



IDSS COMMENTARIES (25/2006)

IDSS 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 IDSS.

Bangsamoro's Autonomy The Key Issue Behind Bid to Oust MILF Chief?

Lynn Antonette Lumayag*

13 April 2006

THE Philippine national media reported in early March that there was an effort within the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to unseat its current chairman, Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim. There is some mystery as to why such reports are emerging at this time.

Murad took over the mantles of the MILF after the death of Salamat Hashim, its founding chairman, in July 2003. Murad's three years in power have been characterized by a pragmatic nationalism that until now has won the respect of the moderate nationalists, as well as the hardline Islamic nationalists. If this is true, why the rumours of a plot against his leadership?

The Emergence of Factions

There is a clear public perception that the MILF is riven with factions, a view that is rejected by Murad. He, does however, acknowledge that the MILF is a collegial group, but that this should not be seen as a fragmentation of the organization.

The difficulty in confirming this view is partly due to reports suggesting that the rumours might have been deliberately spread by government intelligence to weaken and split the MILF. Nonetheless, the current situation seems to echo the formation of the MILF in 1977. This group split from the Moro National Liberation Front when the MILF supporters felt that they were not consulted by the then MNLF chairman, Nur Misuari, on the peace agreement with the Manila government. The political split may however have had more to do with ethnic divisions: The MNLF is dominated by the Tausugs from Sulu while the MILF is dominated by the Maguindanaoans and Maranaos from Cotabato and Lanao respectively.

There are potential faultlines within the existing MILF Central Committee, some of them quite public. Murad Ebrahim, Ghajali Jaafar, Aleem Mimbantas and Mohagher Iqbal, who together formed the backbone of the organization, have some sharp personality differences. For example Jaafar is known to be more open to the public and is the most accessible leader whereas Mimbantas is quieter and is rarely accessible to media.

Thwarted Coup

But the rumours of a coup bid against Murad had received intriguing support from senior MILF leaders Abdullah Musanip, alias Commander Adan, and Bitol Mateng, alias

Commander Guevarra. They seem to suggest an ongoing collaboration between Ameril Umbrah Kato and Wahid Tondok to unseat Murad. Both MILF followers are supporting Samir Hashim, the younger brother of the late Salamat Hashim. Samir Hashim is the leader of the MILF's elite 106th Base Command located in Maguindanao province. They wanted Samir to take over the seat of Murad and be the new chairman of MILF.

The MILF's chairman of the peace panel, Mohagher Iqbal, immediately disputed this claim and said that there is no concrete proof of an ongoing coup against Murad. He firmly rejected the report as pure fabrication by journalist Nash Maulana, a close kin of the late MILF chairman Salamat Hashim. He insisted that the MILF is still intact and contended that he had talked to Commander Adan who vehemently denied the arraignment.

The rumoured coup would replace Murad with Samir. Samir advocates the establishment of an Islamic state in the southern Philippines while Murad is open to discuss federalism, Free State and other forms of governance. Murad's position could lead to the establishment of an autonomous state in Mindanao, based on the Bangsamoro ethnic identity. This is anathema to Samir, who wants a separate independent state.

Assessment

The supposed coup against Murad has several implications. Firstly, the old issue of autonomy versus independence seems to remain an unresolved question. Three decades after the original split, the leadership still has not settled this fundamental issue. Murad seems to recognize that the government can only afford to grant autonomy. This is the most viable option since it is already provided in the 1987 Constitution, and does not require the consent of the Philippine Congress -- something that independence would, and which could create a high-level political complications.

Second, the MILF leaders themselves cannot seem to agree on the objectives, let alone what they want to be independent for. Initially, the MILF leaders stated that there is no way they would accept 'autonomy'. Mohagher Iqbal said 'autonomy' is only one of the highly-charged words. What MILF really wants is space where the Bangsamoros can freely practise their religion and apply their way of life. Wanting space means wanting to separate from others. To separate is to be independent. This draws the conclusion that they want independence. To have autonomy is only to be free to implement its own rule, while the group is still under the roof of the Philippine government and has to abide by the law.

However, this contradicts Murad's interview with Mindanews in July 2005. He had contended that the MILF is open to discuss federalism, Free State and any other form of governance. The issue of total independence by having a separate Islamic state was not highlighted. The Bangsamoros wanted Mindanao to be an independent state like East Timor, Palestine and Bougainville.

Third, it calls into question the 11th exploratory peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the MILF which resumed on March 21-22, 2006 in Kuala Lumpur. The talks tackled the implementing guidelines of the basic principles of the ancestral domain aspect of the Tripoli Agreement of 2001.

Ancestral domain refers to the Bangsamoros' demand for territory that will constitute a Moro homeland, sufficient control over economic resources and a structure of governance that will

allow the Bangsamoros to govern themselves in ways that are consonant with their culture -- with minimal interference from the Philippine government.

These points allow for an abstract form of independence in Murad's view, not a geographical separation and a legally acknowledged independence as advocated by Salamat. This distinction in goal could create a split within the MILF, thus denying either side the long sought-after peace. And it would also raise the question for the government -- can Murad actually deliver on any agreements? If not, why continue to negotiate?

Fourth, the quick and strong denial falls into the category of 'thou protest too much', meaning it was too fast and too strong to be accepted. Even if the denial of the supposed coup is to be believed, it may still indicate that there was a serious plot. The message was not directed at the public, but at other members of the MILF. The message is -- do not support the coup, or the possible coup. It could also indicate that a coup did occur, and was successful. The denial will allow for Murad, who still commands respect within the MILF, a face-saving way to step down at a later date. Of course it could all be simply a rumour started by a local journalist, used to undermine the existing leadership. Or it could even have been put out by Murad himself to pressure the government to reach a settlement quickly and on terms more favourable to the MILF. In any event, it appears there is serious disunity within the senior leadership at a very critical time.

Irrespective of the internal machinations of the MILF, the peace process must continue, and be strengthened. There are persistent reports of cease-fire violations on both sides. The longer the peace process is seen as dragging on, the more likely hardliners on both sides will revert to armed conflict.

The difficulty is, how much can the government offer if the MILF cannot decide what it actually wants? The form of government is secondary to the vision of the settlement. Only the MILF can decide that.

* Lynn Antonette Lumayag is a Filipino research analyst at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.