

May 2005

The Philippines - three decades of terrorism

Paul Wilson

Bond University, Paul_Wilson@bond.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs

Recommended Citation

Paul Wilson. (2005) "The Philippines - three decades of terrorism" , , .

http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs/29

This Journal Article is brought to you by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at [ePublications@bond](mailto:epublications@bond). It has been accepted for inclusion in Humanities & Social Sciences papers by an authorized administrator of [ePublications@bond](mailto:epublications@bond). For more information, please contact [Bond University's Repository Coordinator](#).

The Philippines - three decades of terrorism

By Paul Wilson
Dean of Humanities
Social Sciences Bond University

In 1972 Attorney-General Lionel Murphy asked me to report on how police dealt with organised crime in South-East Asia. The Philippines was my first destination and I arrived a few days after President Marcos declared martial law to meet the Police General, a squat, tough looking man who had no hesitation answering for the rationale for martial law. It was essential to neutralise the current crop of communist terrorists and other insurgents. "We did it before and we will do it again" and, explained how the national government had brutally crushed communist guerrillas terrorising most of Luzon just after World War II, proudly pointing to the medals he won during the campaign. If the New People's Army (NPA), an offshoot of the remnants of the guerrillas, was to be eliminated then martial law, detention without trial and even the political assassination of NPA leaders would be used with a vengeance.

The NPA, founded in 1969, was a Marxist guerrilla group that waged a protracted insurgency from the countryside aimed at overthrowing the Marcos Government and establishing a communist state. The group enjoyed widespread support especially from those sickened by the excesses and brutality of the Marcos regime and the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. As it turned out, the NPA was never crushed by government forces but neither, on the other hand, was it able to overthrow the Marcos regime. That task was left to "people power" on the streets of Manila in 1986.

Two years after Cory Aquino came to power I returned and found this euphoria had all but disappeared. Certainly, some democratic institutions had been restored but rich oligarchies still held most of the land and the social gap was, if anything, widening. A renewed sense of optimism appeared when President Fidel Ramos was elected in 1992.

Ramos promised to end the vicious civil war in Mindanao that had plagued the country for the previous two decades. The central government was in conflict with two guerrilla groups - the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The former group once enjoyed support from Libya, Saudi Arabia and nearby Malaysia and originally demanded an independent Muslim state in the south. The MILF, on the other hand, split from the MNLF in the late 1970s over ethnic and strategic differences.

Both groups originated in a province with some of the richest agricultural land in the country yet the economy was in tatters after years of neglect by the Manila government. Muslims in Mindanao also suffered political marginalisation and some of the highest rates of infant mortality, illiteracy and unemployment in the country. But what really drove guerilla insurgencies was a sense of being deliberately swamped by Christian settlers from Luzon.

The Spanish and American colonisations included massive resettlement programs encouraging Christian internal migration and later governments continued this policy. By 1983 it was estimated that 80 per cent of the ten million people living in Mindanao were non-Muslims. Christian agricultural communities were created deep in the heart

of indigenous Muslim territories. The bitterness that these settlements generated led to a civil war in 1971 and over the next 25 years led to the loss of 120,000 lives.

To deal with this bloodbath President Ramos signed a peace agreement in 1996 with MNLF leader Nur Misuari, in what was known as the Davao consensus. Some degree of self-determination, and most importantly economic investment, was promised for the region. It looked as though cultural, social and religious autonomy for Muslims living in Mindanao was at last to become a reality. Unfortunately the civil war in Mindanao did not end mainly because the MILF rejected the peace plan on the grounds that the government did not go far enough. To this day the group continues to fight on and so do elements of the MNLF.

I was in the Philippines again during Ramos's election campaign when he promised that his country would become part of the Asian tiger-cub economy in which ordinary Filipinos would benefit under a regime of law and democracy where corruption would be weeded out. I visited the violent, politically volatile slum district of Tondo. The impoverished area was a breeding ground for some of the toughest criminals in the country and infamous for notorious NPA "Sparrow Squads", who, during the 1960s and 1970s, assassinated police officers and government officials. I began to realise that terrorism was never going to be stopped unless something was done to improve intolerable conditions.

I have seen equally appalling conditions in many other parts of the country. These include rampant bribery and corruption that affects every domain of Filipino society, from police officers to politicians. This spurs the population to behave as their leaders behave, evidenced by the destruction of the huge Clark Air Base in Pampanga province in 1991 after the Americans departed where I witnessed what could only be called mass vandalism and theft. My driver told me that the Americans left more than 116,000 items for the Filipino government to use. But the population stole all of them including every piece of equipment from a five-storey hospital.

Under the Ramos Government Muslim Mindanao never received the economic packages the Davao consensus promised. The planned economic revival that was going to lift the living standards of the Filipino masses never eventuated. Nor was Ramos able to stem the endemic corrupt practices. Then came the election of Joseph Estrada in 1998. The rural masses heavily supported the former B grade actor because he promised to lift them from the quagmire of poverty and despair. But his Government did little to improve the condition of the masses. Though Estrada visited many towns and villages during his presidency and lavished gifts and money on his supporters, the country's economy stagnated, unemployment grew, and corruption became even more endemic.

Estrada did try to deal with the terrorist networks and the civil war in Mindanao but he used brute military force, not social or economic development, as his weapon. A large, well-equipped army was sent against the MILF. Stories of atrocities committed against civilians by troops and vigilante groups abound and provide recruitment fodder to enlist future Muslim rebels. One tactic was the use of special Christian vigilante groups, established by the military, who were formed to ostensibly secure "law and order" in mixed Christian and Muslim areas in Mindanao. I heard stories about many random shootings of civilians by these militias. But I also heard about similar massacres by Muslim vigilante groups in the same region.

What was undoubtedly true was that there were some military successes during the Estrada era. The army closed down the notorious Abu Bakar terrorist camp that

trained not only men from Mindanao but also Muslims from Indonesia and the Middle East. Though Estrada boasted that they had “pacified” the Muslim rebels it was clear that the MILF were far from defeated. It was also apparent that corrupt members of the army and police were undermining attempts to deal with terrorist groups and especially with the notorious Abu Sayyaf guerrillas, a radical Islamist group whose activities are now deeply etched within recent Filipino history.

In 1995 about 200 arrived by boats and attacked a largely Christian town on the western coast of Mindanao where they indiscriminately fired on the population killing at least 53 people and wounding another 44. The town was previously almost entirely Muslim in population but had been overtaken by Christians. The massacre was also a warning to other Muslim groups not to co-operate with the government. In a statement after the attack an Abu Sayyaf spokesman criticised the mainstream MNLF leadership for “betraying the Muslim cause”.

The Abu Sayyaf has also employed bandit-like tactics such as kidnapping and beheading of foreigners. In May 2001 the group kidnapped 20 people, including three American hostages one of whom was beheaded. The rebels obtained millions of dollars from these and other criminal activities (such as drug-running) and for years escaped massive military resources arraigned against them.

It now appears that the terrorist group's Houdini-like skill resulted from money-for-information deals between Abu Sayyaf and the army, deals that led to much comment and criticism within the Philippines media. After the September 11 attacks the Filipino government, with advice from American Special Forces, launched a major campaign against the Abu Sayyaf killing scores, perhaps hundreds, of their fighters and sympathisers. The history of the Abu Sayyaf and the government's attempt to eliminate it illustrates a common theme that emerges in the Philippine battle against terrorism. Bribery and brutality appear to go hand in hand; the terrorist groups and the authorities practise both.

One example of this official brutality was illustrated to me in 1998 at the beginning of the Estrada regime by supporters of thrice-elected Davao Mayor Rodrigo Duterte who attained almost cult-like status in the country after making the most lawless city in Mindanao a relatively safe and secure place for locals and foreigners. They told me that when he was first elected, ten years earlier, Duterte inherited a city plagued by kidnappings, murders, drug addiction and a huge communist insurgency problem. Duterte began by negotiating with the communist terrorists. He told them that they had to stop assassinating government officials and robbery. He promised housing, jobs and money for their followers and money for their leaders.

The negotiations were successful so he turned to kidnappers, bank-robbers and muggers and issued a public statement warning criminals that unless they stopped, they would pay a great price. Many just laughed. But then the bodies of kidnappers, robbers and remaining communist terrorists were found lying on the city's footpaths with bullets through their heads. Duterte denied any involvement but no one in Davao had any doubts about the existence of death squads. Duterte's success was relatively short lived. Five years later crime in Davao was increasing and so was terrorism, as was so dramatically shown by bombing attacks at Davao airport.

It is clear to me that neither bribery nor brute force will end terrorism in the Philippines, a fact that the government of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is just coming to grips with. Though her Government, with the assistance of American

military advisors and personnel, appears to have had some successes against the Abu Sayyaf, this group is far from destroyed.

Similarly, as social and economic conditions remain abysmally bad and corruption continues unabated, the Moro groups grow from strength to strength. That bribery still plagues the police and military was vividly illustrated during the escape and subsequent shooting of the fanatic Jemmah Islamiyah terrorist Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi. He was originally a member of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front but as a Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist was responsible for many bombing deaths in the country. Al-Ghozi was able to walk out of his high security cell with breathtaking ease.

Although hundreds of al Qaida recruits trained at Moro camps in the late 1990s, Jemaah Islamiyah and other fellow travellers move freely around the Philippines, no overarching terrorist organisation yet exists. The Moro rebels aim for an independent Islamic State, Abu Sayyaf has degenerated into a bunch of bandits and the NPA seems preoccupied with building up its financial resources and members. But how long will it be before these metamorphose into an oligarchy that is structured and organised? Some terrorist researchers such as Professor Rohan Gunaratna, author of *Inside Al Qaeda*, believe that over the past year groups like Jemmah Islamiyah, Lasker Jihad, the Abu Sayyaf, the MILF and MNLF have formed interconnecting networks that eventually aim to create a unified Islamic state across the region.

Unless President Arroyo, or her successor, begins to deal with the causes of terrorism, rather than just with its symptoms, we can expect to see even more guerrilla violence and the tentacles of terrorism spreading throughout this complex and highly volatile country. It is, however, difficult to be optimistic when the leaders of far more developed, affluent and politically sophisticated nations also continue to try to combat terrorism by addressing its end result rather than its causes.

Posted Tuesday, 24 May 2005 at www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=3470