



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#) » [East Asia and Pacific](#) » [Philippines](#)

## Philippines

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report**

Report

**September 13, 2011**

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

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. The armed insurgent Muslim group, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), continued to seek greater autonomy. The government and MILF have maintained a ceasefire instituted in July 2009 and have since engaged in peace talks.

There was some 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 U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy officials actively encouraged the peace process between the government and MILF and maintained active outreach with religious leaders and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to engage them in interfaith activities.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 115,831 square miles and a population of 97.98 million. According to 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.

Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Assemblies of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Philippine (Southern) Baptists. Domestically established denominations include the Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan); the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ); the Members Church of God International; and The Kingdom of Jesus Christ, the Name Above Every Name. Iglesia ni Cristo is the largest indigenous Christian denomination, with approximately 5.6 million members. Christianity is the majority religion among indigenous peoples. Between 12 million and 16 million indigenous persons adhere to Catholicism or Protestantism, often incorporating elements of traditional indigenous belief systems.

Conversion from Christianity to Islam is most typical among overseas Filipinos while they are living and working in Islamic countries. Many of these converts remain Muslim upon their return to the country and are known collectively as "Balik Islam" (return to Islam).

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

### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. 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 reporting period.

The cabinet-level National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) worked to promote the rights of Muslim Filipinos at both the national and local levels and supported 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 and the conduct of activities for the establishment and maintenance of Haji towns, Islamic centers, and other projects. The Presidential Assistant for Muslim Affairs helps coordinate relations with countries that have large Islamic populations and that contributed to Mindanao's economic development and the peace process.

The government permitted religious instruction in public schools with parents' written consent, provided there was no cost to the government. Based on a traditional policy of promoting moral education, local public schools gave religious groups the opportunity to teach moral values during school hours. Attendance was not mandatory, and the various groups shared classroom space. The government also allowed 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 attended Catholic schools from elementary to university level; these students were not required to receive religious instruction.

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

in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A total of 588 madrassah were registered with the NCMF, while 62 were registered with the Department of Education (DepEd). Registration with the NCMF or the DepEd is optional for madrassah but, if pursued, can lead to financial assistance from the government. Most madrassah did not meet the department's accreditation standards. The DepEd manages financial assistance to the madrassah system from local and international sources, and the DepEd's Bureau of Madrassah Education oversees education activities in the ARMM.

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The government continued to implement its unified curriculum, designed to integrate madrassah into the national education system. In addition to the 62 madrassah registered with the DepEd, one madrassah in Mindanao was in the process of obtaining operation permits from DepEd at the end of the reporting period. DepEd ordered public elementary schools that had at least 15 Muslim students to begin offering Arabic language instruction and classes on Islamic values, but funding shortfalls and a lack of qualified Arabic teachers limited the reach of this initiative. During the 2009-10 school year, DepEd provided Arabic language instruction and Islamic values education, including textbooks on these subjects, to Muslim students in selected public elementary schools. In August 2009 DepEd began an assistance program with seed funding of 19 million Philippine pesos (\$398,992) to private madrassah that have already adopted the standard madrassah curriculum. The department was still in the process of assessing grantees for possible funding support for school year 2010-11 at the end of the reporting period.

The government's National Interfaith Consultative Committee (NICCOM) fostered interfaith dialogue among major religious groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, Muslim groups, Iglesia ni Cristo, Aglipayan, and Protestant denominations. Smaller Protestant denominations are represented in the NICCOM through the National Council of Churches of the Philippines and the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, two large networks of Protestant churches and mission groups. NECCOM members met periodically with the president to discuss social and political issues.

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.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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.

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, the Sharia courts suffered from a large number of unfilled positions. All five Sharia district court judgeships and 39 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.

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

Although the government maintained a cease fire with the MILF, there were attacks by rogue elements often in relation to clan, land, and election politics. In August 2008 after the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order on the signing of a government-MILF territorial 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 in central Mindanao of hundreds of thousands of civilians. The government and MILF instituted a ceasefire in July 2009 and have since engaged in peace talks. There had been a pause in the talks as both the Philippine government and MILF reorganized their peace panels following the May 2010 election; the parties publicly expressed an intention to resume formal talks.

During the reporting period, the government also attributed a series of attacks, kidnappings, 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 reporting period. On December 25, an improvised explosive device exploded in a chapel on a Philippine National Police (PNP) camp in Jolo City, Sulu, during a Christmas Day mass. The explosion wounded 13 people, including a priest. In January, the PNP filed criminal charges against several suspects affiliated with the ASG in connection with the bombing. The case remained under preliminary investigation at the prosecutor's office at the end of the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

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

The government promoted interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. The Council on Interfaith Initiatives' executive mandate ended in June with the conclusion of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's term in office. Under President Benigno S. Aquino III's administration, issues relating to religious freedom are monitored by the Commission on Human Rights.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Historically, Muslims have been alienated socially from the Christian majority, and some ethnic and cultural discrimination against Muslims has been recorded. 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.

Over the past 60 years, 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.

Despite these circumstances, amicable ties among religious communities were common, and many participated in interdenominational efforts to alleviate poverty. The Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, a loose coalition of various religious and faith-based groups, continued to focus on building and strengthening interfaith relations through dialogues 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 hold dialogues on addressing local issues of peace and order and intercultural solidarity. Other interfaith groups also promoted peace between persons

of different faiths. Leadership of human rights groups, trade union confederations, and industry associations typically represents many religious persuasions.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officers regularly met with representatives of all major religious groups to discuss these problems and concerns. 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 also 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. The embassy continued to conduct a wide range of programming to promote interfaith dialogue and peace and to highlight these issues with populations in and around Manila, as well as across Mindanao.

The estimated total development support of the U.S. government to Mindanao for fiscal year 2010 is \$98 million, which comprises nearly 70 percent of U.S. government foreign assistance to the Philippines. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs contributed to promoting peace and fostering an environment for greater religious tolerance. USAID trained more than 6,042 peace advocates, mostly Muslims from areas in Mindanao affected by conflict and Muslim separatist activities. Thirty-two percent of the trained peace advocates were Muslim women. The USAID-trained mediators handled a total of 2,232 disputes or cases, 87 percent of which were resolved.

USAID funds were also used to develop an Islamic-based handbook on conflict resolution for community leaders and to institutionalize community-level alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. In the environment sector, USAID supported a special initiative called Al Khalifa (The Steward), a sourcebook based on the Islamic perspective on managing the environment. The sourcebook was incorporated in the development of a learning program for Mindanao State University's (MSU-Marawi Campus) Civic Welfare Training Service titled "Khalifa (or Stewardship) and Ecological Governance." These modules were being pilot-tested in four colleges at MSU-Marawi.

In August the embassy partnered with a Manila-based NGO to launch the Strategic Speaker Initiative Program under the theme "Partnership and Engagement for Our Collective Future." The program conducted outreach to young Christians, Lumads, and Muslims on the importance of interfaith initiatives.

In October the embassy partnered with a Mindanao-based NGO to launch the U.S. Embassy "English Writing Workshop." The participants, drawn from a variety of faiths and alumni of various U.S. government-funded youth exchange programs across the country, were encouraged to share their unique experiences and leadership skills and network for future collective initiatives. The embassy also partnered in October with another Mindanao-based NGO to conduct a workshop on "Youth Peace Platform for Mindanao: An Exhibit," which targeted the participation of Christian, Lumad, and Muslim youth leaders from across the country. Through the use of visual arts, the peace education workshop provided youths an opportunity to be fully aware of their role as peace advocates in their respective communities.

USAID also supported the Department of Education, both at the national and the ARMM level, in drafting the Madrassah National Operations Manual during the reporting period. Once finalized, the manual will provide guidelines for the operation of private madrassah that wish to implement the standard madrassah curriculum and become nationally accredited.

[Back to Top](#)