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- **Source:**  
USDOS - US Department of State
- **Title:**  
2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Philippines
- **Publication date:**  
30 July 2012
- **ecoi.net summary:** Annual report on religious freedom, covering 2011 [ID 224246]
- **Countries:**  
Philippines
- **Original link** <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dliid=192657>

**Recommended citation:**

USDOS - US Department of State: 2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Philippines, 30 July 2012 (available at ecoi.net)

[http://www.ecoi.net/local\\_link/224246/331815\\_en.html](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/224246/331815_en.html) (accessed 28 November 2012)



## 2011 International Religious Freedom Report - Philippines

### Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were some reports of ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against members of the Muslim minority by members of the Christian majority. This, combined with economic disparities, contributed to persistent conflict in certain provinces in the southern part of the country. The armed insurgent Muslim group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) continued to seek greater autonomy. Despite occasional incidents of conflict, the government and the MILF have maintained a ceasefire instituted in July 2009 and continued peace talks.

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

### Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2000 survey by the National Statistics Office, approximately 93 percent of the population is Christian. Roman Catholics, the largest religious group, constitute 80 to 85 percent of the total population. Islam is the largest minority religion; Muslims constitute between 5 and 9 percent of the total population. Most Filipino Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups. They reside principally on Mindanao and nearby islands. Although most belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, a small number of Shia Muslims live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao. An increasing number of Filipino Muslims have migrated 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.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. There is no state religion, and the constitution provides for the separation of church and state.

The law requires organized religions to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue to establish tax-exempt status. There is no penalty for failing to register, and some groups do not. There were no reports of discrimination in the registration system during the year.

The cabinet-level National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) works to promote the rights of Muslim Filipinos at both the national and local levels and supports the implementation of economic, educational, cultural, and infrastructure programs for Muslim Filipino communities. NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment administers the Hajj (annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca). It is also responsible for the administration of awqaf (endowment properties) and institutions, as well as the conduct of activities for the establishment and maintenance of Haji towns, Islamic centers, and other projects.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools with parents' written 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 interested groups to distribute religious literature in public schools. By law, public schools must ensure that the religious rights of students are protected. Muslim students are allowed to wear hijab (head coverings), and Muslim girls are not required to wear shorts during physical education classes. In many parts of Mindanao, Muslim students routinely attend Catholic schools from elementary to university level; these students are not required to receive religious instruction.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, All Saints' Day, Christmas Day, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha.

### Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government does not ban or discourage specific religious groups or religious factions. However, Muslims, who are concentrated in some of the most impoverished provinces, complained that the government had not made sufficient efforts to promote their economic development. Some Muslim religious leaders asserted that Muslims suffered from economic discrimination. 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.

Although the government maintained a ceasefire with the MILF, there were attacks by rogue elements of the MILF often in relation to clan, land, and election disputes. In August 2008--after the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order on the signing of a government-MILF agreement, an agreement later declared unconstitutional--MILF attacks and subsequent clashes with government troops resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Christian and Muslim residents and the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians in central Mindanao. The government and the MILF instituted a cease-fire in July 2009, and, despite occasional incidents of conflict between MILF and security forces, both sides remain publicly committed to the ceasefire. There was a pause in the talks as both the Philippine government and the MILF reorganized their peace panels following the May 2010 election; the parties resumed formal talks in 2011; in November, the parties' peace panels began meeting on a monthly basis.

The Code of Muslim Personal Laws recognizes Sharia (Islamic law) as part of national law; however, it does not apply in criminal matters, and it applies only to Muslims. Some ulama (Muslim community leaders) argued that 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 41 percent 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.

Approximately 14 percent of the Mindanao student population attended madrassahs (Islamic schools). Government officials estimated there were more than 1,000 madrassahs operating throughout the country. Of

these more than half were located in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A total of 602 madrassahs were registered with the NCMF, while over 60 were registered with the Department of Education (DepEd). Registration with the NCMF or the DepEd is optional for madrassahs but, if pursued, can lead to financial assistance from the government. The DepEd manages local and international financial assistance to the madrassah system, and the DepEd's Bureau of Madrassah Education oversees education activities in the ARMM.

The government continued to implement its unified curriculum, designed to integrate 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 also provided 31 million pesos (\$715,770) to 59 private madrassahs for the 2010-11 school year.

## **Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations**

During the year, the government attributed a series of attacks, kidnappings for ransom, and killings to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), other Islamic militants, and the New People's Army. Religious affiliation was not seen as a relevant factor in these attacks.

Sporadic bombings of places of worship continued during the year. On July 1, an improvised explosive device exploded outside a mosque in Shariff Aguak in Maguindanao province, killing the mosque's caretaker; it is unknown if there were religious motivations for the attack. Towards the end of the year, police operatives and the military heightened the security alert in Southern Mindanao Region after claiming to have discovered plans by Islamic militants to bomb mosques and churches. The military asserted that the plot by Islamic militants was intended to inflame conflict between Muslims and Christians and escalate violence in Mindanao.

## **Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no new laws or policies promulgated specifically on protecting religious freedom during the year. However, the Philippine Development Plan 2011-2016, which embodies the administration's policy framework for national development, includes provisions for the protection and promotion of religious freedom. The government promoted interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. Under President Benigno S. Aquino III's administration, the Commission on Human Rights monitored issues relating to religious freedom.

On August 12, the Office of the President created the Task Force on Interfaith Initiatives and Values Formation, which seeks to address and coordinate all interfaith concerns and initiatives of government agencies.

On October 13-14, the Philippines hosted the seventh Asia-Europe Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue (ASEM-IFD) in Manila. Government representatives, leaders of faith-based and civil society organizations from 46 ASEM member countries, the ASEAN Secretariat, and the European Commission participated in the Dialogue.

The Department of Foreign Affairs, Department of Education, and Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process supported the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's "Face to Faith" program and identified possible entry points for its implementation in the country. In August government officials signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the foundation's patron, former United Kingdom Prime Minister Anthony Blair.

## **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

No formal reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice were submitted to the Commission on Human Rights. However, there were some reports of religious tensions.

Efforts by the dominant Christian population to resettle in traditionally Muslim areas such as Mindanao have fostered resentment among many Muslim residents. Many Muslims viewed Christian proselytizing as another form of resettlement, with the intention of depriving Muslims of their homeland and cultural identity, including their religion.

Young Muslim professionals reported that some employers stereotyped Muslims as being less educated. Some Muslims reported that 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. Therefore, many resorted to adopting Christian pseudonyms and wearing Western clothing.

Despite these circumstances, 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 and faith-based 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 and order and intercultural solidarity. Other interfaith groups also promoted peace between persons of different faiths. The leadership of human rights groups, trade union confederations, and industry associations typically represents many religious affiliations.

## Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officers regularly met with representatives of all major religious groups to discuss human rights issues, including religious freedom. In addition, the U.S. government actively supported the government's peace process with Muslim insurgents in Mindanao, which has the potential to contribute to peace and a better climate for interfaith cooperation.

Embassy officials maintained active outreach with NGOs. The embassy hosted meetings of political and opinion leaders from the Muslim community to discuss the U.S. role in Mindanao.

During the year, the Mindanao Working Group, which coordinates embassy-wide efforts in Mindanao, held a series of roundtable discussions with religious and civil society leaders during five assessment trips to conflict-affected areas. During these trips, representatives from several U.S. government agencies organized discussions with religious leaders of different faiths to promote mutual understanding.

In September the embassy's public affairs section invited Muslim and Christian leaders from Zamboanga to its first iftar celebration in Mindanao. Attendees included the winners of an embassy-sponsored essay contest for university students to write about their faith and its meaning to them. The event featured a broadcast of President Obama's iftar message of tolerance, a speech by an embassy official about interfaith dialogue, and speeches by local religious leaders. The ambassador concurrently hosted the annual embassy iftar dinner in Manila.

In October the public affairs section and the American Corner at Ateneo de Zamboanga University (ADZU) held a five-day Interfaith Youth Peace Camp for 50 high school leaders from conflict-affected areas. Professors from ADZU's Peace and Culture Institute led discussions about religious understanding and conflict prevention, and Christian and Muslim alumni of American exchange programs served as moderators and counselors.

In December the embassy's public affairs section funded the production of 10,000 interfaith calendars featuring the Gregorian Christian and Hijrah Islamic calendars through an NGO, Peace Advocates Zamboanga. The calendars were distributed to religious leaders, government officials, and civil society leaders living in conflict-affected areas.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) continued to provide assistance to many areas of Mindanao, including conflict-affected areas, in part to ensure USAID programs are responsive to the needs of Mindanao's religious and cultural minorities. Programs included infrastructure development, vocational training, education and health services, employment generation, affordable energy, local government, and conflict-mediation projects. During the year, USAID implemented a project to strengthen community-based dispute resolution mechanisms in conflict-affected "barangays" (smallest administrative division in the Philippines) of Maguindanao, Tawi-Tawi, Davao del Sur, Davao Oriental, Davao del Norte, Saranggani, and Zamboanga Sibugay. More than 3,000 volunteers, including influential religious leaders, were trained in conflict analysis, mediation, and counseling. Close to 40 percent of the volunteers were women, a majority of whom were Muslim. The project's objective was to provide communities with means to prevent the escalation of disputes into violent conflict. During the year, these volunteers mediated more than 10,600 disputes, with a successful resolution rate of 85 percent.