

PHILIPPINES 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religious profession and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of religion by law. No religious test is required for the exercise of civil or political rights. The Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), the implementing legislation for the comprehensive peace agreement between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), continued to be an important topic of national discussion and was debated in both houses of congress. The draft legislation affirms the right to the freedom and expression of religion and belief and nondiscrimination on account of religion, sect, or ethnicity. It also includes provisions to expand the existing sharia court system in the region to cover civil, commercial, and criminal law, as well as family law. The expanded sharia courts would have jurisdiction only over Muslims, as the family courts do now.

There were instances of discrimination in economic opportunities and public statements – via the internet and social media – denigrating the beliefs or practices of particular religious groups, particularly Muslims, or non-believers. Observers stated the controversy surrounding the January 25 Mamasapano incident – in which 44 members of the Philippine National Police Special Action Force (PNP-SAF), 18 MILF members, and five civilians were killed – caused distrust between Muslims and Christians to resurface in social media, online commentary, and public statements.

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom issues, such as freedom to worship and freedom to change religions, with various government offices. The Ambassador and senior embassy officers gave remarks on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance at events around the country, including several in Mindanao.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 101 million (July 2015 estimate). According the 2010 census conducted by the National Statistics Office, approximately 81 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Approximately 9 percent belong to other Christian groups, including the following internationally based denominations: Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, other Protestant, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Episcopal Church in the

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Philippines, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Bible Baptist Church; and the following domestically established churches: Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), Members Church of God International, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and the Name Above Every Name. Approximately 6 percent of the population is Muslim and the remaining 4 percent did not report a religious affiliation or belong to other groups, such as the various animistic and syncretic religions of the Lumad, an indigenous people.

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 live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur on 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 provides for free exercise of religious profession and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of religion by law. No religious test is required for the exercise of civil or political rights. The constitution provides for the separation of religion 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. Religious groups must submit their articles of faith and existing bylaws for SEC registration as religious corporations. 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 corporate registration and must request tax exemption from the BIR. The basic requirements for registration include a name verification of the religious corporation, articles of incorporation and bylaws, a director, list of members, and a list of financial contributors. The BIR gives three-year provisional

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tax exemptions to newly established religious corporations. Established nonstock, nonprofit organizations may be fined for late filing of registrations with the BIR and nonsubmission of registration datasheets and financial statements. There is no nontax penalty for failing to register, and some groups do not.

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.

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

The pending BBL, which is the implementing legislation for the peace agreement between the government and the MILF, continued to be an important topic of national discussion and was debated in both houses of Congress. It would abolish the existing Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and replace it with a new, autonomous regional government, known as the Bangsamoro, in parts of the southern island of Mindanao. The proposed BBL contains specific provisions affirming the right to the freedom and expression of religion and belief and nondiscrimination on account of religion, sect, or ethnicity. The population already has these rights under national legislation. The draft BBL also includes provisions to expand the sharia court system to cover civil, commercial, and criminal law, as well as family law, which will apply only to Muslims.

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, particularly in securing peace and order to encourage additional private investment. Muslims also sought government help in settling

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contentious land disputes in Mindanao, obtaining greater investment in livelihood programs, and garnering support for agricultural development.

The government stated that it promoted interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. For example, the Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns hosted a two-day international conference on interreligious dialogue in April that gathered people from various religious traditions as well as academics and students from local universities to discuss peace-building. The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and the Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns continued to monitor issues relating to religious freedom and received no complaints or cases involving the abuse of religious freedom during the year. The NCMF also received no reports of the persecution of Muslims based on their religion.

The NCMF stated it 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. In April the NCMF conducted its 41st Quran reading competition to determine the champions that would represent the Philippines in various international Quran reading competitions. The NCMF opened a women's center in July to serve as a resource and training center for Muslim women. In August the NCMF launched the Access to Justice Network (AJN) with the support of the EU-Philippines Justice Support Programme II (EPJUST II) in eight pilot communities in Palawan which is intended to provide Muslims the capacity to address legal issues through access to referrals. The NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment continued to administer logistics for the Hajj, such as obtaining flight schedules, facilitating sheikh accreditation, administering vaccines, coordinating with the Department of Foreign Affairs to process Hajj passports, filing Hajj visa applications at the Saudi Embassy, and conducting pre-departure orientations for pilgrims. The NCMF reported there were 8,000 pilgrims and 150 members of the supervisory and medical team for the year. It also administered the 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 Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns continued to coordinate all interreligious and intercultural concerns and initiatives within the government on behalf of the Office of the President. The Task Force helped coordinate the papal visit in January.

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Madrassahs had the option of registering with the NCMF, the Department of Education (DepEd), both, or neither; registration was not mandatory. A total of 75 madrassahs were registered with DepEd. Only registered schools could receive financial assistance from the government. The DepEd's Office of Madrassah Education managed local and international financial assistance to the private 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 DepEd provided 65.8 million pesos (\$1.4 million) in financial support to the registered madrassahs, accounting for 13,167 students.

The government continued to implement its unified RBEC curriculum, which partially integrated madrassahs into the national education system. DepEd continued to support the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) program to Muslim students in selected public elementary schools. For the school year 2014-2015, a total of 1,668 public elementary schools administered the ALIVE program, including providing instructional materials and modules. Within those schools, 300,160 elementary students enrolled in the ALIVE program. Although the program provided Muslim youth in secular schools outside of the ARMM an opportunity to learn more about Islam, the NCMF stated the allotted times and availability of ALIVE classes remained insufficient.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

The government attributed a series of killings, attacks, and kidnappings for ransom to the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and other Muslim militants. Violent incidents in many rural areas were frequently associated with rido, or clan warfare. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On January 25, PNP-SAF launched an operation in Mamasapano, Maguindanao province, to serve warrants on two people wanted for terrorism, including Zulkifli Abdhir, also known as Marwan. During the ensuing seven-hour battle, police forces killed Zulkifli, and 44 members of the PNP-SAF, 18 MILF members, and five civilians lost their lives. The MILF said the police failed to coordinate with it on the operation, as required under the ceasefire agreement. Observers stated the incident significantly delayed the passage of the BBL and had rekindled underlying tensions between the Muslims and Christians. Observers and members of Congress stated they believed that as a result the BBL would not pass in Congress before the end of the administration in 2016.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were instances of discrimination in economic opportunities and public statements – via the internet and social media – denigrating the beliefs or practices of particular religious groups, particularly Muslims, or non-believers. Religious scholars and leaders within the Muslim community and Catholic and Protestant churches said that while relations among religious groups in society were generally amicable, there were reports of tension between different religious and ethnic groups, especially in conflict-affected areas. Some Christians in the southern part of the country expressed fear that if the BBL were passed, it would exacerbate religious tensions and allow Muslim leaders to impose sharia on the Christian minority. The Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches stated that some former Muslims who converted to Christianity faced verbal abuse and mockery from their families and communities, while others feared that revealing their new religion would result in being beaten, disowned, or isolated from their communities.

Observers stated that the media coverage and controversy surrounding the Mamasapano incident and the numerous investigations by the Senate, House of Representatives, PNP, Department of Justice, CHR, International Monitoring Team of the peace process, and MILF caused distrust between Muslims and Christians to resurface in social media, online commentary, and public statements. For example, a six-minute video showing a PNP-SAF commando being shot twice at close range during the January 25 shootout spread very quickly on social media in February although at the time the video was published, the context was not yet verified. The media reported widely on the video and published photos of the clip portraying blood and corpses. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, a local nongovernmental organization that promotes responsible journalism, stated that the reporting on the video used “loaded language” and also “boosted already high levels of anti-Muslim sentiments.” Sources stated that comments on the video and accompanying news articles, as well as social media posts at the time, showed the increasing strain in relations between Muslims and Christians.

Many religious communities participated in interreligious efforts to alleviate the friction and address discrimination. The Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy worked with Catholic institutions, such as Miriam College, to establish the “Maryam Movement,” which connects the two faiths via a shared religious figure: the Virgin Mary to Catholics, or Maryam to Muslims. The Peacemakers’ Circle Foundation (TPCFI), a coalition of various religious groups, continued to focus on building and strengthening interfaith relations through dialogue between

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Muslims and Christians in selected communities. In May the TPCFI conducted an interfaith dialogue workshop intended to help soften negative attitudes toward the BBL. The workshop included family members of both Christian and Muslim victims of the Mamasapano incident. Other interfaith groups, such as Religions for Peace Philippines, also promoted peace between persons of different faiths through interfaith activities and dialogues.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officers regularly met with government officials to advocate for religious freedom. Embassy officials met with the CHR and the NCMF to discuss government protections for, and promotion of, 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 U.S. support for religious freedom. Embassy officers met frequently with Mindanao religious, political, and civil society leaders from both the Muslim and Christian communities. Some of these discussions touched upon the need to maintain religious harmony in the region regardless of any future structural changes in the regional government. During trips to conflict-affected areas of Mindanao, embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, 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. The embassy also supported a project in Maguindanao, Cotabato, South Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat, all located on Mindanao, to resolve land conflicts between Catholic and indigenous communities through interfaith, interclan, and community dialogue. The embassy actively supported interfaith youth camps in Cotabato and Zamboanga, which included a focus on peace-building and religious tolerance for youth leaders of diverse backgrounds from conflict-affected areas of Mindanao.