

Armed to the Teeth

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Months before the Nur Misuari's impetuous act of rebellion on November 19, 2001, it was evident that the besieged Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) chief had already abandoned the process set forth by the 1996 Peace Agreement between the Moro group and the Philippine government. He was conspicuously absent in the public hearings on the draft autonomy law conducted by the Senate in Mindanao in 2000. In April 2001, the Fourth Bangsamoro People's National Congress convened in Zamboanga City and declared a Bangsamoro Republic with Misuari as President. The MNLF also did not participate in the August plebiscite that passed the amended Organic Act for the new autonomous region and added two new areas to the coverage of the autonomous government.

In all, Misuari had felt particularly ignored by the Estrada administration, very unlike the attention he got from the previous Ramos Cabinet. The new administration of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) also did not hide its disappointment over his poor governorship. Reportedly with the prodding of GMA's presidential adviser on special concerns, a Council of 15 MNLF leaders broke ranks with Nur. Its head, Parouk Hussin, was subsequently endorsed as the administration candidate for the governorship of the new autonomous region in elections set for November 26.

Misuari's problem was that nobody took his threats really seriously. Some policymakers regarded the MNLF as a spent force and see instead the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as the group to contend with. A good number wanted to get rid of him and what they considered his pathetic leadership as governor. Still others wanted to protect their turf from the autonomous government and were happy to shortchange Misuari in the process.

To show that his bite can be as ferocious as his bark, Misuari gathered the forces loyal to him in his main camp in Parang, Jolo, on November 4 for a Fifth Bangsamoro Congress. Nur then asked them to take the law into their hands the way they knew best — through

the barrel of the gun. Simultaneously on November 19, they lay siege and attacked with mortar several army camps in Sulu, and occupied the ARMM complex and surrounding government buildings in Zamboanga City.

The dramatic, if not desperate, show of force fell flat on its face. But more than a hundred soldiers and rebels were killed in Sulu, and scores of civilian-hostages and the affected neighborhoods in Zamboanga severely traumatized. Nur himself escaped in the Sulu Seas and was promptly arrested on November 24 in one island off Sabah by the Malaysian government.

The jolting turn of events glaringly indicated that despite the peace agreement, Muslim Mindanao remains armed to the teeth. No real demobilization nor disarmament has taken place in the five years that the Agreement took hold. Consequently, the recourse to arms was just a breath away.

The Agreement actually did not say anything about demobilizing the government estimate of 14,000 MNLF fighters. The provision to integrate 5,750 MNLF combatants into the armed forces and 1,750 rebels in the police force was not sufficient to cover all rebels. In fact, many of those who were trained and integrated were not the rebels themselves but the so-called successors who availed of the slots assigned to their kin.

In the meantime, the Bangsamoro Armed Forces continued to stand as some kind of an army at rest. Rebels not included in the integration program were allowed to keep their arms. They were reportedly distributed in different MNLF camps in Mindanao. A general I interviewed in October 1999 claimed that their own monitoring shows that the MNLF forces remained intact, despite the reported fallout to the MILF. There were also reports of continued training of younger Moros recruited to the mysterious "Mutallah" forces.

Arms continued to flow and change hands during the five-year interregnum. As before, illegal sale of arms proliferated. A good number of these arms apparently were government issues that found their way to the blackmarket. Several sources from inside the military corroborated

the claim that an M16 can be bought at about P30,000 while a Colt US can go as high as P40,000 to P45, 000 in Lanao.

Although each of the 5,750 MNLF rebels integrated into the AFP had to turn in a firearm to be accepted into the integration program, they were eventually issued firearms after their training. Police integrees did not have to surrender any arms and were eventually issued their weapons. The ARMM under Misuari's governorship also procured new arms using government funds. One can easily surmise that there was overall an increase in firearms in the hands of the MNLF network.

Employment in the military and police appears to have increased the capacity of ex-combatants to further arm themselves. Their new-found status as regular wage-earners and loan privileges as government employees have enabled them to acquire more arms through loans. The practice is perfectly legal and even processed with the assistance of the military or police force. Guns bought from these government-approved suppliers are also licensed.

It is understandable from other country experiences why a complete turnover of firearms need not have been a pre-condition to the Peace Agreement. As the MNLF waited the outcome of the process, they could not have really been compelled to put down their arms and close their camps—otherwise no agreement would have been reached. It is however very alarming that the end result was an increase in armaments in Mindanao, no thanks to all the parties involved in the arms trade.

The integration of former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) combatants into the Philippine army and police force is the least known and smallest component of the 1996 Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro rebel group, compared to the development projects, the setting up of a transitory peace and development council and the legislation of a new autonomy law.

Until the November rebellion of Nur's forces, it appeared that most integrees' chose to remain loyal to their new organization. As emotions run high, loyalties will be fiercely tested. Minor incidents can also spark conflagrations founded on insecurities over each one's survival as the political tide changes.

Indeed, the integration component of the Peace Agreement can really be viewed more as a subset of the economic or livelihood program rather than as an effective tool for demobilizing or disarming. Our interviews with integratees affirmed that their satisfaction with their new status stemmed from the fact that they are now regular wage-earners living more or less normal lives with their families. But like many people in Mindanao, they and their kin and neighbors remain heavily armed.

Moreover, hometown, tribal, kin, friendship and other ties and loyalties make movement of personnel and arms very fluid among the various Moro armed groups. The motivations for this fluidity may vary and overlap – economic gain, personal survival and security, political strategy, among others. Among those who attended the last Bangsamoro Congress were people linked to the Abu Sayyaf. A delegation of the MILF was also there, although they too were probably caught off-guard by Misuari's subsequent action.

The almost datu-style of leadership and support commanded by Misuari among his men and the fact that the Organization of Islamic Conference has not disowned him make the most straightforward recourse of putting Misuari in jail and on trial for rebellion replete with complications. But even more difficult is how to dismantle the infrastructure as well as the culture of guns and violence nurtured by decades-long of civil strife. ❁