



# The Mindanao Peace Process and Roles of Civil Society

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22 August 2017

**The peace process in Mindanao between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front was an important step towards ending four decades of conflict in the south of the Philippines. But this initiative now faces many challenges.**

On March 27th 2014 the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. This ended an armed conflict that began in 1969, which saw at least 120,000 deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced.

Civil society groups on Mindanao have played key roles in supporting a comprehensive and sustainable peace process. However, civilian groups and communities face challenges in the context of new outbreaks of Islamic State-inspired violence, and the recent (re-)imposition of martial law.

The peace process in the southern Philippines carries great geopolitical importance, as an example of a Muslim armed group engaging in structured dialogue to address and resolve key political grievances. It is important that the Mindanao peace process succeeds, as it carries great significance beyond the Philippines.

### The Moro struggle

The population of the Philippines is approximately 100 million, with twenty-two million people living on Mindanao, the largest island in the country. Of these, approximately 10% are Muslims, divided into thirteen ethnolinguistic

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subgroups, known collectively as the Moro; another 5% are upland ethnic minorities, generally referred to as indigenous people. To denote continuity with precolonial ethnic-religious identity, since the late 1960s Mindanao Muslim nationalists have used the epithet 'Moro' to describe themselves and 'Bangsamoro' for their homeland.

Armed groups representing the predominantly Muslim Moros have been struggling for greater autonomy from the Philippines government since the late 1960s. Although narratives of the Spanish and American colonial periods often overplay the extent of conflict between Islamic and Christian communities, Moro groups nevertheless share a strong sense of historic injustice. For many conflict-affected Moro communities, the state is perceived as politically and economically intrusive and predatory, embodying a religious and cultural majority bent on forced assimilation of Muslim minorities. Moro grievances focus in particular on Manila-sponsored 'internal colonization', including transmigration of large numbers of Christian Filipinos to the southern Philippines, settled on land originally belonging to Muslim and other indigenous communities.

### **A troubled peace process**

The 1976 Tripoli Agreement between the government and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) seemed a breakthrough at the time, but was not properly implemented – although a subsequent 1996 agreement granted some autonomy to Muslim areas (in addition to decentralisation under the 1987 Constitution). However, the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao was a largely hollow entity, undermined by poor governance. These setbacks discredited the MNLF, leading to a new round of insurgency by the 12-15,000 strong MILF, which adopted a more overtly Islamic identity.

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The following two decades in western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago were characterized by low-intensity armed conflict, with occasional steep upsurges in fighting associated with human rights abuses and consequent episodes of forced migration. During this period, the MILF consolidated control over key elements of the Moro resistance, reinforcing its Islamic credentials, but always open to structured political engagement with the government.

A 2008 pact with the Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo administration focused on Moro rights to their 'ancestral domain', or traditional lands. This could have been an important breakthrough addressing key grievances, but the agreement was struck down as unconstitutional by the Philippine Supreme Court, in part at the instigation of powerful politician-oligarchs on Mindanao. Following the breakdown of the 2008 peace agreement, the Armed Forces of the Philippines launched a major offensive against the MILF displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians.

During this protracted period of progress towards peace, followed by relapses into violence, relations between civil society and Moro armed groups underwent important changes. Civil society actors have in the past complained about their lack of input in the peace process. One striking difference between the situation since 2012 is the extent to which the MILF has undertaken concerted and systematic efforts to engage with civil society actors, including through a series of community consultations. Nevertheless, questions remain regarding whether it will be possible for community-based organizations to work at the grassroots level without undue political interference or co-optation.

How will civil society activities, some of which are framed within liberal-democratic norms and values, fit the Islamic agenda of some MILF leaders and supporters? Past experience of ineffective government-implemented

development projects, and their appropriation by clientelist networks, has led grassroots activists to be sensitive about corruption and the politicization of aid, and the risks of being co-opted by powerful interests. Moro community activists are often wary of outsider (particularly secular) aid agencies, and sceptical about the international community being able to understand and respond effectively to local needs in the peace process – although some external actors have worked diligently to win local trust.

Despite such challenges, the MILF has maintained its ceasefire – in part thanks to effective ceasefire monitoring on the ground. Mindanao civil society groups have played key roles in ceasefire monitoring, including networks such as the Bantay Ceasefire local volunteers, and through civilian participation with the International Monitoring Team (IMT). The IMT coordinates closely with the MILF and Armed Forces of the Philippines, on several occasions successfully preventing local incidents flaring up into large-scale clashes.

For the MILF, internationalisation of the peace process has resulted in significantly enhanced legitimacy and political credibility, on the national and regional stages. Domestically, one of the MILF's major challenges is to demonstrate its ability to represent not only Islamic Moro communities, but also the indigenous peoples of Mindanao. The MILF (and, to a degree, the MNLF) have included indigenous leaders in political discussions, and the sharia law envisaged for the Bangsamoro under the BBL would not apply to non-Muslims. Nevertheless, some indigenous people fear marginalization in the future Bangsamoro. There are important roles here also for civil society actors, to represent the often excluded voices of indigenous people, and continue building trust and confidence between ethno-linguistic and religious communities.

## Conclusion

A key lesson from the southern Philippines for other peace process is the need to consult extensively with civil society actors, to ensure sustainable buy-in from local stakeholders. This is particularly important given the risks of widespread lawlessness in the post-conflict period, as government and non-state armed groups relax their authority on the ground.

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