

Current Terrorist Groups and Emerging Extremist Armed Movements in the Southern Philippines: THREATS TO PHILIPPINE NATIONAL SECURITY *

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In this current millennium, the Philippines continues to be bedeviled by multiple security threats and challenges emanating from internal and external as well as traditional and non-traditional sources. Most of these security threats and challenges are old ones. But they recur in a new security landscape.

The complex interplay of the whole panoply of these sources makes these threats and challenges so complicated to surmount. A more circumspect understanding of these threats and challenges is essential in the formulation and pursuance of a more nuanced security policy and strategy.

Internally, the resilience of various non-state armed groups (NSAGs) continues to pose a threat to the country's political security and stability. These NSAGs refer to the post-cold war remnants of the new People's Army (NPA), residual armed factions of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), lawless elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), militant members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Al-Qaeda inspired followers of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and the shadowy Moro Army Committee (MAC) and the Khilafa Islamiya (KI). The Involvement of NSAGs in many criminal activities as well as acts of terrorism and violent extremism complicate the multifaceted nature of these security threats. This paper identifies current terrorist groups and emerging extremist armed movements operating in Mindanao as threats to Philippine national security.

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Introduction

In its Country Reports on Terrorism published in May 2013, the United States Department of State claims that the Philippines remains to be threatened by acts of terrorism and violent extremism by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) involved in insurgency, banditry and other illegitimate violent activities. The Report states that in the Philippines, “terrorist acts were generally limited to criminal activities designed to generate revenue for self-sustainment, such as kidnapping for ransom or extortion, but members of terrorist groups were suspected to have carried out several bombings against public and private facilities.”¹

Thus, countering the threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism is a formidable challenge not only for law enforcement and other concerned government agencies but also for the wider society of citizens who are often times victims, casualties, and collateral damages of criminal, terrorist, insurgent and violent extremist activities. This paper describes some current terrorist groups operating in the Southern Philippines. It also presents some emerging extremist armed movements engaged in various acts associated with violent extremism.

These current terrorist groups and emerging extremist armed movements pose tremendous threats to Philippine national security in both traditional and non-traditional sense. They pose traditional security threats because they challenge the sovereignty of the state and the territorial integrity of the Philippine republic. They also pose non-traditional security threats because of the involvement of these groups in maritime piracy, international terrorism, smuggling and trafficking of arms, drugs and persons, as well as other violent criminal activities like kidnap-for-ransom and extortion.

Current Terrorist Groups

Though the Philippines has many armed groups engaged in various acts of terrorism, only two groups have usually received the label of terrorist organizations: the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The termination of peace talks with the National Democratic Front (NDF) in April 2013 has recently placed the New People’s Army (NPA) in the list of terrorist organizations in the Philippines even as some sectors urge the Philippine government to go back to the negotiating table with the communist movement.

¹ United States Department of State Publication, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* (Washington DC: Bureau of Counterterrorism, May 2013), p. 39.

Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)

It is common to refer to ASG when talking about terrorist organizations in the Philippines.² In fact, the United States classifies the ASG as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) for having been responsible for several high profile terrorist bombings in the Philippines like the Zamboanga City bombing of 2002, the Davao City Airport bombing of 2003, the Super Ferry bombing of February 2004 and the Valentines Day bombing of 2005, among others. The ASG has also been suspected of having participated in the January 25, 2011 bus bombing in Makati City and many recent bombings in Mindanao in 2012. The ASG also masterminded numerous kidnap-for-ransom activities in the Southern Philippines prompting Philippine law enforcement authorities to describe the ASG as a mere bandit group.

But others regard ASG members as rebels because of the ASG's original Jihadist cause for the establishment of an independent Islamic state in Mindanao. A few believe that the ASG is an agent of the state and the creation of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP).³

Twelve years after the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the United States, the ASG has drastically evolved into an NSAG with multiple personalities involved in various acts of political and criminal violence. Thus, the current nature of the ASG can only be properly understood if it is analyzed on how the group has effectively morphed through the years.⁴

When Abdurajak Janjalani formed the group in 1989, his original intention was to bridge the divide between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) of Nur Misuari and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of the late Hashim Salamat. Thus, Abdurajak recruited followers from the MNLF and the MILF. But when he died in 1998, the ASG rapidly degenerated into a bandit group engaged in kidnapping, extortion and smuggling activities under the leadership of his brother, Khadaffy Janjalani.

² Rommel C. Banlaoi, "The Abu Sayyaf Group and Terrorism in the Southern Philippines: Threat and Response" in Patrico N. Abinales and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, eds. *The US and the War on Terror in the Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil, 2008), pp. 114-150.

³ Soliman M. Santos, Jr. and Octavio A. Dinampo. "Abu Sayyaf Reloaded: Rebels, Agents, Bandits, Terrorists (Case Study) in Soliman Santos, et, al. *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2010), pp. 115-138.

⁴ See Rommel C. Banlaoi, *Al-Harakatul Al-Islamiyyah: Essays on the Abu Sayyaf Group*, 3rd edition (Quezon City: Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, 2012).

At present, the ASG has adopted a cellular-type structure led by several commanders in their respective geographical turfs in Mindanao, particularly in Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi (ZAMBASULTA). With many commanders at the helm of a single group, the ASG has already evolved into a highly promiscuous armed group linked with other armed groups engaged in terrorism, insurgency, banditry and other violent acts.

The ASG has also become a very resilient armed group having been protected by some corrupt local politicians and a few scalawags in uniform who benefit from ASG's violent activities. Some ASG members even serve as members of private armed groups (PAGs) of a few local politicians in Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi, particularly during elections. Some armed men associated with the ASG served as bodyguards of some local politicians who ran for public posts in the May 2013 Philippine local elections.

Thus, the ASG of the late 80's is no longer the ASG of today because of its current schizophrenic personality. Some armed men who claim to be followers of the ASG are also claiming to be followers of the MNLF and the MILF, depending on the expedient situation. Current remnants still prefer to use the name, ASG, as it has become a very convenient trademark for their violent activities. The ASG is said to have taken its name from Ustadj Abdul Rasul Sayyaf because of his credentials. Sayaff prominently figures at the center of Afghanistan's political realm through the past three decades. He was the leader of the United Front for the Liberation of Afghanistan. Ustadj Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the real person whom this trademark is based, is very displeased to see his name being used in the Philippines for violent purposes.

Since the global war on terrorism in 2001, the Philippine government has already put to justice many ASG members for committing various crimes associated with terrorism. But the ASG threat persists because the ASG has a survival instinct that is also shared by some likeminded groups abroad. ASG's staying power comes from the continuous supply of illiterate and out-of-school youths in Mindanao joining the group for a variety of reasons from personal, economic, social, and political.

In fact, the ASG's rank-and-file is composed of some young orphans who are being forced by old commanders to mount various kidnap-for-ransom and extortion activities. In a 20 September 2012 raid of an ASG camp in the remote village of Calabasa in Zamboanga City, evidences revealed that young Moros aging from 13 to 21 years were being trained by Khair Mundos not only in Islamic education and Arabic language but also in bomb-making and guerilla warfare.

The Philippine military officially declares that the ASG has around 400-armed members as of 2010.⁵ Most of its members operate mainly in Basilan, Sulu, Zamboanga Sibugay and Tawi-Tawi. But there are also sightings of ASG followers in Metro Manila. During the first semester of 2013, the Philippine government says that the ASG membership has declined to around 300 armed followers.

Thus, the ASG is only a very miniscule armed group. But the small number of the ASG members seems irrelevant to the ASG's strength. The ASG threat looms large because it wields tremendous strength from its superb ability to network with countless armed groups in Mindanao that are engaged in various criminal, terrorist, insurgent and even partisan political activities. These armed groups serve as force multipliers of the ASG. Strictly speaking therefore, the armed strength of the ASG can be much more than 300 armed followers if their force multipliers will be included.

While a few ASG commanders still embrace an Islamic ideology that aims to promote the establishment of a Islamic State in Mindanao, most followers have become violent entrepreneurs engaged in predatory economic activities such as kidnapping, extortion and smuggling of arms and drugs. These violent entrepreneurs have skills in jungle and urban warfare. Worse, they have the ability to manufacture improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that they use for criminal, terrorist and insurgent activities.

Based on the independent investigative research conducted by the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR), almost 90% of the funds of the ASG are derived from illicit activities, mainly from kidnap-for-ransom and extortion activities.⁶ The ASG has also demonstrated its inherent capability to conduct acts of piracy and maritime terrorism.⁷

The Philippine government has declared a policy of crushing the ASG through combined police and military efforts. But it recognizes difficulties in doing so because of the ASG's complex links with other armed groups like the lawless

⁵ General Headquarters of the AFP, *Internal Peace and Security Plan, Bayanihan* (Quezon City: Armed Forces of the Philippines Headquarters, 2010), p. 12.

⁶ Rodolfo B. Mendoza, Jr., "The Evolution of Terrorist Financing in the Philippines" (Paper presented at the International Conference in Countering the Financing of Terrorism at the Sulu Hotel, Philippines, 7-8 July 2008).

⁷ Rommel C. Banlaoi. "The Abu Sayyaf Group: Threat of Maritime Piracy and Terrorism in Peter Lehr (ed), *Violence at Sea. Piracy in the Age of Global Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 121-138.

elements of the MILF, rouge factions of the MNLF, remnants of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Mindanao and other violent groups such as the Al Khobar Group (AKG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and even the New People's Army (NPA). The ASG's links with some local warlords, government militias, and local communities confound the already convoluted threat it poses to Philippine internal security.

In other words, the ASG has become a "complex adaptive system" with a superb survival instinct. This instinct to survive is reinforced by their complex linkages with one another as well as with ordinary organized crimes groups and partisan armed movements. Underlying issues of abject poverty, inefficient governance, ethnic conflict, clan feuding and religious/ideological intolerance, among others, also fuel the staying power of the ASG.

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in the Southern Philippines

Aside from the ASG, another terrorist group operating in the Southern Philippines is the JI.

The Philippine government initially denied the presence of JI in the Philippines. But the government has admitted that some JI personalities are still operating in the Philippines, particularly those accused of 2002 Bali bombing. The Philippine military says that the Southern Philippines belong to the original Mantiqi 3 structure of JI.⁸ The raid of a terrorist camp in Butig, Lanao del Sur on 16 July 2012 indicated that foreign jihadists linked with JI continued to be active in Mindanao.

In 2010, the military has publicly revealed that there are around 50 foreign terrorist personalities in operating in Mindanao.⁹ Most of these foreign terrorist personalities are linked with, associated with or inspired by Al-Qaeda. In October 2012, the PNP reported that almost 30 foreign terrorist personalities are associated with JI. Armed groups associated with the ASG, MILF and even MNLF are reportedly coddling them.

⁸ Bilveer Singh, *The Talibanization of Southeast Asia: Losing the War on Terror to Islamist Extremists* (Connecticut and London: Praeger Security International, 2007). Also see Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2003) and Maria Ressa, *The Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia* (New York and London: Free Press, 2003).

⁹ General Headquarters of the AFP, *Internal Peace and Security Plan, Bayanihan*, p. 12.

But strictly speaking, it is very difficult to determine the number of JI elements operating in the Philippines as foreign terrorist personalities operating in the country already refuse to be identified with JI. In fact, the use of the term JI in the Philippines has become a generic label to foreign nationals involved in various acts of terrorism in Mindanao. Most of these foreign nationals come from Indonesia, particularly from the province of Sulawesi. An Indonesian based jihadist facilitating terrorist activities in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Southern Philippines is leading this so-called “Sulawesi Extremist Group” (SEG).

The SEG currently serves as the main hub of what was previously known as the JI activities in Mindanao. SEG members and operatives are also associated with Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), a new extremist group in Poso, Central Sulawesi.¹⁰ Philippine law enforcement authorities believe that through the SEG, the JAT can operate in Mindanao using its existing networks with the ASG, the MILF, the MNLF and other foreign Jihadists. Based on a recent PIPVTR study, JI is operating in the Philippines through a new shadowy group called Khilafa Islamiya, which will be discussed later.

The Philippine military argues that JI operatives in the Philippines have limited capabilities to launch terrorist attack. But the threat they pose to internal peace and security “is their transfer of terrorist knowledge (i.e. assembly and use of improvised explosive devices) to local groups”.¹¹

New People’s Army (NPA)

The NPA is the armed wing of the Maoist inspired Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).¹² Formed on 29 March 1969, the NPA aims to overthrow the current government through an armed revolution using a guerilla strategy of “protracted people’s war” in order to establish a new government patterned after Mao’s concept of a “people’s republic”. The NPA was responsible for several

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, “Indonesia: The Dark Side of Jama’ah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT)”, *Asia Briefing*, No, 107 (6 July 2010).

¹¹ General Headquarters of the AFP, *Internal Peace and Security Plan, Bayanihan*, p. 12.

¹² The Philippines is home to two communist parties: the Soviet-inspired and the Chinese-inspired. For a good historical discussion, see Alfredo B. Saulo, *Communism in the Philippines: An Introduction*, Enlarged Edition (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1990). For an excellent historical examination of the Maoist-inspired CPP, see Kathleen Weekley, *The Communist Party of the Philippines, 1968-1993: A Story of its Theory and Practice* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2011). For a more recent analysis, see Yettan Liwanag, Jun Alcover, Tito Porras and Matthew Jennings, *Atrocities and Lies: The Untold Secrets of the Communist Party of the Philippines* (Quezon City: Nationalist Alliance for Democracy and Freedom Foundation, Inc., 2009).

high profile violent attacks against government forces for more than four decades of its armed struggle guided by the CPP and supported by its political arm, the NDF. Thus, the Philippine communist movement refers to the CPP-NPA-NDF, collectively called by the Philippine military as CNN.

Because of its violent activities in the form of bombings, genocides, ambushes, murders, assassinations, arsons, extortions, and the like, the U.S. State Department listed NPA as a foreign terrorist organization in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks. The *2011 National Security Policy* of the Philippine government describes the NPA as its greatest internal security threat.¹³ The Philippine military, on the other hand, regards the NPA as the “primary threat to the country’s internal peace and security” in its *2010 Internal Peace and Security Plan* (dubbed as Oplan Bayanihan).¹⁴

Official statistics indicate that the NPA has no more than 5,000 fully armed members as of 2010.¹⁵ During the first semester of 2013, the Philippine Army estimated the armed strength of the NPA to be less than 4,000. But the Joint Foreign Chambers and Commerce in the Philippines has estimated the total armed strength of NPA to be at least 10,000 during the same year.¹⁶ The PIPVTR has estimated the armed strength of NPA to be 18,000 as of May 2013 based on a 12% annual increase in their membership since 2010.¹⁷

Half of the total NPA strength is believed to be deployed in Mindanao, particularly in the Eastern side covering the provinces of Agusan del Sur, Agusan del Norte, Bukidnon, Davao del Sur, Compostela Valley, Davao del Norte, Surigao del Sur, Surigao del Norte, and North Cotabato. The 10th Infantry Division of the Philippine Army said the Southern Mindanao has become the epicenter of NPA activities in the entire island of Mindanao with 12 out of 23 reported NPA guerrilla fronts located in three Davao provinces and Compostela Valley.¹⁸

¹³ Office of the President, *National Security Policy, 2011-2016* (Manila: Office of the President/National Security Council, 2011), p. 15.

¹⁴ General Headquarters of the AFP, *Internal Peace and Security Plan, Bayanihan* (Quezon City: Armed Forces of the Philippines Headquarters, 2010), p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁶ Joint Foreign Chambers and Commerce. “Security”. *Arangkada Philippines 2010: A Business Perspective* (Makati City: Joint Foreign Chambers and Commerce, December 2010), pp. 353-367.

¹⁷ Rodolfo B. Mendoza, Jr., *Current Situation and Latest Assessment of the Philippine Armed Communist Movement* (Presented during the public symposium entitled, “The Current State of Armed Communist Movement in the Philippines: Prospects for Peace and Implications for Tourism” held at the Asian Institute of Tourism on May 9, 2013).

¹⁸ “Southern Mindanao is NPA’s New Epicenter”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (9 October 2011).

NPAs in Mindanao have tactical alliance with Muslim rebels through the formation of a shadowy group called Moro Army Committee (MAC).¹⁹ In fact, the NDF has a new front organization in Mindanao coming from a Muslim group called the Moro Resistance and Liberation Organization (MRLO) based in Maguindanao province. The MRLO is considered to be the 16th “allied organization” of the NDF operating in Mindanao.²⁰ In other words, NPA shares its violent extremist activities with Muslim rebels in the Southern Philippines.

The NPA recently demonstrated its violent extremism when it attacked in October 2011 three mining sites in Surigao del Norte, namely the Taganito Mining Corporation, Taganito HPAL Nickel Corporation and Platinum Group Metals Corporation. These attacks resulted in the destruction of US\$68 million worth of mining equipments and facilities including 1 smelting plant, 1 guesthouse, 132 dump trucks, 22 backhoes, 9 barges, 2 cranes, 2 bulldozers, 1 compactor and 1 grader.²¹ These attacks have affected not only investors but also the direction of the peace process between the Philippine government and the NDF.²² NPA’s involvement in illegal taxation, illicit business activities and extortion operations provide the armed group the necessary funding to carry out their violent activities.

Emerging Extremist and Movements

Aside from the aforementioned terrorist groups, the Philippines is also facing the problem of emerging extremist armed movements that are involved in various acts of political and criminal violence. These extremist armed movements are usually identified with the so-called lost commands of the MILF, armed wing of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), rouge factions of the MNLF, remnants of the Al Khobar Group (AKG), armed fanatics of the Awliya Group of Freedom Fighters, and members of the shadowy Moro Army Committee (MAC) and the Khilafa Islamiya (KI).

¹⁹ The existence of a Moro Army Committee (MAC) was classified secret by the Philippine National Police. But the existence of MAC was first discussed in the public domain in January 2011 in the context of the Makati bus bombing on 25 January 2011. See Alcuin Papa, “Bus Attack: A Failure of Intelligence”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (30 January 2011).

²⁰ Ryan Rosauo, “Reds Forming Group to Recruit Moros”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (16 July 2005).

²¹ “NPA Attacks on Mining Firms Imperil Peace Talks, Frighten Investors”, *Philippine Star* (5 October 2011).

²² Ibid.

“MILF Lost Commands”

The Philippine government does not officially describe the MILF as a violent extremist movement or a terrorist group because of the on-going peace negotiation being facilitated by the Malaysian government. But the *2011 National Security Policy* of the current Philippine administration laments that the presence of the MILF is giving the Philippines an internal security problem.²³ The MILF still maintains an armed force that can still challenge the Philippine government.

Government sources say that the MILF has only around 10,500-armed combatants in Mindanao, to date. Sources from the MILF, however, claim that the group has around 100,000 regular troops spread around Mindanao, not to mention its almost a million reserves in its various base commands.²⁴ At present, the MILF has 17 base commands spread around the Southern Philippines, particularly in Western and Central Mindanao. Intelligence sources said that almost 30% of the armed men associated with the MILF belonged to lawless elements or lost commands.²⁵

Based on the recent video obtained by the PIPVTR, the MILF has a strong military ability to launch conventional war against government forces because of its huge arsenal of small arms and light weapons that are locally manufactured. In this video, the MILF showcases its ability to manufacture weapons through its so-called Bangsamoro Firearms Industry (BFI).²⁶ Through the BFI, the MILF can manufacture their own assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, sniper barrels, and machine guns that all can be used not only for conventional and guerrilla warfare but also for the illicit sale of small arms and light weapons.

Though not sanctioned by the MILF Central Committee, some MILF base commanders and sub-commanders have reportedly established operational links with established criminal armed groups in Mindanao engaged in extortion and kidnap-for-ransom operations like the Al-Khobar Group, the Mayangkang Saguille Group, the remnants of the Tahir Alonto Group, and even the Pentagon Gang. In Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulo and Tawi-Tawi areas, the working relations of the MILF with the ASG and residual armed factions of the MNLF also strengthen the armed projection of the MILF.

²³ Office of the President, *National Security Policy, 2011-2016*, p. 16.

²⁴ Author's interview with MILF Chairman Al Haj Murad Ibrahim in Camp Darapanan on 5 September 2011.

²⁵ Data obtained from corroborated sources from Philippine intelligence units October 2012.

²⁶ Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, “The Bangsamoro Firearms Industry” (A video dated 4 November 2009 obtained by the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research in December 2011).

Thus, it is imperative for the Philippine government to ensure the success of the peace talks with the MILF. If peace talks with the MILF succeeds, building peace after the war will continue to be the main national security challenge for the Philippine government.²⁷

The signing of the Framework of Agreement on the Bangsamoro on 15 October 2012 has raised hopes that the MILF can be a partner of the Philippine government in law enforcement operations in Mindanao, particularly against lawless elements associated with the MILF. These lawless elements are national security threats as some of them have reportedly joined a new armed group called the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)

The BIFF is the armed wing of the BIFM, a breakaway faction of the MILF. Ameril Umbra Kato, then commander of the 105th Base Command of the MILF, founded the BIFF in December 2010. On 26 February 2011, Kato renamed the BIFF as BIFM during its First General Assembly “owing to its increasing mass base.”²⁸

Sheik Muheddeen Animbang, a former MILF commander, was elected by the BIFM Central Committee as Vice Chairman for Military Affairs and concurrent Chief-of-Staff of the BIFF. Sheik Muhammad Ali Tambako, another former MILF commander, was elected Vice Chairman for Political Affairs of BIFM. Abuazam Endal, also a former MILF commander, was elected Vice Chairman for Internal Affairs of BIFM.

According to Abu Misrry Mama, a former MILF commander and now the BIFM Spokesperson, the movement has almost 10,000 mass membership based largely in Central Mindanao. The armed-wing of BIFM, the BIFF, has 4,815 assorted arms in its local arsenal. But Mama admitted that the armed individuals of the BIFM are only 1,500 distributed among the four military divisions of the BIFF. Each military division has around 2,000 followers but only 200-250 individuals are actually armed. Mama claims that almost all members of the families of BIFM followers have their personal arms, “so the armed potential of the BIFM should not be underestimated.”²⁹

²⁷ See Mats Berdal, *Building Peace After the War* (London and New York: International Institute for Strategic Studies and Routledge, 2009).

²⁸ Author’s interview with BIFM Spokesman Abu Misrry Mama on 15 December 2011.

²⁹ Ibid.

It was rumored that Umbra Kato died of heart attack in December 2011. To dispel rumors of Kato's death, the BIFM held its Second General Assembly on 20 December 2011 in Camp Al Farouq situated at the tri-boundary of Maguindanao province's Guindulungan, Datu Saudi and Datu Unsay towns. It was during this General Assembly that the BIFM declared full jihad to "pursue the genuine aspiration of the Bangsamoro people for self-determination, freedom and independence" through armed struggle. It was also during this Second General Assembly that the BIFM reiterated its rejection of the MILF stand on the peace process arguing that the MILF is "selling out the real freedom of the Bangsamoro people."³⁰ The BIFM is fighting for the creation of a separate Islamic state in Mindanao.

On 17 November 2011, BIFM founder Umbra Kato met Nur Misuari in Camp Al Farouq. In this meeting, both leaders exchanged views on the peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF. Both leaders also discussed possibilities of unity between the BIFF and the MNLF. In the aftermath of the signing of the Framework of Agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF, the BIFM and the MNLF reiterated their desires to join forces and forge alliances.

Rouge Faction of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)

Nur Misuari founded the MNLF in 1969 to advocate for an independent state of Bangsamoro people in Mindanao through armed revolution. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) recognizes the MNLF as the sole and legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro people. In 1976, the MNLF signed the Tripoli Agreement with the Philippine government to grant Muslim autonomy in Mindanao. But in 1977, the peace process between government and the MNLF collapsed. Armed engagements continued between government and MNLF troops until 1989 and a new Philippine government re-opened talks with the MNLF.

In 1996, the MNLF and the government signed the Final Peace Agreement (FPA). With the FPA, Nur Misuari became the first governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and Chairman of the Southern Philippines Zone of Peace and Development (ZOPAD). Around 7,000 MNLF fighters were planned to be integrated into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) but the full implementation of the integration plan became problematic.³¹

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Soliman M. Santos, Jr., "MNLF Integration into the AFP and the PNP: Successful Cooptation or Failed Transformation" in Soliman M. Santos, Jr. et al. *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2010), pp. 162-184.

After Nur Misuari's term as ARMM governor, he was accused of corruption and unlawful use of public funds.³² In 2001, Nur Misuari declared another armed rebellion against the government and went into hiding until he was captured in 2002. But his loyal followers in Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan continued the armed struggle.

The AFP named the MNLF followers loyal to Nur Misuari as Misuari Break Away Group (MBG). But Nur Misuari claims that his group is the genuine MNLF and not the MNLF that joined the Philippine government. At present, around 650-armed individuals belong to MBG currently described by the AFP as rouge MNLF engaged in various acts of violent extremism. Habir Malik, a loyal follower of Nur Misuari, is known to be the most violent commander of rouge MNLF.

These so-called rouge MNLF members continue to wage armed struggle against the government to establish an independent state of the Bangsamoro people in Mindanao. They have become "residual armed groups", which are parties to the conflict but not parties to the 1996 FPA. Rouge MNLF members are believed to have established ties with the lawless elements of the MILF, key commanders of the ASG and even JI personalities in Mindanao.³³

At present, the MNLF has five major factions. The Philippine military describes the factions supporting Nur Misuari as rouge MNLF or renegade MNLF. These Rouge or renegade members of the MNLF are currently opposing the peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF. They are also accused of supporting another group called Awliya Group of Freedom Fighters.

Awliya Group of Freedom Fighters (Awliya)

The Awliya is a new group of Muslim rebels based in Sulu. The group claims itself to be the protector of the Bangsamoro people. Founded by Hatib Zakaria, a known follower of Nur Misuari, the Awliya became known when it led a suicidal attack of a military detachment in Talipao, Sulu on 24 September 2011.³⁴ Though Muslim leaders in Sulu describe the Awliya Group as a cult, security

³² For more details, see Benedicto R. Bacani, *Beyond Paper Autonomy: The Challenge in the Southern Philippines* (Cotabato City: Center for Autonomy and Governance and Notre Dame University College of Law, 2004).

³³ General Headquarters of the AFP, *Internal Peace and Security Plan, Bayanihan*, p. 11.

³⁴ Julie Alipala, "AFP Warned of Suicidal Members of Moro Group", *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (17 October 2011).

experts regard the group as an emerging threat to Philippine security because it endorses suicide terrorism.³⁵

The official website of the MNLF hails the Awliya Group as an organization reviving the spirit of martyrdom among Bangsamoro people.³⁶ Suicide attacks are known in Sulu as Parrang Sabil, which means “war for martyrdom”. During the Spanish colonial period, this act was described as “juramentado” or a person running amok. Because of its endorsement of suicide attacks, the Awliya Group is an emerging violent extremist group that can further complicate the problem of armed violence in the Southern Philippines.

Al Khobar Group (AKG)

The AKG is more known as an extortion group operating in Mindanao, particularly in the cities of Tacurong, Kidapawan, Koronadal and General Santos. Exact date of its foundation is not clear but the group became known in 2006. One of its leaders is believed to be Mukasid Dilna who is also accused of being a member of the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the MILF. Thus, there is allegation that the Al Khobar is a special unit of the MILF with the primary task to mobilize resources through extortion activities.³⁷ The MILF leadership, however, denies any involvement with any Al Khobar’s bombing activities.³⁸

The Philippine military regards Zabide Abdul (alias Commander Beds) as the founder of AKG. Commander Beds is a known member of the 105th Base Command of the MILF used to be led by Umbra Kato. Thus, the AKG is not only being linked with the MILF but also with the BIFM.

Followers of AKG have not been firmly established because arrested individuals linked with this group are also associated with the ASG and the MILF. But Philippine law enforcement authorities claim that the AKG has no more than 30 regular operatives.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ MNLF Website, “Parrang Sabil (War for Martyrdom) Is Again on the Rise!” (26 September 2011) at http://mnlfnct.com/BMNews_New/Parrang-Sabil%20Again%20on%20the%20Rise.htm.

³⁷ Violent Extremism Knowledge Base, “Al Khobar” at http://vkb.isvg.org/Wiki/Groups/Al_Khobar <accessed on 6 February 2012>.

³⁸ Maria Ressa, “Philippines’s Evolving Terrorism Threat”, *CNN Opinion* (31 January 2011) at http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-31/opinion/maria.ressa.bus.bombing__1_al-qaeda-al-khobar-bus-bombing?_s=PM:OPINION <accessed on 6 February 2012>.

This group became notorious in Central Mindanao because of its bombing activities meant to extort commercial buses and business establishments. Its use of 81-mm mortar in its improvised explosive devices (IEDs) became its signature bomb. This signature bomb has already been shared with the ASG through Basit Usman, the known bomb-maker of the so-called MILF-SOG. The AKG is currently being accused of supplying the bomb requirements of the BIFM. Police and military sources argue that the AKG learned its bomb-making skills from JI operating in Mindanao. The AKG is also reported to have established tactical alliance with another group called the Moro Army Committee.

Moro Army Committee (MAC)

The Moro Army Committee or MAC refers to the Muslim members of the NPA operating in Central Mindanao.³⁹ Sources from the PNP said that the MAC was a product of the tactical alliance between the NPA and the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) of the MILF.⁴⁰ The Mindanao Commission of the CPP authorized the formation of MAC as early as the late 1990s.

For the NPA, the creation of MAC is only natural, as half of the total NPA strength is deployed in Mindanao, particularly in the Eastern side covering the provinces of Agusan del Sur, Agusan del Norte, Bukidnon, Davao del Sur, Compostela Valley, Davao del Norte, Surigao del Sur, Surigao del Norte, and North Cotabato. The 10th Infantry Division of the Philippine Army said the Southern Mindanao has become the epicenter of NPA activities in the entire island of Mindanao with 12 out of 23 reported NPA guerrilla fronts located in three Davao provinces and Compostela Valley.⁴¹

In fact, the NDF, the CPP's political wing, has a new front organization in Mindanao coming from a Muslim group called the Moro Resistance and Liberation Organization (MRLO). The MRLO is principally based in Maguindanao province. The MRLO is considered to be the 16th "allied organization" of the NDF operating

³⁹ The existence of a Moro Army Committee (MAC) was classified secret by the Philippine National Police. But the existence of MAC was first discussed in the public domain in January 2011 in the context of the Makati bus bombing on 25 January 2011. See Alcuin Papa, "Bus Attack: A Failure of Intelligence", *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (30 January 2011).

⁴⁰ "Moro Army Committee" (Briefing obtained from the Philippine National Police, November 2011).

⁴¹ "Southern Mindanao is NPA's New Epicenter", *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (9 October 2011).

in Mindanao.⁴² In other words, NPA, through the MAC and the MRLO, shares its violent extremist activities with Muslim rebels in the Southern Philippines. The presence of MAC is exacerbating the problem of emerging extremist armed movements in Mindanao.

Khilafa Islamiya (KI)

Based on the classified intelligence information obtained by PIPVTR, the KI was organized by a young Moro extremist sometime in early 2012. The group was responsible for the August 16, 2012 bombing of the Rural Bus Transit in Barangay Guiwan, Zamboanga City.

On October 11, 2012, KI also carried out the bombing of Maxandrea Hotel along JR Borja Street in Cagayan de Oro City. Police investigation revealed that Zulkipli bin Hir (alias Marwan), a JI operative in the Philippines, guided KI in the Maxandrea Hotel bombing. On December 24, 2012, the group orchestrated the bombing of Pension House in Iligan City.

Based on the intelligence information obtained by PIPVTR, key leaders of KI met Umbra Kato of BIFM in July 2012 to form a tactical alliance for the establishment of an independent Islamic state in Mindanao. During this meeting, KI and BIFM reportedly established a united front to oppose the peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned discussions, the Philippines continues to face the national security problem of terrorism and violent extremism. The twin problem of terrorism and violent extremism exacerbate the over-all threats of armed violence in the Philippines.

Current terrorist groups and emerging extremist armed movements have complex relations with one another. They even use social networking sites to solidify their relations.⁴³

⁴² Ryan Rosauo, "Reds Forming Group to Recruit Moros", *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (16 July 2005).

⁴³ See Maria Ressa, *Ten Days, Ten Years: From Bin Laden to Facebook* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2012).

Though the Philippine government has already entered into Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF in 1996, so-called rouge factions of the MNLF continue to wage armed struggle. Even the so-called lost commands of the MILF continue to be involved in armed violence even as the central leadership of the MILF engages in peace talks with the Philippine government. Other armed groups associated with the ASG, JI, the BIFF, AKG, Awliya, MAC and KI are also complicating the armed conflict situations in Southern Philippines.

Having a more circumspect and nuanced understanding of the interrelationship of the current terrorist groups and emerging extremist armed movements in the Southern Philippines is therefore essential in order to effectively deal with the challenges they pose for Philippine internal security and regional stability. Without a circumspect and nuanced understanding of these armed groups, the Philippine government is bound to face the vicious cycle of threats they pose to national security.

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