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Philippines

The Marawi Siege and Martial Law in Mindanao

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More than two weeks ago, the ISIS-inspired Maute group and the Abu Sayyaf have laid siege of the Islamic City of Marawi and currently there is no sign that the massive destruction created by these radical Islamists and the counter-siege by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is losing its steam.

The AFP has already utilized and put into action all its major branches (Army, Air force and the Navy - Marines) which comprise more than half of the human, logistical and armored assets of the Western Mindanao Command (WestMinCom). It has also put into action (for the first time) the FA-50 fighter jets which were just purchased from South Korea. This is in addition to the use of the OV-10 bombers and the MG 520 attack helicopters. The AFP with the assistance of the US technicians has utilized the use of unmanned drones (for the first time in combat zones) and the US Navy P3 Orion surveillance plane to guide the Air force bombers for the so-called surgical bombings.

All these combat mobilizations and manoeuvres are directed against those with inferior military training but highly determined fanatical groups which according to the AFP source, number around 400 to 500 radical jihadists. It has been known that there is no substantial support from the city residents which means that the radical Islamists are mainly coming from the outside in terms of human resources and these fanatics are just helping themselves in terms of logistical and material needs from those left behind by the Marawi residents.

Meanwhile, the number of deaths and wounded have been increasing by the hour and they are coming mostly from the civilians. There are still scores of dead bodies of not only Christians but also of AFP soldiers (which could not be retrieved due to the snipers' fires) and from the radical Islamists which are left unattended on the streets in the central part of Marawi.

There are more than two thousand civilians who are still trapped inside the hotly contested buildings, streets and areas in the City.

As seen today, almost all the buildings including the commercial center as well as residential in the central trading center of Marawi have been destroyed and literally flattened to the ground as a result of artillery fires and direct hits of air strikes and surgical bombings done by the AFP in spite of the well-known fact that civilians are still trapped in many of these buildings.

The Marawi Siege is very unprecedented and the boldest armed attacks by the Islamist radicals since their founding in the early 90s in the case of Abu Sayyaf and five years ago in the case of the Maute group. The nearest comparison one can make in terms of style and intensity is the Ipil massacre in April 3, 1995. The Abu Sayyaf then led by its founding head Abdulrajak Janjalani attacked the unsuspecting commercial and bustling municipality of Ipil. They had occupied the center of the town, blocked the national highways, robbed 8 commercial banks, killed several dozens of civilians and burnt the City before successfully made their escape after three days of the siege.

But one has to take note that the Marawi attack by the Islamic extremists is a reaction to a botched operation to capture Isnilon Hapilon the self-proclaimed emir of the ISIS inspired radical extremists by the AFP and PNP operatives.

In short the AFP has initiated the armed hostilities and the Abu Sayyaf and Maute group have just reacted and executed their seemingly pre-planned siege of the Islamic City of Marawi. They have burnt the City jail, occupied the

medical center, burnt a college and the St Mary Cathedral. They had robbed all the banks, occupied strategic buildings and blocked highways.

It has been more than two weeks now since the start of the armed hostilities between the AFP and the radical extremists but there have been no sign of these abating. In fact, it has already surpassed two deadlines, one made by the National Defense Secretary and the Mindanao Martial Law administrator – Secretary Delfin Lorenzana (June 2, 2017) and the other deadline by the country's President himself which was June 5, 2017.

But twice the ground commanders of the AFP have to apologize for not fulfilling the deadlines because they could not predict what will become of the dynamics on the ground with the close-quarter combat. The deadlines set by their leaders had pressured them to unleash more bombs which could mean more destroyed buildings and more loss of lives from both sides but most especially for the civilians who are still trapped in the City.

Meanwhile, sources on the ground are saying that the leadership of both the Abu Sayyaf and Maute group – Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute brothers Omarkhayam and Abdullah respectively – are still in the city leading their Islamic fanatics in fighting the AFP and sparing no one especially the Christian civilians in their deadly occupation of the only Islamic City in the country.

And just like in Ipil massacre twenty-two years ago they (Maute and Abu Sayyaf) have held more than two hundred hostages (mostly Christian including a priest) to shield them away from the bombs and will also possibly make their successful escape.

I - The Abu Sayyaf, Maute Group and Others

There are four identified groups which claim to be inspired by the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) or Daesh in Mindanao, Philippines. The oldest among these four (in terms of its founding or formation) is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) which started in early 90's (between 1991 and 1993). The ASG had earlier called itself as AL Harakatul AL Islamiyyah (AHAI) and its armed component was called Mujahideen AL Sharifullah but later it has become known as Abu Sayyaf which literally means father of the swordsman. Its founding leader – Abdul Rajak Abubakar Janjalani had been educated in the Middle East but got international contact with other mujahideens when he participated in the Afghanistan war. He had maintained his network with global Jihadists and other Islamic movements which helped ASG to be part of global movement of self-radicalized and still be effective in decentralized cells.

The ASG became globally known when they attacked and burnt the municipality of Ipil (the Ipil massacre) on April 3, 1995. Their founding leader was killed in December 1998 and replaced by his brother Khadafi Janjalani but later split into different groups, one led by Isnilon Tonton Hapilon. The ASG has survived and flourished through different criminal acts like kidnapping, extortions and outright robbery. They are mostly supported by their relatives and impoverished people in rural areas who got their shares in the looting and ransom money.

In 2001, the ASG under the leadership of Isnilon Hapilon made its link to the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Al Qaeda regional network in South East Asia and 13 years later, the ASG through the leadership of Isnilon Hapilon, took bayah (pledge of allegiance) to the Islamic State Group (ISG). The bayah is made between the central Daesh and the purported caliphate and there should be a clear manifestation of reciprocation between the two. Seemingly, there is no (to date) outright reciprocation. This fact has pushed the ASG to highlight its presentation of ideological façade (the formation of caliphate and strict application of Shariah Law among its people) to cover their criminal acts. [In spite of] the absence of operational links from Central Daesh, the act of bayah has one useful role for the ASG; to create an image of ferocity for their criminal activities to instil fear and get the attention of the center.

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At this point, it will be very important to note that the ASG has been infiltrated by both the Philippines and the US intelligent operators since its formative years. The former case of Edwin Angeles who himself admitted to being a Philippine agent tasked to infiltrate the ASG is a good example. It is also a well-known knowledge that Abdulrajak Janjalani had made some connection with US covert operators during the Afghanistan war. Another is the case of Abu Sabaya, the once famous ASG spokesperson who was one of the leaders of ASG in the Sipadan kidnapping. He simply disappeared in the US-Philippine anti-terrorism operations.

The second Jihadist Group is the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) which was formed in 2010. Basically the BIFF came from the MILF 105th base command. The separation of the BIFF from the MILF was the former's reaction to endless negotiations and the indefinite ceasefires with the government. This was clearly expressed by their founding chairman Ustadz Ameril Umbra Kato the former head of the MILF's 105th base command. He died years later but was able to establish and maintain links with the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) through Zulkifli bin Hir alias Marwan who was later killed in January 2015 during the famous botched Mamasapano Operation of the Philippine National Police (PNP) [1]. The BIFF later pledged allegiance to the ISIS and its leader – Abu Bak'r al Baghdadi.

The BIFF made its first appearance when they massacred several Christian civilians between the boundary of Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat province especially after the non-approval of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) between the MILF and the Government of the Philippines. Since then, they have been known to be involved in various criminal activities along the boundaries of Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat and North Cotabato.

The third group is the Maute Group which was formed in 2012 by the brothers Abdullah and Omarkhayan Romato Maute. At first, they called themselves as Daulat UL Islamiyah but later they regard themselves as Islamic State-Ranao or IS-Ranao. Before they formed their group, they were identified with the MILF with Aziza Romato who was their aunt but was also the second wife of the late MILF Vice Chairperson, Alim AbdulAziz Mimbantao. The Romato clan owned the land occupied by the MILF's famous Camp Bushra. Currently, the Maute Group had occupied the MILF Camp but made it off limits for the latter (MILF).

The Maute Group became famous for their spectacular bombings in night markets of urban centers that cost many lives such as in 2013 in Cagayan de Oro City and 2016 in Davao City. They were also suspected of attempted bombing of US Embassy last November 2016. During the same year, they fought to be recognized as the ISIS or IS Ranao. Its ferocity was shown when they beheaded two Christian workers in a small sawmill in Lanao del Sur when the relatives of the workers could not raise the P5 million ransom. The beheading was shown in a video so the world could witness its barbarous act.

The fourth group is the AL Khalifah-Philippines (AKP) which was formed in August 2014. It was founded by Jaafar Maguid alias Tokboy who used to be part of MILF just like BIFF and the Maute group. It sought allegiance to the ISIS and just like the other Jihadist groups mentioned above, it did not get reciprocal action from the Daesh Center. They (AKP) have their criminal activities in the provinces of South Cotabato, Sarangani, and Sulatan Kudarat. A year after it was founded, its leader, Maguid was killed in the government operation. The next batch of leadership of the AKP was also captured by the government agents in a municipality of Sarangani province. Among the four groups, AKP was the closest to the International mujahideens because of its link to the other ISIS inspired groups in Malaysia and Indonesia. This connection was through the Indonesian Saifullah Ibrahim alias Ibrahim Ali and Sucipto who was the mastermind in the bombings of Fitmark in Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat and in General Santos and Sarangani Provinces.

Aside from glaring commonalities among the four jihadists in the country they have also particularities in terms of the historical stages that they were founded as well as their ways of identification to the ISIS and the particular Islamic traditions (development of Wahabism among the leadership and its members) and the idea of the building the wilayat

(province) in their day to day activities.

All of them had once belonged and identified themselves to a moro revolutionary group either MNLF in the case of ASG and the MILF in other three jihadist groups. They all came out of the revolutionary fronts and formed their separate groups during the lull periods of the peace talks of the Moro fronts and the government. All of the founding leaders of the four groups got their leadership and military skills from the Moro fronts. They had also brought with them their weapons from the fronts on their initial days of filling up the gaps during their formative years.

All the jihadists have been based in the rural areas where the socio economic-conditions are always ripe for recruitment and the poor rural people can easily be swayed by religious preaching for an alternative society. The unsuccessful or protracted peace negotiations have also helped in creating desperate conditions for the rural people who have been frustrated with the protracted processes of the peace negotiations between the Moro fronts and the government.

Aside from attracting most of their followers from the rural areas, the four groups are mostly family-based jihadists. This means that their followers and even those in the leadership mainly come from their own families and relatives. The clannish nature and dynamism of the Moro society has something to do with this characteristic. In the case of the Maute group, they are known lately to attract young followers, especially the students aside from their own family including the extended ones.

All the leaders of the Islamist groups in one way or the other were scholars and had studied in the Islamic institutions in the Middle East. They became well versed in Islam and became effective and charismatic preachers in their own areas. Their understanding of Islam had been mostly influenced by their contact with the International movements and Jihadists. In the case of the Maute brothers they went to the Middle East as migrant workers which gave them the opportunity to meet people in the Jihadist movement.

Almost all of them became critique and felt frustration with the mainstream religion and its practices especially as seen in their traditional leaders as well as the leadership of the moro fronts.

The four Islamic Jihadists have all pledged allegiance to the ISIS and to AL Baghdadi and made their bayah to build a wilayat (province) in their own respective areas but notable there have been no expressed reciprocity from the center (Daesh) and the purported caliphate/province. Lately it has been announced that the four groups have merged as one and recognized Isnilon Hapilon as their Emir.

It is very difficult to find reason(s) behind the absence of clear manifestation of recognition from the center (ISIS/Daesh) to their pledges from the groups which have wanted to become part of the Global Islamist Network. But what had happened to the earlier experience of the Al Qaeda and the infiltration of both Philippine and US intelligence operators to neutralize if not paralyze the Regional AL Qaeda or the Jemaah Islamiyah from the Philippines could have not been easily forgotten by the Daesh. The latter has considered the Philippines as the weakest link in their global network and therefore should be subjected to extraordinary screening in terms of membership acceptance. However, one thing such condition has impacted to the four ISIS inspired groups. They all want to create an image of ferocity of their criminal activities and almost mimicking the worst that the ISIS has been doing to their kidnap victims like beheading and always making stress that non-believers (kafirs) do not have right to share the world with them.

In the siege of Marawi, there are only two groups (Maute and Abu Sayyaf) which are known to be involved. But surely they could have maintained their communication and their coordination with the other two jihadists which could be expressed in different forms like diversionary activities or help in the evacuation of the leadership as well as the

wounded.

This context can help us understand the reasons behind the siege and the burning of the Islamic City of Marawi. The non-monolithic characteristic of Islam and our profound understanding to this dynamic should help us comprehend the reason(s) behind the decision of the Maute and Abusayyaf to choose the Islamic City of Marawi to start their Jihadist war. The timing of the siege – during the month of Ramadhan is another consideration.

II. The Islamic City of Marawi

The mosque studded heartland of Islamic faith in the southern part of the predominantly Roman Catholic nation and the political capital of Lanao Del Sur where the pristine Lake Lanao is located has become a full-battle field after more than two weeks of a very violent battle between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Abu Sayyaf-Maute extremists. The city has been burning and in complete ruin. For the first time, the only predominantly Muslim City has been emptied by its more than two hundred thousand population. Its people have hurriedly left their residences and businesses (leaving behind everything) on the first day of the siege firmly believing that it would be very brief evacuation. But that was the last time they saw their home intact and their properties and their wealth safely hidden in their residences. Their lives and dreams have been burnt together with their city. Islamic extremists well-orchestrated siege of the city and the declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao by President Rodrigo Duterte have both made the people of Marawi transcending all the social divide instant Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or Instant Displaced Persons (IDP). The latest figure (June 9, 2017) has reached 252,638 individuals or 52,460 families. Their situation has been made worst since it happened when the people have to observe fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

What are the Whys and How's of all these developments? Who started what? Who are the targets of whom? Who reacted to which?

Whatever the answers to all these questions should be relevant for the understanding of fast unfolding situation in the city. Further, whatever these will be, they cannot change the fact that the once proud culture of the Maranaw has been ruined and it will take a long time to rebuild and heal and much less comprehend its complexities.

Before the actual siege of Marawi, there have been clear signs that the Maute group with the Abu Sayyaf were preparing for something big. As early as the late 2014, the Maute brothers had sent their people to be trained by Marwan and Basit Usman to make bombs in Pidsandawan, Mamasapano (just before the famous January 25, 2015 Mamasapano massacre). Since then they have been initiating bombing activities elsewhere in Mindanao (bombing in Davao, attempt bombing in US embassy in Manila). The famous armed activities of the Maute group was the siege of their own town – Butig in the last quarter of 2016. The municipality of Butig is one of the 39 towns of Lanao del Sur with 17,000 population. During the Butig siege, 16,000 out of its total population were displaced. For the first time during the siege the Maute had made a chilling show of power when black-clad members of their group raised the ISIS flag in the old municipal building which they had controlled along with a high school building and a madrasah. This event has clearly shown that the Maute from family-based has metamorphosed into a force which could create havoc even in their own municipality and dislocating their own people including their own relatives.

In the first quarter of 2016, it has been known that there was merging of Isnilon's Abu Sayyaf and the Maute's group which was known to happen in Butig and which means that Isnilon Hapilon had to make long and very risky travel from his home base Basilan to a strange area with very peculiar tradition and culture of the Maranaos.

The AFP through its 103rd Brigade of the First Infantry Division had launched intense operations against Abu Sayyaf

and Maute group during and after the Butig siege (November 26, 2016). According to mainstream media reports, the AFP was able to inflict heavy damage and casualties and pushed the radical Jihadists to the mountains.

But in the first quarter of this year (2017) everybody was surprised because there was a big armed encounter in Butig's neighboring town of Piagapo (nearer to Marawi). Again the AFP claimed to inflict heavy casualties to the Jihadists. According to the AFP reports, thirty (30) jihadists were killed and allegedly Isnilon Hapilon was seriously wounded in the encounters and the air strikes.

And just before the Marawi siege, there was a big International assembly of Tableeghi Jemaat which is held yearly. Islamic believers from different countries are attending this month long activities. For this year, the assembly was held in Abubak'r Markas Mosque which has assembly complex in the place near the apartment where accordingly the group of Isnilon Hapilon was using. It was also in this place where the combined forces of the AFP and the PNP would serve the Warrant of Arrest for Isnilon Hapilon in the fateful day of May 23, 2017.

The subsequent events would show that the Abu Sayyaf and the Maute group were more prepared than the AFP and PNP. It was like Mamasapano of 2015 all-over again. The targets of the military operations were more prepared than the ones who were supposed to know the surroundings of the area or place where the target persons are hiding. The shoot outs which followed and which later made Marawi under heavy attacks have distracted the Tableeghi Jemaat and made those foreign missionaries and believers scattered and running for their lives. Others would have a strong belief that these foreigners are those who have joined the Jihadists in their fight against the government forces. This belief is backed up by the knowledge that no foreigners could be found in all evacuation centers unless they have hidden in the private houses in the City or in the neighboring municipalities.

III – The Besieged City of Marawi

The events that followed after the botched operation to arrest the so-called Emir of the Daesh in the country have resulted to simultaneous but coordinated attacks in the central and commercial areas in Marawi. The City jail was attacked, burnt and all its prisoners were set free. Many of these freed prisoners had joined the Islamic Jihadists in fighting the government and burning the City. The Dansalan College (an oldest Christian institution in the island – founded by Protestant missionaries in 1908) was burned down and the teachers were either held hostages or had hidden themselves in some buildings in the neighboring areas. The Saint Mary Cathedral was also burnt down but not before destroying the religious images and statutes which Catholic believers considered sacred in their faith. The parish priest and the concurrent Vicar general of the Prelature of Marawi together with some of his parishioners are held hostages and they are made human shields of the Jihadists against the bombings of the AFP. They (Islamists) have tried to attack the City executive building as well as the PNP provincial camp but they are not successful but up to now more than three dozen of the PNP personnel and officers are still missing. The provincial hospital and the medical center of Amai Pakpak was also attacked and has been closed since then.

The manner of the attack and scale of its destruction showed that it was pre-planned and coordinated which in effect made the Islamists control all the bridges going to the City center and is also aimed to surround the Camp Ranao or the base of the 103rd Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division. It was also aimed to isolate the Main Center of the Mindanao State University (MSU) where more than twenty two thousand students coming from different provinces and cities in Mindanao are studying and residing. There were attempts to isolate the Provincial Capitol building of the province of Lanao del Sur but was not also successful.

The scale of the attacks and the various strategic areas covered by the Islamists operations would surely need intense and elaborate level of preparation by the extremists and it would be impossible that these activities did not

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reach and get the attention of the Philippine authority – especially its intelligence community. According to sources from the ground people in the City had alerted the AFP and the PNP about the alarming Islamists activities before 23rd of May 2017. They were told that the data would be checked and validated.

The people of Marawi in general did not support the Maute and the Abu Sayyaf groups nor their plan to seize Marawi. According to the residents they could not imagine themselves being the followers of an Islamic caliphate where strict adherence to Sharia is paramount. The Maranaos are mainly Sunnis [but] not Wahhabists. The Marawi residents could not imagine even in their wildest dream that they would participate in burning and ruining their own homes and City. At best, the Jihadists were able to get the support of their relatives in the City and the few students they were able to recruit in the late 2016 and early 2017.

Accordingly, the AFP and the PNP were surprised to find so many high-powered firearms including the 50 caliber sniper rifle-barret and so much ammunition which made the radical Islamists last this far. The reality is that the residents of Marawi including people in the province of Lanao del Sur have been buying and collecting arms. In fact, the common understanding is that the higher you are in the social ladder the higher caliber and more sophisticated arms you should have. This fact is both deterrent to avoid clan wars (rido) and at the same time a sure defense in times of clan wars.

It should be remembered that people of all walks of life leaving behind their money and their arms behind believing that the situation would be brief and very temporary.

Again, this explains further two points, one is that, as AFP would claim later, the Maute and ASG have prepared for this battle because they have built solid and fortified houses and kept big amount of money. Anybody who knows Marawi and the Maranaws would know well that the people would usually build their houses solidly precisely because of rido. In fact, one can easily find snipers' holes and bunkers in the houses. One just has to travel from Marawi to Malabang to see these types of houses along the highway. But anybody can also observe these realities even in the rural and interior areas in the province. It simply explains that the western type of justice system and governance is not really strictly followed in these areas. Rido is still substantially use to settle or resolve family feuds.

And with regards to the large amount of money found in houses in the city. Not a few families in Marawi or even in the province are used to deposit such amount money to the banks. But again, few weeks before the Marawi siege, there were noticeable big withdrawals from the big banks. Accordingly, the average monthly withdrawal from the banks in Marawi would average between P100-P150 million but during those pre Marawi siege days and weeks, more than P200 millions were withdrawn in a month.

Some explanations can be possible like the month of Ramadhan is fast approaching so people with money in the banks had started to withdraw for the preparation of the month-long religious activities. The money lenders have also withdrawn big amounts of money to make a big hit in terms of high interest rate (5/6) for the politicians who have not yet received their Internal Revenue Allocations (IRAs) and also for those people who have to get easy cash for fasting celebrations and for the parents who will go to the money lenders for the school enrolment of their children.

Lastly, but not definitely the least, the Maute and the ASG had robbed all the banks in the city so that explained the presence of lots of cash in the besieged city.

The total failure of the intelligence works of AFP and PNP should be given due considerations. As mentioned earlier, people had been giving information to the AFP and PNP in the pre-Marawi siege but no concrete actions had been done. The fact that the city jail of Marawi where several Maute operatives had been imprisoned was raided and attacked before, no action had been done to correct these security lapses and to secure the jail either by reinforcing

the personnel and guards or transferring the Maute prisoners to other jails (such as in CDO or in Manila).

But none of these were done and worst the President of the country has been blaming the people of Marawi of not informing the authorities before the Marawi siege. The President has been insinuating that the people of Marawi have welcomed the Islamic extremists.

The above-mentioned events would led to the declaration of Martial Law by President Duterte not only to Marawi but to all 27 provinces and 33 cities in Mindanao.

IV – Declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao

President Rodrigo R. Duterte has declared Martial Law in Mindanao through Presidential Decree (PD) 216 which takes effect starting 10pm of the 23rd of May 2017.

The President made the proclamation when he together with his top military and security advisers were starting with his State visit to Moscow. The PD 216 declaration was made a few hours after the botched AFP/PNP operation to serve the warrant of arrest for Jihadist leader Isnilon Hapilon and the early hours of rampage by extremist followers of Marawi City.

Accordingly, the President made the declaration of Martial Law based on reports of these early clashes unfolding in the Islamic City. But earlier on he has previously expressed that he would not hesitate to declare martial law to preserve the nation.

It should be noted that martial law (based on the 1987 Philippine Constitution) can only be legally declared when there is a rebellion or invasion and when public safety requires it. There should be sufficient in the factual basis for the declaration of martial law or for the suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus. It cannot be definitely use preemptively.

Surely one cannot simply determine that there is a rebellion or invasion and that the public safety is requiring it a few hours when the Maute and the Abu Sayyaf have started to create havoc in the City. More so if the operation to serve the warrant of arrest even to the most wanted terrorist in the world has failed.

Unless there are other bases that only the President and his inner circle of his trust know that indeed Martial Law should be declared.

If one should consider that there might be other information from the intelligence community that the President and his security advisers knew and therefore the failed arrest mission and the early phase of the siege of Marawi have just served only to trigger for the declaration of martial law because public safety is requiring it then it could not be corroborated by facts on the ground. The security sectors which include the 103rd Brigade of the 1st Tabak Infantry Division and the PNP provincial command were totally caught by surprise by the Marawi take over. Not a few personnel of the Army Brigade were on leave/vacation during the actual attack which means that they were not advised to stay put because of the intelligence information of the impending attack. The PNP should not be in total disarray when the siege of the city started. Most important of all, at least the civilian authority should have had a minimum of modicum preparation to at least reduce the risk for the safety of the public or the civilians which means they should be informed earlier even excluding the details. The disorganized evacuation of the City's population and the thousands who are left behind to absorb all the artillery and aerial bombings should not have happened.

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The government spokespersons have been trying to tell the country that there is an invasion because there are foreign nationals fighting alongside with the Maute and Abu Sayyaf Jihadists. The proof or such claim is definitely the foreign passports found on the battle field. Serious consideration should be given to the foreigners who attended the Jamaat of the Tableegh at the time. And with regards to the raising of the ISIS flags they could not be the basis of the invasion before and after the siege. The Moro revolutionary groups have been raising their own flags since time immemorial. The fact that these fanatical jihadists want to make Marawi a caliphate of ISIS this cannot simply form an invasion because how can 400 fanatics declared an empty city of Marawi as a wilayat of Daesh.

Another reason that the central authority of the country is claiming is that the Maute and Abusayyaf is waging a rebellion. A rebellion should at least have a political objective and this objective should be at least supported by a portion of the population of the place /city where they have the rebellion. In the case of Marawi city, it is only the Maute and the Abusayyaf extremists who are involved in the rampage of the City. The terroristic activities and the havoc that the fanatics have inflicted in the city have made the population abandoned the city.

At best, the Islamic Extremists have inflicted terror on the population and their terroristic activities have alienated them from the people. One cannot have a wilayat without a people and one cannot have a successful invasion without the support of the people. These fanatics are called terrorists.

The Philippines has adequate laws to take care of this problem. The R.A. 9372 or the Human Security Act of the 2007 can be an effective tool to face the threats of terrorists. But what might be the basis of the President's declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao? For one the President knows that there are destabilization moves against his regime. These moves have been expressed covertly because the President is still very popular. But it is well known that the US has been worried by the president's pivot to China at Russia. In fact it is not coincident that the siege of Marawi started when the President, defense and security advisers were in Moscow and about to sign military and defense agreements with President Vladimir Putin when the Marawi siege happens. The US and the State Department will surely not want the Philippines to become part of China and Russia circle. It will definitely do anything to stop the President's pivots away from them.

The appropriate time to prevent President Duterte's direction away from the US circle should be now. The current crop of leaders from both the AFP and the PNP is still pro US because they have been educated and trained by the US. There is still the positive influence of the military doctrine in and among all levels of the security sector of the country as President Duterte himself has admitted.

The Marawi siege and the possible outcome of the takeover by the extremists and the counter siege by the security can create destabilization effects among the young corps of officers. A purely military approach to a religious, political and military problems like the jihadists have been advocating would truly fail. Marawi city have been sieged by fanatics mainly coming from outside Marawi and cannot and will not be solved by purely security sector also coming from the outside. The people of the city and of the province should have been involved in the defense and protection of their respective places and not only in performing humanitarian actions. The declaration of Martial Law will cause another level of problems like repression and abuses mainly because the security sector has not been fully cleansed and reformed. Abuses and violations of Human Rights have been already reported during this stage of the siege.

Another danger sign as shown by the Marawi siege is the linking of problems of terrorism to the drug problem. The President himself has already MENTIONED that drug money has bankrolled the takeover of Marawi. It is simplifying the root causes of terrorism and just point out to an easy culprit like drugs and drug lords. This line of thinking will surely lead to Martial Law as an answer to the drug problem in the country. This is simply promoting a purely military approach in solving a complex problem like illegal drugs and terrorism.

V - The US and the Declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao

When President Ferdinand E. Marcos had declared Martial Law in the Philippines in 1972, he did so after duly consulting and getting the advice of the US. The dictator knew very well that if he would want to be successful in his absolute governance of the country, he would need the support of the US. Indeed all throughout his dictatorial regime the US had not abandoned him until that time when the people had to oust him from the Malacañang and the US had to assist the dictator to be safely flown out the country before the people could have skinned him and his family alive.

It is not definitely the case when President Rodrigo R. Duterte declared Martial Law in Mindanao which he promised to be harsher than Marcos's. Anyway he did not only consult the US for any advice but in fact he has openly declared that he wanted all the agreements with the US be abrogated. But everybody knows that this is not because he wants that his administration will adopt an independent and nationalist foreign policy direction but he wants the US out because he has established and strengthen his relationship with China and Russia. President Duterte is very much aware though that the security sector of the country is still very US dependent and oriented. His frequent visits to military camps and talk to military officers men and women should be understood in this context.

So if the US would want to make a timely action it should be now that those relationships and agreements with China and Russia have yet to be consummated.

One has to be critical here of the role of the Abusayyaf and Isnilon Hapilon in all these developments. The US covert operations have not abandoned its link with the local and reliable agents not excluding those from the extremist groups like the Abusayyaf. Isnilon Hapilon arrival in Butig last year is very strange. It has been reported that his Lanao del Sur basing due to extreme pressure of the military operations by the Philippines security sector and the US Special covert operators. Considering the ethno-linguistic group dynamics like Yakans and Maranaos it should have greater reason that the high-valued person like Isnilon (with 5million USD price on his head) could be secured in a setting like Butig and Lanao del Sur and starting to fight another battle not necessarily their own. Anyway, this fact should be given enough consideration as well.

Currently the US special operatives are back right at the heart of the operation to monitor and help the Philippine security sector fight and end the siege of Marawi. They (US) have been highly projected in active circulation once again within the Philippine security sector and allegedly helping the latter to end the rampage of the extremists. They did it just on time when their Chinese and Russian counterparts have not yet put their feet on the Philippine ground. Meanwhile, President Duterte has to eat his own words and his pride in not so silent manner.

What will be the end scenario? Nobody can tell, except that one will not be surprised to witness another Abu Sabaya scenario – that is Isnilon Hapilon will successfully disappear in Marawi and will be somewhere else where he will be again needed. Meanwhile the gallant and courageous soldiers of the Republic are losing lives and Marawi city has continued to burn. Properties and lives of Muslim (Maranaos) and Christians alike have been destroyed and ruined. The rebuilding of the city can only be better and stronger if it be outside the framework of Martial Law or its shadow.

June 9, 2017

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[1] On this operation see <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/> and look for the key word Mamasapano.