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Terrorism in the Philippines: historical evolution and current scenario

Abstract

Since the days of Spanish colonisation and subsequent occupation by the United States, the political reality of the Philippines has been characterised by a constant struggle for control over its identity and territory. A largely Catholic country, the Philippines found a relatively stable democratic transition after independence in 1946, passing under the iron rule of the Marcos family for more than two decades (1965-1986). During all this time, the Philippines has been facing a complex scenario of insecurity, historically caused by two reasons: on the one hand, the ever-presence of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), whose armed wing, the NPA, has been pursuing the establishment of a communist regime in the islands for decades; and, on the other hand, the complex evolution of the Moro nationalist movement, whose Islamist leanings have been exploited in recent years by jihadist groups to implement their fundamentalist agenda in the Bangsamoro. In this context, the election of Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos as the new president opens up an uncertain future for the country, which is torn between finding a formula for peace and returning to the authoritarian origins of his father.

Keywords: Philippines, terrorism, Communist Party of the Philippines, jihadism, Bangsamoro

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1. Introduction

The Republic of the Philippines is an island state in Southeast Asia composed entirely of more than seven thousand islands, which are located between the island of Taiwan to the north and the Celebes Sea to the south, and which in turn bathe its coasts between the South China Sea and the Philippine Sea from west to east. A country of Catholic tradition after its extensive colonial legacy, the Philippines would belong to the Spanish crown for more than 300 years, during which time it would become Spain's main enclave in Far Eastern waters. After the end of the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Philippines came under de facto US control, and was not fully liberated until 1946, when its independence was officially recognised.

After the end of World War II, the Philippines began its own process of national reconstruction through the modernisation of its economy and the consolidation of its democracy, a project that was cut short when Ferdinand Marcos (1917-1989) came to power in 1965. Marcos ruled the country's politics with an iron fist for more than 20 years, and was not removed from office until 25 February 1986. On this date, celebrated as one of the great milestones in Philippine political history, the so-called People Power Revolution or EDSA Revolution will be held, a popular mobilisation that will put an end to the Marcos regime and restore democracy to the country.

Thus, after 30 years of relative political stability in the executive, Rodrigo Duterte's arrival to power in 2016 will mean an increase in the police state and violence on the country's streets, as part of his particular fight against drug trafficking and organised crime. This new policy, heavily criticised by some international organisations, has claimed the lives of up to 30,000 people in this period alone (HRW, 2021), and its effects have lasted until the present day.

It is against this backdrop of violence that the former dictator's son, Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr. will win the last elections in May 2022. This victory has been viewed with scepticism by various sectors of Philippine society, who see him as a supposed prolongation of Duterte's executive, as well as a possible return to his father's authoritarian origins.

At present, the election of 'Bongbong' Marcos as the new president - even pending the official results - has raised doubts about the future management of his government, especially with regard to the fight against drug trafficking¹ and counter-terrorism (Rappler, 2021). For decades, the Philippines has been facing a communist paramilitary group - the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA) - as well as a secessionist-Islamist movement in the south of the country. This movement has been instrumentalised in recent years by jihadist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf, or the current Dawla Islamiya coalition, in order to apply their fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia law. This fact, together with other social problems such as high levels of poverty and inequality, and territorial disputes with China, threaten to make the Philippines a focus of regional instability in the Asia-Pacific area.

1 According to some official estimates, around 2% of Filipinos - about 1.8 million people - are reported to be regular drug users in the country - mainly marijuana and methamphetamine or shiba - which has been questioned by some of the country's independent media.

2. Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP): from its anti-colonial past to its designation as a terrorist group

After centuries of colonial abuse and foreign interference, the Philippines achieved its longed-for national independence on 4 July 1946, the symbolic date on which President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially recognised the archipelago's sovereignty. The process of national liberation was an arduous one - two colonial wars and a Japanese occupation attest to this - demonstrating the historic desire of the Filipino people to become a newly independent state.

However, despite the general feeling of enthusiasm in the country in the first months after independence, the political situation in the Philippines was not to change much. Under the first president of the nation, Manuel Roxas (1892-1948), the United States would continue to be the Philippines' preferential partner in its commercial exports, while committing the Philippine state to the maintenance of American military bases and ships in its territory for a period of 99 years (Machuca Chávez, 2019). This openly pro-American stance would be opposed by the first Communist Party of the Philippines (PKP-1930), which would end up being banned by order of Roxas in 1948.

As a result of ideological divergences with the PKP, Jose Maria Sison, a spiritual leader and revolutionary activist, opted to leave the party and form the new Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in 1968. The year after its creation, the New People's Army (NPA) was founded as the armed wing of the renewed communist formation (CPP-NPA).

2.1. New People's Army (NPA): main operations and activity to date.

Following the schism within the PKP, the CPP-NPA, with a markedly anti-liberal and anti-US character, sought through armed struggle to establish a communist state in the Philippines and to expel all US influence from the islands, relying on the popular support of the peasantry (CISAC, 2018). Acting on these objectives, the group led by Jose Maria Sison intensified its armed and political activity throughout the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with the regime of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos since his election in 1965.

With his election as leader of the Nationalist Party, the Philippines experienced intense economic growth under the dogma "Stability first, representation later", which perfectly defined Marcos' political thinking throughout his mandate (Naidu, 1985). After the first years of economic prosperity and stability, the economic crisis of the late 1960s brought in its wake a series of popular protests and student demonstrations in the streets of Manila. It was precisely in the midst of these protests that the Plaza Miranda attack took place in 1971, which resulted in the death of nine people and a hundred injured (Fernandez, 2021).

This attack, the authorship of which is still unknown², was an important turning point in the country's recent history, as it would serve as Marcos' justification for the implementation of Martial Law³ in 1972 (Overholt, 1986). The CPP-NPA then proceeded to create a new political formation, the National Democratic Front (NDF), in 1973, which brought together the CPP-NPA and the National Democratic Front (NDF) to form the National Democratic Front (NDF).

Following the implementation of Martial Law and the suspension of civil rights, the CPP-NPA proceeded to create a new political formation, the National Democratic Front (NDF) in 1973, to bring together the various leftist factions in the country. For the next three years, the CPP-NPA continued to enjoy logistical support from China in its communist struggle. However, it was in 1976 with the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the Marcos regime and Maoist China that several CPP leaders were arrested. It was not until 1981, with the lifting of the notorious Martial Law, that the Communist Party was able to re-organise.

After years of restructuring and recruitment in rural villages (1981-1984), CPP-NPA attacks on security forces and government officials became increasingly frequent. This military resurgence, coupled with the political fragility of the regime, led to an escalation of the conflict between forces loyal to Marcos and the communist guerrillas in 1985, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people in the process.

Thus, with the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986 and the subsequent release of political prisoners, peace negotiations between the NDF and the new government of Corazon Aquino (1933-2009) took place in December of the same year. The negotiations, however, came to an end only a month later, when Philippine army forces opened fire on a large group of protesters on 22 January 1987 (Curaming 2013)⁴. The so-called "Mendiola Massacre" would result in great popular outrage among Filipinos, as well as the NDF's withdrawal from the negotiations. This unilateral decision to withdraw from the negotiations led the Aquino executive to officially declare war on the group from then on.

In the following years, the CPP-NPA would experience major setbacks for its organisation, from the arrest of some of its main leaders to the death of many of its members. As a result, the group disintegrated, leading to the formation of new parties, associations and non-governmental organisations throughout the 1990s. Since then, peace talks between the NDF and successive governments in Manila have alternated with episodes of violence, with the United States officially designating the Communist Party as a terrorist organisation in 2002. In 2010, new peace negotiations took place between the executive of Benigno Aquino III and the CPP, albeit without success. It was then under the jurisdiction of Rodrigo Duterte's government that the group was again declared a terrorist organisation in 2017 (La Vanguardia, 2017).

2 The Plaza Miranda attack remains the subject of much controversy to this day. Various sectors of Philippine society at the time saw Marcos as the mastermind of the attack, having taken advantage of the situation to pass Martial Law and thus gain a foothold in political power. Other sources, on the other hand, pointed to Communist Party leader Jose Maria Sison as the perpetrator of the attack to incite protests and thus bring about the fall of the regime in the country.

3 Among the reasons given by Marcos for the legitimisation of the controversial law, the Plaza Miranda attack would constitute for him sufficient "evidence" of a "gigantic communist conspiracy" against his government.

4 The so-called "Mendiola Massacre" refers to a demonstration called by the peasant group KMP to demand the implementation of agricultural reforms throughout the country, a march that was joined by sympathisers from other groups. According to some investigations, the alleged presence of infiltrated CPP-NPA members among the demonstrators is said to have led to the shooting, causing a total of 13 deaths.

Since then, the group has remained almost “neutralised” and on the verge of disappearing, although there have been spikes in activity in the northern part of the island of Mindanao this year (Rappler, 2022). In a recent communiqué on 13 May, the Communist Party of the Philippines condemned on its website the election of Bongbong Marcos as the new president, calling his future government “illegitimate” and calling on the civilian population to maintain the “counter-revolution and the “armed prolongation of the conflict” (PRWC, 2022).

3. “The Mindanao Problem”: from the Moro national liberation movement to jihadist insurgency

Parallel to the armed insurgency led by the Communist Party and the NPA since the late 1960s, another nationalist-Islamist movement sprouted in the southern Philippines, threatening the territorial integrity of the archipelago: the process for the self-determination of the Bangsamoro or Islamic Mindanao.

3.1. The Moro Nationalist Movement in Islamic Mindanao

Since the time of Spanish colonisation, a self-determination movement known as Bangsamoro (“Moro nation”) has existed in the southern Mindanao region. The term Bangsamoro refers to the thirteen Muslim tribes spread across the territory who are said to “possess distinct cultures and dialects but share a common belief in Islam” (Taya, 2007).

The origins of the movement date back to the years of US interference, when, at the request of the US, the Philippine government tried to promote the political and cultural integration of these tribes within Filipino-Christian nationalism. With a markedly anti-colonialist and Islamic character, nationalism in the Bangsamoro grew after the country’s independence. 1968 saw the so-called “Jabidah massacre”, a mutiny against the military conscription proposed by the Marcos regime that ended with the execution of some 200 rebels and further fuelled Moro nationalist discourse in the area.

Thus, in the face of the Muslim population’s growing discontent with their government and increasing tensions with the Christians in the south, the first secessionist groups were founded in the region, such as the MIM (Mindanao Independent Movement) and the BMLO (Bangsa Moro Liberation Organisation), which, despite lacking sufficient popular support in the area, managed to lay the foundations for the creation of the future MNLF or Moro National Liberation Front in 1972.

With the founding of the MNLF, the Moro insurgency became much more violent in the Bangsamoro, making the MNLF the main national liberation group until the 1990s. According to some estimates, in the first four years of the conflict alone, “about 150,000 Bangsamoro would be killed in the first four years of the

conflict, more than 500,000 would be forced into exile (...), and more than 1 million would end up homeless and destitute” (Taya, 2007).

During these years, the MNLF was to count on the support of the Libyan regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi, who would supply arms to the group in line with his ideal of pan-Arabism. However, after a meeting with Gaddafi, Imelda Marcos, the dictator’s wife, managed to get Gaddafi to cease his arms support for the group, leading the MNLF to sign the Treaty of Tripoli in 1976.

As a result of this treaty, the MNLF lost many followers, and the following year the Muslim theologian Salamat Hashim created the so-called Mora Islamic Liberation Front or MILF in 1977. The MILF gradually replaced the MNLF as a reference point in the struggle for the liberation of Muslim Mindanao, with the first attack by this group against the Christian population occurring in 1986. In the same year, MNLF representatives led by Nur Misuari initiated peace talks with the recent government of Corazon Aquino for the implementation of an Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (RAMM). These negotiations were not supported by the MILF, which initially opposed partial autonomy for the Bangsamoro in the name of independence.

Thus, after the failure of peace talks in 1987, it was not until two years later that Corazon Aquino unilaterally proclaimed Act 6734 of 1989 for the holding of a referendum on Bangsamoro autonomy. Of the 13 provinces asked to join the RAMM, only four agreed to join, losing even the support of the MNLF for the holding of the referendum.

The MNLF’s unsuccessful attempts to gain independence for the region eventually led to a more radical wing of the group deciding to break away, founding in 1990 the group known as Abu Sayyaf or Al Harakat-Al Islamiya, which has a strong jihadist influence.

3.2. Abu Sayyaf and the spread of jihadism in the Bangsamoro

In 1990, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, a former combatant in the Afghan war and a member of the MNLF since his return to the Philippines, decided with other members the founding of the jihadist group Abu Sayyaf to proclaim an Islamic state in the area (Rogers, 2004)⁵. With a radical Islamist ideology, Abu Sayyaf soon gained notoriety on the islands of Jolo (Sulu) and Basilan, where he carried out several bomb attacks against the Christian population in the area.

Despite the efforts of the MNLF and MILF, and their repudiation of the brutal methods employed by Abu Sayyaf, the group enjoyed some popularity among the lower classes in the Bangsamoro as a result of the poor living conditions of the Moorish population in the region during the 1990s. With the same objective as its parent organisation, Abu Sayyaf pursued the establishment of an independent Islamic state in the region, albeit governed by a much more fundamentalist vision of Sharia. Thus, after a series of bombings, kidnappings, and

5 A brother-in-law of the iconic Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden reportedly met with Janjalani for the creation of an Islamic separatist group on the islands of Sulu and Basilan in western Mindanao around 1990.

attacks, mostly targeting the region's Christian population, Abdurajak Janjalani was killed by the Philippine police in 1998.

Janjalani's death dealt a severe moral blow to the group, which saw in him its main leader and ideological driving force. As a result, the organisation was split into two subgroups, thus losing the terrorist link with Al Qaeda. In order to survive the loss of its leader and obtain a new source of income to guarantee its survival, the group gradually specialised in the international kidnapping of tourists, such as the one that took place in a Malaysian resort in 2000 (Fuller, 2000).

The recruitment of tourists and locals was a lucrative activity for the group during those years, and it was not until four years later that Abu Sayyaf returned to terrorist activity in February 2004. The attack on Superferry 14 in Manila Bay killed 116 people, making it the deadliest maritime attack to date and the bloodiest attack in Philippine history. Abdurajak's brother and direct successor, Khadafi Janjalani, was neutralised in 2006, returning the group to the ostracism of kidnapping and bringing the era of large-scale attacks to an end.

Khadafi's death opened a new operational stage within the group where "bomb attacks and assassinations were replaced by kidnappings in exchange for ransom" in what could be described as a new involution into a criminal organisation rather than a terrorist group (Aguilera, 2020). After almost a decade without major incidents, it was the agreement between MILF fighters and members of the Benigno Aquino III government for the establishment of the RAMM in 2014 that led to a new attack by the Abu Sayyaf against a group of the faithful in July of the same year (Pareño, 2014). This attack was to be claimed by Isnilon Totoni Hapilon, charismatic leader of Abu Sayyaf in the region, who weeks later issued a video statement pledging allegiance to the Islamic State terrorist group (CEP, 2022)⁶. Following the announcement, several attacks and kidnappings followed, with IS designating Hapilon as the new emir and leader of the terrorist organisation in the Philippines two years later, in 2016.

Just one year later, on 17 May 2017, jihadist groups seized the southern town of Marawi in what was to become a five-month-long armed conflict that left thousands of dead in its wake. After taking control of large parts of the city and some official buildings, President Duterte, in response, decreed the application of martial law throughout the territory and ordered the suspension of habeas corpus in order to stop the terrorist threat (Amnesty International, 2017).

The "siege of Marawi" resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, as well as the destruction of infrastructure and many civilian lives. The fighting came to an end in October, when Philippine military officials claimed to have killed two of the main architects of the siege, Omar Maute - co-founder of the Maute Group with his brother Abdullah - and Hapilon in October. For some international organisations, the battle of Marawi represents the "most significant incursion" of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia, as well as one of its most violent manifestations (Amnesty International 2017).

In the following three years, new attacks followed, such as those on the island of Basilan in 2018 (Ben Saga, 2018) or the two suicide bombings against the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on the island of Sulu

⁶ According to official Philippine military sources, Islamic State leaders in Syria reportedly contacted Hapilon in 2014 with a view to establishing an Islamic caliphate in the Mindanao region, joining with other Islamist groups loyal to Hapilon.

in 2019 and 2020 respectively (ICG, 2022). These attacks resulted in high death tolls and plunged the region into the terror of the growing jihadist threat. However, since 2019, cooperation between RAMM leaders and the Philippine executive to contain the jihadist threat seems to be bearing fruit, relegating groups such as the BIFF (Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters), the Maute Group, currently DI Lanao, or the Abu Sayyaf itself - all collectively known as Dawlah Islamiya - to sporadic episodes of violence. However, despite this decline in terrorist activity, aspects such as the high risk of social exclusion and the lack of opportunities continue to be two of the main breeding grounds for the recruitment of young people in the region, as well as for their subsequent radicalisation into jihadist activity.

4. Counter-terrorism policy and future expectations

With the start of peace negotiations between the MILF and the government of Benigno Aquino III in 2012, a historic process of national reconciliation began, culminating in the installation of a new government in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in March 2014. Through this agreement, both parties agreed on the cessation of hostilities, as well as the approval of the RAMM as its own autonomous body through a plebiscite in 2019.

The situation of insecurity in the south of the country as a result of the incipient presence of jihadist groups led both parties, both the central government and the transitional authority, to improve cooperation in anti-terrorist matters. Since 2007, counter-terrorism policy has been regulated by the Human Security Act, but it was not until 13 years later that the Anti-Terrorism Act 11479 (2020) was enacted. This law, passed under the auspices of President Duterte, redefines the criminal concept of terrorism in the country, as well as the measures and sanctions applied to it.

In response, human rights groups and civil society groups expressed dismay at the new law, which would give “excessive powers” to the Duterte government, as well as an overly lax framework for the executive to act in counter-terrorism matters (Amnesty International, 2020). Under the law, the range of offences that can be charged as terrorism, such as “threatening or inciting to commit terrorist acts”, was expanded, allowing for extrajudicial arrests, and extending the maximum time a suspect could be held in police custody from 3 to 24 days (EFE, 2020). This amendment was reportedly interpreted by some experts and rights organisations as a move by Duterte to “brand and persecute” dissent, as well as any opponents suspected of being “enemies of the state” (EFE, 2020).

Despite the evident opposition of large sectors and social groups in the country to the implementation of the Anti-Terrorism Law, it has led to a notable decline in jihadist activity in recent years, due in large part to the coordinated activity of RAMM authorities alongside official government forces during this time. This cooperation has in turn led groups such as Dawla Islamiya to maintain a more ‘defensive’ but definitely ‘not extinct’ profile in the area (ICG, 2022). The materialisation of the RAMM as a political entity, together with the efficient performance of the security forces in the fight against jihadism, has reduced the levels of violence in the region and driven many young people away from enlisting in these organisations. However,

attacks such as those on the Sulu Cathedral, or the recent clashes between jihadist groups and the security forces in the south of the archipelago (Méndez, 2022) highlight the resilience of these groups in recruiting members and reorganising themselves.

5. Conclusions

The election of Bongbong Marcos as the new president of the Philippines raises a number of questions regarding the future management of his government in the fight against jihadism. Unlike his rival in the elections, Leni Robredo, Marcos has not yet announced exactly what his government's policy will be in this area, although some analysts are already predicting a continuity with his predecessor, largely due to the family ties between the future vice-president, Sara Duterte, and the former president - they are father and daughter.

Some experts believe that Marcos's accession to power could jeopardise the peace agreements reached with the MILF over the Bangsamoro region, thereby affecting progress made in the fight against terrorism. His father's political legacy, together with historical feuds between his father's family and members of the MILF and the local Moorish population, could play a decisive role in the future course of events, even jeopardising the region's autonomy. For other authors, however, the new leader's long political and military experience should serve as a sufficient guarantee for him to repair tensions with the local population and reach agreements with other groups (Chew, 2022).

On the other hand, regarding the possible future of jihadism in the region, it is worth noting that on 2 March, official Philippine government sources announced the identity of the new leader of Dawla Islamiyah: Fahrudin Hadji Satar, alias Abu Zacaria, who in turn would have established himself as the new emir of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia (Yeo, 2022). Likewise, official reports speak of recent NPA attacks in the Bisayas, in the north of the island of Mindanao (Punongbayan & Desacada, 2022), in what is considered a repositioning of the group in the face of the emergency situation experienced during the pandemic inside the island.

Regardless of the approach adopted by the former dictator's son, what seems clear is that the solution must be to keep the peace accords stable, as well as to try to correct the mistakes of the past in order to continue advancing towards the goals of social justice and the fight against terrorism. International criticism of the new government, local distrust of the new administration, and recent events on the ground seem to point to an uncertain future for the southern Philippines, which could end up becoming the new focus of instability and insecurity in the Asia-Pacific area.

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