



Factors and Forces that Led to the Marawi Debacle

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ABSTRACT. This report is an attempt to piece together the events that led to the battle of Marawi in 2017, before rebels acting on a pledge to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), planned a takeover to turn Marawi into a *wilayat*, or a province under an absolute Islamic state. How the events found its way to Marawi was gathered from private interviews with four intelligence officers and their analysis of classified reports, four major sources close to the Maute family, and from secret dossiers brought to the attention of former President Benigno Aquino III whose government at the time before the Marawi siege was cautious to highlight the threat. This report would also reveal the collaboration of the fighters belonging to the so-called Maute Group with a few identified foreign terrorists who have managed quite easily to slip into and stay in the country, influencing, variably, the trend of extremism among Filipino Muslims.

KEYWORDS. Marawi · Maute · violent extremism · terrorism

INTRODUCTION

No sooner had the Islamist fighters unleashed a rampage in the city of Marawi than President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law in the entire Mindanao. He was out of the country, on a visit in Moscow with an entourage of military and police generals with their wives. The sudden declaration surprised the senior commanders, including the armed forces chief of staff. It came rather convenient for the president at the spur of the moment, even without having a full picture of the situation on the ground that day, May 23, 2017. There was a breakdown of governance, clearly, and intelligence culled over the previous months came to naught. The battle would last five months, with a toll of nearly one thousand killed and the city in ruins.

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Syria), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), planned a takeover to turn Marawi into a *wilayat*, or a province, under an absolute Islamic state. How the fight found its way to Marawi was gathered from private interviews with four intelligence officers and their analysis of classified reports, and equally from four major sources close to the Maute family who, as well as the others, asked not to be named; and also secret dossiers brought to the attention of former President Benigno Aquino, whose government, at the time before the Marawi Siege, was cautious to highlight the threat. This would also reveal the collaboration of the fighters belonging to the so-called Maute Group with a few identified foreign terrorists who have managed quite easily to slip into and stay in the country, influencing, variably, the trend of extremism among Filipino Muslims.

For nearly half a century, the Muslim insurgency has laid its cartography of rebellions, uprisings, attacks, and killings in the Mindanao south—where peace seems elusive. The Battle of Marawi in 2017, in the heart of the Islamic city in Lanao del Sur province, deviated into violent extremism that opened more fears for the future in what was an undertaking by mostly a generation of millennial fighters. The siege that lasted five months, from May to October, was unprecedented in magnitude; it challenged the military in doctrine and tactics, prompting daily sorties of air strikes that reduced Marawi to a state of destruction. It was unbelievable that two principal brothers of a family attached to the political and business elite of the Maranaos—the Muslim ethnic tribe of Lanao del Sur—had raised the stakes of Islamism beyond the call for autonomy in a fractured land.

Omarkhayam and Abdullah belonged to a family that became popularly known as the Maute Group. Their movement, small as it was in the beginning, had been going in and out of the radar of military intelligence which had a hard time pinpointing what was happening among the Muslim rebel groups, given their constant splintering and their shift to bombings and kidnappings after the military had taken down many of their original leaders. Besides, the military's focus was always on the Sulu and Basilan islands, where the radical Abu Sayyaf Group, previously linked to the Al-Qaeda and aligned with the hardcore fighters of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) that refused to yield to negotiations with the government, were operating. The MNLF leadership came mainly from Sulu, the seat of the Tausug ethnic group. The military never thought of the Maranaos of Lanao as capable of doing what the Tausugs had done. The Maranaos are mostly

traders by tradition and find constant war bad for business. But Lanao del Sur, along with other provinces in Muslim Mindanao, has long been beset with poor governance and riddled with clan violence. The military should have known, for soldiers themselves steered clear of Marawi City even before the siege to avoid getting caught in the middle of conflicts.

It was in the town of Butig where events leading up to the battle in Marawi was put into action to turn the vision of an Islamic state into a reality. It lies to the south of the omnipresent Lake Lanao, for which the province is named, a natural jewel symbolically inherent to the social and cultural lives of the Maranao people—one of the three major ethnic groups in Muslim Mindanao. There was not much to see in Butig except for the town hall that represents a token of local government, flanked by a few houses unfinished or done in makeshift. There is the basketball court outside the town hall that divides warring factions in a *rido* fight, a blood sport for revenge ingrained in the Muslim culture. (Two years after the siege, Butig would return to life with the sound of fun and excitement of a basketball tournament but only because of army presence in civil-military operations). Butig was a microcosm representing wedges in the Muslim culture that makes taking up arms uncomplicated and facile, with local leaders (albeit elected) choosing sides of warring clans rather than pursuing peace and progress.

The sight of poverty recedes out to the meadow in the wide green space, turning into forest trails that lead to a well-hidden encampment, which was an ideal spot to hide and train a rebel army. The land was looked after by the matriarch of the brothers, whose family, the Romatos, were pioneers of Butig and aligned through blood relations with one of the senior leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF had broken away from the MNLF, taking over as the current dominant rebel group that went to the peace table with the government. At the height of its strength in the 1990s, the MILF held a complex of encampments in the forest of Butig, one of which was Camp Darul Iman, which was closer to the river. It was strategically on the other side of the mountain range from the grand Camp Abubakar in neighboring Maguindanao province, which was then the seat of MILF power before the army ran it down in 2000.

It was there in Camp Abubakar and smaller camps around the border where the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) trained in their cadetship of a clandestine military school, with neophyte fighters from Indonesia and

Malaysia whose ties with Filipino rebels formed—over a period of time in scattered shifts of their ideologies—a certain kinship. They developed smaller secret cells for training sessions that broke up after the military campaign in 2000. Those who stayed in Butig came into contact, eventually, with the Maute brothers whose family was a mainstay in the town politics and linked to the MILF as well.

In Butig, graffiti on the wall of the bare concrete structure that was their barracks said it was called Camp Darul Iman (part of the complex of encampments) under the MILF from 1996 to 2015. And then the Maute brothers took over after a major disagreement with the MILF, which demanded the brothers take down the black flag they hoisted at the camp. At the time, the MILF was committed to keeping the peace talks with the government going, and the black flag was a thorn on their side of goodwill. The elder of the two, Omarkhayam, stubbornly refused, saying it was a message of Allah, and holed himself up for about a month until he decided to join his younger brother Abdullah, who had set up tents in a hamlet a few kilometers away. When the MILF abandoned Camp Darul Iman in Butig after the successive military air strikes in 2016, the brothers took over what was left of it and held their training sessions there. The army would attack the camp during what it called its Haribon campaign, named after the brigade unit based in Marawi. This campaign was alternately called the Butig campaign, referring to its location.

The Maute brothers began their jihad in early 2014. They had already returned from their Islamic studies abroad: Omarkhayam from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, where he met his Indonesian wife, (he moved with her to Jakarta before settling back home); Abdullah from Jordan where he spent close to seven years mastering the Koran and learning the jurisprudence of the Sharia law at the Al Mu'tah University. Although he was a year younger than Omarkhayam, he was considered the *de facto* leader because of his knowledge in Islamic religion. The Maute brothers' graduate degrees from abroad were the shining scepter of their authority. In Butig, they attracted young Maranaos from poor families who knew nothing of religious ideologies but were impressed by the thunder in which they delivered their speeches. To their recruits, they were educated, idealistic, and influential in a small, impoverished town. In time, the brothers also started recruiting kin, which proved to be a cinch because of a cultural code among Muslim clans to help or rescue family members as a matter of honor. It did not matter what they did; it was a family obligation to

protect one another. They also sought out friends of families, and then friends of friends. Many of the latter were from middle-class clans and went to good schools. As the group became more known, even children of local politicians sought them out, which was not so unusual, given that many families were armed to begin with. The last group they tapped were orphans and delinquent children sent to boarding schools called *toril*. The Maute Group was an organization of millennials. The brothers were in their thirties and so were many of their main recruits. In contrast, the MILF fighters were in their late thirties to forties.

There was a third man in this partnership, an unknown rebel who goes by the alias Abu Dar, the head of the local Khalifa Islamiya Movement. He did not have many followers, according to one former fighter who was with him, and it was believed that he joined the Mautes to compensate for this weakness. Abu Dar's full name is Humam Abdul Najid, a Maranao who studied in the far north of the country, at the Almaarif Educational Center in Baguio City. How he got there in his youth is not clear. According to the military, Abu Dar underwent military and explosives training in Afghanistan in 2005 and had also gone to Saudi Arabia as an overseas worker, returning to Mindanao in 2012 to found a militant group (that he called Khalifa Islamiyah) in Lanao del Sur. He tried to link up with the notorious Commander Bravo of the MILF's base command in Lanao, and forged ties with another base commander in the neighboring Maguindanao province, Ameril Umbra Kato. Kato broke away from his comrades from the MILF and formed the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters or the BIFF—which formally split from the MILF in 2010.¹

Abu Dar was involved in bombings in the neighboring Christian cities of Iligan and Cagayan de Oro. He joined the brothers to bring their forces together and this was how the so-called Maute Group was formed. The government put up a bounty of three million pesos in wanted posters distributed around Butig using Dar's other alias, Owayda Benito Marohomsar.² In the photograph, Dar had a slightly

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1. Bravo and Kato severed their ties with the MILF because they opposed the autonomy agreement with the government, claiming they wanted full independence. Kato died of an illness in 2015 and Bravo returned to the fold, later becoming a member of a Bangsamoro Transition Authority based in Cotabato City in 2019.
 2. Abu Dar has another alias, Humam, which goes with what his fellow rebels said was his true name.

bearded chin, which added some charm to his smile, his head tightly wrapped in a black headband (partly to conceal a shaven head). Abu Dar was as charismatic as the brothers, but he was the type who stood inconspicuously at the back in a group, getting close and personal only when it came to teaching what he wanted to impart to his students about Allah. In that sense, he was on equal footing with Abdullah—the man who was considered the thinker, the strategist for bringing the flag of ISIS to the southern Philippines. Many of the fighters they took under their wings were in their late teens or in their twenties.

THE RECRUITMENT

Gail Tan Ilagan of the Ateneo de Davao University prepared a comprehensive report on the recruitment of the Maute fighters and their path to violent extremism. She ascribed the growth of the organization to the frustration, cynicism, and distrust of young Maranaos, stemming from the long years of peace talks with the government and the lack of fundamental growth to create normalcy in the areas of Muslim Mindanao. Similar surveys done in Iligan and Zamboanga cities and in Lanao del Sur in 2016 reported a general sense of futility in reaching a stage of Muslim self-determination. A substantial number of respondents, therefore, were leaning toward a true jihad instead, deviating from a homegrown teaching of Islam. These sentiments permeated in the universities, among young professionals and civil servants, and also the students in madrasas. Tan Ilagan's report entitled, "Toward Countering Recruitment to Violent Extremism in Mindanao," warned:

Departing from traditionally moderate interpretations of Islam that is more the norm among Muslims in the Philippines, these radical ideas [taken from the internet, radio, etc.], represent novelty that could be sufficient to pique more than passing interest . . . It seeks to override the aspirations for a Moro homeland by injecting the urgency for the Moro to unite instead with Muslims everywhere for a pan-Islamic state. (Tan Ilagan 2017, unpublished manuscript)

In Butig, the supposed center of the soon-to-evolve ISIS community, the Maute brothers and Abu Dar conducted a "seminar" in October 2014, where the participants, about forty of them, went through some heavy soul-searching, complete with full confessions and weeping. They were supposedly to purify themselves of their sins and vices like

smoking, drinking, and fornication. They were told that this was the way to repent. One could atone for their sins as well as intercede in behalf of seventy family members in their lineage. Was this the beginning of radicalization? Was this going to be a one-way ticket to heaven? Could they erase their sins in the name of jihad, which was going to be the “roof to protect the community”? Sharia law was rarely practiced by Filipino Muslims. It was only in ISIS and in Pakistan, Brunei, and Saudi Arabia that punishment by stoning for certain instances of fornication were done. By introducing this to a future of the Islamic State, the Maute leaders hoped to turn the world of Filipino Muslims—one that was generally moderate, secular, and still adhering to folk mysticism—upside down. If the recruits felt they knew very little of what true Islam was, in this “seminar” they finally found their true education. The seminars were a hard blow to their conscience and there was no let-up to changing minds and hearts until their leaders were convinced of a full conversion. They were lectured in a mix of soft tones and hard ones, to go by the high emotions of the moment. At night the participants mulled over the lessons in their sleeping bags or *malong*.

In the last phase of the seminar, the recruits were ordered to familiarize themselves with weapons. This was not altogether unusual because having a gun in a Muslim household is as normal as having a pot in the kitchen. They were shown a rocket propelled grenade, or an RPG—the kind of weapon that paralyzed military armors in the first days of the Marawi Siege. They were told that, by way of *hadith*, even carrying a weapon alone was going to make them blessed, which would come with heavenly rewards. They were then made to walk for an hour from their bare lodgings to an open field that was to be their training ground. They went through a ring of fire; they crawled in and out of tunnels; their adrenaline fueled when live bullets rained on them. The training was supposed to give them a sense of how it was like to be in a real firefight. At the end of the training, they marched in a parade like an army that was born. Abdullah led them, riding on a horse and waving a black banner that had an Arabic emblem that said, “There is no god but Allah. Mohammad is the messenger of Allah.”

By the time they returned to Camp Darul Iman in Butig later that year, in December 2014, they had completed their all-around training. It was time to fight, to become martyrs and absolve themselves and their families of their sins. In that meeting, Abdullah did most of the talking while Abu Dar quietly stood at the back. Omarkhayam was the

brother, eager for the trigger, who would draw first blood. In February 2016, in an operation called Butig 1, he led an attack against an army detachment in Butig's town hall. Abdullah apparently did not know about this plan of his brother to give the young recruits their baptism of fire. When the army fought back, Abdullah was forced to bring in reinforcement of about fifty men, and the firefight lasted for days, this time with bombs and artillery. Abdullah was upset at his brother for having done such a thing. "The enemy is here," Omarkhayam was quoted as having told his younger brother. "Why do I need to ask permission [to launch an attack]? The enemy is here, why shouldn't we fight?"³ The young recruits were also eager for a fight, emboldened by what they heard had happened a year before, when rebels ambushed an army truck traveling on a major bridge between Iligan and Marawi. And Butig 1 did yield political dividends for the Maute Group. A senior-ranking fighter said the group, which first had a small army of thirty, grew to about two hundred forces, and by the time the battle of Marawi started, they had about six hundred fighting against government forces to gain control of Lanao del Sur's capital.

During pursuit operations, the military was able to recover documents telling of the existence of a group called Daulat ul Islamiyyah (commonly called Daulah Islamiyah) of which Abdullah was the leader. This was a name interchangeable with the Maute Group and Abu Dar's Khalifa Islamiya, so much so that their own neighbors could not tell them apart. The group would soon be part of a conglomeration of local terrorist groups, including the BIFF in Maguindanao and Ansar al-Khalifa in Sarangani, that swore allegiance to the ISIS. The documents were also an indication that the Maute brothers were coming out into the open, when previously, they had kept themselves hidden from the eyes and ears of the military. The military also retrieved improvised explosive devices, an ISIS flag, and handbooks by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi of Iraq, the leader of ISIS. The documents should have left the military little doubt that there was a new group. Yet, it had downplayed the threat even up to the early months of President Duterte's term in office that began in July 2016.

The documents recovered after the operations revealed additional information about the training camp and Abu Dar's training of his recruits, guided by a *Lone Mujahid* pocketbook. They also showed that

3. The military believed it was Abu Dar who reinforced Omarkhayam's unprovoked attack on the military detachment.

the ambush was in retribution for the deaths of two rebels killed in a firefight. Finally, one report stated that Abu Dar had been kicked out by Commander Bravo from his stronghold in the northern part of Lanao and had found his way to Commander Kato's area, and had possibly made his visit to Basilan where there are towns occupied by both the MILF and the Abu Sayyaf before he found himself back in Lanao del Sur and in the fields of Butig.

In due time, the Maute brothers aroused the curiosity of intelligence operatives when copies of their passports were found after a November 2012 shootout that killed an Indonesian terrorist named Sanusi in the campus of Mindanao State University in Marawi. Sanusi, who had been the object of a manhunt for years, was a key figure in the terrorist cells of Southeast Asia. The military believed that he might be related to Omarkhayam's Indonesian wife. Oddly, the Maute name hardly rang a bell then. The intelligence operatives figured the brothers were mere "affiliates" to Sanusi, who, upon his death, was a ranking leader of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) that earlier had access to the camp in Butig.

Sanusi, who took the Arabic name Ibnu Gholib al-Jitli as *nom de guerre*, fled to the Philippines in 2006 after he was accused of beheading three Christian girls on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. As a ranking JI figure, he was able to embed himself in Lanao, marrying a local Muslim girl and becoming the pipeline between Islamic rebels in the Philippines to outside terrorist groups. He, likewise, was able to arrange the training of foreign jihadists in Mindanao. The Philippines was the "enabling environment" for hiding foreign terrorists, with its weak internal security and porous borders. Anything was readily grown in Muslim Mindanao over the course of decades of on-again, off-again fighting, like a nest that could breed a host for a string of rebellions, criminal syndicates, private armies, or any of the kind. They meld into each other, forming a nebulous picture, making it difficult to squarely address the trouble in the south. The military was either a step behind any trend or unwilling to take risks on a bigger scale without a strategic push from national government policy.

Thus, foreign terrorists could in some ways manipulate outcomes for Filipino Muslim rebels, one of which was an escalation of bombings. The figure who represented such action was the Malaysian terrorist Zulkipli Bin Hir—whose alias was Marwan.

Marwan had been in the Philippines all along, marrying the widow of Abu Sayyaf leader Khadafy Janjalini, who was killed in a firefight in Sulu in 2006. He later fled Sulu in haste following an Air Force strike

that hit the rebels' jungle base in Sulu with precision-guided weapons. The attack killed a key Abu Sayyaf leader, angering the commander who forced Marwan and his cohorts to leave for unexplained reasons, but which the military surmised was the outcome of factional rivalries within the group. Marwan took refuge with Sanusi in Butig, crossing the sea, from where he moved to the hamlets of the MILF-controlled Mamasapano in Maguindanao. Marwan came to notorious prominence when he was killed in a police operation in January 2015. That incident provoked national tragedy on account of forty-four police commandos killed in a botched plan to capture Marwan in MILF-controlled hamlets. The political fallout caused the breakdown of then-President Aquino's plan to offer a new autonomous law for Muslim Mindanao in a deal signed with the MILF leadership. In fact, it was this lack of coordination that was said to have caused the Mamasapano incident in January 2015; but Marwan's Filipino partner, Basit Usman, who led the Ansar al-Khalifa in Sarangani, was killed in the hands of the MILF four months after the Mamasapano incident in 2015, ostensibly to show its good faith in the negotiations with the government.

In many areas of Mindanao, brewing trouble was not to be as surprising as the one that was happening in Butig. The younger rebels had everything in place: ideal location, family connections (which means money), an ideology to move forward where their elders had left off and chosen cooperation with the government. The presence of foreign terrorists and the exposure to social media had invariably changed the vision of what Islam is supposed to be. In January 2014, Abu Dar and the brothers met with the MILF at the camp to resolve certain issues. The MILF, according to a Maute relative, did not want the black banner flying and this became a point of contention. The army was already aware of this meeting, so the army brigade commander requested for an operation by February, but this was turned down without prior permission from a ceasefire committee.

In March 2014, the Maute brothers were already in place in the camp. A satellite visual recording a few months later showed what looked like a black flag flying over Camp Darul Iman. The people observed were going to pledge their allegiance to the ISIS and be recognized and approved by the latter to create a *wilayat* or province. It was done in April 2015, and in the following year, ISIS accepted that allegiance, as shown in a newsletter online. In the scheme of things, the south of the Philippines was a small dot to the Islamic State that was being entrenched in Mosul, Iraq, and in Raqqa, Syria. It took time for

the splintering rebel groups to align and decide to veer the way of the ISIS (and yet, not all joined the same path for various reasons, some unknown, others political). If the genesis had started in Butig, were they to start the wilayat there, or go directly to the Islamic capital, Marawi? The answer to that came in May 2017.

In the weeks leading to the training of the recruits in October 2014, there were leaflets distributed in the central mosque of Marawi, quoting passages in the Koran written in Maranao referencing a jihad. Text messages were making the rounds to go to the mosque. In 2015, the Maute Group stepped up their activities with a series of attempts to kill soldiers or policemen, the bombings of electric power lines using improvised explosives, and the random killings of ordinary Christian vendors eking out a living in Marawi. Targeted killings of Christians was something new, as it was extremely rare in the past, although tensions between Muslims and Christians in Marawi had usually been more pronounced than, say, the Sulu islands. Many of these incidents took place in the capital Marawi, about forty kilometers north of Butig, so that when Butig 1/Haribon 1 turned into a firefight, there was no connecting of the dots as of then. The radicals of the group displayed their brand of fighting online when they showed the beheading of Christian workers who had been kidnapped from a logging site and taken to Butig where the brothers had initially set up camp.

Gail Tan Ilagan's report stated that in mainland Mindanao (i.e., Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur provinces), mosques and madrasas, especially those funded by money from Saudi Arabia, were said to be places for potential recruits, "identified through their devout worship, their regular participation in Islamic seminars, and the kind of earnest questions they ask during such gatherings." While the boarding schools of the toril essentially confine their students and hold them captive to extremist indoctrination, "there is little indication of the success of mass recruitment, if indeed such is being attempted in the first place." In Marawi, the toril were known to be the parents' last resort for delinquent children, but for some who found out that their children were being trained in Butig under harsh conditions and, in some extreme cases, were sent to tiny, isolated islands on the lake, they attempted to take them back. The orphans were a much easy prey.

THE BUTIG CAMPAIGN

Butig 2/Haribon 2 broke out three months after the first one, in May 2016. The military was able to identify four small encampments in the Butig hideout and began firing artillery in their direction. There were those from the Maute Group that were training in Piagapo, near west of Marawi. They came to the rescue of the fighters in Butig and were able to bring the battle back against the military before the start of the Ramadan in June. The fighters were told that striking during the Holy Month would mean having their heavenly rewards multiplied. But the military bombardment had taken its toll. Many were wounded and escaped to the lake using a banca to seek medical assistance elsewhere.

This second operation lasted for more than a week. For the young recruits, this was their first real taste of firefight. Others sought refuge back in Piagapo, where there was a training camp, while others went back to their homes, keeping a low profile while waiting to be called into action again. While doing so, they learned how to dig tunnels and rat holes—something that would be useful during the Marawi Siege the following year. After Butig 2/Haribon 2, the group continued recruiting among close relatives, school children, and orphans. Rogue fighters from the MILF and the breakaway BIFF also joined, beefing up a force not of ragtag but young, solid fighters. There were some women who also trained to use rifles.

In late August that year, Abu Dar led a jailbreak that became the stuff of news in Marawi, attesting to the Maute Group's audacity.⁴ There were setbacks, however; Abu Dar's wife, two of the Maute sisters, and five men were arrested at a checkpoint after their van was stopped on the way to Marawi from Butig. Police found pistols and materials for making bombs inside the vehicle (or they could have been planted, which is a common practice in the police force for quick arrests of suspected terrorists). The Mautes' mother had political connections and tried to have them released on bail or through some other arrangement with prison officials. Both did not pan out in time.

That checkpoint arrest gave the military a goldmine of information when they retrieved a laptop from one of the men arrested, who was believed to be the one in charge of the group's social media communications. He was able to provide a wider reach of their

4. Abu Dar led the daring act, his wife having taken with her two of their children whom she was still breastfeeding. His wife was later caught in General Santos City in July 2018, and taken to jail in Manila where she gave birth to another child.

influence, as was done in the recruitment of fighters to Syria from different parts of the world. The laptop also had pictures of the young fighters, mug shots that would be printed on tarpaulins for the wanted men posters of the rebel group. The Maute Group was now out in the open, a presence that could not be ignored. Social media had played a huge role in the rebellion of the younger recruits; it gave them the impetus to be different, whether real or not, and to aspire for an identity that had been missing all their lives, perhaps regardless of how they see their faith in the lay of their land that bred violence. In the decades of Muslim insurgency, a keg had already matured into a concoction of a rebellion; besides which, possessing a weapon remained, constantly, part and parcel of their identity.

By the time December 2016 came around, there were random air strikes leading up to what would next become Butig 3/Haribon 3. The rebels were caught off guard, retreating to the hinterland border of Maguindanao. There, they stayed silent. Some of the fighters had heard that one of the Abu Sayyaf leaders, Isnilon Hapilon, was coming from Basilan island to join them. The military had information that he had landed by boat along the northwestern coast by Illana Bay, along with fifty passengers among whom were supposedly foreign fighters. This was the basis for the third operation, believing that after such a heavy bombardment, Hapilon might have gotten killed or wounded. By all accounts, this was big news. But Hapilon actually did not arrive in Lanao until the second week of January 2017, according to one of the fighters, when the Maute brothers' group was already settled back in Butig after the military operation. He had his own team of men, including his son, and was given his own camp where only Abdullah and Omarkhayam could see him.

Hapilon visited the young recruits in their camps, introducing himself as the "Emir of East Asia." He had the look of a man in his fifties and was physically fit. He was wearing the typical robe of a *tabligh* missionary, with a turban that was to be a part of his persona. He seemed intimidating, too. He spoke to his men in Tausug but spoke to the Maranaos in Tagalog with a heavy accent. He also stayed with these young fighters for the noon prayer. He told them it was his obligation to stand as the emir, following a designation awarded to him by the higher ranks of ISIS "even though he didn't want it," according to one of the recruits who was there and heard him speak. Once in Lanao, he basically took over the leadership of the Maute Group from Abdullah. The Maranao fighters assumed that Hapilon had closer ties

with ISIS based on what they saw on social media. The brothers' domain was limited to Lanao.

Military reports indicated that the announcement of Hapilon's rise to emir was done earlier in the Maute home in Marawi in June 2016. During that period, another key terrorist with the alias of Tokboy was holding court. His real name, Mohammad Jaafar Maguid, was also a Maranao who had been arrested and later escaped. He was in the same league as Marwan, both categorized as "bombers." He replaced Basit Usman of the Mamasapano incident, shifting the base of the Ansar al-Khalifa between Sarangani and neighboring Sultan Kudarat province. Tokboy allegedly masterminded the market bombing in Davao City in August 2016—breaking the myth that President Duterte's bailiwick was safe and infallible. Tokboy was nearly caught in November 2015 when Marines were going after militants in Sultan Kudarat province. Instead, they killed an Indonesian named Saifullah Ibrahim (aka Ibrahim Ali). This turned out to be a significant pursuit. Secret documents that reached the desk of then-President Aquino revealed that Ibrahim Ali, alias Sucipto, was being groomed to be the emir for ISIS in Southeast Asia. No other intelligence gathering had the same findings, saying that it was not logical for Filipino rebels to kowtow to a foreigner. It was one thing to have them train and teach in the underground fight, but quite another to have them lead the local militant groups to be galvanized into one cause.

Sucipto was a top student in the first batch of the JIs who trained in Camp Abubakar in 1992, and was then selected to help command the organization's operations in southern Philippines. He was caught in Sabah en route to Indonesia. Rather than deport him to Indonesia, Malaysian authorities sent him to the Philippines where he had pending charges on bombing incidents in Mindanao. He was jailed for years in a maximum-security prison in Manila but was acquitted in 2014 for lack of evidence. Philippine authorities let him go scot-free instead of deporting him to Indonesia. The first thing he did upon his release was to visit Marwan in Mamasapano. He later linked up with Tokboy in Sultan Kudarat, where he was shot and killed in November 2015. These provinces had become host to burgeoning underground militant activities, aided by an easy access to Indonesia. Tokboy was particularly close to young Filipino men who were referred to as the *Balik Islam*—Christians who had converted to Islam in mosques in other parts of the country as well as overseas Filipino workers in the Middle East who had been converted by the Salafist and Wahhabi

ideologies. It was the radicals who moved to the mainland of Mindanao for the underground Islamist movement.⁵

Tokboy was killed in a shootout against intelligence agents in a beach resort in Sarangani province in January 2017. This was around the time Hapilon had set foot in Lanao province. The story of why Hapilon was chosen to be emir has yet to be unearthed; one former police officer surmised that the rebel groups were “scraping the bottom of the barrel,” meaning there was no other choice after many of the key leaders had been killed. Why did not the other Abu Sayyaf leaders in Sulu support Hapilon? Were the rumors of a leadership split true? Hapilon’s religious mooring was “very strong” by far, so why did not the others follow? He was one of Khadafy Janjalani’s lieutenants though he was not a favorite. He was a Yakan, not a Tausug. Was this the reason why, by being the newly anointed emir, his recourse was to join forces with the Maute brothers of Lanao?

The young fighters in Butig were in awe of Hapilon, coming face-to-face with the warrior who had been around since the inception of the Abu Sayyaf in Sulu in the late 1990s. Hapilon’s five million-peso prize on his head made him a high-value target but also enhanced his stature. The military was not too far behind, closing in on him but hitting on the wrong targets of the camps. The rebel group had already put up a “new” camp of tents and shelters. Following an inspirational speech from Hapilon during a private and personal meeting, the fighters moved to Piagapo, crossing Lake Lanao and settling by the site near a tower that was once an American settlement in the colonial days of the early 1900s. Located by the hills that stood at the edge of a plain, it had the remains of solid bunkers where they could hide. An imam who was formerly with the MILF took care of the place. The group stayed there for about a month, during which time there was talk of a big Marawi operation, similar to what they had heard when Hapilon came to Butig. The other fighters, about one hundred of them, set up camp surreptitiously and separately in the barangays around Marawi. A big plan was afoot.

Those involved in the terrorism watch assumed that Hapilon needed space, freedom of movement, and foreign supporters because

5. The role of the converts is another story to tell: they who joined the battle of Marawi and were said to be hardliners fighting at the front line. One of the last ones to hold out even after the death of the leader Hapilon during the siege was said to be a Balik Islam.

his narrow territory in Basilan was overrun by constant deployment of army troops. In the Mindanao mainland, however, there was a large area to maneuver. Abu Dar had told his men that it was imperative (a *dalil*) to follow Hapilon as the chosen emir and anyone who did not do so was considered a traitor, or a *kafir*. The fighters thus ended up regrouping in Butig, Piagapo, and Marawi. Having received intelligence reports of this movement by Hapilon and other foreign terrorists, the military launched an operation from January until the first week of March 2017.⁶ The rebels did not in any way respond to the bombings and steered clear of military operations. Soldiers would discover the camps empty and did not know what to make of it. The rebels discovered a military spy amid their ranks, a young unlettered boy who was close to Abdullah. They would use him to provide the military with wrong information as well as false targets. No one knew what happened to the boy, but the officer for whom he was spying was killed in a rubout in Marawi in February 2017.

Then in April 2017, the brigade commander camp asked for more troops when reports filtered in that there was going to be another attack. When elite special forces moved into Piagapo, fighting ensued.⁷ It took Air Force strikes to stop the rebels and they thought that was the end of it, and that it would take time before the rebels could regroup again and strike somewhere else. As it turned out, the military was very wrong. Soon after conducting the Piagapo operation, their attention was suddenly diverted to going after communist rebels operating at the border into Bukidnon on the eastern flank of Lanao del Sur. The army camp in Marawi was left vulnerable with only about a company on guard. This explains why, despite receiving naval intelligence reports all the way from the Western Command in Zamboanga warning of an impending threat by Hapilon and his comrades, the local command was in no position to prevent the siege of Marawi by the rebels on May 23.

6. During one of the firefights, it was possible that Hapilon had been wounded or killed, but this was never confirmed.

7. Piagapo was relatively a progressive town compared to others in Lanao del Sur province, and the local government more or less cooperated with the military in house searches after the Piagapo operation that took over the rebel camp and dismantled their base.

CONCLUSION

The Battle of Marawi was officially declared over after the military killed Isnilon Hapilon and Omarkhayam Maute in mid-October 2017. Abdullah Maute, too, was believed killed earlier in the siege but his corpse was not found. Abu Dar escaped and tried to put a new army together. His plan was short-lived; he was killed in a firefight with an army platoon in mid-March 2019, in an area a mere thirty kilometers from Butig. Marawi, however, has never recovered from the battle. It remains a devastated area and its residents have yet to receive the government aid promised by President Duterte who, later in his speeches, relinquished those promises to rebuild Marawi, saying there were enough wealthy Maranao families who could provide the needed help, and blamed the illegal drug trade and corruption money as impetus for the violence. By reducing the causes and aftermath of the Marawi Siege to a black-and-white issue, the government would likely fail to address the Muslims' future in nation-building, as previous administrations lacked foresight and cutting-edge policies.

The narrative of how Marawi came into fruition remains incomplete. There are still many unanswered questions. For example, how does one draw links and connect dots from place to place (rebel strongholds) and people to people (rebel leaders) before the plot to take over Marawi was hatched? Is it the clandestine movement of foreign terrorists vis-à-vis the local rebel movement that spelled a change in the trajectory of the Muslim insurgency? Mapping out the links and alliances would be as tough and arduous as unspooling the threads binding the clans and family loyalties, not to mention their place as dynastic families in the sphere of local governance. But it was certainly the call to violence over the years, the inability to stop it at all cost, that made the southern enclaves of Muslim Mindanao an open field.

The military had the wilayat plan in their hands only after the attempt to arrest Hapilon triggered the Marawi Siege, in a house that was a couple of kilometers from the brigade camp and a few meters away from the mosque. The attempt was a failure but it had a silver lining of preempting the takeover that was supposed to have started on the first day of Ramadan three days later. If the intelligence report had not arrived in the nick of time and the raid had not been carried out, Marawi might have been lost altogether.

It was only in the Philippines where Islamist rebels were aiming for an East Asia wilayat, the Holy Grail, so to speak, to get ISIS recognition

(Jones 2018). While the Abu Sayyaf of the Philippines and the Jemaah Islamiyah of Indonesia were originally linked to Al-Qaeda, their goals overlapped with those of ISIS, thus bringing them under the banner of the Daulah Islamiyah, or the Daulat ul Islamiyah. Sidney Jones, a conflict analyst, said they could very well do that under the usual circumstances in southern Philippines, but it was a much bigger undertaking to have every group of Southeast Asia together, or what was envisioned to be a wilayat in the region. Clearly, from the time foreign terrorists set foot in Mindanao, initially for training in Camp Abubakar in the 1990s, the movement had altered the configuration of local rebel groups into an amorphous threat bound by varied ideological preferences, drawing a thin line between banditry and terrorism, and a marriage of convenience.

Under what conditions were Filipino rebels willing to take in their counterparts from Indonesia or Malaysia or elsewhere? Is their fight refracted from what they had learned abroad—in the Middle East and South Asia? What of it has remained homegrown? The Philippine Muslim narrative is different from that of their Southeast Asian neighbors, Jones pointed out—does this mean they have to fill in gaps or were they bonded in circumstances from the days of Camp Abubakar? The Maute brothers were supposed to recreate what ISIS accomplished in Mosul, Iraq; Omarkhayam was said to have trained his sight on that goal with the help of an Indonesian from Central Java named Abu Wali, alias Faiz, according to Jones. Philippine records identified him as Muhammad Saifuddin but he used the name Mohammad Yusuf Karim Faiz, who was only twenty-six when he was arrested in Zamboanga in 2004 as he landed at the port on charges of being an “undesirable” and of possessing illegal firearms and explosives. He was jailed in a special cell in Manila until March 2014, when he and another Indonesian and a Malaysian—all suspected terrorists—were acquitted by a regional trial court for lack of evidence and were immediately deported to Indonesia under a Blacklist Order.

This was more than a year after Sanusi was killed in a shoot-out in Marawi. The Indonesians did not want Faiz back but the court had given a verdict. From Jakarta, Faiz went on to fight with the ISIS in Syria, at the same time keeping his contacts in the Philippines. Omarkhayam became a strong link because he could speak in fluent Bahasa, and through this, the idea of a wilayat was nourished. Yet, as the fighting in Marawi raged, ISIS was losing control of Raqqa in Syria. Though there were calls instead for Islamist outsiders to join their

fellow rebels in the Philippines, judging from social media interactions, few came, and it was not until three months later, when the military was already gaining momentum in the urban battleground, that ISIS itself acknowledged the sphere of an East Asia wilayat—though it was too late for the fighters of the Maute Group. They were losing men and running out of food when government forces cornered them in a block near the lake of Marawi to where they were hoping to escape.

The recent precedence to the fighting in Marawi took place in Zamboanga City in November 2013, when MNLF rebels tried to take over a coastal community in an armed tantrum over the government's peace negotiations with its rival the MILF. But Marawi took on a bigger dimension, with younger and educated men, with audacity and clever maneuverings, with an ideological ring attached to violent extremism. It was not just any other fight. They made their older predecessors look almost irrelevant by the way they fought, and by doing so, a page has turned in the history of the Muslim rebellion in southern Philippines. A report commissioned by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process showed that, in the aftermath of the Marawi Siege, there was cause for alarm that the Bangsamoro leadership was losing control over the younger generation of fighters. There was fear that corruption, patronage, and factions among the Muslim leaders, elected or otherwise, will remain "the order of the day"—with distrust among the people in their own leaders to implement true change, as amplified by the disorganized rehabilitation plan for Marawi. The city itself, even before the siege, had degenerated into a chaotic amalgam of crime, zealotry, and tribal politics. The cause for rebellion by the younger generation could be understood in many prisms, not one alone. Their elders and leaders, as well as forces governing national policies, have handed them a mess of a future. How could they possibly climb out of that?

At the start, Muslim leaders had carried the torch of nationalism, pushing for self-identity and self-determination. Nur Misuari of the MNLF became a failed revolutionary who was the first to broker peace with the government, obtaining his seat as governor of an autonomous region, only to be reduced into a spoiled, whining leader trapped in a web of corruption and ethnic rivalries. Salamat Hashim of the MILF was caught in the larger debate of the Arab world and into the internal schism of Islam but found himself in his last days returning to the words of Sufi, his illness triggered by the loss of Camp Abubakar. His body was buried in an unmarked grave in the mountains of Butig. It was the outcome of the Arab debate that, according to Professor

Julkipli Wadi of the University of the Philippines, gave rise to Al-Qaeda and, consequently, ISIS (Julkipli Wadi, pers. comm.). The Muslims of the Philippines, he said, was led to (or followed) the trend of the global structure of power that elicited cultural fragmentation in the Muslim world in the shaping of a nation-state from as far back as the eighteenth century.

The differences among Islamic movements were sharpened, like “chickens inside the cockpit,” with fundamentalists on both sides fighting each other. The call for Islamic hegemony eventually trickled down to the Muslims of Mindanao who were tempted to take the bait because, at home, “they were not given an opportunity to resolve their problems” but as a consequence were forced to face a mimic image of themselves among many forces—not knowing who among them were their friends or enemies. Was it the Christians of the north? Was it their leaders? Was it the misunderstanding of religion? Was it the influence of the outside world? The lure of extremism may have been tempting because, according to Wadi, “for every time there is a peace process and it reaches a crucial moment, it causes the emergence of another group”—thus, from the MNLF, to the MILF, to the Abu Sayyaf, to the BIFF, until it reached the crescendo of violent extremism under the young fighters who wanted to take over the Islamic City, not because the city was truly Islamic but because it had changed into an underworld of drug trafficking, gun running, and shameless corruption. The beauty of what Marawi used to be stays in the memories of the old timers who remain attached to a pre-Islamic heritage, driven by the belief that they are the true people of the lake. The Maute brothers and their cohorts would not have known any of that. They wanted to create the Marawi of their own vision, even if it happened to be an amalgam of ideas culled from foreign Islamists attempting to extend their claws beyond their reach, both in terms of religion and culture.

But Marawi being land-locked, “it was so easy to throw the seed of whatever you want to grow, including Islamic orthodoxy,” Professor Wadi said of the Maranao tribe. The battle of Marawi was concluded as the largest combat operation in urban warfare of contemporary Philippine history. The extremists have done it, and the tune has changed from counterinsurgency to countering or preventing violent extremism. One of Wadi’s students, Lt. Al-Qatar Kamlian, a Muslim officer in the Philippine Army’s Special Forces, noted in his academic paper, “Understanding Extremist Ideology,” for his master’s degree in Asian studies, that government forces must rethink current approaches

by countering the narrative which remains a key strategy in the struggle to diminish extremist ideology. “In doing so, enlisting the religious sector, community-based civil society organizations, and other relevant stakeholders will form a genuine partnership that would develop an effective reach beyond the traditional dimension of the society.”

This is a tall order, considering an array of systemic problems wracking Muslim Mindanao for decades: inefficient governance; inept social services; high levels of divisions along ethnic and religious lines; endemic political and economic marginalization; low levels of development with high levels of poverty, social injustice, and inequality. This goes on without mentioning that the government has no clear policy on deradicalization or even countering it. The tragedy in Marawi was “an awakening to every dimension of Philippine society,” the paper said, and, therefore, there must be an urgency in government to respond to the evolving threat. The military may have scored victories in their kinetic targets, but the ground zero of Marawi, still in rubbles, still eerie in its emptiness, stands as a desolate memorial to the consequence of violence.

In early 2019, roughly two years after the Marawi Siege began, a new Bangsamoro authority was put in place for a regional election in the near future, for a new autonomous government. It is imperative that it forges ahead in its map to define a resurgence of Muslim pride and demand equality among Filipinos; to reel back would no doubt bring Mindanao into a spiral deeper into violence, serving yet again the ingredients for another Marawi in the making. ❁

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