



*The ARMM Roundtable Series brings together academics and leaders in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao to a discussion and analysis of critical issues in the autonomous region. This paper builds on the output of the discussions. Views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of Notre Dame University and the Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung.*

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## SECULAR AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN THE ARMM

### INTRODUCTION

The dual education system in Muslim Mindanao continues to be a contentious issue surrounding the country's formal education system. There is the mainstream public school system that follows the Department of Education (DepEd) national basic education curriculum with English as the medium of instruction and the other sectarian, privately-run Madaris that teaches Islam as a religion and uses the Arabic language. This two-system structure prevailing in the Muslim Mindanao education, according to Education Undersecretary Manaros Boransing, creates a split identity in the educational realm and does not enrich the Filipino Muslim's identity.

There are problems arising in the basic education in two Muslim areas, the ARMM and non-ARMM areas. These problems are becoming more complex as migrant Muslim communities in large cities outside the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) seem to be increasing rapidly. The DepEd ARMM had begun the development and mainstreaming of Madrasah education, especially in the teaching of Arabic Language and Islamic Values, as authorized under RA 9054. What is lagging behind is the development and mainstreaming of the Madrasah education in migrant Muslim communities outside ARMM. Recognizing these conditions, the Comprehensive Education Development of Muslim Mindanao and Migrant Muslim Communities is pursued in the country.

The prevailing realities of the Islamic education and the DepEd ARMM's initiatives towards addressing these conditions were the focus of the paper presented by Undersecretary Boransing in the roundtable discussion on *Secular and Islamic Education in the ARMM* conducted on July 8, 2004 at the College of Law, Notre Dame University. The roundtable session convened stakeholders on the Islamic Education to share and discuss the state of affairs, as well as the problems and prospects for its advancement and development. Of particular interest in the session was the state of secular and Islamic education in the ARMM. What are the issues confronting education in the ARMM? To what extent are the provisions of the ARMM Organic Law in promoting Islamic education being implemented? What strategic steps can be taken to improve the education system in the ARMM as a means to promote peace and development? What legislations need to be enacted to develop secular and Islamic education in the ARMM?

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## MADRASAH SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

Madrasah is an Arabic name for school (Madaris is the plural form). Makhdum Kharim, who built the first mosque in the country in Indangan, Simunul, Tawi-Tawi, first introduced it in the Philippines in the 13th century. The madaris are mostly found in Mindanao, particularly in the ARMM, where the majority of the Muslim communities are located.

The madrasah is a community-based and community-managed school where the teaching is focused on the Qur'an, Islam and moral education. As a Muslim school, it teaches Arabic and Islamic studies, especially Qur'anic reading and Arabic language. It is considered as an institution of learning in most Muslim communities and also a symbol of Islam.

According to Undersecretary Boransing's paper, there are 706 madaris in the country today. They are of three types— a) the weekend or Qur'anic madrasah, b) the regular madrasah that operates elementary and high school with Islamic sectarian curriculum and Arabic language as the medium of instruction, and c) the integrated Madrasah with secular and Islamic subjects, and are recognized by the government. There are more of the weekends or Quranic madrasah types, numbering about 612 schools in the country. These madaris enroll about 97,926 pupils/ students being served by 4,187 teachers.

### Curriculum

The madrasah covers three levels, each level taking four years to complete: primary level (Ibtida'i), intermediate level (I'dade) and high school (Thanawi). A madrasah offers only the primary or intermediate or both. When the school offers a complete 12 years program, the school is called a Ma'ahad (plural is Ma'ahid).

A madrasah may offer only one or two years of primary, intermediate and/ or secondary education. Not all madaris extend complete courses from kindergarten to high school. As each madrasah operates privately, there is no standard curriculum. Each one adopts its own curriculum. They are as diverse as the background and country of training of the school operators and teachers. In general however, primary and intermediate madrasah curriculum includes eight subjects such as Islamic Studies, Character Building, Arabic Language, Social Studies, Mathematics, Science, English Language, and Military and Physical Education. They differ from the national elementary and high school curriculum that covers 10 subject areas. The Madaris do not include subjects like Filipino, Music, Arts, and Values Education.

The school is privately owned, performed either by the community through an elected group or by a mosque-based organization. It is managed personally by its owners and supported by a head teacher of principal (Senior Ustadz). Tuition fees and donations from affluent donors are the financial sources of its operations. Muslim countries in the Middle East extend donations to the madaris, which are used for infrastructures, as well as, teaching and instructional materials.

The Madaris are important component in the educational system among the Muslim people yet these have not yet been fully institutionalized and have not been adequately given support by the government. The government's direct responsibility is to address this institution of education for the country and its citizens.

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## Legal Basis

What are the legal bases on the issue of Islamic Education? Nowhere is the government's responsibility on education clearly enshrined than in the mandate of the Philippine Constitution. The Philippine Constitution states: (ART. II, SEC 17) "The state shall give priority to education, science and technology, arts, culture, and sports to foster patriotism and nationalism, accelerate social progress and promote total human liberation and development".

The Education Act of 1982 further defines the essential tasks of the national educational system. It states that "the educational system aims to provide for a broad general education that will assist each individual in the peculiar ecology of his own society to attain his potentials as a human being, to enhance the range and quality of individual and group participation in the basic functions of society, to acquire the essential educational foundation of his development into a productive and versatile citizen; to train the nation's manpower in the middle-level skills required for national development; to develop the professions that will provide leadership for the nation in the advancement of knowledge for improving the quality of human life; and to respond effectively to changing needs and conditions of the nation through a system of educational planning and evaluation".

The Final Peace Agreement (FPA) signed between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1996 clearly spells out the provisions for the madrasah education. It states, "Existing Madaris, including Madaris Ulya, shall be included under the Regional Autonomous government educational system as presently organized in the area of autonomy (Paragraph 117).

The Republic Act 9054 also was signed making the teaching of Arabic language and Islamic values mandatory for Muslim pupils. This Act, in amending Republic Act 6734, adopted in toto the provisions on madrasah education with Section 11, Article XIV stating, "Accredited madaris in the autonomous region shall be supervised by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) now Department of Education (DepEd)" (Art XV, Sec 8 in RA 6734).

The FPA 1996 and the RA 9054 provide for the accreditation of the madaris and their supervision by the Regional Department of Education, Culture and Sports (now Department of Education). The strengthening and development of the madrasah educational system, which recognizes Islam as its core, is vested in the Regional Assembly. The Assembly is mandated to enact laws to make Muslim education responsive to the fast changing modern society without impairing its core, Islam.

## CONCERNS AND ISSUES IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION

The overall dismal state of education in Mindanao, particularly in the ARMM, continues to be a critical national concern. The participants to the discussion sessions generally concurred that the Mindanao education sector severely lags behind in terms of participation rate, cohort survival rate, highest dropout rate, lowest performance in licensure examination for teachers, lowest simple literacy rate and lowest functional literary rate. This deteriorating quality of education in Mindanao, in both the formal basic education and Islamic education, particularly in the ARMM, are reflected in its low ratings in most education statistical indicators.

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ARMM Governor Farouk Hussin has described the state of education in the region as “depressing”, partly due to the unresolved armed conflicts in the area where communities are displaced every time a confrontation between rebels and government troops occur. The poor commitment of teachers to their teaching responsibilities adds to the problem. Teachers come to school late and leave early. The drop out rate is also alarming at the rate of 24 percent for the elementary level. Moreover, only six out of ten are able to read and perform simple arithmetic by the end of the school year.

This overarching educational reality further aggravates the state of Islamic education in the country. The Madaris confronts many critical problems ranging from administration, curriculum, and faculty and students performance. The perennial problems of school buildings, desks, textbooks and other basic needs continue to characterize the madaris operations. Madaris owners and teachers cite problems such as the lack of financial assistance, and the lack of standardized/ reconciliatory curriculum, among others. Since the madaris are privately owned, they are not supervised, not accredited by the DepEd and not given government support to their programs and needs.

Madaris operators present in the discussion pointed out that most of the Muslims in the ARMM attend the Madaris schools. The problem is that these schools are not accredited in the Philippine education system and so their graduates are not accepted in private schools, colleges or universities. Madaris students also do not possess the competitive and employability skills upon graduation since the labor market prefers the graduate of the mainstream education. This deprives the Muslim youth who attend exclusively in madaris with opportunities provided with those in the DECS schools.

***“There are two modes of responses to the issue of madaris education in the ARMM. The first mode subscribes to the concept of integration. . . The other is the accreditation mode.”***

The other issue on the Islamic education is the reports that indicate Madrasah operations as a state security concern on suspicion of terror links. The schools became controversial because similar schools abroad have been accused of recruiting mujahedin in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

## **INTEGRATION AND ACCREDITATION OF MADARIS**

There are two modes of responses to the issue of madaris education in the ARMM. The first mode subscribes to the concept of integration. This is the mainstreaming of Madrasah education as a subsystem of the Philippine educational system. The idea is to integrate the teaching of Islamic Values and Arabic Language in the public education’s curriculum.

***“The initial thrust consists of curriculum review and development to “upgrade, synchronize and harmonize” the madaris curriculum with that of the formal education system.”***

The other is the accreditation mode. Sectarian integrated madrasah which incorporates basic education subjects of the DepEd in the curriculum and makes English as the medium of instruction, gets recognized and are accredited by the DepEd.

ARMM Vice-Governor Mahid Mutilan (ARMM’s Education Department head, a Doctor in Islamic Theology of the Ulama League of the Philippines) emphasized the administration’s mainstreaming program to accredit the private Islamic schools with the DepEd and CHED. The initial thrust consists of curriculum review and development to “upgrade, synchronize and harmonize” the madaris curriculum with that of the formal education system. This entails the inclusion of Philippine history, culture and language, along with English and information

technology while fully preserving the Islamic teachings and culture of the schools.

But still, the issue of integration continues to be opposed by some Muslim sectors as they argue that integrating madrasah education into the national education system is contrary to the grant of autonomy. They contend that if the government is sincere in the grant of autonomy, then it should refrain from interfering in the running of the autonomy. The Madaris teachers and the Ulama likewise argue against the integration move. They rather opt for the accreditation process.

## **INTERVENTIONS FOR MINDANAO EDUCATION**

The past decades saw the inflow of support to Mindanao education. Many ODA (official development assistance) projects in the ARMM are in education or have education components. To name a few, there is the ARMM Social Fund for Peace and Development, Basic Education Assistance for Mindanao (BEAM), the Mindanao Basic Education Development, the Growth with Equity in Mindanao project on strengthening the DepEd-ARMM in terms of teachers' performance monitoring.

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao is pursuing the implementation of the Comprehensive Education Development of Muslim Mindanao and the Migrant Communities (CEDMM), under the Department of Education, Undersecretary Boransing noted. There are three components to the program: a) Development and Mainstreaming of Madrasah Education, b) Catch-up plan for upgrading quality basic education, and c) Entrepreneurial and Skills Development Program for the out-of-school youth.

The program aims to develop and mainstream madrasah education and facilitate easy access to basic education. At present, the mainstreaming program has accomplished the following while the two other program components have not yet been lengthily pursued.

- Curriculum for Arabic Language and Islamic Values for elementary—grades 1-6 for public schools,
- Textbooks for Arabic Language and Islamic Values for grades 1 and 2,
- Curriculum for Model Integrated Pilot Madrasah—elementary and high school,
- Survey of madrasah institutions including Madaris Directory (financed by Asia Foundation),
- Madrasah Teacher Training in Language and Strategies toward DepEd Integration under the DepEd Madaris Educational Assistance Program (MAE), funded by the Asia Foundation as a pilot project,
- Project Proposal for Assistance submitted to Malaysian Government under the RP-Malaysian Joint Commission, and
- Appointment of an Undersecretary for Muslim Affairs to assume responsibility of developing and mainstreaming Madrasah Institutions.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are important policy recommendations to be pursued as raised in the discussion — accreditation of existing madaris, formulation of a standardized curriculum, provision of funding assistance for madaris, and organization of a body under DECS to oversee madaris operations.

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Undersecretary Boransing noted that the CEDMM shall harmonize and integrate madrasah education with the country's basic national education curriculum to Filipinize it. This would allow Muslim children to avail themselves of the release of free and mandatory elementary education while undergoing an accredited Muslim education. In effect, the DepEd requires the following policy interventions:

- Inclusion of Arabic Language and Islamic Values in the public school curriculum as additional subjects to RBEC
- develop private madaris as integrated Islamic sectarian schools incorporating in the curriculum secular RBEC subjects
- establish model integrated Islamic sectarian madrasah in strategic Muslim communities
- issuance of DepEd Order or Presidential Executive Order requiring the teaching of Arabic language and Islamic Values in public schools, at the same time requiring private madrasah to unify their curriculum and shall include all RBEC subjects.

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## CONCLUSION

Relevant, quality education is the most effective instrument to improve quality of life and self-governance of the ARMM. It is through education that society can attempt to break the cycle of poverty and conflict in the southern Philippines. These can be achieved only through an enlightened citizenry with broad and equitable access to quality and relevant education. The Madaris play a significant role in the education of the Muslim Mindanao population yet they are one of the neglected sectors in Mindanao.

The ARMM government, through its Regional Legislative Assembly, must play an important role towards the advancement of Islamic education for the Filipino Muslims. The RLA must seriously address the issues confronting Islamic education in the country, particularly in clearly defining the educational policies to be implemented. Whatever form and shape the Islamic education in the country develops, it still will be the oldest educational institution in Mindanao that will play a significant role in the preservation of Islam faith and culture in the Philippines.

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