

**PHILIPPINES:
AVOIDING A ZERO-SUM GAME
IN THE 2025 BARMM ELECTIONS**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Election fever is sweeping the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) as the October 1 deadline for filing candidacy for next year's parliamentary elections approaches. The elections, scheduled for 12 May 2025, were supposed to mark the completion of the long peace process between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government of the Philippines. Instead, they will take place with many elements of the peace process incomplete, including decommissioning of combatants, dismantling of private armed groups and transitional justice, to name a few. Some of President Marcos's advisers are suggesting that keeping the MILF in power for one election cycle – that is, until 2028—will help ensure security and stability. But there are many reasons to question that premise.

It is not clear that the unfinished business of the peace will be any closer to completion in three years. The MILF has now had six years to learn to govern, slowed down by two years of Covid, but far more experience and on-the-job training than most insurgents-turned-politicians receive. The MILF party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP), has been registered with the National Election Commission (COMELEC) since 2015 and took part in the 2019 plebiscite that led to BARMM's creation; the 2022 general elections; and the 2023 village elections. It is not as though the 2025 elections will be its first chance to test its electoral capacity. The MILF's opponents have all voiced support for the peace process, and some have been instrumental in encouraging surrenders, particularly of the militant Abu Sayyaf Group. It is therefore not clear that security depends on the MILF staying in power. Some in BARMM fear that an MILF defeat could lead to a loss of patronage funds and dangerous disgruntlement among combatants, thereby endangering the peace, but the answer is probably a better-managed reintegration program rather than an enforced delay in transfer of power.

Meanwhile, violence is increasing and is likely to get worse. It mostly takes the form of drive-by shootings by unidentified gunmen, particularly in the MILF heartland of central Mindanao where the contest between the UBJP and its opponents is shaping up to be the fiercest. It is not always clear whether the shootings are the result of ordinary crime, clan feuds, or politics, but in Mindanao, these categories are not mutually exclusive. The danger is that the two largest parties in the election, the UBJP and the alliance of traditional politicians known as the Bangsamoro Grand Coalition (BGC) view the election as a zero-sum game, where one side cannot allow the other to win. Intervention on one side from Manila will not help.

This paper explores the political dynamics in BARMM as of July 2024, with particular attention to the local parties and the perceived interests of President Marcos and his inner circle, collectively known as “Malacañang”, the name of the presidential palace.

This is the third in a series of IPAC reports on the preparation for the May 2025 polls¹ It is based on a ten-day trip to Cotabato, Zamboanga and Maguindanao del Sur in July 2024,

¹ See IPAC, “Violence in the Southern Philippines in the Lead-Up to Local Elections”, Report No.88, 14 September 2023 and “Political Jockeying and Violence before the 2025 Elections in BARMM”, Report No.93, 3 April 2024.

including interviews with members of twelve of the sixteen registered parties, as well as with BARMM and local government officials.

II. A QUICK REVIEW OF ELECTION MECHANICS

On 12 May 2025, candidates will be competing for 80 parliamentary seats. BARMM is the only part of the Philippines with a parliamentary system of government, and many voters are still unfamiliar with how it works. Of the 80 seats, 40 will be filled by party lists, with sixteen parties registered to take part.² They are currently undergoing a verification process by the National Election Commission (COMELEC) to make sure they meet the requirements spelled out in the Bangsamoro Electoral Code and implementing regulations. Parties will need to get at least 4 per cent of the vote to take a seat. Thirty-two districts will also elect a single candidate to represent them. These districts have been delineated by the current transition parliament.³ Eight sectoral representatives will be appointed by the BARMM government, with two seats each for indigenous peoples and settler communities, and one seat each for women, youth, traditional leaders, and ulama.

After the election, elected MPs will choose a Chief Minister by majority vote, and this is where competition is intense because of the scope for patronage involved. The standard-bearer for the MILF's United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) is likely to be either the incumbent, Murad, or acting Maguindanao del Norte governor Abdulraof Macacua, better known as Sammy Gambar. The opposition BGC has chosen Sulu Gov. Abdulsakur "Sakur" Tan as its candidate. All three have powerful backers in Manila.

III. THE UNITED BANGSAMORO JUSTICE PARTY (UBJP)

The UBJP, according to virtually all those interviewed for this report, does not have the votes to win a parliamentary majority in 2025 on its own. The only way it can hold on to the Chief Minister position is through some formula of power-sharing with the BGC, which looks unlikely; cobbling together an alliance with smaller parties, which is possible, but its rivals can do the same; trying to woo local officials over to its side, since they have the potential to mobilise voters at the grassroots; intense pressure from Manila on local officials; buying enough independent elected MPs to put the votes for Chief Minister over the top; outright fraud; or some combination of the above.

² The sixteen are United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP); Bangsamoro Grand Coalition (BGC); Al-Ittihad-Ungaya Sa Kawagib Nu Bangsamoro; Mahardlika Party; Bangsamoro Party (BAPA); Amanat Democratic Party; Bangsamoro People's Party (BPP); Progresibong Bangsamoro Party; Bangsamoro Federal Party; Bangsamoro People's Democratic Party (Raayat); Partido Bangon Bangsamoro (PBBM); Indigenous, Settler, Sama and Minorities Alliance Party (ISAMA); Indigenous People's Democratic Party (IPDP); Serbisyong Inklusibo Alyansang Progresibo (SIAP); Moro Ako; and United Advocates for Settler Communities.

³ Under Bangsamoro Autonomy Act 58, they include eight districts in Lanao del Sur, seven in Sulu, four each in Maguindanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Norte; three in Tawi-Tawi and Basilan; two in Cotabato City and one in the Special Geographic Region carved out of North Cotabato.

The UBJP's stronghold is in the Maguindanaon areas of central Mindanao, but it also has support of the popular governor of Basilan, Jim Hataman-Salliman, and the governor of Tawi-Tawi, Mang Sali. The backing from these two island provinces is important, because the Murad administration has been accused of favouring mainlanders, especially Maguindanaon, at the expense of the island ethnic groups like Tausug and Yakan.

A. Patching Up Rifts

As the election draws closer, the UBJP needs to maintain unity, but in late 2023, a rift developed between two of its leaders, Mohagher Iqbal and Sammy Gambar.⁴ Iqbal, the top negotiator for the MILF during the peace talks, is a member of the MILF's central committee, BARMM Minister of Education and heir presumptive to the MILF leadership if something should happen to Murad. He and Murad are very close. Sammy, in addition to his acting governor role, is secretary-general of the UBJP and heads the MILF's armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF).

As Malacañang started contemplating whom they would like to see as Chief Minister, President Marcos; his special assistant Anton Lagdameo; and his peace adviser Gen (ret.) Carlito Galvez Jr all initially gravitated to Sammy. They liked Sammy because he supported Marcos in 2022; he oversaw the armed combatants and was thus critical to the decommissioning; he was significantly younger than Murad; and he was seen as a pragmatist. If he were to be a candidate for Chief Minister, he would have to step down as governor and run for a parliamentary seat.

There were two problems, however. The rank-and-file of the MILF remained loyal to Murad, so putting Sammy in contention for Chief Minister could worsen internal divisions. It was also not an absolute given that Sammy could win a seat. Although Sammy disclaimed any interest in dividing the MILF and some said that he and Iqbal had patched up their differences, it was not at all clear that Sammy would get one of the top five slots on the UBJP party list. If he ran for a seat from the district where he was registered, his election was likely but not guaranteed, and it was getting too late to change districts, given a six-month residency requirement. If he stayed in the governorship, however, he would likely face powerful clan leader Suharto "Teng" Mangudadatu, who resigned from his current job in Manila effective 31 July 2024, apparently to contest the governorship.

Sammy has gone out of his way to demonstrate that he has no problem with his UBJP colleagues. In Mindanao del Norte, UBJP posters were plastered everywhere in July with the slogan "We Will Fight" (*Matu Tano*), showing a giant Murad standing like a father figure behind the much smaller images of Iqbal and Sammy – but with Sammy a little in front. If reconciliation in the interest of presenting a united front succeeds, then Sammy's chances as a party candidate might improve, even as his chances to succeed Murad as Chief Minister might diminish.

⁴ For more on the origins of the rift, see IPAC, "Political Jockeying and Violence before the 2025 Elections in BARMM", op.cit., pp.3-4. There were many factors involved, but they included differences over who would stand as candidates in the October 2023 village elections and Sammy's closeness to former BARMM Minister of the Interior and Local Government Naguib Sinarimbo, whom Murad expelled from the government in December.

B. Playing Dirty

One individual interviewed for this report was so worried that the peace process could be disrupted by the elections that he was urging the MILF to use any measure, fair or foul, to produce a majority. The measures he suggested included rigging the new vote-counting machines from South Korea⁵; controlling the National Election Commission (COMELEC), which will supervise the election; withholding budgets of local mayors unless they proved their support for the UBJP; ensuring that teachers serving on electoral boards and as poll-monitors were not assigned in their home areas; controlling the courts so they could delay hearings on any BGC petition alleging vote-tampering; and making use of BIFF for security as necessary. (In parts of central Mindanao, the identities of the MILF and BIFF are said to be interchangeable: “MILF by day and BIFF by night,” said one official.⁶)

There was no indication that MILF leaders were heeding his advice, nor was there any reason to believe that either side was above using underhanded tactics. But even if the elections do not degenerate to the level proposed by this individual, there are still concerns expressed by both the UBJP and BGC about double registration and ghost voters. Politicians from both sides suggested that current voter rolls be discarded and voter registration start from scratch, but this would add more delays to the already tight timeline.

IV. THE BANGSAMORO GRAND COALITION (BGC)

The biggest surprise of the electoral process thus far was when COMELEC on 2 July 2024 announced that the BGC was one of sixteen regional political parties that had registered to take part in the 2025 elections. No one had expected the coalition to register on its own.

The BGC, an outgrowth of the Bangsamoro Governors Coalition (note the same initials), had first announced its existence on 24 April 2024 as an alliance of four parties:

- Ittihad, led by Maguindanao del Sur governor Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu and her husband, Teng Mangudadatu;
- SIAP, led by Lanao del Sur governor Mamintal “Bombit” Adiong Jr. and his son;
- BPP, led by Congressman Mujiv Hataman, former governor of BARMM’s predecessor, ARMM, and likely candidate for governor of Basilan;
- Salaam, led by Sulu governor Sakur Tan.

It also drew in another powerful local politician, Vice-Mayor Johari “Butch” Abu of Cotabato City, as a member of SIAP. The coalition thus represents traditional clan leaders against the MILF, even with Mujiv Hataman, widely seen as a progressive, on board. In April, when the coalition was announced, many political observers believed that each component party would draw up its own list of 40 candidates as well as fielding district candidates in its

⁵ The machines have already featured in accusations of corruption, with Comelec chief George Garcia being accused by Congressman Rodane Marcoleta of having received kickbacks to favor Miru Systems, the South Korean manufacturer of the machines, in the procurement process. Garcia denied the allegations. See “Poll machine bribery scheme? Coelec’s Garcia hits Marcoleta over ‘demolition job,’” *rappler.com*, 9 July 2024.

⁶ IPAC interview with BGC official, Buluan, 19 July 2024.

strongholds. But Salaam, Sakur’s party, failed to register on time, and BPP was not sure that it would pass the COMELEC verification process. BGC would also be in a stronger position to challenge the UBJP as a single, large party than as several smaller ones.

Accordingly, members have agreed that they will submit a joint list. The top five on the list will include the strongest candidates from Maguindanao, Lanao, Basilan, Sulu and Cotabato City respectively. The next five will also be equally divided and so on until the requisite 40 candidates are chosen. It is unlikely to be a wholly harmonious selection process, but the ultimate list could be very strong. Candidates for the district seats will represent the component parties, so SIAP will field district candidates in Lanao del Sur, Cotabato City, the Special Geographic Area (SGA), and perhaps elsewhere.⁷ BPP will likely do well in district races in Basilan and so on.

Malacañang, in its quest for stability, proposed that the UBJP and the BCG find a power-sharing formula. One suggestion was that they share the terms of Chief Minister, first Sammy, then Sakur Tan, but Sakur was not interested. Then Sakur proposed offering Sammy the No.2 position as speaker, in the interests of having an “uncontested election” – the formula he had used in Sulu to suppress opposition and reduce electoral violence.⁸ But this time it was Sammy who was not interested. (One observer said that it was not just a question of being second, it was that no ethnic Maguindanaon would ever accept working under an ethnic Tausug.)

As of July, therefore, it looked highly unlikely that any power-sharing would happen.

A. Al-Ittihad-Ungaya sa Kawagib nu Bangsamoro Ittihad (Ittihad)

The Ittihad party includes some of the MILF’s most implacable foes and most entrenched traditional politicians.⁹ The party started out as a small group of politically active lawyers and NGO activists, but the Mangudadatus needed a regional political vehicle to further their ambitions in BARMM, and Ittihad fit the bill.

On 31 July 2024, Teng Mangudadatu resigned from his position as head of a national education development agency to prepare for taking part in the BARMM elections. He did not specify how he would participate, but most assume he will be a candidate for governor of

⁷ The SGA includes the 63 barangays from North Cotabato, now grouped into eight municipalities with acting mayors appointed by Chief Minister Murad, that voted to join BARMM when the plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law was conducted in 2019. See “CM Ebrahim names OIC local officials in new eight SGA towns,” *The Mindanao Star*, 11 July 2024, p.1.

⁸ For more on Sakur Tan’s tactics in Sulu, see IPAC, “Violence in the Southern Philippines in the Lead-Up to Local Elections”, Report No.88, 14 September 2023, pp.4-8.

⁹ Gov. Mariam Mangudadatu unleashed a diatribe against the UBJP and the MILF leadership when interviewed in July. She said that she and Teng had supported the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2019 and, in late 2021, in a meeting with President Duterte and other national and BARMM officials, had even supported the three-year extension of the BTA from 2022 to 2025. But she said they did so on the understanding that the UBJP would not join local or national elections in 2022. Then UBJP turned around and fielded candidates against them anyway, only to lose badly to the politicians they had challenged. She said one reason for supporting the extension was to give the MILF another three years to show they could produce economic development, after the forced slowdown produced by COVID. But after three years, she said, there was nothing. She also accused the MILF of holding up decommissioning by failing to turn over lists of names to officials, when she as governor knew where all the MILF camps in her province were and the names of their commanders. Why was nothing happening? IPAC interview with Gov. Mariam Mangudadatu, Buluan, 19 July 2024.

Maguindanao del Norte.¹⁰ If he runs, he could beat all rivals, including Gov. Macacua aka Sammy Gambar, should Sammy decide to forego a seat in parliament and try to stay on. A Mangudadatu victory also cement family control over the Maguindanao region, with Teng in Maguindanao del Norte; his wife Mariam the governor of Maguindano del Sur with several more terms to go; and their 27-year-old son, Pax, the governor of neighboring Sultan Kudarat province, which is not part of BARMM.¹¹

B. The Bangsmoro People’s Party (BPP)

Like Ittihad, BPP started as a small group of professionals and intellectuals who knew they did not have the numbers to meet the Electoral Code’s registration requirement of 10,000 members. At the time the Code was passed, BPP’s members totalled about 1,000. Several of its founders had worked with Mujiv Hataman in the ARMM government and approached him for help. Mujiv had a local party, the Basilan Unity Party (BUP), under whose banner he won his race for Congress in 2019 and his wife won the mayorship of Isabela, Basilan’s capital city, in 2022. Its support is only in Basilan, so it never intended to contest the BARMM parliament, though its candidates will continue to run for local executive and legislative seats. (Mujiv will be running for governor of Basilan in 2025, while one of his strong allies, Mayor Hanie Bud of Maluso, Basilan, will likely replace him as Congressman.)

According to one BPP founder:

We talked to Kang Mujiv and made an alliance with his Basilan Unity Party. The BUP had 40,000 members and he gave us 10,000. That’s how we got registration. He called his men in and told them to go with us. So in a way we were an alliance of three parties, the BUP, the BPP and a small party called Anak Mindanao.¹²

He said Sakur Tan reached out to Mujiv in March 2024 and asked him to join the coalition. Sakur, he said, at 74 was old enough to be thinking about his legacy and wants his contribution to be remembered. That was one motivation for drawing in the BPP progressives. As for the latter’s motivation to join with the traditional politicians, he said, “We need professionalisation of politics, and we have to do it through the clans and big families because they have the luxury of resources and personnel.”¹³

A second reason for BPP joining the BGC is that it would be hard-pressed on its own to come up with 4 per cent of the vote that is necessary to gain a seat in the parliament. And a third is that with the deepening rivalry between the two brothers, Gov. Jim Hataman-Salliman and

¹⁰ The agency is TESDA, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority. See “Teng Mangudadatu quits TESDA to run in 2025 polls,” politico.com.ph, 22 July 2024.

¹¹ Teng himself and his father, Datu Pax Mangudadatu before him, served as Sultan Kudarat governor so the younger Pax is third generation to occupy the post. For the intricacies of the Mangudadatu clan and its allies, see “5 Maguindanao clans unite as Mangudadatu kin split,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 April 2019. See also International Crisis Group, “Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro,” Asia Report No.306, 14 April 2020.

¹² IPAC interview with Atty Rasol Mitmug Jr, Cotabato, 17 July 2024. Anak Mindanao ran as a local party in 2019 but failed to win a single seat.

¹³ IPAC interview with Atty Rasol Mitmug Jr, Cotabato, 17 July 2024.

Congressman Mujiv, they would not be comfortable on the same side – and Jim is solidly aligned with the UBJP.¹⁴

C. SIAP from Lanao

The Serbisyong Inklusibo-Alyansang Progresibo (Inclusive Service–Progressive Alliance) or SIAP party was founded in 2002 by the current governor’s father to promote candidates for local executive positions, much like the Basilan Unity Party. It is one of the most powerful components of the BGC, with the additional asset of having Naguib Sinarimbo, former BARMM Minister of the Interior and Local Government and political strategist extraordinaire, as Cotabato City chairman.

Gov. Bombit Adiong, like Teng Mangudadatu, is the embodiment of a traditional clan leader. Both his late father and mother served as governors of the province, and his younger brother was acting governor of ARMM before Mujiv Hataman. He controls most of the local government units in the province (38 of its 40 mayors are members of SIAP) and, as head of BARMM’s most populous province, he is being wooed by all sides. He has been with the BGC from the beginning and none of its principals believe he will shift. But UBJP believes that by fielding particularly strong candidates in Lanao del Sur, it has a chance to win at least a few of its eight district seats.

D. The MNLF factions

The MNLF has three factions that Gen. Galvez has been trying to bring together. Two of the three are taking a wait-and-see attitude. They are the Nur Misuari faction, represented by the Mahardika party, and the Muslimin Sema faction, represented by the BAPA party. The third faction, once led by the late Yusop Jikiri and after his death, by his son Albakil “Thong” Jikiri, is solidly with Sakur Tan and the BGC in Sulu, where Thong is running for mayor of Indanan.

Mahardika is open in principle to working with BGC but will probably not align before the election. It wants to field its own party list of 40 members and believes that since the BGC’s list cannot possibly absorb them all, it would rather stay separate for now. Given Sakur Tan’s control over Sulu, which is also Misuari’s base, Mahardika may decide not to field any district candidates at all, although this is still under discussion within the party.

The Sema faction is also hedging its bets, even though it is part of the BARMM government with two ministries (trade and labour). Despite a widespread assumption that it will eventually join UBJP, one insider thought it might have a tough time getting a top slot on the UBJP list and thus might shift support to the BGC.

Mahardika is particularly interesting because of its well-defined positions on several sensitive issues. Like Sakur Tan and many others in Sulu, it was against BARMM from the

¹⁴ As IPAC noted in its April 2024 report, Jim is planning to run for vice-governor, while his son will oppose Mujiv for the governorship. If Mujiv wins, which is very likely, some say Jim will resign, rather than serve under his brother. In that case, the highest vote-getter on the provincial board would replace him.

beginning, believing that the islands would be marginalised under mainland Mindanao leadership. It was more supportive of former President Duterte's view (never very clearly spelled out) of a broad, federal system where Sulu, alone or together with the other island provinces, would have a direct line to Manila without going through a regional layer of bureaucracy. It differs from BAPA in its policy on MNLFF camp transformation because it remains opposed to any registration of MNLFF firearms, and it differs from the Jikiri faction over its practice of encouraging ASG members to surrender to the MNLFF so they then can be eligible for amnesty. One Mahardika official said he believed that any ASG responsible for kidnapping should be prosecuted and punished to the fullest extent of the law. And while Mahardika avoids saying anything specific about the Philippine claim to Sabah, it implicitly indicates its support by emphasising the importance of ancestral domain. Finally, the official said, it wants Bangsamoro autonomy enshrined in the Constitution, because as long as it is not, there is always a chance that it can be scaled back or revised by a future Congress.¹⁵

V. THE SMALLER PARTIES

Some of the smaller parties are hoping to be kingmakers by earning just enough seats to put one side or the other over the edge and secure lucrative ministries for themselves in the process.

A. Progresibong Bangsamoro Party (Pro-Bangsamoro Party)

One of these is the Progresibong Bangsamoro Party, a vehicle for the Sulu-based intermarried clans of Loong, Arbison, Sali and Matba, who are also intermarried with the Tans. Among them they control two governorships (Tawi-Tawi and Agusan del Sur, which is outside BARMM but a source of influence and funds) and six mayors, mostly in Sulu. The combined clan network also includes several past governors of Sulu, including Benjamin Loong, who served as governor from 2004 to 2007, and his older brother, Habib Tupay Loong, who served from 1984 to 1996.¹⁶ The party chairman is Bangsamoro MP Don Mustapha Arbison Loong, whose Facebook page explains some of the clan connections.¹⁷ As a party, they are aiming more for 2028 than 2025, and are accordingly placing their members both in the UPJB and the BGC. They nevertheless will field a full party list.

¹⁵ IPAC interview, Atty Randolph "Bong" Parcasio, Secretary-General Mahardika Party, Zamboanga, 18 July 2024.

¹⁶ Habib Tupay Loong died in 2016. Benjamin, who served as Regional Secretary of the ARMM government, suffered a mild stroke in mid-2024 and pulled out of politics as he recovers.

¹⁷ According to his Facebook page, "MP Loong hails from the political clans of Tupay, Hasim and Aldam in Basilan, the Loong, Arbison and Tingkahan of Sulu and the Sali and Matba clans of Tawi Tawi. He is the son of another founder of the Bangsamoro Revolution, late Dr Salih Loong, a graduate of Medicine of Egypt, part of the Cairo Scholars together with late MILF Chairman Sheikh Hashim Salamat that initiated the movement for self-determination from Egypt. Dr Salih Loong and Chairman Salamat were part of the Batch 300 [the second batch of MNLFF cadres who all trained in Malaysia.] Around thirty members of the batch 300 are relatives of late Dr Salih Loong. MP Loong is a native of Barangay Alu Layag in Parang, Sulu, the barangay where five provincial governors have emerged, late Sulu Gov Tupay Loong, Late Tawi Tawi Gov Gerry Matba and former Sulu Gov Ben Loong, former Tawi Tawi Gov Rashidin Matba and present Tawi Tawi Governor Mang Sali. Former Congressman Kalbi Tupay of Basilan also hails from Alu Layag, Parang, Sulu." <https://www.facebook.com/MPDonALoong>, accessed 30 July 2024.

A senior party figure calculates that BGC will end up with 30-35 votes and UBJP with 25-30, so the former will need at least six to command a majority.¹⁸ He believes his party's candidates will secure enough seats to bargain with.

Our party has been invited by both UBJP and BGC. In 2019, Sakur only won the governorship by a narrow margin over Ben Loong. He got 132,277 votes and Ben got 106,418. Sakur only got 320,000 votes in 2022 because our clan wasn't running. In Sulu, for now, we're aligning with the BGC. But if we get seats, we can vote independently.¹⁹

Through strategic alliance with whomever wins, they are hoping to get the three powerful posts of Speaker, Minister of Public Works and Minister of Education. This is probably wishful thinking, but there is no question that bargaining for ministries will intensify between now and the election.

B. ISAMA AND IPDP

Among the smaller parties are two that are focused on indigenous peoples (IP): the Indigenous, Settler, Sama and Minorities Alliance (ISAMA) party and the Indigenous Peoples' Democratic Party (IPDP). ISAMA is more of a curiosity, promoting the Sama people as the mother of all indigenous groups in BARMM, but IPDP, under the leadership of BARMM member of parliament Froilyn Mendoza, herself an indigenous Teduray, claims to represent non-Moro indigenous people.²⁰

This is important because a controversial bill, the Bangsamoro Indigenous Peoples Development Act (BIPDA), also known as the IP Code, one of the last two laws that will come to a vote in the parliament before the elections, faces opposition from many non-Moro IPs.²¹ They have argued from the beginning that they prefer the existing Indigenous People's Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA, Republic Act 8371) to a new code. By including Moro IPs, like the Yakan, the new code breaks the promise of the peace agreements, which specifically referred to non-Moros. The Code adopts the MILF position that there is only one Bangsamoro ancestral domain and that IP lands are incorporated within it.²² It stops delineation of non-Moro ancestral land that was already underway.²³ It uses a BARMM ministry (Ministry of Indigenous People's Affairs, MIPA) to adjudicate land disputes. This could mean bias in

¹⁸ IPAC interview, Sheikh Mahir Loderson Gustaman, Zamboanga, 22 July 2024. The way he calculates it, Sulu's seven districts will be solid for Sakur, plus five BGC party seats, for a total of twelve. Ittihad will get four or five districts plus at least two party seats so that's a maximum of seven. In Basilan, Mujiv's BPP will get all three districts and two seats from the BGC, for a total of five. Gov. Adiong will get at least ten seats from Lanao del Sur, including most of the eight districts and two of the BGC seats. BAPA, if it joins BGC, will only get one or two seats at most.

¹⁹ Interview, pro-Bangsamoro Secretary-General Sheikh Mahir Loderson Gustaham, Zamboanga, 22 July 2024.

²⁰ Mendoza had filed a separate bill (Bill 166) that would have applied only to non-Moro IPs. According to one source, it should have been merged with BIPDA, but MIPA decided to consider it just as a policy paper and ignored it in the final drafting process.

²¹ For an analysis of the IP concerns about their rights in an autonomous Bangsamoro, see International Crisis Group, "Fostering an Inclusive Bangsamoro," Asia Report No.322, 18 February 2022, p.8 and "indigenous Rights and the MILF Peace Process," Report No.213, 22 November 2011.

²² Benedicto Bacani, "Protecting Identity and Ancestral Domain: The Urgent Need for Safeguards for Non-Moro Peoples in the BARMM," Institute for Autonomy and Governance, 8 May 2024.

²³ Ibid. Bacani points out that on 23 May 2022, the then Bangsamoro Transition Authority issued Resolution No. 38 "Protesting the Delineation process in Maguindanao province urging the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) to Cease and Desist the Delineation process and the Proceeding for the Issuance of the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title in the province of Maguindanao, Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao."

favour of non-indigenous claimants, although IPs can appeal a MIPA ruling to the national appeals court.

A UBJP member who worked on drafting BIPDA dismisses these criticisms and says in fact, the Code provides all IPs with more scope for securing their rights. The Code, she says, recognises traditional rights, institutions and political structures. Municipalities with at least a 5 per cent IP population will have a deputy mayor for indigenous affairs. An indigenous development office will help allocate resources equitably among tribes. Moreover, she said, not all IP claims are justified. If you took the size of the territory the Teduray are claiming, it would amount to more than 60 per cent of BARMM territory, although Teduray leaders have been open to scaling this back.

Another source of tension is planned “camp transformation”. The end of the peace process is supposed to see the dismantling of MILF camps and the settling of its inhabitants on the land. But at least two MILF camps, Camp Omar and Camp Bader in Maguindanao del Sur, are on land claimed as IP ancestral domain, and transformation as originally envisioned may not be possible.

All this means that the selection of the two sectoral MPs for IPs will be scrutinised for indications of whether they will stand up for non-Moro IP rights, and tensions are already visible. In what could be a warning of more to come, a Teduray vice-mayor aligned with the BCG was fatally shot, together with an aide, in an ambush by unidentified gunmen in Maguindanao del Sur on 2 August 2024. The official, Roldan Benito, was a party to a long-running land dispute going back to the 1970s, meaning his murder might not be directly related to current wrangling over the IP Code. It sparked outrage across the political spectrum, however, and there will be more pressure than usual to find the perpetrators.²⁴

VI. MALACAÑANG’S INTERESTS

Nearly every politician interviewed believed that Malacañang would weigh in on the vote, in furtherance of Galvez’s position that returning the MILF to power was the best guarantor of peace and security. Not all were happy about it. Said one Basilan resident:

If Imperial Manila really wanted to help [the peace], there’s lots of other things they could do to help it along, rather than taking sides in the election.²⁵

In his State of the Nation Address (SONA) on 22 July 2024, President Marcos gave over-the-top praise to the BARMM government’s achievements, with Murad sitting in the audience, smiling and applauding.²⁶ But peace is not the president’s only interest in BARMM.

²⁴ “Cops still piecing ‘puzzle’ in the murder of Maguindanao Sur vice mayor,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 August 2024.

²⁵ Interview, former BARMM official, Zamboanga, 21 July 2024.

²⁶ The relevant text of the SONA speech was as follows: “The implementation of peace agreements is now in its concluding phase. Former combatants now live peaceful and productive lives in their respective communities. Some of our former rebels are now absorbed into the AFP, serving in the defense of our Republic; while others are now part of the PNP BARMM. Government will honor and fully comply with its remaining deliverables and commitments under these agreements. [applause]”

Several politicians and political analysts said that Marcos cared most about the twelve national Senate seats that will be contested in May 2025. As his rivalry with former president Duterte deepens, he needs as many allies as possible in the Philippines Congress to ensure a victory over the Duterte clan in 2028.²⁷ Several senators up for re-election are steadfast Duterte supporters – especially Bong Go and Ronald “Bato” Dela Rosa. Marcos’s party, the Partido Federal ng Pilipinas (PFP), has entered into an alliance with another national party, Lakas-CMD, led by his cousin, Speaker Martin Romualdez, and they are hoping together to defeat Duterte’s men and ensure that more of their own allies secure seats.²⁸ Some doubt that BARMM has the numbers to make a difference at a national level, but if it voted as a bloc at the president’s request and if the races were close, it might be able to sway a few seats.

Within BARMM, Sammy Gambar is regional chair of PFP, another reason Malacañang likes him. Sakur Tan and Bombit Adiong of BGC, however, are Lakas members, and PFP and Lakas have allied for the May 2025 elections. On 1 August 2024, officials from Sulu’s nineteen municipalities became Lakas members in a ceremony in Patikul with Sakur Tan and Romalduz in attendance. If Sakur Tan can get out the vote for Marcos’s candidates in May 2025, Malacañang can probably adjust to him as Chief Minister, if it comes to that.

But it was still giving signals that it would prefer the MILF to win, and an incident in June was instructive. The BARMM Ministry for Interior and Local Government called BARMM mayors to Manila on 24 June to hold a dialogue with the president to discuss the elections. Earlier that day, Special Assistant Lagdameo called Adiong to the palace and they talked for three hours. Lagdameo told him that the president needed to secure the maximum votes possible from BARMM for PFP in the Senate races. Adiong said he and all his mayors were Lakas. Lagdameo reportedly told him that he was not forcing anyone to join the UBJP or PFP, they just wanted a solid bloc for the Senate. The meeting ended inconclusively.

In November last year, we signed proclamations granting amnesty to former rebels. A month later, and then in June of this year, the House of Representatives and the Senate issued their respective resolutions concurring with these amnesty proclamations.

That Congress is one with us, is a testament to the whole nation’s sincere desire for peace. In such a short period, the BARMM has impressively established the strong foundation for its progressive autonomous social development.

Investments continue to pour into the BARMM. Last year, investments in the region increased by one hundred forty percent year-on-year.

The improved peace and order situation, good governance — not to mention high hopes and confidence amongst its people — all contribute to the reasons why BARMM’s poverty index has significantly decreased since 2018. [applause]

In Marawi, the rehabilitation and rebuilding continue — under the supervision now of the Office of the President. [applause] Our focus remains on restoring energy, water, and livable communities.

As of today, all seven inter-governmental mechanisms of the BARMM, as mandated under the Organic Law, have been organized and activated. These will guarantee effective and constant consultation between the Bangsamoro and the National Governments in the fundamental aspects of governance.

Five out of the seven essential laws for the BARMM have already been enacted by the BTA Parliament. Now, it has its own Administrative Code, it has its own Local Government Code, Election Code, and those for Education and the Civil Service as well.

With these inspiring developments, the BARMM appears primed and ready for its first regular elections - the first ones that they will have - in the coming year. [applause] Excerpted from “Full TEXT: President Marcos’ State of the Nation Address, 2024”, [rappler.com](https://www.rappler.com/philippines/sona-2024-full-text-transcript-speech-president-marcos-jr/), 22 July 2024.

²⁷ Marcos cannot run again, since presidents have one six-year term under the 1987 Constitution. Not only does he have family members who can continue the family dynasty, however – he also has his cousin, Speaker Romalduz, who is one of the foremost champions of changing the Constitution.

²⁸ <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/elections/how-philippines-senatorial-race-shaping-up-2025-polls/>

The mayors' meeting took place at the Diamond Hotel in Manila several hours later. Sulu's mayors did not attend; neither did Maguindanao del Sur's. Most of the other BARMM mayors were present. Instead of the president, however, it was Marcos's henchman, PFP founder and president and South Cotabato governor, Reynaldo Tamayo Jr, who showed up for the dialogue.

What followed is contested, but one Lanao mayor said Tamayo had threatened to have them investigated by the Commission on Audit if they did not support the UBJP. (The Commission on Audit is believed to be so corrupt that a common joke in Mindanao is that its real name is Commission OR Audit, i.e. give me a kickback or you get audited.)

The Lanao mayors then issued a statement from which the following is an excerpt:

The mayors of Lanao del Sur were called to a function room with Governor Tamayo who told us the following:

1. That he (Governor Tamayo) was under instructions from the President to inform us that President believes that BARMM must still be MILF-led for one more round because among others [sic], decommissioning is not yet completed.
2. That before the President comes, he (Governor Tamayo) will report to the President who among us has agreed or disagreed with the President's wishes.
3. That the President wants us to support his candidates and it will be known if we have not delivered because if we win and the President's candidates do not win, then that is an indication that we did not support the President.
4. That for those who do not support the President, this means that their governance is [not?] good and will be scrutinized.
5. That for us present in the meeting, these words of Governor Tamayo were clearly and unmistakably a veiled threat that we will be subject to COA national audit if we do not support UBJP which has to win in order that BARMM remains MILF-led.²⁹

The mayors said that Tamayo told them there would be a major reshuffling of BARMM and the Chief Minister would "be replaced" – not voted out, but replaced, as if it he accepted that someone had the authority to do this.³⁰ Tamayo said he was misunderstood.

In his focus on stability, President Marcos may also have national security considerations on his mind. If BARMM is stable and secure, he can focus more on worsening tensions with China in the South China Sea. There is already discussion of redeploying some troops from the 11th Infantry Division of the military, currently based in Sulu.

²⁹ "Manifesto in Support of Mayor Raida Maglangit on the Meeting of the BARMM Mayors with Governor Tamayo", Lanao del Sur Chapter, League of Municipalities of the Philippines, 2 July 2024 (signed by 23 mayors).

³⁰ Ibid, point 8.

VII. DECOMMISSIONING AND AMNESTY

If one of Malacañang’s reasons for wanting the MILF to stay in power was so the decommissioning process could be completed, it should think again. The reason decommissioning has stalled has nothing to do with the need for more time. It is stalled because the MILF knows that if it completes the process, it loses its bargaining power. Its guns and combatants are its main source of leverage to push for the other “deliverables” of the peace process, including amnesty, camp transformation, disbanding of private armed groups (PAG) and transitional justice.

Amnesty is a particularly sore point, especially as some MILF members who would otherwise be strong UBJP candidates in the election may not be able to take part because of pending charges. COVID delayed the implementation of an MILF-specific amnesty offered by Duterte in 2021.³¹ The offer was only valid for those facing or convicted of criminal charges under the Penal Code for crimes committed “in furtherance of their political beliefs”. The delays meant that some fighters were killed before any action could be taken on their amnesty applications, such as the five killed in a police raid to serve a warrant against them in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao in June 2023.³²

Other applicants applied under Duterte, heard nothing, and were arrested after the Duterte commission lapsed but before those in question had submitted a new application – or knew they had to.³³

President Marcos proclaimed a new amnesty in November 2023, but this time it was not just for the MILF but also for the MNLF, the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army (CPP-NPA), and the Alex Boncayo Brigade, an NPA splinter. A National Amnesty Commission (NAC) was charged with handling applications, and as of mid-July, the NPA accounted for 497 of 578 applications it had received.³⁴ The first application from BARMM was only filed in May 2024 by an MNLF fighter facing charges of illegal possession of firearms, and three months later, only 33 MILF and 46 MNLF members had applied.³⁵

Various theories were proposed for why so few had come forward. A major one was that they did not feel safe. Given what had happened in Datu Paglas, they might have decided to lay low rather than come forward with the information required on the application including name, address, photograph, phone number, admission of guilt as made under oath, and details on the case against them.

A second and equally important factor may be lack of information. Many fighters were likely unaware of the potential benefits of the amnesty or how to apply, and the nine local boards that had been set up to process applications did not have the funds to disseminate

³¹ “Proclamation No. 1090, 5 February 2021”, <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/7/92838>.

³² IPAC, “Political Jockeying”, op.cit.

³³ One case involved a senior MILF commander named Jovy Sanguila, also known as Commander Wahab Gara. He had a P1.3 million bounty on his head and was wanted for attacks in Lanao del Norte on 18 August 2008, resulting in the death of a police officer, a soldier and 23 villagers. Despite his amnesty application, police arrested him at his home in Marawi City on 8 June 2024. See “MILF Leader with P1.3-M bounty nabbed in Marawi City,” Philippine News Agency, 10 June 2024.

³⁴ “578 rebels apply for amnesty,” *Daily Tribune* (Manila), 16 July 2024, p.3.

³⁵ “MNLF member is first amnesty applicant in BARMM,” *Philippine Inquirer*, 11 May 2024.

information about the program in a way that reached the appropriate communities, including in camps and prisons.³⁶ Some may have been deterred by the cost of notarising their applications, although local boards were trying to persuade notaries to lift these fees.

Others who might have been eligible likely did not feel at risk and therefore saw no need to go through a cumbersome application process, yet they had become the target of outreach efforts from some local boards, because those facing more serious charges were not coming forward.³⁷

Finally, the usual bureaucratic turf battles and charges of nepotism and conflict of interest in appointments to the local boards, especially between the BARMM Ministry of Interior and Local Government (MILG) and the Cotabato City prosecutor's office, constituted another hurdle to implementation.

In the midst of it all, many were overlooking two salient facts. First, the total number of combatants with pending charges against them is probably not that high; one BARMM official estimated that the total number of such individuals in the MILF is less than 100.³⁸ Second, the most dangerous people running around loose are the most in need of an amnesty. It will not make a difference to peace in BARMM if someone accused of motorcycle theft gets an amnesty, but it could make a huge difference if a senior commander accused of illegal weapons possession trusted the amnesty process enough to come out of hiding. If some of those people could compete in politics without fear of arrest, everyone would be better off.

VIII. VIOLENCE

The elections will take place in an atmosphere of violence. Databases on violent incidents in BARMM since January 2024 show that the most dangerous areas are Cotabato City, where there is a shooting almost every day; Maguindanao del Sur; and Maguindanao del Norte.³⁹ The perpetrators are almost always unidentified gunmen. They are only identified when they are killed in a clash with military or police. As noted, it is not always possible to determine from news reports whether a particular clash was the result of a clan feud (*rido*), a political attack, a crime or a business rivalry, but multiple motivations can be involved. And in Lanao del Sur, where remnants of the ISIS-linked Dawlah Islamiyah or Maute Group still operate, terrorism can be added to the list.

Sources of the political violence can be hired operatives of political figures, including active-duty police in moonlighting roles, ex-combatants (or sometimes not so ex), or private citizens. The gun laws allow so many professions to claim imminent threat to life and

³⁶ Of the nine local boards, only three were in BARMM, in Cotabato; Basilan; and Sulu, though more were said to be planned. The others were in Manila, Bacolod, Iloilo, Pagadian, Davao and Cagayan de Oro. See National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, "578 rebels apply for amnesty – NTF-ELCAC", 18 July 2024.

³⁷ Interview, atty alman, Zamboanga. One example was the group of MNLF fighters who had taken part in the 2013 Zamboanga siege but had been released after a plea-bargaining package. A lawyer for a local amnesty board said they could get their name cleared under the amnesty process but why bother, if they were out of prison and not facing any likelihood of rearrest?

³⁸ IPAC interview with BARMM official, Cotabato, 18 July 2024.

³⁹ A forthcoming report by Conflict Alert, *Conjuring Peace: The Conflict Alert 2021-23 Report*, (to be published 22 August 2024) documents the level of violence in Maguindanao.

therefore exemption from restrictions that any likelihood of control seems impossible. The following categories are exempt, for example: members of the Philippine Bar; certified public accountants; accredited media practitioners; cashiers and bank tellers; priests, ministers, rabbis and imams; physicians and nurses; engineers; businessmen who by the nature of their business or undertaking are exposed to high risk of being targets of criminal elements; elected incumbent and former officials; and active and retired military and law enforcement personnel.”⁴⁰

Moreover, Philippine law allows an individual to possess up to fifteen firearms, and if they can show that they are “gun collectors”, there is no limit at all. At a minimum, this could mean that a politician’s family – spouse, son and daughter, for example – could among them legally own 60 guns: already a private army.⁴¹ New implementing regulations for the law, adopted in March 2023, allow citizens to own automatic rifles.⁴² Efforts to require stricter regulation have failed.⁴³

The idea that private armed groups, defined as “an organised group of two or more persons, with legally or illegally possessed firearms, utilised for sowing fear and intimidation, and violence for the advancement and protection of vested political and economic interest”, can be dismantled with these provisions in place is laughable.⁴⁴

The problem is not just the weapons, it is who wields them. There are concerns that Sakur Tan could incorporate Abu Sayyaf and MNLF commanders into his security detail, just as UBJP leaders could draw on armed MILF or BIFF. In Cotabato City, the Ayunan clan was referred to derisively in one interview as a mercenary force, although one that helped the UBJP win a yes vote in the BARMM plebiscite in 2019.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

The 2025 elections are shaping up to be a rambunctious exercise in democracy, on the one hand, and deadly competition over power on the other, exacerbated by interference from Manila. Instead of trying to ensure that the weaker party wins, Malacañang should be using its influence to lobby for stricter gun laws, a separate amnesty board specifically for the MILF and MNLF, a workable exit agreement, and tighter monitoring of the block grant. Staying neutral on the political parties would be far better than taking sides.

Giving the MILF another term is not necessarily going to ensure final decommissioning nor better governance. If the traditional politicians win this round, BARMM voters can vote them

⁴⁰ “An Act Fixing the Validity Period of the License to Own and Possess, Registration, and Permit to Carry Firearms Outside of Residence or Place of Business, Amending for the Purpose Sections 7 And 19 of Republic Act No. 10591, Otherwise Known as the ‘Comprehensive Firearms And Ammunition Regulation Act’,” https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2022/ra_11766_2022.html.

⁴¹ See Republic Act 10591 of 2012, An Act Providing for a Comprehensive Law on Firearms and Ammunition and Providing Penalties for Violations Thereof”, https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2013/ra_10591_2013.html.

⁴² “Eased policy on civilian gun ownership triggers concerns,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 7 March 2024.

⁴³ “Impunity unbridled: Gov’t targets private armies,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 7 March 2023.

⁴⁴ “Memorandum Circular No.83 Creating the National Task Force for the Disbandment of the Private Armed Groups in the Areas of the Proposed Bangsamoro and the Adjacent Regions IX To XII”, 2 September 2015, https://lawphil.net/executive/mc/mc2015/mc_83_2015.html.

out in 2028, while perhaps civil society, working with some of the newly elected parliamentarians, can try to legislate controls on entrenched political machines or enforce existing provisions against political dynasties.

Police also have an important role to play. They should immediately cease the practice of “neutralising” suspects, just because it is so much trouble to bring them to court, and instead focus on negotiating arrests and apprehending them alive, especially if it involves a high-profile combatant. A ban on moonlighting for politicians needs to be enforced, with serious penalties for violation. And more effort needs to be made to increase the number of slots available to qualified Bangsamoro recruits in the local police.

No one ever said the peace would be easy, but it does not have to be portrayed as all or nothing. Perhaps it is time to declare that peace has been achieved and move on.

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