



LOCAL CAPACITY BUILDING AND THE CURRENT CRISIS IN MINDANAO

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Violence continues to mar the ongoing peace process in Mindanao in the southern Philippines, with two groups seeking to derail the advancement of talks and the Bangsamoro Framework Agreement of October 2012 between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. However, in spite of the current crisis, prospects for peace would appear more promising than they have in a decade. Key to the peace process are ongoing efforts at local capacity building, an area in which the international community should further bolster its efforts.

On September 20, the representatives of the Government of the Philippines (GPH) concluded the fortieth negotiating round with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) on a positive note but without reaching final agreements on the two remaining annexes of the historic Bangsamoro Framework Agreement (BFA). The spotlight, however, has been thrown on Mindanao for a different reason. A faction of the other Moro group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), led by the latter's former chairman, Nur Misuari, has staged a siege of Zamboanga City and initiated fighting on the island of Basilan in southwest Mindanao, claiming over 100 lives and causing the displacement of over 118,000 persons since September 8. The current crisis, however, should not obscure other more positive developments.

Context to Current Crisis

On July 14 this year the GPH and MILF signed a wealth-sharing annex of the BFA, agreeing on an income and revenue-sharing formula, including distribution of revenues from the vast natural resources of Bangsamoro territory. With clearly outlined commitments, this is one of the most promising steps taken so far in the GPH-MILF peace process. However, it has met with opposition from Misuari's faction of the MNLF as well as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), MILF's splinter group led by Ustadz Amiril Umra Kato. BIFF operates mainly in central Mindanao and claimed responsibility for the summer bombings in Maguindanao and North Cotabato, prior to and in the aftermath of the signing of the wealth-sharing annex.

Indeed, a simmering power struggle is underway in

Mindanao. Misuari has declared independence from the Philippine state and claims that ultimate peace in Mindanao is unattainable as long as the 1996 peace agreement between the GPH and MNLF is not fully implemented. There is nonetheless very little support for Misuari's view among the Moro community. Both areas where the current fighting is occurring are predominantly Muslim and most of those affected, both civilians and members of the local and national security forces, are Moros. Other MNLF factions, including also from Misuari's home province of Sulu, have refused to send reinforcements to Zamboanga City. Muslimin Sema, the current MNLF chairman, went so far as to condemn Misuari's recent actions and pledged his full support to the GPH-MNLF implementation talks of the 1996 agreement.

In contrast, MILF has further augmented gains for the Moro community: the new entity of Bangsamoro will have full economic autonomy, which the previous Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), a result of the 1996 agreement, did not have. MILF has shown strong commitment to the process, has successfully cooperated with the government forces within the AHJAG ceasefire mechanism on joint kidnap rescue operations, and has established relations with external actors, including a number of international organizations such as UNICEF. Notwithstanding the fact that the GPH-MNLF process also had third party facilitators (Libya, OIC, Indonesia), the current process including MILF is far more internationalized. The international involvement is tiered in several levels (official, informal, grassroots) and has more functions, including a monitoring role. MILF would have a lot to lose if the peace process failed, as it has a lot vested in it. Misuari's recent actions do not have



the support of the Moro community and it is highly unlikely that the present crisis in western Mindanao could in any way derail or impact the future of GPH-MILF talks. The GPH and MILF negotiating panels issued a joint statement on September 10 condemning the outbreak of violence and averring their commitments to the ongoing peace process.

In spite of the current crisis and the fact that an all-encompassing peace agreement is yet to be reached, the building of local capacity, as explored below, has been one of the victories of the ongoing peace process. In contrast to the state of local capacity at the time of the negotiation of the 1996 agreement, the Moro community of today is far better prepared to deal with the current situation, including managing donor funds, development projects, and resources.

Local Capacity Building

The current Zamboanga crisis will not derail GPH-MILF talks but, rather, it has underscored the fact that local capacity has improved since the 2008 outbreak of violence, which followed the abrogation of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain—the proposed final political solution to the conflict—by the Supreme Court. Indeed, the government has learnt valuable lessons from the GPH-MNLF peace process and has heavily emphasized the development of local capacity. Local Moro, Christian, and indigenous civil society groups now constitute a vibrant civil society, which has proven to be vital not only during the current crisis in western Mindanao but also during natural disasters such as the super typhoon Pablo in December 2012.

Locally founded organizations like the Mindanao Human Rights Action Center (MinHRAC) have well-functioning networks of local volunteer monitors and professionals who are trained to provide accurate and relevant assessment of humanitarian needs and developments in their communities. This knowledge, for instance on new IDP camps, is further shared with international humanitarian organizations and the local authorities. During the current crisis, the role of grassroots organizations like MinHRAC has been instrumental in attending to the needs of civilians in Basilan and some areas around Zamboanga, which are otherwise inaccessible to international and national organizations. MinHRAC's information campaign also helped in deterring possible disinformation campaigns, which have previously been frequently used in Mindanao to the detriment of stability.

The final ultimate peace agreement and its successful im-

plementation may still be far off but a well-functioning local capacity is one of the already-achieved Moro victories. The next step for the international community supporting peace and development in Mindanao is to leverage local capacity more effectively. Due to the perceived image of low development accountability and the general need to retain decision-making powers with the external agencies, the local organizations in Mindanao's conflict-affected areas are often sidelined. The capacity is already on the ground—organizations like MinHRAC have shown that they can provide effective first response—and what is needed now is that international organizations and donor agencies recognize this capacity and elevate their relations with local actors on a more equal-footing.

What then can international actors learn from the current crisis in western Mindanao? It is important to recognize that the conflict is predominantly about the people living in the affected communities. Strong local ownership of the overall reconstruction process in Mindanao will also be a vital component to any successful implementation of the outcomes of peace negotiations.

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