Paramilitaries, generators of capital flow. Examples from Mindanao, the Philippines

“Capital drives beyond every spatial barrier,” wrote Marx. In case of Mindanao, the national, the local capital is intermingled with the international big capital and the two are often joined, in achieving their best interests. And as in Russian matryoshkas, one capital often hides another. Mindanao is a playground of various geo-political interests’ between foreign and local elites. Conveniently, the already-existing insurgencies, paramilitary units or purposefully created units are the pawns which are moved - often by the use of some ideology - in order to generate big capital for the account of these elites (Sidel 1989, McCoy 2009). If lucky, skillful and violent enough, some paramilitary-leaders can benefit from their role, and become, at their turn, a new elite in a society shaped by the big capital. While, others, clever in sensing the social changes just continue to ride the ‘wave’ their ascendance enabled, ensuring themselves and for their progeny, a secure position in high layer of the social strata.

Keywords: insurgency, private armies, Muslim extremism, communist rebellion, China

Introduction

The armed violence -scene of Mindanao is extremely complex. This complexity stems partially from the turbulent history of this part of the world but also from its social conditions and traditional practices of violence on this island. Additionally, the Philippines are a fairly young nation-state, created after the subsequent Spanish, American and Japanese occupations. It has a fairly week central power, which stretched over a geographically complex area made of thousands of islands coupled with an ever-shifting political scene just adds to this complexity (Sidel 1989, Kerkvliet 2002).

For starters, Mindanao is a setting for the two longest insurgency movements in this part of the world. Secondly, as well as in other parts of the Philippines, it is a playground to various paramilitary units, which sometimes act as private armies and sometimes are created with an unique, goal-oriented purpose. These units usually serve either the private interests of some local warlord or landlord, often acting according to their private interest or they act as proxies for the state or benefiting some other stakeholder, such as private companies. Thirdly, it is a home of several terrorist units, which are using armed violence under a banner of some kind of ideology, but are mainly land- and sea-pirates, motivated uniquely by spoils.

It is well-demonstrated that the local economic and political elites benefit from the violence of these armed actors -which for the sake of simplicity I will refer with a generic term of ‘paramilitary’. It is also known that violence created some of the local political elite and new elite is created by violence as we speak. However, due to the upper-mentioned facets which make up the
complexity of the Mindanaoan case, it is often difficult to assess the interplay between the local, the national and international levels of interests.

How to see through this complexity?

For starters, I propose some preliminary word about the paramilitary scene in this part of the world.

Secondly, I suggest mentioning a couple of big ‘players’ from the international level who are either present since historically (as f.i. the US) or more than a half of century (China & Malaysia) in Mindanao or have put their feet in the past decades (wahhabism). These international players bring with them strong political and economic interests which are usually wrapped up with a concordant ideology and blur the line between means and the goal. They too are present on the paramilitary-scene of Mindanao.

Finally, I intend to examine three particular cases in which paramilitary violence either sustained the exiting economic-political elite, either challenged it or wiped-it out. These three cases are illustrations and will shed lights on the international levels of the big capital, because ‘behind the curtain’, they are the forces that move the violence-actors as chess-players on the board. Seemingly, these episodes of violence are ideologically and structurally distant, but what they all have in common is either that they challenge or restore the existent social order. The basic intent is to set a comfortable ground for the big capital to strive. And after all said and done: it is the big capital which will resurge as always victorious.

Paramilitary players in Mindanao

One of the oldest conflicts which occasionally result in an outburst of violence is the so called ‘Moro insurgency’. The open hostilities which last since the 1970es between the Philippine government and several Moro insurgent groups are one of the most notorious armed conflicts in this part of the world. For describing the tensions and the open acts of organized violence the term ‘insurgencies’ is often used in the related bibliography to describe the armed groups which rebel against the Philippine state (Cruz de Castro 2019). The term ‘insurgencies’ used to describe these armed groups is a point of a view of a state whose monopoly over violence in the Weberian manner is challenged by the mere existence of these groups. The English word ‘insurgent’ comes from the Latin insurgentem and means ‘one who rises in revolt’. That means that the concept of ‘insurgencies’ covers a semantic field according to which there is a certain ‘status quo’ which the ‘insurgent’ refuses and therefore revolts against it. However, this term does not cover the actual motifs, causes and the inner mechanism of a revolt. I argue that the use of the concept ‘insurgency’ for describing the efforts of the Moro population should be used carefully: because in order to rebel against a ‘status quo’ – a status quo first has to exist. Considering that the Philippines are fairly young nation-state, and that the Moro-insurgency existed already during the American occupation (the s.c. Moro Rebellion in1899–1913) and continued when Mindanao and
Sulu were joined to the Philippine Commonwealth territory of 1935, one has to wonder which status quo is challenged. However and again, for the purpose of simplicity, I suggest using the term of paramilitary instead of insurgency.

There are several armed groups leading an armed combat against the Philippine state in the region of Mindanao. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its ‘branch’ and later the political opponent in the ongoing peace negotiations, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), are fighting for years an armed and a political war in order to achieve territorial and cultural autonomy from the Philippine state. This is was a conflict which lasted for 50 years, and it has been accompanied by more or less successful peace negotiations between the representatives of these armed forces and the Philippine state for almost the time. The ARMM and its inheritor BARMM are one of the direct results of the armed struggle.

There are other armed groups terrorists, which operates in the Mindanao region such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Jemah Islamiah (JI) and New People’s Army (NPA). The difference between these armed groups is their political orientation and their geographical area. Abu Sayyaf is a militant Islamist (fundamentalist) group which operates mainly on the islands of Jolo and Basilan and its goals are territorial and political independence.

The second insurgency group is the New People’s Army (NPA) which was created at the end of the 1960es and has been active in other parts of the Philippine island, in the Cordillera of the Luzon Island or the Visayas. However, one of its strongholds has been and still is Mindanao. The NPA is a guerilla organization and has a revolutionary agenda and it is inspired by Leninism-Marxim.

The conflict in Mindanao theoretically can be analyzed as according to the ‘horizontal’ v.s. ‘vertical’ line, as suggested by Arcala-Hall (2017). The ‘direction’ means according to which path the conflict-players act: vertical - oriented toward the power-holders or ‘up’; or horizontal, toward ‘equals’ - groups in similar socio-economic situation. This second, the ‘horizontal’ is a conflict between the minority population – which are the Muslim Moros – and the majority – the Christian Filipinos. The existence of Christian militias (such as the Ilaga armed group – ‘ilaga’ meaning the “rats”) who fought against the Moro armed groups just ads to the complexity of the conflict, making the Mindanao situation more than a simple rebellion against the Philippine state, which becomes hence a ‘vertical conflict’, in which a group fight a mighty opponent, the State (Arcala-Hall 2017). The horizontal dimension of the Mindanao conflict-scene has also a religious facet to this conflict, because the Moro population is Muslim, while the Philippine majority, not only at the regional level, but also on the level of the whole state is Christian (Catholic).

This fact is strongly exploited on the international level, particularly since the global war on terror was launched in 2001. There are several Islamist units in Mindanao which are fundamentalists’ organizations, the Jemah Islamiyah, the Misuari Renegade/Breakaway Group (MRG/MBG) and Abu Sayyaf which is

1 About MILF see more in Kreuzer(2005), Quimpo (2016) Flaan and Adam(2016)
particularly present in this region. The Filipino-ISIS branch assaulted the city of Marawi in the late spring of 2017. Several countries (US, Canada, Australia, etc.) and the United Nations design these formations as a terrorist organization. The fact that the MILF and the MNLF are also armed groups whose political ideologies are far from fundamentalist but nevertheless contain elements of religious ideology makes them suspects for either being partially fundamentalist or being linked to radical groups. The conflict between the Moro armed forces and the Philippine state can be therefore be also analyzed under the conditions of religious tensions.

There is yet another layer to the general conflictual situation in this region, besides the one between the minority vs. majority and Muslims and Christians. Mindanao is a region rich in resources such as forests, mines and agriculture and fishing. Regions with rich natural resources and weak state apparatus and great social differences are prone to violent conflicts and regular outbursts of armed conflicts (Le Billon 2001, Le Billon 2013, Lujala 2010). The corruption rate is considerable: the Philippines are among the most corrupt countries in the world, ranking 111th out of 180 surveyed in 2017, according to Transparency International. Big international corporations which function in Mindanao are often tools and sources of structural violence from which the poorest strata of the population, particularly the Lumads suffer the most. The wide-spread corruption hand in hand with international corporations which operate almost without control in Mindanao generate systemic poverty: mayors of cities and provincial governors often control private armies which are rented to these companies as ‘securities’ and aggravate the conflict with the local population. The Philippine government tried to dismantle and integrate these private armies in order to control the occasional violence and abuse of power, so in 1987 the CAFGU (Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units) were created. However this did not stop the creation of private armies, often labeled as ‘security’, it just added to the kaleidoscopic scenery of the private armies, insurgencies, various security forces and (religious) militias. Politics in general are under a control of politicians who are often members of prominent, ‘notable’ rich families, called ‘political families’ (McCoy 2009, Tehenkee 2007). The political kin stemming from these family relations functions as a form of (neo) feudal landlords, controlling territories – which they own or which belong to the communities of which they represent politically (Teehankee 2007, Teehankee & Thompson 2016). In this way agricultural and natural resources as well as ‘their’ electorate is controlled. They are also the main factors in the negotiations with international corporations of which they are often shareholders. Philippine law is not respected, as for instance the labor code or the minimum wage prescribed by law. Social injustices are created and the cleavages between the social strata seem to be insurmountable. The political dynasties often own private armies (security) which compete over the monopoly of violence in the region (Sidel 1989, Anderson 1988, Kreuzer 2016). These units serve foremost their (private) masters. If the interests of their masters coincide with those of the Philippine state, they act as proxies to the government.
Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the conflict between the groups – particularly between the Christians and the Muslims - was encouraged as a tool of a colonial rule: first by the Spanish, then by the US. Therefore we could argue that a violent conflict - or even better: a religious conflict – is one of the ‘leftovers’ of the colonial era. Before the 1970s, there was peaceful coexistence between the non-Islamized (Christians and the Lumads) and the Islamized natives. Proof to that is when Emilio Aguinaldo (the first de facto President of the First Philippine Republic in 1898), he invited the Moros in Philippine South to join the Federation, that was short-lived due to the infamous "Treaty of Paris" in December 10, 1898. A sort of addendum is that the minoritized population in Philippine South felt that the state becomes a "surrogate" of the majority population (of Christians in the Northern part) being used to reinforced neo-colonial policies institutionalized by the Spanish, then by the Americans. Hence, the Mindanao conflict is also considered as a resource-based conflict among ethnic groups (non-Muslims and Muslim groups).

In the narratives of individuals, particularly in the narratives of the representatives of the Moro population, the fact that the Moro population resisted to the Spanish colonial rule for almost 400 years (1521-1898) is an important historical marker. It is repeated in almost every narrative about the desired political and cultural autonomy of the Mindanao region. The fact that the catholic part of the population was exploited by the Spanish colonial forces and consecutively by the American is also often mentioned. The manipulation practices of the Moro population by the US colonial regime is rarely mentioned, on the other hand, the independent Philippine state is now accused of being ‘neo-colonialized’ by the contemporary US.

**Big capital in Mindanao**

There is a curse which lies upon Mindanao, as in other places of the world in which the abundant natural resources couples with hierarchical, violent societies and extreme poverty: everyone wants his share of the riches and this is goes usually with ruthlessness and tremendous violence upon the population.

Behind the existing historical grievances that motivate armed movements and beside the occasional outbursts of violence as forms of struggle for natural or political resources, lies the ever-present main-initiator: big capital. Mindanao is a playground for various capital and geo-political interests’ between foreign and local elites. Conveniently, the already-existing paramilitary units or purposefully created units are the pawns which are moved - often by the use of ideology which plays the crucial role in the grassroots - in order to generate big capital for the account of the elites. If lucky, skillful and

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2 The Philippines has been under Spanish, US, an Japanese colonial rule.
3 I would like to thank Mlle Yasmira Moner from Mindanao State University for pointing me this out.
4 Fieldwork done during summer 2013
violent enough, some paramilitary-leaders can benefit from their role, and
become, at their turn, a new elite in a society shaped by the old-new big capital.
While, others, smart in sensing the social changes continue to ride the ‘wave’
when their ascendance is enabled, ensuring themselves and for their progeny a
secure position in high layer of the social strata.

For the purposes of this paper, I will mention several of the big
international actors which are present in Mindanao. They are the sources of big
capital interests and they couple their political goals with a matching ideology.
All are motivated by the natural and human resources of Mindanao. This brief
sketch will enable the reader to get an idea about the main big-capital players
who all have interest in either stepping in for good in Mindanao or in creating a
form of a stronghold on this island to which the paramilitary formations and
the insurgencies are a convenient tool.

Let’s start with Malaysia. The *Sturm und Drang* relationship between the
two neighboring countries is probably best known in the example of the
Sultanate of Sabah. In short, both Malaysia and the Philippines are claiming
ownership of Sabah, which is at the island of Borneo (which itself is divided
between Malaysia, Indonesia and the Sultanate of Brunei). The Sultanate of
Sulu obtained Sabah from the Sultanate of Brunei as a gift for helping put
down a rebellion. It leased Sabah to the British North Borneo Co. in 1878, but
Sabah became part of Malaysia when it gained independence in 1963. While
Sabah became part of Malaysia in 1963, Kuala Lumpur pays an annual rent of
5,300 ringgit (aprox. US$1,600) to the heirs of the Sultan of Sulu. Both
Malaysia and the Philippines claim right on Sabah.

Additionally, Malaysia played a crucial role of one of the international
mediators in the peace-negotiation process between the MILF and MNLF and
the Philippine government. What is problematic is the conflict of interest that
Malaysia has as a mediator. Primarily, MILF is backed in trough unofficial
channel from Malaysia. For instance, members of the MILF received military
training in Sābah.\(^5\) Secondly, a Malaysian national oil company, Petronas
started during the 90’s an exploration of a marshland area (Liguasan Marsh) in
Mindanao, rich in supply of natural gas.\(^6\) The PNOC (Philippine National Oil
Company) and Petronas suspended operations in the Liguasan Marsh area due
to threats from the MILF and extortion by local mayors and political warlords.
From the time it stopped the exploration, the collected data from the
marshlands had already placed Mindanao’s untapped mineral wealth worth
between $840 billion and $1 trillion.\(^7\) Among Mindanao’s minerals that could
be found, explored and transformed to money include gold, copper, nickel,
manganese, chromite, silver, lead, zinc, and iron ore. In an interesting turn of
events, MILF has now allotted 75% shares of Liguasan Marsh estimated to be
worth US$500 billion of oil and gas deposits in Cotabato to Petronas Malaysia,
20% to unknown interests (presumably Philippine government cronies) and 5%
shares to MILF. Considering that funds which were supporting the MILF
during the years of insurgency were channeled through Malaysia, this country
was in position to dictate terms to the MILF. When it comes to the resources
from the marshlands, MILF seems to play the role of the proxy of Malaysia.
Secondly, we have the USA’s interests in the region. Beside the strategic
position of the Philippine islands in this part of world, the Philippines islands
make them a convenient pied-a-terre for the US military bases. The Americans
too are aware about the abundance of the natural resources of Mindanao. Based
on the US intelligence assessment which was leaked through Wikileaks, “the
Philippines may have untapped minerals worth between US$840 billion to
US$1 trillion” in Mindanao. The US intelligence assessment was included in
the 2006 "unclassified/for official use only" cable from the US embassy in
Manila released online by Singapore-based journalist Andrew Macgregor
Marshall and can be seen at the site of Wikileaks. From this assessment, we
can learn that the US government has long funding intelligence gathering
operations just to keep an eye over the untouched treasures of Mindanao. The
American assessment too identifies the Liguasan Marsh as resource-potential.
Besides being controlled by the MILF, the marshland is in an area where the
warring political dynasties are situated who also have claims of ownership for
this land. Among the claimers are the dynasties of Candao, Mangundadatu,
Ampatuan and Pendatun clans. In parallel MILF claims a communal, Muslim
(ummah) legacy of this land.

Being aware that a long-lasting conflict between the Philippine
government and the MILF could prevent any exploitation of the Mindanaoan
resources, the US jumped in as one of the acting peace-brokers.

Unofficially some American military presence in the armed conflicts of the
island indicates that the US government is willing to back-up its intention with
manu militari if needed. For instance, after the Mamasapano clash, a local
farmer confirmed to the Philippine press that a "blue-eyed" American soldier
was among the casualties. The U.S. embassy denied any involvement in the
clash. This incident is just one of several in Mindanao that happened the past
two decades, which indicates that the economic interest are in some form
backed-up with armed units.

And then we have China. China is active on the paramilitary-scene of the
Philippines since the creation of the New People's Army (NPA) which is the
armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). NPA is
ideologically orientated as Marxist-Leninist. Similarly to the MILF, the NPA
has a long history of four decades of armed clashes with the Philippine
government forces. They finance themselves trough ‘revolutionary taxes’, by
taxing locals, communities and businesses. It is estimated that NPA
collects two billion pesos each year from "revolutionary taxes" that are usually

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10http://newsflash.org/2004/02/be/be004421.htm
2% of any business project in the region. In December 2016, it was estimated that NPA counted 3,800 fighters with more than 4,500 firearms.\footnote{11}{https://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/new-peoples-army-npa-philippines}

At the beginning NPA was heavily supported by Maoist China: with weapons, training and funding. However, once China established diplomatic relations with the Philippines, although the basic ideological sympathy remained, an unhinged supply of weapons, ammunition and funds became difficult.

Considering that China has interest in maintaining its military presence in the South Chinese Sea, while having in mind that China claims its rights on the Spratly islands\footnote{12}{https://spatly.is/}, China uses its ideological influence and its assistance to help the NPA with the goal to create leverage on the Philippines.

China also fosters smuggling of precious metals from the Philippines. With its occupation of the Scarborough Shoal (what China calls “Huanyin Island”), smuggling precious metals from the Philippines to a China base has become more opportune especially after the island was transformed into a four story fortress\footnote{13}{https://mambulaoansworldwidebuzz.blogspot.com/2012/12/focus-chinas-mining-occupation-of.html}. China also occupied in 1996 the Mischief Reef, located just 75 miles from Palawan.


More recently, China further developed its investments in the mining-sector in the Philippines the last decade. According to the investigative journalist’s reports, China is a pretty ‘dirty’ player when it comes to respecting tax-payments or obtaining exploration-permits (Stern 2016). Chinese frontmen also use corruption to bribe local politicians and officials for approvals. The impact on the environment of such mining-explorations is environmentally lethal. Additionally, China is one of major clients of the Philippines in mining-products. However, according to the legal documentation, China, although not appearing as the top mining-investor in the country, somehow manages to exploit the most the mining-resources. Investigative journalism demonstrates that Chinese mining companies use secret permits and agreements and Philippine subsidiaries to get the goodies.

There is no accurate data about how many Chinese mining-companies exists and operate in Mindanao. However, in December 2012, 25 major Chinese mining investments operated in the Philippines (Stern 2016). One can
only speculate that this number is way higher, because a legal ‘whole’ in the
local legislation: in the Philippines foreign-owned companies may be granted
mineral processing permits, mineral exploration permits, as well as financial
technical assistance agreements (FTAA). However, only Filipino individuals or
corporations can obtain mineral contracts to be able to conduct full mining
operations. Mineral production sharing agreements (MPSA), on the other hand,
are only given to firms that are 60% owned by Filipinos (Stern 2016). Hence,
financing a local duty enables a mining-exploitation that goes under the radar
of the government.

Interestingly, as other capital-ventures the mining-exploitations, the
(Chinese) mining companies also have a right to private security forces. Hence
under the pretext of arming companies’ security forces and under the pretext of
needing explosives which are abundantly used in the mining industry, (foreign)
weapons are shipped to Mindanao.

In 2014 NPA rebels in Mindanao started showing off their AK-47s at
about the same time that some 1,000 of these assault rifles were bought by a
businessman based in the region 15. According to the local press, the rifles were
purportedly bought for security forces in the mining-sector. The broker even
obtained a clearance and license from the Philippines Firearms and Explosive
Office. Apparently the rifles were a Chinese variant of the well-known model.

The Philippine authorities suspected that these AK-47 came from China.

Last, but not least, there is another big international player sustaining the
culture of paramilitary units in Mindanao: wahhabism. In the recent years,
Southeast Asia has become a new battleground, a new ‘frontier’ of jihadi
groups such as Isis and Al-Qaeda. Paramilitary groups inspired and funded by
Saudi and Qatari wahhabism sprout in Indonesia, Malaysia and the
Philippines 16. Wahhabist-money and ideology influenced young Southeast
Asian men to partake in the Syrian conflict. The flow of funds and men also
created war-returnees, who once backed in Asia, instigated new branches of
ISIS & Al-Qaeda. Through the channel of war-returnees and mostly young
indoctrinated scholars, Saudi and Qatari money launched new paramilitary-
movements in Mindanao to which Aby-Sayyaf was one precursor. The
Marawi-battle was another example. The ultimate goal of Wahhabism is one
global Islamic community with one doctrine, Wahhabism, ruled by one
Khalifah (Alvi 2014). Over the last few decades, Saudi Arabia has spent more
than US$100 billion exporting Wahhabism to all corners of the globe 17.
Thousands of mosques, seminaries, universities, schools and community
centers have been built, while thousands of imams, teachers and activists have
been educated, trained and shipped across the world along with Wahhabi-
approved textbooks and other literature. Naturally Saudi Arabia and Qatar
invest also legally in the Philippines, mainly in the agricultural sector.

15 https://www.rappler.com/nation/60279-ak47-communist-rebels
Let the Blood Flow - Big Capital needs it

In order to illustrate how big capital generates paramilitary violence in Mindanao, I suggest discussing three separate cases of armed clashes. They all illustrate the intrinsic relation of big capital and armed violence on this island. They offer example of how paramilitary units sustain the existing order. These cases also provide insight into how the paramilitary units challenge the existing social order and demonstrate how the existing order is maintained. What these incidents all have in common is that they strongly resonated on the international media-scene, they have been abundantly reported on and were analyzed from various angles - hence the motive to elaborate on them.

One

In November 2009 in the province of Maguindanao in Mindanao, a convoy of cars containing 58 passengers, soon to be victims, was stopped by 100 armed men. The cars and the passengers were abducted and shot. Five of the female victims were raped before they were killed. All of the abducted women were shot in genitals and later beheaded. The cars and the bodies were buried in pit which was dug previously with an excavator. The cars in the convoy were containing Mindanaoan journalists, friends and family-members of Esmael Mangudadatu, at the time the vice mayor of the city of Buluan. The convoy goal was to file a certificate of candidacy for Mangudadatu for the forthcoming Maguindanao gubernatorial election. Mangudadatu challenged the mayor of the municipality of Datu Unsay, Andal Ampatuan Jr., the son of the incumbent Maguindanao governor Andal Ampatuan Sr.

After the killing, which was later known as the ‘Maguindanao massacre’ and became the biggest killing of journalists in the world, all proof pointed toward the Ampatuan clan. The Ampatuan clan is one of the leading Muslim political clans in Mindanao. The excavators belonged to the Ampatuans.

Andal Ampatuan Sr., the patriarch of the Ampatuan clan was also the founder of this political dynasty as it is in its present state. He went from being a commander of a paramilitary unit to vice mayor and then mayor of Maganoy (now Shariff Aguak), a municipality in Maguindanao. Ampatuan Sr. knew how to pick sides, he sided with the anti-Marcos insurgency and when the Marcos regimes was overthrown, two years after the 1986 “People Power Revolution” which drove Marcos from power, Ampatuan, Sr. was reelected mayor of Maganoy. It was an election plagued by violence: opponents of the political rise of Andal Amptuan sr. were killed in the process. Starting from the second half of the 1980s the Ampatuans gained commercial power by using threats and unlawful force to acquire land. The people whose lands were seized had two choices: either to allow the Ampatuans to buy the land or to get a bullet.

As the years went by, crimes such as killings, land-appropriation and extortion committed by the clan continued - their political influence grew.
They have committed the past four decades at least 200 killings. Human Rights Watch collected 56 different cases of killing between the period of 1988 and 2009 (before the Maguindanao massacre) committed by either by one of the Ampatuans or by their men. The Ampatuans were never prosecuted for the killings and extortions. Their private army was made from policemen, CAFGUs, and those men who lived on ‘their’ land, the region under their governance and who were more or less forcibly ‘drafted’, often wearing (& shooting) guns for the clan, usually to be paid with a sack of rice.

The Maguindanao massacre was just a tragedy in waiting but it was too much, even for the Philippine circumstances. The arrests that followed the November 2009 Maguindanao massacre appear to have weakened, but didn’t eliminate the Ampatuan power in Mindanao. As a result of the May 2010 elections, 8 of the 34 mayors in Maguindanao carry the Ampatuan name; while others are related to Ampatuan, Sr.

Now, long before the Maguindanao massacre, the documents leaked by Wikileaks, dated February 2006 and prior in which the Mindanaoan marshlands are particularly discussed, describe the tensions between local clans about the property of Liguasan. Among the claimers (see supra) were and still are the clans of Mangundadatu and Ampatuan. The political challenge was just a pretext to the massacre. The ownership of the Liguasan Marshland is worth a lot of money - enough to wipe off from the face of the earth anyone who could challenge in the future the Ampatuans legitimacy to this ownership. The risk was worth taking.

The Ampatuan clan has controlled who lives and who dies in the Maguindanao province for four decades. The rise was enabled due to the willingness of the clan leader to exchange violence for political interests. The clan and its paramilitary unit (‘private army’) made of from 2000 to 5000 armed men, with an arsenal of 5000 guns (at the time of the Maguindanao massacre) has served the interests of the government of Manila. These forces and social capital were used first to help pull down the Marcos dictatorship, and later by assuring presidential candidate-votes in the province - particularly for the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. During her presidency, the Ampatuans were popularly referred to as her ‘monsters’.... The local population often saw the men of Ampatuan as the prolongation of the Philippine government and the army. They came handy in dealing with the insurgency movements in Mindanao (MILF and NPA): the Ampatuan’s private army played the role of the proxy of Manila. The Ampatuan men were armed by the Philippine army. Although Muslims, the Ampatuans have been loyal allies to Manila against the Moro insurgency (MILF). Analyzing the list of their victims provided by the HRW, it becomes evident that they systematically ‘removed’ all individuals suspected being an actor or sympathizer of the Moro insurgency. *Nec plus ultra*; it was their interests to eliminate any possible ‘rising-star’ of the insurgency, a future warlord or a paramilitary leader, who, as once Andal Sr. did, would rise and establish a new political clan in the region.
At least 198 suspects, including Andal Ampatuan Jr. and Andal Ampatuan Sr. and several other members of the Ampatuan clan, were charged with murder after the Maguindanao massacre. Andal Sr. died at the age of 75 before his trial.

The Mangudadatus have become the big players in the region, although the Ampatuans are still strongly present. The Liguasan marshland future remains uncertain.

Two

In September 2015 the Philippine media reported a clash in Surigao del Sur region in Mindanao between the anti-communist paramilitary unit called Magahat Bagani and the communist-Maoist NPA. The Magahat Bagani was a security threat in this province of Mindanao for a while. Magahat Bagani was the same armed force that killed a Lumad school director and a couple of Lumad residents in the same region previously. The Lumad in question belong to the Manobo ethnic minority of Mindanao.

The three individuals which were executed by the Magahat Bagani at the beginning of September and started the series of armed clashes was Emerico Samarca, the executive director of the Alternative Learning Center for Agricultural and Livelihood Development (Alcadev). Samarca was found dead inside a classroom. He had a stab wound and his throat was slit open. The two others were Dionel Campos and his cousin Aurelio Sinzo, and they were killed in front of the villagers. Campos was a community leader and the chairperson of the indigenous people group Maluhutayong Pakigbisog Alansa sa Sumusunod (Mapasu), which is known for its firm position on the protection of ancestral lands and its campaign against human rights violations targeting indigenous people.

The Magahat-Bagani also burned down the building of a community cooperative not far from the school compound. Due to these incidents and the others that followed soon some 3,000 Lumads were displaced, fleeing from the Magahat Bagani.

The Lumads in Mindanao originally are the un-Islamized and un-Christianized ethnic groups of the island. The Lumads became politically organized during the Marcos-regime, as a response to the martial law. They lost a part of their ancestral lands due to the incapacity to adhere to the modern land tenure system. In their efforts to protect their lands and their community, some of the Lumad communities have become a stronghold to the NPA which become widespread, and sometimes welcomed, particularly because of its communist-Maoist ideology. NPA systematically recruit its armed forces from the Lumad communities. In that sense the Lumads of Mindanao found themselves in the crossfire between the Philippine army and the NPA. As members of indigenous nations, representative of Lumads of Mindanao have turned to UN for protection, but without major success.
The NPA is collecting its ‘revolutionary taxes’ partially from the Lumad community members. The taxes are to be paid by the sympathizers and by those who are not. Caught in the middle, the Lumad communities are often accused by the Philippine government that they are ‘influenced’ and ‘led’ by the NPA.

Magahat Bagani, the main actor of this example, seems to be a purposefully created paramilitary unit. At the funeral of two of the three massacre victims in September 2015, three military and paramilitary personnel were apprehended by Lumad marshals. They were caught taking photos and videos of Lumad leaders and supporters as thousands prepare to bury the victims. The witnesses identified one of them as a member of Magahat Bagani.

Later as a response, the Philippine army issued a statement that the military caught during the funeral were actually within their mission. No statement about the member of Magahat Bagani, caught along with the military personnel, was issued. It wouldn’t be the first time that the Philippine army uses paramilitary proxies to deal with its opponents. Hence, the creation of a new, disposable ‘monster’, such as the Magahat Bagani is plausible.

Two years after the killing of the Lumad representatives, Duterte declared that the NPA should figure as a terrorist organization (November 2017). The international reaction was immediate and loud; the Lumad representatives of the Philippines, present of the international scene, accused Duterte of trying to annihilate the indigenous rights, by outlawing their representatives as ‘communist terrorist’. They claimed that Lumads stand between Duterte and his goal of industrial priorities in the region. Duterte and his regime were accused of indigenous human rights abuses. Several NGO leaders - among them Lumad individuals too - were placed on a list of 600 so-called terrorists as part of a petition filed in court seeking to declare the Communist Party and its armed wing as terrorist organizations. Indisputably the Philippines figure on the top a list of Global Witness, a non-profit organization which monitors the killings worldwide of people fighting to protect their land and ecosystems from destructive industries. However, as always in the case of Mindanao, an interesting turn of events demonstrates that nothing is simple on this island as it seems.

In spring 2019, the Duterte administration presented evidence to the European Union that some of the received EU funds actually end up in the pockets of the communist insurgency in the Philippines.

The EUs ambassador in the Philippines admitted that two million of euros were to be released to a local NGO, called Rural Missionaries of the Philippines, a group that the Philippine officials have accused of being a legal front of communist insurgency. Evidence was provided to the EU according to which the European funds were granted to a certain group which was acting as legal front of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA). The EU conducted an audit. It has to be said, that the EU classified the NPA as a ‘terrorist group’ since 2005. Damage-control ensued by the EU.
Similarly, the Belgian government too was finger pointed. They funded the CPP-NPA through various NGOs in the Philippines which acted as legal fronts to the communist insurgency. Three Belgian organizations were identified (Solidagro, Viva Salud and Kiyo) as funders of the ‘reds’. Many local NGOs, financed by the upper three Belgian organizations, received Belgian/EU money and acted as cover to the communist paramilitaries: among them the upper mentioned Alliance of Concerned Teachers Alternative Learning Center for Agricultural and Livelihood Development (Alcadev). It was with them that Magahat Bagani was used to deal with.

Considering the complexity of the Mindanaoan case, one has to ask the eternal question *quid bono* - who benefits. Indisputably the European intelligence agencies is far from being perfectly functional, however it seems unlikely that the Belgian government and the EU were unaware where does the Belgian/European taxpayers money go. The EU has economic interests in Mindanao, and since the Duterte’s presidency the ties between (mainly) western European countries and the Philippines are pretty tense. The Duterte’s regime is incessantly criticized and labeled as ‘populist’ (even ‘right-wing’). Duterte’s name is eternally linked in the western media with his ‘war against drugs’ (Oplan Tokhang) which can be resumed as extrajudicial killings of all individuals who are (presumably) tied with drug-abuse and trade.

Although it is highly unlikely that the EU would be willing (and able) to directly fund an insurgency movement to destabilize a regime - even if it is tyrannical – the financial support of an (unofficial) strategy to discredit as much as possible a (uncooperative) administration - is not unimaginable.

On the other hand, there is a third party which benefits not matter how the wind blows. China continues to supply weapons trough unofficial channels to the NPA. The brand new AK-47 which were seized after the conflict between the NPA and Magahat Bagani and in other circumstances are of Chinese origins. The environment-protection oriented Lumad grassroots’ NGOs are directly directed against the Chinese mining-activities. They represent a more or less serious obstacle in quiet extraction of precious materials from the beautiful mountains of Mindanao. However if the ecologically oriented NGOs would be discredited in some manner - as for instance linked with an armed insurgency -this would at least for a time enable undisturbed mining-activities in the province. China is the biggest beneficiary in both versions of events: with one stroke the NPA is funded and ideologically motivated (kept prepared if needed for some future use). NPA is one of the oldest insurgency movements in the Philippines and is still one of the key armed players in Mindanao. In a clash state v.s. insurgency movements, historically speaking, insurgencies are often successful, hence China’s interest to keep them financed and armed. With the same stroke the ties between the Lumad and the NPA makes it easy to discredit the ecologically oriented Lumad-movements.

As in a mirror-image, the same goes for the Philippine government. Manila just had to lie back and wait for the actors to discredit themselves and reap the benefits.
Three

The Marawi-crisis, often called as the Battle of Marawi was a mini-war which lasted five months in 2017 in Mindanao. In was the longest urban battle in the modern history of the Philippines and the first serious armed clash for the Duterte administration.

The city of Marawi was under siege by the Philippine government security forces (the army and special police forces). The city was taken hostage by at least three different paramilitary-units: Aby Sayyaf, the Maute-group and Ansar Khalifa Philippines; although according to the press-releases, individual members of the MILF who joined one of these units participated as well. Some of them, wearing MILF uniforms were among the casualties.

The mini-war resulted in 978 killed militants (13 foreigners; unofficially from Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia). 168 killed government forces and 87 dead civilians (40 due to illness). Most of the city was destroyed and damaged beyond repair and at some point 300,000 civilians were evacuated.

The city of Marawi before the siege was an important Muslim religious and cultural center of Mindanao. Foremost it is cultural and social center of the Maranao/Maranaw (Muslim) ethnic group of Mindanao and an important hub of the Bangsamoro region.

According to the Philippine government, the Marawi-crisis began during an offensive in Marawi to capture Isnilon Hapilon, the leader of the ISIL-affiliated Abu Sayyaf group. However, citizens reported months before the actual battle that various armed groups, with ISIS-insignias were seen in the city. For months the members of various Islamist paramilitary units have been plaguing the (Christian minority) citizens of the city. Marawi - being an urban Moro-center, and as one of the MILF-strongholds, got used to the sight of armed Muslim paramilitary unit-members marching up and down in the city. They belonged to the urban scenography. When the Islamists paramilitary unit-members started slowly pouring into the city no greater public attention was given to them.

The Maute-group (founded by two brothers with the same family-name) was most made of former members of the MILF. Additionally some of the members, the leaders included had afinal kinship-ties with members, particularly leaders of the MILF. The Maute-group split from MILF in 2013. By 2013 they were associated with Jemaah Islamiya and in 2015, along with another Philippine Islamist paramilitary formation, the Ansar Khalifa Philippines (also from Mindanao), they pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Before the Marawi-battle, they had several activities in Mindanao: they abducted six and beheaded two sawmill workers in Butig and were behind the 2016 Davao city bombing (in which 14 people died and 70 were injured).

The Maute-group is affiliated with another, older Islamist paramilitary formation, the Abu Sayyaf, a militant jihadi formation. The Abu Sayyaf is a breakaway group of the MNLF (N.B. MILF stems also from MNLF). This
formation is behind some of the worst terrorist attacks in the Philippines since the 2000’s.

In spring 2017 the Philippine military and police conducted joint zoning in Marawi to validate the information that suspicious personalities (the Maute brothers) in the city when they spotted Insilon Hapilon. An operation was launched to capture these men, which turned into siege. During the siege MILF leaders volunteered (a weak after the first clash) to mediate between the Philippine government and the leaders of the Maute- and the Aby Sayyaf Islamists. MILF also facilitated ceasefire and offered humanitarian assistance to the civilians’ trapped in the city under siege. As the siege kept going, some local warlords/community leaders or datu-s realized that the time had come to pick sides. Several datu-s played a crucial role in negotiating in on-to-one negotiations with the leaders of the Islamists leaders to release hostage and in saving trapped Christian civilians.

The warlord-datu-s who actively took part in negotiating directly with the Islamists during the siege are members of the lustrous local political clans. Among the clan-members which took part are the Alonto and the Lucman clan. Considering that the province of Lanao del Sur ‘belongs’ to them it was natural order of things in Mindanaoan circumstances. During the clash (June 2017), the Justice Secretary Vitaliano Aguirre II claimed that the clan members of Alonto-Lucman met with several Philippine lawmakers and members of the Duterte-opposition prior to the siege with a goal to discuss the destabilization of the Duterte administration. Later the Justice Secretary denied his statement and stated that he was misquoted.

The Alonto-Lucman clans are one of the oldest politically active clans in Mindanao. In the 1934 Constitutional Convention that framed the 1935 Philippine Constitution (used as the fundamental law of the Commonwealth and 1946 Republic of the Philippines), several elected Muslim Constitutional delegates, led by Alauya Alonto, the first Muslim senator, called upon their fellow delegates not only to cease from calling Muslims as Moros but also to accept Muslims as part of the Filipino nation (Buendia 2005:113). Another Alonto, was a member of the House of Representatives, proclaimed before the First National Muslim Convention in 1955: “We need a thorough spiritual rejuvenation ... If we are good Muslims, we are automatically good citizens.” (Buendia 2005:114) While another Lucman formed the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organisation (BMLO) in 1971 (Buendia 2005:114).

One of the members of the Alontoc-Lucman clans, I will refer to as NAL, a former deputy governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, directly took part in negotiating with the Islamist unit-leaders during the siege of Marawi. Fluent in five languages (Tagalog, Maranao, Arabic, French and English) well educated – partially in US -, he served in his youth as a diplomatic representative, a writer, a playboy but foremost a warlord. In a loose friendly conversation, NAL explained to us that he “inherited 1000 men

18See Buendia (2005) about the Alonto clan
from his father”¹⁹, who are “at his disposal at all time” to fight [for him] if necessary. He made sure to underline that he didn’t choose to have these men as his subordinates, but it’s his “obligation to command them”. These men “count on him”. He related an anecdote in which he played a decisive role: a Swiss citizen, an investor present in Mindanao was kidnapped by some armed units (he didn’t explain which ones)²⁰. He omitted to explain how he was called to intervene in the negotiations with the hostage-takers. When a phone line was established with the hostage-takers e insisted to speak with the hostage. Knowing that the hostage is Swiss and that the line is eavesdropped by the hostage-takers, as soon as he had on line the hostage he asked him in French what is the first thing that he (the hostage) is seeing around him. Before the liaison was interrupted by the hostage-takers who realized that they will not understand the rest of the conversation for the simple reason they didn’t spoke French, the hostage managed to utter that he sees a lake. This element was enough for NAL to establish the exact location where the hostage was held and the Philippine army was able to locate him and safely recovered his freedom.

During the siege it was again a moment for NAL to shine. He took the fleeing Christian civilians in Marawi in his house under his protection and refused to hand them over when the Islamists besieged his house. The story was lavishly covered even by the international news agencies in lengthy reportages about the armed clashes in Marawi. It remains unclear if those 1000 men inherited from his father played a crucial role in why the Islamist paramilitary didn’t insist on him handing out the civilians. The story circulated for weeks in the international media. He became one of the heroes of the mini-war. Months after the siege, with Marawi almost completely destroyed (only 70 % of inhabitants returned), the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the region (Iligan city included) shaken by this experience, NAL admitted on his Facebook profile that part of the guilt lies on the “hospitality of the Marawi (Muslim) citizens” who accepted and ignored the true nature of the paramilitaries which infiltrated their city and caused its destruction.

Flirting with foreign, Saudi (wahhabit) money is no stranger to the community leaders of the city. For instance, foreign money built the beautiful Aga Khan Museum in Marawi and financed Muslim scholars of Marawi City University. The Islamist paramilitary unit leaders who have chosen to settle in Marawi surely didn’t came empty-handed. It was after the siege that the Philippine military discovered that the Islamic state funded with 1.5 million US dollars the so called ‘insurgents’ (aka the Islamists). The media stated that the Iraqi city of Mosul was used as a blueprint to take over Marawi. The Mautes were killed in August and in October 2017 as well as Isnilon Hapilon. However, a new paramilitary group took the vacant position: the successor group has been labeled as the "Turaifie group" a faction which split

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¹⁹Fieldwork from 2013
²⁰Hostage-taking of foreigners is the favorite pastime and mean of self-financing of the Philippine paramilitaries
from the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) which is itself a breakaway of MILF.

Two years exactly after the Marawi-clash, NAL was a Vice gubernatorial candidate in the midterm elections of 2019 in Mindanao. He was not elected. He complained to the local press that the elections were rigged.

Conclusion

These three briefly described examples all happened in Mindanao in a period less than a decade and they were all acts of extreme violence. What they all do have in common is the instrumentalization of paramilitary units, whether they are employed by the government or by private parties.

The example ‘One’ demonstrates the upward social mobility that an unhinged violence can ensure in Mindanao. Violence assured the rise of an individual who ensured his place by positioning his kinship and afinal kinship members in such a manner that they guaranteed the social ascendance of the whole clan for the past forty years and probably for the decades to come. Being aware of how the use of violence is a tool of social mobility, the former warlord Ampatuan made sure to eliminate all possible challengers and all risks were just worth taking for that goal. Older, more known Ampatuan family members did fall, however the clan didn’t and survived the blow which ensued by the national government. After all said and wrote about the Maguindanao massacre, little attention was given to the ‘spark’ that potentially caused a massacre of such a great scale: the natural resource-aboundant Liguasan Marshlands. The marshlands are the pivotal point on which several international sides and local players are fighting. Political influence breeds capital, hence it is vital who will politically dominate the region with such a treasure. Private armies and insurgencies are those who are going to make things happen.

The western media has the distressing habit to simplify circumstances that accompany killings of the NGO-members in Mindanao. The sensationalism-hungry foreign press is always eager to describe violent killing of partisans of some righteous cause which heightens the moral outrage of an eventual reader. However what example ‘Two’ demonstrates that no conflict is simple as it seems in Mindanao. Mindanao, due to its natural riches is in a center of several foreign interests which are keen to get their share. Their task is easier because of the political situation in Mindanao, which probably didn’t know any prolonged peace since centuries. Mindanao is home of two major insurgencies and as the cases demonstrates the field of numerous ‘small’ terrorist, paramilitary formations and private armies. They are the convenient device to achieve economic and political interests on a short- or long-term. Not even the ecologically-oriented NGOs are spared from being instrumentalized. From the historical perspective, this case wouldn’t be the first in which big capital interests, disguised as a NGO, sustain a revolutionary (‘red’) insurgency and manipulate humanitarian - in this case, ecological ideology to outsmart the
existing political setting. We only have to remember how Wall Street financed
the Bolshevik revolution, which went so far that bankers disguised as members
of the Red Cross during WWI went to Russia to establish future alliances with
the leading revolutionaries (Suton 1974). Capital doesn’t recognize ideology; it
recognizes opportunity and uses all possible means to succeed.

Alfred McCoy’s ‘Anarchy of the families’ (1993) resumes the basic
concept which is held as cornerstone of any political study about the Philippine
state: that the family is a special unit of analysis. Most of the political and
economic strategies are developed and operationalized within families. There is
visible evolution of strategies and tactics as generations’ progress: most
successful families held office through three colonial regimes and five
republics. There is clearly a set of specific social practices that enable singular
individuals to stand out and embrace roles of participants of the power-game in
the society. Example ‘Three’ demonstrates this. The oligarchic, cacique families’ success is based on the skills and abilities of their gifted individuals
which occasionally are produced or rise from their ranks. Enrichen with social
capital such as foreign education, polyglossia, backed-up with valuable social
skills and ramified social network these singular individuals play a crucial role.

They are either mediators between their own social strata and the civil society
at large, or they portray themselves as organic parts of the civil society which
they dominate. They often embrace the role of a ‘tool’ of the interest of the
state if it coincides with their own interests and goals. With the willingness to
use coercion in order to achieve his goals, an enthusiastic and the capable
warlord can reach incredible peaks of social hierarchy in a community in which
men with weapons have a long tradition of social acceptance and social
mobility (Anderson 1988, Kreuzer 2006, Quimpo 2016, Adam & Verbrugge
2015, etc).

When foreign paramilitaries arrived in Marawi, they were accepted
according to the rules of local hospitality-practices and the Islamic ideology of
ummah. Openness to create alliances with various armed formations with just
common point, Islam, was as an option until a choice had to be made between
two allegiances: the one to the Philippine state and a long-term survival of the
existing social order and to the other, the ummah. When things turned sour, the
local community leaders - as well as MILF, knew when to pick the right side.
Not even the 1.5 million US dollars could make a difference. In that sense case
‘Three’ is the unsuccessful example of how, in this case foreign capital failed
to shift out of balance the usual social order.

Belonging to a paramilitary unit or becoming a notorious warlord was and
continues to be way of upward social mobility in Mindanao. As in the case of
the Maute-brothers, the whole unit of the family supports the individuals in
their efforts. It is probably the reason why breakaway formations keep popping
out from each other: MNLF gave birth to MILF, while MILF members created
the Maute-group and so forth. As soon as one unit is dismantled and it leader(s)
are killed, there is always another formation which will take its place because
of the hope that eventually a new leader and a new formation will manage to
ensure long-term rule. The question is: who will the new formation serve? One thing remains certain: only big capital will win at the end.

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