



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 119/2012 dated 9 July 2012

Involving Indonesia in the Philippine Peace Process: Clearing Away “Inclement Weather”?

By Joseph Raymond S Franco

Synopsis

An Indonesian contingent has joined the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) overseeing the ceasefire in Mindanao between forces of the Philippines Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The deployment will arguably complement efforts to mediate between the two sides and address the socio-economic roots of the conflict.

Commentary

On 02 July 2012 an Indonesian contingent joined the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) overseeing the ceasefire in Mindanao between forces of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

With the deployment seen as a natural progression of the peace process, Indonesia's involvement comes at an opportune time: a period of peace in Central Mindanao. Arguably, issues critical to the sustainment of the GPH-MILF ceasefire such as perceptions of mediator neutrality and the socio-economic roots of the Mindanao conflict, can be better addressed with complementary efforts from Indonesia.

All quiet on the southern (Philippines) front?

In its mid-year report, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) trumpeted the occurrence of “zero GPH-MILF” clashes for the first half of 2012. There is optimism on both sides that as long as the ceasefire holds, a peace pact will be signed by the end of the year. The deployment of the Indonesian contingent—of ten military and five civilian personnel, to Cotabato City in Central Mindanao comes on the heels of recent peacebuilding and ceasefire initiatives.

In late June 2012, the GPH and the MILF agreed to establish five additional Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Posts in traditional flashpoints. These moves underscore the commitment of both peace panels to prevent the outbreak of violence as seen in August 2008, when rogue MILF members went on a rampage against civilian communities, to express displeasure over the abortive signing of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), which promised substantive concessions to the MILF.

Irritants to the peace process: irrigation, inclement weather, and interlocutors?

While this prevailing narrative is largely correct, it glosses over underlying issues that trigger episodic conflict in Mindanao: the salience of community-level factors. Studies made by academics, the military, and non-government organizations have highlighted that clashes in Central Mindanao often start with parochial concerns such as disputes over harvests, irrigation, and land. What initially begins as a family or clan squabble often draws in the government and MILF forces.

The clashes of August 2008 was no exception: while conflict was linked to the aborted MOA-AD signing, tensions in Central Mindanao had already boiled over by July 2008, with the MILF's 105th Base Command (105BC) occupying six towns. Men from the 105BC were involved in a farming dispute with Christian farmers in North Cotabato, which erupted in skirmishes. Torrential flooding in Central Mindanao, a result of an abnormally intense monsoon that year, further compounded matters, as MILF fighters and their families sought shelter in Christian-dominated areas in North Cotabato.

Further inflaming the situation were repeated allegations by then North Cotabato Vice Governor Manny Piñol and Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat, among others, that the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) were turning a blind eye towards MILF provocations. Worse still were widespread speculation among pundits and even the mainstream Philippine media that Kuala Lumpur was actively supporting the secessionist movement.

Such rhetoric, which conveniently ignores the multinational composition of the IMT, (which has personnel from Malaysia, Brunei, Japan, Norway, and the European Union), found credence amongst high-level policy makers in Manila and lead to an impasse in the GPH-MILF talks. This interregnum would only be bridged three years later after a face-to-face discussion between MILF Chairman Murad Ibrahim and Philippine President Benigno Aquino.

Fast forward to 2012, Indonesia's entrance into the GPH-MILF ceasefire comes at an opportune time. The confluence of a major breakthrough in the talks (e.g. the 24 April 2012 "GPH-MILF Decision Points on Principles"), inclement weather (e.g. 2012 with its unusually strong monsoon), and the oncoming rice harvest in Central Mindanao is analogous to the circumstances of August 2008. Conditions exist for the sudden escalation of conflict if complacency is allowed to set in.

Thus, the arrival of the Indonesian contingent comes at a critical point in the GPH-MILF talks. The 15-member contingent brings the 40-strong IMT closer to its formally mandated strength of 60. It is expected that the Indonesian contingent would further "internationalise" the composition of deployed IMT contingents all over Mindanao. Although the previous Arroyo Presidency considered having Indonesia broker the talks as early as 2001, it would take eight years—in 2009, before the GPH and the MILF sent a formal request to Jakarta to consider sending monitors.

Impartiality and experience: an Indonesian advantage?

There is a qualitative difference that the Indonesians bring to the table, namely: impartiality and experience. Unlike the Malaysian members of the IMT, the Indonesians are not saddled with the historical animosity between Manila and Kuala Lumpur. Pundits have often speculated that Malaysia was not an impartial mediator given its long-standing territorial dispute with the Philippines over Sabah, in Borneo.

Tacit support which Malaysia provided to the defunct Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)—the precursor of the MILF - is also a wellspring of the critique over Malaysia's leadership of the IMT. Statements of hardliners such as Mayor Lobregat that Indonesians are "more appropriate" as ceasefire monitors, illustrate the relative acceptability of Jakarta's involvement. As the August 2008 clashes have shown, perceptions of mediator bias have a major impact on the viability of a ceasefire.

Reinforcing this positive appraisal of Indonesian intentions is the good track record of Jakarta in brokering peace in Mindanao. It was through Indonesia's intercession that a Final Peace Agreement (FPA) was signed between the Philippine Government and the MNLF in 1996. Simplistic as it might sound, stakeholders mostly on the government side, are expecting good results from the introduction of the Indonesia factor in the ceasefire.

It can also be argued that Indonesia's success in dealing with secession in Aceh may hold applicable lessons to the Mindanao conflict. The multi-faceted nature of conflict in Mindanao would benefit from applicable best practices from internal conflicts elsewhere.

Joseph Raymond Silva Franco is an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Excellence in National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School for International Studies.