

Fourteen killed in stand-off between Philippine sultan and Malaysia

Joseph Santolan
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Fourteen people died in Sabah, North Borneo, during an exchange of fire between Malaysian security forces and the followers of the leader of a southern Philippine political dynasty, the Sultan of Sulu. There are conflicting reports, but it is clear that 12 of the Sultan's followers and two Malaysian policemen died during the half-hour firefight on March 1.

On February 11, around one hundred people, with 30 to 40 small arms, sailed from the Sulu archipelago in the southeastern Philippines and entered Lahad Datu, in eastern Sabah, one of the 13 member states of Malaysia. They were led by Agbimuddin Kiram, who was sent by his brother Jamalul Kiram, one of two claimants to the title of Sultan of Sulu. Kiram is asserting an ancestral claim to the entire state of Sabah, a claim that has the longstanding endorsement of the Philippine government.

Malaysian security forces surrounded the remote village where Kiram and his supporters landed. Over the two weeks leading up to the shoot-out there was a bizarre and complicated stand-off between the governments of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, Philippine President Benigno Aquino, and the forces of the sultan.

Both the Philippines and Malaysia are currently in the thick of election campaigns. Najib and Aquino have responded to the stand-off with apparent reluctance and political embarrassment, each seeking to preserve local political alliances in the lead up to elections.

Najib's ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) has been steadily losing political ground, in the face of an increasing downturn in Malaysia's export markets. Sabah is one of the Malaysian states in which the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)-led BN is most vulnerable, as it is one of five states where BN has lost in the past to the opposition Peoples Alliance (PR) coalition.

The initially hesitant response from Kuala Lumpur to the Sabah stand-off was dictated by Najib's desire to preserve political ties with sections of the local elite, who rely heavily on hundreds of thousands of Filipino migrant workers employed in Sabah's palm oil plantations. A souring of

relations with the Philippines might jeopardize this supply of cheap labor.

UMNO has, through a calculated practice of preferential economic and political policies, deliberately cultivated its support base among the ethnic Malay population. The opposition PR has charged UMNO with selectively granting citizenship in Sabah to Muslim Malay populations, such as so-called illegal Filipino immigrants, under the auspices of 'Project IC' in a bid to shore up its political support in the state.

Philippine President Aquino meanwhile is seeking political advantage for his Liberal Party coalition in the upcoming midterm elections in May. The incursion of the sultan of Sulu's forces into Sabah places at risk the recent peace deal between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for the establishment of an autonomous political entity known as Bangsamoro, intended to end decades of hostilities on the southern island of Mindanao. The Bangsamoro peace deal was brokered by Kuala Lumpur under Prime Minister Najib.

The peace deal was made at the instigation, and with the full support, of Washington, which has an eye to both the possibility of placing military bases within the autonomous Bangsamoro region, as well as to its use as a platform for cheap labor.

At the same time, however, members of the rival United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) coalition in the Philippines have begun to seize upon the opportunity afforded them by the Sabah stand-off to engage in political grandstanding, calling upon Aquino to defend Philippine national sovereignty and to assert the historical claims to Sabah.

The opposition parties in the Malaysian PR, particularly Anwar Ibrahim's Keadilan party, have denounced Najib for "compromising the security and safety of Malaysians" and said there is "no valid reason whatsoever for our Malaysian Armed Forces not to act to defend our country against the armed Sulu invaders." They called for a crackdown on "foreigners" in Sabah, who were becoming "a security threat to those born in Malaysia." This retrograde appeal to

nationalism is an attempt to undermine UMNO's moves to expand its base of support in Sabah.

Under this mounting opposition pressure, Najib issued a deadline to Aquino for the sultan's forces to leave Sabah. Aquino, reluctant to appear to be relinquishing Philippine territorial claims, but under a great deal of pressure from Washington to push the peace deal with the MILF forward, equivocated. He said the Philippine government did not recognize Jamalul Kiram as rightful sultan, as there were several rival hereditary claims to the title. He thus avoided directly addressing the question of the territorial claim.

Aquino issued an ultimatum to Jamalul Kiram: "The right thing to do now would be to order your followers to return home as soon as possible. The choices and consequences are yours. If you choose not to cooperate, the full force of the laws of the state will be used to achieve justice for all who have been put in harm's way." But the full force of the laws of *which* state? At no point in his statement did Aquino address the question of jurisdiction, or whose security agents would be responsible for dealing with the sultan's forces.

Aquino immediately dispatched six armed naval vessels to the waters off Sabah, throwing questions of sovereignty and jurisdiction even further into question.

Malaysian deputy inspector-general of police, Datu Khalid Abu Bakr, at a press conference where he was flanked by representatives of the Malaysian armed forces, stated: "Malaysian police are in charge of the operations against the armed Sulu group and will not allow any external forces to interfere in the country's internal security."

The Sulu sultanate has its origins in the pre-Hispanic Philippines, where it engaged in regional trade and maintained a system of debt-slavery throughout its holdings. It had close familial ties with the sultan of Brunei, who ceded territorial control of Sabah to the Sulu sultanate in 1662 in exchange for his assistance in fighting a civil war. The sultan of Sulu in turn transferred this land to a group of British businessmen in 1878, in return for an annual payment in perpetuity of the equivalent of \$US1,700. A dispute arose after the conclusion of the treaty over the meaning of the word 'pajak,' which the British claimed meant 'to cede,' and the sultan, 'to lease.'

The land was transferred to the British North Borneo Co., and then, in 1946, to the British colonial government. Philippine President Macapagal in the early 1960s filed a case before the United Nations protesting the inclusion of Sabah in the newly formed Federated States of Malaya. Resource-rich Sabah, with its oil reserves and palm oil plantations, was a prize that Manila eagerly desired.

When President Macapagal's appeals to the UN failed to gain traction, his successor, Ferdinand Marcos pursued plans for an invasion. In 1967 Marcos secretly set in motion

Operation Merdeka, which aimed to seize upon Malaysia's vulnerability from both the loss of Singapore and an ongoing border dispute with Indonesia, by sending trained fighters from Sulu to invade Sabah.

Some 180 men were recruited from Sulu and taken to Corregidor in Manila Bay for training. Their conditions were abysmal and they did not receive their promised pay. After three months they threatened mutiny. Accounts vary, but from 12 to 24 of the recruits were taken by their commanding officers in the middle of the night and shot with automatic weapons. One recruit escaped by jumping into the sea. The event became known as the Jabidah massacre and was an impetus to the formation of a secessionist movement in Mindanao. Operation Merdeka was quietly dropped.

The Sabah claim was never abandoned but neither was it pursued by any subsequent administration. The sultan of Sulu continues to receive \$US1,700 every year from the Malaysian government.

The newly-drafted peace accord between the MILF and the Philippine government and its proposed creation of a Bangsamoro region will take from the rival Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and its ally, the sultan of Sulu, practically all of their existing political power.

The MNLF and its head, Nur Misuari, have been engaged in a series of provocations trying to undermine the Bangsamoro framework and Manila's peace deal with the MILF (see: "Fighting in Southern Philippines kills at least 22"). The sultan of Sulu's invasion of Sabah is a further escalation of these political maneuvers.

The tense armed stand-off continues. Najib addressed the press after the shooting, stating that the police "are given the full power to act in this case, using their discretion but the armed group must be defeated and appropriate further action taken against them ... There will be no compromise; either they surrender or face the consequences if they refuse."



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