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Religious extremism and terrorism in Malaysia

Nelson Rand



1 Recent attacks on Malaysian churches underscores the threat from Islamic extremism

2 Although Malaysia has never experienced a major attack, it is a focal point of terrorism in Southeast Asia

3 Malay ultra-nationalism and Islamic radicalism have been creeping into the country's political fold

A recent series of attacks on churches in Malaysia has challenged the country's reputation as a moderate Muslim nation and underscores the risk that Islamic extremism and terrorism poses to this Southeast Asian country and its neighbors.

The attacks began on 8 January, a week after a Kuala Lumpur High Court ruled in favor of a Catholic newspaper, the Herald, which challenged a 2007 ban that prohibited Christians from using the term "Allah" to refer to "God." Although the ruling was suspended on 7 January pending an appeal from the government, the next day three churches in Kuala Lumpur were firebombed. In subsequent days, eight more churches were attacked throughout the country as well as a Hindu temple and two mosques. Not since 1969 has ethnic and religious tensions reached such a peak in Malaysia, a country generally known for its racial harmony, religious tolerance, and its moderate practice of Islam (about 60 percent of the population is Muslim, while just over 9 percent is Christian).

As evident by these attacks, the court's ruling has sparked widespread anger and opposition among Muslim Malaysians, whom many believe that Allah, an Arabic word, should only be used by Muslims. Others go further and say Christians using the word may be attempting to win converts – even though converting from Islam in Malaysia is illegal. The fury over the ruling is especially worrying considering that most of the Muslim world has no such ban over Christians using "Allah" to refer to "God". Indeed, the word itself predates Islam. In Malaysia, Christians, including indigenous peoples in the Eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, have been using the term "Allah" for hundreds of years.

According to Dr Lim Teck Ghee, director of the Kuala Lumpur-based Center for Policy Initiatives, a "long lighted fuse" led to these attacks that can be traced back to 2001 when then prime minister Mahatir Mohamad proclaimed Malaysia an Islamic State. "This was a result of the long time pandering by UMNO leaders to the extreme religious right wing," he says, referring to the United Malays National Organization, the country's dominant political party. "This was a predictable outcome given the mantra fed by some of the country's leaders to the Malays Muslims that they are a privileged and protected community, not subject to the laws and norms of our country when their 'interests come under threat'."

Although the attacks have caused little damage and zero fatalities, there is an inherent danger the situation will worsen. The attacks have also exposed extremist elements that linger in Malay society. "Malaysia must solve this problem now, otherwise it will escalate and Malaysia will suffer," warns Dr Rohan Gunaratna, a terrorism expert who heads the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. "When ethnic harmony and relationships break down, the environment becomes ripe for terrorism...Malaysia must take this situation seriously."

While Malaysia has never experienced a major terrorist attack and the country has no indigenous separatist groups or insurgents (unlike neighboring Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia), the country is nevertheless a focal point of terrorism in Southeast Asia. The region's largest terrorist network, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), was founded in Malaysia in the early 1990s by two Indonesian clerics, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Abdullah Sungkar, who lived in exile there from 1985 to 1998. During this time, the pair founded two religious schools in the country, which propagated their extremist views, and recruited volunteers in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia to train and fight in Afghanistan with the Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation of the country.

"Malaysia attracted radical Muslims [in the 1980s and 90s] because of the anti-west policy stance of long time Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad," says Dr Jim Veitch, a terrorism expert and associate professor at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. "Encouraging radicalism was the 'Open door' policy implemented by the Malaysian government and extended to Muslims all over the world especially to those from the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)."

While Malaysia was a key forming ground and a safe haven for Islamic extremists in the 1980s and 90s, major crackdowns by the authorities beginning in the late 1990s succeeded in changing this environment. Since then—and especially following the September 11, 2001 terrorist

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attacks in the US – the implementation of tough anti-terrorism laws, aggressive strategies launched by the authorities and improved intelligence have severely weakened the ability of terrorist networks to operate in the country. Nevertheless, Malaysia remains a key transit country for regional terrorists and a main “exporter” of terrorists.

According to Gunaratna, there are about a dozen Malaysian terrorists currently operating in Indonesia, the Philippines and Southern Thailand. “Malaysia is a very hostile environment for terrorists now,” he says, attributing this to the success of the Malaysia Special Branch, which he regards as one of the top counter-terrorism agencies in the world. “Most Malaysian terrorists don’t operate in Malaysia anymore.” Most go to Indonesia, like Noordin Mohammed Top, Southeast Asia’s most wanted terrorist until he was killed by Indonesian security forces in September 2009.

Top, born in the Malaysian state of Johor, graduated from the University of Technology in Malaysia in 1991 and worked briefly as an accountant before launching his career as a jihadist. He taught at an Islamic school in Johor founded by Ba’asyir and Sungkar but fled to Indonesia following a crackdown by Malaysian authorities after 9/11. As a key JI member, he assisted in the 2002 Bali bombings, which killed 202 people and injured more than 200, and catapulted JI into the international spotlight. Top went on to mastermind the bombing of the JW Marriot in Jakarta in 2003, the bombing of the Australian embassy in 2004 and the Bali bombings of 2005. The three suicide bombers in the 2005 Bali attacks were Malaysian, as was Top’s partner in all three attacks, Azahari Husin.

In 2006, following an alleged fall-out with the main JI leadership due to a disagreement on hitting “soft targets” such as hotels and nightclubs (which Top favored), he founded the group Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad (the Organization for the Base of Jihad, also referred to as al-Qaeda for the Malay Archipelago). It was this group that orchestrated the July 2009 bomb attacks on the JW Marriot and Ritz Carlton in Jakarta, which killed nine and injured over 50. It was Top’s last work of terror – he was gunned down in a hail of bullets on September 17, 2009 in a raid on his hideout in Central Java.

Aside from being a main “exporter” of terrorists, Malaysia is also a key transit country for regional terrorists from Southern Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia. A main transit point is the Eastern state of Sabah, which has also become an area of operations for the Philippine-based Abu Sayaf Group (ASG). Although unlikely related to the church attacks, the US State Department issued a travel warning on 15 January for Eastern Sabah, saying there are “indications” that both criminal and terrorist groups are planning acts of violence against foreigners in Eastern Sabah and makes specific reference to ASG. The advisory remains in effect until 15 April.

Malaysia has long been touted as a voice of moderation in the Muslim world. However, Malay ultra-nationalism and Islamic radicalism have been creeping into the country’s fold. A dominant opposition party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), steers a radical agenda that aims to establish Malaysia as an Islamist theocratic state. After the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the party declared jihad against the United States and urged its supporters to fight alongside the Taliban. The PAS has been gaining support in recent years, while the country’s dominant political party, UMNO, has been pursuing a more Malay-centric agenda and cozying itself with ultra-conservative Muslims in the hope of garnering more support after seeing its dominance wane in recent years. Interestingly, in the present controversy over the right for Christians to use the word ‘Allah,’ PAS is taking the more plural and moderate position of favoring the court’s ruling to overturn the ban, while UMNO is taking the hard-line stance to keep the ban in place.

According to Dr Lim Teck Ghee of the Center for Policy Initiatives, a concerted effort by the government and the media to assert Malay supremacy and Islamic pre-eminence “have laid the seeds of racism and ultra-nationalism in young and impressionable minds that are difficult to erase or indeed control.” He cites the popularity of a recent Facebook group that opposes the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims, which has much inflammatory content, as an example of the growing extremist views being propagated in Malaysia. “[This] can easily lead to uncontrollable acts of mischief or violence by individuals that are roused by the messages and content of the website,” he says, adding that the group received over 200,000 members in two weeks of operation.

“The Government has to act decisively and impartially in curbing these and other initiatives aimed at inciting and provoking the Muslim population or we will reap a bitter harvest,” he warns.

Understanding Thailand's political crisis

Matt Wheeler



On 15 November 2009, scores of People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) supporters gathered at the municipal youth center in Yala City, in southernmost Thailand, to condemn self-exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on the occasion of his visit to Cambodia. In concert with larger rallies in Bangkok and elsewhere, the PAD supporters pledged loyalty to Thailand's 81-year-old monarch, King Bhumipol Adulyadej, ninth king of the Chakri dynasty. They concluded their event with a spirited sing-along of "*Nak Paendin*" ("Scum of the Earth"), a propaganda tune popular during the 1970s heyday of official anti-communism. The lyrics describe domestic enemies who appear outwardly to be Thai, but, with evil in their hearts, sell out their country, betraying their compatriots and king.

Reprisal of this brutal, nationalist anthem illustrates how, for all its novelty, the political turmoil that has wracked Thailand for the past five years reflects longstanding social and economic divisions. Worryingly, it also hints at Thai society's potential for civil violence. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, a combination of economic grievances and Bangkok's unresponsive, authoritarian rule fueled a low-level insurgency by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Introduction in the 1980s of limited "Thai-style" democracy and decades of spectacular economic growth deprived the CPT of their cause, but failed to bridge gaps between urban rich and rural poor. Inequalities of wealth and income have worsened over the past decade and old grievances have resurfaced in the twilight of the Ninth Reign. Contemporary political strife echoes themes of that earlier conflict. Some observers have attributed significance, for example, to the fact that Thaksin's supporters are concentrated in the former CPT strongholds of the North and Northeast and that they choose the color red as their symbol. Some leading Thaksin loyalists are former revolutionaries; government officials and PAD activists have claimed that the pro-Thaksin movement is a reconstituted communist plot.

Today's conflict is often depicted as an elite contest for the right to determine Thailand's political order, pitting an entrenched, privileged establishment—represented by the military, bureaucracy, and monarchists—against the upstart, billionaire telecommunications tycoon Thaksin and his loyalists. As prime minister, Thaksin built an electoral base among the rural poor through redistributionist policies, while maintaining support from provincial political bosses and big-business interests. With an unassailable lock on the electorate, Thaksin rode roughshod over constitutional checks and balances and threatening to perpetuate himself in power indefinitely. Thaksin also encroached on the monarchy's role as champion of the rural poor, a role it played most actively during the anti-communist struggle. This challenge to the existing order threatened the foundations of the elite's influence and affluence and stimulated its abiding unease with majoritarian politics. In September 2006, the royalist establishment and their middle-class allies applauded Thailand's first military *coup* in 15 years. The intensity of contention reflects a growing awareness that the socio-political order that has obtained in Thailand for more than half a century is poised to end with the death of the ailing King Bhumipol, who has reigned since 1946.

The elite-level conflict has found expression in popular discord that draws energy from social and economic disparities. Since late 2005, hundreds of thousands of Thai citizens have mobilized against each other. The yellow-clad PAD has protested against successive Thaksin-aligned governments in the name of "clean politics" and in defense of the monarchy, citing Thaksin's alleged corruption and authoritarianism. The PAD enjoyed widely acknowledged (but not openly discussed) backing from "influential" quarters, which helps explain how its supporters were able to occupy government property and shut down the capital's airports without resistance or sanction. Red-shirted pro-Thaksin forces, meanwhile, have marched under the banner of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) against *amathiyathipatai*, which signifies the rule of an unelected and unaccountable military-bureaucratic elite. Red Shirts have been motivated not only by Thaksin's material support but also by anger at having been disenfranchised and repeatedly maligned by Yellow Shirts as too poor and too ignorant to responsibly participate in a democratic system. These popular social forces lend the crisis incendiary potential.

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The political turmoil in Thailand reflects longstanding social and economic divisions

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The social forces underpinning the crisis lend it incendiary potential

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Several aspects of the crisis bode ill for the prospect of near-term stability



Events since 2006 have demonstrated that *coups d'état* are no longer reliable means to determine political outcomes in Thailand. The military-installed government drafted a constitution that weakened the executive, diluted the voting power of Thaksin's provincial strongholds. At the first opportunity, though, voters handed power to the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP). Moves by the PPP-led government to rehabilitate Thaksin and amend the 2007 constitution brought the PAD back into the streets for a campaign of often violent, extra-parliamentary pressure, culminating in the final quarter of 2008 with occupations of Government House and Suvarnabhumi Airport. The military declined to maintain order. The courts stepped in to remove two Thaksin-aligned prime ministers, the first for conflict of interest for appearing on a televised cooking show, and the second after the PPP was ordered dissolved for breaking election laws. In December 2008, a deal brokered by the military brass resulted in defection of a bloc of MPs formerly aligned with Thaksin, allowing the opposition Democrat Party to form a government and elevating party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva to the premiership. Abhisit has since had his own difficulties with street demonstrations. In April 2009, UDD protestors, unopposed by security forces, invaded the venue of an ASEAN East Asia Summit in Pattaya. Two days of unrest in Bangkok followed. Abhisit's subsequent pledges to seek reconciliation have come to nothing.

Several aspects of the current crisis bode ill for political stability: the politicization of key institutions; lawlessness and impunity for violent actions; rabid nationalism; state efforts to restrict information and free speech; and the high-stakes, winner-takes-all nature of the conflict.

The 2006 *coup* and repeated failures to maintain public order demonstrate the unwillingness of senior military officers to subordinate themselves to civilian authority. In October 2008, Army chief General Anupong Paojinda openly called for the lawfully selected, pro-Thaksin prime minister to step down. The Army stood aside as PAD protestors ran amok. The intervention of "retired generals" was reportedly required for the Army to restore order during the April Red-Shirt unrest, raising serious questions about civilian control of the military.

The Privy Council, traditionally above reproach owing to its exalted role as advisor to the King, has descended openly into partisan politics. Privy Council president and former prime minister Prem Tinsulanon recently suggested that another former prime minister, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, was a "traitor" for joining a pro-Thaksin political party. In April 2009, after Thaksin publicly named Prem as instigator of the 2006 *coup*, Red Shirts faced armed troops while demanding that Prem and other Privy Councilors resign. Not since the final broadcasts of the CPT's clandestine radio station in the 1980s has there been such open assault on the royalist network. Following the April crackdown came rumors that upcountry Red-Shirt cells were stockpiling weapons for an armed struggle.

The judiciary, traditionally the least politicized branch of government, has become the establishment's favored instrument for eradicating Thaksin's influence. *Lèse majesté* charges are brought with greater frequency, and recent convictions have carried unusually heavy penalties. The government has made strenuous efforts to block websites deemed to threaten national security. In November 2009, four people were arrested under a computer-crimes law for posting translations of foreign news reports commenting on the King's health. This quixotic effort to control the flow of information betrays the establishment's anxiety. Prime Minister Abhisit's failure to impanel a committee to investigate extra-legal PAD actions, and his repeated use of the Internal Security Act to control Red-Shirt rallies, evinces a double standard that spurs Thaksin's supporters. Failure to punish illegal acts of violence raises the likelihood of future bloodshed. PAD leaders, meanwhile, have specialized in stoking militant Thai nationalism, stirring popular anger against Cambodia in a border dispute. Reckless appeals to nationalism risk unleashing passions that have led to paroxysms of savagery in Thailand's not-so-distant past.

As demagoguery reduces prospects for compromise, the continued politicization of key institutions means that there are ever fewer entities not implicated in the conflict and thus fewer that are able to play a mediating role. Prospects for peaceful reconciliation are narrowing. The measure of establishment apprehension about the future may be the Internal Security Operations Command's forlorn advertising campaign to foster a "Moderation Society."

Any resolution of the crisis likely awaits royal succession. As the inevitable draws nearer, factional alignments are becoming increasingly fluid. Some royalists are concerned that Thaksin may strike a deal with designated successor Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn that would pave the way for his return to Thailand and perhaps the premiership. Others foresee a deal in which Thaksin would give up politics in exchange for return of his frozen assets. These scenarios call for elite-level compromises that will fail to address popular concerns. They are thus not likely paths to stability. Greater violence may precede a lasting resolution.

Engaging Pakistan's madrasas

Rebecca Cataldi



Since 9/11, Pakistan's madrasas (Islamic schools) have come under international scrutiny. Many have accused madrasas—sometimes rightly—of links to militancy. A nearly six-year madrasa engagement effort has demonstrated that many madrasas are indeed able to play a key role in international security—not as a threat to global peace, but as an asset.

From the Middle Ages through the sixteenth century, madrasas were without peer as institutions of higher learning, drawing pilgrims from the West and making global contributions to math and science. (It was under colonialism and other influences that many eventually closed themselves off to the outside world, forsaking science and other “secular” disciplines and focusing solely on religious studies.) Today, it has been estimated that those which preach violence or militancy represent no more than 15% of Pakistan's estimated 20,000-25,000 madrasas. While this may represent a potent force, much larger is the untapped potential of the madrasas to contribute to peacemaking.

Given the position of respect and influence that madrasa leaders, as religious authorities, often command among their students and their larger communities, madrasas have tremendous potential to shape the influence of Pakistan's future religious leaders and the development of Pakistani society. Since 2004, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) has been working with Pakistan's madrasas to develop this potential, engaging them in educational enhancement programs that have trained more than 2300 madrasa administrators and teachers from more than 1500 madrasas across the country in religious tolerance, human rights, conflict resolution, and curricular and pedagogical enhancement.

This effort has been enthusiastically embraced by madrasa leaders because it is grounded in respectful partnership, inspires them by appealing to the positive values and academic achievements found in their own rich Islamic heritage, and enables them to take ownership of the reform process. When engaged in this way, madrasa leaders have demonstrated their ability to be powerful agents of peace. For example, one of our madrasa partners played an instrumental role in securing the release of the Koreans held hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan in the summer of 2007, organizing a delegation of religious leaders who engaged the captors by appealing to Islamic principles. During a workshop at a madrasa that has been known as a major Al-Qaeda feeder, another of our madrasa partners persuaded the participants that the battle they were waging in Kashmir was politically motivated, but not religiously sanctioned. These same madrasa leaders are now working to tone down the militancy of their graduates.

During one past campaign of hardline cleric Maulana Fazlullah, whose militants fought the Pakistani army and took over areas of the Swat Valley, the students of one madrasa leader who had participated in our program were seen holding signs saying “Not in the name of madrasas.” This effort managed to keep Fazlullah's forces away from many of the madrasas in that area. In another instance, several months before the Red Mosque's violent clash with the Pakistani government, one of its clerics appeared with three of his madrasa students at an ICRD workshop, threatening that these students were ready to become suicide bombers if the government did not submit to their demands. The madrasa workshop participants stood up, told the cleric that he was not following Islam and was giving madrasas a bad name, and then escorted him out of the building. Another madrasa leader saved the lives of four members of his remote village by using Islamic human rights principles discussed in the workshops to challenge tribal customs that had called for their execution.

In one of our recently-launched training programs for female teachers of girls' madrasas, some of the women acknowledged that their sons have been actively involved in fighting in Afghanistan, and that as mothers they initially supported them. However, following the workshops, many of these women indicated that their minds had been changed. As one teacher indicated: *“After my experience here,, I personally will go back and talk to my two sons and tell them not to fight anymore, because I realize that this is not Islamic jihad . . . I have realized that it is only through personal struggle and hard work that we can rebuild our countries, and I will make this a regular part of my teaching . . . You can talk to all the male madrasas you want, but if you don't engage us female teachers, it will be very hard to stop the fighting. As mothers and sisters, it is we who*

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1 Madrasas can be an asset to international security efforts

2 The ICRD has been working with Pakistan's madrasas to develop this potential

3 Madrasa reform projects need international support to achieve their full potential



can influence the men more than anyone else.” These programs also inspired a follow-up gathering in a Punjabi village where over 200 female madrasa, parliamentary, and civil society leaders came together to discuss what they could do to counter extremism. They issued a declaration condemning religious intolerance and the killing of members of other faiths or sects as un-Islamic, and committed themselves to working to end hatred and extremism.

Graduates of our madrasa training programs have also organized their own training programs to promote peace and tolerance—even inviting non-Muslim members of the community to participate—and have preached on these themes in their Friday mosque sermons. One madrasa partner started a special program to facilitate cooperation among Pakistani Muslim and Christian leaders to reduce religious extremism and discrimination. At one such workshop, a participant who happened to be a commander in Lashkar-e-Taiba declared at the end that he had attended in order to discredit what the workshop was teaching. But as a result of his participation, he now felt that for the first time in his life, he understood the true peaceful intent of the Qur’an and that he had been passing on an incorrect interpretation to others for the past 26 years. He stated: *“I have read the Qur’an my whole life, but after this workshop, I realize that until now I have missed the true soul of the Qur’an. . . . After having this experience, I want to help my students appreciate the different religious groups of people who live in our community and our country. My kids need to know that only through being peaceful can they spread true Islam . . .”* ICRD subsequently returned to find him teaching these ideas to his students, proclaiming that he needed to rectify his past errors and turn his kids from the direction of violence toward peace.

Another participant who runs a large madrasa in the Northwest Frontier Province and is known to have links with Al-Qaeda, who had initially expressed skepticism about interfaith activities, subsequently started a Peace Commission in his region that has grown to include more than 150 members. This Commission has facilitated interfaith seminars and outreach at the community level to promote peace and reconciliation, and the madrasa leader has continued this work despite attacks on his business by the Taliban.

In addition to contributing to greater domestic and global security, madrasa leaders have contributed to the development of their society in other ways. Prior to Pakistan’s 2008 elections, ICRD conducted specialized workshops on Islam and Democracy. Many of the participating madrasa leaders who had previously believed that Islam was incompatible with democracy stated that the program had cleared up their misperceptions, and subsequently pledged not only to participate in the electoral processes but to convince their students, teachers, and the public to vote. Many of these leaders went on to give speeches at their mosques about the importance of voting and democratic involvement by religious leaders and the religious community.

The lesson to be learned is that the link between madrasas and greater security is not to marginalize, isolate, or demonize them, but to engage them as partners in a spirit of respect, hold up the noblest values of their faith as a model for emulation, and equip them with the skills to use their influence to enhance the education of their children and the security of their society and its neighbors. Having engaged madrasas in this way, we are now receiving more requests from the madrasas themselves for further training than we can accommodate—including from madrasas that trained Taliban leadership and are now seeking guidance on how to teach principles of peace to the children of these Taliban. Madrasa leaders have become leaders of efforts to build peace and stability in ways that few other actors in Pakistan can.

In order for the madrasas to reach their full potential in educating their children and contributing to global stability, the support and commitment of the international community is needed—particularly in encouraging current efforts by the madrasa leadership and the Government of Pakistan to negotiate a new madrasa reform policy acceptable to both parties, and in offering financial support for the educational enhancements (e.g. teacher training, salaries and textbooks for the teaching of “new” subjects like math and science, facilities) that would be necessary for the madrasas to meet the standards articulated in the new policy.

The will to improve their education, to counter extremism by promoting authentic religious values, and to contribute to the stability and prosperity of their country is there within Pakistan’s madrasa community. The key to capitalizing on this is to engage the madrasas as partners in the struggle to stabilize their country and provide the best possible future for their children—to see them as partners and as assets to security rather than liabilities.

The Massacre in Maguindanao

Rommel C. Banlaoi



1 The massacre in Maguindanao points to the worsening problem of warlordism

2 There are more than 100 warlords in the Philippines, and some 200 private armies

3 The problem is accentuated by widespread small-arms proliferation

November's massacre in the Maguindanao province of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines which resulted in the death of at least 57 people points to the worsening problem of warlordism and private arms violence in an area already torn by four centuries of armed conflicts.

Warlordism is not a new phenomenon in the Philippines. Long before the establishment of a Philippine Republic, there were already local warlords in the dispersed islands of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao competing for supremacy. Present-day warlords come from feuding families and clans who, more often than not, represent the elite and counter-elite of Philippine politics.

The massacre in Maguindanao on 23 November 2009 was just an expression of growing clan violence, locally called *Rido*, between the Ampatuans and the Mangudadatus who are incessantly struggling for political dominance in the province. *Rido* usually occurs in troubled areas where law enforcement authorities are terribly weak, security is very scarce, and justice is too slow. This phenomenon is not unique to the Philippines as similar cases have been documented in the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Caucasus and even the Appalachian region of the United States.

At present, there are more than 100 warlords in the Philippines distributed in 79 provinces. There are also around 200 private armies in 1,495 Philippine municipalities. Warlords and private armies vary in size: small, medium, large, etc. The Ampatuans may be considered as a mega-size warlord with a mega-size private army lording over Maguindanao for more than 20 years.

The problem of warlordism and private arms violence in the Philippines is exacerbated with the rapid proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Around 2 million SALWs are illegally proliferating in the Philippines because of weak law enforcements of the Philippine government and porous borders of the Philippine archipelago. SALWs are not only arming terrorist, rebel and organized criminal groups. SALWs are also arming warlords and private groups.

Warlordism, private arms violence and proliferation of SALWs are grim recipes for the worsening problem of political violence in the Philippines. Warlordism is more alarming than terrorism because warlords can kill with impunity while terrorists cannot. Warlords can even run for public office while terrorists only run in the mountains. Except with the bombing of Super ferry 14 in 2004 which killed 116 people, warlords kill more people than terrorists after September 11, 2001.

The massacre in Maguindanao may be viewed as a blessing in disguise as it brings to intense public debate the worsening problem of warlordism in the Philippines. Because of its brazenness, the Maguindanao massacre not only got the attention of the Philippine public but also the attention of the international community, which shall exert pressure on the Philippine government to put to justice the perpetrators of this heinous assault against civilians.

As of this writing, 28 local leaders including the Ampatuans have been charged of multiple murder and rebellion. Around 600 supporters of the Ampatuan patriarch were also charged of rebellion and various criminal offenses related with the massacre. Martial Law was declared in Maguindanao on 4 December 2009 to prevent the escalation of private arms violence in the area. Because of domestic opposition, martial law was lifted on 11 December 2009. According to the Philippine government, a week of martial law in Maguindanao enabled the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police to arrest suspects and even confiscate the private armories of the Ampatuans.

Yet, the Ampatuan clan is just one of the many warlords in the Philippines. There are warlords who continue to lord over many towns and provinces in the country. There are even warlords running for office for the 2010 Philippine elections. Other politicians challenging the warlords are even arming themselves for protection.

Because arms are circulating in the black market, warlordism and private arms violence will not disappear in Philippine politics. Confronting warlordism and private arms violence is a much bigger challenge than combating terrorism.

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