



Southern Philippines: Making Peace Stick in the Bangsamoro

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Principal Findings

What's new? The peace process in the Philippines' autonomous Bangsamoro region is both largely on track and in peril. For lasting peace to take hold, all responsible authorities must work to quell violent instability, which persists in pockets, and speed up elements of the process that are behind schedule.

Why does it matter? President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., elected in 2022, has appointed new members to the region's interim governing body. With only two years remaining before the Bangsamoro is supposed to elect its parliament, concluding the transition to full autonomy, efforts at stabilisation are crucial.

What should be done? The ex-rebels running the regional government should, in coordination with Manila, improve law and order, strengthen conflict resolution efforts and find a modus vivendi with political clans. Manila should focus on normalisation, including delivery of the promised socio-economic packages to demobilised combatants. Donors should help fill funding gaps.

Executive Summary

The Bangsamoro peace process in the southern Philippines, while successful in many respects, is hitting obstacles at a critical moment. In 2019, the Bangsamoro region – home to a majority-Muslim population that has long been neglected in the Catholic-majority country – achieved a degree of autonomy. Self-rule was the result of a 2014 peace treaty, which voters endorsed via plebiscite five years later. The creation of the new autonomous region helped bring about a peaceful resolution to decades of armed conflict between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government. But the region is not quite peaceful yet, and parts of the 2014 deal remain unfulfilled. The regional government, Manila and international donors should work together to shore up the peace process before the 2025 parliamentary elections, which are supposed to mark the start of full regional autonomy. They should focus on quelling local conflicts and accelerating “normalisation”, a process that includes rebel and militia disarmament as well as provision of socio-economic packages promised to ex-rebels as a peace dividend.

Almost ten years after the parties signed the peace deal, several issues are putting the transition it envisaged at risk. For one, violence is flaring up in the region. Some of these skirmishes, especially in central Mindanao, can be traced to conflicts over land and politics between and among MILF members and militias controlled by powerful clans. That is not exclusively the case, however: the ceasefire between the government and MILF suffered a serious breach in November, when a clash in Basilan province resulted in the death of ten soldiers and MILF members. Meanwhile, although the interim governing authority in Bangsamoro has made headway in leading the war-scarred region toward greater peace and development, it has not passed major legislation required to complete the transition – including rules for local governance and procedures for revenue collection.

There have also been delays in normalisation, particularly in reintegrating rebels and allowing for economic development in the Bangsamoro. For example, some former MILF fighters have not received the socio-economic assistance packages the government pledged to give them. The Philippine military and the MILF are also not in full agreement about how many weapons the ex-rebels should hand over. Another difficult point is “camp transformation” – ie, the process of turning erstwhile MILF-controlled areas into peaceful communities integrated into economic and civic life. Much of the Bangsamoro is economically depressed, and the MILF camps need significant support in order to develop. The normalisation program aims to get them that assistance. For now, however, the effort is sputtering, due partly to slow implementation but also to political realities. There are also concerns about development happening at the expense of Indigenous communities.

There is still reason to hope that the process can succeed. After winning election to the presidency of the Philippines in May 2022, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. emerged as a supporter of the peace effort. It was not at all certain he would take that stance, in part because the MILF leadership endorsed his opponent. When political clans in the region who had backed Marcos, Jr. pressured him to increase their level of representation in the interim Bangsamoro parliament, he refused. He and his advisers attended

the parliament's inaugural session in the regional centre, Cotabato City, a move that signalled his commitment to the peace process. On 21 September 2022, in a speech at the UN General Assembly, he pointed to the progress of the Bangsamoro peace process to date and proposed making its completion a pillar of the Philippines' bid for a seat on the UN Security Council in 2027-2028.

Moreover, while the Bangsamoro's interim government still has work to do, it has racked up important accomplishments. In March 2023, it passed an electoral code that will allow residents to elect members of the regional parliament in two years' time. The interim authority has also built hospitals and village halls as well as spear-headed agricultural programs. Some sub-regions even recorded economic growth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Still, as stresses that threaten to impede conclusion of the peace process become more pronounced, it is incumbent on both regional and national leaders in the Philippines to address them. A big obstacle to enduring peace in the Bangsamoro is clan politics: powerful families dominate the region politically and economically. They hold most of the region's seats in the national congress and control many of its provinces and municipalities. Relations between the ex-rebels and clans were rocky even before the 2022 local and presidential elections, and tensions grew as the elections cemented the big families' role in regional governance. The clans often employ what amount to private armies: some of the violence in the region can be traced to tussles between them and the ex-rebels. Although these militias pose no threat to national security, Manila needs to get serious about dismantling them.

As normalisation efforts proceed, the Philippine government and the former rebels also need to resolve questions about the support packages promised to ex-militants and the number of weapons the MILF is to turn in. If Manila is short of funds to deliver the socio-economic dividends, the national government should reach out to international donors for aid. A risk persists that MILF members may pick up arms, or refuse to disarm, out of frustration that the transition is failing to bring them the benefits they expected or fear that the Bangsamoro's political families could push the MILF out of the regional leadership. Taking steps to disburse the support packages, as well as finding ways to deal with the political aspirations of all the region's factions, will help keep the transition on track.

A successful Bangsamoro peace process would benefit the region and set a positive example for the rest of the world. Outside supporters of the process can help achieve its aims. International donors, in particular, should ensure that Manila has the resources it requires to deliver support packages to demobilising fighters and pursue the transformation of MILF camps. Now that the new president has aligned himself with the process, they should urge him to work closely and in the spirit of compromise with the MILF and other Bangsamoro political leaders so that opportunity for peace does not slip through their fingers.

Manila/Brussels, 1 May 2023

Southern Philippines: Making Peace Stick in the Bangsamoro

I. Introduction

Born in 2019, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is the latest attempt by the Philippine government and former rebels to end a long-running separatist struggle in the southern Philippines.¹ The outcome of decades of negotiations, the BARMM provides a form of self-rule to the majority-Muslim region, a sprawling zone of islands, river deltas and mountains with a population of about 4.5 million.² The grant of autonomy is an effort to address the Moro Muslims' demand for the right to self-determination, rooted in resentments that date back hundreds of years.³

The most recent insurgency started in the late 1960s, when communal unrest led to war between the separatist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippine military. In the following years, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) emerged as a splinter group of the MNLF, continuing an armed conflict that lasted four decades.⁴ In 2014, after more than 40 years of fitful negotiations between the Philippine government and Muslim secessionist fronts, Manila and the MILF inked a peace deal. In 2018, the Philippine congress passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law, the legal instrument for creating the Bangsamoro autonomous government. Voters in Mindanao emphatically endorsed the law in a two-stage plebiscite in early 2019, which ratified the new autonomous region and determined its geographical scope. The plebiscite also greenlit the launch of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), an interim government that gained authority over the region in February 2019.

The new transitional authority has administrative powers as well as some political and fiscal clout and the authority to enact laws. Manila did not, however, allow the region to have its own police force, citing constitutional impediments. (The peace deal talks about one, though that seems unlikely to happen.)

¹ For earlier reporting on the peace process and transition, see Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 323, *Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines*, 18 March 2022; 322, *Southern Philippines: Fostering an Inclusive Bangsamoro*, 18 February 2022; 313, *Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro*, 15 April 2021; and 306, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, 14 April 2020.

² The Bangsamoro's territory encompasses six provinces – Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur – a Special Geographic Area (an administrative district encompassing 63 villages that formerly belonged to Cotabato province), two cities in Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago.

³ The Moro are Muslims descended from thirteen ethno-linguistic groups that converted to Islam in the 14th and 15th centuries. They have a history of rebellion: they took up arms against Spanish and U.S. colonisers, as well as the Japanese when they occupied the Philippines during World War II. The Bangsamoro also has ethnic and religious minorities, including Indigenous peoples sometimes referred to as Lumad, who consider themselves distinct from the Moros.

⁴ Some MNLF commanders gave up the struggle in the 1970s; others continued to fight, and the organisation splintered into factions. At present, all the MNLF leaders support the peace process.

The fledgling authority is taking shape as parliamentary committees develop legal codes that will be the backbone of the future government. The region has exclusive jurisdiction over policy areas such as government budgeting and local administration, while in other areas, for example security and land registration, it shares power with Manila.⁵ Although not elected, the transitional administration is fairly reflective of the Bangsamoro's diversity. It comprises 80 members: 41 nominated by the MILF ex-rebels and 39 by the government in Manila. Among its members are women (making up 20 per cent of parliament), youth, Christians and Indigenous people as well as former insurgents, traditional politicians and clan affiliates – drawn from all the region's ethno-linguistic groups. While only a few clan patriarchs sit in the BTA, many of its members belong to prominent families.

The real test of the Bangsamoro's durability as an autonomous entity will be the region's inaugural parliamentary elections. These were originally scheduled for 2022, but in October 2021, then-President Rodrigo Duterte extended the interim government's term for three years per the request of MILF leaders, who argued that COVID-19 had hamstrung their efforts to amass policy accomplishments. The 2025 elections will offer the first opportunity for Bangsamoro residents to elect their local representatives, and they may reveal whether the MILF has won over the public during the period in which it held control of the interim authority.

The elections will mark an important, and potentially dangerous, moment for three major reasons. Firstly, the vote will show whether the peace process has positively affected the political culture in a region accustomed to strongmen acquiring power through violence rather than the ballot box. Secondly, if the MILF fears it may lose the elections because political clans are using vote buying, patronage and intimidation, the ex-rebels could in the worst case deploy the same tactics to counter the traditional elites, undercutting decades of work to foster peace in the Bangsamoro. Thirdly, if the vote does cost the MILF power, there is a risk that a splinter group of rebels could return to arms.

Against this backdrop, and building upon Crisis Group's previous work on the subject, this report examines the successes and challenges of the peace process in the Bangsamoro and highlights the steps various actors need to take to prepare the way for a peaceful transition. It draws on field research in the Bangsamoro and Manila, conducted over the last year, including interviews with MILF and military commanders, representatives of the interim regional government, national and local officials, civil society figures, clan leaders, donor and development officials, villagers and decommissioned fighters.

⁵ The Ministries of Public Order and Safety and Interior and Local Government play a role in Bangsamoro's security arrangements, for example in conflict resolution and disaster relief. But there is no specific Bangsamoro police. The mandate to ensure law and order lies with the Philippine military and National Police.

II. An Incomplete Transition

As parliamentary elections approach in 2025, there is both good and bad news with respect to the Bangsamoro transition. On one hand, the election of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. as the Philippines' new president does not appear to have derailed the process. Marcos, Jr. has kept key personnel in place in the interim government and sent positive signals about his support for its efforts. The MILF-led interim government also has meaningful accomplishments to tout. But the concrete work of fulfilling the peace agreement is nevertheless lagging in ways that could jeopardise the transition's ultimate success.

A. *From Duterte to Marcos, Jr.*

Since its inception in 2019, the Bangsamoro government has made progress, ushering in a degree of peace and development that had long eluded the region. The economic situation in parts of the territory has improved as Moro rebels and government forces fight each other less and less. For almost two years, however, COVID-19 forced the transitional authority to put much of the region's institution building on hold in order to focus on the pandemic response.⁶ The parliament has passed only three of the seven "priority codes" legally required as part of the process to replace former laws with new rules governing elections, regional government, education, the civil service and other local matters.⁷ The decommissioning of former MILF guerrillas – a key component of the peace process – was at a standstill until late 2022. In part because of these delays, the MILF-led interim government pushed to postpone the parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for 2022, by three years. The heated debates over the extension had the unfortunate effect of taking away precious time from attention to governance.

While President Duterte's government agreed to the election extension in 2021, the ex-rebels in the transitional government found themselves at loggerheads with several Moro clans that opposed it.⁸ These clans hold little power at the regional level in the interim setup, and so were eager for an opportunity to bring about its demise, or take it over, sooner rather than later.

Frictions became even more pronounced in the run-up to the May 2022 local elections in Bangsamoro provinces and towns. The MILF, through its political arm, the United Bangsamoro Justice Party, fielded candidates who challenged traditional politicians in the provinces of Maguindanao and Basilan, and the regional seat of government, Cotabato City. Despite holding the top offices in the interim administration, the ex-rebels used these local campaigns to frame the contest as a battle between what they called "the forces of change and the forces of the status quo".⁹ The elec-

⁶ Georgi Engelbrecht, "Covid-19 shakes South Philippine peace deal", *Asia Times*, 14 December 2020.

⁷ The requirement for new legislation was set out in Article XVI, Section 4 (a), of Republic Act No. 11054, enacted by the Congress of the Philippines on 23 July 2018.

⁸ Georgi Engelbrecht, "The Philippines: Three More Years for the Bangsamoro Transition", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 October 2021. The MILF convinced some local politicians to support their extension campaign, but many of the traditional clans lobbied hard against it.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, MILF activists, Cotabato, Parang and Datu Piang, 7-11 May 2022.

tions were the first in which the ex-rebels entered candidates, and the outcome was mixed. The party of former insurgents won the mayoral seat in Cotabato City but secured only a few other positions in the autonomous region.¹⁰

At the national level, the MILF endorsed Marcos, Jr.'s main opponent in the 2022 presidential race, Leni Robredo, a quiet but well-known supporter of Bangsamoro autonomy and the peace process.¹¹ The MILF's rivals among local political elites, in contrast, supported Marcos, Jr., who remained vague about his vision for Bangsamoro throughout the campaign. Political clans and their candidates won in most provinces and municipalities, and also delivered votes to Marcos, Jr. in the presidential election, contributing to his landslide victory in the region.¹² Marcos, Jr. even secured votes of some former rebels and their communities, benefiting from their dissatisfaction with the interim government.¹³

Marcos, Jr.'s win put the MILF in an uncomfortable position. Some in the movement feared retribution for having endorsed his opponent.¹⁴ The MILF had no direct link to the new president, in contrast to its connections with his predecessor, Duterte, who hailed from Mindanao. Marcos, Jr., moreover, was on excellent terms with Mindanao's Moro clan elites, who run provinces and towns in the region. While the ex-rebels struggled to get an appointment with the new president, the clans that had secured his victory in the region met with him repeatedly.

The clans told the new president in Manila that the ex-rebels had failed to deliver good governance and they requested changes to augment their own power, including more posts for themselves in the local parliament and key slots in the regional cabinet. Some clan leaders apparently lobbied for the chief minister position, trying to unseat the former insurgents from the most important office in the autonomous region.¹⁵ Some political families, and even members of Marcos' entourage, also expressed scepticism about the head of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPPRU), Carlito Galvez, Jr., a Duterte appointee whom they perceived as too sympathetic to the MILF. During the presidential campaign, and in the immediate aftermath of his victory, Marcos, Jr. said almost nothing about the future of the peace process, creating uncertainty about his commitment to take it forward.¹⁶

¹⁰ Overall, the May 2022 local polls were more peaceful than many past elections, but occasional violence still occurred in parts of Basilan, Lanao and Maguindanao provinces. See Georgi Engelbrecht, "Ballots and Bullets in the Bangsamoro", Crisis Group Commentary, 20 June 2022.

¹¹ The MILF was sceptical of Marcos, Jr. due to his father's proclamation of martial law in 1972, which had fuelled the Moro rebellion; Marcos, Jr.'s vague policy pronouncements on the peace process; and his ties to traditional local politicians.

¹² Georgi Engelbrecht, "The Philippines Votes the Marcos Dynasty Back into Power", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 May 2022.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, MILF commanders and political officers, Maguindanao and Cotabato, 23-28 October 2022.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, source close to the MILF, Manila, 31 May 2022.

¹⁵ There was also talk of administrative reforms, such as breaking the region into two sub-regions. Crisis Group interviews, journalist, Cotabato City, 29 October 2022; political insiders, Manila, 5 and 13 November 2022.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, officials and sources close to the peace process, Manila, June-July and October 2022.

In the end, Marcos, Jr. kept the peace process architecture intact. To the relief of the MILF, he preserved the ex-rebels' parliamentary majority in the transitional authority, which could have been threatened if the new president had decided to reward his allies in the region. He reappointed MILF Chairman Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim as chief minister, which was a boon for Bangsamoro governance. He declined to give the political clans that had supported his candidacy more seats in parliament.¹⁷ In October 2022, the president also reappointed Galvez as chief adviser on peace and reconciliation.¹⁸ He then named Galvez secretary of defence, something the MILF welcomed, before appointing another retired general, Isidro Purisima, as acting peace adviser.¹⁹ The Intergovernmental Relations Body, a mechanism to ensure coordination and collaboration between Cotabato and Manila, remains in place.

In addition to signalling commitment to the peace process, President Marcos, Jr.'s appointments to the transitional authority made it a bit more inclusive. In what many observers consider to be a politically adept move, he appointed representatives of the MNLF's different factions, including the son and daughter of famous Moro rebel leader Nur Misuari.²⁰ In addition, he modestly increased the number of women and youth in the interim parliament.²¹ The body is not perfectly representative: Marcos, Jr. did not bring in more Indigenous representatives, and Manila (and to an extent the MILF through its own nominees) did not augment the number of parliamentarians from smaller Moro ethno-linguistic groups.²² But it is more so than it used to be.

After the round of fresh appointments, the new presidential administration publicly promised to uphold the peace process and to fully implement the peace deal. Marcos, Jr. and his advisers attended the inaugural session of the Bangsamoro parliament in Cotabato City.²³ A few days later, on 21 September 2022, he cited the success of the Bangsamoro peace process in a speech at the UN General Assembly as qual-

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, MILF members and peace process observers, September 2022.

¹⁸ In addition, the new president relies on two other cabinet members on Bangsamoro matters. First, Antonio Lagdameo, special assistant to the president and head of the government mechanism for the normalisation process, and Benhur Abalos, Jr., secretary of the interior and local government. Other important officials for the peace process are Speaker of the House of Representatives Martian Romualdez (Marcos, Jr.'s cousin), Senator Juan Miguel "Migz" Zubiri (from Bukidnon in Mindanao) and Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman (the granddaughter of an influential Moro leader and sister of a regional parliament member).

¹⁹ Daphne Galvez, "Marcos names acting presidential peace adviser", *Inquirer*, 21 February 2023.

²⁰ For the first time, the interim parliament therefore includes representatives from both the Sema-Jikiri faction as well as the Misuari group. In the BTA's first iteration, only a handful of MNLF members belonging to the first faction were represented, a far cry from the 1990s, when former MNLF commanders ran the autonomous region. Since then, the MNLF has become a loose association of political-military leaders whose clout is greatest in Sulu. Following a split in 2001, the MNLF comprises two factions: one led by Nur Misuari, the rebel movement's founder, and the other by Muslimin Sema, from Maguindanao, and Albakil Tong Jikiri, from Sulu.

²¹ Sixteen of the region's 80 parliamentarians are women, three more than in the first parliament.

²² Noteworthy was the inclusion of ethnic Yakan base commander Hajji Dan Asnawi from Basilan, given both that base commanders have not traditionally been appointed to regional government and that smaller Moro groups are only present in small numbers in parliament.

²³ John Unson, "Marcos urges unity in visit to Bangsamoro parliament", *Philippine Star*, 15 November 2022.

ifying the Philippines to contend for a seat on the UN Security Council during the 2027-2028 session.²⁴

Marcos, Jr.'s family history may play a role in the way he finally embraced the peace process. Government officials have told Crisis Group that the Marcos, Jr. administration has a "unique opportunity" to finish what Marcos, Sr. started when he signed the 1976 Tripoli Peace Agreement with the MNLF, the first accord between the government and a Moro group.²⁵ Whatever the exact motives of Marcos, Jr. for investing himself, his gestures ended months of uncertainty surrounding the future of the peace process.²⁶

B. *What's Next for the Transitional Authority*

The 2022 elections and Marcos, Jr.'s appointments did not radically change the interim government. The majority of parliamentarians kept their seats in the BTA, and only minor reshuffles occurred in the cabinet and ministries.²⁷ Members of the transitional authority have been talking about dividing ministries to accommodate influential Moro leaders or bureaucrats not included in the new parliament, but whether they will do so remains to be seen.²⁸

The interim's parliament main's task for now is the passage of the remaining legislative codes. Members of parliament are already debating how to amend the local government codes the MILF majority introduced in late 2022. Chief Minister Ebrahim announced that the interim authority would pass the codes in the first quarter of 2023.²⁹ With the passage of the electoral code in March 2023, the most prominent items left are two codes that would set out the rules for local government and procedures for revenue collection.³⁰

Apart from such institutional reforms, the transition envisages the interim government delivering "peace dividends" to the region, both in terms of concrete benefits

²⁴ "Full text: President Marcos' speech at the 77th UN General Assembly", Rappler.com, 21 September 2022.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, OPPAPRU officials, Manila, 22 September 2022. Signed in Libya, the agreement failed, as Manila did not deliver what the rebels wanted and some of them continued the armed struggle.

²⁶ The Philippine congress also postponed village elections to 2023, delaying a traditionally competitive, and potentially violent, exercise in the Philippines.

²⁷ For example, Paisalin Tago replaced Dickson Hermoso as minister of transport and communications. A number of MILF officials were also reappointed to the Ministry of Interior and Local Government, including a deputy commander, Butch Malang. MILF spokesperson Von Al Haq became a "senior minister" in the cabinet.

²⁸ The idea would be to split the Ministries of Education and Agriculture, Fisheries and Agrarian Reform. According to insiders, Marcos Jr., the MILF and the clans agreed to take these measures. Crisis Group interviews, Cotabato City, 29 October 2022; Manila, 5 and 13 November 2022. There are also relevant legislative proposals in the regional parliament.

²⁹ Sheila Mae Dela Cruz, "Bangsamoro parliament tackles proposed election, local governance codes", *Inquirer*, 24 September 2022. There seems to be no substantial progress, however, regarding the revenue code or the Indigenous peoples code.

³⁰ The electoral code institutes a quota system for women and penalties for turncoats, among others. The interim government has also focused on adapting a Gender and Development Agenda, which foresees gender mainstreaming in the Bangsamoro, and drafting a Regional Action Plan on Peace, Women and Security.

but also a more general sense of bringing peace. Opinions vary as to whether the new regional setup has fulfilled this mandate. A local bureaucrat told Crisis Group that the interim government “does a lot, but it is hard to see for the common people”.³¹ Under the interim government’s stewardship, the autonomous region in fact has made progress. It has built hospitals and village halls; put various agricultural programs in place; and allocated funds for social welfare, education and health. The region weathered the COVID-19-induced economic crisis, with some sub-regions even recording economic growth during the pandemic. In 2021, the region’s agricultural and fisheries output was the country’s highest by value.³²

Still, criticism of the interim government is widespread and, in many cases, warranted. A former government official said development is “uneven”.³³ A chunk of the Bangsamoro’s economy, especially the public sector, remains controlled by clans and local elites who sometimes undermine the interim government’s efforts. The uncertain security situation, meanwhile, discourages investment from outside the region.³⁴

Critics also argue that the Bangsamoro could more efficiently spend the money Manila sends to the region in the form of a block grant (a device that allows the region wide latitude and is meant to promote its fiscal autonomy): if the regional government engaged in more timely and transparent budget deliberations, these critics argue, funds could be allocated more expeditiously. But even then, its ministries and departments would also need to improve their absorptive capacity and skills to make use of the funding.³⁵ Even MILF leaders themselves admit they could improve their track record in this area.³⁶ There also appears to be growing discontent about perceived corruption and nepotism in the bureaucracy.³⁷

Bangsamoro authorities and international supporters are attempting to update development plans for the region and passage of priority legislation is under way. Still, observers are getting fed up with the delays that emerged in the course of the pandemic but are also attributable to unrelated challenges with which the interim government has struggled.³⁸ A civil society activist complained: “All this planning only touches the surface. We need implementation”.³⁹

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City, 28 October 2022.

³² Luisa Jocson, “BARMM tops regions in 2021 agriculture growth by value”, Business World Online, 27 April 2022.

³³ Crisis Group interview, former government official, Manila, 7 October 2022. Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur have made headway in alleviating poverty, but Basilan and Sulu are poorer than the Bangsamoro average.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, donor officials, Manila, 22 September 2022.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, MILF officials, Cotabato City, 26 and 28 October 2022.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, interim government officials, Cotabato City, 25 and 28 October 2022. The grant amounts to 5 per cent of the Philippines’ annual net internal revenue.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Manila, October-November 2022. For example, there are comments about the MILF-led interim government’s continuing opacity in disclosing details of how the budget is spent, as well as allegations of unfair hiring practices and favouritism. More broadly, people associated with the MILF leadership are said to have monopolised business opportunities, for example in real estate. Crisis Group interview, Manila, 4 November 2022.

³⁸ Created in 2020 and updated in late December 2022, the plan is meant to be a strategic document to guide the region’s development.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City, 27 October 2022.

C. *Decommissioning Challenges*

A vital component of the peace process is phased disarmament, or decommissioning, of the 40,000-strong Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, the MILF's armed wing.⁴⁰ After the pandemic hiatus, the third phase of decommissioning resumed in September 2022 and should wrap up in the second quarter of 2023.⁴¹ So far, the third-party Independent Decommissioning Body, together with the central government and MILF, has decommissioned 4,625 weapons and 24,844 combatants, or around 62 per cent of the total rebel force.⁴² While there is no official timeline for working through the remaining caseload, officials in Manila are optimistic that the fourth and last phase could begin in 2023, allowing for all the rebels to demobilise before the end of the transition period in 2025.⁴³

The national military, however, has raised concerns about the decommissioning process. First among them is the disconnect between the declared number of fighters (40,000) and the number of weapons (7,200) listed for decommissioning, which the military suspects means the ex-guerrillas will be holding onto many firearms.⁴⁴ Both parties were clear at the outset that decommissioning would exclude privately owned and borrowed firearms, but as the process advances the military is pushing to confiscate more guns.⁴⁵ For now, government officials are informally proposing a 1:1 ratio between fighters and arms in the fourth phase, which would mean that 9,000 to 10,000 firearms could be decommissioned.⁴⁶ That is unlikely to happen, for reasons discussed below, but the fact that the military is holding firm on this demand demonstrates lingering discomfort with the MILF holding so many weapons.

The armed forces and other critics have also expressed concerns about the list of combatants that the authorities are using for the decommissioning process.⁴⁷ Rather than submitting the entire list to the decommissioning body from the inception of the process, the MILF has only done so at the beginning of each phase. These lists, moreover, are confidential and shared only with the decommissioning body.⁴⁸ This

⁴⁰ At the time of the peace agreement, in 2014, observers estimated the number of MILF combatants at 12,000. The MILF later revised the figure upward, and the Duterte administration acquiesced, accepting the argument that the ex-rebel force includes not just fighters but also civilian auxiliaries. Crisis Group interviews, officials, Cotabato and Zamboanga, December 2019.

⁴¹ As of April, 1,300 combatants remain to be demobilised in the third phase, which is expected to continue in June. The third phase covers 2,450 weapons, including high-powered and well-functioning guns. The delay is due to a lack of funds for the immediate cash assistance to be provided to the combatants. Crisis Group interviews, Manila, 21 October 2022; 22 February 2023.

⁴² The decommissioning body comprises officials from Türkiye, Norway, Brunei and Japan, and national experts representing the Philippine government and the MILF. The vast majority of decommissioned combatants are men.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, involved officials, Manila, 21 September and 21 October 2022. Bangsamoro's local politicians have also urged the government to speed up decommissioning. Ferdinandh Cabrera, "4 BARMM governors ask palace to hasten decommissioning of MILF", *Mindanews.com*, 24 February 2023.

⁴⁴ "We think in terms of weapons, not necessarily combatants", a senior officer told Crisis Group at the start of the decommissioning process. Crisis Group interview, Zamboanga City, 22 December 2019.

⁴⁵ Estimates of the MILF firearms that are outside the organisation's control vary widely.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior military official, Datu Odin Sinsuat, 26 October 2022.

⁴⁷ The term "combatant" is not defined in the peace agreement.

⁴⁸ The MILF has not yet submitted the list for the fourth phase.

arrangement has drawn flak, since in the beginning the parties had spoken about one complete list. More dubious is that the MILF alone decides who figures on these lists, and the decommissioning body is only tasked with verifying the identities (as opposed to the affiliation) of those listed. As a result, critics allege that, in some instances, individuals decommissioned were not bona fide MILF members.⁴⁹ That, in turn, allows them to claim money they are not entitled to. It also means that some legitimate fighters have not in fact handed over their arms.

D. *Other Implementation Challenges*

Decommissioning is only one of several steps envisioned as part of the peace process, in a package of measures known locally as “normalisation”. The full package includes financial and other benefits for ex-fighters; measures turning ex-rebel encampments into peaceful communities (which the peace deal says would “progress”, meaning become more developed, over time); and moves to disband private militias. On all these fronts, the process has fallen behind schedule.⁵⁰

One of the most contentious issues is the central government’s promised socio-economic package for ex-combatants. All those decommissioned have received \$1,800 in cash. But the government has not, for the most part, provided other benefits such as housing, health and education allowances.⁵¹ Among the MILF’s ranks, there is a widespread belief that the government has promised 1 million pesos [around \$17,960] worth of support to each decommissioned combatant.⁵² Government officials have been equivocal on this point; some say the package was contingent on a scenario where the MILF decommissions one gun per fighter (the so-called 1:1 ratio); other officials say the benefits package is in fact flexible (read: not as generous as the ex-rebels claim).⁵³ In any case, Manila estimates that it will disburse the cash and deliver other parts of the package by 2027.⁵⁴ But locals and the ex-rebels worry that once the MILF’s force is dismantled, the government will have few incentives to stick to its part of the bargain.

Another contested point is the “camp transformation”, an ambitious but incomplete program for transforming the main MILF camps into productive communities.⁵⁵ The process has recently gained momentum with the creation of a centralised multi-

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, military officer, Manila, 3 June 2022. Crisis Group has heard anecdotal reports of these patterns since the first phase, but it is difficult to thoroughly assess their validity.

⁵⁰ For information about women in normalisation, see Crisis Group Report, *Southern Philippines: Fostering an Inclusive Bangsamoro*, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

⁵¹ Part of the reason is that these elements of the package require a detailed needs assessment and coordination among various agencies. While some projects for decommissioned combatants are completed, their number and scale are hard to quantify. The Philippine government estimates that it would need around \$346 million for the provision of all packages. Document on file with Crisis Group.

⁵² This impression stems from a verbal promise allegedly made by Secretary Galvez himself, with conflicting accounts of whether there is also a written document referring to this amount. Crisis Group interviews, sources privy to the process, November 2022.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, July-October 2022.

⁵⁴ The timeline extends beyond 2025, as the government assumes it would take longer to deliver the socio-economic contents of the package.

⁵⁵ The six recognised MILF camps are: Abubakar as-Siddique, Badre, Bilal, Darapanan, Omar ibn al-Khattab, Rajamuda and Busrah Somiorang.

lateral donor pool, the Normalisation Trust Fund, which is aimed at better coordinating assistance. Several projects are now in the pipeline.⁵⁶ But there are unresolved questions over issues such as land ownership, especially when it comes to non-Moro Indigenous communities living near the camps.⁵⁷ In recent years, Moro armed groups have encroached on these neighbouring areas, on some occasions violently.⁵⁸ The encroachment sparks conflict with Indigenous groups, who claim that the MILF and powerful Moro clans neglect their concerns, or worse, pay lip service to granting them equal rights with no intention of doing so.⁵⁹

Other aspects of the deal also appear to be contested. The MILF's insistence on the creation of a Bangsamoro police force, stipulated in the peace treaty, but subject to unsettled interpretation, remains a distant prospect, and is unlikely to gain momentum under Marcos, Jr.⁶⁰ The central government has yet to fully roll out the amnesty promised to ex-rebels. President Duterte set up a National Amnesty Commission to determine eligibility, and Marcos, Jr. has appointed a chair for the commission, but other specifics remain pending.⁶¹ Lastly, despite the peace deal's requirement that the military redeploy its forces from and inside the Bangsamoro, local instability and a lack of alternatives (including the police force conundrum) have made it impossible for the armed forces to leave.⁶²

Meanwhile, the process of disbanding private armed groups, ie, militias employed by local politicians, has made headway – but only haltingly. Getting rid of these armed groups is necessary to make Bangsamoro more stable.⁶³ According to government data, the National Task Force on the Disbandment of Private Armed Groups has so far dismantled fifteen small militias comprising 94 members in total, who gave up 86 firearms.⁶⁴ But several sources told Crisis Group that power brokers in parts of Maguindanao and the Special Geographic Area, an administrative district encompass-

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, donor official, 7 October 2022. The Bangsamoro Normalisation Trust Fund is a financing mechanism administered by the World Bank.

⁵⁷ This concern is prevalent in Omar and Badre camps in Maguindanao.

⁵⁸ While the number of attacks on Indigenous communities has decreased since 2021, locals remain alarmed about alleged land grabs in the heights near and even within the MILF camps. Crisis Group interviews, 12 March 2023.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, 2021-2022.

⁶⁰ So far, the new administration seems inclined to follow Duterte's model of integrating MILF fighters into the national police force, rather than creating a new regional one. For now, Moro guerrillas can apply for jobs in regular police ranks, under Manila's command, but the MILF has said it wants to return to the original agreement's terms at some stage. Crisis Group interview, peace process observer, Manila, 14 October 2022.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, senior MILF commander, 26 October 2022. In late 2022, hundreds of MILF members applied for amnesty. The process was delayed due to unclear guidelines and because the ex-rebels were apparently hesitant to provide a list of former combatants. "400 MILF combatants seek gov't amnesty, pardon", GMA News, 6 October 2022.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, military officials, Manila, 25 April 2023.

⁶³ Private armies and militias (used interchangeably in this report) are defined by the government as: "an organised group of two or more persons, with legally or illegally possessed firearms, utilised for sowing fear and intimidation, and violence for the advancement and protection of vested political and economic interest". The militias are usually associated with politicians who use them as muscle to advance political goals, punish rivals and protect business interests.

⁶⁴ Lade Kabagani, "Task force dismantles armed groups in Mindanao", Philippine News Agency, 13 June 2022.

ing 63 villages that formerly belonged to Cotabato province, have created new private armies and expanded the existing militias' arsenals.⁶⁵

Locals are worried not only about the presence of these “goons” but also about the violent political culture they represent.⁶⁶ Indeed, despite the MILF's leadership role at the regional level, several local elites continue to impose their will on communities with impunity.⁶⁷ The presence of these militias is one of the reasons why MILF fighters hesitate to give up their guns. Overall, according to estimates, as many as 100,000 unlicensed firearms are in circulation in the Bangsamoro.⁶⁸

E. *Understanding the Slow Pace*

Besides the rebels' fear of surrendering weapons too quickly, other factors have slowed implementation of the peace deal. Financial constraints and bureaucratic inertia are also contributing to delays: the government argues it lacks resources to cover interventions such as the decommissioning packages and camp transformation, which were envisioned as part of normalisation. Manila has suggested that the MILF use part of the block grant for such purposes.⁶⁹ Some, including a number of MILF officials, consider that option viable, at least in theory. Others, however, point out that the peace agreement clearly states that financial responsibility for normalisation lies with Manila.⁷⁰

Another challenge is the lack of coordination between the various government bodies charged with bringing normalisation to fruition. For example, the two task forces for camp transformation and decommissioned combatants need to work together, not least because their geographical coverage overlaps. They appear, however, to be operating largely on their own.⁷¹ The government and MILF have convened workshops and consultations to encourage more cooperation, but little has changed in practice.⁷²

Differing views within the Philippine government and MILF about normalisation's progress make the next steps trickier. MILF leaders stress that, while the peace process – particularly decommissioning – has made significant gains, it is important “not to trivialise the rest”. “Cutting corners” would be inconsistent with the peace agreement, they add.⁷³ For their part, government officials highlight their past accom-

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, MILF sources, Cotabato City, 24 and 28 October 2022; bureaucrat, 6 November 2022.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, October 2022.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, observer from Maguindanao, 15 November 2022.

⁶⁸ A joint UN-Japan program on small and light weapons also aims to cover areas where militias proliferate. It promises the community socio-economic projects in exchange for management and/or surrender of privately owned guns.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ See Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, Annex on Normalisation, 25 January 2014, paragraph I. 1, p. 9.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, donor and development officials, Manila, 14 and 15 November 2022.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, development expert, Cotabato, 26 October 2022.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, senior MILF official, 25 October 2022.

plishments and emphasise the need for patience, however slow or cumbersome the process may be.⁷⁴

As for international partners, for the most part they remain supportive of the peace process. They are contributing to the Trust Fund and have developed initiatives to help the transition's political and normalisation tracks along.⁷⁵ The European Union (EU), for example, has conducted trainings in public administration. Japan and Australia have provided workshops on human resource management and conflict-sensitive development planning in the camps. Residents appreciate the presence of international actors in the Bangsamoro, be it through direct engagement in development projects, regular visits or attendance at events, such as inaugurations or program launches. Showing up sends an important symbolic message.⁷⁶

But the donors are not always fully aligned. Some stressed to Crisis Group that funding is not limitless.⁷⁷ Others made clear that they have varying perspectives about how they regard the Bangsamoro's challenges and needs.⁷⁸ Some are only willing to support programs that prioritise the political over the normalisation track, preferring to focus on governance and administration rather than ex-fighters and their concerns.⁷⁹ The Philippine government has its own perceptions of each donor, which also makes program development complex. The lack of strategic donor alignment and coordination is not insurmountable, but it means that funding is not used as effectively as it could be – and slows the transition to full regional autonomy precisely when the process needs to speed up.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, OPAPPRU officials, 22 September 2022.

⁷⁵ The largest donors, such as Japan, Australia and the EU, have a wide portfolio of interventions, ranging from technical support for the interim government's civil servants to bigger development projects focused on agribusiness, job creation and value chains.

⁷⁶ An international presence has traditionally helped people in the Bangsamoro feel more confident in the peace process.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, donor officials, Manila, 21 September 2022.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, donor official, Manila, 6 October 2022.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, development expert, Manila, 5 November 2022.

III. The Role of the Clans

A successful transition in the Bangsamoro will hinge, among other things, on reaching a modus vivendi that satisfies the national government, the ex-rebels and the clans. Clan networks are the most enduring institutions in the region (and in other parts of the country). They hold most of the region's seats in the Philippine national congress and run many of the Bangsamoro's provinces and municipalities. As noted, relations between the ex-rebels and several powerful clans were difficult even before the 2022 local and presidential elections. Afterward, their rapport deteriorated further, as the elections cemented the role of these powerful families in the Bangsamoro's governance. The clans won governorships in all the region's provinces: the Hatamans continue to dominate Basilan; the Alonto-Adiongs run Lanao del Sur; the Salis rule Tawi-Tawi; and in the Sulu archipelago, the Tans remain firmly in control.⁸⁰

The most intense political rivalry remains centred in Maguindanao, where the local elections were particularly contentious – and sometimes violent, due to clashes among loyalists of MILF-linked candidates and rival clans. Elections in Maguindanao were consequential, in part because the majority of the ex-rebels' camps, and thus a substantial number of former – and present – fighters, are located there.⁸¹ The incumbent governor, Bai Mariam Sangki-Mangudadatu, known for her scepticism of the MILF leadership, prevailed over her husband's cousin, Esmael "Toto" Mangudadatu.⁸²

The governor's victory did not make her the sole power broker, although she has considerable sway. Political authority in Maguindanao remains contested, in part because Marcos, Jr. did not reward the governor for her loyalty in recent elections by extending privileges such as an appointment in the interim government for her husband, Suharto "Teng" Mangudadatu. Still, her family, a strong political force with close links to Manila, leads a coalition of the major political clans in Maguindanao and maintains influence in the neighbouring Sultan Kudarat province (where her son is governor). It also allegedly enjoys good relationships with several past and present insurgents.⁸³ Following the elections, this part of the Bangsamoro has seen an increase in violence related to the political schism between the MILF leadership and the clans as they battle for control and legitimacy.

Power politics in Maguindanao became even more complicated when a plebiscite in September 2022 divided it into two parts: Maguindanao del Norte in the north and Maguindanao del Sur in the south.⁸⁴ In both provinces, there is a risk of further

⁸⁰ While the governors of Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and Lanao del Sur appear pragmatic, or at least open to dialogue with the MILF-led interim government, Sulu's Abdusakur Tan and his clan are highly critical of the MILF and its handling of the regional administration. Except for in Maguindanao, all the governors in the Bangsamoro are men.

⁸¹ Four of the MILF's seven camps and at least one third of its military power are in the two Maguindanao provinces. The 104, 105, 106, 108, 109, 118 and 129 base commands, MILF's basic military units, are all in the area.

⁸² Part of the reason for her success was her ability to secure the votes of several MILF commanders and their constituencies.

⁸³ A number of MILF commanders are among these contacts. Crisis Group interview, Manila, 3 June 2022. Sultan Kudarat's governor is Pax Ali Mangudadatu.

⁸⁴ The division of Maguindanao was a longstanding objective of local elites. In the past, there were two differently named provinces in its territory, before the Supreme Court declared them unconsti-

conflict. Southern Maguindanao, which is adjacent to Sultan Kudarat province, is less politically contested, but a small danger of instability persists. Several clans are positioning themselves for village elections in October 2023, which are shaping up as another contest between the incumbent families and MILF candidates. Disagreements within the Ampatuan-Sangki-Mangudadatu clan alliance and among its allies could also trigger violence.⁸⁵ The province still contains armed MILF units, and harbours militants such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), an MILF splinter group outside the peace process. Several commanders of both groups have contributed to electoral violence in the past.

As for northern Maguindanao, it is relatively free of militant groups, but has a number of strong political clans, which are already jockeying for position in the 2025 parliamentary elections.⁸⁶ It is also home to several high-ranking MILF leaders.⁸⁷ As the new province establishes itself, it is suffering from political uncertainty. Marcos, Jr. waited for months before appointing a governor, finally naming a high-ranking MILF official, Abdulrauf Macacua, who has since pledged to reach out to his opponents.⁸⁸ The Sinsuat clan and its allies have announced they will legally contest the appointment, leading to a bizarre situation in which the province has two would-be governors.⁸⁹ Observers of Maguindanao politics told Crisis Group that this twist will lead to more tensions – and possibly to violence.⁹⁰ “There are many flashpoints”, said a regional official.⁹¹

Given the number of actors involved in Bangsamoro politics and the distrust among them, governance is likely to remain contentious. Divergences on the local,

tutional. The split means that the BARMM now comprises six provinces – administered by six governors – rather than the original five. The two newly created provinces are under the control of traditional elites at odds with the MILF. John Mendoza, “Comelec: 99% ‘yes’ votes in Maguindanao split plebiscite”, *Inquirer*, 18 September 2022.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, political insider, Cotabato City, 26 October 2022. The ruling clan draws from the three interrelated families mentioned above. It is also allied with smaller political clans such as the Matalams, Paglases, Mengelens and Pendatuns.

⁸⁶ Several UBJP mayors have created a grouping of the so-called United Bangsamoro Development Councils, including the towns of Northern Kabuntalan, Parang, Datu Blah Sinsuat, Sultan Mastura and Upi. Despite its governance-oriented name, it also appears to be a political grouping of like-minded politicians. Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, 27 October 2022.

⁸⁷ Murad Ebrahim is from Sultan Kudarat, Mohagher Iqbal from Datu Odin Sinsuat, and Naguib Sinarimbo from Pigcawayan. Chief of Staff Sammy al-Mansour hails from Kabuntalan.

⁸⁸ Macacua goes by the nom de guerre of Sammy al-Mansoor or Sammy Gambar and is the chief of staff of the MILF’s military wing. He will serve as “office-in-charge” until the 2025 elections. The appointment was preceded by political conflict between the MILF and the Sinsuats. The ex-rebels waited for Marcos, Jr. to formally appoint a governor, while Maguindanao’s incumbent vice-governor, Bai Ainee Sinsuat, appeared to think she should be governor by default. Manila put a hold on Bai Ainee Sinsuat’s appointment as governor despite the clan’s lobbying. Crisis Group interview, confidential source, Manila, 18 November 2022.

⁸⁹ The two camps have different interpretations of the law dealing with the division of the province into northern and southern parts. President Marcos, Jr. appointed Macacua, but the Sinsuat clan has questioned the prerogative of the president to do so – particularly Bai Fatima Ainee Sinsuat, who formally remains vice-governor of Maguindanao del Norte, and her ally Bai Mariam. Crisis Group correspondence, sources close to the family, 8-10 April 2023.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group online communication, sources from Maguindanao, 9 and 10 April 2023.

⁹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, 24 April 2023.

regional and national levels are particularly salient. The MILF may still be in charge of the interim regional parliament, but it faces challenges from the clans in the provinces and in Manila, where the big families have at least as much leverage. These tensions complicated the passage of the electoral code in early 2023, and similar disputes could delay introduction of a local government code in the coming months.

Both of these legislative initiatives touch upon the essence of the relationship between the regional authority, on one side, and national and local levels of government, on the other.⁹² The drafts required consultations in the regional parliament as well as with experts and communities.⁹³ Early versions proved controversial. Provincial governors issued a position paper addressed to Marcos, Jr., highlighting “red flags” and asking him to undertake a legal and constitutional review of both codes.⁹⁴ While the MILF and its critics eventually reached a compromise on the electoral code, establishing the rules for local governance will require more haggling.⁹⁵ Both laws, moreover, could face challenges at the Supreme Court.⁹⁶

The ex-rebels are cognisant of the challenges they face from the clans as the 2025 elections draw nearer. “We need to campaign soon to show what we have achieved and are currently doing in terms of governance. But as for the interim government, there needs to be accommodation [of the clans]”, said an insider from the former rebel movement.⁹⁷ Accommodation is not easy, however, because the clans may – if included more in decision-making – play the role of spoilers, depriving the MILF of policy accomplishments and highlighting its failures. At the same time, the MILF’s rise to power and legitimacy has made the political families’ own calculus complex, because they must compete with ex-rebels who used to operate in the shadows but are now the region’s dominant politicians, with influential supporters in Manila.⁹⁸ A clan member said: “Now the only option for the families is to sabotage the formula [of a MILF-led regional government]. Nowadays, violence is less of a tool, but there are other ways. They can influence public opinion”.⁹⁹

⁹² Starting in 2023, all local governments in the Bangsamoro, as well as other parts of the country, will also benefit from the Mandanas-Garcia ruling, a Supreme Court decision that will provide them with more funds from national government revenues.

⁹³ The electoral code does not list electoral districts; the plan is to present the districts in a separate bill. The draft local government code, meanwhile, appears to be a compromise between the MILF’s aspirations for a strong region and the status quo of local power, even though some provisions remain controversial: for example, some have also taken issue with a clause that gives the chief minister “exclusive” authority to “supervise and regulate the affairs” of local government. Crisis Group interviews, experts, Manila and Cotabato, 13 and 26 October; 4 November 2022.

⁹⁴ Document on file with Crisis Group.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group correspondence, experts and journalists, 20-22 March 2023.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, peace process official, Manila, 17 January 2023. Crisis Group correspondence, legal expert, 11 April 2023.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Manila, 6 October 2022.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group correspondence, political analyst, 7 November 2022.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City, 25 October 2022.

IV. Continued Violence

The first three years of the transitional period were, fortunately, not plagued by incessant violence. Still, enduring tensions between political forces and other forms of conflict have harmed the peace process in several regions, especially Maguindanao and the neighbouring “special geographic area” in the former Cotabato province. In these areas of instability, the delays in normalisation and political conflicts have created what a Bangsamoro human rights activist called “a cycle of violence”.¹⁰⁰

A. *Persisting Insecurity*

In the years since the autonomous region was created in 2019, the ceasefire agreement between the government and the MILF has largely held, with only a few minor incidents.¹⁰¹ Still, the pull-out of a Malaysian-led international monitoring team in July 2022 caused grumbling on the MILF side.¹⁰² International military observers had been present in the Philippines since 2004, at one time numbering 60 soldiers. The contingent subsequently shrank, especially after the peace treaty was adopted. But though the number of international observers was smaller, the ex-rebels regarded the third-party presence as a valuable safeguard during the tense period when they started giving up weapons. The government, in contrast, chafed at having foreign military personnel on Philippine soil. The Duterte administration declined to extend the team’s mandate, saying observers were unnecessary because conflict between government forces and the MILF had subsided.¹⁰³

But while in general the Bangsamoro is no longer a conflict zone, armed clashes continue to occur periodically. These sometimes pit state forces, whether soldiers or law enforcement personnel, against the MILF or militants. But more often, fighting is touched off by community disputes, clan feuds (implicating private militias) and increasing intra-MILF friction.

1. Clashes with the MILF

Despite their ceasefire, the Philippine military and the MILF have clashed in recent months. In the municipality of Ungkaya Pukan, in Basilan province, a firefight broke out that lasted for two days in November 2022 and led to ten casualties.¹⁰⁴ The fight was reportedly triggered by the return of MILF forces to the village of Ulitán after they had to leave the area to allow for military operations months earlier.¹⁰⁵ That

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, 20 November 2022.

¹⁰¹ Most of these incidents occurred during military operations against militant groups, as in the cases of Maguing, Lanao del Sur, and Shariff Saydona Mustapha, Maguindanao.

¹⁰² In absence of the monitoring team, both parties now work through the Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities, which coordinates movements on the two sides, and the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group, which coordinates law enforcement operations in MILF areas.

¹⁰³ Jim Gomez, “Philippines ends stay of foreign peacekeepers in the south”, Associated Press, 15 July 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, MILF and civilian sources, November 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Forces under Commander Hiram Malangka of the 114 Base Command reportedly coordinated the return of ex-rebels to the area using ceasefire mechanisms established as part of the peace pro-

municipality and adjacent towns had already experienced a spate of shootings before and after the heated 2022 elections.¹⁰⁶ Some observers believe that local officials and the military had concerns about the MILF presence; for their part, the MILF considered their local rivals obtrusive, making for a combustible dynamic. The November incident, during which the army conducted mortar shelling and airstrikes, displaced about 2,000 families.¹⁰⁷

Another clash occurred on 9 December in Tapudoc, a village in the “special geographic area”, between paramilitaries and an armed group that included MILF elements, killing nine people and wounding six.¹⁰⁸ The hostilities stemmed from a feud between two families that dates back to 2016. The latest flare-up started when a member of the local paramilitary forces was ambushed by the armed group with kinship ties to the MILF, leading to retaliation.

In yet another incident, 39 Philippine soldiers entered a MILF area in Maguing town on 8 February 2023, apparently due to a coordination mishap; there were no clashes, but the special forces personnel ended up laying down their guns and MILF forces prevented them from leaving the vicinity for 24 hours.¹⁰⁹ Both sides dealt with the issue prudently, but some military officers stationed in the region are said to be frustrated with both the coordination protocols and the optics of having been held in a rebel camp.¹¹⁰ While all these incidents were limited in scope and quickly managed, the mere fact that clashes persist years after the peace deal is worrying.

2. Groups outside the peace process

Somewhat more concerning for the region’s stability is the continued presence of militant groups that fall outside the peace process, including jihadist elements.¹¹¹ These groups may have reached the apex of their influence in 2017, when a coalition of the Abu Sayyaf and Maute Groups, which had assembled a force that included foreign fighters, launched an assault on Marawi, the Philippines’ largest majority-Muslim

cess, but that did not prevent armed clashes. Crisis Group telephone interviews, MILF and civilian sources, November 2023.

¹⁰⁶ The MILF candidate lost the mayoral election. Crisis Group telephone interviews, MILF and civilian sources, November 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Both parties quickly agreed to a ceasefire, which stipulated the following points: 1) immediate cessation of hostilities; 2) withdrawal of MILF reinforcements from nearby villages; 3) return of Commander Hiram and his troops to Ulitán on the condition that they keep their firearms inside their houses; 4) establishment of a joint detachment comprising military, police and MILF members; and 5) a joint ceasefire mechanism known as the Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities, to be used by both sides in case of issues related to the MILF’s presence in Ungkaya Pukan. Document on file with Crisis Group.

¹⁰⁸ John Unson, “9 dead, 6 wounded in Cotabato gunfights”, *Philippine Star*, 10 December 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Froilan Gallardo, “39 Special Forces soldiers held by MILF in Lanao Sur released”, *Mindanews*, 8 February 2023.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, source close to the area, 23 March 2023.

¹¹¹ Criminal syndicates, for example groups involved in the drug trade or other illicit economies, are also present in the Bangsamoro and nearby. Membership in these groups sometimes overlaps with other armed groups such as militants or private militias. The reach of these syndicates is, however, lesser than in the past.

city. Fighting between the militants and the government persisted for five months before Manila re-established control.¹¹²

Since then, while these militant groups continue to inflict damage, they have been largely on the defensive. Surrenders and fatalities have depleted Abu Sayyaf's ranks. The region has also become less hospitable to the group: local elites have moved away from tolerating or even collaborating with the militants and the population now leans more decisively toward the central government.¹¹³ In Lanao del Sur, remnants of the Maute Group are also lying low. That said, they have committed sporadic acts of violence.¹¹⁴ After several months of silence, the group claimed the bombing of a transmission tower in Kauswagan town, for example.¹¹⁵

The security outlook also remains concerning in other provinces. In Basilan, despite the death of local Abu Sayyaf commander Radzmil Jannatul in March 2022, a few militants are still occasionally wreaking havoc, committing violent crimes and, according to some sources, acting as hired muscle for local politicians.¹¹⁶ Most of the Bangsamoro's militant activity, however, occurs in Maguindanao. BIFF commanders Esmel Abubakar (aka Bungos) and Mohidin Animbang (aka Karialan) persist in launching occasional attacks. In October and November 2022, for example, the BIFF targeted army detachments in Datu Salibo and Shariff Aguak towns. They were also responsible for ambushing the chief of police in Ampatuan Town and killing a MILF commander in Shariff Aguak.¹¹⁷ The latter incident led to cascading battles between MILF units and the BIFF in villages in the Maguindanao del Sur interior, displacing hundreds.¹¹⁸

Locals worry that the militant groups' movements and intermittent attacks could trigger more Philippine security operations, resulting in clashes that end up displacing civilians.¹¹⁹ Since many militants tend to hide in communities near MILF areas, the risk of accidental hostilities between the military and the ex-rebels during such operations also remains a source of concern. In mid-April, a bombing of a bus at a terminal in Isulan town, Sultan Kudarat province, injured six passengers and led to a heightened state of alert in central Mindanao.¹²⁰

¹¹² Joseph Franco, "The Philippines: Addressing Islamist Militancy after the Battle for Marawi", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 July 2018.

¹¹³ Several clashes occurred during the course of 2022, particularly in Patikul town, a known hotspot, but according to government reports, the military initiated most of these encounters. For more on the anti-Abu Sayyaf campaign, see "Decline in Violence by the Abu Sayyaf Group and Ongoing Risks", Institute for Policy Analysis and Conflict, 23 December 2022. One of the remaining leaders of the group, Mundi Sawadjaan, is said to be hiding around Patikul and Indanan municipalities. Crisis Group correspondence, source from Sulu, 7 April 2023.

¹¹⁴ Members of the group are said to be moving around the eastern shore of Lake Lanao and mountainous areas nearby. Crisis Group telephone interview, security analyst, 4 November 2022.

¹¹⁵ Merlyn Manos, "NGCP tower in Lanao del Norte bombed", Rappler.com, 25 October 2022.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, journalist, 29 October 2022.

¹¹⁷ The insurgents also attacked a paramilitary detachment in Datu Saudi Ampatuan town in Maguindanao on 9 January 2023.

¹¹⁸ Edwin Fernandez, "2 MILF members slain, 4 hurt in Maguindanao Sur ambush", Philippine News Agency, 24 January 2023. This area also goes by the moniker of SPMS Box.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, source from Maguindanao, 16 November 2022.

¹²⁰ "Dawlah Islamiya, BIFF tagged in Isulan bus bombing that injured 7", Business World Online, 18 April 2023.

3. Local conflict

Local communal violence, political competition and land-related disputes pose an even more pressing threat to regional stability. According to Crisis Group data, at least 23 intra-Moro clashes occurred in the Bangsamoro between July 2022 and April 2023, leading to at least 90 fatalities and 40 injuries.¹²¹ A farmer from Datu Piang town in Maguindanao said: “Our town is peaceful now, but we are still in an abnormal situation. There is still conflict just nearby”.¹²²

A common thread in many of these disputes is local political conflict. In the town of Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Norte, for example, tensions between the Sinsuat clan running the town and MILF members and their local political allies were already running high before the 2022 elections.¹²³ Weeks after voters went to the polls, gunmen shot dead Datu Jamael Sinsuat, the main candidate of the MILF’s political party in broad daylight after Friday prayers.¹²⁴ It was the most high-profile of a number of killings in the municipality, almost all related to electoral competition.

Fractious contests for local seats have worsened an already fragile political situation in the area. In Pandag town, located in the neighbouring province of Maguindanao del Sur, a legal battle over who would assume the mayoralty turned into a proxy conflict between the incumbent provincial governor and the regional authorities. In the adjacent municipality of GSK Pendatun, tensions after the elections culminated in several clashes between MILF-aligned forces and supporters of the incumbent mayor. For now, an uneasy calm prevails, but locals are worried that conflict could erupt at any time.¹²⁵ Village elections in October could trigger further bloodshed in these areas.

In many places, the complex landscape of conflict is not only a matter of electoral politics. In Pikit town, for example, the elections exacerbated tensions, leading to almost daily shootings after the elections. Violence in Pikit comes in three forms. First, some clashes involve disputes between and among Moro families, local politicians and rebel commanders. Secondly, there are land conflicts, mostly between Muslim Moros and Christian settlers (but also among Moro clans). Thirdly, perpetrators sometimes take advantage of lawlessness to settle personal scores.¹²⁶

Politics lie at the heart of many conflicts: the town’s mayor has been at odds with both the Cotabato province’s governor and a prominent MILF commander in the

¹²¹ Civilians have been caught in the crossfire, even if most of the violence is targeted, and people are often displaced. During these clashes, most of the victims were men. In some instances, however, women were purposely attacked due to their identification with a certain family or communal group.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, community leader, Datu Piang, 23 November 2022.

¹²³ The elections in the town were peaceful. One explanation appears to be that the MILF did not support its candidates strongly enough to provoke clashes.

¹²⁴ Several other incidents followed the killing. These included a bomb scare at a local university, the attempted shooting of an electoral officer in Cotabato City in front of a shopping mall and an ambush of a vehicle along the highway in Datu Odin. Normalisation is affected, as problems in Datu Odin hamper development projects near Camp Badre: at one point, MILF members hesitated to travel around the area because they felt threatened. Crisis Group interviews, MILF source, Cotabato, 24 October 2022.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, sources from GSK Pendatun, 16 November 2022.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Pikit and Datu Odin Sinsuat, 22-24 October 2022.

area.¹²⁷ The ensuing unstable political environment became more fraught after the May 2022 elections.¹²⁸ Many observers believe that at least some of Pikit's violence stems from a proxy war between these competing politicians. To complicate things further, part of Pikit town falls under the autonomous region's jurisdiction, while Cotabato province administers the other part.¹²⁹ The split governance makes conflict resolution even more convoluted, because the parties to various conflicts are located on both sides of the administrative boundary.¹³⁰

Intersecting conflicts featuring insurgents and militants, as well as intra-Moro competition, are not new to the Bangsamoro.¹³¹ What is new is that these dynamics are playing out in the midst of a formal peace process, in a region that has enjoyed a degree of autonomy for the past three years. As an academic from Lanao del Sur remarked: "We talk about 'post-conflict', but the reality is we are backsliding".¹³²

B. *A Concerning Trend toward Greater Violence*

Overall, the region slid toward greater violence over the course of 2022, due mostly to intra-Moro disputes.¹³³ Several factors might explain this concerning trend. First, there appears to be ineffective coordination among actors such as the interim regional authority, local governments, the police, the military, the national government and the ex-rebels.¹³⁴ A MILF commander tasked with conflict resolution and reconciliation said: "Everyone claims to be an authority ... yet no one can impose action".¹³⁵

Secondly, transition-related violence in the Bangsamoro, especially in Maguindanao, is inherently political. Given the leading role elected representatives play in mediation efforts, it is perhaps unsurprising that some have been more interested in preserving their hegemonic position than keeping the peace. In some instances, local politicians spearheaded mediation for political mileage, rather than to achieve durable solutions, and conflicts soon flared up again.¹³⁶

Thirdly, conflict resolution efforts in the Bangsamoro have been too often stymied by the structure of bureaucracies. Both the Bangsamoro Ministry of Public Order

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Pikit and Cotabato City, 23 and 29 October 2022.

¹²⁸ The daughter of the MILF's Eastern Mindanao Front Commander Jack Abbas challenged Pikit's Mayor Sumulong Sultan but lost.

¹²⁹ These villages joined the autonomous region in the January 2019 plebiscite.

¹³⁰ Some disputes even spill over to neighbouring towns, such as Aleosan.

¹³¹ For a good overview, see Francisco J. Lara, Jr., *Insurgents, Clans and States: Political Legitimacy and Resurgent Conflict in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines* (Manila, 2014).

¹³² Crisis Group telephone interview, 7 November 2022.

¹³³ As noted above, clashes between the government and armed groups also continued, albeit on a lesser scale than before.

¹³⁴ Some lack of coordination is to be expected, however, since the Organic Law did not give the MILF the mandate to police its areas: security is still the responsibility of the national government through the military, the police and other law enforcement agencies.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, 23 October 2022.

¹³⁶ In Maguindanao, for example, the governor's team for resolving conflicts was not always able to achieve long-term peace. Critics allege that warring parties were bought off, not pacified. Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, 7 May 2022; MILF members, Parang, 8 May 2022; military officer, Manila, 3 June 2022.

and Safety and the MILF have facilitated mediation efforts.¹³⁷ But these efforts are hindered by overlapping mandates and sometimes unproductive working relationships between MILF commanders, political committee heads and local government units.¹³⁸ Their efforts are also often devoid of effective enforcement measures or sanctions against those who perpetrate violence.¹³⁹ There is also seldom an effort to rethink why certain conflicts keep erupting anew.¹⁴⁰

Where conflicts cut across boundaries, jurisdiction issues also arise. In Pikit, for example, authorities of the BARMM and neighbouring Cotabato province initially seemed to work in parallel rather than jointly.¹⁴¹ In November 2022, a task force was created, allowing for better coordination, but even afterward conflict resolution efforts have been hampered by the fact that the task force does not play a strong role.¹⁴²

Fourthly, a broader failure to tackle the long-term causes of fighting – for example, land disputes – is a hurdle to conflict resolution.¹⁴³ In many instances, the MILF and the regional government aim to defuse conflicts in the short term but do not address the deeper causes. Mediators sometimes arrange for the payment of “blood money”, a sum paid by a perpetrator of a crime to a victim. While such payments may resolve some disputes, they do not address underlying dynamics and risk a cycle of reprisal.

Fifthly, the enforcement mechanisms for keeping the peace have struggled. While the military is often responsible for the immediate stabilisation of local conflicts and brokering ceasefires, it is often not in a position to prevent flare-ups of violence.¹⁴⁴ Part of the problem is that the military does not always keep a garrison in remote places and thus cannot deter fighting there. Nor does the military have experience with conflict prevention, a task that has traditionally rested with civilian authorities. Meanwhile, hybrid units composed of soldiers, police officers and MILF members created by the 2014 peace agreement to provide local security during the transition have not fully

¹³⁷ The Ministry of Public Order and Safety trained several mediators and partnered with local organisations to settle disputes at the local level. It also sponsored “blood money” payments as a form of resolution. The MILF used its Task Force Ittihad (Unity) to disengage warring parties (most recently early November, after a feud escalated in the village of Dado in Datu Piang town). There are also other task forces, most of them affiliated with particular commanders, that engage in conflict resolution.

¹³⁸ The Ministry of Public Order and Safety, for example, interprets its mandate of a “coordinating” body conservatively and prefers to delegate conflict resolution to local partners.

¹³⁹ To some extent, the MILF’s political committees and military structure still play a role in defusing tensions. But solutions are dependent on the nature of the dispute, the personalities involved and their ability to enforce rulings. In practice, commanders rarely resolve issues without help from a regional body or ministry. In the best cases, ex-rebel commanders use their skills and community standing, combined with logistical and financial support from the BARMM, to fully resolve conflicts. Crisis Group correspondence, source from MILF’s 118 Base Command, 13 March 2023.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group correspondence, 10 April 2023.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, MILF officials and activists, 23–26 October 2022.

¹⁴² Bong Sarmiento, “BARMM forms task force to address killings in North Cotabato town”, *Min-danews.com*, 14 November 2022.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, peacebuilding experts, Manila, 2 June and 2 September 2022.

¹⁴⁴ In late April, during a firefight between men associated with two MILF units but also linked to local politicians, in a village of Datu Saudi town in Maguindanao del Sur, the army and police stayed out of the way, intervening only belatedly to disengage the warring sides. Villagers complained about the dilatory action. A MILF commander said it had taken time to coordinate between the local MILF units and security forces to halt the fighting. Crisis Group telephone interviews, villagers and MILF commander, 23 and 24 April 2023.

lived up to expectations. A limited mandate, insufficient funding and the national authorities' hesitancy to use them as peacebuilding actors have rendered the teams less effective than originally envisioned. The government and MILF stepped up deployment of hybrid teams in early 2023, but their weak mandate remained a hindrance.¹⁴⁵

That said, any analysis of regional trend lines should take into account this caveat: while insecurity is a major concern in areas of the Bangsamoro, other parts of it remain relatively free from deadly conflict, or at least show some capacity to manage it. That is due in large part to local actors resolving differences before they escalate. In parts of Lanao del Sur, for example, disputes have rarely escalated since the May elections.¹⁴⁶ Warring politicians in the town of Malabang engaged in violent electoral competition – including a shootout at a school that served as polling centre – but contained the conflict before it could erupt into a full-blown feud.¹⁴⁷ Active mediators with links to both clans and insurgents have also managed to preserve calm in the Iranun area between Maguindanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur. The quiet, in turn, has a positive effect on surrounding communities such as Camp Abubakar.¹⁴⁸ In Sulu, a community-based non-governmental organisation with strong buy-in from the military, the MNLF and religious scholars have been resolving feuds for years.¹⁴⁹

C. *Risks Ahead*

Many observers agree that strengthening conflict resolution in the Bangsamoro is likely to be a lengthy process.¹⁵⁰ That leaves the region vulnerable to flare-ups in the short term. Civil society figures, ex-rebels and local politicians told Crisis Group that they are worried about violence erupting across the region in the run-up to the 2025 parliamentary elections.¹⁵¹

A first litmus test will be village elections in October 2023. If violence spikes before voters go to the polls, or during the actual balloting, it could augur even bigger prob-

¹⁴⁵ Known as Joint Peace and Security Teams, the hybrid units are supposed to be deployed near or in critical conflict areas. The teams' main function is to "work for the maintenance of peace and order and stability", according to the Annex on Normalisation, but this concept lacks operational details. Crisis Group interview, official, Manila, 1 March 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, local official, Cotabato, 26 October 2022. Three factors play a role: one clan, the Alonto-Adiongs, is firmly in control in the province; the MILF's local branch is cohesive and not overtly antagonistic to clans; and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms tend to be better respected than in other parts of the Bangsamoro. There was, however, a high-profile incident on 17 February, when gunmen ambushed the governor's convoy in the town of Maguing, killing four and injuring two, including the governor. The suspects allegedly belong to a criminal syndicate. Crisis Group correspondence, sources from Lanao del Sur, 24 April 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, source from Lanao del Sur, 9 November 2022. Clan feuds do occur, but they are less violent than in other Bangsamoro areas. Shootings are more common than firefights. The army also sees progress in land dispute resolution in Lanao. See Apipa Bagumbaran, "PH Marines help settles rido in Lanao del Sur", PIA.gov, 20 December 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, local officials, Sultan Mastura, 25 October 2022; MILF commanders, Parang, 26 October 2022.

¹⁴⁹ Governor Tan's influence over the provincial mayors, and his order to preserve peace during the local elections in 2022, are two other reasons for Sulu's relative stability.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, October-November 2022.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Cotabato City, October-November 2022.

lems for 2025.¹⁵² But elections will not be the only potential flashpoints, as illustrated by the troubles in Pikit and other towns. If clan feuds and lingering frustrations among ex-rebels persist, and regional authorities are not able to curb violence, persistent insecurity is likely to reduce confidence in the Bangsamoro peace process.

Besides the failure to quell violence, other unfulfilled promises of the peace deal could raise questions related to the MILF's cohesion and especially the ex-rebel leadership's relationship with the rank and file. While the MILF leadership is firmly committed to the peace process, regular combatants are sometimes prone to venturing into independent action. Perhaps the biggest worry is that some MILF members could once again take up arms if they conclude that they have little chance of keeping power after the 2025 election, particularly if they think it might be the clans' vote buying and dealmaking that defeats them.

There are several ways disgruntled fighters could express their frustrations. First, they could join existing armed groups and engage in low-level attacks on the government. Secondly, they may align themselves with local politicians as enforcers in private militias – in effect becoming the “goons” that residents fear.¹⁵³

Thirdly, a splinter group of rebels could, in theory, resume the armed struggle against Manila. Recently, the organisation has faced a challenge from within its own ranks: an informal grouping known as the “Salamat wing”, which includes several current and former MILF figures. Members of this group have publicly aired grievances about aspects of the transition, demanding more inclusive and democratic decision-making in the MILF.¹⁵⁴ While some of these members have valid points, this quasi-faction appears to have emerged in part because a handful of skilled political operators from outside the MILF seek to divide and weaken the ex-rebels to improve their own standing.¹⁵⁵ For now, however, chances of an outright fracturing of the MILF are slim. A young, non-decommissioned male cadre member reasoned: “Despite all the problems and the fact that some of our leaders are involved in politics now, we still need to follow our emir [leader]. If there is more resistance from within, then we will be in more chaos. This is not an alternative”.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Village elections have a history of violence. See Peter Kreuzer, “Killing Politicians in the Philippines: Who, Where, When and Why”, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, March 2022. Village officials have been targeted more often in the last several months, particularly in both Maguindanaos and in Basilan.

¹⁵³ In several of the local disputes, links between politicians and MILF fighters – due to kinship, patronage or lending of guns – make it hard to tamp down conflict. The fighting in Datu Saudi Ampatuan town, Maguindanao del Sur, is a case in point, leading to frustrations among the population. Crisis Group correspondence, sources from Maguindanao del Sur and del Norte, 24 April 2023.

¹⁵⁴ The group made three major demands: accommodation in the interim government (allegedly promised to some of their members); a return to a more consultative approach of decision-making within the MILF; and greater transparency. Crisis Group interview, source close to the Salamat wing, 26 October 2022.

¹⁵⁵ For instance, local politicians took advantage of MILF commander Abdulfatah Delna's frustration with the slow pace of the peace process and lack of election assistance by extending political and material support to him and his family. Other disgruntled personalities also joined the dissenters, including a former MILF spokesperson, Eid Kabalu, and a former bureaucrat and close confidant of MILF's founder Salamat Hashim, Amor Pandaliday. Crisis Group interviews, September–November 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, MILF commander, Cotabato City, 25 October 2022.

Beyond the Salamat wing, the risk of a major splinter group remains low. Factions breaking away from the MILF lack a charismatic leader, a compelling message and broad community support – at least for now.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Speaking about the Salamat wing, a mid-level MILF member said: “I understand some of their grievances. But we should not deal with an internal issue by leaving the organisation or creating another group”. Crisis Group interview, 26 October 2022.

V. Boosting Momentum for Peace

Despite all it has accomplished, the Bangsamoro peace process is at a fragile moment. The challenges it faces – exemplified by protracted conflicts, delays in normalisation and fractious clan politics – could still derail its final phases. There are, however, steps that local, regional and national authorities can take, along with outside actors, to improve the odds of successful completion and support the region’s transition to a brighter future.

A. *Nurturing the Spirit of the Peace Process*

Many of the peace and development challenges facing the Bangsamoro stem from the complicated relationship between the MILF-led autonomous region and Manila. To bolster the connection between the central government and the Bangsamoro, the spirit of cooperation and willingness to compromise embodied in the 2014 peace agreement should remain a guiding precedent. Though much of the responsibility for fulfilling the peace agreement’s terms, especially normalisation, rests with the national government, Manila should genuinely cooperate with the ex-rebels – both as a matter of principle and to allow the Bangsamoro to have ownership of the process. Adequate funding from Manila is necessary but not sufficient; more broadly, the government should also promote the peace process and its achievements in Congress and among the general public.¹⁵⁸

For their part, the ex-rebels should be realistic and make clear that they accept that some provisions in the peace pact may fall by the wayside, despite the promise of “full implementation” in the 2014 agreement.¹⁵⁹ It seems a near certainty that the regional government will not be permitted to field its own police, for example, even though the peace deal mentions a “police force for the Bangsamoro”, with Manila handing over that responsibility to the region.¹⁶⁰ For the national authorities, it is anathema (and unconstitutional) to have a separate police force given that there is only one government with responsibility for state security.¹⁶¹

The MILF should also disseminate factual information on the peace process to its members and the Bangsamoro’s population. It should not only lay out the benefits but also explain timelines, benchmarks and why the process is occasionally delayed. Both sides should also participate in additional sessions of the Intergovernmental Relations Body, the entity responsible for resolving outstanding issues between Manila

¹⁵⁸ The peace deal requires the parties to “mutually” take steps for implementation. Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, Manila, 27 March 2014, p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Annex on Normalisation, op. cit., pp. 1-2. While the MILF is aware that fielding a regional police force would be difficult, the ex-rebels still regularly mention the issue as an outstanding provision of the peace treaty. From Manila’s perspective, such an endeavour is unconstitutional. The Organic Law did not reiterate this provision, speaking only of the regular national police taking care of law enforcement in the Bangsamoro. Crisis Group interviews, Cotabato City, October–November 2022.

¹⁶¹ Roel Parreno, “Duterte nixes separate security forces for Bangsamoro region”, *Philippine Star*, 27 March 2018.

and the region.¹⁶² That body has convened only once during the Marcos, Jr. presidency; given the rising challenges to the peace process, more meetings could be useful.

B. *Achieving Internal Consensus*

Some degree of intra-Moro consensus on the region's political rules of the road is needed to achieve a sustainable *modus vivendi* between the MILF-led regional authority and the Bangsamoro's clan-dominated local governments. The most pressing matters, such as rules for local governance and provision of basic services during and after the transition, must be decided during the transitional period. As a first step, Chief Minister Ebrahim should as soon as possible convene the Council of Leaders, a body that includes representatives of Moro leaders and communities, to facilitate dialogue between provincial governors and other important elected figures.¹⁶³ Many observers believe that the MILF-led interim government made a blunder by not convening the Council in the transition's first three years.¹⁶⁴

The MILF and some of the more sceptical clans, particularly those who wield power in Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur and Sulu, should also engage in dialogue. Ideally, the ex-rebels would initiate these talks, given their role at the helm of the regional authority, using emissaries if required for outreach to MILF rivals such as the branch of the Mangudadatu clan from Sultan Kudarat. Such talks could help to forge compromises: on the local government code, on law and order, on electoral districting and on other topics.¹⁶⁵ Without such compromises, the political conflicts that sometimes beset the peace process, for example in Maguindanao del Norte, will remain a stumbling block to everyday governance. Violence is bound to spread if these disagreements escalate. Jockeying for power has always been a feature of Bangsamoro politics, but it should not be allowed to throw the transition off track.

In that regard, the forthcoming consultations about the local government code present an opportunity for the interim government to begin discussing a vital issue: delineation of municipal and regional powers for the Bangsamoro. For discussions to remain non-adversarial, it could be useful to create an advisory expert working group, jointly nominated by Manila and Cotabato, to guide technical discussions and local consultations.¹⁶⁶ More broadly, the transitional authority should work toward the goal that local governments perform in a responsible and accountable manner – not only through oversight and budget allocation, but also a spirit of cooperation instead of confrontation.

¹⁶² Crisis Group correspondence, peace process observer, 11 November 2022.

¹⁶³ The Council, envisioned by the 2018 autonomy law, should comprise the chief minister, members of the Philippine Congress from Bangsamoro districts, governors, mayors of the cities of Marawi, representatives of Indigenous peoples, women and religious communities, and others. Chief Minister Ebrahim appointed most of the community representatives in April, but the selection is not yet complete. Asangan Madale, "Ebrahim names 9 representatives", *Manila Times*, 16 April 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Cotabato and Manila, September–October 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Clan members and MILF acknowledge the necessity of dialogue but are also cognisant of the difficulties that impede engagement. Crisis Group interviews, Cotabato and Manila, October–November 2022.

¹⁶⁶ Interim government representatives visited the region's provinces in February and March. Crisis Group correspondence, source privy to the process, 17 November 2022.

C. *Reducing Local Violence*

With local political tensions on the rise in the lead-up to the 2025 elections, and violence proliferating, all parties need to redouble their efforts to mitigate conflicts at this sensitive moment in the peace process – before the frictions become sources of lasting instability. For starters, both sides should abide by the existing ceasefire provisions, and if possible, adhere to them more strictly still. Recent incidents in Basilan, among other places, should be a reminder for both parties to respect the protocols that are essential for avoiding loss of life and displacement of civilians.¹⁶⁷ Ensuring that local tensions do not devolve into violence is at least as important a responsibility for the government and MILF as tamping down gunfights.

Secondly, given that a return of the International Monitoring Team appears unlikely, the government and MILF should consider reviving local civilian monitoring and peacekeeping networks, with active participation by both men and women, as a preventive measure.¹⁶⁸ Donors could support these efforts with funding. Another option could be for both parties to strengthen the mandate of the hybrid security teams, composed of ex-rebels and state security personnel, giving them instructions to step into brewing conflicts to mediate. Some of the existing teams could be stationed in conflict-prone regions such as parts of Basilan, the “special geographic area” and Maguindanao. The teams’ hybrid composition could act as a deterrent.¹⁶⁹

Thirdly, another “vital task”, in the words of a regional official, is formalising the relationships between ex-rebels and the Bangsamoro ministries.¹⁷⁰ The regional authorities might employ MILF commanders in key ministries or hire them as consultants to provide technical expertise on mediation.¹⁷¹ Creating these formal linkages between the interim government and former rebel commanders could make it easier to mitigate tensions and enforce rules. Given the rise of local conflicts, the chief minister should strive in particular to improve coordination between the Ministry of Public Order and Safety and rebel commanders on the ground.¹⁷² Those lines of communication have not always worked well to date.

Fourthly, the recent creation of an agency for local peace and security provides another opportunity to improve ties between ex-rebels and regional institutions. The chief minister created the new office with international funding, asking it to work first on mediating intra-MILF disputes. Such internecine conflicts may be easier to tackle than more complex ones involving the local government or clans, but if the of-

¹⁶⁷ See also Georgi Engelbrecht, “The Bangsamoro peace process: Not taking the ceasefire for granted”, *Rappler.com*, 14 September 2022.

¹⁶⁸ A grassroots monitoring network called Bantay Ceasefire was on the ground in Mindanao from 2003 until around 2010. Though that team is gone, four local organisations that made up its Civilian Protection Component retain a mandate to monitor the ceasefire until at least 14 December 2023. Lastly, several Bangsamoro community organisations have volunteer networks that regularly monitor local peace and security.

¹⁶⁹ Both government officials and the MILF recognise the peacekeeping teams’ value in keeping local conflicts and disputes under control. Crisis Group telephone interview, peace process official, 14 November 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City, 24 October 2022.

¹⁷¹ Some MILF commanders, including their male and female relatives, are already employed in ministries or agencies of the interim government.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, high-ranking MILF commander, Cotabato, 23 October 2022.

force can deal expeditiously with intra-MILF disputes, it should not limit itself to those.¹⁷³ Indeed, in the early months of 2023, the agency managed to pacify some of the clan conflicts in central Mindanao, but it is too early to tell how effective it will be in the long run.¹⁷⁴

Fifthly, the conflicts in the Special Geographic Area also require particular attention if the region is to attain stability. To defuse tensions in Pikit and elsewhere, de-escalation should be the first priority. The MILF, with thousands of fighters still under arms, should strengthen efforts to exert command and control.¹⁷⁵ The organisation's military structures still exist, which could allow the MILF to mobilise senior commanders at all levels, including front and base commanders who are members of parliament, and instruct them to help keep the peace. That would make it more likely that the ex-rebels could prohibit their own commanders from engaging in violence, discipline those responsible for stirring up conflicts – for example by removing repeated violators from the ranks or changing sub-commander leadership – and position themselves to resolve intra-MILF disputes. For its part, the military also needs to discipline local paramilitaries who take part in violence.¹⁷⁶

Where conflicts involve non-MILF members, the regional ministries and local government units need to work together on resolving them to ensure the necessary buy-in from non-MILF parties and enforcement of the agreement.¹⁷⁷ They could do so by convening the parties, or activating the Peace and Order Councils, which are locally led dispute resolution bodies in every municipality (and are often convened only for show).¹⁷⁸ All parties, including the MILF, local governments and the military, also need to abide strictly by decisions once an agreement is reached. Failure to do so should spur intervention by mediators such as the Intergovernmental Relations Body, which is tasked with bridging differences between the two sides at the implementation stage of the peace process.¹⁷⁹

Finally, there is an urgent need to disband the private armies that are often used by local power brokers in local conflicts. Although these militias pose no threat to national security, Manila needs to be more serious about dismantling them to curb

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, MILF official, Cotabato City, 26 October 2022. The office's mandate still needs to be distinguished from that of existing institutions (especially the Public Order and Safety Ministry), but the plan is apparently for it to focus on intra-MILF disputes. Initial funding came from the International Organization for Migration. Crisis Group telephone interviews, local and international experts, November 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, peacebuilding expert, 2 February 2023; MILF source, 13 March 2023.

¹⁷⁵ The front commanders are all sitting in the parliament, but not all base commanders are represented in the transitional authority or other offices. Crisis Group interview, source close to the MILF, 17 November 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Particularly the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units under military supervision.

¹⁷⁷ The Pikit issue has reached the level of the chief minister, who held several meetings with regional and local officials and the military throughout November 2022, though concrete results remain to be seen. Crisis Group telephone interviews, bureaucrats and activists, 17 and 18 November 2022.

¹⁷⁸ The councils have divergent track records when it comes to representing women, youth and Indigenous people, as their representation depends on local government structure.

¹⁷⁹ The Intergovernmental Relations Body, envisioned in the 2014 agreement and called for by the 2018 Bangsamoro Organic Law, focuses on transition-related issues of administration and institutions, bringing together high-level officials from both sides. "National and Bangsamoro Government Intergovernmental Relations Body Convened Under Marcos Administration," OPAPPRU, 1 December 2022.

instability at the regional level.¹⁸⁰ The national task force in charge of breaking up these outfits needs to move faster in identifying these groups, especially those that are not purely criminal – that is, those embroiled in political feuds. The task force should assess the militias' firepower and links to traditional politicians and rebel groups, and then dismantle the strongest of them in 2023 and 2024. It could do this job in parallel to the final phase of the MILF's decommissioning.

While there are obvious security concerns arising from disarmament of these groups that need to be carefully considered – especially since some might engage in violent resistance – there are also less dangerous steps that can be taken by summoning greater political will. Manila should work harder to convince militia commanders and politicians to surrender their firearms, arrest those who have pending cases in court and are at liberty, and discipline local officials who violate relevant Philippine gun laws or illegally collude with armed groups. It should also offer ex-militia members who surrender and meet screening criteria a chance to join the military or its auxiliaries, chipping away at the links between politicians and militiamen.

D. *A Big Push on Normalisation*

The normalisation process is at the core of the peace agreement, and its success (or lack thereof) could make or break the Bangsamoro's transition to full regional autonomy. Importantly, the concept of normalisation encompasses not only the steps required to take guns away from fighters but also to help them build new lives. All proponents of the peace process at every level of the government, and outside it as well, should throw their weight behind it. Perhaps the biggest challenge is ensuring the “well-being of the combatants”, as a senior MILF leader put it, referring to the delivery of promised socio-economic support.¹⁸¹ Absent visible progress, ex-rebels could lose faith in the peace process amid debates over the decommissioning process, frustration over the delivery of socio-economic packages and camp transformation.

1. Decommissioning process

The rocky disarmament process must be navigated carefully. A final phase of disarmament, envisioned as part of the peace deal, will require both sides to bridge the gaps in their expectations. At this stage, modifying the number of combatants that the two sides agree to decommission would be impractical. It could also send a dangerous message that key aspects of the peace process are, in effect, being revisited. The discussion should therefore focus on the number of weapons to be impounded. Both sides have, in principle, four options:

Status quo. The original number of 7,200 guns to be decommissioned remains final. This option is perhaps the easiest to pursue, but the hardest for the military to accept,

¹⁸⁰ Security officials and clan leaders told Crisis Group that it will be very hard to completely disarm these armed groups. But they said disarmament efforts could nonetheless be useful in the Bangsamoro. Crisis Group interviews, Manila, 14-16 November 2022.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Cotabato City, 25 October 2022.

because of justified concerns that the number of weapons privately owned by the combatants, which are excluded from the decommissioning, is in excess of that figure.¹⁸²

Adjust the numbers. The two parties could agree to increase the official number of weapons to be decommissioned via a formal agreement or addendum to the normalisation annex, the part of the 2014 peace treaty dealing with disarmament and related matters. While this negotiation could be tough, the provision of benefits packages, and the dismantling of rival armed groups, could help convince the MILF to give up more weapons.¹⁸³ In this scenario, both sides would avoid the issue of decommissioning combatants' privately owned guns. In any case, decommissioning the weapons officially owned by the MILF should remain the priority, as agreed by both sides.

Focus on personal firearms. A third option would be to forego any increase in the agreed number of 7,200 guns to be decommissioned, and instead look to the parties to create a working group on how to address MILF combatants' personal firearms, whether individually owned or borrowed from third parties.¹⁸⁴ This working group could research best practices from other conflicts and provide recommendations on the most appropriate way forward in the Bangsamoro. One solution could be for the government to buy back the personal guns or provide other compensation, perhaps in the form of small livelihood packages.¹⁸⁵ This option might create counterproductive incentives, however, including for the acquisition of weapons that can be traded in.

Combined approaches. A fourth possibility would be to combine the second and third options. If the military cannot accept only 7,200 surrendered weapons, the parties could reach a new agreement on the number of guns to be decommissioned, in combination with a long-term effort to tackle the issue of personal weapons in the hands of ex-rebels and other militias. The MILF could agree that some of its members would volunteer to hand in their personal guns in exchange for compensation. If there are seizures of private militia weapons, the MILF could perhaps hand over a corresponding number of firearms, to make sure that the ex-rebels and their local rivals give up firepower at the same time.

The option that removes the greatest number of weapons from circulation outside state control would be the most attractive. In practice, the success of any of these options will depend on political will. The most important thing is that the parties reach an agreement and abide by it. Both sides should engage in open discussion of these options and reach agreement on the way forward. Clear endorsement of a shared plan by the government and MILF will be essential to the success of the final phase of decommissioning.

¹⁸² The process refers only to weapons owned by the MILF organisation. Sometimes, MILF members have procured their own firearms or borrowed them from politicians, relatives or friends. These guns are not included in decommissioning.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group correspondence, 17 November 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Those parties are mostly relatives or local politicians, with the two categories often overlapping.

¹⁸⁵ Details are bound to be murky, and past programs in the Philippines designed in such a manner had their drawbacks. See Crisis Group Asia Report N°248, *The Philippines: Dismantling Rebel Groups*, 19 June 2013, pp. 5-7. For the best results, non-monetary rewards and strong local oversight would be required.

2. Socio-economic support

Beyond the decommissioning process, there is an urgent need to resolve the impasse regarding the socio-economic packages that Manila promised to ex-combatants. The government should seek a better understanding of the former rebels' needs, building a database of all decommissioned fighters that would record the services they have received and their socio-economic status, especially in terms of livelihoods and housing. A database is the best way to obtain a clear picture of shortcomings in service delivery to these individuals and their families.¹⁸⁶ Some of the work required for such a database has already been accomplished, after government officials conducted interviews with ex-rebels when they went through decommissioning.¹⁸⁷ Based on existing lists, both parties should come up with estimates of budget needs and programmatic priorities. While the full content of the benefits package remains under discussion, Manila needs to clarify what it can deliver in the politically sensitive 2024-2025 period.

International donors should support efforts to meet the challenges that come with this part of normalisation. They could help with programming but also should provide financial support if the government falls short.¹⁸⁸ Major donors and actors such as the World Bank and the UN could provide funding and perhaps supplement the compensation packages with development interventions for combatants, their communities and their camps. Donors will need to coordinate to avoid duplication and uneven regional distribution of development programs.¹⁸⁹

The Bangsamoro government, Manila and donors all have roles to play in the region's development. So far, donor coordination exists on an informal and ad hoc basis. For a more efficient process, Manila and Cotabato should establish a mechanism for policy coordination and planning with donors. The mechanism could involve the region's existing Bangsamoro Planning and Development Authority, or the newly formed Bangsamoro International Development Assistance Committee, in tandem with the peace process office in Manila.¹⁹⁰

The funding for normalisation projects should come from Manila or donors. The Philippine government has the responsibility to take care of normalisation as required by the 2014 peace treaty. The Bangsamoro interim government could, if need be, contribute to elements of the package for ex-combatants, perhaps regarding its design or technical advice on implementation. As a last resort, the ex-rebels could even use their own funds, which may have the benefit of giving them a share of ownership. But dipping into the BARMM's block grant to bankroll normalisation programs would divert money from the regional government's budget for day-to-day governance. It may also raise problems of accountability, as funds allocated to separate tasks get mixed together.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ The government, the MILF and the decommissioning body have already collected the names of the ex-rebels decommissioned so far.

¹⁸⁷ Such interviews are still under way. Crisis Group interview, government official, 24 October 2022.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group correspondence, donor officials, 14 November 2022.

¹⁸⁹ It should include the Joint Normalisation Committee, the Bangsamoro Planning and Development Authority and Task Forces on Camp Transformation and Decommissioned Combatants.

¹⁹⁰ The committee was formed in late December 2022, and few details about it are available.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, peacebuilding expert, 7 November 2022.

3. Camp transformation

A key part of normalisation is encouraging economic development in the MILF's six camps. All of them need equal attention, given their history of conflict, the presence of influential rebel commanders in the camps and the volatile political dynamics of surrounding areas. Still, four camps – Rajamuda, Omar, Badre and Bilal – require additional precautions, as they have seen violence most recently.¹⁹² Given the history of conflict in neighbouring Indigenous areas, particularly around Badre and Omar, policymakers should proceed cautiously when constructing new housing and rolling out other interventions in these camps. In other words, Manila and the MILF, through their established task forces, should take care that normalisation does not cause harm. The regional parliament has not passed the Indigenous peoples code, which aims to clarify rules of development in or near Indigenous areas; in the meantime, land grabs go on at the Indigenous communities' expense.¹⁹³

The government and MILF should also work to ensure that aid goes to the camps and MILF communities that have received the least support. A first step will be identifying which camps and MILF areas have been underfunded. Donors could assist the task forces for decommissioned combatants and camp transformation, as well as the region's planning and development authority, with technical support to conduct this economic analysis.¹⁹⁴ Once it becomes clear which areas are due a greater share, regional actors should maximise the possibility that these regions, which are among the poorest in the country, see economic development. Encouraging the regional bureaucracy to coordinate with the task forces for decommissioned combatants and camp transformation could facilitate development near the camps. For example, initial meetings between these task forces and the Ministry of Public Order and Safety have resulted in less duplication of effort.¹⁹⁵ Local government units should also take part in program design and implementation, provided that they do not politicise the process.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Areas near camps Omar, Badre and Rajamuda have seen increasing levels of insecurity throughout 2022. Camp Bilal, although making significant progress, is under control of Abdullah Macapaar, known as Commander Bravo, a rebel leader and parliamentarian still considered a wild card by local observers. For more ideas on conflict sensitive approaches to normalisation, see Crisis Group Report, *Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro*, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, sources close to the area, Manila, 12 March 2023.

¹⁹⁴ For ideas about how to include women in the process of shaping inclusive normalisation measures, see Crisis Group Report, *Southern Philippines: Fostering an Inclusive Bangsamoro*, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, peacebuilding expert, 21 September 2022.

¹⁹⁶ It would be in the interest of mayors and governors across the Bangsamoro – who are, after all, elected officials – to support normalisation and development rather than being a stumbling block. A positive example is the Dimaporo family, which has been supportive of interventions in Camp Bilal.

VI. Conclusion

Close to a year into the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., the Bangsamoro peace process, despite many obstacles, is progressing. It also faces perils, however. The slow speed of the process, coupled with instability in parts of the Bangsamoro, is threatening the success of the transition. With only two years before the 2025 election season kicks off, time is running out to achieve the peace deal's goals.

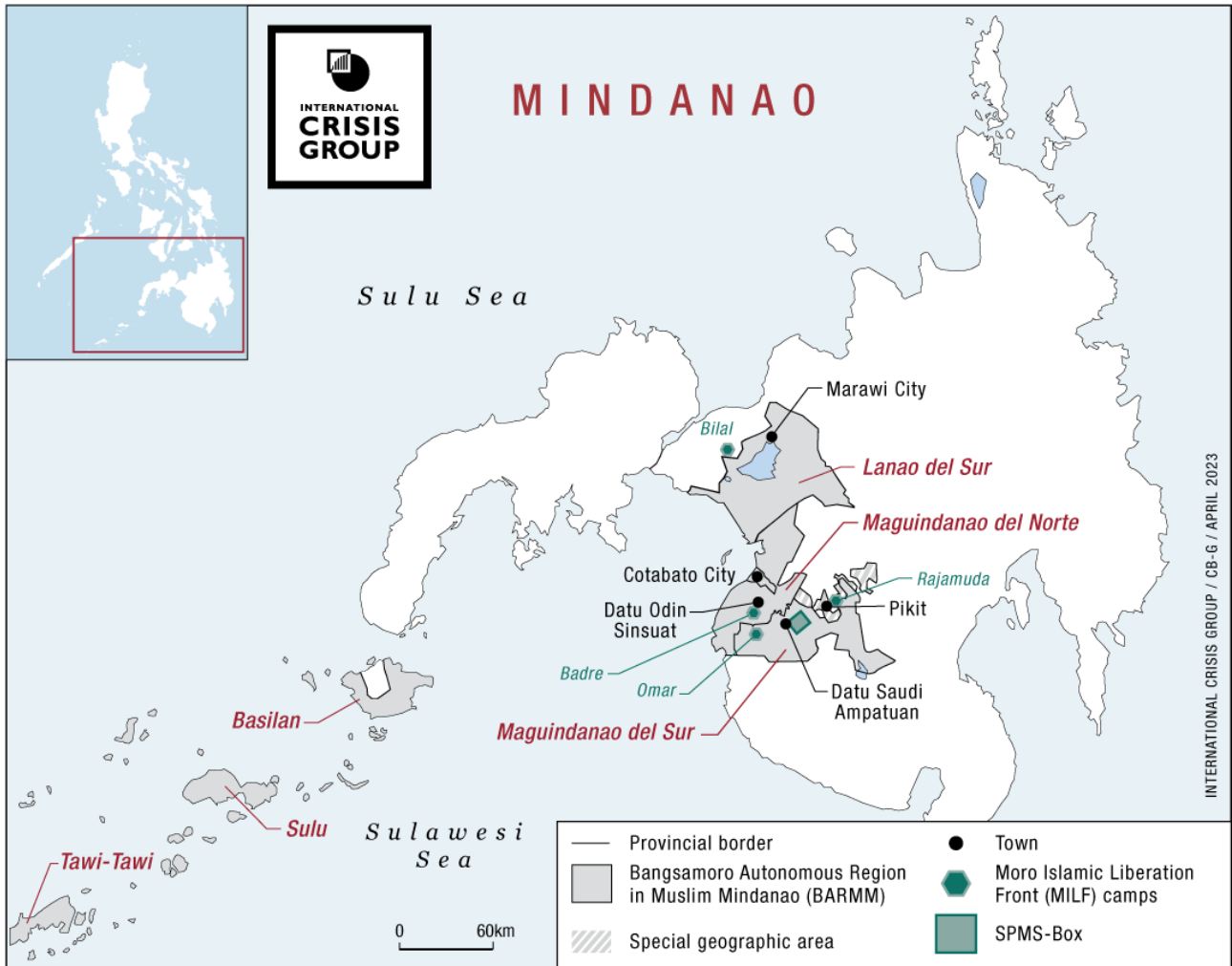
The paramount goals are for national and regional authorities to defuse local conflicts, ensure that MILF rebels continue to hand in their weapons, support their full transition to civilian life and disarm the ubiquitous clan militias. The closer authorities get to these objectives, the smoother the path will be toward the 2025 parliamentary elections, and successful completion of the decades-long effort to bring peace and autonomy to the Bangsamoro. The benefits of this success would of course be most keenly felt in the region, but its symbolism would likely resonate beyond the Philippines, given the extent to which the Bangsamoro has become an example of a negotiated, democratic approach to addressing long-term conflict.

On the other hand, if the authorities allow instability to fester, and if they fail to provide the socio-economic benefits promised as part of the peace deal, then the elections could be another kind of turning point – with rebels and others losing confidence in the political process and pursuing their interests by other means.

This negative scenario can still be avoided. The biggest risk now is that lingering hindrances – such as issues related to decommissioning of fighters and local violence – will hobble the peace effort. Rather than allowing themselves to be hamstrung by these issues, Manila and the interim authority should work cooperatively, creatively and in the spirit of compromise that allowed the 2014 peace agreement to be reached. As indicated above, solutions are within reach for the security and political issues that are straining the transition, but they will require all parties to summon the requisite political will. Outside actors should urge them in that direction, offering material and technical support as needed. The Bangsamoro peace process remains a model for what can be achieved through an inclusive, democratic effort to resolve a longstanding conflict. For the sake of both those who benefit from it, and those who would emulate it, the deal must not be allowed to fail.

Manila/Brussels, 1 May 2023

Appendix A: Map of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region
in Muslim Mindano (BARMM)



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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