

The book cover features a complex, layered illustration. On the left, a woman's face is depicted with intricate, dark, swirling patterns around her eyes and mouth. Her mouth is open, revealing a landscape of thorny vines and a single white rose. The background is a textured, sepia-toned scene of a city, likely Zamboanga, with a prominent mosque featuring a large dome and minaret. The overall style is painterly and evocative, blending human features with natural and architectural elements.

Conflict's Long Game

A DECADE OF
VIOLENCE IN THE
BANGSAMORO

Edited by
Francisco J. Lara, Jr.
Nikki Philline C. de la Rosa

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The peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) formally concluded with the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014. During the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte, the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), also known as Republic Act No. 11054, was finally ratified by Congress in 2018 and paved the way for the creation of a new political authority in the southern Philippines in 2019. President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. further supported the region by appointing a new set

of interim officials. The peace project in the Bangsamoro has been consistent as the national government firmly committed to a negotiated settlement with the largest Moro rebel group, the MILF. Yet, more than a decade after the accord, challenges remain. Arguably the most evident proof of a long road to peace are the recurring episodes of conflict and violence in the region.

The book *Conflict's Long Game: A Decade of Violence in the Bangsamoro* thoroughly examines enduring post-conflict violence in the Bangsamoro. Edited by Francisco J. Lara, Jr. and Nikki Philline C. de la Rosa, experienced scholar-practitioners, its focus lies particularly on various drivers of violence and an assessment of the potential for long-lasting peace in the region. The different essays combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to grasp the intersection of land conflicts, identity, clan politics, and militancy affecting present conflicts in the Bangsamoro. At the same time, the authors give ample space to political, economic, and social factors that have affected conflict until the present. This line mirrors many conflict scholars who highlight that the study of violence is, by default, a mixed-method undertaking. This interdisciplinary approach, often with the help of data and statistics, helps shape the academic discussion of a peace process that needs to be addressed in scholarship and should influence policy, both on a national level and towards the international support side. The book was also nominated for the 42nd National Book Awards.

A key message conveyed in the book is that, despite numerous peace agreements and interventions, the implementation of these accords requires greater consistent and effectiveness. The challenge is evident in both the Final Peace Agreement of 1996 and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in the Bangsamoro of 2014. The former peace pact did not prevent massive all-out-wars in the 2000s, as it was applicable only to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which has since become an amalgam of several political factions equipped with firepower. For instance, in the province of Sulu—which recently has been excluded from the Bangsamoro region following a Supreme Court decision—these dynamics remain evident. It is one of the more peaceful provinces in the southern Philippines at the moment, yet the MNLF was never officially disarmed. The CAB, with its detailed provisions, safeguards, and hybrid mechanisms, remains a highly sophisticated agreement but faces significant practical obstacles.

The Bangsamoro peace process is at a vital stage since the formal end of the political transition draws nearer. But much more remains to be done to guarantee genuine peace in the region. The normalisation process is a case in point. Decommissioning the remaining 14,000 MILF fighters and more than 2,000 weapons, the most important stage according to both parties, is unlikely to conclude very soon. The transformation of MILF camps into productive communities, along with efforts in transitional justice, is also behind schedule. The possible extension of the transition period and the rescheduling of elections are thus efforts to allow more time for stakeholders to deliver on key promises of the agreement.

What makes conflict trajectories in Bangsamoro unique is the interrelationship between political families and various rebellions that happened in Mindanao since the 1960s. The peace agreement by default could not resolve long-standing societal issues that remain drivers of the fragile post-conflict piece. The role of local elites is something that distinguishes the local context in the Southern Philippines from other settings such as Aceh in Indonesia or Patani in Thailand. Simmering local conflict in pockets of the Bangsamoro remains a challenge. This is indeed perplexing, but it also highlights how peace transitions are often irregular, contingent, and sometimes marked by violence. Thus, one of the overarching questions of the book is: Why does violence in Mindanao continue despite and after the peace accords?

The chapters of the book follow and elaborate on International Alert's terminology of horizontal violence. The reader is introduced to this notion early on. Horizontal conflicts in the Bangsamoro refers to conflicts and violence that occur within communities rather than between the state and insurgent groups. This form of violence is a significant challenge to peace and stability, as it disrupts social cohesion and can lead to cycles of retaliation and further conflict. Feuding, for example, becomes complicated when members of a family or clan belong to an armed group. In such a case, reinforcements to a conflict party occur due to collective self-defense or other forms of loyalty and following. Outside the Moro political fronts, different groups, such as insurgent remnants, criminal syndicates, and local elites, exploit the current instability for their gain. The proliferation of small arms further exacerbates the conflicts. These factors lurk between the lines of several chapters in the book. Mindanao is not as lawless as it was decades ago. But residual risks are certainly real.

The book comprises ten chapters, each focusing on different aspects of violence and dimensions of conflict, often zooming in on specific questions, themes, and motifs. The collection of essays displays the full power of data. Here, International Alert's Conflict Data has been a vital dataset.

The first three chapters are a prelude, with an editor's introduction, a general view on shifting conflict dynamics, and an overview of human development factors in BARMM. The chapters discuss, for instance, the role of the Marawi siege as a pivotal event in the region, tied up to the activities of jihadist militants in Mindanao. They further discuss the multi-causality inherent in many conflict incidents in the region, the surge in land conflicts, and economic development prospects. Around the time of publication, poverty indicators slightly improved in the region but remain far from certain to hold in the future. The reader realizes that policymakers and supporters of the Bangsamoro transition need to avoid a conflict trap.

The fourth chapter grasps with a fundamental concern: the potential recurrence of violence given the so-called "conflict strings" in the genesis of local disputes across the region. Numerous case studies underline how vendetta dynamics and multiple causes of clan feuds complicate resolution. Noteworthy and reinforcing other research, hybrid arrangements emerge as possible mitigation mechanisms. Blood money or compensation alone is hardly suited to solving the problem, even though it is an easy and convenient approach, often used by those who have the wealth to act as pacifiers.

The fifth chapter deals with the so-called Violence Intensity Index, measuring the intensity of conflict, that tries to disaggregate data on skirmishes and hostilities. The sixth chapter is a fascinating comparative look explaining variations in violence in borderland areas in and near BARMM. This case study compares the Upi cluster in Maguindanao with the Lanao del Sur towns of Wao/Amai Manabilang. The author employs a historical frame to explain divergent conflict dynamics and warns against simplifying analysis. Not surprisingly, with the book's theme and past work by International Alert, the role of illicit economies is critical. It also reflects the strengths of the comparative method both in social science and in the Bangsamoro setting.

The next chapter focuses on the indigenous peoples. The authors highlight the current complications and tensions between ancestral domain claims concepts and the current Bangsamoro governance initiatives. It does not focus much on the specificities of violence but rightly points out cleavages that are influencing dynamics in some municipalities of Maguindanao del Sur and del Norte. Legislation on indigenous peoples is still pending at the level of the Bangsamoro interim government. In Central Mindanao, the Teduray-Lambangian struggle the most amidst decades of oppression, ongoing violence against community leaders, and an uncertain future within the autonomous region.

The penultimate essays cover cross-cutting issues of women in conflict and social media (including the issue of “othering”). Regarding the former, two chapters provide a nuanced view of the gendered dynamics of conflict and highlight the essential element of local context. Peacebuilding needs in Central Mindanao, the Lanao provinces, and the Sulu Archipelago are not identical, and interventions should strengthen existing frameworks in the respective territories rather than duplicate them. Interestingly, one chapter finds that female-headed poor households were more vulnerable to militancy and recruitment.

An essay on Moro voices during pivotal events rounds up the book's thematic reach. It drives back the point that the power of narratives has always been strong in Mindanao and that the online dimension is just another layer thereof. The chapter mirrors recent findings about increasing polarization in the digital domain.

The concluding chapter, written by James Putzel from the London School of Economics, wraps up key messages and contextualizes the transition period within a spectrum of ideological, economic, and military power by national and local actors. Putzel leaves the question about the MILF's legitimacy in the open.

Conflict's Long Game is a comprehensive, persuasive, and insightful piece of scholarship. But it is not without some limitations. The language slips at times into academic jargon. Policy proposals, direly needed at this point, lack in some chapters. There are also only a few Moro contributors. This could easily be mitigated next time. Other chapters are strong on description but could benefit from more analysis. The strongest essays in

the book focus clearly on key cross-cutting themes and a sharp discussion on evident data.

An important point is also the framing of the analysis. While clan dynamics have been rightly highlighted in several essays especially regarding their role in conflict, a more nuanced view on local violence could further enrich the arguments presented. Highlighting governance challenges of ex-rebels is necessary. But these deficiencies do not explain other drivers of violence. It is crucial to look at other factors.

The rules and roles of political clans are a case in point. In some cases, the clan rule is beneficial to stability but may often work as a stabilizer only for a limited time. Moreover, some clans that are entrenched in political dynasties have fewer incentives to take care of their communities beyond the voting cycle. This also corresponds to the traditional understanding of the *datu*. These strongmen or *orang besar* represented their communities, but often their main objective was power and control over constituencies. Clans are ready to enforce the laws of the state, rule over their constituencies (as in other parts of the Philippines) but also to protect their private interests against any competitors. *Ampatuan* rule in Maguindanao is a case in point. That being said, ex-rebels contribute as well to growing insecurity in Bangsamoro.

But alas, not only decommissioning of rebels, but also the disbandment of private armies - an integral part of the 2014 peace agreement - is hardly moving forward. The implications of these gaps are uncomfortable and would go against the groupthink of Bangsamoro as a pure success story. At present, there are some signs that the peace process is being overshadowed by the international attention given to the Philippines' geopolitical role. As the various stumbling blocks in Mindanao, at least *vis-à-vis* local violence, do not add up to a perceived challenge to national security, neither Manila nor the international community appear to push too hard to tackle those. A level of violence becomes implicitly accepted as a cost of the transition. Yet sometimes, neither parliamentarians nor policymakers feel these side-effects and burdens as deep as communities stuck in messy, cyclical conflict.

Overall, the book is a poignant contribution to scholarly literature and a relevant piece of research at a key time when the Bangsamoro faces several transitions. On a fundamental level, the book should make us think about

violence and conflict and is also a valuable guide showing us what both terms mean and encompass. This matters especially as another extension of the transition is just across the horizon.