



**MASSACRE IN MAGUINDANAO:  
A WORSENING PROBLEM OF WARLORDISM AND PRIVATE  
ARMS VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES**

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Beyond the threat of terrorism, the Southern Philippines is faced with a much bigger challenge of warlordism and private arms violence. The massacre in the Maguindanao province of Mindanao, which resulted in the death of at least 57 people to date, is just an indication of a worsening problem of warlordism and private arms violence in an area already torn by four centuries of armed conflicts.

Warlordism is not a new phenomenon in the Philippines. Long before the establishment of a Philippine Republic, there were already local warlords in the dispersed islands of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao competing for supremacy. Present-day warlords come from feuding families and clans who, more often than not, represent the elite and counter-elite of Philippine politics.

The massacre in Maguindanao on 23 November 2009 was just an expression of growing clan violence, locally called *Rido*, between the Ampatuans and the Mangudadatus who are incessantly struggling for political dominance in the province. *Rido* usually occurs in troubled areas where law enforcement authorities are terribly weak, security is very scarce, and justice is too slow. This phenomenon is not unique to the Philippines as similar cases have been documented in the Balkans, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Caucasus and even the Appalachian region of the United States.

At present, there are more than 100 warlords in the Philippines distributed in 79 provinces. There are also around 200 private armies

in 1,495 Philippine municipalities. Warlords and private armies vary in size: small, medium, large, etc. The Ampatuans may be considered as a mega-size warlord with a mega-size private army lording over Maguindanao for more than 20 years.

The problem of warlordism and private arms violence in the Philippines is exacerbated with the rapid proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Around 2 million SALWs are illegally proliferating in the Philippines because of weak law enforcements of the Philippine government and porous borders of the Philippine archipelago. SALWs are not only arming terrorist, rebel and organized criminal groups. SALWs are also arming warlords and private groups.

Warlordism, private arms violence and proliferation of SALWs are grim recipes for the worsening problem of political violence in the Philippines. Warlordism is more alarming than terrorism because warlords can kill with impunity while terrorists cannot. Warlords can even run for public office while terrorists only run in the mountains. Except with the bombing of Super ferry 14 in 2004 which killed 116 people, warlords kill more people than terrorists after September 11, 2001.

The massacre in Maguindanao may be viewed as a blessing in disguise as it brings to intense public debate the worsening problem of warlordism in the Philippines. Because of its brazenness, the Maguindanao massacre not only got the attention of the Philippine public but also the attention of the international community, which shall exert pressure on the Philippine government to put to justice the perpetrators of this heinous assault against civilians.

As of this writing, 28 local leaders including the Ampatuans have been charged of multiple murder and rebellion. Around 600 supporters of the Ampatuan patriarch were also charged of rebellion and various criminal offenses related with the massacre. Martial Law was declared in Maguindanao on 4 December 2009 to prevent the escalation of private arms violence in the area. Because of domestic

opposition, martial law was lifted on 11 December 2009. According to the Philippine government, a week of martial law in Maguindanao enabled the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police to arrest suspects and even confiscate the private armories of the Ampatuans.

Yet, the Ampatuan clan is just one of the many warlords in the Philippines. There are warlords who continue to lord over many towns and provinces in the country. There are even warlords running for office for the 2010 Philippine elections. Other politicians challenging the warlords are even arming themselves for protection.

Because arms are circulating in the black market, warlordism and private arms violence will not disappear in Philippine politics. Confronting warlordism and private arms violence is a much bigger challenge than combating terrorism.

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