



## Philippines

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

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. Peace talks between the Government and the MILF were suspended in August 2008 after rogue elements of the MILF launched a series of attacks in several areas of Mindanao following a Supreme Court order preventing the Government from signing a territorial agreement with the MILF, an agreement that was later ruled unconstitutional. A reconstituted government peace panel was working to resume peace talks with the MILF at the end of the reporting period.

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 Philippines.

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, comprise 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 Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups, commonly referred to as Moros. 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.

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), and the Members Church of God International.

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 who have lived and worked in Islamic countries, largely because conversion brings social and economic benefits while abroad. Many of these "converts of convenience" 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. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. 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 Office of Muslim Affairs (OMA) generally limits its activities to supporting 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 helps coordinate the annual Muslim pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca, supervises endowment (auqaf) of properties and institutions, and conducts activities for the establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and other projects. 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 the peace process.

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 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 their head coverings (hijab), 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; however, these students were not required to receive religious instruction.

Approximately 14 percent of the Mindanao student population attended Islamic schools (madaris). Government officials estimated the number of Islamic schools at 2,000. Of these, more than half were located in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A total of 633 madaris were registered with the OMA, while 38 were registered with the Department of Education. Registration with the OMA or the Department of Education 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 Department of Education manages financial assistance to the madaris system from local and international sources.

The Government continued to implement its unified curriculum, designed to integrate madaris into the national education system. In addition to the 38 madaris registered with Department of Education, 37 additional madaris in Mindanao were in the process of obtaining operation permits from the Department of Education at the end of the reporting period. The Department of Education ordered public elementary schools that had at least 25 Muslim

students to begin offering Arabic language instruction and classes on Islamic values. During the 2008-09 school year the Department of Education provided Arabic language instruction and Islamic values education, including textbooks on these subjects, to Muslim students in 754 public elementary schools.

The Government's National Ecumenical Consultative Committee (NECCOM) fosters 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 meet periodically with the President to discuss social and political issues.

The Government observes Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, All Saints' Day, Christmas Day, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha as national holidays.

#### 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 Code of Muslim Personal Laws recognizes Islamic law (Shari'a) as part of national law; however, it does not apply in criminal matters, and it applies only to Muslims. Some Muslim community leaders (ulama) 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 36 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, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

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

The Government attributed several attacks 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.

During the reporting period, the Government also attributed a series of attacks and killings to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), other Islamic militants, and the New People's Army (NPA).

On April 10 and April 11, 2009, alleged members of the ASG killed farmers Cosme Aballe and Emilio Clemente in

Zamboanga City. The ASG claimed Clemente and Aballe were members of the Ilaga, a Christian vigilante group that allegedly attacked Muslim rebels in Basilan and other parts of the ARMM.

On July 1, 2008, the military found the body of Josefino Estaniel, a Protestant pastor in the village of Dalagdag near Davao city, who was kidnapped in May 2008. The Government claimed that Pastor Estaniel was tortured and killed by communist guerillas for cooperating with the military.

In July 2008 Catholic Bishop Martin Jumoad of Isabela, Basilan and other Catholics reportedly received letters from self-described 'Muslim warriors' possibly linked to the ASG, threatening harm if the Catholics did not convert to Islam or pay "Islamic taxes."

#### 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 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 nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners. The Council receives, approves, and prioritizes programs and project proposals designed to achieve peace and development through interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

#### 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 this, amicable ties among religious communities are common, and many participate 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.

On April 6, 2009, members of the local Muslim tribe Yakan allegedly attacked a Christian community in Lantawan town in Basilan, killing three Catholics and injuring several others. Basilan's local bishop condemned the attack, noting that it took place during the Christian's observance of Holy Week, and appealed to local authorities to secure and protect the Christian community in Lantawan. The motivation for the attack was unclear.

#### 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 August 2008 the Embassy hosted the visit of an American imam who reached out to Christian and Muslim community leaders and clergy to discuss the importance of interfaith dialogue and tolerance among religions. A digital video conference in February 2009 linked Muslim leaders in the Manila area with the King Center in Atlanta to discuss the promotion of tolerance.

For fiscal year 2008, 60 percent of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) \$91 million budget for the country went to programs in Mindanao, mostly in the ARMM. USAID programs were instrumental in supporting the peace process and helped foster an environment for greater religious tolerance. During the reporting period, USAID supported the development of an Islamic-based conflict resolution trainer's manual, which features Islamic teachings on peace and conflict resolution. Some 450 peace advocates, mostly Muslims and Christians from conflict-affected areas in Mindanao, were trained to use the manual. USAID's Livelihood Enhancement and Peace Program helped more than 28,000 former Moro National Liberation Front members make the transition from fighting to productive farming. Other USAID-funded programs focused on helping Muslim students and recent university graduates in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao acquire some of the vital skills necessary to compete successfully for stable and lucrative employment in high growth sectors of the economy. USAID also implemented an internship program for young Muslim students and potential leaders in the largely Christian-dominated House of Representatives. This program helped policy makers 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.

The Embassy also sought to help community leaders broaden their cultural understanding through the Mission's exchange programs. During the reporting period, the Embassy sent Department of Education officials and madaris' principals to the United States on Voluntary Visitor and International Visitor Programs. The Embassy used two student exchange programs, the Youth Leadership Program and the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program, to enable Muslim students to study in the United States and learn about religious tolerance and pluralism from the perspective of American youth. During the 2008-09 academic year, the YES Program sponsored 40 secondary students from the ARMM to spend the academic year living with American families. In April 2009, through the Youth Leadership Program, 23 Muslim, Christian, and Lumad (indigenous) students attended a four-week student exchange program with an American university. Two Citizens Exchange Programs sent 18 Muslim leaders to the United States for one month to meet with Americans engaged in interfaith dialogue and also brought Americans to Mindanao. An embassy official delivered a speech and organized a digital video conference on Islam in the United States and its annual Ramadan observances, while American Corners throughout the Philippines featured educational displays titled "Islam in America." The Embassy organized two children's summer camps in Mindanao for Muslims, Christians, and Lumads with a theme of community service and diversity, and the Ambassador also hosted 40 at-risk children from a Muslim community at a basketball game in Manila.

The Embassy's Public Affairs Section, with increased staffing to handle expanded outreach programming for Mindanao, funded several programs for teachers or young persons. In December 2008, 34 teachers whose schools had been affected by fighting in Cotabato attended a seminar on English teaching. In April and May 2009, the Public Affairs Section provided a Regional English Language Officer from the United States at summer camps for

approximately 300 teachers throughout Mindanao. In April 2009 the Embassy launched a Mindanao-based chapter on its website to highlight its Mindanao programming to promote tolerance and peace.