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Questioning the State-Rebel Divide in Mindanao: A Comparative Analysis of North Cotabato and Compostela Valley Province

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Abstract

This article challenges the pervasive notion of rebel groups in the southern Philippines as non-state actors opposing the penetration of the state. Instead, through a historically informed analysis of local politics in two Mindanao provinces with a presence of Muslim and communist armed insurgents, respectively (North Cotabato and Compostela Valley), it will be demonstrated that particularly since the end of the Marcos martial law regime and subsequent democratisation and decentralisation efforts, local state and rebel structures have become increasingly intertwined. On the one hand, this observation can be explained with reference to particular historical-institutional trajectories, which led to the establishment of the local state as a vital instrument for accumulation and for political legitimisation. On the other hand, the current situation can only be fully understood when considering the wider set of social structures that cut across the state-rebel divide, prime amongst which those defined by kinship.

Keywords: *armed conflict, Mindanao, the Philippines, decentralisation, rebel groups, state formation, resources*

Introduction

For over 30 years now, the southern Philippine island of Mindanao has been home to two armed insurgencies. While most attention is devoted to the Muslim rebellions of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the western and central parts of the island, since the 1980s the remote uplands of eastern Mindanao have become one of the strongholds of the Maoist New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of

the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Whereas in the former case, the conflict was clearly framed in religious terms, in the case of the CPP-NPA, the conflict obviously obtained a class-based character. Despite their different framing, most critical academic analyses of these armed insurgencies trace their origins to local grievances that resulted from the aggressive penetration of a (post-)colonial state—particularly the authoritarian Marcos regime—keen to exploit Mindanao’s natural resource wealth. Underlying these analyses is a pervasive tendency to treat both the Muslim and Communist rebellion as “ideology-based armed conflicts” directed against the state, and espousing “alternative state-visions” (Human Development Network, 2005: 2). For instance, in a recent article, Podder describes MILF-structures as a “parallel system of governance that shadows elected government functionaries”, and that functions according to Islamic principles (Podder, 2012: 502). In another contribution, Hall argues that the demobilisation of MNLF fighters in 1996 should be seen as a movement from non-state to state spaces (Hall, 2009: 24).

In this article, we critically interrogate this assumed dichotomy between informal rebel structures and formal state structures, on the basis of an empirical analysis of local-level politics in two Mindanao provinces that boast a strong historical presence of Muslim and Communist insurgents, respectively, namely North Cotabato and Compostela Valley. Our analysis reveals that already during the authoritarian Marcos martial law years (1972-1981¹), but particularly following democratisation and decentralisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this often taken-for-granted distinction between local state and rebel structures does not stand up to empirical scrutiny. Instead, both provinces have witnessed the emergence of indistinct alliances and networks that connect local politicians to paramilitary and rebel forces, particularly but not exclusively on the level of the barangay. Drawing on existing literature and our own fieldwork experience, we offer two related explanations for this seemingly counter-intuitive observation. First, the mutual entanglement between state and rebel structures can only be fully understood when taking into account the historical-institutional legacies of a particular trajectory of decentralised state-building, which established the local state as a “structure of accumulation” (Harriss-White, 2003) in the local economy (Sidel, 1999), and as an instrument for legitimising claims to public authority (Abinales, 2000). Secondly, moving beyond a purely state-centric analysis, critical attention is also drawn to how local state and rebel structures are integrated in

¹ While martial law was lifted in 1981, most observers agree that the Marcos regime retained many if not most of its authoritarian features until its ultimate demise in 1986 (e.g., Wurfel, 1991).

the wider social fabric, and to how various social relations—prime amongst which those associated with kinship—connect people at different sides of the state-rebel divide.

The remainder of the article is organised in three sections. In the second section, we provide some theoretical reflections about the state in the Philippines and its position within broader society. Taking up these insights, in the third section, we present our empirical analysis of local-level politics in North Cotabato and Compostela Valley provinces. In both cases, we draw upon a combination of existing literature and primary data collected during different field visits over the past three years, mostly on the basis of qualitative interviews with a wide range of key informants. Finally, we present a critical discussion of the most important findings and implications of our analysis.

Theoretical reflections on the state of the state in the Philippines

The ebbs and flows of the local state as a structure of accumulation

(Post-)colonial origins of the local state as a structure of accumulation

The Philippines is often seen as a country with a long history of political-administrative centralism, with the 1991 Local Government Code (the centrepiece of decentralisation) presented as a radical break with this centralist past (Guevara, 2001). To be sure, despite modest efforts to devolve basic government functions during the post-war third republic (1946-1972), political-administrative centralism was indeed the dominant form of political organisation, and was taken to the extremes by the authoritarian Marcos martial law regime (1972-1981) (Wurfel, 1991). However, detailed historical-institutional analysis has revealed a formative role for local politicians in (post-)colonial trajectories of state-building. While a class of “native politicians” or *principalia* had already emerged under Spanish colonialism, their role became particularly pronounced during the first half of the 20th Century, when American colonial rulers imposed a system of democratic suffrage, and came to rely on local politicians as bridging figures between Manila and the periphery (Hutchcroft, 2000). On the one hand, local “strongmen-politicians” acted as guarantors of social stability, fending off the rise of organised opposition against the state (read: counterinsurgency) (Wong, 2006). On the other hand, as agents of state rule, they espoused the “emblems of state rule”, prime amongst which was the regular organisation of and participation in democratic elections (Abinales, 2000). In order to fulfil this dual role as state-builders, local politicians typically relied on a combination of patronage and coercion. Municipal mayors in particular came to enjoy extensive control over the police and military, which were widely deployed for private political and economic gain (Hedman and Sidel, 2000; Kreuzer, 2009). Indeed, in exchange for their dual state-building role, local politicians retained

a high degree of autonomy from Manila, and could bank on priority access to the local state as a “structure of accumulation”. The idea of the local state as a “structure of accumulation” was coined by Barbara Harriss-White in the context of rural India, to describe the ways in which the local state plays an enabling role in processes of capitalist accumulation, and simultaneously acts as a “regime of private extortion” for state officials (Harriss-White, 2003: 80). Similarly, and contesting images of a weak Philippine state, Sidel has argued that American colonialism has given rise to a set of local state institutions that were not “simply a resource for patron-client relations”, but also a “complex set of predatory mechanisms for private accumulation” (Sidel, 1999: 146).

These capacities of the local state as a structure of accumulation were expanded further in the decades following independence in 1946. In the face of a persistently weak national army, local politicians started recruiting their own “private armies” (Anderson, 1988), later effectively replaced by paramilitary militias and vigilantes (Kowalewski, 1992). All too often, however, “counterinsurgency” and the maintenance of social stability serve as a pretense for the ruthless protection of private political and economic interests (Kreuzer, 2009). Together, these “legacies served to blur the lines between state/society, civil/military, military/paramilitary, and legal/illegal, with a variety of peculiar coercive formations—notably so-called ‘lost commands’, ‘private armies’ and ‘fanatical sects’—operating at the behest of entrenched local ‘warlords’ and landed oligarchs” (Hedman and Sidel, 1999: 58). Furthermore, state resources like government jobs and “pork barrel funding” (funding used by congressmen to reward their political allies in their home province) gradually replaced land as the most important source of patronage and private accumulation (Nowak and Snyder, 1974; Magno, 1989). These patronage resources are disbursed through vertically organised political party networks, which are an important instrument in the hands of provincial-level delegates in congress to keep in check their local-level counterparts (Landé, 1968; Hutchcroft, 2000). Meanwhile in parallel with economic modernisation and diversification, the local state became increasingly important as a set of regulatory instruments to control access to the local economy (Sidel, 1999; Lara and Schoofs, 2013). Finally, local politicians can bank on the formal-democratic legitimacy inherent to statehood and state officialdom to shore up their local authority and standing (Abinales, 2000; Wong, 2006). We will return to this point in more detail below.

The Marcos conundrum and the closure of the state as a structure of accumulation

When Ferdinand Marcos assumed the presidency in 1965, he embarked upon a path of centralisation, culminating in the proclamation of martial law in 1972. Relying on a multi-pronged strategy, he succeeded in reining in on some of the prerogatives of local politicians. First, by centralising control over the armed forces and the police, the coercive capacity of local strongmen was diminished (Hedman and Sidel, 2000). Secondly, by centralising control over patronage resources—significantly beefed up by international capital inflows—in the presidency, Marcos created a key instrument to win over the loyalty of local elites. Thirdly, the abolishment of congress and pork-barrel funding weakened the power base of the provincial-level political elites that had long dominated Philippine politics (Wurfel, 1991). Fourthly, in addition to creating regional planning bodies to coordinate and implement the regime's development plans, Marcos also designed a series of institutions on the local level to curb the autonomy of municipal- and provincial-level strongmen, and to shorten the distance between the regime and the local population. The *barangay* (the lowest political-administrative unit in the Philippines) in particular came to fulfil a vital role in the new constellation, not only as a service-hatch for development funding and as a counterinsurgency tool, but also as an instrument to shore up the regime's democratic legitimacy (Wurfel, 1991). Finally, local elections were tightly monitored, and served primarily as instruments to reward the regime's allies and to disenfranchise its enemies (Franco, 2001).

To some extent, then, Marcos was successful in restructuring the political elite, and in reversing the traditional flow of power between the national and the local level, with local elites increasingly dependent upon access to the presidency for patronage. Ultimately however, he failed to do away with the localist tendencies in Philippine politics, and continued to rely on regional elite support to implement the regime's increasingly authoritarian agenda, and to fend off mounting opposition against the regime (Hutchcroft, 2000; Franco, 2001). For example, provincial governors loyal to the regime continued to wield significant influence over the appointment of provincial-level army commanders and over local paramilitary militias, like the Civilian Home Defense Forces (CHDF) (Hedman and Sidel, 2000). We will return to this point in more depth in our empirical section. Important for our purposes is that Marcos excluded important sections of local and regional elites from access to the state machinery (Abinales, 2000). As will also be discussed below, some of these disenfranchised elites responded by throwing in their lot with the nascent rebel movement, in an attempt to reclaim their formerly privileged position within the state.

Democratisation, decentralisation and the restoration of the local state as a structure of accumulation

As a result of a worsening economic crisis and authoritarian excesses, by the 1980s the Marcos regime faced mounting opposition from a broad range of societal forces, including (but by no means limited to) by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA). The military mutiny and people-power revolt that eventually overthrew Marcos and swept Corazon Aquino to power in 1986 ushered in an uncertain transition period, marked by a profound spirit of popular empowerment. The new 1987 constitution reflected this spirit, calling on congress to produce several pieces of legislation that would facilitate progressive social change. This included "a Local Government Code which shall provide for a more responsive and accountable local government structure instituted through a system of decentralisation".² The Local Government Code (LGC) was passed in 1991 in the form of Republic Act 7160, and devolved a series of fiscal and regulatory responsibilities to local government units (LGU): regions, provinces, cities, municipalities and barangays (Legaspi, 2001). Examples include the enforcement of national environmental and building laws; land reclassification and subdivision; food inspection; and discretion over the issuance of business permits and franchises. In addition, LGUs were given increased discretion over employment and procurement. Arguably even more important was the increased financial capacity of LGUs, that now dispose of a range of instruments to extract local fiscal revenues. Furthermore, the introduction of a substantial and guaranteed share of national government revenues, in the form of natural resource rents and Internal Revenue Allotments (IRA), gave the local executive more room to manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* his national-level counterparts. In relative terms, the barangay in particular profited disproportionately from these new fiscal arrangements (Clark, 1999). Finally, the LGC re-established mayoral control over the Philippine National Police.

Ultimately, while the LGC was presented as a response the authoritarian excesses of the martial law regime, it was not a radical move away from a historically-rooted centralism (Legaspi, 2001). Instead, it is perhaps better seen as a restoration and arguably even a further consolidation of the local state as a structure of accumulation. Indeed, critical observers were quick to point out that "the Local Government Code of 1991 and subsequent decentralisation efforts nor the pattern of sustained economic growth in the Philippines in the 1990s have

² The 1987 constitution of the Republic of the Philippines, A. X, s. 3

seriously undermined the institutional and social foundations of boss rule” (Hedman and Sidel, 2000: 108).

Whither the role of the state in Philippine society?

This perspective on the local state as a predatory structure of accumulation can be criticised on a number of accounts. For one, its top-down perspective leaves little room for understanding agency and social change, as it underestimates how throughout Philippine history, the elitist democratic system has systematically been challenged from below (Quimpo, 2005). Furthermore, its depiction of “warlord-politicians” as selfish, profit-maximising actors fails to recognise the discursive production of political authority within the confines set by societal norms (Wong, 2008). Finally, its state-centric perspective fails to recognise that “Normative and cognitive order in many areas of Philippine life (religion, kinship, identity), while strongly influenced by the state, are not necessarily dominated by it” (Pertierra, 1999: 300; see also Pertierra, 2006).³

While we do not aim for an extensive overview and evaluation of these points of criticism, for the purposes of this article (i.e., understanding the intricate relations between local state and rebel structures) it is nonetheless crucial to make two additional observations about state-society relations in the Philippines. First, in line with recent scholarship in the field of political anthropology, we recognise that formal bureaucratic authority inherent to statehood is but one possible source of public authority (Lund, 2006). More often than not, public authority is a hybrid of legal-bureaucratic, personalistic, militaristic, religious and/or traditional authority. Similarly, in the context of the Philippines, both Wong (2006) and Abinales (2000) have argued local strongmen-politicians’ capacity as state-builders hinges upon their ability to fuse legal-bureaucratic and more personalistic forms of authority, thus embedding themselves in local social structures. At the same time, partly as a product of the particular historical-institutional trajectories in the Philippines described earlier in this section, but also in line with trends observed elsewhere (Hansen and Steputat, 2001), state-sanctioned legality has gradually emerged as a central and arguably even the primary frame of reference for staking and

³ In addition, but also partly in response to these critiques, a group of Philippine scholars have attempted to counter what is perceived as the “dominant influence of Western perspectives in Philippine social science” (Aquino, 2004: 105). Their combined efforts have given rise to a particular type of social science that is highly sensitive to indigenous cultural idioms and societal structures. While a case can certainly be made for an analysis that aims to understand and take into account the intricacies of Philippine social organisation, for the particular purposes of this article we feel that this distinct approach has little added explanatory value.

legitimising claims to public authority. In short, in addition to being a vital structure of accumulation in the local economy, the local state is also an instrument for the legitimization of public authority.

A second observation—albeit one closely related to the former—is that it is paramount to pay attention to the embeddedness of both state and rebel structures in wider sets of social relations, prime amongst which those constituted by kinship. In this regard, this article builds on a literature that aims to understand how access to the state is mediated through multiple social institutions, including kinship and family relations, and the specific social status ascribed to these social identities (Harriss-White, 2003; Van Klinken, 2014). It has been argued elsewhere that Philippine politics is a “family affair” (McCoy, 1993), with politics at different levels—but arguably more so on the local level—dominated by alliances between powerful and less powerful families, bound together by intermarriage and patron-client ties. According to McCoy (1993: 9-10), the emergence of powerful political family dynasties in the Philippines can be explained by reference to the growing importance of rents in the Philippine economy. Rents are defined by McCoy as restrictive state licenses that allow holders to gain a monopoly or oligopoly over particular markets. In other words, McCoy argues that privileged access to the state enables privileged control over markets by one and the same elite coalition. For specific historical reasons, in the Philippines, this elite coalition is dominated by extended family networks. Crucially, due to this specific “oligarchic” nature of the state in the Philippines, the supposed distinction between formal state institutions and non-state market institutions becomes a highly artificial one, as overarching kinship structures colonise both spheres.

Taking up these theoretical insights about local state institutions as both a structure of accumulation and an instrument for the legitimization of public authority, which are firmly embedded in the local social fabric, we will now turn to our empirical analysis of local politics in North Cotabato and Compostela Valley provinces.

Local politics in rebel territory: Confrontation, accomodation and collusion

The MNLF, the MILF and the rise of commander politics in Midsayap, North Cotabato *(Post-)colonial state building and the Datu strongmen*

The Spaniards never really gained a foothold in Mindanao, and it was only with the advent of American colonialism in the early 20th Century that successful attempts were made to integrate the island into the colonial body politic. American state-building efforts revolved around a strategy of indirect rule through a traditional Muslim elite, the so-called *datu*s, who were

gradually incorporated in the colonial administration (Abinales, 2009, 2010). In exchange for pacifying the locality and making the colonial state acceptable in Muslim communities, the *datus* could reinforce their political and economic pre-eminence by relying on privileged access to the financial and coercive resources, as well as the legal-bureaucratic authority inherent to statehood.

This strategy of indirect rule persisted after independence in 1946, albeit under different modalities, with Muslim elites becoming incorporated in a nascent mass democracy (McKenna, 1998; Abinales, 2010). Local politics in Muslim Mindanao increasingly gravitated towards “politics as usual”, as practiced elsewhere in the Philippines, organised around factional competition between family alliances embedded in political party networks that stretch all the way to congress and act as prime vehicles for the disbursement of patronage (Beckett, 1993). In the post-war decades, this highly elitist constellation guaranteed the legitimacy of the Philippine nation-state in Muslim Mindanao, with the region enjoying a considerable degree of socio-political stability. These observations already represent an important qualification of the dominant historical narrative of Muslim Mindanao as one of eternal resistance against (post-)colonial state intrusion. Instead, Muslim elites were engaged in a delicate balancing act: While maintaining a degree of autonomy from Manila, they also sought to capitalise on access to the state as a strategic resource to expand their political and economic preeminence, inevitably leading to their integration in the mainstream body politic.

Martial law and the emergence of Muslim separatist movements

This mutual accommodation between Muslim “politicos” and the (post-)colonial state came under increasing strain from the late 1960s onwards (Abinales, 2000). Mounting tensions were particularly apparent in the province of Cotabato, where post-independence politics had been dominated by the powerful Pendatun and Matalam families, which acted as a bridge between Manila and the Muslim population, and could tap into the state’s resource base to appease the local population (Beckett, 1993: 295-296; McKenna, 1998: 130). Due to various factors, the Pendatun-Matalam coalition gradually lost its pre-eminence to a nascent Christian settler elite. From the 1950s onwards, there was a massive influx of Christian migrants that sought to escape a mounting social crisis in other parts of the peninsula (Wernstedt and Simkins, 1965). Many of these migrants ended up in the fertile valleys of Cotabato, where the Muslim population was minoritised by the early 1960s (Borras and Gutierrez, 2004). Land pressures were mounting, with many Christian settlers obtaining private property titles, to the detriment of the native pagan and Muslim communities, that were increasingly facing dispossession.

While this process of dispossession was an important cause for the start of the Muslim rebellion in the late 1960s (Rodil, 2004; Borrás *et al.*, 2011), this rebellion cannot be divorced from a broader logic of electoral politics. Christian demographic growth went hand in hand with the rise of a Christian political class, sections of which garnered the support of the Marcos regime (Mckenna, 1998; Franco, 2001: 223). This changing political landscape risked leaving important sections of the Muslim elite bereft of privileged access to the state. Partly for this reason, Muslim elites accepted the subdivision of Cotabato in a Christian-dominated south and a Muslim-dominated north in 1965 (Abinales, 2000: 164). By 1971, however, Muslims also lost the electoral edge in North Cotabato when Carlos Cajelo, with the blessing of president Marcos, was elected as the first Christian provincial governor (Beckett, 1993: 297). In preparation for the 1971 elections, several Christian mayors in North Cotabato, together with the Philippine constabulary, supported the formation of vigilante groups known as *Ilaga* (“rats”), which formed the vanguard for the increasingly violent dispossession of Muslim communities and for a concomitant expansion of Christian political-territorial control (Franco, 2001: 215-221). Often the evicted lands were converted into private property for Christians, preventing Muslim communities from returning to their land once the violence had settled down.

In response to their looming loss of political-territorial clout *vis-à-vis* Christian settler elites, sections of the disenfranchised Muslim elites resorted to identity politics. Presenting himself as the protégé of the Muslim population, long-time governor of Cotabato Udtog Matalam initiated the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) in 1968. In addition, local Muslim elites also created vigilante units (Franco, 2001: 222). The ensuing tit-for-tat violence between Christian and Muslim vigilantes was one of the key arguments for the Marcos regime to declare martial law in 1972. Later that year, radical Muslim students established the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a guerilla army that vowed to fight for an independent “Bangsamoro” or “Muslim nation”. The MNLF launched a series of attacks on military outposts, to which the Marcos regime responded by declaring open war against the MNLF. This also entailed the creation of paramilitary Civilian Home Defense Forces (CHDF), which played a major role in what is best described as the “ethnic cleansing” of large parts of North Cotabato. The Muslim population was increasingly displaced to the remote border regions with the neighbouring provinces of Lanao del Sur, Sultan Kudarat and Maguindanao, where the MNLF found fertile grounds for recruitment (Franco, 2001: 223).

The MNLF’s establishment put elite Muslim families in a bit of a spot: “If they supported the martial law government they risked rebel retaliation and the loss of political

legitimacy. If they supported the rebels, they invited government reprisals and the forfeiture of their political positions” (McKenna, 1998: 162-163). Thus, their response was mixed. Some rejected the rebellion and threw in their lot with the martial law regime (for a case study on Lanao, see Carter Bentley, 1993). Others adopted a more ambiguous stance, paying lip service to Muslim grievances while rejecting the radical demands of the MNLF, while advocating a stance of “critical collaboration” *vis-à-vis* the regime. A third group, which mainly comprised of younger students and who openly criticised the moderate stance of the traditional Muslim elite, opted to join the rebellion. This strategic manoeuvring by large parts of the Muslim elite remained as the war progressed. Importantly, this cannot only be explained solely on the basis of self-interest on the part of these elites. Instead, while some Muslim politicians were not keen on joining an armed rebellion and preferred the comfort and security of political office, others were very much aware that a continuation of direct armed confrontation would only result in more bloodshed, and that a rapprochement with the Philippine state was ultimately inevitable.

Hence, pretty soon after the proclamation of Martial Law, the MNLF-leadership entered into peace negotiations with the Marcos regime, eventually resulting in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement. This presented the MNLF-elite with opportunities to renegotiate the terms and conditions of its integration in the Philippine state. Vice versa, the agreement presented the Marcos regime with additional leeway to invite the “surrender” of MNLF-commanders. For this reason the regime developed the so-called “attraction and amnesty” programmes, which were meant to absorb former MNLF-fighters in local political structures. These programmes attracted thousands of returnees (so-called *balikbayan*), including the former vice-chairman of the MNLF Abul Khayr Alonto (Molloy, 1988). Ultimately, this policy of attraction led to a further fragmentation of MNLF structures, which increasingly came to resemble a loose coalition of local factions and commanders detached from the central command, cultivating relations with local politicians (Noble, 1981; Molloy, 1988). Ultimately, Marcos’ downfall in 1986 opened the way for more serious negotiations with the MNLF, which eventually led to the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989, and a final peace agreement in 1996 that saw the integration of approximately 5,750 ex-combatants in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) (Hall, 2014).

Meanwhile, the peace process failed to satisfy some of the more radical elements within the MNLF. In 1977, several MNLF leaders disgruntled with the peace talks formed a breakaway group: the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF vowed to continue the rebellion against the Philippine state under the leadership of the late Hashim Salamat. The MILF’s popularity received a boost after the establishment of the ARMM in 1989. The eventual

ARMM was a heavily diluted territorial entity compared to what was originally envisioned in the 1976 Tripoli Agreement: Following a plebiscite, it only included the provinces of Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, later (in 2001) joined by the island of Basilan (except for Isabela city) and the city of Marawi (Rood, 2012: 257-258). Furthermore, the ARMM and its MNLF leadership were increasingly facing allegations of corruption and mismanagement, leading to their further de-legitimation in the eyes of large sections of Muslim society, which became increasingly susceptible for MILF recruitment (Bertrand, 2000; Lara, 2014). Yet, despite their more “radical” stance, by the end of the 1990s the MILF leadership had also entered into peace negotiations with the government. Failing to satisfy either one of the warring parties, these negotiations were interrupted by episodes of open armed confrontation in 2000, 2003 and 2008. Only as recently as October 2012, a peace agreement was finally signed, and the two parties are now no longer officially at war. In September 2014, this peace agreement culminated in a legal framework, the “Bangsamoro Basic Law” that, pending the approval of Congress and the Supreme Court, should enable the creation of a new Bangsamoro autonomous region that will replace the current ARMM.

To summarise, with this short historical overview we have tried to illustrate that Muslim elites, rather than simply resisting their integration in the (post-)colonial state framework, were intimately involved in state-building efforts. Even the separatist Muslim rebellions, while usually seen as a radical rejection of the Philippine nation-state, can in part be understood as an effort on the part of disenfranchised Muslim elites to reclaim their formerly privileged position inside the state. At the same time, ordinary people’s support for the MNLF rebellion was primarily informed by a sense of profound injustice caused by dispossession and government oppression. As a former MNLF rebel explained: “After Martial law, it was declared that all the Bangsamoro should be killed ... Even the students in Cotabato city were being killed during that time. All the Bangsamoro quit from studying. Not only the male students, also the female students were being killed. All of them have the feeling they have to defend themselves. That was why I joined the MNLF. No choice.”⁴

Democratisation, decentralisation and the rise of commander politics

Dynamics in Midsayap were very much in line with those elsewhere in (North) Cotabato, with a first, peaceful face of Christian in-migration, wherein many migrants entered into tenancy

⁴ Interview Bapa Ibrahim, Cotabato City, 21 August 2014.

arrangements with Muslim landowners that were considered as mutually beneficial. By the 1970s, as land became more scarce, the settlement process took a violent turn. With the support of Christian mayor Dequiña, Christian settlers formed the Ilaga (Rodil, 2004: 187); while young Muslim men joined the “Blackshirts”, which were later absorbed in the MNLF. However, Muslim resistance proved impotent in the face of the shrewd counterinsurgency tactics of the martial law regime, which increasingly relied on the brutal paramilitary Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF). The resulting violence led to the displacement of the Muslim population to neighbouring Maguindanao province, particularly to the municipality of Datu Piang.

After 1976, this policy of confrontation was complemented by the aforementioned amnesty programmes, which aimed at inviting the surrender of MNLF commanders. In Midsayap, the local MNLF strongman, Kumander Dante, heeded the call to join the government side. The dissolution of Dante’s leadership led to a fragmentation of local MNLF structures, with several of Dante’s subordinates (by the names of Abusama, Tubog and Harrison) appropriating “commandership” themselves and folding back on their own territorial fief. By the mid-1980s, southern Midsayap had effectively been transformed into a patchwork of competing territorial units, organised around the military might of “commanders” with increasingly indistinct affiliations. As one respondent stated: “Some are in the army, others are in the MNLF or in the MILF. Since the end of martial law there are also more commanders with plenty of weapons who are independent.”⁵ These local commanders were mainly preoccupied with localised struggles over territory and the people and resources residing inside it. It was in this heavily militarised and fragmented context that democratisation and decentralisation were introduced.

The first barangay elections after the restoration of democracy were postponed until 1989 for logistical reasons. They passed off without major upheaval mainly, respondents claimed, because of the lack of incentives to run for barangay positions, which were not yet remunerated. Nonetheless, in barangay Mudsing the elections turned out to be a harbinger for the conflict that came to grip major parts of Midsayap for years to come. Dagalas Urgad, the acting barangay captain under the Marcos regime, was defeated by Abusama Mangadta, an MNLF commander. Urgad was “dishonoured” by this loss and turned to his cousins, who had completed their military training in Malaysia, for support. They were joined by commander

⁵ Interview with civil society members of barangay Nabalawag, Cotabato City, 1 March 2013.

Tubog, Abusama's former MNLF companion who had allegedly joined the MILF in the second half of the 1990s—although others claimed Tubog was simply a ruthless criminal, cattle-rustler and *jueteng* (a gambling game) bigwig. Abusama in turn coalesced with commander Asraf Tayuan, a high-ranking MNLF commander who maintained close ties with Nur Misuari, was acting barangay captain of Kudarangan, and later joined the MILF as well.

Throughout the 1990s, the conflict between the Abusama/Tayuan alliance and the Dagalas Urgad/Tubog alliance escalated into a full-blown turf war, displacing local inhabitants who evacuated to the neighbouring barangays of Nabalawag, Nes, Tugal and Lower Glad. The violence further intensified in the run-up to the 1992 elections, the first to be held after the Local Government Code of 1991, which were eventually won by Abusama. Respondents unanimously agreed that decentralisation, and more specifically the introduction of internal revenue allotments (IRA) and monthly stipends for barangay officials, had immensely raised the stakes of “capturing” the local state.⁶ The direct involvement of these commanders in local politics also presented them with opportunities to strengthen their coercive capacity, as control over barangay-level politics allowed them to legitimise their armed subordinates, transforming them into (supposedly unarmed) Civilian Volunteer Organisations (CVOs) (also known as *barangay tanods*). In short, control over local state institutions had a galvanising effect on the resource base and the political-territorial clout of both alliances, contributing to a further escalation of the conflict.

To fully comprehend the machinations of electoral politics in this volatile environment, attention also needs to be paid to the interaction between different local government levels. Commander Abusama had entered into an alliance with the Dequiña family, the dominant Christian political dynasty at the municipal level. In exchange for delivering the Dequiñas the local vote, Abusama was allegedly supplied with money and weapons. Indeed, local commanders, who typically exert high degrees of territorial control, came to play a leading role in vote brokerage. During a focus group discussion, one respondent stated that, “Commanders are supported financially by politicians. With this money they can buy weapons, but now they also buy big cars. It is still very common for politicians to work with commanders.”⁷ In the early 1990s, Abusama and his peers in neighbouring barangays could also capitalise on ongoing counterinsurgency operations. AFP battalions and paramilitary Citizen Armed Force

⁶ Interview with Civil Society Members of barangay Tugal, Cotabato City, 12 March 2013.

⁷ Interview with political leaders of barangay Upper Labas, municipality of Midsayap, 8 March 2013.

Geographic Units (CAFGUs)⁸—primarily composed of Christian residents from barangays Nes and Salunaya, as well as Abusama’s own men—would not only set up camp in their territory, they also targeted their enemies under the guise of counterinsurgency operations against the MILF.⁹

An important factor enabling the rise of “commander-politicians” was the aforementioned fragmentation of the MNLF, and its gradual absorption into state structures. The concomitant decrease in the frequency and intensity of counterinsurgency operations provided room for the penetration of the MILF in selected barangays in Midsayap. For certain families and personalities, particularly those that did not reap the benefits of this rapprochement between the MNLF and the state, the rise of the MILF provided opportunities to contest existing political-territorial arrangements. The 1994 elections in Nabalawag, for example, were “a very tense affair”, with the barangay captain being challenged by a candidate associated with the MILF.¹⁰ One of the main reasons fuelling the conflict between Abusama and Tubog was the refusal by Commander Dante (their former superior in the MNLF who now occupied an important position inside the ARMM) to grant the latter access to the 1996 reintegration programme; whereas the former was reaping the benefits of the programme. Tubog, therefore, seceded from the MNLF and subsequently turned to the MILF.¹¹ While Tubog’s precise affiliation with the MILF remains unclear—some claimed he merely acted as a “guide” assisting the movement’s penetration in Midsayap¹²—it is nonetheless clear that several MILF commanders were amongst his close allies and that his rising influence went hand in hand with MILF expansion in Midsayap. Ultimately, Abusama’s murder in 1998 reignited a gradual shift of power towards the Tubog alliance, which began to appropriate power in Mudsing and the surrounding Muslim-dominated barangays. This resulted in another armed confrontation in 2001 between Tubog and Puwa Mangadta, a relative of the aforementioned Commander Abusama, who was now on the side of the MILF (Unson, 2001). In the 2002 elections, Tubog became barangay captain in Tugal, while his wife defeated Abusama’s brother in Mudsing and his close allies became the dominant political players in nearby barangays of Rangaban and Nes. Ultimately, Tubog was murdered in April 2006.

⁸ After the CHDF was disbanded in 1987, it was decided that it needed a successor. Hence, the creation of the CAFGU under the tutelage of the Philippine Army.

⁹ Interview with a relative of Abusama, Cotabato City, 16 April 2013.

¹⁰ Interview with political leaders of barangay Nabalawag, Cotabato City, 4 March 2013.

¹¹ Interview with political leaders of barangay Tugal, Cotabato City, 12 March 2013.

¹² Individual interview with a former MNLF rebel leader, 13 August 2014.

As a result of this rivalry between the Tubog and the Abusama alliance in the second half of the 1990s, southern Midsayap witnessed a further bout in political violence, which left at least seven barangay officials and many more regular people dead. Apart from these intermittent violence clashes, this type of commander politics also had a huge influence on different aspects of daily life, with people particularly complaining about the high levels of extortion that were accompanied by constant intimidation. For instance, every harvest time, aides of the commanders entered peoples' houses with empty sacks that were then supposed to be filled.¹³ This put a heavy burden on these communities that were already affected by high levels of poverty.¹⁴ Next, this type of socio-political environment proved to be polarising and resulted in strong societal divides, which were defined along loose family relations. Next, these societal divides also had a clear spatial definition. Importantly, for this specific case at least, these emerging alliances cannot be understood as being based on reciprocal patron-client relations. Rather, these can best be described as what a respondent referred to as the establishment of "small empires",¹⁵ wherein free and fair elections were a mere fiction and these commanders/local politicians acted as true autocrats. Therefore, for the majority of respondents, the emergence of these feuds and highly autonomous commanders/politicians throughout the 1990s were remembered with bitterness. This was not only because of the negative effects this had on daily livelihoods and fundamental democratic rights, but for many people, these feuds came to symbolise a diversion from a legitimate struggle for the rights of the Bangsamoro people towards a pointless intra-Muslim conflict driven by greed.

In sum, this concise historical overview of the Abusama versus Tubog feud illustrates that binary distinctions between "informal" rebel groups and "formal" state institutions do not stand up to empirical scrutiny. Instead, the conflict described above took place between shifting family alliances involving commanders belonging to either one (or none) of the rebel movements and/or to the state. In other words, in a volatile political environment like that of Midsayap in the 1990s and early 2000s, maintaining access to both state and rebel structures is vital for the construction and maintenance of local political-territorial authority. So far this point has been illustrated for individuals bridging the state-rebel divide through their engagement as commander-politicians. In other instances, however, this divide is being bridged through kinship/family connections. The aforementioned Mangadta family is a case in point.

¹³ Interview with a resident of Midsayap/civil society member, Cotabato City, 31 January 2014.

¹⁴ Interview with political leaders of barangay Tugal, Cotabato City, 12 March 2013.

¹⁵ Interview with a relative of Abusama, Cotabato City, 28 January 2014.

While Abusama had decided “to join the government side”,¹⁶ his younger brother Tamarudin put forward the objective of becoming an MNLF commander—an ambition thwarted by the acting MNLF commanders at the time. Another brother of Abusama, Junie Mangadta, also had the ambition of becoming an MILF commander. After the 1996 peace agreements, this strategy whereby families cultivate connections simultaneously inside the government and inside armed groups could be witnessed throughout the province. Another example is that of Jimmy Matalam, the grandson of the aforementioned Udtog Matalam (the founder of the Muslim Independence Movement), who decided to become part of the AFP after having served as an MNLF commander for several years—while also working as a government official at the same time. However, rather than simply switching sides from the MNLF to the government, the Matalam family became involved in a delicate balancing act, maintaining allegiances inside both the Philippine state, the MNLF and the MILF. Here, as suggested in the preceding sections, public authority can only be understood as a hybrid, with traditional authority (the Matalam family is considered to be a noble family) being combined with militaristic authority (through links with the MILF and the MNLF) and ultimately with the legal bureaucratic-authority inherent to statehood. Responding to questions regarding his allegiance, Jimmy Matalam replied: “To the family, secondary is the group. But we use the organisation (AFP) as our shield. And also, some in our family, most belong to politicians. So we also use the government as a shield. And the MNLF, and the MILF.”¹⁷ This quote indicates that in a volatile socio-political environment such as that of central and western Mindanao, people try to navigate between different institutional fields, including both rebel movements and the state. Throughout this entire balancing act, as indicated by Matalam himself, kinship/family structures continue to fulfil a vital role.

The New People’s Army in Compostela Valley province

The emergence of a settler elite in the Davao region

Compared with Muslim Mindanao, very little is known about the socio-political history of eastern Mindanao. Few available sources suggest that, like in Muslim Mindanao, the penetration of state structures started with the advent of U.S. colonialism. Rather than relying on indigenous “collaboration”, however, this process of state penetration was spearheaded by

¹⁶ Interview with a relative of Abusama, Cotabato City, 28 January 2014.

¹⁷ Interview with Jimmy Matalam, Cotabato City, 1 September 2014.

a Christian settler elite that worked in tandem with American colonial officials and American- and Japanese planter interests (Abinales, 2000; Tiu, 2005). As in Cotabato, in-migration increased massively in the post-war decades, with migrant settlers gradually moving inland, including into present-day Compostela Valley province (Wernstedt and Simkins, 1965). As fertile valley lands were gradually occupied, migrants pushed into the uplands, home to the region's indigenous tribes. Different factors contributed to a significant degree of socio-political stability. In addition to the availability of excess land and the existence of communal solidarity ties, the Davao region saw the emergence of strongmen-politicians that fulfilled a vital role in defusing potential social tensions. As in Cotabato some years earlier, however, this stability was upset in the late 1970s and particularly in the 1980s.

Martial law and the rise of the NPA in eastern Mindanao

The New People's Army (NPA) was established on 29 March 1969 on the northern island of Luzon, as the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). It has waged a protracted people's war against the Philippine government for over 45 years, making it the longest-running Maoist insurgency in the world (ICG, 2011). The CPP-NPA is a political inasmuch as a military force: true to Maoist doctrine, it aims to extend its political influence over the countryside, eventually encircling and taking over the cities. Since the end of the Marcos regime in 1986, the National Democratic Front (NDF), the umbrella organisation of the left in the Philippines, has been engaged in "intermittent and inconclusive" peace negotiations with the national government. However, the only major achievements to date have been the signing of a Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) in 1998, and intermittent cease-fire agreements (ICG, 2011).

Initially concentrating their efforts on Luzon and the Visayas, CPP-NPA-organisers gradually found their way to Mindanao, and by the early 1980s eastern and central Mindanao had become one of the movement's strongholds. The CPP-NPA even made inroads into Davao City, the regional urban hub and the third city of the country (ICG, 2011). The CPP-NPA's rapid expansion in Mindanao can be related to a number of factors (Kerkvliet, 1986; Magno and Gregor, 1993). For one, demographic growth due to natural reproduction and in-migration, combined with the expansion of logging, mining and plantation agriculture, led to a gradual exhaustion of the land frontier. Combined with a worldwide commodities crisis, this increased pressures on smallholder farmers, who faced the prospect of dispossession. Meanwhile the Marcos regime was failing to deliver vital public services, particularly in remote upland areas,

and state institutions were widely seen to serve the interests of regional elites supportive of the martial law regime, many of whom were associated with the extractive industries that displaced the local population. Military and paramilitary forces were reverting to increasingly brutal strategies, and while partly successful in isolating part of the NPA's (potential) mass base (Masa), this ultimately increased anti-government sentiment among the population. In this polarised environment, the NPA provided a recourse for the poor, a protection mechanism against land grabbing, cattle rustling, military abuse and exploitation writ large.

Despite this anti-elitist agenda, Rosanne Rutten noted that, "Alliances with elite politicians and landlords in villages and municipalities have always formed a necessary but problematic survival strategy for cadres" (2008: 23). Similarly, Marks observes that while "initial recruits were reacting to the increased authoritarianism of the Marcos administration ... the movement's ranks grew to include local politicians and priests dissatisfied with the government" (1993: 109). In all, however, existing evidence suggests that the presence of a massive pool of aggrieved (rural) poor was the main factor fuelling the expansion of the NPA. Gradually but surely, then, the CPP-NPA managed to extend its influence over eastern Mindanao, particularly in the uplands. In so-called "red areas" where the movement was in near-complete control, it set up revolutionary forms of rebel governance, meting out revolutionary justice, and even implementing a revolutionary land reform agenda (Marks, 1993). In between these rebel-controlled territories and those controlled by the regime and its local allies lay a "twilight zone", where territorial authority was contested, and where most of the actual fighting took place (Grossman, 1999).

The post-martial law era: The demise of the "old" and the rise of the "new" NPA

The end of martial law in 1986 heralded a profound crisis in the left (movement?), because "the legal, democratic channels of claim-making were now restored, the dictatorship dismantled, and the need for an armed uprising against a dictatorial state removed" (Rutten, 2008: 301). The new context sparked intense divisions within the CPP-NPA, eventually culminating, in the early 1990s, in a schism between more moderate "rejectionists" that adopted a rather pragmatic approach towards the new political order, and radical "reaffirmists" who renewed their commitment to Maoist doctrine and armed resistance (Rutten, 2001, 2008). In Mindanao, this crisis was exacerbated by Kampanyang Ahas, a bloody internal purge aimed at rooting out alleged military spies, which left hundreds of cadres dead and convinced many others to quit the movement (Abinales, 1996, 2008). On the counterinsurgency front, the democratic governments of Corazon Aquino (1986-1992) and Fidel Ramos (1992-1998)

adopted a multi-pronged strategy, combining local development projects with military prowess (Magno and Gregor, 1993). In eastern Mindanao, as in other regions, the restoration of democracy on the local level went hand in hand with the organisation of *Alsa Masa*—Tagalog for “masses arise”, a riposte to the communist *Masa*—vigilante units that assisted official law enforcement agencies and local elites in their fight against the NPA (van der Kroef, 1988; Hedman and Sidel, 2000). These militias were later absorbed into auxiliary or paramilitary forces, like the CVO and CAFGU, which continued to operate under the close supervision of local elected politicians (Kreuzer, 2009). These paramilitary structures also offered refuge to former NPAs who wanted to lead normal lives under the protective gaze of the state. In contrast, “For political entrepreneurs, former NPAs are attractive candidates for such positions, because of their skills and reputation for bravery” (Rutten, 2001: 331). Together, these trends led to a notable reduction in the number of NPA regulars nationwide, from an estimated 25,000 in the mid-1980s to approximately one fourth of that a decade later (Santos, 2010). In Mindanao, as well, the combination of internal purges and counterinsurgency efforts had dramatically reduced the CPP-NPA’s military strength.

Rather than leading to its complete demise, however, the decade of decline eventually gave rise to a leaner, and according to some observers a more determined NPA, which was able to reverse the trend of decline (Santos, 2010). Its resurgence was particularly spectacular in eastern Mindanao which, depending on the estimates, was again home to 1,500-6,000 communist rebels by the end of the 1990s (Espejo, 2008). Some observers now suggest that the NPA’s military strength in Mindanao now rivals if not exceeds that of the 1980s (Espejo, 2011). In recent years, this renewed military strength became apparent in a long series of NPA attacks that often involved dozens of well-armed regulars, targeting (amongst others) large-scale mining companies (Lim, 2014), plantations (“NPA attacks Del Monte”, 2013), and selected local politicians (“NPA admits killing”, 2014) and/or traditional leaders (Manlupig, 2014).

Competing causal explanations exist for the persistence of the NPA in places like Samar, Negros and eastern Mindanao, although most observers seem to agree that revolutionary fervour is no longer a major factor. For some, the grievances fuelling the erstwhile expansion of the NPA in the 1970s-1980s still matter a great deal today, with poverty and landlessness, poor governance, injustice and military abuse guaranteeing a steady supply of recruits (Holden, 2013). At the same time, a shift in terms of membership has been noted. Whereas earlier NPA recruits often had educated, urban, middle-class backgrounds, and hailed from outside Mindanao, today’s recruits are often young local men from poor rural backgrounds for whom

rebellion represents one of the few available livelihood opportunities (Santos, 2010). This observation in turn feeds into explanations that treat the communist rebellion as opportunity or even greed driven, depicting the rebellion as a “mafia” (Rosales, 2004) or a “business-like enterprise” (Magno, 2007) that is primarily interested in extorting revolutionary taxes. Significantly, the NPA now collects “permit-to-campaign fees” or “election fees” from local politicians, the costs of which depend on the eyed position and the candidate’s financial capacity, ranging anywhere from P 10,000 into millions (Hookway, 2004; Magno, 2007). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that in some areas, the NPA is demanding a regular share of local government revenues. Finally, Magno (2007) suggested that local insurgent units have reverted to bartering votes from within “their” territory in exchange for money, guns and/or political support for leftist party list candidates. Reminiscent of the situation in North Cotabato, these attempts on the part of the NPA to tap into decentralised state resources are a first way in which distinctions between the local state and rebel structures have blurred in the post-transition, decentralisation era.

Together, these different observations provide us with initial insights into the reasons for the CPP-NPA’s persistence in eastern Mindanao. However, these explanations fail to account for the complexity that now characterises the interaction between communist rebel- and local state structures, which may in fact be a factor in its own right facilitating the CPP-NPA’s survival. In what follows, we aim to illustrate that in Compostela Valley Province, communist rebels have become an intricate part of the indistinct politico-military-commercial networks that now dominate the informal gold mining economy. Significantly, since decentralisation and democratisation, local miner-politicians have come to occupy a central position within these networks, using the state’s capacity as a coercive and legitimising structure to protect the otherwise informal small-scale mining sector.

State-rebel synergies in small-scale mining networks

The dramatic expansion of small-scale gold mining in the Mindanao uplands from the 1980s onwards was chiefly the product of a profound political and economic crisis: For the rural poor, it provided a vital source of income, while urban merchant elites saw a potentially very lucrative activity that provided them with easy access to foreign exchange (Verbrugge, 2014). Important for our purposes is that the initial expansion of small-scale mining took place in the volatile 1980s, when the uplands were home to different armed groups exercising varying degrees of territorial control, prime amongst which the Philippine army and the NPA. Initially, the NPA was in firm control over some of the mining areas. In Pantukan, the NPA was in

charge of allocating mining claims.¹⁸ Furthermore, according to one respondent, as an NPA supporter you were given a bonus every Friday, sometimes amounting to as much as 15-20 grams of gold.¹⁹ As the 1980s progressed, however, the army gradually extended its influence over the uplands. While this often involved significant fighting, at least in the gold rush areas of Compostela Valley, the logic of insurgency and counterinsurgency never really took root.

The Diwalwal gold rush area in Monkayo municipality, by far the biggest and most notorious gold rush area in the Philippines, provides a good illustration. As early as 1987, a reporter from the *Washington Post* noted that “soldiers are digging alongside their adversaries from the Communist New People’s Army (NPA), who have taken a break from their fight to overthrow the capitalist system in order to pan for a little gold” (Richburg, 1987). The lack of clear-cut regulatory order in Diwalwal, and the proliferation of conflicts between tunnel operators induced a “market of protection” (Shah, 2006), which offered opportunities for policemen, soldiers and rebels alike. Aside from providing protection-cum-extortion services to tunnel operators, some higher-ranking cadres within these groups started investing in their own tunnelling and processing activities. As easily accessible alluvial deposits became exhausted, Diwalwal saw a violent phase of cartel formation, with mining financiers and armed actors pooling their resources in an effort to strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* their competitors.²⁰ These different mining groups formed what is best described as private armies, whose task consisted not only in monitoring the labour force, but also in protecting the tunnels from outside intrusion, and fighting rival mining groups in “underground encounters”.²¹ These private armies were often composed of rag-tag bands of (former) communist and Muslim rebels, soldiers and policemen, giving rise to the enigmatic “fusion groups” and “lost commands” that soon became ubiquitous throughout the region.

To summarise, already during the martial law regime and the uncertain transition period that followed it, there was a blurring of the divide between insurgent and counter-insurgent forces in Compostela Valley’s gold mining areas. The availability of gold rents seems to have induced a process of fragmentation in the different armed groups active in the region, with local actors renouncing top-down hierarchies and becoming absorbed in regional political-commercial networks built around small-scale gold mining (Le Billon, 2001). This process of

¹⁸ Interview with a former Pantukan miner, Pantukan, 19 November 2012.

¹⁹ Interview with a former Pantukan miner, New Bataan, 22 January 2014.

²⁰ Interview with a former legal aide of Compostela Valley governor, Tagum City, 29 October 2012.

²¹ This account derives from several interviews with miners formerly or currently active in Diwalwal.

fragmentation was also facilitated by trends within these different groups. Nearing the end of the Marcos era, local army detachments received were increasingly expected to fend for themselves. In addition, Marks noted, “In the absence of any other viable government presence, it was the battalions which became, like so many warlords, the rulers of their domains” (1993: 125). In the case of the NPA, a strategy of decentralisation initiated by the movement leadership in the early 1980s resulted in a significant degree of autonomy for local commanders and their following (Tiglao, 1993). At the same time, after the end of the Cold War and the loss of external funding, the CPP-NPA came to rely heavily on domestic revenue sources and small-scale gold mining soon became a vital source of revolutionary taxes (ICG, 2011).

This blurring of divides became more pronounced in the post-decentralisation era, when several of the key players involved in these small-scale mining networks entered the political-electoral arena. Compostela Valley (which became a separate province only in 1998) witnessed the gradual emergence of a class of miner-politicians and, as of today, the provincial governor, several provincial board members, municipal mayors and municipal board members and countless barangay officials are known to be involved in small-scale mining, either as financiers or as owners of processing plants or gold-buying stations. Particularly in recent years, these miner-politicians have started using the coercive and regulatory machinery of the local state to legitimise and protect the otherwise informal mining sector (Verbrugge, 2015). In different mining areas, barangay officials started actively registering and sanctioning agreements between financiers and informal surface land claimants, and they now play an important role in conflict mediation, relying on the CVO to maintain peace and order. For example, as one landowner recalled: “At one time a Korean financier entered my land without an agreement to set up a big tunnelling operation. Barangay officials went there to have a meeting and told him to leave.”²² In another instance, the barangay settled a conflict over royalty rights from a tunnel located on the boundary of two adjacent plots, by convening the parties involved—i.e., landowners and the financiers—and by working out a sharing scheme.²³ What is important here is that these regulatory interventions, which invariably draw upon the coercive and legitimising strength of the state, imbue small-scale gold mining with a sense of legitimacy and regulatory predictability. At the same time, the barangay’s authority to maintain regulatory order cannot be divorced from its entanglement with local kinship structures, as it

²² Interview with a landowner, Nabunturan, 2 October 2012.

²³ Interview with a landowner, Nabunturan, 22 November 2012.

is typically dominated by a coalition of local landowning families, who often have a stake in small-scale gold mining.

Meanwhile particularly on the barangay level, relations between local politicians and communist rebels are not simply characterised by antagonism, but often involve a degree of negotiation, coordination and, in some cases, even mutual accommodation. Barangay officials repeatedly indicated that they had no choice but to “negotiate” with everyone: the army, the police, higher-ranking politicians, but also the NPA. One even hinted at a tacit co-existence between the NPA and the CVO, the barangay-sanctioned militia: “The NPA respects that the centre of the barangay is controlled by the CVO, and the NPA respects the influence of the CVO.”²⁴ Many respondents saw essentially no difference between the actions of both groups. Both the CVO and the NPA now solicit—or extort—contributions and revolutionary taxes from small-scale miners, whereas individual members of the CVO, the NPA, but also police officers and even army personnel often figure as portal guards. In this capacity, several respondents suggested, they often play a role in disciplining the workforce. At the same time it puts them in a position to monitor the mining operations as part of their taxation-cum-extortion activities: “You cannot avoid paying to the NPA, because they will often intrude the private armies.”²⁵ Different respondents also confirmed that there exists a high degree of mobility between the rebel movement and local paramilitary groups, the CVO in particular. Even some barangay officials that were interviewed had a history in the armed movement.

What we have attempted to illustrate so far is the existence of a multitude of relations between, on the one hand, local miner-politicians and their backers, in their capacity as financiers and/or as owners of processing facilities and, on the other hand, rebel forces who have a clear interest in small-scale mining as a source of revolutionary taxes, but in some cases also as a personal source of income. Seen from this perspective, the NPA and local miner-politicians also share a mutual interest in fending off the expansion of large-scale mining, which now poses serious threats for the survival of small-scale mining in the region (Verbrugge, 2015). In places like Monkayo, New Bataan and Maco, large-scale mining companies have already had to contend with acts of resistance and even outright violence on the part of what they perceive as small-scale mining interests colluding with communist rebels.

Finally, to fully understand the relationships cross-cutting the state-rebel divide, analytical attention needs to be paid to the wider set of social relations in which both state and

²⁴ Interview with a barangay official and mining financier, Nabunturan, 12 January 2014.

²⁵ Interview with two former miners, Nabunturan, 22 February 2012.

rebel structures are embedded. It was already suggested earlier that local state (particularly barangay) institutions are typically dominated by a coalition of landowning families, many of whom are now engaged in small-scale mining. Meanwhile, whereas many of the erstwhile NPA regulars hailed from outside of the region, many of today's members and supporters (the Masa) are recruited in local communities, which still harbour a massive pool of aggrieved young men and women who potentially see the NPA as a vehicle to struggle for greater social justice, or simply for personal emancipation. As a result, local respondents in many mining areas, including state officials and local militia members, now have cousins, siblings, neighbours, former schoolmates or at least acquaintances within the movement. Consider the example of a *datu* (a traditional leader) with a long and distinguished record as an NPA commander in the 1980s and 1990s, who still maintains contacts within the movement. While several of his cousins are still active inside the NPA, the *datu* himself has acted as an official tribal representative at the municipal level for several years, whereas his daughter was running for a barangay position in the 2013 elections. In short, after a decade-long presence in the province, the NPA has become firmly rooted in the local social fabric, and people have grown accustomed to its presence, which remains, however, somewhat enigmatic not just for an outside researcher, but also for a migrant gold-rush miner: "I know there are lots of NPAs inside the mining areas, but it is very hard to distinguish them. They are all civilians there."²⁶

In contrast with this locally-rooted character of the communist rebels, the army, despite considerable effort to improve community relations, continues to be treated as an outsider by many Comvaleños. The overall sentiment was well captured by a barangay official in a mining area that is known to have a strong NPA-presence: "The army treats this as a red area. And they are right: there is NPA, there is Masa ... Small-scale miners pay revolutionary taxes ... But this is not a warzone, we have a peacekeeping alliance."²⁷ Obviously this has implications for the long-term dynamics of armed conflict. As suggested by a 2011 International Crisis Group report: "Local communities and politicians work around the conflict, often making pragmatic decisions to collaborate with one side or the other or both. This inhibits efforts to quash the insurgency by military and police, whose relations with local government units are fraught" (ICG, 2011: 10). Indeed, different respondents pointed to the existence of direct lines of communication between local paramilitaries who often serve as scouts for the army and the

²⁶ Interview with two former miners, Nabunturan, 22 February 2012.

²⁷ Interview with a barangay official, Nabunturan, 27 January 2014.

NPA, which were aimed primarily at avoiding casualties on either side due to “misunderstandings”.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have critically interrogated the almost intuitive tendency to portray both the Muslim and communist rebellion on the island of Mindanao as diametrically opposed to the Philippine state. Instead, our empirical analysis of local politics in two conflict-affected provinces has revealed a high degree of overlap and mutual entanglement between state and rebel structures.. In an attempt to explain this observation, we have drawn attention to particular trajectories of (post-)colonial state formation that established the local state as a vital tool for accumulation and for the legitimation of public authority. In many ways, the situation described in this article is reminiscent of that in Colombia, where decentralisation has given birth to indistinct coalitions involving local politicians, paramilitaries and, in some cases, even (communist) rebels. On the one hand, the survival and strength of armed actors has come to depend on their ability to tap into state resources (Eaton, 2006) and “state-mediated networks of power” (Ballvé, 2012). Vice versa, local politicians now depend on the coercive strength of these armed actors to solidify their political-territorial control. Rather than being anaemic to processes of state formation, armed actors are becoming embroiled in the further diffusion of the symbolic and normative registers of state rule (Ballvé, 2012). However, we have added a second layer of argumentation, drawing attention to the intricate ways in which state and rebel structures are embedded in the local social fabric, with kinship relations in particular fulfilling a vital bridging role between state and rebel forces. Admittedly, much work remains to be done here, particularly in understanding the relationship between state/rebel forces and other “normative and cognitive orders” (Pertierra, 1999), including those of religion, ethnicity and class.

Meanwhile, while the two cases exhibit important similarities, there are also significant differences with regards to the form and extent of the interaction between state and rebel structures, which was much more direct and intense in North Cotabato, as compared to Compostela Valley. While this may partly be explained by the more radical ideology professed by the Maoist NPA, important clues may also be derived from the underlying economic structure. As suggested by numerous respondents, in the case of North Cotabato and particularly on the level of the barangay, state resources now represent a prime target for private accumulation and patronage, requiring a more direct form of control over the state apparatus. Meanwhile, in Compostela Valley, the local state, while also important as a source of rents in

its own right, also serves as an instrument to stabilise the small-scale gold mining economy, as a vital source of rents for miner-politicians and the NPA alike. In this case, rebels may be more than satisfied with a “live and let live” arrangement with local politicians. The influence of underlying economic structures on the type of state-rebel relationship (and vice versa) is a second promising area of inquiry.

Finally, rebel-influenced or even rebel-held regions often continue to be treated as places of exception within the Philippines. However, as hopefully demonstrated by the case studies presented in this article, these places actually share many of the characteristics of local “politics as usual” as practised elsewhere in the Philippines, i.e., factional competition between constantly shifting family alliances, embedded in vertical patronage networks tied up with political parties (Landé, 1968; McCoy, 1993). Nonetheless, based on the particularly violent type of barangay politics described in the case of North Cotabato in particular, it can be hypothesised that the presence of armed groups risks further exacerbating some of the authoritarian tendencies in Philippine politics.

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