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The US and the Southern Philippines' Quagmire

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According to media reports, the US has been making significant progress in the war on terror in the southern Philippines, somewhat a contrast to its setbacks in Iraq. With US troops providing substantial training, intelligence and logistic support, the Philippine armed forces have killed or captured half of the estimated 400 Abu Sayyaf fighters on Jolo island since the start of a major counterterrorist operation last August. Abu Sayyaf leader Khadaffy Janjalani and a possible successor, Abu Sulaiman, were among those killed. In 2002, US soldiers helped stamp out the Abu Sayyaf in Basilan island, where it was mainly based, but many of its leaders managed to escape to nearby islands, including Mindanao, the southern Philippines' largest. Now the terror group is said to be on the run in Jolo, the main island of the Sulu archipelago.¹

The glowing news reports about gains in the war on terror in what US diplomats in Manila openly call the “new Afghanistan”, however, have not touched on a most sensitive issue: deepening US involvement in the southern Philippines. US Special Operations Forces (SOFs) were deployed to the area in January 2002 ostensibly to train, advice and assist Filipino troops – and they have remained there ever since without a clear departure date.² Since 9-11, the US military has sought a more fixed presence in the area between the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, where terror groups such as the Abu Sayyaf and the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) have been moving about. Far more than mere joint military exercises between the US and the Philippines have actually been taking place. Although the Philippine constitution prohibits foreign troops from engaging in combat operations within the country, the SOFs' commander bluntly described their mission as “unconventional warfare operations”.³ Apart from providing “military assistance” to Filipino soldiers, US troops have undertaken humanitarian missions as well as infrastructure projects in areas where the Abu Sayyaf has been active. US engagement has not been limited to the activities of its troops. In 2001-2006, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) poured \$260 million in development aid to Mindanao and Sulu, focusing on such areas as reintegration of former separatist rebels, economic growth, local governance, infrastructure, health and education.⁴ The United States Institute for Peace (USIP), funded by the US Congress, has embarked on a major project to facilitate negotiations toward a peace agreement to end the decades-old armed conflict between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front

(MILF), now the largest Moro separatist group in the southern Philippines. A USIP special report enthuses that the Mindanao conflict, having “matured to the point where both sides see more advantages to ending it than to continuing the warfare”, is “ripe for resolution”.⁵

Helping to crush terrorism and to bring a lasting peace in the southern Philippines, however, is not as simple as it seems. For 35 years now, Mindanao and Sulu have been wracked by an armed conflict between government forces and Moro separatist movements that has already killed 120,000 people, maimed countless more and displaced hundreds of thousands. Powerful political clans, Christian and Moro, some with their own private armies, have contributed greatly to the violence and disorder. Links and working relations between Moro rebels in Mindanao and international Islamist jihadis date back to at least the 1980s. Three peace agreements forged by the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), once the main Moro separatist movement, have all miserably failed to bring peace and development in the southern Philippines. A peace pact signed by the government and the MILF in 2001 has not led to a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict between the two parties. Way before US troops were deployed in 2002 and even before the Abu Sayyaf entered the scene, the southern Philippines was already a boggy ground in which various parties in conflict sank deeper and deeper and found it difficult to extricate themselves – a quagmire.

In this article, I raise a cautionary note on deepening US involvement. Contrary to USIP’s optimistic assessment, peace is not at all at hand in the southern Philippines. A GRP-MILF peace agreement is possible, but with the worsening patrimonial and repressive features of the Philippine state and its continuing ethnocratic bent, this may not fare any better than the string of forlorn GRP-MNLF peace accords. Unless the US is prepared to confront the deep-seated problems underlying the long-standing conflict in the southern Philippines, it may well fall short of achieving its avowed goals and may even help worsen the situation. And it risks being dragged into the mire.

TERRORISM AND ETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

Established in 1991, the Abu Sayyaf is the most notorious terror group in the Philippines. While mouthing crude radical Islamist rhetoric, the Abu Sayyaf has engaged in monstrous acts of banditry. It has been responsible for bombings, kidnappings, extortions and killings of Filipinos and foreigners alike, mostly in the southern Philippines. Among those kidnapped by the terror group in 2001 were three Americans, one of whom was beheaded and another killed during a botched rescue operation after a year of captivity in the forest. In 2004, the Abu Sayyaf bombed a ferry in Manila Bay, killing more than 100 people – the deadliest terrorist attack in the Philippines and the second deadliest in Southeast Asia (after the Bali bombing of 2002).⁶ Declared a “foreign terrorist organization” by the US State Department as early as 1997,⁷ the Abu Sayyaf has been working closely in recent years with transnational Islamist terror groups and is said to be harboring two key JI figures behind Bali 2002.⁸

With US military and civil assistance, the Philippine armed forces may soon and finally, after 16 long years, put an end to the Abu Sayyaf scourge. The demise or decline of this terror group, however, does not necessarily spell the end of terrorism in the southern Philippines. The Abu Sayyaf emerged and developed within the context of a long unresolved ethnic conflict. In fact, it started out as a small breakaway group from the MNLF that was critical of the latter’s peace negotiations with the government.

The early makings of the ethnic conflict in the southern Philippines hark back to the colonial era when the Spanish conquistadores mobilized the colonized and Christianized *indios* to fight against the unsubjugated Moros (Muslims) in a series of wars spanning more than three centuries. The US, which took over the Philippines from Spain, vanquished Moro resistance. Despite objections from many Moro leaders to eventual incorporation of the Moro areas in an independent Philippine state, the US turned the entire Philippines into a single administrative unit and encouraged the resettlement of Christians from the northern and central Philippines to the south. The postcolonial Philippine state exhibited ethnocentric tendencies, adopting policies and measures that privileged the dominant Christian sector.⁹ It took on the symbols and “national history” of the Christian majority, which tended to exclude or marginalize the Moros and other minority ethnic communities, and then sought to “integrate” the non-

Christians into the mainstream of the new Filipino nation. While promoting further Christian resettlement in Mindanao, the state did nothing to stop powerful Christian warlords with private armies from encroaching on the ancestral lands of the Moros and other minorities. The predominantly Moro areas contracted considerably. Moreover, due to government neglect, the Moro provinces ranked among the country's most impoverished.¹⁰ In 1968, an indomitable Muslim warlord-politician established the Muslim Independence Movement (later renamed the Mindanao Independence Movement) and sponsored the training of Moro separatist guerrillas both abroad and locally.

All hell broke loose in Mindanao and Sulu after President Marcos declared martial law in the Philippines in September 1972. The MNLF, led by former university lecturer Nur Misuari, came to the fore. It called on the Moro people to wage armed struggle against "Filipino colonialism" and establish an independent "Bangsamoro" (Moro nation) state. In the first four years of Marcos' authoritarian rule, tens of thousands of people were killed in intense fighting in the southern Philippines. Through the intercession of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the GRP and the MNLF signed a peace agreement in Tripoli, Libya, in December 1976, which provided for an autonomous region consisting of thirteen provinces. With Marcos implementing his own version of autonomy, however, the peace accord quickly collapsed. A split in the MNLF in 1977 greatly weakened the MNLF, and it was never able to regain the level of its military strength in its early years. After the fall of Marcos, the MNLF forged an agreement with the Aquino government in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 1987 to continue discussion on autonomy. Nothing came out of it as President Aquino unilaterally set up the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). In 1996, the Ramos government and the MNLF signed a "final peace agreement" in Jakarta, Indonesia, in which the two parties agreed to establish a "special zone of peace and development". Misuari became ARMM governor and chairman of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). Despite the large inflow of foreign aid, however, the 1996 agreement brought neither peace nor development, and each side blamed the other for its failure. In 2001, fresh fighting between government and MNLF forces broke out in Jolo. Misuari sought refuge in Malaysia, but Kuala Lumpur promptly arrested him and turned him over to Manila. The Jakarta Agreement is now moribund. A fact-finding mission sent

by the OIC in 2006 to mark its tenth anniversary declared that it had “become dysfunctional, leading to increased tension in the region and to the outbreak of fighting in various areas”.¹¹ Meanwhile, Misuari, now being tried for rebellion, remains under house arrest in Quezon City in the national capital region.

The group headed by Islamic scholar Salamat Hashim, which broke away from the MNLF in 1977, replaced “Nationalist” with “Islamic” in its appellation in 1984 to highlight its Islamist identity. In molding MILF’s ideology, Hashim drew inspiration from the writings of such radical Islamist thinkers as Hassan al-Banna, Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb.¹² While the MNLF undertook politico-diplomatic initiatives, the MILF quietly built its “camps” – sprawling politico-military base areas, a few even stretching to over a thousand square kilometers in size – in different parts of Muslim Mindanao. By the mid-1990s, the MILF had supplanted the MNLF as the southern Philippines’ largest rebel group. In 1997, the government and the MILF opened peace negotiations and agreed on a ceasefire. Disagreement on the issue of the MILF camps, however, led to an impasse. In 2000, President Estrada launched an “all-out war” against the rebel group; government soldiers destroyed the MILF’s famed stronghold, Camp Abubakar, in the province of Maguindanao. After Estrada’s ouster, President Arroyo reopened talks, this time with Malaysia as third party facilitator. The government and the MILF signed an “agreement of peace” in Tripoli, Libya, in June 2001, in which the two sides committed themselves to working for a comprehensive political settlement. Pitched battles, however, broke out anew in February 2003, and government soldiers overran the MILF’s new headquarters at the so-called Buliok Complex, in Pagalungan and Pikit, in Maguindanao and Cotabato provinces, respectively. After the two sides agreed to the setting up of an International Monitoring Team (IMT) headed by Malaysia, to ensure the implementation of the security, rehabilitation and development aspects of the 2001 peace agreement, peace talks on substantive issues resumed.

A complicating factor requiring delicate handling in the ongoing peace process is the question of MILF links with international terror groups such as the al-Qaeda and JI. In the past, the Philippine military had time and again harped on this theme but convinced few. MILF leaders have repeatedly denied having connections with terror groups. In 1999, Hashim did acknowledge that his organization had received some financial assistance

from Osama bin Laden, but he clarified that this had only gone into the construction of mosques and Islamic schools, not firearms, and that this had lasted only until 1984.¹³ Shortly after, Al Haj Murad, then MILF's military chief, revealed that 500 of their guerrillas had trained in foreign countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan since 1986.¹⁴ In recent years, however, Kit Collier of the International Crisis Group (ICG) and Malcolm Cook of the Lowy Institute have come up with detailed reports about how personal friendships of MILF trainees with other Southeast Asian trainees – including eventual JI jihadis – at Pakistani and Afghan camps in the 1980s led to joint trainings in Mindanao under MILF auspices in the 1990s in replication of the Pakistani-Afghan camp system.¹⁵ A few weeks before his death in July 2003, Hashim renounced terrorism, declaring it as anathema to MILF principles.¹⁶ Murad, who replaced Hashim, is widely believed to be serious in pursuing a political settlement with the government, but some local commanders are reportedly maintaining ties with regional terror groups.¹⁷

POWERFUL POLITICAL FAMILIES AND PATRIMONIAL POLITICS

Ethnic conflict and terrorism have not been the only ingredients in the making of the southern Philippines' quagmire. Corruption and violence in Philippine elite politics have had a tremendous impact on the deterioration of the conditions in Muslim Mindanao – much more than often portrayed.

Philippine politics has long been beset by corruption, fraud and violence. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the intense competition among factions of the country's politico-economic elite had become so marked by these devilries that elections were said to be ruled by “guns, goons and gold”. After Marcos imposed martial law, the country's clientelist democracy became a patrimonial dictatorship. The dictator plundered the government's coffers and had tens of thousands who resisted his authoritarian rule (including some leaders of the elite opposition) imprisoned, tortured or killed. Since Marcos' fall, the corruption and violence have continued unabated. In fact, recent studies tend to show that these are practically imbedded in the country's political system. Paul Hutchcroft characterizes the Philippines as a “patrimonial oligarchic state”, a weak state preyed upon by an oligarchic elite that takes advantage of, and extracts privilege from, a largely incoherent bureaucracy.¹⁸ To Alfred McCoy, the country has descended into an

“anarchy” of powerful political families that have increasingly resorted to “rent-seeking” and political violence to maintain their hold on wealth and power.¹⁹ John Sidel presents “bossism” as a common phenomenon in the Philippines, describing “bosses” as strongmen who achieve monopolistic control over both coercive and economic resources within certain areas and who often use mafia-style methods in their operations. He depicts the Philippine state not as a weak state but as a complex set of *predatory* mechanisms for the private exploitation of the country’s resources.²⁰ The ouster of President Estrada in 2001 after being implicated in an illegal gambling racket graphically illustrates the gravity of the country’s corruption woes in the post-Marcos period. The competition among the predatory political clans remains intense – and violent. The Philippines is perhaps the only democracy in the world where scores always get killed during elections in poll-related violence. In the May 2004 national elections, for instance, at least 147 people were killed in election-related violence, making the elections the bloodiest since 1986.²¹ Not much of a wonder in a country which, the national police candidly admits, has 93 private armies²² and 328,000 loose firearms, not including guns held by rebel groups.²³

Among all the country’s regions, Muslim Mindanao has probably suffered the most from patrimonial politics. The national government injects billions of pesos into the ARMM each year, but as an MILF spokesman points out, such support has become a “carrot” to reward political loyalty or appease the disgruntled.²⁴ According to the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, the ARMM prior to the Jakarta Agreement was “saddled with an oversized, demoralized and mostly inept bureaucracy staffed by people hired for their political connections and family ties rather than their skills”, and it reeked with “a culture of corruption”.²⁵ Misuari drew his MNLF colleagues into the ARMM and SPCPD, but instead of bringing about reform, they fell into the slime of patronage, ineptitude and corruption. As before, powerful political clans maintain private armies, thinly disguised as private guards, “civilian” armed forces or volunteers. The ARMM, the country’s poorest region, has the most private armies²⁶ and probably the biggest number of loose firearms. For fear of being ambushed by their political rivals, local officials in many municipalities hold office in the provincial capital, not in their own municipal halls. During elections, vote-buying in ARMM is not as rampant as in

other regions. That's because electoral fraud is "wholesale, not retail", a local leader tells me.²⁷ The ARMM has long been notorious for the frequent falsification of election returns at the municipal and provincial levels.

Corruption in the Philippine armed forces and police has plagued the fight against terrorism. At the height of the Abu Sayyaf kidnappings, the Philippine media frequently reported about soldiers colluding with the terrorists, selling them guns and ammunition and getting cuts from ransom payments. Time and again, Abu Sayyaf and JI leaders have escaped from encirclement or even from maximum-security prison under dubious circumstances.

Although Arroyo stood in the forefront in the "Oust Estrada" campaign, she has long ceased to be an inspirational figure in the fight against corruption. According to sociologist Randy David, she has turned out to be a patrimonial president adept at "governance by patronage", who personally dispenses public welfare benefits to the poor in ways that would make them feel indebted towards herself.²⁸ Through presidential control over pork barrel releases, she reduced the opposition to a small minority in the House of Representatives. Not surprisingly, Arroyo survived two attempts of impeachment by Congress, after she herself was accused of committing electoral fraud in the 2004 elections, corruption and other improprieties. In a Transparency International survey, 31 percent of respondents assessed the Arroyo government's actions in the fight against corruption as "not effective". Worse, in the same survey, 23 per cent stated that the government does not fight corruption at all, and 24 per cent, that the government does not fight but actually encourages it.²⁹ In the eyes of expatriate businessmen in Asia, the Philippines has replaced Indonesia as the most corrupt country in the region.³⁰

Under Arroyo, human rights violations have risen sharply. Investigating numerous reports of extra-judicial killings of left-wing activists, a United Nations special rapporteur found the number of executions distressingly high and criticized the armed forces for inaction on the killings. He noted that a significant number were "convincingly attributed" to them.³¹ Fifty journalists have been killed since Arroyo took power. Once regarded as having Asia's freest press, the Philippines is now considered by the International Federation of Journalists as the second most dangerous country in the world

for journalists, after Iraq.³² Human rights groups fear that an anti-terrorism bill recently signed by Arroyo into law could lead to more human rights abuses.³³

Patrimonial politics appears to have often reared its ugly head in Arroyo's major dealings with Muslim Mindanao. Despite the recent gains in the war against the Abu Sayyaf, Arroyo is probably most memorably associated with the ARMM in connection with the 2004 electoral fraud case in which she was accused of utilizing the region's vaunted electoral falsification machinery to steal the presidential election. Tapes of telephone conversations ostensibly between her and an election commissioner, Virgilio Garcillano, provided lurid details of the alleged vote-rigging. She later admitted talking with an unnamed election official in "a lapse of judgment". Hounded by investigators and the media, Garcillano went into hiding for several months – somewhere in Muslim Mindanao.³⁴ In the 2005 ARMM elections, Arroyo backed the candidacy for regional governor of Zaldy Ampatuan, the son of traditional strongman Datu Andal Ampatuan, Maguindanao provincial governor. The young Ampatuan won handily. The patronage connection was most unsubtle. In 2004, Arroyo had received more than 99 per cent of the votes in seven Maguindanao municipalities controlled by the Ampatuan clan.³⁵ The Arroyo-Ampatuan alliance has not only alienated the MNLF, which boycotted the 2005 elections; it complicates the GRP-MILF peace process as well. The elder Ampatuan is a mortal foe of the MILF, which he accuses of having perpetrated armed attacks that killed one of his sons in 2002, and, notwithstanding his large retinue of heavily armed "civilian volunteers", almost finished off the strongman himself in 2005.³⁶

Communist insurgency and the increased activity of criminal syndicates have added to the bloody mess in the southern Philippines. Since 1969, the Communist Party of the Philippines, together with its New People's Army, has been waging a guerrilla war all over the country to overthrow the government. This war has claimed the lives of over 40,000 people.³⁷ The US has included the CPP-NPA, which killed a US colonel and several US servicemen in the 1980s, in its list of foreign terrorist organizations. In Mindanao, the CPP-NPA operates mainly in non-Moro areas, but some of its guerrilla zones are in mixed Christian-Moro areas or adjacent to MILF or MNLF areas.

The combination of protracted insurgencies and patrimonial politics has provided a particularly conducive environment for lawless elements to operate. Criminal

syndicates engaged in extortion, robbery, kidnapping-for-ransom, smuggling, piracy, etc. have thrived. Since the warring parties in the political world frequently engage the services of the underworld or engage in crime themselves, the situation has become quite murky and convoluted. It often becomes difficult to distinguish the crime lords and petty criminals from the military and police, from the politicians, warlords and their security men, or from the rebels and terrorists. Tracing the events in the 16-year government-versus-Abu Sayyaf saga will vividly bear this out.

DEEPENING US INVOLVEMENT IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

Although the bulk of the Abu Sayyaf leadership has already been decimated, Mindanao-Sulu remains high in US's priorities in the global war on terror. Within a few months after the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan, the southern Philippines was already regarded in Washington circles as the "second front" in the war on terror. The US soldiers sent there in 2002 constituted the single largest overseas deployment of US troops since Afghanistan.³⁸ Nearly blotted out from public attention by the Iraq war, the southern Philippines nonetheless drew increased US assistance. In the last few years, there has been growing documentation on just how extensive the connections have been between local Moro militants and transnational terror groups and how Mindanao-Sulu has served as haven and training ground for regional terrorists. The southern Philippines has become "Southeast Asia's weakest link in the war on terror", note Collier and Cook, due to "state failure, chronic insurgency and proliferating ties between local and foreign terrorists" as well as "a restive military and an impotent administration".³⁹ In the light of this, the US has broadened its concerns beyond the Abu Sayyaf.

Vanquishing the Abu Sayyaf may be the easy part. Finding a peaceful resolution to a decades-old, very bloody and tangled ethnic conflict that has provided fertile ground for spawning terrorists constitutes the formidable challenge. But how committed is the US to it?

The US, working mainly through the USIP, has tried to tread gingerly in its peace efforts. In 2004, US special forces did conduct joint military training exercises with the Philippine Army in Cotabato, in the heart of Central Mindanao, where the MILF is strongest, and more of such exercises have been planned in the area. Instead of

employing military means to shock, awe and punish the MILF for past or lingering links with transnational terror groups, however, Washington has wisely opened lines of communication and dialogue with the rebel group and encouraged it to take the road of peace.

Facilitating the GRP-MILF peace process, however, appears not to gibe fully well with the war on terror, which remains the *raison d'être* for US involvement in the southern Philippines. Conditioned by the imperatives of this war, the US has tended to look for quick and easy solutions and to be oblivious to the complexity and obduracy of the area's problems. What the US initiative boils down to is to push for a comprehensive and final political settlement of a conflict that is "ripe for resolution" and then to infuse massive amounts of development assistance. The problem with this peace-pact-and-development-aid approach is that we've been through all that before – in the three GRP-MNLF peace pacts that now lie in virtual tatters.

Washington is waxing overly optimistic about the prospects of the peace process. The long-standing ethnic conflict in the southern Philippines is nowhere near resolution. In the GRP-MILF talks, the two sides have not been able for some time now to break the impasse on the issue of the Moros' ancestral domain. Even if the panels of the two sides do reach a peace deal, it would still require enabling legislation by Congress. Anti-Moro leaders in the Christian areas of Mindanao could whip up, as they did in 1996, strong opposition to any peace pact with Moro rebels. As experience has shown – and not just once – reaching a peace agreement with Moro rebels can be done. Since the Aquino administration, the government peace panels that negotiated with the rebels have been mostly if not wholly composed of distinguished personages who have been serious and dedicated in working for a just peace. The fruits of their efforts, as well as of their rebel counterparts, can be gleaned from a textual analysis of the 1987, 1996 and 2001 pacts. Much more crucial than forging of peace pacts, however, has been the problem of their implementation. Poor implementation plagued all three GRP-MNLF peace accords, and, at least until 2003, the 2001 GRP-MILF pact. There is hardly any evidence that a better outcome for a final GRP-MILF pact can be ensured. Moreover, a GRP-MILF peace agreement would have to be reconciled with the past GRP-MNLF accords. The MNLF's

claimed Bangsamoro homeland is basically the same as the MILF's. The OIC still recognizes the MNLF as the sole legitimate representative of the Bangsamoro people.

The Philippine state, particularly because of its patrimonial and ethnocratic features, lies at the very core of the problem of the poor implementation of peace pacts. The government has always had effective control of implementation and has often resorted to unilateral actions. Its development initiatives in Muslim Mindanao do not go very far because powerful clans exploit and sap the state's resources through patronage, rent-seeking and corruption. The military and police are themselves corrupted. Instead of promoting democratic elections in the ARMM, national and local politicians use the "Wild West" region for rigging elections. Since 1996, the government has not undertaken any major initiative to stem the Moros' further marginalization. The MNLF, which benefited from the ruling coalition's patronage in the 1996 and 2001 ARMM elections, lost the patronage and the power in 2005. By then, it had imbibed a bit of the patrimonial-bossist politics itself, with some MNLF commanders acting like warlords themselves. As a keen observer of the ARMM's dynamics, the MILF has vowed to guard against falling into a similar patronage trap.⁴⁰ But this is easier said than done. In the event of a peace pact, the MILF would have to transform itself into a non-armed electoral party. What chance would such a fledgling party with no experience in elections have against the traditional parties of patronage and patrimonialism of the powerful political clans with their private armies and their election-rigging systems?

The US has failed to address squarely the deep-seated problems underlying the long-standing conflict, most especially the patrimonial character of the Philippine state. The USAID is aware that corruption is "one of the biggest – and most underestimated – challenges to the success of post-conflict agendas".⁴¹ Despite all the efforts of the USAID, World Bank and other international organizations to fight corruption in the Philippines, however, the country has kept sinking in Transparency International's corruption ratings. The failure of their managerialist approach illustrates that anticorruption without politics simply does not work in a patrimonial oligarchic or predatory state. For as long as international aid organizations keep tight watch over their development assistance to the southern Philippines, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats may encounter difficulty dipping their fingers into it. The donor organizations have no

control, however, over the day-to-day running of government. Closely supervised international aid programs may become model programs, but they would likely just remain isles of efficiency and accountability in a sea of patronage, corruption and bad governance.

Making matters worse, Washington has allowed itself to be too closely identified with the government of President Arroyo, whom President Bush has given much aid and commended for her strong support in the global war on terror. The Arroyo administration is now widely regarded as the most corrupt, repressive and unpopular since the Marcos regime. Since October 2004, Filipinos dissatisfied with Arroyo's overall performance have consistently outnumbered those satisfied in surveys conducted by the independent polling organization Social Weather Stations. She is the only Philippine leader since Marcos to receive a negative satisfaction rating.⁴² After her "lapse of judgment" in the 2004 elections and after helping to deliver ARMM to the warlords, Arroyo is perhaps not the most credible figure for promoting new politics and good governance in Muslim Mindanao. The US has recently expressed concern over the spate of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines, but has been silent on other issues.⁴³ To many Filipinos, Washington's criticism of the extra-judicial killings may sound hollow. No less than the chief justice of the Philippines' Supreme Court, Reynato S. Puno, has attributed the escalation of such killings to the "mindless" U.S-led global war on terror which has taken "legal short cuts" and shrunk the scope of human rights in the scramble to end terrorism.⁴⁴

PROSPECTS FOR US PEACE EFFORTS IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

Although strong third party involvement in the peace process is urgently needed – not just for the signing of peace agreements – the US's role in this regard is somewhat circumscribed. The GRP-MNLF peace pacts could not have materialized without the facilitation of the OIC, particularly member countries Libya and Indonesia. None of them, however, managed to put enough pressure on the GRP and MNLF to abide fully with the provisions of the Tripoli, Jeddah and Jakarta agreements. Malaysia may succeed in brokering a GRP-MILF agreement, but it does not have enough clout to go farther than that. Reconciling the GRP-MNLF and GRP-MILF agreements in word and in deed would also demand strong third party involvement. For the protracted peace process in the

southern Philippines to have greater chances of success, a government or intergovernmental body with much more clout than previous brokers, such as the United Nations, European Union or Japan, would have to come into the picture.⁴⁵ Philippine nationalists would object strongly to having the US, the Philippines' former colonial ruler, assume a more prominent role in the peace process. And probably some Asian neighbors too. Already, Malaysia has not welcomed the participation of the USIP – an independent federal institution – in the GRP-MILF talks.⁴⁶

It would be highly impolitic for the US to extend its military presence in the southern Philippines indefinitely. Although large numbers of Filipinos admire the US and anything “stateside”, there is also a very strong nationalist movement that succeeded in having the US military bases in the country closed down in 1992. Washington's relations with the Moros in the southern Philippines have not really been warm. When the dictator Marcos was killing tens of thousands of Moros, the US was providing him with substantial military and economic assistance. Many Moros remember the stories and images of the Moro-American War of a century ago, Uncle Sam's very first war in the Islamic world: how US troops slaughtered 1000 Moros at Mt. Dajo, Jolo, in 1906 and over 2000 at Mt. Bagsak, Jolo, in 1913, including large numbers of women and children; how President Theodore Roosevelt congratulated General Leonard Wood and his men for a “brave feat of arms” at Mt. Dajo;⁴⁷ how General John Pershing was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for “extraordinary heroism in action against hostile fanatical Moros” at Mt. Bagsak;⁴⁸ how the US Army replaced the 38-caliber revolver with the 45-caliber pistol “to meet the need for a weapon with enough striking power to stop fanatical charges of lawless Moro tribesmen in hand-to-hand fighting”.⁴⁹ Since 9-11, anti-Muslim bigots in the US have been spreading the false story that Pershing rid the Philippines of Islamic extremism by executing Moro terrorists using bullets dipped in pig's blood and burying them in a grave filled with pig's blood and entrails – actions which Muslims supposedly believe prevent them from going to heaven.⁵⁰ The horrible photos of Abu Ghraib pale in comparison to photos of the Moro-American War showing, for instance, US soldiers posing with a beheaded Moro rebel, with the bodies of dead Moro men, women and children after the Mt. Dajo and Mt. Bagsak massacre, and, six weeks after Mt. Dajo, with their skulls.⁵¹

Promoting peace is much harder when ethnic conflict is all mixed and mired up not just with terrorism but also with patrimonial and clan politics, warlordism and various other forms of rebellion or lawlessness. Last April, just two months after the international media reported that the Abu Sayyaf was on the run in Jolo, fighting broke out anew on the island between the Philippine military and the forces of MNLF commander Habier Malik, whom the military accuses of supporting the Abu Sayyaf. Twenty-one people were killed in the fighting and 42,000 Joloanos fled their homes. Despite an OIC appeal for a ceasefire, Arroyo gave the military free rein in pursuing “Moro terrorists”.⁵² Malik, whom the Philippine military describes as a “rogue commander”, is considered one of four top lieutenants of MNLF chair Misuari. Zainudin Malang of the Center for Moro Law and Policy Concerns, regards the resumption of armed clashes as “a reflection of government’s failure to engage peacefully the mainstream Muslim liberation fronts”. He warns that this would “leave them with no choice but to ally themselves with the more extremist groups now wanted for terrorist acts in the region”.⁵³

Unless Washington grapples fully with the southern Philippines’ complexities, its peace efforts may amount to nothing. Frustration with another failed peace pact could help spawn new Abu Sayyafs. And the US could find itself sucked into the muck.

NOTES

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