# A test of BARMM’s integrity

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While Congress was focused on the Palace-approved postponement of elections for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), grave allegations of fund misuse have been hurled at its government in what could become another roadblock to the region’s full autonomy.

In a privilege speech at the House on Tuesday, Lanao del Sur Rep. Zia Alonto Adiong disclosed that P100 million from the BARMM’s Office of the Chief Minister (OCM) had been deposited in the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) accounts of barangay officials in Lanao del Sur.

“More than 400 barangay officials of Lanao del Sur woke up with their LBP accounts containing money, ranging from P500,000 to as much as P2.5 million. Later, officers from BARMM OCM told them to withdraw a big chunk of the money and just leave P200,000 behind,” Adiong said. Barangay officials were then asked to hand over the bulk of the funds to OCM personnel, and to keep P200,000 for unspecified “special operations,” he added.

“This is a grave and urgent matter that threatens the core principles of good governance, accountability, and the sacred trust placed in us by the people of the BARMM,” the House assistant majority leader said.

## Block grant

In his speech, Adiong said the amount could have come from the P6.3 billion local government support fund (LGSF), the block grant from the national government that was incorporated in the BARMM’s P98.5 billion budget for 2024.

Along with House Deputy Speaker Yasser Balindong (Lanao del Sur), Deputy Minority Leader Mujiv Hataman (Basilan), Rep. Samier Tan (Sulu), Rep. Mohamad Paglas (Maguindanao del Sur) and party list Rep. Shernee Tan-Tambut (Kusug Tausug), Adiong filed a resolution seeking a probe on the alleged misuse of the block grant, citing reports from civil society groups and concerned citizens.

The reports indicated that local government units not allied with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which holds key positions in the interim parliament and transition authority, were being denied their share of the LGSF.

The BARMM government denied the allegations. Its spokesperson Mohd Asnin Pendatun said Chief Minister Ahod Ebrahim was “very concerned” and ordered an investigation when he learned about the matter last month. He described the claims about barangay officials asked to give the money deposited in their accounts to OCM officials as “unfounded rumors aimed at destroying the image of the BARMM.”

## ‘Political advancement’

The allegations, however, cannot be simply swept under the rug as they impute corruption to the interim government. Most concerning was the handling of the billions in block grant sourced from taxes and revenues collected by the national government and automatically allocated to the region every year. While BARMM has fiscal autonomy, the Bangsamoro organic law mandates safeguards including the application on the block grant of budget rules from the Department of Budget Management and the Department of the Interior and Local Government.

It would be unfortunate if the block grant were being used by the MILF for the “political advancement” of its political party in the upcoming parliamentary elections. According to the lawmakers who filed the resolution, Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao del Sur, whose officials belong to the Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats Party, were denied access to the funds.

The alleged distribution of money to barangay officials, which they were then supposed to give back to OCM officials, is also a serious charge that must be looked into. Concerned barangay officials must be empowered to help authorities get to the bottom of the matter by identifying the BARMM officials and personnel who partook of the funds.

## Credible BARMM

But does the national government have the political will and gumption to demand an accounting of the BARMM funds, or conduct its own inquiry, given the fragile state of the autonomous region that is yet to have its first elected officials, and the sensitivities of the MILF that holds sway over it?

President Marcos, who has supervision over the BARMM chief minister, must stand firmly and exercise this authority to ensure that the allegations are investigated and addressed before the first parliamentary elections finally gets under way. With the President backing the postponement, the House and the Senate bicameral conference committee approved on Tuesday the bill resetting the elections to Oct. 13. The next few months would be a good opportunity to undertake a thorough investigation.

It does not augur well for the BARMM’s new government to be saddled with allegations of fund irregularities even before it could hold office. It is in the interest of a credible BARMM government to show transparency and commitment to the proper management of public funds, to prove once and for all that the Bangsamoro people deserve the autonomy and self-governance that they had long and arduously fought for.