

How to impress a terror network and gain recognition

President Rodrigo Duterte's response may be just what aspiring terror group was waiting for How to impress a terror network and gain recognition



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Armed clashes in the southern Philippines between state security forces and gunmen claiming to have links abroad bring to light the phenomenon of local terror groups trying to gain recognition.

The militarist response of the government, which has declared martial law, might become a "bonus" for the aspiring terror group that has now caught global attention.

What used to be a band of adventurous criminals has become an overnight sensation that may result in the much-coveted recognition, and maybe even funding, from foreign terror networks.

Joseph Franco, a research fellow at the Center of Excellence for National Security, described this week's standoff in Marawi as a "propaganda move" of the Maute group.

"This is a group trying to get the attention of [the so-called Islamic State] in the Middle East," said Franco, adding that "there is nothing here we haven't seen before."

The attack in Marawi is nothing new in this volatile region of the southern Philippines. This week's

conflict actually pales in comparison in terms of firepower to previous clashes.

What surprised many, however, was how the government responded.

There was no martial law declaration when Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) fighters laid siege to the port city of Zamboanga, displacing more than 100,000 people.

The Maute fighters are currently engaged in close-quarter combat with soldiers in Marawi and seem not to be there to fight, but "to show off," said Franco.

The security expert said even the Islamic State (IS) knows that "these guys [the Mautes] do not have the capability."

"They do not control parts of the country so it really [does] not fit into the IS model," said Franco.

And if the government's claim is to be believed, the Mautes did not plan to attack Marawi.

The fighting was a "chance encounter" when security forces tried to arrest top Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon who is hiding in Marawi.

More than a dozen Maute fighters, who were supposed to be guarding Hapilon, surprised the raiders. Sympathizers of the terror group later staged "diversionary attacks."

Unlike the Maute group, the Abu Sayyaf was established in the 1990s by a group of idealist young men who wanted to set up an Islamic region in Mindanao.

The Mautes, meanwhile, used to be a band of "petty criminals" who turned "militants" because of family, clan, and political interests.

They first tried to court the attention of the Islamic State in 2015 when they donned black shirts, waved Islamic State flags, and pledged allegiance to the terror network.

The Maute fighters claim to belong to the Daulah Islamiyah, an organization led by a certain Abdullah Maute, eldest of the brothers Maute.

In 2012, the brothers, in an attempt to break away from the mainstream rebel group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), formed Khalifa Islamiah Mindanao.

Taking up arms runs in the brothers' blood. Their father, Cayamora Maute, used to be a senior official of the MILF, which broke away from the MNLF in 1978 due to ideological differences.

The MNLF was established in the early 1970s by a university professor with a dream of seceding from the Philippines.

In 1997, the MNLF inked a peace deal with the government. The MILF in recent years has also entered into peace negotiations, leaving fighters like the Mautes dismayed.

What then is the option for the hundreds of fighters who felt betrayed by their leaders? Impress groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

But getting international recognition is not easy. Personal ties through studies abroad and marriage to foreign nationals helped but are not enough.

The Maute brothers had to prove that they have the might to impress potential foreign benefactors.

In 2016, the Maute group staged attacks, which displaced thousands of people in hinterland communities of Mindanao. They also took photos of beheadings and posted them on social media.

Although the links started to tighten, it was not enough to threaten the established order, unlike what the MNLF and the MILF did in the past 40 years or so.

Until "accidents" like Marawi happen. The militarist response of President Rodrigo Duterte might be what the Maute group was waiting for.

They have now the international spotlight. Finally, they can be called a terrorist group.

They have burned a Catholic cathedral and a Protestant school, and even kidnapped a priest and several Catholic churchgoers.

Many residents have fled, and for another day, a running gun battle continued to rage in what is supposed to be the country's only Islamic city.

A new terror group is born. The next question Filipinos, and its neighbors in the Southeast Asian region, have to ask is "Are we ready for it?"

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