


Dissatisfaction and insecurity fuels polarization and violence

CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM (CEMS)-
EARLY RESPONSE NETWORK (ERN)
SECURITY BRIEF

5 OCTOBER 2023



Teduray-Lambangian families flee their homes in Sitio Nunangen, Brgy. Bèlanting, Talayan, Maguindanao del Sur in August 2023 due to clashes between armed groups. The Teduray-Lambangian have been victims of resource- and political-based conflict since 2019. Photo courtesy of Timuay Justice and Governance.

Mounting violence from horizontal conflict as the country heads towards village-level polls in October 2023 has placed local government and national security officials on edge. Horizontal violence is rebounding across the region and triggering armed challenges against the government amidst a new surge in clan, rebel, and extremist violence in the first half of 2023.

The evidence shows that the decline in violent conflict went on reverse in 2021 (**Figure 1**). Meanwhile, inter and intra clan and rebel violence increased in the first six months of 2023 and the rise is getting steeper as we head towards the last quarter of 2023.

The fear is that violent conflicts between and among political entrepreneurs from the Moro clans plus current and former rebel groups and private armed groups, including violent extremists, will increase in the run-up to 2025.

As a result, the Philippine National Police (PNP) has recommended a suspension of the barangay elections.¹ Nearly all governors in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)

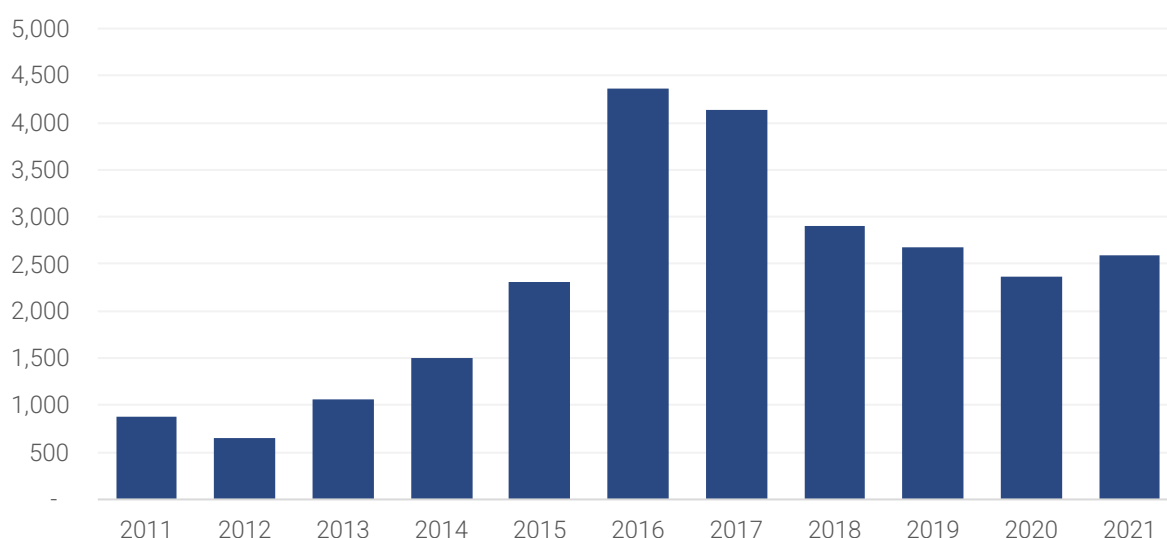
likewise called for a suspension until the total decommissioning of a still-armed Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is accomplished.² These appeals fell on deaf ears, so vulnerable groups are preparing for a new season of displacement and death.

A blast from the past

Surging violence during electoral episodes has always been the case in the Philippines, especially in Muslim Mindanao. The 2019 midterm elections saw the highest numbers of conflict incidents in the past ten years despite martial law still in effect (**Figure 2**). This was due to two political battles that occurred in 2019, i.e., the Bangsamoro referendum in January and the mid-term elections in May.

In the 2022 national elections, the Critical Events Monitoring System of the Early Response Network (CEMS-ERN), an independent and local real-time conflict monitoring group recorded around 42 violent incidents, mostly in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur. Newspaper accounts of election related violent incidents rose to seventy-five (75) despite this being a single election year. These

Figure 1. Number of violent conflict incidents in the Bangsamoro, 2011-2021

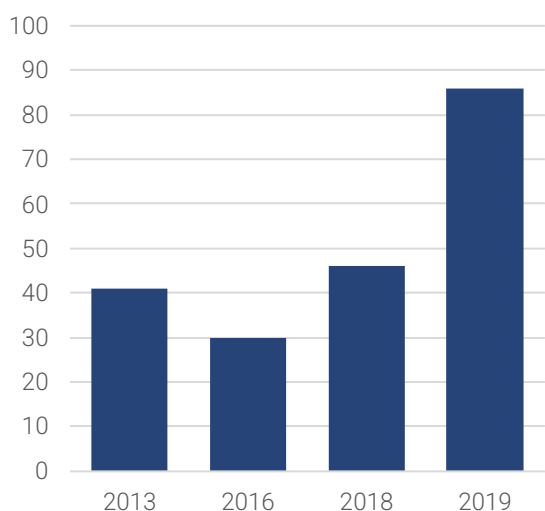


Source: Conflict Alert

¹ Statement from Police Regional Office of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region Brig. Gen. Allan Nobleza. 24 August 2023. <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2023/08/police-urges-comelec-to-postpone-bske-in-barmm/>

² Statement from the governors, except for Maguindanao Norte, to suspend the barangay elections. 11 June 2023. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1786687/barmm-govs-renew-calls-to-defer-barangay-sk-polls>

Figure 2. Election-related incidents in the Bangsamoro during election years, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2019



Source: Conflict Alert

include explosions, threats, harassments, stabbing, and shooting incidents, riots, and fistfights on election day.

In contrast to 2019 and 2022, the run-up to the 2023 barangay and youth council elections portends dark days ahead. Violent conflict incidents involving incumbent and aspiring barangay officers have been rising fast. From January to September 2023, CEMS recorded 35 incidents of shooting, ambush, and clashes between armed groups involving either incumbent, aspiring barangay officers, and their relatives. To date, nineteen (19) people have died ahead of the 2023 elections.

This number of incidents is already more than a third of the number of election-related incidents, and nearly double the number of deaths recorded in the national elections of 2019, underscoring the distinctly bitter and deadlier competition inherent in village battles.

For example, ERN members in Maguindanao del Sur report that the municipality of Datu Abdullah Sangki is becoming more violent and could experience a deadlier election in 2023, which was not a feature of election-related violence in the municipality in the past. Datu Abdullah Sangki is a stronghold of the incumbent Maguindanao del

Sur Governor, who is known as a key opponent of the MILF. The MILF political party United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) is fielding their own candidates for the barangay elections against supporters and allies of the governor.

In Lanao del Sur, the deadly feud between two rival political clans in Malabang that started in the 2019 elections and continued up to the 2022 elections, has been revived in the run-up to the 2023 polls. Residents started to live through another round of gun battles just a few days after the filing of candidacies in August 2023. Eight (8) barangays in the municipality are considered as “areas of grave concern”, and the municipality itself has been placed in the election watchlist.

Election-related violence was also accompanied by a surge in extremist violence in the first seven months of 2023. There were 291 reports of violent extremist-related conflict incidents from January–August 30, 2023. Reports started to increase soon after the turn of the year: from an average of twenty-five reports in January–February, nearly doubling to 48.2 reports by the end of the first half of 2023.

There were a hundred and six (106) distinct incidents of violence underneath the reports. In terms of actors involved, most of the incidents involved the Dawla Islamiya-Lanao group, followed by the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, and lastly, by remnants of the Abu Sayyaf Group.

A wave like no other

There are many reasons for the rapid escalation in violence. The more obvious is the upcoming barangay elections and the knowledge that gains in village polls will spell equivalent success when regional elections are held in 2025.

More importantly, violent competition is being spurred by the increasingly lucrative financial resources at the local government level—higher internal revenue allotments and bigger budgets for barangay development. Recent changes to the country’s local government code dramatically increased the budgets available, as well as the scale of rent seeking behavior.³

³ The Mandanas-Garcia ruling increases the tax base on which the share of the local government units is computed from, and therefore, strengthens fiscal decentralization.



More than 126 families of non-Moro indigenous group fled their homes in Brgys. Biarong and Lamud in South Upi due to a series of clashes that started in August 2023. Some families remain displaced to date. **Photos courtesy of Timuay Justice and Governance.**

Yet there are other shifts in power connected to the conflict to peace transition. The rulers of the new Bangsamoro government gained power and authority without the political legitimacy of an election and are currently building up its political network at the village level. For the MILF, making sure that their own loyalists and supporters are elected in October is crucial. Meanwhile, the provincial political elites had also installed a network of barangay leaders beholden to them. Ensuring that their loyal ward leaders are elected is as important and strategic.

Power and authority offer unparalleled access to internal revenues in any political setting. In the Bangsamoro, it also fosters the desire to seize public land, ancestral domains and contested

landholdings before a new regional land law is put into place and to exact revenge and retribution to settle old scores.

Indeed, the delay in crafting a just and equitable land law that recognizes the inalienable right of indigenous peoples to their land, including those areas covered by rebel camps, is leading to forced displacement, injury, and deaths of indigenous leaders and their family members. There are predictions too of a crucial change in the Bangsamoro authority in 2025. Uncertainty about the outcome of this forthcoming political battle is also triggering a race to seize land assets and exact revenge in case the reigning authority is booted out of office.

The overarching reason, however, is a deep sense of dissatisfaction and insecurity over the high levels and enduring nature of violence that accompanied the transition. People have felt no relief from conflict since the new BARMM was established and a new national government elected to power in 2022.

Polarization or consensus?

One thing is certain, the people of Muslim Mindanao are uncertain and insecure about what the future holds in the next two and half years. Polarization is gaining ground in many areas, leading to more death and displacement. There are few cases where consensus prevents division.

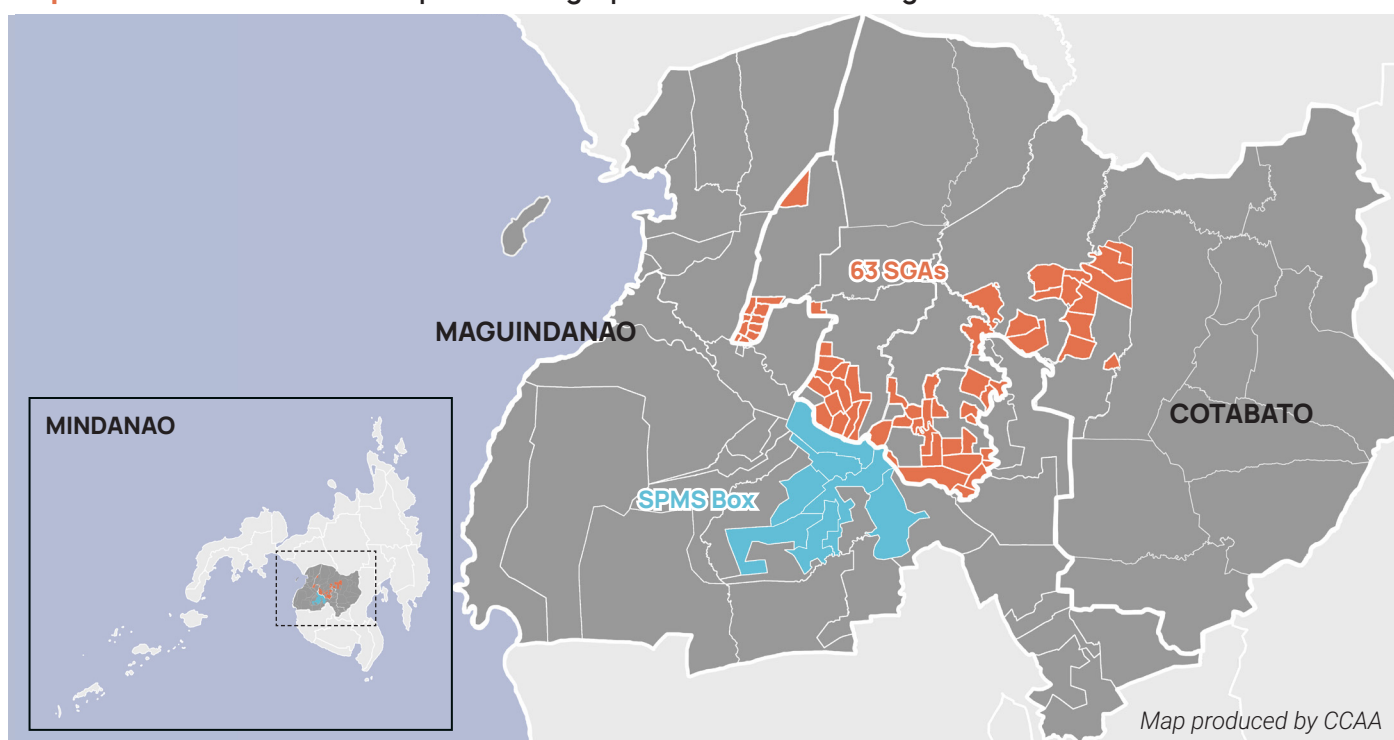
In fact, a live case of violent polarization is aflame at the geographical center of the Bangsamoro. For more than a year now, villages in the SPMS box and the special geographic areas (SGAs) have seen the rise of identity-based violence of the religious type. Random killings of Muslims and Christians are happening daily, fanned by Muslim-Christian rhetoric and resource-divides. The transfer of jurisdiction over 63 villages appears to have fueled

the polarization, as religious boundaries were activated.

The delayed accommodation and integration of the SGAs allowed rival groups such as the BIFF to step into the gap. Military operations early in March 2023 in the municipalities of Datu Montawal, Pagalungan, and Pikit saw hundreds of families flee to safer grounds. Firefights would soon spread across the Liguasan Marsh, particularly in Mamasapano and Sultan sa Barongis.

The most alarming incident occurred in February 2023 when two young students became the latest victims of revenge killings in barangays Poblacion and Macabual in Pikit, North Cotabato. These retaliatory killings can be traced back to a land feud in 2013 between parties affiliated with the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) on one side, and the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Unit (CAFGU) on the other. One is Muslim and the other Christian, with a history of violence between their followers since the 1970s. The two families used to live adjacent to one another, with the members of the BIAF based in Sitio Tubak, Brgy. Pagangan, Aleosan; and the members of the CAFGU in Sitio New Valencia, Brgy. Bualan, Pikit.⁴

Map 1. SPMS Box and the 63 Special Geographic Areas in the Bangsamoro



⁴ This incident was captured in the Conflict Alert monitoring system. Data indicate the event that occurred at the boundary of Brgy. Bualan, Pikit and Brgy. Pagangan, Aleosan on August 10, 2013, involving members of the 105th Base Command and armed groups.



Authorities set-up military checkpoints in several barangays in Pikit, which is ground zero in random killings of Muslims and Christians. Photo courtesy of Pikit LGU.

Add to this the presence and affiliation of armed groups in the area and the complexity of land issues that continue to plague Pikit. Camp Rajamuda, one of the six major MILF camps is located in Pikit, North Cotabato. The Eastern Mindanao Front Command, the National Guard, plus four base commands of the MILF cover the municipality. There are camps of the extremist BIFF and the rival Moro National Liberation (MNLF) in Pikit as well. The CEMS documented intense land disputes between the MILF and the MNLF in 2021, resulting in mass displacement of residents in the municipality. From 2021 up to the present, the CEMS has recorded at least eight strings of violence in Pikit.⁵ The common feature of these strings is that its causes are political and identity-based and often intersect with resource-based issues.

Muslim-Christian conflict is the worst type of identity-polarization, which everyone thought was a relic of the past. ***The question is who is fanning the flames and is there room for more consensus rather than division?***

There are cases where an early consensus was reached that prevented potential rivals from going

to war. For example, in 2022 pervasive conflicts over land in the Iranun Corridor were settled through land dispute settlement alliances across five municipalities. The model worked because prevention was able to head off actions to counter conflicts that erupted due to overlapping titles and territories. The dispute resolution process was later institutionalized into ordinances at the municipal level—narrower in scope but easier to monitor and enforce.

Conclusion

People feel that they are squeezed between a rock and a hard place. Local communities agonize over the choice of whom to support in the 2023 village polls. They are resigned to the same form of governance if they accept the status quo of the same barangay leaders who have held power for many years. If they disrupt the status quo, they are placing their trust in a group of leaders whose capabilities to govern and the interests they will be promoting are uncertain. CEMS reporters describe many respondents as taking a cynical stance: *“Better the devil I know than the devil I don’t”*—which is a fundamental feature of clan politics. Maintaining the status quo is seen as a

⁵ A conflict string refers to a string of violent episodes connected to each other that may run for a couple of days, months, or even years.

safe, though not necessarily wiser option, because it only reinforces the interests of traditional elites who control those in power at the village level.

The current cycle of violence is inching towards a flashpoint in clan or religious (identity-based) violence in the last quarter of 2023, and a potentially violent blast against the State at both the local and regional level in 2025. A convulsive element is the use of violence against indigenous peoples, other ethnic or religious groups, and rival political factions who assert their rights and economic claims. One additional factor contributing to the prevalence of collective violence is the disparity in the distribution of resources, such as land and other assets, under the new regional authority. This adds to the growing disquiet over

the use of development aid in the post-conflict rehabilitation process, which is disproportionate to the needs of indigenous peoples, other identity groups, and even members of the MILF themselves.

These challenges will continue to create an impasse to peace and a dilemma for peace builders and development workers alike. A positive development is the evolution of coalitions between governor and mayors, and between civil society groups working with women and indigenous peoples, who are demanding more transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness—hopeful signs of consensus, rather than division, as we head to 2025. ●

The Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) is an SMS- and high frequency radio-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities in real-time. It is used by the Early Response Network (ERN), an independent 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. The CEMS is now managed by the Council for Climate and Conflict Action Asia (formerly International Alert Philippines), a local organization focused on understanding the drivers of conflict and its interaction with climate risks for policy formulation, community strategies, and peacebuilding.



Council for Climate and
Conflict Action Asia

