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A new political entity in Mindanao? Challenges of election-related dysfunction and violence

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Synopsis

The Philippine government (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have expressed confidence over the establishment of a “new political entity” (NPE) as part of initiatives to achieve a peace settlement by yearend 2012. However, election-related violence and other dysfunctions in the electoral process in Mindanao illustrate the challenges facing political participation in a post-peace process scenario.

Commentary

The Philippine Government (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) held their 29th round of Formal Exploratory Talks in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 18 July 2012. In a joint statement both GPH and MILF panels reaffirmed their optimism over the outcome. They agreed on the mechanics for a “transition committee” that is expected to help pave the way for a “new political entity” (NPE). This entity would replace the existing Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) once a political settlement is reached between the two sides. This development follows the successful conduct of the Bangsamoro Leaders Assembly (BLA) at the MILF’s Camp Darapanan, of engaging all peace stakeholders.

While the parties claim to be at the “door of an agreement”, this must be weighed against more substantive issues critical to the GPH-MILF peace process. The joint statement referred only to “continued discussions on *power sharing*”, without a definitive reference to actual solutions. However, as seen in the outbreak of clashes in 2008, the issue of power sharing (over the defunct Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain) was the critical issue used by hardliners on both the GPH and MILF side to scuttle the negotiations. Thus, it would be more realistic to look at the 18 July joint statement as indicative of limited success.

Perils of violence and voter registration

Even if a Final Peace Agreement is signed by the GPH and the MILF, there is no guarantee political violence would give way to political participation. In turn, the lack of meaningful political participation would make conflict-affected areas in Mindanao vulnerable to a slide back to secessionist conflict.

In the southern Philippines, specifically within the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), dysfunctional politics manifest in multiple ways. The recent voter registration exercise in ARMM (09-18 July 2012) — intended to cleanse the rolls of fraudulent voters, saw a continuation of violent tactics. While electoral violence is not new in the Philippines, its persistence in the ARMM is doubly confounding to the central

government considering the high level of attention accorded to it by Manila.

Through kinship ties, armed groups such as the MILF and the supposedly re-integrated Moro National Liberation Front (which signed a 1996 Final Peace Agreement) are drawn in feuds between warring political factions. The ten-day registration saw several violent incidents of shooting, lynching and bombings of election workers and ordinary registrants. These incidents bely the claim of the Philippines Commission of Elections (COMELEC) of the absence of “major peace and order problems”.

Flying and ferried voters

Politics in the region have been complemented by unscrupulous political factions with shrewd tactics to secure an electoral “victory”. The explicit goal of the registration exercise to “cleanse” voters’ lists of fraudulent identities was put to the test by various factions attempting to flout the rules. A report by COMELEC estimated that 50,000 minors (disqualified by age to vote) attempted to register after being ferried to registration sites by a coterie of local officials and candidates.

Another 50,000 illegal registrants were monitored by COMELEC to have been trucked in, with the intention to be “flying voters”— who are registered in multiple jurisdictions. The number of potential fraudsters is staggering, considering that the ARMM has been a key electoral battleground and has been a source of swing votes during national elections. Overall, the COMELEC is hopeful that biometrics can help weed out half a million ineligible voters out of the baseline figure of 1.7 million. However the dismissive response of the COMELEC was problematic - that “it is not their fault...we don’t want to penalise them [ineligible voters]. The penalty will simply be that they will not be allowed to vote. That’s good enough for us for the *meantime*”.

Violence, fraud and the roots of secession

The persistence of violence and fraud has far-reaching implication for the peace process. It reveals that even in spite of security guarantees, transparency measures, and capability-building accorded by Manila; meaningful political participation remains totally elusive in ARMM. Instead of being a showpiece of autonomy by a distinct polity, violence and fraud persist as hallmarks of a lack of governance.

A more fundamental issue is how dysfunctional political participation precludes genuine empowerment. The quote above summarizes and illustrates the sentiment that passive involvement in politics (or worse, manipulated involvement) is the way of life in Mindanao. It takes little leap of the imagination to assert that a feeling of political disempowerment is a major factor in stoking radicalisation and extremism. Insufficient corrective steps in the meantime, bode ill for the future of political participation in the ARMM, and by extension, the prospective “new political entity”.

Clearly, steps must be taken to ensure that a GPH-MILF final peace agreement would not merely mark an interregnum in the long history of political violence in Central Mindanao.

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