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Philippines

# Mindanao on the brink

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**Hundreds dead, tens of thousands of refugees and the very real threat of further escalating hostilities between Muslim nationalists and the central government. That is the situation the people of Mindanao, the southern part of the Philippines, find themselves in.**

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**Mindanao: Eighth most populous island in the world**

Wikimedia

They have been there before; in the seventies when the island saw heavy fighting between Islamic independence fighters and Marcos' troops and in 2000 when then president Joseph Estrada declared 'total war' against the Muslim separatists. In a cruel twist of irony, the spark that ignited the newest round of fighting were the contents of a treaty that some hoped would bring peace to the island once and for all.

On the surface, the developments of the last few weeks are easy to follow. After years of negotiating, the government of current president Arroyo seemed to agree with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front – the main Muslim group still at war with the Filipino government – about the establishment of a highly autonomous homeland for the Muslim minority, or Moros as they're called in the Philippines. The agreement was supposed to end more than twenty years of fighting between the MILF and the government in Manila – fighting that started after the MILF broke away from the other major Muslim nationalist movement, the Moro National Liberation Front, in the late seventies, disagreeing with its handling of negotiations with the central government. The already existing Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao – the ARMM, formed as a result of the agreements between the MNLF and the government - would be extended and granted additional rights to form the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) – Bangsamoro being the name used for the nation of Philippine Muslims.

Things went awry when shortly before the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain which would set the borders of the BJE, the contents of the treaty became public. Not only would the BJE be endowed with extensive privileges, causing the anger of Filipino chauvinists who saw this as splitting of the Republic of the Philippines; large proportions of land would be included in the BJE even though its inhabitants had not been consulted about this. Some regions that would be included in the BJE are pre-dominantly inhabited by Christians or non-Muslim indigenous groups with their own distinct cultures and religions.

Opponents of the treaty urged the constitutional court to declare the agreement unconstitutional, saying no government has the right to divide the national territory of the Republic. The court issued a temporary restraining order, ordering the government to post-pone signing the agreement until it could make a definitive decision about its constitutionality. This order came on August 4, just before the official signing in Kuala Lumpur. All the participants of both panels were already in Malaysia to attend the signing ceremony.

The MILF, obviously angered by this turn of events, declared that the ruling of the court was an internal matter for the Filipino government and that it considered the agreement a done deal. Two military commanders of the MILF decided however that the time for talking was over. Commanders Kato and Bravo attacked a number of Christian communities that had protested against the establishment of the BJE. Dozens of civilians were killed, houses looted and burnt. To cover their retreat from the army, the MILF fighters took civilians hostage in a number of cases, using them as human shields.

These attacks were not authorized by the central leadership of the MILF. But so far the MILF has refused to place the commanders under arrest or expel them. The government demands that the commanders will be handed over

and placed large prizes on their heads – further antagonizing the MILF. The chief negotiator for the MILF, Mohager Iqbal, declared they would never hand the commanders over and that if they would stand trial, this would be in a court organized by the MILF. The MILF is a loose organization and many of its members divide their loyalties between the organization as such, local leaders and individual figureheads in the movement and this is not the first time individual commanders acted on their own.

The fighting so far has left hundreds dead – mainly civilians - and forced a large number of people to flee their home. Precise numbers are difficult to establish but the Red Cross houses 70.000 refugees that left their homes and estimates already half a million people on the total island population of 18 million have been affected by the fighting. So far, officially the fighting has been limited between the army and the troops of three MILF field commanders – Kato, Bravo and a third commander, Pangalian, who has been accused of helping the two others. But as the number of casualties mounts and MILF guerrillas split up and retreat to other areas to stay out of the hands of the enemy, the risk of other MILF troops and even the organization as such joining the combat is very real. Already, a majority of the guerrilla camps of the MILF have been attacked.

Not so obvious is what the explanation for the recent events is. The cause the Moro Islamic Liberation Front is fighting for is well-known; an independent Muslim homeland, in some form or another. The organization is highly critical of the level of autonomy of the ARMM but the MILF has seemed willing to settle for an increased level of autonomy. The struggle of the Moros for self-determination goes back a long way, with Moro nationalists placing themselves in what they see as the centuries old tradition of the anti-colonial resistance against successive invaders – the Spanish, Americans, Christian Filipino's – by the Moros. In its modern form, the fighting broke out when in the early seventies the MNLF decided to take up arms against the Marcos regime in an attempt to end years of discrimination and ill-treatment.

Although a resource-rich and fertile area, Mindanao remains the poorest part of the Philippines, underdeveloped and neglected. Added to this is the specific, racist oppression of the Moros. In the fifties, Manila shipped large numbers of Christian, landless peasants from northern Luzon to Mindanao, displacing large numbers of mostly Muslim farmers there. This was an attempt to defuse a communist-led insurgency in the north that was mainly based on the peasantry. Later, in the seventies not just the MNLF but also the Marcos regime propagandized the war as a religious conflict. Manila funded Christian fundamentalist vigilante groups that committed a large number of cruelties. State sanctioned anti-Muslim racism made the lives for many Moro's, already under-privileged, worse.

Although focusing on democratic, political goals as national self-determination, both the MNLF and the MILF have acquired some understanding that there's an economic side to the plight of the Moros – part of the agreement that led to the establishment of the ARMM was a series of developmental projects by the central government in the Muslim territories. Many of these promises remained unfulfilled.

But why did this old conflict lead to renewed fighting when a solution seemed so close? A possible interpretation of the recent events is that the government never intended the peace treaty to be implemented and that it hoped that protest from communities or the court would block the treaty, giving the government a reason to resume the war and maybe even provoking the MILF to attack first. If this was indeed the plan, it appears to have been successful.

Such a level of cynicism might be difficult to imagine but the Arroyo government and its supporters would be well capable of it. Since Arroyo's coming to power in 2001 hundreds of progressive activists have been murdered by hit-squads or were 'disappeared'. Regarding the other main insurgency in the countries, led by the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines, the government has made it clear that its goal is not peace-talks but making 'irrelevant', through military means, the CPP's armed operations before 2010.

Indeed, the first round of fighting seemed to be welcomed by the government. The first attacks happened on the

18th of August; three days later the government declared that in the future its focus in negotiations would not be the rebel groups themselves but the communities in affected areas. That means side-stepping a group like the MILF, which enjoys broad support among the Moro population – according to some estimates it can mobilize over 100.000 armed fighters - and effectively rejecting their claim that they speak for the Moros. Only a few days later, this statement was followed up by a declaration that in any future talks with armed groups, their demobilization, disarmament and the 'rehabilitation' of its former fighters into society would be the first issues on the agenda. In plain English, this means that the government makes surrender a pre-condition for future talks. It seems unlikely that the MILF, aware that it thanks its bargaining position largely to its military power and not from any democratic niceties from Manila, will accept this. The whole agreement was then thrown in the trash by the government – even surprising the judges who had ruled a postponement of the signing.

Long before the fighting broke out the army had been organizing paramilitary groups and distributing large quantities of weapons, only to stand back when the first MILF attacks happened. Soldiers remained in their barracks or arrived hours after the fighting broke out. One reason why so many civilians were killed was that they fought with their own weapons against the MILF. All of this, critics of the government say, can only mean one thing; that Manila sprung a trap on the MILF.

Mindanao has been milked by the Manila government for its resources for decades. Except from agricultural products, various kinds of metals like zinc, copper and gold, are found on the island. And its not only natural resources the Arroyo government has been mining in Mindanao: as Nathan Quimpo points out, it has been massive fraud in the ARMM that has allowed the political machines of Arroyo and her supporters to steal the most recent elections; Mindanao has become 'the national center for committing electoral fraud and stealing elections at the national level'<sup>1</sup>. Making a deal with a part of the Moro-elite for some kind of political autonomy or granting them a somewhat larger slice of the pie - like the ruling elite did when it established the ARMM – is one thing, giving up control over these resources is another. Some of the most resource-rich parts of the island are under MILF control and the BJE would have been allowed to control a size able part of Mindanao and have its own currency, armed forces and diplomatic ties with the outside world, thus taking its people and resources out of the hands of Manila.

The MILF has lost a considerable amount of support the last few weeks. Part of its appeal was that it considered itself a revolutionary organization at war with the state, not with the Christian community, unlike some of the splinter groups that have been targeting civilians. This attitude not only won it sympathy among Moros but also the respect of Christian Filipino's who support a political settlement. If the current conflict spirals further down the path of a sectarian confrontation, the Filipino elite – Christian and Moro - will be the one benefiting from a weakened, divided opposition while the Moro guerrilla's will be fighting and dying for empty promises. Already, civilians are arming themselves or asking for more arms from the army to fight against the MILF. Socialists in the Philippines, like the section of the Fourth International – the Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao or RWP-M which concentrates its work on Mindanao, face the hard task of confronting state-repression and combining the struggle for democratic rights like self-determination with economic emancipation.