

The Two Worlds of Abu Sayyaf

By Sean Yom

The summer has not been kind to Philippine President Gloria Arroyo. On May 27, 2001, armed members of the Muslim rebel group Abu Sayyaf raided a luxury hotel on the western island of Palawan and took 20 tourists hostage, including three Americans. A flustered Arroyo pledged to “annihilate” the group and ordered the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to launch a massive operation against Abu Sayyaf with astonishingly little regard for collateral damage. Two months and several battles later, most of the hostages are either dead or missing, over 12,000 families have fled their homes from the encroaching fighting, and mounting casualties of soldiers, rebels, and civilians have led to new doubts about the efficacy of Arroyo’s military solution.

President Arroyo faces a dilemma that all her predecessors have also reluctantly confronted, namely the continuing struggle for self-determination by the country’s Muslim population. Arroyo’s government has employed brute force against the well-armed Abu Sayyaf, with little success; this was its second mistake. Its first was misjudging the group as a typical criminal gang, rather than a vibrant politico-religious group holding deeply rooted grievances and ideologies. If Arroyo and her allies wish to retrieve the hostages and palliate the group’s militancy, they must realign their strategic assessment of Abu Sayyaf. The government should regard Abu Sayyaf not as a mere collection of bandits, but rather as a distinct, complex phenomenon produced by two parallel trends—Muslim separatism and Islamist jihadism.

Muslims have lived among the Philippines’ 7,000 islands since the 14th century, well before the Spaniards arrived. Four million Moros (the local term for Muslims) now live in the Philippines, which is the only predominately Catholic country in Southeast Asia. Since the late 1960s, the leading Moro rebel organiza-

tions, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), have waged guerrilla warfare to establish an independent Moro state. In 1990 the government incorporated four Muslim-dominated provinces into the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), and MNLF leaders now head its fledgling semi-autonomous government. Meanwhile, since 1978 the MILF has conducted low-level guerrilla activities, although it is now engaged in peace talks.

Abu Sayyaf began operations in the early 1990s, after the worst of the Moro guerrilla and government’s counterinsurgency violence had passed. Its leaders wish to create a sovereign Moro state ruled by shari’a (Islamic law); this marks the group as the latest embodiment of Moro ethnic nationalism. It regards the creation of ARMM as a half-hearted concession designed to appease the immediacy of the Moro plight rather than genuine progress toward independence. Since its founding, Abu Sayyaf has orchestrated various bombings, assassinations, and extortions. In 2000, it obtained international notoriety when it captured over 40 hostages over three months, many of them European tourists. Some Filipino captives died, but the Westerners escaped or were released through ransom payments, which allowed Abu Sayyaf to buy a large cache of advanced weaponry and gear. Wary of this, Arroyo has pledged a no-negotiation policy with the full support of MNLF and MILF leaders, who decry Abu Sayyaf as “un-Islamic” and a “stain upon Islam.”

Arroyo’s government should remember that only after thousands died and millions of refugees were created did the wars of the MNLF and MILF end. Throughout the past three decades, it has been the AFP, not the government itself, that has been the frontline negotia-

tor with Moro nationalists, resulting in prolonged violence. Although it does not have MNLF or MILF support, Abu Sayyaf is no less nationalist; perhaps it is more so. Most significantly, Moros still suffer from the same basic deficiencies they did thirty years ago, when the Moro guerrilla groups first formed. The Moro population suffers the nation's worst poverty and life expectancy levels, along with the least developed economy and a low level of institutional support from the government. What have been the Moros' traditional homelands for five centuries have disappeared in the past fifty years. These factors produced titular claims for Moro self-determination decades ago, and Abu Sayyaf's militancy proves that they continue to do so now. Arroyo should not passively stand by and allow the group to kidnap others, but improvident military containment is not the answer. It neither soothes radical nationalism nor constructs productive discourse; if anything, it further alienates a Moro population already inimical to the national government's integrationist desires.

Abu Sayyaf appears more radical than the MNLF and MILF because it incorporates elements of Islamist jihadism into its ideology. Apart from the discourse of Moro nationalism, Abu Sayyaf functions in a parallel world that has emerged in the past decade, when thousands of Muslim Russo-Afghan War veterans have returned home. In the 1980s, Muslim youths traveled from their homes around the world to Afghanistan and enrolled in training camps that taught them guerilla warfare and arms proficiency. Supported by the

U.S., Saudi Arabia, and other countries, these fighters waged a vicious jihad (holy war) against the occupying Soviets. After the Soviets left, most of the itinerant guerrillas carried home not only radical Islamist ideas but also the destructive strategies and methods that would characterize a new wave of violence across the Islamic world. They exerted substantial influence in their respective countries: for instance, in Algeria, they fueled the violent Islamic Salvation Front; in Yemen, they bolstered the militant ranks of the Islam Reform Party (the *USS Cole* bombers were two such veterans); they even fought in Bosnia during the Yugoslav civil war. And one veteran, Abdurajak Janjalani, would return to his native Philippines and in 1991 found Abu Sayyaf, whose name translates as "bearer of the sword."

The Islamist movements of the 1990s waged jihad against their home governments through terrorist or guerilla tactics; Abu Sayyaf's proclaimed jihad regards the government and AFP as oppressors that must be banished from Moro lands by any means necessary. Muslim scholars maintain that this version of jihad—violent struggle against others based upon political or religious distinctions, often for the imagined glory of historic Islamic lands (for instance, Osama bin Laden's "jihad against Americans and Jews")—does not faithfully reflect Quranic teachings. Nonetheless, this jihadist discourse justifies violence as a legitimate, immanent means to a transcendent end. Embedded within this context, Abu Sayyaf's declaration of jihad gains considerable import. It is not an excuse to terrorize; it manifestly signals an entrenched religious

devotion to an ideal image of Islamist justice. Military action against the group fuels this mentality.

Arroyo has dismissed the claim that the group stands for something other than criminal malice. Isolated from its magnanimous political and religious dynamics, Abu Sayyaf's violence does appear brutally criminal. Moreover, not all Abu Sayyaf members ardently evince either Moro nationalism or jihadist thought. It is no coincidence that its membership surged last year when it received millions of ransom dollars for its previous hostages. But its core leadership and membership remain intensely coupled with Moro separatism and Islamist jihadism, which fuse the religious, political, and violent realms of praxis into a unitary domain of concern.

In other regions, not only has mindless military force usually failed to stamp out Islamism, it often perpetuates crushing cycles of violence (i.e., Chechnya). Arroyo does not have to cede half her country to Abu Sayyaf's secessionist claims, but destroying the group will not arrest Moro restlessness or Islamist jihadism; a lasting *modus vivendi* requires a degree of willing communication that bullets will not bring. Unless Arroyo navigates her course with prudence—and pays more attention to the ideological and political trends that Abu Sayyaf represents—she will only hasten her country's painful balkanization.

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