



Zamboanga City Crisis: Politics, Philippine Style

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(This issue analysis was contributed by CenPEG Fellow Ben O. Lim. Lim, who wrote this analysis on Sept. 17, is a retired professor from the University of the Philippines and now teaches in the Ateneo de Manila University.)

What are Filipinos to do when the leadership at the highest level engages in dangerous brinkmanship and political grandstanding instead of speeding up the call for ceasefire or peace negotiation in the on-going Zamboanga City confrontation? What are Filipinos to do when their Vice-President, without authorization or instruction from the President, negotiated truce with Nur Misuari on his own, told Secretary Voltaire Gazmin and even announced on Friday night that a ceasefire between the military and the MNLF would take effect at midnight?

It appears that President Aquino instead of calling for an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of combatants of both sides from Zamboanga City, and start negotiations seems more interested in prolonging the crisis, while blaming Nur Misuari or his "breakaway faction" for the crisis and sabotaging the Framework Agreement. Worse, PNoy aggravated the crisis when he tries to resolve the political problem using military force.

Unfortunately his "calibrated" military solution has created other problems: the wounding and deaths not only of combatants from both sides but of civilians caught in the crossfire. It brought into being between 40,000 to 60,000 refugees who are sick and hungry and worse, worry whether their houses would be razed to the ground due to the fighting. Above all, it paralyzed the operations of the entire city turning it into a warzone which led to massive economic losses not only for Zamboanga but also for the whole country. Still PNoy and Interior Secretary Mar Roxas tried to assure the nation that they are working 24/7 for ways and means to resolve the crisis.

The inability of the government to end the crisis quickly and decisively has led people to ask: How big is Nur's breakaway army and what hi-tech weaponry do the rebels possess that they are able hold the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippines National Police to a standoff for over a week? How come the Office of the President and the AFP with so much intelligence funds, have been unable to detect and cut off the advances of what it now considers as a mere fraction of the Moro National Liberation Front?

This inability has prompted some critics to charge that despite billions of pesos in financial support, the intelligence sectors of the AFP and the PNP are dysfunctional, while others suspect that the standoff is being deliberately prolonged by the Aquino administration for political reasons. PNoy, they charge, is using the tragedy that turned the residents into refugees as an opportunity to take the thunder out of the demands of the civil society to abolish all pork barrels and to demonstrate that his office needs to keep the emergency and other pork barrel-related funds and even the transfer of the congressional pork barrel into the President's office in order for him to immediately and effectively meet this and other types of emergency, to relieve the refugees of their miseries. Secretary Dinky Soliman has already taken a census of those who lost their houses and property and promised to help them rehabilitate and reconstruct their losses. For most observers, this is a first time the Aquino administration has offered such an all-encompassing aid package which dwarfs the measly sum given through the conditional cash transfer program. And for some observers, this must be in anticipation of the transfer of pork barrel from the Congress to the President's office.

Indeed there could be some truths to all these speculations and charges that the politics of pork barrel is behind this new-found government benevolence, and it is beyond dispute that ideal solutions have been missing until now. Critics point to PNoy's ambiguous and meandering position on the Zamboanga City standoff as the rationale that prolonged the crisis. It was only after one week that the half-hearted military decided to drop a few bombs and to wage an all out war. And even before the crisis is over they are now boasting that not only do they liberate the hostages from harm but are rehabilitating and rebuilding their traumatized lives.

But if public safety, peace and normalcy have been the PNoy administration's overriding concern, he and his advisers would not allow Zamboanga City to fester as a warzone for a long time. As things turn out, it seems clear that Nur has been willing to talk peace from the very start.

Precisely because a political strategem is being added to the crisis to justify the consolidation of congressional pork barrel into the office of the President, Vice President Jejomar Binay decided to add one of his own – to upstage the President the way he staged a coup against candidate Mar Roxas within the Aquino camp during the last presidential elections. For Binay, power has been an acquired taste, the acquisition as intriguing as it was treacherous. Even now one still senses his triumphal outlook for his rough and tumble type of politicking. But this time, there is something amiss in the way he maneuvered the attempted coup against the President in the Zamboanga City crisis.

Binay, without authorization or instruction from President Aquino and the Commander-in-Chief of the AFP,

negotiated a truce with Nur Misuari and announced that a ceasefire between the military and the MNLF would take effect at midnight. Binay told reporters that he had spoken to both Secretary Gazmin and Misuari about the ceasefire that the men on both sides would lay down the terms of the truce. Unfortunately for Binay, Gazmin did not recognize him as his Commander-in-Chief.

Worse, when the ceasefire did not materialize, Binay crowed in his press statement: “There was a good start. Both were for peaceful settlement. But the President did not accept the conditions Misuari set for a ceasefire.”

Binay while acknowledging that PNoy has the ultimate say on the crisis nonetheless blamed the President for rejecting the opportunity he created that could end the Zamboanga crisis - since Binay and Misuari “were for peaceful settlement.”

Clearly Binay not only took advantage of the prolonged crisis but decided to overshadow the President by showing that he could achieve peace faster and more effectively than President Aquino and Secretary Roxas. Throughout Binay's justification of his move, he displayed a new-found pleasure in exposing the President's meandering ways. “It's a pity” Binay implied, the President is not for peace.

In this respect, President Aquino and Vice President Binay are only the latest in a string of Philippine leaders who have shown few limits to the harm they can inflict on the Filipino people by playing politics to serve their own ends. The country is still stuck with the same woeful, corrupt, selfish and divisive leadership that plunges the country's economy to the brink and toward a civil war.

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