

NOTA

WHY NOW? – TYPHOON HAIYAN AND THE PEACE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT AND THE MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONTby **Anna Wasiak**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Given the evidence that climate change is increasing the intensity and frequency of natural disasters (IPCC, 2011), the effects that natural disasters may have on the societies they hit seem worth a glance. Natural disasters can be drivers of change when it comes to their impacts on ongoing conflicts (Birkmann et al., 2010). Le Billon and Waizenegger (2007: 423) find that “*disasters can foster political change*”. Accordingly, post-natural disaster situations can be a window of opportunity for change (Birkmann et al., 2010). Most authors see the direction of this change lying in increased levels of conflict. The most prominent scholar studying the environment-conflict nexus, Homer-Dixon (1999), argues that resource scarcities caused by environmental change result in conflict due to competition over scarce resources because decreasing access to natural resources increases frustration, which in turn generates grievances against the state and society and increases the opportunities for rebellion. However, cases exist in which a natural disaster was followed by the signing of a historical peace agreement ending decades of internal conflict. This was the case in Indonesia, where the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 resulted in the signing of the peace agreement between the government and the Free Aceh Movement eight months following the disaster event (Schaffer, 2011). Also in the Philippines a peace agreement between the government and the country’s biggest rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was signed in March of this year, within a couple of months after the Philippines were hit by Typhoon Haiyan. Did the typhoon contribute to the signing of the peace agreement on the Philippines?

II. WHY SHOULD THESE EVENTS BE LINKED?

The existing arguments in the literature can be divided into two groups: those arguing that natural disasters increase levels of armed conflict, and those who argue that natural disasters provide windows of opportunity for peace. What appears to be the common view in the literature on natural disasters and conflict, is that “[n]atural disasters are expected to exacerbate conflict risk primarily through economic loss and a weakening of government authority” (Theisen et al., 2013: 619). This view is based on the theoretical contributions developed by Homer-Dixon (1999) and Kahl (2006). According to Homer-Dixon (1999), resource scarcities caused by environmental change result in conflict due to competition over scarce resources. Natural disasters, by being unpredictable in nature, will immediately result in a reduction of essential resources for livelihood. Feelings of relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970) arising from the resource scarcities, will raise the level of grievances, which eventually may lead to conflict (Bhavnani, 2006). In addition, after a natural disaster, the state loses its normal position and becomes weaker due to decreasing resources and raising demands of the population (Bhavnani, 2006, Kahl, 2006). In this situation, rebel groups gain a comparative advantage, as in contrast to the state, they are not expected to manage the consequences of the disaster (Birkland, 1998). In response to its

weakening, the state takes action to restore its strength. This can be either by using relief resource in its favour or for political means, meaning that the available resources are channelled towards particular groups in society to gain or reassure their support, or by increasingly relying on repression and violence to weaken its opponents. The state's opponents, rebel groups connected to the territory of the disaster in internal conflicts, for example, may feel threatened by state action and resort to violence to secure their survival (Kahl, 2006). The second line of argumentation relates to "disaster diplomacy". Here, natural disasters are said to influence peace processes in the short-term given that a basis for the peace process existed already before the natural disaster (Kelman, 2012). These arguments, however, does not provide a clear causal mechanism linking the two events and are much more uncommon in the literature.

III. TYPHOON HAIYAN AND ITS AFTERMATH ON THE PHILIPPINES

Typhoon Haiyan, locally referred to as Yolanda, hit the Philippine islands of Samar and Leyte on 8 November 2013. Although the Philippines face several natural disasters every year, the level of storm surge and flooding caused by Typhoon Haiyan was unexpected (Crowley, 2013) and one of the strongest typhoons ever recorded (Chu, 2013), leaving behind huge levels of destruction. According to Scheffran (2011), human needs on which environmental events are expected to impact are water, food, energy, health, jobs/income, transportation and education. The typhoon on the Philippines affected over 14 million people (UN OCHA, 2013a). Electricity supply and telecommunication were interrupted, roads were severely damages, and air and seaports in the affected area were closed (UN OCHA, 2013b). Days after the typhoon numerous affected towns had not received any of the food, medicine, and water they needed (Chu, 2013), and relief took weeks to arrive to many remote rural regions (Walch, 2013). Towns could not be reached during days (Chu, 2013) and also UN agencies and NGOs were struggling to reach many of those places where food, medical supplies and clean water were scarce (The Economist, 2013).

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, law and order broke down in many places, criminals had broken out of jails and police forces and local governments were overwhelmed (The Economist, 2013). The typhoon hit some of the strongholds of the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, where aid convoys were attacked in the days following the disaster and many cases of looting were reported. A justification given by the group was that the aid convoys were used by the military for counterinsurgency measures against the NPA. Aiming at restoring order and ensuring aid delivery, the government established checkpoints. The NPA declared a ten-day ceasefire, later extended to two months, to facilitate disaster relief and its troops provided to aid in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. However, it remained vigilant regarding military movements in the devastated areas. In fact, government forces have been deployed to sensitive areas for the sake of aid delivery (Walch, 2013) and were accused by the NPA of continuing their operations against the group despite of the ceasefire (Philstar, 2014).

IV. MEANWHILE IN MINDANAO

What indicates that the process towards signing the peace agreement in March 2014 has been accelerated by the typhoon and its aftermath? Steps towards the final peace deal had been taken since October 2012, when the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro was signed between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Already in October 2012 the preliminary agreement, the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro was signed, starting off the process that led to the

recent signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro. The Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro was a preliminary peace agreement calling for the establishment of an autonomous region of Bangsamoro as the new autonomous political entity to replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The framework agreement itself was only the beginning of a process that would culminate in the signing of a comprehensive agreement, the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro signed in March this year. The process towards the final peace agreement would include negotiations and agreements of several “Annexes” to the final deal concerning power sharing, the generation of revenues and wealth sharing from the natural resources available on the territory of the Bangsamoro, the process of normalization of the situation, and the process of implementation of the establishment of the Bangsamoro (Philippine Government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front, 2012).

The process that was started with the Framework Agreement, however, was not always proceeding smoothly. Although the government and the MILF proceeded in signing the required annexes to culminate in the comprehensive agreement, violence in the region was ongoing (Adriano, 2013). Also, before the typhoon hit the country, in September 2013 weeks of fighting took place in Mindanao between government forces and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) opposing the peace process with the MILF, a breakaway group from the MNLF formed in 1977 (Aljazeera, 2012). Although talks on a possible peace agreement had been going on for years, the final Exploratory Talks between the government and the MILF leading towards the comprehensive agreement in January and the signing of the peace deal in March only started in December 2014, almost one month after typhoon Haiyan hit the country (Inquirer Research, 2014). Finally, at the end of January 2014 the Philippine government and the MILF negotiated what was labelled a historic peace agreement ending decades of violence that have cost tens of thousands of people their lives (Whaley, 2014). After announcing in January that a final peace deal would be reached, government forces launched a major offensive against Muslim splinter groups that opposed the deal (IRIN News, 2014) ensuring that the deal was signed as planned in March.

V. IS THERE A LINK BETWEEN TYPHOON HAIYAN AND THE PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE MILF?

In the case of the Philippines it can be argued that the typhoon resulted in resource scarcities and contributed to competition over the existing resources as shows the fact that several resources necessary for livelihood were limited in the regions affected by the disaster event. Competition over the available resources emerged as was visible through the lootings reported as well as the increased levels of frustration, anger, and criminality that followed the typhoon (Hodal, 2013; Marshall and Grudgings, 2013). Also, the typhoon seems to have impacted on the cleavages between the NPA and the government, since the relief efforts undertaken by the government forces in response to the typhoon had been conceived by the NPA as counterinsurgency measures, while the NPA on its part attacked aid convoys and slowed down the delivery of assistance before the groups announced a ceasefire in order to facilitate aid delivery to the affected population (Walch, 2013; Philstar, 2014). Disasters are “*by definition, a mismatch between a natural event’s impacts and the response resources and efficiency of the affected society*” (Olson and Drury, 1997: 227). Accordingly, no matter how well a state reacts, public dissatisfaction will emerge. Given the level of criticism that has reached the Philippine government regarding its preparedness and response to typhoon Haiyan, as well as reports of criminality and failure to reach areas hit in the immediate aftermath of the disaster mentioned above (The Economist, 2013; Walch, 2013), levels of dissatisfaction can be assumed to have been high and that state weakened, as argued by Kahl (2006). According to the literature, in this situation of

weakness, the government needed to undertake some action in order to regain its strength. One could argue that given the government's weakening in one part of the country, it turned towards Mindanao with the purpose of achieving a success and counter its weakening resulting from the aftermath of typhoon Haiyan.

The government was in need of a success to restore its strength. Since it was weakened by the events in one part of the country, namely where Typhoon Haiyan hit, and where the NPA was challenging its strength, it took the chance and turned to another issue, through which it could potentially regain some strength. Peace in Mindanao is the current President's aim before the end of his term in 2016 and steps had already been taken towards a peace agreement as of October 2012, when the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro was signed. As predicted by theory, the government did rely on violence and repression to regain its strength, however, in a different direction. In order to ensure that the peace deal announced in January could be signed, the government started a military operation against rebel groups that opposed the deal. This operation itself was a sign of strength of the Philippine government which was only the first step in achieving the bigger success, namely the comprehensive agreement.

Although the deal signed in March is the final agreement paving the way for a lasting resolution of the conflict (Heydarian, 2014), many challenges remain as to whether it will bring peace after all. Several aspects of the recent peace deal have been criticized. The peace agreement is only another step on a larger path. The Basic Law proposed, based on which the Bangsamoro, the new autonomous political entity to replace the ARMM, shall be governed (Philippine Government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front, 2012), still needs to pass Congress, and the MILF has announced that it will not give up its arms or the identities of its fighters before the law has been passed. Besides, the agreement could be challenged by the Supreme Court as happened in 2008 when it stopped a peace deal negotiated with Aquino's predecessor, Gloria Arroyo, on the ground of being against the country's constitution. And, of course, splinter groups opposed to the present agreement threaten its success since they could continue to create violence in Mindanao (Malakunas, 2014). The above mentioned events leading to the signing of the final peace deal as well as the mentioned criticism may be seen as an indication that the agreement was signed in a rush. This may be due to the fact that President Aquino has made it his goal to implement the agreements and achieve final peace before the end of his presidential term in 2016. Given the previous events in other parts of the country, it may have been due also to the government's weakened position which needed to be newly strengthened.

VI. CONCLUSION

Would the agreement have been reached without the disaster? Probably yes. However, the time when it would be reached could have varied a lot. Further, more detailed analysis of the chronology of events connected to Typhoon Haiyan and the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro would be in need for a more detailed analysis of how much in fact the choice of timing for the agreement was connected to the aftermath of the typhoon. Whether it was a deliberate choice by the government to proceed towards the negotiation and signing of the agreement with the MILF in order to respond to its weakening in the aftermath of the typhoon, or not, the peace deal can be said to have arrived at a good time, giving the government positive visibility after months of being challenged from various sides.

Although no major role can be definitely attributed to the disaster in achieving the peace agreement between the government and the MILF, the timing of its signing may

have contributed to the image of the Philippine government in regaining its strength after being weakened in the aftermath of the typhoon and challenged for months. Whether peace will come or not, the agreement is seen as a success on the longer path, which can be clearly attributed to the efforts of the Philippine government which now can record a success. Despite the fact that a natural disaster itself cannot end decades of conflict, one good thing can be seen in the destruction such natural events leave, namely that they shake up society and carry the potential of pushing towards action by governments. Therefore, the claim that natural disasters are windows of opportunity for change (Birkmann et al., 2010) carries some truth.

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