

Southern Philippines backs Muslim self-rule in landslide result - “Now comes the hard part”

Saturday 26 January 2019, by [FONBUENA Carmela](#), [QUINTOS Patrick](#)

Result raises hopes of an end to decades of violence including attacks by Isis-inspired groups.

People in the Muslim-majority southern Philippines have voted by a landslide to create a new autonomous region covering five provinces and three cities, a result the government hopes will bring peace to a war-torn part of the country and address issues that lure recruits to Isis-inspired groups.

On Friday, the election commission declared the Bangsamoro Organic Law plebiscite “ratified”, four days after the vote was held. Almost 1.6 million voted yes, while 250,000 voted no.

Another vote will take place on 6 February to allow more towns and villages to join the autonomous region.

The plebiscite sealed a peace deal that the government signed with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 2014, but which languished in the national legislature until it was approved last year. The rebels have pledged to end a three-decade separatist uprising that killed more than 100,000 people in exchange for broader autonomy.

The Liberation Front’s chairman, Murad Ebrahim, welcomed the victory, but said he knew the real work for lasting peace was just beginning.

“We really see this as a huge challenge, because from being revolutionaries, we will be transforming into governance. That will be very challenging, because many of us have never been in government,” said Murad, who is poised to lead the new region.

The Bangsamoro region will expand the powers, resources and territory of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) that it replaces. It will also receive an estimated at \$1.3bn (£1bn) grant to bolster development in an area with some the highest poverty rates in the Philippines.

Bangsamoro will include the core ARMM territories of Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi.

Cotabato City, which twice rejected joining the ARMM in past referendums, voted yes to the new region, though by a narrower margin than elsewhere, 36,682 to 24,994.

Celebrations erupted on social media as early as Monday night when unofficial counts pointed to a victory for yes across the southern Philippines, raising hopes of a final end to decades of violence. There has been a recent wave of attacks by militants linked or inspired by Isis, including the siege of Marawi city in 2017.

An explosion on New Year's Eve killed two people and wounded dozens in Cotabato City. The night before the plebiscite, a grenade was thrown at a house of a public official.

The government described the day of the referendum as "relatively peaceful", although a few scuffles outside polling stations were reported. Turnout exceeded 85%, according to James Jimenez, a spokesman for the election commission.

Two crucial steps that will determine the success or failure of the newly created region will follow: governance and demobilisation. First, a Bangsamoro Transition Authority will be appointed by President Rodrigo Duterte to govern until October 2020, when elections will take place across the country. The 80-strong body is expected to be dominated by Liberation Front nominees.

Second, the Liberation Front will demobilise its 30,000-40,000 forces in exchange for social and livelihood assistance.

Carmela Fonbuena in Manila

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After Bangsamoro Organic Law is ratified, now comes the hard part

MANILA/COTABATO CITY—Hotel taxi service driver Tong Saluguinan is sick of the gunfights and killings in Mindanao, a southern Philippine area that, for nearly half a century, became a battleground not only between government troops and Moro rebels, but also of warring political clans and their private armed groups.

This is why in a plebiscite in Cotabato on Monday, January 21, Saluguinan voted "yes" to a law that will create a new region promising greater autonomy to the restive homeland of the Philippine Muslim minority.

Based on the final and official plebiscite results, the "yes" votes won in Cotabato City, which means it will now be included in new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), along with present Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, where the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) was overwhelmingly ratified.

Only Isabela City in Basilan rejected inclusion in the new BARMM.

Some 600,000 people in North Cotabato and Lanao del Norte areas will decide on February 6 whether to join, too.

The victory is a hard-fought dream paid with the blood of all Moros who fought in their struggle for a homeland.

"We're all so sick of that [fighting]," Saluguinan said in Filipino, as he recalled the time more than 20 years ago, when he was armed with guns as a member of the country's largest Moro rebel group,

the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), formed in the 1970s to resist the martial law regime and advance the cause of Moro separatism.

"There was a time when soldiers surprised our group with an attack in a camp near Ampatuan town. It was very early in the morning and we were still wearing our malong (traditional tube garment). We ran as they threw explosives at us. Two of my fellow fighters were hit. They were thrown off by the impact and ended up hanging on a tree," Saluguinan added.

Tired of bloodshed, Saluguinan left the underground movement in 2000 and went to Manila a year later to find a job. He went back to Cotabato a decade later to settle with his family.

Saluguinan was among 36,600 people in Cotabato who voted for the Bangsamoro law, while 24,900 others voted "no." The city, which rejected joining the current ARMM in two previous plebiscites, will join the new BARMM despite the opposition of its mayor, Cynthia Guiani.

"I feel really good. The moment I heard 'yes' won, I thought this should trigger change for some of the rowdy people here . . . That should be a priority because some of the Bangsamoro people here are hot-headed, they need discipline. They shouldn't act that way just because we won the plebiscite. We need to change gradually," Saluguinan said, referring to some of his fellow Filipino Muslims in the city.

New struggle for an old rebel leader

The Moro rebellion began in the late 1960s when massacres by paramilitary groups, seemingly backed by the government at that time, left many Filipino Muslims in Lanao and Sultan Kudarat areas dead.

Al-Hajj Murad Ebrahim, leader of the MILF, was already in the underground movement at the onset of that revolution.

"The struggle of the Bangsamoro, basically, is a political struggle for our rights for self-determination. Even before the colonial period ay nakipaglaban na kami sa colonizers. We wanted to sustain our independence as a nation. But unfortunately, we didn't succeed," he told ABS-CBN News in an interview at the MILF stronghold, Camp Darapanan, a day after the January 21 plebiscite.

That struggle, Murad explained, began ages ago with the inclusion of their land under the Philippine Republic without the consent of the Bangsamoro people. Although the Moros embrace their Filipino identity today, the dream of governing their own land according to their own set of customs, systems, and beliefs, had remained unfulfilled, Murad added.

While people in the different Philippine islands and the Bangsamoro south have their own struggles, all of them faced a common adversity when then President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. declared a nationwide martial law.

"In 1972, when President Marcos declared martial law, the situation worsened for the Moros. The atrocities were all out there, and we saw the military behind it. At first, there will be these groups, but it appears the government was supporting this because we saw the Philippine Constabulary with them," Murad said.

Murad was only 19 when he joined the underground movement in 1968, dropping out of Notre Dame College in Cotabato City when he was just a year away from finishing a degree in civil engineering. This caused a fissure in his relationship with his older brother, who was paying for his studies back then.

“He didn’t talk to me for one or two years,” Murad recalled. While Murad is now able to smile remembering that time, what happened to him in the battlefield is no laughing matter, especially the hardships and sacrifices — including near-death experiences and friends lost — during the time of war.

“We defended this very area for 4 years during the height of the fighting in 1974. We only ate bananas. There were so many sacrifices, two of my training batchmates died in battle. I barely survived when splinters from an air attack hit me. There was even a time when my group was surrounded by the Armed Forces of the Philippines. We waited until night and in the dark we tried to slip,” he said.

Murad was initially a member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari, but he later joined Hashim Salamat in the 1980s to form the MILF when the two factions failed to agree on how to implement the 1976 Tripoli Agreement, a historic deal that gained the support of all Moros and member-states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation at that time.

The rebellion persisted for decades until the MILF, then led by Murad, struck a landmark peace deal with the government, headed by President Benigno Aquino III in 2014. After several setbacks, the new Bangsamoro Organic Law was passed by Congress and signed by President Rodrigo Duterte only in 2018.

Now 70, Murad is no longer an armed fighter. The former rebel leader said he spends a lot of his free time with his 9 grandchildren, who he said are “closer to me than their parents.”

Being a grandfather, he said, lightens up the burden as he faces the challenge of leading a transitional government for 3 years to carry the Bangsamoro people into a new era of self-rule.

A new battleground

The autonomous Bangsamoro government will be parliamentary-democratic, similar to the United Kingdom, and based on a political party system. It will put the MILF leaders on the same policy-making field with the powerful political clans in Muslim Mindanao.

An analyst said the setup could be challenging.

“A genuine political party system means the clan will not vanish. You will put clans in a situation where there are new rules of the game, which are more democratic, equitable, fair play, and no violence,” political analyst Ramon Casiple said, adding that this is an opportunity for the Bangsamoro to establish a political party system that may even be better than what is being practiced in Philippine Congress.

Murad acknowledged that dealing with influential political families, which usually have private armed groups, in a parliament would be difficult, but he is optimistic that the political party system of the Bangsamoro government will focus less on individual politics and diminish somehow the power of local clans.

“It’s a fight between political parties, not individual parties. We reduced this to party politics. In individual politics, only the popular personalities win. That is the reason why we have actors turned politicians, and the reason why only the rich people are able to win elections. But this one is political party politics. The strongest political party will dominate,” Murad said.

The Bangsamoro parliament will have 80 seats, wherein 50 percent is allotted to political parties not exclusive to the MILF, meaning parties of other groups such as the MNLF will also have a chance to

be represented. About 40 percent of the seats in the parliament will be allotted to district representatives, and about 10 percent for Christians, Lumad, and other sectors.

Unlike the national government, which changes every 6 years, the Bangsamoro parliament will have continuity as only the officials and the number of seats held by political parties will change every election, said Murad.

“When it is a political party, if the party is maintained, even if the officials sitting in the parliament change, the program remains, and it cannot be changed by one man alone. The program will be there and that will be continuous. Even if the party is not that strong, it will still be part of the government, and it will struggle to push its programs,” he said.

The MILF leader said he is confident that his group is big enough to have a strong voice in parliament, and that although it will face different sectors and parties in the lawmaking body, it can convince them to support its agenda if it is for the benefit of all people in the Bangsamoro land, regardless of their affiliation.

Next-gen Moros to lead new Bangsamoro gov’t

Instead of training for combat operations, the youth of the MILF are now being trained to become future leaders of the Bangsamoro government. Murad said the old members of the group have done their part, and they want the next generation to take over in the next chapter of their struggle.

According to Murad, for the past 5 years, they have been sending some 200 young MILF members, usually fresh college graduates, to leadership trainings in Japan, Malaysia, Turkey and Europe. These young leaders will be members of the MILF’s political party, and some of them may one day win a seat in parliament.

“During the start of the revolution, we really mobilized our youth to fight. But now that we’re here in the negotiation, there is a promise. We started training our youth so they can really develop. For us, we’ve done our part already so the next generation will take over,” Murad said, adding that they have also established a leadership institution in the MILF.

It’s not just the MILF members gearing up for the change that will soon take over their land. Young Moros in Muslim Mindanao are also preparing for the Bangsamoro government, hoping they can participate, in any capacity, in efforts to make their hometown, which has been seen as a security hotspot for along time, a better and a more peaceful place for everyone.

“Being a youth here, we need to be ready because the elders are doing what they can for us young ones,” said 24-year-old Ilham Lagantao after voting “yes” for Bangsamoro in Sultan Kudarat town in Maguindanao. She is optimistic that her first time to exercise her right to suffrage will result in gains not only for her fellow Moros but also for her Christian and Lumad friends.

Equality

While the struggle of the Bangsamoro people was anchored on the aspirations for self-determination, there is no denying that they are not the only natives of Muslim Mindanao, Murad said. He said Moros should accept this reality of sharing their homeland with Christians, Lumad, and even migrants from different places in the Philippines.

This is why the MILF leader said several provisions have been placed in the Bangsamoro Organic Law to ensure that the rights of non-Muslims in the region will be respected and their voices heard by the new government. He vowed that everyone, regardless of religion or sector, would feel the

benefits of having an autonomous government.

“There are several provisions in the BOL and the agreement, that the rights of the non-Muslim, the migrants, the IPs [indigenous people] are well-entrenched and respected. The decision was a compromise, so despite the fact that we were fighting for the Bangsamoro, we also have to accept that other people in the area have their own rights we have to respect,” Murad said.

In a predominantly Catholic Christian country, the Philippine Muslim minority is a majority in the ARMM. A 2015 report by the Philippine Statistics Authority shows Moros account for about 91 percent of the population in the region, with Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao having the highest number of Muslims.

“This is the first time in the country that minorities will be represented in the government. If you look at the national [level], you don’t see any representatives of the minority. Here, they are all well-represented. They have seats in the parliament. The benefits of the Bangsamoro will be the same for non-Muslims and indigenous peoples,” Murad said.

Fighting corruption is Bangsamoro’s first real struggle

Murad said he sees new highways and airports rising in Muslim Mindanao once the three-year transition period he will lead ends. His initial plans include building a major coastal road stretching some 200 kilometers from Datu Odin Sinsuat town to the Lanao del Norte areas, a road more than twice the length of the North Luzon Expressway in Manila.

He said placing “strategic infrastructure” across the Bangsamoro region is doable with the help of the 5-percent block grant from the national internal revenue agency and Customs collections, and the 10-year, P50-billion special fund allotted for the new autonomous government to help them catch up in development.

The 5-percent block grant for the Bangsamoro region is pegged at P67 billion, which is more than twice as much as the P32-billion highest budget received by the 29-year-old ARMM, said Murad. But he emphasized the first struggle for the new government is to make sure these funds will not end up in the pockets of corrupt officials.

“The corruption rate in our place is very high. The amount of appropriated budget will have no bearing if we will not be able to counter corruption. Everything will just lead to nowhere. That is the first struggle that we need to solve,” Murad said, adding that one of the root causes of corruption in the ARMM is its weak auditing system.

He said one of the “weapons” against corruption placed in the organic law is the “double auditing” system, wherein the region’s funds will go through both the national and Bangsamoro government’s auditing offices.

Murad earlier told foreign reporters in a press conference that self-rule will be difficult, because “maybe our enemy will be ourselves.”

Prospects of lasting peace in Mindanao

Controlling loose guns and disbanding private armed groups in Mindanao, where “anybody can just buy weapons,” is part of the MILF’s shared responsibilities with the national government under the peace pact, and Murad believes this will be one long process that will require patience and effort from the policy-makers.

Decades of armed struggle and the presence of private armies in Muslim Mindanao, which poses threats even to civilians, have made owning guns a necessity for survival in the southern Philippines, and only an effective security structure that can be trusted by residents will be able to address the issue, Murad added.

"The people will not let go of their firearms. They see the need to hold guns for survival. That's why the joke here is, it is better to separate with your wife rather than your firearms. It means the people are very concerned. If there is an effective security structure, it will be OK. To be frank, people right now do not fully trust the PNP and AFP yet . . . This is a very long struggle," he said.

The MILF leader said they will immediately give up a third of their firearms upon the ratification of the organic law, which is part of the peace process. He said the remaining firearms will be used by a joint peace and security team, composed of members of the Philippine National Police, Armed Forces of the Philippines and the group's armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF).

"This joint peace security teams will be composed of the non-decommissioned BIAF members, then the PNP and the AFP. This may address the issue of loose firearms. We can also open for licensing because that's what other countries are doing. As long as there is control first, because we cannot put everything in place until there is no effective security structure," Murad said.

He added that MILF combatants will become civilians after the decommissioning process.

Former fighters will have a chance to apply for the PNP and AFP but the Bangsamoro government will try to provide social packages for those who no longer wish to do so or for those who will not be accommodated by the national security forces, he added.

Asked how the new Bangsamoro government will address the problem of violent extremism in Mindanao, Murad said dialogues will be held with other armed groups, such as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, a breakaway group of the MILF, and the Abu Sayyaf Group, a splinter group of the MNLF.

Murad is confident these groups can be convinced to lay down their arms and help the new Bangsamoro government because the root of their cause is "frustration" with previously unimplemented peace pacts with the government.

These groups, he said, have little money, which is why they resort to kidnapping and funding from international extremist groups.

"If we will be successful, this will gradually fade because the people will be supporting the Bangsamoro government. Before, they are seen as heroes; now, they will appear as saboteurs. Nobody wants conflict. We have to open the option by showing to them and by having dialogues with them. Of course if this won't work, the security structure will address this," he said.

Asked how his group would deal with possible frustrations with the new Bangsamoro government, given that addressing the problems of the region will be a long process, Murad said they can only offer transparency.

He earlier said he wants the Bangsamoro struggle to be a lesson of peace, especially to other countries that have similar conflicts.

"We revolutionaries, although we resorted to armed struggle, but then, we have always seen the solution to the problem is peace. The important thing is we do not close our doors for peace because

war is not a solution. The solution is still peace,” he said in a press conference after exercising his right to suffrage for the first time last January 21.

Patrick Quintos, ABS-CBN News

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