

Fighting for peace? The strange contradictions in the current Zamboanga standoff



MNLF Chair Nur Misuari, 2009. Photo: Keith Bacongco



Mindanao – When 200 MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) fighters attempted to raise their flag of independence in the city hall of the city of Zamboanga on September 10, a standoff began which not only hit the headlines of the Philippine newspapers but also received considerable international attention. While this attempt was thwarted by the Philippine security forces, the MNLF fighters retreated into nearby neighborhoods.

Writing from Mindanao island, Saturday September 14, the latest reports indicate that 52 people have been killed, an estimated 15.000 to 30.000 people have been displaced and about 100 to 200 civilians are still held hostage as human shields against the security forces.

While armed clashes between government troops and Muslim armed groups, including commanders of the MNLF, are not exceptional in the restive southern island of Mindanao, the recent events stand out for a couple of reasons. First of all, the audacity of the attack has surprised everybody as the fighting occurred in a major port city instead of peripheral hinterlands. Secondly, this crisis has a major political significance because of the involvement of the founder of the MNLF, Nur Misuari.

In fact, the current crisis can only be understood as the climax in a process in which the MNLF and Misuari himself have become irrelevant players in the decades-long struggle for Muslim autonomy in the Southern Philippines.

It was Misuari who founded the MNLF in the late sixties as the first armed organization struggling for independence. However, after years of intensive fighting, a peace agreement was concluded in 1976. Much to the dismay of the MNLF, this 1976 agreement was only implemented in 1996 through the establishment of the ARMM (Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao), after which the MNLF was theoretically no longer at war with the Philippine state.

However, shortly after the signing of the 1976 agreement, a group split off from the MNLF, hereby establishing the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front). This MILF proved to be a contender to the hegemony of the MNLF, not the least because many people lost their faith in the tiresome negotiations between the MNLF and the GRP.

In addition, the ARMM proved to a huge disappointment and this further added to the already diminishing popularity of the MNLF and Nur Misuari, who became installed as the first governor of the ARMM.

On the other hand, although the MILF at different periods was involved in open warfare with the Philippine state, they also became the foremost partner for peace negotiations.

Currently, these negotiations are in an advanced stage and are expected to be concluded next year, hereby transforming the ARMM into the BJE (Bangsamoro Juridical Entity). This BJE will presumably be dominated by the MILF.

In addition, Misuari, and some of his closest associates such as commander Habier Malik who is in charge of the current attack in Zamboanga, have been sidelined within their own organization with the establishment of an alternative leadership in 2001. Not coincidentally, many MNLF commanders have expressed their disapproval of the events in Zoambanga and openly distanced themselves from Misuari.

All this gives some preliminary answers for the apparently pointless attack on the city of Zamboanga and the rather absurd declaration of independence by these 200 fighters.

Instead, it makes much more sense seeing this crisis as an (admittedly extravagant) statement by Misuari and his followers they are still relevant, capable of challenging the Philippine government and therefore a factor which should be taken seriously.

In other words, the current standoff should be understood as an ultimate attempt by Misuari to become included in the current negotiations and the formation of the BJE. Whether this will actually happen or whether this was the last trick of the once charismatic leader of the Muslim resistance in Mindanao will probably become clear in the near future.

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