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Philippine prelates criticize Congress' decision to delay Mindanao vote

by Catholic News Service

MANILA, Philippines

Church leaders have criticized Congress' decision to postpone August elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

"The law is not respected, and we, here in Mindanao, are not given the opportunity to choose our own leaders," said Bishop Martin Jumoad of Isabela, in Basilan province.

"We want the elections and not the imposition of leaders," the prelate said. His remarks were reported by the Asian church news agency UCA News.

On June 7, the Philippine Senate and House agreed to postpone the elections in the region to coincide with Philippine midterm elections in 2013. Proponents of the legislation said this allowed more time for the government-rebel peace process as well as allow time for reform in the region, site of decades of fighting by Muslim separatists.

The Commission on Elections stopped preparing for the elections while it waits to see if the Supreme Court upholds or overturns the congressional decision.

Auxiliary Bishop Jose Bagaforo of Cotabato said the principle of autonomy was violated with the vote and the decision would fuel protests in the region.

Bishop Jumoad said the postponement of the elections will result in renewed political tension in the region.

"The possibility of discontentment breeds lawlessness. ... If the heat is too much, the pressure cannot be controlled," the bishop said.

Oblate Father Eliseo Mercado Jr., chairman of the lobby group Kusog Mindanaw, said the decision to postpone the elections was a "lethal blow to the little autonomy and self-determination" of the Muslim region.

The priest said the delay of the elections is also a blow to the peace process because it can be taken by warring parties as a government signal that it is "business as usual" in Mindanao.

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