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A Diplomatic Milestone for Mindanao?

Summary

- A recent framework agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) leaves much yet to do in building peace in Mindanao, but does offer an opportunity for careful progress.
- Many of the problems that have plagued previous agreements in Mindanao's 40-year conflict still exist.
- The international community has an opportunity to support progress and avoid a repeat of previous agreements' disappointments.
- Careful foreign aid policies that empower locals and do not foster competition can be critical in building peace in Mindanao.

Introduction

The historic October 15th agreement between the government of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) will require a new level of interest and commitment from domestic and international players to result in a lasting and stable peace. Both sides have negotiated hard to put this framework on the table, and the signed document is cause for calibrated celebration.

The framework agreement comes after more than four decades of fighting in Mindanao (southern Philippines). The conflict's roots lie in the economic and political marginalization of indigenous peoples (the largest of which is the predominantly Muslim Moros) by centuries of colonialism and decades of central government policies encouraging the migration of northern Filipinos to the southern island of Mindanao. The self-determinationist aims have been claimed by three rebel organizations, including the MILF, currently the largest; the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which has signed several previous agreements with the GRP; and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which refuses negotiations.

The framework acknowledges the Bangsamoro identity, and paves the way for an autonomous entity with powers of law, taxation and justice under broad outlines. This entity would replace the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM)—an earlier, but widely unsatisfactory, attempt to assuage the conflict. Many details of the new arrangement, however, are left to a set of yet-to-be-written annexes to the agreement: on power sharing, wealth sharing, and transitional arrangements and modalities.

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A Step Forward

The framework agreement is a rare window of opportunity in one of the world's longest-running conflicts, and one marked by cycles of combat and negotiation. These opportunities extend beyond the obvious benefits to combatants and civilians who call Mindanao home. Moving into the Pacific Century, the Philippines is a key U.S. ally. While its military manages two conflicts at home (against both the Moros in the south, and a nationwide challenge posed by the Communist New People's Army), the archipelago also faces rising tensions with China. The Philippine government and its allies have an interest in domestic resolution that would allow the Philippines to turn additional attention and resources outward.

Furthermore, Mindanao is home to significant oil, natural gas, mineral wealth and rich farmland outside of Southeast Asia's typhoon belt. All of these resources have been underdeveloped amid the ongoing conflict, which has also exacerbated maritime insecurity in an area through which approximately half of the world's shipping passes.¹

October's framework agreement is the latest in a string of documents—none of which, obviously, has been able to quell the conflict. The MILF has been negotiating with the GRP since 1997, after a 1996 agreement with the MNLFF that proved widely unsatisfactory.

Challenges Ahead

While the framework agreement is an important step in moving Mindanao toward peace, the process moving forward faces several challenges. First, the agreement is a framework—not a comprehensive and self-implementing peace deal. The challenge now lies in hammering out details in the series of annexes, casting them into law, passing this legislation and enacting it.

Prior deals inked by the GRP and MNLFF in 1976, 1986, and 1996 underscore the devil in details of power sharing and dividing Mindanao's wealth. The political and legal wrangling that accompanies the details of these agreements can be, and historically has been, a forum for spoilers. This is particularly so as this agreement faces a shifting political landscape: a new president will be elected in 2016, and the legislation needed to draft the agreement into law faces politicians up for election in 2013.

The violence following the non-signing of the last substantive GRP-MILFF agreement in 2008 is an unfortunate reminder of the difficulties both sides face in bringing their constituencies to the table—and keeping them there. On the government side, 2008 highlighted the clout of politically and economically powerful non-Moros in Mindanao, and constitutional conservatives in Manila concerned about national dismemberment. On the rebel side, 2008 highlighted the risk of fractionalization. Going forward, the MILF must manage both senior ideologues and youth frustrated by what they could view as decades of ineffectual negotiation. Both sides must also deal with a motley crew of clans and warlords (Moro and non-Moro) enfranchised by limited political control and by the government's decades-long efforts to rule Mindanao by proxy.

Both sides may be accused of selling out in signing the framework agreement and both sides face significant costs if negotiations break down and conflict resumes. The MILF's current leadership faces the challenge of retaining credibility and the possibility of fragmentation should the agreement fail, or if leaders concede too much at the negotiating table. The GRP, too, faces a loss of credibility as a negotiating partner, and both the government and international community would also face any violent fallout of fragmentation, and would lose the working relationships they have built with the current MILF leadership.

Cause for Hope

Still, the situation offers some points of optimism. First, President Aquino enjoys sufficient support to lend weight to his support of the framework and the peace process more broadly. If he remains willing to spend political capital on this that will significantly improve the agreement's chances of maintaining support and integrity through the detail and implementation phases. Second, key players who dissented in 2008 have voiced support for the current pact, seemingly weighing the electoral consequences of countering the moves of a president with grassroots popularity.

Third, the MILF comes to the negotiating table better equipped to transform themselves from rebels to rulers. This transition proved difficult for the MNLF, whose political wing had historically been underdeveloped. My own research suggests the MILF brings with it personnel who adjudicate disputes, administer social programs, and organize village improvement projects—in a word, bureaucrats. These resources and experience may serve the transition well.

Fourth, history suggests coordination between the government and the MILF can work, and has been remarkably successful in recent years. Except for the 2008 breakdown, the ceasefire has largely held—due in part to fairly solid mid-level coordination between the two sides. Moreover, my own research suggests that, at the grassroots, some communities have already wedded the official Filipino administration to elements of MILF's own governance apparatus in a functional fashion. An agreement could give such efforts broader cover.

Finally, civil society is far more developed than it has been under previous agreements. To be sure, Mindanao civil society includes some holding political loyalties to one side or the other, but an emerging strand is willing and able to stand on its own for Moro civilians.

Opportunity for the International Community

The international community has a tremendous opportunity to play a constructive role in building a peaceful and prosperous Mindanao. Decades of war have begot widespread underdevelopment, but also a complicated political topography. The international community may be leery of repeating the frustrations that attended aid programs following the GRP-MNLF agreement in 1996, but can both learn from those lessons and leverage changes since 1996.

Politically, the international community can do much to encourage both sides to honor and maintain the gains they have made at the negotiating table, and pressure both to manage their spoilers.

International attention has proven remarkably effective even in the small, unarmed footprint of the International Monitoring Team (IMT), which has monitored the GRP-MILF ceasefire since 2001. The addition of the International Contact Group (ICG) in 2009—adding four states and four international NGOs to the peace process—has shown some efficacy behind the scenes in facilitating negotiation.

Moreover, international aid can be a tremendous asset in moving the peace process forward. However, such aid must be carefully calibrated. My own research suggests locals have been frustrated by being locked out of the decision making in many aid programs and in receiving assistance they find less than helpful. Allowing indigenous input on both what types of aid are most needed and where they should be sent can ameliorate these issues. However, the international community must walk a difficult line between enfranchising local populations to determine the type and placement of programs while avoiding fostering competition among local stakeholders. Coordination among aid agencies themselves can help—competition between agencies has historically pulled in both unwilling local stakeholders and opportunists.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Dr. Jennifer M. Keister is a political scientist and a former USIP Randolph-Jennings Peace Scholar (2010-2011). She is a visiting research fellow at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, where she is finishing a book on Mindanao. This report is based on her own research—during which she has spent more than 21 months in the field, traveling extensively in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao (2008-2011)—and on recent discussions with contacts still in-country.

Even so, navigating a political topography complicated by conflict can be difficult for international actors. The community can be aided here by leveraging existing structures on the ground—structures that have already garnered some experience in processing foreign aid, have legitimacy, and local ties. The Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), a joint product of previous GRP-MILF negotiations, has some experience here, as do local elements of the MILF apparatus. The framework agreement acknowledges the MILF's political wing in addition to its military and provides broader political cover for the international community to engage these structures.

The international community can foster the MILF's incentives to see this agreement succeed, and can draw from Mindanao's civil society. Overall, the international community can strengthen the framework and its attendant agreements by working with the mechanisms the two parties set forth for foreign assistance. Parallel structures can undermine the agreement's credibility, and create additional confusion and competition rather than harmony.²

Conclusion

The potential payoff from a GRP-MILF agreement is very high for thousands of Mindanao residents who could rebuild shattered lives. The framework offers an opportunity to both sides, which, despite enduring decades of conflict, have demonstrated a willingness and ability to move forward. The international community, too, has an opportunity to positively participate in this process—helping both sides and civilians cement gains with real humanitarian impact and security improvement in a geopolitically strategic part of the world.

Notes

1. Mindanao sits at the confluence of four of the world's busiest shipping lanes. See John H. Noer and David Gregory, *Chokepoints: Maritime Economic Concerns in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996).
2. For a discussion on the dangers of aid provision in fostering competition between combatants, see Benjamin Crost and Patrick Johnston, "Aid Under Fire" (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center Discussion Paper Series, 2010). The authors suggest coordination with the stakeholders can minimize the incentives for violent competition.



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