

# THE LAY OF THE LAND: VIRAL VIOLENCE AND THE THREAT OF A WIDER WAR

## CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM BULLETIN

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As Ramadhan ended and the government eased its lockdown measures, violent conflict continued to surge in the Bangsamoro. Among the critical events monitored in the region were the expulsion of indigenous peoples (IP) from their ancestral lands; clashes between rebel groups and between factions of these rebel groups; the murder of a local government executive in Cotabato City; continued attacks by violent extremists and the death of two children from a mortar explosion; and the forced displacement of thousands of families due to these conflicts.

The upsurge would seem unprecedented as spikes in violence during the Islamic holy month usually give way to a decrease in incidents once Ramadhan ends, while the relaxation of the lockdown strictures was expected to ease the tensions and pressures the COVID pandemic had wrought.<sup>1</sup> These deadly incidents, however, occurred alongside a tumultuous Bangsamoro transition, enduring clan feuds, and the constant threat of violent extremism.

These flashpoints may also seem unrelated. Nonetheless, they reveal the changes in the balance of economic and political power between political groups and alliances at various levels, as well as the broader shift in the risks and threats that newly emerging violent actors bring.

<sup>1</sup> Conflict Alert annual reports from 2013-2019 shows the temporal nature of violent conflict and the regular spikes in violence during and after Ramadhan that were often linked to clan feuding, and more recently, to violent extremism.

Residents pass by a crime scene  
in Datu Salibo, Maguindanao.

Photo by Salahudin Alonto

## VIOLENT POLARIZATION ON FOUR FRONTS

To be sure, violent extremism has remained persistent within and outside its previous bases in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao and in the island provinces of Sulu and Basilan. New alliances between extremist and rebel groups are also surfacing. In their midst, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), dominated by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), is imposing its mandate beyond the MILF's traditional bases and boundaries and is trying to block resistance to its authority from local authorities.

These accounts signify the intensification of polarization—the creation of poles or extremes—along multiple fissures or divides within state and society in the Bangsamoro. In the early part of the first half of 2020, boundaries were activated, walls were erected, and those who straddled the middle ground fled to either extremes.

## POLARIZATION OVER LAND AND OTHER NATURAL RESOURCE ISSUES

The most recent and important sign of polarization of communities is seen around land and other natural resource issues, and their consequent impact on identity and political issues. Numerous land-related disputes have brought about or reinforced sharp divisions between identities and economic groups.

First, there are longstanding disputes over land ownership and control in areas such as South Upi in Maguindanao, which have long been occupied by the mostly Teduray IP but are also claimed by Maguindanaon Muslims,



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in some instances backed by MILF allies. An explosion of violence involving these two groups occurred on May 29, leading to the forced evacuation of nearly a thousand Teduray families, and the onset of a shooting war that mimicked the armed conflict between the Christian and Moro paramilitary groups that squared off violently in the 1960s-70s.<sup>2</sup> The conflict continues over who eventually gets to control land being eyed by agribusiness and mining groups.

The same conflict had happened in October 2019, sending hundreds of villagers fleeing from their villages.

Second, there are violent struggles over land between MILF and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) commanders and between rival MILF groups, including their respective families and clans. While these flashpoints are ostensibly tied to land issues, it is important to remember that the vital access to the weapons, manpower, and other resources, plus these groups' vertical connections, endow these actors with the ability to engage in long-term violence.

Examples of the above are the armed conflicts between MILF and MNLF commanders that erupted in Pikit over several days in April and in Matalam on

<sup>2</sup> The Ilaga was a paramilitary group in the 1960s and 1970s that consisted mainly of Christian settlers and their allied indigenous peoples groups (e.g., Teduray) who fought against the Moro tribes and their armed fronts usually on the issue of land. In turn, the Moro groups had their own paramilitary groups called the Black Shirts and the Barracudas.



April 29, all in the province of North Cotabato; and in Sultan Kudarat on April 12 and in Guindulungan on May 14-15 in the province of Maguindanao. Another clash took place in the boundary between Pikit, North Cotabato and Pagalungan, Maguindanao from May 7 to 10.

Violence erupted as well between two MILF commanders in Pikit, North Cotabato on April 12. The conflict between Buto Sanday and Jack Abas, which took place between the villages of Bulod, Bulol, Rajah Muda, and Talitay in Pikit, resulted in the displacement of thousands of families. On May 12, Sanday was booted out of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF), the MILF's armed wing, by BIAF Chief of Staff Sammy Al-Mansoor, who cited Sanday's involvement in numerous rido, the attacks against Abas, and disregard for the safety of civilians. This conflict will be threshed out in the next CEMS Bulletin.

Third, compounding the land-related conflicts is the occupation by MILF combatants of lands encompassed by their base camps, even if these parcels already have claimants and owners. This began in September 2019 when MILF members in Lanao del Sur established houses and other structures on land spanned by their camp, forcing landowners to give up their properties.

*International Alert's youth partner, Rod Matucan, distributes relief goods to residents affected by the clashes between armed groups in Pikit, North Cotabato.*

*Photo courtesy of Rod Matucan*

## **POLARIZATION BETWEEN REGIONAL AND LOCAL ACTORS**

The second clear manifestation of violent polarization is the widening collective and coordinated attacks between the forces loyal to the MILF and the MILF-led BTA versus the local strong(wo)men, clan bureaucrats, and legitimate local authorities elected and ensconced in local government units such as the case of Cotabato City.

The assassination on May 25 of the Cotabato City mayor's executive secretary, Aniceto 'Boy' Rasalan, is only the most recent flashpoint in a chain of retaliatory attacks between the various warlord politicians and clans, and some MILF officials appointed to positions in the BTA and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), and the local clan and political alliance that governs the city.

Violent struggles between the two forces had intensified during the major political battles of 2019 and in early 2020, particularly the January 2019 plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), the May 2019 local elections, and the implementation of the Cotabato City lockdown.

At the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, reports of Cotabato City officials blocking the entry of relief supplies coming from the BTA-BARMM and the establishment of checkpoints and other barriers that did not allow the quick and smooth entry and exit of BTA and BARMM leaders and personnel from the city pushed the formal relationship between the regional authority and the city mayor's office to the edge. Several tense occasions in checkpoints and adjacent areas where firefights nearly erupted were monitored and recorded. Palace efforts to secure a political settlement between the city and the regional authority were spurned by the latter.

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The Rasalan assassination is expected to lead to reciprocal attacks and further polarize the citizens of Cotabato City and the wider Maguindanao province. It underscores the unfinished and violent contestation for power between the key leaders of the Bangsamoro regional authority and its political allies against the fiercely independent mayor of Cotabato City.

## **IDEOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION**

The third trigger of polarization is the widening ideological and religious fissures within Bangsamoro society that is manifested in the emergence of new conflict actors upholding an extremely violent and extremist version of Islam.

Towards the end of 2019, a clash between the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and a joint military-MILF group erupted in the infamous town of Mamasapano and lasted more than a week.<sup>3</sup> The BIFF had attacked a military outpost in Barangay Tukanalipao. It took close to two

<sup>3</sup> Mamasapano was the site of the tragic massacre of 44 police commandoes in January 2015.



A dead body lies on a road in  
Datu Salibo, Maguindanao.

Photo by Salahudin Alonto

weeks to recapture the area, and 14,000 people were reported displaced.

Early this year, we saw the renewed presence of ISIS-affiliated groups in their previous holdouts in Lanao del Sur, and a general resurgence of violence coming from the separate yet coordinated actions of the ISIS/Maute in the Lanao provinces, the BIFF in Maguindanao and North Cotabato, and the Abu Sayyaf Group in Sulu and Basilan, possibly indicating the onset of a second wave of attacks after the Marawi siege of 2017.

Numerous sightings of ISIS groups in Lanao del Sur, Sulu, and the SPMS Box in Maguindanao have been reported in previous CEMS Bulletins, including close to a hundred accounts of violent extremist actions registered in the first half of 2020 alone.

The most significant incident in the first half of 2020 coincided with the celebration of Eid'l Fit'r on May 24 when an 81mm mortar exploded in a residence in Brgy. Kitango, Datu Saudi Ampatuan municipality in Maguindanao, killing two children and injuring others, including the mother of the children. The evidence gathered by partners

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on the ground indicate the culpability of the military because similar mortar attacks using the same type of explosive happened days before the incident.

For example, on April 19, military forces repulsed a BIFF attack against a military detachment in Datu Piang town in Maguindanao. The BIFF was forced to flee from the area, including residents who were also forced to evacuate after soldiers used 81mm mortar rounds against the BIFF combatants. A similar clash between the military and BIFF forces occurred in

Datu Hoffer Ampatuan on May 3. Military personnel in Brgy. Talibadok were fired upon when they accompanied the local interagency task force dealing with the pandemic. Mortar attacks were conducted by the military after two soldiers were killed and one wounded.

The significance of the May 24 incident is that it drew widespread condemnation from among people in the communities affected and forced the BTA-MILF leadership to act swiftly to mitigate its effects on the peace process. The incident was denounced by the BARMM and the MILF, and a statement from Environment Minister Abduraof Macacua (aka Sammy Al-Mansoor, BIAF chief of staff) and Interior Minister Naguib Sinarimbo scored the military's failure to adhere to protocols including the agreement on a cessation of hostilities and the agreement on coordination and joint military actions, and hinted at further delays in the decommissioning and normalization process. The military promptly released a statement denying culpability in the attack.

Beyond the resurgence of ISIS-linked groups in the BARMM, there is also an evolving geographic convergence between violent extremist groups such as the ISIS/Maute and BIFF and the communist New People's Army (NPA) in parts of Lanao del Sur and North Cotabato.

In 2019, NPA combatants and BIFF or ISIS/Maute militants sharing the same geographic space were respectively reported in Matalam, North Cotabato and in Butig, Lanao del Sur. NPA sightings were reported in other towns of Lanao del Sur such as Tagoloan II and Kapai.

The most ominous evidence of an evolving opportunistic or tactical alliance between the NPA and the extremists is an encounter that occurred on July 26, 2019 in the town of Lumba-Bayabao, which is a known lair of ISIS in Lanao del Sur. Another clash happened on April 25, 2020 when the military overran a camp of around 20 NPA

combatants in Brgy. Buntalis, Lumba-Bayabao. The lone fatality was killed while guarding 36 sacks of rice. Three rifles were also captured.

Indeed, the Philippine military's fight against the NPA has certainly intensified in the principal bases of the insurgents located in Southern Mindanao and the Caraga region. The aim to end the insurgency before the end of the Duterte government in 2022 is leading to two unanticipated results: first, the aforementioned beginnings of a tactical alliance between communist rebels and violent extremist groups, and second, the trans-boundary movement of communist rebels towards the Bangsamoro region, particularly Lanao del Sur and the Iranun corridor in Maguindanao.

## **POLARIZATION FROM HARD APPROACH AND LOCKDOWN**

Finally, the fourth trigger of polarization is the mailed-fist approach used during the pandemic with its consequent lockdown effects on local communities and local economies, and the possibility of opportunistic attacks against clans made vulnerable by the pandemic.

In the previous bulletin, Alert focused the spotlight on a few critical events that foment tensions and pressures that induce violent conflict. The first relates to corruption and exclusion in the provision of medical supplies, access to diagnostic tests, and medical treatments. Even the provisioning of basic health services has led to perceptions that have ignited cases of violence.

The second relates to the proxy war between the IP groups in Mindanao. There are reports of the military and certain state agencies favoring certain IP groups in the distribution of health services and relief. This practice was also a feature of civil wars in other countries where rulers encouraged their own ethnic militias to prey on weaker



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groups during a humanitarian crisis. Close monitoring of the deployment and distribution of medical relief is needed to dampen these fears.

The most critical evidence of looming conflict is the increase in the purchase of small arms and light weapons across the region, but particularly in the 'Iranun corridor' towns of Barira, Buldon, Matanog, and Parang in northern Maguindanao. This happened during the pandemic and the holy month of Ramadhan and in many cases were enabled by the access to subsidies targeted for food and medical support during the public health emergency that were rechanneled to purchase ammunition.

Two reasons were given for the robust trade in weapons and ammunition: one, the generalized fear and anxiety that people felt due to the uncertainty and insecurity of jobs and livelihoods and the decline in the economy; and two, the anxiety over unresolved clan feuds that could intensify in the post-pandemic period and lead to opportunistic attacks against those clans severely affected by the public health crisis.

## **ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The confluence of an ongoing Bangsamoro transition and a major public health crisis, plus their negative effects on the economy, is widening the gap between the 'strong and the stable' versus the 'weak and vulnerable' families and clans in the Bangsamoro.

This is causing a strain on alliances and an opportunity to shift the balance of power and authority at various levels. At the higher level, the BARMM regional authority is trying its utmost to consolidate power and assert control over local executives and local governments, and at the lower level, some MILF commanders and combatants are seizing the opportunity of their 'normalizing' or the 'soon-to-be-decommissioned' status to settle scores with IPs and other rivals they faced in longstanding land conflicts.

These trends do not bode well for prospects of an early end to the long drawn-out conflict between warring clans and warring fronts, between the newly established regional authority and resistant local government authorities, between government forces and violent extremists and criminal groups, and between local states stoking new 'geographic identities' as they fought over access and control over vital resources at the height of the pandemic.

As the evidence suggests, the primary cause of violent polarization is the issue of land and natural resources across the Bangsamoro. The increase in land-related conflicts is occasioned by longstanding disputes over the ownership and control of ancestral lands. However, the trigger of violent clan feuding is the entry of investments (agribusiness and mining) and development inputs (irrigation) in these landholdings.



Residents seek shelter in a school in the midst of clashes in Pikit, North Cotabato.

Photo by Rod Matucan

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What is problematic in all of these land-related conflicts is the lack of priority given over a coordinated, systematic, and responsive effort to establish the over-arching institutional framework for resource use management, agrarian reform, and indigenous rights over land at the earliest possible time. There is less focus at the regional level to work on a set of formal rules to prevent conflict. There is

growing perception that critical voices and perspectives are being ignored or excluded from the formal arenas for developing solutions to the aforementioned issues.

Another source of disquiet is the forced occupation of lands by MILF commanders, their men, and their allies from families and clans in Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur and elsewhere. The failure to end violent land conflicts that involve members of the MILF is a testament to the remaining massive weaponry and firepower still in the hands of rebel commanders and combatants—and exposes the predicament over the existence of a truly significant decommissioning and normalization process.

The second cause of violent polarization is the drive to strengthen the legitimacy and secure the authority of the BARMM and the MILF-dominated BTA, causing discord with some local governments. To be sure, there is no evidence in the Rasalan

<sup>4</sup> There are tensions and pressures in the case of Sulu that voted against inclusion in the BARMM, and among many Maranao strongmen, bureaucrats, and civil society leaders who believe that the MILF has cornered the resources and power of the BTA and has generally excluded other ethnic groups.

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assassination that points a finger at the MILF or any of its allies. What it does suggest though, is that the bad blood and tenuous relationship between the two parties allowed the assassins to eliminate the target and throw the blame on others. Indeed, there are speculations that the attack could have been a clever but sinister ploy designed to distract the attention of investigators and fuel further animosity and division between the BARMM and Cotabato City.

Though the struggle to control the seat of the Bangsamoro regional government is not the only contentious issue in this kind of polarization, it is certainly the best case-in point of the central flaw in the alliance strategy of the MILF and the MILF-led BTA.<sup>4</sup> The flaw lies in forsaking alliance-building and political settlements.

It has become apparent that the BARMM and the MILF-BTA have turned a deaf ear to other voices in their efforts to impose their authority across the region. This is clearly a reversal of its previous experience and record in brokering political settlements at various levels and with various sectors. The urge to settle differences, protect the fragile government-MILF ceasefire, and reach a final political settlement peaked during the incumbency of Presidents Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Benigno Aquino III. The aim to secure a strategic post-settlement role in the transition induced the MILF to negotiate and come to an agreement with rival political parties, clans, and strongmen across the Bangsamoro.

Today there is very little appetite among the MILF-BTA leadership for the same painstaking process of political bargaining and alliance-building that they undertook to

secure the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014 and the BOL in 2019.

Meanwhile, the war against violent extremists is bound to generate recruits from both sides due to the economic impact of the pandemic and the enduring presence of ISIS-related groups in hotspots, particularly in Lanao del Sur, the SPMS Box in Maguindanao, and the island provinces of the Bangsamoro.

At the same time, the war against communist insurgents will run alongside the intensification of violence in the Bangsamoro, and in the aftermath of the State's military campaigns, these distinct struggles may become intertwined if more boundaries are breached and a tactical alliance is secured between the two forces. This will require more vigilance and granular-level monitoring to defeat these groups politically and militarily, and to head off their human and physical costs on communities.

Finally, the current pandemic and its economic consequences is expected to arrest economic growth, boost inequalities, and dangerously widen the human development gap to the same levels that characterized the period preceding the fall of the Marcos regime 34 years ago.

The next 18 months will be critical. The situation is so dire that it can motivate warring groups to arrive at political settlements that can end longstanding insurgencies in Mindanao. However, it can also provoke a more violent interlude of rising crime and community-level violence magnified by the loss of jobs and livelihoods on the one hand, and on the other, a mad scramble for the scarce economic and political resources that the 2022 national elections can bring.

*International Alert's Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) is an SMS- and high frequency radio-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities. It is used by the Early Response Network (ERN), a group of men and women in various localities in the Bangsamoro, who share real-time information and work with local governments, key agencies, the security sector, and religious and traditional leaders in coordinating quick and context-specific responses to tensions, violent conflicts, disasters, and displacement, as they happen. Command posts are led by our local partners TASBIKka, Inc., ERN Lanao del Sur, MARADECA, Inc., and Lupah Sug Bangsamoro Women Association, Inc.*



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