Can guerillas govern? In Mindanao, a long insurgency moves toward a fragile peace

Dr. Haroro Ingram, River Harper

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Can guerillas govern? In Mindanao, a long insurgency moves toward a fragile peace

The Moro insurgency is a conflict that has been ongoing since the 1960s in the southern Philippines. Although this conflict is crucially important to one of the United States’ closest allies in the region, it has gone largely unnoticed by Western media outlets. In an interview with GJIA, Dr. Haroro Ingram draws on his experience implementing peacebuilding programs in Mindanao to reflect on the shifting nature of the conflict and explains why leaders in international relations should pay close attention to the situation.

GJIA: To begin, could you give our readers a bit of background on the history of the Moro conflict, which dates back to the 1960s, its development over time, and where things stand right now?

HI: The Moro struggle in the southern Philippines is a centuries-long struggle for autonomy characterized by insurgencies that may present themselves as unified and representing a unified Moro identity, but inevitably have been divided along ethno-tribal lines. In the late 1960s, but particularly after 1972 with the formation of the MNLF, the Moro National Liberation Front, you then see this internal struggle for autonomy, with the conflict focused predominantly between the Philippine government and separatists. What has characterized the decades of armed struggle that has followed is a cycle of violence, peace agreements that fail and, in the aftermath, the rise of increasingly violent and more ideologically extreme groups that refuel the conflict and the cycle continues.

The most recent efforts toward achieving a more sustainable peace in the southern Philippines resulted in the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and the appointment of the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA). The BTA is responsible for the two-track peace process and taking the region to its first elections. It is a very challenging time for the Authority, and not just because of centuries’ worth of poverty, conflict, instability, and underdevelopment. Now you have the COVID pandemic as well. When you then step out to the national level—with the presidential elections in 2022 and the regional challenges of the great-power competition heating up—there is this convergence of forces and dynamics. That makes this not only a challenging time for the Philippine government and Bangsamoro Authority, but the international community should be paying more attention and providing support to help them address these issues.

In Mindanao, what role do you think international actors and other countries have played in this conflict in the last fifty or so years? How influential have these actors been?

A range of international actors have had a presence in the southern Philippines for centuries, and that is the product of both history and geography. Mindanao sits at the southernmost tip of the Philippine archipelago, in that tri-border area with Indonesia and Malaysia. Throughout history, international actors, both state and non-state, have engaged on either side of the insurgency. Going back to the 1970s, Libya was...
heavily involved in the Moro struggle, providing support to the MNLF. Part of the efforts to stop that support and transform Libyan engagement led to the 1976 Tripoli Agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF, which as the name suggests was hosted and mediated in Libya. From that point on, every decade you have this cycle of peace negotiations. In the 1980s, it was Saudi Arabia with the Jeddah Accords. In the 1990s, it was Indonesia. Through the 2000s, Malaysia led peace efforts from the international community’s perspective.

I think it is important for us to step back a little; Moro independence is a centuries-long struggle. However, this description of Moro independence implies a degree of unity across the communities in Mindanao that, frankly, has rarely been the reality. There is this great ethnic and cultural diversity in Mindanao, with certain groups tending to reside in certain parts of the island. Moro resistance has more often than not been divided along these ethnic lines in the geography. The MNLF are largely Tausūg, whereas the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or MILF, which broke away from MNLF in the late 1970s, are mostly Maguindanaon and are largely on the main island. While the Tausūg dominated MNLF-led peace efforts with the Philippine government from the 1970s into the 1990s, the more recent peace talks have been driven by the MILF. So, you have this shift in the center of gravity of the Moro independence effort. But with that shift comes all of this historical, ethnic, and personal baggage as well. The reason I highlight this is because it has largely been very local factors that have driven insurgencies in Mindanao for decades. If and when the support of international actors brings some advantage, local insurgency groups inevitably try to balance this with considerations of how it will look to local constituents and the impact it will have on often very fluid local alliance-building efforts.

Most recently, it is international, non-state actors who have arguably had the most influence in terms of the actual fighting and violence in the last couple of decades. Filipinos who traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight against the Soviet forces returned with not just battle experience and new skills, but also networks with jihadists from around the world, and some pledged to Osama bin Laden. What makes this significant is that if you fast-forward to 2014, with the rise of the Islamic State, breakaway factions from those groups that originally pledged to bin Laden then aligned themselves with the Islamic State. What this allegiance with the Islamic State was able to do, at least for a moment, was unite different ethnicities under this banner of the Islamic State and its so-called Caliphate. They also were able to overcome rural and urban divides as well. What is interesting about that is that the capture of Marawi City in 2017 actually worked to drive a rejuvenated push for peace, because from the Moro and Philippine government perspective, there was now this urgency. They saw what was at stake. These ethnic, historical, and demographic divisions were being overcome by this non-state international actor in the Islamic State. So, there was this real urgency to push through peace efforts, and that is what the Duterte administration was able to do, working with the MILF and others.

In Western media, we tend to gravitate toward ethnic and religious conflicts because we find them very interesting. At the same time, this insurgency has not received much attention in Western media. Why do you think that that is? What could be done in order to raise awareness?

This is a forgotten conflict, yet it is so consequential—not just to the Philippines, but to the region. I think there are several reasons why the conflict doesn’t get much attention from the Western media.

First, I think that this is a long-running conflict. It is always bubbling away. It is also very complex in the sense that even when you are on the ground, it is really hard to disentangle the insurgencies in Mindanao from other dynamics. As a journalist, you have to be on the ground regularly and working with local networks, and Mindanao has been a difficult place to work by any standard. Most foreign ministries advise their citizens not to travel to Mindanao; it is often categorized at the same level as Iraq or Syria.
I do not think that is necessarily fair, but there are certain parts of Mindanao where you would probably just not want to go.

From an American perspective, the Philippines is one of the oldest U.S. allies in the region, but it also has all the baggage of a colonial past, and some of the bloodiest chapters of that colonial history are in the south. But even then, media focus tends to be elsewhere. And frankly, from a Western journalist’s perspective, there are a lot of other stories when it comes to the Philippines. For example, media attention has tended to focus on President Duterte for obvious reasons.

Then, when you step out at a regional level, the Philippines is one of the most geopolitically significant countries in Asia because of the rising great power competition with China, both in the region itself, but also globally. So, for a big news story, Chinese bullying in the West Philippine Sea is always going to attract Western journalists, especially [those] from Australia and the United States. I say all this because of all the stories that could be covered, you can see how pieces on Mindanao just drop further and further down that priority list for Western media outlets. However, I would argue that peace in the south forms a really crucial thread that cuts its way through almost all of these issues. Consider the amount of blood, treasure, and time the Philippines has expended on wars in the south. The entire focus of the Philippine security and military apparatus is devoted to internal security, but what happens in the south impacts how the Philippines prioritizes a whole range of other policy decisions too, including how it engages regionally and how it deals with other nations.

While I think that competent, informed media coverage would [help to] bring attention and understanding to what is going on, international engagement has not always been beneficial to peace efforts. For instance, after the Marawi siege, funding just flooded into the coffers of NGOs, and these organizations went into Mindanao to run PCVE (Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism) and development programs. Frankly, this created a lot of resentment among locals, especially the big multimillion dollar contracts. Many people ask questions like “where is this money going?” “What has been the impact?” “How has this helped us?”

Now, I do want to be clear, this is a crucial time in the peace process. Pressures are immense, especially due to COVID’s impact, and there is a real need for international funding to support peace efforts in the BARM MM. The Bangsamoro authorities are particularly keen to receive that support, but ultimately, locals need to be able to pick and choose what is most appropriate for them. So, to come full circle, I think that good quality, on-the-ground media coverage would be very useful for telling those stories and shaping those perspectives. I hope that as the world increasingly focuses toward the Indo-Pacific, what is happening in the southern Philippines will make its way up that priority list and get the attention of the international community.

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As someone who has been on the ground and seen things firsthand, what does the situation in Mindanao look like right now, given the COVID-19 pandemic? Have the new leaders in the autonomous region been successful in improving the lives of people in Mindanao?

When you consider that the BARM MM was established in 2019 and all they have had to confront, I think the BTA has performed remarkably well. Given that when it was established in 2019, there were delays in the transition of power and delays in funding being transferred throughout that year. Also, the milestones articulated in the
peace agreement were probably overly optimistic in time that was allocated to achieving them. You then have, from early 2020 through today, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The BTA has been praised for its response to the pandemic in many communities, and this has helped build confidence in the transitional authority and, more importantly, confidence in its institutions and bureaucracy. Of course, it has not been perfect. There have been issues, but generally speaking, its response to the pandemic has been seen positively.

The challenges facing the BTA, however, are immense. These are mostly former guerrilla commanders, people whose lives have been spent in revolutionary movements, now trying to implement a centralized bureaucratic government, a parliamentary system. In that non-existent perfect world, doing that is already hard, but when you add war, poverty, seasonal natural disasters, and an unprecedented global pandemic, it is a lot to deal with. Ever since the BTA was established in 2019 and its ministers were appointed, the hopes and expectations from the people of the BARMM have been very high. There was this sense that with the establishment of the BARMM, that peace, stability, and prosperity would finally come to the region. There was a very strong belief within the population, reflected in the 2019 plebiscite results but also in polling taken since, that with autonomy, decades of devastation would be reversed, and the promises of what peace dividends would deliver for education, the economy, security, and social stability would all be realized.

But the reality is that there have been significant delays in the achievement of milestones in that two-track peace process. Those high expectations in the population have on the one hand brought a lot of goodwill and patience, but also high expectations for what the peace dividend will deliver. Those expectations have often been unrealistically high. This has created a vulnerability, because if these expectations are not met, then the consequences could be very dire.

I think this highlights both the great potential to achieve sustainable peace and stability in Mindanao, but also the potential problems if that fails—this will become another generation lost to war and extremism. Politics of dashed expectations is a common lever used by peace spoilers to exploit these perceptions of crisis in the population. This has certainly been the case in the aftermath of failed peace processes in the past. Since the 1970s, you can see this cycle of violence: hopes being raised as peace negotiations begin, hopes being dashed when they fail, and more violent, ideologically extreme groups emerging and breaking away in the wake of those failings. So, there are great fears within the local population, especially civil society groups that have invested the most in this opportunity for peace, that if current efforts fail, the results could be catastrophic, and Islamic State affiliates may prove to be the biggest beneficiaries of that.

You mentioned President Duterte. What role do you think that he has had in Mindanao during his presidency? What do you think his departure next year after the elections will mean for the region?

I think that many in the BARMM believe that Duterte and his administration delivered the peace process. They pushed this through when others may have faltered. Also, Duterte is from Mindanao and was the former mayor of Davao City, a position now held by his daughter, Sara Duterte, so that connection can be important for some, too. For much of his presidency, he has remained quite popular in the south. The recent extension of the transition period by three years, which means that the BTA will take the BARMM to its first elections in May 2025, has stirred some controversy but also, I suspect, strengthened affections for Duterte as the president who secured a chance at peace. Ultimately, there is a lot that can change between now and the May 9 presidential elections. But I think what is certain is that the next president will have a significant influence on the peace process, given that their term will cover through to and beyond the first elections of the BARMM in May 2025.

The Philippines will be getting a new president soon, which may cause significant change in the government. But on a more general level, what do
you think is the biggest challenge that the BTA will face going forward?

First and foremost, the main challenge is satisfying the requirements of the two-track peace process. The first track refers to the legal and bureaucratic transition to autonomy. The second track, which is normalization, involves the decommissioning of combatants, arms, and camps. These are very practical, rudimentary challenges of establishing a functioning government, setting up a bureaucracy, ensuring legal frameworks, and providing basic services to the population. That is an enormous challenge, both to satisfy those requirements and to be seen addressing the needs of the population.

The other main challenge is expectations management. In fact, I would argue that expectation management is equally important to any other issue for Bangsamoro authorities and civil society groups. Expectations management, which includes keeping the population committed to peace, and moderating expectations as circumstances change along the way, is essential for any peace process—but especially for the BARMM and especially now. This fledgling democracy must not only satisfy the practical needs of its people, such as economic, education, social welfare, and law and order issues, it must also forge and strengthen the population’s relationship with these new institutions and processes. It has to build trust, demonstrate the rule of law, and demonstrate the benefits of peaceful political participation where armed struggle has for too-long dominated. These are the core challenges facing the Bangsamoro region and there is every reason to be realistically optimistic for the future. But let’s not underestimate the rapidly converging and compounding problems that could shift momentum the other way and condemn another generation. The international community really needs to be paying attention to this forgotten conflict that now has its best chance at peace.

This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Interview conducted by River Harper