



RECENT INSURGENTS ATTACK IN PHILIPPINES AND ITS IMPACT ON PEACE PROCESS

A Commentary

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While Kenyaⁱ and Nigeriaⁱⁱ are in the news because of Islamic extremists, who are using excessive violence and bloodshed against civilians in order to establish an Islamic State, the situation is not very different in the Philippines, which has been struggling with an Islamic insurgency for a long time. The insurgency is one of the problems which are rampant both in India and the Philippines. While the insurgency in India is against the state's exploitation of poor and tribal people who sit on big chunks of land that have huge deposits of several precious minerals. In Philippines the cause of the insurgency is religious, where the militants of Islamic group "Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)ⁱⁱⁱ" have been fighting for autonomy for Philippines Muslims for last 40 years.

Philippines is in the news again due to the three weeks long clash between the Islamic insurgents and the Philippines military which ended on 28th September in the victory for Philippines military. The crisis erupted on 9th September when about 200 insurgents belonging to a faction of MNLF launched a planned pre-dawn assault on the port city of Zamboanga with the intention of seizing the city which has a population of about 800,000 and proclaiming the Independent Bangsamoro Republic (an Islamic state). The rebels took about 180 of the city residents as hostage and refused to negotiate with the Philippines government. Due to the continuous fighting between government troops and rebels, more than 10,000 houses were burnt by the rebels or destroyed due to fighting, more than 200 people (including rebels) died and more 110,000 have been displaced.

The whole problem is about the demand of several insurgent groups in an autonomous state for Muslims in the Mindanao region [called the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)] which is the southernmost island group of the Philippines as the region is predominantly Muslim. Indigenous Muslims make up about 5% of Philippines total 106 million population and are known as Moro people, while most of the rest population adheres to the Christian faith. Muslim insurgents formed the MNLF in 1971 in order to achieve their goal by coercing the government through armed insurgency. Till date about 150,000 people have died in the fighting.

The government has been struggling for decades to contain the Muslim led attacks on catholic Filipinos. After several rounds of negotiations the MNLF signed a peace deal with the Philippine government in 1996, but its leaders were angered when a separate agreement was forged with the rival “Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)^{iv}” last year that some leaders said would encroach on the original deal. Officials in Manila and Moro have been negotiating under a tentative power and a resource sharing agreement reached last year^v with MILF which is a splinter group of original Moro Front. The meeting was held in August 2011 in Japan where Malaysia served the role of key mediator.

Peace negotiations with the MILF culminated in the 2012 Framework Agreement on Bangsmaro, which laid down the foundation of an Islamic sub-state in the near future, allowing the Muslim minority (Moro) to enjoy a measure of political, cultural and economic autonomy in the South.^{vi} This constituted the best attempt at a political settlement of the conflict regarding separate statehood for Moro people.

But because the Philippines government chose to negotiate only with one among several insurgent groups and stakeholders, the process has backfired. The main drawback of the agreement was that the original MNLF was sidelined from the talk and instead chose to negotiate with a newer insurgent group. So in the absence of an all inclusive stakeholder’s talk, the agreement’s foundation itself was shaky^{vii}. Taking a lesson from recent incident, the government needs to invite all the parties for talks in order to come to a final solution.

MNLF members decided to protest their exclusion from the ongoing peace process by declaring “independence” from the Philippines. They argued that the government-MILF

negotiations unjustly superseded the 1996 peace deal, which marked the cessation of the MNLF's two-decade-long guerrilla war against the government^{viii} and the establishment of the ARMM shortly after.

It is believed that the recent attack was launched by a rebel faction of the MNLF because its leaders are angry at being sidelined from peace talks between the MILF and the government. The rebels even refused the offer of surrender and come to table for talks by Philippines government and demanded that the United Nations or the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation be brought in to facilitate negotiations on this 'international issue'.

The issue is relevant for other countries too and UN has very rightly expressed its concerns over the armed struggle in which civilians are unnecessarily losing their lives. The matter is not just about forming an autonomous Islamic state for minority Muslims in Philippines but also about the tussle for power among the several splinter groups of Moro Front. The possibilities lies that even if an Islamic state is formed, the fighting is likely to continue by those groups who do not get a share in the government as it is most likely to be dominated by one of the groups.

It is imperative that Philippines find an amicable solution of the issue so that peace and normalcy could be restored in the war ravaged Mindanao region. The inner stability will provide Manila with the opportunity to focus more on its economic and security challenges.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ 68 civilians were killed in a mall sieged by Al Shabab terrorists of Somalia.

ⁱⁱ About 50 school children were massacred by Islamic extremists.

ⁱⁱⁱ MNLF is the original insurgency group whose leader is Nur Misuari.

^{iv} MILF is currently Philippines largest insurgency group whole leader is Murad Ebrahim.

^v New attack raises fears of broader threat in Philippines.13 Sept 2013.<http://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/new-attack-raises-fears-broader-threat-philippines>

^{vi} See the official gazette at <http://www.gov.ph/the-2012-framework-agreement-on-the-bangsamoro/>

^{vii} See the background in detail at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/09/philippines-struggles-with-muslim-rebels/>

^{viii} Philippines struggles with Muslim rebels.By Richard Heydarian.24 Sept 2013.http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-240913.html