

Private Armed Groups: A New Security Threat in the Philippines

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The rapid proliferation of private armed groups (PAGs) has become a serious national security problem for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). From a mere peace and order concern for the Philippine National Police (PNP), the proliferation of private armed groups is increasingly threatening security at a national level. The Department of National Defense (DND) has recently declared PAGs as one of the greatest concerns to the country's defense and security, along with local communist movements and Muslim secessionist movements.

According to the Independent Commission Against Private Armies (ICAPA), formed in the aftermath of the 23 November 2009 massacre of 57 persons in the Maguindanao province of the Southern Philippines, 112 PAGs have been identified across the country. The ICAPA reports that most of these PAGs are found in the Muslim areas of Mindanao, but does not specify how many or the exact proportion.

However, the ICAPA figure on PAG numbers is highly conservative. In the Philippines, it is customary for all local government officials to have two or more private armed bodyguards. As the Philippines has 82 provinces, 122 cities and 1,495 municipalities, not to mention at least 287 members of the Philippine House of Representatives, the true number of PAGs in the Philippines must be far larger than 112. In Maguindanao province alone, almost all of its 36 municipalities have two or more armed groups. In Sulu and Basilan, there is a saying that each household has a gun - this is a very telling indicator of how big the problem of privately armed violence in the Philippines really is.

One issue surrounding the rise of PAGs is the difficulty of adopting an adequate definition. The ICAPA reports that some private armies in the Philippines are organized and funded by the government to fight crime and insurgencies, and this makes the definition of private armies in the Philippines highly problematic. If some PAGs are government-organized and funded, can they really be referred to as fully 'private' armies?

Furthermore, if the 112 PAGs identified by ICAPA refer to the illegally armed private groups maintained by traditional warlords without the sanction of the government, how can they be dismantled if they serve elected officials? Additionally, how can the police and the military effectively pursue PAGs, if many of them have more resources and stronger firepower than local law enforcement?

Ultimately, the problem of private armed violence in the Philippines has become a larger security threat because it exacerbates already existing security challenges emanating from a shifting network of local communist and Moro secessionist insurgencies. Also, when PAGs are not fighting against one other for political and personal reasons, they are likely as not conniving together to commit crimes such as arms smuggling, drug trafficking, extortion, and kidnap-for-ransom. These crimes are committed primarily for financial gain.

From a human security perspective, private armed violence threatens the welfare of local populations, as was the case in the November 2009 Maguindanao massacre, in which 57 people were killed, including the wife, sister, and aids of opposition candidate Esmael Mangudadatu, several innocent by-standers, and at least 34 journalists (see the March 2010 *ACR* for this author's report on the incident). PAGs also perpetuate the practice of settling private problems and local disputes through the use of armed and violent confrontation. This practice aggravates an already weak rule-of-law, creates semi-anarchy in some communities, and undermines human rights by creating a politics of fear and intimidation in the day-to-day lives of many people. The situation propagates itself as a vicious circle; the PAGs are, in part, a response to weak central government services in many under-developed localities, but the atmosphere of fear they create in turn discourages the very foreign and local entrepreneurs from investing in the areas where they are needed most in order to propel local economic development, create jobs and reduce poverty. In the view of potential investors, the resulting high costs of ensuring personal and infrastructure security far outbalances any potential profit.

Private armed violence exists because of a weak state that fails to insulate itself from the parochial interests of clans and families maintaining their own private armies. PAGs also proliferate when some corrupt key military, police and elected government officials are beholden to local warlords. The result has been the evolution of a complex network that will be extremely difficult to dismantle in a society already torn by complex internal armed conflicts.

Identifying and addressing the underlying causes and conditions of internal armed conflicts in the Philippines is a key first step to deal with private armed violence. In a weak state this task is truly gargantuan, but it is achievable and must be tackled. Overall, the Philippines must urgently pursue security sector reform - a vital task that is easier said than done.

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57 people were killed by private armed groups (PAGs) in November 2009 during the single Maguindanao massacre

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The Philippine Department of National Defense has just declared PAGs to be a significant threat to Philippine security

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The Independent Commission Against Private Armies has identified 112 PAGs operating across the Philippines, but the real number is much higher