



# National Elections in the Philippines

## New Leadership and New Prospects of Peace in Mindanao?

*Martina Klimesova*

*On May 10, Benigno “Noy” Aquino secured a majority in the national elections and will be the next President of the Republic of the Philippines. With strong electoral support and as an offspring of two national heroes, late President Corazon “Cory” Aquino and Benigno Aquino, an assassinated leader of Marco’s opposition, Aquino appears to be in a better position than his predecessor, the incumbent President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Will Aquino turn the popular support into a strong leadership and secure sufficient political will to finalize more than a decade long negotiation process with MILF? Will his administration find a lasting solution for the Moro national struggle in Mindanao?*

When the Filipinos voted in the May 10 national elections for new President, Vice-President, parliamentarians, and local government officials, it is likely that very few outside of the island of Mindanao had the Moro issue on their mind as they cast their votes. Indeed, future strategies for peace negotiations between the central government in Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) or the implementation of the agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) from 1996 were not dominant issues during the campaign. The Moro issue aside, the new administration will face other security concerns in the south, such as insurgency led by the New People’s Army (NPA), a communist insurgency, and radical Islamic militant groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group operating in the Southwest of Mindanao with links to the Al Qaida terrorist network.

President-elect Benigno “Noy” Aquino III will face many challenges when he assumes the office on June 30. To improve the dire economic conditions and combat high levels of corruption are imperative tasks. Nevertheless, while the Moro issue mostly constitutes undesirable additional nuisances for the majority of the Filipinos living outside of the island of Mindanao, the new President will have to adopt a clear strategy for Mindanao and the Moro question. This requires more than an economic and development package.

The Moro issue is currently most visibly represented

in the ongoing peace talks between the government and MILF. The government also has not yet fully concluded talks with the MNLF on how to implement the 1996 agreement, but the process involving MILF is considered as the key to reaching a lasting solution to the conflict in Mindanao. While a political solution to the Moro question was addressed only vaguely by all of the leading Presidential candidates, Mindanao was often linked to threats of violence during the election campaign. Amid worst expectations, the only reported violent incident during the elections in Maguindanao in Central Mindanao, which was the site of November massacre leaving 57 dead, was when a M79 grenade launcher was fired in the Datu Salibo district.

### The Core Issue is Moro Self-Determination

Peace talks have been going on for years, informal talks between the government and MILF date back to 1997. Direct talks have taken place but did not bring results. The current process under auspices of Malaysia as a facilitator was initiated in 2001 by President Arroyo. The core issue is to find a solution for Moro self-determination claims. A Memorandum of Agreement on the Ancestral Domain (MoA-AD) that declared the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity an area covering predominantly Muslim areas of Mindanao was ruled as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in August 2008. The decision was announced only hours before



the agreement was to be signed and significantly derailed the process. It indicated that the agreement had many avid opponents both in Manila and among groups representing large land owners and Christian settlers in Mindanao. The dispute concerns both the political level, including political and national rights, and the grassroots level that is focused on land ownership rights and where anti-agreement sentiments are stipulated by fear of Christian settlers about losing land. However, finding a solution to the issue of Moro self-determination that would be acceptable for both MILF and also the most avid opponents, like the departing vice-governor of North Cotabato Emmanuel Piñol, still seems rather unattainable at the moment.

MILF has a firm policy of non-participation in the Philippine electoral exercise as reiterated by Ghazali Jaafar, MILF Vice Chairman for Political Affairs for Lurawan on May 11. During the election campaign MILF representatives did not express their views on different presidential candidates as the group does not perceive Manila politics as part of their affairs. Nonetheless, it can be safely assumed that the former President Joseph “Erap” Estrada was the least popular candidate among the Moros as he is by far least accommodative towards the Moro question out of all the candidates. In March 2000 the former President, who was ousted from the office in EDSA Revolution 2001, launched all-out military offensive against MILF, and during his campaign he clearly stated that only a military victory over MILF would secure a lasting peace in Mindanao.

### **The New Administration and the Mindanao Issues**

Inevitably, the new administration will have to adopt a strategy for finding an enduring solution for the conflicts in Mindanao. Aquino advocates transparent and all-inclusive dialogue that would involve most avid critics but also other groups so far unrepresented, such as the indigenous Lumos minority. For the same reason, Aquino’s Liberal Party opposes the MoA-AD because the power distribution and definition of a Bangsamoro nation as outlined in it does not, according to Aquino, consider aspirations of non-Muslim groups in Mindanao. It is yet to be seen what measures Aquino’s administration will employ to achieve this.

Aquino has a strong electoral mandate; the question is if that will also result in strong leadership. His popular sup-

port puts him in a stronger position than his predecessor Arroyo whose popularity suffered after corruption scandals, allegations of planned charter change (cha-cha), and results from the 2004 elections which indicated vote buying in Mindanao. In seven towns belonging to the district ruled by the Ampatuan clan Arroyo gained a whopping 99.83%, and in two towns 100%. This fueled discussions about her dependency on local interest groups. Aquino’s ability to withstand pressure from interest and lobby groups will also be an important test for him. Some observers have suggested that he may have difficulties in sustaining the pressure, not only from the local interests groups in Mindanao but also from their influential allies in Manila.

At the time of writing, the winner of the Vice Presidential race is not yet clear. The Vice Presidential race is very tight between Jejomar “Jojo” Binay and Manuel “Mar” Roxas of the Liberal Party. Binay is a running mate of Joseph “Erap” Estrada, and Roxas is one of the main opponents of MoA-AD from 2008. In March 2010, the Bangsamoro Supreme Council of Ulama in the Philippines issued a fatwa against Roxas, Drillon and Estrada declaring them as enemies of Muslims (Estrada for 2000 war, Roxas and Drillon for their campaign against MoA-AD in 2008). MILF distanced itself from the declaration but it is likely that Roxas as a Vice-President would oppose any agreement with MILF resembling the MoA-AD. Roxas says that he is for peace but against MoA-AD as he believes that it would escalate the conflict instead of solving it. Thus, there are concerns that Roxas raises many questions among MILF and is seen as partial to Christian landowners. On the other hand, he also has the potential to involve in the peace dialogue some of its most assiduous opponents.

The main ability that will be required from the new president when he faces the challenges in the South is a strong leadership and strong political will to unite the government, earn respect from opponents to the peace process and sustain the pressure from lobby and interests groups. Most importantly, the new administration should find an efficient communication strategy to explain accommodative concessions towards the Moro groups that would be necessary to general public at large. Indeed, strong leadership and coherent policies determined for peace with dignity for all instead of power politics and shadow deals would be the main assets of the new administration to secure an enduring peace agreement between the government and MILF.



## Arroyo's Mindanao Legacy

President Arroyo is leaving the office with the legacy of an unfinished peace process between the government and MILF. As new president she launched peace initiatives and made efforts to conclude an interim agreement that may not end in success. Negotiations were resumed in December 2009 but it may be difficult to find an acceptable solution within such a limited timeframe as it cannot be assumed that deadlines and imposing time constraints will work in favor of the negotiators. The Arroyo administration's credibility was tainted by the derailing of the process in August 2008, and MILF will be careful not to rush into an agreement that does not reflect its aspirations. Nevertheless, should the present negotiations result in an agreement this does not mean that the Aquino administration would not have to deal with MILF. Implementation of an agreement can be even harder than reaching it as demonstrated in the MNLF agreement from 1996 which still has not been fully implemented. Another task on the agenda of the incoming government will be the 600 000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have been waiting for over a year to return to their homes – 100 000 of whom have no home to return to. Currently, the government works on this issue together with MILF and the International Monitoring Team (IMT). The new government will need to show a strong commitment to continue with the engagement.

A recent International Crisis Group (ICG) report suggests that some local politicians take advantages of the situation and exacerbate Christian concerns that an agreement will be signed without proper discussions with all stakeholders (Asia Briefing N0103/May 4). Two strong opponents of the GRP-MILF process and the MoA-AD, Celso Lobregat, Mayor of Zamboanga City, and Lawrence Cruz, Mayor of Illaga City, were re-elected in the May 10 elections, but the most notorious opponent of the process, Vice-Governor of North Cotabato, Emmanuel Piñol, lost in the governor election in North Cotabato. It is too soon to tell what this means for the power politics in Central Mindanao but it is not likely that Piñol will give up his anti-MoA-AD/MILF campaign. He has already declared that the election results were manipulated and organized a rally in his defense. With or without Piñol, land ownership rights related issues will continue to pose challenges to the reconciliation process. There is also a very limited general knowledge about the

actual implications of the agreement which generates leeway for misinterpretations and substantial ground for opponents of the process.

## Conclusion

In sum, strong political leadership and will in Manila is essential for bringing a lasting peace to Mindanao. The government should be realistic about other problems in the area such as a high criminal rate resulting from communal and clan violence and actions of radical groups like Abu Sayyaf Group. It should also make a clear distinction between these criminal actors and the Moro groups striving for self-determination. The key to peace in Mindanao lies in Manila's hands and with the new leadership. The time is ripe for a fresh start in the peace negotiations between the government and MILF.

*Martina Klimesova is a PhD Candidate at Charles University in Prague and a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP).*

*The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

## The Institute for Security & Development Policy

Västra Finnbodavägen 2, SE-13130 Stockholm - Nacka

E-mail: [info@isdpeu](mailto:info@isdpeu) / Tel: +46(0)8-41056953

Website: [www.isdpeu](http://www.isdpeu)

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