

Why Peace Agreements Fail: Institutions and Power in the Bangsamoro

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Abstract

Why do ostensibly comprehensive peace agreements fail to become self-enforcing? This paper explains the fragility of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) through Acemoglu's critique of the Political Coase Theorem (PCT): in post-conflict settings, institutions remain endogenous to power and credible external enforcement is scarce. Using a structured-focused comparison and process tracing, the paper analyzes two Bangsamoro "stress tests" between 2023 and 2025 (1) institutional manipulation around leadership and election timing, and (2) credibility shocks in the normalization track—against four comparative cases (Northern Ireland, Aceh, Colombia, Sudan). Recent events include the Supreme Court of the Philippines' 2025 ruling voiding two BARMM redistricting laws and ordering the first parliamentary election no later than 31 March 2026, and the MILF Central Committee's suspension of Phase 4 decommissioning in July–August 2025 over delayed socio-economic delivery. Where external anchors and third-party monitoring were strong (Good Friday Agreement; Aceh's AMM), bargains hardened into rules. Where they were weak (Colombia; Sudan), elites reshaped institutions and diluted commitments. The Bangsamoro trajectory currently resembles the latter. The paper contributes (i) a test of Acemoglu's critique in Southeast Asia; (ii) an operational approach to measuring "institutional insulation" and "commitment credibility"; and (iii) concrete policy mechanisms that link aid and recognition to verifiable milestones in elections and normalization. Without insulation and external enforcement, CAB remains a fragile equilibrium rather than a self-sustaining peace.

Keywords

Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), Credible Commitment, Peace Agreements, Political Coase Theorem

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Introduction

The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), signed in 2014 between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), was hailed as a landmark peace accord. It promised to end decades of insurgency in Mindanao and transform a secessionist movement into a partner in democratic governance. Yet, more than a decade later, the peace it envisioned remains fragile. In March 2025, the removal of MILF chair Ahod “Murad” Ebrahim as interim chief minister—replaced by Abdulraof “Sammy Gambar” Macacua, an ally of Malacañang—signaled renewed central interference in regional leadership (Gomez, 2025). Four months later, the MILF Central Committee suspended the final phase of decommissioning, citing the government’s failure to deliver promised socio-economic packages (Arguillas, 2025a; 2025b; Associated Press, 2025; OPAPRU, 2025). Together, these events exposed how easily the peace’s core pillars—autonomy and normalization—can be unsettled.

The Bangsamoro struggle, rooted in centuries of resistance and exclusion, reflects the enduring challenge of embedding self-determination within a unitary state (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017; McKenna, 1998). Earlier settlements, including the 1996 MNLF accord, collapsed under weak institutions and central manipulation (Che Man, 1990). The CAB sought to avoid this fate by establishing the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) under a parliamentary system.

Yet progress has been uneven. Repeated postponements of BARMM’s first parliamentary elections and judicial reversals on redistricting have raised doubts about autonomy’s credibility (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2025; COMELEC, 2025; IAG & CCAA, 2025). Meanwhile, normalization lags mirror patterns seen in other fragile settlements such as Colombia and Sudan (International Crisis Group, 2024; Kroc Institute, 2024; SIPRI, 2025). These developments underscore Acemoglu’s critique of the Political Coase Theorem: peace agreements fail when institutions remain endogenous to power and commitments lack credible enforcement.

Theoretical Framework

Peace agreements are, in essence, negotiated bargains between former adversaries who hope to replace violent contestation with institutionalized political competition. Understanding why such bargains often fail requires revisiting the logic of the Coase Theorem, its political extension—the Political Coase Theorem (PCT)—and Acemoglu’s critique of both.

Ronald Coase’s classic essay *The Problem of Social Cost* (1960) argued that when property rights are clearly defined and transaction costs are negligible, parties can bargain toward efficient outcomes regardless of the initial assignment of rights. The key condition is credible enforcement. If rules are clear and enforced neutrally, parties can strike mutually beneficial deals. Subsequent work extended this logic to resource governance and property rights (Libecap, 1989). But Coase’s framework assumes that enforcement is external, impartial, and strong.

Political economists imported this intuition into conflict studies as the Political Coase Theorem (PCT). PCT suggests that governments and insurgents should rationally prefer negotiation over prolonged conflict because peace maximizes the joint surplus (Weingast, 1997). In this view, stable power-sharing, autonomy, or decentralization should be achievable if both parties can credibly commit to the deal. Yet, as Fearon (1995) famously argued, civil wars persist not only because the parties disagree about terms, but because they cannot trust each other to stick to any agreement once one side disarms. The moment one group demobilizes, the other gains a unilateral advantage.

Daron Acemoglu (2003) sharpened this critique by highlighting three deep flaws in applying Coasean logic to politics. First, politics lacks neutral enforcement. The actors who sign the deal are the same actors who enforce (or violate) it. When relative power shifts, so do incentives to renege. Second, institutions are endogenous. As North (1990) argued, institutions structure political and economic incentives, but Acemoglu stressed that these institutions are themselves the products of prior struggles. Winners bend rules to preserve advantage; rules are not exogenous constraints. Third, politics is driven by distributional conflict. Following Olson (1993), Acemoglu argued that elites may rationally prefer an inefficient arrangement that preserves their dominance over a socially efficient arrangement that would dilute it.

Taken together, these insights undercut the optimism of the Political Coase Theorem. Peace agreements are not self-enforcing contracts. They are fragile equilibria that persist only so long as compliance is cheaper than defection.

Comparative conflict research backs this view. Jarstad and Nilsson (2008) show that the implementation phase—not the signing moment—is when many peace processes falter. Fortna (2004) finds that external monitoring reduces the probability of renewed conflict by raising the cost of cheating. Walter (2002) emphasizes that third-party security guarantees can substitute for the missing neutral enforcer. Peace lasts, in other words, when two conditions hold: (1) institutions are insulated against unilateral manipulation, and (2) commitments are externally verified and materially backed.

Applied to the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), two structural weaknesses emerge. First, BARMM's political institutions are still pliable to central manipulation: leadership reshuffles, appointment powers, and even the timing and composition of the first parliamentary election continue to be shaped by Malacañang and—most recently—the Supreme Court (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2025; COMELEC, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024). Second, credible commitments are weak: the MILF's willingness to complete decommissioning now depends on seeing concrete delivery of livelihood and development packages, which have been delayed or uneven (Arguillas, 2025a; 2025b; Associated Press, 2025; OPAPRU, 2025; Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2025). The Bangsamoro case shows that peace persists not because it is self-enforcing, but because—for now—defection is still riskier than compliance.

Related Work

Recent monitoring literature underscores that “what happens after signing” is the decisive test of peace. International Crisis Group (2024) warns that the Bangsamoro process is at risk of drifting into a patronage-controlled autonomy unless timelines, elections, and normalization benefits are implemented transparently. The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (2024), which tracks Colombia’s 2016 accord, similarly reports partial and uneven fulfillment of rural reform, reintegration, and security guarantees for ex-combatants.

Comparative experience suggests that external anchors matter. Northern Ireland’s Good Friday Agreement was embedded in a treaty-based architecture between the UK and Ireland, with sustained US and EU engagement, making unilateral revision costly (Good Friday Agreement, 1998; UK House of Commons Library, 2023). Aceh’s Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (2005) was paired with the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), a joint EU–ASEAN mechanism that directly verified disarmament and troop withdrawals (Council of the European Union, 2006; Saferworld, 2005). These arrangements raised the political cost of defection and made “cheating” visible.

The global context is becoming less forgiving. Data from SIPRI (2024, 2025), the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2024), Peace Research Institute Oslo (2025), and Davies, Engström, Pettersson, and Öberg (2024) show that the number of active armed conflicts is near historic highs, while multilateral peace operations are stretched thin. This means post-conflict regions like BARMM face a credibility problem in a world where third-party enforcement capacity is declining.

Methods

Design

This study uses (1) structured-focused comparison across five cases—BARMM, Northern Ireland, Aceh, Colombia, Sudan—and (2) within-case process tracing for BARMM. The structured comparison asks the same focused questions of each case: How insulated are post-conflict institutions from unilateral manipulation? How credible are core commitments (e.g., DDR, power-sharing, resource transfers) in practice?

Case Selection

All five cases are autonomy or power-sharing settlements that emerged from internal armed conflict. They diverge in two features that theory says matter most: (a) strength of external anchoring/monitoring and (b) credibility of material delivery to ex-combatants and communities. Northern Ireland and Aceh represent “externally anchored” outcomes; Colombia and Sudan represent “weakly anchored” or “contested” outcomes; BARMM is evaluated relative to these poles.

Operationalization

We assess two constructs on 0–2 scales. Institutional insulation captures how hard it is for domestic elites to rewrite the rules: 0 when executives or courts frequently alter core arrangements without

broad consent; 1 for mixed insulation; and 2 when rules are effectively locked in by external or legal guarantees. Commitment credibility captures whether promised steps are actually delivered: 0 when implementation stalls or reverses; 1 for partial or uneven progress; and 2 when milestones are met on schedule with independent verification. All coding draws on legal acts, court rulings, election calendars, official monitoring outputs, and third-party reports.

Limitations

The analysis relies on official statements, high-credibility media, civil-society monitoring reports, and legal documents; it does not yet incorporate elite interviews or primary internal communications. To manage bias, each factual claim is triangulated against at least two independent sources, or an official/legal source plus one independent source.

Flashpoint One: Institutional Manipulation

The removal of Ahod “Murad” Ebrahim as interim chief minister of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in March 2025 marked a pivotal moment in the peace process. Murad symbolized the transformation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from rebellion to governance. As the organization’s chair and successor to Salamat Hashim, he embodied the trust of former combatants who had surrendered arms believing their leader would oversee a peaceful transition. His replacement by Abdulraof “Sammy Gambar” Macacua—a former MILF military commander seen as closely aligned with Malacañang—was thus perceived as a politically motivated intrusion by the central government rather than a routine reshuffle.

The timing—months before BARMM’s first parliamentary elections—heightened tensions. Though Macacua was a senior minister, his appointment by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was widely viewed as an effort to weaken Murad’s faction and expand central influence (Gomez, 2025). Protests erupted in Marawi City, with effigies of presidential advisers burned, underscoring public frustration that autonomy remained conditional on Manila’s approval.

This crisis unfolded amid repeated delays in BARMM’s first elections. Initially set for 2022, polls were postponed multiple times and ultimately reset by the Supreme Court in 2025, allowing presidential appointees to occupy nearly nine percent of parliamentary seats (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2025; International Crisis Group, 2024). Civil society organizations such as the Institute for Autonomy and Governance (IAG) and International Alert Philippines warned that these maneuvers undermined confidence in democratic self-rule.

From Acemoglu’s (2003) perspective, the episode exemplifies how political institutions remain endogenous—reshaped by those in power to preserve control. Rather than stabilizing peace, these interventions turned BARMM’s institutions into arenas of contestation, transforming promised autonomy into renewed dependency and eroding the institutional foundations of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB).

Flashpoint Two: Failure of Credible Commitments

While leadership manipulation exposed the fragility of Bangsamoro's institutions, the suspension of the decommissioning process revealed the deeper problem of unfulfilled commitments. The normalization track—designed to build trust through disarmament and socio-economic reintegration—had, by mid-2024, demobilized 26,145 combatants and collected 4,625 weapons. Yet only about five percent of these came from the six recognized MILF camps, and more than a third were from outside BARMM, raising doubts about the process's authenticity (Arguillas, 2025a). Although each fighter received ₱100,000 in cash, the broader livelihood, housing, and education packages lagged far behind schedule. Civil-society monitors warned that reducing decommissioning to a mere “cash-for-arms” exchange risked undermining its transformative intent (IAG & CCAA, 2025).

In July 2025, citing government non-compliance, the MILF Central Committee suspended the final phase of decommissioning. Murad's 16 August memorandum barred commanders from participating in normalization activities without his approval, freezing the process and reasserting MILF authority (Arguillas, 2025b). The Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU) downplayed the decision as an “internal matter,” deepening frustration. Across BARMM, communities reported confusion, delayed benefits, and fears that promised assistance might never arrive (PAM-M & CRS, 2025).

Viewed through Acemoglu's (2003) critique of the Political Coase Theorem and Fearon's (1995) logic of credible commitment, this episode illustrates a stalled equilibrium: both parties hesitate to act because enforcement is uncertain. For the MILF, holding weapons serves as insurance against betrayal; for the state, full compliance reduces leverage. Without credible reciprocity, disarmament becomes a source of renewed mistrust rather than confidence. The suspension of Phase 4 thus exposes the peace process's central paradox—institutions meant to consolidate trust can instead reproduce fragility when promises are delayed, enforcement is weak, and each side waits for the other to move first.

Robustness and Alternative Explanations

Three alternative explanations are often raised:

Intra-MILF factionalism and clan politics.

It is true that BARMM politics is factional, and elite rivalries within the MILF and among traditional clans affect leadership struggles. But factionalism alone does not explain the Supreme Court's intervention in BARMM's electoral timetable (Supreme Court of the Philippines, 2025; COMELEC, 2025), nor the formal suspension of Phase 4 decommissioning announced at the MILF Central Committee level (Arguillas, 2025b; Associated Press, 2025). Those events reflect bargaining between MILF and the central state, not just intra-elite rivalry.

Criminal or spoiler violence

Spoilers do exist, especially in the Sulu and Maguindanao corridors, but the July–August 2025 suspension was not framed as a response to spoilers. It was framed as a response to non-delivery

of livelihood, housing, and camp development commitments (Arguillas, 2025a; Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2025; OPAPRU, 2025; PAM-M & CRS, 2025). That points to credibility and sequencing, not just insecurity.

Administrative capacity constraints

Procurement bottlenecks and fund disbursement delays are real (Panti & Locus, 2025). But capacity problems have political consequences when there is no credible external monitor: unmet promises erode trust, and trust erosion triggers strategic noncompliance. Colombia's experience—partial rural development delivery, uneven protection for ex-combatants—shows the same pattern (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2024). In that sense, “capacity” is inseparable from political will and enforceability.

Overall, these rival explanations are not wrong, but they are nested within the larger problem. Acemoglu (2003) and International Crisis Group (2024) describe: institutions are still being actively shaped by powerful actors, and promised benefits are not independently guaranteed.

Comparative Case Studies

The fragility of the Bangsamoro peace process is best understood through comparative analysis. Other negotiated settlements demonstrate both the potential and limits of autonomy-based peace agreements. Four cases—Northern Ireland, Aceh, Colombia, and Sudan—reveal how the design of institutions, credibility of commitments, and external enforcement determine the durability of peace.

Northern Ireland: Institutions Insulated by External Anchors

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) ended three decades of conflict by creating a power-sharing assembly, devolved governance, and cross-border bodies linking Belfast, London, and Dublin (Good Friday Agreement, 1998). Crucially, it embedded guarantees at the intergovernmental level. Neither the British government nor Irish republicans could unilaterally alter core provisions without incurring diplomatic costs and violating treaty-level commitments. Independent international commissions verified decommissioning. The 25-year review continues to underline this multilateral guarantee structure as essential to institutional survival (UK House of Commons Library, 2023). From Acemoglu's (2003) perspective, Northern Ireland did not “naturally” converge to cooperation; cooperation was externally anchored and politically expensive to unwind.

Aceh: Critical Junctures and External Monitoring

The 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding between Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) followed the 2004 tsunami, which reshaped incentives on both sides (Aspinall, 2005). What made Aceh different was enforcement. The EU–ASEAN Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) directly observed troop withdrawals, GAM disarmament, and political transition (Council of the European Union, 2006; Saferworld, 2005). Aceh also received enhanced revenue control and local political participation rights. The monitoring mission's presence—public, professional, and limited in duration—reduced fears of betrayal and locked in key concessions. Manila has not allowed an analogous mechanism in BARMM.

Colombia: Partial Compliance and Persistent Insecurity

The 2016 peace accord between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) promised land reform, reintegration, and political participation. After a failed referendum, revised terms narrowed some commitments. Implementation since then has been partial and geographically uneven. Hundreds of demobilized fighters have been assassinated, and rural areas remain contested by armed actors. The Kroc Institute's 2024 Barometer notes persistent delays in core provisions and warns that credibility is eroding (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2024). Institutions were not insulated from rollback; enforcement was inconsistent. This mirrors BARMM's stalled normalization track.

Sudan: Institutions Manipulated to the Breaking Point

Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) established power-sharing, resource-sharing, and an autonomy period for what became South Sudan. Yet Khartoum manipulated revenue arrangements and resisted structural reforms; institutions became instruments of central domination rather than neutral arbiters (Young, 2012). South Sudan's 2011 independence produced sovereignty, not stable peace, and both Sudan and South Sudan later spiraled into renewed conflict. Sudan's case shows how autonomy arrangements can be hollowed out when institutions are fully endogenous to the dominant elite.

Lessons from Comparative Experience

Northern Ireland and Aceh succeeded because external monitoring and treaty-grade guarantees insulated institutions against unilateral manipulation. Colombia and Sudan faltered where elite actors could dilute commitments and delay delivery. BARMM currently resembles the latter cluster: Manila retains levers over leadership and electoral sequencing, while normalization benefits to MILF combatants are delayed and only partially verified (International Crisis Group, 2024; Arguillas, 2025a; 2025b; Associated Press, 2025; OPAPRU, 2025). Unless CAB is hardened through insulation and externally backed enforcement, it risks becoming another "incomplete peace."

Discussion: Peace as a Fragile Equilibrium

The Bangsamoro peace process demonstrates how difficult it is to transform negotiated settlements into stable institutions. The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) sought to convert rebellion into democratic participation, but its implementation remains undermined by institutional manipulation and weak credible commitments. The experience affirms Acemoglu's (2003) critique of the Political Coase Theorem (PCT): political bargains are not self-enforcing because institutions are endogenous to power and enforcement is rarely neutral.

In theory, the PCT assumes that once parties agree, cooperation persists because peace benefits all. In practice, those who control enforcement reshape the rules to preserve advantage. The replacement of interim chief minister Murad Ebrahim and the repeated deferral of BARMM's first election reveal how autonomy remains vulnerable to central intervention rather than insulated from it. Similar patterns have doomed other peace settlements: Khartoum's manipulation of

Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and Colombia's partial implementation of the 2016 FARC accord both transformed institutions of peace into arenas of renewed contestation.

By contrast, Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement and Aceh's Helsinki MoU endured because external monitors—the EU, ASEAN, and the United States—made unilateral manipulation politically costly. BARMM lacks such external anchors. Fearon's (1995) insight also applies: conflict persists when actors cannot trust compliance after disarmament. Delayed socio-economic delivery and Manila's tepid response to the MILF's suspension of decommissioning highlight this credibility gap. Ultimately, peace in BARMM survives not as a binding contract but as a fragile equilibrium—maintained only while defection remains costlier than cooperation.

Policy Implications

The fragility of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) underscores the need to insulate institutions from manipulation and reinforce credible commitments. Comparative experience from Northern Ireland, Aceh, Colombia, and Sudan points to four strategic reforms.

First, establish third-party monitoring with clear conditionalities. External oversight narrows the credibility gap. In Aceh, the EU–ASEAN Monitoring Mission verified disarmament, while in Northern Ireland, international guarantors deterred violations (Aspinall, 2005; Good Friday Agreement, 1998). In the Bangsamoro, donor states and multilateral partners could play similar roles by linking assistance to measurable benchmarks such as timely socio-economic delivery, camp rehabilitation, and credible elections.

Second, strengthen legal and institutional safeguards. The 2025 leadership reshuffle exposed BARMM's vulnerability to executive interference. Reforms requiring supermajority approval for amendments to the Bangsamoro Organic Law, along with independent electoral oversight—possibly with international participation—would raise the cost of manipulation and reinforce autonomy.

Third, synchronize normalization with development. The suspension of decommissioning revealed the risks of unfulfilled livelihood and reintegration commitments. Development investments must proceed in tandem with disarmament, ensuring that benefits are front-loaded and visible to build reciprocal trust.

Finally, deepen inclusivity and accountability. Integrating women's groups, Indigenous Peoples, and community councils in planning and monitoring processes ensures that peace dividends are widely shared and guards against elite capture.

Ultimately, sustaining peace in BARMM requires embedding the CAB in a broader accountability architecture—externally anchored, internally safeguarded, and socially inclusive—to transform a fragile bargain into a resilient political order.

Conclusion

The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) was envisioned to transform rebellion into governance and establish the institutional foundations for lasting peace in Mindanao. More than a decade after its signing, however, the stability of the region remains uncertain. The removal of Chief Minister Murad Ebrahim and the suspension of the final phase of MILF decommissioning are not isolated incidents but structural indicators of deeper institutional vulnerabilities. These developments reveal that BARMM's political framework continues to be susceptible to central manipulation, while commitments to former combatants lack consistent and credible implementation.

The Bangsamoro experience demonstrates the limits of the Political Coase Theorem (Acemoglu, 2003): peace agreements do not self-enforce because political institutions remain endogenous to power and are routinely reshaped by those who stand to benefit from altering the rules. Consequently, the region's peace is best understood as a fragile equilibrium—sustained only while the cost of defection remains higher than the perceived benefits of compliance.

This fragility has far-reaching implications not only for political stability but also for the business environment. Investors and firms rely on predictable institutions, enforceable rules, and credible commitments from government. When leadership changes appear politically motivated, election timelines shift unpredictably, or core normalization milestones stall, these signal institutional volatility that heightens perceived investment risk. Businesses respond to such uncertainty through reduced capital inflows, delayed expansion plans, and a preference for short-term, low-exposure activities rather than long-term investments. Sectors critical to BARMM's development—agribusiness, logistics, halal manufacturing, and tourism—are particularly sensitive to political signals. Fragile institutions increase transaction costs: firms must navigate fluctuating regulations, shifting political alliances, and inconsistent enforcement, all of which directly undermine competitiveness and the region's capacity to attract both domestic and foreign investors.

Comparative experiences reinforce these insights. In Northern Ireland and Aceh, durable peace facilitated substantial economic revitalization precisely because institutions were insulated from unilateral manipulation and external guarantors enforced compliance. In contrast, Colombia's uneven implementation and Sudan's institutional reversals generated prolonged uncertainty, deterring private investment and constraining economic recovery. BARMM currently resembles this latter trajectory. Without stronger legal insulation for autonomy, transparent and timely implementation of normalization commitments, and credible third-party monitoring, the peace process risks continued fragility—limiting not only political progress but also the region's economic potential.

Ultimately, the sustainability of peace in BARMM is inseparable from the region's business climate. Institutional stability is a prerequisite for meaningful economic development. Unless the CAB is reinforced through stricter legal safeguards, predictable governance, and credible enforcement mechanisms, it risks becoming another incomplete settlement—remembered for its aspirations rather than its ability to deliver inclusive growth, investor confidence, and a stable environment where businesses and communities can thrive.

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