



Philippines Government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front: A Strategic Counter-Terrorism and Extremism Partnership

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Extremism has been on the rise in recent decades, with some nations—like the Philippines—experiencing a greater level of it than others. The Philippines government sought to develop practical strategies for combating such a catastrophic phenomenon. Military and security forces were adopted as a solution, but no notable results were seen on the ground. Especially in the south, terrorist attacks on the rise, resulting in significant material and human casualties. Therefore, a new strategy has to be used to address and resolve the problem. In response, the government formed a strategic alliance with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front after factions of the Bangsamoro liberation groups split off and turned to violent extremism.

Mutual Trust

The administration of former Philippines President Benigno Simeon Aquino III saw the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) as a crucial ally in the fight against terrorism and extremism in the area. The Philippines government persisted in pressing ahead with the implementation of its plans to put an end to extremism and terrorism despite the complexity of such challenges. This encouraged more governments to work together under MILF leadership, notably the administration of the late President Rodrigo Duterte.

The MILF welcomed this policy shift and gave priority to putting this strategic partnership's strategy into practice. It created a foundation of confidence and understanding that allowed for the sharing of information and the execution of significant operations against terrorist networks, resulting in the death and the widespread detention of terrorist organization members.

Causes of Extremism

Extremism in Philippines is rooted in the integration policy adopted by the government in the Bangsamoro case, which resulted in a violent long-term conflict between Bangsamoro liberation movements and the Philippines government. Many Bangsamoro people rejected such a policy, reiterating their wish for Bangsamoro to become a US province or state .

The government attempted to integrate the Bangsamoro people, particularly the liberation groups, using military force. This produced a great deal of resentment, which later turned into protests against the government and the integration project. They continued for a while, but in vain. Nevertheless, the government maintained this approach. The dispute then intensified as the government insisted on implementing the integration strategy in a country where Christians, who make up the majority of the population, are politically, socially, economically, and culturally dominant. This was demonstrated when the government used state-run institutions like schools, colleges, and the media to impose cultural, religious, and linguistic integration on Bangsamoro people, whose predominant culture is Christian, frequently using violence. Such a course of action produced significant results.

Implications

The people of Bangsamoro were disappointed with the integration programme that was imposed on them without their agreement and that ended their hopes for autonomous rule. They became overwhelmed with feelings of injustice, discrimination, oppression, and marginalization when they discovered they were left out of key positions and decision-making. All of this contributed to rage and probably violent extremism.

The incident had long-term effects on every facet of Bangsamoro life. In terms of politics, the people who wanted to exercise their rights to freedom and self-determination lost their sense of political identity. The liberation groups in Bangsamoro, including the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, were a direct result of this worsening struggle between the people and their government.

During this time, violent extremist groups like the Abu Sayyaf and Maute groups started to develop. These groups attacked government buildings and employees, kidnapped soldiers, and threatened to kill them if their demands were not met. Naturally, the authorities could not tell the difference between Bangsamoro liberation movements

that struggled for legitimate rights and freedoms and extremist and terrorist organisations. The security situation in south Philippines deteriorated as a result.

With the abandonment of the government's integration programme and the granting of autonomy to Bangsamoro, Mindanao's Muslim region, stability was mostly restored. Additionally, positive efforts were made towards sustainable development, which had a favourable impact on people's lives. On June 7, 2020, Human Relief Foundation Vice President Hussein O'Rourke stated that the unity between Muslims, Christians, and other minorities in the region has become exemplary for other regions around the world.

The new policy exacerbated a climate of resentment and intense hatred towards extremist groups, not just in the south of the Philippines but everywhere, which promoted a secure life for everyone—Filipinos, members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and others—inside and outside the region.

Popular Rejection

Extremist Bangsamoro groups were not well-liked by the general public because they lacked a strong political cause for their war or a clear vision for society. Additionally, terrorist organisations like Abu Sayyaf and Maute have carried out more atrocious crimes against innocent populations, including kidnappings, murders, and bombings, especially during operations in densely populated regions. They conducted political, social, and economic strikes, ordered people to leave particular locations, and claimed to be in charge of certain places, all of which contributed to the general public's rejection of them.

Significant damage and a high death toll were caused by the 2017 siege of Marawi and the five-month conflict between security forces and the Abu Sayyaf and Maute insurgents. Nearly a thousand individuals lost their lives, 300,000 were compelled to abandon their homes, and important institutions and buildings suffered physical harm. The cost of rebuilding the city was estimated by the Philippines government to be 50 billion pesos, around \$899 million. As a result, public hostility for terrorist organisations and their abhorrent brutality and subversion intensified. Observers assert that being able to comprehend the problems of the Bangsamoro people, granting them some authority, and identifying deprived areas produced individuals who were loyal to the State and assisted in defeating violent extremist groups.

Renunciation of Extremism

In 2019, the government of the Muslim Island of Mindanao was established under the leadership of MILF, paving the door for MILF to lead the interim administration known as the "Bangsamoro Transitional Authority". Additionally, they eliminated extremist groups that continued to oppose the integration programme and peace attempts, which undermined the strength of those groups.

MILF started cooperating with the Philippines government under President Benigno Aquino III. They provided substantial support neutralizing rebels connected to global terrorist networks and dismantling their groups. For example, Filipino bomb maker Abdul Basit Usman was neutralized. He was the mastermind of many extremist operations targeting the Philippines government and its allies. "He was the mastermind of the General Santos City bombing in April 21, 2002, killing 15 and injuring 55. He commanded a set of operations linked to Abu Sayyaf group JL branch in southeast Asia, al-Qaeda, and ISIS."

Bangsamoro transitional authority managed to bring considerable gains to a war-torn region afflicted by violence and chaos, and impeded extremists and militant groups. Military operations of the Philippines government and MILF, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, imposed heavy pressure on extremists, dispersed them all over the country, and substantially depleted them .

Owing to the close collaboration between the two parties, the joint military operations between the Philippines military forces and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the military branch of MILF, uncovered a number of terrorist networks and neutralized dozens of extremists and terrorists. The Philippines government benefitted from the counter extremism and terrorism efforts exerted by MILF and the dismantlement of the complex network of international terrorist groups in the region.

Conclusion

The strategic alliance between the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has been highlighted in this article, along with how it helped the fight against extremism. This partnership has successfully addressed numerous critical security issues while dismantling terrorist networks and neutralizing their members. It definitely encourages more similar partnerships to combat such malicious phenomena. This approach sets a framework for counter terrorism and extremism efforts in Philippines, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and other regions.