# Delaying the inevitable

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The last-minute move to postpone the first parliamentary elections for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (Barmm), which was set alongside the midterm polls in May next year, sounds like another excuse to stall the inevitable.

Senate President Chiz Escudero filed on Nov. 4 a bill seeking to postpone the regional parliamentary elections by a year, from May 12, 2025 to May 11, 2026, ostensibly to allow the Barmm to reconfigure its jurisdiction and reallocate seats in its parliament after the Supreme Court declared that Sulu is not a part of the Barmm.

In a unanimous decision released on Sept. 4, the high court upheld the validity of Republic Act No. 11054, or the Bangsamoro Organic Law enacted on July 27, 2018 that established the Barmm and its structure as a political entity. But the Supreme Court ruled that Sulu is not part of the Barmm after the province rejected the ratification of the law in a 2019 plebiscite. Sulu had earlier filed a petition questioning the constitutionality of the Bangsamoro Organic Law and protesting its previous inclusion in the regional entity despite its vote of rejection.

The high court’s ruling is seen as a blow to the Muslim autonomy project meant to end decades of conflict in the poverty-stricken region. Without Sulu, which Inquirer columnist Segundo Eclar Romero described as a “historical heartland of the Bangsamoro,” the Barmm now comprises the predominantly Muslim provinces of Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, and Tawi-Tawi.

## Autonomy and self-governance

Whether the Sulu exit would prove harmful to the province and the region will be determined in time. Despite that setback, however, the Barmm’s quest for autonomy and self-governance must continue in earnest.

Such aspiration has cast doubts on Escudero’s bill to postpone the elections yet again. Though supported by at least two Bangsamoro parliament members and Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity Secretary Carlito Galvez, the bill only prolongs the process of finally handing the reins of the regional government to leaders elected by the people.

Recall that the election for members of the parliament, the Barmm’s legislative body that will also elect the region’s head or chief minister, was originally set in 2022, four years after the Organic Law was ratified.

It’s not as if the postponement would magically bring back Sulu to the Barmm. With the high court ruling, the Barmm now constitutes four provinces that voted for its creation, and no delay will fix that. There is no reason why the Barmm parliament cannot do with 73, instead of 80 members.

## Compelling argument

“The Decision is immediately executory,” the high court said in its ruling. SC spokesperson Camille Sue Mae Ting stressed that: “The Court, consistent with its prior rulings, issued the order making the decision immediately executory knowing that the election cannot be postponed.”

Accordingly, the Commission on Elections prepared for the elections to be held on schedule, with the filing of certificates of candidacy ending on Nov. 9. Some 109 aspirants are vying for the 73 seats up for grabs. Postponing the elections will cost P1 billion, and P3 billion if the polls were automated, cautioned Comelec Chairperson George Erwin Garcia.

The cost notwithstanding, the more compelling argument against Escudero’s bill is the unwarranted delay in the Barmm residents’ right to duly elect their own leaders. By its name, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), which is composed of members appointed by the President, is only transitional or temporary. Yet the interim Bangsamoro parliament seeks to prolong the elections until 2028, not just in 2026 as Escudero has proposed, which would amount to a nine-year transition period. What’s behind this suspicious need to stay in these government-appointed positions?

## Powerful forces

More than those of outsiders, the voices of the Barmm constituents must be heard. Maguindanao del Sur Gov. Mariam Mangudadatu has pointed out that despite the fact that the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was in command of the region, more than 70 skirmishes have occurred between and among the MILF forces, resulting in the death of at least 100 people since 2022. And if the polls were moved to 2026, she pointed out, it would mean a total of seven years for Barmm functioning without oversight and an independent review of how it spent the P500 billion block grant funded by Filipino taxpayers.

Mangudadatu expressed her objection to the extension even if this position might “trigger the armed MILF and every influential person behind the proposal.”

Agreeing with Mangudadatu, Maguindanao del Sur Rep. Mohamad Paglas said there was no reason to fear the elections in Barmm.

The contrary stance of Barmm leaders and constituents raises a crucial question: what powerful forces are behind the proposed delay, who seek to perpetuate themselves in power without an electoral mandate, while hampering the promise of true autonomy for our Muslim brethren?