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A Whole-of- Government Approach: Lessons from the Philippine counter-insurgency

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The Philippine counter-insurgency bears a lesson for the whole-of-government approach. It has all the elements for a successful counter-insurgency: diplomatic and legal offensives, citizen's diplomacy, effective military strategy and the effective use of government institutions. However, the Philippine insurgency also shows that success is temporary if the overall political solution is missing.

THE WARS in Iraq and Afghanistan that forced the United States to stage a counter-insurgency campaign has highlighted the relevance of lessons from other counter-insurgencies. One of these is the campaign against the communists in the Philippines. Since 1932, the communist movement has posed a national security threat. As of 2006, it has a combined strength of about 7,000 armed regulars influencing more than 2,000 villages all over Philippines. The communist movement in the Philippines is led from exile by Prof. Jose Maria Sison, who was recently arrested and temporarily freed in the Netherlands.

Jose Maria Sison and the CPP/NPA

The 28 August arrest of Sison is the result of an effective diplomatic offensive of the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP), against the communists. Sison is the chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA). He was arrested in Utrecht, Netherlands for the alleged murders of his former comrades in the communist movement. By the admission of the Philippine National Security Adviser, Norberto Gonzales, the arrest was facilitated by the Philippine government. This effort is believed to be part of a wider strategy to limit the options of the exiled CPP/NPA leaders abroad. The goal was to force the group to respond to the reconciliatory gesture of the government's general amnesty programme.

On the domestic front, the government intensified its legal offensive by charging in court leaders of militant organisations identified with the communist movement for rebellion. This move is aimed at forcing the communists either to negotiate or accept the general amnesty programme. The strategy has been effective. The combined diplomatic and legal offensives weakened the ideological and support backbone of the communists while at the same time strengthening the rule of law.

Complementing this soft approach is the Philippine Armed Forces military and citizens' diplomacy offensive. The intensified citizen's diplomacy comprises community involvement in civic, community defence, and development programmes. This diplomacy has adversely affected the mass support for the communist insurgents. In fact, military personnel seen implementing civic-action programmes have largely diminished the capability of the left-leaning organisations to rally the poor for their anti-

government protest actions.

Internationally, the CPP/NPA has also been severely affected by its designation as a terrorist organisation by the United States and the European Union. This has greatly reduced external funding as well as material and morale support for the movement. This is one of the tangible benefits of the Philippines-US bilateral relations in the global war on terror.

Caveats and policy options

The success of the government's counter-insurgency strategy is however not without caveats. There are two compelling areas that the Philippine government seems to have forgotten. The first is the credibility and appropriateness of its whole strategy. The second is whether the strategy is addressing effectively the root causes of the insurgency problem.

The government's counter-insurgency campaign recently suffered a credibility problem because of recent allegations of rampant human rights violations and the disappearance of left-leaning critics of government policies. The impact is to undermine the legitimacy of the government campaign against the communists. The alleged human rights violations perpetrated by Philippine security forces even attracted the attention of the United Nations and the EU leading them to send representatives to look into the allegations. The alleged violations, if proven, manifest the lack of coordination in tactics and strategy between the government and its front-line implementers.

Another caveat is the government's inconsistent appreciation of the root causes of the problem. Some suggest that the government's failure reflects the lack of political will to implement programmes that could lead to a head-on collision with people with vested interests. These are the big land owners holding key positions both in the executive and legislative branches of the government. Since independence, the government has been ineffective in pressing with socio-economic policies that are weighted in favour of the poor and marginalized in Philippine society. This is due to the obstructionist nature of the dominant elite with interests to protect. Policies that would eradicate business monopolies and patronage politics have been dismal failures.

To address this problem, there must be a collective effort to end the politics of patronage through a legislated affirmative action. This would open up access for the poor to quality education. The electorate must be educated to use the power of their electoral votes to send people to congress who will best represent their interests. Only through the defeat of ignorance can the poor emasculate political manipulation and exploitation. Unless this is done, as Jose Maria Sison has said, you can only jail the "revolutionary but not the revolution".

The government must also pursue the Philippine defence reform programme, currently assisted by the US and Australia. However, it must not only focus on enhancing military capabilities but also tackle the lack of skills in citizen's diplomacy and civil affairs. There must be a paradigm "mentality" shift for the 'first man-in the foxhole' to the 'last man in the General Headquarters', from a highly conventional military doctrine of "attrition warfare" to a more socio-cultural and people-based counter-insurgency doctrine. This approach is focused on skills that could win the hearts of not only the population but the insurgents themselves. Only a professional army can effectively defeat an insurgency in combat and in the hearts of the people.

Political Settlement is key

An insurgency is the only form of warfare in which both parties in conflict can neither claim total victory nor defeat. Only a political settlement acceptable to both parties in conflict will bring an end to violence. The current lessons of the Philippine counter insurgency illustrate the above axiom. The critical element to remember is not to maintain a focus on the security approach but to develop and

implement “the whole-of-government approach in counter-insurgency”.

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