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## From Rebels to Soldiers: Lessons from the Military Integration of Ex-Combatants in the Philippines and East Timor

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From Nepal to Iraq, the idea of absorbing ex-combatants from non-statutory forces into national armies is gaining policy ground. Either as a peace investment or a counterinsurgency tool, the military integration of former insurgents and militiamen presents vexing security challenges. In 1996 and 2001, the Philippines and East Timor respectively embarked upon parallel projects to absorb former rebels/combatants into their army. Under the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), 5750 ex-combatants and their proxies were integrated into the Philippine army as enlisted men and officers over a three-year period. Under a UN supervised post-conflict framework in East Timor, 650 Falintil combatants were recruited, selected, and trained to comprise the First Battalion of the new army, the Falintil Forças de Defensas de Timor Leste (F-FDTL). The processes underlying these integration/insertion projects were controversial and produced enduring political consequences in both countries.

In the Philippines, the MNLF leaders supplied the list of eligible members drawn through proportional distribution of slots among various commands. The Philippine army waived age, literacy, and height requirements but insisted upon individual surrender of a weapon as prerequisite for training admission. The training featured culturally-sensitive elements (e.g. provision of halal food, religious space, and periods for worship and fasting). Although initially trained as a separate unit, the integratees were absorbed individually into regular forces currently deployed in Mindanao. An international donor-supported reintegration program was also implemented for MNLF members but did not include veterans' benefits or pensions. The integration process was perceived as politicized because it drew unevenly from supporters of rival factions. Rather than disarming ex-combatants, the process exacerbated weapons proliferation as individual recruits acquired weapons by purchase or by loan to comply with the army requirement. Roughly one-tenth of the recruits left the program; many left because of an inability to cope with military life and because they were opposed to fighting against their kin in the Mindanao frontlines.

In East Timor, the insertion process and parallel efforts at disarming and demobilizing the Falintil occurred while at cantonment in Aileu. The Falintil High Command supplied a master list of combatants, and physical, age, and literacy requirements were imposed, resulting in a younger pool of recruits. An international military team provided training while international donors financially underwrote a generous reintegration assistance package with pensions and other benefits for Falintil veterans. The process in East Timor marginalized female Falintil veterans and those who were not present at the cantonment. Further, allegations abound that recruitment heavily

**Rosalie Arcala Hall, Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of the Philippines Visayas, explains that “From Nepal to Iraq, the idea of absorbing ex-combatants from non-statutory forces into national armies is gaining policy ground. Either as a peace investment or a counterinsurgency tool, the military integration of former insurgents and militiamen presents vexing security challenges.”**



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favored those from the Eastern commands. This issue continues to drive political mobilization in East Timor with the dismissal of a subset of ex-Falintils in the army in 2006. These dismissed soldiers, along with veterans excluded from the master list, continue to press for political change.

Significant differences were evident in the two cases. In terms of context, the MNLF integration was part of a largely unaccomplished autonomy project between an ascendant national government and an electorally-disempowered MNLF group beset by internal disputes. In contrast, the Falintil enjoyed widespread public support as liberators and therefore were able to press for greater leverage over the process vis-à-vis the UN administrators. The proportion of intake was smaller for the MNLF, but featured a mix of combatants and proxies selected via a “special” process and later dispersed to various regular army units. By contrast, the ex-Falintils absorbed were all ex-combatants, comprise a separate unit, and were taken in using the same criteria as those used for subsequent recruits for the Second Battalion. International support was present in both, but decisively more comprehensive in East Timor as donors pursued demobilization and disarmament and provided for reintegration programs and pensions for Falintil veterans.

These different trajectories created enduring consequences for the nature of both armies. In the Philippines, being a Muslim is not a strong identity source for the MNLF integreees despite the army’s accommodation for them to freely exercise their religious convictions: members are avowedly loyal, proud, and thankful of the material benefits accrued from being in the army. By contrast, Falintil identity inside East Timor’s new army is contested by veterans, dismissed soldiers, and women ex-combatants who felt marginalized symbolically and materially by the integration process. This perceived marginalization continues to fuel political mobilization in East Timor. In the Philippines, the absorption of Muslim integreees engendered cultural pluralism within the army and improved the institution’s capability to undertake civil-military operations in Mindanao. In East Timor, volatile divisions among ex-Falintils fuel rivalry with the police and threaten the institution’s effectiveness as a force.

The integration projects in the Philippines and East Timor offer valuable lessons for the international community contemplating parallel options vis-à-vis insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq. The absorption of ex-insurgents into the state army feeds into multiple and often competing goals of achieving peace, making the army more effective in addressing security threats, and fomenting “national” identity. If the priority is lasting peace, integration activities must be carried out within a framework that also demobilizes and disarms the entire group, accompanied by a substantial re-integration package for the more numerous proportion of ex-combatants who opt for civilian life. International support to document veterans and a complimentary re-integration policy (monetary and livelihood assistance to veterans and their families) are crucial. Without these guarantees, the token absorption of a few into the state, with the attendant material benefits that come with it, would only create incentives to re-group and re-arm by those left out in the process. Given the fiscal implications and training demands, an integration project must also be carried out with an eye on the entire security force’s orientation and structure to ensure that changes introduced do not produce inter-service rivalry. Furthermore, where integreees comprise an ethnic minority, culturally-sensitive army policies are essential in fostering better relations between integreees and regulars in mixed units.