



**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. 200/2013 dated 28 October 2013

The Mindanao Peace Process: Can Indonesia Advance It?

By Margareth Sembiring

Synopsis

The recent violence in Zamboanga has prompted Indonesia to offer assistance in brokering peace in the southern Philippines, citing its role in the OIC and its experience with mediating peace. In view of the conflict's complexity, are those credentials enough?

Commentary

VIOLENCE SHOOK Zamboanga city in Mindanao, Philippines, for weeks in September 2013, leading to renewed calls for peace. The Indonesian government through Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa expressed Indonesia's willingness to mediate peace in that strife-torn region.

Quoting Indonesia's role in the committee of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and its involvement in sealing a peace agreement between the government of the Philippines and rebels in 1996, Indonesia said that it was ready to facilitate peace talks at the request of the Philippine government and other concerned parties. While this offer deserves some attention, what are the prospects for Indonesia's success at mediating peace in Mindanao?

Credentials and complexities

Indonesia has several relevant credentials. Operating under the peace framework of the OIC, it was actively involved in facilitating the peace process in the beleaguered Muslim-dominated Mindanao in the 1990s. After hosting peace talks between the Philippine government, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and OIC representatives for almost four years, a peace agreement was reached in 1996. Indonesia also deployed military observers, the Garuda Contingent XVII, to the region between 1994 and 2002.

In addition, Indonesia has twice deployed its personnel to be part of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) observing the ceasefire between the Philippine armed forces and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), an MNLF breakaway faction. Indonesia's first participation in the IMT in July 2012 was received positively for its perceived impartiality. Its de-facto leadership in the region through its role in ASEAN and its current chairmanship of the OIC Peace Committee for Southern Philippines lend it further credibility.

Notwithstanding its previous involvement in Mindanao and its position in the region and the OIC, Indonesia will not find it easy to broker peace in Mindanao. The 1996 agreement that Indonesia successfully facilitated is

neither the first nor the only peace accord ever attempted. In fact, various Philippine administrations have tried to make peace deals with rebel groups in the area. In 1976, the Marcos administration and the MNLF signed the Tripoli Agreement, with the OIC playing a mediating role. During Corazon Aquino's era, an agreement was reached in 1987 on the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

In 2001, Malaysia and Libya played major roles in negotiations that resulted in a unity agreement between the MNLF and the MILF. In 2008, under Arroyo's presidency, the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) between the Philippine government and the MILF gained some traction but was ultimately ruled unconstitutional by the Philippine Supreme Court.

All of these peace accords ultimately failed to quell instability in Mindanao for various reasons. The 1996 agreement, for example, frayed due to growing dissatisfaction over Nur Misuari's poor management of the ARMM and a lack of a sense of ownership by tribal communities and non-Muslims who had been largely left out of the negotiation process. As peace agreements have generally been fraught with problems, the signing of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro between the Aquino administration and the MILF in October 2012 was viewed with trepidation. The recent standoff in Zamboanga was therefore not completely unexpected.

The existence of different rebel groups and factions represents another hurdle to a peace settlement. The MNLF was dominant in the early days, but its influence dwindled following a leadership rift that resulted in the establishment of the MILF by Hashim Salamat in 1978, which then fractured in 2008 into the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) headed by Kato. The MNLF is itself also divided into several factions, such as the Council of 15, the Islamic Command Council and the Misuari group.

The situation is made more complicated by issues of identity, culture and rights associated with the heterogeneity of the population in the southern Philippines. Further, local officials and business entities have their own priorities. Regardless of attempts at inclusive approaches, the presence of multiple groups with different interests increases the probability of dissatisfaction and disagreement.

The Philippine government is also partly responsible for the unravelling of peace agreements. Within the government, there are different policy positions towards Mindanao, and this often creates gridlock and makes progress generally slow. The government's perceived motives and lack of commitment have also led to a sense of distrust. The 1976 Tripoli agreement was believed to be merely an attempt by the Marcos administration to weaken MNLF leaders and mollify them. The government has also been criticised for inadequate allocation of resources to the region. The historical lack of consistency creates ingrained misgivings and renders peace processes constantly fragile.

What will it take?

Against this backdrop, Indonesia's position in the region and the OIC and its prior involvement in Mindanao may not be enough for it to effectively broker a sustained peace agreement. Indonesia must acquire an excellent understanding of the real dynamics between the Philippine government, the different rebel groups, and the diverse societies of southern Philippines. It needs to get buy-in from the wider groups within the society for it to extend its influence to ground-level actors.

Further, the sensitivity of the relationships between the Bangsamoro and the Filipino majority needs to be carefully addressed throughout the process. This is a very challenging undertaking as it deals with the notion of identity and associated inequality.

At its core, it is imperative for Indonesia as a potential mediator to be able to effectively influence rebel groups and other stakeholders to want to compromise on their demands and truly desire sustained peace. It could take advantage of its perceived impartiality and its role in the region and the OIC to encourage other states and private actors to engage with these groups, in particular to establish trust so as to prepare the ground for a common negotiating position.

They would also need to be able to effectively influence the policy processes within the Philippine government. These would be key to Indonesia's success in initiating fresh peace talks in Mindanao.

Margareth Sembiring is a Research Analyst at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.