



Philippines

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. Adherents of all faiths are free to exercise their religious beliefs in all parts of the country without government interference or restriction. However, socioeconomic disparity between the Christian majority and the Muslim minority has contributed to persistent conflict in certain provinces. The principal remaining armed insurgent Muslim group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), continues to seek greater autonomy or an independent Islamic state. The Government and the MILF currently maintain a yearlong cease-fire with both sides planning to continue their peace dialogue brokered by neighboring Malaysia. An eventual peace settlement will likely include special recognition of Islamic (madrassa) education and Shari'a law, among other pro-Muslim provisions.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there is some ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against Muslims by Christians. This has led some Muslims to seek a degree of political autonomy for Muslims in the southwestern part of the country. The once-largest Muslim insurgent group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), signed a peace accord with the Government in 1996, resulting in a strengthened Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy is actively engaged in the peace process between the Government and MILF and plans to monitor future peace talks.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 115,831 square miles, and its population is approximately 84 million. Over 81 percent of citizens claim membership in the Roman Catholic Church, according to the official 2000 census data on religious preference. Other Christian denominations together comprise approximately 8.9 million, or 11.6 percent of the population. Muslims total 5 percent of the population and Buddhists 0.08 percent. Indigenous and other religious traditions comprise 1.7 percent of the population of those surveyed. Atheists and persons who did not designate a religious preference account for 0.5 percent of the population.

Some Muslim scholars argue that census takers in 2000 significantly undercounted the number of Muslims because of security concerns in Muslim-majority areas of western Mindanao, preventing them from an accurate count. The 2000 census placed the number of Muslims at 3.9 million, or approximately 5 percent of the population, but some Muslim groups claim that Muslims comprise anywhere from 8 to 12 percent of the population. Muslims reside principally in Mindanao and nearby islands and are the largest single minority religious group.

Among the numerous Protestant and other Christian denominations are Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, Assemblies of God, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

day Saints (Mormons), and Philippine (Southern) Baptist denominations. In addition there are three churches established by local religious leaders: The Philippine Independent Church or "Aglipayan"; the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ); and the Ang Dating Daan (an offshoot of Iglesia ni Cristo). A majority of the country's indigenous peoples, estimated between 12 and 16 million, reportedly are Christian. However, many indigenous groups mix elements of their native religions with Christian beliefs and practices.

Most Muslims belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. A very small number of Shi'a believers live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao. Approximately 20.4 percent of the population of Mindanao is Muslim, according to the 2000 census. Members of the Muslim community are concentrated in five provinces of western Mindanao, the only provinces in which they represent the majority: Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Large Muslim communities are also located in the Mindanao provinces of Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay, Zamboanga del Norte, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao del Norte, and North Cotabato. Sizable Muslim neighborhoods also can be found in metropolitan Manila on the northern island of Luzon and on the western island of Palawan.

There is no available data on "nominal" members of religious organizations. Estimates of nominal members of the largest group, Roman Catholics, range from 60 to 65 percent of the total population. These estimates are based on regular church attendance. El Shaddai, a local charismatic lay movement affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, has grown rapidly in the last decade and has a reported 8 million members worldwide. El Shaddai's headquarters in Manila claims a domestic membership of 6 million, or 7.5 percent of the population, although this number cannot accurately be corroborated.

Christian missionaries work actively throughout the country, including most parts of western Mindanao, often within Muslim communities.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. Although Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, is the dominant religion, there is no state religion, and the Constitution provides for the separation of church and state. The Government does not restrict adherents of other religions from practicing their faith.

The law requires organized religions to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) to establish their tax-exempt status. For SEC registration, religious groups must submit their articles of faith and existing bylaws. The law does not specify penalties for failure to register with the SEC. To be registered as a nonstock, nonprofit organization, they must meet the basic requirements for corporate registration and must request tax exemption from the BIR law division. Older religious corporations are required to submit a 5-year financial statement, while new groups are given a 3-year provisional tax exemption. Established nonstock, nonprofit organizations may be fined for late filing of registration with the BIR and nonsubmission of registration datasheets and financial statements. There were no reports of discrimination in the registration system during the period covered by this report.

The Government provides no direct subsidies to institutions for religious purposes, including the extensive school systems maintained by religious orders and church groups. The Office on Muslim Affairs (OMA), an agency under the Office of the President, generally limits its activities to fostering Islamic religious practices, although it also has the authority to coordinate economic growth and livelihood projects in predominantly Muslim areas. The OMA's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment administers the annual Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, supervises endowment (Awqaf) properties and institutions, and conducts activities for the establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and Awqaf projects. The bureau helps coordinate the travel of religious pilgrims by coordinating bus service to and from airports, hotel reservations, and guides.

The Presidential Assistant for Muslim Affairs helps coordinate relations with countries that have large Islamic populations and that have contributed to Mindanao's economic development and to the peace process. In February approximately 3,000 of the country's Muslims participated in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

The ARMM, established in 1990, responded to Muslim demands for local autonomy in areas where Muslims represent a majority or a substantial minority. In 1996, the Government signed a final peace agreement with the MNLF, concluding an often violent struggle that lasted more than 20 years. The Government is working with MNLF leaders on a variety of development programs to reintegrate former MNLF fighters through providing them with jobs and business opportunities. The integration of ex-MNLF fighters into the armed forces and police has helped reduce suspicion between Christians and Muslims.

In response to the 1996 peace agreement between the Government and the MNLF, the U.N. enacted the Multi-Donor Program (UNMDP). By the end of the period covered by this report, this program had not officially commenced since it was in a 3-month succession phase. Discussions are ongoing in preparation for the next phase of the project.

In March, peace advocates, military troops, and government officials declared Jolo municipality in Sulu province a zone of peace under the UNMDP. Under this declaration, police and military personnel are not allowed to carry firearms within the municipality. Both the MNLF and the MILF agreed to work in previously rebel-controlled areas to help enforce the project, but local observers note mixed results in Jolo. Apart from Jolo, other towns in North Cotabato, Maguindanao, and Zamboanga del Norte provinces have been declared peace zones in the past. The peace zones in North Cotabato and Maguindanao have been somewhat successful due to community involvement and a mutual cessation of hostilities between the military and the rebels.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools with the written consent of parents, provided there is no cost to the Government. Based on a traditional policy of promoting moral education, local public schools make available to church groups the opportunity to teach moral values during school hours. Attendance is not mandatory, and various churches rotate in sharing classroom space. The Government also allows interested groups to distribute free Bibles in public schools.

According to the law, public schools must ensure that the religious rights of students are protected. Muslim students are allowed to wear their head coverings (hijab), and Muslim girls are not required to wear shorts during physical education classes. In 2001, the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) announced plans to erect a mosque on campus to provide Muslim cadets a place to worship and to enhance cultural awareness of Islam for all cadets; however, this project had not yet been completed by the end of the period covered by this report.

In many parts of Mindanao, Muslim students routinely attend Catholic schools from elementary to university level; however, these students are not required to receive Catholic religious instruction.

Approximately 14 percent of the school population in Mindanao attends Islamic schools. Estimates of the number of madrassas (Islamic schools) across the country vary widely; government officials estimate the number at over 2,000. Of these, more than half are located in the ARMM. To date 1,140 madrassas seeking financial assistance from local and foreign donors are registered with the Office on Muslim Affairs, while only 35 are registered with the Department of Education (DepEd). Most madrassas do not meet the DepEd's accreditation standards for curricula and adequate facilities. On February 18, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo issued Executive Order No. 283 that provides for the creation of the Madrassa Development Coordinating Committee (MDCC) tasked to manage financial assistance to the madrassa system from local and international sources.

During the 2002-03 school year, the Government announced a program to integrate madrassas into the country's national education system. The five-point program includes information and communications technology, madrassa education, peace education, Mindanao culture and history, and teacher training. It initially involved madrassas in the ARMM, with the intention of eventually expanding to all Mindanao provinces.

To propagate the moderate teachings of Islam as opposed to the extremist positions of radical Muslim groups, a 2-day International Ulama (Islamic religious leader) Forum was held in Manila in May. The conference aimed to create a Center for Moderate Muslims to showcase Islam as a religion of peace, harmony, tolerance, and understanding. Activities of the Center would include discussions on the fundamentals of Islamic faith, producing educational materials, and public awareness campaigns. Approximately 10 top-ranking ulama officials in Mindanao, 50 ulama leaders from Luzon, 10 Muslim women religious leaders, and 30 foreign ulamas from Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Cambodia, and Japan participated in the forum.

The Government's National Ecumenical Consultative Committee (NECCOM) fosters interfaith dialogue among the major religious groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, Islam, Iglesia ni Cristo, the Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), and Protestant denominations. The Protestant churches represented in the NECCOM are the National Council of Churches of the Philippines and the Council of Evangelical Churches of the Philippines. Members of the NECCOM meet periodically with the President to discuss social and political issues.

Officially recognized religious holidays include Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, All Saints Day, and Christmas Day.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Government does not ban or discourage specific religions or religious factions. Muslims, who are concentrated in many of the most impoverished provinces in the country, complain that the Government has not made sufficient efforts to promote economic development. Some Muslim religious leaders assert further that Muslims suffer from economic discrimination by the Government, which is reflected in the Government's failure to provide funding to stimulate Mindanao's economic development.

Despite such programs, intermittent government efforts to integrate Muslims better into the political and economic mainstream have achieved limited success. Many Muslims claim that they continue to be underrepresented in senior civilian and military positions, and cite the lack of proportional Muslim representation in national government institutions. After the May 10 national elections, Muslims held 10 seats in the 235 member House of Representatives.

The Code of Muslim Personal Laws recognizes the Shari'a (Islamic law) civil law system as part of national law; however, it does not apply in criminal matters, and it applies only to Muslims. Some Muslim community leaders (ulamas) argue that the Government should allow Islamic courts to extend their jurisdiction to criminal law cases, and some support the MILF's goal of forming an autonomous region governed in accordance with Islamic law. As of May 31, there were 32 incumbent judges and 19 vacancies in the Shari'a Circuit Court, and no incumbent judges and 5 vacancies for the Shari'a District Court. As in other parts of the judicial system, the Shari'a courts suffer from a large number of unfilled positions.

In March, Muslim leaders within the Government and the private sector objected to the proposal of the Philippine National Police (PNP) to adopt an identification system exclusively for Filipino Muslims, which they regarded as discriminatory. PNP responded that a Muslim group voluntarily proposed the adoption of an identification system for all Muslim residents in Metro Manila as a means to identify suspected terrorists and criminals who are seeking refuge in Muslim communities. A Muslim community leader noted that there is no similar scheme for Christians. The plan had not been implemented as of the end of the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) claims to seek the immediate establishment of an independent Islamic state in the southwestern region. The ASG is primarily a loose collection of criminal-terrorist and kidnap-for-ransom gangs, and mainstream Muslim leaders reject its religious affiliation and strongly criticize its actions as "un-Islamic." Most Muslims do not favor the establishment of a separate state, and the overwhelming majority rejects terrorism as a means of

achieving a satisfactory level of autonomy. According to the military, the ASG has 300 to 400 members, which is lower than in previous years.

In June, security forces found and defused a bomb outside a Catholic church in Manila. Authorities arrested three suspects and believe the crime was driven by opposition to the presidential inauguration, not by religious or discriminatory motives. Two similar bombs were found a day earlier at political and military locations.

In April, following a series of illegal raids of Muslim communities and arrests reportedly without warrants, some 4,000 Muslims held a prayer vigil and protest march in Metro Manila and accused the Government of targeting Muslim communities in its hunt for terrorists. The Ulama League of the Philippines, an organization of Muslim religious groups, denounced the military's report tagging an Arabic teacher and two city hall workers as suspected ASG members and called for the establishment of sufficient evidence before linking Muslims with terror groups. In a meeting with Manila Muslim leaders, President Arroyo clarified that the campaign against terrorism was carried out without ethnic or religious bias.

In April, in line with the Government's antiterrorism campaign, the President ordered the creation of a special Muslim police unit tasked to handle cases involving the arrest and investigation of Muslims. Some Muslims disagreed with the creation of the police group and branded it as a ploy to pit Muslims against Muslims, but the Government claimed it would ensure that the rights of Muslims are protected.

According to March press reports, a military official claimed that Christians who had converted to Islam were the vanguard of terrorist activities in Metro Manila, Mindanao, and other parts of the country and had links with the ASG and Jemaah Islamiyah, an Indonesia-based terrorist group.

In March, the five-member Commission tasked by the President to investigate the March 2003 Davao Airport bombing and the April 2003 Wharf bombing cleared the antiskidnapping chief and a military officer who some suspected of being involved in the incident. The Commission also dismissed allegations against the MILF in the bombings.

In March 2003, a group of Muslim villagers complained of government-sponsored religious abuse when AFP soldiers flagged down their bus, demanded to know whether Muslims were aboard, and allegedly accused some passengers of being members of the MILF.

President Arroyo briefly declared a "state of lawlessness" in Basilan in 2001 and gave the military power to detain suspected ASG members and supporters for 36 hours without an arrest warrant. In early 2002, the military detained 73 Muslim individuals under this authority. As of the end of the period covered by this report, all 73 remained in detention with their cases pending. Several human rights groups maintain that the detainees are innocent civilians who have been targeted because they are Muslim.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report; however, the Abu Sayyaf Group has employed jihadist rhetoric in its public statements and claimed responsibility for the Superferry 14 explosion in February.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there is some ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against Muslims by Christians. Religious affiliation customarily is a function of a person's family, ethnic group, or tribal membership. Historically, Muslims have been alienated socially from the dominant Christian majority, and some ethnic and cultural discrimination against Muslims has been recorded.

Christian and Muslim communities live in close proximity throughout the central and western Mindanao region, and their relationship is harmonious in some areas. However, efforts by the dominant Christian population to resettle in traditionally Muslim areas over the past 60 years have fostered resentment among many Muslim residents. Many Muslims view Christian proselytizing as an extension of a historical effort by the Christian majority to deprive Muslims of their homeland and cultural identity, as well as of their religion. Christian missionaries work in most parts of western Mindanao, often within Muslim communities. Predominantly Muslim provinces in Mindanao continue to lag behind the rest of the island in almost all aspects of socioeconomic development.

The national culture, with its emphasis on familial, tribal, and regional loyalties, often creates informal barriers whereby access to jobs or resources is provided first to those of one's own family or group. Some employers have a biased expectation that Muslims have lower educational levels. Muslims report that they have difficulty renting rooms in boarding houses or being hired for retail work if they use their real name or wear distinctive Muslim dress. Therefore, some Muslims use a Christian pseudonym and do not wear distinctive dress when applying for housing or jobs.

Reports from the Mindanao region highlighted incidents of discrimination against Muslim refugees by Christian evacuees and officials. Muslims were sometimes automatically associated with the MILF separatist movement apparently because of their religion.

Sectarian violence is rare in Mindanao even though the cleavage between Christians and Muslims is exacerbated by the fact that the country is predominately Christian. Christians and Muslims remain suspicious of one another, although relations are not overtly hostile. In general, societal attitudes toward religion are open and relaxed, mirroring the national culture.

Religious dialogue and cooperation among the various religious communities generally remain amicable. Many religious leaders are involved in ecumenical activities and also in interdenominational efforts to alleviate poverty. The Interfaith Group, which is registered as a NGO, includes Roman Catholic, Islamic, and Protestant church representatives joined together in an effort to support the Mindanao peace process through work in the communities of former combatants.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference meets monthly to deepen mutual understanding between Roman Catholic and Muslim leaders and also actively supports the Mindanao peace process. The Archbishop of Davao, the President of the Ulama League of the Philippines, and the head of the National Council of Churches all strongly support this effort. The conference seeks to foster exchanges at the local level between parish priests and local Islamic teachers and community leaders. Paralleling the dialogue fostered by religious leaders, the Silsila Foundation in Zamboanga City hosts a regional exchange to reduce bias and promote cooperation among Muslim and Christian academics and local leaders. Other active local organizations include the Mindanao State University Peace Institute, the Ranao-Muslim Christian Movement for Dialogue, the Peace Advocates of Zamboanga, the Ateneo Peace Institute, and the Peace Education Center of the Notre Dame University.

Amicable ties among religious groups are reflected in many nonofficial organizations. The leadership of human rights groups, trade union confederations, and industry associations typically represent many religious persuasions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officers in Manila meet with representatives of all major faiths to discuss their concerns on a variety of issues. In addition the U.S. Government

actively supports 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.

The Embassy also maintains active outreach with NGOs. The Embassy hosted meetings of political and opinion leaders from the Muslim community to discuss the past, present, and future U.S. role in Mindanao. The Embassy continues to engage host country communities outside Manila. In November 2003, the Ambassador hosted an Iftar dinner at his residence during Ramadan. In December 2003, Embassy officials traveled to Mindanao to host a dinner for Muslim Ulama (scholars) and hear their concerns about peace and religious freedom.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) helps consolidate peace efforts in Mindanao and expand economic opportunities for residents of the island. During the period covered by this report, it budgeted \$40 million in grant assistance (approximately 58 percent of its total budget), targeting the poorest regions of Muslim Mindanao. USAID operates the Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) program, and as well as the Livelihood Enhancement and Peace Program. GEM aims to foster peace in Mindanao, accelerate economic growth, specifically in conflict-affected areas, and support conflict resolution mechanisms. The Livelihood Enhancement and Peace Program assists in re-integrating 25,000 former Muslim combatants into the agricultural sector.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy sent Muslim and Catholic leaders to the United States on International Visitor Program Grants. The **2003 International Visitor Program**, in addition to promoting interfaith dialogues, examines how religious organizations and faiths work in the United States with each other. The Philippine International Visitor Alumni Association established its own working group focusing on peace and Muslim-Christian relations.

The Embassy provided small-grant assistance to various interfaith dialogue initiatives and promoted similar themes in its speakers program. Programs to foster interfaith dialogue included a citizen exchange program for Christian and Muslim high school students in Mindanao (ACCESS), which allowed 40 high school students to travel to Chicago to learn methods for dispute resolution and ways to foster interethnic cooperation. Also, the Partnerships for Learning Youth Exchange and Study (P4L YES) Program brought 40 Muslim students to the United States for a year of academic study. There they could learn about U.S. society and develop leadership skills, as well as educate Americans on their culture and establish a common bond between Muslim communities. In addition **an NGO** received a U.S. Embassy small grant to hold discussions on Islamic culture in the country and its relationship with democracy. In September 2003, two representatives from the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Washington, D.C., traveled to Marawi City, Mindanao to discuss how Muslims in the United States support democracy and democratic principals, such as freedom of religion.

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