

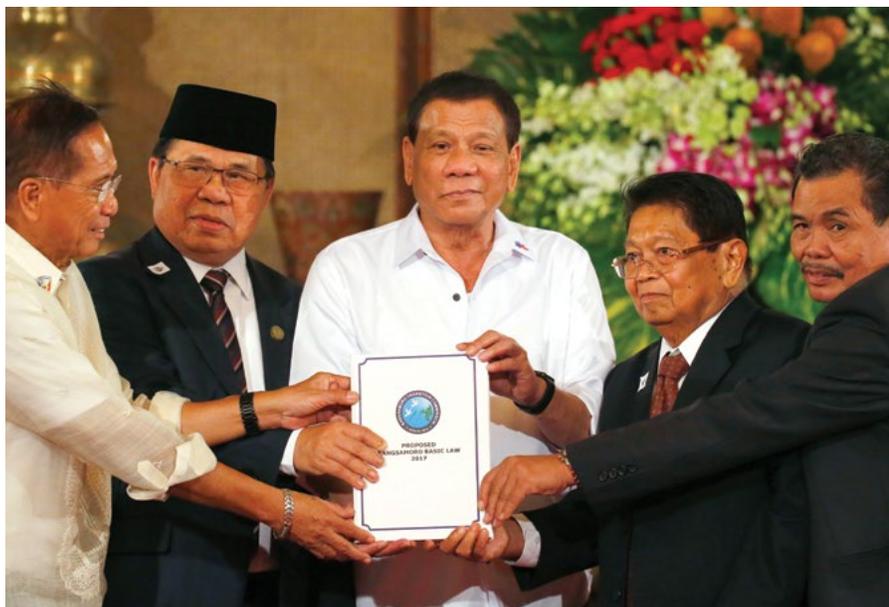
SPECIAL REPORT

NO. 468 | JUNE 2020

UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE www.usip.org

The Challenges Facing the Philippines' Bangsamoro Autonomous Region at One Year

By Zachary Abuza and Luke Lischin



Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, center, holds the draft of the Bangsamoro Basic Law during a ceremony at Malacañang Palace on July 17, 2017. (Photo by Bullit Marquez/AP)

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Summary

- The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was formally established in early 2019 as part of a peace agreement to end nearly five decades of conflict between the Philippine government and Moro secessionists.
- In its first year, the BARMM accomplished several major feats, including forming a transitional government, drafting a regional budget, and overseeing the decommissioning of thousands of fighters.
- Yet the BARMM faces a number of challenges that could undermine the entire peace process, including the task of coalition building in the regional government, which is complicated by intra-Moro competition among rival groups.
- Furthermore, militant Moro groups affiliated with the Islamic State, though small and geographically separated, are a clear danger to the citizens of the BARMM and a potential spoiler to the peace process.
- The gains made by the BARMM are impressive but not irreversible. At this pivotal time, outside help—if it is of the right kind—to support the peace process would be invaluable. The United States has the opportunity to augment the institutional capacity of the BARMM by providing counseling, training, oversight, and financial aid.



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Making Peace Possible

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is the result of over twenty years of fieldwork in the southern Philippines, detailed data set analysis, as well as extensive research into the Bangsamoro peace agreement. It is the first thorough analysis of the implementation of the peace agreement, including milestones and shortcomings, and of what needs to happen in the coming years to achieve full implementation.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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Special Report No. 468. First published 2020.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-807-4



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Members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front prepare to battle Islamic State-affiliated militants in Datu Salibo, a town on the island of Mindanao on September 28, 2017. (Photo by Jes Aznar/New York Times)

Introduction

In 2014, a historic peace agreement was concluded between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which had been fighting since the 1970s for independence for the “Bangsamoro” (literally, “Moro nation”), an artificial construct that includes nine separate ethnolinguistic groups in the southern Philippines. A cease-fire violation in 2015 delayed implementation of the agreement, but a five-month siege of a major southern city in mid-2017 by pro-Islamic State militants drove home to the government and the MILF the importance of peace and security in the southern Philippines. By mid-2018, the Philippine Congress passed the implementing legislation for the peace process, and in January 2019 the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was formally established by plebiscite.

By February 2020, the BARMM could look back on a year that had witnessed no major setbacks to the peace process but had highlighted a number of issues in its implementation that could undermine this opportunity to bring peace and development to this conflict-prone area. Among the countries of Southeast Asia, the Philippines is the one most affected by terrorism, and much of that occurs in the country’s south.¹ The euphoria of 2014 has given way to a realization of the host of challenges facing the new autonomous government as it gets to work and tries to reconcile its legal mandate with national legislation and a 1996 peace agreement with a rival faction. The devil of a peace process is in the details and in implementation, but the 2014 agreement is nonetheless the best chance at bringing peace to a region that has been wracked by war since the early 1970s.

The intent of this report in focusing on the challenges facing the BARMM is not to diminish the BARMM's accomplishments, but to emphasize the gravity of the obstacles it yet faces. Peace processes do not end at the signing of the agreement; they require years of continued implementation, legal tweaking, the delivery of services and transitional justice, and the management of expectations. At just over one year old, the BARMM is still a fragile project, one that risks shattering should it stumble too hard.

This report is a thorough assessment of the BARMM's first year and of the challenges confronting its governance and the next phases of the peace process. Whereas journalism and scholarship on the BARMM in the Philippines and abroad are limited in scope to narrow categories of threats and opportunities, this report offers a holistic assessment of interrelated challenges. Among the subjects the report spotlights are the enduring challenges posed by local political dynasties and the role of external actors. The report is the product of over twenty years of fieldwork in Mindanao and other parts of the Philippines, most recently in August 2019, in addition to rigorous analysis not only of laws and administrative policies, but also of detailed open-source data sets of political violence in the southern Philippines.

Advent and Structure of the BARMM

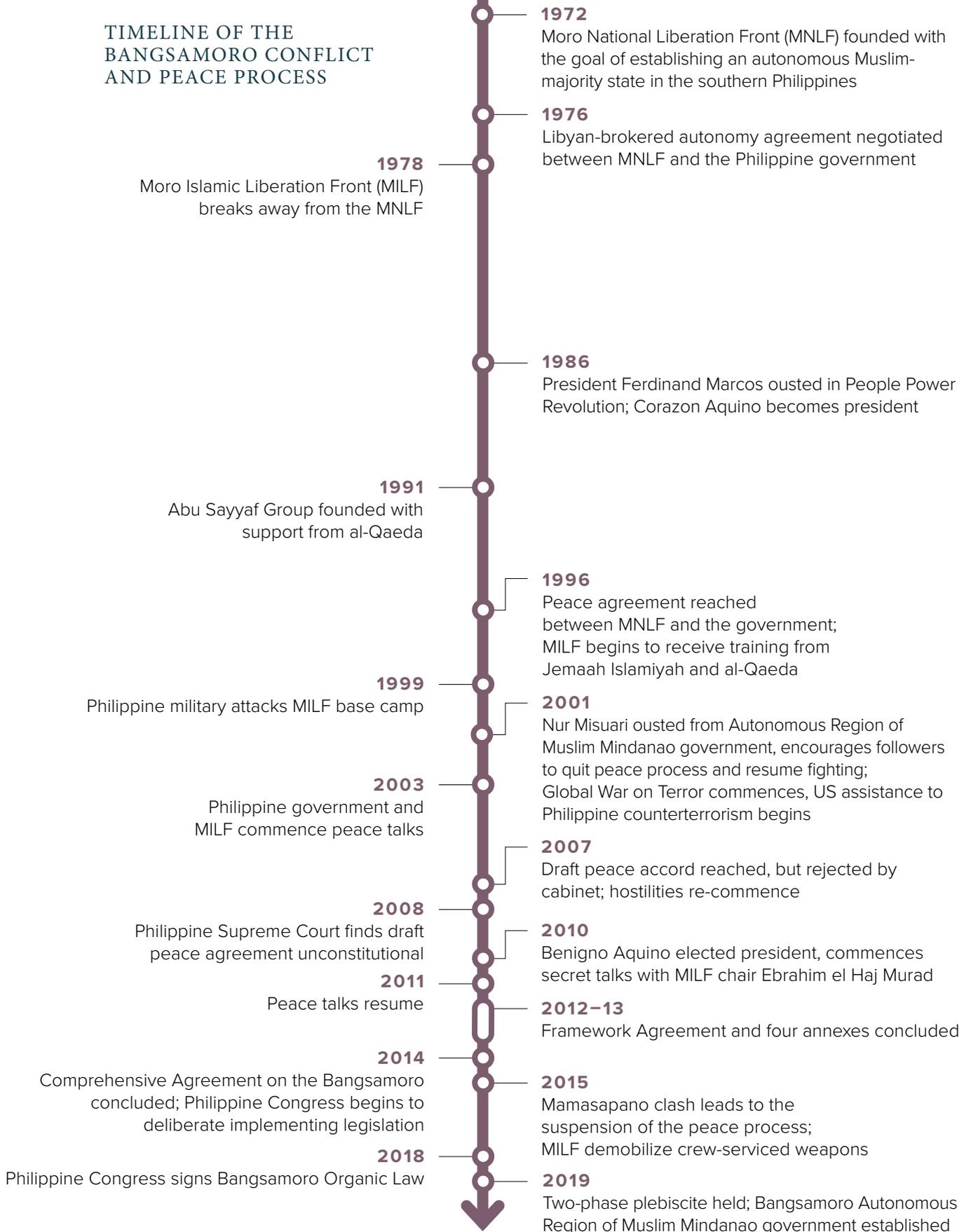
Moro secessionism erupted in the early 1970s, led by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and its success largely explains President Ferdinand Marcos's declaration of nationwide martial law in 1972. In 1976, Marcos and the MNLF signed the Tripoli Accord, an autonomy agreement intended to end the MNLF's rebellion. The agreement, however, was flawed and poorly implemented, and the MNLF returned to fight for another twenty years. By 1978, a large faction of the MNLF led by Hashim Salamat broke away to form the MILF. The MILF continued to grow in strength up until 1996, when the government and the MNLF signed a second autonomy agreement. That agreement, like its predecessor, was poorly implemented, and civil war continued. By 1999, the MILF controlled vast swaths of Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines, and had established a proto-state that became the target of a major military offensive in 1999.

The MILF commenced negotiations with the government in 2003. Hostilities broke out at key junctures, with the MILF losing key territories. By 2007, the MILF had abandoned its goal of an independent homeland and accepted in principle an autonomy agreement. The crux of negotiations focused on the size of the autonomous region.

Yet, the draft peace agreement was rejected by the cabinet of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2007. In 2008, in a further blow to the agreement, the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional. Some units of the MILF resorted to violence in retaliation, but they were unable to sustain their operations. Some hardline commanders broke away and formed the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in 2007. Peace talks with the MILF resumed in 2011 with the election of President Benigno Aquino, leading to the Framework Agreement of 2012 and its four annexes in February 2013, and then to the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in March 2014.

The government-MILF peace process could not occur without a parallel intra-Moro reconciliation process, which proved far more challenging. The MNLF, which feared losing its political power, was

**TIMELINE OF THE
BANGSAMORO CONFLICT
AND PEACE PROCESS**





SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES AND THE BARM

Geographically, the BARMM encompasses the provinces of Basilan (except Isabella City), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, as well as Marawi City, Lamitan City, Cotabato City, and sixty-three barangays (villages, the lowest administrative unit of local government) in Cotabato. (Adapted from artwork by kosmozoo/iStock)

a staunch opponent of the MILF's peace process. Throughout the negotiations between the MILF and the government, the MNLF demanded the holding of "tripartite talks" between the government, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and itself to revisit the 1996 accord. If that was fully implemented, the MNLF calculated, the MILF's peace process would be moot. But the government rejected the MNLF's proposal and encouraged it to give its support to the MILF-government agreement, which promised all Moros greater autonomy and powers. The MNLF was unhappy that its rival had won greater concessions, but internal factionalism weakened the MNLF's own negotiating position.

The Comprehensive Agreement is a complex and far-reaching document covering governance, fiscal affairs, revenue sharing, natural resources, demobilization and disarmament, transitional justice and human rights, jurisprudence, and minority rights. The implementing legislation that aims to reconcile the peace agreement with the Philippine constitution and laws is now known as the Bangsamoro Organic Law, but it originated from various drafts of what was called the Bangsamoro Basic Law.

Congress was deliberating the Bangsamoro Basic Law when, in January 2015, a clash erupted between MILF combatants and an elite group of police in the town of Mamasapano, Maguindanao Province, in central Mindanao. The police were conducting a counterterrorist operation against

two foreign-born members of Jemaah Islamiyah, the regional al-Qaeda franchise, who were living in MILF-controlled territory. Convinced that the MILF would tip the jihadists off, the police did not coordinate the operation with the MILF, in defiance of cease-fire protocols. (The MILF’s ties to jihadi organizations were supported through kinship and clan relations with members of the BIFF—who, in 2014, had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.) Forty-four policemen were killed during the operation, including some who were filmed being executed. While the MILF described the event as a “tragic mis-encounter,” and an act of self-defense, it convinced many in Philippine politics, security services, and society that the MILF could not be trusted. It was a botched tactical action that had strategic consequences.

At the time of the incident, the Philippines was entering its election season with several senators running for the presidency. Myriad investigations and congressional hearings were launched, and political support for the Basic Law’s passage evaporated. The MILF tried to show its goodwill, first by decommissioning its crew-serviced heavy weapons, but the political environment was so toxic for the peace process that the government’s lead negotiators faced legal charges of treason.² Anti-MILF sentiment was only curbed thanks to efforts by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) leadership. The cease-fire was assiduously maintained thereafter.

While sympathetic to the plight of the Bangsamoro, President Rodrigo Duterte, who was elected in May 2016, sent mixed messages about the MILF peace process. While not opposed to the peace agreement in principle, he was concerned that it would use up political capital he needed to achieve his primary legislative goal: a constitutional amendment to establish a federal system.

It was not until nearly two years into Duterte’s presidency that Congress took up the Organic Law. The draft was significantly watered down from what had been negotiated in the second half of 2014. The MILF, frustrated but realistic, was forced to relinquish the idea of creating an independent regional police force and lost some fiscal powers.

The Organic Law received only tepid support from the president, who feared that expending political capital on the BARMM would jeopardize his agenda to amend the constitution to establish a federal system.³ But finally, on July 26, 2018, the Organic Law was signed into law.⁴ The Organic Law established the BARMM, with its boundaries determined by a two-phase plebiscite conducted in January and February 2019.⁵ Although the results of that plebiscite were contested, those tensions have since abated.

List of Acronyms

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines	BIAF	Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces
ARMM	Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao	BIFF	Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters
ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group	BTA	Bangsamoro Transitional Authority
BARMM	Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao	MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front
		MILF	Moro Islamic Liberation Front

Geographically, the BARMM encompasses the provinces of Basilan (except Isabella City), Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, as well as Marawi City, Lamitan City, Cotabato City, and sixty-three barangays (villages, the lowest administrative unit of local government) in Cotabato. The MILF anticipated that several barangays in Lanao del Norte would be included as well, but these communities voted by a narrow margin to stay outside of the BARMM following an intense and controversial campaign, marred by allegations of vote buying and political intimidation, led by an anti-MILF politician.

Presiding over this region is the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA), an appointed government that serves as the interim parliament of the BARMM until democratic elections are held in 2022. The BTA is intended to be broad based and inclusive. Its eighty members include former officials of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), nine MNLF representatives, and forty MILF representatives.⁶ The BTA is presided over by eight parliament officers, including the speaker, Ali Pangalian M. Balindong, a former MNLF counsel who previously served as speaker for the ARMM Assembly and as a congressman. The deputy speaker is Hatimil E. Hassan of Basilan, who was a part of the MNLF peace negotiating panel and also served as speaker in the former ARMM Assembly. Twelve of the eighty members are women. The interim chief minister of the BARMM is Ebrahim el Haj Murad, also known by his given name Ahod Balawag Ebrahim, the chairman of the MILF, who presides over a fourteen-person cabinet.

The BARMM established a parliamentary form of government. This was a pragmatic decision taken largely to secure buy-in from the MNLF. Unlike the MILF, the MNLF has strong support among the Tausugs and Yakan ethnic groups in southwestern Mindanao, and therefore a parliamentary system was seen as a way of guaranteeing that the MNLF would be represented in the BARMM government.

Milestones of the Peace Process

The peace process between the government and the MILF is historic in its own right. It is a multi-actor peace process that attempts to bring almost fifty years of secessionist insurgency to an end. The peace agreement was truly a negotiated settlement, which required significant and meaningful concessions on the part of all sides. It has established a creative power and revenue-sharing system within a unitary state. Its implementation led to a dramatic decline in political violence in Mindanao, Basilan, and Sulu, and it created a template for other warring parties to emulate.

The MILF had every reason to be wary about a peace process that would lead to the demobilization of its fighters because the surrender of weapons would limit their ability to return to war. Nor was the Philippine government a trustworthy partner, having a long history, dating back to 1976, of signing agreements that it did not implement.

Yet the peace process has achieved several significant milestones, not least the completion of the first phase of demobilization of MILF combatants. On September 7, 2019, 1,060 MILF combatants were decommissioned and 940 firearms turned in.⁷ Twelve thousand more members of the MILF's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) will be decommissioned by the end of 2020, in a process overseen by Turkish, Norwegian, and Bruneian officials. The International Disarmament Body will put the weapons beyond use, stored in eleven remotely monitored facilities.⁸



Agents of an independent decommissioning body inspect surrendered firearms in the town of Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, Philippines on September 7, 2019. (Photo by STR/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

Unfortunately, there is less to the decommissioning than meets the eye. The MILF claimed ownership of just seven thousand firearms between roughly thirty thousand fighters, a declaration that Chief Peace Adviser Carlito Galvez Jr. characterized as “very conservative.”⁹ The best estimates were some eleven thousand combatants at the height of the conflict, and even then, as guerrilla fighters, many were working in the agriculture sector. Many of the MILF’s combatants in the first phase of the demobilization were relatively old and in poor health. Experts consulted for this report believe that the thirty thousand figure includes people who were simply too old to still be fighters or who were no longer active combatants.

The MILF has an incentive to swell its ranks, both to obtain more resources for decommissioning and to secure a higher number of potential jobs in the security services. The MILF has pledged to demobilize and disarm one-third of its fighters by April 2020.¹⁰

To some extent, the disparity between the number of its firearms and the number of its fighters can be explained by the fact that BIAF members own their weapons privately, and these are not covered under the decommissioning plan. Most of these firearms are illegally held, highlighting the need to reconcile gun ownership in the BARMM with national laws.¹¹ Even the firearms turned in by the MILF were mostly old and in poor condition, and included Korean War-era

bolt-action rifles. Concern has grown that the MILF is either holding on to its automatic weapons or selling them on the black market. Such fears are undermining confidence in the normalization process.¹² Nonetheless, the demobilization and disarmament process is continuing and is scheduled to be completed by the time parliamentary elections are held in 2022.

In short, the MILF has overestimated the number of combatants that it seeks resources to demobilize while underestimating the number of weapons it has, either because it wants to hold on to them as an insurance policy or because it knows it could not force its own combatants to voluntarily surrender their weaponry.

As part of its preparations for the 2022 elections, the MILF began to transition itself into a legal political party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party, established in December 2014 and led by a MILF veteran.¹³ The party has received training from a host of both domestic and international civil society organizations in party and platform development. The transition from an insurgent group to a political party is never an easy one, and as with the decommissioning process, progress has been real but limited. There are legitimate concerns that some MILF commanders will not join in the political process, and it is unclear how they will react if there are local challengers to what they believe to be an entitlement to political power.

The creation of a Bangsamoro justice system that incorporates a sharia high court with appellate jurisdiction over sharia district courts is another notable accomplishment of the peace process. Given the lack of trust among the Mindanaon public in the Philippine justice system, the sharia court system is intended to provide a legitimate legal structure applicable to Muslim residents of the BARMM. The Organic Law also recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples living in the BARMM and contains provisions validating their customary laws and protecting their rights, although (as discussed below) ancestral domain policies are inchoate.

Another sign of the BARMM's concern to provide good governance is the fact that its health service, despite being nascent and poorly resourced, has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with speed and humanity. Social welfare agents delivered food to quarantined people, and a hundred-bed hospital was quickly constructed in anticipation of the large number of people who would need care.

Challenges Ahead

Although these milestones are encouraging, sustaining and expanding the gains made by the peace process depends on how the BARMM government responds to a host of challenges stemming from political, fiscal, and human capital shortfalls—namely, those relating to intraparty governance, intergovernmental relations, intra-Moro political competition, and security. Any one of these challenges could jeopardize the entire peace process. Popular expectations are very high, and the BTA's management of those expectations will be critical in respect of each of them.

THE BTA AND INTRAPARTY GOVERNANCE

As interim chief minister of the BARMM, Ebrahim el Haj Murad is well aware of the challenges facing the MILF, challenges exacerbated by the MILF's lack of governing experience.¹⁴ As he admitted in an interview in September 2019, "The first challenge we face is office life itself. It is a

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challenge to transform our organization into a structure of governance. As head of a government, my life is different from what it was as head of a revolutionary organization.”¹⁵

The institutional demands of insurgency are seldom conducive to the cultivation of democratic norms and processes within rebel groups transitioning from warfare to electoral politics. As Gyda M. Sindre’s comparative study of insurgents-turned-politicians concludes, “The nature and persistence of decentralized and sometimes highly fragmented wartime command structures and continued dependence

on such networks to run the party organization works counter the development of intra-party democracy.”¹⁶ The leaders of insurgencies tend to be secretive and autonomous from their constituents, so the transition to a transparent and accountable decision-making style is never an easy one.

Since its founding, the MILF has been governed by a small and secretive Central Committee that until 2014 operated in wartime conditions. Like many vanguard organizations, the MILF has tended to overstate its degree of popular support. While it had a political wing to mobilize support and conduct outreach to civil society organizations, the MILF was a top-down organization—albeit one that sought consensus—not a democratic one.

Likewise, the BIAF distributed command authority through a fairly well-defined hierarchy that extended from the general staff down through regional fronts and base commands to units. Command and control ebbed and flowed during different periods of the conflict, and most units operated with considerable autonomy. These BIAF commands held sway in their areas of operation, brokering ties with local and provincial actors to sustain their insurgency. In the process, many commanders rose to regional prominence, sometimes retiring from the MILF to launch successful political careers on their own.

The MILF’s component of the BTA has to get used to sharing power, building consensus, and negotiating with political rivals that represent constituencies apart from the largely Maguindanaoan— and to a lesser extent Maranao—communities supporting the MILF. Although the BTA is supposed to have broad demographic and political representation, the executive and cabinet are dominated by members of the MILF from Maguindanao. Understandably, politicians, academics, and other actors involved in the peace process have voiced concern that Murad continues to consult and empower his MILF comrades, who have little in the way of law-making expertise, rather than BTA members who had served in the previous ARMM government.¹⁷ The national government’s appointees to the BTA face their own challenges and political rivalries.

Despite initial success in its first year, the BTA has not yet made the leap from a closed executive counsel to a broader deliberative space, where public policy and laws have to be written, deliberated, passed, and implemented. Murad has begun to bring his cabinet on inspection tours to villages to modestly enhance accountability by having the BTA’s executive engage in dialogues directly with local governments and citizens.¹⁸

In 2019, critics, including MNLF representatives and independent politicians in Mindanao, complained that the MILF-dominated BARMM cabinet was not reporting to or engaging with the BTA at large.¹⁹ Murad has since tried to improve transparency, lest he be seen to be ruling at the

expense of other groups and sectoral interests, which would undermine his and the cabinet's political legitimacy. Nevertheless, concerns regarding MILF patronage and corruption within the BARMM persist in private discourses.²⁰

The BTA must also pass at least seven major pieces of legislation, dealing with matters ranging from taxation to the civil service to indigenous affairs. As of March 2020, only two—on the education code and the local government code—had made it to the final draft phase.²¹ Once written and passed, these codes will reconcile the BARMM with national codes. Drafting these laws would be a major challenge for any legislative body, let alone a new one with limited legal experience and limited time to spare. The local government and education bills may be voted on in mid-2020, though the COVID-19 response could set back that schedule. Drafting all seven codes will be the primary challenge for the BTA in its second year, and if it falls short the peace process could be derailed.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

The second critical challenge to the BARMM's success is the task of delineating and negotiating its relationship with the national government and with local government units. Although the BARMM government is technically autonomous, a number of its laws and regulations have to be reconciled with national laws and codes.

The chain of command of local government units is a case in point. Under the Organic Law, local government units in the BARMM fall under its purview as distinct constituent units.²² And yet, local government units within the BARMM are still operating under the 1991 Local Government Code and other national legislation, which makes them accountable to the national-level Department of Interior and Local Government. Unfortunately, Article VI of the Organic Law, which covers intergovernmental relations, does not stipulate a mechanism to coordinate regional and local governance. In the absence of a fora for deliberation across governments, issues of public administration are less likely to be resolved.²³ Until the BTA enacts the Bangsamoro Local Government Code, relations between regional and local governments will continue to bedevil the BARMM's ability to govern effectively.

The absence of intergovernmental relations mechanisms in the field of indigenous peoples' affairs has already produced conflicts between national and regional governments over the issue of ancestral domain—land taken from Moro or indigenous groups by Philippine settlers—or the lands and other properties belonging to indigenous people by law. According to Article IX, Section 3 of the Organic Law, entitled "Indigenous Peoples' Rights," the Bangsamoro government must "create a ministry for indigenous peoples and shall have the primary responsibility to formulate and implement policies, plans, and programs to promote the well-being of all indigenous peoples in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in recognition of their ancestral domain as well as their rights thereto."²⁴

On September 25, 2019, the BTA issued a resolution establishing the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs to fulfill this obligation. However, this resolution also challenged the authority of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, which had been issuing certificates of ancestral domain within the BARMM for indigenous claimants. The BTA explicitly rejected the petition for ancestral domain put forward by an organization of Teduray and Lambangian indigenous peoples in Maguindanao, who had submitted their claim to over two hundred thousand hectares of land and fourteen thousand hectares of water in 2014.²⁵



Macaraya Ampuan (center), a former commander of a Moro Islamic Liberation Front unit, meets with residents, contractors, and nongovernmental organization workers to talk about a newly installed water pump in the village of Padas on April 13, 2019. (Photo by Jes Aznar/New York Times)

Throughout the southern Philippines, state and nonstate actors are using increasing levels of violence and coercion to force indigenous peoples from their lands.²⁶ The perpetrators have ranged from unknown gunmen, to substate militants, to the AFP during anticommunist counterinsurgency operations. State violence against indigenous peoples in the Philippines under the guise of anticommunist counterinsurgency is deeply entrenched and dates back to the independence of the Philippine Republic.²⁷

The question of land rights affects not just indigenous peoples but all citizens of the BARMM. Decades of conflict have displaced countless citizens of the BARMM from their lands and made it all but impossible to keep track of land titles. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Eduardo Del Rosario stated that 55 percent of displaced residents in Marawi City do not have titles to their properties, creating an impasse where structures cannot be cleared or rebuilt without the consent of their often-uncertain owners.²⁸ With the monetary value of these lands set to increase as conflict decreases, the national and BARMM governments will have to determine how they will share the task of resolving conflicting claims to their ownership.

An even more pressing challenge for intergovernmental relations is tackling the issue of revenue and block grants, which, under the terms of the Organic Law, the national government is required

The BARMM contains a variety of ethnic groups, including Maguindanaoans, Maranao, Tausug, Samal, Iranon, and other minority groups. Most MILF supporters are Maguindanaons and Maranao; Yakan, Samal, and especially Tausug support a variety of political actors that vie with the MILF for political power.

to distribute to the BARMM annually. For the first four months of its life, the BARMM had no budget and did not even have the funds to pay the salaries of the thirty-six thousand employees it inherited from the ARMM. In December 2019, the BARMM government received its first block grant of P63.3 billion (\$1.2 billion). For 2020, the BARMM should receive roughly P70.6 billion (\$1.3 billion).²⁹ The government disbursed the first tranche, P5.3 billion, in February, allowing the BARMM to meet payroll and provide basic social services.³⁰

The grant was set by the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro at 5 percent of annual government revenue, but the BARMM's ability to levy taxes was scaled back by the time the Organic Law was passed. The fewer taxes it can collect, the smaller the block grant the BARMM receives will be. Moreover, the BARMM's dependence on the block grant has grown because one potentially valuable income stream—75 percent of rents from natural resource extraction are meant to go to the BARMM—has yet to yield much revenue, with both domestic and foreign investors so far being reluctant to invest in resource extraction enterprises. With an economic recession likely due to the effects of COVID-19, the block grant is likely to be smaller in 2021.

Even if the BARMM were to get more revenue—from the block grant or other sources—it may not have the capacity to spend and disburse all of it. In 2018, some P8 billion (\$157 million) was left unspent, despite being urgently needed, not least to rebuild Marawi. This raises serious questions about the BARMM's capacity to govern.

That capacity has not been bolstered by President Duterte's failure to name members to the Intergovernmental Relations Body. As mandated under the Organic Law, the Intergovernmental Relations Body is to "coordinate and resolve issues on intergovernmental relations through regular consultation and continuing negotiation in a non-adversarial manner." The MILF appointed their seven members, but, as the MILF has complained, to date Duterte has not named anyone.³¹

Murad has also complained that Manila is treating the BARMM like it treated the ARMM: after signing an agreement on autonomy, the government is doing little to implement it. That does not bode well for future relations between Manila and the BARMM or for the BARMM's ability to be truly autonomous.

INTRA-MORO POLITICAL COMPETITION AND SPOILERS

The BARMM contains a variety of ethnic groups, including Maguindanaoans, Maranao, Tausug, Samal, Iranon, and other minority groups.³² Most MILF supporters are Maguindanaons and Maranao; Yakan, Samal, and especially Tausug support a variety of political actors that vie with the MILF for political power. Moreover, some of these actors are vocal opponents of the BARMM, most notably the governor of Sulu, Abdusakur Tan. Tan, an ally of President Duterte, has advocated for a federal system that will grant Sulu's majority Tausug population, known as Bangsa Sug, autonomy separate from the rest of Mindanao.³³ Of all of the territorial components of the ARMM, Sulu alone voted against inclusion in BARMM during the plebiscite in early 2019.³⁴ Despite its opposition, because the majority of the ARMM voted in favor, Sulu was also

incorporated into the BARMM. Tan now seems resigned, at least for the moment, to working with the BARMM and is currently coordinating with Sulu mayors and local government units to draft development plans that will be submitted to the BARMM in 2020.³⁵

The most important voice of Bangsa Sug opposition to the BARMM is Nur Misuari, the founder of the MNLF, a former ARMM governor, and an old friend of Duterte. After exiting previous peace processes, Misuari waged armed attacks against the government in both 2002 and 2013. Duterte waived an arrest warrant issued for Misuari for his September 2013 attack on Zamboanga City, which displaced more than a hundred thousand people and led to a significant decline in Misuari's power.³⁶

Despite the passage of the Organic Law, Misuari continues to lobby Manila for a separate peace agreement with his faction of the MNLF and the holding of tripartite talks between the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the MNLF, and the Philippine government.³⁷ Duterte has met with Misuari, promising him a "separate peace process" without explaining how that would be reconciled with the Organic Law or the BARMM.³⁸ In December 2019, Duterte appointed Misuari as a special envoy to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, arguably playing to Misuari's vanity.³⁹

Duterte's intentions toward Misuari are unclear. The president may intend to honor his promise to have a separate peace treaty without undermining the BARMM administration, or he may simply be trying to mollify Misuari and buy time, aware that Misuari's faction of the MNLF is a potential spoiler. The government is well aware that Misuari is a potent symbol of Tausug nationalism, and has gone to considerable lengths to accommodate him, even tolerating his threat to go to war if an agreement for Philippine federalism is not reached.⁴⁰ Without doubt, Bangsa Sug revivalism is a defining feature of the BARMM's contested political landscape.

Yet Misuari represents only one faction of the MNLF. The MNLF is a highly factionalized body, and some important figures support the BARMM and sit on the BTA, most notably Yusop Jikiri, a leader of the largest MNLF faction who has sometimes challenged Misuari's control of the MNLF. The MNLF has yet to establish its own political party like the MILF's United Bangsamoro Justice Party, a step that might help to counter its organizational indiscipline and enable it to measure the depth of its support during the 2022 elections.

Further complicating the picture are remaining tensions between MNLF and the government. The MNLF did not have to disarm as part of the 1996 peace agreement, and there are close clan and kinship ties between the MNLF and the jihadist insurgent Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Sulu. Ample evidence exists that shows Misuari himself is deeply tied to the ASG and its kidnap-for-ransom operations.⁴¹

Maguindanao is perhaps the epicenter of political contestation between the MILF and non-MILF interests, as instanced by a tense confrontation in September 2019 between the Army and armed MNLF supporters.⁴² Nowhere is this political battle more evident than in the BARMM's new capital, Cotabato City. Mayor Cynthia Guiani-Sayadi appealed directly to President Duterte for her city to be excluded from the BARMM until June 30, 2022, when she leaves office.⁴³ The conflict of visions between Guiani-Sayadi and the MILF is a long-standing feature of Cotabato City politics and has at times turned violent; Guiani-Sayadi accused the MILF of vote buying, fraud, and intimidation during the Bangsamoro plebiscite, which the MILF denied.⁴⁴

The mix of the MILF, the MNLF, and anti-BARMM politicians is made even more combustible by the activities of well-armed political dynasties. A provision intended to break the political



Women gather at a voting precinct in Maguindanao Province during the plebiscite on Bangsamoro autonomy on January 21, 2019. (Photo by Mark R. Cristino/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

stranglehold of dynastic politics on democracy was originally part of the Organic Law, but it was deleted in July 2018 after facing opposition in the Philippine Senate and the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, both of which include members of prominent political families.⁴⁵ A new draft of anti-dynasty legislation, however, will be produced by the BARMM Ministry of the Interior for the consideration of the transitional parliament.⁴⁶

If left unaddressed, the pernicious influence of dynasticism will only get worse. According to one 2019 study, political dynasties in the Philippines are growing “fatter,” with members of the same family occupying more political offices simultaneously than they did in the past.⁴⁷ Three out of the five component provinces of BARMM are among the ten provinces nationwide with the highest number of “fat” dynasties, and Maguindanao leads the pack at number one.

These dynasties are remarkably powerful, with private armies that carry out atrocities with scant repercussions. Until December 2019, the Ampatuan family of Maguindanao had escaped justice for the 2009 massacre of fifty-eight people, including rival politicians and local journalists.⁴⁸ After a lengthy trial, during which four witnesses were killed, two leading members of the family, along with forty-three other individuals, were convicted of fifty-seven counts of murder and sentenced to *reclusión perpetua* (a stricter version of life imprisonment) without parole.⁴⁹ An additional twenty-eight

persons were sentenced to forty years imprisonment, while fifty-five persons, including other leading family members, were acquitted. Impunity remains a critical problem in the Philippines, which is annually ranked as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.⁵⁰

The Normalization Annex of the peace agreement calls on private armies to be demobilized, which is something that the government has so far been reluctant to enforce. It remains to be seen whether the BARMM government, with the support of the national government, will be confident enough to move to disband private armies now that the Ampatuan clan has suffered legal setbacks.

In addition to political dynasties, the BARMM government must contend with the endemic and notorious clan disputes of Mindanao. These intergenerational feuds known as *rido* often became intertwined with the civil war between the rebels and the national government. Groups such as the MILF had an incentive to police their territories and not let *rido* cause rifts within the movement that the government could take advantage of. Today, those conflicts are spilling out into the open. While *rido* might not pose the same level of threat as pro-Islamic State groups that have rejected the peace process, the BARMM, bereft as it is of independent policing powers, is hard pressed to stop the feuds through the tools it does have, such as mediation.⁵¹

SECURITY

Intra-Moro competition is not confined to political disputes. Enormous security challenges are posed by militant Moro groups that have eschewed the peace process. These include the Islamic State Lanao (better known as the Maute Group), the ASG, the Ansuar Khalifa Philippines, and the BIFF faction led by Abu Turaife. While all four of these groups are indigenous, they have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, continue to attract foreign fighters, and are determined to undermine the peace process. They also sometimes fight among themselves.

The MILF is a frequent target for Islamic State-aligned groups. For instance, on October 3, 2019, a BIFF cell attacked an MILF encampment, killing seven people; later that month, seven BIAF fighters were wounded by an IED that was likely planted by the BIFF; and in November, another IED attack targeted but missed an MILF official.⁵² And yet, there remain close clan and kinship ties between members of the MILF and BIFF.

Even though these groups are not an existential threat individually, they tend to be geographically autonomous, which requires the Philippine security forces to spread their already inadequate resources thinly. When they do cooperate, such as with the 2017 siege of Marawi, when a faction of the ASG teamed up with the Maute Group and several dozen foreign fighters, they can have a devastating effect.⁵³

Although the US government believes that an ASG commander is likely the new emir of the Islamic State in the Philippines—the regional affiliate of the Islamic State—there is little in the way of centralized command and control among Islamic State groups, though there is informal cooperation.⁵⁴ Two ASG leaders, Hatib Hajaan Sawadjaan and Furuji Indama, continue to stage attacks to undermine the peace process and attract foreign fighters in the Sulu archipelago and Basilan. Thirteen Philippine soldiers were killed in a single clash in April 2020, and four were wounded in a separate clash.⁵⁵

Between July 2018 and April 2020, there were four incidents of suicide bombings, involving six suicide bombers.⁵⁶ Of those six, at least one, and possibly a second, was a Filipino, the country's

first Filipino suicide bomber. With the collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the Islamic State's adoption of a global insurgency model, the southern Philippines has arguably taken on added importance and is the destination for Southeast Asian militants to engage in *hijrah* (which in the context of Islamic State propaganda means traveling to other countries to fight).⁵⁷ The southern Philippines remains the one place in Southeast Asia where militants can actually control physical space. Islamic State leadership and social media platforms have repeatedly called on militants to travel to the Philippines. Attacks by jihadi militants are a challenge to the peace process, as they seek to undermine confidence in and the legitimacy of the BARMM government.

Groups such as the Maute Group and Ansuar Khalifa Philippines benefit from the national government's woeful mismanagement of the reconstruction of Marawi, where some seventy thousand people remain displaced.⁵⁸ Reconstruction has taken so long that funds worth P4.2 billion (\$82.5 million) earmarked for construction are in danger of expiring.⁵⁹ In addition, the government estimates that reconstruction will take another three to five years. To add insult to injury, the Philippine government is considering building a new military base in Marawi, prompting public outcry and official protests.⁶⁰

According to Julie Chernov-Hwang, an expert on terrorism in Southeast Asia, many of the individuals who joined the Maute Group did so initially because they had personal connections to its members or needed money (which the Maute Group would offer to recruits), and only later adopted Islamic State ideology.⁶¹ As the BTA takes over the task of rebuilding Marawi, it will have to consider the needs and aspirations of people intensely frustrated with the central government for failing to act in their best interest. As long as Marawi reconstruction stalls and people cannot return home, promises of revenge and financial assurances offered by Islamic State groups will remain appealing to the displaced and the dispossessed. The Maute Group, it should be pointed out, emerged in large part as a generational challenge to the MILF. As the reconstruction drags on, a new generation of youth will emerge who feel betrayed by both the state and the MILF.

One of the MILF's strongest arguments to a skeptical Philippine Congress during the debate over the passage of the Organic Law was that only the MILF has the incentive to counter these pro-Islamic State splinter groups, who are both real and ideological rivals.⁶² And yet, the MILF has fewer tools and legal authorities than originally agreed with which to combat and defend against these groups.

Among the many provisions of the Organic Law that were scrapped or diluted between 2015 and 2018 were those making the MILF responsible for internal peace and security. The two sides established the Joint Peace and Security Committee to oversee a range of security issues, including demobilization and disarmament, as well as internal security. While the government has set up a number of Joint Peace and Security Teams with the MILF, the committee remains an ad hoc organization with unclear authorities and resources. The first batch of two hundred MILF fighters are being trained for this force, alongside 1,600 members of the AFP and 1,400 police.⁶³

Although in December 2019 the AFP convinced President Duterte that martial law was no longer needed in Mindanao (it had been imposed during the Marawi siege in 2017), the security situation in the southern Philippines remains tenuous.⁶⁴ In addition to the aforementioned suicide bombings carried out by the ASG, towns and cities such as Patikul in Sulu are bloodily contested territory, where fighters believed to be under the command of Sawadjaan regularly trade



Philippine government troops conduct a patrol in Jolo, on the island of Sulu, on January 22, 2019, the day after Sulu's majority Tausug population voted against Bangsamoro autonomy. (Photo by Ben Hajan/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

fire with the AFP.⁶⁵ Even the Maute Group, which has not been implicated in any recent attacks, is regarded cautiously by the AFP, noting continuing reports of young men being recruited by what remains of the group.⁶⁶ An incident in November 2019 in which air support was called in to bomb a suspected training camp in the mountains of Lanao del Sur suggests that the Maute Group is attempting to regroup.⁶⁷

The ongoing military campaigns against Islamic State–aligned groups pose other concerns. First, it is hard to make the case that there is a peace process when the war continues. Second, it is hard to argue that the region is autonomous when Philippine security forces still maintain an oppressive presence. Third, Philippine counterinsurgency operations often lead to egregious human rights violations, civilian casualties, and the displacement of large numbers of people. The BIFF's proximity to civilian populations and reported recruitment of child soldiers makes pursuit by security forces a highly risky endeavor; investigations are ongoing into the killing of seven individuals, several of whom were minors, who were alleged by the AFP to be BIFF fighters despite claims to the contrary made by the local community.⁶⁸ All of this undermines the BTA's political capital.

Perhaps most concerning of all is the reality that members of the MILF are often bound through kinship to other militant groups, creating conflicts of interest around cracking down too



Abdullah Macapaar, who uses the nom de guerre Commander Bravo, waits for the oath-taking ceremony for the creation of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority at the Presidential Palace in Manila on February 22, 2019. (Photo by Bullit Marquez/AP)

hard. Beyond kinship, there is a pragmatic justification for turning a blind eye. Others in the MILF, including leaders such as Abdullah Macapaar, known as Commander Bravo, have privately tolerated pro-Islamic State militants in their territory, despite publicly disowning them, seeing them as an insurance policy should the government renege on the peace process.⁶⁹

All the while, splinter groups will continue to avail themselves of ubiquitous firearms and attack government and MILF forces, as well as civilian targets, to undermine confidence in the peace process. Many people benefit from the political economy of low-intensity conflict, and there is no shortage of spoilers who want to undermine the peace process by portraying the MILF as collaborators and the government as occupiers.

Should the peace process falter, or the high expectations of a peace dividend go unrealized, these groups will be able to recruit from the MILF's ranks. Former rebels have many reasons to mistrust the national government's commitment to implementing the peace process. Indeed, in February 2020, police arrested Abuhail Sabpa, a MILF commander at Mamasapano, who had an outstanding arrest warrant.⁷⁰ Although his arrest was not a violation of the letter of the peace process, it was a violation of the spirit of the peace process, and an act that undermined trust in the government.

Conclusion

Against the odds, the BARMM accomplished much in its first year: solidifying the cease-fire between the MILF and the AFP, establishing an interim government, disbursing block grants, conducting the disarmament and demobilization of the first tranche of combatants, establishing a sharia court system, witnessing the transition of the MILF into a political party, and drafting and passing legislation. The BARMM also created mechanisms for rival groups, such as the MNLF, as well as unaffiliated actors to be included in regional governance, and it stood up to a host of spoilers.

But the peace process is complex, especially when the agreement has to be reconciled with existing laws and regulations. And much is at stake: the successful implementation of the peace agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government is the best hope for peace and prosperity in a region that has been wracked by war since the early 1970s.

At this pivotal time, outside help—if it is of the right kind—to support the peace process would be invaluable. Encouragingly, the European Union and the United Kingdom have pledged €50 million (\$55.7 million) and £3 million (\$3.7 million), respectively, to support the implementation of the peace agreement.⁷¹ The United States, whose oldest treaty ally in the Pacific is the Philippines, has yet to offer the same level of support. To be sure, US counterinsurgency help has been considerable. Since 9/11, the US government has invested over \$2 billion to support counterterrorism efforts in the southern Philippines, including military aid and training, law enforcement, and development projects. But this assistance has been unable to prevent major jihadi attacks (such as the siege of the city of Marawi in 2017) or to transform the security situation.⁷² Any strategy based on decapitation will invariably fail in a region that has long-standing political grievances and is mired in poverty and awash in weaponry. In comparison, the peace process between the government and the MILF holds greater promise for a lasting peace. Equally, the failure of that process would have profound implications for security; should the BARMM stall or fail to meet the expectations of the people, the MILF will be unable to stop its members and unaffiliated youth from joining other militant groups.

To date, US support for the peace process has consisted chiefly of limited US Agency for International Development funding for a few peace, stability, and governance projects in the southern Philippines.⁷³ But the United States still has the opportunity to augment the institutional capacity of the BARMM by providing counseling, training, oversight, and financial aid. Holistically supporting the peace process is both more cost-effective and important in undermining popular support for pro-Islamic State militants than continuous military counterinsurgency interventions.

The value of such support at this critical time cannot be underestimated. And yet, with a global recession looming as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer resources—both international and in terms of the block grant—will be available to support the implementation of the peace process. The peace process is not irreversible. There are ample opportunities for political opponents to the BARMM to water agreements down or undermine them completely. There is the challenge of drafting a host of new laws before further delays create policy backlogs and test the patience of the public. Managing expectations is difficult, especially as Mindanaoans and former combatants hope for a quick peace dividend. Whether the BARMM government can

satisfy such expectations will depend not least on whether the national government provides the required resources.

The BTA will have its hands full in 2020–21, drafting the legislation that will give the BARMM its full legal footing. The MILF has pledged that disarmament and demobilization of its troops will continue to be phased in as key milestones in the peace process are reached, but the security environment remains fraught, with a host of groups vying to spoil and discredit the peace process. The onus—certainly in terms of public opinion—on security in the BARMM falls to the MILF, even though the Philippine Congress stripped it of the power to police the region. And whether the BARMM government can continue to respond proactively and transparently to the public health challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic remains to be seen. Mindanao, it should be remembered, is the poorest part of the Philippines, and its new government is significantly underresourced.

The Philippines is a weak state, with a history of not implementing agreements that it has concluded. Yet the government of Rodrigo Duterte is increasingly authoritarian, antidemocratic, and less accountable. In June 2020, the Philippine Congress rushed the passage of the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which allows for warrantless arrests, a fourteen-day period to detain suspects without charge, and the empowerment of the presidential-appointed Anti-Terrorism Council to designate individuals and organizations vaguely defined as “terrorist” without judicial review or administrative oversight—policies that are rife for abuse, both against political opponents of the president, as well as within Muslim Mindanao.⁷⁴ The MILF therefore has every reason to be vigilant. The peace process itself has weakened the MILF, which, having commenced demobilization and disarmament, has fewer capabilities to return to war—one of its few points of leverage over the state. Although both sides remain committed to the peace process, the devil is in the details—in implementation as well as in reconciliation with the national legal-constitutional framework. Much needs to be done for the peace process to enter its next phase, but it is building on achievements reached in the first year of the BARMM administration.

Notes

The authors would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions, and Dr. Cynthia Watson, dean of Faculty and Academic Programs at the National War College, for her support of the project. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone and do not reflect the opinions of the National War College, the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the US government.

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