

MILF's Stalled Peace Process and its Impact on Terrorism in Southeast Asia

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Early July saw a spate of fighting that has seriously challenged the peace process in the southern Philippines. The fighting began with attacks by pro-government paramilitaries on Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) villages in Maguindanao. The MILF's counter-attacks provoked intervention by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). On July 3, after three days of fighting that produced 5,000 refugees, the MILF ordered its forces to stand down at the request of the small contingent of Malaysian truce monitors (Philippine Daily Inquirer, July 3; Reuters, July 3). The following day it declared a unilateral ceasefire for the sake of the peace process. The breakdown of the ceasefire that has held fairly well for more than a year-and-a-half is not surprising and is testimony to the increasing frustration within the ranks of the MILF; sadly, it has repercussions for the war on terrorism in Southeast Asia.

In April 2005, the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MILF announced a breakthrough in their peace talks. Although only some of the details were made public, it is clear that the MILF renounced their bid for an independent Islamic state and accepted a degree of autonomy. In return, the government gave in on two key concessions: it expanded the size of the autonomous region (the 1996 accord with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) created the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which is comprised of five provinces and one city), expanded the political and fiscal autonomy of the ARMM and gave the MILF control over sub-terrainian resources. The agreement proposed the establishment of the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, in which the MILF would have full fiscal, political and religious authority.

Since then, the talks have stalled on the issue of "ancestral domain"—the actual size and scope of the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity. Moreover, the agreement was conditioned on a constitutional amendment. Several MILF officials told this author a year ago that they would give the government up to two years to push through the charter changes so that an agreement could be finalized [1]. It has already been more than a year, with no charter change in site, and a president who is so politically weakened that it is unlikely that she will be able to push through the necessary amendments in the Philippine Congress, especially after the brief imposition of emergency powers to fight off a "leftist-rightist coup" in February.

There are additional stumbling blocks to the peace process. First, there has been little public explanation as to how this agreement will impact the GRP-MNLF agreement of 1996 that established the ARMM. Will the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity supersede the ARMM? Will the MILF share power with the MNLF? Will the MILF protect the MNLF's economic interests? Will the MNLF accept the establishment of Islamic institutions? Indeed, one of the causes for the recent outbreak of fighting was a June 23 car bombing-cum-assassination attempt on the anti-MILF governor of Maguindanao Andal Ampatuan that killed six people, including two of his relatives, which some say was perpetrated by MILF commanders Ombra and Pakiladatu. These two commanders were also suspects in the 2002 bombing that killed Ampatuan's son (Manila Star, July 4; ABS-CBN, July 4). Intra-Muslim rivalry is a major stumbling block to the peace process.

Second, there are many potential spoilers, not least of all the politicized Philippine military, many of whose leaders are against making significant concessions to the rebels. The military is politically strong because President Arroyo has become increasingly dependent on them. Third, the Philippine government is so fraught with corruption and institutional frailties that even if it were fully committed to the peace process it would have trouble implementing it.

The stalled peace process has implications to the war on terrorism in Southeast Asia. Frustration within the MILF is palpable. In early March, coup rumors circulated in Mindanao. Although the MILF quickly denied that there had been any move to unseat the moderate Chairman Ebrahim el Haj Murad, who has been behind the peace process, it is clear that a growing cadre of MILF members are questioning the wisdom of the ongoing peace process. Already, many in the MILF were skeptical of the agreement and many hardliners—such as Wahid Tondok, Salamat Samir and Ustadz Ameril Umbra Kato—saw it as a betrayal of the original goal to establish an independent Islamic state. It took Murad two years to effectively consolidate power following the death of the group's founder Salamat Hashim in 2003, to the point where he could make these concessions (in early 2005, he also re-organized the MILF's military commands and installed loyal lieutenants in positions of command in an attempt to isolate the hardliners). MILF leaders are very concerned about the growing radicalism of their youth who are frustrated with the older leader's inability to win the revolution. Should the peace process completely break down, their ability to resort to war will be greatly diminished. If Murad cannot deliver a viable peace, he will be replaced by Islamist hard-liners, such as Kato and Tondok, or more likely by the vice chairman, Aleem Abdulaziz Mimbintas. While Murad is a popular leader, he is not a religious leader, a fact that has angered many, and his hold on power is not guaranteed.

Moreover, many in the MILF's armed wing contend that as each day passes, the MILF's ability to wage war (because of military dissipation and the short shelf life of ammunition and weapons in the tropics) diminishes. One of the ways that the MILF has augmented its military capacity is by forging tactical alliances with groups such as the Southeast Asian affiliate Jemaah Islamiya (JI).

The MILF began to invite members of JI to train in its camps beginning in 1996. At the time, a number of al-Qaeda trainers were dispatched to Mindanao to train MILF and JI operatives. The MILF denies that these ties are formal (they admit that some individual commanders may maintain such relations) and that they have been severed [2]. Indeed, they cite the fact that they have established the Joint Ad Hoc Action Group with the government specifically to go after criminal elements and JI and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists; they have not, however, arrested or turned over a single individual. A steady stream of both high and mid-level JI operatives arrested in Malaysia (Zulkifli and the Darul Islam 12), Indonesia (Mustaqim and Abdullah Sonata) and the Philippines (Taufiq Riefqi and Rohmat) in the past two years has confirmed that training is still continuing, although at a much lower rate than in the late-1990s.

In addition, the MILF continues to provide sanctuary to a core cadre of high-level JI operatives—including Dulmatin, Umar Patek, Zulkifli bin Hir and possibly Abdulrahman Ayub—who have continued to train members of JI and the ASG in MILF camps. Hardline members of the MILF continue to protect these operatives and contend that keeping channels open to the international jihadist community is in the MILF's interest in the absence of a durable peace; indeed, continuing this relationship makes perfect sense.

For one, the MILF has not been punished for these actions. Since 2001, the Philippine government has pleaded with the U.S. government not to put the MILF on the Foreign Terrorist Organization list for fear of undermining the peace process, although last year the U.S. government came very close to designating them. Second, most fighters in the MILF see the JI members as their brothers, fellow mujahideen whom they have known since Afghanistan. There is a commitment to a global agenda, which speaks of the fard ayn (the religious obligation) to help other jihadis. Third, the MILF has low expectations for the outcome of the peace process and the government's seriousness and intentions to actually implement it. If history is any guide, their skepticism is well placed. They cannot afford to cut ties to JI and al-Qaeda. The MILF does not regularly or like to employ terrorism, but they use it like clockwork when they suffer battlefield losses—usually to good effect in that it ends the offensives.

The festering conflict in the southern Philippines has regional security implications beyond simple human security concerns in the Philippines. Weak states can easily become failed states and serve to legitimize the Islamic vigilantism of transnational jihadist organizations.

Notes

1. Readers should note that there have been two concurrent moves to amend the constitution. The first would abolish the U.S.-style presidential system and replace it with a Westminster style parliament. The second proposal would break down the strong centralized state and devolve significant political and economic power to the provinces. It is the latter constitutional reform that is the crux of the peace process. Both amendments are languishing because of fighting between the weakened president and a hostile congress.

2. See, for example, the June 9, 2006 posting on the MILF's website at www.luwaran.com/modules.php.

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