

# Southern Philippines backs Muslim self-rule in landslide result

Tuesday 29 January 2019, by [FONBUENA Carmela](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2019).

## **Result raises hopes of an end to decades of violence including attacks by Isis-inspired groups**

People in the Muslim-majority southern Philippines have voted by a landslide to create a new autonomous region covering five provinces and three cities, a result the government hopes will bring peace to a war-torn part of the country and address issues that lure recruits to Isis-inspired groups.

On Friday, the election commission declared the Bangsamoro Organic Law plebiscite “ratified”, four days after the vote was held. Almost 1.6 million voted yes, while 250,000 voted no.

Another vote will take place on 6 February to allow more towns and villages to join the autonomous region.

The plebiscite sealed a peace deal that the government signed with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 2014, but which languished in the national legislature until it was approved last year. The rebels have pledged to end a three-decade separatist uprising that killed more than 100,000 people in exchange for broader autonomy.

The Liberation Front’s chairman, Murad Ebrahim, welcomed the victory, but said he knew the real work for lasting peace was just beginning.

“We really see this as a huge challenge, because from being revolutionaries, we will be transforming into governance. That will be very challenging, because many of us have never been in government,” said Murad, who is poised to lead the new region.

The Bangsamoro region will expand the powers, resources and territory of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) that it replaces. It will also receive an estimated at \$1.3bn (£1bn) grant to bolster development in an area with some the highest poverty rates in the Philippines.

Bangsamoro will include the core ARMM territories of Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi.

Cotabato City, which twice rejected joining the ARMM in past referendums, voted yes to the new region, though by a narrower margin than elsewhere, 36,682 to 24,994.

Celebrations erupted on social media as early as Monday night when unofficial counts pointed to a victory for yes across the southern Philippines, raising hopes of a final end to decades of violence. There has been a recent wave of attacks by militants linked or inspired by Isis, including the siege of Marawi city in 2017.

An explosion on New Year's Eve killed two people and wounded dozens in Cotabato City. The night before the plebiscite, a grenade was thrown at a house of a public official.

The government described the day of the referendum as "relatively peaceful", although a few scuffles outside polling stations were reported. Turnout exceeded 85%, according to James Jimenez, a spokesman for the election commission.

Two crucial steps that will determine the success or failure of the newly created region will follow: governance and demobilisation. First, a Bangsamoro Transition Authority will be appointed by President Rodrigo Duterte to govern until October 2020, when elections will take place across the country. The 80-strong body is expected to be dominated by Liberation Front nominees.

Second, the Liberation Front will demobilise its 30,000-40,000 forces in exchange for social and livelihood assistance.

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