RSIS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RSIS COMMENTARY

www.rsis.edu.sg No. 034 – 23 February 2021

Name-Giving in Muslim Mindanao: Problem of Conflating Labels

By Mathew L. Bukit

SYNOPSIS

The inkling of a rapprochement between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and IS-affiliated groups in the Philippines highlights how name-giving shapes fundamental assumptions about violent non-state actors, often to the detriment of counterterrorism effectiveness.

COMMENTARY

MURAD EBRAHIM, Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Interim Chief Minister of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), recently announced that he had reached out to three Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighter (BIFF) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) factions affiliated with the 'Islamic State' (IS), seeking to "convince them to join…the government".

The fact that two out of three factions are reportedly receptive to this overture brings into question whether the demarcation between the 'revolutionary' MILF and the 'terroristic' ASG and BIFF is as clear-cut as their labels suggest. Rather, the (un)surprising inkling of rapprochement highlights how name-giving in counterterrorism can inadvertently lead to parochialism.

What is 'Terrorism'?

Since 9/11, terrorism has been a permanent fixture in global security discourse. As attention ballooned, the descriptive value of 'terrorism' has been eroded by a nexus of policy and media name-giving, while also being applied to an increasingly broad range of acts and actors. The term is so contested that no universally agreed upon definition of terrorism exists.

Tenuous militant identities are negotiated against the backdrop of the aphorism "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter". For example, in 2003 the Philippines government attempted to come to terms with whether the MILF were 'revolutionaries' or 'terrorists'. Though they ultimately opted to retain the 'revolutionary' label, it was not without public deliberation that demonstrated the arbitrariness of these labels.

The tendency to demarcate what are considered discrete types of violence for which coherent strategies can be tailored is made problematic by this arbitrariness and definitional quibbling. The mixing and matching of deradicalisation, counter-narratives, community engagement, development, political reform, policing, and military operations manifests as counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, or preventing/countering violent extremism. These approaches propagate a presumed distinctiveness between the threats posed by terrorists, insurgents, and violent extremists.

But violence rarely conforms to neat categories, especially when the character of a conflict is changing. In such cases, uncertain deferral to the categories and labels that should aid the formulation of, rather than dictate, responses can risk misdiagnosing its perpetrators by putting the cart before the horse. The perceived shift from Moro (Philippine Muslim) separatism to IS terrorism in the southern Philippines typifies this transforming threat landscape.

Moro Separatism

Moro separatists fought an insurgency in Mindanao from the early 1970s in pursuit of a Muslim nation in the Philippines: the Bangsamoro. The most prominent armed groups were the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and MILF 'revolutionary' groups, and ASG and BIFF 'terrorist' groups.

Both revolutionary groups have signed peace agreements with the Philippines government, resulting in iterations of autonomous regional governance: first the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which was replaced by the MILF-led BARMM in 2019.

As the insurgency putatively wound down with the 2012 Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, which paved the way for the BARMM, the rise of IS and its quest for a global caliphate eclipsed Moro irredentism in policy thinking. A constellation of militants in Mindanao began to swear fealty to IS in 2014; first ASG faction leader Isnilon Hapilon, with the BIFF and Ansar al-Khilafah Philippines shortly thereafter.

The Maute Group, who swore allegiance to IS in 2016, would gain infamy for their major role in the 2017 Battle of Marawi. The scale of the five-month long Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) siege against IS-affiliated Filipino and foreign fighters came as a shock to those that had downplayed IS' presence in the Philippines.

Bringing the Local Back In

Since then, and amidst a growing trend of suicide bombings, IS terrorism is now considered dominant, with the Bangsamoro struggle seemingly consigned to history. The BIFF are caught in the turning tide, once nominally separatists pursuing the

Bangsamoro, but now perceived to be adrift between this goal and IS ideology. In 2017, the AFP believed that the BIFF was "training for its gradual alignment with DAESH ideology and objectives", referring to another name for IS.

Yet, there is an implicit recognition of instrumentality in believing that violent irredentism and global *jihad* might be reconciled through training. When IS ideology predominates the characterisation of militants, idiosyncrasies below the surface of their aggregation are obscured.

Violence is equally shaped from the bottom-up by local interests as it is from the top-down by what is conceived to be a conflict's overarching issue. Overlaying understandings of IS over militants in the Philippines should converge with, not substitute, situating them in their local context.

Since its founding in 2010, the BIFF consistently engaged in clan feuding known as *rido*, which ranges from land disputes to electoral violence. Electoral conflict is endemic in the Philippines but particularly pronounced in Mindanao as a legacy of its dysfunctional incorporation into the state.

In Mindanao, clans wield violence to monopolise political offices and protect their participation in lucrative illicit economies. This has at times been tolerated in Manila because Muslim politicians have historically delivered bloc voting that can win national elections. Following the 2015 death of its founder Ameril Umra Kato, the BIFF split into three factions, of which two are pro-IS and the most fervent led by Abu Toraife.

Even so, the behaviour of Toraife's followship has not deviated too far from the BIFF's pre-splinter conduct, continuing to challenge the oligarchic monopoly over local illicit economies by extorting local governments and mulcting 'revolutionary taxes.'

Finding a Middle Ground

The significance of IS in Mindanao should nevertheless not be downplayed. The enlistment of foreign fighters is clearly important, most visibly in the continued spectre of suicide bombings. However, this generally remains insulated from — rather than transforms — the relationship between Filipino militants and their local milieu.

Nor are espousals of IS ideology unequivocally instrumental. Though most IS-affiliated Filipino militants are unlikely to understand the *Salafi-jihadist* principles underpinning IS ideology, the depositions of suspects in the Maute Group's 2016 Davao City Bombing indicated the allure of IS' narrative of 'purely Islamic' governance.

But it is difficult to divorce that narrative from its juxtaposition with Mindanao's local milieu today, where political clans have long defended their hegemony and illicit aggrandisement to the national government by instrumentalising Muslim Filipino identity.

What is key for those in authority who allocate descriptive labels is regular introspection to ensure that labels continue to clarify, rather than conflate, the pathologies of violence in Muslim Mindanao.

Mathew L Bukit, an alumnus of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies' (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore, is an independent researcher. He was previously Programme Manager and Editor at the Asian Vision Institute, a think tank in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg