

The Maguindanao Massacre, Critical Elections and Armed Conflict in the Philippines

by Eva-Lotta Hedman

The Maguindanao Massacre has sent shock waves through the Philippines and beyond. A convoy of cars was caught in an armed ambush on Monday 23 November, leaving at least 57 persons dead, with mutilated bodies and crushed vehicles found buried in large pits. The convoy was destined for the Commission of Elections office in Shariff Aguak town, Magindanao Province in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The purpose was to file local vice mayor Esmael Mangudadatu's certificate of candidacy to run for the governorship of Maguindanao province in the May 2010 Philippine elections. Among the victims of the massacre were at least 30 journalists, more than 20 women, including the wife and two sisters of Mangudadatu.

As news of the massacre spread quickly, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and the U.S. Embassy in Manila called upon President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to ensure that those responsible for the attack be brought to swift justice. At this writing, a local mayor and scion of the powerful Ampatuan family, Andal Ampatuan Jr., has been charged with 25 counts of murder and remains in police custody in a Manila prison. A number of other people have also been recommended to face murder charges, including at least six other Ampatuans (the provincial governor, the ARMM governor, another mayor, a vice mayor, and the head of so-called 'police auxiliary forces'). In the aftermath of the massacre, Maguindanao was first placed under a state of emergency, and the entire locally appointed police force of more than 1,000 men dismissed. Subsequently, Arroyo has moved to declare martial law in the province, thus effectively authorizing thousands of government troops to make arrests without court warrants and otherwise crack down on the Ampatuan clan and its private army of so-called 'auxiliary' police forces or 'civilian volunteer organizations.'

The targeting of women and media representatives in such large numbers and brutal manners during broad daylight, possibly resulting in more journalists killed in a single attack than anywhere else in the world, was not merely shocking. It was also the fatal outcome of a deliberate strategy for launching an electoral challenge against the grip on power exercised by the Ampatuans through elective and appointive government positions, as well as through local police and private armies, in Maguindanao, and beyond (the ARMM governor is also an Ampatuan as of 2005). That is, Mangudadatu's convoy itself represented an attempt

at expanding the repertoire of oppositional politics in the forbidding context that is contemporary Maguindanao. While the placing of women and journalists in harm's way failed to deter the fatal attack, the swift public reaction to the massacre is nonetheless testimony to the power of the individual courage and collective action demonstrated by those who joined in this convoy.

The particular circumstances and suspected culprits behind this massacre have attracted considerable attention, in the Philippines and elsewhere. While details and evidence have yet to be heard in a court of law, the deeper causes and consequences of this massacre can be gleaned from analyzing the wider political context and dynamics – in Maguindanao, in Muslim Mindanao, and elsewhere in the Philippines. There are at least three important patterns to consider in this regard: i) the practice of election-related violence; ii) the integration of the Muslim minority population; and iii) the emergence of zones of impunity in the southern provinces of the Philippines.



Many observers have noted that election-related violence remains a familiar and widespread practice not merely in southern Philippines but in many other parts of the country as well. In recent memory, for example, a reported 186 candidates and supporters were killed in election-related violence across the country in 2004, and another 126 in the 2007 elections. More generally, 'guns, goons, and gold' have long been a mainstay of Philippine electoral politics, as have national citizens' movements that seek to safeguard 'free and fair' elections against violence, vote-buying and electoral fraud.

More easily overlooked, however, is a pattern of violence during periods when a (long-term) incumbent president is – or should be – a lame duck and the anticipated realignment of national politics spells a concomitant shift in (entrenched) local structures of power. In view of the firm grip on local power by the Ampatuans in Maguindanao since 2001, and their close association with Arroyo during a long presidency which is now drawing to a close, the May 2010 elections present precisely such a moment of (would be) change and turnover in the wider context of a deeply entrenched authoritarian enclave, or so-called ‘warlord bailiwick.’ Having played a critical role in delivering a hefty chunk of the ‘Mindanao vote’ to Arroyo’s ruling party in the 2004 elections, the Ampatuans have since consolidated their grip on local power and held a total of 16 positions to political office in Mindanao, including two governorships, at the time of the massacre. Here, the – notoriously violent – elections of 1971, when then president Ferdinand Marcos had been in power for six years and was expected to leave office in 1973, suggests useful insights and sobering lessons for the prospects and dynamics of the upcoming Philippine elections to be held in May 2010.

The problematic pattern of integration of the Muslim minority population is another important but often misunderstood backdrop to the conflict in the southern Philippines. The early 1970s witnessed armed separatist mobilization for an independent Moro homeland under the rubric of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). By the mid-1970s, nearly 75% of the troops of the Armed Forces of the Philippines had been deployed to Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, with violent clashes leading to an estimated 50,000 casualties and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents. With a peace accord signed in 1976, live-and-let-live arrangements emerged in the southern Philippines, allowing armed Muslim groups to enjoy considerable local power. The resumption of democratic elections in the mid-late 1980s, and the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in the 1990s facilitated this pattern of accommodation.

However, from 2000, and deepening with the onset of the ‘Global War On Terrorism’ in late 2001, the southern Philippines saw large-scale government military campaigns in the name of ‘counter-terrorism’, causing casualties, destruction, and forced displacement on a scale not seen since the early-mid 1970s. A ‘Total War’ begun in 2000 dramatically reduced the effective control enjoyed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) over Muslim areas of central Mindanao. A later wave of military operations in the islands of the Sulu Archipelago was waged against the small shadowy Islamist terrorist network known as the Abu Sayyaf Group.

From 2006 up through mid-2008, however, a new pattern of accommodation had emerged between the Philippine government and the MILF, with informal understandings accompanied by formal diplomatic negotiations, leading to a Memorandum of Understanding in early-mid 2008. This lull in the fighting coincided, not accidentally, with the 2007 mid-term elections. But the proposed accord was opposed by many Christian interests in Mindanao and by elements within the MILF as well. Tensions increased, and

both sides began to rearm and remobilize their forces. By mid-2008, armed skirmishes were reported in mixed Muslim/Christian areas of central Mindanao, with MILF attacks on villages provoking a large-scale AFP military campaign that has continued, on and off, well into 2009. Meanwhile, kidnappings by the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan and Sulu sparked renewed counter-terrorism operations by Philippine government forces in the Sulu Archipelago. In both central Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, the resurgence of armed conflict has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents, only a minority of whom have found refuge in the government’s evacuation centres. February and March 2009 saw renewed fighting and large-scale flight in some areas, and new military operations were launched in April, prompting further large-scale displacement, especially in Maguindanao. Despite the July 2009 ceasefire and the December resumption of peace talks between the Philippine government and MILF, conflict, violence and displacement continue to loom large on the horizon of Muslim Mindanao in the absence of a political solution.

Localised in the context of southern Philippines, the Global War On Terrorism has thus lent added momentum to the emergence of zones of impunity in parts of Mindanao. As the heartland of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and a key theatre of armed conflict, the province of Maguindanao presents a political terrain where extrajudicial killings have continued to feature prominently among civilian casualties. Indeed, the absence of any clearly demarcated zones between military and civilian areas has remained the norm in Maguindanao and other parts of Mindanao affected by protracted conflict and cycles of militarised violence. What is at times referred to as clan-based violence, or *rido*, pitting rivaling families and their supporters against each other in their competition for local political power and resources, is perhaps the most notorious manifestation of such impunity, as noted in a recent study conducted by researchers at Mindanao State University in Marawi.

As the stalled peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF have resumed in Kuala Lumpur on 8–9 December, the shock waves from the Maguindanao Massacre continue to reverberate. Perhaps the calls for swift justice and the moves to prevent further bloodshed in the aftermath of the massacre will also add urgency and momentum to end the injustices and violence visited upon the thousands of Filipinos caught in the crossfire of armed conflict and military campaigns in southern Philippines. It can only be hoped that the Arroyo administration’s declaration of martial law and ongoing military operations against the Ampatuans and their alleged 4,000 strong private army in Maguindanao does not portend yet another chapter in Philippine history in which conflict in Mindanao and corruption in Manila converge at great expense to Filipinos of all faiths.

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