

# The Politics of Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education in Selected Philippine Schools

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**Abstract**—The study aims to expound on the politics involved in the conduct of Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) in selected Philippine elementary schools. The ALIVE is the Philippine government attempt to mainstream madrasah education into the public education system. Through case study research, the authors found out that as a program for the minority population, the implementation of the program was affected by the marginal status and “otherness” of Muslims in Philippine society. If unexamined, the biased attitudes of the Christian majority towards the Muslims can hugely affect the success of ALIVE.

**Keywords**—ALIVE; Muslim Filipinos; minority

## I. INTRODUCTION

An archipelago of more than 7,100 islands, the Philippines like many other countries in Asia is peopled by different ethno-linguistic groups of variegated features. One of the country’s ethno-linguistic groups is the Muslims. Nestled in the southern part of the country on the island of Mindanao, the Muslims comprised 5% of the Philippines’ total population [1]. Introduced by visiting Arab and Muslim traders in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Islam became the widely accepted religion by 17<sup>th</sup> century [2]. Alongside the growth and expansion of Islam was the crucial role played by the local rulers in its promotion [3] and to some scholars, the formidable role played by Islamic education in strengthening the faith of the new converts [4]. Since Islam is a religion of the word or divine text, a huge emphasis on education has been emphasized since the time of Prophet Muhammad. Arguably, Islam is the only religion that has well-defined categorization of knowledge found in the world, no less than the Qur’an underscored the importance of education to better understand the nature of the God people worship and pray to.

## II. ISLAMIC CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION

### A. Islamic Education Before and After The Arrival of Spaniards

For the Muslims, including the Muslim Filipinos, real education is composed of both religious and secular education. One should be well-versed in the Qur’an aside from his skills and knowledge to cope with the world. In the case of Muslim Filipinos who have long occupied Mindanao with relatively little incursion from Spanish colonizers, the only form of

education they had acquired was the basics of religious education [4]. This kind of education in a way was rudimentary as it focused on the reading of Qur’an and just the essential teachings of Islam. Though quite basic, this kind of education became the conduit of Islamic faith. Islam later on became the hallmark of their identity as a people.

### B. Education Under the Americans

When the American colonizers arrived in Mindanao in 1899, public education system was introduced through public schools. Though enrollment rates were successful among Christian Filipinos, enrollment rates among Muslim Filipinos showed otherwise. Cognizant of Americans’ ploy to use education to deculturize their group, many Muslim parents refused to send their children to schools. Hence, it was only Christians who experienced the newly installed public school system [4]. This access would later affect the way identity is constructed in the minds of future Filipinos. Meanwhile, as Christians became more “Americanized”, Muslims became more Muslims through the Islamic education they accessed at the time.

The use of education to turn the Muslims into “civilized” beings continued even after the departure of the Americans. No less than their Christian brethren continued the deculturation policy operationalized in unified curriculum implemented across the country. Though the curriculum is intended for everyone, it leaned towards the Christian orientation of the then emerging democracy. Learning contents of the books were silent about Muslim experiences. Contents were not relatable to Muslim learners as they mostly feature situations of Christian and American orientations [5]. Books that featured Muslims sometimes depicted them derogatorily. Incidents like these continue to the present time although in a much lesser scale [4].

### C. Muslim and Education

Currently, Muslim enrollment in public schools is definitely higher than before. However, public schools especially in Mindanao are still in worse conditions due to government oversight and corruption, both of Christian and Muslim officials. These two was further exacerbated by decades-long armed conflict between the Philippine military and Muslim rebels. Muslim insurgency that started in early 1970s and culminated several years after [6] traced its origins

from the documented massive marginalization under a Christian-dominated leadership. Some included but not limited to land takeover, administrative oversight, and cultural prejudices [4]. All these led to the formation of Muslim Filipino armed secessionist groups such as Moro National Liberation Front and Moro Islamic Liberation Front to which the government has attempted a couple of peace agreements.

In matters concerning their education, Muslim Filipinos have clearly expressed their desire for a relevant and quality education anchored on both secular and religious frameworks. Secular education is very important because it enables the Muslim Filipinos to be on par with their Christian brethren in terms of ability, knowledge, and skills [7]. In Milligan's work, combining their refusal to accept colonial education and the current limitation of public education in Mindanao, Muslims are said to be 50 years behind in terms of competency [8]. Access to quality secular education is highly necessary for the Muslims since their marginalization in the present times comes from their "ignorance". Furthermore, good education is necessary to thrive in a more competitive workplace brought about by the changing global order overly dependent on knowledge and skills. Religious education on the other hand plays a crucial part in their spiritual formation. As a belief system that holds no distinction between the secular and religious life, Islam has its own set of expectations for its people. Muslims are expected to live with piety and steeped in Islamic religious identity [9]. Moreover, Islam with its tendency to emphasize the Arab elements of the faith has the tendency to prescribe Islam in its unadulterated form. Without sound religious education it is impossible to attain the kind of Islam recognized by the *Umma*. This move though is not only confined to Muslim Filipinos, in fact this also applies to other Muslims in Southeast Asia where syncretism of Islam and indigenous tradition was the initial practice among its first believers [3].

### III. METHOD

Using case study research, the lead researcher went to two schools located in two cities, Manila and Sta. Rosa, in the province of Laguna. Case study is an "in-depth exploration of an activity, event, process, or individual based on extensive data collection" [10]. One of the strong points of case study is its ability to identify an array of cultural, social, and political factors related to the object of study. And since case study is comprised only of a limited number of participants, the researcher could give more attention to each. Manila is the capital of the Philippines while Sta. Rosa is a city 42 kilometers from Manila. The former hosts a huge number of Muslim immigrants from Mindanao in search for better lives and opportunities. As early as the 1960s, Manila hosted well-established Muslim communities as evidenced by the construction of big and famous mosques in the area. Sta. Rosa started to have Muslim communities in mid-2000s when the government created resettlement communities for informal settlers then living dangerously along railroads of the Philippine National Railways. In these two cities, their livelihood comes from the retail businesses they set up and manage. Business as a source of livelihood has a special place in the history of Islam. First, it was the occupation of Prophet

Muhammad and second, Islam's global expansion is attributed to travelling merchants [11]. In the Philippines, retail business is the most practical endeavor a less educated Muslim can engage in. Restricted by competitive nature of work in cities, Muslims are inclined to become traders and achieve success. Their success stories encouraged others to follow suit thus their influx to the two cities mentioned.

In Manila, Geronimo Santiago Elementary School (GSES) became the main object of the study, while in Sta. Rosa, it was the Santa Rosa Elementary School Central II (SRES CII). Data were gathered in November 2017-August 2018 following these steps: **Initial observation**. The main researcher went to the two schools to get initial impressions about the awareness of teachers, students, and staff regarding the presence of ALIVE. **Interview**. The Principals and ALIVE Teachers of the two participating schools were interviewed about the conduct of ALIVE in their respective schools. The separate interview questionnaires were validated by three experts: a seasoned Principal, a multicultural education expert, and a former ALIVE Teacher who has advanced knowledge of Islamic Studies. **Transcription**. Interviews with the Principals and ALIVE Teachers each lasted for 45 minutes were transcribed and later read and analyzed.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In 2004, the Philippine government through the Department of Education decided to implement Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) program in public elementary school across the country [12]. Sort of a "peace offering" for Muslims, the program mainstreams Islamic education deemed historically important for Muslims into the public education system. In ALIVE, a public school with 15-20 Muslim pupils can offer the program which incorporates the teaching of Arabic and Islamic belief system on a daily basis for 40 minutes each day. The class occurs either before or after the regular class of the participating pupils.

#### A. Findings

Seventy five percent of the GSES student population is Muslim, while at BES, there is only less than 130. Since the majority of the population at GSES is Muslim, the ALIVE became an integral part of the school academic program. Originally an elective subject for Muslim pupils, the program has become entrenched in the daily class programming of the school. It is taken by all pupils whether Muslim or not at a fixed schedule unlike in other schools which is offered either before or after the regular class by Muslim pupils only. How did this happen?

Since the Muslims are the majority at the GSES it was easy to institutionalize the program. It was not only the school leadership that initiated the establishment of the program, the parents helped out as well. Consequently, the ALIVE has become part of the regular schedule and is appreciated by Muslim parents.

The school leadership, a major factor in the success or failure of any school program played a crucial role as well [13]. The current Principal, an advocate of multicultural

education and with significant background in the Social Sciences has been very supportive of the program like his predecessors. Hosting the program for more than ten years now, the previous school leaderships have no doubt rendered enough support that sustained the program.

At the macro level, the “Moro Problem”, a thorny issue since the Spanish colonial rule is still unresolved. Traditionally refers to the strong resistance of Muslim Filipinos in Mindanao to accept Spanish, American, and later on Christian Filipino leadership because of their perceived “uncivilized traditions”, both colonial and modern-day governments did not fully concentrate on resolving the problem. First, the thinking that Muslim is just a tiny part of the population still lurks in the mind of Filipino leaders. Second, restive Mindanao is far from the seat of power and therefore the seat of power in Manila could get away with the Moro Problem easily. It was only when the armed conflict reached alarming status that even Arab Muslim countries had to mediate on Muslims’ behalf that the government dealt with the Muslim rebels.

At the SRES Central II, Muslim population is so small just almost 130. In this small population, only five pupils attend ALIVE. This small number puts the program in the sideline. Before the researcher’s fieldwork in the said school, the ALIVE class had no room of its own. The ALIVE Teacher or *Ustadz*, borrowed another teacher’s classroom so she could conduct her class after the latter’s around late afternoon. Luckily, the teacher agreed. The program is not new to this scenario. Before SRES Central II, the ALIVE class was held in Santa Rosa Elementary Schools Central III (SRES Central III). But because of classroom shortage (a common problem in Philippine public schools until recently), the program had to transfer to its location now. Since the attendees in ALIVE were traditionally handful, it was easy for the previous host school to displace them to give way to other “more important” needs for space.

The ALIVE class at SRES Central II now has its own classroom. This comes after the deployment of a new School Principal who in the course of the researcher’s interview showed positive regard towards Muslims. In the interview, the Principal mentioned that had it not to a friendship he sealed with a Muslim years back, he would have been indifferent to Muslims and to ALIVE program as well. Aside from providing a classroom, the new Principal frequently visits the ALIVE class, and checks on the Ustadz and other needs of the program.

The limited number of ALIVE attendees does affect the status of the program in the school. The small number obscures the program from the eyes of the school community. Many times the lead researcher asked school security personnel and pupils about basic information on the program like the time and place it is conducted but they failed to give definite answer. The program’s obscurantism increases the possibility of inaction on the part of school leadership and indifference on the part of the school community as shown at the SRES Central II before the arrival of the current Principal. Without attention from these two, improvements in the program may be hard to come. After all, the class has no

significant number of attendees that can compel substantial actions from the leadership.

The majority-minority divide is a constant challenge for many countries with minority population as exemplified in the restive south of Thailand and Philippines [14]. Both still suffer from their dichotomized relationships with the Muslims. In the case of the Philippines, overdependence on the ability of education to forge a common identity among ethnic groups is believed to be the culprit behind the inadequate review of policies that could effectively mitigate the Moro Problem. Moreover, faith in the ability of education to solve Muslim-Christian tensions in the country did not have a sound basis and therefore should not have been blindly adopted by the state [4]. What could be the better way to solve the Moro Problem then?

The ALIVE at GSES though an archetype of the ALIVE program from the point of view of the Dep ED and concerned Muslims, is not free from the disparaging stare from non-Muslim members of the community. A 1975 study conducted by Filipinas Foundation showed Muslim Filipinos were the least desired “neighbors, employers, employees, friends, or marriage partner” among non-Muslim respondents. The often cited reasons for this were Muslims were said to be “fierce, treacherous, killers, and warlike”. They were also perceived as “unreliable, hostile and proud people, extravagant, non-progressive, lazy, poor, conservative, and stingy”. At present time the negative view of Muslim has significantly improved. In a 2006 Social Weather Stations survey which asked about the trust given by non-Muslims to their Muslim peers, 47% of non-Muslims considered Muslims as trustworthy. Moreover, more than 60% of those surveyed also had a favorable opinion of Islam. Though there is a great improvement, remnants of biased attitudes towards them still persist. The school leadership of GSES is aware that non-Muslim parents in the community hesitate and sometimes refuse to enroll their children for the simple reason that it is a Muslim-dominated school. The 2006 survey aside from shedding light to Christians’ perception of Muslims, also underscored a possible solution to the Moro Problem. In the same survey, it was also shown that the more knowledge a non-Muslim has about Islam, the more that person holds favorable opinion about Muslims. Instead of considering Moro problem as a Christians’ problem of Muslims and education through a unified curriculum as a means to solve it, why not consider the Moro problem as the problem of both sides? And that education in the form of genuine effort to know and understand Muslim Filipinos, their history, faith, and struggles can become the first good step to iron out this problem.

## V. CONCLUSION

Running for almost 14 years now, the program is not without problems. The authors argue that these problems are microcosmic reflection of the current status of Muslim Filipinos in the Philippines, that of a minority group struggling to thrive in a Christian-dominated society. It is no doubt that the ALIVE has survived in the two participating schools but knowing the importance of ALIVE both for the Philippine government and for the Muslims, survival of the program is not enough. If ALIVE is really good and important, the ideal

condition is for it to thrive in all schools in the Philippines, not only in schools where the Muslims are the majority. The Dep ED effective implementation of the program is best shown if the program can thrive and become successful even without the clamor of the minority who in the first place is deserving of equal opportunity like the majority. If survival is hard, making the program thrive and succeed is more difficult. As ALIVE is now mainstreamed into the public school system, the Principal of the school, especially if he or she is a non-Muslim plays a huge role in its effective implementation. Unchecked cultural prejudices and bigotry among school administrators are dangerous as they can contradict the very purpose of bringing ALIVE into the public schools.

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