

Detecting Future ‘Marawis’: Considering Alternative Indicators for Assessing the Potential for New Manifestations of Violent Extremism in Mindanao

by Joseph Franco

Abstract

The 2017 Battle for Marawi was the proverbial perfect storm—the Maute Group (MG) and its allies were opportunistic actors who exploited the violent milieu provided by the city. Marawi’s prevailing insecurity, its built environment, and alienated population coalesced into a setting conducive for the protracted battle. What are the potential indicators that could detect future ‘Marawis’? This article highlights the need to identify alternative measures to detect sources of violent extremism in Mindanao. Greater foresight could be obtained by observing proxy indicators such as the responsiveness of local governments, poverty levels, and the effectiveness of educational institutions. Based on field visits conducted for this article, the hinterlands of Maguindanao may be the most likely enclave for new MG-style groups.

Keywords: Mindanao, Terrorism, Philippines, Countering Violent Extremism, Counter-terrorism

Introduction

The 2017 Battle for Marawi was the proverbial perfect storm—the so-called Maute Group (MG) and its allies were opportunistic actors who exploited the violent milieu provided by the city. Fighting in the Islamic city of Marawi erupted on 23 May 2017 after an operation was launched by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) special operations forces (SOF) to capture Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of Islamic State-pledged (IS) militants in Mindanao. What was planned as a swift raid transformed into a confused running gun battle against hundreds of Maute Group (MG) members, other Filipino militants, and foreign terrorist fighters. The raid preempted the MG’s plan to take over Marawi on 26 May 2017. Months before the siege, the MG had planned to time their attack to coincide with the start of the holy month of Ramadan.

After five months of fighting, no more than a dozen of the original 200 or so MG fighters survived. However, similar groups may yet emerge even after the demise of the MG leadership. Given the possibility of a resurgence among jihadist-inspired groups, what are the potential indicators that could detect future ‘Marawis’? Reliance on security sector-measures such as the number of previous violent incidents has only limited early-warning utility. It may be more productive to look at other indicators such as the responsiveness of local government units, poverty levels, and the effectiveness of educational institutions.

Based on an initial assessment of potential proxy indicators for violent extremism and field visits to Mindanao, the hinterlands of Maguindanao may be the most likely enclave for new MG-style groups. It is unlikely that another urban centre in Mindanao would experience a protracted battle like the one in Marawi. However, the presence of un- and mis-governed spaces populated by an organised armed and/or criminal group can be a viable recruitment site for foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and other violent extremist organisations (VEOs). There remains the possibility of a VEO similar to the MG emerging in the so-called ‘SPMS Box’ (see figure 1 below) in the Maguindanao province. The ‘SPMS Box’ is a 10,000-hectare subregion in Maguindanao province named after the municipalities of Shariff Aguak, Pagatin, Mamasapano, and Datu Salibo.

Methodology

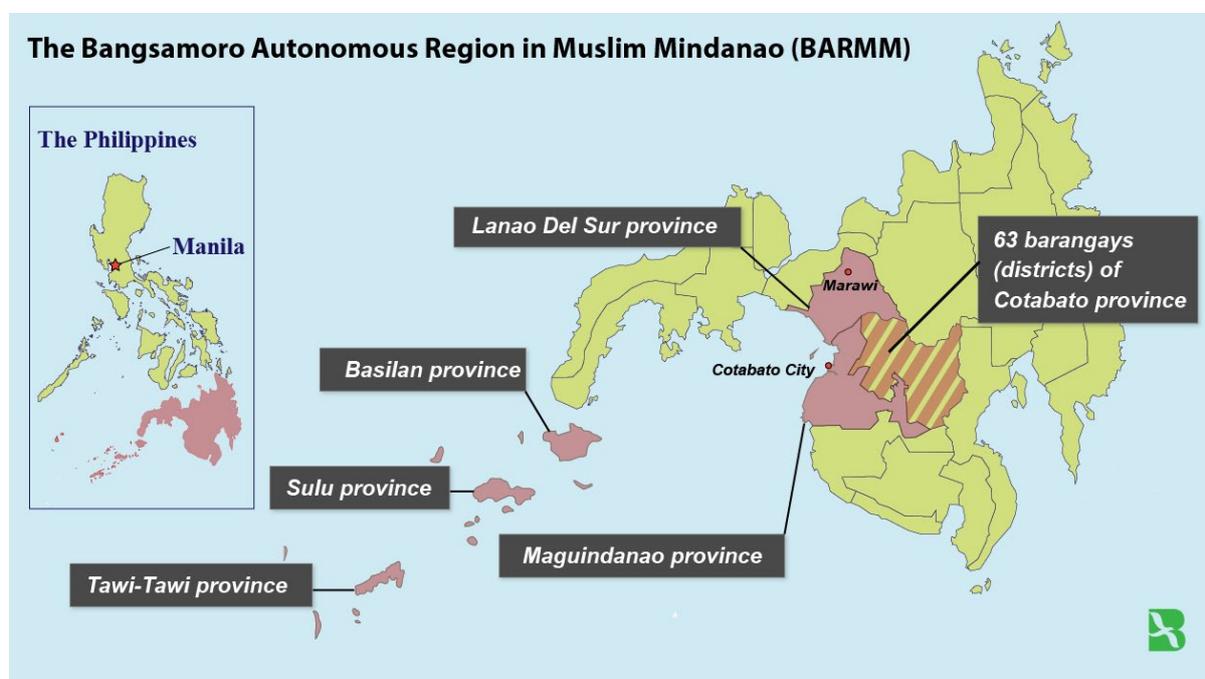
This article intends to shed light on often-overlooked issues, aside from ideological explanations, which contribute to the emergence and persistence of VEOs. During several research trips to Mindanao cities and

municipalities, 30 subject-matter experts were interviewed by the author. Field visits covered the provinces of Misamis Oriental (Cagayan de Oro City), Lanao del Norte (Iligan City), Lanao del Sur (the Islamic City of Marawi and Butig municipality), and Maguindanao. Sites visited include the heavily damaged city of Marawi; the abandoned Butig municipal hall; the ancestral home of the Maute clan; and Cotabato City, the de facto capital of the new BARMM.

Background

More than two years after the Battle for Marawi, over 100,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are still barred from returning to the city.[1] Frustration over the slow pace of Marawi's rehabilitation has raised concerns that the devastated city may become a symbol for terrorist recruitment not just in the province of Lanao del Sur but also across Mindanao.[2] Zachary Abuza has even remarked that Manila need not look far as botching the rebuilding effort meant "[the] next Marawi will be Marawi." [3]

Map 1: BARMM



(Source: Benar News)

Hopes for peace in Mindanao are now pinned on the 80-persons strong Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA). On March 29, 2019, the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) inaugurated the BTA to take on legislative and executive functions. Under the BARMM, conflict-affected areas were granted enhanced political autonomy and given economic resources to address long-standing issues exploited by VEOs. It was the culmination of a decades-long peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a group that originally sought to carve out an independent state in Muslim Mindanao.

There are two sets of hurdles for the effective implementation to the BARMM. In the short-term, optimism over the ability of the BARMM to deliver results has waned. Implementing guidelines covering the hiring of civil servants, budgeting, and the awarding of contracts is not yet finalised. Lack of clarity over the day-to-day operations of the regional government could stymie much-needed socio-economic interventions. In the long-term, the BARMM needs to confront the persistent challenges of local corruption and illicit economies. The dominance of political clans in Mindanao is the manifestation of such local-level dysfunctions.

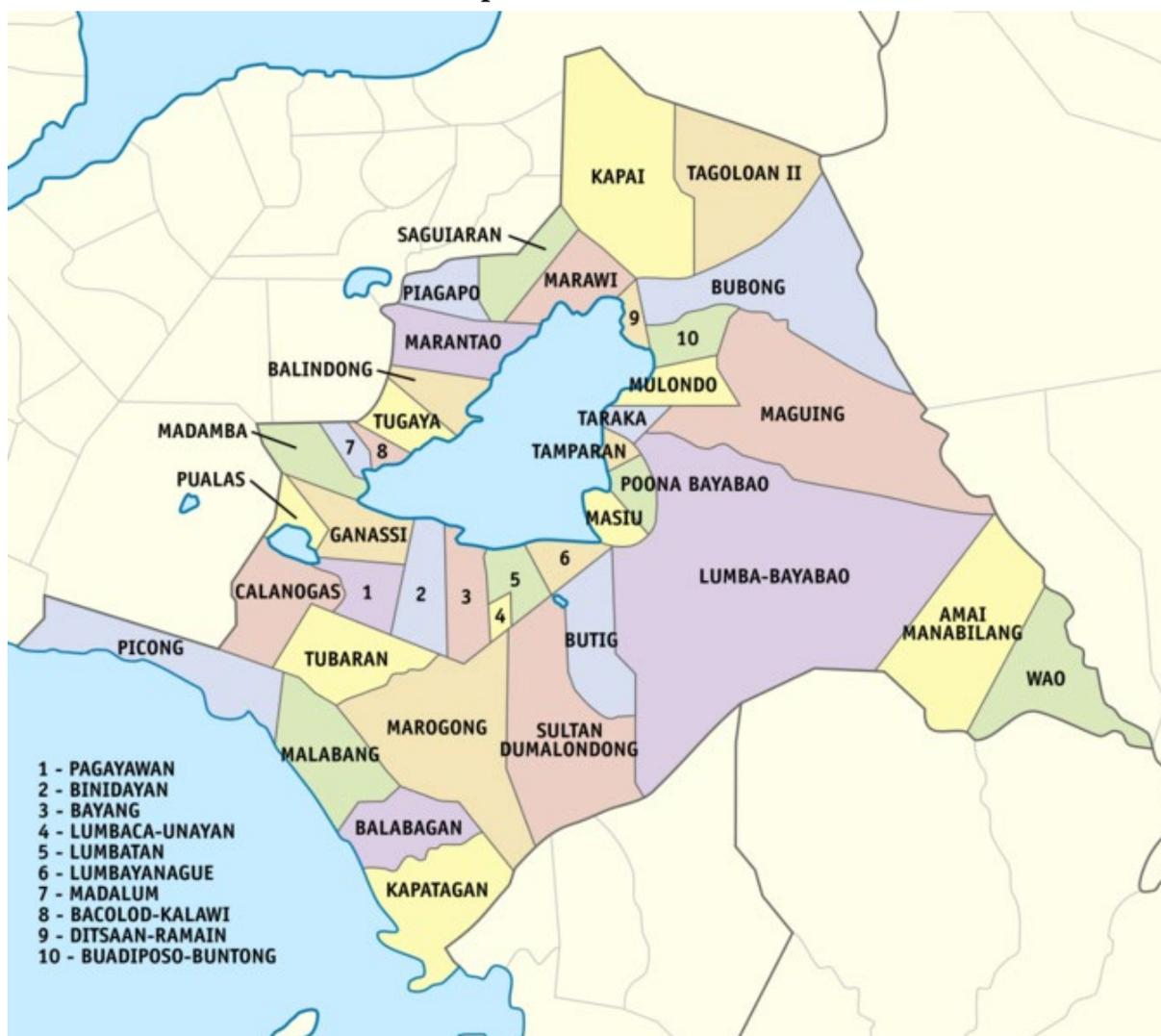
The 2019 Philippine midterm elections saw the continuity of dynastic politics, including the use of violence.

While Mindanao was under martial law, this had not dissuaded clans from ‘business-as-usual’—committing illegal acts during the campaign and the polling periods. Even Marawi itself reported brazen vote-buying activities months before the plebiscite that ratified the establishment of the BARMM.[4] Explosions rocked Maguindanao province and Cotabato City on the eve of the plebiscite.[5] Also documented were reports of vote-counting machines either being tampered with or destroyed.[6]

Marawi and the Rise of the Maute Clan

Prior to the Marawi siege, the city was considered as one of the centres of illicit economic activity in Mindanao. [7] The purported exclusivist mindset of the Maranaos residing in Marawi foiled the ability of local law enforcement to build trusting partnerships with its residents.[8] When fighting began in the Marawi’s suburbs, local community leaders initially rebuffed assistance from the military; stressing that Maranao problems could only be solved by Maranaos. This sentiment even extended to the widespread belief among Marawi’s displaced residents that military forces deliberately razed and looted the city.[9] The recurring narrative among the internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Marawi is about how “Manila destroyed Marawi.”[10] High levels of criminality in the city also resulted in a built environment where families kept arms caches and fortifications. [11]

Map 2: Lanao del Sur Province



(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Local government officials initially thought that the Maute clan was just bringing in illicit wealth for safekeeping within the city and allegedly tolerated the entry of the MG leadership, specifically the Maute brothers Omar and Abdullah.[12] Aside from financial considerations, Marawi's former mayors facilitated the entry of the MG. Brothers Pre and Solitario Salic who were engaged in a *rido* [clan war] with the incumbent vice governor of Lanao del Sur province, Bombit Adiong. Adiong was able to convince the Philippine Army brigade commander to put pressure on the rival Salic clan. In turn, the Salic clan sought help from their Maute clan relatives in the neighbouring town of Butig.[13]

The evolution of the MG is emblematic of how local conflicts from the provincial to the village level can lead to the emergence of groups like the Islamic State-linked (IS) MG. The MG mimicked IS imagery to differentiate itself from other clans' private armies.[14] Before 2016, the MG started as a private militia of the Romato and Maute clans in the Lanao del Sur province. Abdullah and Omar Maute, scions of the Maute clan, took an extremist turn when the clan's favoured candidate lost the mayoral post in Butig municipality. Butig became associated with the terrorist group after a series of military offensives in late 2016. Troops from the Philippine Army's 49th Infantry Battalion (49IB) now occupy Butig—the birthplace of the MG.

Prior to this escalation, the then-unnamed MG was a private militia for the clan headed by its matriarch Farhana Maute, intimidating other clans that contested it in local elections in the province.[15] Clansmen used coercion to mobilise votes and extort contractors involved in public works projects.[16] In 2016, the MG gained public notoriety after having raised a black flag associated with IS in the abandoned old municipal hall of Butig. What began as an attempt to intimidate local rivals caught the attention of IS-linked personalities beyond the Philippines.[17] This show of force was prompted by the loss of the Maute clan's favoured candidate for the mayoralty of Butig and the subsequent disruption of illicit financing.[18]

What became known only more recently was that the origins of the MG as a militia goes back to a specific clan crisis. Farhana Maute entered the clan into a pyramid scheme in 2012, seeking to launder funds it obtained after skimming off funds from government infrastructure projects. However, the venture failed. For the MG, the combination of financial and electoral losses meant the collapse of a decades-long network of patronage. To protect itself from loan sharks, the clan organised in 2015 an armed group as a "defence measure" in 2015. [19] Had they not taken up arms and organised a militia, the Maute clan would have been very vulnerable to a *rido* waged by their creditors.

The Maute Group During and After the Battle for Marawi

The destruction of the MG as an organised armed group came in the wake of the Battle for Marawi. After five months of fighting, no more than a dozen of the original 200 or so MG fighters who attacked the city had survived.

Different respondents came to the same conclusion that the presence of FTFs in the city was limited. During the initial hours of the siege, an 80-strong band of local gunmen he heard speaking in Maranao seized Father Chito Soganub.[20] Soganub was the only Catholic priest permanently assigned in Marawi since 1995. During Soganub's 116 days in captivity, he recalled that he saw 10–12 FTFs among the 80-strong Maute unit based inside the mosque. He assessed that the FTFs were either Indonesians or Malaysians. In his opinion, the FTFs were "not impressive" and appeared to have "no [combat] experience." They appeared more eager to attain martyrdom and would gleefully explain to him that they wished to die in combat to ascend to heaven.

From a special operator's perspective, the presence of foreign fighters was "negligible." [21] As an illustrative example, one Philippine Army officer recalled how his unit was able to recover the cadaver of one "tall, fair-skinned" fighter but was unable to determine his nationality. One Indonesian straggler was captured, days after the end of major combat operations in the city.

Nonetheless, remnants of the MG were able to evade capture in Marawi and sought refuge in rural municipalities of the Lanao del Sur province. Three "hard-core" MG members remained active.[22] After the Battle of Marawi,

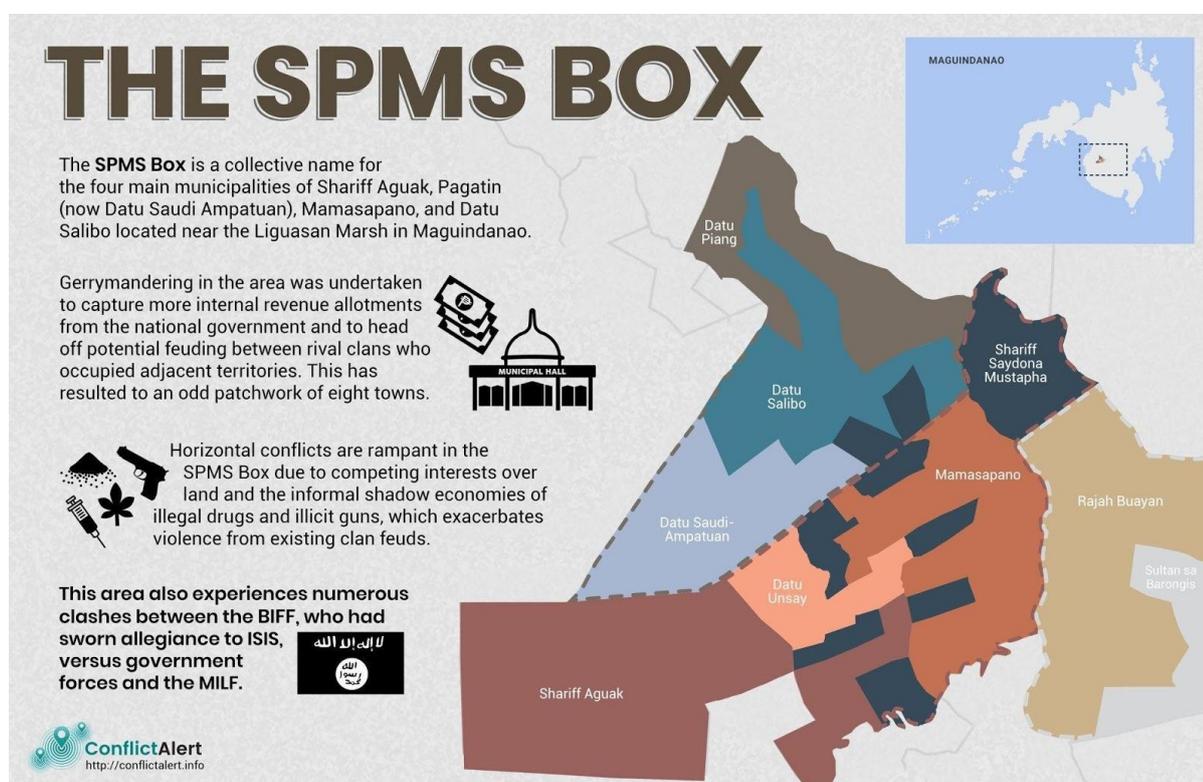
the Philippine Army's 49th Infantry Battalion was involved in two skirmishes in neighbouring municipalities of Masiu and Tubaran, both in the Lanao del Sur province. Contrary to Marawi, Masiu and Tubaran saw no involvement of FTFs. The actual number of armed fighters accompanying the late Abu Dar varied from 10–50 individuals and varied from place to place. In areas where his clan wields more influence, Abu Dar had 50 men to protect him. In villages where his clan's presence is weak, he mustered only 10–15 men. In spite of Abu Dar's efforts, foreign funding remained elusive and the MG lost contact with its foreign supporters.[23] Abu Dar was subsequently killed in a military operation in March 2019.[24]

Where Is the Next Maute Group?

While the MG leadership has been eliminated and its members practically dissolved, similar groups may yet emerge. Maguindanao province is estimated to have around 10 FTFs, according to community leaders.[25] Overall, there are around two dozen FTFs monitored across mainland Mindanao, with a similar number in the island provinces.[26] However, reliable evidence of the emergence of leaders like the Maute brothers, with international connections has yet to surface.

Based on findings from field visits conducted for this article, the most likely enclave for MG-style groups is in the adjoining province of Maguindanao. Maguindanao's is the location of the so-called 'SPMS Box'. The Box has a disproportionately high number of violent incidents in the history of conflict in Mindanao.[27] In 2008, former MILF members launched attacks across the SPMS Box and the adjoining provinces of Lanao del Norte and North Cotabato to protest the collapse of peace talks between the administration of then Philippine president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the MILF. It was the catalyst for the creation of a MILF splinter group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

Figure 1: The SPMS Box



(Source: Conflict Alert)

Present in the Box is a critical mass of armed fighters that could follow the trajectory of the MG.[28] Around 100 members of a private militia, affiliated with the Ampatuan clan, are hiding in the Box.[29] These individuals are in flight from the police after the 2009 Maguindanao Massacre, which saw the killing of 57 journalists by the Ampatuans. These armed individuals often act as mercenaries for other political clans, especially in the run-up to a local election.[30] There are concerns that the Box can provide opportunities for local and FTF groups to converge and exchange terrorist techniques.

However, similar to the Battle for Marawi, the impact of FTFs in the province appear limited at present. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) recovered from the province remained unchanged and do not show indications of foreign influences.[31] A “handful” of FTFs are suspected to be in the SPMS box. Expectations of receiving financial resources from the Middle East, which, however, remain unfulfilled, motivated their local hosts.[32] For the time being, FTFs just provide a degree of prestige to their local hosts.

The Limited Role of Madrasahs

The MG was monitored as it was attempting to “influence” madrasahs and to “take advantage” of lax education accreditation schemes.[33] Nevertheless, these overtures were not successful. Local Islamic teachers in Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao were actively contesting jihadist narratives at the village level.[34] In Maguindanao, it was noted that aside from religious instruction, indigenous forms of conciliation mechanisms have successfully mitigated conflict. The so-called ‘Iranun corridor’ in Northern Maguindanao is bracketed by areas influenced by the Maute Group and the BIFF.[35] Yet, Iranun areas have remained free of jihadist-inspired violence.

In the case of the MG, their recruitment process was premised mostly on financial gain. Young recruits were enticed by cash payments and access to firearms.[36] Parents of recruits were told that their children would be sent to vocational schools in the Marawi and Cotabato City. The MG leadership themselves were products of an elite Christian college in Marawi.[37] It is unclear whether either Omar or Abdullah Maute were educated in the Middle East (Egypt) or South Asia (Pakistan)—such claims may have been part of personal myth-making.[38]

Instead of looking at religious schools, a more accurate indicator of levels of youth radicalisation could perhaps be found in observing secular schools. In Marawi, Mindanao State University (MSU) was exploited by the Maute clan as a recruiting ground for disaffected youths.[39] In Cotabato City, vocational institutions such as the Cotabato City State Polytechnic was the source of recruits that would ultimately be proficient in bomb making.[40]

The New Bangsamoro and Violent Extremism

Monitoring the situation in Cotabato City goes beyond looking at its educational institutions. The effectiveness of governance in Cotabato City, the de facto capital of the new BARMM, could be a bellwether for future trends, including those related to violent extremism.

On January 21, 2019, a plebiscite was held to ratify the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). The referendum garnered 1.5 million ‘Yes’ votes with only 199,000 ‘No’ votes. A new Bangsamoro region replaced the now-defunct Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The BARMM included more than 60 additional villages contiguous to the ARMM, as well as Cotabato City. The BOL was the culmination of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), which signed by the government of Philippines and the MILF. Both the top leadership of the Philippine government and the MILF have heralded the event as the beginning of meaningful governance.

However, the BTA has had a shaky start. For instance, the appointment process for youth representatives was “haphazard”, with some appointees stripped of their designation at the last minute.[41] Another issue raised was the domination of the BTA members from the Maguindanao ethnic group, which was only one out of

13 Filipino Muslim groups.[42] High expectations over what the BARMM can deliver cannot not match the intricate details that need to be resolved in the short-term. The priority for the BTA is on “daily needs” of residents of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).[43] However, the challenges faced by the BTA is the absence of several key policy instruments - namely the Electoral Code, the Administrative Code, and the Budget Code for the BARMM. Without these codes, the BARMM will not be able to recruit and retain members of the civil service, undertake procurement, and conduct BARMM-wide elections.

Delays in infrastructure projects can be the catalyst for frustration among Cotabato City residents and the Bangsamoro as a whole.[44] A pessimistic assessment warned that if there are no meaningful projects completed in six months, residents of the BARMM may take that as a “tipping point” for the resurgence of anti-government sentiments.[45] MILF members are apparently feeling left out of high-level discussions between the Manila and Cotabato-based elites. The advocacy for the BARMM has reversed from a grassroots effort to a more top-down arrangement.

From a security point of view, the multitude of security mechanisms may prove paralysing to the BARMM. The command-and-control arrangements for the Cotabato City police force are one example. Units in the city are under the control of Police Regional Office (PRO) XII, a PRO adjacent to the now-defunct PRO of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao. Police officers in Cotabato City were given the option of joining the PRO-BARMM or returning to their ‘mother unit’. Some police personnel refused to join the PRO-BARMM for fear that it would be politicised.[46]

If the mood in Cotabato City is to be the gauge, the question is no longer whether there will be frustration and impatience at the grassroots level. Without tangible improvements to peace and development, the Bangsamoro constituency may be disillusioned and trigger another cycle of secessionist-inspired violence. The challenge now for the BTA is to manage frustrations in the short-term while building sustainable institutions by 2022. Mindanao is no stranger to how violent extremist groups can thrive and exploit governance vacuums. As BARMM Chief Minister Murad remarked, “...the success of our [Bangsamoro] government is the best antithesis to violent radicalism.”[47]

Proxy Indicators to Detect Future ‘Marawis’

This article highlights the need to identify alternative measures to detect more sources of violent extremism in Mindanao. The lack of good governance and the levels of clan conflict appear to be the most promising indicators for future ‘Marawis’ in central Mindanao. Recruitment remains a clan-based and community-level activity. In turn, weak governance structures can incentivise the creation of private militias as a hedge against uncertainty. At worst, what starts as self-organised groups for communal defence can trigger a security dilemma as clans become inadvertently locked in a spiral of escalation with other militias. More than two years after Marawi, the socio-economic and political context that gave rise to the Maute Group remains largely unchanged.

Illicit economic activities by organised crime groups, whether committed directly or in cooperation with militias, can be considered as an indicator. Another quantifiable proxy indicator is the presence or absence of an entrenched criminal syndicate in a locality. Criminal syndicates when threatened by political and economic stressors can be compelled to embark on more violent trajectories—as seen in the evolution of the MG as an organisation. This implies closer cooperation between government agencies—going beyond combined law enforcement and military operations, to systematic inclusion of financial intelligence organisations. Instead of focusing primarily on tracking down personalities or groups espousing violent extremist ideology, it may be more prudent to include collection and production of intelligence on organised crime groups in proximity to known militant strongholds.

Detecting any future ‘Marawis’ would also entail monitoring non-traditional measures that may not be directly related to CVE or security initiatives. Statistics on municipal or even village-level economic inequality, out-of-school youth, and even incidents of financial fraud can serve as early-warning indicators. Reliance on security

sector-measures such as the number of violent incidents has limited early-warning utility. An initial test for the validity of these proposed proxy measures of violent extremism could involve comparisons between different localities in the BARMM. For instance, municipal and village-level statistics on income inequality from conflict-affected and conflict areas can be compared. A succeeding test can entail using the presence of armed conflict as a control variable to determine the effect of income inequality. The same two-step process can be repeated for other proposed proxy measures to detect future ‘Marawis’.

Conclusion

What needs to be further examined if there are the ideological shifts occurring VEOs in Mindanao. Subject matter experts interviewed expressed surprise at the seemingly minimal use of MG- and IS-inspired groups of social media to recruit new members. Getting individuals to join remains a clan-based and community-level activity in Mindanao. It is also very striking that suicide attacks are not a common fixture in the repertoire of Filipino militants. Even the five-month-long siege in Marawi saw the conspicuous absence of suicide IEDs or vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs). The Battle for Marawi was an existential fight to the finish for the MG and its allies. If Marawi was not enough to prompt the MG to use more lethal measures such as VBIEDs, then it is hard to think of a conflict with even higher stakes.

In short, the apocalyptic ideology of IS has not been fully conveyed to Filipino militants—it was better to try to live to fight another day. Material gains through terrorist means remain the most potent driver that sustain and incentivise non-state armed groups in the Philippines. In such a scenario, ideology justifies and legitimises terrorist tactics. The oft-assumed role of ideology in motivating violence is flipped on its head. Even with the demise of IS and its allies, it is unlikely that violent extremism would disappear overnight in Mindanao or the Philippines as a whole. While not posing an existential threat, VEOs would remain a persistent challenge. Clearly, there are many potential areas of study that can be pursued to head off any future “extremisms.”

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