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Southern Philippines: The Way Forward for Stalled Peace

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The road to peace in Southern Philippines is when the four gatekeepers of peace - the MILF, the MNLF, the traditional leaders, and the leaders of the affected Christian provinces - work out a political settlement acceptable to the people of Mindanao.

THE MORO Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) predicts a grim scenario if the stalled peace process between the Government of Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the MILF in Southern Philippines cannot be salvaged. The MILF has claimed in its official website (www.luwaran.com) that the deadlocked talks are helping the hardliners in its ranks, who are opposed to the peace process, and are using this to wrestle power and influence within the movement. Around the time this statement was issued, an unidentified armed group reportedly bombed two steel towers of the government-owned National Power Corporation (NPC). The MILF has not claimed responsibility for the sabotage. However, the areas where it took place are known MILF strongholds. The upsurge in attacks and clashes in the southern province of Maguindanao (Datu Piang) and in Sulu recently increase the likelihood of a wider conflict re-igniting.

Two Scenarios for the future

What the incidents tell us is that the relationship between the two parties is very fragile. The subordinate units of both sides have local un-settled differences with each other, suggesting the likelihood of provocation and escalation. One should also not forget the Philippine Marines, who have suffered the humiliation of seeing their comrades be-headed in Basilan. They may also want to settle scores with the MILF perpetrators operating un-touched in their midst because of the peace process. The situation is a reflection of two parties in conflict whose members have their finger on the trigger, ready to shoot at the slightest provocations.

There are two scenarios for the future of security in Southern Philippines. The first scenario is a situation where the peace process finally breaks down and there is an escalation of conflict with the MILF. The second scenario is one where the government pushes for constitutional change to establish a framework that can accommodate the demands of the MILF and other stakeholders. Such demands

include addressing the problems of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari from which the MILF broke off, the Moro traditional leaders, and also ensuring the protection of the rights of the affected Christian communities.

The first scenario is preventable but very likely, considering the volatility of the situation. In the event of an all-out war, it will likely create a scenario where all the secessionist groups unite as one front, return to the struggle for independence and fight a war of hard attrition. This is also the scenario that the Philippine military secretly expects to unfold, as it suspects an on-going tactical alliance between the MNLF Misuari Group and the Abu Sayaf Group (ASG) which has been labeled as a terrorist outfit.

The possibility of a tactical alliance of MILF-MNLF and ASG in the event of a break-out of conflict is not a remote one. The MNLF, which is concentrated in Sulu, the ASG in Basilan, and the MILF in Central Mindanao, will not face operational problems working together, as the leaders are all former cadres of the then un-divided MNLF. The immediate implication should the first scenario occur is the derailment of any gains made as a result of the counter terrorism efforts of the Philippine government.

The workable scenario

The second scenario is what will prevent the first scenario from happening. It requires the Philippine government to accommodate the MILF demand for self-rule under a federal system. This will be a tedious and long-drawn process.

Firstly, it has to contend with a highly unsupportive Philippine senate, which questions the government's intentions in changing the constitution. Secondly, it has to contend with a Christian majority congress, which has from the beginning expressed opposition to any expansion of the areas of the current autonomous region. One clear complication would be the proposed inclusion of more than a thousand Muslim communities in the Christian-dominated provinces into the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE).

Currently, two governors of Christian-dominated provinces Jesus Saccalan (North Cotabato), and Daisy Avance Fuentes (South Cotabato), have expressed opposition to any agreement reached without public (Christian) consultation. Thirdly, the government has to find political accommodation with local leaders in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), such as Moro Sultans and Datus who may lose influence under any deal.

Finally, the government has to deal with the MNLF, who may see their influence decline in any new expanded region. Frustration with the implementation of the current agreement and the aforementioned fear may increase the incentive for a return to armed struggle for the MNLF. The southern Philippines stands at the abyss.

Way Forward

Is there a way forward? The Philippine government and the Moros need three consensus tools, if they are to successfully resolve the Moro problem. Firstly, there is a need for a "mental shift" by both the Philippine society and the Moros. This means trusting the Moros, and giving them their due in the Philippine society to heal their feelings of alienation. Likewise, the Moros will need to accept that they are part and parcel of the Philippine society and start to feel and act like one.

Secondly, there is a need to unify and achieve political consensus for the four local stakeholders mentioned above. Thirdly, there is a role for the international community, especially the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and major powers such as the United States of America (USA).

The OIC, which has been a dismal failure in mediating the conflict, must show its resolve by investing resources in terms of funds and expanding its diplomatic pressure to ensure that both parties abide by any peace agreement.

The ASEAN states, on their part, need to end their passivity. More than 100,000 people have died in the conflict; positive intervention now may prevent more deaths. For instance, Singapore, which has a successful engagement with its minority Muslim communities, can help provide lessons in governance.

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