

Beyond the Ballot:

Unpacking the first Bangsamoro Parliamentary election

Boto Mo Bangsamoro Post-election Bulletin
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Security forces cordon off the crime scene of a shooting incident in Brgy. Bagua 2, Cotabato City, hours before the first Bangsamoro Parliamentary election. This incident resulted in three casualties and at least 13 others wounded. *Photo courtesy: Yanie Abdulrasid*

The historic first Parliamentary elections in the Bangsamoro on 14 September has been declared “generally peaceful,” but the violence surrounding the polls tells a deeper story.¹ Violence erupted in various parts of the region, accompanied by incidents of vote-buying and electoral fraud, all of which collectively invite a more circumspect analysis of whether the “generally peaceful” elections were in fact free, fair and credible.

A total of 476 reports were received by Climate Conflict Action’s (CCAA) Critical Events Monitoring System from 11 to 14 September, of which 322 of these were received during election day itself. Around 35 Early Response Networks (ERN) were deployed across the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, Special Geographic Areas (SGA), Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi.

Lower violence but deadly in the Bangsamoro capital

Violence remains to be a feature of the first Bangsamoro Parliamentary Election (BPE), although incidents and deaths recorded were lower compared to the 2025 midterm and the 2023 Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan (BSK) elections.² There were a total of 364 incidents reported from 5 May to 14 September, with 36 incidents captured three days preceding the election and 21 on election day itself (Table 1).

Still on the other hand, the deployment of a total of 20,000 police and military personnel in the BARMM to keep peace and order during the recent elections, appear to have been responsible in part for a quantitatively lower number of violent incidents in the region.³ Thus, voting proceeded smoothly in Tawi-Tawi and the SGA, which recorded little to no violent incidents. In Lanao del Sur, incidents of brawls, fistfights, and verbal altercations arose which were eventually settled by either the military or elders. Yet the sight of war tanks in the province evoked painful memories of the trauma, displacement, and devastation brought by the 2017 Marawi war.

The experience was starkly different in Cotabato City, however, where the Bangsamoro government sits and where several international observers were deployed. Automatic weapons were fired inside a polling precinct, creating a security terror that sent people scampering for cover. It was ground zero of violence, with firefights, riots, and grenade explosions rocking the city, mostly between supporters of the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) and the Bangsamoro Federalist Party (BFP), leaving seven (7) dead and eleven (11) injured. Accounts from the ground describe panic and chaos among the international observers too as violence unfolded across the city. There was a glaring failure in the threat assessment as well as the city was not identified as an election hotspot and was only declared under Commission on Elections (Comelec) control on the eve of the election.

Table 1. Comparative assessment of conflict data, election periods, 2023, 2025, 2026

Election period	Coverage	Total conflict incidents	Monthly average incidents	Total deaths	Monthly average deaths	Injured
2023 BSKE (July-Oct 2023)	4 mos	438	110	165	41	38
2025 NLE (Oct 2024 - May 2025)	7 mos	719	103	244	35	89
2026 BPE (May-Sep 2026)	4 mos	364	91	143	36	34

Data source: Critical Events Monitoring System

¹ PNP: Bangsamoro polls ‘generally peaceful’ despite shooting, explosions. ABS-CBN. 14 September 2026. <https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/regions/2026/9/14/pnp-bangsamoro-polls-generally-peaceful-despite-shooting-explosions-1520>

² CCAA’s election period monitoring begins during the filing of certificates of candidacy. In previous instances, violence has erupted as early as the candidacy filing stage, as seen in the 2009 Maguindanao massacre.

³ More than 20,000 police and military personnel were deployed to secure polling places and major routes across the region, with authorities emphasizing the protection of voters and the preservation of the electoral process. (14 September 2026). Philstar. <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2026/09/14/2556326/comelec-downplays-isolated-incidents-violence-barmm-polls>

In Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Maguindanao del Sur, a firefight lasted for six hours which for obvious reasons disabled voters from casting their votes, resulting in widespread political disenfranchisement in the area.

The eruption of violence in such numbers, nature and gravity cannot be glossed over as isolated or irrelevant, particularly when guns firing and grenades exploding defied the highest security arrangements in areas like Cotabato City. When violence cause disenfranchisement that in turn disables the expression of the people's will at the polls, the election process deserves a more thorough assessment than a sweeping reference to "generally peaceful."

Lower stakes for the voters, different political competition

The variance in the number of violent incidents may be traced to the distinction between the National and Local Elections (NLE) and BPE.

The NLE is a traditional local contest where competition is often shaped by kinship ties, personal networks, and interests of traditional clans. In previous elections, violence was more pronounced as the stakes were higher for local political actors, who are closely embedded within their communities, which involves fierce competition for local power and resources.

The BPE on the other hand was seen more as an electoral contest between the two parties affiliated with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF): the BFP and the UBJP which explains why more of the violent encounters involved supporters of the two parties. The election

shifted the political competition from one that is traditionally clan-based towards one that is driven by a political organisation that played a central role in the Bangsamoro peace process.

This underscores why the classification of election hotspots warrants constant reassessment. Assessments should go beyond historical records of violence to also include mapping political competition and shifting alliances. As alliances change, so do the actors, the interests at stake, and the dynamics of competition. It is noteworthy that violence was comparatively lower in Lanao del Sur and in Shariff Aguak and Datu Odin Sinsuat in Maguindanao, areas where previous elections were marred by violence. These areas are also where prominent traditional political clans continue to wield political power.

"High voter turnout," but questions of electoral credibility

The Comelec declared that the Bangsamoro election delivered an 84.34% voters' turnout, which reflects the determination of Bangsamoro voters, many of whom had long anticipated the election and turned out to exercise their democratic rights.⁴ But the figure alone does not tell the full story of how the vote was conducted.



Poll watchers monitor the crowd of voters in a polling precinct in Brgy. Tubig, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi. Voting in the province concluded without reports of violence. Photo courtesy of CCAA-ERN

⁴ Comelec: 84.34% final voters' turnout for BARMM polls. Inquirer. 16 September 2026. <https://www.inquirer.net/489658/comelec-84-34-final-voters-turnout-for-barmm-polls/>



The aftermath of a riot: two vehicles parked outside Sero Central Elementary School in Cotabato City were wrecked by rioters during the first Bangsamoro Parliamentary Election. *Photo courtesy: DXMS Radyo Bida*

The data from the ground cites several cases of electoral fraud, an observation shared by other monitoring groups.⁵ Reports included pre-shaded ballots, and in some areas, multiple ballots being filled out by either the same voter or the electoral board. These falsified or manipulated ballots may feed into the percentage of voter turnout, thereby resulting in inaccuracies.

ERN members also observed that in some areas, relatively few voters turned up, and voting had concluded by midday. This may be partly explained by the fact that the ballots had a shorter list of candidates and were easier to fill up. Another explanation is the low voter participation further meant fewer voters at stake, fewer incentives for

political actors to engage in coercion or violence, and therefore less violent incidents. At the same time, lower voter participation creates an opportunity for local political actors to fill out ballots on behalf of those who did not vote, thereby inflating the higher voter turnout.⁶

There were also reports that votes had been pre-arranged and distributed between political parties. In the past, such arrangements served as a bargaining chip of local leaders to ensure they get support and endorsement from the political parties in succeeding elections. An unintended consequence is the deterrence of violence as votes are already negotiated, at the cost of disregarding the very essence of fair and democratic elections.

⁵ Several organizations including [LENTE](#), [ANFREL](#), and [NAMFREL](#) have reported widespread electoral fraud and violence.

⁶ In Marantao, Lanao del Sur, voters report that they discovered that individuals have casted their votes and signed the master list. <https://www.facebook.com/nmdailysource/posts/pfbid032ctAT6HGks2C5V8CYnsE31wsxgZ25YA76vXL5XWCUsmpakFCY2tRm2tj2WYVime6>

A test in the Bangsamoro political settlement's future

The lesson to be learned from this turnaround is that the assessment of the BPE should not be a knee-jerk reaction to a political stimulus that yearns for the success of the BPE as historic milestone. To say that it is “generally peaceful” is at best inadequate and at worst, an insult to those who experienced the violence firsthand.

Furthermore, since it is issued by official government channels, it induces passive acceptance of a default narrative. Rather, the reports of intense violence and election fraud and falsification of ballots that have been consistently reported by observers, socio-civic groups and some mainstream media organizations must be considered in the qualitative and subjective assessment of whether or not the BPE is successful in accord with the clearly defined aspirations of the Bangsamoro people.

The first Parliamentary election gave the Bangsamoro people an important opportunity to exercise their democratic right and indeed marked a significant milestone in the political settlement. But the peace

process goes beyond ensuring people can participate in democratic processes without fear and intimidation, but more so in addressing the broader conditions that threaten peace and stability in the region. At the end of the day, it is ordinary Bangsamoro citizens who should feel the gains of the peace process, for they are too often the ones who bear the brunt of violence, displacement, and instability.

Several risks remain in the post-election period:

First, post-election violence could erupt between and among those involved in the violence during election day.⁷ The widespread reports of electoral fraud and violence need to be addressed by the Comelec to safeguard the credibility of the electoral process, both in the recent and in succeeding ones, and to preserve the integrity of the institution itself. Comelec should ensure that these incidents are not merely investigated, but that appropriate legal action is filed against those responsible.

Second, the risk of the resurgence of horizontal violence that has been temporarily suppressed



Voters cast their ballots in Kauran Elementary School, Ampatuan, Maguindanao del Sur.
Photo courtesy of CCAA-ERN

⁷ Previous electoral cycles have shown how violence persists beyond elections as candidates and supporters contest the results and political rivalries intensify, especially once the security personnel pull out from the region.



Voters crowd outside a polling precinct in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Norte as they search for their names. The municipality, for the first time in recent election history, enjoyed a peaceful conduct of elections. Photo courtesy of CCAA-ERN.

dominant factions will require strategic influence and robust alliances to tip the scales in favour of one over the other.

Fourth, the rising dominance of traditional politicians in the Parliament itself has emerged as a vital gamechanger. Whichever side secures their alliance could decisively influence the top position in the region, which risks a regression to political patronage.

Fifth, the resurgence of MILF grievances among those who have yet to fully realise the gains of the peace process, coupled by the perceptions that the central government has failed to deliver on its commitments which provides uncertainty on the completion of the peace process. These are further compounded by risks that the MILF remain undecommissioned. The newly elected BARMM Parliament also has a central role in prioritizing regional laws that address the root causes of conflict in the region, such

by the security deployments. In fact, violence has already re-emerged in Nabalawag, SGA due to a recurring rido between two MILF commanders just two days after the election.

Third, the volatile political landscape owing to the MILF split and the struggle for influence over the Chief Minister position. The results that evenly divided the votes between the two

as on the harmonization of land laws, and addressing proliferation of illegal firearms.

Finally, the perceived continued Malacanang interference on the election, the election of the Chief Minister and its legitimacy, and its potential implications in the 2028 national elections, could pose a risk to the autonomy envisioned for the region.●



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.

