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Philippines

Mindano: state of war and martial law in the Philippine south

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Pierre Rousset spoke on June 4, to Reymund de Amore, a member of the leadership of the Revolutionary Workers' Party – Mindanao (RPM-M), a section of the Fourth International, about the recent fighting in Mindanao between government forces and groups identifying with Islamic State.

Since June 4, the situation has worsened. Until now, the government has been unable to reconquer the whole of Marawi City. Nearly all of its population has fled and the town itself is partially destroyed. The militarisation of the province has become tighter and the political situation in the country is getting more and more unstable.

How did the fighting begin?

On May 23, 2017, a joint army-police operation was undertaken in the city of Marawi to capture Isnilon Hapilon, considered as the agent of Islamic State in Mindanao (the USA has put a price of five million dollars on his head). The response of the Maute group was very strong and totally unexpected. The government had to send emergency reinforcements. The fighting hasn't stopped since then.

Can you enlighten us about the situation?

We are well established in the two provinces of Mindanao most affected by the crisis. Lanao del Sur, where Marawi is located and where the fighting has taken place; and Lanao del Norte, where the city of Iligan is located and where many refugees have fled. It is however difficult to give a precise picture of the situation. The violence of the conflict has led to massive population displacements.

Marawi city has more than 200,000 inhabitants, about 94% of them Muslim and about 6% Christian. According to a United Nations body, OCHA, on June 1st there were more than 100,000 "displaced persons", 14% of them in 24 evacuation centres and 86% outside of them in makeshift camps, or with relatives.

Movement is complicated with the imposition of curfews and the multiplication of military checkpoints on the roads. Finally, we are under martial law, the army blocks access to numerous zones to prevent journalists or independent observers finding out what is going on.

We can however say that the picture presented by the government is very far from the reality. The press has repeated the official figures (nearly a hundred Maute fighters killed, along with 30 government soldiers and 19 civilians). The presidency has rapidly announced the reconquest of 90% of Marawi. Indeed several days after this declaration, we saw significant reinforcements continuing to enter the city, including 21 tanks, which means in fact that the fighting is intensifying. There were units of Marines, land, sea and air troops and the national, police (PNP). It's war, and it has been going on for 13 days now.

The civilian victims are certainly numerous. On the one hand the Maute group has committed massacres. We have received testimonies from soldiers who have seen a number of decapitated corpses in the streets of Marawi (mainly Christians). On the other hand, the army has had massive recourse to aerial or artillery bombardments. There is no 'surgical precision'. The military top brass have even been forced to acknowledge a sizeable blunder: one of their units was bombed by error, leading to ten deaths in their ranks! The city is largely destroyed.

Where does the Maute group come from?

Maute is the name of a family originally from the town of Butig, influential in the municipalities of the province of Lanao del Sur. Two sons of Cayamora Maute - Abdullah Maute, Mohammad and Omar, pursued Islamic studies in the Middle East. They gained a status as intellectuals and wished to promote a Salafists/Jihadists, an extremist version of Islam, whereas Filipino Muslims (the Moros) are mainly Sunni (an Orthodox version of Islam) – this is notably the case with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The MILF set up some of its main camps in Lanao del Sur. The famous one is in Butig (Camp Busra) which was led by Aleem Abdulaziz Mimbatas (now dead), who became Vice-Chair of Internal Affairs for the Islamic Front and was one of the most trusted advisors of its founder, Salamat Hashim. Cayamora, the father of the Maute brothers, was for a time a member of the leadership of the MILF in the area and was just recently captured in checkpoint. The MILF closed its camp in Butig because of the hostility expressed by Maute, notably in relation to their differing religious choices.

The Maute family influence local political life. It possesses high calibre weaponry (which must come from the MILF) and has involved in criminal activities. This group really emerged in a big way on the political scene when Isnilon Hapilon came to propose to it that it identify itself with Islamic State, in concert with Abu Sayyaf, an organization known for its kidnapping activities. Being actively sought, we think that it wanted to find allies with a view to destabilizing Duterte under the cover of religious radicalism. Hence their occupation of Marawi and the massacres of Christians.

Abu Sayyaf and Maute have recruited youth, trained in their version of Islam. They represent an attractive pole, because they possess significant weaponry, affirm their radicalism and offer an alternative whereas the peace negotiations with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Islamic Front (MILF) have not reached resolution of the question of the right of self-determination of the Moros on their territory (Bangsamoro) by the Philippine government.

The MNLF and the MILF have both offered to help the government in the conflict in Marawi. An irony of history, since a few years ago (September 9, 2013), it was the MNLF which attacked another city (Zamboanga) in order to have itself recognized. In fact Abu Sayyaf is very active in the province of Nur Misuari, the historic leader of MNLF, and also in his home town. They attack civilians and kidnap for ransom.

The MILF is especially worried about the consequences of this conflict for the peace process which it has undertaken with the government. Hence its current position. Duterte and the leadership of the Islamic Front have agreed to propose to Maute/Abu Sayyaf the creation of a humanitarian corridor (Peace Corridor) open for two hours a day to bring aid to the people and care for the injured. The MILF will for this end use its own armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). An agreement in principle has been obtained, even if its implementation is not obvious. That could be the point of departure for broader negotiations, towards a way out of the crisis.

It seems, however, that the MILF does not have good relations with the local population. Also it has in its ranks many who are related to Maute and Abu Sayyaf. Indeed, in Moro culture, family, clan and blood links are thicker than ideology or religion. We have to take account of this factor and not interpret everything in political-religious terms.

The humanitarian situation is grave...

Very grave. The Maute group have executed civilians, set fire to the prison and buildings linked to the Church, including the Catholic cathedral of Saint Mary and the Dansalan college, managed by Protestants, and then they

have taken hostages, including a priest and some teachers. Maute and the groups allied to them are extending their field of action and sowing terror around them, adopting a policy in the style of Islamic State.

The imposition of martial law by Duterte has aggravated the situation by creating a state of generalised arbitrariness, at least in the conception that the president has of it. The Philippine Constitution sets the framework for the conditions of declaration of martial law and the extraordinary powers conferred on the army or government. Indeed, it was proclaimed in 1987, after the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship and its regime of martial law. It is much more democratic than many Constitutions in the Western world.

Duterte has swept away the constitutional constraints with a wave of the hand. He has said that martial law will be “like under Marcos” – in fact, he observes less formalities than Ferdinand Marcos in 1972. He has “covered” for violations of human rights in advanced by saying that he will assume himself the responsibility for “blunders” committed by government forces and drove home the point – in the form of a “joke” – by telling soldiers that they can with impunity rape up to three women, but no more than that.

The military leadership has taken its distances in relation to Duterte on this question, assuring that it will operate within the constitutional framework. This “dissonance” expresses very real political tensions between the army and the presidency.

Duterte wages the “war on terror” like his “war on drugs” without any concern for law and human rights.

How is solidarity organised?

There are many spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity, for example, by Philippines working abroad who have sent money to their relatives. Various humanitarian organisations are helping to manage the evacuation centres or makeshift camps. It is important to us that the associative and social movements “on the ground” coordinate their own efforts, giving a popular and collective dimension to this solidarity, allowing the populations concerned to themselves defend their rights.

This is in particular what is done by MiHANDs, a coalition of around fifty organisations in Mindanao who coordinate their actions during situations of humanitarian crisis, whatever the origin: the Haiyan (Yolanda) super typhoon in the Visayas, or the military conflict in Marawi. It has acquired a precious experience in this area. However today it has to intervene in dangerous conditions. It has activated its activist network up to the conflict zones, but it has to permanently evaluate what is and isn't possible.

In the Philippines, MiHANDs collects donations in kind (for all the needs of everyday life) as well as financial contributions. At the international level, it is obviously about financial support. For us it seems important to make the situation in Mindanao as widely known as possible so as to better respond to their appeal for solidarity.

The state of war continues, and any possible return to normal will take a lot of time. Marawi city has been partly destroyed by fire and bombs. Solidarity is thus both urgent and necessary. That is one of the reasons we have the policy of aiding self-organisation of the populations and communities affected, so that they regain control of their destiny. Punctual aid is always insufficient.

Why do you speak of a “possible” return to normal?

Because it's possible that the conflict gets worse and even spreads beyond Mindanao, to the region of the capital

notably, or to Cebu. A casino very near the international airport in Manila has already been attacked, although the circumstances remain a little hazy. President Duterte envisages imposing martial law across the whole country. The repercussions of the war in Marawi are and will be profound. All the more so since, generally, the political situation remains very uncertain.

The influence of the USA in the Philippines is very profound. The archipelago was one of their few colonies and independence (1946) was prepared in such a way as to maintain very close links between the former metropolis and the local élites. The armed forces are trained in US military academies.

Since his election nearly a year ago, president Duterte has sought to play Beijing and Moscow off against Washington, without actually breaking links. It's a dangerous game. Duterte's popularity certainly remains very high (80%), although it has fallen a little. However, Washington cannot allow the loss of the Philippines and doesn't want to react too late. We think that the CIA is working underhand in Mindanao to destabilise the presidency, taking advantage of Abu Sayyaf for this purpose to sharpen religious conflicts via the Maute group.

I note that in late May Congress refused to confirm environment minister Gina Lopez in her post. The mining industry had her scalp. How is that some members of a government formed in June 2016 are not yet confirmed?

The process of ratification by the Congress of members of the Cabinet is (by choice) very slow so as to take account of the evolution of the relationship of forces. The government includes leftist elements alongside direct representatives of the élites. When the popularity of Duterte was at its zenith (more than 90%), its choices could not be challenged. It has become possible to get rid of an activist opposed to the mining lobby.

The (Maoist) Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has four representatives in the government at ministerial or equivalent level. They have not been ratified. Their fate is in the balance with the evolution of the peace negotiations between the Maoist guerrillas and the regime – the talks are currently at a standstill.

In fact, many other things remain in the balance, including the Duterte presidency.

All the peace processes seem to be at a standstill currently.

Yes, for now the talks between the CPP and the government are deadlocked. The Maoist guerrillas are calling for the intensification of their military operations, Duterte is threatening to jail the party's negotiators.

In June 2016 Duterte hoped that by including in the government leaders of the legal movements identified with the pro-CPP "bloc" and by opening a new cycle of talks he could convince at least some of the Maoist regional leaderships to enter into substantial peace negotiations. On this question he was jeopardising his credibility with the army. For now, nothing has happened. For the first time since its foundation in 1968 (!), the CPP has held a congress, thanks to an Internet link between one of its zones in Mindanao and Holland, where a part of the leadership lives in exile. This congress, whose conditions of preparation aren't known, has reaffirmed the previous line, including the primacy of rural armed struggle.

One of the mechanisms which has led to the repeated breakdown of the peace talks between the presidency and the PCP is the fact that the two unilateral ceasefire declarations have been announced independently of each other, by the NPA and by the government. There was no joint, bilateral ceasefire declaration which would have allowed the establishment of a common mechanism of monitoring and implementation, allowing rapid reaction in the event of

incidents. More profoundly, the PCP is demanding socio-political commitments from the government prior to negotiations, whereas the government thinks these matters should be the subject of the negotiations.

So far as the negotiations with the Muslim movements in Mindanao are concerned, an agreement had been signed by the previous Aquino administration and the MILF for the creation of new entity under the governance of the latter. This agreement required a constitutional reform and was unable to find a majority in Congress before the presidential election which brought Duterte to power.

Many established interests have undermined the agreement with the MILF; but the MILF itself has neither wished nor been able to give guarantees on the rights which would be enjoyed by the Lumads (mountain tribes), villages and Christian populations, and the other Muslim organisations, starting with the MNLF (Misuari group).

In the leadership of the MILF and MNLF today we find powerful political clans, very rich businessmen. They are notably linked to the mining and forestry groups which exploit the wealth of Mindanao, often to the detriment of the local populations. The current developments also show that the two big Muslim fronts have not even been able to block the affirmation of a very aggressive Islamic fundamentalist group.

One of the most important issues from the election of Duterte was precisely the question of the peace negotiations. He resumed the process with the PCP and initiated a new framework for talks in Mindanao, opened this time with all the actors concerned: the MILF obviously but also the MNLF, representatives of the Lumads and other communities. This process could now be at risk.

The failure of the past negotiations (with the PCP or the armed Muslim organisations) was notably related to a key democratic question: they were carried out at the top, in secret, without popular involvement. The people were invited to approve *a posteriori* an agreement which had been drawn up without their participation.

We – the RPM-M and the Revolutionary Peoples' Army (RPA) – are also involved in a peace process in Mindanao. We have involved the local people in the talks, when they have taken place, and we let them judge any possible intermediary agreements which concern them primarily. We do not carry out any offensive operation against the government; our posture is defensive, to ensure our protection and those of the communities where we are established. Unhappily we are faced with the militarisation of society, the war in Marawi, with martial law. One of our cadres, comrade Ruben, was killed last March by government forces in the province of Lanao del Norte. We are calling for international solidarity to bring pressure on the Philippine government to immediately lift martial law in Mindanao and to not extend it to the other regions of the country.

In these conditions, how can we disarm? But we support the combat waged by civil society to create conditions for a lasting peace in Mindanao, where the people have suffered harshly under decades of conflict. The war in Marawi can generate a movement of rejection which gives new life to this struggle, bringing together the three peoples of our island: Moros, Lumads and the Christian descendants of the Philippine colonists who initially came from the north and centre of the archipelago.

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