



# Peace Monitor

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## Beginnings and endings in the land of Allah

It was to be a propitious beginning, the holding of elections for the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). But even before the polls could start on August 8, controversy quickly set in. First, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) boycotted the elections. In an announcement, the MNLF central committee charged that with Malacañang's endorsement of non-MNLF Zaldy Ampatuan for governor, it was reneging on its commitment to the 1996 peace accord, which was designed to ensure the "Muslims' quest for self-rule." While some provisions of the agreement have yet to be fully implemented, the establishment of the ARMM is seen as the most concrete by-product of the accord.

Second, incumbent ARMM governor Parouk Hussin withdrew his re-election bid. Hussin, who concurrently sits as MNLF foreign affairs committee chair, said that "I respect the decision of the majority of my comrades" to boycott the elections. What Hussin didn't say was that, for all his heartaches against the administration, his "comrades" were not united in the decision to stay away from the polls. For one, Hatimil Hassan, a member of the MNLF's influential Council of 15, ran for assemblyman in the lone district of Basilan. The MNLF chief of staff, former Sulu governor Yusuf Jikiri, supported the gubernatorial candidacy of Mahid Mutilan, the ARMM vice governor. Also supporting Mutilan were Ex-MNLF commander and now Basilan congressman Gerry Salapudin and Marawi City Mayor

Omar Ali, also known as "Commander Solitario."

In the end, the elections were held. Ampatuan won hands down, of course, despite charges that the polls were no more than a ploy to repay political debts to one of Maguindanao's most powerful warlord families.

Mutilan's supporters staged street protests. Hussin probably scoffed at what the MNLF likely believed was a *fait accompli*. Whatever the reactions from his rivals, Ampatuan's "victory" merely represented the status quo in Muslim Mindanao, which is marked by violence, poverty, and ignorance.

Early in the month, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) political affairs chief Ghadzali Jaafar revealed that an Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) member, one Isnilon Hapilon, was seen prowling the Maguindanao hinterlands. A spokesman of the Army's 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion said they would look into the report. Lt. Col. Franklin del Prado admitted that the ASG were "too elusive." No sooner than the military warmed its boots than fighting erupted in Sumisip, Basilan between Army troops and the ASG led by Commander Amir Mingkong. Mingkong is said to be a former member of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). And then, the ASG set off a bomb in Zamboanga City, hurting 26 people. Col. Ruperto Pabustan of the Army's 602<sup>nd</sup> Infantry brigade revealed that 50 new "graduates" of the Jemaah Islamiah

terrorist network have fanned across Mindanao for "test missions," but he promised to pursue the bandits. Soon after his bold statement, the ASG blew up a ferry in Lamitan, Basilan. Throughout the initial days of August, ceasefire observers were allegedly still sighting US surveillance planes combing the hills of Guindolongan and Talayan in Maguindanao for traces of the ASG.

The MILF, too, was at war not only with the government but also with its own cadres. In Dinas, Zamboanga del Sur, its forces, with women and children in tow, were ambushed at sea by *Bantay Dagat* operatives. Inexplicably, the operatives were also MILF sympathizers. The MILF also clashed with the MNLF in Midsayap, North Cotabato. Sparked by a family feud, the fighting triggered the displacement of 5,000 civilians.

All these do not bode well for the GRP-MILF peace talks, which was miscalculated to resume once the opposition's calls for President Arroyo's ouster began to lose steam. As both parties grew anxious over the date of the next meeting, Malaysia had kept mum throughout the entire month, except to concede to requests to extend the tour of duty of the International Monitoring Team (IMT). The new team arrived August 15.

Since their last talks April in Kuala Lumpur, government and MILF leaders had yet to agree on key issues on Governance, which are part of the Ancestral Domain clause in the 2001 Tripoli Agreement.

While all these were happening, a survey said that the crisis in Mindanao may be due in large part to the failure of peace groups to effectively promote Muslim-Christian understanding. The Social Weather Stations reported that, after all these decades of development work, only 59 percent of Christians in Mindanao accept having a Muslim as a best friend.

The SWS may be right. Nowhere is such an embedded acrimony more apparent than in the countryside, where poverty continues to gnaw at the residents. A corn farmer in Cotabato committed suicide when Chinese traders in Davao City refused to accept his entire harvest. Rains, and the lack of post-harvest facilities in his area, had threatened to spoil his grains. But the farmer risked the dire prospects and traveled all the way from a place called Barangay Ranzo, about a hundred kilometers from Davao, with a truckload of the corn. The trader took one look at the cargo and rejected it. The farmer of seven children went home, entered his house, and drank rat poison.

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