

COMMENTARY

The Ruthless Political Entrepreneurs of Muslim Mindanao

Sunday 29 November 2009, by [LARA Francisco Jr.](#) (Date first published: 26 November 2009).

LONDON (MindaNews/26 Nov) — The Maguindanao massacre predicts the eruption of wider violence and conflict as the nation heads towards the 2010 elections. Yet to dismiss this incident as “election-related” is to miss the fundamental political and economic implications of this evil deed. The massacre is rooted in the shift in politico-economic sources of violence and conflict in Muslim Mindanao. It signifies the emergence of new-type warlords whose powers depend upon their control of a vast illegal and shadow economy and an ever-growing slice of internal revenue allotments (IRA). Both factors induce a violent addiction to political office.

Mindanao scholars used to underscore the role of “local strong men” who were an essential component of the central state’s efforts to extend its writ over the region. The elite bargain was built upon the state’s willingness to eschew revenue generation and to grant politico-military dominance to a few Moro elites in exchange for the latter providing political thugs and armed militias to secure far-flung territories, fight the communists and separatists, and extend the administrative reach of the state.

The economic basis of the elite bargain has changed since then. Political office has become more attractive due to the billions of pesos in IRA remittances that electoral victory provides. The “winner-takes-all” nature of local electoral struggles in Muslim Mindanao also means that competition is costlier and bloodier. Meanwhile, political authority may enable control over the formal economy, but the bigger prize is the power to monopolize or to extort money from those engaged in the lucrative business of illegal drugs, gambling, kidnap-for-ransom, gun-running, and smuggling, among others. The piracy of software, CDs and DVDs, and the smuggling of pearls and other gemstones from China and Thailand are seen as micro and small enterprises. These illegal economies and a small formal sector comprise the “real” economy of Muslim Mindanao.

The failure to appreciate how this underground economy, coupled with entitlements to massive government-to-government fund transfers, shapes prevailing notions of political legitimacy and authority in the region partly explains the inability of the central State to deal with lawlessness and conflict.

Political legitimacy in Muslim Mindanao has very little to do with protecting people’s rights or providing basic services. People rarely depend on government for welfare provision, and are consequently averse to paying any taxes. People actually expect local leaders to pocket government resources, and are willing to look the other way so long as their clans dominate and they are given a small slice during elections. Legitimacy is all about providing protection to your fellow clan members by trumping the firepower of your competitors, leaving people alone, and forgetting about taxes.

There were positive signs in the recent past, especially among the Moro women and youth who bore the brunt of conflict and who sought a different future. But achieving their aspirations depends on their ability to rise above clan structures and the dynamics of hierarchy and collective self-defense

that bound its members. This dilemma was painfully exposed in the Maguindanao massacre, where Moro women who usually played a strategic role in negotiating an end to *rido* became its principal victims.

The sad thing about the recent massacre is that it could have been avoided. Everyone in Central Mindanao knew about the looming violence between the Ampatuan and Mangudadatu clans as early as March 2009, when the latter's patriarch Pax Mangudadatu confronted Andal Ampatuan in a public gathering and made known his clan's intention to challenge the latter's political hold on Maguindanao. This threat was in turn based on the knowledge that Ampatuan was planning to undermine the Mangudadatus by fielding a challenger against them in Sultan Kudarat.

In short, the "looming" *rido* which pundits are predicting today actually started more than six months ago. Yet neither Malacañang nor the COMELEC, PNP, and the AFP made any attempt to monitor their activities, disarm their private security, demobilize their loyalists within the police and military, and ring-fence their camps.

Why?

The answer lies in the newfound role of Muslim Mindanao to national political elites. The region is known for a long history of electoral fraud. The difference today lies in its ability to provide the millions of votes that can overturn the results of national electoral contests, a situation brought about by the creation of a sub-national state (ARMM) and reinforced by the sort of democratic political competition in the post-Marcos era that makes local bosses more powerful and national leaders more beholden to them. This was the case in the presidential elections of 2004 and the senatorial race in 2007. It will serve the same purpose in 2010. Whose purpose is served by arresting Ampatuan in an election year? Certainly not those of the ruling coalition.

This partly explains the foot dragging and the lame treatment of principal suspects in the massacre. And to those pressing for limited martial rule in Maguindanao, beware what you wish for. Having a surfeit of troops on the ground can provide a superficial peace at best. At worse, it may facilitate the same type of electoral fraud in 2010, or leverage the firepower of the dominant clan over another.

In a region where the rebellion-related conflict between the GRP and the MILF received all of the national and international community's attention and aid, NGOs such as International Alert and the Asia Foundation have often decried the ignorance and indifference of the government and donor agencies to community-based inter and intra clan violence. As International Alert asserts, it is time to focus on the confluence between both types and sources of violence and conflict. Indifference will only lead to more death and destruction as the election approaches, when a convergence between rebellion-related, and inter and intra clan conflict occurs as military forces and armed rebels take sides between warring clans and factions.

Mindanao scholars such as Patricio Abinales, James Putzel, and John Sidel have previously noted how local strong men made Mindanao, and how the region provided an ideal case of the country's "imperfect democracy" and "political bossism". More recently, the conflict scholar Stathis Kalyvas called attention to the birth of "ruthless political entrepreneurs" who shape and are shaped by the dynamics between states, clans, and conflict. The viciousness of the Maguindanao attack shows how these phenomena resonates here. It demonstrates the weak and narrow reach of the central Philippine state in Muslim Mindanao, and how the continued reliance on local strong men will not end the cycle of violence.

P.S.

* From Mindanews, November 26, 2009.

* Francisco Lara Jr. is Research Associate at the Crisis States Research Center, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics.