

# US Dirty Tricks? Malaysia Faces Uncertain War in Sabah

By [Nile Bowie](#)

Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, March 10, 2013

*Tension is high in Malaysia's eastern state of Sabah following an ongoing standoff between Islamic militants from the nearby southern Philippines and Malaysian security forces. 235-armed militants landed in eastern Sabah in early February and occupied several villages in an effort to assert a centuries-old claim over the territory. Both sides accuse the other of firing the first shot, but once the stand-off produced Malaysian casualties,*

Malaysian security forces deployed fighter jets and launched an unprecedented air assault on the militants with five battalions of soldiers deployed over the area in an operation to flush out the militant group, which they termed "Operation Sovereignty". At least 52 militants have been killed, in addition to several Malaysian policemen who were reportedly mutilated by the insurgents; reports claim that militants sent an e-mail message to Malaysian authorities that included images of beheaded police officers. The insurgents identified themselves as the "Royal Sulu Army", representing the now-defunct Sulu Sultanate that controlled the territory for centuries before leasing the land to the colonial British North Borneo Company in 1878.

The Manila-based Sultan of Sulu, Jamalul Kiram III, directed the insurgency, while his brother Agbimuddin Kiram led ground operations into Sabah. The Sultanate insists that Sabah is its homeland, and it will not budge on its claims over the territory even if its personnel are killed in the standoff. British colonialists leased the land from the Sultanate and eventually annexed Sabah in 1946 before turning over the disputed territory to the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. At the time, the Philippines contested the transfer, claiming that the British did not possess the authority to transfer ownership to Malaysia.

The British and the Malaysian authorities responded by asking the United Nations to conduct a referendum which came to the conclusion that two-thirds of the population of Sabah favoured joining Malaysia. The Malaysian government also began paying small annual payments to the heirs of the sultanate as compensation for their cession of the land, an arrangement that has continued to the present day.

Malaysia originally took a soft approach on the Filipinos militants by offering them the opportunity to lay down their arms and leave peacefully, leading many to criticize the government and security forces for allowing the militants to penetrate Malaysian territory. Local media referred to the gunmen as "intruders", but soon after the gunmen engaged security personnel in a firefight, Malaysia began referring to the group as "terrorists". Prime Minister Najib Razak authorized intense retaliatory strikes, calling for the total surrender of militants. Following the airstrikes, Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III told Filipino media that he was unable to contact his brother, militant leader Agbimuddin Kiram, and that he was increasingly worried over the safety of his "royal army" in Sabah, prompting the Sultan to

call for a ceasefire. Malaysian PM Najib reiterated that he would not consider any request unless the militants in Sabah turn over their arms to the Malaysian authorities and



surrendered.

### Filipino militant groups call for retaliation against Malaysia

The Philippine government under President Benigno Aquino has sided with Malaysia and reiterated its call to followers of Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III to surrender to prevent further bloodshed.

Aquino has spoken of punishing the Sultan and his men for masterminding the armed rebellion in Sabah, prompting a domestic backlash that threatens fragile peace deals with separatist militant groups sympathetic to the Sultan's cause. Fighters representing the Sulu Sultanate are ethnic Tausugs from the Philippines' Sulu region, some of whom have aligned themselves with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) which has been fighting for autonomy over the territories in the southern Philippines. Nur Misuari, leader of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), warned the Aquino government of chaos if Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III is arrested or his men apprehended.

Nur Misuari founded the MNLF in 1969 with the aim of forming an independent egalitarian nation in the Philippines' easternmost regions of Mindanao, Palawan, and Sulu. The organization has at times preached religious tolerance, and is composed of Muslims, Christians, members of indigenous faiths. An MNLF offshoot - the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) - is known to have perpetrated brutal violence and murder. The ASG maintain links to Al-Qaeda networks, and [reports issued by AFP](#) claim that US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks implicate a Saudi Arabian ambassador to the Philippines of bolstering Filipino terrorist networks with cash through religious charities.

At a recent press conference, Misuari stated, "And for what reason is he (Aquino) aligning this country with Malaysia, a colonial power occupying the land of our people? I am against that, totally against that with all my soul. I hope the president will be properly advised. I hope he will recant. Otherwise we won't forgive him. And there is an attempt even to arrest the sultan, I understand. Let them do that. The country will be in total chaos if they do, I promise you." MNLF political chief officer Gapul Hajirul has warned of civil war in Sabah waged by Filipino Muslims who have long resided there. Nur Misuari warned Malaysian PM Najib that targeting Filipino Muslims in Sabah "would be tantamount to war".

After Malaysia's assault on the Sulu militants, Princess Celia Fatima Kiram warned that the Sultanate would wage a "long civil war" in Sabah. The MNLF has claimed that thousands of

ethnic Tausug fighters were planning to enter Sabah using small pump boats, and that many had already successfully slipped through a naval blockade set up by the Philippines. The Philippine Daily Inquirer reported that MNLF member Habib Hashim Mudjahab claimed that at least 10,000 Tausug people from islands in the southern Philippines were headed to Sabah to act as reinforcements in support of the Royal Sulu Army. Filipinos in Sabah who are not part of the Royal Sulu forces have reportedly joined the fighting in reaction to what they perceive as atrocities committed by the Malaysian government. Former MNLF member Hadji Acmad Bayam told the Manila Bulletin that MNLF forces may have a significant weapons arsenal hidden within Sabah's thick jungles left behind by MNLF commanders who have moved in and out of the region over the years.



Allegations of political motives

Malaysia will soon hold a pivotal general election that pits incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak against de-facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. Najib voiced suspicion as to why the Sulu rebels chose to pursue their long-standing claim to Sabah when the country was preparing to hold a general election. Reuters cited sources within the Malaysian government who claimed that the gunmen were suspected to have links to factions that were unhappy with the Philippines' recent peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), another breakaway group from the MNLF which today is widely recognised as the mainstay of the Moro movement. Malaysia acted as the facilitator for that 2012 peace agreement. Kuala Lumpur has played a key role in facilitating peace talks between Manila and Mindanao since 2001, and the MNLF publicly opposed MILF's Framework Agreement with Manila. Furthermore, Reuters [cited an anonymous Filipino military officer](#) who claimed that Sulu rebels were "invited to Sabah by a Malaysian opposition politician to discuss land issues". Najib then ordered Malaysian intelligence officials to investigate claims that an opposition leader had a hand in the armed intrusion in Sabah. Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim pressed charges against Malaysian broadcasters for running a story implicating his involvement in the insurgency, and vehemently denied his involvement.

Local analysts have criticized Ibrahim for accepting funds and training from US Government-linked foundations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), while pro-government mainstream media is routinely critical of Anwar's links to foreign figures. Bloggers have also posted photographs of Anwar Ibrahim meeting with MNLF leader Nur Misuari, insinuating cooperation between the two in coordinating the Sulu insurgency. Tian Chua, one of the leaders of of the Pakatan Rakyat opposition coalition headed by Ibrahim,

accusing the ruling party of having orchestrated the gun battle with Filipino militants, claiming that the incursion was believed to be a “planned conspiracy of the [UMNO] government” to divert attention and intimidate the people in the run-up to elections, prompting unanimous denials from the ruling party. Filipino sources claim that the Sulu Sultanate’s incursion of Sabah is an attempt to undermine President Benigno Aquino in midterm elections scheduled in May. Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III ran as a senator allied to former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo during elections in 2007 and Filipino politicians allied to him are seen as pressuring Aquino to pardon his predecessor, who remains under



house arrest for electoral fraud.

#### Sulu Sultan calls for US intervention

Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III [has told media in the Philippines](#) that he wants the United Nations, the United States and the United Kingdom to intervene in his claim over Sabah. The Sultanate claims that the United States must intercede, as agreed upon in a 1915 agreement signed with then US colonial government in the Philippines that mandated the US provide “full protection” to the Sulu Sultan in exchange for exercising sovereignty over the kingdom as the colonial administration. As calls for intervention and accusations of plots abound, mudslinging is rampant between the ruling parties and oppositions of both Malaysia and the Philippines. The Sulu militants have put aside “responsible conduct” by attempting to legitimize their force by invoking historic claims to the land.

The resource-rich state of Sabah is abundant in oil and gas reserves, which contribute to 14% of Malaysia’s natural gas and 30% of its crude oil reserves. Sabah’s fifteen oil wells produce as many as 192,000 barrels a day. Four new oilfields have been found in Sabah’s territorial waters over the last two years, and perhaps one of the motivations for the Sultan’s push to reclaim the territory is profit-driven. Even so, the highly unusual timing of the Sulu operation being so close to Malaysia’s general elections will naturally be perceived as suspect – and in following that line of thought, it is unsurprising that many are asking questions about the Sultanates’ arms sources and funding. The Sulu Sultanate could have taken several alternative dialogue-based approaches with the nations involved to address this situation that would have yielded infinitely less destructive consequences for his followers and his cause. The insurgent approach taken by the militants undermines the Sultan’s claims entirely, and lends much credibility to alternative narratives that allude to the crisis being manufactured to bring about a conflict at a politically sensitive time. As figures of all political leanings ask themselves who stands to gain from this situation, there is not enough information available to make an accurate assessment.

Malaysia is not often faced with security crises, especially of the sort that this conflict could expand into if more Filipino militants take up arms. Malaysia's upcoming general election is expected to be extremely close, and many fear that a wider crisis would delay polls. Sulu Sultan Jamalul Kiram III has spoken of foreign intervention as the only solution to the conflict, and wider war could likely be something he is trying to achieve. As many Filipinos categorize the actions taken by Malaysia as "atrocities", a credible threat exists in the prospect of wider war if MNLF soldiers establish a foothold in Sabah, or potentially even by conducting retaliatory attacks in Peninsular Malaysia population centers like Kuala Lumpur. While Malaysia's position must continue to be firm, security forces must exercise restraint in quelling the insurgency to prevent the indiscriminate loss of life if the militants refuse to abandon their mission and turn over their arms.

*Nile Bowie is an independent political analyst residing in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He can be reached at [nilebowie@gmail.com](mailto:nilebowie@gmail.com)*

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