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Breakthrough for Bangsamoro: Can They Overcome the Odds?

By Joseph Franco

SYNOPSIS

Muslim Mindanao is getting a fresh start as an autonomous region in the Philippines. Repeated delays to the Bangsamoro Transition Authority's (BTA) inauguration have, however, raised questions about its ability to bring tangible benefits to its constituents. Failure to manage frustrations can derail the Bangsamoro's self-governance.

COMMENTARY

ON 21 JANUARY 2019, a plebiscite was held to ratify the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL). The referendum garnered 1.5 million 'Yes' votes with only 199,000 'No' votes. This meant that a new Bangsamoro region will be created; the previous Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) will be expanded to include more than 60 villages contiguous to the ARMM, as well as Cotabato City.

The BOL was the culmination of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), which was signed by the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Under the CAB, a new subregional political entity will be created that would allow for the meaningful exercise of political autonomy in Mindanao. The BOL was initially slated to be ratified in 2015 but was derailed by the 2015 Mamasapano Massacre which saw the killing of 44 police commandos in a misencounter with MILF forces.

Breakthrough, with Halting Starts

The plebiscite was to be subsequently followed by the appointment of an 80-strong Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), a parliamentary-style legislature which would fuse law-making and the implementation of new infrastructure projects. The new

BARMM's major difference from the ARMM is the greater share the BARMM gets from natural resources extracted from the Bangsamoro region.

The BARMM will also see a normalisation process for former MILF combatants. The Independent Decommissioning Board (IDB) is tasked to oversee the demobilisation of 30 percent of MILF combatants by the end of 2019.

Euphoria, not surprisingly, greeted the oath-taking of more than 70 newly appointed BTA members in Manila on 22 February. The event was heralded by both the top leadership of the Philippine government and the MILF as the beginning of meaningful governance. At the time, it was expected that the inaugural session of the BTA would take place a month later on 21 March. Instead, the momentum seems to have been weakened as the inauguration was re-scheduled thrice, only pushing through on 29 March.

The delays were attributed to scheduling issues. Bangsamoro Chief Minister Murad Ebrahim stated that President Duterte could only be present on 29 March, but was eager to witness the inauguration of the BTA, having been instrumental in paving the way for the breakthrough in Mindanao.

Prior to the recent BTA inaugural session, some of its members have sternly called out the irony of the situation. What was meant as an assertive exercise of self-determination became subject to the whims of the Manila-based national leadership.

Keeping Lights on in BARMM

While the BTA has much promise, it does not have the luxury of slowly easing its way into governance. The BOL, which acts as the founding charter of the BARMM, needs to be supported by a framework of enabling laws and codes. Without such policy instruments, the entire bureaucracy meant to execute the will of the BARMM would grind to a stop.

Civil servants employed in the now defunct regional government face the very real threat of massive lay-offs if the mandate of their respective offices either lapses or become redundant. Promotions and salary adjustments would also likely be affected, as the BARMM needs to promulgate its own rules for its civil service.

Without clarity in funding mechanisms, disaster relief plans would likely be disrupted. This can exacerbate the effects of an exceptionally dry summer in Mindanao, as it faces the El Niño phenomenon.

Building the BARMM

The national media as well as Malacañang Palace have been focusing mostly on the potential benefits of the BARMM. Large-scale prestige projects such as the opening of a new seaport and airport in Cotabato City have been promoted heavily. The thrust towards massive infrastructure projects is signalled by no less than Chief Minister Murad taking a concurrent role as Minister of Public Works and Highways.

Funding for BARMM infrastructure would come from block grants from the national

government, which can be as much as three times the amount allocated for the former ARMM.

The question is whether the BARMM's fiscal policy can be truly independent, given that the new political entity still needs to develop its bureaucracy. The BOL anticipates that the BARMM will sustain itself through the exploitation of natural resources.

Compared to other regions in the Philippines, the BARMM would get 75 percent of proceeds from resource exploitation (including offshore oil and gas) instead of 40 percent. There are concerns if the BARMM can transcend the endemic corruption that beset the former ARMM.

Securing the new BARMM

Under the BOL, the new BARMM would have its own regional security force, in charge of internal security.

The other important security-related question is the normalisation process for combatants of the MILF's armed wing — the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). The process will be overseen by the Independent Decommissioning Body (IDB), which includes members from third-party countries like Turkey, Norway and Brunei Darussalam.

On 29 March, the BIAF submitted a list of 12,000 combatants who are slated to turn-in their weapons. This development is the first major step in the normalisation process, following the ceremonial turnover of 20 crew-served weapons and 55 other high-powered firearms.

Validation of the 12,000-strong MILF list of combatants will be an arduous process, with some members of the security services expressing scepticism over the ability of the BIAF command to compel their fighters to turn in their weapons. Further complicating the matter is the need to secure the budget for the arms buyback schemes that would incentivise the disarmament process.

Enough time for BARMM Transition?

The delayed inauguration of the BTA has truncated the already short transition process of the BARMM. The appointed members of the BTA would only have three years to lay the foundations for the BARMM, until regular elections are held. The MILF members of the BTA would need to wield their majority stake decisively and effectively.

Without tangible improvements to peace and development, the Bangsamoro constituency may be disillusioned and trigger another cycle of secessionist-inspired violence. If the current mood in Cotabato City is to be the gauge, the question is no longer whether there will be frustration and impatience at the grassroots. The challenge now for the BTA is to manage frustrations in the short-term while building sustainable institutions by 2022.

Mindanao is no stranger to how violent extremist groups can thrive and exploit

governance vacuums. As Chief Minister Murad remarked, “the success of our [Bangsamoro] government is the best antithesis to violent radicalism”.

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