

Mapping Mindanao

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MANILA, Philippines — All of us carry in our minds a map of the place in which we live or work — as natives or as settlers, as residents or as commuters. This map will never correspond point by point with the area it seeks to represent. There will be many other maps of the same place, reflecting a variety of purposes and destinations. Of every map, one can only ask how useful or practical it is, not whether it is a truer representation of the world.

In the light of the recent killing of an unprecedented number of soldiers in three encounters/ambushes in Basilan and Sulu, one is prompted to ask if the soldiers' map of Mindanao is serving them well. The nation's soldiers may not only be performing their tasks in unfamiliar terrain, they might also be operating with a misleading map, one that is more ideological than functional.

Let's take a look at some of the key features of this map. First, it makes a distinction between armed individuals and armed groups. In Muslim Mindanao, every adult male is presumed to own a firearm, but not everyone is a member of an armed group. Only the latter are on the military radar screen. Then it marks out "terrorist" armed groups (like the Abu Sayyaf) from the other armed groups (such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, or MILF, and the Moro National Liberation Front, or MNLF) with which the government has ceasefire agreements. Only the former are the overt target of military operations.

Third, it separates the mainstream MNLF from a so-called "Misuari Breakaway Group" of the MNLF. The former is treated as an ally of the government, while the latter is perceived to be hostile. Fourth, it distinguishes between the regular forces of the MILF, MNLF and Abu Sayyaf, on one hand, and the armed "lost commands" and rogue elements engaged in banditry. The latter create a big problem for the police, but the bigger problem is the one posed by Abu Sayyaf extremists. How useful are these distinctions? How practical are they in the field?

As with all forms of internal references, one will only know how well a particular map works by observing other maps at work.

The most important social network in Muslim Mindanao is the kinship group; people locate themselves above all in a map of extended families. Individuals may join the government, or the Philippine National Police or the Armed Forces, or — for that matter, the MILF or the MNLF or the Abu Sayyaf, but in doing so, they do not cease to be members of kinship networks. Here, an injury committed against one member is taken as an injury against the whole kin group.

A soldier might imagine a clear-cut delineation of the different Moro groups. Nothing would be more mistaken. It is common knowledge that many of the founding leaders of the Abu Sayyaf were children of MNLF warriors, and that the MNLF and the MILF themselves used to belong to one movement. While these two major groups have gone their separate ways to fight or negotiate with the Philippine government, one cannot underestimate the shared goal of a Moro homeland that works as an unbreakable link connecting all Moro rebels.

The map that locals use may distinguish clans, ethnic groups and Moro armed organizations from one another. It may mark out Muslims from "lumad" [indigenous peoples] and Christians but, in general, it will not distinguish between "terrorists" and non-terrorists. Locals do not care much whether an armed group is listed in the US registry of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. When such a map is at work, a family will give sanctuary to a rebel for no other reason than because he is a relative. A kin group's map is blind to a warrior's specific organizational affiliation.

The July 10 ambush of a Marine unit in Basilan, which resulted in the death of 14 soldiers, and the beheading of 10 of them, perhaps illustrates the tragic consequences of using a faulty map. The initial military accounts told of a surprise encounter with the Abu Sayyaf by forces looking for the kidnappers of Fr. Giancarlo Bossi. To the surprise of the government, the MILF announced that it was in fact its forces that figured in the skirmish, even as it denied responsibility for the beheadings. The MILF justified its men's action as self-defense, claiming that the soldiers had intruded into "their" territory without coordinating with local officials of the area.

Under pressure to preserve the ceasefire and save the peace talks with the MILF, the government showed unusual restraint in the treatment of the incident. But this was followed by two other encounters in Jolo, resulting in the death of 60 people, including 27 soldiers. Again, the Abu Sayyaf was singled out as the culprit. But the MNLF said it was their forces that were involved. It is more likely that the soldiers had encountered a composite force of Islamic rebels. Identifying them as Abu Sayyaf terrorists has its uses. It confers on these battles the credentials of a global anti-terrorist effort. As important, it provides a warrant for the disturbing presence of foreign troops in Mindanao's combat zones.

But the costs are high. So long as we insist on seeing the Mindanao conflict primarily through the lenses of the global war on terror, we will never grasp the complex reality of the struggle for an independent Moro homeland. Every administration oscillates between war and appeasement in a bid to corrupt, divide and break the Moro rebellion. More of our soldiers will die as a result of this thoughtless policy, and many more innocent lives will be lost in the process.

P.S.

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