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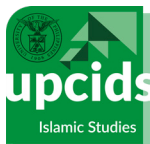


UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
ISLAMIC STUDIES PROGRAM

***Balik-Islam* in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered**

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Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered¹

Macrina A. Morados and Aisha F. Malayang²

Abstract

This paper tackles the motivation behind the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam who adopted a new religious identity as Balik-Islam (balik, a Filipino work meaning “return”). Only converts in the Philippines use the term “Balik-Islam,” negating the idea of abandoning their previous faiths but indicating rather a returning to the pure (*fiṭrah*) and original religion for all mankind. Thus, the term means “reverts to Islam,” and it started to evolve and gained acceptance from both the reverts and “born Muslims.” Balik-Islam are aware that they must be prepared to hurdle different forms of challenges from personal to family issues, especially those living with non-Muslim families who cannot accept their decision to become a Muslim. Islam is indeed the most misconceived religion. As such, the Balik-Islam have become the most misunderstood group in the country.

¹ The Study on Balik-Islam in the National Capital Region and Some Selected areas in Luzon is part of the study titled: “Research on Balik-Islam in the Philippines,” conducted by the authors in collaboration with the Institute of Autonomy and Governance (IAG) based in Cotabato City. This study was completed on August 2021, and it was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Australian Embassy, Philippines.

² Macrina A. Morados (mamorados@up.edu.ph) is a former convenor of UP-CIDS Islamic Studies Program (2017–21) and currently a faculty member of the UP Institute of Islamic Studies (UP IIS). Aisha Flores-Malayang is a former Commissioner on Balik-Islam and Women of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos and a former UP IIS lecturer.

Introduction

The reported peak of the Balik-Islam phenomenon in the Philippines, particularly in the Luzon area, dates to the late 1970s. This was also the time when many Filipinos ventured for greener pastures abroad. The booming oil industry made many Muslim countries in the Middle East attractive as work destinations to hundreds of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Surprisingly, many of these non-Muslim workers, particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, returned to the Philippines as new Muslims.

In the Philippines, where Muslim converts are also referred to as Balik-Islam, initial research by the Institute of Autonomy and Governance and the University of the Philippines Institute of Islamic Studies (IAG and UP IIS 2020) revealed that these individuals can be categorized into:³

- (1) **Balik-Islam who were converted because one is married to a Muslim.** This type of Balik-Islam soon adopts the lifestyle of one's spouse, including the dietary restrictions and observance of some religious rituals. In most cases, upon the death of the Muslim spouse, these types of converts returned to their former religion, leaving their children in a dilemma over which religion to follow.
- (2) **OFW Balik-Islam converts to while working in the Middle East.** When they returned to the Philippines after working overseas, they organized themselves and become active *duāh* (plural of *dā'ī*, meaning Islamic preachers). They also became responsible for the establishment of many Balik-Islam centers. Some of these run Islamic schools and have connections to funding agencies abroad, getting support from their Balik-Islam networks in the Middle East.

³ *Research on Balik-Islam in the Philippines* is a collaborative project between the Institute of Autonomy and Governance (based in Cotabato City) and the University of the Philippines Institute of Islamic Studies. The study was completed and published in August 2021 and was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Embassy of Australia, Manila, Philippines.

Many of the active Islamic preachers in the country belong to the Balik-Islam group.

- (3) **Balik-Islam who converted out of personal conviction, through a spiritual journey, and through meeting Muslim friends who had inspired them to study Islam.** In most cases, this type of Balik-Islam is very passionate. They are very eager to share Islam with their friends and loved ones. But being new to the religion, they would appear to be more concerned about following the rituals more rigidly than people who were born Muslims.
- (4) **Balik-Islam who found Islam through social media, a *da'wah* network, and/or by following Islam lectures through these media.**

The concept of Balik-Islam is built on two assumptions:

- (i) The Islamic narrative about humanity being inherently “Muslim” shows how people tend to be naturally inclined to Islam until their parents turn them to other faiths. Thus, anyone who decides to embrace Islam is returning to one’s *fiṭrah* or nature.
- (ii) The historical narrative of Muslim presence across the Philippine archipelago before the advent of Western European colonial powers (IAG and UP IIS 2020, 7).

Indeed, as Lacar (2001, 39) writes, “[W]hile they may be denominated as converts to Islam, without exception, none of them wants to be called a convert. They insist on being designated as Balik-Islam (‘returnees’ to Islam) rather than as converts.” Moreover, he defined them as individuals who have made a “‘paradigm shift in their ordered view of life from one perspective to another.’ The ‘paradigm shift’ is from Christianity to Islam” (Lacar 2001, 39). In another study, Banlaoi (2006, 1) noted the same observation. “Followers prefer to be called reverts based on the belief that Islam was the original religion of the Philippines.” Leon Salzman defines religious conversion this way:

Religious conversion is a specific instance of the general process of human adaptation. In the process of fulfilling human needs, some people follow a rather direct course of minimal strife and turmoil, while others face major obstacles which require major adjustments. . . .

Most change . . . is gradual in its development; but since it culminates in a specific moment of alteration or conversion, it may seem instantaneous, unexplained, or mysterious event. . . . Where a profound change in philosophy, ideology, or ethics occurs, the hidden but encompassing struggle is particularly significant. Thus conversion cannot be regarded as a sudden or dramatic event. (1953, 177)

Salzman observed different phenomena in which the term “conversion” refers to a change from one religion to another, change from one sect to another, or sudden inspiration and devotion within a religious group. Ullman (1989, 5) observed that “[r]eligious conversions vary in terms of the abruptness of the change, in the intensity of the experience, in the presence of a mystical revelation, or in the extent to which it is experienced as an act of will or of ‘self-surrender.’” In the Philippine context, the term “Balik-Islam” implies that “those who embrace Islam are just returning to the faith given that historically the early settlers in the Philippine Islands were generally or already Muslims before the period of colonialism” (Wadi 2004).

Also, in the Philippines, where the government is secular, changing one’s religion is not an issue for the state. The growing number of Balik-Islam converts has noticeably put this community under scrutiny, particularly in traditionally Muslim areas in the southern Philippines and even in largely Christian communities outside Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. Unfortunately, the Balik-Islam community has also triggered security concerns because of their alleged involvement in extremism in some parts of the country.

Reports have suggested that Balik-Islam converts are vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups using Islam (Ullman 1989). One best example is the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), which “emerged from the larger and more moderate Balik-Islam group” (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2005). RSM leaders participated

in acts of terrorism, such as the bombing of the MV SuperFerry 14 in 2004, which was considered one of “the worst act[s] of maritime terrorism.” In addition, the RSM staged a series of “coordinated blasts” on Valentine’s Day in 2005 in the cities of Makati, Davao, and General Santos (United States Department of State 2008).

During the 2017 Marawi siege,⁴ there were unofficial reports or sightings of Balik-Islam joining the ranks of the Maute group⁵ and pledging support to the establishment of an *ad-Dawla al-Islamiyyāh* (an Islamic state) in the country. In September this year, police accosted a Balik-Islam in Metro Manila. The apprehended individual allegedly served as liaison and contact person for Daulah Islamiya, another terrorist group in Mindanao.

Muslim Population in the Country

According to the census of 2015 (PopCen 2015), there are 5,646,000 Muslims in Mindanao, 28,262 in the Visayas, and 390,472 in Luzon, for a total of 6,064,734 in the entire Philippines (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA]–BARMM 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d). Of the 24 million Filipinos in Mindanao, about 23.39 percent are Muslim. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has the highest concentration of Muslims in the country.

TABLE 1 ► Breakdown of Muslim Populations in Luzon Regions

Region	Muslims	Percentage from Luzon’s Population
National Capital Region (NCR)	154,840	40%
Cordillera Autonomous Region (CAR)	4,679	1.20%
Region I	10,801	2.77%

⁴ The siege was triggered when the military tried to arrest top ISIL leader Isnilon Hapilon. This prompted the attacker to fight back, declaring the city a new caliphate of ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group, also known as ISIS.

⁵ The Maute group, also known as the Islamic State of Lanao, was a radical Islamist group composed of former Moro Islamic Liberation Front guerrillas and foreign fighters led by Omar Maute, the alleged founder of a Dawlah Islamiya, or Islamic state, based in Lanao del Sur.

Region II	6,525	1.67%
Region III	39,202	10.04%
Region IV-A	67,983	17.41%
Region IV- B	99,208	25.41%
Region V	7,234	1.85%
LUZON	390,472	.68%

Source: PSA-BARRM 2017a, 2017b, 2017c

After BARMM, Muslims are also found in Region XII (South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and General Santos or SOCCSKSARGEN), Region IX (Zamboanga Peninsula), and Region X (Northern Mindanao). The Caraga Region has the least number of Muslims in Mindanao (PSA-BARRM 2017c).

Luzon has more Muslims (around 390,000) than the Visayas (around 28,000) (PSA-BARRM 2017b, 2017d). Based on 2015 census data, almost half of the Muslims in Luzon are in Metro Manila.

Nearly 40 percent of the Muslims in Luzon were in NCR. They occupy 1.20 percent of the total population of the region. Among its 17 cities and municipalities, the Cities of Taguig and Manila accommodate most number of the Muslims at 4.28 percent and 1.92 percent of their population, correspondingly. (PSA-BARRM 2017b)

The rest of the Muslim population in Luzon is scattered in Regions IV-B (Mimaropa, or Mindoro, Marinduque, and Palawan), IV-A (Calabarzon, or Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon), and III (Central Luzon). The only province in Luzon without a Muslim population is Batanes (based on the census at least). The smallest number is reported in Apayao province (four) (PSA-BARRM 2017b).

In the Visayas, about half of the Muslim population is residing in Region VII (Central Visayas). The rest are scattered throughout the other Visayan regions (PSA-BARRM 2017d).

Aside from the natural birth rate and migration, there has been an increase in the number of the Muslim population in the country. One of the reasons is attributed to the so-called “Balik-Islam” phenomenon.

Metro Manila, officially the National Capital Region (NCR), is home to some religious sites for local and visiting Muslims from foreign lands. One of the notable sites is the Greenhills Musallāh (Prayer Hall) in Greenhills Shopping Center, which Muslim foreigners frequent. The Manila Golden Mosque and Cultural Center in Quiapo, Manila is another site. It was built in 1976 to serve as a “welcoming gift” to Muammar Gaddafi of Libya; however, he was unable to visit the Philippines (Lonely Planet 2022). Considered the largest mosque in Metro Manila, it can accommodate up to 22,000 worshippers at a time. Another significant venue is the Salaam Mosque in Libyan Street inside the Salaam Muslim Compound in Barangay Culiati, Quezon City. Four other mosques can be found within the barangay.

The Salaam Compound is a *waqf* or endowment from the Libyan government and is currently a vibrant Muslim community and receptacle of the Morospora or interregional Muslim migrant communities. The Blue Mosque in Taguig City lies in the heart of Maharlika Village, a sprawling 54-hectare area and home to the largest Muslim community in Metro Manila. The area used to be a part of a military reservation created through the Presidential Task Force for the Reconstruction and Development of Mindanao (PTFRDM) under the administration of then-President Ferdinand E. Marcos.

The Study on Balik-Islam in the NCR and Selected Areas in Luzon

For the National Capital Region/Metro Manila and Luzon areas, the University of the Philippines Institute of Islamic Studies (UP-IIS) Research Team came up with four clusters to get a substantial representation of respondents for the focus group discussion (FGD) and survey questions. There were two FGDs conducted in NCR. These discussions were held in two areas in Quezon City—the Salaam Compound in Barangay Culiati and Masjid Burhan in Project 7 (Barangay Veterans Village).

The Luzon areas were divided into three clusters: the North Luzon cluster to cover areas for Ilocos Sur, Ilocos Norte, Pangasinan,

Baguio, and other northern provinces with possible Balik-Islam communities; the Central Luzon cluster with one FGD conducted at Masjid al-Ikhlās, Bulacan; and the South Luzon cluster, where two FGDs were held at the KASAMA Halal Cooperative, Inc. Center, Santo Tomas, Batangas and at the Islamic Studies Call and Guidance Philippines (ISCAG) in Dasmariñas City, Cavite. The total number of FGD participants was 60, with 25 males and 35 females.

No FGD was conducted for the North Luzon cluster due to the COVID-19 pandemic and stricter travel restrictions, and because of the alarming increase in cases in Pangasinan. Thus, the team decided to hire a local enumerator to administer the survey questions to compensate for a supposed FGD in the Balik-Islam community under the Discover Islam Pangasinan Da'wah Center. There were 30 sets of questionnaires administered, and around 17 were retrieved and processed. For the overall project, a total of 140 questionnaires were administered to cover the four clusters. There were only 109 retrieved, of which 60 respondents were female and 49 were male.

The key informants consisted of ten Balik-Islam and ten non-Balik-Islam individuals. They were selected based on their personal experiences and depth of knowledge about Islam, Muslims, and the Balik-Islam phenomenon. All professionals, they have achieved significant milestones or have had successful careers and/or chosen fields of practice.

Six case study respondents presented very positive, fresh, encouraging, and inspiring stories about their journeys to Islam and how they have made a difference, not only to themselves but also to their larger communities. Three of them came from the National Capital Region, one from Central Luzon, and two from South Luzon.

Nine persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) were invited to participate in the study on high-profile inmates. Two were interviewed as key informants, and seven participated in the survey on their understanding of some Islamic concepts and their perceptions on some issues related to Islam and being a Muslim (Morados 2020).

Overall, the respondents in this study were composed of three groups: (1) Balik-Islam, (2) non-Balik-Islam, and (3) PDLs. The Balik-

Islam group comprised (a) survey respondents, (b) FGD participants, (c) key informants, and (d) case study participants. The non-Balik-Islam group consisted of high-profile key informants and were chosen based on their wide knowledge and experiences about Balik-Islam in their communities. Part of the PDL group were high-profile personalities who were being linked to alleged terror organizations in the country.

Socioeconomic Profile of Balik-Islam in Selected areas in Luzon and Metro Manila

In Luzon, the socioeconomic profile of the Balik-Islam respondents is as follows:

- The Balik-Islam respondents in Luzon belonged to diverse ethnic affiliations and hailed from almost all the regions of Luzon, down to the Visayas, and some from Mindanao. The biggest number of Luzon respondents were from Pampanga (14.68 percent), Manila (12.84 percent), Quezon City (8.26 percent), Batangas (7.34 percent), and Quezon Province (5.50 percent).

A few came from Ilocos Norte, La Union, Tuguegarao City, Ilocos Sur, Isabela, Cagayan Valley, Pangasinan, Tarlac, Nueva Ecija, Bataan, Cavite, Bulacan, Palawan, Samar, Marinduque, Antique, Sorsogon, Romblon, Bacolod, Western Visayas, and Zamboanga City. The dispersed areas of origin is a strong indication of local migration among the respondents. Interestingly, a big number were of Tagalog origin (46.79 percent), followed by Ilokano (17.43 percent) and Pangasinense (10.09 percent).

- Their mean age was 39 years old. Of the 109 respondents, 57 were female, and 49 were male. The sex-disaggregated data reflected 70 married respondents (64.22 percent), with 38 females (34.86 percent) and 32 males (29.36 percent). For married males, 26 (81.25 percent) reported that they only have one wife, while five (15.63 percent) have two at the time of the survey.

TABLE 10► Selected socio-demographic characteristics for Luzon Respondents

Selected variables	N = 109
1 .Sex	
Female	57.3%
Male	45%
2. Mean age	
	39 years
3 .Marital status	
Married	64.2%
4 .Ethnic Affiliation	
Tagalog	46.8%
Ilocano	17.4%
Pangasinense	10.1%
Ilonggo	6.4%
Other ethnic groups	19.3%
5. Number of wives of married male (N = 32)	
With only one wife	81.3%
6 .Order in marriage for married female (N=38)	
Only wife	71.1%
First wife	5.3%
Second wife	21.1%
7. Length of stay in the present residence	
More than 10 years	52.3%
Below ten years	45.9%
8. Housing arrangement	
Own house	36.7%
Living with relatives	11.0%
Renting	44.0%
9.Former religion	
Catholics	84.4%

- For married females, 27 (71.058 percent) reported that they were the only wife of their husband, while eight (21.05 percent) disclosed that they were the second wife, and two (5.26 percent) of them were the first wife. One respondent reported that she is the third wife at the time of the survey.

- More than half of the respondents (52.29 percent) have been staying in their present address for more than 10 years, 21 percent have stayed for more than five years, and 25 percent have stayed for less than five years. A good number of 40 (37 percent) reported that they are staying in their own house, while a bigger 48 (44.04 percent) are renting. A smaller 11 percent are staying with their relatives.
- Like BARMM respondents, the majority (84.40 percent) were Roman Catholics before they embraced Islam. The rest of the respondents were converts from other Christian sects.
- In terms of highest educational attainment, 39 out of 109 (35.78 percent) have college education. Still, a big number (27, 24.77 percent) reached, but could not finish, college. Two only had an elementary education, while 14 (12.84 percent) finished high school, and 10 (9.17 percent) were unable to do so. A few managed to finish postgraduate education (6 percent).

TABLE 11 ► Educational attainment of the respondents

Selected variables	N = 109
10. Highest educational attainment	
With elementary education	1.8%
With secondary education	22.0%
With a college education	24.8%
College graduates	35.8%
% With postgraduate	5.5%
11. Islamic education attended	
% With formal Islamic studies	10.1%
% With informal Islamic studies	82.6%
12. Level of formal Islamic education attended (N=11)	
Ibtidā'ī (elementary level)	1%
Thanawi (secondary level)	4.6%
Kulliyah (collegiate level)	4.6%

- Only 10.09 percent received formal Islamic education, while the majority (82.57 percent) had informal Islamic education from Islamic centers and/or masjid (mosque). Of the 11 (10.09 percent) who had formal Islamic education, five (4.59 percent) reached *kulliyah* (collegiate level); five (4.59 percent) had completed *thanāwi* (secondary level), and the remaining two finished *ibtidāī* (elementary level). Three out of 11 respondents had their formal Islamic education abroad.
- In terms of employment, 39 (35.78 percent) were unemployed, 38 (34.86 percent) were self-employed; 23 (21.10 percent) were employed in the private sector, and only seven (6.42 percent) were employed in a government office.

The household monthly income of 23 respondents (21.10 percent) lies below PhP 10,000. Eighteen respondents (16.51 percent) reported an income between PhP 10,001 and PhP 20,999. About 12 (11.01 percent) reported a higher income between PhP 21,000.00 and PhP 30,999.00. Very few of them reported an income higher than that. Forty-six respondents (42.2 percent) did not disclose their monthly income. The mean monthly income of the Balik-Islam respondents in Luzon appeared to be PhP 19,007.76. With the previous data on high unemployment rate among the respondents, this study also confirms their socioeconomic condition: that about 21 percent are considered poor according to their monthly income. A *BusinessMirror* article notes that

Based on the results of the Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES), the PSA said the poverty threshold per family amounted to P10,481 a month. An income below this amount would categorize a family as being poor and income above this would mean a family is nonpoor. (Ordinario 2019)

As the present study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted businesses and employment worldwide, it is important to note that 38 out of the 109 respondents (34.86 percent) who reported that they were self-employed did not disclose information about the size and nature of their businesses. This detail

refers to engagement in either a micro or small business enterprise or otherwise.

The Balik-Islam households in the Luzon study are relatively small. Seventy-five respondents out of 109 (68.81 percent) have five or fewer members in their household. Eighteen respondents (16.51 percent) have a bigger household with six or more members. Thirteen respondents (11.93 percent) did not provide information. The mean family size of the Luzon respondents is 4.98. This indicates that households are mostly composed of members of a nuclear family. In addition, an extended family system of housing arrangements is not a common practice.

TABLE 12 ► Employment Status of the Respondents

Employment status	N = 80
Employed in the government	6.42%
Privately employed	21.1%
Self-employed	34.9%
Unemployed	35.8%

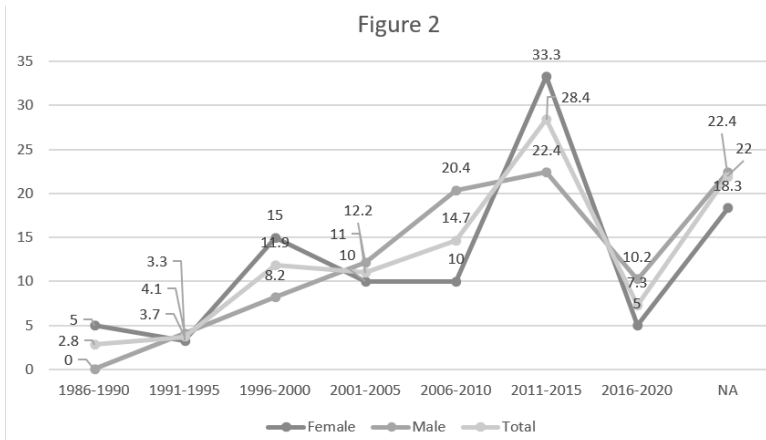
TABLE 13 ► Household size and family size of the respondents

	Members
Household size	5.38 members
Family Size	4.98 members

III. On Becoming Balik-Islam: Motivation and Aspiration

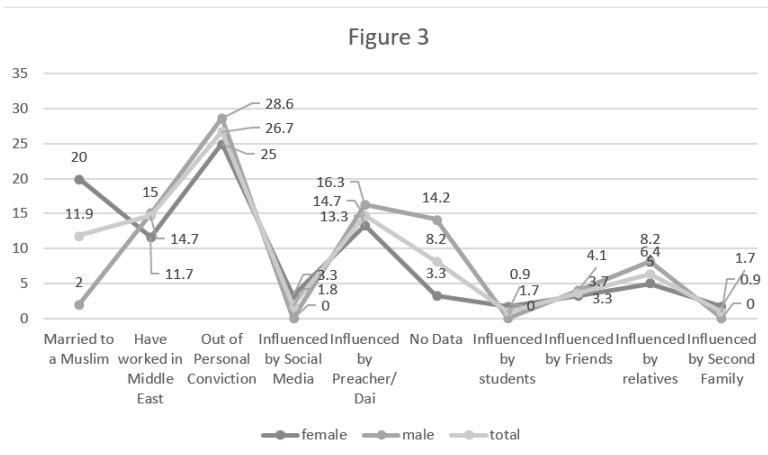
One of the first questions to a Balik-Islam is the date of their conversion, which also indicates how long they have been practicing the Islamic faith. The data reveal that the years of conversion to Islam ranged between 1986 (among the oldest) and 2020 (among the youngest). This factor may be attributed to the age bracket of the respondents in Luzon, where the mean age is 39 years old. This would indicate that among the participants in the Luzon and Metro Manila surveys, the eldest person in the Islamic faith, not in chronological age, is 34 years.

FIGURE 2 ▶ Year when the respondent became Balik-Islam



In Figure 2, the years 2011–15 saw an increase in conversions of 40 people within a span of five years. The number of reverts to Islam gradually increased beginning in 1986 and tapered down towards 2020. Also, more women have converted to Islam in most of the inclusive years, except between 2006 and 2010.

FIGURE 3 ▶ How respondents became Balik-Islam



In this study, we thought of such possible factors for religious conversion. Almost one-third (28.44 percent) revealed that it was out of their personal conviction and that no other external social influences drove them into making this major life decision (Figure 3).

About 18 percent were influenced by a *dā'ī* (preacher), and another 17 percent reported that it was through their employment in the Middle East. Interestingly, out of the 17 who attributed their reversion because of marriage to a Muslim, 15 were female, and only two were male. It would mean that in intermarriages among Muslim males to non-Muslim females, the wife may be likely to embrace the faith of her husband.

The influence of social media on reversion characterizes of the women's experience more than that of their male counterparts. The work of the *du'āh* (the plural form of *dā'ī*), or Islamic preachers, finds fruition when people revert to Islam through their zealously in inviting others to the faith. In this study, almost the same numbers of male and female respondents were influenced by a *dā'ī*. Most of them have never gone to any Muslim area or country.

Among the respondents, 11.01 percent revealed that their relatives influenced them to embrace Islam. This is also observed in some of the participants in the focus group discussions. However, reversion because of the influence of relatives is not always the case. Some participants in the case studies still failed to convince their nuclear families and relatives even when they became *du'āh* themselves. In Islam, it is said that there is no compulsion in religion, and it is only through the mercy of Allāh, the Creator, who leads one to Islam. This is the common attitude to situations like this.

This study established the usual age when a person converts to Islam. It revealed that almost half of the respondents embraced Islam during early adulthood (between 20 and 40 years old). Nonetheless, some respondents became Muslims as young as 10 years old and even younger. Figure 4 shows that among women, the highest percentage of converts to Islam were from the age group 20–39, and the highest percentage among men were from the age groups 10–19 and 30–39. The average age of female converts is 35.75, and that of males is 32.28.

Personal changes are not reflected in the survey instrument, but are rather extensively discussed in the results of the FGDs, key informant interviews for Balik-Islam, and case studies. Table 13 shows the qualitative data on the reported personal changes, which appear to be a recurring theme among the three approaches:

FIGURE 4 ► Age the respondents became Balik-Islam

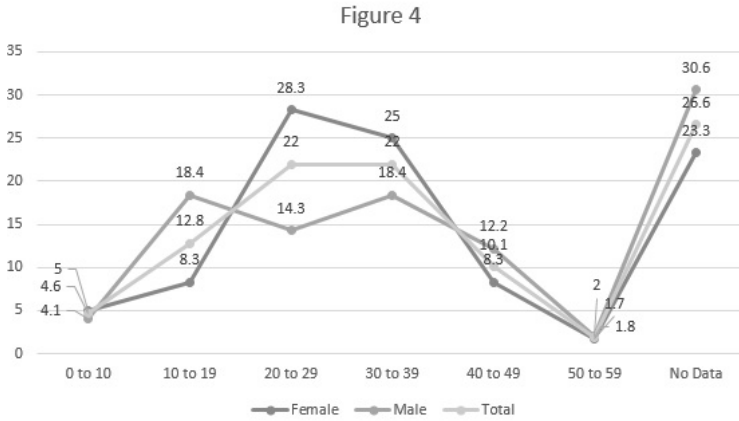


TABLE 13 ► Personal changes after professing Islam in several aspects

Aspects	Recurring themes in the responses of the respondents
Spiritual	Worshipping one true God (tawhīd) Knowing the purpose of life, which is service (‘ibādah) Observing the five daily prayers Fasting during the month of Ramaḍān (sawm) Experiencing contentment (sakīna) Realizing that life in this world is temporary and that the final goal is reaching <i>Janna</i> (Paradise, where the righteous dwell) Attaining peace of mind Giving alms (<i>zakāt</i>)
Dietary Restrictions	Not eating pork Avoiding liquor Quitting smoking Avoiding food that is not ḥalāl Refusing to consume food that are offered to gods other than Allāh (s.w.t.; <i>subḥānahū wa-ta’ālā</i> ; “praised and exalted”) Eating ḥalāl-slaughtered meat

Behavioral	Total change of lifestyle Observing ṣabr (patience) Becoming more charitable, kind, and merciful Choosing the right words to say Avoiding hurting others Leaving bad habits and vices (e.g., gambling) Becoming considerate to others Observing taqwā (fear of God)
Relational	Improving relationships with the husband and children Struggling to have good relationship with non-Muslim parents and siblings for the sake of Allāh Respecting people including non-Muslims Distancing from the opposite sex
Physical Appearance	Wearing of ḥijāb; looking more conservative because of ḥijāb and long skirts; looking very simple with no make-up; exuding modesty Treating the ḥijāb as liberating; considering that the value of the self is more important than outward appearance

Responses both in the survey questions and focus group discussions affirm that Islam transformed the respondents' lives. These changes can be categorized into personal changes in spirituality; the observance of dietary restrictions; and in their behavior, relationships, and appearance.

In terms of spirituality, respondents noted that understanding fully the principle of tawḥīd (monotheism) turned them into a new being that is affirmed by another principle: the nature of purity or state of fiṭrah. With this realization, life's purpose in this world is solely for 'ibādah, or worshipping Allāh (s.w.t.). Thus, every Muslim has to submit to the will of Allāh (s.w.t.). Praying five times a day, observing the month of Ramaḍān, and giving zakāt are manifestations of this realization of tawḥīd and 'ibādah. For these reasons, many of the Balik-Islam respondents claimed to have attained contentment, sakīna (inner peace). They know that life in this world is temporary and that the Muslim's final goal is to be in Janna (Paradise).

The Balik-Islam respondents understood that these spiritual changes will manifest in the other aspects of their lives. For instance,

observing dietary restrictions such as avoiding pork, blood, and nonhalal slaughtered meat. In terms of behavior, the Balik-Islam claimed that Qur'anic injunctions and *Sunnah* (traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad) inspired them to become more patient, generous, kind, and considerate. Also, many of them noted leaving old vices, and they became conscious of the choices of words to avoid hurting other people.

Also, many of the respondents noted improvements in their relationships with their husband and children and because of the changes in their behavior.

IV. Challenges Encountered by Balik-Islam after Reversion

The issues and concerns of the Balik-Islam are grouped into (a) personal, (b) family, and (c) community.

A. Personal Challenges

1. Wearing of Hijāb and Discrimination

In Islam, the most quoted verse as reference for the injunction on *hijāb* is the following:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornment except what normally appear let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their "hidden" adornments except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, their fellow women, those "bondwomen" in their possession, male attendants with no desire, or children who are still unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not stomp their feet, drawing attention to their hidden adornments. Turn to Allāh in repentance all together, O believers, so that you may be successful. (Qur'ān 24:31)

Muslim women consider this verse in *surah* (chapter) 24 (*an-Nūr/The Light*) a sacred command from Allāh (s.w.t.) that must therefore be obeyed. In the Philippines, though the Constitution

guarantees freedom of religious practice, the situation of Muslim women wearing *ḥijāb* is not different from that in other Muslim-minority countries, where discrimination against *ḥijābis* is prevalent. This is a problem faced by both Balik-Islam and born-Muslims. There have been many reports that Muslim women are forced to remove the *ḥijāb* at work or at school, which can be considered a form of curtailment of their religious freedom. Former UP Diliman Chancellor Michael Tan wrote a column in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* discussing the challenges encountered by *ḥijābis* in Metro Manila.

If there's anything that symbolizes the gap between Muslims and Christians, it is the *hijab*, or head veil.

On a Catholic woman, it elicits respect, with meanings of sanctity and honor, from Catholics and often from people of other faiths as well, including Muslims in Mindanao who may have benefited from the education given by various Catholic women religious (notably the Religious of the Virgin Mary).

On a Muslim woman, for fellow Muslims, it, too, elicits respect, representing modesty and an expression of faith. Sadly, for Christians, it sometimes brings out bias and prejudice. (Tan 2016)

Former NCMF Commissioner for Women, Analiza G. Flores-Malayang, had her own story of discrimination. She recounted, “I lost my job after embracing Islam, especially when I insisted my right to wear *ḥijāb*. I also experienced getting searched thoroughly in public establishments due to my *ḥijāb*. This was very unusual as other women entered the establishments with no hassle.”

Another key informant working in a broadcasting company, serving as one of the segment writers of a reality show, shared her experience. “I had difficulty wearing *ḥijāb* at work. I was so afraid that my coworkers will see it strange as they have never seen any Muslim *ḥijābi* employee in our building. It took me more than a year to finally wear *ḥijāb* at work, and *al-Ḥamdulillāh* [Praise be to God].”

Another Balik-Islam Sister commented, “Yong inayawan kang isama sa lakaran dahil naka-*ḥijāb* ka. Para bang nahiya sila na may kasamang Muslim o nakasuot ng pang-Muslim” (Some refuse to let you be with them whenever they go out just because you are a *ḥijābi*

(one who wears a *ḥijāb*). They would feel ashamed if they were with a Muslim or someone who wears clothes that Muslims usually wear).

Having a hard time hiring a taxi or getting a ride on account of their Muslim attire is a common experience among *ḥijābis*. They tend to be the last choice of passengers. One respondent shared, “Dati, wala akong problemang umuwi nang gabi. Ngayong Muslim na ako, pahirapang kumuha ng taxi. Dami ko nang pinara, ayaw akong hintuan” (Before, I didn’t have any problem going home late at night, but now that I became a Muslim, getting a taxi has been so difficult. For several times I tried to get one, but they refused to stop).

Another Balik-Islam Sister noted her experience in school when she negotiated with the administration to allow her to alter her uniform in conformity with the Islamic dress code. She said, “Kailangan kong i-negotiate sa school na and aking uniform, maging long-sleeved at mahaba’ng palda dahil gusto kong isabuhay ang Islam” (I need to negotiate with the school administration to alter my school uniform to be long-sleeved and with a long skirt to conform to the prescribed Islamic dress code).

One of the participants in the FGD at KASAMA in Batangas considered discrimination at the workplace. She narrated, “Ang naging suliranin ko ay sa pag-*ḥijāb*, kasi nu’ng nagwo-work ako, hindi ako makapag-*ḥijāb*. Hindi rin ako makapag-*ṣalāh*.” (I had issues with when I am to wear a *ḥijāb*. I cannot wear it at work. I could not even perform the *ṣalāh* [obligatory prayers]). Another participant noted, “Nandiyan pa rin ang diskriminasyon, especially sa priority sa trabaho. ‘Pag-alam na Muslim, di pipiliin sa trabaho” (Discrimination is still there, especially in prioritizing in job applications. If one is found to be a Muslim, he or she would not be hired).

These experiences affirm that Islam is one of the most misconceived religions. These misconceptions are largely shaped by the media’s depiction and portrayal of Islam and Muslims, which in turn shape public opinion. It sets public discourses where biased opinions are framed without looking into the source of truth. This careless attitude oftentimes contributes to the patronage of fake news that triggers Islamophobia. Non-Muslims feel an unreasonable fear and disapproval of Muslims.

Professor Rufa Guiam noted the incidence of irresponsible journalism in print media where the word *Muslim* is used to label criminals, i.e., “a Muslim thief,” “a Muslim kidnapper,” or “a corrupt Muslim politician” mostly occurred in print media. This aggravates the already tainted image of a Muslim. It is a misnomer to label a Muslim as a terrorist or a bandit, or to use the word in a derogatory manner because a Muslim denotes complete submission to the will of God (Cagoco 2000).

2. Lack of Access to *Ḥalāl* Products and services

Muslims are not only enjoined to follow the five pillars of Islam but also to observe a *ḥalāl* lifestyle. *Ḥalāl* (حلال) is an Arabic word that literally means “permissible or lawful.” Its Qur’ānic basis lies in the 16th surah, *an-Naḥl* (The Bee): “Eat of the lawful and good things with which Allah has provided you and be thankful for the favors of Allah if it is He you worship” (Qur’ān 16:114; Darwish Concordance). Adherence to a *ḥalāl* lifestyle manifests one’s commitment to follow all of Allāh’s (s.w.t.) the commandments.

One FGD participant articulated his intention to adhere to a *ḥalāl* lifestyle. When asked about his struggles after embracing Islam, he stressed, “Ang mapagtagumpayan at masolusyonan ang mga pagsubok sa *ḥalāl* na pamamaraan, tulad ng pinansiya at edukasyong naaayon lang sa itinuro ng Mahal na Propeta (s.a.w.) [*ṣallā-llāhu ‘alayhī wa-sallam*; blessings of Allāh be upon him as well as peace]” (To hurdle and resolve all challenges in observing *ḥalāl* injunctions like patronizing *ḥalāl* financing and education all in consonance with the teachings of the Holy Prophet [s.a.w.]).

The concept of *ḥalāl* is not limited to food. It covers a dress code; financial transactions and services; hospitality; tourism; relationship (no intimate relationship outside marriage); and most importantly income, which should be derived from *ḥalāl* sources. It is understandable that most of the participants prioritized issues related to *ḥalāl*. A Balik-Islam living in a non-Muslim community stressed, “Nagkaproblema dahil mahirap bumili ng pagkaing *ḥalāl* dahil sa place namin na non-Muslim area” (We had a problem in buying *ḥalāl* food because we are living in a non-Muslim area).

3. *Difficulty in Adjusting to Many Changes in One's Life in Trying to Live Up to the Moral Teachings of Islam*

As discussed earlier, the state of *fiṭrah* (purity) after uttering the *shahāda* (testimony of Islamic faith) inspires the reverts to live a life in accordance to the teachings of Islam.

Tawhid eliminates hatred, insults, curses, injustice, vices, falsehood and all types of sins from the heart of humans. Abstaining from committing adultery, fornication, animalistic behavior, injustice, corruption and crime is the command of Tawhid. Tawhid also decrees the glad tidings for worldly blessing as well as the success for life after death, and asserts warning about sorrow and grief on earth and warning against the impending punishment of hell fire. (Ali 2016, 121)

In other words, *tawhīd* becomes the moral compass in a Muslim's life. This entails many changes in one's life, as new reverts start to realize that they have to give up some of their vices and old habits to fully follow the teachings of Islam. Giving up these "un-Islamic" habits are considered manifestations of their personal sacrifices or *al-jihād al-akbar* (the greater struggle), a journey they take for the sake of pleasing Allāh (s.w.t.). As one FGD participant indicated earlier, the pursuit of a *ḥalāl* lifestyle is treated as a personal struggle to adhere to Islamic teachings.

Respondents indicated challenges in adopting a new lifestyle. These include shunning away from bad habits; struggling with leaving vices like drinking alcohol and indulging in *ḥarām* (forbidden) relationships (e.g., intimate relations outside marriage); desiring to follow *ḥalāl* economic financing; struggling to have a better economic status in a *ḥalāl* way; and doing away with usurious transactions (*ribā*), such as charging interest. Overall, Balik-Islam aspire to become better persons and live their lives in accordance to the moral teachings of Islam.

B. Issues with Family and Friends

Balik-Islam also encountered issues with their non-Muslim families and friends. They have been at the receiving end of a

hostile and condescending attitude, ill treatment, disrespect while performing salah (prayer) and sawm (fasting), and hurtful comments about Islam and Muslims. A Balik-Islam has to hurdle these challenges with patience and du‘ā’ (prayer). One Balik-Islam key informant, a lawyer, shared his worst experience.

I have a very close friend who no longer treats me the same way. She is a very strong Marian devotee and Catholic. But I think most of the enmity was caused by her lack of understanding of her own faith, to be honest. She never read the Bible herself, nor [she would] have any knowledge of Islam. Much of what she knew was anecdotal and based on her own misconceptions. Ignorance breeds enmity; lack of knowledge begets fear; lack of understanding results [in] adversity.

One of the FGD respondent noted a similar experience. She noted: “Ang aking naranasang suliranin ay ang pagtrato sakin ng pamilya ko, kaibigan, at kamag-anak, na bakit daw ako nag-Muslim” (The problem I experienced was how my family, friends, and relatives treated me on why I became a Muslim).

This is a recurring experience among new reverts. Another respondent shared a more problematic situation. “Pinalayas po ako at di na kinikilalang anak hangga’t ako ay Muslim” (I was cast away and disowned unless I renounce Islam). Another respondent shared that his non-Muslim family doubted his intention of embracing Islam, which is to enjoy the privilege of contracting up to four subsequent marriages. This shows only how judgmental people can be. Lack of knowledge and ignorance truly breed contempt.

Balik-Islam women raised another issue that affects their marriage to their husbands who were born Muslim. Because their husbands belong to a tribe with a high sense of ethnocentrism, the wives found it difficult to deal with their respective husbands’ families and relatives. As Balik-Islam, they are considered second-class, and their children are considered mestizos or mestizas or half-Muslims. In fact, parents even suggest that their son marry a girl belonging to their tribe and clan. This results in unhappy relationships. Also, some single women, in their desire to be married to a Muslim man, usually consent to become the second or third wife.

New converts to Islam tend to be alienated from and discriminated against by their family and friends. This experience was also common even during the time of Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.), where early Muslims were persecuted by non-Muslims. However, the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions showed inexhaustible patience, treated those people with kindness, and showed them the teachings of Islam through their actions.

A FGD participant from Norzagaray, Bulacan also did the same to his family. He said, “Ipinakita ko sa pamilya, kaibigan, at kamag-anak ang turo ng Islam kung paano ang tamang pag-uugali at magandang asal na turo ng Islam sa akin” (I showed my family, friends, and relatives how Islam teaches to exhibit proper conduct and good behavior. These are what Islam taught me). Another FGD participant from ISCAG (Islamic Studies for Call and Guidance) also deals with this challenge the same way, “practicing friendly behavior to the other Muslim and non-Muslims.” Doing supplications for the family is also seen as a way of coping with challenges one faces with them. One FGD participant articulated, “I keep on asking (du‘ā’) Allāh that he may include my parents in those whom he guides, as well as to those whom I give da‘wah whenever there is the opportunity, daily.”

Another legitimate concern that worries Balik-Islam living with a non-Muslim family is dealing with a death in the family. The death of Balik-Islam actor, Royette Padilla in 2021, was a good example how a non-Muslim family violated Islamic rules in burying a Muslim. There have been cases in the province where a cadaver buried under Muslim rites was exhumed by the Christian family from a Muslim cemetery and was buried in a Christian one. Sadly, the Muslim wife exhumed his remains and returned it to its first burial site. Community elders had to intervene before the problem was resolved. The wife cited the final wish of his husband to be buried under the Islamic rite. One respondent noted the same concern. “Pag-aalala kung abutan ng kamatayan sa lugar ng pamilyang hindi pa Muslim, baka ilibing [ako] sa hindi Muslim na paraan” (My worry is really when death might come when I am with my non-Muslim family. They might bury me under a non-Islamic rite).

Despite the negative reactions from friends and families, some respondents noted inspiring stories of welcoming and acceptance from their families after their conversion to Islam. Islam brought positive transformation in the lives of the reverts, and these changes were appreciated. These life-changing transformations included becoming prayerful and respectful; shunning away from vices like drinking liquor, gambling, and engaging in harām relationships.

C. Issues in the Community

One of the attributes of Islam appealing to the Balik-Islam is the sense of belongingness to a wider *ummah* (community of believers, i.e. Muslims). For new reverts, finding a strong support system from the community is expected. However, in many cases, there are instances where Balik-Islam get cold treatment from their fellow Muslims, especially from born-Muslims. Balik-Islam tend to treat born-Muslims as their role models. They hope to get the affirmation that what they are doing are correct in accordance with the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) and as followers of mainstream Islam. However, there are cases where Balik-Islam feel alienated and find difficulty in getting acceptance from born-Muslims.

Many of the prominent Balik-Islam in the country understand this struggle. They established Balik-Islam centers to respond to the needs of the new reverts. These centers provide the opportunity for the new reverts to deepen their faith through Islamic lectures and gatherings. The Balik-Islam's zealously to learn Islam is manifested by their commitment and dedication to apply the knowledge they learned from these centers. This desire to prove oneself makes Balik-Islam, especially those new to the faith, observe some religious rituals more strictly. For example, Balik-Islam follow the Five Pillars of Islam more meticulously than born-Muslims. They found some born-Muslims frustrating for being so lax and for taking Islam for granted.

On the other hand, some born-Muslims consider Balik-Islam to be constricted and ultraconservative. In most cases, and because of this somewhat relational gap and misunderstanding, many Balik-Islam develop their own circle of friends that also serve as support system. One Balik-Islam respondent from Pangasinan commented,

“[It] feels like [I] no longer fit comfortably in the non-Muslim world and haven’t yet found my place in the Muslim world. And gladly I found fellow Balik-Islam working together. so I joined their group. . .”

V. Views on Violent Groups like ASG/Maute/BIFF/RSM/ISIS

Majority of Balik-Islam respondents are aware that security issues threaten their existence as a community. One respondent noted,

Balik-Islam as a group often face the issue of being tagged as terrorist like being associated with Abu Sayyaf, Maute, ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], etc. My response is patience and continuous da’wah effort, educating the public about the true color and teachings of Islam. Similarly, when it comes to jobs and opportunities, Muslims are being discriminated. My take about this is complete reliance [in] Allāh alone and holding on to the belief in tawḥīd or Islamic monotheism.

One key informant added, “Just like most of the Muslims, Balik-Islam [dream] to live in an ideal Islamic environment. Where this environment promises [sic] to achieve this dream, there are Balik-Islam who showed support to these radical/extremist groups.”

By supporting such an ideology, many do not mean agreeing with violence to achieve a goal. Yet this is alarming because without proper guidance, they become vulnerable targets for recruitment into groups that support violent extremist ideologies. This is the point raised by one key informant. He stressed, “To the measure that all of these mentioned terrorist/extremist groups are Wāḥḥābi/Salafī in orientation, many of the Wāḥḥābi Balik-Islam may potentially sympathize with their portrayed aspirations of purifying the faith.”

But on the ground, many of the Balik-Islam respondents agreed with the following views in opposition to ISIS, the Maute group, and the Abu Sayyaf group (ASG). These are the popular opinions:

- Hindi ako naniniwala sa grupo na ’to na sila ay totoong Muslim dahil taliwas sa turo ng Islam ang kanilang mga

pinaggagawa (I don't believe in this group claiming that they are true Muslims because what they are doing is exactly the opposite of what Islam teaches).

- Kaaway sila ng Islam at sangkatauhan, at sinabihan sila ni Allāh sa Qur'ān, 'Ang tagasira sa kalupaan.' (They are enemies of Islam and humanity, and Allāh [s.w.t.] mentioned them in the Holy Qur'ān as destroyer of the land.)
- Ang aking pananaw sa mga grupong ito ay mga gumagawa ng hindi maganda sa kapwa nating mga Pilipino, tulad ng pangangidnap, paggera sa mga sundalo o pakikipaglaban, binobomba ang ibang lugar sa Mindanao, at iba pa (My view about this group is that they do bad to our fellow Filipinos like kidnapping, waging war with the military, bombing places in Mindanao, among others).
- Mga ligaw [na] nahaluan ng ibang 'aqīdah [creed] [ang] mga Extrememist tulad [ng] ASG." (They are deviants who went astray from the right way of our religion, espousing extremist ideologies like the ASG.)
- Misguided people, having personal political agenda, and they do not represent the Muslims. Simply, they hijacked Islam

On top of these issues, majority of the Balik-Islam agreed that the problem with violent extremism lies in the way these extremist groups interpret verses of the Holy Qur'ān. They quoted verses selectively without looking at the *asbāb al-nuzūl* or the rationale behind the revelation. There are verses that cannot be applied in today's context. One has to always look at the *maqāṣid al-sharī'a*, or the objectives of Islamic law.

In the case of the RSM (Rajah Soleiman Movement), this group evidently came up with a very extremist view of Islam. Their desire to establish an Islamic state violated many Islamic principles. Muslims who were lured to this kind of ideology had negative experiences with the military; suffered discrimination; and were youths who felt hopeless. Youth who were attracted to extremist ideologies did

not have a proper education; faced so much oppression, graft, and corruption; and were neglected by the government, including local elders. These are all push factors. Unless we can truly address the root causes of the problems, extremist groups would always be ready to surface, having different names and leaders, but the grievances are carried over from the past.

Under the BARMM (Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao), the rehabilitation of the besieged Marawi must take place. If the situation does not improve, this incident will just be used to form a new batch of radicalized and discontented youth. One respondent noted that oppression experienced by Muslims oftentimes can draw sympathizers to radical ideology.

These radical groups are victims of imperialism and oppression who have been blinded by their anger and twisted Islam to support their dangerous worldview. They believe that they are doing the right thing, but cannot see that they have proven themselves a greater danger to fellow Muslims than those who oppress Muslims. They are not pragmatic, and do not seem to have sustainable feasible goals in their efforts; which only prolong their campaigns, and thus the suffering of those affected.

VI. How Balik-Islam Overcome Difficulties

Reversion has not been easy for new Muslims. Aside from adapting to Islam's religious practices, the recurring issues confronting Muslims and Islam have also made the life of Balik-Islam challenging. Their strong belief, however, helped them cope with these concerns. The FGD participant from Norzagaray, Bulacan overcame difficulties by believing that fear of Allāh and following His commands would solve problems. He stated, "Sa aking pananaw, ang takot at pagsunod muna sa ipinag-uutos ng Allāh (s.w.t.) ay magiging daan sa solusyon na hinahanap natin" (In my opinion, fear and compliance with the commands of Allāh [s.w.t.] will be the way to find the solution we are seeking).

The belief that Allāh (s.w.t.) will ease the difficulties of every Muslim also helps them in overcoming challenges. The FGD participant from ISCAG said as much. A sincere prayer is also a

helpful mechanism to cope with challenges. Prayer is not only a form of worship glorifying Allāh (s.w.t.) but also a form of communication to him, a remedy and comfort to all believers afflicted with difficulties. During the FGD, a participant emphasized how sincere prayer and fasting helped him. He said, “I practice Islam sincerely, especially my prayers and fasting.” Another FGD participant also sees prayer as a solution to problems. When he was asked how he overcame challenges, he said, “Complete five times a day prayer (*ṣalāh*).”

The observance of religious rites is challenging, especially for Balik-Islam whose families could not accept their decision. This situation makes it hard for them to practice religious rituals. The FGD participant from Norzagaray overcame this challenge by living separately from his non-Muslim family. He said, “Para magampanan ko ang obligasyon bilang totoong Muslim, nag-rent ako ng bahay na kung saan wala akong distraction sa pagsa-*ṣalāh*, at nagagawa ko ang pag-fa-fasting, lalo ’pag buwan ng Ramaḍān. *al-Ḥamdu lillāh*.” (To perform my obligation as a Muslim, I rent a house where I am able to pray the *ṣalāh* without distraction and fast, especially during the month of Ramaḍān. Praise be to God).

Conclusion

Balik-Islam in the Philippines is a unique phenomenon. Balik-Islam are aware that professing Islam means they must be prepared to hurdle different forms of challenges. These range from personal to family issues, especially for those living with non-Muslim families that cannot accept their decision to become Muslims. Reverts suffer financial problems because they automatically inherit the widespread discrimination against Muslims (born-Muslims) that has become a social malady in the Philippines.

Balik-Islam are easily sidelined in many job prospects for the simple reason that they are or have become Muslim. Muslims are systematically discriminated in the job market. Applicants in the Philippines would need to declare their religion in their biodatas or résumés. This form of discrimination is so disappointingly rampant in Metro Manila, and Balik-Islam attest to this fact, since many of them lost their jobs just because they became Muslims.

Like born-Muslims, Balik-Islam have been the victim of negative stereotypes. They experience culture shock because every day, they discover many things that they can freely do before, but by becoming Muslims, they have to adjust accordingly. Committing to a ḥalāl lifestyle is an example.

Sadly, Balik-Islam find security issues as their most problematic. They are aware that government is closely watching them because some Balik-Islam are suspected to have links with radical groups. However, the majority of the Balik-Islam adhere to the mainstream teachings of Islam. Just like other Filipino families in the country, they want to live in peace, and have dreams for their children.

On the issue of violent extremism, majority of respondents noted that the lack of understanding or ignorance of the true teachings of Islam, including the concept of *jihād* is one reason why such extremism draws patronage among Muslims. Some respondents also mentioned the importance of the source of knowledge. Thus, it is important to help Balik-Islam centers get access to good Islamic literature and lecturers who can teach Islamic principles and concepts using the framework of *wasat* or moderation. The true teachings of Islam have been hijacked by people who claim to be Muslims, but in reality, by their actions and violations, they cannot represent Islam and Muslims.

Recommendations

- (A) **The sociocultural dimension** covers and addresses the nuanced issues and concerns of Balik-Islam at the personal and familial levels
 - (1) **Transition period.** Since conversion is not a one-off thing, Balik-Islam need to be assisted through their journey. Deepening their faith is most essential and is expected of them. Institutions like the National Commission for Muslim Filipinos (NCMF), local *shari‘ah* (roughly translated as the “Way”) courts, local masjid, *madrassa* (schools), or *da‘wah* organizations can be most helpful.

- (2) **Integration.** After their transition period, Balik-Islam are expected to start immersing to become part of the Muslim community. The *imām* (leader) in the local mosque can serve as a teacher, counselor, and advocate for them.
- (3) **Balik-Islam as bridge-builders for intercultural dialogue and nation-building.** Because of their previous and present backgrounds, Balik-Islam groups can play a critical role in promoting intercultural dialogue between the Muslim community and the rest of Filipino society, in the spirit of nation-building and improving majority–minority relations. The National Council for Muslim Filipinos needs to be proactive, through its Bureau of Peace and Conflict Resolution (BPCR), in addressing historical and contemporary stereotypes and prejudicial views, and in preventing, deescalating, and solving conflicts through peaceful means.

BPCR can mobilize key Balik-Islam personalities and organizations to work with other government agencies—such as the Department of Education (DepEd), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), National Youth Commission (NYC), and government media, and with nongovernment organizations like the Bishop–Ulama Conference (BUC), Interreligious Solidarity for Peace (ISP) and Silsilah Dialogue Movement (SDM)—and create platforms and opportunities for positive intercultural and interreligious activities.

(B) **The politico-security dimension** covers and addresses the issues of organizational support from other relevant government agencies and nongovernment organizations, as well as issues of violent extremism that have tainted and haunted the Balik-Islam community in the country:

- (1) **The NCMF is the primary government agency for Muslim Filipinos.** It is responsible for all Muslims. The agency needs to expand and deepen its involvement in, and support for, the Muslim community. To make a stronger mark, the NCMF

needs to address both credibility and quality-service issues observed by many respondents. While it can easily accredit Balik-Islam organizations, it will need dedicated personnel and resource package to be able to monitor and support them regularly.

- (2) **Presidential Decree (PD) 1083 (Series of 1977).** Many Balik-Islam individuals are not fully conversant with the decree where the registration of reversion is a function of the shari‘ah courts in the Philippines. One possible limit of the law is that these courts are in traditionally Muslim areas in the southern Philippines. Therefore, Balik-Islam groups in Luzon and the Visayas have to travel far and spend much to carry out their conversion. To mitigate this concern, there is a need to revisit the geographic placement of such courts vis-à-vis the latest Muslim demographics.

For example, in the 2015 census, a large Muslim population of over 35,000 can now be found in Metro Manila (National Capital Region), Region III (Central Luzon), Region IV-A (Calabarzon), and Region IV-B (Mimaropa). The total Muslim population in the Visayas, based on the same census, is 28,000.

Aside from the provision on reversion and the shari‘ah courts, the same decree (PD 1083) also provides for the establishment of an office called the Jurisconsult in Islamic Law under the administrative supervision of the Supreme Court. Article 166 states the functions of this office, which has “the authority to render legal opinions, based on recognized authorities, regarding any question relating to Muslim Law” and in the exercise of this function, “consult or ask for a consensus of the *ulama*.” This office is crucial in determining what falls within mainstream Islam, which is exemplified by moderation, tolerance, and clemency; and in alerting the Muslim community in general, and the Balik-Islam groups in particular, as what constitutes morally-repugnant acts, such as

taṭarruf (extremism), *ghuluww* (excessiveness), *tanattu'* (harshness) and *tashaddud* (severity).

- (3) **Relationship with the local government, the police, and the military.** While the Philippine government is largely secular, with an explicit constitutional provision on the separation of the State and the Church, the Balik-Islam community needs to consider the government's concern over alleged Balik-Islam individuals alleged alignment with RSM and Daulat Islamiyya (the Maute group). This helps protect the majority whose conversion has nothing to do with the weaponization of religion for violent means and extremist ends.

Toward this end, Balik-Islam organizations need to have a working relationship with the local government, police, and military units where they reside. Transparency and awareness will go a long way. Balik-Islam organizations can invite personnel from these units to grace their activities. Hopefully, the interaction will reduce suspicion, build trust, and foster a positive working relationship that will be a "win-win" solution for the Balik-Islam group and the government.

- (4) **BARMM.** The BARMM has even more flexibility and capacity for meaningful support to the Balik-Islam within the region. While the Office of the Jurisconsult for Islamic Law needs to be reestablished at the national level, there is already a functional Regional Darul-Iftā', an advisory body in the BARMM. So aside from issuing a fatwā (a legal opinion) for the general Moro population, it can also issue crucial guidance, specifically targeting the Balik-Islam during their transition towards, and integration into, the Muslim community. The Bureau of Madrasah Education (BME) can also develop learning materials and transition programs for Balik-Islam, as the latter learn Islamic

practice and the Arabic language. The Bangsamoro Women Commission may support Balik-Islam women. The Bangsamoro Youth Commission may assist Balik-Islam youth. The Ministry of Social Welfare and Development may help indigent Balik-Islam families. The Office of the Chief Minister (OCM) can allocate funds to Balik-Islam organizations to improve their socioeconomic lot and hasten their integration into the Muslim community. Often, Balik-Islam individuals are oblivious to Moro history and heritage, and the multiple ethnic languages that are spoken among Moros can be daunting for new Balik-Islam. In this respect, the BARMM Bureau of Cultural Heritage (BCH) can also play active roles in narrowing this “ethnic and language gap” through cultural immersion and language learning programs.

- (5) **Zakāt shares for Balik-Islam.** Zakāt is the Islamic practice of levying 2.5 percent from assets and possessions. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) mentions that Balik-Islam or reverts are one of the authorized beneficiaries of zakāt. To benefit from this, there is a need to institutionalize zakat collection and distribution, so that the shares of the new reverts benefit them.
- (6) **Recognition of a Balik-Islam’s Last Will and Testament.** Respondents have raised this issue regarding the recognition of their last will and testament, stating their strong preference to be buried under Islamic rites. There were cases in the past and recent events, where non-Muslim families buried their Balik-Islam relative in the conventional way, including the observance of funeral wake for many days. The Balik-Islam community should strongly urge the NCMF to include this in future policy statements and come up with guidelines to address this problem.

(7) Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA)

- (a) The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) should implement Administrative Order (AO) No. 1 (Series of 2005), which mandates the out-of-court registration of Muslim personal events in the local Office of the Civil Registry of the city or municipality where they took place. These events include reversions to Islam, marriages, divorces, births, and deaths.
- (b) The PSA may consider hold a census every five years to ensure the nominal representation of Balik-Islam populations. There should be a specific item for Balik-Islam in the choices of religion to ascertain data for reversion to Islam. The Balik-Islam spouse should also have a separate identity in the identification of tribal and religious affiliation, so that the said spouse's identity will not be dissolved simply by virtue of marital affiliation. Thus, the Balik-Islam spouse, especially the wife, will one's original ethnic affiliation by birth and is not to be classified as a member of the tribe of her spouse.

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