

# Violent strings in the 2025 elections and the new Bangsamoro politico

17 June 2025

The 2025 mid-term election in the Bangsamoro region saw conflict behave as it mostly did in the past: it drew from a deadly mix of communal violence and horizontal attacks between and among political rivals, warring clans, and criminal groups, and merged these with limited yet significant vertical attacks and counterattacks between non-state armed groups and the police, military, and paramilitary forces.

Unending violence remained a constant part of the conflict to peace transition that hovered above the new Bangsamoro region. The elections were accompanied by voter intimidation and harassment; vote buying and flying voters; illegal checkpoints and vote blockades, and ambushes and assassinations. Violence escalated from scuffles and brawls into coordinated attacks that displaced communities. The characteristic progression of collective violence from violent rituals to opportunistic aggression, and from scattered attacks to coordinated destruction accompanied the elections as violence bounced back from 2021-2024.<sup>1</sup>

## The 2025 elections surpassed the violence in 2023

The mid-term election surpassed the deadly outcomes of the 2023 barangay elections. Worse, the violence has not ceased. Collective violence persists between and among clans, politico-military groups (MILF, BIFF, MNLF, etc.) migrant-settlers, and indigenous peoples, while vertical attacks against the state continues to rear its head in familiar places such as Basilan and Lanao del Sur, where pockets of Dawla Islamiya have reemerged.

On May 12, 2025, there were less than ten fatalities in Lanao Sur, Maguindanao Sur, and Basilan. The small number of casualties mimicked the similarly low numbers of election day deaths in the 2023 barangay elections. However, as in the past, election related conflicts and deaths occurred five to eight months ahead of election day, and continued way beyond the certification of winners. The severity of violence can only be felt if we begin counting the physical costs of conflict starting from the days leading up to the elections i.e., from the filing of certificates of candidacy, to voting day, and at least a month after the elections.

CCAA has case-specific evidence showing that there were 759 violent incidents, of which 327 were election related. The total number of dead was 244, of which 103 were due to election-related conflicts, and 265 injured. Five people were killed on election day itself, with 66 who were injured during 14 recorded brawls and fistfights across the region on May 12. CCAA counted a total of 125 families displaced on election day itself, mostly among the non-Muslim indigenous groups.

---

<sup>1</sup> Collier, Paul. (2003). The Politics of Collective Violence Ch 1-2 and Stathis Kalyvas (2006). The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars.

These numbers are higher than those during the barangay elections of 2023. The latter was declared by both the PNP and CCAA as the deadliest election in the region prior to this year's mid-terms.<sup>2</sup> In 2023, 438 violent incidents were recorded from July to October 2023, of which 327 were election related. One hundred sixty-five (165) deaths were recorded, of which 105 deaths and 138 injuries were election related.

**Table 1: Comparative assessments of election-related conflict incidents and human costs (2023 and 2025)<sup>3</sup>**

Year	Coverage	Total Incidents	ER Incidents	Total Deaths	ER Deaths	Injured
July – October 2023	Four months	438	327	165	105	138
Oct 2024 – May 2025	Seven months	759	327	244	103	265

Vote-buying and flying voters remained a key feature of the mid-term election. This observation was neither new nor distinct from the past and was largely ignored by law enforcers except for some international monitoring groups who saw it as emblematic of the “*systemic deficiencies*” that marred “*voter’s commitment to democracy.*”<sup>4</sup> The EU EOM observation is problematic because it pins the blame for electoral deficiencies on the voter, ignoring the political actors perpetuating coercion and intimidation. It shifts the burden of democratic decay on to the vulnerable electorate who are often forced to choose between survival and political idealism.

## The violence could have been worse

Yet for all its deadly outcomes, there is reason to believe that the violence could have been far worse. Several factors subdued the level of violence:

***One, the decision to separate the dates of the mid-term and parliamentary election reduced the number of casualties during the mid-term elections.*** However, continued vigilance is needed as the postponement also extended the period for clan feuding and other horizontal

<sup>2</sup> Note that the COMELEC did not subscribe to this description and criticized CCAA of “war mongering.” Five days after the CCAA statement, the PNP declared their conclusion that the 2023 village elections had indeed been the bloodiest election in the region. (Dexter Cabalza, “This year’s barangay polls most violent since 2010,” Inquirer, November 12, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/mrk2bckw>.)

<sup>3</sup> 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 Climate Conflict Action (CCAA, 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.

<sup>4</sup> EU: Election Observation Mission (May 14, 2025) Preliminary statement: “Voter’s commitment to democracy marred by systemic deficiencies.” The headline issue was in deep contrast to other observations that praised the enthusiasm and commitment of voters to exercise their right to suffrage despite the difficulties and risks they encountered. (CCAA Digest 4: May 12, 2025). The EU EOM was later criticized by top officials of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) for pressuring the Commission to disregard election rules that protected voter privacy by prohibiting observers from entering polling booths. (Kaycee Valmonte, “It’s the law: Comelec stands by decision to bar foreign observers from precincts,” Rappler, May 14, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/ycy9rwwx>.)

wars to exhaust their ferocity. As well, the anticipated toll in fatalities may have simply been delayed until the parliamentary and barangay elections in the last quarter of 2025.

***Two, the COMELEC exercised stronger oversight and control over the actions of security forces in contrast to previous elections, and the latter applied new strategies and approaches to prevent or defuse violence.*** This time the security forces deployed more policemen and soldiers, leading to more intensive on-site monitoring in known hotspots and a preparedness to swiftly wade into brawls to head-off more violent armed clashes.

Soldiers and policemen repeatedly fired their guns into the air to de-escalate tensions, avert polarization, prevent injuries, and avoid armed clashes. This tactic helped avert deadlier violence and aided in quelling a further deterioration in security that might have caused more fatalities or a failure of elections.

***Three, there was a surge in reports of impending violence from early response units and networks—providing timely and reliable information of potential flashpoints, rule-breaking, and the actors involved.*** The most effective early response units were those who had the logistics, track record, and monitoring networks that were established way ahead of the elections. They focused on early response systems instead of creating new early warning platforms.

The post-election summary digest released by CCAA on the evening of May 12 stated that the positive outweighed the negative experiences in the 2025 mid-term elections. CCAA concluded that the fistfights and firefights plus the targeted neutralization of voting machines revealed a coordinated campaign to disrupt the vote and terrorize communities. “However, at day’s end all the coercion, intimidation, and militarization from state and non-state actors plus the logistical attacks against free and fair elections were not enough to stop people from voting. Local communities bravely voted despite the intimidation and pressure.”

## Resilient challenges

Most of the difficulties and challenges experienced by both state and society were often a repeat or an offshoot of previous election-related conflicts. These included (a) the numerous instances when active and vigilant monitoring was sapped and undermined by the inaction or delayed reaction of security forces and other first responders; (b) the repeated and inexorable slide into violence of the same communities in the same municipalities and cities long considered as conflict bailiwicks from the start of the Bangsamoro state building process; and, (c) the failure to impose an effective gun ban and make it stick,

***First, robust monitoring and intensive vigilance to signs of polarization and impending violence was sometimes attenuated by the absence of immediate and effective mediation by law enforcers and their application of both persuasive and punitive sanctions.*** The flood of conflict evidence and the opening of new lines of communication between the COMELEC, the security sector, civil society organizations, and government agencies at different levels could have curbed more violent incidents if the flow of information was matched by the application of timely and responsive joint actions.

The absence of both preemptive and preventive actions is often rationalized as the result of poor coordination and dysfunctional communication systems that delayed the transmission of critical evidence and real-time intelligence data about earlier episodes of confrontation and harassment, including erstwhile evidence of signaling behavior that often precedes a string of

violence.<sup>5</sup> This explanation reveals that the police and the military were not always in possession of the necessary information to undertake mediation, negotiation, and bargaining that could help settle grudges and feuds. There are few accessible information storage systems that contain useful conflict information and data, including blotter reports and documented accounts of existing grudges and grievances between rival groups, gangs, and clans.<sup>6</sup> The infrequent and irregular convening of municipal, city, and provincial peace and order councils where vital and specific security issues are managed is partly to blame as well.

Another important lesson is that “early response and mediation” must be redefined, recast, and understood as the set of preventive actions that ***begins long before, and ends long after, an election is held in the Bangsamoro.***

***Second, the inexorable slide into violence of the same conflict-affected communities uncovered a fracture in the information loop between and among relevant government and security agencies, local governments, and civil society groups engaged in peacebuilding about where persistent threats and risks exist, allowing violence to thrive in these areas.***

The critical information presented and discussed by numerous pre-election conferences and security briefings did not seem to reach those most in need of the data.<sup>7</sup> Coordinating a critical mass of mediators and early responders is inadequate if we do not create an overarching institutional security framework supported by a hybrid state-society structure at the local government level. This joint mechanism is essential if we want to impede evolving flashpoints—and deploy prompt actions to avoid, prevent, or de-escalate violence.

The government must also review its understanding of how collective violence evolves and the salience of the “***wars within wars***” phenomenon. Vertical and horizontal conflicts are often treated as separate realms when they are interrelated and oftentimes indistinct from the other.

This flawed understanding has led to complacency and gruesome outcomes such as the 2009 Maguindanao and the 2014 Mamasapano massacres. Why have some towns visited by major tragedies in the past, such as Butig, Sharif Aguak, South Upi, Mamasapano, Lamitan, and Al Barka to name a few, continued to figure prominently as violent hotspots, even in the recent elections?

An important reason is that the COMELEC, OPPAPRU, PNP, AFP, and the other relevant security agencies seemed more interested in changing or shifting the conflict narrative, instead of fostering early negotiations and truce-building to arrest further polarization. In fact, some senior government officials and ranking officers of the police and military tried to dissuade election and conflict monitoring groups to avoid treating or categorizing scuffles, brawls, and fistfights as election-related violent incidents or horizontal wars because of their limited scope,

---

<sup>5</sup> CCAA can attest to several cases where reports of polarization and potential flashpoints were ignored or neglected by security forces because of a poor understanding and experience in preventing polarization and conflict strings, including a flawed understanding of how violence begins, extends, and ends.

<sup>6</sup> The CIRAS system installed by the PNP in 2011 requires a fresh, third-party audit to examine its strengths and weaknesses and improve the system and its capabilities.

<sup>7</sup> An RTD hosted by IAG and attended by CCAA with the participation of other civil society organizations (PPCRV and NAMFREL) and the relevant government agencies such as the COMELEC, DILG, DOJ, OPPAPRU, including various national security professionals from the NSC, AFP and PNP.

low level of violence, and insignificant physical costs.<sup>8</sup> The appeal included a request to hide the identity of key actors fomenting the rise of violence.<sup>9</sup>

These appeals were disparaged by many community leaders, media groups, and CSO peacebuilding experts who opposed the obfuscation about intra and inter-rebel involvement in horizontal wars. Many were also aware that the so-called harmless scuffles and brawls had the intentional effect of stoking risk-averse behavior and preventing people from going to polling places to vote. Indeed, election-related brawls in the BARMM are never happenstance, but a systematic strategy to sow fear and harass rival supporters and groups to prevent them from voting.

The government is also keen to celebrate the so-called demise of vertical violence, or direct attacks and counter attacks between state and non-state forces as opposed to horizontal conflicts such as clan feuding and revenge killings. These optimistic expectations led to complacency and inhibited vigilant monitoring. The National Security Council (NSC) has said repeatedly that Al Qaeda and Dawla Islamia and other insurgent groups such as the Maute Group, the Abu Sayaf and the BIFF, including the communist New People's Army (NPA), are no longer consequential as they were reeling from military and police attacks and were reported to be losing ground and popular support from the youth and their other followers.

The optimism is farfetched because youth recruitment by extremist groups continues, with ample evidence of their participation in limited but targeted attacks against security personnel in places like Basilan and Lanao Sur in 2023 and 2024. The analysis also fails to acknowledge the toll on lives and livelihoods and the displacement of thousands from their land and properties from communal violence that can be just as dangerous and ruinous as vertical conflict.

***Third, the carrying of firearms during the elections, whether licit or illicit, was not stemmed nor mitigated by the gun ban.*** Local governments and the BARMM did little to interdict and capture weapons. Only a few checkpoints used gun and metal detection devices. The proper identification of legitimate gun holders exempted from the gun ban was not strictly enforced.

Law enforcers in these checkpoints had to deal with a potentially lethal impasse and dilemma—must law enforcers challenge and arrest persons only upon sight of their weapons? Is credible suspicion of illegal gun possession sufficient to allow law enforcers to search, hold, deter, and detain potential troublemakers?

Many candidates and their political leaders, including MILF and UBJP-associated politicians, even flaunted their weapons and their ammunition in the mainstream and social media. Some MILF combatants traveling with their weapons and ammunition across many cities and towns during the election ban period were briefly detained but were later released with no punishment.<sup>10</sup>

There has been a further slide in vigilance towards gun-related violence since the mid-term election. Both houses of Congress have just approved perilous amendments to RA 10591

---

<sup>8</sup> Round Table Discussion with COMELEC, NSA, OPPAPRU, DILG, AFP-PNP and CCAA in attendance.

<sup>9</sup> Hiding the scale of MILF-related violence became a preoccupation among local, national, and international, peacebuilding and development agencies and organizations, including some bilateral and multilateral aid donors who were deeply invested and drawing funds from the Bangsamoro peacebuilding and state building process. Interviews with three resource persons, names and interview dates withheld.

<sup>10</sup> Rommel Rebolledo, "Authorities free MILF members caught with firearms amid gun ban in Maguindanao del Sur," Rappler, May 15, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3fuhhr2a>.

(firearms law signed under the government of Benigno Simeon Aquino ) that would, among others, shorten the number of days needed to enforce an effective gun ban during elections, increase the amount of ammunition that can be stored by gun owners and firing ranges, and increase the coverage and lengthen the validity of permits to carry weapons outside residences.

Though the a.m. bill still awaits the signature of the President, more deregulation is already being planned by the PNP chief in the renewal of permits to carry firearms outside the residence (PTCFOR). <sup>11</sup> This proposal comes amid PNP reports that they recorded over 3600 persons caught circumventing the prohibition on firearms since January 2025.

## Communal violence and collective revenge

***In the period leading to the elections, boundaries were activated, animosities were revived and old hatreds restored.*** Signaling triggered collective revenge against rival identities, targeting particularly the non-Muslim indigenous peoples. As it was in 2017 when deadly attacks against indigenous groups were shrouded by the war in Marawi, so it is today, as the assassination and murder of indigenous leaders piled up with scant alarm because these were tagged as merely the usual and common spikes in violence that accompanies an election.

***Violent polarization between Muslim clans, Christian-settlers and Non-Muslim Indigenous Peoples is on the rise (NMIP).*** CCAA recorded a significant increase in the number of violent incidents targeting NMIPs after the May 12 elections—sixteen (16) violent incidents from October 2024 to May 12, 2025, and an additional forty (40) incidents after May 12 to May 25, 2025—which represents more than a doubling of incidents in such a short period of time. In sum, from October 2024 to May 2025, there were a total of fifty-six (56) violent incidents recorded where eleven (11) IP leaders have been killed.

The threats, intimidation, and harassment of NMIPs has intensified following the successful election of non-Muslim indigenous leaders into government in pivotal towns such as South Upi—a town long considered a hotspot of identity-based violence and central to the ancestral land claims of the Teduray and Lambangian.

The case of South Upi is a dire warning of how polarization can explode into communal violence at any moment between Bangsamoro Muslims, Non-Muslim indigenous peoples and Christian settlers. The conflict data demonstrates a massive temporal increase from the run-up beginning in October 2024 until May 12 election day and just two weeks following the upset victory of an indigenous non-Muslim Teduray leader in South Upi.

## The new Bangsamoro Politico and the peace agreement

Amidst the results of the 2025 mid-term elections, an important issue to raise is whether ***the power and authority of traditional politico-economic elites been dulled by the entry of new politico-military challengers such as the MILF for formal political authority and power in the region?*** Did the recent elections herald a new contender that can dominate local and regional politics and usher in a new Bangsamoro politico who rules and reigns from a combination of kinship tribal, ideological, and politico-military ties?<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Jason Sigales. (14 June 2025). “PNP Chief eyes easier gun permit processes.” Page A6: Philippine Daily Inquirer

<sup>12</sup> See Kevin Nielsen M. Agojo and Julio C. Teehankee (2023) “Politics of Ideas and Discourses: Understanding the Ideational and Discursive Struggles in the Formation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.” **Asia-Pacific Social Science Review** | Vol. 23 No. 2 | June 2023

The new Bangsamoro politico was supposed to emerge from within the new governance initiatives promised by a political party established by former insurgents who vowed to rule with “moral governance” as their compass; accommodation and resistance as their strategy; and autonomy and self-rule as their code. The ruling political elites saw the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as the harbinger of change and a credible partner in changing the standard of living and way of life of the poor and powerless Moro people of Southern Mindanao. Meanwhile, the MILF-UBJP was seen as a legitimate representative and a viable contender for formal political authority in the BARMM.

Abinales (2025) noted how MILF leaders “*shifted their energies from overseeing a people’s war to superintending a local autonomous regime. They have also agreed to play the electoral game.*” However, the MILF must continue “*learning the art of patronage and backroom politics while keeping committed to their quest for Moro autonomy.*”

The peace agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government (GPH) gave legitimacy to the MILF’s role in pursuing peace and development in Muslim Mindanao and it was rewarded with billions in national government and international aid. From the Philippine government, the MILF-headed BARMM had become the custodians of billions of pesos from block grants and special development funds. From the foreign embassies, the development banks, and from various bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, the BARMM received millions of dollars to finance development, infrastructure, information technology, transport and communications; humanitarian assistance, support for peace building and the strengthening of democracy, plus successive cash transfer programs, including funding for merit goods such as education, health, and shelter; from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, the UN development agencies, and from the US, UK, Canada, Germany, Japan, Australia, to name a few. These grants, investments, and loans lubricated the MILF’s political legitimacy and ought to have contributed to real economic change and a more stable peace in the region.<sup>13</sup>

Change has happened but far from what was expected.

***First, violence dropped significantly after the declaration of martial law following the 2017 siege of Marawi and the end of the pandemic crisis in 2022.*** However, before the end of the COVID crisis in 2022, violence started to rebound and surge to new heights from 2021-2024. Worse, the spike in violence was registered in the mainland provinces of Maguindanao—where the regional BARMM government is based. (Figure 1).

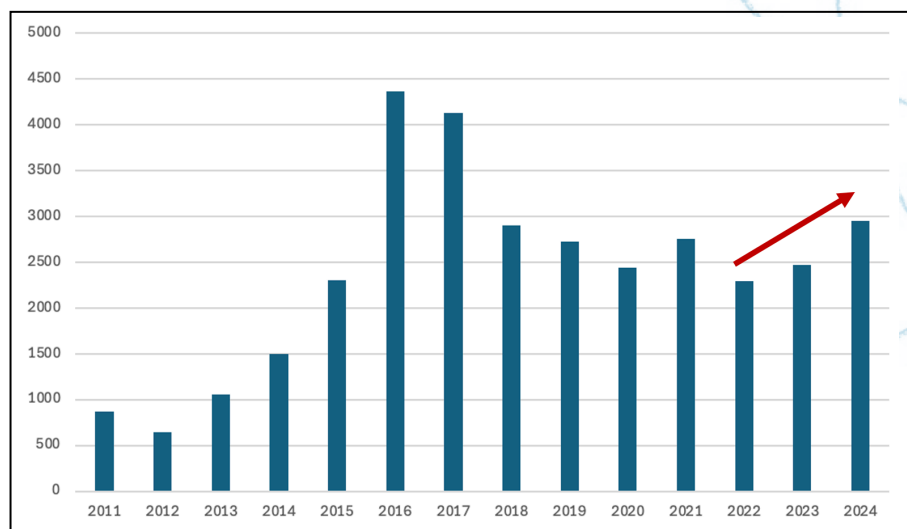
***Second, the outcome of the mid-term elections does not offer hopeful signs of the promised moral governance framework of the MILF-led UBJP and the institution of a meritocracy led by professional, transparent and accountable leaders.*** Instead, the new Bangsamoro politico carried the same autocratic and exclusionary baggage marked by cases of corruption, nepotism, and plunder.<sup>14</sup> (Table 2)

---

<sup>13</sup> In 2024 the World Bank released a report indicating the results of its economic survey of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The report showed that the region “*experienced a remarkable transformation marked by a substantial reduction in poverty and notable economic growth.*” However, the report did not explain causality, only that the change “*coincided*” with the 2018 passage of the law establishing the new Bangsamoro regional authority, the substantial increase in financial support to the BARMM from government and private transfers, and the steady economic growth in the region exceeding the rest of the Philippines. With the resilient violence plaguing the region and new data showing a rebound in conflict incidence beginning in 2021, one could conclude, as the eminent economist and conflict scholar Paul Collier did, that certain economies must be paradoxically “*doing well out of war.*”

<sup>14</sup> Ernesto Hilario (June 13, 2025) “BARMM Education Ministry called out for tainted deals.” The article reported that the BARMM Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education (MBHTE) has been marred by corruption issues, including

**Figure 1. Incidents by year, 2011-2024 (20% increase from 2023)**



**Table 2: Political Mapping of the BARMM Regional Elections (2025)**

Province	MILF members	UBJP ally	Opposition
Governor	---	3	2
Vice governor	1	3	1
Representatives	---	4	2
Mayor	8	51	50
Vice mayor	11	47	51
Total	20	108	106

***Third, the evidence demonstrates how the disproportionate claims of an overwhelming victory of the UBJP must be tempered by the fact that many of the same traditional politicians and members of the old Moro aristocracy won.*** These politicians joined President Ferdinand Marcos’s Partido Federal ng Pilipinas as their national party, and aligned themselves with the UBJP to secure their votes and sustain their power and authority. Only the elected governors of Lanao del Sur (Mamintal “Bombit” Adiong) and Basilan (Mujiv Hataman) belonged to the Bangsamoro Grand Coalition (BGC), an opposition party consisting of incumbent governors.

***As well, most of the elected representatives in Congress were not organic members of the UBJP but mostly allies who were welcomed by the UBJP because of name-recall and winnability.*** It is doubtful if they share the mantra of moral governance. For example, former governor Toto Mangudadatu defeated Tong Paglas in Maguindanao Sur while Dimple Mastura retained her post in Maguindanao del Norte. So did the elected representatives from Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. Only Rep. Adiong and Rep. Balindong of Lanao del Sur belonged to the opposition.

---

allegations of selling slots to prospective teachers. The ministry is facing scrutiny over alleged anomalous transactions, including a single-day disbursement of P1.7 billion. In **About Town: The Manila Standard**. See also the **RMN Network NEWS**. “Anomalous transactions discovered in the MBHTE.”

***It is at the local government level where the elected mayors included at least eight (8) MILF commanders and members mostly from the BARMM Special Geographic Areas.*** Opposition candidates and allies of the UBJP could theoretically create a “balance of power” that could work for genuine reforms. But looking into the provincial figures, 31 mayors remained allies of Governor Adiong in Lanao del Sur, compared to just 9 mayors allied with UBJP.

In Maguindanao del Sur, 14 mayors belonged to Bai Mariam’s Mangudadatu’s group while 10 mayors supported UBJP. Only in Maguindanao del Norte was there a clean sweep for UBJP with only the Talitay mayor belonging to Bai Mariam’s Ittihad party. Meanwhile, the vice mayoralty winners mostly reflected the party affiliations of their mayors. Only a handful of the elected mayors and vice mayors belonged to the other remaining different parties, such as in Old Kaabakan (SGA), Rajah Buayan (MDS), Ungkaya Pukan and Al-barka in Basilan.

In sum, the enduring political settlement that cemented strongman rule in Mindanao has shifted and leveraged the power of a new set of actors with revolutionary credentials and spoke of development and democracy before entering into alliances with traditional politicians who can dilute their moral governance agenda and rule no differently than the ruthless political entrepreneurs and clans who founded their base and strength in controlling national tax allocations, foreign aid, and the same old shadow economies in the mainland and in the porous boundaries of the South China Sea.

***In the face of this mash up, it is likely that the power sharing agreements during the midterm elections will give way to new programmatic alliances for the October parliamentary elections. In the meantime, we should temper down our expectations of moral and good governance and focus only on a set of tangible and attainable reforms:***

## **Preparing for October 2025**

### **1. Rigorous firearms control**

- Accomplish the decommissioning of all MILF combatants and their weapons before the parliamentary election in October 13, 2025.
- Enforce the election gun ban impartially: deploy trained checkpoint teams equipped with metal detectors, and hold security forces to clear, measurable seizure targets.
- Amend protocols so that “reasonable suspicion” can allow an inspection for loose firearms.
- Create a dedicated PNP/NTF unit to oversee illegal-arms interdiction, complemented by joint MILF decommissioning audits and mandatory registration of all weapons previously exempted.

### **2. Enhanced security & ceasefire mechanisms**

- Support and expand the reach of existing Early Response Network (ERN) units. Improve the capacity of communities and agencies seeking to establish their own ERNs, and clarify SOPs for pre- and post-election flashpoint mediation.
- Review the mandate and functions of ceasefire committees (JPST, CCCH, QRT) to remove procedural barriers that hinder AFP–PNP collaboration and rapid law-enforcement operations.
- Maintain robust deployments in known hotspots—Maguindanao del Sur, SGAs, Lanao del Sur—and rotate forces to prevent collusion.

### **3. Institutional & policy reforms**

- Review and tighten COMELEC protocols: ban last-minute reshuffling of election officers, designate separate entry and exit points in polling places, disclose and publicize the location of legitimate checkpoints and sanction unauthorized blockades.
- Strengthen oversight and control of the decommissioning process: reinstate independent audits of MILF arms turnovers with civil society observers, backed by clear, enforceable decommissioning targets.
- Harmonize firearms law with peace process imperatives and veto regressive amendments to RA 10591, i.e., shortening of election gun ban, lengthening the validity of permits to carry firearms outside residences (PTCFOR), etc.
- Recognize the right of decommissioned combatants to own weapons for their own protection. Facilitate the forensic registration and licensing of guns allowed to remain in their possession.
- Legislate stricter penalties for election-related gun crimes.

### **4. Inclusive protection & accountability**

- Launch a multi-agency fact-finding mission (NCIP, CHR, DOJ, OPAPRU) into NMIP killings (84 killed since 2018) to enable prosecution of offenders and improve protective measures for IP communities.
- Establish functional and reliable community hotlines for reporting threats, with guaranteed anonymity and swift follow-up by security forces.
- Mobilize women, youth, and civil society partners as frontline monitors for election day and beyond, ensuring threats against voters are documented and addressed.

If these measures are enacted swiftly and in concert, we can prevent the 2025 parliamentary elections from becoming yet another chapter of violence. Instead, they can reaffirm the Bangsamoro's commitment to peaceful self-governance and set a course toward a truly stable, inclusive region.