

Moro National Liberation Front

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 1972

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: October 21, 1972: The MNLF launched an attack on various targets in Marawi City, including the Philippine Constabulary, a government radio station, and a state university (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹

Last Attack: September 9, 2013: Forces from Nur Misuari's MNLF faction entered Zamboanga City, attacked government forces, and ultimately took about 300 civilian hostages. Fighting lasted until September 28 (6+ killed, 24 wounded).²

OVERVIEW

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) is an Islamic separatist organization based in the southern Philippines that seeks autonomy for Filipino Muslims, called Moros. The MNLF was established in 1972, and it led the Moro separatist movement until the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the MNLF and the Philippine government. Since 1996, the MNLF has been surpassed in strength and influence by its rival group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which began its own peace talks with the Philippine government. Today, the MNLF consists of many factions, some of which support current negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) is an Islamic separatist organization based in the southern Philippines. Its stated purpose was to create an independent Islamic state or autonomous region for the Filipino Muslim minority, known as the Moro people, who live primarily in the Philippines' Mindanao region. For about two decades beginning in the 1970s, the MNLF was the leading organization in the Moro separatist movement.³

The MNLF is a splinter group of the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM), later called the Mindanao Independence Movement. The MIM was founded in May 1968 in the wake of the Jabidah Massacre (also called the Corregidor Massacre), in which the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) killed an unknown number of Moro Muslims who had been trained as soldiers for a coming military operation. The exact circumstances are debated, and the government only acknowledged the event in 2013.⁴ After its founding, the MIM was largely a political movement whose primary activity was issuing manifestos that advocated for a separate Moro state in the southern Philippines. The group allegedly also established an armed wing called the Blackshirts, which fought against Christian militants. MIM members – like other Moros – also participated in revolts against the Philippine government.⁵ Beginning around 1969, Malaysia started providing training and arms to Filipino Muslims, which included MIM members. Though supported by external partners, the MIM never gained popular support among the Moros. It remained a loose, weak movement with little recorded activity and under high military pressure from the government.

In 1970, MIM leadership agreed to disband after a meeting with then-President Ferdinand Marcos.⁶ Afterwards, traditional Moro elites established a second organization, the Bangsa Moro Liberation Organization (BMLO), which was largely comprised of older MIM elites and MIM student leaders. However, the BMLO was soon destroyed by internal conflict fueled by the enduring generational differences among its members. In October 1972, the leaders of the younger generation officially founded the MNLF in Pulau Pangkor, Malaysia.⁷ The young leaders distrusted the older Moro elites whom they viewed as antiquated and corrupt, and they used the MNLF to separately pursue the same goal of an independent Moro state. Nur Misuari, an early student leader of the movement, became the MNLF's first chairman.⁸

President Marcos declared martial law in September 1972, citing violence between Muslims and Christians as well as the existence of an illegal separatist movement. This action curtailed Moro political activity and increased government power. After this declaration, the scattered Moro revolts against the state that had been occurring for years escalated to war.⁹ Under martial law, state forces dissolved well-established Moro political groups and confiscated all firearms used by rebel forces and non-state actors. As a result, the leading Moro groups deteriorated, and the newly formed and more radical MNLF was quickly able to dominate the Moro separatist movement. Previously disparate rebel forces that had fought separately against the Philippine government and armed Christian groups began to unite under the banner of the MNLF. The MNLF was particularly attractive to former rebels because the group's leadership, mostly located in Malaysia, was able to provide a steady supply of weapons from abroad. These weapons were then used to engage local state forces and Christian militias in traditional warfare.¹⁰ Significant foreign support came from Libya, which had historically supported the Moro cause. Around the time of the MNLF's establishment, Misuari and another key MNLF leader, Hashim Salamat, traveled to Libya and successfully persuaded the Libyan government to shift its support away from traditional Moro elites and toward the MNLF. In response, many Moro fighters soon joined or aligned with the MNLF, greatly unifying the separatist movement.¹¹

In 1973, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) began a massive military operation to quell the Moro separatists, including the MNLF. After the MNLF suffered major defeats in conventional battles against the AFP, military advisors from Libya and Malaysia helped the group adopt guerrilla tactics, which proved more effective against government forces. Simultaneously with the AFP's offensive, the MNLF solidified its organizational structure. In 1974, MNLF leaders living in Libya established the MNLF's Central Committee. The Committee was originally composed of thirteen members led by Misuari. The MNLF also made several other organizational changes, including establishing an armed wing called the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA) or the Bangsamoro Armed Forces (BAF), a Supreme Revolutionary Tribunal, and a National Congress.¹² However, these components were not equally active or effective. The National Congress—which was supposed to act as a legislative body within the MNLF—was almost never

convened, and the MNLF developed as a centralized rather than a consultative organization under Misuari's leadership.¹³

In 1974, the MNLF released a manifesto that used nationalist claims and rhetoric to justify a separate Moro state, as opposed to the religious motivations that might have been expected from the organization.¹⁴ The manifesto scarcely mentioned Islam despite the MNLF's Muslim base of support. Instead, the MNLF espoused an independent state – called the Bangsa Moro Republik – for all people of the southern Philippines, provided that they gave up their Philippine citizenship. The manifesto's openness to non-Muslims and its emphasis on resistance to 'the Philippine government's colonial oppression' attracted the attention of the New People's Army (NPA), a Filipino Communist militant group. The NPA allegedly approached the MNLF about an alliance, but the MNLF rejected this offer in 1975. The group was cognizant of ideological differences with the NPA, as well as the need to retain the backing of its international Islamic supporters, which may be upset by an NPA-MNLF alliance. Though the MNLF never formally cooperated with the NPA, some critics of the MNLF would condemn the organization as communist and insufficiently Islamic throughout its lifetime.¹⁵

Throughout the 1970s, women played an important role in supporting the MNLF. They provided communication between MNLF members in urban areas and those in rural areas. Women also delivered supplies, information, and weapons; made uniforms; prepared food; collected financial contributions; and helped with recruitment and raising awareness of the MNLF's cause. Women also received weapons training from the MNLF. The MNLF also established a Women's Committee and a women's auxiliary group for the Bangsa Moro Army (BMA).¹⁶

By the mid-1970s, the MNLF's clear leading position within the Moro separatist movement and its successful use of guerrilla tactics against the state led the Philippine government to acknowledge the organization's power. In January 1975, the Philippine government sent a negotiator to meet with the MNLF's leadership.¹⁷ In July 1975, in a second acknowledgment of the MNLF's status, the MNLF was recognized as a legitimate representative of the Moro separatist movement by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), an international body of Muslim states and institutions that later became known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The OIC urged the Philippine government to reach a political settlement with the MNLF.¹⁸

With Libya's mediation, the MNLF and the Philippine government signed the Tripoli Agreement on December 23, 1976. This agreement would have established an autonomous region that included Basilan, Sulu, Palawan, and other areas in the southern Philippines. It also would have divided authority over the management of the region's foreign policy, defense, education, courts, and finances between the Philippine government and the proposed autonomous government.¹⁹ The MNLF wanted President Marcos to implement the agreement by executive order, but Marcos submitted the agreement to a referendum within the provinces that would comprise the new autonomous region. Filipino Muslims constituted the majority in only three of those provinces, and voters overwhelmingly rejected the agreement in the referendum on April 17, 1977. Only a few provinces approved the autonomy proposal; those provinces were located in two different regions, known today as Region IX and Region XII. Rather than creating a single autonomous region, the two provinces chose to establish two different autonomous regional governments, which would serve as the predecessors to the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Thus, instead of creating a large and unified autonomous region led by the MNLF as was stipulated in the Tripoli Agreement, the referendum mostly maintained the status quo.²⁰ Unsatisfied with this result, the MNLF ended talks with the government. The group instead renewed its call for full independence and returned to guerrilla attacks.²¹

In the same year, Hashim Salamat and other members broke from the organization to form the New MNLF, later called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Salamat condemned Misuari's dictatorial

leadership and divergence from what he considered truly Islamic goals. According to Salamat, the MNLF did not focus enough on promoting an Islamic nation. Salamat believed that the organization's strategy was largely dictated by Misuari's autocratic personality rather than consultation with its members. Although Salamat had long been more religiously motivated than Misuari, Misuari's decision to end government talks – a decision with which Salamat disagreed – exacerbated the leaders' ideological differences and helped prompt the MILF's split from the MNLF.²² Other dissatisfied members also left the MNLF between 1978 and 1982, including MNLF Vice Chairman and co-founder Abul Khayr Alonto. These members often established their own groups, some of which are considered factions of the MNLF rather than independent organizations. One example is the Moro National Liberation Front-Reformist Group (MNLF-RG) founded by MNLF member Dimas Pundato, which later disbanded. MNLF factions often emerged along tribal lines; for example, MNLF members who supported Dimas Pundato were from the Maranao tribe.²³

The MNLF's internal problems during the late 1970s and early 1980s were compounded by its military losses to Philippine government forces, which ultimately pushed the MNLF to shift its demands from full independence to regional autonomy. In 1986, Misuari met with then-President Corazon Aquino and agreed to a ceasefire and negotiations. However, in the end, peace talks failed.²⁴

Meanwhile, Moro politicians and the Philippine government had been working to change the autonomy arrangement in the southern Philippines. This effort culminated in 1989 when President Aquino signed Republic Act No. 6734. The act established the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which evolved from the autonomous regions created after the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. The government held a referendum whereby provinces could vote to be included in the ARMM, and only four of thirteen provinces chose to join the new region. The MNLF was not consulted about Republic Act No. 6734 nor the ARMM, and it opposed both policies.²⁵

In the early 1990s, several MNLF members frustrated with the MNLF's approach to improving Moros' status broke off to form the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The ASG presented itself as a more extreme version of its parent organization. It utilized violent tactics like bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations to gain attention and promote the Moro separatist cause.²⁶

During the administration of Fidel Ramos, who succeeded Aquino as president in 1992, the MNLF experienced a diplomatic breakthrough with the Philippine government. The MNLF and the government engaged in peace talks mediated by international actors, including the OIC, the Libyan government of Muammar el-Qaddafi, and the Indonesian government of Suharto. The Philippine government and the MNLF signed Statements of Understanding and Interim Agreements between 1992 and 1996. These efforts culminated in the Final Peace Agreement—also called the Jakarta Peace Agreement—that was signed by the Philippine government, the MNLF, and the OIC on September 2, 1996. The 1996 agreement officially ended the MNLF's fight against the government. It designated a Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) in the southern Philippines, which would be the focus of special development and investment efforts for three years, and it expanded the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The agreement outlined the ARMM's new governance structures and called for the integration of MNLF members into the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). These stipulations would be implemented across two phases.²⁷ The MNLF at this time allied itself with President Ramos' political party, Lakas (Strength). About a week after the Final Peace Agreement was signed, Misuari ran in the elections for the ARMM's regional governorship. With the Philippine government's support, Misuari easily won.²⁸

Despite its benefits for the MNLF's external relations, the 1996 agreement triggered further divisions within the organization. Some MNLF members supported and participated in the ARMM government, the council overseeing the SZOPAD's administration, and the Philippine security forces. However, others

were angered by what they viewed as capitulation to the Philippine government. Dissatisfied members accused Misuari of sacrificing Moro welfare and independence for his own political gain. Many members left the MNLF altogether to join the MILF, which strongly denounced the agreement and advocated full Moro independence. The MILF attributed the enormous surge in its recruitment to backlash from the 1996 agreement, and its membership grew to approximately 15,000 militants. The MILF is generally considered to have replaced the MNLF as the dominant group within the Moro separatist movement at this time.²⁹

After 1996, the MNLF demobilized. The MNLF's primary purpose and structure during this period are unclear, but it seemed to function almost as a form of political identification. Though the MNLF withdrew from the Moro separatist fight, networks between its members continued to exist. The 1996 agreement originally had provisions for including a certain number of MNLF members in the regional government, and approximately half of the MNLF's fighters entered the PNP and the AFP.³⁰ The agreement also created special programs to provide education and technical skills for MNLF forces that did not integrate into the AFP or the PNP. MNLF militants with political ambitions utilized the group's connections to President Lakas to run for elected office.³¹ The MNLF did not disarm, although some MNLF members who integrated into Philippine society chose to surrender some of their weapons through a buy-back program called Balik-BARIL (Return Gun).³²

Despite its members' successful integration into Philippine society and politics, the MNLF grew upset with the implementation of the 1996 agreement. Many MNLF members believed that the 2001 New Organic Act for the ARMM – which initiated the 1996 agreement's second stage – contradicted the Final Peace Agreement's stipulations of authority over mineral resources. The MNLF fractured into various new factions, including the Executive Council of 15 (EC-15) – established in 2001 – that emerged in opposition to a faction still loyal to and led by Misuari. Before ARMM elections in November 2001, Misuari's dissatisfaction with the 1996 agreement's implementation and his own waning influence drove him to lead an armed attack in Sulu and Zamboanga City. This attack – carried out by Misuari's MNLF faction, sometimes called the Misuari Breakaway Group (MBG) – was meant to stop the ARMM elections that Misuari did not believe he would win.³³ Misuari escaped to Malaysia after the rebellion failed. However, he was arrested and deported back to the Philippines, where he was jailed.³⁴ Misuari was placed under house arrest in 2006. He was released in 2008 after prosecutors could not provide enough evidence to connect him to the 2001 rebellion in Sulu.³⁵

After Misuari's fall, MNLF member Alvarez Isnaji served as acting ARMM governor. Fellow MNLF member Parouk S. Hussin won the second ARMM governorship, which ended in 2005.³⁶ In the same year, Misuari's followers within the MNLF launched attacks in Sulu in February and November, allegedly cooperating with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Misuari's well-armed MNLF faction was able to engage the Philippine military in conventional warfare, conducting direct attacks against army positions. The conflicts in 2005 displaced over 80,000 people from the areas of intense fighting, mostly through a preemptive evacuation of approximately 70,000 civilians and MNLF supporters.³⁷

In 2006, the MNLF and the Philippine government attempted to renew their relationship and work together to implement the 1996 peace agreement, introducing the Sulu Road Map for Peace and Development which highlighted several development priorities.³⁸ The MNLF also began fighting against the ASG, in conjunction with the Armed Forces of the Philippines, after the ASG's designation as a terrorist organization by the United States and the United Nations.³⁹ However, the cooperation and goodwill between the MNLF and the Philippine government waned due to continued difficulties with implementation of the peace agreement.⁴⁰

Beginning especially in the late 2000s, the MNLF-Philippine government relationship was complicated further by government negotiations with the MILF. Many MNLF members opposed MILF-Philippine

negotiations on the grounds that their own 1996 Final Peace Agreement had already ended the question regarding the status of Muslims in the Philippines.⁴¹ Under President Benigno Aquino III, who assumed office in 2010, talks with the MILF advanced significantly. These talks centered on replacing the ARMM with a new autonomous region called the Bangsamoro. On October 12, 2012, the MILF and the Philippine government signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (FAB) to establish this new independent region.⁴²

Since the beginning of talks between the government and the MILF, Misuari and his MNLF followers have been among the strongest opponents of negotiations with the MILF and the proposed Bangsamoro region. On August 12, 2013, Misuari unilaterally declared the independence of the Bangsamoro Republik at a gathering in Sulu.⁴³ In September, MNLF fighters engaged Philippine government forces in Zamboanga City and took hundreds of hostages. Government forces were deployed to the city. The mayor instituted a curfew, and travel to the area was restricted because of the standoff. The hostage crisis in Zamboanga City lasted approximately three weeks.⁴⁴ Although an arrest warrant was issued for Misuari, he allegedly managed to flee the country for some time. From 2013 until talks over the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) in 2018, Misuari was believed to be back in the southern Philippines guarded by his followers.⁴⁵

During the 2013 hostage crisis in Zamboanga City, an MNLF faction led by Muslimin Sema condemned the violence and refused to participate.⁴⁶ Because of the attack, the MNLF Central Committee allegedly ousted Misuari in absentia on February 10, 2014, a move supported by the OIC. The MNLF Central Committee then elected Abul Khayr Alonto as chairman.⁴⁷

MILF-Philippine government talks on the proposed Bangsamoro progressed, particularly in 2015 with the introduction into the Philippine Congress of the Basic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BLBAR), another name for the BBL. There was continual disagreement among the MNLF factions on how to react to improving government-MILF cooperation. Some leaders within the MNLF – including Misuari and Habib Mujahab Hashim, chair of an MNLF faction called the MNLF-Islamic Command Council (MNLF-ICC) – spoke out against the peace process. Misuari originally boycotted talks in support of the original 1976 agreement forming the ARMM.⁴⁸ Other MNLF leaders – such as Sema and Abul Khayr Alonto – urged support for the proposed Bangsamoro. Though the MILF-Philippine government negotiations largely excluded the MNLF, various MNLF members appeared before the Philippine Congress in order to express their opposition or support.⁴⁹

On July 24, 2018, the Philippine House of Representatives passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), the final name of the former BBL.⁵⁰ A Muslim regional entity was created in Mindanao, and MILF representatives at the signing of the bill declared their support. MILF leader Ebrahim declared that 30,000-40,000 fighters would be decommissioned.⁵¹ Misuari and Hashim's factions of the MNLF remained opposed to the BOL. Instead, they pushed the government to honor the 1996 ARMM agreement and place Misuari in the position of governor of the autonomous region.⁵² In March 2019 during a meeting with President Duterte, Misuari allegedly threatened to go to war with the government if the Moros were not given their own form of federal system and advocated for the formation of a panel where the MNLF could negotiate with the Duterte government.⁵³

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

The MNLF long operated as a unified, centralized organization under Nur Misuari's leadership. However, the group has factionalized and weakened over time, especially after the 1996 agreement. Today, the MNLF consists of various factions headed by different leaders. These leaders sometimes cooperate with each other and sometimes express antithetical opinions and goals, especially regarding the MILF-Philippine government talks and the proposed Bangsamoro region. There are conflicting reports on who serves as the MNLF's chairman. The Philippine government, the OIC, separate MNLF factions, and the media name multiple individuals as the organization's chairman.⁵⁴

Nur Misuari (1972 to Present): Misuari is the MNLF's founding chairman and, as of 2019, leads one of the organization's current factions.⁵⁵ During his term as ARMM governor from 1996 to 2001, Misuari was heavily criticized by government officials and MNLF members for political and financial mismanagement. These disagreements led to the formation of anti-Misuari factions like Muslimin Sema's Executive Council of 15 (EC-15).⁵⁶ After the 2013 Zamboanga City Crisis and warrant for his arrest, Misuari went into hiding. However, he continued to hold an influential position among some of the factions, three of which chose him in 2014 as their representative for any future talks with the government. Misuari strongly opposed MILF-Philippine government talks.⁵⁷ In the lead-up to the passage of the BBL, however, Misuari met with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and took a more public role. He opposed the elimination of the ARMM as a framework for Moro autonomy in the country's south and insisted that he be made governor of the autonomous region.⁵⁸

Dimas Pundato (1982 to 1985): Pundato established an MNLF faction called the Moro National Liberation Front-Reformist Group (MNLF-RG) in 1982, after Misuari refused to enact his reform proposals. While the MNLF under Misuari demanded independence, Pundato and his MNLF-RG supporters demanded autonomy instead. Supported by Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, Pundato ultimately wanted to create a Shariah-based society in the southern Philippines. The MNLF-RG was headquartered in Malaysia and seems to have been short-lived, although there is little information on the group or its founder.⁵⁹

Muslimin Sema (2001 to Present): Sema served as the MNLF's secretary general before he left the group to over dissatisfaction with Misuari's policies. Sema led an anti-Misuari faction called the Executive Council of 15 (EC-15), which was established by fifteen dissatisfied MNLF members in 2001. The EC-15 emerged as an MNLF faction rather than an independent group. For an unknown period of time, the Philippine government formally recognized the EC-15 – sometimes called the Council of 15 or the Central Committee – as the official leadership of the MNLF. Later, Sema served as the mayor of Cotabato City from 2010-2013.⁶⁰ In 2017, Sema stepped down as the chairman of the EC-15.⁶¹

Hatimil Hassan (2001 to Present): Hassan was a leading figure within the Executive Council of 15 (EC-15), an anti-Misuari faction of the MNLF. Although he was sometimes identified as the EC-15's main leader, he was generally considered only its nominal leader, as real power reportedly resided with Muslimin Sema. Following Sema's departure as chair of the EC-15 in 2017, it is unclear if Hassan has taken on more of a leadership role in the faction. Before helping form the EC-15, Hassan previously served as the MNLF's vice chairman.⁶² In March of 2019, Hassan was elected as the deputy speaker of the Bangsamoro Parliament.⁶³

Abul Khayr Alonto (2014 to Present): Alonto was generally recognized as the MNLF's official chairman after the Misuari faction's attack in Zamboanga City in 2013. The MNLF Central Committee allegedly ousted Misuari on February 10, 2014, a move supported by the OIC, and elected Alonto as chairman.⁶⁴ Alonto previously served as the MNLF's first vice chairman before leaving the

organization for a time in 1978 because of opposition to Misuari's policies.⁶⁵ In 2016, Alonto was named Chair and Secretary of the Mindanao Development Authority, a position he still held as of 2019.⁶⁶

Habib Mujahab Hashim (Unknown to Present): Hashim currently leads the MNLF's Islamic Command Council (MNLF-ICC), which emerged as a faction of the MNLF in the late 1980s.⁶⁷ Hashim was the MNLF's head negotiator with the government between 1986 and 1987. In the early 2000s, he served in government offices dealing with Moro affairs. Hashim has strongly opposed MILF-Philippine government peace talks and instead insisted on the proper implementation of the 1996 agreement.⁶⁸ As of 2019, further activity by Hashim is unknown, but he likely still leads the MNLF-ICC. His last activity as chair of the group was in 2018.⁶⁹

Hadja Bainon Karon (Unknown to Present): Karon is the long-time chair of the MNLF's Women's Committee. She also served as the ARMM's acting vice governor in the late 2000s or early 2010s. Karon has expressed support for the MILF-Philippine government peace negotiations.⁷⁰ As of 2019, she is currently a member of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) and a chair of the Regional Commission on Bangsamoro Women (RCWB).⁷¹

Alvarez Isnaji (Unknown to Unknown): Around the 1990s or early 2000s, Isnaji established the Isnaji Group, a faction within the MNLF. There is little information regarding this group, which may have been disbanded in 2001. Previously, Isnaji held a high-ranking military position in the MNLF. In 2008, he was arrested for his alleged role in a kidnapping while serving as mayor of Indanan.⁷² As of 2019, further activity by Isnaji is unknown.

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

There is little information on the MNLF's current strength, especially since many members integrated into Philippine society after 1996. Additionally, because the MNLF has fractured into several different factions, it is difficult to estimate the group's current total size.

- 1975: 30,000 (Dictionary of Terrorism)⁷³
- 1994: 14,000 (Armed Forces of the Philippines)⁷⁴
- 1996: 17,700 (Armed Forces of the Philippines)⁷⁵

D. RESOURCES

From its beginnings in the 1970s, the MNLF received significant financial support from foreign actors that backed the Moro separatist struggle, including Libya, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Foreign Islamic government agencies, foundations, charities, and businesses also contributed funds to the MNLF. Within the Philippines, the MNLF depended on zakat, or alms, that included money and food.⁷⁶

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the MNLF acquired its weapons from corrupt government officers, the black market, looting after battles, and Libyan shipments. Many MNLF members also relied on their own weapons. The MNLF's arms have included assault rifles, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenade

launchers. The MNLF has also reportedly used landmines in the past, specifically against the Armed Forces of the Philippines.⁷⁷

After the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, the MNLF received funding and support from the Philippine government because of its role in leading the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Additionally, some MNLF members who integrated into Philippine society chose to surrender some of their weapons through a buy-back program called Balik-BARIL (Return Gun). However, the Balik-BARIL program was generally unsuccessful in reducing the MNLF's stockpile, receiving only 4,874 firearms of mostly low quality.⁷⁸

There is little information on the MNLF's current resources, especially since many members integrated into Philippine society after 1996. Additionally, because the MNLF has fractured into several different factions, it is difficult to estimate total resource levels or fundraising and weapons acquisition activities.

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Although officially founded in Malaysia in 1972, the MNLF has always operated in the Philippines, specifically in the southern Mindanao region.⁷⁹

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

The MNLF uses nationalist rhetoric to call for an independent state in the Southern Philippines. Its 1974 manifesto discusses the Moro people as a nation based more on a shared homeland in the southern Philippines and oppressed by the central government, rather than a group characterized by a common religion. While the group has not emphasized an Islamic agenda, the MNLF claims to represent Filipino Muslims. It made a few references in its manifesto to defending Islam and has historically sought Islamic supporters like the OIC. It enjoys the OIC's official recognition.⁸⁰

The MNLF initially sought a fully independent state for the Moros, but its leadership accepted an autonomy arrangement in the 1996 Final Peace Agreement.⁸¹ Currently, the MNLF is divided in its aims. Some factions – led by Sema and Alonto – have supported the MILF-Philippine agreement and the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), while other factions – led by Misuari and Hashim – have voiced opposition and insisted upon full implementation of the 1996 agreement.⁸²

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing on and off for two decades, the MNLF engaged in peace talks with the Philippine government, then led by President Ferdinand Marcos. The OIC and Libya facilitated these talks, with the former urging the Philippine government to negotiate and the latter hosting the negotiations that culminated in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement.⁸³

The next significant round of talks began in 1992, when Philippine President Fidel Ramos restarted peace negotiations with the MNLF. As before, various international actors mediated the talks, including the OIC, the Libyan government of Muammar el-Qaddafi, and the Indonesian government of Suharto. The Philippine government and the MNLF signed Statements of Understanding and Interim Agreements

between 1992 and 1996. These negotiation efforts culminated in the Final Peace Agreement – also called the Jakarta Peace Agreement – that was signed by the Philippine government, the MNLF, and the OIC on September 2, 1996. The 1996 agreement officially ended the MNLF’s fight against the government. It designated a Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD) in the southern Philippines, which would be the focus of special development and investment efforts for three years. The agreement also expanded the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and outlined its new governance structures. In addition to these territorial provisions, the agreement called for the integration of MNLF members into the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. These stipulations were to be implemented across two phases.⁸⁴

The 1996 agreement drove the MNLF to become more integrated with the Philippine political system. The MNLF officially allied itself with Lakas (Strength), the political party of then-President Ramos. Drawing on these political connections, MNLF leader Misuari easily won election as the ARMM’s regional governor about a week after the 1996 agreement’s signing. The political alliance also enabled other MNLF members to run for elected office.⁸⁵ Some MNLF members entered the ARMM government or the council overseeing the SZOPAD’s administration.⁸⁶ MNLF members held the ARMM governorship from 1996 to 2005.⁸⁷ In March of 2019, MNLF leader Hatimil Hassan was elected as the deputy speaker of the Bangsamoro Parliament.⁸⁸

The MILF-Philippine government peace talks, culminating with the signing of the BOL in July 2018, largely excluded the MNLF. Many MNLF members have opposed the ongoing MILF-Philippine government peace talks, insisting that the 1996 Final Peace Agreement already resolved the question of the status of Muslims in the Philippines. MNLF leaders, including Habib Mujahab Hashim and Muslimin Sema, have spoken in front of the Philippine Congress to express their support for or opposition to the proposed Bangsamoro region.⁸⁹

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

The MNLF has historically depended on armed struggle and government negotiations to achieve its aim of an independent state or autonomous region for Filipino Muslims. Throughout the 1970s, the MNLF fought the Philippine government and armed Christian groups. The MNLF’s militant activity began with attacks against government targets in Marawi City after then-President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in September 1972. Although the MNLF had some capacity to engage in conventional warfare, a massive military operation launched by the Armed Forces of the Philippines in 1973 forced the group to turn to guerrilla tactics with support from Libya and Malaysia.⁹⁰ MNLF negotiations with the government began in the mid-1970s and continued for two decades, interspersed with violence. The MNLF often renewed its attacks against the government when it was dissatisfied with the results or implementation of peace agreements. For example, such violence occurred after the 1977 referendum on autonomy in the southern Philippines. The MNLF’s attacks have mostly involved firefights with government troops. The MNLF conducted scattered kidnappings, boat and airplane hijackings, and attacks on civilians in the 1970s.⁹¹ However, the group has generally focused on targeting government troops rather than civilians. The MNLF has used both guerrilla tactics and conventional warfare effectively.⁹²

The 1996 Final Peace Agreement formally ended the MNLF’s armed struggle but did not completely cease the MNLF’s use of violence. Most notably, Misuari led his faction in two significant violent campaigns in 2001 and 2013. In 2001, Misuari’s followers launched a major attack against government troops. In the 2013 attack, MNLF members entered Zamboanga City, took hostages, and fought government forces. Violent activity by other MNLF factions (i.e., those factions not led by Misuari) has been less prominent.⁹³

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

The MNLF's militant activity is not always well-documented. In particular, there is little information on specific attacks and battles between 1977 and 2001. Although the MNLF and the Philippine government were engaged in sporadic peace talks, the group continued to mount attacks and use violence to achieve its goals.

October 21, 1972: MNLF operatives launched an attack on various targets in Marawi City, including the Philippine Constabulary, a government radio station, and a state university. This attack was conducted in response to then-President Ferdinand Marcos' declaration of martial law. It is generally considered the beginning of the MNLF's armed uprising against the Philippine state (unknown killed, unknown wounded).⁹⁴

February 7, 1974: The MNLF entered Jolo, the capital of Sulu, and reportedly tried to declare Mindanao's independence for the first time. The group allegedly attacked Jolo and held it for days before the Philippine military retook the city. The Battle of Jolo devastated the city, although reports differ over whether the MNLF or government forces were mostly responsible for the destruction (unknown killed, unknown wounded).⁹⁵

October 10, 1977: A MNLF commander invited a Philippine military general to a market in Patikul under the pretense of a ceasefire meeting. MNLF forces then ambushed the general and his men (34 killed, unknown wounded).⁹⁶

November 19, 2001: Misuari's followers attacked multiple Philippine military camps on the island of Jolo, allegedly to undermine ARMM elections in which Misuari was expected to lose. (111+ killed, unknown wounded).⁹⁷

September 9, 2013: Forces from Nur Misuari's MNLF faction entered Zamboanga City, attacking government forces and ultimately taking about 300 civilian hostages. Fighting lasted until September 28 (6+ killed, 24 wounded).⁹⁸

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

The MNLF is not designated as a terrorist organization by the United States or the European Union.⁹⁹

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In the 1970s, the MNLF emerged as the leading player in the Moro separatist movement. In 1975, the Philippine government began negotiating with the MNLF for the first time. However, the MNLF grew less popular due to the 1996 Final Peace Agreement and the growing perception that Nur Misuari was committed more to his own political gain rather than to championing Moro welfare. With the MNLF's decline, the MILF became the leading organization seeking Moro independence or autonomy. The almost decade-long MILF-Philippine government negotiations have further marginalized the MNLF.¹⁰⁰

Historically, the MNLF's strongest support has come from Muslim tribes based in western Mindanao, namely the Tausug, Sama, and Yakan. The MNLF has also enjoyed substantial support from the Maguindanao and Maranao tribes based in central Mindanao.¹⁰¹ The fracturing of the MNLF along tribal lines, however, has eroded its support base.¹⁰²

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

The MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) – the most significant splinter group to break away from the MNLF – have historically competed for resources, support, and political legitimacy since the MILF splintered in 1977. The MILF's rise within the Moro separatist movement coincided with the MNLF's decline, following the MNLF's 1996 Final Peace Agreement with the Philippine government, which the MILF strongly opposed.¹⁰³ In recent years, the MNLF's factions have adopted different attitudes toward the MILF. Sema's Executive Council of 15 (EC-15) supported the MILF-Philippine government peace talks and maintained friendly relations with the MILF. In contrast, Misuari and his faction have resented the MILF and sought to undermine the negotiation process.¹⁰⁴

The MNLF has formally condemned the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which is listed by the United States and the United Nations as a terrorist organization. The MNLF has cooperated with the Philippine military to oppose the ASG. However, at the local level, relationships between MNLF and ASG commanders have sometimes resulted in alliances against the Philippine military.¹⁰⁵

D. STATE SPONSORS & EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Even before its formal establishment, the MNLF benefited from the influence of foreign actors, especially Malaysia. Beginning in 1969, the Malaysian government supplied training and weapons to Filipino Muslims, some of whom would later become MNLF members. MNLF leader Nur Misuari was one of those Malaysian-trained members. The group's connections to Malaysia are also apparent in the fact that the MNLF was officially formed on the Malaysian island of Pulau Pangkor in 1972.¹⁰⁶

After its establishment, the MNLF also secured financial support and military training from Libya, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and other foreign sources.¹⁰⁷ From 1972 to 1975, Libya and the OIC provided approximately \$35 million to the MNLF, including arms and equipment that were funneled to the group through Malaysia. In the mid-1970s, Libya became the major training site for MNLF members. Syria, Pakistan, and the Palestine Liberation Organization also trained MNLF members beginning in the 1980s.¹⁰⁸ In 1975, The OIC officially recognized the MNLF as the representative of Filipino Muslims, and the MNLF has continued to trumpet its status as an OIC non-state observer to emphasize its legitimacy.¹⁰⁹ Until the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, the OIC annually supplied \$1 million to the MNLF.¹¹⁰

The OIC also played a pivotal role in the MNLF-Philippine government negotiations leading up to the 1996 Final Peace Agreement, and it was a signatory to the official document.¹¹¹ More recently, the OIC has also supported the MILF in its negotiations with the Philippine government. The MILF-Philippine government talks, and eventual signing of the BOL, marginalized the MNLF. The OIC has advocated a peace process open to all stakeholders including the MNLF, which it still formally recognizes.¹¹²

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