

(Part 2)

Power shifts change the dynamics in relationships that define new ordering and norming in society. World wars in the past shifted power to allied forces from the Central Powers in World War I and Axis Powers in World War II. Each shift came with promises of stability and peace that have not yet sustainably come true. Peace agreements in civil wars are also accompanied by negotiated power shifts that are supposed to define new relations of power between the central state and rebel groups. Like other power shifts, they are supposed to define a new order and secure stability and peace. However, some power shifts gear up new dynamics that perpetuate conflict and violence; others, go towards a more positive note.

Peace remains elusive in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Conflict and violence persist despite the peace agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1996 and a separate Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government in 2014. A major power shift emerged in 2018 upon the enactment of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) and establishment of the MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) in 2019.

The post-BOL regional power shift in favor of the MILF-led BTA raised a lot of expectations on the transition to peace. However, these expectations remain unmet. The political transition itself, leading to formal legitimation of the regional government through elections, did not happen as originally planned in 2022. Similarly, the programmed decommissioning of MILF weapons and combatants has been delayed.

Thousands of rebel guns remain in the hands of the MILF, so are other illicit guns in the hands of private armed groups and civilians. From 2011 to 2020, Conflict Alert recorded 2,774 gun-related violent incidents in the BARMM due to illegal guns that are associated with various types of threat actors of which 95.5% are unidentified. Topping the list of identified actors is the MILF.

Palimbang in Sultan Kudarat province is not part of the

Palimbang: How a maritime frontier moves away from violence



MEDOL ISLAND, Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat

YELLOW PAD ED QUITORIANO

Bangsamoro political transition and normalization processes, but it remains part of the organizational systems of the MNLF and MILF. A new addition is the organizational system of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA). No one really knows how many illegal weapons are in the hands of non-state armed groups, criminal gangs, and civilians in the town. There has been no record of disarmament and surrender except for weapons confiscated during law enforcement operations of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP).

Power dynamics in frontier areas like Palimbang can either lead to persistent violence or peaceful transition. Skeptics may not be convinced that a maritime frontier like Palimbang can choose to take the non-violent route to development. However, there are positive markers that show otherwise. These are substantive markers

behind the overt and physical signs of improvement such as the modern government buildings, well-lighted boulevard, and sprouting of restaurants and lodging accommodations.

Conversations with various stakeholders in Palimbang — the municipal and barangay local authorities, the AFP, MNLF, MILF, former NPA rebels, and ordinary civilians — suggest positive markers of how local power shifts can lead to nonviolent routes to peace. A history of violent conflicts, ethnic diversity, formal and informal institutions of governance, and co-existence of state and non-state armed groups easily place Palimbang as an arena of fierce competition. However, local actors chose the other way — to become partners rather than competitors.

First, a look at the power shift in the agrarian economy. Palimbang has a land area of roughly 48,000 hectares, of which 30,000 hectares are under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). Municipal Agrarian Reform Officer Omar Kanda says that the program benefits 16,000 families, roughly 85% of the total number of families in the municipality. This shift faces no competi-

tion from big landlords. It only shifted legal control of the resettlement areas from the National Government to the local people.

The MILF and MNLF cooperated in the agrarian reform process. The land where the MILF camp in Tibulho is located is also under CARP coverage. Kumander Teng (aka Macalma Sabidan Ali) ensured that indigenous peoples and Christian settlers are not excluded from land distribution. He and his wife — Bainon Benasi, who is the Barangay Chairperson of Tibulho — preside over agricultural support from the BARMM, Palimbang being considered by the MILF as a special development area.

This shift does not follow the conventional “guns-to-plows” approach, but it works. Earlier on, former combatants of the MNLF and MILF, mostly women, organized themselves into the Palimbang Entrepreneurs and Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Cooperative (PEARBCO).

Crystal Solaiman, daughter of former MNLF combatants, manages the cooperative. Still landless in 2008, she and 24 other women offspring of former combatants initiated the formation of the cooperative with P1,000 in individ-

ual contributions to produce *nipa* shingles. Upon acquisition of certificates of land ownership award (CLOAs) in 2013, they shifted to the production of banana chips, *palapa*, *bagoong*, coffee and *buri* bags, alongside pre-existing production of coconut. What the cooperative produces is considered by the municipal government as “braggable” goods that have attracted support from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department of Science and Technology (DoST).

Second, the shift in use of armed power by the MILF and MNLF. They maintain military camps and command structures and hold on to their guns. Being outside the BARMM, they are not subject to the terms and conditions of normalization and decommissioning. However, they chose to respect the peace process, cooperate with the local government, local police, and the AFP; and get out of the rebellion. This leaves the CPP-NPA alone in non-state armed activities, limited to movement in indigenous people's (IP) communities.

Third, the AFP's shift to the “keyhole” approach in the mobilization of military power. According to Col. John Paul

Baldomar, commanding officer of the 37th Infantry Battalion, this approach is characterized by incisive military actions that are less invasive to communities. Unlike other provinces, the AFP in Palimbang does not detain captured (or surrendered) NPA rebels in de-radicalization facilities. Former rebels are immediately allowed to return to their home communities. Col. Baldomar also gives credit to alliances with the MILF, MNLF, and IP leaders in containing CPP-NPA movement.

Fourth, the shift in deployment of local government power. The current Mayor, Joenime Kanima, does not fall under the category of a traditional politician. He spent his youth in General Santos City but did not finish college because, as he says, he was a “malingarer.” Although a Muslim, he was exposed to non-Muslim urban culture. Religious tolerance is also in the family, his wife being of mixed Maguindanao, Muslim-Ilocano-Christian parentage.

Mayor Kanima changed the face of Palimbang into a modern-looking township that is supposed to attract entrepreneurship, investments, and tourism. The municipal government benefits from technical assistance provided by Action for Economic Reforms in data-driven adaptive management. The government center boasts of a modern building (with an elevator), a wide plaza, a seaside promenade, and a guest house called the Green Palace. The physical set-up is designed to accommodate local entrepreneurs and the inflow of investments and commodities from other provinces.

The mayor worries less about the rebellion and insurgency. Sporadic violence is mainly driven by *rido* (clan feuds). For this, he established the Kukom Kalilitad, an informal dispute resolution mechanism that settles clan feuds. Often, he uses personal funds to cover the *diya* (blood money) as compensation to the victim or heirs of victims of clan feuds. The money spent is a better alternative to perennial equal retaliation. ■

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and the handling of selective free contraceptives. And there's finger-pointing over budget allocations for the administration and implementation of this very specialized program. And somehow it has expanded from population control to discussions of women's rights, human rights, and gay rights.

The chaos and confusion might intuitively beg questions in one's conscience: why is all this turmoil happening? What have I got to do with this? How is this going to end? The answer might not be a practical one — not like the Great Flood that drowned all creatures except Noah's family of eight and representative pairs of animals and birds.

“Increase and multiply,” God said to Noah after the flood, as He said to Adam in the beginning of time. From the eight people from Noah's Ark, there are now eight billion people in the temporal world — “temporary” for sure, because of the sureness of death. Instinctively, Man wants survival for oneself, but must also respect the right of others to live. Thou shalt not kill.

The RH Law only prescribes and makes available population control measures and means for the better practical life for Filipinos. Each person has the power of choice and instinctive moral guidance on surviving in our crowded earth. ■

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Innovating to cure multiple sclerosis

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a condition that occurs when the immune system attacks the brain and spinal cord. Over 1.8 million people worldwide have MS, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The Philippines is among the countries with a reported 27.8% change in age-standardized rates of MS between 1990 and 2016, which is higher than the global prevalence change of 10.4%.

In MS, the body's immune system attacks myelin, the fatty insulation that surrounds the nerves in the brain and spinal cord. This disrupts the electrical impulses that are sent through the nerves to the rest of the body and results in scars (plaques or sclerosis).

Symptoms of MS vary from person to person and depend on the location and severity of nerve fiber damage. These include vision problems, difficulty walking or keeping one's balance, difficulty thinking clearly, numbness or weakness especially in the arms and legs, muscle stiffness, depression, problems with sexual function or urination, and feeling very tired. MS symptoms can come and go or get worse over time, especially with heat or during other infections such as urinary tract or respiratory infections.

There is currently no cure for MS. Specific MS disease-modifying therapies (DMTs) are started as early as possible to reduce the frequency and severity of relapses, slow the disease progression, manage symptoms, and improve quality of life.

For a very long time, it was not known what triggered the immune system to attack myelin, but experts suspected that genetic and environmental factors played a role. MS happens most commonly in young to middle-aged adults,

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more in females than males, and is more common in higher latitudes, possibly due to sun exposure and vitamin D, the WHO said.

In 2022, scientists identified the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) as the reason why the immune system attacked myelin in people with MS. EBV is the cause of mononucleosis or glandular fever (also known as the “kissing disease”). This important discovery opened up new treatment options for MS, with clinical trials of antivirals and vaccines against EBV now under way.

Antiviral therapies could reduce EBV levels circulating in patients' immune systems. A large international study published in the *Annals of Neurology* in December 2023 found that people living with HIV who were on antiviral drugs were less likely to be diagnosed with MS than the general population. However, full-scale clinical trials are needed to confirm this finding.

Two Phase I clinical trials are currently being conducted to assess the safety and the immune response induced by two EBV vaccines. The American biopharmaceutical company Moderna is conducting a clinical trial on an mRNA vaccine against EBV involving 422 healthy adults aged 18 to 30. On the other hand, the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) is trialing a nanoparticle vaccine against EBV involving 82 healthy adults aged 18 to 30.

Both clinical trials are designed to train the body's immune system to attack an EBV protein known as gp350, which enables the virus to invade immune cells.



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Strong B-cell antibody responses are an important first-line defense against acute EBV infection. A previous EBV vaccine based on gp350 successfully prevented the development of glandular fever in Phase 2 clinical trials, although it was not able to prevent infection. Ongoing research has highlighted the importance of T-cell-mediated immune responses in long-term effective EBV control. B-cells and T-cells are lymphocytes, a type of white blood cell, that are key disease-fighting components of the immune system.

A study by Australian researchers published last year in *Nature Communications* describes a new EBV vaccine that is highly effective in laboratory models. The researchers used several strategic design elements to create a more effective EBV vaccine, according to Multiple Sclerosis Australia.

First, they used components from several EBV viral proteins to achieve wide immune coverage across various stages of EBV infection, as well as to stimulate both B- and T-cell arms of the immune system. Aside from utilizing gp350 to stimulate a strong antibody response, the team genetically engineered a protein called “EBVpoly” to activate T-cells thereby enhancing the vaccine's global potential. They also incorporated an adjuvant, a vaccine ingredient that helps boost immune responses, with a specific focus on directing the vaccine to the lymph nodes, a critical site for immune response activation.

The EBV vaccine induced strong responses against EBV in both arms of the immune system. It was effectively targeted to the lymph nodes by the adjuvant, and immune responses in the lymph nodes were enhanced. Both arms of the immune response to the vaccine were long-lasting and detected beyond six months. Furthermore, the vaccine effectively prevented the spread of an EBV-related cancer in a laboratory model. The study represents a major advance towards an effective EBV vaccine for human use.

Continued investment and re-investment in biopharmaceutical research and development will be crucial in finding medicine and vaccine innovations that will help improve the lives of patients with MS and their families. ■

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