PEACEPTIONS

THE WINDING ROAD TO PEACE

Peacebuilding in a Context of Multiple Sources of Violence – Philippines

Sabine Kurtenbach, Jennifer S. Oreta, Carla Isabel Ravanes

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The violent landscapes in the Philippines show a high-level of subnational diversity regarding actors and levels of violence.

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Peace agreements can significantly reduce violence, but remain fragile if they do not produce viable livelihoods and political spaces for ex-combatants and local communities

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The labeling and criminalisation of civil society actors – very common in war and armed conflict – are dangerous practices as they undermine the important role that civil society actors can play in supporting and monitoring peace agreements at different levels.

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Violence and armed conflicts in the Philippines are shaped by multiple actors and dynamics. The remnants of the communist guerrilla are active across the islands, the Mindanao secessionist movements signed a peace agreements, private armies and warlords shape the local violent landscapes. Notions of peace are highly diverse, the three most mentioned are personal safety, tranquillity, and reconciliation.

Filipinos articulate confidence in local government units, but low trust in Catholic church and civil society – a reverse of how these institutions were regarded during the martial law and post-authoritarian periods. Increasing civic spaces might provide opportunities to strengthen peacebuilding.

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Content

1

INTRODUCTION – THE CONCEPTUAL APPROACH OF PEACEPTIONS

The PEACEption project is a collaborative and participatory project between the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Berlin, various national FES offices and many local researchers and partners. The overall aim is to identify and analyse the understanding and perception of peace by different actors and the general population in the six countries participating in the study (Colombia, Venezuela, Cameroon, the Philippines, Tunisia and South Sudan).

It was Willy Brandt who coined the famous phrase »*Peace is not everything, but without peace everything is nothing*«. Many political sermons, national and international policy documents postulate »peace« as a goal. This is nothing new; it permeates time and space. However, there are differences in the underlying definitions and concepts of peace, as well as in the answers to the question of how to achieve and maintain peace. Understandings of peace and its goals vary among external and internal actors at the international, national and local levels, as well as among different population groups. Understanding these differences is key to developing context-specific strategies for sustainable peacebuilding.

The project follows a common methodology, using the same key concepts to set the necessary scientific standards to allow comparability of country studies.

The core of the project is to provide a conceptual framework in which different conceptions of peace can be highlighted and their differences analysed in order to formulate concrete proposals for peacebuilding. The concept of peace is based on three basic functions of any society across time and space, across historical and cultural boundaries: (i) security, i.e. physical integrity; (ii) participation, i.e. individual and collective human rights; and (iii) a set of norms and values that enable constructive conflict transformation. However, the specific forms these three pillars take vary according to historical and cultural legacies as well as political and economic developments, among other factors. From this perspective, peacebuilding is a non-linear and multi-scalar process, shaped by local, national and international developments and dynamics, and a variety of actors.
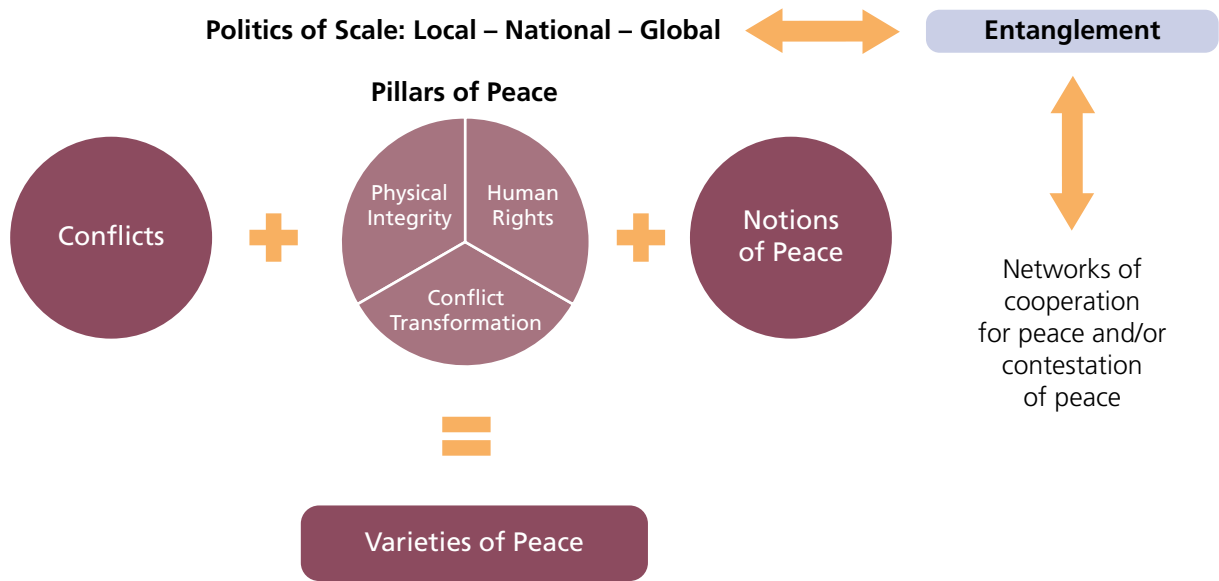
The case studies use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. As a first step, the main conflicts (and their actors) are analysed at different levels (Birke Daniels and Kurtenbach 2021; López Caldera and Kurtenbach 2023). Qualitative and quantitative data on the three pillars of peace make it possible to identify deficits but also opportunities for peacebuilding. Quantitative data are drawn from international sources in order to make the results comparable across case studies, while available national and sub-national data are used to complement and deepen the analysis. Qualitative case studies from local contexts of varying degrees of peacefulness provide nuanced information on specific conflicts, actors and contexts. The picture is rounded off by a survey of the prevailing notions of what peace means to different groups of actors at the local, national and international levels, as well as to the state and society (see Figure 1). The survey serves as a baseline for the needs and preferences of the respective society.

The overall objectives of the project are thus

1. to understand peace by analysing the underlying conflicts and conceptions of peace of different actors and levels within and between societies on the basis of a consistent framework;
2. to assess peace by comparing the status of the three main pillars of peace at national, sub-national and transnational levels and their interrelationships; and
3. to promote peace by developing policy recommendations that can bridge different meanings and conceptions of peace in the cases analysed and more generally for the FES and other actors.

Beyond the policy level, the results of the project can also be useful for the strategic planning of the FES offices involved. They help to analyse the interrelationships and trade-offs between different areas of FES work at the country level and the development of peace as an overarching goal.

Figure 1:
The PEACEptions methodology

Politics of Scale: Local – National – Global ⟷ **Entanglement**

Pillars of Peace

Conflicts **+** Physical Integrity / Human Rights / Conflict Transformation **+** Notions of Peace

⇕

Networks of cooperation for peace and/or contestation of peace

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Varieties of Peace

Source: Kurtenbach (2021. 345).

2

SPECIFIC CONTEXT IN THE PHILIPPINES[1]

The more than 7,000 islands that make up the national territory of the Philippines today are geographically located at the periphery and interface of several larger polities, both distant neighbours such as India and closer ones such as China, and Muslim sultanates such as Brunei. These influences and various episodes of colonial rule continue to shape the dynamics of peace and conflict to this day. Spanish colonial domination of the Philippines extended over a long historical period (1521-1898), although it did not establish territorial control over all of the various small kingdoms, chiefdoms, sultanates and local communities, such as the second largest island, Mindanao. Its main legacies include a predominantly Catholic population and a highly centralised government in which local communities had no say. Under US rule (1898-1946), the central state extended its reach to Mindanao and other remote regions, and established two institutions that remain important today – the presidential system and administration, and the national army. The Japanese occupation during World War II (1942-1945) was a period of intense conflict and atrocities that resulted in high levels of civilian casualties. Following the atrocities of the war, the independent Philippine government was among the first to sign the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Post-colonial development was characterised by a high degree of economic and military dependence on the United States and a first phase of democratisation until Ferdinand Marcos Sr. declared martial law in 1972. In February 1986, the People Power Revolution led by civil society and the Catholic Church ushered in a regime change and a second phase of democratisation Although elections are held regularly, Philippine politics is highly personalised with political clans or families playing a key role. Since 2001, Filipinos have elected four presidents, all from political dynasties. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was president from 2001 to 2010. Her political career was heavily influenced by her father, Diosdado Macapagal, a former president of the Philippines. Benigno Simeon »Noynoy« Aquino III. President from 2010–2016, entered politics following his family's legacy; his father, Benigno Aquino Jr., was a key opposition leader against Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and his assassination in 1983 helped spark the
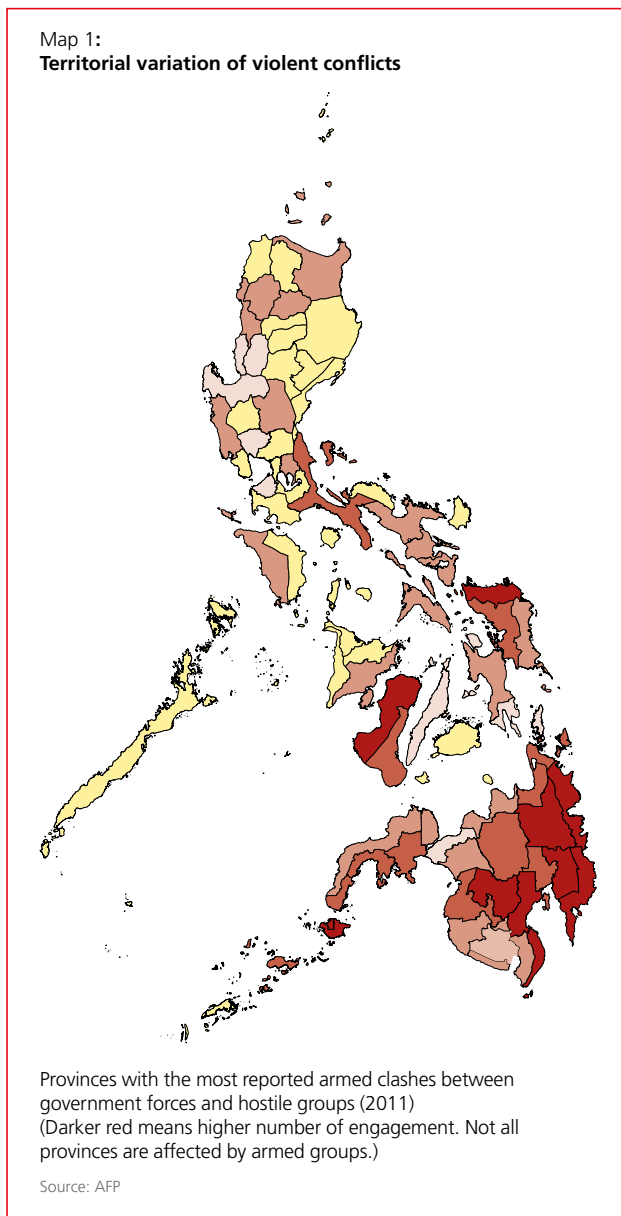
People Power Revolution. His mother, Corazon Aquino, became the country's first female president in 1986 and worked to restore democracy and social justice through the 1987 Constitution. The current president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., is the son of Ferdinand Marcos Sr, and his vice president, Sara Duterte, is the daughter of Rodrigo Duterte, president from 2016–2022.

As in other countries of the third wave of democratisation, structural problems such as the rural-urban divide, the marginalisation of religious and ethnic minorities and weak democratic institutions have not been overcome. This is evidenced by the persistence of a number of armed conflicts and ongoing political violence.

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1 This report draws heavily on the qualitative and quantitative reports provided by the members of the Philippine project team. Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted in all selected regions of the country to complement the survey results.

3

MAIN CONFLICT STRUCTURES: HIGH DEGREE OF TERRITORIAL VARIATION

Map 1:
Territorial variation of violent conflicts

Provinces with the most reported armed clashes between government forces and hostile groups (2011)
(Darker red means higher number of engagement. Not all provinces are affected by armed groups.)

Source: AFP

Violence and armed conflict in the Philippines can be observed in four specific manifestations and geographical areas.

– Throughout the Philippines, the remnants of the NPA (New People's Army), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, are waging war with varying degrees of intensity.

– The secessionist movement in Mindanao, led by various armed groups under different names, has fragmented alongside various peace processes.
– Private armies and warlordism thrive, especially in remote areas of the country.
– Last but not least, at the inter-state level, China's claim to all the islands in the South China Sea has led to a heavy militarisation of the disputed region.

3.1 THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S ARMY

The communist insurgency has its roots in the revolutionary anti-colonial movement for independence from Spain. The group KKK or Kataastaasang, Kagalanggalangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan (Supreme and Honorable Association of the Children of the Nation), a clandestine organisation, was influenced by the European liberal, freemasonry tradition and attracted both the educated and the mass public, especially on the principles of independence, secularism and republicanism. The revolution led to the creation of the First Philippine Constitution and the first republican government in Asia in 1899, but its inspiration also led to the organisation of trade union groups in the early period of the American occupation. As early as 1902, the Union Obrera Democratica de Filipinas was organised by Don Isabelo delos Reyes, a nationalist with close ties to the KKK. In the post-war period, the trade union movement grew and gained considerable influence in society. (Caroll 1961). In 1924, Crisanto Evangelista founded the Partido Obrero (Workers' Party) and later the »Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas« (PKP, Philippine Communist Party) in 1930. The PKP was legalised in 1937.

At the outbreak of World War II, the PKP formed the Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon or Hukbalahap (People's Army Against Japan). This People's Army was used by the Philippine state and the Americans to fight the Japanese forces and was provided with firearms. After the war, the PKP launched an armed struggle against the government that led to its outlawing in 1948. The Hukbalahap became the Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB, People's Liberation Army), the armed wing of the PKP. The firearms in the hands of the HMB, together with its experience of guerrilla warfare (using Mao Zedong's strategy of protracted warfare), would later become a major strength of the communist insurgency and a major problem for the Philippine state. The PKP soon succumbed

to internal strife, which eventually led to its implosion. By the end of 1954, suffering heavy losses (i.e. leaders arrested or killed, setbacks in armed clashes with state forces), the PKP had de facto abandoned the armed struggle and shifted its approach to hybrid legal-illegal actions.

In 1968, a Marxist-Leninist group re-emerged from the PKP under the leadership of Jose Maria Sison and adopted the name »Communist Party of the Philippines« (CPP), the same group that exists to this day. The HMB became the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the CPP. Today, the CPP-NPA continues to challenge the political authority of the government through its primary mode of protracted people's war. Although its numbers have dwindled due to internal problems, splits and cadre defections, the communist organisation remains resilient and has been described as the longest communist armed insurgency in Asia, and its presence in local communities continues to threaten people's physical safety and disrupt development projects in local areas. Investors shy away from areas identified as host to their presence; ironically, the lack of economic opportunities makes people in these localities more susceptible to the radicalisation of dissent by the communist insurgents, creating a steady pool of potential recruits for the underground movement. The interrelated problems of poor governance, security threats, lack of economic activity and geographical isolation create an environment conducive to militancy and dissent (Oreta, 2022). This creates a never-ending cycle of underdevelopment and armed conflict in communities.

3.2 SECESSION IN MINDANAO

When the Spaniards arrived, the Muslim communities in Mindanao fought the colonisers and thwarted their advance by fighting and regrouping in concentrated areas. While the communities have effectively resisted subjugation, the immediate effect has been to shrink the physical terrain occupied by Muslims in Mindanao. Instead of attempting to subjugate Muslim Mindanao, the Americans signed the Bates Treaty (Kiram-Bates Treaty, Kho n.d.) in 1899, which promoted mutual respect between the US and the Sultanate of Sulu. However, the Americans abrogated the treaty in 1904,[2] creating a Moro province and exercising direct American control over the province in preparation for its eventual incorporation into the Philippine state. As part of the initiative to »civilise« the Muslim population and exploit the region's natural resources, Americans and Christian Filipinos from the northern provinces were encouraged to migrate to Mindanao. (Gowing, 1976). In addition, to resolve the PKP-HMB rebellion and resettle former insurgents as part of its agrarian reform, the government cleared land, established administrative infrastructure, built roads and created housing areas in Mindanao. In February 1951, the first group of settlers, mostly members of the HMB from Central Luzon, were brought to Mindanao and given land titles (Greenberg, 1987). This resettlement programme was the government's first attempt at DDR (disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration) of ex-combatants. It helped to neutralise and transform the problematic situation with the communist insurgents, but it also contributed to exacerbating the problem of secessionism in Muslim Mindanao. The government-sponsored resettlement programme, the continued migration of Christian settlers, and subsequent land policies dispossessed Muslims of lands they regarded as ancestral.[3] Muslims deeply resented the loss of their lands. This frustration was exacerbated as they watched settlers take over large tracts of prime land, leading to disputes between locals and migrants. In addition, the government supported many of the resettlement areas, allowing them to develop faster than the areas inhabited by Muslims. The marginalisation that resulted from these events created deep resentment among Muslim communities towards the settlers and the government.

In 1968, amid growing hostility between the Philippine state and Malaysia over the disputed territory of Sabah, President Marcos Sr. created a special group in the Philippine Armed Forces composed of Tausug-speaking members from the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi (BaSulTa). They were to be deployed on a secret mission, dubbed Operation Jabidah, to infiltrate Sabah and start an internal rebellion to provoke a response from the Malaysian government. When the members learned of the secret mission, they refused to take part, as a significant number of people in Sabah are related to families in the BaSulTa areas. In order to avoid detection and diplomatic discord, the members of the Jabidah mission were killed, hence the case of the Jabidah massacre (Muslim 1994: 91-93). It was in this context that the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) was born.

When martial law was declared in 1972, an underground liberation movement, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), was formed. While the MIM sought to mainstream its independence agenda through legal platforms, the MNLF pursued the same agenda using armed struggle as its primary means. The declaration of martial law, ostensibly to deal with armed secessionism in Mindanao, ironically facilitated the unity of the various groups and political clans in Mindanao under the banner of the MNLF.

The MNLF later split, triggered by dissatisfaction among some members over the signing of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF. This split gave rise to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1978.

In 1989, a law was signed giving the predominantly Muslim areas of the region a degree of self-government, creating the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The ARMM is the legal translation of the 1976 Tripoli Peace Agreement; it was later amended on the basis of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the same parties.

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2 Memorandum: Carpenter Agreement, March 22, 1915. The Official Gazette, Republic of the Philippines. https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1915/03/22/memorandum-carpenter-agreement-march-22-1915/

3 OPAPP. 2016. PEACE 101. Training Resource Manual for the Security Forces.

While the intention of the autonomy agreement was to give the Muslim communities sufficient leeway for self-government and to promote development in Mindanao, the outcome has been far from that. MNLF chairman Nur Misuari became governor of the ARMM, but his administration failed to improve the lives of the people of Mindanao. The failure of the ARMM experiment provided the space for the MILF to rise to prominence. The MILF seized the banner of secessionism left by the MNLF, and armed violence erupted in communities.

The Philippine government pursued peace talks with the MILF, inviting Malaysia as a third-party facilitator. In 2014, after seventeen years of negotiations, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) was signed by the Philippine government and the MILF. The CAB would be enacted as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2018. Under the new law, the ARMM was abolished and a new entity, the BARMM (Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao), was created.

Later, several breakaway groups emerged, some of them more radical and brutal in their methods, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which is known to carry out kidnappings for ransom and bombings to achieve its stated goal of an independent Islamic state in Mindanao and the Sulu Islands. There are also smaller groups that have pledged allegiance to IS/Daesh, such as the Maute Group and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

The establishment of BARMM will not bring an end to the regional conflict. Clan feuding or *rido* remains a major issue, driven by competition for political power or land among Moro families and fuelled by a strong sense of honour or pride. There are also inter-communal tensions, as the Moro population is diverse, comprising different Muslim ethnic groups with distinct cultures, as well as Christian settlers and non-Muslim indigenous tribes, collectively known as Lumad.

3.3 WARLORDISM AND PRIVATE ARMIES

In the post-colonial period, power remained in the hands of the elite or political dynasties. Given the inadequacy of the security provided by the state security forces, many political families resorted to organising their own private security forces. Since the 1940s, political and economic elites have used these private armies to influence electoral outcomes and policies, as well as to protect their own interests and assets. The emergence of private armed groups to serve private needs is not really surprising, given the widespread availability of firearms and the lack of employment opportunities.

The informal agreement between the state and the oligarchy allowed private armed groups to act as »force multipliers« for state security, effectively privatising the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. The situation was further complicated by Republic Act 6975 of 1990, which demilitarised the Philippine Constabulary and gave local executives control over the Philippine National Police (PNP). As a result, many low-ranking former AFP and PNP personnel were hired by local warlords and political dynasties. Driven by the demand for violence, poverty and patronage, these individuals found lucrative opportunities as hired guns with fewer restrictions (Parada,2023).

The Philippine government even incorporated existing private armies into its counterinsurgency strategy, a tactic first used by President Ramon Magsaysay against the Hukbalahap. Under Marcos Sr., the creation of the Integrated Civilian Home Defence Forces, made up of armed volunteers supervised by local officials, further legitimised paramilitary forces. As a result, groups originally created for political and business purposes were redirected to fight communist and Muslim insurgents, with state-sanctioned forces often serving political and business interests (Parada,2023).

The Maguindanao massacre, one of the most horrific episodes in Philippine history, highlighted the entrenched influence of warlord clans, particularly in the southern regions. On 23 November 2009, 58 people, including 32 journalists, were brutally killed in an attack orchestrated by the Ampatuan clan to maintain their political dominance in Maguindanao province. The massacre underscored the dangerous intersection of politics, violence and impunity that has long plagued parts of the country, particularly in areas controlled by powerful families.

More than a decade later, the assassination of the provincial governor of Negros Oriental Roel Degamo on 4 March 2023 echoes the dark legacy of the Maguindanao massacre. In this latest incident, Degamo was assassinated in his home by ten gunmen, with politician Arnolfo Teves Jr. believed to be the mastermind behind the killing. This event highlights the enduring power of political dynasties and warlord-like figures in the Philippines, where violence continues to be a tool for maintaining and consolidating power.

Conflicts between feuding clans are usually triggered by disputes over control of resources and political power. Once in office, political leaders use state power, resources and information to consolidate and expand their economic and political influence. The horizontal conflicts of political families intertwine with the vertical conflicts of state and non-state armed groups, complicating the conflict dynamics in areas. It doesn't help that many of these places are also geographically isolated and depressed areas. Poor road connectivity makes some areas safe havens for armed groups – they have freedom of movement in these localities due to the lack of a permanent government presence. Armed groups, whether politically motivated or organised on the basis of self-interest, offer private security services and thrive in this environment. »Armed groups and militia formation in the Philippines showcase their fluidity of movement, from legal, political, and criminal. This creates a huge grey area that makes the issue difficult to wrestle« (Oreta, 2022).

3.4 THE TERRITORIAL DISPUTE WITH CHINA

Over the past decade, territorial disputes in the South China Sea have intensified due to China's extensive claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea. The claimants are the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. The South China Sea is vital for global trade, fishing grounds and potential natural resources. China's claims are based on its unilaterally declared »nine-dash line« principle, which is based on historical claims. Notably, this was rejected by the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in response to the case filed by the Philippines in 2013, which stated that the nine-dash line claim has »no legal basis« (Beech, 2016). The Philippines, like the other claimants, bases its claim on international law, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Maritime standoffs and legal challenges between China and the claimant states are the overt manifestations of the dispute; propaganda, intelligence gathering and power politics are the more covert domains of tension.

Under the current administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the Philippines has taken a stronger stance to protect its claims in the West Philippine Sea (Magramo, 2023). The current administration is also seen to have strengthened its alliance with the US by expanding the scope of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty to include the South China Sea. Last year, the Philippines and the US conducted a record 500 joint military activities (known as »Balikatan« or shoulder-to-shoulder), with the significant increase in the number of US troops in the annual Balikatan war games, which many analysts attribute to growing US concerns about China.

While territorial disputes are generally seen as a national concern for a country's security and foreign ministries, it is undeniable that China's expansionism in the South China Sea is felt most keenly by the local communities affected by its presence. China's occupation of Philippine waters has restricted local fishermen's access to their traditional fishing grounds. Prior to China's occupation, the Scarborough Shoal, located 120 nautical miles west of Luzon, was an important fishing ground for fisherfolk in Zambales. Now the shoal is effectively controlled by China, which has maintained a permanent presence in the area. Filipino fishermen experienced a brief period of relief when Rodrigo Duterte assumed the presidency in 2016. His strategy of not challenging China's claims has allowed Filipinos to return to the shoal, but this approach has long-term strategic implications. The Duterte administration's subservient stance has emboldened China's posture in the South China Sea, further threatening regional peace and freedom of navigation in the waters.

China's military construction and reclamation of islands in the disputed waters not only block Philippine fishing vessels, but also damage the aquatic environment, further harming the Philippine fishing industry. Currently, fish stocks have declined by five per cent. Data from the Philippines' National Stock Assessment Programme show that the West Philippine Sea is now overfished and has reached critical reference points for its health. In 2019, the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute estimated that damage to reef ecosystems in the disputed region costs the country around PHP33.1 billion (US$681.4 million) each year (Lucio, 2024). Fishermen also face psychological distress, with some reporting anxiety and trauma (Ramos, 2023).

Local people in Zambales during the focus group discussion felt that the Philippine Coast Guard and the Philippine Navy, as the country's maritime forces, could do more to protect citizens and address the current challenges of protecting national territory. While this is an understandable sentiment, it is also much easier said than done, given that China's naval forces vastly outnumber and overpower those of the Philippines.

4

THE THREE PILLARS OF PEACE AT THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

The territorial differences in conflict and violence also translate into differences in the three pillars of peace – physical integrity, human rights and conflict transformation.

4.1 PHYSICAL INTEGRITY

Physical integrity concerns the reduction, containment and prevention of direct physical violence against people. The Philippines has experienced a reduction in various forms of political violence over the past decade, according to different data sets (see Figures 2-4). While politically motivated violence has been somewhat contained, largely due to the peace process and its implementation (see Figures 2 and 4), the spike in state-based violence in 2017 appears to be a reversal. The increase in the number of deaths can be attributed to the Duterte administration's »war on drugs« programme, with 2017 marking the height of the community drug sweeps. 2017 was also the year of the *Marawi siege*, when members of ISIS-affiliated groups took control of Marawi City and held on for five months, from May to October 2017. Before the Marawi siege, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and the New People's Army (NPA) were in heightened conflict with state forces; after the Marawi siege, the remnants of those who participated in the five-month battle were relentlessly pursued by state forces.

The result is an increased frequency of internal security operations, especially in areas that serve as hosts for these groups – this explains the high level of political terror rated by human rights groups from 2016 to 2019 (see Figure 3).

Due to the high degree of geographical variation, physical integrity varies across the country. The continued presence of armed threat groups has contributed significantly to the higher conflict impact rate, particularly in the southern Philippines. Several insurgent groups are currently active and are also believed to be moving between extremism/insurgency and criminality:

Despite the reduction of the NPA and the confinement of fighting to the localities where NPA members reside, their ability to evade capture and maintain some level of community support remains a challenge to completely neutralising the group. The strategy of combining military pressure with development projects in remote villages appears to be working, although the effort to completely defeat the guerrillas remains complex and ongoing. The NPA is present throughout the Philippines (see map 2), but a significant proportion of all NPA-initiated violence occurs in Eastern Mindanao, including the Caraga region. The main reasons given for this are: (1) the continued extortion of the various mining companies and businesses in Caraga, which serves as

Figure 2:
Violent incidents and deaths in the Philippines 2011–2022
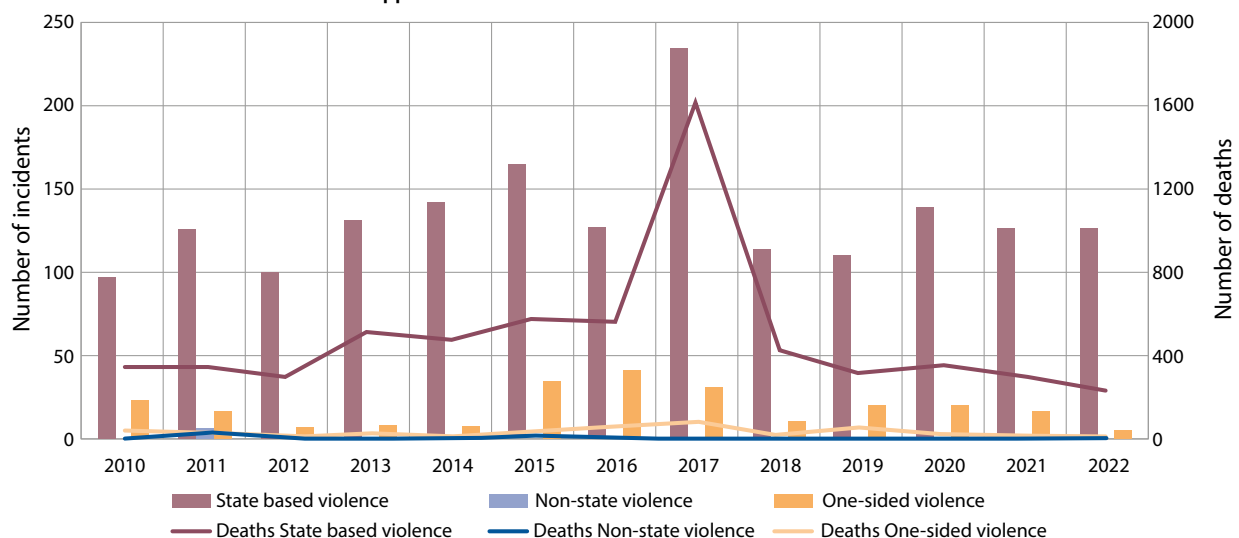
Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Date of retrieval: 23/09/05) UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia: ucdp.uu.se, Uppsala University.

Figure 3:
Political Terror Scale (PTS) Philippines 2010–2022
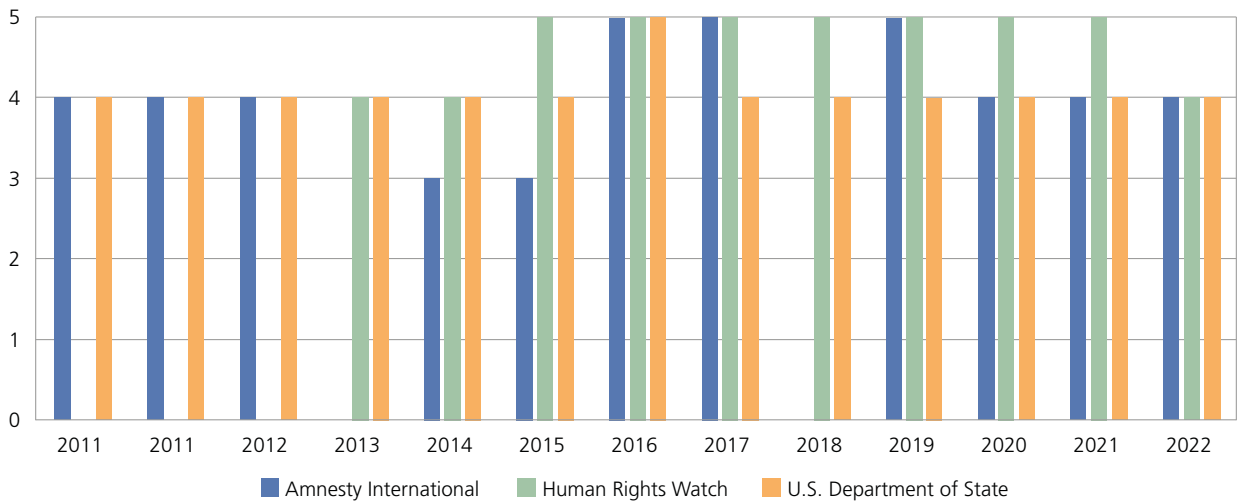
Definitions used to define the levels of political terror in Figure 3:

Level 3: There is extensive political detention or a recent history of such detention. Executions or other political killings and brutality may be common. Indefinite detention, with or without trial, for political opinions is accepted.

Level 4: Violations of civil and political rights have spread to large sections of the population. Assassinations, disappearances and torture are commonplace. Despite its generality, terror at this level primarily affects those with an interest in politics or ideas.

Level 5: Terror has spread to the entire population. The leaders of these societies set no limits on the means or thoroughness with which they pursue their personal or ideological goals.

Source: Gibney, Mark, Linda Cornett, Reed Wood, Peter Haschke, Daniel Arnon, Attilio Pisanò, Gray Barrett and Baekkwan Park. 2022. The Political Terror Scale 1976–2021. Retrieved 30 September 2023 from the Political Terror Scale website: http://www.politicalterrorscale.org. Data from HRW have also been included since 2014.

Figure 4:
Political Violence & Protest Events in the Philippines 2016-2022 (ACLED)
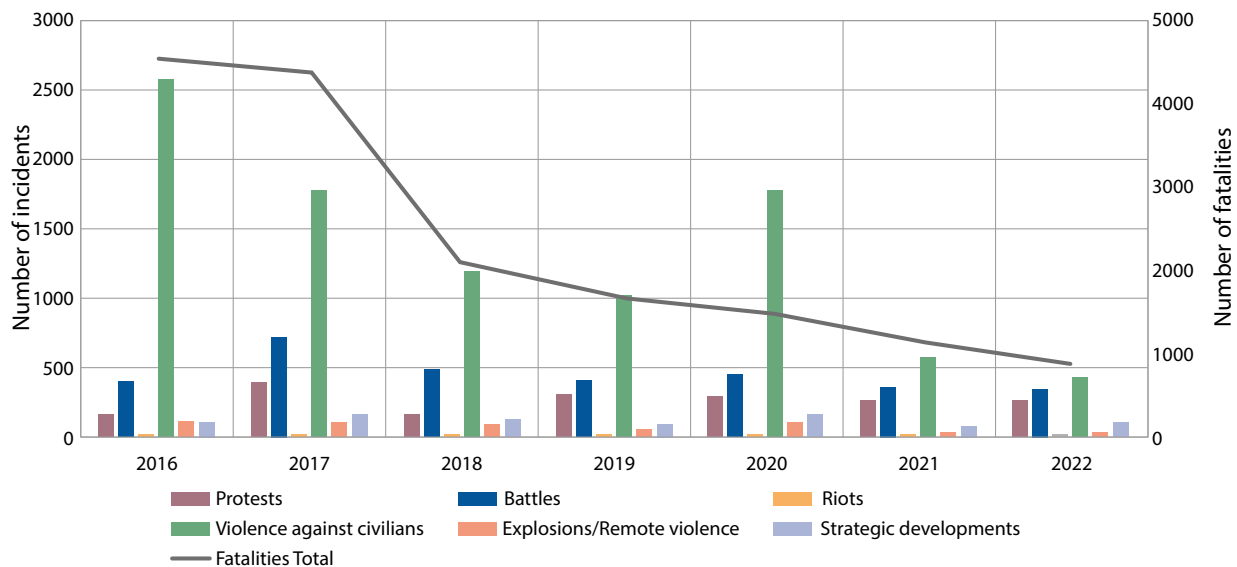
Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); retrieved 27 July, 2023, from acleddata.com.

the organisation's primary »income«, and (2) the continued exploitation of the indigenous peoples' vulnerability. Businesses choose to give money or »revolutionary taxes« to the CPP-NPA because they are threatened and intimidated by the rebel groups. They are also afraid to talk to the security forces about the extortion activities because the rebel group might discover their »alliance« with the state and harass them further. Potential investors perceive the Caraga region as risky, so they choose not to come. For the indigenous peoples in particular, the NPA capitalises on their legitimate issues and

concerns by exploiting, manipulating and mobilising them as victims of government neglect. By agitating the indigenous peoples, the NPA makes them easy targets for recruitment into the insurgency and their communities a source of refuge for the group.

Map 2:
NPA 2021–2022 (ACLED)

New People's Army (NPA) in the Philippines 2021–2022

ACLED Event Types

● Battles against non-state armed actor

● Battles against state actor

● Explosions/Remote violence

● Violence against civilians
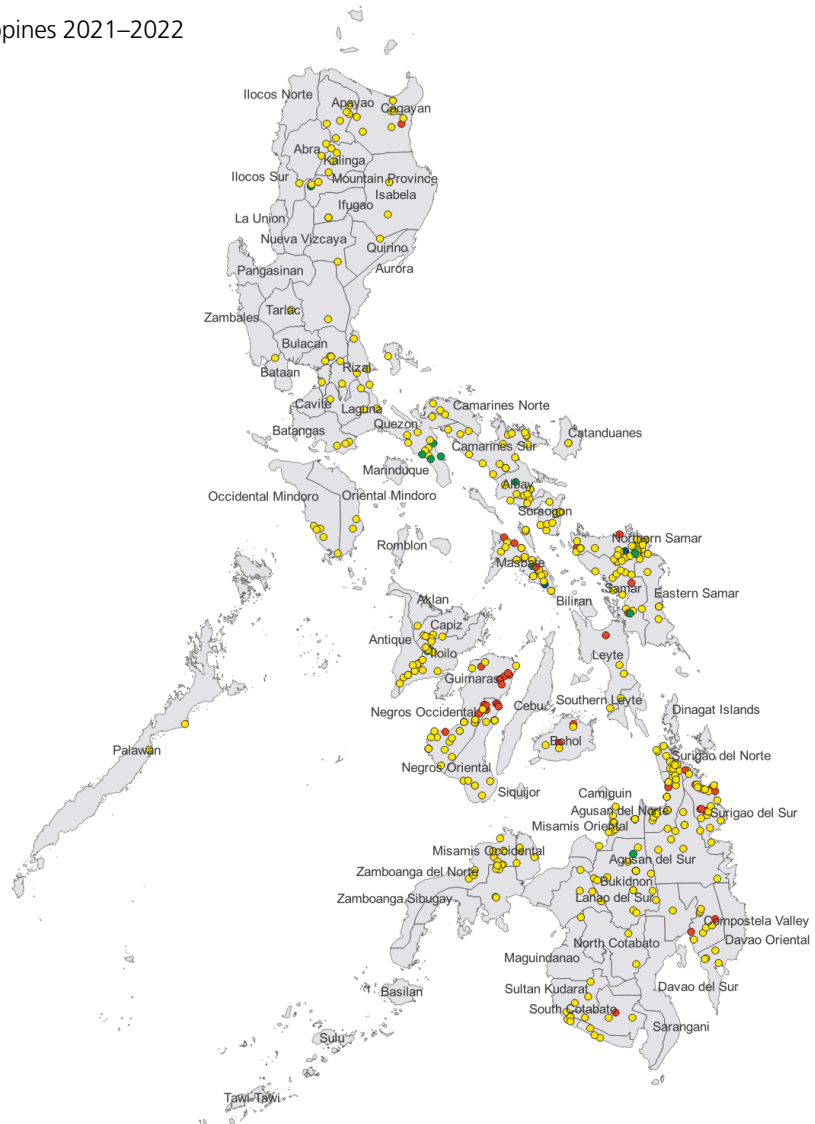
Source: ACLED 2023

At the heart of the armed violence in Mindanao is the issue of secession and/or religious freedom. Various groups have split from the original MNLF in recent decades (see Map 3).
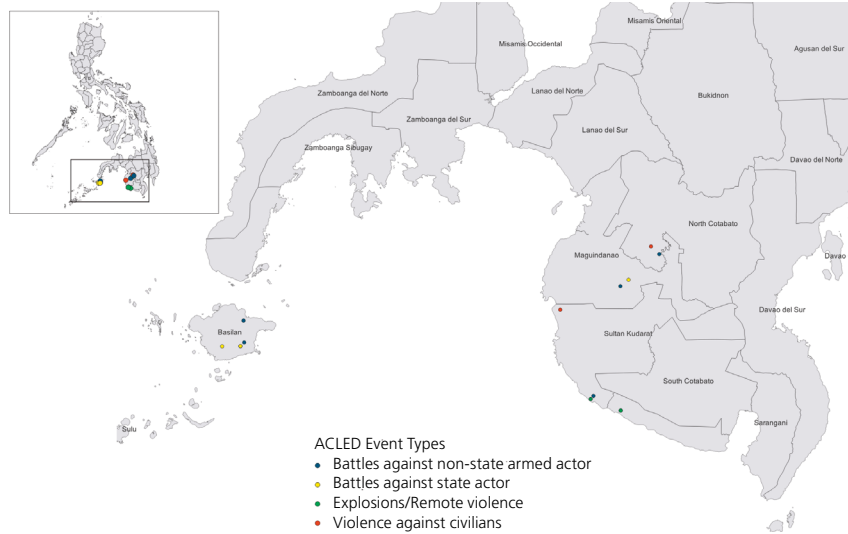
The ideological cores of the MNLF, MILF, ASG and BIFF all revolve around Moro self-determination, identity and different interpretations of Islamic governance. The MNLF is primarily focused on Moro self-determination and autonomy within the Philippine state, with an initial goal of an independent Moro state. The MILF also seeks Moro self-determination, but with a stronger emphasis on Islamic governance, advocating an autonomous region governed by Sharia law. The ASG is more radical, pushing for an independent Islamic state in Mindanao through militant action, often involving criminal activities and links to global jihadist networks. The BIFF, a splinter group of the MILF, shares a similar radical Islamist ideology, rejecting peace processes in favour of armed struggle to establish an independent Islamic state governed by strict Islamic principles.

In the current security environment, the Philippine government faces challenges not only from the MILF and MNLF, but also from a fragmented array of Islamic State-inspired factions operating under black flags. Mindanao has been plagued by a toxic combination of political violence, identity-based armed conflict, and ethnic and clan divisions, all exacerbated by ongoing rebel and terrorist activities. These factors have hindered regional political unity and social cohesion, which is further complicated by the region's socio-economic challenges. This environment has allowed non-state armed groups involved in criminal activities to flourish.
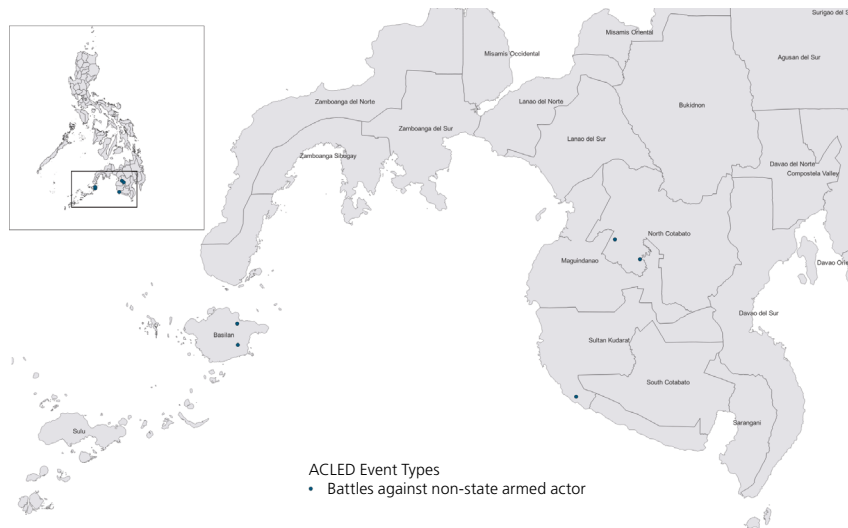
Pervasive violence and limited access to justice can drive individuals to violent extremism as a means of redressing grievances, particularly when combined with discrimination against Muslims, which increases feelings of marginalisation and facilitates extremist recruitment. Political alienation and disenfranchisement further increase the appeal of violent extremism, especially among those of low socio-economic
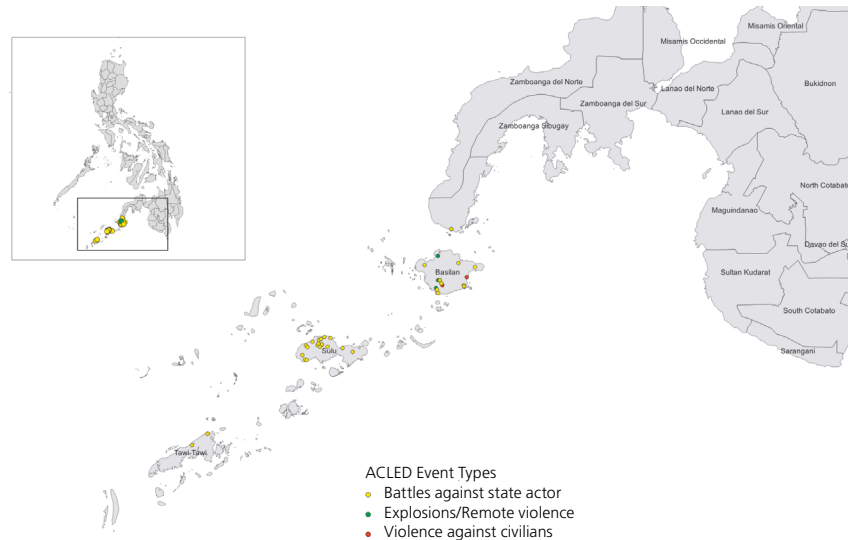
Map 3:
MILF and break offs (2021–2022) ACLED

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines 2021–2022

ACLED Event Types
- Battles against non-state armed actor
- Battles against state actor
- Explosions/Remote violence
- Violence against civilians

Moro National Liberation Front (MLNF) in the Philippines 2021–2022

ACLED Event Types
- Battles against non-state armed actor

Abu Sayyaf (ASG) in the Philippines 2021–2022

ACLED Event Types
- Battles against state actor
- Explosions/Remote violence
- Violence against civilians

Source: ACLED 2023

status who may be attracted by financial incentives. The Moro struggle has long centred on two key demands: the creation of an autonomous region to preserve Moro identity and culture, and the improvement of socio-economic conditions within Moro communities. While the first remains important, there is now an urgent need to focus on the second demand in order to improve the standard of living in these communities.

The Duterte administration's »war on drugs« led to a drastic increase in state repression, reported police brutality, human rights violations and extrajudicial killings of drug offenders. The Duterte administration framed the drug problem as having reached the level of a national crisis, justifying the need for the »war on drugs« campaign. However, data from government agencies contradict this claim and maintain that the criminality issue associated with drug use, while a major concern, is not on the national security scale magnitude. The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) reported 5,601 deaths as of 31 January 2020, but the Philippine Commission on Human Rights estimates that the actual number could be as high as 27,000, including those killed by vigilantes. (Conde. 2020) The war on drugs has been criticised for exacerbating human rights violations, with the majority of victims coming from marginalised communities. Questions have been raised as to whether the then government's initiative really targeted the high-value and high-impact drug lords, traffickers and syndicates, especially since the majority of victims of drug-related homicides were poor drug users or small-time dealers.

4.2 HUMAN RIGHTS

While political rights are largely guaranteed, civil liberties and freedom of the press have been curtailed in recent years, and labour rights continue to be violated (see Figure 5). The most prominent case of an attack on press freedom is that of journalist Maria Ressa, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for her fight against human rights violations

and corruption (Ressa 2023). According to the International Trade Union Confederation, the Philippines is one of the 10 worst countries for workers due to human rights violations and abuses.

Our survey and the qualitative local studies show that Filipinos highly value human rights as an essential element of peace. Agreement with the view that respect for human rights is key to achieving peace is essentially universal in the Philippines as a whole (95%), and this is confirmed by the qualitative data generated by the study in the various areas and classes. Almost all adult Filipinos believe that human rights are protected in their community (91%) – a view shared by majorities across geographic areas and socio-economic groups. Freedom of expression is the second most commonly cited human right important to Filipinos (40%). Freedom of movement (32%) and the right to education (30%) form a third set of important human rights. According to the survey, 71% of Filipino adults believe that the President (at the time of the 2022 fieldwork, Rodrigo Duterte) plays an important role in protecting or promoting human rights. Meanwhile, more than a third (38%) see local mayors as important protectors or promoters of human rights in the country, while the military and police are identified by just over a quarter of Filipino adults (27% and 28%, respectively).

People understand the concepts of human rights and justice, and even have high levels of confidence in the ability of institutions to uphold them, as shown in the survey. However, this resonates weakly with the qualitative data. Group discussions and interviews indicate that human rights remain a major concern. Communities affected by the government's draconian programmes such as the »war on drugs« and the »red-tagging« or labelling of human rights defenders by people in authority strongly emphasised this. Similarly, communities in Zambales, caught in the middle of a diplomatic row between the Philippines and China, question the commitment of the Philippine government to protect the rights of its own fisherfolk.

Figure 5:
Human Rights in the Philippines 2010–2022
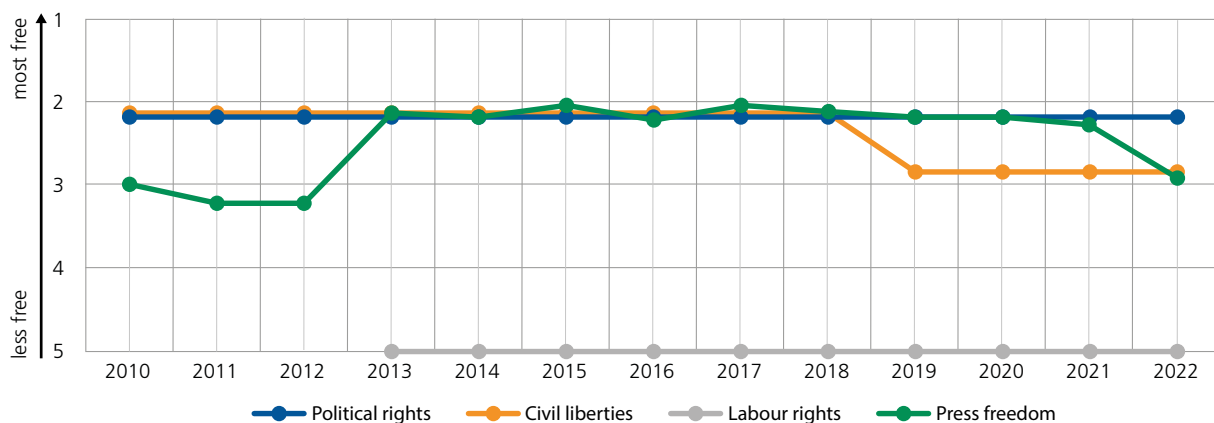
Sources: Freedom House (2023). Freedom in the World Country Report. Retrieved 25 September 2023 from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world.
International Trade Union Confederation (2023). Global Rights Index. Retrieved 25 September 2023 from https://www.globalrightsindex.org/.
Reporters Without Borders. (2023). World Press Freedom Index [South Sudan/Africa]. Retrieved 25 September 2023 from https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index.

In Caraga, labour rights, abuses and the manipulation of indigenous peoples (IPs) are also instrumental in creating conflict in the region. Despite the Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA), a law designed to protect the rights of IP communities, they remain marginalised. There were also reports that indigenous people were sometimes coerced by security forces into falsely claiming to be members of rebel groups and surrendering to the government.

In other words, the data shows that people have a reasonable understanding of human rights principles and the role of the state as a duty bearer. However, there is a divide between those whose rights are protected and those whose rights are violated. Those whose rights are not violated have a high level of trust in the state, but those whose rights are violated have doubts about the state's ability and commitment to uphold these values.

Other contradictions emerged between the opinion poll and the interviews on human rights. There were different views on what people saw as gaps in the implementation of human rights: First, the human rights discourse is biased towards social and political rights, but many respondents believe that the mainstream discourse should also include economic rights in order to pressure the state to act. This view is echoed in most of the local interviews and discussions, especially in economically disadvantaged communities.

Second, the human rights discourse is often seen as protecting civilians *against* security authority figures (e.g. police, LGU officials/staff, military), creating the impression that these authority figures are duty bearers but *not* rights holders. This perception of »unfairness« in the application of human rights was raised by members of the police and civilians during the community discussions of the study. The
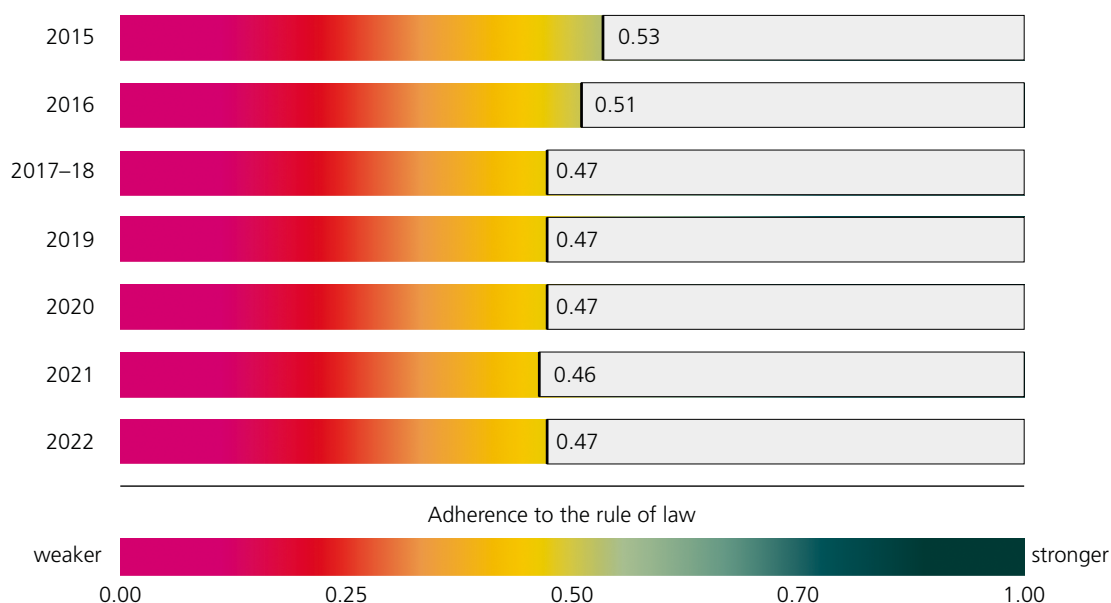
contentious nature of the issue reflects the ongoing debate about the application of human rights in a context where security forces play a prominent role in internal affairs and nation building.

4.3 INSTITUTIONS

In democracies, the rule of law is, or in theory should be, an important mechanism for conflict transformation. However, problems arise when access to the relevant institutions is restricted and when the law is applied in a partial manner that favours certain groups over others. Conflict transformation differs from the containment of violence, which is carried out by state security forces, especially the police. In the Philippines, the police and the military have developed various joint mechanisms (e.g. Joint Peace and Security Coordinating Centres/ JPSCC) to deal with the intersection of internal security and law enforcement threats in a more coordinated manner. In addition to the security forces, other government agencies/bodies also play a prominent role in conflict resolution. The local offices of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) monitor and document human rights violations. And in some active localities, Peace and Order Councils (POCs) and the Development Councils (DCs) conduct regular meetings and dialogues to deliberate on important peace and order issues and to sustain peace and development in their communities.

The previous administrations (Aquino Jr. [2010–2016] and Duterte [2016–2022]) up to the present government have emphasised the »whole-of-nation« approach as the backbone of some of their key policies aimed at resolving armed conflicts and achieving sustainable peace. One of these is the creation of the National Task Force to End Local Communist

Figure 6:
Overall Rule of Law Score Philippines 2015–2022

Year	Score
2015	0.53
2016	0.51
2017–18	0.47
2019	0.47
2020	0.47
2021	0.46
2022	0.47

Adherence to the rule of law

weaker   stronger

0.00   0.25   0.50   0.70   1.00

Source: World Justice Project (2021). Rule of Law Index 2021. Retrieved 25 September 2023, from https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2022/Philippines/.

Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), established under Executive Order 70. The NTF-ELCAC is an inter-agency mechanism that serves as an avenue for the various government agencies to more easily establish links with LGUs to respond to peace and conflict issues in their communities.

In terms of the rule of law (see Figure 7), the Philippines' performance is comparable to that of other fragile democracies. However, there was a notable decline following the accession to power of President Duterte's administration (2016 to 2022).

However, in our survey, a majority of adult respondents (72%) tended to be satisfied with the implementation of the law, a view shared by majorities across sectors and classes. Dissatisfaction with the implementation of Philippine laws is expressed by only 10% of Filipino adults, while 18% are undecided.

Nationally, 14% of adults say they have defended themselves or a family member against some form of injustice in the last two years. In defending themselves or their relative, most turned to other family members and/or friends (61%) and local government units (LGUs) (57%) for help. LGUs and/or local government officials are cited by 40% of those who had to defend themselves or a family member from some form of injustice as the first entity that helped them. A third of those in this sub-group (34%) say that family and/or friends were the first to help them. Smaller percentages cite the courts (10%), churches/religious organisations (10%) and politicians (6%). While family and friends remain the most important source of insurance (61%), the LGUs have risen in importance in people's minds. This is a good development for LGUs – that people have more confidence in them and rely on them more. However, the data should be of concern to churches/religious groups – the fact that only 10% would turn to them in times of need means that their presence has become almost insignificant in the eyes of the people. This is in stark contrast to the martial law period (1972-1983) when it was the church, religious organisations and non-government organizations (NGOs) that people turned to in times of turmoil. There are also non-state institutions, such as traditional authorities, that can play similar roles in managing and transforming conflict at different levels. It is important to note that while the formal structure of local government exists throughout the country, the reporting and resolution of crime-related issues at the community level is not always straightforward. Some areas do not always report crimes, preferring instead to solve problems through their own – sometimes violent – means, as in the case of *rido* (clan wars). In Central Mindanao (North Cotabato, Maguindanao and Lanao), Basilan and Sulu, *rido* between families was mentioned as a common conflict, usually resulting in violence. *Rido* could sometimes mean years of animosity, some even intergenerational, between two or more families, exacerbated by an immediate issue (e.g. land ownership, electoral competition, business competition, etc.) that is initially »won« by whoever has the strongest forces at hand.

In addition, in areas with a strong cultural identity (e.g. Muslim communities or indigenous communities), there are usually elders, religious leaders or tribal leaders who have enough influence and/or resources to be seen by their communities as someone who can help solve problems, sometimes even more so than elected local officials or law enforcement.

The Philippines has a long history of war in Mindanao. From independence in 1946 to 1968, Philippine leaders assumed that the »problem« of Mindanao could be solved by the rapid integration of Muslims into the new Philippine Republic (Tan 1993). Many Muslim leaders shared this view and actively participated in national electoral politics and governance. The national government created political spaces to facilitate the integration of Muslims into mainstream society. The Commission on National Integration (CNI) was established in 1957, followed by the establishment of the Mindanao State University (MSU) in 1961. Many Muslims and Christians benefited from these institutions. This pattern of integration continued until 1968, when the so-called Jabidah Massacre[4] occurred, triggering the creation of the Moro National Liberation Front and the beginning of decades of armed hostilities between the state and Moro groups.

The peace process initiated by President Corazon Aquino in 1986 opened a new chapter in the history of the Bangsamoro. What followed was a long and arduous process of negotiations between the Philippine government and the Bangsamoro secessionist groups. The following milestones in this history are noteworthy: The 1996 Final Peace Agreement (the precursor of which was the 1976 Tripoli Agreement signed during the martial law period of President Marcos Sr.) and the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro.

All of the peace agreements in the Bangsamoro, signed in 1976, 1996 and 2014, established an autonomous government, and are constantly being improved upon. Republic Act (RA) 6734, which created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), was based on the 1976 Tripoli Agreement; RA 9054 was based on the 1996 Final Peace Agreement and amended RA 6734; and RA 11054 was based on the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and amended RA 9054. RA 11054 is the basis of the current arrangement, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The politically autonomous arrangement is the compromise position between the Philippine government's position (capitulation under the 1987 Constitution) and the Bangsamoro self-determination agenda.

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4 The Jabidah massacre is part of the oral history that Muslims pass on from the old to the young. The challenge with this event is the fact that the narration of the event came from the survivor(s) of the massacre, but there were no means to corroborate the story. This is because the operation in which the victims of the massacre were involved was claimed to be a top secret mission. In other words, there is no proof that the event actually happened; but there is no proof that it didn't happen either.

The peace agreement has set the stage for peace-building and sustainable development in the Bangsamoro region. This significant development has rekindled hope for lasting peace. However, Malik (2021) stressed that this is an important but only first step in resolving the long struggle of the Bangsamoro people for their right to self-determination and self-governance. Decades of conflict have left the people of the region in a state of poverty and despair, with dilapidated infrastructure and underdeveloped political, economic and social institutions. Peace agreements have been signed, but the much-needed peace dividends have not come as quickly as the results of the war. Nevertheless, the establishment of BARMM offers a unique opportunity to address structural governance problems and to reshape Mindanao's relationship with the national government and neighbouring provinces. Indeed, Prof. Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, Chair of the GPH Peace Panel, articulated during the signing of the CAB in 2014 that the sealing of the Comprehensive Agreement was important not only for the Bangsamoro, but also for the people of Mindanao and all other Filipino citizens in the pursuit of the unfinished task of nation-building. Malik (2019a) further emphasised that the Bangsamoro government must demonstrate strong leadership, effective democratic governance and a high level of competence in delivering peace dividends to all segments of society. Priority must also be given to the process of demobilising ex-combatants by changing their mindset, providing for their livelihood and other basic needs, and transforming them into productive members of society.

5

PERCEPTIONS OF PEACE[5]

In terms of perceptions of peace, the results show that Filipinos emphasise personal security (40%) and tranquillity (36%) (see the heatmap below). This suggests that these two aspects are seen as important facets of people's conception of »peace.«

A second set of elements of peace considered important by the country's adult population includes reconciliation between groups with different views on issues (34%), inclusiveness in various processes (29%), human rights (29%) and justice (29%). Reconciliation is seen as crucial, reflecting the importance of resolving conflicts between different groups and promoting harmony. The emphasis on inclusiveness also highlights a desire for wider participation in decision-making processes, suggesting that peace is also linked to equitable

representation and participation. With both human rights and justice seen as vital, there is a recognition among Filipinos that peace is not only about security, but also about ensuring fairness and the protection of rights.

Although somewhat less emphasised, the results suggest that emotional well-being contributes to a sense of overall peace. Happiness or contentment is identified by almost a quarter (23%) as an important element of peace in the country. Respect for others (17%), education (16%), health security (13%) and community participation (12%) form a fourth group of elements. The data suggests that promoting peaceful interaction and mutual respect is fundamental to creating a harmonious society. Education is also highlighted as a crucial component, probably because of its ability to promote understanding, mitigate conflict and open up opportunities for individuals. Health security is also seen as an important aspect, reflecting the view that access to health care and protection from health risks are essential to achieving peace. In addition, community participation is valued,

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[5] Please note that the questionnaire had to be translated into the various local languages which may have obscured the meaning of the underlying concepts.

Figure 11:
Heatmap: Perceptions of Peace (N= 1200)
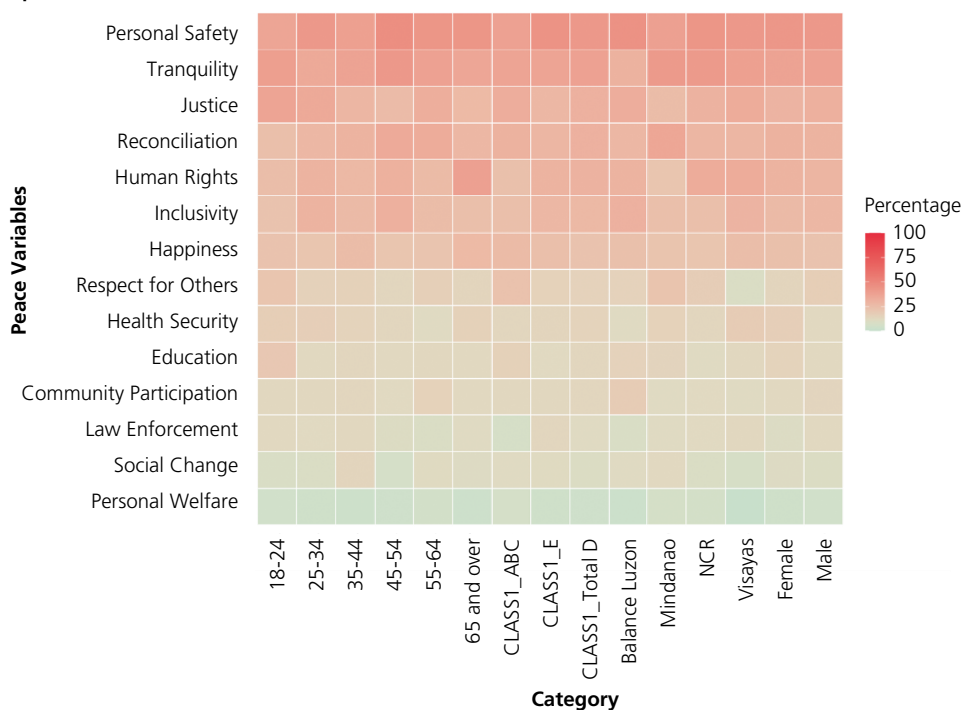
underlining the importance of engaging in local activities and decision-making processes to cultivate a shared sense of peace.

The least frequently mentioned elements are law enforcement (10%), genuine social change (9%) and personal well-being (4%). Law enforcement is seen as less important than other factors, which may indicate a preference for community-based or preventative approaches to peace rather than relying solely on traditional law enforcement methods. The lower emphasis on genuine social change suggests that immediate concerns such as safety and security may take precedence over broader societal reforms. In addition, personal well-being is the least emphasised aspect, possibly reflecting a belief that overarching elements such as security and justice are more fundamental to achieving peace than individual well-being.

The qualitative interviews and focus group discussions provide a more nuanced picture, showing that perceptions of peace are closely linked to personal experiences and contextual realities.

Across the different communities, several key themes emerged in relation to people's perceptions of peace. These notions revolved around views on community cooperation, states of tranquillity, the ability to exercise one's rights, and the ability of institutions to fulfil their functions. Peace is thus linked to the ability of individuals and their communities to access their environment; it is also connected with the context that people face in their daily lives, as well as the obstacles and challenges of their daily existence.

In discussing perceptions of peace, the fishing communities affected by the territorial dispute in the West Philippine Sea focused on how the protection and continued provision of livelihoods is key to maintaining human security and dignity. There was a constant emphasis on securing the community's livelihood through demands for legal assistance and protection.

The communities in Basilan and Sulu define peace as not being labelled or suspected as terrorists; the communities in Zambales see peace as having the freedom to navigate the fishing grounds without fear of being chased by Chinese vessels; the communities in the National Capital Region see peace as having the ability to move around at any time without fear of being victimised by criminal groups; for indigenous peoples, peace means being able to move freely in their ancestral lands and protect their natural resources; the communities in Cotabato, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur see peace as being able to live without fear of armed clashes between state and non-state groups, as well as political clan or *rido* conflicts.

The results of this study showed that people's perceptions of peace may vary depending on a variety of factors such as personal experiences, ethnic and religious affiliations, and socio-economic conditions, but there are many similarities given that violent conflicts have been deeply entrenched in these provinces as they became the battleground for the struggle to establish a Bangsamoro region.

Peace is associated with security and stability, meaning a safe and predictable environment in which people can live their lives without fear of violence or conflict. It involves having established institutions, effective governance and an operational rule of law that guarantee the protection of individual rights and promote social order.

Peace is linked to happiness and contentment, which includes a state of well-being and contentment among individuals and communities. This is explicit in the responses of some informants who verbalised that peace is access to basic needs such as food, water, shelter, education and healthcare, all of which contribute to a sense of fulfilment and contentment.

Throughout the community discussions, peace is perceived by people as the opposite of poverty, a situation where people can eat three times a day and have their own jobs and livelihoods to support themselves, thereby avoiding bad acts such as stealing, cheating and gambling. People believe that if the economic conditions in their areas are stable, if skilled people get jobs, if the government gives them what is due to them, then there will be no conflicts. Indeed, informants see peace as closely linked to the government's efforts to maintain its support for the people and to grant them their rights and privileges.

Peace is closely linked to cultural harmony and respect for diversity, mutual understanding, tolerance and acceptance of cultural differences. Significantly, these responses came from respondents from the BARMM areas as well as from indigenous communities – the two groups that have been neglected and marginalised by the government and the majority Christian population.

6

MAIN ACTORS IN PEACEBUILDING

Across the Philippines, three-quarters of the adult population (75%) in our survey emphasise that the country's president plays an important role in promoting or achieving peace in the country. This may be due to the fact that the type of political system that people have been exposed to since the country's independence is the presidential system, where the president is the leader, manager and decision-maker. As expected, people look up to the President to set the direction for the country, especially in terms of peace, security and development. The survey data also show that Filipinos see local mayors (33%), the military (32%) and the police (28%) as the most important institutions for promoting peace, indicating a strong reliance on local government and security forces to maintain order. Legislative bodies such as the Senate (22%) and local councils (22%), as well as citizens (20%), are also considered important, reflecting people's expectations of these institutions in peacebuilding.

In contrast, churches and religious organisations (11%), the judiciary (9%), traditional community leaders (8%) and non-governmental organisations (3%) received low scores, indicating the declining relevance of these institutions in political decision-making and hence low expectations of their role in peacebuilding. Churches, religious organisations and NGOs have been recognised for their role in peacebuilding, particularly during the martial law and post-martial law periods. After the 1986 »People Power« uprising and the subsequent removal of President Marcos Sr. from office, many believed that the political system had normalised with the restoration of democracy. This led the Catholic Church and other religious organisations to deliberately distance themselves from politics and return to their moral-pastoral guidance of their flock. Particularly after the death of Cardinal Sin, the church leader who was instrumental in the 1986 People Power mobilisation, the Catholic Church limited its political involvement to issues related to abortion, divorce and the death penalty. Similarly, many NGOs were involved in various causes, but also became increasingly preoccupied with mobilising funds and resources to sustain their existence. The retreat from politics rendered these institutions seemingly irrelevant to peace and security issues.

Another factor contributing to the declining influence of churches, religious organisations and NGOs was President Duterte himself. The President was very vocal about his displeasure with churches, NGOs and religious organisations,

as these groups were among the most vocal critics of his administration as mayor of Davao City. When Duterte became President, he made it his mission to instill fear in the people and neutralise potential centres of power outside the government. So he deliberately targeted churches and NGOs to undermine their influence in society. He began by using ridicule as a political tool – making lewd comments and jokes about religious groups, especially the leaders of the Catholic Church and NGOs. The second phase was when he associated some leaders of these institutions with and/or accused them of wrongdoing and abuse of authority that inconvenienced the people (e.g. the massive traffic caused by the Pope's visit; priests involved in molestation). The third and final phase is the red-tagging or labelling of leaders as supporters of communists, terrorists and drug syndicates. By the middle of his term, he had effectively undermined the influence of these institutions on the people. These two major waves of events can partly explain the low ratings that these institutions receive from the people.

The judiciary received a low score because of the dysfunctional justice system – it is expensive, slow (court cases take years to resolve) and predatory (some judges and/or court officials are accused of favouring the rich and powerful). Traditional community leaders, while important in local conflict resolution and mediation, have limited reach and authority beyond their immediate communities.

In recent decades, successive governments have relied on peace negotiations and DDR (disarmament, demilitarisation and reintegration) processes to end armed conflict. The government has pursued different strategies with regard to the NPA and the Moro groups. The process with the NPA collapsed in 2017, and since then the government has promoted a mix of counter-insurgency and development plans based on Executive Order 70, which created the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Implementation is delegated to local administrations, which promote community dialogues and DDR negotiations with armed actors. By the end of 2022, 24,000 combatants were demobilised (interview with W. Orbeso, Presidential Peace Adviser, Manila, 13 February 2022). At the same time, the government has pursued a counter-insurgency strategy that has significantly reduced the power of the NPA. However, between 1,200 and 2,000 fighters remain under arms in the poorest and most remote areas (International Crisis Group

2024). A new initiative for talks appears to be underway in 2024, but is controversial within the government.

Another much-criticised component of the government's strategy is the use of the Anti-Terrorism Act 2021 to target real or perceived support for the NPA. Red-tagging is being used to criminalise civil society actors and reduce civic space, thereby reducing people's trust in state institutions. There is a perception that the current security environment, inherited from the previous administration, has allowed the government to label civil society organisations as being associated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) – an entity that is treated as a criminal organisation by some in the security sector. This jeopardises the safety of individuals and groups, whose fears are not unfounded given the several cases of red-tagged individuals who have disappeared or been killed by unknown assailants or been unlawfully arrested.

The Mindanao process is based on a 2014 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the appointment of an interim regional autonomous government led by former MILF fighters in 2019. Elections for the regional autonomous government were postponed due to the COVID pandemic and will be held in 2025. This will be a crucial point in the peace process, as the MILF may not be re-elected due to the resurgent strength of traditional political clans. The village elections in October 2023 provided some evidence of the underlying problems when violence flared up. The interplay between the lack of peace dividends for combatants and local communities and clan politics could prove a dangerous mix before, during and after the elections. The peace process in Mindanao has received international support. The Organisation of Islamic States has played a role in earlier negotiations, and the Transitional Justice Committee is supported by Switzerland and Australia. An indirect international influence in support of the peace process could be the government's bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2027–2029.

7

SPECIFICS OF PEACEBUILDING AND LESSONS LEARNT

The Philippines case study offers a number of lessons that resonate with other case studies. Peace agreements can significantly reduce violence, but they remain fragile if they do not produce a peace dividend in terms of viable livelihoods for ex-combatants and local communities. Therefore, peace agreements need to be complemented by development programmes that improve the livelihoods of the people rather than those of elites or international corporations.

Second, the criminalisation of civil society actors – very common in war and armed conflict – is a dangerous legacy as it undermines the important role that civil society actors can play in supporting and monitoring peace agreements at different levels. In the Philippines, this is particularly evident among communities affected by draconian government programmes such as the »war on drugs« and the government's »red-tagging« or labelling of human rights defenders.

Third, even governments with authoritarian tendencies may seek to promote peacebuilding strategies to enhance their legitimacy. Rodrigo Duterte – the first president born in Mindanao – and the peace process in Mindanao is a case in point. However, these strategies will be fragile unless they are complemented by the guarantee of basic human rights. International support can be crucial here, reinforcing positive trends, encouraging the involvement of civil society and other non-armed actors in the process, and co-financing development programmes.

A fourth lesson related to the specific Philippine context is that while everyone has an opinion on what peace is, the majority of respondents did not anchor their answers in a political-institutional framework. This may reflect the low level of social differentiation and the importance of traditional social, economic and political hierarchies.

Fifthly, the local government units (LGUs) receive a high level of trust with regard to peace and justice, as they are the main institution providing assistance to people in need. It is particularly surprising that the church and civil society groups don't enjoy the same level of trust as the LGUs, given the important role they played in the regime change of the 1980s and later in the larger national political discourse and in empowering communities to assert their rights. Indeed, the Philippines has been recognised as having a strong civil society movement that serves as a watchdog on state institutions and a vehicle for community empowerment. So while it is good that LGUs are now being recognised, the diminished trust in the Church and civil society organisations should serve as a wake-up call for civil society.

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