



2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Philippines

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Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Combined with economic disparities, societal and religious tensions contributed to persistent armed conflict in certain provinces in the southern part of the country. The government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed two of the four annexes of the peace framework agreement on the Bangsamoro -- a roadmap for the creation of the Bangsamoro entity which will replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

U.S. embassy officials actively encouraged the peace process between the government and the MILF, discussed religious freedom issues with government officials, and maintained outreach with religious leaders and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to engage them in interfaith activities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population to be 105.7 million (July 2013 estimate).

According to a survey conducted by the National Statistics Office in 2000, approximately 93 percent of the population is Christian. A large majority of Christians are Roman Catholic, constituting 80 to 85 percent of the total population.

The 2000 survey states that Islam is the largest minority religion, constituting approximately 5 percent of the population. A 2012 estimate by the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF), however, states that there are 10.7 million Muslims, which is approximately 11 percent of the total population. Most Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups. Approximately 60 percent of Muslims reside in Mindanao in the south and nearby islands. Although most belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, a small number of Shia live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao. An increasing number of Muslims are migrating to the urban centers of Manila and Cebu.

Religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the following international denominations: Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Assemblies of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Philippine (Southern) Baptists; and the following domestically established churches: Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), Members Church of God International, and The Kingdom of Jesus Christ, the Name Above Every Name. In addition, there are Lumad, who are indigenous people of various animistic and syncretic religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. There is no state religion and the constitution provides for the separation of church and state. The law treats intentional attacks directed against buildings dedicated to religion as war crimes or crimes against international humanitarian law.

The law requires organized religious groups to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue to establish tax-exempt status. There is no nontax penalty for failing to register and some groups do not. The registration process is nondiscriminatory.

The NCMF promotes the rights of Muslims at both the national and local levels and supports economic, educational, cultural, and infrastructure programs for Muslim communities. NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment administers logistics for the Hajj. It also administers *awqaf*, an endowment for the upkeep of Islamic properties and institutions, and oversees establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and other projects. The Office of the Presidential Assistant for Muslim Concerns helps coordinate relations with countries that have large Islamic populations and contributes to Mindanao's economic development and the peace process.

The Code of Muslim Personal Laws recognizes sharia (Islamic law) as part of national law; it does not apply in criminal matters and applies only to Muslims. The state court hears cases involving Muslim and non-Muslim respondents, and national laws apply.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools with written parental consent provided there is no cost to the government. Based on a traditional policy of promoting moral education, local public schools give religious groups the opportunity to teach moral values during school hours. Attendance is not mandatory and the various groups share classroom space. The government also allows groups to distribute religious literature in public schools.

By law, public schools must ensure the religious rights of students are protected. Muslim students may wear the hijab (women's headscarf) and Muslim girls are not required to wear shorts during physical education classes.

Government Practices

Muslims, concentrated in some of the most impoverished provinces, said the government had not made sufficient efforts to promote their economic development. The government's campaign against terrorist groups led some human rights NGOs to accuse the police and military of acting with bias in their treatment of Muslims.

Ulama (Muslim leaders) maintained the government should allow Islamic courts to extend their jurisdiction to criminal law cases and some supported the MILF's goal of forming an autonomous

region governed in accordance with Islamic law. As in other parts of the judicial system, sharia courts suffered from a large number of unfilled positions. All five sharia district court judgeships and 43 of circuit court judgeships remained vacant. Aside from budget restrictions, judicial positions on the sharia courts were particularly difficult to fill because applicants must be members of both the sharia bar and the Integrated Bar of the Philippines.

Madrassahs had the option of registering with the NCMF, the Department of Education (DepEd), both, or neither. A total of 588 madrassahs were registered with the NCMF, while 79 were registered with the DepEd. Only registered schools could receive financial assistance from the government. The DepEd's Bureau of Madrassah Education managed local and international financial assistance to the madrassah system. DepEd-registered schools followed the Standard Madrassah Curriculum and received funding for teachers of the Revised Basic Education Curriculum (RBEC) subjects and for classroom and facility improvements.

The government continued to implement its unified RBEC curriculum, which partially integrated madrassahs into the national education system. DepEd continued to provide Arabic language instruction and Islamic values education to Muslim students in selected public elementary schools and private madrassahs. The DepEd provided 58 million pesos (\$1.3 million) to 69 private madrassahs for the 2012-2013 school year, a 31 percent increase in funding which included funds for an additional 17 madrassahs compared with the previous year.

The government promoted interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) continued to monitor issues relating to religious freedom.

On August 8, the CHR issued an advisory affirming the right of Muslim women to wear the hijab in schools and other learning institutions. The issuance of the CHR advisory stemmed from the complaint filed by the NCMF before the CHR against certain schools in Zamboanga prohibiting Muslim women from wearing the hijab. In July the DepEd issued Department Order No. 32 reiterating its 2001 policy on the protection of religious rights of students.

The Department of Foreign Affairs provided support to the forum and interfaith dialogue meetings conducted in celebration of Interfaith Harmony Week held, from February 1-7. Religions for Peace Philippines organized the event in collaboration with leaders from different religions and peace advocates of interfaith organizations to promote religious freedom, dialogue, and cooperation among different religious groups.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

The government attributed a series of attacks, kidnappings for ransom, and killings to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), other Islamic militants, and the communist New People's Army. Because ethnicity and religion are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize specific incidents as instances of religious intolerance. For example, on August 4, unidentified suspects shot and killed three Moro Islamic missionaries in Libungan, North Cotabato. The three clerics were on their way to attend an Islamic religious forum in Pikit, North Cotabato, when they were attacked. The case was under police investigation at year's end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, affiliation or practice.

Efforts by the dominant Christian population to resettle in traditionally Muslim areas, such as Mindanao, fostered resentment among many Muslim residents. Muslims viewed Christian

proselytizing as another form of resettlement, with the intention of depriving Muslims of their homeland and cultural identity, including their religion.

Muslim religious leaders asserted that Muslims suffered from economic discrimination.

Young Muslim professionals reported employers stereotyped Muslims as being less educated. Muslims stated they had difficulty renting rooms in boarding houses or being hired for retail work if they used their real names or wore distinctive Muslim dress. Muslims reportedly resorted to adopting Christian pseudonyms and wearing Western clothing.

Amicable ties among religious communities were common, and many participated in interdenominational efforts to alleviate poverty. The Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, a coalition of various religious groups, continued to focus on building and strengthening interfaith relations through dialogue between Muslims and Christians in selected communities. The Bishops-Ulama Conference in Mindanao continued to bring together Catholic bishops and members of the Ulama League of the Philippines from Mindanao and to hold dialogues on addressing local issues of peace, order, and intercultural solidarity. Other interfaith groups, such as Religions for Peace Philippines, also promoted peace between persons of different faiths. The leadership of human rights groups, trade union confederations, and industry associations typically represented many religious affiliations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers regularly met with government officials and representatives of all major religious groups to advocate religious freedom. When insurgents attacked Zamboanga and took a number of hostages, embassy officers urged government security force officials to uphold international human rights norms for all Filipinos, no matter their religion.

The embassy hosted meetings with political and opinion leaders from the Muslim community throughout the country to discuss the U.S. role in Mindanao. The Mindanao Working Group, which coordinated embassy-wide efforts in Mindanao, held discussions with religious and civil society leaders. During trips to conflict-affected areas of Mindanao, embassy representatives, including the Ambassador and the Deputy Chief of Mission, organized discussions with religious group leaders to promote mutual understanding. USAID funded a project in Zamboanga City, Basilan, and Sulu provinces that worked with leaders from the Muslim and Catholic communities to support interfaith dialogue and the resolution of clan or community conflicts.

Embassy outreach programs promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. The embassy initiated a Youth Council Summit which brought together 50 Muslim, Christian, and Lumad youth representatives from across Mindanao. The two-day summit provided leadership and governance training and highlighted the positive results of working across boundaries of faith and worship.

The embassy held two iftars, one hosted by the Ambassador for 80 religious leaders and Muslim youth, and a second for 70 guests, including youth leaders, civil society organizations, and local officials. The Ambassador paid the first-ever visit by a U.S. ambassador to a Manila mosque during Ramadan and engaged religious and community leaders in dialogue on religious tolerance. In October the embassy partnered with a local NGO in a peace advocacy program for 40 Muslim, Christian, and Lumad youth leaders in Mindanao.

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