

Bandits or Terrorists?

The Abu Sayyaf Group between
Economic Interests and Religious Ideals

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The Abu Sayyaf Group was designated as a terrorist organisation by the U.S. State Department at the end of the 1990s. The Philippine authorities followed suit in September 2015, more than 15 years later. The group made several references to its links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Nonetheless, this article argues against its reckless tagging as an “Islamic terrorist organisation” by some, thereby calling for a more scrupulous approach in dealing with the complex conflict situation on the ground.

Introduction

The Philippines, the world’s twelfth largest country in terms of population, seems to only receive international attention during reports of natural disasters, kidnappings, and particularly violence. The most prominent synonym for violence and terrorism in the Philippines is Abu Sayyaf (aka the Abu Sayyaf Group, ASG). The Abu Sayyaf Group has for many years contributed to the image of the Philippines being a safe haven for Islamist terrorists. Their most recent success was the abduction of a German couple in 2014 which created enormous media coverage for the group. Apparently, a high ransom was paid for the release of the German couple. Nonetheless, the varying success of ASG in their operations in the Philippines has been unsteady to say the least. But their persistence and violent actions have kept the world wondering how an organisation like ASG can prosper and create such impact in a predominantly Christian country.

In order to understand this, one has to understand the history of violence and terrorism in the Philippines which is the history of separatism. Hence, it is important to take a closer look at the circumstances that have given rise to separatist movements and how those groups have evolved – leading to the present situation, wherein violence remains and groups like the Abu Sayyaf continue to influence the country’s image.

Prior to Spanish and U.S. American colonisation of the Philippines, Islam already reached the

Philippines in the 14th century through Arabian traders. During the 15th century, parts of Luzon (the northern-most island group) and Mindanao (the southern-most island group) had become sultanates of Borneo, with a large population of Muslims, particularly in Mindanao. Neither Spain nor the U.S. had ever completely succeeded in exercising full control of these predominantly Muslim areas in the south. Efforts during the U.S. colonial rule, particularly relocating Christian settlers to Muslim Mindanao, had spurred additional tensions in the region.

Today, as the Philippines faces severe problems such as political instability, growing corruption, failures in governance, and a stagnation of high poverty rates, Mindanao remains the least developed part of the country. It is there, in Mindanao, wherein groups such as the notorious Abu Sayyaf, have their strongholds.

A Breeding Ground for Violence and Extremism?

A study of the Philippines reveals that most of the provinces that are predominantly Muslim belong to the poorest and least privileged regions in the country. Evidence indicates the problems the Philippines are facing today provide a framework that is conducive to extremism. Violence and terrorism in the Philippines are a reflection of two important issues – poverty incidence and governance. In examining how these two relate to each other, it can be said that high poverty incidences are due to poor govern-

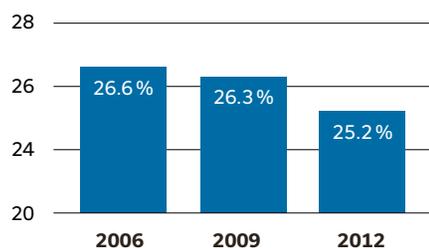


At prayer: Islam reached Filipinos in the 14th century. Muslims make up around five percent of the population, living primarily on the southern islands. Source: © Erik De Castro, Reuters.

ance. Poor governance is a recurring issue and a problem in the country and it is this particular factor that must be considered when analysing terrorism and extremism in the Philippines.

Poverty incidence is a practicable measure of governance in any country. Data provided by the World Bank indicates that the poverty rate has remained relatively stable in the past ten years.¹ Inability to reduce poverty therefore continues to serve as a reason for discontent in the country.

Poverty Rate in the Philippines



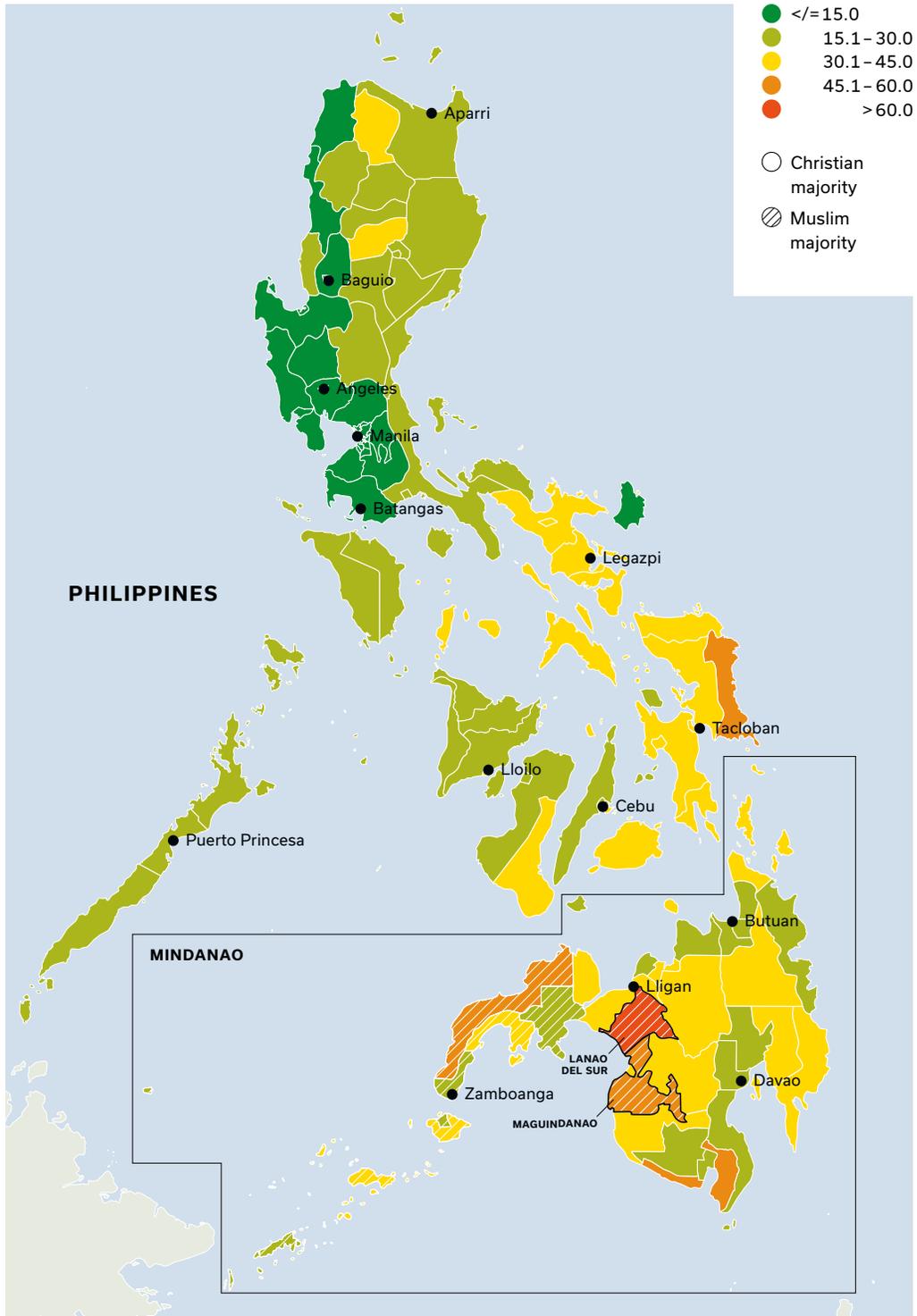
Source: The World Bank, World Data Bank, in: <http://databank.worldbank.org> [9 Mar 2016].

What is more staggering, however, is the comparison of the overall national poverty rating to regional figures. Out of the provinces that constitute the current *Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao* (ARMM) two provinces show poverty rates beyond 50 per cent, namely Lanao del Sur (68.9 per cent) and Maguindanao (57.8 per cent), making the ARMM the poorest region in the entire Philippines.² This region and the neighboring island provinces play hosts to the New People's Army, the ASG, (former) separatist movements like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and their spinoffs such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

The Evolution of Separatist Movements and the Birth of Abu Sayyaf

The history of separatist groups, eventually splitting into moderate and extremist, even terrorist factions like Abu Sayyaf, seems to be a self-repeating process in the Philippines. The struggle for independence in the Muslim south

Poverty Rates and Religions in the Philippines



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is a process that has continuously seen groups violently fighting the Philippine government. The first prominent secessionist group that emerged in the Philippines in the second half of the 20th century was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in Mindanao. It was founded in 1969 by its first chairman, Nur Misuari. Their aim, to be reached by any means, was clear: independence for the Bangsamoro (“the land of the Moros”, i.e. Philippine Muslims) from the Philippines. With the declaration of Martial Law under President Marcos in 1972 it became obvious that the struggle of the MNLF *had* to be a violent one. Hundreds of thousands were either killed or displaced during the uprisings and military actions of the Marcos regime.

Libyan Leader Muammar Gaddafi brokered the negotiations between the MNLF and the Philippine Government, leading to the Tripoli Agreement in 1976. Both parties signed the agreement with the MNLF effectively accepting autonomy in Muslim Mindanao, surrendering their struggle for secession. The ceasefire that was initiated some months later failed, thus, preventing real peace or real autonomy from being sustainable or lasting.

In 1978, another group emerged: Rejecting autonomy in favor of outright independence, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), split from the MNLF.³ By the time Misuari and the MNLF realised that no kind of meaningful autonomy would become reality the MILF had already made significant headway in recruiting disgruntled senior MNLF commanders and young ideological Muslim scholars.⁴

It was only after the end of Marcos’ dictatorship that a chance for a real autonomy seemed attainable under the presidency of Corazon Aquino. In 1990, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was established, being truly implemented in 1996 with Nur Misuari as its first governor. At that time, Abdurajik Abubakar Janjalani gathered radical forces inside the MNLF, who sought to resume a violent struggle for an independent Islamic state, rather than following the idea of autonomy. Together,



Janjalani and his supporters founded the radical Abu Sayyaf in 1991.

Even though, the MILF declared publicly in 2011 that they would no longer pursue a course for independence but strive for genuine autonomy instead, other factions had not given up on their violent fight against the Philippine government. In 2012, the Philippine government and the MILF jointly signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB), paving the way for signing the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014. A proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law remains under deliberation by both houses of Congress. It is meant



Former MILF-commander Kato: Following MILF's renunciation of its fight for an independent Bangsamoro – subsequently settling for an extensive autonomy instead – the organisation began to splinter.

Source: © Joseph Penney, Reuters.

to pave the way for a meaningful autonomy in Muslim Mindanao, replacing the ARMM which is considered to be a failed experiment. Even now it remains unclear when and in what version or form a Basic Law will be passed, leading to the establishment of the long awaited Bangsamoro Autonomous Region. While MILF and MNLF support a transition to meaningful autonomy, Abu Sayyaf and BIFF could not be integrated into any kind of peace talks.

This history of struggles for independence or autonomy has left Mindanao with a broad playing field of moderate former rebel groups, violent break-away groups, and smoldering discon-

tent. However, a certain pattern seems to have become obvious: whenever a radical group has changed its policy from striving for genuine autonomy in Muslim Mindanao to fighting for secession (or an Islamic state), a smaller faction, which remains radical in its pursuit for secession, splits from the original group. Out of those violent groups, the ASG remains the only group listed as a “Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization” by the U.S. Department of State.⁵

The Abu Sayyaf Network

The question of the true nature and purpose of the Abu Sayyaf has been discussed widely

among analysts, police and military officials and the media. However, two facts seem to be undisputed: 1) The Abu Sayyaf was originally born as a break-away group when the MNLF surrendered its course for an independent state. Therefore, Abu Sayyaf's original purpose was to continue the fight for a separate Islamic State. 2) Today, the main activities of the group result in kidnapping-for-ransom and seem to serve an economic rationale rather than a religious ideology. Abu Sayyaf was first designated as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" by the United States in 1997. The U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism 2014 state: "ASG is the most vio-

lent of the terrorist groups operating in the Philippines and claims to promote an independent Islamic state in western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago."⁶ To which extent this claim or the actual objective is the underlying rationale for the group's activities remains unclear. Despite its public statements of support for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), its actions revolve around kidnapping-for-ransom. In the past years, hardly any activity could be characterised by a religious or ideological motive.

In order to identify the true nature of Abu Sayyaf as an organisation it is necessary to have a closer



Patrol flight: In the last couple of years, the Philippine military succeeded in pushing back the country's terrorist groups into remote parts of the jungle. Source: © Erik de Castro, Reuters.

look at their evolution. In 2011, Zack Fellman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) argued that ASG activities can be divided into several periods: foundation and rise (1991 to 1995/96), the first subsistence period (1995/96 to 2003), the resurgence of terrorism (2003 to 2006) and a second subsistence period (2006 onwards).⁷ Without a doubt the ASG has committed severe terrorist acts in the past. They received worldwide attention for attacks like the Ferry Bombing in 2004. Due to ongoing counterterrorism efforts of the Philippine government and the United States and repeated losses in their main leadership the Abu Sayyaf had been subjected to a “leadership vacuum” in their fourth period of development since 2006. In addition to this, a degraded organisational structure has led the group to resort mainly to kidnapping-for-ransom activities. Fellman concluded that the ASG hardly has the means or the expertise to return to a serious period of terrorism.⁸ Given the more or less shattered structure of the organisation it is fair to assume that the Abu Sayyaf has rather transformed into a network than a consistent group. Up until today kidnapping-for-ransom, in particular of foreigners, remains the most prominent activity of the Abu Sayyaf. No major act of political violence or extremist action with a possible Islamist/separatist motive can be traced to the ASG in the recent years, following the 2004 Star Ferry Bombing.

Abu Sayyaf and Other Networks: “Terrorisme Sans Frontières”?

A common perception held by the international public is that ASG is closely linked to influential terrorist groups abroad. Although ASG’s motives and nature as a terrorist group (rather than mere bandits) is disputed, they are believed to cooperate with terrorist groups outside the Philippines. Years ago, ASG had publicly declared their support of al-Qaeda. Even though media and analysts speculated about the true nature of the relationship between both groups, many believed ASG to be coat-tail riders seeking to benefit from the reputation of a more influential terrorist group. Nonetheless, it is undisputed

that many members of the ASG haven been trained together in Afghanistan together with and by al-Qaeda.⁹

Abu Sayyaf recruits its operatives rather with the promise of income than religious motives.

It appears to be a reoccurring pattern of the ASG to supposedly align with a “bigger brand”. More recently, Abu Sayyaf (just like the BIFF), through one of its leaders, Isnilon Hapilon has declared publicly their support of ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in July 2014.¹⁰ According to experts like Joseph Franco of the Singapore-based S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the incentives of ASG have in fact nothing to do with any religious ideology or support for ISIS. Abu Sayyaf recruits its operatives rather with the promise of income than religious motives.¹¹ The island provinces in which ASG concentrates its activities are facing massive problems in terms of poverty. Therefore, it is plausible to believe that economic prospects are more of an incentive for ASG operatives than ideological reasons. In January 2016 another video of Isnilon Hapilon was published on the internet. Again, he pledged allegiance to ISIS on behalf of Abu Sayyaf leading the media to speculate whether ISIS might declare Mindanao a satellite province of its own terrorist network.¹²

While the relationship between ASG and ISIS/al-Qaeda remains subject to speculations, one of ASG’s real allies seems to be Jemaah Islamiya (JI), a fundamentalist terror group originating from Indonesia. Although it has its origins in Indonesia, JI considers the entire Southeast Asian region as its field of operations.¹³ Founded in Malaysia in 1993 by Indonesian Islamist clerics Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, JI is a Salafi jihadist group which was inspired by the same ideology as al-Qaeda.¹⁴ Nonetheless, experts disagree on the extent of the relationship and possible links to al-Qaeda.¹⁵



The connection between Abu Sayyaf and JI is certainly the most tangible one. JI's cooperation with the Abu Sayyaf can be traced back to at least two fields: financial cooperation and training activities. Abu Sayyaf is said to have received support from other regional terrorist groups, those include Jemaah Islamiya. Also, there are indicators that JI helped the ASG in training their fighters.¹⁶ Due to the archipelagic nature of the Philippines it is easy for such groups to cross borders between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Nonetheless, the Philippines are not a permanent safe haven for foreign terrorists in general. The U.S. Department of State claims that only a small number of Jemaah Islamiya members remain in the Philippines today in some small isolated pockets of Mindanao and the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi island groups.¹⁷ In 2015, as the Mamasapano clash between government forces and BIFF fighters occurred, it became obvious that JI elements continue to be present in the southern Philippines indeed. During the said incident Zulkifli Abdul Hir (aka Marwan, a known member of JI) was killed during a counter-terrorism operation in January 2015.¹⁸

The question as to whether ISIS and other transnational groups pose a threat to Southeast Asia and the Philippines can hardly be answered in one way. Experts say the ISIS threat to the Philippines is relatively low right now. However, it has potential to grow.¹⁹ Ahmed S. Hashim of the RSIS argues that the main threat is not based in the Philippines but in the Middle East since 2.5 million Filipinos live in this region as so-called Overseas Filipino Workers. If groups like ISIS intended to hurt the Philippines they would not have to infiltrate the country but could rather target those Filipinos abroad.²⁰

Outlook: Endless Terror in Mindanao?

Assessing the motives and background of Abu Sayyaf, it has become clear that the emergence of this group is not an isolated incident, but a consequence of previous developments and struggles, mainly related to separatist movements in Mindanao. While experts and media seem to disagree on the nature of the group as

either terrorists or bandits, it is necessary to admit that the spectrum of separatist groups and violent actors and their motives (and therefore) their classification has changed massively. While MILF and MNLF seem to be committed to genuine autonomy in Muslim Mindanao, Abu Sayyaf, originally a MNLF breakaway, has shown tendencies of pursuing economic motives rather than religious ideals.

Abu Sayyaf's network-of-networks structure and its flexible ideology make it susceptible to instability, but resistant to complete eradication.

As far as Abu Sayyaf's future is concerned, Tim Fellman has come up with a scenario for the year 2025: ASG's network-of-networks structure and its flexible ideology make it susceptible to instability, but resistant to complete eradication.²¹ A circumstance which might support this prediction is the fact that ASG is not a completely cohesive organisation. Some of its fighters are recruited on a job-basis among families, clans and neighbors in their geographical strongholds. The criterion of affiliation with the group is merely vague and can vary.²² When assessing the future of the group (and with it Fellman's prediction) many variables have to be accounted for. The future progress and acceptance of the Peace process in Muslim Mindanao, resulting in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region has to be factored in when evaluating the growth or demise of groups like Abu Sayyaf. If meaningful autonomy can be reached for Muslims (and non-Muslim inhabitants) in Muslim Mindanao (including the islands provinces) which results in economic progress, the south is less likely to be a breeding ground for unsatisfied extremists. If the peace process and the struggle for meaningful autonomy are to face further significant setbacks, the environment might become more favorable for extremists in the future.





Yes to Bangsamoro, peace and national unity: The continuation of the peace process is crucial in reducing tensions in the region. Source: © Cheryl Ravelo, Reuters.

Today, the ASG core group supposedly consists of less than 20 members. Out of those, only two or three leaders follow a religious ideology in any way.²³ The entire organisation, including their leadership, remains fragmented. Taking into account that the group has not carried out political acts of terror, rather than kidnappings, in years their nature as an Islamist terrorist group should be questioned. This assessment is supported by the fact that Abu Sayyaf did not even back off from kidnapping Muslims in March 2016 (ten Indonesian fishermen) in order to extort ransom.²⁴ However, given the volatile nature of the peace process in Mindanao and the related implications for actors involved in it, this could change again in the future.

As far as international links of Abu Sayyaf and the possible threat of ISIS joining forces with ASG are concerned, experts may paint a compli-

cated picture as well. In the past, even possible links between Abu Sayyaf and Saudi Arabia had been discussed. While it is often argued that private donors support terror networks²⁵ all over the world (including ISIS and al-Qaeda), looking for specific links between Saudi Arabia and the ASG leads to highly speculative results at best. Nonetheless, Abu Sayyaf has reiterated its dedication to more influential groups, namely al-Qaeda and ISIS, through the years. In the face of those statements – although mainly to be believed marketing tactics – and their current activities as bandits and kidnappers a Philippine court has declared the group a terrorist organisation in September 2015. The reason for this is not a change in the nature or goal of ASG’s activities, but a legal implication. This first-ever terrorist designation makes it easier for authorities in the Philippines to prosecute members and supporters of the group.²⁶



Yes to peace: Chief negotiators of the Philippine government and MILF shake hands after signing the agreement in 2012. Source: © Samsul Said, Reuters.

Ultimately, it seems accurate to state that the current nature of Abu Sayyaf merely characterises the groups as bandits with economic interests rather than Islamist terrorists. Despite this judgment many variables have to be factored in in order to assess whether Abu Sayyaf might return to its original path as fundamentalist separatist group. Among those variables, two seem to stand out:

The progress of the peace process in Mindanao remains the most important domestic factor for the overall development in the Muslim south. If the quest for genuine autonomy (and along with it economic development) in Muslim Mindanao becomes a success story, it will be hard for Abu Sayyaf to recruit operatives and find supporters.

The main external variable might be the manifested interest of foreign groups like JI or ISIS

to establish strongholds in the Philippines. If any development in the region drives radical actors from outside the Philippines into further cooperation with ASG, state authorities in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia would face massive challenges in their pursuit of peace and security.

Therefore, the sole solution for the current situation goes beyond particular counterterrorism activities in terms of military actions. It is crucial to support the peace process in a way which leads to a leveled playing field providing better lives for the inhabitants of the future Bangsamoro Autonomous Region.

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