

PHILIPPINES 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that “no law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall be forever allowed. No religious test shall be required for the exercise of civil or political rights.” The government played an active but limited role in religious affairs, including participating in efforts to promote religious harmony and tolerance. The government and leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed a comprehensive peace pact towards the establishment of a new, autonomous political entity known as Bangsamoro in the southern island of Mindanao and supported the crafting of a draft “Basic Law” on Bangsamoro that affirms the right to nondiscrimination based on creed and the right to freedom from harassment based on religious belief or ethnicity. The draft legislation also includes provisions on sharia, which would only apply to Muslims.

Religious scholars and leaders within Catholic and evangelical churches said relations among religious groups in society were generally amicable; however, there were instances of ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against the Muslim population. Observers stated that this, combined with economic disparities within the country at large, contributed to persistent conflict in provinces in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Various religious groups and human rights organizations focused their efforts on building and strengthening interfaith relations by facilitating dialogue among persons of different faiths.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom issues with the government and maintained outreach with religious leaders and nongovernment organizations to engage them in interfaith activities. The Ambassador and senior embassy officers hosted and attended events, including several in Mindanao, which promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population to be 107.5 million (July 2014 estimate). According to a census conducted by the National Statistics Office in 2000, approximately 81 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Approximately 9 percent belongs to other Christian religious groups, including the

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following international dominations: Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Assemblies of God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Philippine (Southern) Baptists; and the following domestically established churches: Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), Members Church of God International, and The Kingdom of Jesus Christ, the Name Above Every Name. Approximately 5 percent is Muslim and the remaining 5 percent belongs to other groups including the Lumad, an indigenous people who follow various animistic and syncretic religions.

A more recent estimate, made in 2012 by the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF), an office within the Office of the President, indicates that approximately 11 percent of the total population is Muslim. Most Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups. The majority of Muslims reside in Mindanao in the South and nearby islands. Although most are Sunni, a small number of Shia lives in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao. An increasing number of Muslims are migrating to the urban centers of Manila and Cebu.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that "no law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. The free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever be allowed. No religious test shall be required for the exercise of civil or political rights." There is no state religion and the constitution provides for the separation of church and state. The law treats intentional attacks directed against buildings dedicated to religion as war crimes or crimes against international humanitarian law.

The law requires organized religious groups to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) to establish tax-exempt status. For SEC registration, religious groups must submit their articles of faith and existing bylaws. The SEC requires existing religious corporations to submit annual financial statements. The law does not specify penalties for failure to register with the SEC. To be registered as a nonstock, nonprofit organization, religious groups must meet the basic requirements for

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corporate registration and must request tax exemption from the BIR. The BIR gives three-year provisional tax exemptions to newly established religious corporations. Established nonstock, nonprofit organizations may be fined for late filing of registration with the BIR and non-submission of registration datasheets and financial statements. There is no non-tax penalty for failing to register, and some groups do not. Religious leaders state the registration process is uncomplicated and nondiscriminatory.

The government recognizes sharia through a presidential decree. Sharia courts only handle cases relating to personal laws on family relations and property. Sharia does not apply in criminal matters and applies only to Muslims. The state court system hears cases involving Muslims and non-Muslims, and national laws apply in those cases.

On March 27, the government and the MILF signed a comprehensive peace pact towards the establishment of a new, autonomous political identity known as Bangsamoro in the southern island of Mindanao. The peace pact supported the crafting of a draft “Basic Law” on Bangsamoro that affirms the right to freedom and expression of religion and belief, and nondiscrimination on account of creed, religion, and ethnicity. The draft legislation also includes provisions on sharia that would only apply to Muslims.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools with written parental consent 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 groups to distribute religious literature in public schools.

By law, public schools must ensure the religious rights of students are protected. Muslim girls may wear the hijab and are not required to wear shorts during physical education classes.

Government Practices

Muslims, concentrated in some of the most impoverished provinces, continued to state that the government had not made sufficient efforts to promote their economic development. Predominantly Muslim provinces in Mindanao lagged far behind the rest of the country in most socioeconomic indicators. Poverty levels in

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the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao were more than twice as high as the national average of 22.3 percent.

The government played an active but limited role in religious affairs, including efforts to promote religious harmony and tolerance.

The *Ulama* (Muslim leaders and scholars) stated 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 sharia. As in other parts of the judicial system, sharia courts suffered from a large number of unfilled positions. All five sharia district court judgeships and 43 of circuit court judgeships remained vacant. Aside from budget restrictions, judicial positions on the sharia courts were particularly difficult to fill because applicants must be members of both the sharia bar and the Integrated Bar of the Philippines.

Madrassahs had the option of registering with the NCMF, the Department of Education (DepEd), both, or neither. A total of 588 madrassahs were registered with the NCMF, while 79 were registered with the DepEd. Only registered schools could receive financial assistance from the government. The DepEd's Bureau of Madrassah Education managed local and international financial assistance to the madrassah system. DepEd-registered schools followed the Standard Madrassah Curriculum and received funding for teachers of the Revised Basic Education Curriculum (RBEC) subjects and for classroom and facility improvements. Despite yearly appropriation for such programs, access to the limited funds supporting Muslim learners and educators remained a challenge.

The government continued to implement its unified RBEC curriculum, which partially integrated madrassahs into the national education system. DepEd continued to provide Arabic language instruction and Islamic values education to Muslim students in selected public elementary schools and private madrassahs. For the school year 2013-2014, a total of 1,333 schools were provided with Arabic language instruction and Islamic values education, including instructional materials and modules. Of those schools, 1,199 were public elementary schools. The DepEd provided 58 million pesos (\$1.3 million) in financial support to the same 69 private madrassahs that received assistance the previous year. DepEd also provided 250,000 pesos (\$5,600) in financial support each to 50 of the 69 DepEd-registered private madrassahs under the Sajatra Program, which aimed to improve the socio-economic and human development of the Bangsamoro people through education.

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The NCMF continued to promote the rights of Muslims at both the national and local levels and support economic, educational, cultural, and infrastructure programs for Muslim communities. The NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment continued to administer logistics for the Hajj. It also administered *awqaf*, an endowment for the upkeep of Islamic properties and institutions, and continued to oversee establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and other projects.

The government promoted interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) continued to monitor issues relating to religious freedom.

On August 26, the Office of the President established the Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns which is mandated to address and coordinate all interreligious and intercultural concerns and initiatives of the Office of the President and all government agencies.

Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

The government attributed a series of killings, attacks, and kidnappings for ransom to the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and other Islamic militants. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Often violent incidents were associated with *rido* or clan warfare. For example, on October 8, two people were killed and three others wounded after a rifle grenade fired by two motorcycle-riding men exploded during services inside a church of the United Church of Christ in Pikit, North Cotabato. Authorities were investigating the incident at year's end. On February 2, unidentified men threw a grenade at a group of elderly parishioners inside a church in Zamboanga City, injuring five people. Security forces pursued leads that indicated the motive was to harm ongoing peace talks.

The government made significant progress in negotiations with MILF, signing a peace agreement with the militant group. In October the insurgency agreed to decommission its weapons as a show of goodwill. Nevertheless, other Islamic militants continued to struggle with the government.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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Religious scholars and leaders within Catholic and evangelical churches said relations among religious groups in society were generally amicable; however, there were reports of religious tensions and discrimination.

Muslim religious leaders said that Muslims suffered from economic discrimination, including in disputes over traditional indigenous land ownership.

Young Muslim professionals reported employers stereotyped Muslims as being less educated. Muslims stated they had difficulty renting rooms in boarding houses or being hired for retail work if they used their real names or wore distinctive Islamic dress. Muslims reportedly resorted to adopting Christian pseudonyms and wearing Western clothing.

Many religious communities participated in interreligious efforts to alleviate poverty. The Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, a coalition of various religious groups, continued to focus on building and strengthening interfaith relations through dialogue between Muslims and Christians in selected communities. From January 30 to February 7, in celebration of the World Interfaith Harmony Week, the Peacemaker's Circle Foundation conducted a workshop and other activities in Manila that promoted interfaith dialogue for Muslim-Christian understanding and cooperation.

The violence that occurred in Zamboanga in 2013 provided a platform for additional interfaith efforts. On February 1 to 7, the UN Interfaith Harmony Partners of Zamboanga, a local coalition led by the Silsilah Dialogue Movement, organized activities that focused on rebuilding Zamboanga City through dialogue and interfaith harmony. The Bishops-Ulama Conference in Mindanao continued to bring together Catholic bishops and members of the Ulama League of the Philippines from Mindanao and to hold dialogues on addressing local issues of peace, order, and intercultural solidarity. Other interfaith groups, such as Religions for Peace Philippines, also promoted peace between persons of different faiths through conduct of interfaith activities and dialogues. The leadership of human rights groups, trade union confederations, and industry associations typically represented many religious affiliations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers regularly met with government officials, including the Secretary of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos, to advocate religious freedom.

The embassy hosted meetings with political and opinion leaders from the Muslim community throughout the country to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, Muslim community concerns, the peace process in Mindanao, and the U.S. role there. An internal embassy working group on the situation in Mindanao held discussions on religious freedom promotion with religious and civil society leaders. During trips to conflict-affected areas of Mindanao, embassy representatives, including the Ambassador and the Deputy Chief of Mission, organized discussions with religious group leaders to promote mutual understanding. The embassy funded a project in Zamboanga City and Basilan and Sulu Provinces that worked with leaders from the Muslim and Catholic communities to support interfaith dialogue, resolve clan or community conflicts, and counter recruitment by violent extremists.

Embassy outreach programs promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. The embassy initiated two interfaith youth camps focused on peace building and religious tolerance for 100 youth leaders of diverse backgrounds from conflict-affected areas of Mindanao and Southern Palawan.

The embassy hosted a U.S. speaker who traveled throughout the country to discuss the importance of interfaith dialogue in peace building and conflict resolution to groups of religious leaders, civil society groups, young leaders, Islamic scholars, and local media.

The embassy held two iftar receptions, one at a mosque in Manila for 120 religious leaders, youth, and community members of diverse backgrounds, and a second in Mindanao for 80 community members. The Ambassador attended the Manila reception, and also participated in a community outreach event the same day with members of the Muslim community. During these activities, members of different faith groups discussed the importance of interfaith dialogue as a way to promote understanding, harmony, and peace.