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“COEXISTENCE CEASEFIRE” IN MINDANAO

by *Malin Åkebo*

In the peace and conflict literature, a ceasefire is often conceived as an event or an outcome of an armed conflict. In this paper, I argue that we can gain a better understanding of ceasefires by approaching them as dynamic processes of change and by exploring patterns of interactions and changing relationships in the context of ceasefire. I use this approach in a case study of the ceasefire between the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Mindanao. I suggest that the Mindanao ceasefire can be conceptualized as a form of “coexistence ceasefire,” and I trace the development of the particular ceasefire structure and interactions to features of the armed conflict, including its territorial dimension and the presence of multiple sources of violence. The paper contributes a new and more nuanced way of studying ceasefires that provides a better understanding of their characteristics and dynamics and of how they shape and in turn are shaped by the broader conflict landscape.

INTRODUCTION

On January 25, 2015, the government of the Philippines sanctioned a raid for a wanted international terrorist in Mamasapano in the Philippines’ southernmost province of Mindanao. The operation was successful in capturing and killing the terrorist sought, but by the time the Philippine National Police’s Special Action Forces (SAF) withdrew from the area, the operation ended up in a fire fight between the SAF and the armed separatist group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). At that time, the Philippine government and the MILF had observed a ceasefire for almost two decades, and a comprehensive peace accord had been signed less than a year earlier, in 2014. The encounter in Mamasapano resulted in the death of forty-four members of the SAF, seventeen Moro fighters, and at least five civilians.² This

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was the first deadly skirmish since 2012, and the most serious in terms of casualties since a temporary collapse of the ceasefire in 2008.

The political fallout of the Mamasapano incident proved to be severe; criticism of the peace process immediately started to gain traction across the Philippine polity, and as a result, the scheduled adoption of a new law on the governing of Mindanao was immediately put on hold and a revised version of the same law failed to pass Congress the following year. While the government and the MILF both reaffirmed their commitment to peace, the peace process was more or less put on hold for years, and many people have described Mamasapano as the turning point that sparked this negative development.

Still, despite these setbacks in the peace process, the ceasefire held and it continued to be widely praised as a success. Thus, while the Mamasapano incident indeed put the long-lasting ceasefire to the test, ultimately it did pass this test; violence did not re-erupt; trust was rather quickly restored both on the ground and between the leaderships of the warring parties, and the ceasefire bodies continued to function remarkably smoothly.³

Considering that ceasefire agreements are part of most peace processes and that multiple ceasefires are commonly reached along a conflict trajectory,⁴ the amount of research devoted to ceasefires is relatively scarce. In what is often held to be the seminal work on ceasefires, Virginia Page Fortna analyzes ceasefires in interstate armed conflicts from 1945 to the early 1990s with the objective of explaining why some ceasefires endure while others do not (i.e., whether or not war resumes).⁵ She particularly emphasizes the quality of agreements and external third parties as important factors in explaining why some ceasefires prove to be respected by the warring parties. Additional studies have along a similar line striven to identify explanatory factors in ceasefires. For example, in a study of ceasefires in the Syrian conflict setting, Dogukan Cansin Karakus and Isak Svensson conclude that insider mediators have been the most important factor in this conflict setting, characterized by few formal written agreements and often with no direct connection to the process of elite peace negotiations.⁶

Some scholars have taken a more comprehensive approach to analyzing ceasefires in relation to the dynamics of ongoing conflicts and peace processes. This has often been done through in-depth case studies aiming to capture the nature and effects of ceasefires, including Åshild Kolås' study of the Naga ceasefire in India,⁷ Christopher Clapham's study of Rwanda,⁸ Zaw Oo and Win Min's work on Burma,⁹

and Malin Åkebo’s comparative study of ceasefires in Aceh and Sri Lanka.¹⁰ These studies have, among other things, highlighted the potentially negative consequences of ceasefires on conflict dynamics, hence questioning the commonly held assumption in the literature that ceasefire agreements “pave the way to peace.” Thus, previous studies suggest that ceasefires can influence conflicts and peace processes in profoundly different ways. This suggests that there is great diversity in terms of ceasefires and of how they operate and exert influence in different conflict settings. To nuance and advance our understanding of ceasefires, this calls for analyses to explore these diverse ceasefire characteristics as well as how they influence and in turn are influenced by features of the conflict setting.

This paper aims to make a contribution to the literature on ceasefires by providing a new and more nuanced way of approaching ceasefires, which gives us a better understanding of their characteristics, dynamics, and implications. In doing this, the paper devotes empirical attention to a case study of the ceasefire between the government of the Philippines and the MILF in Mindanao. While empirical insights often point to the temporary and fragile nature of many ceasefires, other ceasefires, including the one in Mindanao, deviate from these patterns. This ceasefire thus represents a case where there has been ceasefire for a long period of time, which I argue makes it ideal for an in-depth exploration and analysis of how ceasefires operate and change over time and for tracing long-term developments linked to a ceasefire.

By exploring patterns of interactions and changes in relationships related to the ceasefire, I suggest that the ceasefire in Mindanao can be conceptualized as a type of “coexistence ceasefire.” The concept of coexistence captures imperative features of the Mindanao ceasefire, including high levels of interparty interactions and cooperation and territorial coexistence. This concept highlights the particular ceasefire characteristics by considering aspects related to the ceasefire structure and by situating the ceasefire within the broader conflict landscape, including its territorial features and the presence of multiple armed elements and sources of violence in the region. The study shows that, through continuous joint engagement within the ceasefire structure, the parties have over time developed a coexistence relationship based on cooperation on the resolution of conflicts and mutual respect and trust. These patterns have been produced in the context of a territorial setup and conflict landscape—characterized by the presence of

numerous armed groups and sources of violence in addition to the armed conflict involving the government and the MILF—that has prompted high degrees of ceasefire interaction and security cooperation and coordination between the government and the MILF. By broadening the scope of analysis, the study at the same time also points to the limitations of a ceasefire in terms of contributing to conflict transformation and underscores the fact that ceasefires are inherently volatile. Both the conflict and the peace process remain in limbo as multiple partial agreements are fused together within the prolonged ceasefire, holding Mindanao in a state of “no war, no peace.”¹¹ This context has over time been conducive to the creation of additional armed groups in the area, posing further challenges for a peace process between the government and the MILF to contribute to broader conflict transformation.

CEASEFIRES IN THE LITERATURE

While ceasefire agreements are part of most peace processes, there is no generally accepted definition of the concept in the literature; rather, the definition chosen tends to depend on the objectives of the specific study. Some treat ceasefires as a conflict *outcome*, or a type of war termination alongside victories and peace accords that put an end to a war.¹² Others have found such an approach wanting, as it fails to capture aborted or “unsuccessful” ceasefires.¹³ Ceasefires are thus at other times treated as events of deal-making or of a cessation of violence based on the level of battle-related casualties. Furthermore, in some studies, ceasefires are considered as components of peace agreements in a more general sense. From this perspective, Christine Bell makes a distinction between pre-negotiation agreements, framework/substantive agreements, and implementation agreements and views the ceasefire as a component that can be included in any of these agreements settled at different stages of a peace process.¹⁴

This study approaches ceasefires as *agreements* between conflicting parties with the stated aim of changing patterns of interactions and stopping the fighting, at least temporarily. An important element of this definition is thus the *relational* dimension of ceasefires. The relational focus draws attention to the ceasefire as a mutual engagement and considering changing patterns of interactions and relationships linked to the ceasefire.¹⁵ Furthermore, as this suggests, it is important to examine the ceasefire as a *process* of multiple

interactions rather than treating it as an event or outcome to a conflict. In this framework, ceasefires are part of longer-term processes of change, which implies events and periods of ceasefire breakdowns are part of more long-term dynamics.

The Nature of Ceasefire Agreements

Ceasefire agreements come in many forms. Some ceasefires constitute agreements in their own right, while others are part of substantive peace accords. Furthermore, while some ceasefires are directly linked to the progression of a peace negotiation process, for example, by constituting a prerequisite for engagement in dialogue, others lack such a connection, as can be illustrated by the numerous local ceasefires settled by different groups in Syria.¹⁶ While many ceasefires are written documents, they can also be less formalized oral undertakings. For instance, a majority of ceasefires reached in Myanmar in the 1990s were oral agreements settled between local military commanders and ceasefire groups.¹⁷

There can be several different motivations behind conflicting parties engaging in a ceasefire, which is important to bear in mind for understanding the nature of the agreement. Ceasefires can be introduced mainly for tactical reasons, to find space to recruit and rearm, for example, when one or other party is exposed to military pressure due to battlefield fatigue, or to advance positions before entering into negotiations.¹⁸ A decision to engage in a ceasefire can also be motivated by an ambition to gain increased recognition and legitimacy as an actor; especially for a nonstate actor with the goal of independence, entering a formal agreement with a state actor can be seen as a strategy to advance one's status and position as a legitimate actor on the international stage. Furthermore, if a conflict party finds it more promising to pursue its aspirations through political rather than military means, a ceasefire can be seen as a measure to show good will and trustworthiness before entering a negotiation process. In that case, reciprocation of the same gesture can be considered a prerequisite for engaging in such a dialogue process. Moreover, the decision to initiate a ceasefire agreement may be incentive-driven and motivated, for example, by an offer of economic or other types of resources upon participation in a ceasefire. The decision can also be more directly forced upon one party by external parties, such as states or other actors with stakes in the conflict, in a more or less coercive manner.

While most ceasefire agreements are temporary and short-lived, some outlast the conditions that initially motivated the parties to agree to a ceasefire. The changed conditions may not be what drive one or more parties to stay committed. Attitudes and relationships might change over time, as they are shaped both by the experience of engaging in a ceasefire as well as by developments external to the ceasefire process. Furthermore, the continuation of a ceasefire is not necessarily a reflection of “genuine” commitment; indeed, some ceasefires linger on although the agreement is repeatedly being violated, because none of the parties want to be the one to opt out, or because they see other benefits in staying committed. It is important to stress that warring parties entering a ceasefire are not monolithic actors; rather, those who make the decision to engage will hold different levels of authority within their own group and diverging degrees of support among its constituencies. This dynamics within these hierarchies will also affect how the ceasefire operates and how it influences the dynamics of the conflict and ongoing peace attempts.¹⁹

The ceasefire between the government of the Philippines and the MILF in Mindanao includes formal written ceasefire accords that are part of a broader peace negotiation process. This case can thus provide insights into these types of ceasefire processes. Since the ceasefire has continued for a long period of time, the case reveals how the motivations for a ceasefire might change over time and how these dynamics unfold. Due to the complex composition of armed groups operating in Mindanao, it also provides insights into how such dynamics influence a ceasefire.

The Content of Ceasefire Agreements and Patterns of Ceasefire Interactions

In essence, a ceasefire includes an agreement to stop the fighting, and generally, it also lays out the rules and procedures for doing so. In this respect, while some ceasefires are very limited in scope, others constitute detailed definitions of prohibited acts of violence and hostility and structures to ensure that the set rules will be obeyed. Prohibited violent and hostile acts can include various forms of direct violence against people or properties and supplying new weapons and re-grouping of forces. It can also include a ban on verbal attacks as we have seen, for example, in the Darfur Peace Agreement of 2006 as well as other forms of provocative behaviors such as raising flags or

going about in uniform. In addition, ceasefires are not always limited to include actions against the other party or parties to the agreement, but can also explicitly state that hostile behavior against civilians is prohibited.²⁰ For example, some ceasefire agreements, such as those in Sudan, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, have prohibited conflict-related sexual violence.²¹

The commitment to refrain from the use of violence and other prohibited acts can be pursued both through means of physical separation and through elements of nonviolent interaction and cooperation. A separation of forces can be stipulated in a more general sense so as to avoid clashes and armed confrontation, or it can be done by stipulating the drawing of territorial demarcation lines to identify areas under the control of the respective parties. Fortna suggests that if a ceasefire line is clearly marked between the parties, it can help maintain the ceasefire.²² However, in intrastate armed conflicts that involve a claim for territorial partition, if the process of separating forces includes demarcation of territories under the control of specific groups, such measure can also have negative implications for conflict dynamics and be seen as a way of consolidating control over claimed territories.²³

In terms of nonviolent interaction and cooperation, the ceasefire agreement can introduce organizational bodies and mechanisms with the objectives of coordinating actions and movements, cooperating on the monitoring of ceasefire implementation, and facilitating dispute resolution. The parties can also take joint measures to cooperate on humanitarian relief and the reconstruction of conflict-affected areas, for example, by introducing mechanisms specifically designed to create space for safe passages. In Aceh, for instance, as part of the ceasefire structure the Indonesian government and GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) introduced a joint committee on humanitarian action to assess the needs of humanitarian assistance and coordinate and guarantee its delivery to the people in Aceh.²⁴ These sorts of organizational structures can be described as forums for the warring parties to interact nonviolently in order to facilitate the implementation of the ceasefire.

The form and content of a ceasefire agreement and the structures introduced to oversee and enforce its implementation will generally be the result of a bargaining process between the parties to the agreement (and possibly third parties), and it can also be influenced by previous agreements and the outcome of these processes.²⁵ In addition, features

of the violent conflict in which the ceasefire is embedded can also be expected to be important in shaping the structure of the ceasefire and how it operates, hence contributing to the generation of particular patterns of ceasefire interactions. This includes such things as the geographical setup which, as discussed above, can shape patterns of separation and interaction. The presence of other armed groups that are not parties to the ceasefire might also create incentives for intensified ceasefire cooperation between the parties to the ceasefire, either in order to allow it to work or to gain other advantages. This suggests that by situating a ceasefire within the broader conflict context, one can gain a better understanding of the diverse characteristics of ceasefires, how they operate in different contexts and how this can be understood.

The government–MILF ceasefire in Mindanao provides an interesting case for analysis along these lines. By considering the structure and patterns of ceasefire interactions that have developed in this conflict setting, the ceasefire in Mindanao can be described as a type of “coexistence ceasefire.” In the context of violent conflicts, the term coexistence usually implies that conflicting parties or groups exist or live together and interact with mutual tolerance and respect, and agree to manage or settle conflicts without using violence.²⁶ Thus, central to this conceptualization is the actors’ physical existence in the same locality with continuous contact and interactions. Furthermore, coexistence does not exclude conflicts, but implies that conflicts are *managed* without resorting to violence. This conceptualization is useful in characterizing the patterns of interactions and relationships that have evolved in the Mindanao ceasefire process. The concept of coexistence also implies a continuity of interactions, thus enabling it to capture the longevity of the Mindanao ceasefire. The government–MILF ceasefire indeed stands out in terms of its duration of active engagement in a ceasefire arrangement, especially for being an intrastate armed conflict, which makes it amenable to analysis of ceasefires as dynamic processes of change.²⁷ Thus far, there is no conceptual apparatus in the literature that describes ceasefires in terms of their characteristics and contextualized within the parties’ patterns of interaction and changes in relationships.²⁸ The concept of “coexistence ceasefire” provides a clearer view of how the ceasefire operates and evolves over time by means of high levels of interparty interactions and cooperation and territorial coexistence.

NOTE ON METHODS

To provide a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and dynamics of ceasefires, I rely on a case study design.²⁹ I selected the case of the ceasefire between the government and the MILF in Mindanao because this long-lasting ceasefire highlights how continuous joint engagement in ceasefire over time generates particular patterns of interactions and relationships, and how features of the conflict landscape contribute to shape this development. As such, it can contribute to the theoretical literature on ceasefires and how they can be understood as processes of long-term change. Furthermore, considering that most ceasefire agreements fail within days or weeks, those that do endure merit further inquiry. In addition, the Mindanao peace process—and the ceasefire agreement in particular—has thus far received comparatively limited attention in the conflict resolution literature, which further justifies a more in-depth examination.

The study builds on written documents and interviews. The written materials include agreement texts, academics publications, reports from INGOs, and newspaper articles. These written materials were important in particular to map events and to portray the broader landscape within which the ceasefire is embedded. I conducted eighteen interviews in Manila and Davao City in Mindanao in 2016 and 2018, including an interview via email correspondence and a telephone interview. I interviewed both people who have been directly involved in the peace process and ceasefire and those who in other ways have good insights into these processes, including representatives of local and international NGOs and academics. The study has also been informed by a number of informal conversations with people with good insights into the conflict and peace process, including academics and members of the civil society.

This study begins with a brief background to the armed conflict and peace processes in Mindanao. Thereafter, I focus attention on the government–MILF ceasefire, starting by introducing its content and structure and by giving an overview of how it has evolved over time. The analysis is then structured in three main sections that have emerged through a dialogue between theoretical knowledge and empirical insights from the case. These sections include nonviolent engagement and cooperation via the ceasefire bodies; territorial coexistence and ceasefire interactions; and ceasefire coordination in the

context of multiple sources of violence. The conclusion situates the ceasefire in relation to the evolution of the peace process.

ARMED CONFLICT AND PEACE PROCESSES IN MINDANAO

The armed conflict between the government of the Philippines and groups striving for self-determination for Muslim Mindanao commenced at the end of the 1960s. The onset of the armed struggle can be traced back to a long history of self-rule for Muslim Mindanao, which was challenged by Spanish and American colonialism³⁰; extensive resettlement programs of Christian Filipinos to Mindanao by the time of the Philippine independence, which turned the majority Muslim population in Mindanao into a minority; land-reform processes that were unfavorable to the nonelite Muslims and the indigenous people in Mindanao; and long-term political and economic marginalization. By the end of the 1970s, the war had resulted in approximately 100,000 casualties.³¹

Parallel processes of war and peace negotiations between the Philippine government and Moro groups in Mindanao had been in progress since the 1970s. At the time of writing, these negotiations have engaged seven different presidential administrations in the Philippines and two Moro groups in particular. By the mid-1970s, the Marcos regime commenced peace talks with the largest armed movement in Mindanao at the time, the Moro Nationalist Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari. These negotiations continued on and off for twenty years under the mediation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (formerly the Organization of the Islamic Conference) and culminated with the signing of the Final Peace Agreement in 1996.³² However, the 1996 peace agreement did not bring an end to violent conflict in Mindanao. The agreement was poorly implemented, and it was not widely supported. In 1977, a group had splintered off from the MNLF under the leadership of Salamat Hashim due to differences in ideology and the importance of religion in the self-determination quest, as well as differences in leadership styles and disagreements over which approach to use in negotiations with the government. This group was formally organized in 1984 as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). While the MNLF emphasized an ethno-nationalist dimension of the struggle, the MILF stressed the central role of Islam in the organization of the future governance of Muslim Mindanao. The demand for independence of each of these groups

versus their acceptance of autonomy within the larger Philippine republic has shifted over the years.³³

Accordingly, the MILF did not support the 1996 government–MNLF peace deal, which led the government to redirect its attention to the MILF. By that time, the MILF had developed into the largest and most influential of the armed groups in Mindanao. The government and the MILF started to engage in low-profile meetings in 1996. These early initiatives marked the starting point for decades of continued government–MILF engagement in peace initiatives in which the ceasefire agreement has been a central component.

It is important to stress that the Mindanao conflict landscape is fragmented and that there are a number of armed elements in the region in addition to ones that have been directly engaged in peace processes with the government (i.e., the MNLF and the MILF). Thus, a ceasefire between the government and the MILF has not implied a cessation of violence in the region more broadly, and, as will be discussed more thoroughly, these features of the conflict landscape have contributed to shape the ceasefire structure and interactions between the government and the MILF and also had impact on the prospects for broader conflict transformation.

THE GOVERNMENT–MILF CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT

Content and Structure

In July 1997, after about a year of government–MILF engagement, the chairmen of the peace panels of each of the parties signed an Agreement for General Cessation of Hostilities (AGCH). The agreement was reached through bilateral negotiations in cities across Mindanao. This ceasefire agreement has continued to be the main reference point for ceasefire in Mindanao for the past two decades, despite shorter periods of ceasefire breakdown. While the agreement in essence determines a general cessation of hostilities between government and MILF forces, it also states that this is done with the end in view of finding “a just and lasting solution” to the conflict.³⁴ The agreement stipulates a number of prohibited hostile and provocative acts that the parties shall refrain from.³⁵ As part of the ceasefire arrangement, the parties were also commissioned to jointly identify areas to be considered as MILF areas, or territories that are recognized as being under the control of the armed movement and considered

“no-go-areas” for the military. Any movement by MILF fighters outside these areas should, furthermore, be coordinated by joint ceasefire bodies to be set up as part of the ceasefire arrangement.³⁶

The agreement also includes the development of an organizational structure with bodies entitled to oversee compliance with the ceasefire, coordinate adherence to its provisions, and resolve conflicts that arise. The main bodies of the ceasefire are the Coordinating Committees for the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCHs), which consist of small groups of people appointed by the two parties.³⁷ These bodies are under the authority of the peace panel chairs to whom they report about developments on the ground. The CCCHs have been part of the ceasefire structure from the beginning and remain active today. In 2002, the parties also agreed to establish a special body to coordinate military and police operations in or near MILF areas. The Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) was eventually set up for this purpose in 2005. The third main body is the International Monitoring Team (IMT), which was established in late 2003 following a breakdown of the ceasefire earlier the same year, and its main team was deployed in October 2004.³⁸ This is a small unarmed team originally with some sixty monitors from Malaysia, Libya, and Brunei, and later including monitors from Japan, Indonesia, and Norway. It is tasked with monitoring the ceasefire agreement and reporting violations directly to the peace panels.

It should be stressed that, in particular, the MILF has continuously insisted on having a peace process based on incrementalism, gradually taking small steps before settling substantive issues, and on irreversibility, meaning an adherence to all agreements with the view that agreements can be extended and improved, but not reversed. As a result, after periods of ceasefire breakdown, the provisions stipulated in the 1997 accord have been reaffirmed (although sometimes as part of a new agreement with additional aspects of a political settlement included), while the ceasefire mechanisms have, at the same time, been adapted and gradually extended and institutionalized.³⁹

Twenty Years of Ceasefire—Collapses and Continuities

Since the establishment of the ceasefire agreement in 1997 until today, the ceasefire has collapsed three times—in 2000, 2003, and 2008.³⁹ However, aside from these three periods of ceasefire collapse, there has been a ceasefire between the government and the MILF for

most of the time since its commencement in 1997. Indeed, in contrast to many protracted armed conflicts in which ceasefires have constituted short periods during the trajectory of a conflict, the Mindanao ceasefire is commonly described by its continuation; in other words, rather than having ongoing war that is being paused by a period of ceasefire, it is commonly said that the ceasefire in Mindanao has been temporarily erupted by periods of ceasefire breakdown. Since the 1997 ceasefire accord still constitutes the basic reference for ceasefire provisions, and since many central organizational bodies have remained despite periods of ceasefire breakdown, I have accordingly treated the government–MILF ceasefire as a long-drawn ceasefire with intermittent breakdowns.⁴⁰ This has also facilitated the analysis of ceasefire as a process of change and taking a long-term perspective.

In the first ceasefire period 1997–2000, the parties established the ground rules for the ceasefire and set up its organizational structure. However, by and large violence continued⁴¹ and culminated in 2000 when the government declared an “all-out-war” and launched extensive military offensives against MILF areas, which led the ceasefire to collapse.⁴² The reinstatement of ceasefire the next year in 2001 came together with a more comprehensive agreement on peace, facilitated by Malaysian mediators. This ceasefire period lasted two years before it collapsed in 2003. This time, the ceasefire broke down with government offensives against MILF strongholds and the breakdown lasted for a few months.

The third ceasefire breakdown in 2008 was, in contrast, the result of an unexpected failure of a memorandum of understanding that was put on hold on the very day of its signing and was deemed unconstitutional soon after. This draft memorandum was the first agreement between the government and the MILF that dealt with core conflict issues and expectations were high that the settlement would bring an end to the violent conflict. The failure to settle the peace deal resulted in the most prolonged suspension of ceasefire since its commencement in 1997.⁴³ One year after its breakdown, the ceasefire was reinstated in 2009. A framework agreement for peace was forged in 2012, and two years later, the parties settled a comprehensive peace accord in 2014. Except for the 2015 Mamasapano ceasefire breach mentioned at the beginning of this paper, since 2012 there have only been two minor misencounters both related to operations against the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)—a splinter group of the MILF—in Maguindanao in 2016.

While progress has been slow in terms of implementing the 2014 peace deal and it is unclear at the time of writing when we will see an “exit” from the ceasefire arrangement, it is noteworthy that the ceasefire agreement and its structure remains active two decades after its first initiation.⁴⁴ Several developments can be suggested as important in explaining this. First, the government basically won the military power struggles associated with the first two ceasefire breakdowns in the early 2000s.⁴⁵ This made the MILF realize that it could not win on the battlefield. At the same time, the different Philippine regimes (or at least factions of them) have recognized the Moro grievances as legitimate and in need of a political solution, which has seemingly motivated the leadership of both parties to support a ceasefire. From the moment peace talks started to make progress on vital conflict issues—first around 2005 and again in 2012—this has further strengthened the political will of both parties to maintain their commitment to the ceasefire. This particular study is less concerned with identifying events that can explain the parties’ continued commitment to ceasefire in Mindanao than with analyzing the ceasefire as a long-term process of change shaped by internal dynamics and the broader conflict landscape. Together, they contribute to shaping ceasefire structures and patterns of interactions best characterized as coexistence ceasefire.

NONVIOLENT ENGAGEMENT AND COOPERATION VIA THE CEASEFIRE BODIES

The ceasefire agreement in Mindanao had at the outset of the ceasefire engagement in 1997 included a structure to facilitate cooperation on shared security issues and nonviolent management of conflicts. The main ceasefire body—the CCCH—is commonly described as the central component for the everyday observance of the ceasefire. Within this forum, the parties communicate and cooperate on a daily basis to respond to incidents, to prevent outbreaks of violence, and to act immediately to put a stop to any fighting that occurs. While at the beginning of the ceasefire engagement in the late 1990s and 2000s, the functioning of the CCCH varied,⁴⁶ the body has, as one interviewee put it, become a kind of “trouble shooter” for a lot of issues that threaten to escalate.⁴⁷ This does not mean that the ceasefire operates smoothly without conflicts; the parties file reports on ceasefire violations against each other frequently, but most are managed within

existing structures. The parties have developed routines for handling ceasefire issues over the years, and a lot of the ceasefire structures thus operate based on “established protocols.”⁴⁸ This development has been facilitated by key persons within these organizational bodies who have been working in the ceasefire structure for a long time, which has enabled institutional knowledge to foster reliable routines.

The consistent participation of people in key positions has fostered trusting personal relationships which Kristian Herbolzheimer, who has been part of the International Contact Group (ICG) to the government–MILF peace process, has credited with preventing escalation of conflict when violence has occurred.⁴⁹ As one interviewee with direct involvement in the peace process explained, “there has to be some friction naturally but not on a personal level.”⁵⁰ It has also been stressed that the ceasefire bodies and in particular the CCCHs include influential people who are trusted and respected within their own parties. Especially when more serious incidents such as firefights occur, it is imperative that the people within the CCCH have the authority to “call someone and make it stop.”⁵¹ This is also aided by support of authorities from each party of the bodies in principle.⁵²

The international monitoring body, the IMT, also works together with the CCCH and provides another platform for interaction, by doing such things as jointly coordinating meetings with the CCCH and parties involved to reduce tension and resolve conflicts.⁵³ In case of a ceasefire violation, the CCCH of one party writes a letter of protest to the other party with a copy to the IMT. If not resolved, the IMT will organize a Tri-Partite meeting to discuss the issue(s) cited. The IMT does not have the authority to place blame or enforce sanctions due to violations, but the parties can jointly agree to have some form of “justice” by, for example, agreeing to implement measures to avoid similar incidents in the future. Should the issue still be disputed after the Tri-Partite meeting, it can be elevated to the Peace Panels. While neither of the conflict parties are “eager” to have the meeting, as one interviewee with direct involvement in the peace process describes it, the fact that the parties will meet first before the meeting with the internationals, shows that the progress has gone quite far, that relationships have been built.”⁵⁴ Considering its size and mandate, the IMT has fairly limited abilities to exert influence on the process. The ceasefire has broken down once during the time the IMT has been in place (in 2008), which led the team temporarily to suspend its activities. However, as an interviewee from an international NGO

who has been actively engaged in the formal peace process put it: “It [the IMT] is not many people, and they do not necessarily patrol very much. But just being there makes a difference, and all sides acknowledge the relevance of their presence.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, considering the asymmetrical nature of the conflict involving a government of a state and a nonstate group, the international involvement also has an impact on power relations. Ever since the first ceasefire breakdown, the MILF has made international involvement a precondition for continuing engaging in the peace process.⁵⁶

However, while this description suggests that the parties to the ceasefire agreement have developed routines and relationships of trust that enable the ceasefire to function, it should be stressed that the ceasefire arrangement works when it is allowed to do so. For example, the government’s willingness to coordinate with the MILF as agreed when going after groups that are not parties to the ceasefire has varied. As mentioned, in 2015 the Philippine national police insisted on going into Mamasapano without coordinating with the ceasefire structure, reportedly to avoid the risk of intelligence leaks about the secret operation. Similarly, in 2011, when the peace process started to gain momentum, several members of both the army and the MILF were killed in an encounter triggered by a military operation that was not coordinated through the ceasefire mechanism.⁵⁷ Also, on the MILF side, there has more recently been the experience of splinter groups. The MILF has a number of “strong” commanders and its organizational structure is decentralized, which implies that there is a risk of breakaway groups that might choose to disrespect the ceasefire.

Nonetheless, the continuous joint engagement within the ceasefire structure suggests the development of a coexistence relationship based on cooperation on the resolution of conflicts and mutual respect and trust. To further understand how these patterns of interactions have emerged, I suggest that one must situate the ceasefire within the broader conflict landscape by looking at the territorial features of the armed conflict and the presence of multiple armed elements and sources of violence.

TERRITORIAL COEXISTENCE AND CEASEFIRE INTERACTIONS

The territorial features of the conflict in Mindanao must be considered in an analysis of the ceasefire, as it has contributed to shaping the ceasefire structure and patterns of interactions. The armed conflict

between the government and the MILF has a territorial dimension in the Muslim struggle for self-determination, which includes claims to lands in Mindanao that Muslims presently inhabit and historically have ruled. The first years of ceasefire in the 2000s revolved around the issue of demarcation of territorial control of the MILF. The 1997 ceasefire agreement commissioned the parties to jointly identify areas to be considered as MILF areas and concluded that any movement by MILF fighters outside these areas should be coordinated with the government. However, the identification of areas as under the control of the MILF played into conflict incompatibilities; the concentration of MILF's political and military powers in these areas—often called “camps”—would clearly make these questions contentious.⁵⁸ Consequently, the first phase of the government–MILF peace process generally had a security and military focus, with the ceasefire as part of the struggle to consolidate territorial control. For the MILF, this could be seen as a step toward sovereignty in these areas, and the movement repeatedly demanded the recognition of camps as a precondition for engaging in formal talks with the government. This struggle to make the ceasefire into an instrument of territorial control stemmed from the first two breakdowns of the ceasefire in 2000 and 2003, respectively, and the military operations to take over MILF camps.

However, while the MILF camps have continued to be important areas of MILF control, the process of recognizing camps did not result in a sharp separation of troops. First, as mentioned previously, the MILF was basically defeated by the military during the 2000 all-out-war and their position was increasingly weakened by the 2003 military operations against some of their most important camps. Hence, the group did not succeed in securing *de facto* and absolute control over these areas. Second, the MILF camps are basically communities and not military camps in any strict sense; the MILF fighters live in these camps with their families and the camps are areas where people make their livelihoods. Many of the fighters are civilians who occasionally have taken up arms,⁵⁹ which further blurs the distinction between who can move in and out of these areas, as the MILF fighters are not always easily identified. Datu Mussolini Sinuat Lidasan, an academic at the Ateneo de Davao University in Mindanao, describes the MILF camps as “fluid”⁶⁰ in reference to the movement of people in and out of the camps without strict controls. Also, the fact that there are additional armed elements present in the same areas that are not parties to the ceasefire requires cooperation to delineate who is a

party of which group. For example, when the military goes after the BIFF who operate in a MILF-controlled area, the “kinship” or common family membership among the BIFF and the MILF make it difficult for the military to know who belongs to which group.⁶¹ Thus, one objective of the ceasefire bodies has been to distinguish MILF insurgents from other armed actors present in or near the same territories. In this way, the security cooperation with the MILF through the ceasefire arrangement has enabled the government to address what they perceive as threats in the area since the MILF are living in the communities. As the government’s former chief negotiator Professor Miriam Coronel Ferrer described it, “it allows the military and the MILF to coexist.”⁶²

While on the one hand the ceasefire implies a form of territorial separation with areas being defined as MILF areas, it can better be described as territorial coexistence with high degrees of interaction and security cooperation. This has prompted the development of a ceasefire structure to enable coordination between the MILF and the military and has created conditions for establishing additional mechanisms to facilitate further coexistence. Furthermore, it has also been suggested that the fluidity in terms of MILF/government areas, and the fact that the camps are communities with people moving in and out of the camps areas, has implied interactions between people on the ground. This has created opportunities for people to get to know each other over the years, including combatants from both sides and the communities.

CEASEFIRE COORDINATION IN THE CONTEXT OF MULTIPLE SOURCES OF VIOLENCE

While the violent conflict between the government and the MILF is central to the Mindanao conflict landscape, there are multiple armed groups and sources of violence in the area, which has contributed to shaping both the ceasefire structure and patterns of interactions.⁶³ Indeed, while the MILF has been the most influential armed group in Mindanao and the one that the government has prioritized for negotiations in recent decades, it is not a strong hegemonic military organization that can command obedience from other groups in the region.⁶⁴ The conflict with the MNLF is still on the agenda and eruptions of violence associated with this group have occurred also after the 1996 peace agreement, although infrequently.⁶⁵ Furthermore, just

as the MILF initially emerged as a splinter group from the MNLF, breakdowns in the government–MILF peace process have resulted in additional breakaway groups. The BIFF were established by breakaway commander Ameril Umbra Kato in the aftermath of the 2008 ceasefire breakdown, and the group has subsequently been engaged in violent encounters with the Philippine military. While the MNLF and the MILF have their support base within different ethnic groups and have their strongholds in different geographical areas, the MILF and the BIFF are commonly described as “kin” and often live in the same communities. Another group that originates from former MILF fighters is the Maute Group formed in 2013. The Maute was the main group involved in the outbreak of war with the Philippine military in Marawi in Mindanao in May 2017, and it has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS).⁶⁶ The Philippine military is also engaged in armed conflict with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which became active in the 1980s.⁶⁷ Like MNLF and MILF, the ASG has made claims for an independent state for Muslim Mindanao but, in contrast to the former groups, it has refused to talk to the government and exclusively resorted to violent tactics including public bombings and kidnappings. Particularly, since the proclamation of the “war on terror” in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the Philippine government has been extensively engaged in anti-terrorist operations in Mindanao where the ASG has been one of the central targets in these operations.

The presence of these armed groups and the government’s interest in engaging in counter-terrorist operations around Mindanao has also shaped the government–MILF ceasefire structure and patterns of interaction, since the government is dependent on cooperating and coordinating with the MILF in order to be able to carry out these operations as they wish without clashing with MILF fighters. In 2002, after the first ceasefire breakdown, the parties agreed to establish the AHJAG ceasefire body, which was put into effect in 2005 so as to coordinate military and police operations against “criminal and lawless elements” in or near MILF areas.⁶⁸ Through the AHJAG, the government has thus been able to continue its operations against other armed elements in the area. As Steven Rood, who has been part of the International Contact Group (ICG) and the Third Party Monitoring Team (TPMT) to the government–MILF peace process put it, one of the reasons why the military is positive toward the ceasefire with the MILF is because “they have bigger fish to fry.”⁶⁹ In addition to the armed groups mentioned here, the

Philippine government is in armed conflict with the communist insurgency. The armed wing of the communist insurgency—the New People’s Army (NPA)—is geographically dispersed across the whole Philippine state including in Mindanao, but mainly in areas other than those traditionally associated with Muslim Mindanao.⁷⁰

In addition to the vertical violence involving the Philippine government and armed groups, there are also various forms of horizontal violence in Mindanao that need to be considered in order to understand the conflict landscape within which the ceasefire is situated and shaped. These include private armies of influential politicians and powerful landowners (some of whom have strong links to influential politicians in Manila) as well as smaller kidnap-for-ransom groups and armed gangs. There are also frequent occurrences of family or clan feuds (*ridos*), which has been considered among people in the conflict-affected areas to be the most prevalent source of violence and insecurity.⁷¹ These forms of conflicts often take violent manifestations, partly due to the flourishing of guns in the region, even in domestic spaces. These violent conflicts have had a direct effect on the government–MILF ceasefire since some conflicts that start as family feuds develop into military–MILF confrontations. When this pattern was exposed, it changed the procedures of the ceasefire. As Steven Rood describes it: “there might be a clan conflict where one clan has links to the armed forces and the other clan has links to the MILF, and it would get misinterpreted by both sides as separatist conflict, and so it would escalate. [...] And nowadays that basically does not happen, because the first thing everybody asks is whether this is just a *rido*.”⁷² Thus, this has consequently become one aspect for the ceasefire structure to consider so as to prevent violence from erupting or escalating so that “non-ceasefire-related incidents [...] do not escalate into a ceasefire-related incident.”⁷³ In other words, these features of the conflict context have prompted a security cooperation within the ceasefire structure that extends beyond cooperation intended to directly prevent or mitigate clashes between the army and MILF fighters.

To summarize, since the MILF is not the only party in armed conflict with the government in the region, the government has an interest in cooperating with the MILF on security issues by means of the ceasefire structure. For the MILF, this has implied a degree of recognition as an actor and acknowledgement and respect for territorial influence. In this way, both parties have benefited from this ceasefire coexistence.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This analysis has aimed to contribute a more nuanced way of approaching and understanding ceasefires by demonstrating that when the ceasefire is approached in relational terms and as a dynamic process of change, we can capture imperative patterns of interactions and changes in relationships that advances our understanding of how the ceasefire operates and evolves over time. Empirically, the evidence shows that continuous engagement in the ceasefire structure in Mindanao has generated relationships based on cooperation, non-violent management of conflicts and trust. It shows how patterns of interactions and relationships produced in the ceasefire must be understood by considering the features of the broader conflict landscape in which it is embedded, since the territorial setup and the presence of multiple sources of violence in Mindanao have urged high levels of interaction and security cooperation via the ceasefire engagement. Considering the patterns of ceasefire interactions and the longevity of the Mindanao ceasefire, I have suggested that this type of ceasefire can be conceptualized as a form of “coexistence ceasefire.” The concept of coexistence highlights central features of the ceasefire including cooperation, non-violent management of conflicts, mutual respect and trust, and high levels of interparty contact and interaction through the actors’ presence in the same locality. The term allows us to grasp the dynamic processes by which the ceasefire is re-produced and shaped over time. At the time of writing, there has been a ceasefire in Mindanao for more or less twenty years, with ceasefire bodies actively cooperating on ceasefire implementation and the coordination of actions and movements, as well as with established protocols and routines for handling any conflicts that may arise. This has included the creation of an array of communication channels, such as an exchange of telephone numbers and the building of trust and social capital. Through these exchanges, the parties have begun to naturalize patterns of interaction and generated cumulative knowledge through continuous interactions, which has allowed the ceasefire to continue. This institutionalization of the ceasefire is distinct from most others, which tend to be ad hoc and temporary in nature.

This study of Mindanao highlights the importance of considering the territorial dimension of conflict claims and the territorial features in characterizing the ceasefire that is produced. Although the ceasefire in Mindanao stipulated a separation of armed forces through a

demarcation of ceasefire lines, there has not been a true separation of forces. Rather, as an academic based in Mindanao put it, the territorial features of the conflict landscape can be described as being fluid.⁷⁴ In the context of multiple armed elements and sources of violence, this has prompted the government and the MILF to engage in an action-oriented ceasefire with measures of nonviolent interactions and cooperation, allowing for territorial coexistence. This can be compared to the Sri Lankan ceasefire of 2002 in which there was a *de facto* separation of forces and limited degrees of nonviolent ceasefire interaction, which resulted in a further consolidation of positions. This points to the importance of further research that recognizes how the characteristics of ceasefires vary and how we can understand the variation. The concept of “coexistence ceasefire” provides more nuance to our conceptualization and understanding of ceasefires based on central characteristics including patterns of interactions and changes in relationships.

The implications of the ceasefire are multiple for peace research.⁷⁵ First, it should be stressed that the long periods of ceasefire in Mindanao have contributed to improving the security situation in war-affected areas. While the areas are still militarized, ceasefire periods have resulted to some degree in demilitarization, which has contributed to creating some sense of “normalcy” for people living in the conflict-affected societies.⁷⁶ The ceasefire has also led to reduced levels of displacement, allowing children to continue their education and adults to earn their livelihoods without disruption.⁷⁷

Notably, the ceasefire has opened space for civil society engagement in the peace process. Initially, when the political process was mostly limited to the elites from each party, the ceasefire enabled civil society to exert influence on the process. Civil society groups participated in consultations leading to the ceasefire in 2001. In 2003, a grassroots monitoring initiative—the Bantay Ceasefire (Ceasefire Watch)—was created in the context of increasing levels of violence and growing frustration with the seemingly inability of the current ceasefire structure to effectively respond to the violence, and in the absence of proper channels to exert influence on the peace process.⁷⁸ The initiative was supported both by the government and the MILF, but was not part of the formal ceasefire structure and acted independently for a number of years. The fact that there have been prolonged periods of relative calm in Mindanao during the ceasefire years instead of continuous war suggests that many people are not satisfied with only a cessation of hostilities, but demand a political solution to the conflict.⁷⁹

It should be stressed that while the parties did indeed settle a peace agreement in 2014, it took almost two decades from the initial establishment of a ceasefire before the peace accord was concluded. Progress toward implementation of the peace deal has been slow in the aftermath of the Mamasapano ceasefire incident. Bangsamoro Organic Law, which set the basis for creating an autonomous Bangsamoro region, finally passed Congress in late May 2018. The law was ratified in early 2019 and the new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) instituted, headed by the MILF-led Bangsamoro Transition Authority. Progress in this political process is also sequenced with a “normalization” track of the overall peace process, which includes the decommissioning of the MILF and ultimately an exit from the ceasefire arrangement. In April 2019, President Rodrigo Duterte signed the executive order for the implementation of the normalization track. Still, at the time of writing it is unclear how the implementation process will develop and what this will imply in terms of an exit from the ceasefire arrangement. After Mamasapano, the government and the MILF reportedly spent some time in reinterpreting the agreement on the coordination of military operations, but, as emphasized earlier, the ceasefire was never really jeopardized and trust between the parties was quickly rebuilt. Nonetheless, the ceasefire breach did have considerable consequences on the broader peace process, as it provided grounds for forces outside of the agreement to question the legitimacy of the whole peace process. These developments demonstrate that the ceasefire cannot be separated from the broader political processes of peace and conflict, nor can it be understood merely as a reflection of progress or setback in the political process. In light of the continuously frosty relationships between Muslim Mindanao and the broader Philippine polity and the perpetuation of long-lasting biases against Muslims in the Philippines, these continuously polarized and conflictual relationships underscore the limitations of what a ceasefire can do in terms of “paving the way to peace” as is often assumed in the literature. Rather, a long-drawn “no war, no peace” situation has come to characterize the Mindanao conflict setting. Ceasefire breakdowns or setbacks in the peace process in Mindanao have repeatedly spawned breakaway groups from the MILF. While the enduring presence of violence within the fragmented conflict landscape has contributed to shape the government–MILF ceasefire, it has also had great impact on the uncertain prospects for broader conflict transformation. This points to the risks of long-drawn out

ceasefires when progress in the peace process is slow, and further underscores the fact that ceasefires are inherently volatile endeavors.

NOTES

1. Ferdinand B. Cabrera, "ARMM officials mark Mamasapano Tragedy anniversary," *Mindanews* January 25, 2016, <http://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2016/01/armm-officials-mark-mamasapano-tragedy-anniversary/>. Retrieved: September 28, 2017. The 17 Moros killed in the incident included both the MILF and fighters from the armed group the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

2. Interview with Kristian Herbolzheimer, Director of the Philippines and Colombia Programmes at the Conciliation Resources, telephone interview November 24, 2017.

3. See, for example, James D.D. Smith, *Stopping Wars: Defining the Obstacles to Cease-fires*, (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995); Roger Mac Ginty, *No War, No Peace: The Rejuvenation of Stalled Peace Processes and Peace Accords*, (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2006); Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System*, (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage Publications, 2007, 2nd edition).

4. Virginia Page Fortna, *Peace Time: Cease-fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

5. Dogukan Cansin Karakus and Isak Svensson, "Between the Bombs: Exploring Partial Ceasefires in the Syrian Civil War, 2011-2017," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (November 23, 2017): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1393416>.

6. Åshild Kolås, "Naga militancy and violent politics in the shadow of cease-fire," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 6 (2011): 781–92.

7. Christopher Clapham, "Rwanda: The perils of peacemaking," *Journal of Peace Research* 35, no. 2 (1998): 193–210.

8. Zaw Oo and Win Min, *Assessing Burma's Ceasefire Accords*, Policy Studies 39 (Washington D.C: East-West Center Washington, 2007).

9. Malin Åkebo, *Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes: A Comparative Study* (London: Routledge, 2016).

10. See, for example, Mac Ginty, *No War, No Peace*.

11. This is the approach of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Conflict Termination dataset. Joakim Kreutz, "How and when armed conflicts end: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 243–250.

12. Karakus and Svensson, "Between the Bombs".

13. Christine Bell, *Peace Agreements and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

14. For another framework that takes on *peace* more broadly as a relational concept, see Johanna Söderberg, Malin Åkebo, and Anna Jarstad, *Friends, Fellows and Foes: A New Framework for Studying Relational Peace*, Umeå Working Papers in Peace and Conflict Studies No. 11 (Umeå: Department of Political Science, Umeå University, 2019).

15. See, for example, Karakus and Svensson, “Between the Bombs.”
16. See, for example, Oo and Min, *Assessing Burma’s Ceasefire Accords*.
17. Luc Chounet-Cambas, *Negotiating Ceasefires: Dilemmas & Options for Mediators*, Mediation Practice Series No. 3, (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, March 2011); Oo and Min, *Assessing Burma’s Ceasefire Accords*.
18. Åkebo, *Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes*.
19. Chounet-Cambas, *Negotiating Ceasefires*.
20. United Nations Department of Political Affairs, *Guidance for mediators: Addressing conflict-related sexual violence in ceasefire and peace agreements* (New York: United Nations Department of Political Affairs, Policy and Mediation Division, Mediation Support Unit, 2012).
21. Fortna, *Peace Time*.
22. Åkebo, *Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes*.
23. Åkebo, *Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes*.
24. Åkebo, *Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes*.
25. Some people use the concept of “coexistence” to describe social relationships between identity groups in a society more generally and/or include more idealist notions of recognition and respect for diversity, equal access to resources, and “equity in all aspects of life” (Angela Nyawira Khaminwa, “Coexistence.” *Beyond Intractability*, Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess (Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, July 2003), <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/coexistence> , retrieved: May 15, 2018). I use the concept in a more limited way aiming only to characterise the ceasefire and ceasefire interactions—not to describe broader relationships between the majority Philippine population and the Muslim minority in Mindanao.
26. One example of a long-lasting ceasefire in an interstate conflict is the 1953 ceasefire between North and South Korea. As Fortna (2004) suggests, compared to interstate conflicts, it is likely to be more difficult for the parties in an intrastate conflict to leave political issues unsettled (Fortna, *Peace Time*).
27. A distinction is sometimes made between *truces*, *cessation of hostilities*, *ceasefire*, and *armistice*, based on the degree of formality, purpose, and amount of political content in the agreements (see, for example, United Nations Peacemaker, “Peace Agreements: Types of Agreements”, United Nations Department of Political Affairs, <http://peacemaker.un.org>, accessed 10 February 2009). However, these concepts do not capture how the ceasefire operates and what characterises patterns of interactions and relationships. In addition, these various terms are often overlapping and used interchangeably (Smith, *Stopping Wars*, 265–269). Furthermore, the label that the parties chose to attach to a particular ceasefire agreement should be understood in terms of politics and the meanings that different actors ascribe to words, which often mirror the political sensitivity of ceasefires (Åkebo, *Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes*, 20).
28. See, for example, Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th edition (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009); Robert E. Stake *The Art of Case Study Research* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995).
29. While the Spaniards never fully succeeded in conquering Muslim Mindanao (in contrast to Spain’s colonial domination over the majority Christian

Filipino population), the Americans managed to establish colonial control by force in the early 1900s. Source: Tom McKenna, "Saints, Scholars and the Idealized Past in Philippine Muslim Separatism," *The Pacific Review* 15, no. 4 (2002): 539–553, 541–554.

30. Ivan Molloy, "The Decline of the MNLF in the Southern Philippines," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 18, no. 1 (1988):59.

31. See, for example, Peter Chalk, "The Davao Consensus: a panacea for the Muslim insurgency in Mindanao?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 2 (1997): 79–98; Carmen A. Abubakar, "Review of the Mindanao Peace Processes," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (2004): 450–464.

32. Soliman M. Santos, Jr. "War and Peace on the Moro Front: Three Standard Bearers, Three Forms of Struggle, Three Tracks (Overview)," In Soliman M. Santos and Paz Verdades M. Santos (eds.) *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines*, (Small Arms Survey: Geneva, 2010): 58–90.

33. The agreement also includes two implementation agreements settled a few months later in which the ground rules and organizational structure are defined in greater detail. Agreement for a General Cessation of Hostilities (AGCH), the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), City of Cagayan de Oro, 18 July 1997.

34. Prohibited hostile acts include, for example, "terroristic acts" such as kidnapping, bombing, assassination; "aggressive action" such as attacks, ambushes, offensive military action; and the unilateral establishment of checkpoints. Prohibited provocative acts include, for example, the display of the MILF flag in non-identified MILF areas, providing sanctuary or assistance to "criminal or lawless elements," massive deployment and/or movement of forces, and public statements that would "undermine the credibility" of either party. Source: "Implementing Operational Guidelines of the GRP-MILF Agreement on the General Cessation of Hostilities," the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), City of Marawi, November 14, 1997.

35. "Implementing Operational Guidelines," the Government of the Philippines and the MILF.

36. There is one secretariat for the government and one for the MILF.

37. Around the period 2003–2005, there was in general an increase of international engagement in the peace process by the United States, the UN, the World Bank, and a number of aid-funding countries such as Japan that provided resources and urged the parties to adhere to the ceasefire.

38. In addition to the main ceasefire bodies that I will return to in this paper – that is, the CCCH, the AHJAG, and the IMT—there have also been additional ones. An Independent Fact-Finding Committee and a Quick Response Team was established in 1997 and 1998, respectively, but both were later removed. The monitoring structure has also been extended with Local Monitoring Teams (in 2003), Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Posts (in 2004), and a Civilian Protection Component of the IMT (in 2010). These different components do indicate an effort to improve the ceasefire structure in response to challenges on the ground. However, it should be stressed that they have not always been without problems or have functioned as intended. For example, the Civilian Protection Component (CPC) had the ambition

of involving local civil society in the formal process, but ended up being run essentially by the international NGO the Non-Violent Peaceforce.

39. I have in previous case studies distinguished several ceasefire agreements reached in a row and focused on how features and provisions of new agreements respond to new situations, while also considering them as part of more long-term patterns and dynamics (see, e.g., Ákebo, *Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes*).

40. Interview with Alma Evangelista, executive director of OPAPP (Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process) and chair of the Technical Committee at the time when the ceasefire was first introduced, Manila November 20, 2018.

41. See, for example, International Crisis Group (ICG) “Southern Philippines Background: Terrorism and the Peace Process,” ICG Asia Report No 80 (Jakarta/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2004).

42. The breakdown of the ceasefire was triggered by clashes between MILF fighters and Christian militia allied to the military (International Crisis Group (ICG), “The Philippines: Breakthrough in Mindanao,” ICG Asia Report No 240, (Jakarta/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2012), 15. Each collapse of the ceasefire has been associated with a major eruption of violence and has resulted both in fatal casualties and a considerable number of displacements. The areas in Mindanao that are directly affected by the government–MILF conflict are small and densely populated areas, and when armed conflict erupts people are forced to flee to safer areas. The collapse of the ceasefire in 2000, for example, displaced some 900,000 people, and the breakdown in 2008 resulted in some 500,000 displacements in only a few weeks (interview with Kristian Herbolzheimer, 2017).

43. It should be noted that the ongoing ceasefire does not imply that government–MILF violence has necessarily disappeared; indeed, especially, at the beginning the ceasefire was heavily violated to the extent that the security situation was described as even worse than before the ceasefire.

44. On the armed forces’ military overhand over the MILF, see, for example, Patricio N. Abinales, “The End of War in the Southern Philippines,” *Asian Ethnicity*, 15: 3 (2014), 394–398.

45. As a point of illustration, in 1998 the parties were forced to add a ceasefire body in the form of the Quick Response Team to cover for the inadequate response of existing ceasefire bodies and immediately address alleged violations of the ceasefire. Agreement Creating a Quick Response Team (QRT), the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, March 11, 1998.

46. Interview with Professor Miriam Coronel Ferrer, former chief negotiator, GPF Peace panel OPAPP (Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process), Manila January 29, 2016.

47. Interview with Miriam Coronel Ferrer, 2016.

48. Interview with Kristian Herbolzheimer, 2017.

49. Anonymous interview, Manila.

50. Anonymous interview, Manila.

51. Interview with Miriam Coronel Ferrer, 2016; interview with Steven Rood, Country Representative and Regional Advisor for Local Governance at the Asia Foundation, Manila January 27, 2016.

52. The IMT sometimes also conducts verification afterwards and makes suggestions to the parties on how to prevent future incidents. For preventive purposes, it sometimes also conducts “Courtesy Calls” and tripartite meetings together with both parties to discuss different issues, as well as “Peace Advocacies and Visits” to “spread messages of peace” (email correspondence with the International Monitoring Team (IMT) Headquarters in Mindanao, February 25, 2016).

53. Anonymous interview, Manila.

54. Interview with Kristian Herbolzheimer, 2017.

55. This includes the invitation to Malaysia as a mediator in the peace talks in 2001 after the first ceasefire breakdown, the decision to deploy international monitors in 2003 after the second ceasefire breakdown, and the engagement of an International Contact Group comprised of states and international NGOs to assist the peace talk process in 2009 after the third ceasefire breakdown. In addition, the Civilian Protection Component established in 2010 as part of the ceasefire structure also included international NGOs. When the government and the MILF initially engaged in peace attempts in the late 1990s, there was no external involvement in the process. At this early stage, the government’s recent experiences of negotiating with the MNLF were also still fresh in the memory; the MNLF was seen as having earned too much status and recognition through the external mediation by Libya and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

56. International Crisis Group, “Breakthrough in Mindanao,” 3.

57. International Crisis Group, “Terrorism and the Peace Process.”

58. Interview with Kristian Herbolzheimer, 2017.

59. Interview with Datu Mussolini Sinuat Lidasan, Executive Director, Al Qalam Institute for Islamic Identities and Dialogue in South-East Asia, Ateneo de Davao University, Davao City February 10, 2016.

60. Interview with Camilio Bong Montesa, Country Programme Manager Philippines, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD), Manila February 3, 2016.

61. Interview with Miriam Coronel Ferrer, 2016.

62. As Adam notes, the presence of armed groups and the high level of violence and insecurity is not exclusive to Muslim Mindanao, but a feature of the rest of the Philippines as well. However, different forms and sources of violence intersect and reinforce each other in a particular way in the region. Jeroen Adam, “Spaces of Exception and Spaces of Normality: Towards a Relational Understanding of Violence and Peace in Muslim Mindanao,” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 5, no. 1 (2017): 49–66.

63. Interview with Camilio Bong Montesa, 2016.

64. While several of the MNLF fighters transferred to the army or transferred to the MILF after 1996, there is still an active MNLF faction in Mindanao including its long-term leader Nur Misuari. This faction attempted to take over Zamboanga City in the westernmost part of Mindanao in 2013, which resulted in serious armed confrontations with the military and the police and several casualties. Geographically, it is mainly present in the western parts of Mindanao and not in the same areas as the MILF, but it is important to consider in the broader conflict context.

65. The group, founded by brothers Omar and Abdullah Maute, has its stronghold on the Mindanao mainland in Butig, Lanao del Sur, located north of the

MILF’s heartland. The group has reportedly used failures or setbacks in the peace process to recruit young people. See International Crisis Group (ICG), “The Philippines: Renewing Prospects for Peace in Mindanao,” ICG Asia Report No 281 (Manila/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2016).

66. The ASG is based mainly in the southwestern islands but has conducted violent actions in other areas as well.

67. This was in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks with the MILF facing allegations of having ties with and providing sanctuary for groups such as the Jemaah Islamiyah and Al-Qaeda. The MILF publicly denounced terrorism in 2003—a demand by the government for agreeing to resume the ceasefire and peace talks.

68. Interview with Steven Rood, 2016.

69. The other wings of the communist rebellion are the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPA) and the National Democratic Front (NDF). Furthermore, the Philippine government/armed forces also devote a lot of resources to the conflict with China over islands in the South China Sea.

70. Wilfredo Magno Torres (ed.), *Rido: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014).

71. Interview with Steven Rood, 2016.

72. Email correspondence with the International Monitoring Team (IMT) Headquarters in Mindanao, 25 February 2016.

73. Interview with Datu Mussolini Sinaut Lidasan, 2016.

74. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive picture in this regard.

75. Interview with Kristian Herbolzheimer, 2017. In addition, the conflict-affected areas have witnessed progress in the economy and record levels of investments in recent years.

76. Interview with Jasmin Galace, the Center for Peace Education in Miriam College, Manila February 3, 2016.

77. See, for example, Steven, Rood, “Forging Sustainable Peace in Mindanao: The Role of Civil Society,” East-West Center Policy Studies No 17 (Washington D.C.: East-West Center, 2005).

78. Furthermore, it has also been stressed that the ceasefire has allowed space for peace advocacy more generally, since it enables peace activists to reach out to people in the communities when people are not frequently displaced (interview with Jurma Tikmasan, university lecturer and Moro peace advocate in Tawi Tawi, Manila February 3, 2016).