

The Philippines after Marawi

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The “Liberation of Marawi”

On 16 October 2017, President Rodrigo Duterte declared the city of Marawi “liberated” after five months of urban combat. A few days later, on 23 October, Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana declared that “security forces had cleared the last militants from the city.” The siege left hundreds of government forces and hundreds more militants dead, including Abu Sayaff leader Isnilon Hapilon and at least one of the major leaders of the Maute group.¹ Moreover, according to Task Force Bangon Marawi, it is estimated that the city sustained US\$1 billion to US\$2 billion in damages, which will require numerous funding allocations and construction contracts to repair.²

Seven months later, it could be said that “liberating” Marawi resulted in a significant peace dividend for the Philippine government—the president somehow still maintains high ratings in southern Philippines and the local Moro leaders continue to support security forces in maintaining peace and order in the area. Nonetheless, the militant threat in southern Philippines persists and the underlying grievances providing impetus to militancy have remained unresolved.

It remains uncertain as to how long the goodwill generated by the militants’ defeat will endure and the unsteady peace currently prevailing in Mindanao will be tested in the next few months. The underlying security trends playing out in the area as security forces were eliminating

* This paper was submitted on 5 June 2018.

¹ <http://www.ubquirer.net/News-Info-Inquirer.Net>, 23 Oct 2017.

² Task Force Bangon Marawi was created by the Duterte administration via Administrative Order No. 3; it is composed of various government agencies working together towards the recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation of Marawi City.

the militants in Marawi City remain in place.³ Additionally, in southern Philippines, one of the most fertile sources of recruitment is among those who have lost relatives in the fighting, especially the children of “martyrs” or other surviving family members. Moreover, the demonstration of military strength by these Daesh-linked groups will inspire those who are susceptible to recruitment. Southern Philippines will continue to be vulnerable to the challenges of armed conflicts and violent extremism because of the many issues on self-determination as well as demands for increased autonomy and even independence, despite progress being made on the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL). These issues may even outlive Daesh. The Marawi incident also further gives credence to Daesh’s call in a video posted in June last year—that extremists who could not travel to Syria or Iraq could go to Mindanao to wage jihad.⁴

In a speech during the Philippine Army Special Command (SOCOM) Anniversary on 28 May 2018, Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana told the troops that they should prepare for a possible repeat of the Marawi siege in “another city” in the country. Secretary Lorenzana admitted that more foreign terrorists were reported to have entered Mindanao and warned that the troops would again be called upon later or “maybe immediately”. He added, “It is not far-fetched that one of these days they (Daesh-inspired militants) will again hold another city for quite some time.”⁵

The Continuing Threat of Daesh in The Philippines: Groups and Personalities

Although Isnilon Hapilon, the Maute brothers and most of the terrorists involved in the Marawi attack have been eliminated, notorious local and foreign terrorists—who could inspire and re-energize Daesh supporters, the Abu Sayaff Group (ASG) and other terrorist groups and personalities—remain at large. The list includes Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) combatants. As of this reporting, Daesh-inspired groups continue to recruit in several towns in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, South Cotabato

³ Ben West, “Could Jihadist Militants in the southern Philippines Make a Comeback?,” *Stratfor*, 24 April 2018.

⁴ Steven Rood, *Marawi and Beyond: A Look at Violent Extremism*, The Asia Foundation, 28 June 2017.

⁵ <http://www.dnd.gov.ph/May 2018/press-releases.html>.

and Basilan. Moreover, the arrests last December of 15 Malaysians and Indonesians in Sabah and Sandakan who were poised to join the Daesh-linked local terrorist groups in southern Philippines reinforced assessments that the Marawi siege will continue to inspire and attract local and foreign fighters, particularly Southeast Asians, to join their jihad in Mindanao.

The Abu Sayaff Group

The Philippines is home to the militant group ASG, which operates along the Sulu archipelago. Its members continue to harass security forces at about the same rate as they did before and during the Marawi City siege. The death of Isnilon Hapilon, one of its leaders who played a major role in the siege of Marawi, may “weaken” the group for some time but the ASG is hard to defeat. The splintering of the group into factions a few years after its creation and the fact that the ASG has no central leadership and no hierarchical organisation and mostly operates in ad hoc arrangements render it difficult to operate against.⁶ While most of Hapilon’s faction is assumed to have fought in Marawi, the number of ASG members who participated in the siege is unknown. However, a significant number of ASG’s estimated 400 members stayed behind in their maritime strongholds.

Despite making headway against the ASG, the armed forces has yet to expel the group from the Sulu archipelago, where they continue to carry out kidnappings and piracy attacks that have periodically hampered trade in the area. Joint patrols by the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia have pre-empted these activities in the last few months, but hundreds of militants are still entrenched on the islands of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Over the years, however, the ASG has been able to regroup and “pick up the pieces” after losing leaders and fighters in battle. Nonetheless, it may not be easy for the ASG to recover in the aftermath of the Marawi siege; the group may be out of commission for months or even years to come. Nevertheless, based on its track record, the ASG will eventually be able to return in one form or another.⁷

⁶ Michael Hart, “Is Abu Sayaff Really Defeated?,” *The Diplomat*, 23 November 2017.

⁷ Ben West, “After the Siege of Marawi, Another Fight Plays Out,” republished from *Stratfor*, 26 October 2017, econintersect.com.

After Marawi, it is highly likely that the ASG will go back to its previous state, an alliance of loosely linked factions and cells whose terrorist activities are triggered by a combination of ideological, criminal and financial motivations. Nonetheless, there is always the distinct possibility that ASG factions inspired by Daesh and its jihadist narrative may join other radical groups anew to plot terror attacks in major cities. Despite the death of Isnilon Hapilon, there are still other commanders who may be willing and able to take on the mantle of leading the group once more on a jihadist mission.

The Maute Group

According to the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the remnants of local armed groups with ties to Daesh have scattered into 10 subgroups since their defeat in Marawi. The Maute- Daesh group (The US refers to them as “ISIS Philippines” and designated the organisation as a foreign terrorist group.) has more than 300 fighters remaining. They are thought to be keeping a low profile but continue to retrain and recruit new members.⁸

The Philippine military also said that remnants of the Maute-Daesh group are operating farther north in Lanao del Sur in the rural areas outside Marawi City, including in Basilan, Sulu and even Palimbang in Sultan Kudarat. Brigadier General Bienvenido Datuin, the Armed Forces of the Philippines spokesperson, on 6 March 2018, said that there was still a possibility of increased terrorist activity in Mindanao and that the security forces were taking all reports of militant groups in the country very seriously. His statement came in the wake of reports that remnants of the Maute group who escaped before the military retook Marawi City in October 2017 were “regrouping, retraining and recruiting for another attack”. Lieutenant General Rolando Bautista, the Philippine Army Chief, earlier said that militants who had escaped the battle in Marawi with huge sums of cash looted from homes were using the funds to recruit new members and re-arm, and to possibly stage similar attacks.

The Philippine Army also pointed out that Maute remnants broke into smaller groups, with some slipping to Manila to carry out bombings. In early March, joint military and police teams arrested Abdul Nasser Lomondot,

⁸ Carmela Fonbuena, “Maute-ISIS Remnants Scatter into 10 sub-groups-Philippine military,” rappler.com, 5 March 2018.

a sub-leader of the Maute group in Manila. Lomondot was reportedly involved in violent activities perpetrated by the militant group, including the planning of the Marawi siege. He was arrested with fellow Maute member Rizasalam Lomondot.⁹

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters

The BIFF may emerge as Daesh's new standard bearer in the region if only by default. Because only a small number of BIFF members participated in the Marawi siege, with the majority of its combatants instead focused on conducting attacks mostly on its home turf in Mindanao, the BIFF was able to conserve its manpower and thus its ability to carry on with the fight.¹⁰ Over the past month, BIFF fighters under Ismael Abdulmalik alias Abu Turaife (who was initially said to be a strong contender to take over from Isnilon Hapilon as the Daesh emir) have tried to raise the Daesh flag over various locations in Maguindanao province.¹¹

With the dispersal of the Maute group during the battle of Marawi City, the BIFF has emerged to be Mindanao's most active militant group with Daesh ties. Its area of operation is concentrated in Maguindanao province, situated between Davao and Cotabato City. The group, with an estimated 200 to 300 members, has carried out regular attacks against security forces. On 11 March this year, government troops killed some 10 BIFF members but two weeks later, the militants responded with an attack on a police station.¹²

Despite military defeats and other setbacks, the BIFF continues to pose a threat in Maguindanao and surrounding provinces. While the BIFF prefers to operate in more rural areas, given the proximity of its area of operation to city centres like Davao and Cotabato, an attack against those cities is highly likely. In the post-Marawi climate of heightened threat awareness, the recent increase in BIFF's activities has garnered renewed attention not only in the Philippines but across the wider region as well. Yet the group has been around for almost 10 years and has long been

⁹ Ellie Aben, "Philippines on alert for attack by pro-Daesh Militants," *Arab News*, 6 March 2018.

¹⁰ Ben West, "After the Siege of Marawi".

¹¹ Bong Sarmento, "ISIS alive and Well in the Philippines," *Asia Times*, 12 March 2018.

¹² "23 IS-Affiliated Groups Operating in Southern Philippines," *asiancorrespondent.com*, 19 April 2018.

implicated in high-profile attacks, notably the Mamasapano clash of January 2015, which left 44 Special Forces soldiers dead and sent shockwaves through the country. The BIFF pledged allegiance to Daesh in late 2014. When the threat from Daesh became visible during the assault on Marawi, the government forces in Mindanao started to consider pledges of allegiance to Daesh by smaller militant groups far more seriously.

The BIFF remains split into three main factions, the largest and most active of which is led by Abu Turaife. Recently, a worrying source of concern is that the military has reported seeing “foreign-looking” combatants fighting alongside BIFF militants in Maguindanao province. This could indicate that terrorist fighters from elsewhere in Southeast Asia may have joined up with the group after the dispersal of the ASG and Maute groups from Marawi. It is possible that surviving Maute group members, including a number of Indonesians and Malaysians, may have joined and bolstered the BIFF’s ranks. At present, the BIFF is seemingly the new group of choice for the region’s militants.¹³ It now constitutes the surviving remnants of Daesh in southern Philippines and has taken over the space vacated by the Mautes with a renewed sense of purpose and authority. Defence Secretary Lorenzana also mentioned in a recent speech that local authorities were monitoring the recruitment activities of jihadist groups in Mindanao and were bracing for another Marawi-style attack. Cotabato has been mentioned as a possible second target.¹⁴

Possible Successor to Isnilon Hapilon as Regional Emir of Daesh

After the Marawi siege, several possible successors to Isnilon Hapilon as Daesh regional emir were named by the military as well as other security officials—ranging from 2 up to 21 personalities, mostly Filipinos, but also a couple of Indonesians and Malaysians. Although still unconfirmed to date, the armed forces is looking at Omayda Abdul Najid alias Abu Dar, a sub-leader of the Maute group, as Hapilon’s possible replacement. Abu Dar was one of those who plotted the Marawi attack but was able to flee, together with other Maute members and leaders, with a large amount of money.

¹³ Michael Hart, “BIFF Assumes IS’ Mantle in the Philippines,” *Troubled South Geopolitical Monitor*, 12 February 2018.

¹⁴ DND press releases, dnd.gov.ph, May 2018.

Abu Dar is reported to have connections with foreign terrorists and is now operating with them in Mindanao, providing assistance to local terrorists.¹⁵

In a related development, an Egyptian national named Fehmi Lassqued was arrested on 16 February 2018 by Philippine authorities. He was said to have been attempting to recruit adherents among Muslim families in Manila. On 22 January, a suspected Spanish terrorist named Abdelhakim Labidi Adib was arrested in Basilan, adding to the foreign terrorist numbers in southern Philippines.

Peace Agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

On 18 July 2018, the 28-member bicameral conference committee approved the final version of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), now called the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). On 23 and 24 July, the Senate and the Congress, respectively, ratified the BOL. In a consultation meeting on 29 July at their main camp in Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, MILF leaders sought support for the law ahead of a referendum on the measure, which creates an expanded autonomous region.¹⁶

The law aims to enforce a historic but fragile 2014 peace deal under which the MILF vowed to give up its quest for independence and lay down the weapons of its 30,000 fighters in return for self-rule. Under the new law, a new political entity known as the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region would replace the current autonomous region created following a 1996 deal with another rebel group, the Moro National Liberation Forces (MNLF). The Bangsamoro is set to have more power and covers a bigger area.¹⁷

The Commission on Elections has yet to determine the exact date of the referendum but the Office of the Presidential Assistant on Peace Process (OPAPP) is optimistic the Bangsamoro Organic Law will be ratified by the Bangsamoro people. It is expected that upon the ratification of the Law, targeted to be in December this year, 30% of the MILF forces will undergo the decommissioning process. The plebiscite will also decide what regions exactly will constitute the autonomous region although it is

¹⁵ Strategic Intelligence Service, *Philippine Military Identifies and in Pursuit of ISIS Leader in Southeast Asia popularly known as Abu Dar*, 27 May 2018.

¹⁶ News.abs-cbn.com/focus/07/28/18/ph.muslims-hope-law-to-bring-dream-of-peace.

¹⁷ www.iag.org.ph/index.php/1485-read-bangsamoro-basic-law/2018.

likely to extend beyond the current ARMM borders of Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi provinces.¹⁸

Amidst the prevailing optimism, both the government and the MILF acknowledge that there are still hurdles that need to be overcome, like details that still remain to be worked out, e.g., the implementation of the decommissioning of MILF forces; or what regions exactly will constitute the autonomous region that will be decided by the plebiscite—this was a key issue during the negotiations as to which political entity will control strategic areas such as the Sulu Sea and Moro Gulf.

Rehabilitation

The battle for Marawi caused more than 360,000 displaced civilians who have little or nothing and nowhere to return to as the city now “resembles a pile of rubble”. The devastation that resulted from the “all-out” war against the terrorists and now the difficulty of rebuilding its people, communities and institutions may be exploited by Daesh to the hilt to fuel discontent and drive vulnerable civilians towards violent extremism.

While Marawi’s “liberation” was declared in October last year, the prolonged challenge of reconstruction, recovery and rehabilitation is as important as the battle itself. Most of the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons affected by the fighting have now become long-term refugees, creating security protection issues in evacuation centres and promoting extremism in vulnerable populations. In a move geared towards addressing the persistent threat of radicalisation and preventing a Marawi repeat, the government established the inter-agency Task Force Bangon Marawi to coordinate the joint civilian-military response needed for post-conflict issues.

The government also faces post-conflict community-building difficulties, with the armed forces seemingly losing the communications and propaganda battle. Despite allegations that the militants used women and children as human shields, as well as the fact that their use of improvised explosives devices caused significant damage to the city, the post-conflict narrative has not been handled effectively. The government has in effect failed to impart a counter-narrative and to educate, inform

¹⁸ <https://peace.gov.ph/uploads2018/BBI-Primer>.

and communicate with refugees, who have slowly shifted the blame for their predicament from the enemy to the government. The poor handling of these accusations of the use of excessive force by the military has presented an opportunity for insurgents to manipulate the discontent of the populace.

The economic and institutional recovery in Marawi, where years of corrupt law enforcement had led to weak governance, is equally challenging. Moreover, the only functioning informal sector of the economy had been “underground”, based on trafficking of illegal drugs and firearms, and kidnapping for ransom and other illegal activities which run parallel to the activities of violent extremist groups. There will be a need to work closely with the local clan leaders; but while such collaboration should reap benefits for the citizens of Marawi, it will, ironically, undermine the power of those very clan leaders. Post-conflict rehabilitation efforts will require substantial institutional development, including law enforcement and delivery of goods and services for the citizenry, to avoid a return to a volatile security situation.¹⁹

Regional Cooperation

The Marawi debacle is a wake-up call for Southeast Asia’s security forces, particularly its counter-terrorism authorities. The Marawi siege has been popularly labelled by terrorist experts as a “game changer”. The militants’ seizure of Marawi points to the complicated and homegrown capacity of the Islamic terrorist threat in Southeast Asia and emphasises the need for a more coordinated security approach. The continued inability of regional governments to address the drivers of conflict that resulted in the seizure of Marawi exposes other Southeast Asian states to similar terrorist attacks.²⁰

One of the major worries of regional governments was that the defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq would signal the return of fighters from the region to their homelands. However, the Marawi siege illustrated that there are other factors, such as unresolved grievances, that could generate

¹⁹ Samuel J. Cox, *The Philippines: After the Fighting in Marawi*. Australian Institute of International Affairs, 19 March 2018.

²⁰ “ISIS Looks to Rebound in the Philippines and Spread,” Cipher Brief and Analysis, 1 March 2018.

greater potential for violence than a few returning or relocating foreign fighters. The major leaders of the Marawi attack, Isnilon Hapilon and Omar Maute, never went to fight in Syria. Moreover, the foreign fighters in Marawi did not come from Syria but instead flew from Indonesia and Malaysia to Mindanao.

Owing to this prevailing security scenario, there is a need to strengthen existing mechanisms of coordination and collaboration between affected countries, which are mostly members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While such mechanisms do exist, the effective operationalisation of these instrumentalities is held back by the strong tendency of these governments to avoid “intervention” by other countries. Political analysts have pointed out that ASEAN needs to find a way to prevail over the doctrine of non-interference and develop a capacity to conduct joint security operations.²¹ More importantly, concrete actions must be undertaken to harmonize laws and procedures and increase inter-operability and inter-agency points of contact. Meanwhile, the trilateral security cooperation between the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia has significantly reduced violent terrorist activities within the countries’ tri-border. Nonetheless, there is still much room for improvement as this arrangement has yet to engender concrete actions and results on the ground, where it matters most.

Countering Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian countries have a long history of initiative programmes that are in synch with Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), which includes countering, preventing, responding to and addressing violent extremism through non-kinetic and preventive efforts. With governments increasingly recognising the need to invest in prevention and community-based approaches, the CVE agenda is designed to focus on preventing all forms of ideologically based extremist violence by addressing individuals at risk of radicalisation and recruitment.²² Countering terrorism and violent extremism is a main concern for the Southeast Asian region, particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.

²¹ “After Marawi, No Room for Complacency,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, 27 January 2018

²² Sydney Jones, *Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia*, European University Lecture, 31 January 2018.

For the Philippines, a comprehensive CVE is still on the drawing board. There have been various initiatives towards this end by different groups and government agencies but none has so far been effectively promulgated. In the meantime, existing CVE efforts are limited to ad hoc measures, e.g., programmes to recover loose firearms as part of an AFP program in Western Mindanao; a joint AFP-PNP Civil Relations Committee project on national Youth Leadership Summit and National Indigenous Peoples' (IP) Leadership summit conducted early this year. The Philippines has also implemented a counter-radicalization programme called "Payapa at Masaganang Pamayanan" (PAMANA) or Resilient Communities in Conflict-Affected Communities. PAMANA is the government's programme on conflict resolution and development throughout the country and has launched programmes that provide social protection for former combatants and their next of kin as well as support to IP and other marginalized groups.²³

For decades, the Philippine military and the police forces have led government efforts in dealing with terrorism and extremist groups. Taking effect in 2007, Republic Act 9372, also known as "Act to Secure the State and Protect our People from Terrorism" or the "Human Security Act", which acts as a form of counter-extremism legislation in the Philippines, criminalises and defines terrorism and other terms applicable under the law as an accomplice or accessory. This Act created the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC), the lead agency in implementing the Act. President Duterte assigned the ATC the tasks of providing guidance to counter-terrorism agencies and crafting a viable CVE programme, which to date, unfortunately, has not been finalised.²⁴ At present, there are concerns that CVE initiatives will face more fiscal and budgetary constraints due to the demands of the rehabilitation of Marawi. CVE programmes may, for the time being, take a backseat to give way to reconstruction.

²³ <https://peace.gov.ph/2016/payapa.masaganang.pamayanan/pamana///>.

²⁴ Counter Extremism Project 2017, *The Philippines: Extremism and Counter-Extremism*.

Ma. Concepcion B. Clamor retired in June 2017 as the Deputy Director General of the Philippines' National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, a position she held for over four years. Prior to this, she was the Agency Assistant Director General for Production (Research and Analysis) for more than 20 years. Ms. Clamor has been a resource person/speaker on Strategic Issues, Counter-Terrorism, Regional Security Challenges, Terrorism in the Asia Pacific and the Philippines, and other regional issues. Ms Clamor is currently involved in various projects on Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) in the Philippines.

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