



Philippines

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and Government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. 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, brokered by the Government of Malaysia.

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 problems 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, while the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) provided some technical assistance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 115,831 square miles and a population of 89 million.

Roman Catholics, the largest religious group, comprise 80 to 85 percent of the total population. El Shaddai, a local charismatic lay movement affiliated with the Catholic Church, claims a domestic membership of six million.

Islam is the largest minority religion. The most recent census, conducted in 2000, estimated the Muslim population between five and nine percent of the total population. Muslims reside principally on Mindanao and nearby islands. Most 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 on Mindanao.

Groups that constitute less than five percent of the population include a number of Christian denominations such as 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. In addition three churches are 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).

Christianity is the majority religious among indigenous peoples. An estimated number of between 12 million and 16 million indigenous persons follow either Catholicism or Protestantism. However, many indigenous groups mix elements of their native religious groups with Christian beliefs and practices.

Christian missionaries work actively throughout the country, including within Muslim communities in most parts of western Mindanao. Conversion of Christians to Islam is most typical among workers who have lived and worked in an Islamic country, largely because conversion brings social and economic benefits while abroad. Many of these "converts of convenience" remain Muslims 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 the Government generally respected this right in practice. There is no state religion, and the Constitution provides for the separation of church and state.

The law requires organized religious groups to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue to establish tax-exempt status. The law does not specify penalties for failure to register with the SEC. 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 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 helps coordinate the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, supervises endowment (auqaf) properties and institutions, and conducts activities for the establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and auqaf 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 to 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 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 Catholic religious instruction.

Approximately 14 percent of the school population in Mindanao attended Islamic schools. Government officials estimated the number of madrassahs (Islamic schools) at more than 2000. 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 are registered with the OMA, while only 40 are registered with the Department of Education. Most madrassahs did not meet the Department's accreditation standards. The Madrassa 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. Approximately 50 madrassahs in Mindanao were in the process of accreditation with the Department of Education at the end of the reporting period. Public elementary schools that have at least 25 Muslim students were ordered to begin offering Arabic language instruction and classes on Islamic values. Fifty-seven public elementary schools in Manila and all public elementary schools in the ARMM included Arabic language and Islamic values education in the curriculum for their Muslim students by the end of the reporting period. The Department of Education also provided text books on Arabic and Islamic values to these schools.

The Government's National Ecumenical Consultative Committee (NECCOM) fosters interfaith dialogue among major religious groups, including the Catholic Church, Islam, Iglesia ni Cristo, the Philippine Independent Church (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. Members of the NECCOM meet periodically with the President to discuss social and political issues.

Officially recognized holy days include Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, All Saints' Day, and Christmas Day. Each year since 2002, the President has issued a proclamation declaring the feast of the end of Ramadan, known as Eid al-Fitr, a special nonworking holiday nationwide.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government does not ban or discourage specific religious groups or religious factions. However, Muslims--who are concentrated in many 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 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) 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. Aside from budget restrictions, judicial positions on the Shari'a courts were particularly difficult to fill because of the requirement that in addition to being members of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines, applicants must also be members of the Shari'a Bar.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On January 7, 2005, following the creation in 2004 of special Muslim police units, members of the unit in the Western Police District raided the Islamic Information Center in Manila and detained 17 suspected militants, including three women. Two suspects were charged with illegal possession of fire arms and explosives, but a regional trial court judge dismissed these charges in November 2005. The police released the remaining 15 suspects shortly after their arrest.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners 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.

Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) seeks the immediate establishment of an independent Islamic state in the southwestern region of Mindanao. Mainstream Muslim leaders rejected its claimed religious affiliation, strongly criticizing 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.

On April 20, 2007, the ASG beheaded seven men in Jolo, Sulu. The ASG abducted the victims, six of whom were workers of a Government road project, on April 18 in the southern Mindanao town of Parang, Sulu, and demanded \$105,300 (five million pesos) in exchange for the release of their captives, which local authorities refused to pay.

On January 10, 2007, triple bomb attacks were launched in the cities of General Santos, Kidapawan and Cotabato in Central Mindanao. Seven persons died and 30 others were injured. The military blamed the ASG and the international terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah for the attacks.

The Government also attributed some attacks to radical elements of the MNLF and MILF, a group that split from the original MNLF in 1978 and has been in negotiations with the Government for a peace accord during the reporting period.

On June 10, 2007, 10 armed Islamic militants formerly with the MILF allegedly abducted an Italian priest in Zamboanga, Mindanao. The Government immediately launched a search operation but had not found him at the end of the reporting period.

On April 13, 2007, an MNLF rogue leader declared "holy war" against the Government in retaliation for military attacks against MNLF camps in Mindanao.

In February 2007 an MNLF commander kidnapped several government peace negotiators, releasing them two days later.

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 have a biased expectation that Muslims would have lower education levels. 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 and thus resorted to the use of Christian pseudonyms and 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.

Amicable ties among religious communities are common, and many participate in interdenominational efforts to alleviate poverty. The Interfaith Group, which is registered as a nongovernmental organization (NGO), including Catholic, Islamic, and Protestant representatives, continued to support the Mindanao peace process. There is an active Bishops' (Catholic)/Ulamas (Muslim) Conference in Mindanao.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom problems 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 their 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 outside Manila. One notable program was the September 2006 visit of a Muslim-American imam, who met with religious leaders around the country to discuss interfaith cooperation and religious tolerance.

For fiscal year 2006, 59 percent of United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) \$70 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 multi-year USAID program that helped 28,000 former MNLF members make the transition from fighters to productive farmers.

The Embassy also sought to help religious leaders broaden their horizons 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, ACCESS and YES, to enable Muslim students to study in the United States and learn about religious tolerance and pluralism from the perspective of other American youth. During the 2006 academic year, the YES Program sponsored 40 secondary students from the ARMM to spend the academic year living with an American family. Also in 2006, through the ACCESS program, 27 Muslim students attended a four week student exchange program with an American university.

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