

# **PHILIPPINES 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Combined with economic disparities, this contributed to persistent conflict in certain provinces in the southern part of the country. On October 15, the peace panels of the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front formally signed the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro, the roadmap for creation of the Bangsamoro entity which will replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

U.S. embassy officials actively encouraged the peace process between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, discussed religious freedom issues with government officials, and maintained outreach with religious leaders and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to engage them in interfaith activities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The National Statistics Office's 2010 Census of Population and Housing Report released on April 4, 2012, states the population is 92.3 million.

According to a survey from 2000 by the National Statistics Office, approximately 93 percent of the population is Christian. A large majority of Christians are Roman Catholics, constituting 80 to 85 percent of the total population. The 2000 survey states that Islam is the largest minority religion, constituting approximately 5 percent of the population.

A more recent estimate by the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) in 2011 states that there are 10.3 million Muslims, or about 11 percent of the total population. Most Filipino Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups. Nearly 60 percent of Muslims reside in Mindanao and nearby islands. Although most belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, a small number of Shia Muslims live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur in

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Mindanao. An increasing number of Filipino Muslims are migrating to the urban centers of Manila and Cebu.

Religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include the following international denominations: 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.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The law treats intentional attacks directed against buildings dedicated to religion as war crimes or crimes against international humanitarian law. 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 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. The registration process is nondiscriminatory.

The NCMF promotes the rights of Muslim Filipinos at both the national and local levels and supports economic, educational, cultural, and infrastructure programs for Muslim Filipino communities. NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment administers the Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. It also administers awqaf, an endowment for the upkeep of Islamic properties and institutions, and oversees establishment and maintenance of Haji towns, Islamic centers, and other projects. The Office of the Presidential Assistant for Muslim Concerns helps coordinate relations with countries that have large Islamic populations and contributes to Mindanao's economic development and the peace process.

The Code of Muslim Personal Laws recognizes Sharia (Islamic law) as part of national law; it does not apply in criminal matters and applies only to Muslims.

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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 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 may wear hijab (head coverings) 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 and are not required to receive religious instruction.

The Philippine Development Plan 2011-2016, which embodies the government's policy framework for national development, includes provisions for the protection and promotion of religious freedom.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, All Saints' Day, and Christmas Day.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government did not ban or discourage specific religious groups or religious factions. However, Muslims, who were concentrated in some of the most impoverished provinces, complained that the government had not made sufficient efforts to promote their economic development. The government's campaign against terrorist groups led some human rights NGOs to accuse the police and military of acting with bias in their treatment of Muslims.

Some ulama (Muslim leaders) argued that the government should allow Islamic courts to extend their jurisdiction to criminal law cases and some supported the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's goal of forming an autonomous region governed in accordance with Islamic law. 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 percent of circuit court judgeships remained vacant. Aside from budget restrictions, judicial positions on the Sharia courts were particularly

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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 423 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.

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. The DepEd provided 41 million pesos (\$1,005,005) to 79 private madrassahs for the 2011-12 school year, a 31 percent increase in funding to an additional 20 madrassahs compared with the previous year.

In August, the media reported that the Pilar College of Zamboanga, a privately-run Catholic college in the southern Philippines, imposed a "no hijab" school policy. Verified reports confirmed that the school's administrators prohibited wearing the hijab "for uniformity and to avoid discrimination" against Muslims. After a series of consultations with the NCMF and other stakeholders, Pilar College decided to allow the voluntary wearing of hijab for the 2013 school year. The school administration, with the support of the NCMF, undertook training to deepen understanding of the Muslim culture.

The government promoted interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. Under President Benigno S. Aquino III's administration, the Commission on Human Rights monitored issues relating to religious freedom.

On March 9, the Department of Foreign Affairs provided support to a conference, "Dialogue and Heart: Listening for Interfaith Relationship Building." The Peacemakers Circle Foundation, an NGO promoting interfaith harmony and understanding, organized the conference.

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From March 11 through 15, the government participated in the sixth Asia Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue held in Semarang, Indonesia, with the theme “Strengthening Collaborative Communities to Promote Religious Peace and Security: Interfaith and Action.”

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

The government attributed a series of attacks, kidnappings for ransom, and killings to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), other Islamic militants, and the communist New People’s Army. Religious affiliation was not seen as a relevant factor in these attacks.

Sporadic bombings of places of worship occurred during the year. On August 1, a grenade exploded on the roof of Mt. Carmel Cathedral in Jolo city, Sulu province, causing no injuries but slightly damaging the building. No individual or group claimed responsibility for the blast. Authorities attributed previous 2009 and 2010 attacks on the cathedral to the ASG. The incident remained under investigation at year’s end.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, although there were some reports of discrimination and tension.

Efforts by the dominant Christian population to resettle in traditionally Muslim areas, such as Mindanao, 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.

Some Muslim religious leaders asserted that Muslims suffered from economic discrimination.

Young Muslim professionals reported that some employers stereotyped 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. Many reportedly resorted to adopting Christian pseudonyms and wearing Western clothing.

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Despite these circumstances, amicable ties among religious communities were common, and many participated in interdenominational 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. 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 also promoted peace between persons of different faiths. The leadership of human rights groups, trade union confederations, and industry associations typically represented many religious affiliations.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers regularly met with government officials and representatives of all major religious groups to discuss religious freedom. Embassy officers actively supported the government's peace process with Muslim insurgents in Mindanao, with its potential to contribute to peace and a better climate for interfaith cooperation.

Embassy officials maintained active relationships with NGOs. The embassy hosted meetings with political and opinion leaders from the Muslim community throughout the country to discuss the U.S. role in Mindanao.

The Mindanao Working Group, which coordinated embassy-wide efforts in Mindanao, held discussions with religious and civil society leaders. During trips to conflict-affected areas of Mindanao, embassy representatives organized discussions with religious group leaders to promote mutual understanding. In December, embassy officers coordinated with the Armed Forces of the Philippines to sponsor a human rights camp that discussed the importance of interfaith dialogue, among other subjects.

Embassy outreach programs promoted interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. The U.S.-funded Generation Change and Viral Peace programs brought together 50 Muslims and Christians from throughout the Philippines for two days of social media and leadership training. The embassy held four iftars: one which the ambassador hosted in Manila for 40 guests; one in Cebu for 80 guests; one for 25 women in Zamboanga city; and one co-sponsored with a university in Mindanao for 500 guests. The deputy chief of mission met with Muslim leaders in Zamboanga to exchange views shortly after the September 11 Benghazi attacks.

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In Mindanao, the embassy included members of different religious groups in a series of dialogues geared towards strengthening understanding among conflict-affected groups. About 400 traditional and religious leaders participated, of whom 60 percent were Muslim.