



Tarpaulins and campaign materials line the streets of Cotabato City as the campaign season enters its final stretch toward the Bangsamoro's first Parliamentary election. Photo courtesy of CCAA.

A Vote for the Future: The Bangsamoro's critical step toward democracy

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The Bangsamoro region has entered the final stretch toward its first Parliamentary election. The Commission on Elections (Comelec) has begun deploying ballots, automated counting machines, and other election paraphernalia in some remote areas across the region. However, the path to the polls remains marked by electoral and security risks, with reports of vote-buying, political violence, and clan feuds. The government has responded with an unprecedented deployment of security forces in its bid to secure the polls, but the risks extend beyond election day, with potential implications for post-election stability and the broader Bangsamoro political settlement.

Vote-buying and violence

Vote-buying was observed in Cotabato City and some municipalities in Lanao del Sur, with offers ranging from as low as Php1,000 to a high of Php5,000. This practice has been a feature in previous electoral seasons for candidates to secure their vote banks or expand their reach in communities where they have limited political clout.

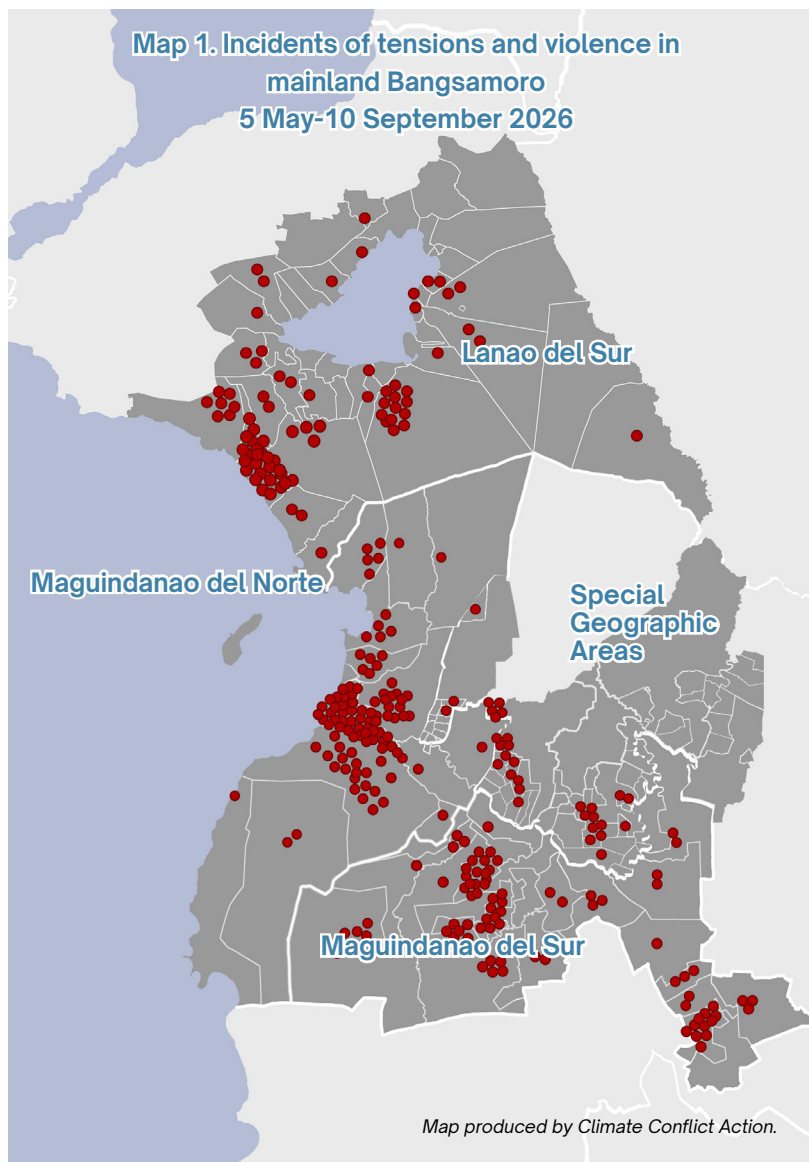
Meanwhile, shooting incidents involving local political actors persisted. On September 7, a barangay chairman in Basilan was targeted in a shooting incident. A day later, a barangay councilor of Datu Odin Sinsuat sustained injuries due to a shooting attack. Two separate incidents of clan feuding erupted in Pagayawan and in Malabang, Lanao del Sur on September 8 and 9, respectively.

Most of the violence reported through the Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) since the start of the filing of candidacy on 5 May remains concentrated in the Maguindanao provinces, Lanao del Sur, and the Special Geographic Areas (SGA) (Map 1 and 2).

Unprecedented security deployment

The Comelec recently identified more than 90 municipalities across the region as election hotspots, with 26 towns classified as “red areas.”¹ While most red areas are in Lanao del Sur, CCAA's Early Response Network flags Maguindanao del Sur, Cotabato City, and SGA as key pressure sites.

¹ Comelec classifies “red areas” as areas characterized by serious armed threats, a history of election-related violence, and/or intense political rivalry. Of the 26 municipalities classified as red areas, approximately 80 percent are in Lanao del Sur <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/1001639/barmm-2026-elections-where-are-the-election-areas-of-concern/story/>



augmentation includes elite military units and high-powered land, air, and sea military assets. These measures are not without basis as previous electoral seasons in the Bangsamoro have been repeatedly marred by intimidation and violence. While this may help deter violence, it can also create new risks such as potential human rights violations, excessive use of force, while also exposing them to retaliation and revenge attacks by armed groups who perceive the security forces as obstructing their interests.

The presence of international observers and heightened international and national attention on the Bangsamoro election adds further pressure on the government and security forces. Any serious incident or failure to ensure the peaceful and credible election could damage the credibility of the security forces, the national government, and the peace process itself.

Peace process for the people

There is without doubt that the first Parliamentary election will be historic and represent a critical juncture in the Bangsamoro political settlement. Yet, the region's ruling parties, have adopted narratives and strategies that could test the future of the peace process.

The UBJP, led by the MILF Central Committee, has previously stated that a UBJP win will be a victory for the peace process.³ Meanwhile, the BFP has positioned itself against what others perceive as having excessive influence from Malacañang, which undermines the autonomy envisioned for the region. Whichever side prevails will have significant implications on the direction of the peace process beyond the election.

Furthermore, recent verbal exchanges between the Philippine government and the MILF have

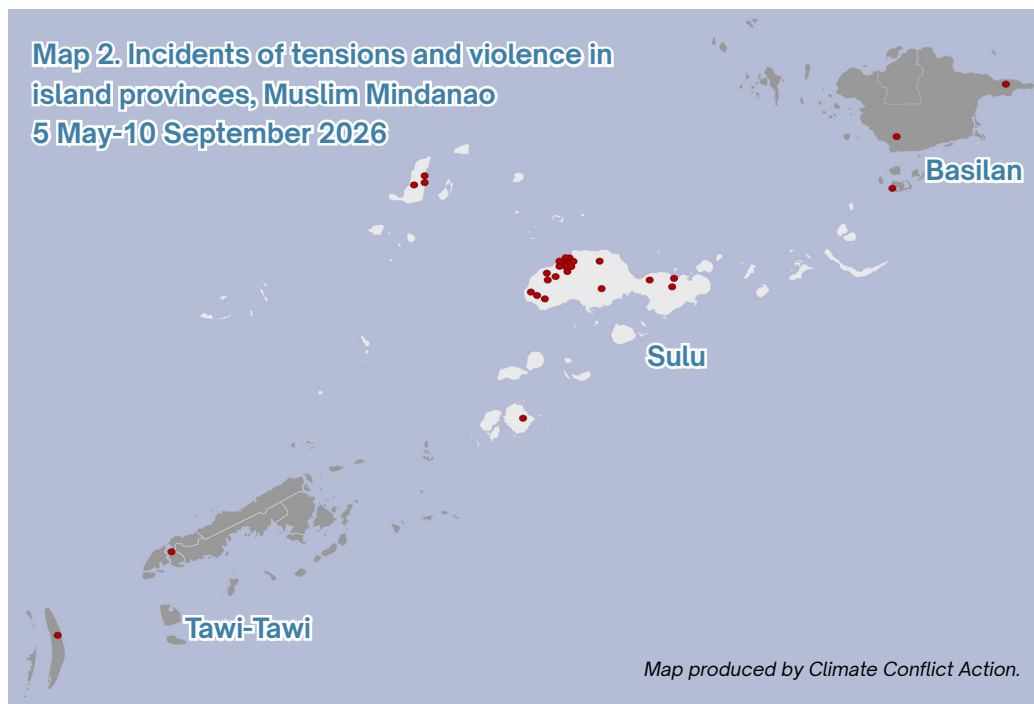
These are where the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) and Bangsamoro Federalist Party (BFP) are locked in a tight race and MILF base commands are present.

Against this backdrop, security preparations have been intensified, with around 20,000 security forces deployed across the region, comprising more than 9,000 personnel from the Philippine National Police (PNP) and nearly 10,000 from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).² This is the largest deployment of security forces to the region in recent election history.

The massive deployment of security personnel is both warranted and unprecedented. The security

²Close to 10K cops deployed for BARMM polls. Philippine News Agency. 11 September 2026. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1283733>; AFP deploys over 10,000 military personnel for Sept. 14 BARMM polls. Inquirer. 27 August 2026. <https://www.inquirer.net/486448/afp-deploys-over-10000-military-personnel-for-sept-14-barmm-polls/>

Map 2. Incidents of tensions and violence in island provinces, Muslim Mindanao
5 May-10 September 2026



Post-election violence can escalate as candidates and supporters contest the results and political rivalries intensify, especially once the security forces pull out from the region.

The Bangsamoro political settlement does not rest on which party holds power. Rather, it rests on the institutional and legal framework set by the Comprehensive Agreement on the

Bangsamoro (CAB) and the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). The first Parliamentary election provides the Bangsamoro government with a clear and credible evidence of its political legitimacy. It can lay a solid foundation for building democratic institutions that will advance the aspirations of its people.

Ultimately, the peace process belongs to the Bangsamoro people, who will decide whom they trust to implement and carry it forward. The question now is: Will this historic election be remembered as a defining moment when the Bangsamoro people were truly free to choose, their votes protected and respected, and their choice secured a democratic future for the region? ●

raised security concerns, following Commander Bravo's declaration that the military and police will be barred from entering MILF communities in Lanao del Sur.⁴ The AFP responded that any unilateral declaration placing MILF communities off-limits to security forces would violate their legal mandate. This is problematic given that the MILF are participating in the election still fully armed and undercommissioned. Concerns among communities, too, have surfaced about the future of the MILF-UBJP, if they fail to win enough seats in the Parliament.

The more difficult question, however, comes after election day. A heavy security presence may be able to curb violence and ensure that Monday's elections will proceed peacefully, but the risks do not necessarily end once the polls close.

³ Iqbal: Bangsamoro peace process continues beyond Sept. 14 polls. MindaNews. 9 August 2026. <https://mindanews.com/peace-process/2026/08/iqbal-bangsamoro-peace-process-continues-beyond-sept-14-polls/>

⁴ MILF commander declare police, army off limits to MILF communities in Lanao provinces. Daily Tribune. 6 September 2026. <https://tribune.net.ph/2026/09/06/milf-commander-declare-police-army-off-limits-to-milf-communities-in-lanao-provinces>



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.

CEMS
CRITICAL EVENTS
MONITORING SYSTEM

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.

