



Conflict analysis of The Philippines

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Questions

What are the main conflict and instability drivers in the Philippines?

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1. Summary

This rapid literature review examines the main conflict and instability drivers in the Philippines. Key findings include:

Conflict profile

- Conflict has been a longstanding feature of the Philippines, with two long-running insurgencies, and a number of other types of conflict and violence. The current situation is complex and dynamic, with an “increasingly fragmented array of violent extremist organizations” (TNC, 2019).
- In the current day the main types of violence and conflict include: violence by state actors against civilians; clan related violence; political and armed conflicts by nationalist/separatist groups in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago; a communist-inspired guerrilla campaign (mainly in western Mindanao); violent extremist and criminal groups; anti-drug vigilantes; other criminal violence; domestic and gender-based violence; protests; violence around elections; and local conflicts over resources and community rights.
- The Philippines is in the midst of a “human rights crisis” following President Duterte’s election in 2016 and the initiation of his war on drugs (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2018).
- More than 150,000 have been estimated to have been killed in conflicts in Central and Western Mindanao over the past five decades.
- There have been at least three main peace agreements between the government and different insurgent groups over history, but none have delivered a sustainable peace yet.

Conflict and instability – insurgent groups and drivers

Insurgent groups

- The Philippines has a long history of insurgent groups, three main armed insurgent groups are currently active, plus there are multiple violent extremist groups and factions. Militants move easily between violent extremism, insurgency and criminality. A number of groups align themselves to the so-called Islamic State (IS). Some see the new groups as representing a new strand of violent extremism, while others see them as having evolved from the previous struggles for secession and self-determination.

Drivers of conflict in the southern Philippines

A wide range of drivers and grievances are identified in the literature, however, importantly, ICG (2019) highlights that “generalisations can be misleading because motivations for participation in violence vary from place to place and individual to individual”.

- **Poverty, lack of opportunities, land dispossession and marginalisation** - A key driver of violent extremism in Mindanao is longstanding historical grievances against the national government, this especially draws on feelings that the Muslim minority population has been marginalised by the dominant Christian population. There has been an acute sense of political and cultural alienation, and economic marginalisation. This draws on the reality that the Southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago are the poorest provinces in the Philippines, and one of Southeast Asia’s least developed

regions. The youth are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation, especially due to the rapid spread of social media. Land dispossession and loss of ancestral homelands of indigenous Muslims by Christian migrant settlers is also a core grievance.

- **State responses** - The government's response to violent extremism has been predominantly military, and hindered by a lack of coordination across government agencies (ICG, 2019; TSN, 2019). Key grievances are: the perception that the state military campaigns have been heavy-handed; protracted internal displacement following the battles and slow state reconstruction processes; human rights abuses by the military; and the sense of betrayal by the government during peace negotiations.
- **Lack of rule of law, governance weaknesses, clan politics and criminality** - Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago's remoteness and weak governance makes those regions the most vulnerable in the Philippines to violent extremism recruitment and training. Extortion of large commodity exporters and mining companies by insurgent groups is a proximate driver of conflict.
- **Religious education and leaders** - Extremist preachers in the Philippines have played an important role in recruiting insurgents from Islamic education institutions, in forming and leading extremist cells, and in teaching extremist views. Transnational linkages amplify violent extremism through the movement and diffusion of ideas, funding, leadership, and tactical and technical knowledge.
- **The current peace process** - The newly formed Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) significantly deepens and broadens political and cultural autonomy, though not as much as the peace agreement promised. It is widely recognised that rapid progress needs to be made on both the governance and normalisation tracks of the peace implementation plan, especially as insurgent groups are likely to seek to spoil the process.

Drivers of instability across the country

Political - The 2016 election of President Duterte saw respect for human rights and civil liberties deteriorate rapidly, with thousands of deaths through extra-judicial killings. Duterte's authoritarian approach has increased the powers of the military and police, while human rights activists and critics have been targeted. The Philippines' political settlement is dominated by entrenched, oligarchic family clans.

- **Socio-economic** - The Philippines has one of the fastest growing economies in East and Southeast Asia, however, stark regional disparities mean that the GDP in the capital is five times that of Mindanao. The national poverty rate has declined over the past decade, however poverty remains high, and over 50% of the population in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao are poor.
- **Environmental** - The Philippines is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world with frequent and increasing natural disasters. Disasters lead to high costs to assets, wellbeing and capabilities. Changes in weather patterns may intensify the El Niño, with particularly severe consequences for the Philippines' poor.

There is a substantial amount of recent literature looking at the different issues that may drive conflict and instability in the Philippines. At the macro/country level, it is mostly from policy and practitioners. The literature tends to focus on: the recent violent extremist conflict acts and actors; the peace process and the newly established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM); and the human rights violations of Duterte's war on drugs. The first two are

discussed together, and the literature does not tend to separate out the drivers for the conflict relating to the older insurgent groups and the newer pro-IS insurgent factions. The majority of literature focuses on the Mindanao region, while the human rights/war-on-drugs literature covers the country more broadly.

2. Conflict profile

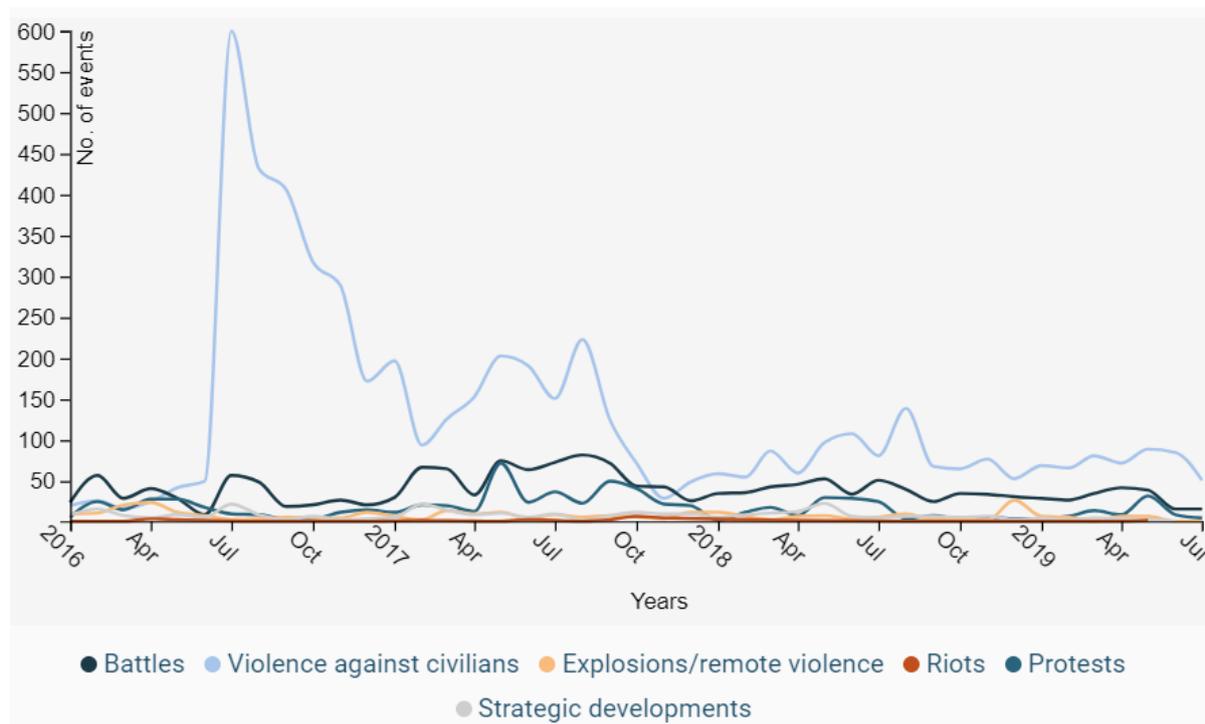
Conflict has been a longstanding feature of the Philippines, with two long-running insurgencies, and a number of other types of conflict and violence that have fluctuated and changed over time. Post-independence (in 1946) The Philippines was relatively stable with steady economic growth (Asia Foundation, 2017). In the 1960s/1970s, violence and instability increased as a nationwide communist insurgency began, and Moros in the south Philippines launched an armed resistance (Asia Foundation, 2017). Authoritarian rule from 1972 to 1986, was replaced by democracy, yet “electoral fraud, corruption, and coup attempts continue to mar national politics” (Asia Foundation, 2017, p.3).

The conflicts and actors are complex and dynamic, with an “increasingly fragmented array of violent extremist organizations” (TNC, 2019). Figure 1 presents ACLED data on the number of recorded conflict events by type of event in The Philippines from January 2016 until the current month (July 2019). In the current day the main types of violence and conflict are (ACLED, 2019; Timberman et al., 2019: 15; TSN, 2019: 6; Crost, Felter & Johnston, 2016; Asia Foundation, 2017):¹

- Violence by state actors against civilians (often as part of the war-on-drugs);
- Clan related violence (*rido* or *pagbanta*);
- Political and armed conflicts by a number of Moro nationalist/separatist groups in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago;
- A sporadic guerrilla campaign by the communist New People’s Army (mainly in western Mindanao);
- Violent and illicit acts of other armed groups that combine terrorism, kidnapping, and the so-called Islamic State (IS)-inspired extremism;
- Violence by anti-drug vigilantes
- Other violence by criminal organisations (sometimes called “Lawless Elements” (LE))
- Domestic and gender-based violence
- Protests
- Violence around elections
- Local conflicts over resources and community rights

¹ The Stabilisation Network (TSN) paper (2019: 5) is a Country Needs Assessment focussing on violent extremism, and responses to it, in the Philippines. It is based on primary sources, literature review and interviews with local officials and civil society leaders.

Figure 1: ACLED recorded conflict events by type (January 2016-July 2019)²



The Philippines is in the midst of a “human rights crisis”, say Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2018), following President Duterte’s election in 2016 and the initiation of his war on drugs. This trend is demonstrated in Graphic 1, where ACLED collected data shows a dramatic increase in violence against civilians that occurred from June 2016, as state officials and anti-drug vigilantes targeted suspected drug users (ACLED, 2018). There is no reliable data, however the estimated death toll ranges from 6,600 (by the government) to 27,000 (by the Philippines’ Commission on Human Rights (CHR) (HRW, 2019).³ Amnesty (2018) highlights that “the deliberate, unlawful and widespread killings of thousands of alleged drug offenders appeared to be systematic, planned, organized and encouraged by the authorities, and may have constituted crimes against humanity”. The International Criminal Court (ICC) passed a resolution for a detailed report into it in mid-2019.

² Figure 1 presents conflict events from ACLED (2019a) based on its dataset - which is publicly available at <https://www.acleddata.com/data/>. ACLED tracks reported political violence from four main types of sources (ACLED, 2019b, p.33): (1) Local, regional, national and continental media reviewed on a daily basis; (2) Reports from NGOs or international organisations used to supplement media reporting; (3) Selected social media accounts, including Twitter and Telegram; and (4) Information and data provided through partnerships with local conflict observatories in hard-to-access cases. The ACLED (2019b, p.6) codebook explains its methodology in further depth and that this data has its limitations – e.g. biases in the media coverage are not corrected for, and hard to reach areas are less covered. ACLED’s fundamental unit of observation is the “event”. ‘Events involve designated actors – e.g. a named rebel group, a militia or state forces. They occur at a specific named location (identified by name and geographic coordinates) and on a specific day... ACLED currently codes for six types of events and twenty-five types of sub-events, both violent and non-violent, that may occur during a period of political violence and disorder’ (ACLED, 2019b, p.6). The six types of events are: battles, explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians, protests, riots and strategic developments.

³ See CBN news article - <https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/12/05/18/chr-chief-drug-war-deaths-could-be-as-high-as-27000>

More than 150,000 have been estimated to have been killed in conflicts in Central and Western Mindanao over the past five decades (the two Muslim-majority areas of the Southern Philippines) (Barron, Engvall & Morel, 2016). And conflict has affected over 60% of Mindanao's cities and municipalities (World Bank, 2018; 2017).

There have been at least three main peace agreements between the government and different insurgent groups but none have yet delivered a sustainable peace (TSN, 2019). In 2014, the government and the Philippines' largest rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), signed the current peace agreement.

Clan feuding (also known as *rido*) is increasing in Mindanao (Barron et al., 2016). *Rido* includes recurring violent retaliation over perceived affronts or injustices (Asia Foundation, 2017). "Factions can be historical (geographic, ethnic, linguistic, insurgent); rivalries are often due to personal, family, clan, or political feuds. Conflicts can erupt over land, marriage, elections, business deals, or personal grudges and often cut across and through families, clans, and insurgent groups" (Asia Foundation, 2017, p.150-151). *Rido* "tends to interact with separatist conflict and other forms of armed violence, especially when the conflicting parties are aligned with armed groups" (Asia Foundation, 2017, p.151).

There was a "dramatic rise" in violent extremism in the Philippines, inspired in large part by IS with 2017 marking a high (TSN, 2019; International Alert, 2018). The 2017 violent takeover of Marawi city by pro-IS insurgents united fighters from Mindanao's three largest ethnic groups, the Tausug, Maranao and Maguindanao (ICG, 2019). The five-month battle saw an increase in the number of deaths from extremism – with "more deaths per incident of violence in 2017 than at any time in the past seven years" (International Alert, 2018; ICG, 2019).

Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago are most vulnerable to violent extremism. While "beyond Mindanao, a low level of extremism affected the Philippines' most populous island, Luzon" affecting Muslim and Balik Islam communities (the latter being Muslim converts from Christianity), and so too are the areas of Quezon City and Quiapo in the capital Manila (TSN, 2019: 12). There is little reliable information on Luzon (TSN, 2019).

Election-related violence is also a common feature in the Philippines – with the 2016 elections "marred by significant electoral violence", and more than the previous elections in 2013 (Asia Foundation, 2017; BTI, 2018: 8). This is particularly so in rural areas governed more by clans, where vote buying and intimidation can occur (BTI, 2018).

3. Conflict and instability – insurgent groups and drivers

Insurgent groups

In the Philippines, there is a long history of insurgent groups, and currently active are three main armed insurgent groups, plus multiple violent extremist groups and factions (most of which have splintered from the Moro nationalist movement in Muslim Mindanao) (TSN, 2019: 7). Militants move between violent extremism, insurgency and criminality "seamlessly", with numbers and factions of militants fluctuating (TSN, 2019: 7). A number of groups align themselves to IS. Information about the different groups are in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Non-state armed groups in the Philippines

The MILF (established in 1977), is the largest armed group in Mindanao. “In recent years, the MILF has observed a ceasefire and positioned itself as a reliable partner in negotiations with Manila” (TSN, 2019: 7). During the 2017 siege of Marawi by IS-affiliated militants, “the MILF denounced IS and helped to establish a peace corridor for trapped civilians to escape the city” (TSN, 2019: 7). It has factions with “potentially disruptive elements” (TSN, 2019: 7).

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) (founded in 1969), is a separatist armed group in Mindanao. The 1996 peace agreement it signed - to establish the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) – failed, and it has now been eclipsed by the MILF. Now, the MNLF is now divided into two main factions” (TSN, 2019, p.8):

- The MNLF–Sema faction supports the peace agreement with Manila and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), and it is represented on the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC).
- The MNLF-Misuari faction has rejected the BARMM. The peace process is focusing on trying to include them in the process, to limit their role as a spoiler.

The New People's Army (NPA) (established in 1969), is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). It was involved in peace talks until 2017 when President Duterte classified them as a terrorist organisation. It is active, and levies revolutionary taxes from businesses in Mindanao and northern Luzon.

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) (emerged in 2008) is a MILF splinter group. It wants full independence and rejects autonomous governance. It derailed the peace process in 2015 during the Mamasapano incident. It now has three main factions – two may be integrated into the demobilisation process, and the other has pledged allegiance to IS.

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)-Abu Turaifie faction (BIFF-Turaifie) – “There are multiple shifting factions of fighters aligned to BIFF-Turaifie who maintain close kinship and social ties to MILF fighters... it is closely aligned to IS” and thought responsible for the 2018 attack on the South Seas Mall in Cotabato, which threatened to spoil the referendum to create the BARMM.

The Maute Group (established in 2012) is a pro-IS “small clan-based armed force of mostly former MILF fighters”. They led the 2017 attack – by an alliance of pro-IS militants - on Marawi city.

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) (established in 1989) is a splinter group from the MNLF, and is “one of the most violent extremist groups in Southeast Asia and has one of the most developed networks with foreign violent extremists. Its agenda to establish an independent Islamic state, however, has been overshadowed by its ‘kidnap-for-ransom’ operations against Filipino and foreign nationals” (TSN, 2019: 9). It played a central role in the 2017 Marawi city attack. “It has a capacity to operate across the Philippines-Malaysia-Indonesia border” (TSN, 2019: 9).

The Abu Sayyaf Group-Basilan (emerged in the 1990s) is a splinter group from the Moro National Islamic Front, and is closely aligned with IS. Its previous leader led the 2017 attack on Marawi City, and it is suspected responsible for a 2018 Lamitan bombing. It “is deeply embedded in local criminal networks” (TSN, 2019: 7).

The Abu Sayyaf Group-Sulu is a MNLF splinter group, with shifting members – many are petty criminals. It is suspected to be responsible for the 2019 Jolo Cathedral bombing.

Source: Text extracted and edited from TSN (2019, p.8-11)

International Alert (2018) explain that there are two competing narratives to explain the current fragmentation of conflict actors:

- The first narrative suggests that the Marawi conflict revealed the rise of a newly-emerging strand of violent extremism over the previous Moro nationalist rebellions;
- The second narrative suggests instead that many of the current actors evolved from previous struggles for secession and self-determination, and merely shifted their allegiance.

One distinction is that the MNLF and MILF have kept their focus on local struggles for self-rule, and do not have global jihadist aspirations (ICG, 2019).

Drivers of conflict in the southern Philippines

A wide range of drivers and grievances are identified in the literature, however, importantly, ICG (2019) highlights that “generalisations can be misleading because motivations for participation in violence vary from place to place and individual to individual”. This section summarises the drivers most commonly discussed:

Poverty, lack of opportunities, land dispossession and marginalisation

A key driver of violent extremism in Mindanao is longstanding historical grievances against the national government, especially those of the minority Muslim population against the dominant Christian population (TSN, 2019). There has been an acute sense of political and cultural alienation among Muslims in Mindanao, and economic marginalisation (TSN, 2019).

Southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago are the poorest provinces in the Philippines, and one of Southeast Asia’s least developed regions (Timberman, et al., 2019: 6; TSN, 2019). Poverty and economic marginalisation has been caused by “decades of national government neglect, poor regional and local governance, insufficient private sector investment, the self-interest of local political clans, ethnic and religious divisions, and the damaging effects of recurring conflict” (Timberman, et al., 2019: 6; TSN, 2019). Mindanao’s protracted conflict over forty years, combined with weak governance, and high levels of migration have limited its economic development and kept people in poverty (World Bank, 2018, p.7). “The same level of asset loss affects poor and marginalized people far more than their wealthier neighbors because their livelihoods depend on fewer assets and their consumption is closer to subsistence levels” (World Bank, 2018, p.7).

Youth are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation, especially due to the rapid spread of social media - communication mediums that are less accessed by their parents (TSN, 2019, p.3). Some

insurgent groups have paid insurgents (or their families) to recruit them or promised benefits to insurgents for carrying out attacks (TSN, 2019; ICG, 2019). However, ICG (2019) highlights that “generalisations can be misleading because motivations for participation in violence vary from place to place and individual to individual”.

Land dispossession and loss of “ancestral homelands” of indigenous Muslims by Christian migrant settlers in Mindanao is a core grievance (TSN, 2019; Alim, 2019). It is framed as the “colonial and neo-colonial occupation of Mindanao” by the Spanish, Americans, Japanese and Philippines Republic which has resulted in: historical injustices, political disenfranchisement, economic marginalisation, social disintegration, and cultural alienation (Alim, 2009, p.4). “Imperial Manila” is also blamed for sponsoring the Christians’ mass migration into Mindanao (TSN, 2019, p.14).

State responses

The government’s response to violent extremism has been predominantly military, thus far, including extending martial law (ICG, 2019). The state’s overall response to violent extremism has been hindered by a lack of coordination, and thus disjointed responses, across government agencies (TSN, 2019: 2).

The perceived heavy-handed military campaigns by the government is identified as a key grievance for insurgents. For example, the Armed Forces are viewed as having responded too aggressively to the 2017 IS-attacks on Marawi City, with many mosques, madrasas and schools also destroyed (TSN, 2019:15). Another example is the “all-out-war” declared on the insurgents who bombed the Jolo Cathedral in 2019, the armed forces’ response displaced an unknown number of citizens (TSN, 2019).

Protracted internal displacement, following the battles, is a key grievance, where slow state reconstruction processes are blamed (TSN, 2019; ICG, 2019). E.g. in Marawi city between 66,000 (OCHA, 2019b) to 100,000 people (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2019) are estimated to be displaced, two years following the siege. The displaced struggle to have access to clean water, permanent shelters, and viable livelihood opportunities (ICRC, 2019). While 46,000 people have been displaced since March in Maguindanao due to operations against remnants of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (OCHA, 2019b)

Human rights abuses by the military also fuels violent extremism in Mindanao as a primary grievance narrative – mostly related to 1972-1968 abuses, some are more recent, and some that occurred around 2000 (TSN, 2019). Abuses include killings, bombings, and the enforcement of martial law by the military (TSN, 2019).

The sense of “betrayals” by the government during peace negotiations, are also recognised as driving grievances (TSN, 2019). The sense of different identity also emerges from many Muslims in Mindanao feeling they are Moro (with Bangsamoro the idea of the Moro nation) rather than Filipino (BTI, 2018).

Yet while in Mindanao grievances are strong against Manila, local government units (barangays) “are typically trusted by residents and their leaders are often actively involved in civil engagement”... thus “the recent creation of a new layer of governance, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), could also provide opportunities to address these challenges on a local/regional level” (TSN, 2019: 2).

Lack of rule of law, governance weaknesses, clan politics and criminality

Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago's remoteness contribute to their locations being the "most vulnerable to violent extremism" in the Philippines. This is because rule of law is weak and many areas are ungoverned spaces (TSN, 2019: 12). For example, the Maute Group recruit and train members in mainland Mindanao, as do the ASG in the Sulu Archipelago (see Figure 2 for information about the groups) (TSN, 2019: 12). TSN (2019: 12) reports that ASG also has "a capability to operate in and mobilize resources from Sabah, in Eastern Malaysia".

The local politics preceding the Marawi crisis is not fully understood, but ICG (2019) notes that it "had a high level of violent crime and a reputation as the centre of Muslim Mindanao's drug trade". Former mayors were named as "narco-politicians (ICG, 2019).

Extortion of large commodity exporters and mining companies by insurgent groups is a proximate driver of conflict – it is e.g. thought to be the main source of finance for the NPA. The commodity exporters are vulnerable to extortion from the groups due to their remote locations in underdeveloped and under-governed spaces. Crost and Felter (2018) find evidence that is suggestive of a mechanism in which insurgent groups fund themselves by extorting commodity exporters, although they cannot show direct evidence due to the illicit and secret nature of extortion.

Religious education and leaders

Mindanao has a heterogeneous mix of religious communities (Christians, Muslims, and other indigenous groups) and is socially fluid (Timberman, et al., 2019). Muslims are indigenous to the Philippines, but today make up only 5-9% of the total population (Timberman, et al., 2019). "Although Muslim political leaders have long been involved in Philippine politics, Muslims have never unified to produce a broad-based political or social movement based on Islam" (Timberman, et al., 2019: 6).

Extremist preachers in the Philippines have played an important role in recruiting insurgents from Islamic education institutions, in forming and leading extremist cells, and in teaching extremist views (TSN, 2019: 20). Daulah Islamiyah in their recruitment, offered opportunities to learn Islam, and stressed the importance of defending Islam and the community from enemies (ICG, 2019). Maute Group recruiters - often skilled preachers – "contrasted the purity of the proposed Islamic State with the appalling character of local politics" (ICG, 2019). Family and other personal ties often but not always play a role (ICG, 2019).

Some educational institutions with radical preachers have links to, or are influenced by, Middle Eastern-trained scholars who condone violent extremism, while more moderate Islamic scholars (trained by the government) have been marginalised, finds TSN (2019: 19). Religious leaders are identified by TSN (2019) as important actors to engage with.

Transnational linkages "are a key amplifier" of violent extremism in Mindanao through the movement and diffusion of ideas, funding, leadership, and tactical and technical knowledge (TSN, 2019: 22; ICG, 2019). The 2017 Marawi city attack was sponsored and funded by IS, and carried out under IS allegiance (TSN, 2019, p.22). The Philippines has a history of foreign fighters engaging in insurgency with the MNLF and MILF – e.g. from Indonesia, and Malaysia (ICG, 2019).

The current peace process

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was officially inaugurated in March 2019, following the peace agreement signed in 2014 (the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB)), that was brokered over a decades-long peace process between the government and the MILF (Timberman, et al., 2019; ICG, 2019). The BARMM significantly deepens and broadens political and cultural autonomy (TSN, 2019: 7); It makes the region semi-autonomous, though not to the level of autonomy promised in the CAB (Timberman, et al., 2019: 8).

The implementation of the CAB and the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) has two tracks (Timberman, et al., 2019: 7):

- **A governance track** - creating the BARMM and the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA) (an interim government until the 2022 elections);
- **A normalisation track** – which decommissions and reintegrates the MILF/BIAF combatants, funds development projects in conflict-affected communities, and starts a transitional justice process.

It is widely recognised that rapid progress needs to be made on both phases to keep the peace process on track (Timberman, 2019: 9). In particular, as potential perpetrators – violent extremist groups, MILF-splinter groups, and other armed groups – (may) seek to spoil the process (Timberman, 2019: 15). For example, the MNLF–Misuari faction are currently not signed up to the current peace process, and in this group (representing many ethnic Tausugs) some already see themselves as marginalised from the new BARMM by Maguindanons (TSN, 2019:15).

Key challenges facing the BTA are (Timberman, et al., 2019: 9):

- “Building capacity to effectively govern and deliver public services and successfully normalising the situation in Mindanao and reintegrating former combatants.”
- “Establishing a parliamentary system of governance, effectively exercising fiscal autonomy, managing relations with the central government and ensuring a meaningful role for representatives of all communities in Bangsamoro are also essential to the success of the BARMM”

Also broader political and security dynamics challenge the process – e.g. Duterte government’s federalism initiative, the situation in Marawi, and the perceived threat of violent extremism (Timberman, 2019: 12).

This sense of betrayal that insurgents feel towards Manila is also extended by some to the insurgent groups that have joined the peace process – e.g. the MILF’s current transition has made it the target of alienated youth and splinter groups (e.g. the Maute Group and the BIFF) who consider them to have betrayed the Moro cause (TSN, 2019). The MILF and the BARMM administration will need to deliver quickly on the peace agreement and new administration to keep insurgents and the public on board with the current process (TSN, 2019). Yet the challenges to the peace process are significant, thus it is likely that frustration and a sense of betrayal will increase as the new administration attempts to deliver on the peace process (TSN, 2019).

Drivers of instability across the country

Political

The 2016 election of President Duterte saw respect for human rights and civil liberties deteriorate rapidly, with his war on drugs and criminality leading to thousands of deaths through extra-judicial killings by police and vigilantes (BTI, 2018: 3). While the Philippines has signed up to human rights laws, and has institutions to implement them (e.g. a national human rights commission and human rights offices in the police and the military), these are flouted (Conde, 2019b).

Duterte’s authoritarian approach has increased the powers of the military and police, while human rights activists and critics have been targeted, harassed and silenced (Conde, 2019a; BTI, 2018). Impunity is widespread, under the banner of the drugs war, and Duterte has given law enforcement officers implicated in abuses assurances they will not be prosecuted (Conde, 2019b). Under the war-on-drugs campaign since 2016, “only one case - out of the official death toll of more than 6,600 and other estimates of 27,000 - has resulted in the criminal conviction of police officers” prosecuted (Conde, 2019b). Human rights activists, union workers and general critics are being targeted too under Duterte (e.g. Conde, 2018c).

The Philippines’ political settlement is dominated by entrenched, oligarchic family clans (BTI, 2018). Duterte has initiated a series of significant structural reforms – e.g. introducing federalism and a parliamentary system of government, and changing the foreign policy orientation) (BTI, 2018). “The extent to which Duterte can challenge these structures of economic and political domination will determine the relative stability of his presidency” and whether his reform agenda is successful (BTI, 2018). With the exception of the radical groups in Mindanao, all other actors of importance accept democratic institutions (BTI, 2018). Duterte’s success in the mid-term elections in May 2019 are interpreted as him winning public approval for his controversial agenda (Reuters, 2019).

Socio-economic

Gross domestic product (GDP) rates of around 6% have made the Philippines’ one of the fastest growing economies in East and Southeast Asia (BTI, 2018: 3).⁴ “With increasing urbanization, a growing middle-income class, and a large and young population, the Philippines’ economic dynamism is rooted in strong consumer demand supported by vibrant labor market and robust remittances” (World Bank, 2019). “Cuts in interest rates and increased government spending have boosted economic confidence. Furthermore, a relatively stable banking sector and the reduction of foreign debts contributed to the overall positive macroeconomic development of the Philippines” (BTI, 2018: 3). However, stark regional disparities mean that the GDP in the capital is five times that of Mindanao (World Bank, 2018, p.8).

⁴ GDP was 6.2% in 2018 according to the World Bank’s World Development Indicators (WDI), accessed 25 July 2019.
https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=PHL

The national poverty rate has declined over the past decade, however poverty remains high (with 22% under the national poverty line in 2018);⁵ and the pace of poverty reduction has been slow compared with other East Asian countries” (World Bank, 2018). Again, regional disparities are stark with two-fifths of the poor living in Mindanao; and over 50% of the population in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao being poor (World Bank, 2018, p.8). There is a nexus between conflict and poverty (World Bank, 2017. p.2). The Philippines is the best for gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region, yet reported cases of violence against women have increased from 2006 to 2011 (Asia Foundation, 2017).

Environmental

The Philippines is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world with frequent and increasing natural disasters including typhoons and earthquakes (World Bank, 2018). Since 1990 natural disasters have caused an estimated US\$23 billion in losses and damages; an estimated one million Filipinos are impoverished each year by natural disasters (World Bank, 2018, p.7). “Where they occur, conflicts not only destroy physical assets, they also erode human capital through loss of life, injury, illness, denial of education and health services, and increased malnutrition. This reduces the earning ability and capabilities of the affected populations and traps people in poverty” (World Bank, 2018, p.7).

Changes in weather patterns may intensify the El Niño, with particularly severe consequences for the Philippines’ poor. “The poorest regions of the country, where agriculture accounts for a disproportionate share of income and the capacity to manage risk is particularly weak, face increased vulnerability to shocks” (World Bank, 2018). The recent outbreak of dengue cases in the Philippines is also thought to have been exacerbated by the El Niño as drought and water shortages led people to collect water in containers and in mosquito breeding places (OCHA, 2019a). An El Niño-caused drought led to a demonstration by at least 6,000 farmers in 2016 where they demanded government subsidies, the violent police response killed three, and left hundreds injured (Asia Foundation, 2017, p.151).

“Both climate change and conflict significantly increase smallholder vulnerability, resulting in loss of livelihoods, financial assets, agricultural yield and the worsening of debt problems. Women and men are affected differently, resulting in changing farming patterns and coping strategies. Women are more disadvantaged and as such tend to farm in smaller plots, work shorter hours or limit farming to cash crops. Extreme climate events in conflict-prone agrarian communities appear to subject women to forced migration, increased discrimination, loss of customary rights to land, resource poverty and food insecurity” (Chandra, et al., 2017).

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