



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Philippines: Ex-guerrillas face each other in their first elections



A day before the first parliamentary elections in Bangsamoro, a Muslim-majority autonomous region in the southern Philippines, **Philippine peace adviser** Mel Senen Sarmiento said the vote would mark the end of the political phase of the peace process.

The elections end the seven-year term of the appointed administration and pave the way for a government that will depend on the support of the regional parliament, but the political calendar has overtaken the security part of the agreement: the final phase of demobilising approximately 14,000 fighters of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, known by its acronym MILF, and the decommissioning of 2,450 declared weapons have not yet been implemented.

Nearly **2.4 million voters** will go to the polls on 14 September in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, in the southern Philippines.

For the first time, they will elect a regular parliament in the areas created under the 2014 peace accord, under which the MILF accepted autonomy within the Philippine state.

The future Chief Minister – effectively the Prime Minister of the Bangsamoro autonomous government – will not be directly elected by citizens but by the majority in the regional parliament formed after the election, while the former political and military leadership of the rebel movement enters the race divided between rival parties.

A peaceful vote would be a significant achievement, but most of the political risk will only emerge during the government negotiations.

Acceptance of the results will show whether those who gained authority during the long armed conflict accept parliament as the sole forum for decisions on the government, the budget and the implementation of the remaining commitments under the peace agreement.

From appointed administration to electoral responsibility

The Bangsamoro was established following the **Comprehensive Agreement** on the Bangsamoro, signed by the Philippine government and the MILF in March 2014.

The movement dropped its demand for an independent Muslim state, and Manila accepted a broader autonomous area with a parliamentary system and greater fiscal powers.

In 2018, the **Philippine parliament** passed a law defining the territory, institutions, jurisdictions and financing of the autonomous Bangsamoro.

Following the law's approval in a plebiscite in early 2019, the **Bangsamoro Transition Authority** was established in March.

The members of the transitional administration were appointed by the President of the Philippines, with the MILF taking the lead role.

The signatories of the agreement were thus given time to establish ministries, pass regional regulations and prepare an electoral system, but their mandate did not derive from a direct decision by the region's residents.

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Elections have been repeatedly postponed due to the pandemic, changes in the **region's territorial composition** and court rulings on constituencies, so the 14 September vote will, for the first time, determine who has the right to govern the Bangsamoro.

The transitional administration will remain in office after the polls have closed, since the mandate of the **elected deputies** begins on 30

October.

The Bangsamoro parliament has 80 seats. Forty seats are allocated to parties according to their percentage of votes across the entire region, while each of the 32 constituencies elects one deputy.

Of the remaining eight seats, two are reserved for non-Muslim indigenous peoples and two for settler communities. Women, young people, traditional chiefs and ulema, or Muslim religious teachers, each have one representative.

The Prime Minister is elected by a majority of all members of parliament, which requires negotiations between parties and does not have to reflect the results in individual constituencies.

In a region where local clans, family ties and territorial control have long determined access to power, a proportional share system should strengthen regional parties and programmes, though its actual performance will depend on how the initial majority is formed.

The MILF enters the campaign divided

The United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP) remains the official political organisation of the MILF. It is led by Ahod "Al Haj Murad" Ebrahim, President of the movement and Chief Minister of the transitional government from 2019 to March 2025.

Before the elections, Murad reiterated that only the UBJP represents the MILF, but that decision no longer binds the movement's former command leadership in its entirety.

His main rival, Abdulraof "Sammy Gambar" Macacua, now leads the Bangsamoro Federalist Party (BFP).

Macacua became Interim Chief Minister in March 2025, having previously served as Chief

of Staff of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, the armed wing of the MILF.

The movement's Central Committee suspended him from his military post in June 2026 and formally dismissed him, along with 40 other officers, in September.

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The **BFP** was founded in spring 2026 with the support of senior officials and former MILF commanders. By the end of May, almost 2,000 members of the movement had joined the party, giving Macacua a significant organisational base among former fighters.

His conflict with Murad may therefore affect both the formation of the regional government and the completion of demobilisation.

Some former fighters and officials have joined other parties, so the organisation that maintained a unified political and military hierarchy during the conflict is entering its first elections with two former soldiers heading the largest rival blocs.

Murad enters the campaign as President of the MILF and the man who oversaw most of the institutional transition. Macacua holds the position of Interim Chief Minister and has ties to parts of the former military structure that have gone over to the BFP.

Their conflict concerns control of the future government, allocation of the regional budget, the position of former commanders, and the right to speak politically on behalf of the movement that signed the peace agreement with Manila.

Fourteen thousand fighters waiting for final demobilisation

The **peace agreement** calls for the

demobilisation of approximately 40,000 members of the MILF and the handover of their weapons to an independent commission.

Manila has pledged to help ex-combatants find jobs and sources of income, and has converted six areas that served as major MILF bases during the insurgency into civilian communities with infrastructure and public services.

The agreement also requires the disbandment of private armed groups still operating in the Bangsamoro. A total of 26,145 members of the MILF went through the first three stages of the official procedure.

The Philippine government rejects the assessment that it has not fulfilled its obligations

In July 2025, the **movement** postponed the final phase, planned for approximately 14,000 people, arguing that Manila had not provided all the agreed economic aid to previously demobilised fighters or made sufficient progress in disbanding private armies linked to local political families.

The Philippine government rejects the assessment that it has not fulfilled its obligations and points to financial aid, employment and development programmes, as well as substantial transfers to the regional government.

The two sides evaluate implementation of the agreement differently. Manila highlights earmarked funds, employment programmes and aid to the regional government, while ex-combatants expect regular income, access to land, properly functioning public services and the rebuilding of communities devastated by decades of conflict.

Former rebel commanders are also guarding the elections

More than **20,000 police officers and soldiers**

have been deployed to secure the vote, and the elections will be **monitored** by 108 international observers from 16 organisations and delegations, including representatives of Japan, Australia, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the election organisations ANFREL and NDI.

On 11 September, representatives of the Philippine military, police and government met commanders of the **armed wing of the MILF** and agreed on direct information exchange and a joint response to incidents during the elections.

Such contacts during the peace process have made it possible to resolve arrests, police operations and local conflicts quickly, before they provoke an armed response from the MILF.

A large-scale return to war between the MILF and Manila is currently less likely than local conflicts

The need for former rebel commanders to participate in maintaining order shows how heavily state institutions still depend on the MILF's military structures.

The movement helps secure elections in which its former comrades and current party rivals compete for power, so without cooperation with that organisation the police and army still cannot reliably maintain peace throughout the region.

A large-scale return to war between the MILF and Manila is currently less likely than local conflicts, voter intimidation and clashes between political families or factions that include people with combat experience and ready access to weapons.

Joint truce commissions and direct communication with commanders have repeatedly curbed clashes with state forces, while local rivalries remain scattered and harder to control through a single political agreement.

Clans did not disappear with the change of system

Thirteen regional parties are taking part in the elections, including organisations that emerged from the MILF and coalitions linked to powerful governors and family networks.

The proportional distribution of the 40 seats forces parties to seek support across Bangsamoro, while the 32 single-member constituencies preserve the advantage of candidates who already have local organisations, money and influential relatives.



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Observers from the **Asian Network for Free Elections** and the US National Democratic Institute judged that the election administration had prepared thoroughly for the vote.

At the same time, they warned of local violence, intimidation of voters, pressure from clans and local leaders on entire communities to vote for certain candidates, large disparities in the money available to parties and a poor understanding of the new parliamentary system.

The clans will retain influence in the new parliament, but regional parties will have to connect votes from different parts of Bangsamoro and publicly defend the coalitions they form.

If the parliamentary majority is reduced to an exchange of positions, budget funds and local influence, changing the electoral system will not change the manner of governance.

Securing a majority will be harder than simply winning the vote

A coalition government currently appears more likely than a single-party majority, although the available opinion polls are not reliable enough to rule out a landslide victory for one of the main blocs.

Negotiations over the election of the Prime Minister could prove more fraught than election day itself, especially if Murad's UBJP and Macacua's BFP win a similar number of mandates.

All significant factions have invested political capital in autonomous institutions, while the regional budget, public offices and ties to the central government provide strong incentives to keep the conflict within parliament.

The remaining weapons, however, increase the cost of any crisis over the results, the composition of the government or the implementation of the peace agreement, especially in environments where party rivalries overlap with old command structures and family ties.

The fragmentation of the former movement and the large number of regional parties make a coalition government the most likely outcome

Immediately after the announcement of the results, the defeated parties will have to decide whether to join the opposition or challenge the distribution of mandates.

Accepting an opposition role would create scope for continued talks on Manila's final

demobilisation and economic obligations, while reliance on former command ties would prolong the situation in which elected government and military authority exist side by side.

The 14 September vote will end the MILF's right to govern the Bangsamoro based solely on its status as signatory to the peace agreement.

From 30 October, the Bangsamoro will for the first time be governed by an administration formed through the election, rather than by the leadership assembled under the agreement between Manila and the MILF.

The fragmentation of the former movement and the large number of regional parties make a coalition government the most likely outcome, so after the vote there will be difficult negotiations over the election of the Prime Minister, control of the budget and the allocation of key departments.

If the regional parties can reach a sustainable agreement on their own, the peace accord will finally give way to regular parliamentary politics as the basis of government in the Bangsamoro.