

Deepening political polarisation in the BARMM

CCAA media brief on the ambush attack against Abdulraof Macacua

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The ambush of Bangsamoro Interim Chief Minister Abdulraof Macacua's convoy on 15 August in Brgy. Bitu, Datu Odin Sinsuat exposes the deepening polarisation within the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). It comes at a particularly critical period of the Bangsamoro political settlement and raises serious questions about the stability of the region, just a few weeks before the first Parliamentary election will be held.

Macacua was on his way back to Cotabato City from attending a general assembly of the Bangsamoro Federalist Party (BFP) in Kabuntalan, where he took oath as Chairperson of the party. No one was hurt in the ambush, but the vehicles were riddled with gun shots.

The national government, the MILF Central Committee, the MNLF, the Commission on Elections (Comelec), and other organisations have condemned the attack. The Philippine National Police (PNP), in coordination with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), has launched an investigation and on 18 August, they announced that it had identified a person-of-interest in connection with the attack. They are still validating whether the incident was election-related.

The circumstances surrounding the incident raise the possibility that it could have been triggered by tensions or developments in relation to the polls.

Several theories have surfaced about the perpetrators and the motives behind the incident.

One dominant narrative circulating on the ground and across social media alleges that the ambush was staged by those aligned with the BFP themselves. Motivations include either

as basis for postponing the election to maintain Macacua in power or to gain public sympathy. Just a day before the ambush, the MILF Central Committee had made public its resolution that indefinitely suspends Macacua as the BIAF Chief-of-Staff, including nine base commanders who pledged allegiance to the BFP.

Another plausible reason is the incident was orchestrated by fervent supporters of the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) who are dissatisfied with Macacua and his recent actions against the Central Committee, including his removal of Mohagher Iqbal as education minister. Macacua's oath-taking as chairman of the BFP must have served as a tipping point, reinforcing the perception among many as cementing his challenge to the MILF leadership and its authority.

Finally, another possibility is that the ambush could have been perpetrated by other groups, including other political parties, gun-for-hire groups, or extremist groups to sow further fear and violence ahead of the election.

If anything, this ambush incident has driven a wedge further within the MILF and deepens the political polarisation that is already evident across the BARMM. This will have significant implications for the MILF's support base and can potentially threaten the election and the broader political settlement. The site of the ambush has long been a hotspot for political and identity-based violence. Rival clans have been contesting for the mayoralty position in the previous elections, with the current mayor aligned with the UBJP. A former Maguindanao board member has questioned over how security situation is being managed in the municipality.¹

In addition, the rhetoric coming from both camps are particularly concerning.

During the BFP rally in Kabuntalan prior the ambush, Macacua asserted that they are “prepared for war to ensure that the Bangsamoro is on the right path.”² Meanwhile, Member of Parliament Abdullah Macapaar (Commander Bravo) issued a strong warning during a UBJP assembly on 3 August that they are prepared to engage in armed confrontation should there be manipulation in the electoral process.³

These declarations signal that the succeeding turn of events could become increasingly volatile and risk returning the Bangsamoro to armed struggle that the political settlement ought to leave behind.

Finally, this could reignite long-standing conflicts and trigger new cycles of violence, particularly between MILF-affiliated groups who have aligned with the UBJP and BFP. This is already evident in places such as Nabalawag, SGA, and could spread to other areas where clan rivalries and intra-MILF violence have been recorded, such as in the SPMS Box, where several MILF base commands remain active.⁴

The weeks leading up to the Bangsamoro election will test whether the first Parliamentary election will strengthen the foundations for lasting peace or if these deepening political polarisation will create conditions for renewed conflict. ●

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¹ A former Maguindanao board member, in a social media post, raised concerns about the security situation in Datu Odin Sinsuat when the highest official in BARMM was ambushed in the municipality. *DXMS Radyo Bida Cotabato City*, 19 August 2026. https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02Lbw57phyJcbqZ32easgeqoqSYMGoqAiMxoGH69F5W1aXopg6opfwoWw7o71U-8Vwt&id=100068735708353

² Abdulraof Macacua takes oath as Chairperson of the Bangsamoro Federalist Party. *BARMM News Online*. 15 August 2026. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1535385247776134>

³ Commander Bravo delivers speech during a UBJP assembly in Binidayan, Lanao del Sur on 3 August 2026. *Ranaw Movement*. 3 August 2026. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1581349156890231>

⁴ The SPMS Box is located in Maguindanao del Sur, comprising the contiguous towns of Shariff Aguak, Datu Unsay, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Datu Salibo, Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Datu Unsay, Datu Piang, Rajah Buayan, Mamasapano, Datu Hoffer Ampatuan, Sultan sa Barongis. The area serves as a stronghold of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and is also home to several MILF base commands.



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