



## Philippines

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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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 period covered by this report. The armed insurgent Muslim group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) continued to seek greater autonomy. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Government and the MILF maintained a cease-fire and continued their peace dialogue.

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.

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 88.6 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'as 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 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 period covered by this report.

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 church groups the opportunity to teach moral values during school hours. Attendance is not mandatory, and various churches 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 (madrassahs). Government officials estimated the number of Islamic schools at more than 2,000. Of these, more than half were located in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A total of 1,140 madrassahs seeking financial assistance from local and foreign donors were registered with the OMA, while 40 were registered with the Department of Education. Most madrassahs did not meet the Department's accreditation standards. The Madrassah Development Coordinating Committee manages financial assistance to the madrassah system from local and international sources.

The Government continued to implement its unified curriculum, designed to integrate madrassahs into the national education system. Fifty-five madrassahs in Mindanao were in the process of obtaining operation permits from the Department of Education at the end of the reporting period. The Department ordered public elementary schools that had at least 25 Muslim students to begin offering Arabic language instruction and classes on Islamic values. During the 2007-08 school year, the Department of Education provided Arabic language instruction and Islamic values education, including textbooks on these subjects, to Muslim students in 794 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, and Eid al-Fitr 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 period covered by this report. 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 has 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 (ulamas) 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 37 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 are required to be members of the Shari'a Bar in addition to the Integrated Bar of the Philippines.

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

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

During the reporting period, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) continued to seek the immediate establishment of an independent Islamic state in the southwestern region of Mindanao. Mainstream Muslim leaders rejected the group's claimed religious affiliation, strongly criticized its actions as "un-Islamic" and denounced terrorism as a means of achieving a satisfactory level of autonomy. The Government has attributed numerous attacks to the ASG.

The Government also attributed some attacks to radical elements of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and MILF, which split from the MNLF in 1978. The MNLF reached a peace agreement with the Government in 1996, while the MILF is currently involved in negotiations with the Government for a peace accord.

On April 13, 2008, a bomb exploded at a cathedral in Zamboanga City, a predominantly Catholic city in Mindanao. Another bomb exploded on the ground floor of the building that houses the local office of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Police and military authorities attributed both explosions to the ASG and identified one of the suspects as an ASG bomb expert.

On January 15, 2008, ten gunmen abducted a Catholic priest and a teacher in Tawi-Tawi, Mindanao. The suspects, believed by the police to be members of the ASG, killed the priest during police pursuit operations. The priest reportedly had received abduction threats from the ASG, but he refused police protection.

On June 10, 2007, armed men, allegedly members of a breakaway faction of the MILF, abducted an Italian missionary priest in Payao, Zamboanga Sibugay. The Government launched search operations immediately after the priest's abduction in Zamboanga, and later negotiated his release through the assistance of a local government leader. The abductors released the priest on July 19, 2007.

### **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. On March 12, 2008, the President created the Council on Interfaith Initiatives to strengthen the Government's existing institutional arrangements for interfaith activities. The Council replaced the National Committee on Interfaith Cooperation as the highest policy-making body for the Government's interfaith initiatives.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

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 stereotype 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 Interfaith Group, a NGO which includes Catholic, Islamic, and Protestant representatives, continued to support the Mindanao peace process. The Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, a loose coalition of various religious and faith-based groups, focuses on building and strengthening interfaith relations in selected communities through dialogue. There is an active Bishops-Ulamas Conference in Mindanao that brings together Catholic bishops and members of the Ulama League of the Philippines from Mindanao to hold dialogues on addressing local issues of peace, order and inter-cultural solidarity. 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 engage communities beyond metropolitan Manila. In July 2007 the Embassy hosted the visit of an American imam who conducted an interfaith summer camp for Muslim, Christian, and Lumad (indigenous people of Mindanao) high school student leaders, as well as interfaith outreach seminars for Christian and Muslim community leaders and clergy.

For fiscal year 2007, 60 percent of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) \$69 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. One example of such an effort was a multiyear USAID program that helped 28,000 former MNLF members make the transition from fighting to productive farming.

The Embassy also sought to help religious leaders broaden their cultural understanding through the Mission's exchange programs. During the period covered in this report, the Embassy sent both Muslim and Christian leaders to the United States on International Visitor Program (IVP) grants. The Embassy also 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 2007 academic year, the YES Program sponsored 40 secondary students from the ARMM to spend the academic year living with an American family. In April 2008, through the Youth Leadership Program, 21 Muslim, Christian, and Lumad students attended a 4-

week student exchange program with an American university. A Citizens Exchange Program sent six Muslim leaders from the country to the United States for a month to meet with Americans engaged in interfaith dialogue.

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