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The Bangsamoro Framework Agreement: Implications for ASEAN

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Synopsis

The signing of a Framework Agreement for Bangsamoro between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) may end a 40-year long insurgency. The Philippines may now attract new waves of foreign investment, strengthen cooperation, economic activity, and tourism among ASEAN nations.

Commentary

ON 15 OCTOBER 2012, the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed a peace framework to end a four-decade conflict and build an autonomous region in Mindanao, to be called Bangsamoro. Early in his term, President Benigno Aquino III declared that his administration's formula for ending the violence in Southern Philippines is to find not just a political settlement, but also to ensure that Mindanao's economy would grow to a level that its people could escape the scarcity that gave birth to the secessionist cause.

The signing was witnessed by foreign dignitaries led by Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia, which played host to the talks since 2001. While details of the roadmap plan - such as power and wealth distribution, transitional arrangements, and decommissioning of MILF forces - have yet to be established, the signing has significant implications for the Philippines' ASEAN neighbours.

Malaysia's mediating role

Malaysia stands to gain from the framework agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government which Kuala Lumpur had facilitated for over a decade, with three prime ministers, including Najib, overseeing the negotiations. The signing of the Bangsamoro framework agreement reinforced Prime Minister Najib's international credentials and augmented Malaysia's position as promoter of peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

Similarly, the prospect of peace finally coming to Mindanao may eventually slow the influx of illegal immigrants through Sabah in East Malaysia. For years, the rising social, economic and security problems in Malaysia have been blamed on the illegal settlers. Worse, the Malaysian government was accused of offering citizenship to them to secure votes. Ahead of the Malaysian elections by 2013, Prime Minister Najib has set up a royal commission of inquiry to investigate and tackle the problem.

Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, Aceh

Further afield Thailand also faces its own perennial insurgency in its three southernmost provinces adjoining Malaysia. A successful peace in the Philippines, however, could give its Thai counterpart a morale boost. Yet there are key differences between the two, which at this point, may make it challenging to employ Manila's strategies in southern Thailand. Firstly, critics of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra observed that she has no grasp of the situation in the South and that her exiled brother Thaksin is the real decision-maker.

Secondly, the southern insurgents in Thailand do not have any apparent leader with whom the government can negotiate, in contrast to the MILF that has a clear leadership structure with which the Aquino administration held face-to-face talks. Thirdly, the Thai government has rejected most assistance from outsiders, which was crucial and played an important role in the Philippine situation.

Indonesia has been at the forefront in supporting the peace initiatives and in the negotiations. This comes as no surprise as the country has also faced insurgencies in several of its provinces, especially in Aceh and the former province of East Timor, which gained independence in 2002. Its Memorandum of Understanding with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) has become an inspiration for the Framework in Mindanao since it was signed in 2005.

Both conflicts are in some ways similar. Much like in Aceh, the southern Philippines became an area of conflict when the Moros launched an armed struggle for their ancestral homeland in the 1960s. Natural resources were controlled by a few elites and the local population did not benefit at all from them; south Mindanao remained one of the poorest and most underdeveloped regions in the Philippines.

Furthermore, prior to this latest accord, Indonesia has facilitated the peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and likewise, had sent an observer group to participate in the International Monitoring Team agreed by both the parties.

Beyond the framework

Against the backdrop of its social problems, Mindanao is endowed with rich natural resources, highly diverse cultures, and a strategic location in a complex and rapidly growing region. Since 1994, trade and investment cooperation between Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in the East ASEAN Growth Area (EAGA) has been on-going. With the signing of the Framework Agreement, economists predict EAGA will push for more socio-economic cooperation. For example, through a Philippines-Malaysia joint committee, the two ASEAN states will draw up collaborative projects focusing on madrasah education, halal industry, tourism, Islamic banking, and university student exchanges among others.

The Bangsamoro Framework Agreement is not the final step of the peace process. Rather, it signals a new phase by which the Manila government and the MILF can now work as partners in the implementation of its provision not only for the people of the Philippines but also for the ASEAN region.

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