Will the ‘Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro’ provide a peaceful and lasting solution to the insurgency and security challenges in the Southern Philippines?

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Senior Chaplain Collin Acton joined the RAN in 1979 as an apprentice. In January 1988, he left the Navy to work part-time while undertaking a year of discernment at St Paul's Anglican Church, Chatswood. In February 1989, he entered Moore Theological College, graduating in January 1993. He was appointed as Assistant Minister at Port Kembla for two years and then a further two years at Christ Church, Blacktown.

He rejoined the Navy in March 1997 and served at HMAS Kuttabul as base support chaplain, and then at sea for two years in HMAS Success, which included support to East Timor. Senior Chaplain Acton was then posted to HMAS Cairns, where he also completed a Graduate Diploma in Psychology. In January 2004, he was posted to ADF, during which time he completed an Honours degree in Social Science (Psychology). In mid 2007, he was appointed as the RAN Senior Chaplain Training.

In 2009, Senior Chaplain Acton was posted as the Senior Chaplain Afloat in HMAS Stuart for Operation SLIPPER. In November 2011, he was appointed Fleet Command Chaplain. In 2012, Senior Chaplain Acton served a rotation at Headquarters Joint Task Force 633, providing leadership and pastoral care to ADF Chaplains in the Middle East Area of Operations and pastoral support to personnel in locations without
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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of whether the ‘Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro’ will provide a peaceful and lasting solution to the insurgency and security situation in the Southern Philippines. It briefly outlines the background to the conflict, and analyses three dynamic factors that have progressed, hindered or derailed the peace process.

The paper argues that the interaction of the political situation in Manila and the fractious nature of the rebel groups make a peaceful solution difficult. Moreover, it contends that should Islamic State establish a presence in the region, it will make it extremely unlikely that an enduring peaceful solution will be found. The paper concludes that this situation is likely to continue to challenge the social, economic and security circumstances in the Southern Philippines, and the Philippine Government more broadly.
Will the ‘Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro’ provide a peaceful and lasting solution to the insurgency and security challenges in the Southern Philippines?

Introduction

In March 2014, the ‘Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro’ was signed by representatives of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic National Front (MILF). The agreement marked a significant moment in the long struggle to secure a lasting, just and peaceful solution to the seemingly-intractable insurgency and security problem in the Bangsamoro region of the Southern Philippines.

The agreement set out the legislative framework and the steps that the Government and the MILF would take in preparation for autonomy in Bangsamoro. It was witnessed by Philippine President Benigno Aquino III, the Organisation of Islamic Council’s chief facilitator, the leader of the MILF and the President of Malaysia.

This paper will argue that although the agreement was presided over at the highest levels, it is unlikely to achieve its stated aim of a just and peaceful solution to the security and insurgency problems that have plagued the Southern Philippines for more than 40 years. To make this argument, the paper will first briefly outline the background to the conflict, noting the significant events, personalities, third-party organisations and political agendas that have interacted with the peace process.

It will then analyse three dynamic factors that have progressed, hindered or derailed the peace process. The first of these is the variable political leadership from Manila. The second is the complexity of the Moro rebel groups—some of whom have been in negotiation with the current Government, while others have shown little interest. The third factor is the potential impact should Islamic State establish a base of operation in the region.

The paper will argue that the interaction of the political situation in Manila and the fractious nature of the rebel groups make a peaceful solution difficult. Moreover, should Islamic State establish a presence in the region, it is likely to act as an accelerant, making it extremely unlikely that an enduring peaceful solution will be found to address the insurgency and security situation in Bangsamoro.

Background to the conflict

The southern region of The Philippines, comprising Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, has a long history of defending its homelands from foreign powers and invaders. Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago peacefully converted to Islam in the 14th and 15th centuries following contact with Arab, Malay and Persian merchants and missionaries. The local Moro people successfully repelled Spanish, British, American and Japanese colonisers and invaders from the 16th to the mid 20th centuries. The Philippines achieved independence in July 1946, and the entire southern region was annexed to the Philippine Republic.

In 1913, the population of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago was 98 per cent Muslim. However, the Muslim majority waned rapidly as a result of large-scale resettlement, facilitated by the government to encourage people from largely Christian regions to settle in resource-rich Mindanao, the second largest island of The Philippines. By 1999, the Muslim population was a minority in its ancestral homelands, with those identifying as Muslim making up only 19 per cent of the population. Mindanao and Sulu remain the two poorest regions of The Philippines, with a population of 23 million, an average household income some 40 per cent of the national average, and a jobless rate around 48 per cent.
This history of Moro dispossession from the land, and their disenfranchisement from The Philippines’ political and economic systems, led to the creation of the Muslim Independence Movement, founded in 1968 to agitate for a separate Moro state in the Southern Philippines. The Moro struggle for independence converted into an armed insurgency against the central government following two significant events. The first was the Jabidah massacre in 1967, where Muslim soldiers—who were under training on Corregidor Island—were killed by members of the Philippine Armed Forces. The second, and arguably more politically-damaging event, involved the killing of 70 Muslims, including women and children, inside a mosque in the province of Cotabato in Mindanao in June 1971, allegedly perpetrated by the Philippine Constabulary.

In September 1972, President Marcos further inflamed the situation by declaring martial law, militarising the situation in the Southern Philippines and generating considerable animosity towards Manila. In 1968, Professor Nur Misuari, an academic and political scientist at the University of The Philippines, assumed leadership of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The MNLF became engaged in an armed insurgency against the government, as well as directing international attention to the plight of Muslim people in the Southern Philippines. The newly-formed international Organisation of Islamic Conference lent its support to the Moro struggle which, together with a threat from Saudi Arabia to restrict the supply of oil to The Philippines, compelled President Marcos to open peace negotiations with the MNLF.

Peace: A slow process and the President’s personal mission

The process towards peace in the Southern Philippines has been complicated and frustratingly slow. Over the last 46 years, under the auspices of the Organisation of Islamic Conference, prominent leaders from Libya, Somalia, Senegal, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia have at times been involved in the peace process. The numerous agreements brokered between the Moro groups and the government all promised degrees of autonomy and self-determination for Bangsamoro. However, none of these agreements has ever been fully implemented; each became bogged down in internal political debate, constitutional arguments and High Court challenges, and a genuine concern about the economic cost to The Philippines of an autonomous Bangsamoro.

The scepticism of Filipino lawmakers has been regularly reinforced by the behaviour of the rebel groups, which have indiscriminately resumed armed insurgency operations against the government. The perception from the provinces is that the government is preoccupied with centralist concerns and has little interest in the outlying provinces. Rather than experiencing the benefits of the recent economic upturn, those in the provinces, particularly in Mindanao, have experienced a firm determination by some central leaders, notably President Joseph Estrada (1998-2001), to crush the insurgency. Over the last 46 years, the conflict has resulted in an estimated 120,000 deaths and the displacement of more than two million Filipinos.

President Benigno Aquino III came to office in 2010 on a platform of ‘inclusive progress’, justice and a peaceful resolution to the Bangsamoro insurgency. Under Aquino’s leadership, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro seemed to provide a pivotal moment in this long struggle, signalling the hope of an enduring and peaceful resolution of the conflict, with the first step being the drafting of the ‘Bangsamoro Basic Law’ in early 2014. It was intended to set out the legal basis of Moro autonomy, including administrative arrangements, power-sharing details, and how revenue would be raised in the newly-formed Bangsamoro region. The proposed law was drafted, and subject to numerous modifications. However, it was never progressed to the Philippine Senate for ratification.

The lack of progress on the Comprehensive Agreement is evidence of the deep concern that many law-makers in the Philippine legislature hold about the efficacy of the negotiated peace agreements. Although elected with a significant majority, Aquino faced a challenging task to gain the necessary political consensus in Manila to progress the Bangsamoro Basic Law through both houses of parliament. The task, however, became even more problematic following the death of 44 Police commandos in January 2015, killed by members of the MILF and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters during an operation to capture two suspected terrorists in the town of Mamasapano in Mindanao.
The death of the commandos outraged ordinary Filipinos, particularly when it was reported that many were killed after they had surrendered. Politicians who were already sceptical about the peace process hardened their opposition to negotiation with what they considered to be a terrorist organisation; as a result, the passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law stalled. In early February 2016, The Philippines’ parliament began a three-month recess, meaning the legislation could not pass through parliament before the elections in May 2016. The MILF’s leadership has responded, after initial disappointment, with a renewed willingness to ‘stay the course’ toward peace. However, some rebel groups are reportedly planning to resume hostilities.

If a peaceful solution to the Bangsamoro situation is to be found, then The Philippines’ next president will need to make the legislation a priority and shepherd its passage through both houses of parliament. There are five presidential candidates in the June 2016 election. Most commentators agree that Aquino’s current deputy, Manuel Roxas, will most likely be his successor. It is understood that Roxas shares Aquino’s concern for the Bangsamoro Basic Law and will move swiftly to implement the agreement. However, should a conservative like Robert Duterte, the current major of Davos in Southern Mindanao win the presidential election, commentators have argued that the peace process is unlikely to make any new progress, increasing the risk of violence.

**Complexity of opposition: autonomy verses independence**

The complex nature within and between the rebel groups has hindered the development of a unified negotiating position between the rebels and the government. Initially, the Moro people demanded independence from The Philippines, arguing that they were never conquered and, as an Islamic people, had a cultural identity that was distinct from the rest of The Philippines. They believed that the US had acted improperly by annexing the Southern Philippines into the newly-formed Republic of the Philippines in 1946. In spite of their initial desire for independence, the Organisation of Islamic Council persuaded some of the MNLF’s leadership to accept the concept of autonomy as a legitimate outcome. It is possible that some member countries of the Organisation of Islamic Council may have influenced it to insist on a solution that respected the sovereignty of the Republic of the Philippines.

It is generally regarded, for example, that neither Indonesia nor Malaysia, near neighbours of The Philippines, would be interested in a solution to the Moro situation that involved secession from a multi-ethnic state. The decision to compromise on independence and settle for autonomy created conflict within the MNLF’s leadership. Hashim Salamat, one of the founding fathers of the MNLF, reportedly clashed with Nur Misuari, insisting that independence was the only outcome consistent with the truly Islamic goals of the Moro people. This disagreement over ideology and politics led to the establishment of the breakaway MILF in 1977 and set an unfortunate precedent for resolving future disputes between the rebel Moro groups.

The MNLF and MILF have competed with each other for regional control and influence of the Moro people and, as a result, any progress towards a peaceful solution has rarely translated into tangible benefits for ordinary Moro people. The creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao was an example of the kind of progress promised by the MNLF. The autonomous region was meant to usher in a new era of economic prosperity and development and, initially, it brought a significant boost in popularity for the MNLF.

However, the concept did not produce the promised economic growth and development that was hoped for by ordinary Moro people. Rather, a small number of Muslim families prospered, which included the family of Nur Misuari, the first governor of the autonomous region. In time, popular Moro support shifted from the MNLF to the MILF. The MILF also changed its position on autonomy and, because it was the largest and most influential rebel group in the Southern Philippines, the government began to bypass the MNLF and negotiate directly with the MILF.

The rebel groups have not only worked to destabilise each other’s positions but factions or undisciplined members have directly undermined the peace efforts of their own groups. At a Senate hearing on the Bangsamoro Basic Law, two key leaders of the MNLF addressed the hearing with contradictory positions. One hoped that it would be rejected in the Congress or the
Senate, while the other was hopeful that it would pass both houses. Nur Misuari was not at the hearing as he was the subject of an arrest warrant, following a violent uprising against Christian settlers in Zamboanga. Yet Misuari made his position clear by denouncing the Bangsamoro Basic Law and returning to the earlier struggle for independence.

The MILF, with whom the government has been primarily negotiating over the past decade, has been deeply implicated in the Mamasapano massacre. The MILF’s leadership is firmly resisting the current Government’s request for access to those MILF fighters suspected of perpetrating the deaths of the Police commandos. Additionally, there are other groups whose formation is based on differing expectations about what the peace process should achieve, contrasting religious emphases and internal power politics. These include the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, Grupong Abu Sayyaf, Jamia Islamia and the Bangsamoro National Liberation Army, a local Sunni Islamic separatist group which has no interest in negotiating with the current Government and does not feel in any way obliged to participate in the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law.

There is also a significant communist insurgency in The Philippines. Successive governments have had some success in curtailling the activities of the communist groups; however, they remain a serious threat to national security. Accordingly, an agreement with only one of the Moro groups will do little to temper the hostilities from other rebel groups.

Islamic State a new player?

Islamic State is expected to announce the formation of a satellite of its caliphate in either Indonesia or The Philippines in 2016. If Islamic State was to commence operations in Sulu, it would add a new layer of complexity to the search for a peaceful resolution to the insurgency situation in the Southern Philippines. Islamic State has officially recognised the pledge of allegiance from Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of Grupong Abu Sayyaf in Basilan, the largest island in the Sulu Archipelago. The leaders of two smaller Southern Philippines extremist groups also pledged their allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (the leader of Islamic State) and Islamic State itself. An official wilayat (or province) is yet to be established in the region. If Islamic State was to do so, it would present not only a serious security concern for The Philippines but also the broader Southeast Asia region.

The Sulu Archipelago has proven to be a difficult and challenging environment to conduct policing or military operations. Grupong Abu Sayyaf and other groups have local knowledge of the terrain and waterways around the archipelago making them difficult to target or contain. It is also likely that Islamic State may use this location to set up training camps, which may lure not only Southeast Asians but other motivated individuals from Australia and China. This would then have direct implications for Australia’s national security. The initial response of the Philippine Government is not promising because, rather than taking this threat seriously, it has publicly written these groups off as jihadi ‘wannabes’. However, Grupong Abu Sayyaf and the other groups that have pledged allegiance to Islamic State are firmly focused on achieving an Islamic state in the region and have no interest in autonomy on anyone else’s terms or power-sharing arrangements with the government.

Conclusion

The slow pace of the peace process in the Southern Philippines has exacerbated the situation for the Moro people and has led to cycles of violent insurgency. The MNLF, MILF and other rebel groups have at times held divergent and often contradictory views of what a peaceful and just solution to the Bangsamoro situation would be. This confusion has existed both among the main groups as well as within the same organisations. While ostensibly pursuing peace, it has also been frustrating that elements within the negotiating parties have acted to scuttle the process by their militant activities. There is also little doubt that the government has, at times, used this confusion and disunity to its advantage.
Moreover, the threat potentially posed by Islamic State, should it choose to pivot into the region, is likely to have a significant and deleterious effect on the entire peace process. A number of commentators have expressed cautious hope of a satisfactory resolution. However, unchecked insurgencies will continue to prevent a just and lasting peaceful solution to Muslim Mindanao security and the insurgency problem. Ongoing strife and violence are also likely to continue, especially from groups that have aligned themselves with Islamic State. This unstable situation is liable to challenge further the social, economic and security circumstances for the Moro and settler communities in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, and the Philippine Government more broadly.

Notes


Ozerdem, 'The contribution of the organisation of the Islamic conference to the peace process in Mindanao', p. 399.


BBC, 'Moro rebel website comments on Philippine-US military exercises', BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 8 July 2004, p. 1; Ozerdem, 'The contribution of the organisation of the Islamic conference to the peace process in Mindanao', p. 400.

Ozerdem, 'The contribution of the organisation of the Islamic conference to the peace process in Mindanao', p. 400.

Ozerdem, 'The contribution of the organisation of the Islamic conference to the peace process in Mindanao', p. 401.


Ozerdem, 'The contribution of the organisation of the Islamic conference to the peace process in Mindanao', pp. 409-10.

They include the Tripoli Agreement, 1976; The Final Peace Agreement for the Implementation of the Tripoli Agreement (Jakarta), 1996; Memorandum of Agreement – Ancestral Domains, 2008; and the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro, 2014: see Ozerdem, 'The contribution of the organisation of the Islamic conference to the peace process in Mindanao', p. 401.


IISS, 'Landmark peace deal close in southern Philippines', p. v.


Jane’s, 'Approval delay to Bangsamoro Basic Law likely to increase civil war risks in Mindanao, Philippines, during 2016', p. 1 contends that 'Robert Duterte is committed to reforming the Philippines into a Federal system of government and he has made it clear that this is the only workable solution to the Bangsamoro issue'.


22 Jane’s, 'Approval delay to Bangsamoro Basic Law likely to increase civil war risks in Mindanao, Philippines, during 2016', p. 1 contends that 'Robert Duterte is committed to reforming the Philippines into a Federal system of government and he has made it clear that this is the only workable solution to the Bangsamoro issue'.


Salimat’s stated position was always full independence for Mindanao, Sulu Archipelago and Palawan even though the MILF had expressed a willingness to entertain regional autonomy: Stanford University, ‘Moro Islamic Liberation Front’, p. 1.


Franco, ‘Malaysia’, p. 213.


Philippine Government, Senate Committee on local government joint with the committees on peace, unification and reconciliation; and constitutional amendments and revision of codes, Senate Committee Transcript, available at <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/MYLP/conversations/topics/2284> accessed on 4 February 2016.

Misuari, the former leader of the MNLF, is subject to an arrest warrant following the 2013 Zamboanga uprising where he led a MNLF force which attacked the city resulting in the deaths of 200 civilians: Heydarian, ‘The quest for peace’, p. 5.

Stanford University, ‘Moro Islamic Liberation Front’, p. 8.


This is not an exhaustive list of militant extreme groups operating in the Southern Philippines: see Banlaoi, ‘Current terrorist groups and emerging extremist armed movements in the southern Philippines’, p. 179.


See, for example, Zachary Abuza, Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: crucible of terror, Lynne Rienner: London, 2003, p. 111.
