

Excitement and trepidation like no other in the Bangsamoro region

Pre-election CCAA conflict briefer

May 2026



Members and supporters of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) held a rally in Cotabato City on 18 May calling for the restitution of MILF Chair Murad Ebrahim as Chief Minister of the BARMM, reinstate the 41 nominees of the MILF in the Parliament, and to ensure the full implementation of the CAB. *Photo courtesy of DXMS Radyo Bida Cotabato City.*

The Bangsamoro region shall claim its final and definite seal of political legitimacy as it heads towards an elected rather than an appointed set of leaders after the parliamentary polls scheduled for the third quarter of 2026.

The post-harvest period and the traditional lean months from end June to early September 2026 will see a surprising burst of enthusiasm and excitement as rival political and clan leaders, movements, and communities gravitate around their preferred political parties and candidates. A buoyant, fiesta-like atmosphere started as early as March 2026 when President Bongbong Marcos signed Republic Act. No. 12317 setting the election date on 14 September 2026.

The dominant United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) founded by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has established the widest political network across the region, though centred in the mainland provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Sur, and Maguindanao del Norte. The 2025 mid-term elections also showed the significant entry of old Moro elite politicians into their ranks. New political parties such as the Bangsamoro Federalist Party (BFP) have also been formed representing new alliances and the factional outcomes created from the defection of former UBJP members and the recent top-level changes in the hierarchy of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.

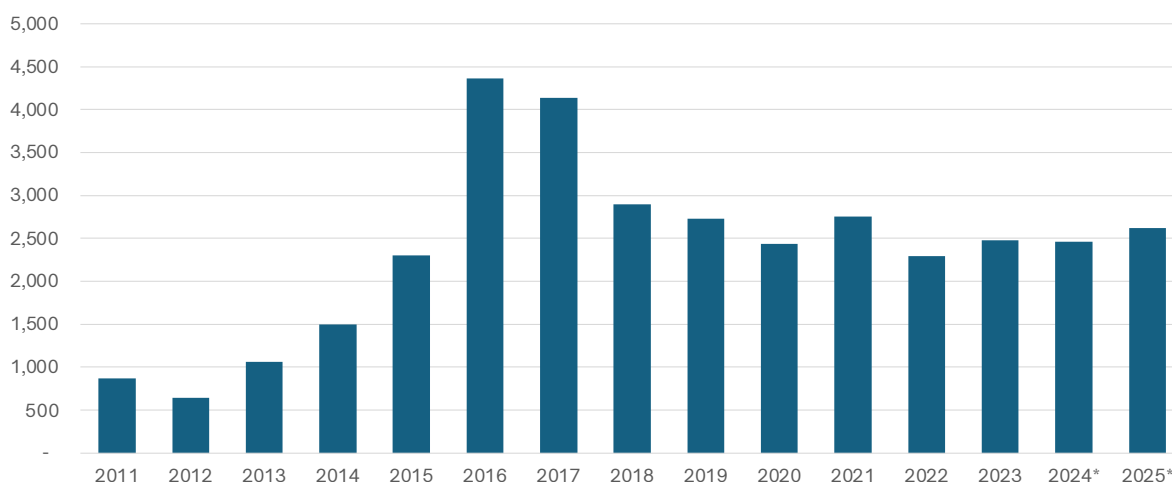
Meanwhile, new party list groups have emerged from various sectors and citizens organizations.¹ The indigenous peoples (IP) and settler groups, especially the non-Moro IP groups have nominated their sectoral representatives. Youth and women groups have also identified and registered their nominees.

People are optimistic despite the unusual and pioneering nature of this major political exercise for the Bangsamoro region as well as the entire country. It is the first regional parliament established under a new organic law for devolved and autonomous rule and holds the promise of genuine representative and participatory rule for other parts of the country. More importantly, people genuinely look forward to choosing their leaders after five years of one-party rule endorsed by the State. These high expectations and confidence are also coupled with reports of growing investments in the Bangsamoro.²

Yet this same quarter is also the most critical pre-election period, and other signs are ominous.

CCAA’s Conflict Alert data has shown that violent conflict continued to rise in 2025 and is approaching levels close to the post-war decline that ended in 2021 (Figure 1). This increase was driven by the rise in horizontal conflict, primarily involving the MILF, and the resurgence of vertical violence linked to violent extremism. Violence will likely increase in 2026 as the region heads to its first Parliamentary election.

Figure 1. Conflict incidents in the Bangsamoro, 2011-2025



Data source: Conflict Alert
*Indicative figures only

¹ 28 BARMM sectoral groups eye registration. 9 April 2026. SunStar Philippines. <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/manila/28-barmm-sectoral-groups-eye-registration>

² BARMM investments hit record high of P5.1B in 4 months. 01 May 2026. Philippine Daily Inquirer. <https://business.inquirer.net/588153/barmm-investments-hit-record-high-of-p5-1b-in-4-months>

A. The first half of the year has seen a resurgence of violent extremism in the mainland and a reemergence in Sulu.

The first five months of 2026 has already recorded a noticeable increase in both VE incidents and deaths as compared to the previous five months of August to December 2025. Incidents rose from 29 to 40, and the number of deaths doubled from nine to 20.

Table 1. Incidents of violent extremism, 6-month period

	Aug-Dec 2025	Jan-May 2026
Incidents	29	40
Deaths	9	20

The Dawla Islamiyah (DI) received major setbacks in April after successive attacks by the military and tit-for-tat attacks between the two. The biggest setback occurred on April 17 when ten DI members, including its emir, were killed in a surgical military operation in Brgy. Banga-Pantar,

Marantao. Those killed were said to be behind the ambush-attack that killed four PNP officers in Munai earlier in January 2026. Marawi City and neighbouring municipalities were placed on red alert in fear of a potential retaliation of the DI. This incident points to serious flaws in the various reintegration programmes implemented and designed for VE members as three of the DI members killed had previously surrendered to the military and the Philippine National Police.

The DI received another major blow in Maguindanao del Sur when three of their members were killed in a military aerial attack in Brgy. Tuayan Mother, Datu Hoffer on April 26. Those killed were said to be behind the ambush-attack that killed five members of the PNP Provincial Mobile Force Company in Shariff Aguak on the previous month. A running gun battle between the DI and military would continue until the first week of May, resulting to four CAFGU members injured.

Meanwhile, suspected remnants of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) appear to be regaining ground in Sulu, where the province has witnessed declining



Disaster risk reduction and management officers conduct response and recovery efforts after the military operation that killed ten DI members in Marantao, Lanao del Sur on April 17. Photo by CCAA-ERN.

violence in the past three years and has enjoyed a tentative, yet stable peace. An armed encounter occurred in Patikul, Sulu on February 1 between government troops and armed elements, resulting to four dead and one wounded. Patikul is a former stronghold of the ASG.

Separately, the military uncovered war materiel, and weapons fabrication equipment in Brgy. Pabrica, Marogong, Lanao del Sur on April 12. The military claimed that the materials belonged to the DI as the confiscation site was a former hideout of the DI-MG. However, CCAA-ERN note that the site also straddles an MILF camp, casting doubt on key aspects of the normalisation agreement between the GPH and MILF.

B. A divided MILF and an explosion of factional fighting between rival commands and political parties spilled into the open in 2025 and threatens to ignite an internal war between fully armed and un-decommissioned combatants.

The violence in the Bangsamoro was accompanied by heightened political instabilities, which intensified when President Marcos, Jr. signed into law the measure resetting the first Parliamentary election to September. Word wars between the faction in the MILF leadership, political realignments, and legal battles relating to the election escalated in April through May. The BFP was established, with most of its members are supporters of Interim Chief Minister Abdulraof Macacua, which many viewed as a direct challenge to the MILF’s UBJP. Meanwhile, petitions aimed to debar the UBJP to participate and field their candidates in the election were seen as a strategy to undermine the party’s influence and prospects in the polls. The Comelec eventually dismissed the petition, allowing the UBJP to join the election.

These all culminated in May when news broke out of the removal of Mohagher Iqbal as Member of Parliament and Minister of the MBHTE. Around 37,000 members and supporters of the MILF held an “emergency peace rally” in Cotabato City the next day, calling for the restitution of MILF Chair Murad Ebrahim as Chief Minister, reinstate the 41 nominees of the MILF in the Parliament, and to ensure the full implementation of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). Iqbal was ultimately removed due to the corruption allegations surrounding his bureau, which according to Macacua, undermines the moral governance that the Bangsamoro government embodies.

C. These risks lie atop smouldering clan feuds accompanied by a vigorous trade in illegal weapons, illicit drugs, and smuggled cigarettes.

The first four months of 2026 already recorded 43 incidents of clan feuding, only five incidents short of the total recorded for the entire year of 2025. Most of these are concentrated in the mainland provinces of Maguindanao del Sur and del Norte, Lanao del Sur, and the Special Geographic Areas (SGA).

Table 2. Incidents of clan feuding in the Bangsamoro, 2024-2025

	2024	2025	2026*
Clan feud	58	49	43

**Data is only for January-April*

A number of these clan feuds involve those affiliated with the MILF, such as on April 22 when a firefight occurred between two groups from the 105th Base Command at the boundaries of Brgy. Bakat, Rajah Buayan, and Brgy Dasikil, Mamasapano, Maguindanao del Sur on April 22. The encounter lasted for a week. Another firefight erupted in Timako Island in Cotabato City on April 4 involving a prominent clan and another who is a former MILF member. On April 15, a firefight due to a land dispute erupted in Brgy. Marbel, Matalam involving an armed group and the 108th Base Command of the MILF. The 40th Infantry Battalion responded to the incident which led to another firefight between the military and the MILF, injuring three people. In the island province of Basilan, three persons were wounded in an encounter between two security aides of a municipal mayor who are also members of the MILF. Investigation disclosed that the MILF member engaged another MILF member in a heated dispute which led to gunfire.

These incidents point to serious flaws in the decommissioning process as weapons are still in the hands of the MILF and have been used as they engage in rido and gun-related violence. At least 47 incidents of gun-related violence have already been recorded between April and mid-May alone, which indicates that a shooting incident occurs every day in the region. This heightens the risk that these firearms could be mobilized or influence local power competition during the first Parliamentary elections in September.

Meanwhile, more than Php 25 million worth of drugs and more than Php126 million worth of smuggled cigarettes were seized by authorities between April and May. Most of these incidents



Residents of Kadayangan, SGA fled their homes and are staying in a temporary shelter after a fire erupted between two families due to rido caused by land and drugs on May 28. Photo by CCAA-ERN.

were concentrated in the urban and peri-urban areas of Cotabato City, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Sultan Kudarat, Parang in Maguindanao; Marawi City and Malabang in Lanao del Sur; and in Jolo, Sulu.

D. These security challenges are further compounded by a major economic crisis brought about by both external wars in the Middle East, a large-scale public works corruption scandal, and the onset of a drought brought about by an extended El Nino and fears of subsequent flooding and sea level rise in early 2027.

Reports of theft and robbery have plagued areas that have been deeply affected by the drought and the oil crisis, particularly those in the SGA. CCAA's ERNs have reported that sari-sari stores have been targeted in robbery and Piso Wifi cash boxes are being tampered with and forcibly opened due to the impact of the crises.

Just recently on May 14, the Bangsamoro region was placed under state of calamity due to the worsening impacts of the oil crisis and the El Nino, which has disrupted food security, transportation, and livelihoods of the people.³ How these issues are addressed will be a critical deciding factor in who people will vote for in the Bangsamoro polls.

Likewise, the onset of the flooding season can affect the election proceedings in September.

E. Finally, the anticipated transition from the Marcos government to a new government in 2028 is bringing its own set of tensions and flashpoints in the region.

The vote banks of the Bangsamoro will shape the direction and momentum of Mindanao's votes in general and thus play a vital role in the success of any contender for the Presidency in 2028. The results of the 2025 mid-term election already exposed a serious fracture in the loyalties of the MILF and the political settlement between the region and the

centre. Will those fractures heal before September 2026, or will the election deliver a bitter pill to the current occupants of Malacañang Palace and their candidates?

The issues in the region are further compounded by the lack of fiscal discipline in the region, laid bare by the corruption allegations surrounding the education ministry. What is more appalling is the deafening silence of civil society groups on the wanton corruption in the region and the glorification of those who should instead be held accountable. These are deeply worrying signs of the collapse of moral governance in the region, a crisis that will further intensify as irregularities in the Marawi rehabilitation and other flood control projects are yet to be exposed.

Conclusions

All these issues will converge towards the first Parliamentary election in the Bangsamoro region, making the period leading from now until September critical. The election represents more than just a democratic exercise. It will also serve as the first real test of whether the Bangsamoro political transition can evolve into one that is genuinely legitimate. However, the electoral process remains vulnerable to renewed security

³ BARMM under state of calamity amid oil crisis, El Niño. 21 May 2026. Philippine Daily Inquirer. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2232271/barmm-under-state-of-calamity-amid-oil-crisis-el-nino>

challenges. The emergence of new threats of violent extremism and new cycles of vertical violence can disrupt the credibility and stability of the elections. Violence is likewise expected to intensify as the election period will converge with the lean months of July to September before the main harvest season. Temporal data from Conflict Alert has consistently revealed that violence often spikes during these two periods.

Ultimately, the Bangsamoro stands at the crossroads. The months ahead will reveal whether the first Parliamentary election will become the foundation of a durable and inclusive peace or provide conditions for the emergence of new threats and cycles of violence. ●



Climate Conflict Action Asia (CCAA) is a peacebuilding organization dedicated to promoting sustainable and lasting peace by addressing the interconnected challenges of climate and conflict. Our work builds upon the legacy of our former identity as International Alert Philippines. Together with local communities, we monitor, analyze, and understand the dynamics of conflict, peace, and development in the Philippines to inspire action and solutions.



CCAA manages the Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS), an SMS-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities that may lead to the eruption of violence. It is used by Early Response Network (ERN) in various localities in the Bangsamoro who share real-time information and work with key stakeholders in coordinating quick context-specific responses.

The rally in Cotabato City on 18 May came after ICM Abdulraof Macacua directed Mohagher Iqbal to resign from his post as Minister of the Basic, Higher, and Technical Education due to corruption allegations. *Photo by CCAA-ERN.*

