

# Violence reigns in the mainland Bangsamoro elections

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

31 OCTOBER 2023



Two people were shot dead in Brgy. Bugawas, Datu Odin Sinsuat while on their way to the polling precinct. The municipality is identified as an election hotspot in the Bangsamoro region. **Photo by Ferdinandh Cabrera**



**T**he recent Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan (BSK) elections were heralded as generally peaceful.<sup>1</sup> One can agree to that statement because no “failure of elections” was declared. However, it does not explain what happened in the Bangsamoro, nor what did not happen.

A total of 200 reports were sent to the Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) on October 30 by Early Response Networks stationed across the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao provinces, island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and the 63 Special Geographic Areas in the Bangsamoro region. These reports include violent conflicts such as shooting, stabbing, and hacking incidents, forms of collective action such as riots and fistfights, and incidents of harassments and intimidation to scare off voters and supporters.

## Bloodiest election in Muslim Mindanao

Conflict data shows that the 2023 BSK elections turned out to be the bloodiest election in the past decade, with incidents of violence spread out across the Bangsamoro mainland. Seventeen deaths in the Bangsamoro and adjacent areas were captured by the CEMS since the start of the campaign period on October 19, and eleven of these occurred during the election day alone. Add to this the more than 30 injured and wounded individuals in 57 incidents of collective violence recorded across the Bangsamoro region.

The morning of the elections was welcomed by the tragic deaths of two individuals in the village of Bugawas in Datu Odin Sinsuat when they were on their way to their polling precincts. In Brgy. Poctan in Butig, Lanao del Sur, a village head aspirant was shot dead by his own brother due to an altercation. The victim was aiming to replace his wife, who is finishing her term as the incumbent chairwoman in the barangay. Supporters were also killed in separate shooting incidents in Marantao and Lumba Bayabao, Lanao del Sur. Two were also dead in shooting incidents in the municipalities

of Bacolod and Magsaysay in adjacent Lanao del Norte province.

In Basilan, three were killed and more than a dozen injured in separate incidents. A council member who was seeking a re-election was shot dead by a member of the CAFGU in Lamitan City. Despite being injured, the victim was able to grab the CAFGU's gun and shoot him dead as well. The barangay chairman was also wounded in the incident. In Tipo-Tipo, a voter was shot dead when armed men entered a polling precinct. In Tuburan town, six, including a barangay chairman seeking re-election, were wounded in a gun attack.

Several others were wounded in incidents of rioting, fistfights, and ambushes. Violent incidents were reported in the municipalities of Datu Odin Sinsuat, Pandag, Sultan Kudarat, Datu Saudi Ampatuan in the Maguindanao provinces; in Butig, Tugaya, Lumba Bayabao, Malabang, Marogong, Maging, and Marawi City in Lanao del Sur.

Contrast these figures with the 2018 barangay elections, where there were 35 deaths recorded across the country.<sup>2</sup> The 17 fatalities as of this date are for the Bangsamoro alone, and the figures are likely to further increase in post-election skirmishes.

The island provinces of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi bode well, though. As well too, and against previous expectations, only minor fistfights were recorded in the two provinces during election day. The same goes for the 63 Special Geographic Areas (SGAs), where only minor incidents of fistfights were recorded despite it being identified as an election area of concern.

## Inadequate security and weak response protocols

Now what did not happen in the Bangsamoro region during the barangay elections? The situation provoked fears and a significant lack of trust in the security arrangements surrounding the electoral exercise.

<sup>1</sup> 2023 barangay, SK polls generally peaceful, orderly — Comelec. Philippine Daily Inquirer. 30 October 2023. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1852931/bske-wrap-up#ixzz8HgGN34Ey>

<sup>2</sup> 35 killed in suspected barangay, SK elections violence — PNP. Rappler. 14 May 2018. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/202502-deaths-election-violence-barangay-sk-elections-2018-pnp/>



A military personnel strictly guards the gate of a polling precinct in Marawi City as voters line up. More than 14,000 security forces were deployed in the Bangsamoro to secure the 2023 polls in the region. **Photo courtesy of ERN Marawi City.**

First, more than 2,000 teachers did not show up. The numbers are astonishing, and an explanation must be given by the Department of Education at all levels, especially in the Bangsamoro, for the fear and insecurity that teachers felt. Indeed, their refusal to serve in this electoral exercise betrays the lack of trust in the ability of law enforcers to protect them and secure their polling precincts.

Second, we did not see discipline, order, and peace reign in areas that were already declared as hotspots long ago. This is strange because security forces had ample information and time to prepare for violence as these affected places were the same places predicted to be notoriously violent and bloody.

Neither did the threat of violence against the non-Moro indigenous peoples (NMIPs) like the Teduray and Lambangian decrease during this democratic exercise. In some places like Datu Odin Sinsuat, some NMIPs were not able to vote because they were forced to move their polling precincts, while others feared for the safety.

Protocols in place were clearly wanting, and whoever thought that using taser guns and warning shots alone, without the deployment of overwhelming force, to dispel threats and intimidation were clearly wrong. The security forces were certainly unprepared for the pushback from armed groups. Fourteen thousand (14,000) security personnel from the police and military were supposedly deployed, but these were certainly inadequate to ensure peace and order. The deployment of police and military personnel to manage the elections in lieu of teachers in many places as a contingency measure was necessary, but the scale of their additional duties may have hindered their capacity to protect and defend as well.

See, for example, the gun battle videos circulating across social media in Tugaya, Marogong, Butig, Datu Odin Sinsuat, where repeated gunshots drove voters away with no discernable action from the police and military supposedly guarding the voting areas.<sup>3</sup> The Philippine National Police (PNP) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) were unable to respond quickly and effectively. At the minimum,

<sup>3</sup> TV Patrol Livestream. ABS-CBN News. 30 October 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pmebywkFiw>

the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) chief, and the Chief PNP should have been in situ, at ground zero, which is the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

Third, other forms of collective violence, including rioting, fistfights, and ambushes remained a common feature in the Bangsamoro, similar to previous elections. Security forces have repeatedly failed to prevent the presence of armed groups in polling precincts that serve to intimidate and harass voters and supporters. In fact, an armed group even blocked the highway to prevent people from voting while reports on opening ballot boxes without permission led to commotion in one precinct in Maguindanao del Norte.

## Prelude to the 2025 elections

The violence in the October 30 polls is merely a prelude to the 2025 elections. It signifies the level and scope of violence that all must be prepared for. Inter and intra-clan warfare will intensify tenfold in many places of the BARMM mainland, especially as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) aims to strengthen its political legitimacy in the region. We have seen this in Cotabato City in the 2022 elections and in Datu Odin Sinsuat municipality this year, where the MILF fielded candidates from their political party, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party to contest traditional elites and political clans. The barangay elections gave us a prequel of how clan feuding combined with armed group violence will surge and overwhelm law enforcers. We need to see the barangay elections as the predicate for the sort of violence that we need to prepare for.

Some steps can be undertaken at the onset.

First, the government ought to ensure and make it clear to everyone involved in the election

process that they will ensure security on the day of election itself and respond quickly and forcefully against anyone that disrupts the peace—including combatants from the MILF, the MNLF, the NPA, or ISIS, and the private armies of political elites and dynasties. The government will advance the deployment of more troops weeks before the election. Likewise, strengthening local government units in responding to critical events and violence are important to build resilient communities.

Second, the government shall ensure the peaceful casting of votes and no failure of elections will occur within the hotspots that have been identified in previous elections. The state must demonstrate that it can control the situation on these areas. Government authorities must harness traditional, religious, and credible community leaders to start brokering peaceful arrangements among rival groups and elite bargains weeks before the elections.

Third, the government must ensure that all political supporters and groups do not bring weapons and are prevented from mobilizing and harnessing their combatants and relatives for collective violence. The comprehensive law on firearms and ammunition (RA 10591) is relevant and the PNP's Oplan Katok (house to house) campaign can be strengthened to encourage firearms owners to renew and register their weapons.

In this regard, the entire decommissioning process must be completed before 2025. Targeted raids and strikes against purveyors of illicit weapons and those in the hands of private armies and ruthless political entrepreneurs at the provincial and local level should be undertaken apace. If the MILF weapons decommissioning process remains unfinished, the cantonment of weapons held by the thousands of MILF combatants must be imposed before, during, and after the elections. ●

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.

