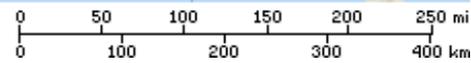
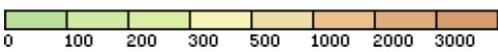


PHILIPPINES

Physical Map



The Philippines: The Moro Islamic Liberation Front - A Pragmatic Power Structure?

Joseph Franco

Conflict in the Southern Philippines has traditionally been seen as a historical struggle between contending religious and ethnic identities: the majority Christian population and the Muslim minority. This discourse was tacitly accepted by both belligerents and victims of the conflict. Unfortunately, such a dualistic perspective obscures the complex roots of insecurity in Mindanao and overemphasizes the role of *ideational* rather than *material* factors in sustaining armed violence. Filipino Muslim secession, stripped of its overlaid ethnic and religious signifiers, can be seen more holistically as a manifestation of postcolonial tensions that resulted in a dysfunctional state-building process. These inequitable beginnings gave rise to an illicit power structure, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Thus, looking at MILF as an illicit power structure first, and an ideological group second, enables a more useful perspective on the decades-long conflict. Filipino Muslims in Mindanao have a long history of contesting homogenizing influences from Manila—during its nearly four centuries as the center of the Spanish colonial administration, afterward, as the seat of the post-1898 U.S. occupation, and today, as capital of the Republic of the Philippines.¹ While various non-Muslim indigenous ethnic communities have resisted central authorities with varying degrees of success, these initiatives were mostly through nonviolent means.² The Filipino Muslims, however, have a long history of armed resistance, starting with almost incessant warfare against Spanish colonial rule and continuing through much of the post-1898 U.S. occupation.³

The Bangsamoro Conflict and Its Causes

From 1903 to 1913, Moro resistance against the Americans was centered in the Sultanate of Sulu on Jolo Island, off the coast of western Mindanao.⁴ Jolo is known for the warrior tradition of its Tausug ethnic population. Tausug poetry abounds with vivid imagery of warfare and a well-developed discourse on waging a just war.⁵ Accomplished seafarers, the Tausug of Sulu carved out a prosperous sphere of influence—the Sulu Zone—with

¹ “Mindanao” may also refer to the entire region spanning Mindanao Island and the provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. This chapter adopts this more expansive definition.

² For example, the Philippine government created the Cordillera Administrative Region on July 15, 1987, to improve administration over the indigenous highland communities of northern Luzon. It was the direct result of the Mount Data Peace Accord between the communist Cordillera People’s Liberation Army and Manila. See Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), “CPLA Peace Table: Background,” www.opapp.gov.ph/cpla/background.

³ W. K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 46.

⁴ Jolo Island is one of the traditional strongholds of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The al-Qaeda-linked ASG was the focus of the US Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) during the Balikatan military exercises with the Philippine military, starting in 2002.

⁵ Gerard Rixhon, ed., *Voices from Sulu: A Collection of Tausug Oral Traditions* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Univ. Press, 2010).

Jolo as one of the great centers of maritime trade in Southeast Asia.⁶ Slave raiding and trading were also a significant source of the Tausugs' wealth, along with pirate attacks against Spanish-established settlements in the Central Philippines, north of Mindanao. It was only after the pivotal battle of Bud Bagsak (1913) that organized Moro resistance against the Americans ended and Muslim Mindanao was pacified.⁷

This history suggests that the conflict in the region owes more to economics than to interethnic differences. Indeed, the overarching driver of conflict in Mindanao all throughout its recorded history was the maintenance of specific economic rights. Discourses of religious and ethnic strife were the *effect* rather than the cause of conflict. The pejorative term "Moro," affixed to Muslims in Mindanao, alluded to the Moors the Spaniards had fought on the Iberian Peninsula. It was a means for the Spanish colonial government to cast Mindanao's Muslims as the subordinate "other." "Bangsamoro" (Moro Nation) was appropriated by Filipino Muslims as a badge of identity to underscore the existence of their communities long before the establishment of the modern Philippine state.

The establishment of the Third Philippine Republic, after World War II, did not bode well for the Bangsamoro.⁸ The outbreak of a Soviet Marxist-inspired insurgency on the plains of Central Luzon by the *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan* (People's Liberation Army), or the Huks, occupied the attention of the fledgling Philippine Republic. Political representation for Filipino Muslims was limited to the appointment of Manila-based governors. Along with this marginalization came large-scale divestment of land and agrarian rights—a legacy of the discriminatory policies enacted during the Commonwealth period. Commonwealth Act no. 141 of November 1936 declared all Moro landholdings public lands, with Moros limited to owning four hectares (compared to 24 hectares allowable for non-Moros). The defeat of the Huks also ushered in a more systematic resettlement of Christians in Mindanao as surrendered Huks were granted parcels of Mindanao land under the 1950 Homestead Act. A clash ensued between the formalized, legalistic notions of land ownership among Christian settlers and the informal, communal practice of usufruct by Filipino Muslims. The combination of state-sponsored homestead and resettlement policies led to an irreversible demographic shift that made Muslims a minority even in Mindanao.⁹ Land-grabbing became the fixture of intersectorial relations, along with incidents involving plain banditry and cattle rustling.

It must be stressed that manifestations of crime at the *barangay* (village) level were not limited to Mindanao. What differed from the banditry occurring in Luzon was how the discourse of Muslim identity overlay the criminal acts. The escalation of violence led

⁶ James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898* (Singapore: National Univ. of Singapore, 2007).

⁷ Charles Byler, "Pacifying the Moros: American Military Government in the Southern Philippines, 1899-1913," *Military Review*, May-June 2005, www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/byler.pdf.

⁸ The Philippines declared independence from Spain in 1898, although the U.S. occupiers did not recognize this. After purchasing the Philippine Islands from Spain under the 1898 Treaty of Paris, the United States fought with the nascent republic. The end of the Filipino-American War (1899-1902) led to U.S. colonial rule. The Philippine Commonwealth was established on November 15, 1935, in response to Filipino nationalists' demands for independence. The Third Philippine Republic followed the formal grant of full independence from the United States in 1946. See "The Commonwealth of the Philippines," www.gov.ph/the-commonwealth-of-the-philippines/.

⁹ Joseph Franco, "Violence and Peace Spoilers in the Southern Philippines," Middle East-Asia Project Essay Series on Sectarianism in Muslim Majority/Minority Countries in the Middle East and Asia, July 15, 2015, www.mei.edu/content/map/violence-and-peace-spoilers-southern-philippines.

to the establishment of both Christian and Muslim militias. Some, such as the Christian *Ilaga*, were known for their brutality.¹⁰ Latent Muslim dissent in the Philippines was catalyzed after the March 18, 1968, Jabidah Massacre, where paramilitaries of Filipino Muslim descent were massacred by their Philippine Armed Forces (AFP) training cadre.¹¹ The massacre occurred after a mutiny of the Muslim trainees, reportedly to protest poor living conditions in camp. The Jabidah trainees were preparing for a subversion campaign against Malaysian-occupied North Borneo, or Sabah.¹² Had the Jabidah commando unit been successfully formed, it would have been the spearhead of an unprecedented expansionist military operation by Manila against another sovereign state.

Filipino Muslim youths angered by the massacre found their champion in Nur Misuari, a Tausug political science professor at the University of Philippines. With Malaysian training and funding, Misuari founded the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the first organized Muslim secessionist group in the Philippines.¹³ Misuari proclaimed his vision of an independent Bangsamoro and launched devastating attacks against the military in Jolo, Sulu, and Cotabato in central Mindanao. The well-organized MNLF inflicted significant losses on the Philippine military. Jolo was razed to the ground to prevent its capture by MNLF units. In Cotabato, the situation became so dire that at one point, government forces were left holding on to just the perimeter of the Awang military airport. Had Awang and the adjacent Central Mindanao Command headquarters fallen, Mindanao would have been an independent state.¹⁴ Widespread fighting ceased only with the signing of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)-brokered 1976 Tripoli Agreement, which promised the “establishment of autonomy in the Southern Philippines” within the bounds of the Republic.¹⁵

Misuari’s lofty goal of using the discourse of the Bangsamoro to unite everyone who identified themselves as Filipino Muslim was not wholly successful. The sudden empowerment of the Bangsamoro through the MNLF and the Tripoli Agreement reawakened long-dormant notions of traditional leadership. Muslim traditional elites argued over who best represented the Muslim masses. The Muslim clans of central Mindanao, who trace their genealogy to the pre-Spanish sultanates, reemerged to challenge the dominance of Misuari, whom they viewed as a secularist young upstart. One such leader was Hashim Salamat, a member of a central Mindanao-based MNLF faction, the Kutawato Revolutionary Committee.¹⁶ Salamat, a member of the Maguindanao ethnic group, decried how Misuari’s MNLF appeared to mimic the secular strategy of the communist

¹⁰ “*Ilaga*” is Visayan for “rat.” Settlers from the central Philippine region of the Visayas made up most of Mindanao’s settler population.

¹¹ Marites Vitug and Glenda Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Univ. Press, 2000).

¹² Lela Gardner Noble, *Philippine Policy toward Sabah: A Claim to Independence* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1977); T. J. S. George, *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

¹³ For a bibliography on Malaysian sponsorship of the MNLF, see Joseph Franco, “Malaysia: Unsung Hero of the Philippine Peace Process,” *Asian Security* 9, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁴ See Fortunato Abat, *The Day We Nearly Lost Mindanao: The CEMCOM Story* (Manila: FCA, 1999).

¹⁵ The 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the MNLF and the Philippines would be signed only after a protracted twenty-year negotiation process punctuated by low-intensity conflict.

¹⁶ Vitug and Gloria, *Under the Crescent Moon*.

insurgency waged by the New People's Army, abandoning the Islamic traditions of the Moros.¹⁷ By 1984, Salamat renamed his MNLF faction the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. It was composed of MNLF defectors from central Mindanao. MILF numbers would be augmented by further defections once the MNLF signed the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) with the Philippine government.

The Peace Negotiations

In 2014, 30 years after MILF's formation, peace in Mindanao appeared imminent with the March 27 signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). But the agreement came only after a protracted negotiation process, punctuated by periodic eruptions of violence. To understand the major role that Mindanao's political economy played in the conflict requires a nuanced, nonideological approach. Cultural inequity and injustice are the effects of a flawed political economy, and not the other way around, as would be the case if the Bangsamoro conflict were ideologically based. The last part of the CAB preamble is a telling acknowledgment of the conflict's material and nonideological roots: "The Parties acknowledge their responsibilities to uphold the principles of justice. They commit to protect and enhance the right of the Bangsamoro people and other inhabitants in the Bangsamoro to human dignity; reduce social, economic and political inequities; correct historical injustices committed against the Bangsamoro; and *remove cultural inequities through agreed modalities aimed at equitably diffusing wealth and political power for the common good [Emphasis added].*"¹⁸ Salamat's intent to highlight the difference between the "religious" MILF and the "secular" MNLF appeared to be reversed by his successor, Murad Ibrahim, who signed the CAB.

It was clear that good intentions could not sustain the peace. For example, the 1997 Agreement on the General Cessation of Hostilities (AGCH), signed during the term of President Fidel Ramos, was a broad statement of principles rather than an actionable cease-fire. A general cease-fire could work only through making peace at the community level, in the various barangays throughout Mindanao. The unintended consequence of the AGCH was a spike in armed violence between Christian and Muslim militias. Cease-fire mechanisms may have restrained the Philippine military and the MILF, but they did not resolve community-level tensions in Mindanao. In effect, violence devolved from the large AFP-MILF skirmishes to brush fires between contending networks of militias and private armed groups. Communal violence became the default method of resolving nonideological disputes over land, family differences, and even financial debts. Government intelligence estimates from the period point to the occurrence of around 400 skirmishes during 1997-99—an increase from earlier levels of violence involving MILF.¹⁹ The tipping point in the conflict was a communal dispute over the use of a small (30-hectare) coconut plantation in Lanao del Norte province, in which MILF fighters

¹⁷ Alvaro S. Andaya, *Philippine Mujahideen Mandirigma: Struggles against Imperialism and Colonialism* (Manila: AFP, 1994).

¹⁸ See GPH, *Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, Official Gazette*, March 27, 2014, www.gov.ph/2014/03/27/document-cab/.

¹⁹ See Cesar Pobre, ed., *In Assertion of Sovereignty: The 2000 Campaign against the MILF* (Quezon City: AFP, 2009).

mobilized to support their clansmen against the opposing Christian militia.²⁰ Skirmishes escalated into open warfare when MILF forces across Mindanao attacked power transmission lines, plunging 16 provinces into darkness, and raided Kauswagan municipality, taking 294 civilians hostage.²¹ In response, on March 21, 2000, the AFP, under orders from President Estrada, launched a major military campaign that became known as the 2000 All-Out War. The nearly seven-month campaign led to the capture of all 46 MILF camps, including the headquarters in Camp Abubakar. By the time the Philippine flag was hoisted on July 10, 2000, at the center of Abubakar, there were severe doubts over the feasibility of continuing peace negotiations.

The stalemate after the capture of Camp Abubakar would not be broken until the next presidential administration. In 2001, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo decided to internationalize the negotiations, bringing in Malaysia as a third-party facilitator. The gradualist and informal nature of the talks nonetheless yielded consensus on strategies to prevent the resurgence of conflict, so that by 2005, only the question of ancestral domain remained unresolved. But the question of resources and wealth remained a recurring hurdle to resolving the Mindanao conflict. On July 27, 2008, the draft Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) was completed in Kuala Lumpur after successive rounds of closed-door talks between the Philippines and MILF. The MOA-AD sought to establish a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, with the “ultimate objective of entrenching the Bangsamoro homeland . . . [with] a system of governance suitable and acceptable . . . [to Filipino Muslims] as a distinct dominant people.”²² What followed was a cascade of opposition, initially from Mindanao Christian politicians, who sued for a temporary restraining order from the Supreme Court.²³ On the MILF side, rogue commanders Ameril Umbra Kato, Abdullah “Commander Bravo” Macapaar, and Solaiman Pangalian launched raids against civilian targets, scuttling the talks.²⁴

As with prior episodes of the conflict, it would take another change in executive leadership for a breakthrough to occur after the MOA-AD debacle. President Benigno Aquino III secretly met with MILF chairman Murad Ibrahim²⁵ on August 4, 2011, in Tokyo to secretly discuss a new substate proposal for Mindanao. This was met by a renewed MILF demand for Malaysia again to take on the third-party facilitating role. Taking the lessons from the aborted MOA-AD talks, both the Philippine government and MILF engaged local stakeholders from the beginning of negotiations. The result was a draft Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), which recognized “the status quo as unacceptable and that the Bangsamoro shall be established to replace the

²⁰ Francisco Lara Jr. and Phil Champain, “Inclusive Peace in Mindanao: Revisiting the Dynamics of Conflict and Exclusion,” *International Alert*, June 2009, endnote 30, www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/Inclusive_Peace_in_Muslim_Mindanao_Revisiting_the_dynamics_of_conflict_and_exclusion.pdf.

²¹ Pobre, *In Assertion of Sovereignty*, 15.

²² GPH and MILF, “Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain,” “Concerns and Principles” section, Aug. 5, 2008, <http://pcdsपो.gov.ph/downloads/2012/10/MOA-%E2%80%93-Ancestral-Domain-August-5-2008.pdf>.

²³ Supreme Court [Philippines] G.R. no. 183591 En banc decision, Oct. 14, 2008.

²⁴ Pobre, *In Assertion of Sovereignty*.

²⁵ Hashim Salamat, founding chairman of the MILF, died from illness in 2003.

Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).²⁶ The agreement was signed in Manila on October 15, 2012. Under the principles laid out by the FAB, the prospective Bangsamoro government would expand the ARMM's powers, with the Framework emphasizing the "just and equitable" sharing of revenue from natural resources extracted and taxation levied in Mindanao. The succeeding months saw intense negotiations to hash out the details of the FAB. Four annexes, covering revenue and wealth sharing, political power sharing, and the postconflict disposition of combatants, detailed the specific modalities for organizing the prospective Bangsamoro government. The Annex on Transitional Arrangements and Modalities, Annex on Revenue Generation and Wealth Sharing, Annex on Power Sharing, and Annex on Normalization were signed on February 27, 2013, July 13, 2013, December 8, 2013, and January 25, 2014, respectively.²⁷ A separate FAB addendum was also signed, outlining the mechanisms for exploitation of resources in Bangsamoro waters.²⁸

With some measure of consensus in place, the FAB led to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, which "ends the armed hostilities between two parties" and "consolidates and affirms the understanding and commitment between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)" as written in prior agreements between the two parties. Implementing the CAB still requires its transformation into legislation – the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL).

As of this writing, the BBL has become indefinitely stalled in both chambers of the Philippine legislature, as a result of the Mamasapano Incident. This botched law enforcement raid, code-named Oplan Exodus, occurred in the municipality of Mamasapano, Maguindanao, on January 25, 2015. The raid was intended to kill or capture Zulkifli bin Hir, aka "Marwan," a Malaysian member of Jemaah Islamiyah. Marwan was shot and killed inside a community controlled by a MILF breakaway group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM).²⁹ Marwan's hut was near a community hosting the MILF 105th Base Command. An ensuing clash between the PNP and MILF led to the deaths of 35 Philippine National Police (PNP) commandos. Nine other PNP were killed by the BIFM.³⁰ The heavy casualties inflicted by MILF on the PNP sparked public outrage. Politicians opposed to the BBL also used the incident to call into question the BBL's constitutionality and to lobby for junking it altogether.³¹ Accusations of MILF duplicity were exacerbated further by insinuations

²⁶ GPH, "Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro," *Official Gazette*, Oct. 15, 2014, www.gov.ph/2014/10/15/the-framework-agreement-on-the-bangsamoro.

²⁷ See GPH, "Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro and Its Annexes," Oct. 15, 2012, *Official Gazette*, www.gov.ph/framework-agreement-on-the-bangsamoro-and-its-annexes/.

²⁸ "2012 Framework Agreement," Addendum on the Bangsamoro Waters and Zones of Joint Cooperation," signed Jan. 25, 2014.

²⁹ Media accounts would also refer to the armed BIFM members as "Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters," or BIFF. The hard-liners making up BIFM split from MILF over opposition to peace negotiations.

³⁰ PNP Board of Inquiry (PNP-BOI), "The Mamasapano Report," Mar. 2015, http://pnp.gov.ph/portal/images/boimamasapano/boi_final.pdf.

³¹ Lira Dalangin-Fernandez, "BBL 'Not Dead' but Won't Be Passed by March – Speaker," *Interaksyon*, Feb. 10, 2015, www.interaksyon.com/article/104779/bbl-not-dead-but-wont-be-passed-by-march---speaker; Maila Ager, "Cayetano Reveals Report of Threats vs Politicians Standing in Way of BBL Passage," *Inquirer*, Mar. 26, 2015, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/681522/cayetano-reveals-report-of-threats-vs-politicians-standing-in-way-of-bbl-passage>.

that the MILF had aided and abetted the wanted international terrorist Marwan.³²

If the BBL ratification and the subsequent plebiscite are successful, the Bangsamoro government is expected to be in operation by 2016—significantly later than originally scheduled. But the Bangsamoro conflict is still open ended. As the Mamasapano incident demonstrated, even an existing cease-fire cannot be the sole guarantee for the rule of law. Cautious optimism is in order regarding the CAB's prospects for delivering on its promises, for high hopes have been dashed before. The 1996 FPA between MNLF and the Philippines, and its establishment of the ARMM, did not prevent MILF's emergence, and it did not stop Mindanao's recurrent violence.

Although it is too early to assess whether the peace settlement with MILF will resolve the core issues behind the Bangsamoro conflict, it is not too early to look closely at the CAB and the prospects for peace that it promises. CAB and BBL provisions concerning asymmetric relations between Manila and the Bangsamoro, decommissioning of MILF forces, and wealth sharing is intended to resolve the political economy of exclusion that feeds the Bangsamoro conflict. The asymmetrical relationship between the central government and the Bangsamoro government will effectively swing in the latter's favor—an important distinction from prior attempts to establish autonomy in Mindanao. In comparison, the ARMM had more limited mechanisms to exercise governance. The greater devolution of political authority and power that is expected from the BBL can counter the tendency toward governance in absentia, which derailed prior efforts at political autonomy and, ultimately, efforts to defuse the Bangsamoro conflict.

It is instructive to look into the experience of Misuari, the MNLF, and the ARMM, to see how unresolved power vacuums can undermine the post-CAB peace in Mindanao. After 1996, Misuari was elected Regional Governor of the ARMM, with 96 percent of the vote.³³ But it was a wasted opportunity. While Misuari and his closest allies were at the helm from 1996 to 2005, they failed to deliver the peace dividend they promised in their campaign. During Misuari's tenure, foreign donors and international development agencies poured massive assistance into the region, with disappointing results for the constituency. Misuari had the political clout to start dismantling the entrenched political interests and rent-seeking behavior of some traditional Muslim elites in Mindanao. But MNLF's nine-year rule of ARMM was marked by widespread complaints about Misuari's mismanagement of the regional government, along with allegations of pervasive corruption. Some ARMM civil servants even demanded to see their municipalities and provinces revert back to their original non-ARMM regions, which were dominated mostly by non-Muslim, even Christian, politicians. Misuari was present at the Office of the Regional Governor for only 187 days during his entire 1996-2001 term in office. This phenomenon of absenteeism creates a power vacuum and denies Filipino Muslims access to their government. "Remote-control administration" is, unfortunately, not limited to Misuari but extends to a large number of ARMM local mayors and governors who spend their time in "satellite offices" in neighboring non-ARMM cities.³⁴

³² Senate of the Philippines, "Committee Report on the Mamasapano Incident," *Philippine Star*, Mar. 17, 2015, www.philstar.com/headlines/2015/03/18/1434963/document-senate-panels-report-mamasapano-clash; PNP-BOI, "The Mamasapano Report."

³³ Tom Stern, *Nur Misuari: An Authorized Bibliography* (Mandaluyong City: Anvil, 2011), 124.

³⁴ The terms "remote-control administration" and "satellite offices" were a recurring feature in con-

Aside from issues of governance and exclusion, the CAB is expected to have a better chance of restraining MILF combatants than the 1996 FPA or the ARMM. Under the draft BBL's Article XI, a Bangsamoro police force will be organized for the "enforcement of maintenance and peace and order" in the Bangsamoro.³⁵ This is on top of provisions in the Annex on Normalization, which calls for the phased decommissioning of MILF weapons. The Normalization Annex prescribes the creation of an independent decommissioning body, composed of foreign and Philippine experts jointly nominated by the government and MILF. The most critical part of the annex is the explicit time frame set for decommissioning MILF weapons and forces by 2016. This provision was missing from the 1996 GPH-MNLF FPA. It was a policy failure with dire consequences: the existence of latent capability to conduct organized armed violence even after a peace settlement. It is a common but unfortunate sight to see MNLF members, ostensibly at peace with the government yet brandishing weapons and sporting MNLF insignia.

Failure to demobilize the MNLF led to armed violence in an apparent subversion, by Misuari loyalists, of firearms possession laws. In 2001, Misuari protested his legitimate ouster from the ARMM, by laying siege to the Cabatangan district in Zamboanga City, the Christian-majority urban center of Western Mindanao.³⁶ Misuari and his armed men were finally dislodged by a military operation that saw the MNLF founder fleeing behind the cover of civilian hostages. More than a decade later, in the 2013 Zamboanga City crisis, pro-Misuari gunmen assaulted the city center in a purportedly unavoidable escalation of a planned "peace rally" that, by all accounts, was a show of force.³⁷ The crisis was deemed the largest urban-warfare incident in Philippine history. Nearly 200 MNLF fighters were killed, and 10,000 homes were destroyed. The CAB is expected to make such dangerous flare-ups less likely.

Also, the CAB will provide increased sources of tax revenue, and a greater accrual of benefits to residents of the Bangsamoro, than the ARMM currently provides. Unlike the ARMM, which relies on block grants (Internal Revenue Allotment) from the national government, the Bangsamoro will be allowed greater leeway in legislating new taxation measures. A greater proportion of taxes collected from the Bangsamoro—an unprecedented 75 percent, compared to the 35 percent retained by the ARMM—will also be retained within the region. Another key distinction from prior efforts at Mindanao autonomy is the Bangsamoro's greater share of proceeds from natural resource exploitation: 100 percent for nonmetallic minerals and 75 percent for metallic minerals. Bangsamoro inland waters would also be subject to preferential arrangements.

The depth and breadth of resources available to the emergent Bangsamoro government are expected to reverse the high levels of economic deprivation in Mindanao. The seminal 2005 Philippine Human Development Report points to economic deprivation

versations with various AFP commanders in central and eastern Mindanao during the author's stint as a researcher-analyst with various units during 2007-11.

³⁵ OPAPP, "Draft Bangsamoro Basic Law," Sept. 16, 2014, www.opapp.gov.ph/resources/draft-bangsamoro-basic-law.

³⁶ Philippine Army, *The Cabatangan Crisis* (Taguig City: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, 2001).

³⁷ Joseph Franco, "The Zamboanga Standoff: The Role of the Nur Misuari Group," RSIS Commentaries, Sept. 17, 2013, www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cens/2056-the-zamboanga-standoff-role-o/#.VRoljvmUc1Y.

as the most significant factor triggering the emergence of conflict in the Philippines (in both Mindanao and non-Mindanao provinces).³⁸ Economic deprivation, measured and observed through human development indicators (HDIs), is also recognized as the key trigger of organized armed violence by the Philippine military.³⁹ In Mindanao, the correlation of deprivation with conflict is apparent since nine of the 10 lowest-HDI provinces are in Mindanao.⁴⁰ Underdevelopment of the ARMM also manifests in measures other than HDI. For example, the most recent 2015 Labor Force Survey results, published by the National Statistics Office, reveal that the ARMM's labor force participation rate, at 55.8 percent, is the lowest of all regions in the Philippines. It is far below the national average of 63.8 percent.⁴¹

Assessing the Illicit Power Structure of MILF

The entire saga of peace negotiations with MILF reveals the importance of addressing the material issues behind the conflict. MILF is a purely materialistic organization, with the political economy and armed capability driving its strategy. Throughout its existence, MILF has functioned as an illicit power structure. Hashim Salamat and his successors have always postured themselves as a counterstate to the Republic of the Philippines and, thus, have organized MILF as a politico-military organization. Formally, MILF is the political structure that controls the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). As an illicit power structure, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front has proved itself resilient and self-sustaining, with a resource base facilitated by its embeddedness within central Mindanao communities.

Before the 2000 All-Out War and the capture of Camp Abubakar, MILF maintained 46 camps across central Mindanao. At the time, MILF's operational posture was a semi-conventional force, with defined areas of operations (covering barangays, municipalities, and provinces in Mindanao) for each BIAF formation. Before the 2000 war, MILF had five divisions: one elite National Guard division and four field divisions, spread across Mindanao.⁴² BIAF divisions are smaller than PAF infantry divisions and have less equipment. Limited manpower is a reflection of the community-dependent recruitment that the group relies on. MILF division commanders also have limited resources. Some MILF communities do not have sufficient agricultural surpluses to sustain a large armed formation. At its height, before the 2000 war, BIAF had 15,690 members—the rough equivalent of five AFP infantry brigades.⁴³ Unlike conventional state military forces,

³⁸ Human Development Network, "Philippine Human Development Report 2005," 2nd ed., 2005, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/philippines_2005_en.pdf.

³⁹ AFP, "Internal Peace and Security Plan 'Bayanihan,'" Jan. 1, 2011, www.army.mil.ph/ATR_Web-site/pdf_files/IPSP/IPSP%20Bayanihan.pdf.

⁴⁰ United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Index Highlights Inequality, Slow Pace of Progress," July 29, 2013, www.ph.undp.org/content/philippines/en/home/presscenter/press-releases/2013/07/29/human-development-index-highlights-inequality-slow-pace-of-progress/. These provinces are Lanao del Sur (0.416), Zamboanga del Norte (0.384), Saranggani (0.371), Davao Oriental (0.356), Agusan del Sur (0.354), Zamboanga Sibugay (0.353), Tawi-Tawi (0.310), Maguindanao (0.300), and Sulu (0.266). Lanao, Tawi-tawi, Maguindanao, and Sulu are all ARMM provinces.

⁴¹ The National Statistics Office published its most recent Labor Force Survey report in January 2015.

⁴² Pobre, *In Assertion of Sovereignty*, 21-22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24.

MILF camps are not marked by actual physical boundaries (e.g., perimeter fencing) or physical camp infrastructure – with the exception of Camp Abubakar during its existence. Other MILF camps are more correctly thought of as agglomerations of *barangays* where the rebels wield influence.

After the capture of Camp Abubakar, the MILF Central Committee broke up its unwieldy field divisions and reorganized into 17 battalion-size “base commands,” with even more decentralized command and control.⁴⁴ MILF base commanders became more focused on maintaining their influence over the villages they held, rather than engaging in Central Committee-ordered sorties against the AFP. The inward-looking nature of the base commands manifested in their preoccupation with acting as community-level adjudicators of land disputes and petty crime among Mindanao’s MILF-supportive population. In short, it was a reversal from MILF’s stated goal to build a counterstate. What emerged was a network of community armed groups whose political and economic interests are not fully aligned with MILF leadership.

The necessary use of agriculture to acquire financial resources has obliged MILF base commands to enter into unlikely partnerships. Central Mindanao MILF commands are typically clusters of farming communities. Thus, they sustain themselves partly through harnessing the agricultural potential of their encampments. In some cases, MILF base commands are compelled to interact and sell their harvests to local traders aligned with progovernment militias. Unlike the rugged archipelagic geography of western Mindanao (where the MNLF was rooted), central Mindanao features large tracts of irrigated paddies. This terrain made Camp Abubakar a prime MILF agricultural production site. Even after its capture by government forces, the patchwork of MILF communities covering the rice lands of Central Mindanao continued to yield harvests, which were sold to the traders in Mindanao’s urban centers, such as Cotabato City.⁴⁵ MILF-supplied rice commanded preferential prices as sellers flaunted their links with the armed secessionist movement. This captive market for agricultural produce remains for the post-CAB MILF and provides its various base commands with a revenue stream.

MILF has also used less licit means to secure resources, exploiting kinship networks not only for legitimate political authority but also to divert government funds to MILF’s purposes. During the 2000 war, approaches to Camp Abubakar were fortified by trenches and bunkers. It was later determined that the fortifications were made from concrete originally intended for irrigation projects but diverted by local politicians sympathetic to MILF.⁴⁶ These obstacles posed a serious challenge to military units spearheading the assault against Abubakar. The Battle of Matanog, which sought to dislodge 1,000 entrenched MILF, resulted in the biggest single-day loss of life for the Philippine military.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding the charged discourse pitting MILF governance against Philippine governance, some MILF-affiliated clans have hedged their bets by having relatives

⁴⁴ Author interview with Rodolfo Garcia, chief of the GPH Peace Panel when the MOA-AD was junked, Quezon City, Dec. 2011.

⁴⁵ Office of the Army Chief of Staff for Operations (G3), Philippine Army (PA) “The Road to Abubakar,” unpublished monograph, Fort Bonifacio, Taguig City, Philippines, 2001.

⁴⁶ Office of the Army Chief of Staff for Operations (G3), “Clearing the Narciso Ramos Highway,” unpublished monograph, Fort Bonifacio, Taguig City, 2001.

⁴⁷ Nearly two dozen Army Scout Rangers and Philippine marines were killed. The debacle delayed the advance by a week. The bunkers were around eighteen inches thick and could withstand close artillery hits. See Pobre, *In Assertion of Sovereignty*.

on *both sides* of the conflict. The biographies of rogue MILF commanders involved in the 2008 clashes are an illustrative example of how MILF both subverts and contests the Philippine government's local administrative units. During the time of the clashes, Aleem Solaiman Pangalian of the 103rd Base Command had a nephew who was also the mayor of Lumbayanague, Lanao del Sur – the municipality serving as his unit is de facto headquarters. Further down the local government hierarchy, one of Pangalian's daughters was the village chief of a Lanao del Sur barangay that supported the AFP's counterinsurgency efforts.

The life of another MILF commander, Ameril Umbra Kato of the 105th Base Command, shows another angle to the role of kinship networks. Kato, who was also involved in the 2008 MOA-AD clashes, was from the outset known to be a firebrand within MILF. He and his notorious operations officer, Wahid Tondok, often figured in clan disputes involving the powerful pro-Manila Ampatuan clan.⁴⁸ Kato and the Ampatuan clan, a powerful Muslim political dynasty in Maguindanao province, had long been locked in a family feud over ownership of vast tracts of land. Clashes frequently erupted between the 105th BC and the Ampatuans' private militia despite the amicable relationship between the MILF Central Committee and the Ampatuans' principal political patron, then-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The attacks appear to be economically motivated, especially since clashes often erupted during the rice harvest. During harvests, Kato and his men would often venture from their redoubts to capture crops. This often led to escalation of violence, which drew in AFP units. The combined role of protracted clan disputes and stolen harvests in stoking community-level violence is often obscured. Thus, what starts as a criminal activity can easily be misperceived by the national media and Manila-based policymakers as sectarian conflict.⁴⁹

Data on MILF's internal revenue from its supporters is even more obscure than data on revenue from illicit activities. The sparse data available, from the period before the 2000 war, concerns the amount of *zakat* (tax based on Islamic jurisprudence) levied on MILF-supporting peasants – only a small portion of the group's revenue stream. Philippine military intelligence sources estimate that *zakat* makes up only two percent of the MILF revenue stream.⁵⁰ And MILF's operating expenses are as opaque as its revenue. Although research exists on the political economy of the communist insurgency, no reliable open sources detail the financial status of MILF and the BIAF.⁵¹

Given *zakat*'s meager contribution to MILF coffers, base commands needed less licit revenue schemes to complement their agriculture-derived financial resources. Each

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, "The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao," Asia Policy Briefing no. 83, Oct. 23, 2008, [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/b83_the_philippines_the_collapse_of_peace_in_mindanao.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/philippines/b83_the_philippines_the_collapse_of_peace_in_mindanao.pdf).

⁴⁹ Joseph Franco, "Attacks in Mindanao: Overestimating the Bangsamoro Splinter Group," RSIS Commentaries, Aug. 13, 2013, www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cens/2037-attacks-in-central-mindanao-o/#.VRpLTfmUc1Y; Chih Yuan Woon, "Reading the 'War on Terror' in the Philippines," *Geopolitics* 19, no. 3 (2014): 658.

⁵⁰ Author interview with assistant chief of staff for intelligence-Philippine Army, Fort Bonifacio, Taguig City, Dec. 2011.

⁵¹ Alexander Magno, "The Insurgency that Would Not Go Away," in *Whither the Philippines in the 21st Century?* ed. Rodolfo Severino and Lorraine Carlos Salazar (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007). According to Magno's estimates, the communist New People's Army requires nearly US\$(2007)90 million a year to fund its operations. Based on MILF's order of battle of around 11,000 fighters, its operating costs would be more than twice the NPA figure, at around US\$200 million.

MILF field division (later base command) had a special operations group (SOG). A SOG was traditionally a few dozen operatives trained to carry out deniable attacks against Philippine security forces, using improvised explosive devices. In reality, though, MILF base commanders used their SOGs more often for profit-making activities. SOG operatives gained notoriety by threatening to bomb businesses or kidnap those who failed to pay a protection fee. The most prolific MILF SOG was the group attached to the now-defunct National Guard Division. This unit was responsible for the 2003 bombings of a major wharf and the international airport, both in Davao City, which killed dozens. Another form of extortion has been MILF's levy of "checkpoint fees" on motorists traveling roads in its areas of influence, such as the Narciso Ramos Highway, on the way to Camp Abubakar.⁵²

Along with its use of coercion and illicit acquisition of resources, the MILF actively sought to project its image as a counterstate to the Philippine government. The narrative of an existing and sustainable Moro counterstate was intended not just to promote the idea of parity with Manila but also – and more importantly – to burnish MILF's reputation among its supporters. Thus, when Camp Abubakar still existed; it served not only as a headquarters but as the de facto capital of the idealized Bangsamoro state. Under Hashim Salamat, Abubakar was also intended to be the nucleus of an independent Bangsamoro state, covering seven municipalities across the provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur. The 10,000-hectare camp was dotted with structures that housed the trappings of the state, including Sharia courts and prisons intended for those found guilty of violating Islamic law. Also, MILF-sanctioned, home-based institutions offered Islamic banking. Retail stores were set up under cooperatives established by MILF commanders, and commanders studied at the Bedis Memorial Military Academy – MILF's response to the Philippine Military Academy. Bedis was also mandated to conduct basic training for rank-and-file recruits. There was even a BIAF Supply and Logistics Department, which housed MILF's limited firearms manufacturing capability. Weaponry crafted there included improvised B40 RPG rounds fashioned from 60mm mortar shells, crude single-shot grenade launchers (similar in form and function to the M79 40mm grenade launcher), and .50-caliber "sniper" rifles.⁵³

Despite the trappings of statehood, MILF's power is, at root, a parochial organization with very localized sources of authority. In fact, research has revealed the organization's limited operational range. Use of geospatial methods shows that MILF's sorties were confined within a limited geography. Ninety-five percent of skirmishes with the AFP occurred within a 10-kilometer radius of MILF communities.⁵⁴ Even at their peak level of

⁵² The levying of "toll fees" reportedly continues even after the fall of Abubakar, albeit in an ad hoc fashion, using mobile checkpoints established by local MILF commanders.

⁵³ In a 2009 author interview with members of the Philippine Navy Special Operations Group (NAV-SOG) deployed in Lanao del Sur, it was pointed out that the "baby Barretts," or "Barit" (MILF allusion to the popular antimateriel rifle), crafted by MILF are durable enough to make only five shots. The rifles were also found to be effective only against area targets from a distance of 200 meters or less, rendering them undeserving of the "sniper" designation. NAVSOG operators surmised that the weapons were made for "show of force" activities.

⁵⁴ Patricio Abinales, "Sancho Panza: The Paradox of Muslim Separatism," in Severino and Salazar, *Whither the Philippines*. Based on the list of municipalities provided by Abinales, the author plotted the operating radii of various MILF units.

armed capability, MILF units based in Camp Abubakar could sortie out to a 15-kilometer radius at most. This geographic limitation is another manifestation of the embedded nature of the BIAF units in their communities.

Leadership positions in MILF are not objectively linked to military competence. Command and control of the BIAF is exercised mostly by self-taught soldiers, usually with backgrounds in religious instruction, rather than by actual graduates of Bedis. The notorious commanders Bravo, Kato, and Pangalian wielded authority and legitimacy over individual MILF fighters based on the cult of personality and their stature in the barangays.⁵⁵ Bravo, one of the parties deemed to have triggered the 2000 war, was a folk hero in the Lanao Provinces because of his Robin Hood-styled persona, aside from his religious credentials. Kato, on the other hand, is respected as an Islamic teacher, having received training in Saudi Arabia. Pangalian followed the mold of these rogue commanders, with Islamic learning obtained in Libya. Such charismatic MILF commanders led the charge against any attempts to engage in peace negotiations.

The exploits of these rogue MILF commanders highlight how local-level strongmen can subvert not only the government's institutions but also the broader revolutionary movement. Violence waged by Kato and Bravo was a marked departure from what the MILF leadership realized early on: that it was in the organization's best interests to scale down secessionist aspirations to the more feasible goal of attaining autonomy. Hashim Salamat and the MILF top echelons had acknowledged by 1997 that the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, earlier agreed to by MILF's predecessor, the MNLF, would be the upper limit of its negotiation goals.⁵⁶ In this sense, the 2000 war was a violent interregnum resulting from local tensions that boiled over into a total AFP-MILF conflict. But from 2001 to the present, MILF has repeatedly pledged its commitment to the peace process. Thus, while MILF's increasingly modest goals may appear as a recent development, this stance had actually been a key part of the group's strategic thought.⁵⁷ It was not just a last-minute concession made to the Philippine government to seal the deal, to pave the way for signing the CAB.

But MILF has never been a monolithic structure. The localized sources of power and the differing agendas of base commanders meant that opposition to the Central Committee's peace initiatives would be inevitable. Hawkish leaders such as Bravo and Kato periodically emerged to contest the Central Committee's pro-peace stance. The organization had dealt with these recidivists to violence, with mixed results. Bravo was apparently won over and has pledged his support to signing the Framework Agreement. Kato, on the other hand, resisted censure by the MILF Central Committee for his acts related to the botched MOA-AD. In 2011, he and some 300 followers from the 105th Base Command established a MILF splinter group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM). BIFM purports to be the genuine voice of the Bangsamoro, aiming to use violence

⁵⁵ For discussion on the biographies of these three rogue commanders, see Pobre, *In Assertion of Sovereignty*.

⁵⁶ The Tripoli Agreement, signed Dec. 23, 1976, called for "establishment of Autonomy in the Southern Philippines within the realm of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines." OPAPP, "The 1976 Tripoli Agreement," www.opapp.gov.ph/resources/1976-tripoli-agreement.

⁵⁷ For discussion of MILF's strategic pragmatism, see Franco, "Violence and Peace Spoilers"; Franco, "Malaysia: Unsung Hero."

to achieve secession rather than adopt MILF's pro-autonomy stance. But its promised large-scale "war" fizzled out in less than a month.⁵⁸ On March 30, 2015, a month-long AFP offensive killed an estimated half of BIFM fighters.⁵⁹ The operation was a punitive action in response to BIFM's opportunistic involvement in the Mamasapano Incident.⁶⁰

Aside from these notorious commanders' actions, some low-level (i.e., not pertaining to the GPH-MILF negotiations) violence has been ongoing among local MILF leaders, who are often embroiled in local-level disputes over land and resources, sometimes against other fellow secessionists. They can also be motivated by *rido*, or interclan disputes among Muslim families.⁶¹ Examples abound of BIFM-MILF skirmishes.⁶² MILF units have also clashed with the MNLF, local strongmen, and even other MILF groups.⁶³ The dynamics of intra-MILF infighting depend on the revenue streams involved – typically agriculturally based trade and extortion rackets. MILF unit commanders may engage in turf wars with each other as extortion/protection rackets overlap. Similar overlaps may also occur in arable zones that fall under the sphere of influence of two or more different MILF commanders.

Taken in this context, Kato's spoiling behavior, aimed at continuing the conflict, appears to be pragmatic – not resulting from an ideological opposition to the pro-peace MILF Central Committee. Allowing the conflict in Mindanao to fester gives Kato the milieu and polarizing discourse to mobilize the population in his private clan war with the Ampatuans. The continuation of conflict also prevents normalization of government functioning in Mindanao, allowing Kato and the BIFM to continue their revenue-generating schemes unhindered.

⁵⁸ Joseph Franco, "The 2012 Bangsamoro Framework Agreement: Lessons Learned," RSIS Commentaries, Oct. 9, 2012, www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cens/1851-the-2012-bangsamoro-framework/#.VRqU8_mUc1Y.

⁵⁹ Carmela Fonbuena, "All-out Offensive vs BIFF Ends Today," *Rappler*, Mar. 30, 2015, www.rappler.com/nation/88362-afp-ends-offensive-vs-biff.

⁶⁰ BIFM, along with bands of armed residents, private militias, and ordinary bandits, joined the skirmish between MILF and the PNP. After MILF 105th Base Command forces withdrew from the main battle site, BIFM members went about delivering coup de grâce shots to the wounded police officers and carting away their weapons and equipment. See MILF Special Investigation Commission, "Report on the Mamasapano Incident," Mar. 24, 2015, www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/458026/news/nation/full-text-report-of-the-milf-on-the-mamasapano-clash.

⁶¹ See Wilfredo Magno Torres III, ed., *Rido: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao* (Makati City: Asia Foundation, 2007); Simone Orendain, "Philippines Local Disputes Complicate Peace Talks with Separatists," *Voice of America*, June 26, 2011, www.voanews.com/content/philippines-local-disputes-complicate-peace-talks-with-separatists-124586334/141380.html.

⁶² See Abigail Kwok, "1 Killed in Clash between 2 MILF Factions," *InterAksyon*, Nov. 20, 2011, www.interaksyon.com/article/17733/1-killed-in-clash-between-2-milf-factions; Jaime Laude, "Kato Commander Killed in Clash with MILF Rebels," *Philippine Star*, Nov. 21, 2011.

⁶³ Ali Macabalang, "MILF Members Figure in Separate Clashes in Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur," *Manila Bulletin*, Apr. 25, 2014.

International Involvement and Its Effects on MILF

The 2001 resumption of the GPH-MILF peace talks came with a plethora of cease-fire mechanisms. At the forefront is the Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH), which was originally tasked with verifying the location of MILF camps. It later transformed into a permanent monitoring body. Thirteen Local Monitoring Teams (LMTs), deployed across Mindanao, are the CCCH's operational arm. Each LMT has five members: two each from the GPH and MILF, and one from the religious sector, who is jointly chosen by the parties.

Unfortunately, the LMTs failed to hold the peace. In fact, months-long clashes erupted in Mindanao when a 2003 law enforcement operation in Buliok, North Cotabato, against the Pentagon kidnapping gang spilled over into MILF-controlled areas. The skirmishes demonstrated how the LMTs and the cease-fire mechanisms in general had limited clout to prevent ad hoc alliances between criminal gangs and low-level MILF commanders.⁶⁴

Malaysia's conduct of back-channel talks and shuttle diplomacy in Kuala Lumpur needed to be translated into tangible actions at the operational and tactical levels. After all, what use were proclamations extolling the need to stay the course of crafting a negotiated political settlement if clashes continued to break out periodically in Mindanao? Cease-fire-related agreements needed to coincide with enhanced mechanisms to prevent clashes in MILF areas. This would entail establishing an independent body to investigate violent incidents and objectively discern whether they were the result of secessionist activities or ordinary banditry.

The Malaysia-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) grew from the OIC's proposal for a peacekeeping force. The first contingent, deployed on October 10, 2004, comprised 60 members, 46 of them Malaysians.⁶⁵ Other contingent members included military and civilian personnel from Japan, Indonesia, Libya, and other countries. IMT members were deployed near sites where AFP-MILF skirmishes had occurred. While the Philippine military initially met them with ambivalence, it soon deemed them a trustworthy and indispensable partner for keeping the peace.⁶⁶ Indeed, after the IMT's deployment, clashes between BIAF and AFP units fell from 569 in one year to 10 the year after the IMT's deployment.⁶⁷

Arguably, the 2008 MOA-AD clashes can be perceived as a failure of the IMT. But these clashes had more to do with the persistence of the local-level conflict triggers, such

⁶⁴ The Buliok complex operation started as a joint military and police operation to arrest the Pentagon kidnap-for-ransom gang. Gang leader Faisal Marohombsar sought refuge with relatives in North Cotabato who were MILF members. Marohombsar and his men sought to use the cover of the MILF-AFP cease-fire to evade pursuing government forces. See Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, "The Many Lives of the Pentagon Gang," *Public Eye* 9, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 2003), <http://pcij.org/imag/PublicEye/pentagon2.html>.

⁶⁵ Ayesah Abubakar, "Keeping the Peace: The International Monitoring Team (IMT) in Mindanao," SEACSN, Jan.-June 2005, www.seacsn.usm.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=118:keeping-the-peace-the-international-monitoring-team-imt-in-mindanao&catid=39:content-january-june-2005.

⁶⁶ Franco, "Malaysia: Unsung Hero."

⁶⁷ OPAPP, "Zero GPH-MILF Armed Clashes since January 2012," June 20, 2012, www.opapp.gov.ph/milf/news/zero-gph-milf-armed-clashes-january-2012-leonen.

as land disputes. Moreover, the narrative of the IMT's failure was espoused primarily by actors who wanted to scuttle the peace negotiations: a peculiar convergence of interests of Muslim rebels such as Kato, on the one hand, and Christian politicians with private militias, on the other. The efficacy of the IMT and the AFP-MILF ceasefire shows most clearly in the fact that during the 2008 MOA-AD clashes, the MILF Central Committee was able to rein in the bulk of its forces. The IMT members were unfazed at being deployed close to the front lines during the AFP campaign against Kato, where some foreign observers were exposed to indirect fire.⁶⁸

With the boost from the IMT came a renewed impetus for local stakeholders to be involved in monitoring the cease-fire. The LMTs, once derided by military commanders as ineffectual in stopping clashes, became most effective with the entry of the IMT. Local civil society actors emerged on the scene. These include the Mindanao People's Caucus's Bantay Ceasefire (Cease-fire Watch), which, starting in 2007, spearheaded IMT investigations in areas where IMT's mandate might be limited.⁶⁹ International civil society actors, such as the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Muhammadiyah, and the Asia Foundation, were also involved.⁷⁰ These actors added other avenues for informal dialogue between the Philippines and MILF. More importantly, they paved the way for a more inclusive consultation process for the negotiations' stakeholders. Again, resistance to the 2008 MOA-AD stemmed mainly from what was perceived as an opaque negotiation process. Having international and domestic civil society actors take the lead in community information drives and consultations assuaged both the central government's and the local Mindanao politicians' fears of a sellout of Philippine sovereignty. Even Christian politicians traditionally opposed to any form of Bangsamoro self-rule, who were indirect instigators of the skirmishes involving the MOA-AD, were convinced of the talks' newfound inclusiveness.⁷¹

Conclusions and Recommendations

Addressing the illicit power structure of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front was not immediately the intent of the internationalization strategy taken by the Philippine government. From the start, acceding to the MILF request to bring in Malaysia was a pragmatic short-term initiative to restart the stalled talks in 2001. But just as cease-fire mechanisms evolved from ad hoc affairs into developed institutions, so the limited international facilitation role evolved from a stopgap measure to a vital role in forming a more positive conception of peace. Once mechanisms such as the IMT were in place, the notion of "negative peace" – the simple absence of armed conflict – gave way to more developmental approaches. But it was an incremental process, from 2001 to the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014.

⁶⁸ Author interview with Brig. Gen. Alejandro Estomo, Davao City, Aug. 2009.

⁶⁹ Kamarulzaman Askandar, "'Bantay Ceasefire': Grassroots Ceasefire Monitoring in Mindanao," SEACSN, Jan.-Mar. 2003, www.seacsn.usm.my/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=169:bantay-ceasefire-grassroots-ceasefire-monitoring-in-mindanao&catid=47:content-january-march-2003.

⁷⁰ See GPH, Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, "Acknowledgment" section.

⁷¹ "Piñol Wishes MILF Luck in Peace Talks," ABS-CBN News Online, Oct. 7, 2013, www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/10/07/12/pi%3%B1ol-wishes-milf-luck-peace-talks.

The peace process is expected to move slowly despite the Aquino administration's stated goal to expedite it. The Mamasapano incident further set back the process, casting doubt on whether the draft Bangsamoro Basic Law will emerge unscathed in the Philippine legislature.

The protracted nature of the negotiations has posed significant challenges, primarily by allowing time for factions to emerge. Time has allowed rogue and recidivist MILF leaders, using the discourse of how the negotiations were going in circles, to consolidate their power bases. It also has allowed illicit revenue-generation activities to fester unchecked because they are marginalized as "low-priority" community-level, quality-of-life issues, distinct from the "high" strategic issue of resolving the Bangsamoro conflict. It is the combination of (a) the discourse surrounding ineffectual talks and (b) the entrenchment of illicit revenue streams that has driven the vicious cycle of continued conflict. Skirmishes and clashes between MILF forces and the Philippine military underscore how, during the initial stages, Manila seemed to have misdiagnosed the conflict as something that could be won through a military victory. Repeating the 2000 All-Out War would only inflame secessionist impulses, obscuring the political economy of conflict in Mindanao. Worse, a purely military solution would only serve to engender feelings of exclusion and worsen economic deprivation.

With the benefit of hindsight and the signed CAB, it is apparent that the strategy of including international observers to counter the eruption of localized conflict paid off. But it was not a perfect strategy. Since the start of Malaysian involvement in the peace process, a recurring discourse has run in Philippine media and policy circles regarding Kuala Lumpur's ulterior motives. Anti-Malaysian discourse is rooted in the historical but latent Philippine claim over Sabah (North Borneo). Setting aside the Sabah claim, the IMT was able to help keep the peace where it mattered: at the community level. The combination of (a) the legitimacy of international actors and (b) local knowledge created a balanced response, countering the adverse effect of central Mindanao's political economy in further entrenching the conflict.

Similarly, the balancing of justice and stabilization was a more recent development in the negotiations. Cease-fire mechanisms were the priority, with the more substantive aspects of post-peace agreement governance coming late into the picture. This, of course, was expected—violence must be brought down to a manageable level before any substantive talks could start. This pragmatic outlook was shared by both Manila and MILF, with the creation of even more novel stabilization arrangements, such as the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group. This group acted as a mechanism for the GPH and MILF to coordinate law enforcement operations by Philippine police, to prevent organized-crime groups from seeking refuge in rebel-influenced areas.

Both sides could have exercised greater political will to address the conflict. Manila could have emphasized the importance of nonmilitary approaches earlier. A more collaborative and comprehensive approach with both government and nongovernment stakeholders could have helped prevent the emergence of dysfunctional governance and power vacuums, which led to the periodic outbreak of skirmishes. A more resolute stance by the Philippine government against erring local elected officials would also have had to coincide with economic improvements and addressing culture of impunity and exclusion prevalent in Mindanao. This would have given more incentive for communities to come together in support of the peace negotiations.

MILF, for its part, could have helped expedite the peace process by exercising firmer control over its units, to prevent factionalization. The MILF Central Committee's limited command and control during the Mamasapano incident is a worrisome indicator of the leadership's loosening grip over its subordinate base commands. A revolutionary organization such as MILF is bound to exhibit heterogeneity among its ranks, but it is no excuse for the Central Committee's apparently hands-off approach toward rogue commanders. That MILF could rein in Bravo and Pangalian, preventing them from establishing a breakaway group like Kato's BIFM, shows that MILF can keep base commanders in line if it wants to.

The two steps forward, one step back progression of negotiations between the Philippines and MILF suggests that the sequence of events leading to successful peace negotiations is made up not of distinct steps but of repertoires of actions that merge and remerge once opportunities manifest. As the IMT moved from peace monitoring to actual demobilization of MILF fighters, so did the cease-fire committees move from merely validating locations of MILF camps to serving as the central fixture of GPH-MILF interactions outside the negotiations in Kuala Lumpur.

In addressing an illicit power structure such as MILF, three principles are key:

- First, local security must be provided to the communities. It cannot be stressed enough that to build a constituency for peace requires allowing spaces for discourse. Insecurity within communities promotes the possession of weapons. Weak rule of law prompts people to acquire firearms. In turn, illicit small arms facilitate the escalation of clan or personal disputes into armed confrontations. When such brush fires draw in Philippine security forces and MILF, this only reinforces prevailing notions of instability. Potential peace constituencies are therefore lost, which can lead to couching nonsectarian disputes in more divisive ideological/sectarian themes. What starts as a loose network of armed individuals, clans, or groups can be radicalized and recruited into the ranks of illicit power structures such as MILF. A still worse scenario is the crystallization of such disparate groups into a cohesive, extremist organization, as seen in the formation of the BIFM from a hard-line faction of MILF.
- Second, the material conditions that sustain conflict must never be overlooked. It is easy to cast conflict in Mindanao simplistically, as a dualistic interaction between secessionists and supporters of the Philippine state, or as a sectarian Muslim-Christian conflict. Policymakers tackling illicit power structures should not fall into the totalizing and polarizing discourse used by belligerents in the conflict. Tagging a community as "MILF-supporting," "MILF-influenced," or a "MILF camp," without adequate validation, can lead to a vicious cycle of pushing once-neutral parties into the arms of MILF. It must also be stressed that even from a military/counterinsurgency perspective, good strategy requires knowing the breadth and depth of the opponent's reality. Depth of knowledge is therefore relevant in envisioning and adapting to the complex postconflict environment.

- Finally, involving foreign or international actors is best done as soon as possible, to infuse new ideas and resources into intractable conflicts. Each conflict is unique, but the key to exploiting foreign involvement is to time it to the point when at least one of the belligerents has come to the realization that domestic resources are not enough. Caution and due diligence are naturally necessary, since a state would not want a third-party to create an irredentist impulse or inadvertently sanction a proxy war. In the MILF case, Malaysia's entry came with Manila's understanding that it was not in Kuala Lumpur's current national interest to stoke the Bangsamoro conflict. Had Malaysia arrived too soon on the scene, MILF would have misread this as supporting its secessionist goals. Manila would therefore have been compelled to take a heavy-handed approach to counter what would be perceived as Malaysian meddling. On the other hand, had Malaysian involvement been delayed, this would have signaled to MILF that Manila was opposed to having an international actor work out a political solution. In short, missing the right window for international involvement would have led to a more intransigent negotiating posture by both sides.

Ultimately, multiple stakeholders' efforts must be coordinated to address the challenges posed by an illicit power structure. States and state actors must realize that non-military initiatives have an indispensable role to play both during and after conflict periods. Governance by local elected officials must be exercised effectively and impartially, denying armed groups space to agitate communities and mobilize them for a protracted conflict. And international actors must be drawn in at the right time, playing the right roles to soften the negotiating positions of the belligerents. The Bangsamoro conflict, as waged by MILF, was the product of a dysfunctional state building process. Only an inclusive process could eliminate the illicit capture of political and economic resources that sustains the roots of violence in Mindanao.