

On the December 3, 2023, Mindanao State University Bombing

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On December 3, 2023, an Islamist bombing occurred during a Catholic Mass at the gymnasium of the Mindanao State University in Marawi, Philippines, killing four people. Our correspondent in the region presents an initial attempt to contextualize what is happening there.

It has been several days (5 to be exact) since the Marawi bombing occurred. Four people were killed on the spot, 73 wounded, but only 53 were sent to the hospital. The brutal act was done while these people were celebrating mass inside a gymnasium within the Mindanao State University (MSU). 189, mostly students, were at the mass celebrating the 1st Sunday of Advent.

The president Bongbong Marcos (BBM) was quick to announce that it was the foreign terrorists who did this despicable act. The Daw'la Islamiya, a subregional branch of ISIS, had immediately claimed responsibility for the act.

We have some analyses of who and why they did such a deadly bombing. At the outset, it was really meant to inflict maximum damage. A 60mm and RPG shell was used and after putting it in the middle of the place where the mass was held, it was detonated by remote control.

Our first theory (popularly spread out) is that it was a retaliatory operation by the Islamic extremist group after suffering losses in different areas like: Dec 1 2023, 11 of their members were killed in a military encounter in Datu Hoffer municipality in the province of Maguindanao del Sur; Dec 2, one of their leaders was killed in the town of Sumisip, Basilan and at one in the morning of Dec 3, another leader of the extremist group was killed in the town of Piagapo, Lanao del Sur. Six hours after they blasted the bomb at MSU.

The 2nd theory is that, they blasted the bomb to get attention from the BBM government. This explains why the Minority Catholic Christians in a majority Muslim city of Marawi were chosen as the target. That it was done in the middle of the mass celebration was again to ensure a serious reaction from the government. They were delivering a message that cannot be ignored. More than six years after the Marawi siege, the majority of the displaced people are staying in temporary shelters with less social services, no water and electricity. The Duterte government failed to fulfil its promise to rebuild Marawi. There is less stress with building social infrastructure, but more on constructing buildings for tourism... The bombing was meant to score positive points from the displaced and frustrated populace that because of government neglect became fertile ground for recruitment of the extremist group.

The 3rd theory is that it was done to justify the militarization of Marawi and BARMM areas. This is part of political manoeuvring in preparation for 2025 BARMM elections. As everybody knows by now, the MILF-led BARMM is not popular in all 6 provinces and 3 cities under the region. If this political situation will not be altered by 2025, the MILF will not be winning in the 2025 elections.

which would mean that the peace agreement signed between the MILF and the government is a failure. The governors of the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Sur, Basilan, Tawitawi and Sulu had agreed among themselves not to participate in the coming elections if the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF - the armed component of MILF) will not be totally decommissioned and disarmed. BBM's government has to appoint the Chief of Staff of the BIAF as governor of the newly created province of Maguindanao del Norte in spite of the strong opposition of the traditional leaders in the area, like the Sinsuats and the Masturas, just to have a kind of political base for the MILF.

The immediate result of the MSU bombing is the militarization of the University and the nearby municipalities. Information is already saying that the BIAF will freely conduct check points and inspection, although this info needs still to be objectively verified.

This is just an initial contextualization of what is happening in these areas.

Meanwhile, we have to have immediate intervention in the university. This morning we are distributing relief goods for the students who are still in the university but do not have food since most of the business establishments were closed. There are still around 600 students who are in the university. All others were evacuated by their local governments as requested by the parents of the students to bring their sons and daughters home. We are also planning to have psychosocial first aids. Long-term activities will be to conduct dialogues between and among the Christians and Muslims students and grassroots as well as the religious leaders of both people. The harmonious relationships among these people should not be put on collateral damage.

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