UBJP appears to be confident of winning, the rift at the top will weaken it. It performed poorly in the 2022 general elections and proved to be no match for traditional clans like the Sinsuats and Mangudadatus. It also fielded candidates in the October 2023 barangay elections, even though those polls were supposed to be non-partisan. Most lost badly to the incumbents.¹⁰

⁸ Teng Mangudadatu currently serves as head of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA).

⁹ For background on Sakur Tan and his alliances, see IPAC, “Violence in the Southern Philippines in the Lead-Up to Local Elections”, Report No.88, 14 September 2023.

¹⁰ The 2023 barangay elections in Cotabato and the SGA became a particular ground of contestation between the two MILF factions. Iqbal wanted to field UBJP candidates against the incumbents. But both areas, through the incumbents, had delivered victories for the MILF in the 2019 plebiscite and the 2022 elections. The Macacua faction believed that rather than being challenged by newcomers, they should be rewarded for their help by backing them for another term, which would only

In late 2023, a possible alliance of the UBJP (including Macacua) with Gov. Tan, Gov. Adiong, and the governors of Tawi-Tawi and Basilan, was under discussion. The governors would ensure a vote for the UBJP for the party seats, with the district seats left to their local parties. With Tan and Adiong on board, a UBJP sweep of the 40 party seats thus would be guaranteed. But because Sinarimbo was one of the architects of the proposed deal, his ouster may have killed it.

Gov. Adiong could be the biggest prize in the pre-election manoeuvring, because he could tip the balance, either allying with the UBJP for an MILF victory (if not a sweep), or with Sakur Tan and the Mangudadatus to ensure an MILF defeat.

IV. THE ISSUES: GERRYMANDERING, POLITICAL DYNASTIES, AND SECURITY ASPECTS OF “NORMALISATION”

Several issues are raising tensions as the elections draw closer. They include efforts to divide existing provinces and municipalities; the inclusion in the Bangsamoro Electoral Code and Local Governance Code of a ban on political dynasties and the determination of traditional politicians to reject it; and the many problems of “normalisation”, the process by which former combatants would be decommissioned.

A. Gerrymandering

Since BARMM was established in 2019, the MILF leadership has embarked on a strategy of carving up existing administrative units to create new municipalities and provinces. The reason, its promoters claim, is to bring government closer to the people and improve the delivery of social services – the same rationale as was offered in Indonesia after Soeharto stepped down, when, in a process known as *pemekaran*, the number of provinces rose from 27 in 1999 to 38 in 2024 and the number of second-level districts and cities (*kabupaten* and *kota*) from 314 to 514. In both places, however, the real goal has been to ensure control over resources, spoils and votes.

Thus far, the most significant division has been the 2022 splitting of Maguindanao province into Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte. An MILF goal from the establishment of BARMM was to break up the dynastic control of the *trapos* by getting UBJP loyalists into power. After all, though *trapos*, in the form of the Sinsuat, Mastura, Mangudadatu and Ampatuan clans, controlled Maguindanao politically, it was also the MILF’s stronghold and home to its major camps. The MILF’s party, the UBJP, might thus have been expected to do well on its home turf in the May 2022 elections, its first major electoral competition. Instead, Mariam Mangudadatu, wife of Teng, won the governorship with 60.38 per cent of the vote to the 38.59 per cent for the UBJP candidate, another

make them more loyal in 2025. Failure to back the new slate was one of the grievances against Sinarimbo that led to his dismissal.

prominent Mangudadatu.¹¹ The UBJP candidates for vice-governor and Maguindanao's two Congressional seats also lost.

One way to break the stranglehold of the clans on power was to divide the province. The effort had started before the 2022 elections but was finalised five months later with the creation of Maguindanao del Sur and del Norte. The division had near-unanimous support from residents, as recorded in a plebiscite in October 2022, but this might have been because the *trapos* believed they could control the outcome.¹² Instead, the newly elected President Marcos appointed Abdulraof Macacua, the BIAF leader, as acting governor of Maguindanao del Norte. This put Macacua in a position to influence the 2025 vote in an MILF stronghold. It also led to allegations that Macacua was cultivating closer ties to President Marcos and his peace adviser, Carlito Galvez, while considering running for the BARMM parliament, instead of for governor, in 2025. This would allow him, if elected, to make a bid for Chief Minister.¹³

In December 2023, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority approved the creation of three new municipalities in the new province, two carved from the town of Datu Odin Sinsuat, whose mayor, Lester Sinsuat, is a leading voice for the *trapos*. It was his wife, Aimee, who was displaced by Macacua for the governorship of the province. The third town was carved from the town of Sultan Kudarat, where the Mastura clan has long held sway.¹⁴ Since the BARMM chief minister has the authority to appoint the mayor, vice-mayor, and eight members of the municipal council for each of the new towns, the MILF's political interests were clear.

As one journalist wrote:

The split of Datu Odin Sinsuat and Sultan Kudarat is seen to provide new space for former Moro revolutionaries entering electoral politics as a result of the 1996 and 2014 peace deals. [...] These developments increase the chances of the UBJP expanding its political power base in the run-up to the 2025 elections.¹⁵

The quick BTA approval in August 2023 of a bill to turn the 63 barangays from North Cotabato into eight municipalities was also almost certainly election-linked – especially as they were created before the BARMM Local Governance Code was adopted and therefore

¹¹ This was Esmael (“Toto”) Mangudadatu. It was his family and supporters who were the targets of the infamous “Maguindanao massacre” in 2009 in which the rival Ampatuan clan killed 58 people as they were on their way to file a certificate of candidacy for Toto in his bid to become Maguindanao governor.

¹² Mariam Mangudadatu would continue as governor of the rump province, Maguindanao del Sur, while her vice-governor, Ainee Sinsuat, by law should have become acting governor of Maguindanao del Norte until elections could be held. Both were from *trapos* families and opposed to BARMM. For a fuller explanation of the division, see IPAC, “Violence in the Southern Philippines in the Lead-Up to Local Elections”, Report No.88, 14 September 2023.

¹³ IPAC e-mail communication with member of BARMM Transition Authority, 26 March 2024.

¹⁴ The town of Sultan Kudarat should not be confused with the province of the same time. The new municipalities resulting from the division were Nuling; Datu Sinsuat Balabaran, named after a leading Muslim politician of the colonial and early independence eras; and Sheik Abas Hamza, named after the grandfather of Mohagher Iqbal, whose original name was Dacutan Abas. The creation of Sheik Abas Hamza led one observer to refer to Iqbal as head of the Abbasid Dynasty (a reference to one of the great Muslim dynasties that ruled from Baghdad between the 8th and 13th centuries).

¹⁵ “BARMM parliament OKs split of 2 Maguindanao del Norte towns,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 22 December 2023.

did not have to meet its population requirements.¹⁶ This is also one area where the level of violence is expected to be high.

B. Political Dynasties

Both BARMM’s Electoral Code and Local Governance Code, passed in March and September 2023 respectively, have provisions against political dynasties that if enforced, would uproot a key component of *trapos* power. It is common in Mindanao, and elsewhere in the Philippines, for a spouse, son or daughter to succeed a local executive when term limits have been reached, with the original officeholder then stepping into the deputy position, only to return to his or her original position as soon as it is legally possible to do so.

The electoral code simply states: “Nominees submitted by a political party shall not be related to each other within the second degree of consanguinity and affinity. Violation of this provision shall disqualify one of the nominees in a manner to be determined by the party.”

Section 45 of the Local Governance Code is more detailed:

The following persons are disqualified from running for any elective local position: *[followed by six categories involving convicted criminals, fugitives, those with dual citizenship, and permanent residents of a foreign country and]*

g) Those who are related within the second civil degree of consanguinity or affinity, whether full or half-blood, legitimate or illegitimate, to any incumbent local official running for an elective position, including the spouses, are disqualified to be candidates in the same election for: (i) any provincial elective position in the same province; (ii) any city elective position in the same city; (iii) any municipal elective position in the same municipality; and (iv) any barangay elective position in the same barangay.

The ban would only apply in 2028, so would have no impact on the 2025 poll, but in the unlikely event it was ever implemented, it would revolutionise Mindanao politics. It would mean, for example, that the practice in Sulu of Gov. Tan exchanging positions with his son, now vice-governor, when his term limits are up would no longer be possible, nor would Mujiv Hataman in Basilan be able to run for governor in Basilan if his brother was running for vice-governor. Most of those who voted against the code did so on the grounds that the anti-dynasty provisions violated the constitutional guarantee of “equal access to opportunities for public service”.¹⁷ (In 2015, Indonesia’s Constitutional Court rejected a similar ban for the same reason, that it violated the right of all citizens to stand for election.)

¹⁶ The municipalities were created under an ARMM law that requires a minimum population of 10,000, as opposed to the local governance code which sets the minimum at 25,000. See TMPT Eighth Public Report, October 2023, p.25. <https://tpmt.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/TPMT-8th-Public-Report-Final.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid. The phrase is contained in Article II, Section 26 of the 1987 Constitution. The same article says the State shall prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law”, but no law was ever passed, as most legislators in the Philippine Congress owe their positions to these dynasties. A proposal to the 17th Congress (2016-19) to include a ban on dynasties in proposed

The *trapos* see dynasties as a guarantee of stability, continuity, and good service and are proud of their long history.¹⁸ In February, three of the power brokers aligned in the Bangsamoro Governors Caucus, all of them associated with political clans – Tan of Sulu, Adiong of Lanao del Sur and Mariam Mangudadatu of Maguindanao del Sur – filed a petition to the Supreme Court challenging the constitutionality of the Local Government Code on a range of counts, including the political dynasties provision. Not surprisingly, they particularly objected to the broad powers outlined in the code that the BARMM government and the Chief can exercise over local government units. On the dynasties issue, they argued that only the national Congress could define and ban them – which it clearly has no interest in doing.¹⁹

In fact, the MILF leadership has already ceded ground to the *trapos*, as it knows that the UBJP cannot win on its own. As noted above, it will have to ally with either Adiong or Tan or both to hold on to the chief ministership. Any alliance of the UBJP with Teng and Mariam Mangudadatu is probably out of the question, given the depth of mutual hostility. Likewise, it will be impossible for a self-styled progressive party like Mujiv Hataman's BPP to win without an alliance with parties representing everything that the BPP claims to be against: dynasties, corruption, and private armed groups.

C. Security Aspects of “Normalisation”

Another contentious issue has been the slow pace of the security track of the “normalisation” process.²⁰ This track includes decommissioning fighters, policing, and disbandment of private armed groups. The government has been operating on the assumption that the decommissioning of MILF fighters would be completed before the 2025 elections, and some local politicians believe the election should be delayed if it is not, on the grounds that armed fighters could be a security risk. Even if the decommissioning process is completed, however, many arms will remain in circulation so the security risk will be present regardless.

Many factors have been cited to explain the slow pace, including the difficulty of resolving definitional questions, such as what constitutes a combatant or a private armed group. Another factor has been the MILF's realisation, as many other insurgencies have realised before, that continued possession of arms is an important bargaining chip and to give it up prematurely is to weaken the ability to force the government to live up to its commitments. The most important, however, may be the increasing disincentives of former combatants to sign up for decommissioning, as will be discussed further below.

constitutional amendments was rejected as “anti-democratic.” See “Political dynasty prevails because ‘people clamor for it’: PRRD”, Philippine News Agency, 13 April 2022.

¹⁸ As one member of the Sinsuat clan wrote in 1949, “Sinsuat is a family dynasty that conjures in the trained mind a nobility, a well-guarded family tradition encased in honor and fame, imbedded in illustrious and amazing achievements, silked in the tender and luminous carpet of distinction and treasured by the glorious and exemplary exhilarating breeze and potency of fame and honor. And the history of this family name is as old as the history of Mindanao itself.” The quotation appears in “A Man of Royalty,” from a memorial volume published shortly after the death of Datu Odin Sinsuat in 1949, quoted in Thomas McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels*, Oakland, 1998, p.101.

¹⁹ “Constitutionality of Bangsamoro Local Government Code challenged at SC”, mindanews.com, 1 March 2024.

²⁰ The normalisation process is outlined in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), the key building block of the peace process.

By 3 August 2023, three phases of decommissioning had been completed, with 26,132 MILF combatants decommissioned and 4,625 arms turned in, most of them, in the words of one army commander, “junk”: homemade, damaged, or otherwise unusable.²¹ But even as the fourth and final phase seemed to be stalled, many parties were unhappy with of the first three.

- The government was concerned that not all those decommissioned had been active members of the MILF armed wing (Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, BIAF).²²
- Some senators thought the number of weapons recovered was too small for the number of fighters decommissioned, especially given the size of the budget allocated for the purpose.²³
- Some of the “decoms”, as the decommissioned fighters are called, were also unhappy that the socioeconomic packages they received were less than what they were promised, weakening the incentive for others to follow suit. In an area where guns are both a sign of status and seen as an essential for personal security, “decoms” are reportedly not highly regarded by their peers – which is another disincentive.

As one former BARMM official put it:

Decommissioning could have been a good menu for peace if they had been serious about getting the guns, but now it’s like the warning on a cigarette packet that the contents could be dangerous to your health. Everyone knows it, but they all still smoke. Likewise, they know guns are dangerous to the peace, but everyone has one.

One reason for the relatively low number of guns turned in is the result of a huge loophole in the agreement on decommissioning, that only weapons owned by the MILF as an organisation should be turned in. Fighters could keep weapons they owned personally or had borrowed from other sources. Also, there was never any decommissioning program for the MNLF, so many of the thousands of MNLF members still living in camps in Sulu have retained their arms.

As one expert on conflict in the Philippines noted, however, even if all firearms belonging to the MILF were turned in, “there is not going to be any impact at all,” as long as a government regulation allows a single individual to own 15 semi-automatic weapons.²⁴

Integration of MILF and MNLF combatants into the Philippine National Police (PNP), envisioned as key to the creation of a Bangsamoro police force, has also taken place at such a glacial pace that a whole new set of grievances has been created. Under the terms of the Bangsamoro Organic Law that brought BARMM into being, policing in the region remained under PNP control but regulations on height, age and education were waived to allow more ex-combatants to compete for slots. After recruitment was delayed for two

²¹ IPAC interview with AFP colonel, BARMM, 21 February 2024.

²² TPMT Eighth Public Report, p.33. See also International Crisis Group, “Southern Philippines: Making Peace Stick in the Bangsamoro,” Asia Report No.331, 1 May 2023, p.8.

²³ “Galvez rebuffs Raffy Tulfo’s corruption claims in MILF decommissioning process,” GMA Integrated News, 6 February 2024.

²⁴ Francisco “Pancho” Lara, quoted in “Decommissioning of MILF Weapons No Guarantee for Peace in Southern Philippines, NGO Says,” benarnews.com, 4 September 2019.

years because of COVID, it was thought that there would be over 5,000 places that could be filled by former combatants. But after a “National Special Qualifying Eligibility” exam was held for MILF and MNLF members in 2022 and 7,145 men and women passed, it turned out there were only 400 slots available – and the waiver on requirements expired in January 2024.

As the Third Party Monitoring Team noted, “Not significantly raising the quota [for ex-combatants integrated into the police] will likely result in considerable frustration among those who have successfully passed the NSQE exam and may not be offered a position.”²⁵ Some of these disgruntled “decoms” could find an outlet in joining one of the militant MILF splinters like Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), some factions of which have continued to take an anti-government, anti-MILF or pro-ISIS stance.²⁶

Finally, the normalisation process was supposed to encompass the dissolution of private armed groups (PAG) in BARMM. The government defines a PAG as “an organized group of two or more persons with legally issued or illegally possessed firearms that could be utilized to sow fear and intimidation for the advancement of and protection of vested political or economic interest of a particular politician or people.”²⁷ A National Task Force for the Disbandment of Private Armed Groups was set up in 2015 and activated in 2020, but they do not seem to have conducted any inventory of these groups, nor is it clear how many of the 18 groups they claim to have dismantled were actually operating in BARMM territory, were active at the time of disbanding, or stayed out of action once the alleged disbanding took place. It is also not clear that the definition of PAG includes private security forces composed of active-duty police, military, or authorized civilian militias (Citizen’s Armed Forces – Geographic Unit, CAFGU) whose primary loyalty is to whoever pays them the most, rather than to their home institution.

Whatever the definition of armed group, the important point is that the failure to address disbandment effectively means that as the election approaches, there are many men outside the MILF and MNLF who may be available for hire to “neutralise” rival candidates in the 2025 elections.

²⁵ TPMT, Eighth Public Report, op.cit., p.36. How the Philippines manages the fallout from this disgruntlement will be of interest to other governments in the region where major increases of local recruitment are planned into the police in areas of conflict and insurgency. Papua in Indonesia is one such area, southern Thailand may be another. See “Polri Buka Rekrutmen 10.000 Pegawai mulai April 2024,” *sloops.com*, 4 March 2024.

²⁶ BIFF was formed in 2010 from an MILF splinter group that broke away as a protest against the MILF’s concessions over a 2008 Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain known as MOA-AD. BIFF had three factions, led by Esmael Abdulmalik alias Abu Toraiife, Mohiden Animbang alias Karialan and Ismael Abubakar alias Bungos, but Toraiife, for years the most radical of the three, surrendered in 2023. The lines between the MILF and BIFF in Maguindanao are very fluid, and fighters can move easily between the two.

²⁷ “Dismantle private armed groups, DILF sec says,” Philippine News Agency, 30 June 2021.

V. THE RISK OF VIOLENCE

Violence has declined substantially in BARMM over the last three years, particularly in Basilan and Sulu, thanks in part to targeted operations against the Abu Sayyaf Group, various surrender and reintegration programs, and the reactivation of the military's 11th Infantry Division in Sulu from 2019 onwards. But in what should serve as a warning for 2025, there was an uptick in killings in the lead-up to the October 2023 barangay elections. One NGO described the election in BARMM as “the bloodiest election in the region in the last ten years”, with seventeen fatalities, including eleven on election day itself, and more than 30 other injuries between 28 August and 30 October 2023.²⁸

Most of the 57 documented incidents took place in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte, but three deaths took place in Basilan. There was no violence in Sulu. Just as concerning as the violence was the fact that some 2,500 public school teachers, who serve as poll watchers or electoral board members, requested to be excused from this task because of fear and past trauma. In the past, they have been blamed by the losing candidate's supporters for the defeat or otherwise subjected to violence, threats, and harassment. Most of the teachers who withdrew were from Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao. In some cases, they were replaced by police, but in a few hotspots, even the police withdrew and had to be replaced by members of the military.²⁹

In addition to political assassinations, some analysts interviewed in Mindanao suggested that a candidate, fearing defeat, could stage a bombing that could be blamed on extremists and be used as a pretext to postpone the polls. It would have to be a major attack to have such an impact, and even then, it seems unlikely that the polls could be derailed.³⁰

Remaining pro-ISIS elements, particularly in Lanao del Sur, could see the 2025 elections as an opportunity to demonstrate their continued existence, as well as their commitment to disrupting democratic processes as repeatedly urged by ISIS propaganda. The “East Asia Wilayah” as ISIS calls the Philippines, is only one of two areas in the world where ISIS claimed credit for more attacks in 2023 (twenty) than 2022 (seven). The other was the Sahel. Almost all these attacks were in Lanao or central Mindanao and most involved attacks on police or military. They included the 3 December 2023 attack on a Sunday mass at Mindanao State University in Marawi that killed four. The pro-ISIS violence, attributed by the military to remnants of the “Maute group”, indicates an ongoing presence of sympathisers that the security forces need to continue to monitor, particularly as the elections draw closer.

²⁸ “Watchdog frowns on Comelec, describes BARMM polls as the bloodiest in years,” rappler.com, 3 November 2023.

²⁹ “2,000 BARMM teachers won't be performing barangay poll duties,” rappler.com, 19 October 2023; “Comelec to probe why teachers back out of poll duties,” rappler.com, 3 November 2023. See also “BARMM teachers hesitant to rend poll duties due to hostile situations,” mindanews.com, 20 October 2023.

³⁰ Some BARMM detractors, citing the TPMT terms of reference, are arguing that elections cannot take place until all the “deliverables” of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (decommissioning, amnesties, disbandment of private armed groups and mechanisms for transitional justice) are complete, and an “exit document” is signed by the government and MILF. That document would formally end the transition. But in fact, both parties, by mutual agreement, can sign it, even with some elements incomplete, so there is no reason not to proceed with the election. Email communication with TPMT member, 23 March 2024.

Another source of violence in the past has been the effort by police to serve warrants without warning on fighters under the protection of the military, the MILF or the MNLF. Attempts to serve warrants prompted two of the most serious outbreaks of violence in June 2023, in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao del Norte and in Maimbun, Sulu.³¹ A more successful effort was the “negotiated” arrest of Myrna Mabanza, a woman with Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) links, accused of channelling funds from ISIS or ISIS supporters to the ASG in the lead-up to the 2017 occupation of Marawi by pro-ISIS elements. Myrna was arrested without violence in February 2024 after police negotiated with MNLF commanders on Sulu, to whom she had surrendered three years earlier. As the elections approach, it might help avoid violence if the police agreed not to serve any warrants through unexpected raids and instead used the “negotiation” model.

Finally, while the Philippine government sees the ASG as a spent force, and Gov. Tan and the AFP have declared Sulu as “ASG-free” after years of intensive military operations, it is not so easy to simply eliminate a group based on clan and family ties, with a new generation coming of age.³² Some of these younger members may well want to avenge the deaths of their fathers, uncles or brothers in military operations. It will be important to guard against regeneration – and also to ensure that ex-fighters do not resurface in the private armies of local warlords on Sulu.

VI. THE MAINLAND AND THE ISLANDS

Interviews in Sulu in August 2023 and in Zamboanga and Basilan in February 2024 found some islanders saying they hoped that someday, there would be two BARMMs, one for the islands and one for the Mindanao mainland. There is a widespread feeling that the islanders have been relegated to second-class status, with all the good appointments going to ethnic Maguindanaon and Iranun, while the ethnic Tausug, Yakan and Sama have lost out.

The islanders have several grievances beyond discrimination. Leaders of the Tausug-dominated MNLF believe the government ignored its commitments under the 1996 peace agreement brokered by the Indonesian government, in the interests of reaching accommodation with the MILF – which started life as an MNLF splinter. The government’s appointment of the children of MNLF leaders Nur Misuari and the late Yusop Jikiri to the BTA in 2022 only partially assuaged this sense of marginalisation and neglect. It is noteworthy that the MNLF faction with which the MILF has worked most closely during the transition is led by Muslimin Sema, an ethnic Maguindanaon (currently BARMM Minister of Labour).

The Tausug feel that the MILF leadership has not taken the claim of the Sulu sultanate to Sabah seriously, in part because Malaysia has been the MILF’s chosen facilitator throughout the peace process.

³¹ See IPAC, “Violence in the Southern Philippines”, op.cit.

³² “Finally! Sulu declared as Abu Sayyaf-free”, *Manila Bulletin*, 7 September 2023.

Sulu was the only area of the old ARMM to vote against the Bangsamoro Organic Law in the 2019 plebiscite, effectively voting against the creation of BARMM, believing it would do better to deal directly with the central government in Manila. Under the law, however, all parts of the old ARMM were automatically included in BARMM, so since all the other ARMM provinces voted for ratification, Sulu could not opt out.

Gov. Sakur Tan of Sulu has been the most consistent opponent of BARMM in the islands. The governors of Tawi-Tawi and Basilan have been generally supportive of the MILF leadership, even if some of their constituents are not. While the UBJP has little support in Basilan and Sulu, it will be important for mainland leaders to demonstrate that they have allies among the islanders and to directly address concerns of MNLF and island leaders.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2025 elections will be the culmination of a peace process that began in 1996. Given the complexity of the region, the number of spoilers on both sides, the number of competing insurgencies and the multiethnic nature of the region, it is nothing short of miraculous that the process has come this far. It is also a testament to the competence and commitment of the negotiators. But all involved need to appreciate that many dangers lie ahead.

If the new government is to start out on the right footing, violence in the lead-up needs to be prevented if possible and at the very least minimised. Particularly tense areas need to be mapped and additional security forces assigned. Hotlines should also be set up for conveying information on threats, with the anonymity of callers assured. Any and all incidents of violence need to be speedily investigated, with any perpetrators quickly prosecuted and if found guilty, not only punished according to law, but immediately dropped from the payroll of their patron or supporting organisation.

Police need to be careful in the lead-up to the elections, with particular attention to the time, place, and circumstances that they serve warrants of arrests – especially against known members of private armed groups or individuals with a past history of involvement in violent extremist organisations.

The MILF needs to get its own house in order and find constructive ways to heal the rift that may well cost it the election. One step that would help would be clarification of procedures for determining succession within the MILF leadership. Part of the underlying reason for the Iqbal-Macacua rift is that both are potential contenders to succeed Murad, should he die or become incapacitated.

The MILF needs to act promptly to move forward with the fourth and final phase of decommissioning and ensure that an independent, impartial body can quickly investigate any violent acts that take place before, during and after the elections.

All parties with a largely mainland base need to reach out to the island provinces, not only to secure their votes but to ensure that their concerns are reflected in Cabinet choices and priority programs.

If the elections are to be the positive step en route to a functional regional government, then all parties need to ensure that guns, violence, intimidation, money politics and ethnocentrism are kept to a minimum, so that the new democratically-elected BARMM has a chance of providing better governance than those who live within its borders have thus far experienced.

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