

The Communist Insurgency in the Philippines: Tactics and Talks

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Philippine government is unable to control and develop large parts of the country because of the longstanding communist insurgency. The conflict has lasted more than 40 years and killed tens of thousands of combatants and civilians. Planning their attacks and securing weapons and funds locally, the insurgents have strong roots in the different regions where they operate and have proved hard to defeat. The government's counter-insurgency strategy has diminished their numbers but has not been able to destroy the organisation. Neither side will win militarily. As peace negotiations resume under the Benigno Aquino administration, the parties to the talks should immediately commit to making existing human rights monitoring mechanisms work, while they try to reach the more difficult long-term goal of a durable political settlement.

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its New People's Army (NPA) launched their armed struggle against the Philippine government in 1968. The organisation was strongest in the 1980s, as the repressive government of Ferdinand Marcos fell and was replaced by the Cory Aquino administration. The insurgency had become a social movement, with an array of above-ground groups intertwined with an underground guerrilla army. Counter-insurgency operations coupled with an internal split crippled the organisation and cost it many of its supporters in the early 1990s. By 2000, the CPP-NPA had regained strength and has since proved remarkably resilient. It remains active in mountainous and neglected areas countrywide. Without altering its communist ideology, the organisation set up political parties that successfully stood for congress and re-engaged in peace negotiations with Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's government. Talks fell apart in 2004, and the Philippine military intensified operations against the guerrillas but failed to wipe them out by June 2010, when President Benigno "Noy" Aquino was sworn into office.

The NPA has fewer than 5,000 fighters, but it still has supporters and is recruiting new members, securing weapons and launching ambushes across the archipelago. It justifies its actions, including extrajudicial killings of "enemies of the people", in ideological terms. The NPA remains a serious threat to soldiers, police and anyone it considers a military informant or collaborator, even though recruitment of highly educated cadres is difficult and crucial mid-level commanders are hard to replace. Hundreds die in the conflict every year, including more than 350 NPA regulars and government security forces in 2010.

The Philippine military has failed to defeat the NPA. Senior commanders feel they do not have sufficient resources and so rely on tribal militias and paramilitary forces. These groups are often poorly supervised and commit abuses. The counter-insurgency strategies used by successive governments have combined military operations and intimidation of communities with development work, yielding few results and often proving counter-productive.

The insurgency has effects far beyond the remote villages where guerrillas and soldiers snipe at each other. The CPP's use of "front organisations" that organise for and channel funds to their comrades underground has made leftist activists targets of military and paramilitary retaliation, resulting in a spate of extrajudicial killings over the past ten years. The conflict has fragmented the left in a country sorely in need of a unified challenge to the stranglehold powerful families have on political office at all levels. "Revolutionary taxes" on businesses discourage investment and permit the rebels to skim profits from resource-rich but impoverished areas.

Resolving the CPP-NPA conflict has often taken a back seat to efforts to reach a political settlement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and is frequently neglected by the international community. But for many Filipinos, the communist insurgency is more immediate, as most have relatives or friends who were once involved or were sympathisers themselves in the 1970s or 1980s. Meanwhile, the Philippine government and donors have tried to address problems in Muslim Mindanao, even though the CPP-NPA is responsible for a considerable amount of the violence plaguing the island. The "Mindanao problem" will not be solved by focusing on Muslim areas alone.

The Aquino administration's decision in October 2010 to revive negotiations with the CPP-NPA was welcome, but it is unclear where talks will lead. Informal discussions in December 2010 yielded the longest holiday ceasefire in ten years, and formal negotiations are scheduled to begin in February 2011. Historically, talks have been a tactic for the CPP-NPA, which remains committed to overthrowing the Philippine government. Most of the organisation's senior leaders are now in their 60s and 70s, some reportedly in poor health. Many have devoted their entire lives to the cause, and a few may be eager to see a settlement within their lifetimes. But there are reports of tensions at the top that could have the potential either to derail peace talks or to deepen internal rifts. The Aquino administration's pursuit of a political settlement also entails a dramatic change for the army, which has had the green light to pursue the NPA militarily for many years. The government needs to ensure that it has full support not only from all ranks of the army, but also from police and paramilitary forces for its new internal security plan.

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