



The Philippines: Keeping the Bangsamoro Peace Process on Track

As 2025 elections draw near in the Philippines' newly autonomous Muslim-majority region, threats to the peace process have emerged. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024, Crisis Group outlines what the EU can do to preserve its gains.

The peace process in the Bangsamoro, the Muslim-majority region in Mindanao, the Philippines' second largest island, stands at a critical juncture. Just over a year remains until parliamentary elections take place, which will conclude the political transition under way in the region after decades of war between Manila and Moro separatist rebels. In 2014, the government reached an accord with the main rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), providing for creation of an autonomous regional authority in the Bangsamoro, which was duly set up in 2019. This accord remains one of the few examples of a negotiated peace anywhere in the world over the last ten years, thanks partly to robust support from the European Union.

Although the peace process has made impressive progress, time is running out for completion of the roadmap set out by the 2014 agreement, which is due to conclude with elections for a permanent regional authority in 2025. Implementation of important provisions, including on disarmament and socio-economic development, is behind schedule. Conflict is surging, in the form of feuds among clans and political rivals, but also rebel infighting, particularly in central Mindanao. Although confined to pockets of the island, the recurrent

skirmishes cast a shadow over the delicate transition. Jihadist groups that oppose the MILF, although weaker than in the past, could exploit the volatility. Together, these sources of tension could throw the process off track.

To preserve the peace process's gains and support development in the Bangsamoro, the EU and its member states should:

- Engage in visible, persistent diplomacy with all parties to press for follow-through on the 2014 accord's provisions, with public visits to the Bangsamoro's de facto capital, EU project sites and MILF camps to underscore the bloc's deep interest in seeing the peace plan to fruition and build confidence in the process among the people most affected. Messages to Manila should stress the importance of meeting financial commitments under the plan, especially with respect to compensating demobilised combatants.
- Continue funding the Third Party Monitoring Team, which has a mandate to review and assess the peace agreement's progress.
- Explore the possibility of additional funding and other support for socio-economic development in the camps where ex-MILF fighters live, as well as peacebuilding initiatives in

Mindanao. More assistance should also be considered for existing programs that can help the interim government address local conflict drivers, such as land ownership. The EU should also stand ready to respond with emergency funds if security deteriorates leading up to the 2025 polls.

- Support local civil society groups working on community peacebuilding and reconciliation as well as women-led organisations, especially in areas, like those in central Mindanao, still suffering high levels of violence.

The Legacy of Internal Conflict

The war between the government and the MILF formally ended in 2014 when the parties signed the historic Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. Five years later, as agreed, the ex-rebels took power over the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, through an appointed interim authority whose term was meant to be three years but was extended to six on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the peace has broadly held. Despite occasional violations, the ceasefire between Manila and the MILF remains in place, and since his election in 2022, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and his cabinet have repeatedly committed to honouring the agreement in full.

In the meantime, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority has crafted key legislation, enacting five of seven priority laws foreseen by the peace agreement, and made strides in setting up a new bureaucracy. The peace deal also proved a landmark in terms of women's participation. Not only did a woman lead the government negotiating panel during the talks, but women have played an active if not equal role in the political transition as a whole: they make up a fifth of the Bangsamoro interim parliament and occupy key administrative positions, including attorney general, a deputy parliament speaker, and heads of the interior and local government and social services and development ministries.

But several interconnected trends are putting the peace process under intense pressure. To begin with, violence has resurged in parts of the Bangsamoro. Local politics remain bloody,

with shootings marring the two municipal and village elections that have taken place in the region since 2022. Clan feuds, in particular, continue to roil central Mindanao, causing casualties, displacement and property damage. Many of these disputes stem from the contest for power and resources between ex-rebels and local politicians, some of whom command private militias. Other squabbles have erupted between MILF commanders. Lastly, jihadist groups, which reject the 2014 agreement, while seriously weakened by intensified military operations in recent years, still pose a threat. On 3 December, ISIS-inspired militants set off a bomb during a church service in the town of Marawi, killing four congregants and wounding over 40 more.

While the Bangsamoro has long seen political tensions, polarisation is on the rise and could take an ugly turn. The major fault line lies between the MILF, which at present enjoys Manila's support, and the political clans entrenched in the region, who dominate the region's power structures and resources, and do not welcome the arrival of a new political force on their traditional turf. The rift was already evident during the municipal and village elections in 2022 and 2023, respectively, but it is widening ahead of the 2025 polls, when the MILF will square off against its opponents for control of the new permanent authority. It is by far the group's most significant test to date at the ballot box. Both sides are already forming coalitions in preparation for a showdown, and new political parties will be joining the fray

in coming months. Given the stakes, and past episodes of political violence, the risk of unrest before the elections is clear.

Adding to the uncertainty are delays in “normalisation”, an ambitious process spelled out in the peace agreement that aims to demobilise rebels, boost economic development (with a focus on MILF-dominated areas) and achieve transitional justice. Around 26,000 ex-combatants have already laid down their arms, but the last phase of the MILF’s disarmament, which covers 14,000 fighters and over 2,000 weapons, is facing hurdles. Rebels are hesitant to give up their guns without getting the complete compensation packages outlined in the accord, which are to help them reintegrate fully into

law-abiding society. A long-awaited meeting between the sides to thrash out a way forward is scheduled for February. Initial meetings on the level of technical working groups are a good sign, but barring a breakthrough, full disarmament before 2025 remains unlikely.

A third problem is the pace of socio-economic development in MILF camps and communities, also known as camp transformation, which has been sluggish. Many villages are still mired in poverty and lack essential services, leading to frustration that the promised peace dividends have not appeared. Other components of normalisation, including measures dismantling private armies and providing for transitional justice, are also lagging.

What the EU and Its Member States Can Do

The EU has generously financed the Bangsamoro peace process for over a decade. At present, its funding portfolio focuses on three areas: governance and institutional support for the interim government; normalisation, with interventions in matters ranging from camp transformation to security (such as training joint peacekeeping teams in civilian protection or helping dispose of landmines); and humanitarian, development and peacebuilding projects. It also pays for smaller peacebuilding and education initiatives led by civil society, including youth and women’s organisations.

The breadth of this assistance has made Brussels one of the largest international donors supporting the Bangsamoro transition. But gaps remain in addressing the region’s needs after decades of war, and the EU could take further steps at this critical time.

First, diplomacy is crucial: Brussels should continue nudging the Philippine government, the MILF leadership and high-level local officials as well as Bangsamoro civil society, including women’s organisations, toward agreement on how best to fulfil the 2014 accord’s promise and bring about a peaceful Bangsamoro. It should stress to all the need to resolve

the difficulties in the transition in a way that prevents recourse to violence and includes all social and political constituencies. It is important that the outreach include a public component. European diplomats should pay regular visits to Cotabato City (the region’s de facto capital), MILF camps and EU project sites to demonstrate their governments’ commitment to the peace process. The EU and member states should also use every opportunity to urge Manila to meet its financial obligations related to normalisation, particularly as regards delivery of compensation packages to demobilised combatants. All these steps will give the Bangsamoro’s people greater confidence in the prospect of lasting peace.

Secondly, Brussels should also continue funding the Third Party Monitoring Team, the official peace process observation mechanism set up by the government and the MILF. The Team’s job is to review and assess progress in carrying out the peace agreement’s provisions and to update the public on the developments.

Thirdly, the EU and its member states should explore the possibility of allocating more resources to development initiatives associated with the peace process. The requirements

for completion of the peace process, especially when it comes to normalisation, are considerable. Generating more money for camp transformation – either through the EU’s own projects, the multilateral Normalisation Trust Fund (tasked with coordinating donor assistance) or the UN agencies involved – would be a big step forward. The EU should also consider providing more support to local groups and individuals, such as community-based organisations or skilled technocrats working to resolve conflicts over land, efforts that are often neglected due to the sensitivities of local elites, including traditional politicians as well as influential MILF leaders. It could fund research on land ownership to help the regional ministries involved in land governance, organise training for local government officials on resource management, and offer technical assistance to existing peace mechanisms and ministries dealing with the issue.

Fourthly, the EU and its member states should support as much as possible the local civil society groups working on community peacebuilding and reconciliation as well as women-led organisations, especially in areas, like those in central Mindanao, still suffering high levels of violence. Brussels should, in particular, use its regional Foreign Policy Instrument not only to continue assisting counter-terrorism, human rights and gender-focused projects, but also expand its range to include crisis prevention initiatives ahead of the 2025 elections.

These last projects could include mediation and conflict resolution of community-rooted disputes involving armed outfits, on both the regional and municipal levels, and should lend technical support to Indigenous peoples, who are often caught between warring factions, including the MILF and other Moro groups. Assistance could encompass capacity building

for local Indigenous officials and funding for civil society groups working to allay the mistrust between Indigenous peoples and armed actors. In parallel, the EU should prepare to assemble contingency funds for local humanitarian responses to emergencies – whether natural disasters or eruptions of armed conflict – that may befall Mindanao in the run-up to the 2025 polls. Finally, considering its relevant expertise, it should contemplate sending an observation mission for those elections, beginning discussions with Manila about feasibility at the earliest opportunity. ■

