

Philippines : the war at home

Tuesday 23 February 2010, by [ABUBAKAR Carmen A.](#) (Date first published: September 2003).

The Philippines will send troops as a contribution to the US deployment in Iraq : President Gloria Arroyo claims this represents a commitment to world democracy. But participation in the US war on terror licenses repressive domestic policies against her opponents, including the Moros.

THE attempted military coup in the Philippines on 27 July [2003] has brought the conflict in southern Mindanao, involving the aspirations to independence of the Moros (Muslims - see Mindanao : a miniature history) back into the headlines. Lieutenant- Commander Antonio Trillanes IV, a spokesman for the rebel Magdalo group [1], revealed that bombings in March in Davao, which had targeted the airport, the port and some mosques, had been organised by military groups. The Magdalo group also accused military leaders of selling arms and munitions to insurgents for use against the national army, which is one reason why the Mindanao conflict continues.

Benasing Macarambon, a former commander of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and now congressman for the province of Lanao del Sur, confirmed that arms and munitions were sold to the MNLF from the 1970s on. Ed Kabalu, spokesman for an MNLF splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), backed up these claims and said that arms and munitions in Mindanao were "commodities", available to those who could afford them. Eriberto Varona, director of the massive arms manufacturing centre that is the Philippines government arsenal, called the allegations "a big, big lie" [2].

Kabalu is delighted at confirmation of the military involvement in the Davao bombings. "At last, we are exonerated," he said. "We have been saying all along that the MILF had nothing to do with the Davao bombings. Now the truth has come out, and we're happy" [3].

But in fact the MILF has little to celebrate. The allegations question the intentions of both the army and the government : just how far are they prepared to go to keep the conflict alive ? And what is the point in negotiating if the fighting is continue indefinitely ? The idea that the army is deliberately prolonging the conflict is not fanciful. On 2 June 2002, during the Lamitan incident [4], members of the Abu Sayyaf group managed to escape the military encirclement of the Dr Jose Reyes hospital, where they had taken shelter, with their hostages.

The Philippines Senate and House of Representatives held an inquiry into allegations of Abu Sayyaf's collusion with the army, and a preliminary report, by the Senate subcommittee on national defence and security, signed by 20 senators, named three suspects, and recommended a court-martial. Gracia Burnham [5], an American who had been taken hostage by the Abu Sayyaf group, accused the army of helping and encouraging her captors. However, none of these allegations have led to any action from President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's government, as the Magdalo rebels point out.

The decision to use repression to resolve the Mindanao conflict has put the military leadership in a stronger position than the civilian authorities. Arroyo's takeover in 2001, with the help of the army,

after she withdrew her support for President Joseph Estrada, made the imbalance permanent. The army is practised at this. It was largely responsible for the stability of Corazon Aquino's presidency between 1986 and 1992. Arroyo's "war on terror" has doubled the size of the military, and she has handled the military elements in her government with kid gloves. There has been only one resignation : that of General Victor Corpus, who was head of the military intelligence services.

Angelo Reyes, the defence minister, did not even ask for a suspension of service during the inquiry into the recent failed coup. Hermogenes Ebdane, head of the national police service, kept his job despite the national sense of embarrassment when Fathur Rohman Al Gozi, head of the Jemaah Islamiyah and accused of terrorism, managed to escape from a Manila prison.

The Moros were quick to underline the reasonable force used, on government orders, against rebel soldiers. This kind of moderation is uncommon in Mindanao, where there are frequent excessive punitive operations to capture presumed kidnappers, or Abu Sayyaf members who might be hiding among Moro communities. Bombardments and machine-gun attacks endanger civilians and their property. The armed forces' operations have claimed many victims and led to a major migration towards the centre of the island. During the total war conducted by Joseph Estrada in 2000, almost 500,000 people were displaced, and some areas of Mindanao became war zones.

The Arroyo government is in a difficult position. It is hard for the state to profess faith in the peace talks while its army is accused of perpetuating the conflict. Recent events can only inspire further distrust among the Moros, whose suspicion of the authorities is hardly new. The split between Filipinos and Moros dates from the United States' colonial era, and has led to stereotypes and prejudices that still plague relations. Though joint dialogues have progressed in several regions, ordinary people are still antagonistic. The Mindanao conflict smouldered after the Philippines' independence, stoked by state policies : the government's treatment of the Moros marginalised and pauperised a community that had been dynamic and prosperous, reducing it to the status of a minority. Clientelism and corruption have maintained this situation.

Life under the republic has been bleak for the Moros. In 1968 the massacre of young recruits who had come from Tawi-Tawi and the Sulu islands for training on the island of Corregidor aroused widespread anger and led to the creation of the MNLF. The organisation's leaders, such as Nur Misuari, felt it was time to end the internal colonisation of the Moros who, before the colonial era, had been a nation in their own right and were justified in asserting their right to self-determination. The aim of the MNLF was secession, and the proclamation of the Bangsa Moro Islamic republic.

The situation in Mindanao deteriorated because of vandalism by gangs such as the Lliga (a Christian self-defence group) and the Barracuda (a Moro organisation), both acting in the name of the struggle for land. Martial law was declared in 1972 ; war broke out between the MNLF and the national army.

Subsequent talks produced a peace agreement, signed in Tripoli in Libya in 1976, which proposed the creation of an autonomous region of Mindanao. Covering roughly the same area as the Moro province that had been set up by the US colonial administration in 1903, this region would have 14 districts and nine towns. The agreement was doomed to failure because President Ferdinand Marcos wanted to submit it to normal constitutional processes, although the constitution was suspended and he was ruling by decree. Marcos created two autonomous regions : regions 9 and 12.

Ruben Canoy, an opposition leader from Mindanao, spoke of regional "monotony", others of "paper autonomy". The MNLF rejected the settlement and returned to its objective of full independence. The intention of the government had been to make apparent concessions to the Moros without changing the structure of government - and without giving the Moros any real political power.

The 1960s produced many organisations and services meant to help Moro assimilation, including the Commission on National Integration, which after several transformations is now the Office of Muslim Affairs (OMA), with its director often chosen through political favouritism and changed by the president. Gloria Arroyo has already named two directors in one year. The OMA has no continuity of action and is thought of as an employment agency rather than a development organisation.

Other bodies created include sharia courts, the Southern Philippines Development Authority (which was recently abolished) and the Islamic Bank, the purpose of which is to finance the economic development of the Moro regions ; but its capital has not exceeded 50m pesos (\$900,000) since its creation. Sharia courts are often set up in dilapidated or isolated and inaccessible buildings, and with insufficient judges, it is impossible for them to process cases fast enough. Both these institutions could be highly effective if they had greater financial and administrative assistance.

The regional autonomy of Muslim Mindanao was written into the Philippines constitution in 1987, when the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was created. But the MNLF and MILF have both rejected this law and continued to fight for independence. The aim of the MILF, then led by Hashim Salamat (6), remains the establishment of a Bangsa Moro Islamic republic.

In 1996 the government and the MNLF signed a peace agreement proposing a three-year transitional period, during which time the Moro regions would be intensely developed. There was then to be a referendum to set up the autonomous territory. But a 1997 financial crisis meant that resources for development never arrived. The Southern Philippines council for peace and development, an organisation bringing together the MNLF with NGOs and local government representatives, and meant to supervise the changes, could not carry out the peace plan. After meeting several times, it gave up.

The United Nations then stepped in to save the peace plan, but it could not counter the under-development that these regions had suffered for decades. The tremendous hopes created by the peace agreement faded.

Gloria Arroyo re-launched peace talks in 2001, but they have been quashed by the “war on terror” led by the US and fervently supported by the government. The MILF has been accused of links with al-Qaida and with the Jemaah Islamiyah. It narrowly escaped being listed as a terrorist organisation after the Davao bombings. It has been persecuted, as have the Abu Sayyaf group and the New People’s Army.

Theoretically talks will re-open soon. In an initial phase the government and the MILF signed a cease-fire and a deal providing for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of areas that had been damaged or destroyed during the total war. More substantial political problems remain to be discussed.

Experience has shown that an agreement is only viable if the president who signs it remains in office. If Arroyo stands by her public announcement that she will not run in the 2004 election, will the agreement that she signed with the MILF fade like the 1996 deal made with the MNLF, whose influence has declined since ? Such uncertainty can only reinforce the Moros’ conviction that the government is not sincere. It is time for the state to take a more serious and positive attitude to the Moros’ right to self-determination. If it does not, demands for full independence will grow.

Carmen A. Abubakar

P.S.

* From *Le Monde diplomatique*, English Edition, September 2003.

* Carmen A Abubakar is dean of the Institute of Islamic studies at the University of Manila, Philippines.

Footnotes

[1] The name refers to a group of Filipinos who fought to get rid of the Spanish colonisers in the 19th century.

[2] *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 30 July 2003.

[3] *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 30 July 2003.

[4] The army attacked the Islamic group Abu Sayyaf, which had taken 200 civilians hostage in the (predominantly Christian) town of Lamitan on the island of Basilan in the Southern Philippines.

[5] Gracia Burnham, a missionary working in the Philippines, and her husband Martin were kidnapped by members of the Abu Sayyaf group on 27 May 2001. Martin Burnham was killed, together with another hostage, during an army assault to rescue them.