

Quo Vadis, Bangsamoro Peace Process?

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After ten years since the signing of the historic Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro or CAB, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) will have its first Parliamentary elections in June 2025. This momentous event follows a political transition during which time, the region was governed by the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) with all members appointed by the Philippine President, and majority of which were nominated by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front or MILF.

There is every reason to celebrate this transition of BARMM towards a political set-up where those that will be running the region are duly elected by the Bangsamoro electorate instead of having their mandate emanating from Malacañang.

Observers however raise the concern that while the political track of the Bangsamoro peace process is moving towards its substantial completion, the normalization track of the CAB remains to be far from being completed.

It must be recalled that the CAB's Annex on Normalization identified the milestones that the GPH and the MILF must accomplish before an "Exit Document" can be signed, certifying that all the requirements have been met. The Normalization program has four key aspects: (1) Security, which has five sub-components—decommissioning, policing in the Bangsamoro, dismantling of private armed groups, redeployment of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and detection and clearance of explosives and ordnance; (2) Socio-economic programs for decommissioned forces and their communities; 3) Transitional justice and reconciliation; and (4) Confidence-building measures, which have two parts—camp transformation of acknowledged MILF camps and amnesty.

Despite glowing reports from some sectors on the progress of these milestones, it is highly likely that the Exit Document will not be signed by the time the BARMM elections is held next year, mainly because of delays in the implementation of the Normalization Annex. This means that the work on completing the implementation of the CAB will have to continue beyond the end of the political transition of BARMM.

Art. XVI Sec. 1 of the BOL clearly states: *"The transition period shall be without prejudice to the initiation or continuation of other measures that may be required by post-conflict transition and normalization even beyond the term of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority."*, which means that the work on normalization and other facets of post-conflict transition contained in the CAB may and should continue even beyond the transition period defined by the BOL.

With the seeming inevitability that no Exit Document would be signed at the end of the political transition of BARMM, possible scenarios are being laid out on what this may mean to the overall Bangsamoro peace process, and if there are risks that different sectors should be concerned about, and what mitigating measures need to be put in place to address such risks.

There are scenarios on what might be the implications if the MILF will lose heavily in the Parliamentary elections, and not retain the majority of the seats in the Bangsamoro Parliament, something that they enjoyed during the transition period.

Some have raised the argument that if the MILF is out of power in BARMM, it would lose its leverage in making the national government complete its commitments under the peace agreement, and that national government will have little incentive to live up to such commitments. Combined with this is the fear that, because the MILF fighters and combatants, including their families and communities, are far from fully enjoying the benefits promised to them by the peace agreement, they would become disenchanted from the lack of progress of the implementation of the CAB, and thereby make them vulnerable to either splintering from the MILF and/ or susceptible to recruitment by other armed groups in the region.

On the other side of the argument, some analysts argue that, with the MILF not responsible for running the day-to-day operations of the BARMM Government, it can focus its attention on the implementation of the CAB, and perhaps be more effective in pressing national government to live up to its commitments.

Others also hold the position that it is a dangerous proposition that it is only if the MILF is in power in the BARMM Government can the implementation of the CAB move forward. In fact, they say that the past ten years of slow progress of the CAB negate such argument.

At this point, it becomes almost impossible to determine which of the two seemingly opposite perspectives will determine what will happen post June 2025.

In fairness to the MILF, it seems to have brought itself above the fray of such discussion and will actively participate in the 2025 elections through its United Bangsamoro Justice Party or UBJP. The MILF clearly will go out to the electorate and make its pitch to continue being the majority in the new Parliament.

What everyone agrees with, however, is that there is much that needs to be done to move faster and in a more substantive manner the implementation of the Normalization Annex, especially the decommissioning of the MILF forces, and that delays put at risk the security not just of the MILF but the entire Bangsamoro region.

MILF Implementing Panel Chair Mohaqher Iqbal in a statement released during the 10th anniversary of the CAB said:

“Foremost among the challenges is the dearth of adequate funds allocated for normalization efforts—a bottleneck impeding the seamless transition of

decommissioned combatants into civilian life. Urgent intervention is warranted to expedite the delivery of socio-economic packages tailored to address the multifaceted needs of these individuals, thereby fortifying the foundations of sustainable peace.”

“A palpable imbalance in the implementation of the Annex on Normalization underscores the imperative for recalibration. Disbandment of private armed groups, expedited camp transformation, and reduction of small arms and light weapons are indispensable prerequisites for fostering a conducive environment for peace and development. Concurrently, the establishment of a professional civilian police force tailored to the unique exigencies of the Bangsamoro region assumes paramount significance.”

National government, in particular, needs to better understand that it is only if the CAB is substantially completed, and all the commitments under it are fulfilled and complied with, and the MILF signing off on an Exit Document, can it be assured that the Bangsamoro region will enjoy sustainable peace, security and development.

Other key sectors especially in the National Capital Region should also re-engage themselves in the Bangsamoro peace process. It is noticeable that sectors such as Church, big business, media and academe, influential groups that were visible and active during the final stages of the negotiations of the CAB have dropped off and have lost interest in what is happening in BARMM. It will be unfortunate that the leaders of these sectors only regain their interest in BARMM when there will be a fresh outbreak of violence like Marawi or Mamasapano. Too little, too late, as they say.

But now, there is still time for the national constituency to rally around the Bangsamoro peace process.

The work is not done. Much needs to be done.

The Bangsamoro enterprise cannot be the responsibility of those in the Bangsamoro alone.

It requires all Filipinos across all sectors to come together to ensure that the future generations of Filipinos, both Moros and non-Moros, live in an environment of peace and security, wherever they are in the country. ■

Disclaimer: This opinion piece was commissioned by INCITEGov with support from the Principles for Peace (P4P) Foundation. The views expressed are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of INCITEGov nor P4P.