

Philippine president to sign Mindanao peace accord

Joseph Santolan
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On October 15, Philippine President Benigno Aquino and the leadership of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) are scheduled to sign a peace framework for the creation of Bangsamoro, an autonomous political entity on the war-torn southern island of Mindanao. During the 40-year conflict on the island nearly 200,000 people have been killed, and more than two million displaced. Mindanao remains the most underdeveloped and backward region in an already impoverished nation.

Many details of the peace deal are still unclear, but its class character is apparent. Manila's political and business elites have, through President Aquino, struck a bargain with a section of the Mindanao elites, i.e., the leadership of the MILF, for the joint exploitation of the island's vast natural resources and its working class. The deal has been secretly brokered by Washington, which is looking to further military deployments in the region, as part of its strategic build-up in Asia, and to open up the freshly demarcated Bangsamoro region as a cheap labor platform.

For more than a century, the involvement of the United States in the Philippines, and in particular on the largely Muslim island of Mindanao, has been a blood-soaked affair. The US conquest of Mindanao 110 years ago—the slaughter of entire villages, mass graves, the executions of unarmed prisoners, torture—set the stage for the colonization of the Philippines.

The resources at stake are vast. Even in its current underdeveloped state, Mindanao has nearly half the country's food production. The island also has major gold and nickel reserves, and accounts for the majority of the country's rubber, pineapple, cacao, banana, corn and coconut production. The waters off the Bangsamoro region hold an estimated 67 million barrels of oil and 228 billion cubic feet of gas reserves.

The existence of armed separatist movements in Mindanao has been used as a justification by Washington for the deployment of US troops in the region, as advisors and direct combatants. The main militias have been the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and then the breakaway

organization, the MILF.

When, in the Tripoli Accord of 1976 brokered by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, the MNLF accepted the Marcos government offer of semi-autonomy, a group insisting on the formation of fully independent Islamic state broke away. They were later named the MILF.

In the late 1980s, under the presidency of Corazon Aquino, the MNLF received control of the newly formed Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Bloody guerrilla warfare between the Philippine Armed Forces and the MILF continued. Eager to drive a wedge between the MILF and the MNLF, the American CIA, with the assistance of President Corazon Aquino, created and funded the terrorist organization, Abu Sayyaf. Over the past two decades, Abu Sayyaf has been used as a justification for the deployment of Philippine and US military forces in Mindanao.

Mindanao in the 1990s was marked by the vacillation of official policy from ceasefire and negotiation, to “all-out warfare”. Millions of farmers and workers were displaced from their homes and land. The MILF leaders sought to assert themselves as political rulers of an independent nation, displacing the MNLF from its sway over ARMM. Washington used the ongoing conflict as a pretext for the continued presence of US troops and ‘advisers’ in the region, following the closure of US bases at the beginning of the decade.

The past ten years have seen a marked shift in the strategy of both the MILF and Washington. The MILF leaders expressed their willingness to abandon their demand for an independent Islamic state, if they could supplant the MNLF as the rulers of a new autonomous region replacing the existing ARMM.

MILF head Hashim Salamat wrote a letter to US President George W. Bush, appealing to “the basic principle of American fairness and sense of justice” and calling upon Washington to negotiate a treaty between the MILF and the government of Philippine President Gloria Arroyo. WikiLeaks cables reveal that the US embassy in the

Philippines and US Institute for Peace (USIP) entered into negotiations with the MILF. The American ambassador to the Philippines went to the unprecedented length of travelling to MILF headquarters in Mindanao for closed-door meetings with its leadership.

Washington was looking to secure a potential location for basing troops in Southeast Asia, circumventing Philippine constitutional obstacles to stationing foreign forces on Philippine soil, by situating them within an autonomous region with its own legal code.

A peace deal emerged from these negotiations, known as the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). The MOA potentially expanded the territory of the ARMM, and granted significant powers to what was termed the “Bangsamoro Juridical Entity,” including the power to set up foreign embassies.

The Memorandum was declared unconstitutional by the Philippine Supreme Court in October 2008. There was press speculation that sections of President Arroyo’s own administration had sabotaged the deal. The agreement was poorly written and some argued that its implementation may have required the amendment of the Philippine constitution. It was leaked prematurely to the press in a bid to undermine its validity. During her presidency, Arroyo began to reorient Philippine economic and political ties away from the United States and toward China, and the MOA-AD was perceived as granting too much power to the United States.

A small section of the MILF broke off from the group, continuing to insist on complete independence. Washington backed the campaign of repression against the new organization, carried out by both the Philippine military and the MILF, with military advisers and unmanned aerial drone surveillance.

WikiLeaks cables show that US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell wrote to the head of the MILF, Ebrahim Murad, who replaced Hashim Salamat on the latter’s death, in November 2009, offering “political and financial support” for renewed negotiations. Upon the election of President Aquino, who under intense US pressure began a realignment of Philippine politics away from China and back firmly into the US camp, Washington called for a new round of talks with the MILF.

In August 2011, President Aquino met face-to-face with Murad at secret talks in Japan arranged by the US government. The deal hammered out in those talks became the framework on which the current peace accord was based.

When Philippine government and MILF representatives sign the peace accord on October 15, it will mark the beginning of the formation of a new entity, Bangsamoro, which will replace the current ARMM. The ARMM, still under the control of the MNLF, is a “failed experiment,”

according to a speech given by President Aquino over the weekend.

The accord divides control over Bangsamoro between Manila and a newly created regional government. A transitional committee is to oversee the implementation of the deal. It will be peopled by appointments made largely by the MILF leadership. The accord specifies what share of the tax revenue, control over mineral resources, and produce will be under the control of the new “autonomous” leadership. The spoils of Mindanao are being divvied up. The MILF leadership emerges out of the ashes of decades of war as the political representatives of the local business elites, seeking to exploit their “own” working class.

The accord also has provisions for the creation of Special Economic Zones in Bangsamoro, which will be likewise autonomous. That is to say, Bangsamoro will not need to abide by even the limited labor code or minimum wage regulations of the national state. The regional government is given authority over both “foreign investments in its jurisdiction” and the power to “make labor competitive.” Major foreign corporations will be turning to the 4.1 million people of Bangsamoro as a supply of ultra-cheap labor, and the MILF leadership will be enforcing their interests. This is part of Washington’s stake in the negotiations.

Solving the “Moro problem” serves Washington’s interests at another level. The Philippine state, at the beck and call of US imperialism, can now re-orient its forces away from the Mindanao conflict and concentrate on the disputed waters of the South China Sea. This is in line with the Obama administration’s aggressive confrontation with China throughout the Indo Pacific region.

It remains to be seen if the Bangsamoro accord will pass scrutiny from the legislature and judiciary in Manila. The MNLF leaders have already expressed their outrage at being displaced. President Aquino, however, with the recent impeachment of Supreme Court chief justice Renato Corona, now has a firm hold over both the lower house of the legislature and the judiciary.



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