



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Philippines

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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 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. An eventual settlement could include special recognition of Islamic education and expanded recognition of Islamic law, among other provisions sought by some Muslims.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there is some ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against Muslims by Christians. This, combined with economic disparities, contributed to persistent conflict in certain provinces.

The U.S. embassy discusses religious freedom issues 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 its population is approximately eighty-five million.

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

The largest minority religion was Islam. The most recent census, conducted in 2000, estimated that the Muslim population was between 5 percent and 9 percent of the total population. Muslims resided principally on Mindanao and nearby islands. Most belonged to the Sunni branch of Islam. A very small number of Shi'a believers lived in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur on Mindanao.

Among the numerous Protestant and other Christian denominations were 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) Baptist denominations. In addition there were three churches 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).

A majority of indigenous peoples, estimated to number between twelve million and sixteen million, reportedly were Christian (Roman Catholic and Protestant). However, many indigenous groups mixed elements of their native religions with Christian beliefs and practices.

Christian missionaries worked actively throughout the country, including within Muslim communities in most parts of western Mindanao. Conversion of Christians to Islam was most typical among workers who have lived and worked in an Islamic country, largely because converting brings social and economic benefits while abroad. Many of these "converts of convenience" remained 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 Government does not restrict adherents of other religions in practicing their faith.

The law requires organized religions to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) 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 Government does not provide direct subsidies to institutions for religious purposes, even for the extensive school systems maintained by religious orders and church groups.

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, Saudi Arabia; 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 worked with Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leaders on a variety of development programs to reintegrate former MNLF fighters through jobs and business opportunities. The integration of approximately 7,500 ex-MNLF fighters into the armed forces and police has helped reduce suspicion between Christians and Muslims.

In March 2004 peace advocates, military troops, and government officials declared Jolo Municipality in Sulu Province a zone of peace under the UN Multi-Donor Program (UNMDP). In addition to Jolo, other towns in North Cotabato, Maguindanao, and Zamboanga del Norte provinces have been declared peace zones. During the reporting period, the peace zones in these areas--with the exception of Sulu--have experienced a dramatic decline in the number of armed encounters between government forces and Muslim insurgents. The reduction of hostilities reduced tensions between Christians and Muslims in these areas.

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 attend Catholic schools from elementary to university level; however, these students are not required to receive Catholic religious instruction.

In November 2005 the University of the Philippines (UP) agreed to the construction of a mussalah (prayer room) and a dormitory for Muslim students inside the campus.

Approximately 14 percent of the school population in Mindanao attended Islamic schools. Estimates of the number of madrassahs (Islamic schools) across the country varied widely; government officials estimated the number at more than two thousand. Of these, more than half were located in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). A total of , 1,140 madrassahs seeking financial assistance from local and foreign donors were registered with the OMA, while only 40 are registered with the Department of Education. Most madrassahs did not meet the department's accreditation standards for curricula and adequate facilities. The Madrasa Development Coordinating Committee manages financial assistance to the madrassah system from local and international sources.

In September 2005, the Government began implementation of its unified curriculum, designed to integrate madrassahs into the national education system. Several private madrassahs began training educators to teach math, science, English, and Filipino, in addition to sectarian subjects. The Government hoped to certify Islamic schools that offer a full range of courses in the coming years, allowing their graduates to enter public high schools or colleges. In addition, public elementary schools that had at least twenty-five Muslim students were ordered to begin offering Arabic language instruction and classes on Islamic values.

In line with the Government's antiterrorism campaign, in April 2004 the president ordered the creation of a special Muslim police unit tasked to handle cases involving the arrest and investigation of Muslims. Some Muslims disagreed with the creation of the police group and branded it as a ploy to pit Muslims against Muslims, but the Government claimed it would ensure that the rights of Muslims are protected.

The Government's National Ecumenical Consultative Committee (NECCOM) fosters interfaith dialogue among major religious groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, Islam, Iglesia ni Cristo, the Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), and Protestant denominations. The Protestant organizations represented in the NECCOM are the National Council of Churches of the Philippines and the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches. 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 religions or religious factions. However, Muslims--who are concentrated in many of the most impoverished provinces--complain that the Government has not made sufficient efforts to promote their economic development. Some Muslim religious leaders asserted that Muslims suffered from economic discrimination. Predominantly Muslim provinces in Mindanao lagged far behind the rest of the country in most aspects of socioeconomic development. Poverty levels in the ARMM were almost twice as high as the national average, with per capita income of \$285 (P15,760) per year.

Intermittent government efforts to better integrate Muslims into the political and economic mainstream have achieved limited success. Many Muslims claimed that they continued to be underrepresented in senior civilian and military positions, and they cited the lack of proportional Muslim representation in national government institutions. There were currently 10 Muslim district representatives and 2 Muslim party list representatives in the House of Representatives out of a total of 236 members.

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.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On February 2, 2006, gunmen attacked Christian families on the southern island of Jolo, leaving six dead. One of the wounded reported that men had knocked on their door in the early morning hours to inquire if the family was Christian or Muslim. Shortly thereafter, the men returned and opened fire on three homes. No arrests were made.

On February 13, 2006, Muslim residents of Isabela City, Basilan, staged a rally protesting a government order to demolish a mosque in the city and replace it with a commercial center. The mayor who ordered the demolition was shot and killed less than a month later, but it remained unclear if his death was connected to the destruction of the mosque.

On May 7, 2006, eleven inmates--including four Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members--were injured at Camp Bagong Diwa in Taguig during a riot sparked by an argument between a Muslim and a Christian inmate. Two prisoners were critically wounded.

Some progress was made since the last reporting period. On February 28, 2006, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) released the results of the investigation into the March 2005 Camp Bagong Diwa jailbreak attempt, which ended in the deaths of twenty-two inmates, including several notorious regional commanders of the ASG. The CHR found the prison authorities used excessive force against the inmates. Some inmates who did not participate in the hostage-taking were summarily executed, and inmates were maltreated after the police assault. The CHR recommended that the Department of Justice create a committee to investigate the criminal liability of the assaulting police units.

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 seventeen suspected militants, including three women. However, police released fifteen of the suspects shortly after their arrest.

In April 2004, following a series of illegal raids on Muslim communities and arrests reportedly made without warrants, an estimated four thousand Muslims held a prayer vigil and protested in Metro Manila and accused the Government of targeting Muslim communities in its hunt for terrorists.

According to March 2004 press reports, the national security adviser claimed that Christians who had converted to Islam were the vanguard of terrorist activities in Metro Manila, Mindanao, and other areas and had links with the ASG and Jemaah Islamiyah, an Indonesia-based terrorist group. Afterwards, the president issued a statement that the campaign against terrorism should be carried out without any ethnic or religious bias.

Perceived religious discrimination sometimes leads to violence. In February 2005 a Moro rights advocate, his wife, and their son were killed in Sulu, allegedly by members of the AFP conducting counter-insurgency operations. Afterwards, the MNLF attacked the military camp in Sulu in retaliation for the deaths, setting off several weeks of intense fighting in the region, which displaced at least twenty-six thousand civilians.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

The ASG claimed to seek the immediate establishment of an independent Islamic state in the southwestern region. This terrorist group is primarily a loose collection of criminal-terrorist and kidnap-for-ransom gangs, and mainstream Muslim leaders rejected its claimed religious affiliation, strongly criticizing its actions as "un-Islamic." Most Muslims denounced terrorism as a means of achieving a satisfactory level of autonomy.

Attacks attributed to the ASG (estimated to have between 300 and 400 members) were numerous:

In August 10, 2005, two bombings wounded twenty-four persons in Zamboanga City, Mindanao. A third bomb was disarmed by police before it could detonate. In August 28, 2005, the bombing of a ferry at Lamitan, Basilan, left at least thirty wounded, including children.

In February 18, 2006, an explosion in a karaoke bar near an army camp in Jolo City, Sulu, killed one person and wounded twenty.

In March 27, 2006, the Sulu Consumers Cooperative store in Jolo City, Sulu, was bombed, leaving nine dead and more than twenty wounded.

In February 7, 2005, approximately 500 followers of jailed former MNLF leader Nur Misuari, reportedly in coordination with elements of ASG, attacked government forces in Jolo and other towns of Sulu.

The government made some progress in response to the attacks. On October 28, 2005, a Makati City trial court sentenced to death an Indonesian and two other ASG members for their involvement in the February 14, 2005, Makati bus bombing, which killed 4 persons and injured 103.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there was some ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against Muslims by Christians.

Historically, Muslims have been alienated socially from the Christian majority, and some ethnic and cultural discrimination against Muslims has been recorded. The national culture often creates informal barriers whereby access to jobs or resources is provided first to those of one's own family or group. Some employers have a biased expectation that Muslims will have lower education levels. Muslims reported that they had difficulty renting rooms in boarding houses or being hired for retail work if they use their real names or wear distinctive Muslim dress, and thus resorted to the use of Christian pseudonyms and Western clothing.

Over the past sixty 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.

A Social Weather Station survey conducted from August to September 2005 found that such attitudes may be shifting. The survey showed that 63 percent of Filipinos viewed Islam and Muslims favorably, an increase from past years. The survey also found that 67 percent of Filipinos believe Islam was a peaceful religion, and 44 percent agreed that Muslims were as trustworthy as any other Filipinos.

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), includes Roman Catholic, Islamic, and Protestant representatives joined together in an effort to support the Mindanao peace process. 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 issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officers met with representatives of all major faiths to discuss 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.

For fiscal year 2005, 60 percent of United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) \$85 million budget for the country went to programs in Mindanao, mostly to 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 when a USAID program helped twenty-eight thousand former MNLF members make the transition from fighters to productive farmers.

In an effort to promote religious education choices, the U.S. government funded a September 2005 NGO program that sent twenty-seven educators from private madrassahs in Mindanao to the United States to learn school administration and teaching methods for academic classes. Upon their return to Mindanao, these educators were given minigrants to implement small development projects in their respective madrassahs.

The embassy also sought to help religious leaders broaden their horizons. During the period covered in this report, the embassy sent both Muslim and Christian leaders to the United States on International Visitor Program grants.

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