

## Muslims

### Profile

Moro, the Spanish name for the Muslim Moors of Spain, is the name by which Filipino Muslim ethno-linguistic groups are usually known. Moros comprise roughly 5 per cent of the total Filipino population and are a significant minority not only because of their numerical strength but also because of their long fight for independence from Manila. The main Moro ethno-linguistic groups are Maguindanao, Marano, Tausug, Samal, Bajau, Yakan, Ilanon, Sangir, Melabugnan and Jama Mapun. However, three of these groups - the Maguindanaos of North Cotabato, Kudarat and Maguindanos provinces, the Maranos of the two Lanao provinces, and the Tausug from Jolo - make up the great majority of Moros. These languages, just like Tagalog and most of the other languages spoken by Christian Filipinos, belong to the Malayo-Polynesian language branch of the Austronesian language family. Most are Sunni Muslims, though with some animist practices in the case of some Moros minority groups living in higher zones.

Despite these linguistic and religious differentiations from the Christian majority, Moros have not traditionally been united, and the various groups, which are divided by degrees of Islamic orthodoxy as well as by linguistic difference, are often hostile to each other. Yet Moros have shared a common hostility to the central authorities - Spaniards, Americans, and then, after independence, Christianized Filipinos from Luzon.

### Historical context

The Islamic religion came to the southern Philippine islands some 200 years before the European colonial period. Moros developed a centralized religious, social and political system based on the Qur'an. Several sultanates emerged, similar to historical sultanates that developed in what are now Indonesia and Malaysia, with the sultans being both religious and secular leaders. These sultanates were *de facto* states, exercising jurisdiction over Muslim and non-Muslim alike. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Muslim principalities had the most politically advanced communities in the Philippines. The sultanates established on Sulu and Mindanao were the furthestmost extension into Asia of the Islamic religion, and it is possible to see the Moro conflict as a 400-year struggle between Islam and Christianity, with neither side being able entirely to subdue the other. The sultanates resisted and fought Spanish authority for 300 years. After the Americans replaced the Spaniards, Moros fought the USA from 1903 to 1935, losing an estimated 20,000 lives. Since independence, Moros have sporadically waged political and armed struggle against the Philippine government based in Manila.

A long-term historical trend has been the displacement and dispossession of previously Moro territory. In the nineteenth century, the Spanish gained a foothold on Mindanao, through missionary efforts among the non-Muslim elements of the population, and through private military expeditions. Displacement and dispossession accelerated in the early 1900s as the American colonial authorities initiated policies to import homesteaders from the northern islands. The development of large-scale plantation agriculture for commercial export provided a further incentive for immigration. Policies of resettlement accelerated after the Second World War and independence, when, in response to the Huk rebellion in Luzon, tens of

thousands were encouraged to migrate to farms and homesteads in Mindanao. Lowland, formerly northern Catholic Filipinos came to outnumber Moros, which led to land disputes, Christian vigilantism, and a cultural and religious reaction. It is through these official government policies that the Moros not only came to lose most of their traditional land, but were also to become minorities: from about 76 per cent in 1903, the Moros only constituted 19 per cent of the population of Mindanao by 1990. Not only did the government take away the land from the Moros to give to Catholic Filipinos, it also banned the use of their languages in education and gave most employment and political positions to non-Muslims.

In 1968, the Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) was launched by radical Islamic leaders calling for independence from the Philippines and the creation of a Bangsa Moro, or Moro nation. This, and local 'Christian' countermeasures, led to full-scale revolt. The years 1969 to 1972, prior to martial law, were a period of indiscriminate violence between Muslims and Christians. In September 1972, Marcos cited the bloodshed and chaos in Mindanao, along with the communist New People's Army insurgency in Luzon, as reasons for the imposition of martial law.

The result was a full-scale guerrilla war as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) supplanted the MIM, and proclaimed Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan as Bangsa Moro. Radical Arab states such as Libya began to provide financial aid and Sabah (in eastern Malaysia) became a sanctuary for MNLF fighters. Fighting continued throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, causing large-scale disruptions and displacements. Through the intervention of the Organization of Islamic Conference, the MNLF and Manila held negotiations in the late 1970s and 1980s, although there was still fighting on the ground. A plebiscite following the passage of the 1987 Constitution created an 'Autonomous' Region in four Muslim provinces in Mindanao (Magindanao, Lanao del Sur, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi). In the early 1990s, the MNLF split. The old faction accepted that independence was politically unviable and that the autonomous region is the best available option. The group's second-in-command, Salamat Hashim, went on to found the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) - which translates as 'Bearer of the Sword' - was formed in 1990-91 by MNLF members angered by its leaders' perceived moves towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Along with its desire to create an independent Islamic nation in the Philippines, the group also has broader visions of a pan-Islamic super-state in south-east Asia and is accused by the US and Philippines governments of having links with the radical regional militant network Jemaah Islamiyah.

Under a peace deal signed in 1996 with the MNLF, the central government in Manila gave the Moros autonomy in the south, where the majority of them live. However the ceasefire collapsed in 2001, when MNLF guerrillas loyal to the governor of the Autonomous Region attacked an army base in Jolo, Sulu, killing 100 people and wounding scores.

Peace negotiations between the MILF and the government got under way in 1997, and a ceasefire was agreed. However the truce broke down in 2000 subsequent attempts at reconciliation between the two sides have failed.

Because of traditional kinship and loyalty ties, many MNLF and MILF members maintain links with Abu Sayyaf. Ethnic and blood relations often transcend membership of any particular group.

## **Current issues**

The rights of the Moro minority are still not being completely respected in a number of areas despite the benefits which they are beginning to receive from the autonomy arrangements of 1997. State schools do not use their main languages as medium of instruction to any significant extent (despite positive efforts such as the 2004 Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao to improve basic education in Southern and

Central Mindanao and the introduction of teaching of Arabic), nor do most of the civil service and governmental positions require fluency in one of these languages, though they do demand fluency in Filipino. Given the very large numbers of non-native Filipino-speakers and their concentration in parts of Mindanao, this language policy continues to create a very real obstacle to the full participation of the Moro Muslims in the country's public and political life, and they remain vastly under-represented in categories of educational attainment and in employment levels in almost all categories of civil service employment and political representation. This in turn perpetuates the perception of the Moros as a disadvantaged group unable to compete against Christian Filipinos.

None of the Filipino government's policies or the powers attributed to the new Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao have had an effect on the loss of land of the Muslim Moros: a process which has been going on for decades. Members of this minority have already lost land, because of government legislation and policies such as the extinguishment of their traditional land rights and the government-sponsored resettlement of mainly Christian Filipinos on the land they previously owned. Land redistribution programmes, such as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, which in theory might have returned Moro land to members of the Muslim minority, appear to have mainly benefited Christian settlers.

According to a July 2007 Human Rights Watch report, violent Islamist groups in the Philippines have killed or injured more than 1,700 people in bombings and other attacks since 2000. President Arroyo has received significant US military support for her campaign against militants in Mindanao and around 120,000 people have been uprooted by the fighting on the island.

In February 2007 a UN investigation found that the numbers of extra-judicial killings in the Philippines are distressingly high and the military appeared to be responsible for a number of them.

In March 2007, as part of ongoing attempts to negotiate a settlement to the 35-year conflict, the MILF Chairman reported that the government had offered Muslims in the south the right of self-determination, yet throughout the year both sides were involved in violent skirmishes. Government crackdowns against both the MILF and MNLF later on in the year displaced some 40,000 civilians on the island of Jolo and 7,000 in Basilan after an MILF ambush killed 14 marines on the island.

The 2007 Human Security Act took effect in July. Civil society leaders, religious figures and human rights activists have criticized the new anti-terror law, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Counterterrorism has called for the law to be repealed or for its implementation to be delayed.