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Philippines

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom 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 successfully 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. The embassy 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, and 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 Shi'a 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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. There is no state religion, and the constitution provides for the separation of church and state.

The law required organized religions to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue to establish tax-exempt status. There was 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.

On February 18, 2010, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo signed Republic Act 9997, which replaced the Office of Muslim Affairs with the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF). The cabinet-level commission worked to promote the rights of Muslim Filipinos at both the national and local level and supported the implementation of economic, educational, cultural, and infrastructure programs for Muslim Filipino communities. NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment will administer 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 *madaris* (Islamic schools). Government officials estimated there were more than 1,000 *madaris* operating throughout the country. Of these more than half were located in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A total of 588 *madaris* were registered with the NCMF, while 40 were registered with the Department of Education (DepEd). Registration with the NCMF or the DepEd is optional for

madaris but, if pursued, can lead to financial assistance from the government. Most madaris did not meet the department's accreditation standards. The DepEd manages financial assistance to the madaris system from local and international sources, and the DepEd's Bureau of Madrasah Education oversees education activities in the ARMM.

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The government continued to implement its unified curriculum, designed to integrate madaris into the national education system. In addition to the 40 madaris registered with the DepEd, five madaris in Mindanao were 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 \$398,992 (Philippine Peso 19 million) to private madaris that have already adopted the standard curriculum on madrasah.

The government's National Ecumenical Consultative Committee (NECCOM) 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 NECCOM 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 practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country. 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 Shari'a (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 Shari'a courts suffered from a large number of unfilled positions. All five Shari'a district court judgeships and 39 percent of circuit court judgeships remained vacant. Aside from budget restrictions, judicial positions on the Shari'a courts were particularly difficult to fill because applicants must be members of both the Shari'a bar and the Integrated Bar of the Philippines.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

The government attributed several attacks in the first half of 2009 to MILF separatist rebels who continued to seek political autonomy in Mindanao during the reporting period. 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.

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 also occurred during the reporting period. On July 5, 2009, a bomb outside the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Cotabato City killed six and wounded 30 others as they were leaving worship service. On July 7 two more bombs exploded near a cathedral in Jolo City, killing two people and injuring 50. On January 11, 2010, a grenade exploded outside a cathedral in Jolo, Sulu. There were no reported injuries, but the cathedral was slightly damaged. On May 9, 2010, the day prior to national elections, two persons were killed and 12 wounded when a hand grenade was thrown inside a mosque in Pikit, North Cotabato. The Philippine National Police detained suspects affiliated with the ASG in connection with these bombings.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Many Muslims welcomed the enactment of the Republic Act 9997, which created and funded the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF). The new commission will expand activities supporting Islamic religious practices and promote the implementation of economic, educational, cultural, and infrastructure programs for Muslim Filipino communities. The new law also mandated the commission's engagement in the following activities: peace process, development of domestic trade and commerce among the members of Muslim Filipino communities, promotion of the halal (a food preparation method in Islamic dietary law), and undertaking studies and establishing ethnographic research centers and museums on Muslim cultures and institutions.

The government promoted interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. The Council on Interfaith Initiatives continued to strengthen the government's existing institutional arrangements for interfaith activities by coordinating interfaith programs and initiatives with all government agencies, local government units, and NGO partners. The council receives, approves, and prioritizes programs and project proposals designed to achieve peace and development through interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

From March 16 to 18, 2010, the country hosted the Special Non-aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and Development (SNAMMM). During the meeting the 118 member representatives of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) adopted a declaration that called for respect of cultural and religious diversity, promotion of tolerance and interfaith dialogues, and related confidence-building measures among members. The government's Council on Values Formation also spearheaded a parallel meeting on interfaith dialogue on March 16, 2010. During the meeting 70 delegates from various civil society and religious organizations urged the NAM member countries to collaborate in resolving issues that would promote lasting peace and development.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

The embassy 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. In December 2009 the embassy coordinated the visit to the country of the U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities, Farah Pandith. The visit included mission briefings, a forum with university students, meetings with NGOs working on Muslim and peace-related issues, interviews with the traditional and Web-based media, meetings with religious leaders and women leaders, and a visit to a local Muslim community to meet government and community leaders.

In February 2009 American Imam Talal Y. Eid, a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, visited the country to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation among interethnic audiences, including women's groups and youth in Metro Manila and Mindanao.

The estimated total development support of the U.S. government to Mindanao for fiscal year 2009 is \$69 million, which composes nearly 60 percent of U.S. government development 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 470 peace advocates, mostly Muslims from areas in Mindanao affected by conflict and Muslim separatist activities. Almost 30 percent of the trained peace advocates were Muslim women. 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), an environmental sourcebook based on the Islamic perspective on managing the environment.

USAID programs also provided support to former MILF combatants to encourage their shift from fighting to productive farming and supported the construction of community-based infrastructure projects. With U.S. Department of Defense 1207 funding, USAID completed the Tawi Tawi airport runway improvement project in FY 2009, which will facilitate increased passenger and cargo traffic, thereby supporting economic development in the conflict-affected areas in the Sulu Archipelago. Improvements in transportation infrastructure in the conflict-affected areas are expected to support long-term economic progress and help consolidate peace.

USAID also supported several internship programs for Muslim students. Fourteen Muslim students completed intensive hands-on training in business administration and enterprise development with multi-national companies. Twenty-five young Muslim student leaders were sponsored as interns of the largely Christian-dominated Philippine House of Representatives. The legislative internship program helped policymakers develop a more intimate understanding of Mindanao's Muslim cultures, while simultaneously fostering an appreciation among the interns for the policy-making and legislative processes.

In May and June of 2009, USAID and the embassy's public affairs section coorganized the Cultures Across Mindanao program, which included the participation of more than 200 in- and out-of-school youth from different faiths and ethnic roots across Mindanao. The youth were given training as peace advocates in five-day camps and were provided an interfaith environment where they could interact with one another. USAID assisted 21 madaris last year to adopt the Department of Education's Standard Madrasah Curriculum and get accreditation and support from the national government. The owners and administrators of the selected madaris were given capacity-building training, such as planning, financial management, school governance, and resource mobilization.

With increased staffing for expanded outreach in Mindanao, the Embassy's Public Affairs Section funded programs in Mindanao that included high school education, arts preservation, community policing, and a summer youth camp. The Embassy partnered with a local NGO to implement a two-year English Microscholarship Program that initially provided after-school English instruction for three public high schools in July 2009 and expanded to some public high schools in Mindanao in September 2009.

In March 2010 the Embassy partnered with a local university in Jolo to launch a revitalization program for Sulu arts and culture. This activity was designed to allow the inhabitants to engage in productive cultural activities that preserve and protect the indigenous culture. The Embassy also partnered with the National Arts Center to sponsor a 12-day summer camp of creative interaction in modern-urban dance for 50 young dancers from the Sulu Archipelago and Luzon. The participants utilized dance as an art form to foster dialogue about art and other forms of human interaction as tools in conflict resolution, leadership skills building, and building bridges across and within cultures, including both Philippine-U.S. and internal Philippine dialogues.

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