

New War and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

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New War and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

Abstract

This capstone is a compilation and analysis of research on the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the largest armed separatist group in the southern Philippines' island of Mindanao, and the national Bangsamoro struggle it embodies. Drawing on contemporary "new war theory," a relatively young, continually evolving model of conflict, I assert that the course of the conflict is on a distinctly "new war" path due to the collapse of both the state and the fragmentation of the MILF, which traditionally acted in the capacity of a state to suppress the violent tendencies of armed men in lawless areas. The current violence in Mindanao is rapidly departing from the more traditional political and ideological motivations of violence, becoming more and more oriented towards personal profit that merely uses ideological rhetoric when convenient. To argue this point, my paper traces the conflict from its historical origins, showing the suppressing influence on non-conventional warfare of politically-oriented armed groups acting in a state capacity, highlighting the weakness of law in the region, and how the current resurgence of violence reflects the recent fragmentation of the MILF itself.

For a conflict that has raged in an English-speaking nation for over 40 years, and for a group active in that conflict for over 27 years, there are remarkably few books and articles that deal with the MILF, and none that the author could discover dealing specifically with this conflict and new war theory. With the current resurgence of violence between the MILF and the Filipino government in Mindanao, a greater insight into the nature and workings of this armed group is a necessary contribution to both the

constantly evolving body of new war knowledge and the literature on the changing conflict in Mindanao.

What is New War?

“New war theory” is a contemporary, evolving model and body of knowledge that was created in response to the unique transformation of warfare that has occurred since 1945. For the past 200 years, military thought has been mainly centered around the principles of Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*. It has focused on warfare as an extension of policy by the nation-state, with nation states as the most important actors, and conflicts characterized by regular armies. These conflicts stress the importance of high tech, high cost weaponry like tanks, airplanes, and naval ships. It is this type of combat that currently bears the honor of the title “conventional warfare.”¹

Since 1945, however, there has been a radical shift away from this “conventional” version of war. Only a minority of conflicts, roughly a quarter, fit into this traditional framework of armed struggle. Replacing conventional warfare as the most common conflict type is what has been deemed the “low intensity conflict (LIC).”²

Low Intensity Conflicts

Low intensity conflicts are distinguished from conventional wars by several unique characteristics. One, they have a strong tendency to occur in developing countries. Two, these conflicts almost never involve regular armies on both sides. Rather, they are often deployed on one side against a non-state group, be they guerillas, terrorists, or even

¹ Van Creveld, Martin. *The Transformation of War* (1991). New York: The Free Press; pp. 10-18

² Van Creveld (1991), pp. 20

ordinary citizens. Finally, the violence of LICs is not primarily carried out using the high-technology collective weaponry that conventional militaries are so proud of. There is reliance instead on small arms like the AK-47 rather than tanks, aircraft, and naval ships.³

The name “Low intensity conflict” has also proven itself somewhat of a misnomer. LICs are not only far more numerous than conventional conflicts, they are also far more bloody. For comparison, let us first take a look at the civil war in Lebanon. A fifteen year, low intensity conflict, the death toll is estimated to have claimed over 100,000 Lebanese lives.⁴ Juxtapose this with the numerous conventional wars fought by the nation of Israel, conflicts justly hailed as the fiercest and most bloody conventional conflicts of their time. After four decades of conventional warfare, Israel’s death toll in its struggles against the regular, state armies of Arab nations had reached approximately 14,000.⁵ This number pales in comparison to the dead in Lebanon, not to mention the more bloody LICs. There were an estimated 3 million dead in the four year Nigerian Civil War, a million dead in the thirty-year Vietnamese conflict, and a million dead in the French-Algerian War, to name only a few.⁶ The number of human lives claimed by these LICs dwarfs that of conventional conflicts; and out of all the many conventional wars that have occurred since the end of World War II, there exist only two that have proven exceptions to this

³ Van Creveld (1991), pp. 20

⁴ Van Creveld (1991), pp. 21

⁵ Van Creveld (1991) pp. 21

⁶ Van Creveld (1991) pp. 21

rule.⁷ As we can see, the theories and tenets applied to conventional conflicts are increasingly out of their depth in the international arena.

Additionally, within these LICs, there have been a growing number of conflicts that defy the logic governing classic insurgencies, wars following the old logic where violence is a means to an end for political or ideological goals. This is a unique type of conflict that has occurred, and continues to occur, all around the world, including Liberia, Chechnya, Darfur, Northern Ireland and Colombia,⁸ and many other countries. The list only continues to grow larger as time goes on.

In these conflicts, previous restraints on targets and tactics have become undone, leading to unprecedented brutality and ruthlessness. It has become more difficult to negotiate and deal with these armed groups. More civilians are both getting involved in and dying in these conflicts. States are finding themselves more and more incapable of dealing with the situations, and the rising trend of this type of violence is alarming. These new conditions and the evolution of these conflicts are aptly called “New War,” to express a distinct cleavage with traditional understandings of how and why groups of humans arm themselves to kill.

⁷ The only two conventional conflicts to break this mould are the Korean War and the Iran-Iraq War. Van Creveld (1991), pp. 21

⁸ For further readings on these conflicts in the context of New War, and application of the theory to individual conflicts, I strongly recommend the following texts:
 Ellis, Stephen. *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*. New York: NYU Press (2007).
 Flint, Julie and Alex de Waal. *Darfur: A New History of a Long War*. Zed Books (2008).
 Gallaher, Carolyn. *After the Peace: Loyalist Paramilitaries in Post-Accord Northern Ireland*. Cornell University Press (2007).
 Kirk, Robin. *More Terrible than Death: Massacres, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia* (2003).
 Tishkov, Valery. *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*. University of California Press (2004).

The literature⁹ has generally acknowledged three key characteristics for recognizing these New War conflicts (although the causes behind these developments remain a matter of debate). First, the armed groups involved have diverged from their original ideological and/or political basis. While they often begin their battles because of traditional motivations like self-determination or politics, their motivations shift over time to become something completely different. The original ideology becomes mere rhetoric used as a convenient excuse while their actions speak otherwise. These “new warriors” fight for more primal desires: war to survive, war for plunder, power, and reputation, war for personal profit and enjoyment.

Second, the previously unified armed groups splinter and factionalize. Due to a collapse of the original organization’s ability to address the needs and desires of its members, a significant amount of its forces part ways. This can occur due to a loss of legitimacy, a loss of power, and/or a collapse of the organizational structure. This aspect of new war conflicts is a large part of what makes negotiations, peacekeeping, and peacemaking efforts exponentially more difficult, especially where multiple fragmentations occur.

Finally, the third characteristic is the weakness of the state. This is the most important of the three. The failure of the state to meet a population’s needs, specifically the inability to enforce law and order and to chase down and destroy the armed groups threatening the state, is a necessary component in the creation of new war LICs. This is

⁹ See the above texts as well as
Van Creveld, Martin. *The Transformation of War*. New York: The Free Press (1991)
Kaldor, Mary. *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford University Press (2001)

also often seen manifested in the use of proxy groups fighting on the state's behalf, whether the government or the civilian population organized these paramilitary forces.

New War and the Philippines

The Philippines is a very unique New War case, boasting a long history of conflict. In order to better understand the nature of the conflict, I first trace the historical roots and progression of the contemporary situation back to Spanish colonization in the 1500s and the ensuing buildup of antagonism between the Filipino Catholic population and the Muslims in Mindanao as a result of colonial policy. I then show that this base of ethno-communal conflict is taken to a new level by American colonization in the 1900s, carrying over into the independence of the Philippines. After this period is where the Filipino experience comes face to face with new war for the first time.

It is at that time, in the 1970s, that violence erupts with an undeniably New War twist. However, the emergence of a state-like armed group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), is able to curtail these New War tendencies and focus the conflict back into the framework of a traditional insurgency. It is able to do this precisely because the organization draws on the long historical roots of the conflict, combining it with the lure of nationalism, a comparatively stable state apparatus, and the strength to unify the Moro peoples.

It is the purpose of this paper, however, to show that the present national movement, embodied by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), is once again giving way to New War. The separatist conflict between the MILF and the Filipino government is devolving into an increasingly New War conflict due to the weakening of the MILF.

The organization was the unifying, limiting factor holding New War violence in check, but it is now coming undone.

Methodology

To briefly recap, I am seeking to demonstrate two main points. My first argument is that the contemporary conflict in the southern Philippines is indeed a new war conflict, and my second is that an ideologically guided, nationalistic armed group has been suppressing Mindanao's new war tendencies.

To argue these two points, I give an account of the conflict in its entirety, from its historical roots to the present day, in order to give the reader a better understanding of the original ideological goals and motivations of the violence, particularly the sense of nationalism that drives the Islamic separatist MILF. Special attention is also given to the outbreak of violence in the 1970s. This period is especially important because it exemplifies a new war situation and how the violence reverted back to following "old war" logic soon afterwards with the emergence of the MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front), predecessor to the MILF. From there, I establish the MILF's inheritance of the original MNLF mantle, thereby continuing to act as suppressor of new war activities, and finally, I finish with the recent fragmentation and weakening of the MILF, the reasons behind it, and its subsequent effect in allowing new war tendencies to rise up once more.

Historical Roots of the Conflict: Creating the Moro Nation

The Muslims in Mindanao were able to join together under an imagined Moro "nation" due to the historical roots of the region, constantly pushing the various Islamic tribes and ethnicities together over the course of several centuries. This can be traced

back specifically to the initial conversion to Islam of the Philippines by the Arabs, the subsequent introduction of Catholicism by the Spanish, and finally the handling of these conditions by the United States under colonial rule.

Before the arrival of Islam and Christianity in what would come to be known as the Philippines (named after the Spanish King Philip II),¹⁰ the land was populated by a variety of indigenous tribes. The Arabs would bring Islam to the area in the 8th century, but these Middle Eastern traders would not establish a permanent settlement until the end of the 1200s. Throughout the 1300s, their religion would permeate to the point that being a Muslim became an acceptable, standard presence in the communities of Mindanao.¹¹ It is important to note here that the influence of these Islamic Sultanates was concentrated almost exclusively on the island of Mindanao, separated geographically from the other segments of the Philippines. This geographic concentration would lead to vastly different experiences under Spanish colonization.

It was in 1565 that the Spanish would arrive in their infamous, imperialistic quest for God, gold, and glory. Having experienced occupation by the Muslim Moors in recent memory, their antagonism of Muslims in the Philippines was especially harsh. It is from the Spanish experience with the “Moors” that the term “Moro” was coined, arising from the similarities the Spanish observed between the religious practice two, and effectively laying the groundwork for the Moro identity we see today.¹²

¹⁰ Scott, William H. *Barangay: Sixteenth-century Philippine Culture and Society*, (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1994), pp. 6

¹¹ Ganguly, Rajat and Ian Macduff. *Ethnic Conflict and Secession in South and Southeast Asia: Causes, Dynamics, Solutions*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2003); pp. 196

¹² Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 196

The conquistadores launched aggressive campaigns against the Muslim Sultanates in the Southern Island of the Philippines, today's Mindanao, in addition to the other areas of the Philippines, but these better organized kingdoms were able to more effectively resist the colonial power, slowing their domination. The difference would make itself known over the course of 350 years of attacks; in the 19th century, the Spanish had full control over other parts of the Philippines while the occupation and conversion attempts in the south had mostly stalled due to fierce resistance. Still, the Spanish controlled most of the trade routes and maintained a loose rule over most of the area with the presence of a few garrisons.¹³

This era of Spanish rule created a strong sense of animosity between these Muslim and Catholic communities, between Mindanao and the rest of the Philippines. To the Spaniards, Muslims were enemies in need of domination and conversion. The already converted Catholics, however, were Spain's allies in their war against the Muslims. The hostility between the Catholic Filipinos and Muslim Moros was fuelled by their military clashes, economic dislocation of the Muslims as Spain came to dominate trade routes and production, and the spread of the Spanish system of education.¹⁴

Furthermore, in the long term, it created a large gap in development and infrastructure. While the Spaniards developed their Catholic protégés' education systems and economy, they destroyed Moro plantations, fields, and trading vessels. While they attempted to spread their system of education to the Moros as well, the embedded Spanish values, institutions, and interests that came along with it were rejected by the

¹³ Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 196-197

¹⁴ Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 197

Moros, whose basic values were threatened and contradicted. This led to the failure of Spain to establish even a single school in Mindanao, a leading cause of illiteracy and stagnation within Moro society. This can be seen from the lack of professionals like doctors, dentists, lawyers, and even teachers in Mindanao under Spanish occupation as compared to their Catholic counterparts to the north. This situation of inequality between Mindanao and the rest of the Philippines has persisted to even the present day, marginalizing Moros in the Philippines along socio-economic lines.¹⁵ In this way, Spanish colonial rule established the groundwork for the Moros to forge themselves into a united front, sharing an experience of persecution and marginalization that transcended their traditional ethnic origins.

American Rule and the Moro Identity

In 1898, as part of the United States' victory in the Spanish-American war, the Philippines came under US control. Despite the fact that the Spanish never achieved complete control over Mindanao,¹⁶ the island was also "given" by the defeated European power to the American victor. This was quickly followed by an uprising on the island by the Sultanates to resist the new occupiers, particularly in two intense and bloody battles in 1906 and 1913, but these were shut down by the militarily superior American forces each time they arose throughout the years. This finally culminated in the American abolishment of the Sultanate altogether in 1940 and a system of direct American rule to replace it.¹⁷

¹⁵ Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 197

¹⁶ Pandey, B.N. *South and Southeast Asia, 1945-1979: Problems and Prospects* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980); pp. 137

¹⁷ Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 198

Throughout American colonization, the Western power sought to integrate Mindanao with the rest of the Philippines. It established the Moro province on the island, under the direct control of Manila. The most significant outcome of this goal in the context of the eventual conflict was the implementation of the U.S. of a policy encouraging Filipino Catholics to migrate into Mindanao, essentially legalized land-grabbing by the Catholic majority. As “public property” of the colonial government since it was declared so in the Land Registration Act of 1902 and Public Lands Acts of 1911, 1913, 1914, and 1919, effectively appropriating the Moros’ ancestral lands, the U.S. began to give portions of land away. However, with the passage of the Act of 1919, only Christian Filipinos could receive 24 hectares of land. All “non-Christians,” discriminatory language almost exclusively targetting the Muslims of Mindanao, were only eligible to receive the smaller amount of 10 hectares.¹⁸ Furthermore, in the 1920s, the administration of government in the Moro Province began to be given over to the Filipinos in preparation for eventual U.S. withdrawal. The positions, however, were almost entirely given to Catholic Filipinos; all Muslim Provinces, with the sole exception of Lanao, found themselves ruled by non-Muslim Governors.¹⁹ In this way, the Muslims of Mindanao found themselves ruled by Christian Filipinos that had developed a pattern of leadership and authority that usurped the cultural and religious values of their traditional Muslim society.

This further polarized the Filipino Muslim and Catholic communities, eventually cementing a transcendent ethno-religious identity among the Filipino Muslims; it is from this identity that a unified Moro front would eventually emerge. It is here that the origins

¹⁸ Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 198

¹⁹ Harrison, F.B. *Cornerstone of the Philippine Independence* (New York: Century Company, 1922); pp. 36

of the nationalist MNLF and its conflict with the Filipino government began to concretely take shape, and this is seen clearly in the following excerpt from a 1946 memorandum issued to the United States, just before it was to give the Philippines its independence:

“Mindanao and Sulu should not be included in such independence... [because] our public land should not be given to people other than Moros. Our practices, laws, and the decision of our leaders should be respected. Our religion should not be curtailed in any way...²⁰ it is not proper [for two antagonistic] peoples to live together under one flag.”²¹

The American government, however, ignored this request. Disappointed, especially since World War II had just ended and the world was abuzz with newly independent states, the Muslim resistance movement began almost immediately after the formal granting of Mindanao to the newly independent Philippines. Their goal was what would become the main goal of Muslim separatists for the next fifty years and beyond: the creation of an independent *dar al-Islam*, or Islamic State, in Mindanao.²²

Beginning of the Contemporary Conflict: New War in the 1970s

At the end of the ‘60s and early ‘70s, there occurred a very unusual outbreak and transformation of conflict in Mindanao. In fact, it goes against the trend we most often see in new war conflicts; instead of only beginning as a conventional conflict and then reverting to new war, which this conflict would do very quickly, new warfare in Mindanao would surge for only a short, yet intense period of time. Following this, the environment of this LIC then shifted more towards the logic governing “old” wars.

²⁰ Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 200

²¹ Cited in Zainon, Ahmad. “Current Conflict Rooted in Moro’s Historical Struggle.” *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), 13 November 1986

²² Rajat and Macduff (2003); pp. 200

The Jabidah Massacre

The Jabidah Massacre of 1968 is the event that undeniably sparked the violence that would engulf Mindanao. In Sulu, one of the Muslim provinces near Malaysia, the AFP was conducting Operation Merdeka, a top secret, covert operation that was created to launch an assault on the resource-rich island of Sabah. The island had been formally given to Malaysia by the British in 1963 as the former Empire decolonized, but the Philippines hotly contested the decision on the grounds that Sabah had previously belonged to, and never legally or formally left the hands of, the Sulu sultanate, a one of the Muslim territories annexed by the United States and “given” to the Philippines upon independence.²³

Operation Merdeka was to be carried out by Muslim recruits, youths from Sulu. The operation would never come to fruition, however. Upon finding out that they would be killing other Muslims in Sabah, the designated invaders wanted to resign from the operation. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back, built up on an absence of promised pay, little food, and general hardship while their superiors basked in general opulence. In March 1968, however, for reasons that remain not entirely clear, the Christian officers in charge, rather than letting them go, killed 11 of the trainees and injured another. To this day, there were no arrests made, and the government at the time had launched an extensive cover-up, exposed only because the lone survivor had

²³ Vitug, Marites D. and Glenda M. Gloria. *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao*. (Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, 2000); pp. 2-14

somehow escaped. Half-dead, shot in the thigh, he had somehow escaped into the waters just off the island on a piece of driftwood and was rescued by several fishermen.²⁴

This event was perceived by the Muslim community as a government attack on Muslims that had willingly served the Filipino state. They had been tricked, betrayed, and finally murdered by Christian state officials, highlighting the prejudice and marginalization of Mindanao's Muslim population as a province of the larger Philippine nation.²⁵

Datu Udtog Matalam

Jabidah had changed the landscape of politics, sparking protests and cutting across ethnic and party boundaries to highlight Muslims against Christians, and in Cotabato this would push political grievances to the very brink. One man who took advantage of this situation was Datu Udtog Matalam, who would later create the first organization for the creation of a separate Islamic state by taking advantage of the outrage Jabidah evoked. However, his personal reasons for the creation of the group had little to do with Jabidah itself.

Matalam had been governor of Cotabato for the past five consecutive terms; as a venerated Islamic authority and World War II hero for his anti-Japanese guerilla warfare experiences, he had reigned as the undisputed head of the province for some time, earning him the nickname of Grand Old Man.²⁶

The inflammation of Jabidah coincided with a period of tragedy and political strife for Matalam. The year before, in 1967, one of the sixty-seven year old's sons had

²⁴ Yegar, Moshe. *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*. (New York: Lexington Books, 2002); pp. 251-252

²⁵ Yegar (2002); pp. 252

²⁶ George, T.J.S. *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics*. (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1980), pp. 130

been killed. In true Mindanao style, Matalam's offspring had always delighted in wielding the power that came so easily as the children of the untouchable Governor Matalam. For example, one who had become a town mayor earned the nickname of "General" for his frequent personal involvement, and self-admitted delight, in leading his police force on various missions. His own power was significant, and he once boasted to army authorities in Manila that he was powerful enough to "wipe out whole cities in Cotabato."²⁷

The unfortunate son in question also enjoyed flaunting his status. His showy behavior, however, reputedly cost him his life. According to one version of events, he once forced a National Bureau of Investigation agent to bow down and kiss his feet, armed bodyguards in toe for extra coercion. The agent, not taking kindly to this, confronted the son at a later date to respond with a fatal shooting.²⁸

His death saddened and infuriated Governor Matalam, and his outrage was further provoked when his son's killer escaped punishment in the corrupt court system. Matalam felt discriminated against by the Christian federal government, believing that they did not deal out justice because his son was just a Muslim in backwater Mindanao; it was a hurt that festered all the more because he had put forth some effort to be fair to Christian settlers in his province. From this incident, Matalam felt a keen sense of marginalization of Muslims by the government.²⁹

In the same year, Matalam would lose the governor's office. Despite being aggressively challenged for the first time by the Nacionalista party, the Grand Old Man had always before relied solely on his impressive reputation and saw no reason to deviate

²⁷ George (1980), pp. 130

²⁸ George (1980) pp. 131

²⁹ George (1980) pp. 133

from the tradition; his political strategy would be to simply place his name on the ballot like he had always done, and the winning votes would of course necessarily follow.³⁰

Matalam's brother-in-law, Congressman Salipada Pendatun was worried that it might not work this time. The congressman's worries were not solely out of concern for his brother-in-law, either. Pendatun, of the same political party as Matalam, was quite aware of the fact that political tradition had demanded that the positions of Governor and Congressman would be held by members of the same party. Pendatun's own position would be in jeopardy if Matalam lost.³¹

In this context, Pendatun persuaded Matalam, still grieving his murdered son, to sit out the election and allow Pendatun to run in his place. Pendatun took to the campaign trail, playing the consummate politician, and selected Simeon Datumanong as his running mate, a political protégé of Matalam with the added political bonus of being related to their opposition by blood, and thus helping to neutralize the Nacionalista candidate.³²

Pendatun would go on to win the election, but what he did next shocked and angered Matalam. As it turned out, Pendatun turned down the governorship, instead preferring to retain his seat in Congress and the position went to Datumanong by default. Matalam felt cheated by this ploy; he felt let down and betrayed by both his friend Pendatun and his protégé Datumanong.

Founding of the MIM

From here, Datu Udtog Matalam would go on in 1968 to found the MIM (Muslim Independence Movement, later re-named Mindanao Independence Movement). It began small in scale, based in Matalam's hometown of Pagalongan. The original goal of this

³⁰ George (1980) pp. 132

³¹ George (1980) pp. 132

³² George (1980) pp. 132

organization was the creation of an Islamic republic in Mindanao; in three months, it was modified to guarantee Christians representation, and finally Matalam would come out to say that all he had was a vague plan for statehood under a federal system.³³ In other words, there was no clear and unified objective to the organization.

The creation of this organization also coincided with the infamous Jabidah shooting; its creation occurred only six weeks after the affair. The timing led to a commonly accepted theory that MIM was a response to Jabidah. However, on close examination, this is very unlikely. After all, Jabidah happened in the province of Sulu among the Samal and Tausug ethnicities, while the MIM was created in Cotabato with primarily Maguindanaons. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the previous section, Matalam had a plethora of personal reasons for leading the MIM that had absolutely nothing to do with Jabidah. Instead, Matalam was simply using genuine Moro outrage over Jabidah for personal ends.

Immediately following the MIM's creation, violence in Cotabato suddenly polarized along religious lines. While it is doubtful that Matalam himself had armed and organized a band of killers, there is no doubt that the Muslim/Christian divide in the province had reached new, bloody heights. Travelers, government officials, and numerous isolated small towns were being attacked by outraged Muslims. Armed with everything from farming tools for the poorer to automatic weapons for the well-off among them, bands of armed Muslim men roamed the countryside killing and raiding their Christian neighbors, and bands of Christians retaliated in kind, neither of which the government and meager law enforcement agencies in Cotabato were able to stop.³⁴

³³ George (1980) pp. 133

³⁴ George (1980) pp. 134

Mindanao: Land of private armies

A large part of why things escalated so quickly after Jabidah and the creation of the MIM was that Mindanao was already a powder keg waiting to go off. In the years leading up to these events, the political landscape was rife with private armies.

This happened soon after the wave of Christian settlers began arriving in the post-war period. The aggressive migrants had found that disputes with others over property rights, again, due to the lack of law enforcement, could be settled easily with a force of private security guards, and this tradition carried over into the political arena.

It was common practice to have 1,000 or more armed men to operate under an important political family. When a candidate ran for office, it was tradition for all of his clan's able-bodied men, as well as any friends willing to support him, to assemble and provide any assistance required of them. Due to this, the private armies of Muslim politicians were almost exclusively Muslim, and the same applied to Christian gunmen following Christian politicians. In this way, Mindanao had already become a land ruled by gunmen already separated along religious lines, with an estimated 20,500 private gang members operating in 1969 Mindanao.³⁵

The Ilaga

At this time, there emerged a classic actor in new war conflicts: a civilian paramilitary force backed by the government, the Ilaga. The first group was formed in Cotabato to combat the Muslim separatists. The Ilaga's creation was a direct result of the government's weakness and inability to enforce the law. As it would turn out, the Ilaga was in fact founded and backed by government officials themselves, mayors in the Moro Province. The "Magnificent Seven," as this group of mayors was called, was ostensibly

³⁵ George (1980) pp. 141

launched to defend Christians in the government's place, but in truth, they first served as a convenient private army to ensure the political power and re-election of the mayors in the 1969 and 1971 elections, against whom several Muslim candidates were running.³⁶

Well-armed with guns, the Ilaga were extremely ruthless and very good at what they did. They became infamous killers, leaving a calling card by cutting off their victims' ears. Led by the dreaded "Kumander Toothpick," they struck terror into their political opponents, forcing whole villages that supported the opposition to flee or be cut down. The Ilaga, however, like any good new war group, soon took on a life of its own.

It is at this point that the concept of state weakness in engendering new war is applied in classic fashion. The Filipino government found itself hard pressed to contain these gangs, its police forces ineffective and unable to make any significant progress. This led to a strategy of enlisting "inside men" in the gangs; as it turned out, they only placed operatives in the Ilaga ranks. The strategy of the field commanders was to encourage agents to cause trouble in a chosen area, drawing out the "local thugs," and from there the military would move in to clean up the situation, arresting or killing the culprits. Of course, the "local thugs" opposing the government Ilaga plants were almost always Muslims. When Christian gangs pillaged and raided, the military was almost always magically elsewhere or arrived too late on the scene. This *carte blanche* to operate only made the Ilaga and other copycat Christian gangs more reckless, confident that the military would leave them alone. The Muslim bands, however, became increasingly aware that they were a people with a common problem.³⁷

³⁶ George (1980) pp. 146

³⁷ George (1980) pp. 152

The sheer brutality and sadism employed by fighters, a distinct characteristic of new war concepts, was employed on all sides. Not only were civilians targeted, but they were often killed in sick and twisted ways. In the town of Lamlahak, a dozen armed Christian men tied a young man with vine, boiled him in scalding water, and then dragged his corpse behind a horse to the next village. The violence was also not confined to Christians and Muslims killing one another. Near Lake Sebu, Muslim gangsters ambushed another Muslim farmer's two sons in the field, kept them alive while amputating all of the boys' limbs, and then finally finishing them off with bolo knives. For the first few years, chaos reigned supreme. The Ilagas eventually turned on their Christian sponsors, killing both Muslims and Christians indiscriminately. In other regions, the trend continued among copycat groups, each killing and looting what they could, embracing the breakdown of order.³⁸

It was a new war conflict waiting to happen. Sparked by the Jabidah massacre, the weakness of the state, the prevalence of armed groups, and lack of organization gave the conflict its brutal new war nature. Ideology and the distinctions of political and religious causes and groups, faded away before the all-consuming bloodbath. The historical divide between Christian and Moro, the government in Manila and Mindanao may have led to the outbreak of violence, but those motivations had no bearing on why fighters were killing indiscriminately for whatever they could get their hands on. The law was weak, the state was weak, and they could take whatever they wanted. It was kill, or be killed. Fight, run, or die.

³⁸ George (1980) pp. 160-164

New War to Old War

This New War environment would give way in several years, however. The conflict in Mindanao would settle into a classical separatist insurgency, a struggle for the right of self-determination. This would be brought about by the realization of the long history leading up to the Bangsamoro identity, finally incarnated into an organization that would unify the Moros and bring an end to the roving gangs so common in the 1970s.

Emergence of the Bangsamoro: Rise MNLF

Although the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) had been founded by Matalam for political, selfish reasons, and would only survive for a few years until Matalam gave it up in exchange for a position as President Marcos's Presidential Adviser on Muslim Affairs,³⁹ it came to embody something more. With the rising violence spreading from Cotabato to all of Mindanao and a growing recognition that government aid supported Christians and not Muslims, more and more of the Moros banded together to counteract this development. Other Islamic organizations began to appear, most notably the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which would be the first organization to fully unite the Moros behind a common cause and focus their efforts towards the creation of a Moro state.

The goal of the Bangsamoro movement was a more concrete version of Udtog Matalam's vague sketch: The Moros wanted secession from the Philippines and establishment of an Islamic nation state. The founder and charismatic head of the MNLF, Nur Misuari, directed the movement along the lines of Bangsamoro nationalism rather

³⁹ Buendia, Rizal G. "The State-Moro Armed Conflict in the Philippines: Unresolved national question or question of governance?" *Asian Journal of Political Science* June 2005 vol. 13 no. 1 pp. 109-138; pp. 114

than adopting a specifically Islamic discourse, influenced as he was by the revolutionary ideals from an education in Manila.⁴⁰

Despite the presence of a multitude of other Muslim groups, Misuari's MNLF quickly became the dominant organization which all the others fell in line under, drawn by the appeal of his secular, national ideology. After the Jabidah Massacre and formation of the MIM, the repeated treatment of Muslims in the south as separate from the Christian Filipino Christians engendered the formation of a united, collective identity that encompassed all of the various Muslim tribes of Mindanao. The Bangsamoro movement surfaced, derived from the words *bangsa* (nation) and the previous *Moro* from Spanish colonial times. Claiming for themselves the right to self-determination, intellectuals and mainstream Muslims alike came to reject their "Muslim-Filipino" identities, even going so far as to say that they were not Filipino, but Bangsamoro.⁴¹ It is from this nationalistic, Bangsamoro identity that the contemporary Islamic separatist movements originated, and it is from this desire for nationhood that would come to mould the nature of the MNLF and its successor the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front).

The success of the MNLF was also due to the fact that it was financially and militarily stronger than other groups, and therefore better able to fill the void left by the Filipino government by better protecting its members. Misuari, in framing the MNLF in the context of a legitimate, Islamic state, obtained the backing of foreign state sponsors Libya, Malaysia, and the OIC (Organization of The Islamic Conference). This official backing provided him with more money, weapons, and supplies than other Islamic groups

⁴⁰ Tyner (2005) pp. 17

⁴¹ Tyner, James A. *Iraq, Terror, and the Philippines' Will to War*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005); pp. 16

in Mindanao, as well as providing further legitimacy to his cause on both the international and domestic level.⁴²

The MNLF gradually absorbed most of the Muslim private armies, using propaganda to further spread its message, and controlled its forces with a centrally organized state apparatus. The military force of tens of thousands was subservient to a political body, the MNLF Central Committee whose members were decided by a voting process.⁴³ This consolidation and control of the Muslim armed groups allowed the Filipino government to negotiate with them all as a single entity.

The Tripoli Agreement

In December 23, 1976, peace finally came again to Mindanao with the Tripoli Agreement. Negotiations were held with the OIC as a mediator, hosted by Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi, resulting in a treaty for full Muslim autonomy in Mindanao's 13 provinces. The random brutality that had typified the initial years had disappeared as the MNLF gained in power, and the Tripoli Agreement finally saw the end of the widespread Ilaga and most other independent military and guerilla bands. While some still operated, their actions were few and far between. While there is a distinct lack of reliable statistics, most estimates place the death toll from the 1968-1976 period of conflict between 50,000 and 60,000 Muslims, Christians, soldiers and civilians. Hundreds of thousands became refugees, Christians fleeing north and Muslims to nearby Islamic countries.⁴⁴ Optimists hailed the Tripoli Agreement as the end of the Islamic insurgency.

⁴² Vitug and Gloria (2000); pp. 61-63

⁴³ Jubair, Salah. *Bangsamoro: A Nation Under Endless Tyranny* (3rd ed). (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1999)

⁴⁴ Yegar (2002) pp. 276

The Tripoli Agreement, however, was not to last. As it turned out, Filipino President Marcos had no intention of keeping his promises. Although Misuari believed that and the MNLF he would be receiving control of the newly established autonomous regions in western and central Mindanao, Marcos appointed all of its officials, filling all the positions without even a single MNLF member on board.⁴⁵

Immediately after the Tripoli Agreement, although fighting came back one more, the level of fighting was far less than what it had been when the conflict began, so much so that it is often characterized as a period of relative peace. It was confined to the occasional skirmish, lacking the widespread fighting that had occurred in the heyday of the Ilaga, and is generally attributed to the political wariness of both the government and the MNLF to a war-weary populace, especially in the face of an unrelated Communist insurgency in non-Muslim areas of Mindanao, and Marcos's pre-occupation with popular resistance and protest to his rule throughout the Philippines.⁴⁶ The stability brought by the political MNLF was a far cry from the post-Jabidah bloodbaths.

As time went on, Misuari and the MNLF began to drift away from their dedication to an Islamic state. At the same time, more and more of its members have become disillusioned. These fighters began breaking away to form their own groups or carry out independent operations as bandits. Predictably, this loss of power and legitimacy resulted in a steady increase in violence. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Pentagon Gang, for example, are made of former MNLF members. Although ASG pretends to be working towards a legitimate Islamic state in a political manner, it is now

⁴⁵ Rodell, Paul A. "The Philippines and the Challenge of Terrorism" in *Terrorism and Violence in Southeast Asia: Transnational Challenges to States and Regional Stability*. Edited by Paul Smith (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2005); pp. 129

⁴⁶ Rodell (2005); pp. 130

infamous for the slew of kidnappings, bombings, and murders carried out each year in Mindanao, gaining most of their funds from kidnappings for ransom.⁴⁷ The Pentagon Gang, on the other hand, does not even bother to pretend that its activities serve a higher cause. Its members very clearly fight and kill for their own personal profit and gain.⁴⁸ While still nowhere near 1970s levels, operating on a very small scale, these groups are still reminiscent of the Ilagas, Barracudas, and Black Shirts. The fragmentation of the MNLF clearly allowed new war tendencies to surface, but the Bangsamoro movement would not relinquish its hold on its main forces just yet.

Between the Tripoli Agreement and 1996

The period between the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and 1996 is characterized by a virtual stalemate and stagnation of the MNLF. One notable event in relation to the conflict are the 1986 the People Power Revolution that overthrew Marcos in a blood less revolution, and the returning the country back to democratic rule. This had little effect on the MNLF, however; peace talks that resumed after this regime change would not reach fruition until 1996, when The MNLF entered into a peace treaty to officially disarm. It is here that the insurgency began to pick up and move once more.

The disarmament treaty provided for the granting of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao to Misuari and the MNLF. Although it was called “autonomy,” the agreement in fact gave no meaning autonomy at all. The MNLF did not control the police, the military, or the legislature. It could not make or enforce laws, and neither could it create an Islamic state. In fact, Misuari’s once fiery ideological fervor, embodying the

⁴⁷ Rodell (2005); pp. 132

⁴⁸ Rimban, Luz. “The Many Lives of the Pentagon Gang”, *Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism*; accessed 04/16/2009 online at <http://www.pcij.org/imag/PublicEye/pentagon.html>

legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro peoples, would become corrupt, just another rotten extension of the Filipino state.

The MNLF and the ARMM: A Continuing Problem of Governance

In September 1996, Nur Misuari was elected governor of the ARMM by a landslide. To accomplish this feat, he drew both from his popularity as the MNLF leader and from the backing and influence of President Fidel Ramos who saw to it that Misuari ran unopposed. This was an unofficial extension of their peace agreement, effectively handing the ARMM to the MNLF.⁴⁹ Not only did the ARMM fail to satisfy the Moro goal of an Islamic state with only limited autonomy, however, it also quickly became a shining example of both Filipino patronage politics and how not to run a government, completely ruining what little legitimacy the MNLF still possessed.

The White Orchids Contract

Within months of taking office, a large scandal would show off the dubious integrity of the ARMM leadership. In December 1996, Misuari approved an expensive P70 million textbook publishing contract with White Orchids Printing and Publishing House. While in theory an excellent step towards boosting the pitifully inadequate educational resources available to Mindanao's school children, what happened in reality was a classic case of corruption and graft.

The money soon pulled a vanishing act, however. In Manila, the entire P70 million was documented being released by the Department of Budget and Management to the ARMM, and the money made its way through the proper channels to Land Bank, Cotabato City where it would supposedly be disbursed to the White Orchids for their

⁴⁹ Vitug and Gloria (2000); pp. 74

textbooks. While the ARMM released an official statement that most of the money, P68.2 million was released, not a drop of that vast sum ever made it to the White Orchids Printing and Publishing House, the specified recipient in the statement. To this day, it remains unclear exactly where the money went.⁵⁰

Additionally, while the ARMM received a significant stockpile of textbooks despite its nonpayment to White Orchids, it chose not to use these valuable, costly resources. It is well documented that the White Orchids delivered approximately half the order, fulfilling textbook orders for the elementary school grades four through six, on April 23, 1997. The books, worth around P32 million, however, would remain unopened, however, stored in a warehouse full of boxes upon boxes of unused textbooks.⁵¹

This happened for two reasons, both personally handled by the new Governor Misuari himself and exacerbated by his sense of pride and entitlement. First, there was admittedly a problem with the delivered textbooks. They contained the educational message of the previous governor, Lininding Pangandaman, rather than Misuari's.⁵² Although only a minor issue, the loss of face that would accompany circulation of the books would not be endured, especially in conjunction with the second reason. Soon after ordering the textbooks, Misuari arbitrarily revoked his decision. While the reasons behind this change are ultimately unclear, it is suspected that someone in the governor's office wanted to shave off a full 40 percent of the deal, or P30 million, as an overhead cost for the ARMM and the White Orchids found the amount appalling enough to refuse, causing Misuari's change of mind about awarding them the contract.⁵³ In any case,

⁵⁰ Vitug and Gloria (2000), pp. 76

⁵¹ Vitug and Gloria (2000), pp. 75

⁵² Vitug and Gloria (2000), pp. 75

⁵³ Vitug and Gloria (2000), pp. 75

Misuari would send a letter to the Secretary of the Department of Budget Management asking to re-assign the P70 million to the ARMM directly, which would then purchase textbooks and library books on its own. When he was rebuffed, he tried again with the Executive Secretary to ask him to “invalidate the request... asking that the contract be given to a certain White Orchids Printer... I have never allows anybody to assign the contractual right to print to anybody.”⁵⁴

Despite these facts, however, trusted Misuari aid and information office of the MNLF Ibrahim Omar would contend that the White Orchids contract was cancelled by Misuari and re-bid to several separate printing companies. He also stated that the books were delivered and in use by the schools in Mindanao. When asked for the names of these printing companies, however, or a copy of the cancellation of the White Orchids contract by lawyers and journalists, he has always come up empty.⁵⁵ Despite the debacle of the White Orchids scandal, not a single official has been held accountable.

The MNLF as a Government

This first case of government corruption and inefficiency would come to typify the ARMM, but the problems would not stop there. Nepotism would become an even larger problem than before with the new MNLF leadership unnecessarily hiring former MNLF members, as well as their family and friends, to make this regional government the largest single employer in Mindanao. In fact, it has had more employees than whole departments on the federal level, which serves forty times as many people, ever since 1997. Many of these appointees remain unqualified, without the necessary experience, education, and professional competence to complete their tasks well. This further reduces

⁵⁴ Vitug and Gloria (2000), pp. 76

⁵⁵ Vitug and Gloria (2000), pp. 77

both the pace and quality of work in the Mindanao government. Additionally, even this creation of a large amount of jobs has failed to significantly impact economic development due to the accompanying salary delays associated with a massive number of unnecessary appointees through the strain on government resources.⁵⁶

In short, the MNLF takeover of the ARMM was more the MNLF fitting into the existing framework of government corruption and inefficiency rather than any change for the better or progress towards a truly independent Islamic state. The official state presence in Mindanao would continue to be weak and thus largely ineffective in maintaining peace and order. Fortunately for the MILF, however, with the absorption of the MNLF into the Filipino government, Hashim Salamat's organization would quickly replace the MNLF as the unifying embodiment of Moro nationalism and statehood.

The MILF: Successor to the Bangsamoro Cause

In the 1980s, it had become increasingly clear that MNLF leader Nur Misuari cared less and less for the Bangsamoro state and his original ideological goals. He sought mere political power, a point that was crystallized in the 1996 peace agreement. Dismayed by this deviance from the original goal, the creation of an Islamic state in Mindanao, MNLF leader Hashim Salamat led a splinter faction away to continue the Bangsamoro struggle in a more pure manner. The armed group that he founded was the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front). It was based entirely off of the original MNLF, even using the same political and military structure that gave the MNLF its state-like presence. Although it started small, as Misuari's lack of devotion became more and more clear to his followers, the MILF swelled in size, power, and influence. Finally, following

⁵⁶ Vitug and Gloria (2000), pp. 78-79

Misuari and the MNLF's absorption into the government in 1996, the MILF became the dominant Islamic separatist group. Seeking to continue the struggle in the face of Misuari's "betrayal," the MILF renewed its attacks on the Filipino government. It is notable, however, that this combat resembled most clearly conventional warfare. The MILF employed a conventional positional warfare tactic through the year 2000, which enabled the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines) to bring their full conventional might, including airplanes, mortars, and other high-tech weaponry, to bear against them.⁵⁷

Since that time, several important developments have taken place that threatens to derail the peace efforts in Mindanao. As demonstrated earlier in the paper, it was only the consolidation of the Islamic armed groups into a unified body and state apparatus that allowed peace negotiations to make and headway. In examining the MILF today, however, from its sources of funding, military structure, and political decisions, we can see that this unified body is in danger of falling apart, giving rise once more to the bloody memory of the 1970s.

The Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces

The military operations of the MILF are carried out by the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). As the first several sections on the BIAF will show, it was originally an uncommonly conventional military wing of a non-state armed group. This is due to the political motivations of the MILF, the quest for legitimacy and ultimate statehood leading the Central Committee to conduct and organize itself along the lines of a state government. However, modifications in the post-2000 conflict to the BIAF as well

⁵⁷ Abuza (2005) pp. 462

as other recent developments, as will be shown, have allowed a significant upheaval of this nation-state framework by undercutting its monopoly on the means of violence and engendering an unprecedented scale of factionalism that ultimately portends the fracturing of the MILF as a unified representative acting on behalf of the Moro peoples.

Organizational Structure of the BIAF - A Conventional Force

In the beginning, the MILF focused on establishing firm base areas of operation around Mindanao, but it was not until the mid-1990s, with the growing disillusionment in the region with the MNLF, that this goal was fully realized. BIAF numbers are estimated to have doubled in size, receiving some 5000 new members upon the MNLF's conclusion of a peace treaty with the Filipino government in 1996. It was evident that there were plenty of MNLF soldiers who believed that the peace treaty was insufficient and/or a personal tool of aggrandizement for MNLF leader Nur Misuari.⁵⁸

With this increase in numbers, the MILF sought to emulate a conventional military force, organizing along the lines of divisions, brigades, battalions, and companies while operating out of eleven camps, which were in effect forts and towns in their own right. This organization along conventional standards, however, and the use of a conventional positional warfare strategy, using mortar attacks and mass infantry movements in military operations, contributed to the eventual defeat in 2000 at the hands of the AFP in President Estrada's offensive campaign in leaving it vulnerable to air strikes and artillery fire.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Abuza (2005) pp. 462.

⁵⁹ Abuza (2005) pp. 462.

Following this loss, the BIAF overhauled its organizational structure to suit a new, hybrid strategy of its old, conventional, positional warfare and guerilla tactics. Now it is divided into at least nine “Base Commands.”⁶⁰ Each command is made up of “Unit-Brigades,” although they are far smaller than the conventional 500 found in most militaries, and these are further broken up into platoons.

As for the structure of these individual units themselves, there is no standardization for what comprises a unit brigade. There exist some with only around 50 regular BIAF soldiers, but most number several hundred. Between Base Commands, there are varying numbers of these Unit-Brigades, dependent on the overall number of soldiers, each Base Command numbering from an estimated 1,200 to over 3,000 fighters. For example, the 107th and 108th Base Commands, located in Tarragona, Davao Oriental, and the Zamboanga peninsula, are relatively small, and therefore their few brigades mostly engage in guerilla warfare. The 101st and 102nd Base Commands in Buldon, Maguindanao, and Butig, Lanao del Sur are on the larger end of the scale. These still have fixed camps, complete with perimeter defenses and with large amounts of territory under their control.⁶¹

⁶⁰ At least one recent news report has indicated that there are no less than thirteen base commands, as seen in the following article: Elizabeth T. Marcelo. “MILF commander Watamama surrenders,” accessed 04/11/2009 online at <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/125920/MILF-commander-Watamama-surrenders>. It should be noted, however, that Filipino government officials tend to distort numbers and military size when it comes to the MILF, and in this specific article, exaggeration of the total would decrease public perception of the total amount of MILF forces actively engaging in the conflict, making the threat seem a small faction that would be easier for the government to handle and eventually put down permanently. The more reliable reports from scholars like Abuza (Abuza 2005, pp. 462) have reported the presence of nine just a few short years ago.

⁶¹ Abuza (2005) pp. 462

BIAF Weaponry

BIAF fighters are also extremely well-armed. Rather than the usual AK-47s, their equipment includes and usually features M-16s, old and new models from ArmaLite, the renowned U.S. small arms manufacturer, and complete in many cases with the grenade launcher addition. In addition, they are known to have significant stockpiles of RPG-2s, B-40 rocket launchers, .45 pistols, machine-gun anti-aircraft guns, and a variety of mortar batteries, ranging in size from small to medium.⁶²

The MILF has armed itself so well in a variety of ways. Some weapons have been taken from the fallen AFP forces on the battlefield while employing guerilla tactics and some have actually come from MILF arms manufacturing facilities that produce RPG-2s, B-40 rocket launchers, and some types of ammunition. They also occasionally employ the Southeast Asia region's black markets, often brokered by Muslims from Southern Thailand, most notably including a deal with a suspected North Korean agent for several thousand Taiwanese-manufactured M16s and accompanying ammunition.⁶³

Military Size Today

The size of the BIAF is a topic of some debate, with much exaggeration and imprecise estimates. On the MILF side, for example, Ghazali Jafaar, Vice Chairman for Political Affairs of the MILF, has stated that the regulars and irregulars together number 100,000 strong.⁶⁴ In the same year, however, only 5 months later in an interview with

⁶² Abuza (2005) pp. 464

⁶³ Abuza (2005) pp. 464

⁶⁴ Arnado, Mary Ann et al., *Bantay Ceasefire 2003* (Davao, March 2004), pp. 49

Time magazine, current chairman Ebrahim el Haj Murad asserted that it was 70,000.⁶⁵

Obviously, if these two leaders cannot even give consistent numbers, it is very likely that much exaggeration is employed to make the MILF seem larger than it truly is.

This is especially true given the estimates of the GRP and its allies. The Office of Net Assessments of the Philippine Department of National Defense estimates put the number of BIAF regulars at 12,000, although it ignores the 109th Base Command. Philippine intelligence agencies also agree that its size is only 12,000, conceding that the number rises in times of hostility to around 20,000 to include irregular guerilla fighters when the MILF call to mobilize goes out.⁶⁶

It is explained by MILF scholar Zachary Abuza, however, that the government estimates are likely on the low side after discovering the intelligence operatives' methodology in interviews. Having obtained some intelligence on the MILF Central Committee's budget allocation to the BIAF, coming to roughly P3,600,000 per month, they assume that the subsistence allowance for BIAF fighters to be P100 per day, using the P180 per day of the AFP as a guideline, and therefore arrive at the figure of 12,000. However, both using the AFP as a guideline and assuming that the budget allocation from the Central Committee as the sole financial means of the AFP can lead to underestimation: in poverty-stricken Mindanao, the subsistence level of BIAF soldiers per day is likely even lower than P100, and the MILF members themselves, in order to decrease reliance on the traditional supply chains necessary to maintain such a large force, often generate additional independent income to maintain self-sufficiency. In fact, the BIAF has

⁶⁵ Elegant, Simon. "Mindanao's Biggest Boss." *Time Asia*, 30 August 2004

⁶⁶ Abuza (2005) pp. 462

achieved the goal of becoming a mostly self-sufficient body of the MILF,⁶⁷ an achievement that has come back to haunt the organization since.

And Back to New War Again: The Collapse of MILF Central Control

The newfound ability of base commands to operate without depending on the traditional funding and direction from the MILF's political leadership would have serious consequences. It is as a direct result of this policy, leading to the loss of the Central Committee's previous monopoly of control over the BIAF, that the conflict in Mindanao is once again sinking ever deeper into the clutches of new war.

Rogue Commanders Macapaar, Pangalian, and Kato

In August 2008, an event occurred that made it strikingly clear that the Central Committee no longer had control of its forces. Three of the MILF's base commands: the 102nd, 103rd, and 105th, led by the MILF commanders Abdullah Macapaar alias Commander Bravo, Aleem Sulaiman Pangalian, and Amelil Umbra Kato, respectively, moved to attack Christian villages North Cotabato and Lanao del Norte and their fighters were told to "kill anybody on sight and bring havoc [to] the area."⁶⁸ This effectively undercut the entire procession of the peace process so doggedly pursued by the Central Committee. It proved that negotiating with Al Haj Murad and the moderate leadership of the MILF would not be enough to achieve peace and disarmament; it proved that there existed, and continue to exist, independent factions within the armed group, and that they no longer speak with a unified voice.

⁶⁷ Abuza (2005) pp. 463

⁶⁸ Pareño, Roel. "Lanao Del Norte Attack: MILF Sub-commander, 30 others surrender." *Philippine Headline News Online* (August 22, 2008). Accessed online 04/9/2009 at <http://www.newsflash.org/2004/02/hl/hl107806.htm>

Furthermore, it is clear that these commanders are not fighting for the benefit of their communities or any higher cause. Although they are claiming to be fighting in response to the 2008 stalling of peace talks, their actions prove otherwise. This can be seen from a particular incident that occurred in August 2008. Commander Macapaar ordered an assault on the hometown of thirty of his own men, causing them to surrender to the government in protest but not halting the assault.⁶⁹ Killing and pillaging villages composed mainly of Moros, it is clear that the renegades are not fighting for the progress of the Bangsamoro, but simply for personal gain and profit.

After all, the nature of these attacks completely lacks the restraints of legitimate military action that had up to this point characterized Central Committee-sanctioned military operations. In each raid, the renegades have killed civilians and pillaged houses, taking both possessions and hostages. The hostages are beheaded, shot, or held for bargaining with the government forces.⁷⁰ These strikes employ definite new war tactics, flying in the face of the Central Committee's stated goals, and show no signs of abating or returning to the way things once were; as of April 2009, there has been no sign of relenting in their attacks, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines have yet to show a capability put down this latest surge in violence.

According to reports gathered so far, 35 percent of the BIAF's forces split off to follow one of the rogue commanders. This includes not only nearly the entirety of the 102nd, 103rd, and 105th, but also includes a scattering of members from other various base

⁶⁹ Pareño, Roel. "Lanao Del Norte Attack: MILF Sub-commander, 30 others surrender." *Philippine Headline News Online* (August 22, 2008). Accessed online 04/9/2009 at <http://www.newsflash.org/2004/02/hl/hl107806.htm>

⁷⁰ International Crisis Group. "The Philippines: The Collapse of Peace in Mindanao." Asia Briefing No. 83, 23 October 2008; accessed 4/13/2009 online at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5740&l=1>

commands that decided to join in on their own, notably the 104th and 107th base commands.⁷¹

How did this happen to what was, up until at least the year 2000, a well-unified, politically-oriented armed group?

BIAF Weaponry- Revisited

In a previous section, it was discussed that the MILF has employed a variety of methods in the past to arm itself. The vast majority of its weaponry today, however, has been purchased not from foreign gun-runners but the stores of its enemy, the AFP itself, illegally through a large and significant black market focused around AFP corruption. MILF fighters obtain these arms both as an organization, using the resources of the organization, and individually, such is the scale of small arms proliferation in Mindanao. It was been documented in a 2005 Amnesty International study that over 70 percent of the population owns one or more guns, owing greatly to both the lawlessness of the region and the cheap, widespread availability of the deadly tools; handguns could be purchased for as little as US \$15, and machine guns are available from around US\$375.⁷²

In other words, each individual base command, indeed, each individual alone, no longer has to rely on the distribution of weaponry from a higher power as it had in the past. This proliferation of small arms is a definite factor in the capability of the rogue base commands to break away from the authority of the Central Committee.

⁷¹ Marcelo, Elizabeth T. "MILF commander Watamama surrenders." *BusinessWorld* (October 9, 2008). Accessed online 04/8/2009 at <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/125920/MILF-commander-Watamama-surrenders>

⁷² Amnesty International (2003), *USA Supplies Small Arms to the Philippines*, accessed 12 April 2009 online at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT31/002/2003/en/638ee31b-d710-11dd-b0cc-1f0860013475/act310022003en.pdf>

Despite the central MILF leadership's continued commitment to politics, the peace process, and the creation of an autonomous Muslim region in Mindanao, they are now hindered by the independent actions of these "rogue elements," ranging from individual members to whole commands under MILF military leaders. They are self-sufficient, hungry for power, and fed up with the restrictions placed upon them by the moderate Central Committee.

A History of Links with Islamic Extremist Groups

A major influence leading to this break is the divide between the Central Committee's commitment to legitimacy and the rogue base commanders' desire for wealth and supplies. This is reflected clearly by their differing interactions with Islamic extremist groups operating in the area.

In the 1990s, MILF officials including the mainstream leadership established and nurtured ties to the Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah, two radical extremist groups with ties to al-Qaeda. This was done in exchange for the financial support that comes from the international terrorist organizations, support that became more and more significant as the Central Committee promoted independence for its individual base commands. These links with the terrorist organizations contributed to the rift between the rogue factions of the BIAF and the MILF Central Committee.

Although the three groups have different ideological goals, they share the common bond of Islam. Additionally, their aims, while not the same, are not antagonistic to one another. The Abu Sayyaf Group seeks to push Filipino Christians out of Mindanao and the nearby Sulu islands completely, while Jemaah Islamiyah is attempting to attain

the even more ambitious and rather far-flung goal of undermining the states of Indonesia, the Philippines, and other nearby Asian countries, establishing a “pan-Asian Islamic caliphate”, or a “pan-Asian component of a worldwide Islamic caliphate,” in its place. Indeed, the completion of the MILF’s push for Moro self-determination would undoubtedly bring the goals of the other two closer to fruition. It follows then, that the resulting alliance would only be natural for these three groups to form an alliance based on their shared resistance to the Filipino government.⁷³

The aims of these two groups, however, would prove to be far less focused on these ideological and political goals than the MILF leadership would have liked. They have been involved in numerous kidnappings and extortion rackets with the leaders making large profits from their criminal activities. Additionally, their continued targeting and killing of civilians, both Muslim and Christian, has left a stain on the legitimacy of their actions and is seen by MILF leadership as counterproductive to their political goals. Seeing this, and also fearful of the joint Filipino-US operations launched against terrorist Islamic groups, the MILF has sought to cut its ties with these groups since 2003, denouncing specific violent attacks against civilians committed by these armed groups, and even providing active support to government military operations against them.⁷⁴

In reality, however, it has proven much more difficult to extricate the MILF from its linkages to these organizations. Despite the official line and rhetoric condemning the terrorist actions of these groups, elements of the MILF have continued to provide

⁷³ Human Rights Watch. “Lives Destroyed: Attacks against Civilians in the Philippines,” July 2007; accessed 4/8/2009 online at http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/philippines0707/philippines_lives_destroyed.pdf; pp. 25

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch (2007), pp. 25

sanctuary and assistance to members of the Abu Sayyaf Group, its affiliate group Rajah Solaiman, and Jemaah Islamiyah.

For example, on April 2, 2003, at the same time the MILF leadership began condemning terrorist actions against civilians in a bid for peace, the Espera family food stand Sasa Wharf in Davao City became a bombing target of the Abu Sayyaf Group. Of the seventeen killed in the attack, six were children, and all were civilians save one policeman unfortunate enough to be passing by. The intended target was a ferry dock gate, which would have caused far more deaths, but upon their failure to gain entrance, the perpetrators left the boxed bomb at the food stand instead. A clearly terrorist action against civilians, such an assault was soundly condemned by the MILF leadership, and yet several MILF members were implicated, along with the Abu Sayyaf Group, in the execution of the operation.⁷⁵ This trend of MILF leadership condemnation and member participation further continues with events like the General Santos Market Bombing of 2004, and beyond.⁷⁶

It is important to note that this continued affiliation with radical Islamic groups while the MILF leadership pursued a political peace settlement was not limited to low-ranking collaborators in the MILF; it included the powerful base commanders as well. This has presented a problem to the approach taken by the MILF leadership in its attempts to cut its ties to groups committing terrorist actions; the official order was given in 2003 to each individual base commander to police their men and “weed out and hold responsible” any rogue members collaborating with and providing sanctuary to these

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch (2007); pp. 9

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch (2007); pp. 17

separate factions. Such an order, however, has only the power of a polite request to the mostly self-sufficient base commanders, and multiple commanders, most notably the rogue Kato, Macapaar, and Pangalian, have chosen to ignore the call, themselves facilitating the training of JI, the ASG, and RS members. They have also provided other means of support, from sanctuary to the sale of arms and supplies.⁷⁷ This is continues primarily for the aforementioned financial benefits given by these organizations in return, and is a prime example of the lack of central control of the MILF leadership over the whole of its expansive membership.

Corruption in the Philippines: Contributor to the weak state

Of course, another reason that new war has begun to thrive is the continued weakness of the state in Mindanao. With the government unable to execute its laws and maintain law and order, it is unable to stop the escalation of a conflict situation before it reaches new war levels. This is reflected in the governance problem, stemming from incredible corruption in the current administration, as well as the weakness of law enforcement.

Corruption of government officials is a serious issue in the Philippines today. The Filipino government has the dubious honors of consistently ranking among the lowest in the world for transparency and adherence to the rule of law.⁷⁸ The general populace feels

⁷⁷ The Philippines' Southern insurgency pp. 2

⁷⁸ Asian Development Bank. *Philippines: Private Assessment Sector*, (Manila: Asian Development Bank, February 2005); accessed online 04/12/2009 at <http://www.adb.org/PHCO/Private-Sector-draft.pdf> pp. 19

this keenly as well, as a “justifiable” public perception of corruption in the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government remains high.⁷⁹

Under the current administration, in June 2005 two scandals broke out that illustrate the habitually corrupt nature of Philippine politics. First, the infamous Garcillano tapes became public following the 2004 presidential elections. The tapes are recordings of current President Macapagal-Arroyo improperly communicating with an electoral officer during the presidential ballot, which she carried by the relatively slim margin of 900,000 votes. In the same month, the second scandal broke: the *jueteng* or gambling incident that showed two congressmen, incidentally the president’s son and brother-in-law, had been receiving proceeds from illegal gambling operations. Although eleven cabinet members resigned, protestors filled the streets, and impeachment charges were filed, Macapagal-Arroyo was able to wriggle out of any serious consequences, the impeachment proceedings dropped after failing to gain sufficient support in congress. The administration remained the same, and corruption has remained rampant.⁸⁰

This permissive culture of corruption is what spread to the ARMM. As mentioned above, it is also a primary cause in the proliferation of military weapons to the armed groups in Mindanao, and it greatly compromises the government’s sovereignty. The corruption issue naturally extends into the local police stations in Mindanao, a region now famous for its extra-judicial killings committed by death squads organized by the

⁷⁹ US Department of State. *2005 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*. (Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, March 8, 2006); accessed online 04/12/2009 at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61624.htm>

⁸⁰ Vicziany, Marika. *Controlling Arms and Terror in the Asia Pacific: After Bali and Baghdad*. (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc, 2007); pp. 206

police and local government officials to target personal enemies and rivals.⁸¹ They operate outside the law, are bribable, and are active contributors to illegal activities, further serving to undercut law and order in the region.

Conclusion: Into the Future

This return to a new war conflict was of course not predetermined to occur right now at the point and time that it did. However, the MILF losses in the 2000 offensive highlighted a very strong tendency for events to unfold as they did. The MILF Central Committee could conceivably have continued to employ a more conventional, and thus centralized, military structure and retained command over its forces. Nonetheless, combined with the difficulty of a non-state armed group facing the combined might of a larger, better-funded national army, it was clearly recognized that in order to continue to face the AFP effectively, a less conventional, central strategy was necessary. This in turn allowed several individual base commanders greater independence and freedom to usurp the Central Committee's authority.

Combined with the existing conditions in Mindanao that allowed the conflict to continue, from the weakness and corruption of both the federal and local governments, the harsh conditions that come along with abject poverty, the operation of various terrorist organizations, and the weak rule of law, this was enough to fragment the Bangsamoro nation. The new warlords, Commanders Kato, Macapaar, and Pangalian have now burst forth on the scene, unafraid to kill and pillage and effectively undercutting the legitimacy of the MILF.

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch. "You Can Die Any Time: Death Squad Killings in Mindanao." April 6, 2009. Accessed 4/22/2009 online at <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/philippines0409web.pdf> ; pp. 6

This will further complicate any peace efforts, closing the door on hopes that a settlement with the politically-oriented MILF will bring an end to the conflict. Now there are more fighters, without motivation beyond personal profit, and even less order that will give more power and momentum to corrupt politicians, criminals, and terrorist groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah. To top things off, it appears that the conflict is only becoming more and more chaotic. There have been news reports of the return of the Ilaga gang, that infamous paramilitary group. They are threatening to kill ten for every Christian death since the village attacks by the renegade commanders.⁸²

It appears that Mindanao is rapidly heading back to the violent period of the 1970s. Now, as then, Muslim fighters are no longer killing for the greater Bangsamoro struggle, that legacy of the long history of a Spanish and American colonial past. Their victims are not always Christian or supporters of the Filipino government. Their actions do not further the creation of the Bangsamoro state, but the gain of personal power and wealth. New war has arrived in Mindanao, and with the difficulty states have traditionally had in dealing with this type of conflict, it is unlikely to end any time in the near future.

⁸² Maitem, Jeffrey. "'Ilaga' vigilantes resurface, warn MILF" *Mindanao Bureau*. August 28, 2008. Accessed online 4/20/2009 at <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view/20080827-157158/Ilaga-vigilantes-resurface-warn-MILF>

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