

# **PHILIPPINES 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of religion by law. On July 26, President Rodrigo Duterte signed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), which the government said would address the aspirations of Muslim and other separatist groups in Mindanao. The signing took place after years of negotiations between the government and separatist groups in Mindanao, aimed at creating lasting peace in the region. The Catholic Church expressed concern over the killings of three priests that the press reported were politically motivated. Church leadership criticized the president's policies, and the president made several statements critical of the Catholic Church and its doctrines. In December he stated people should kill bishops, but his spokesperson said this was hyperbole. He also made statements aimed at improving his relationship with the Catholic Church and the government's relationship with persons of all faiths. The Office of the President's National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) continued to promote the rights of Muslims at the national and local level, and the Department of Education continued to promote the standardization of Arabic language and Islamic values curricula for Muslim students in private madrassahs and public schools with 10 percent or more Muslims. In November the NCMF began to issue standardized identification cards to Muslims to enable better access to services in government and private institutions.

During the year, ISIS-affiliated and other militant groups carried out killings, bombings, and kidnappings for ransom. ISIS claimed responsibility for several attacks, including a July vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attack in Basilan that killed 10 persons and wounded several others. In April a bomb explosion outside St. Anthony's Cathedral in the capital of South Cotabato Province injured two persons; police blamed the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) for the attack.

In July police officers shot and killed a gunman who entered an archbishop's residence, with media suggesting several possible motives of the gunman. There were instances of clan violence and societal discrimination against Muslims pursuing housing and employment opportunities, including on the basis of names and religious attire. Public statements on the internet and social media denigrated the beliefs or practices of religious groups, particularly Muslims.

In meetings with government officials, U.S. embassy representatives discussed the implementation of the BOL and its implications for religious minorities and emphasized the importance of supporting all communities of faith, particularly in conflict areas. In meetings with religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), embassy representatives highlighted the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue and cooperation. In September the embassy organized an orientation seminar for interfaith-based organizations. The two-day seminar encouraged the integration of community-based interventions and facilitated the formulation of community-level cooperation between religious groups and authorities. The Ambassador gave remarks at public events on the importance of the value of religious freedom and tolerance.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 105.9 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2015 census conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), 79.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 9 percent belong to other Christian groups, including Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Bible Baptist Church, other Protestant churches, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other Christian groups include locally established churches such as the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), Members Church of God International, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and the Name Above Every Name. Approximately 6 percent of the population is Muslim, according to the PSA; the NCMF estimates that 10 to 11 percent of the total population is Muslim. The NCMF attributes its higher estimate to the reluctance of Muslims to participate in a formal survey, failure to survey Muslim areas and communities, and transience due to internal movement of Muslims for work. According to the PSA, approximately 4 percent of those surveyed in the 2015 census did not report a religious affiliation or belong to other groups, such as animism or indigenous syncretic faiths.

The majority of Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups and reside in Mindanao and nearby islands in the south. Although most are practitioners of Sunni Islam, a small minority of Shia Muslims live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur on Mindanao. An increasing number of Muslims are migrating to the urban centers of Manila and Cebu.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

## Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of a state religion by law. No religious test is required for the exercise of civil or political rights. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state. The law treats intentional attacks directed against religiously affiliated buildings or facilities as war crimes or crimes against international humanitarian law. The law forbids public officials from interrupting religious worship, as well as any person “notoriously” offending religious feelings during such services or in a place of worship.

The law requires organized religious groups to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) to establish tax-exempt status. Religious groups must submit their articles of faith and bylaws for SEC registration as religious corporations. The SEC requires religious corporations to submit annual financial statements. The law does not specify penalties for failure to register with the SEC. To register as a nonstock, nonprofit organization, religious groups must meet the basic requirements for corporate registration with the BIR and must request tax exemption from the BIR. The basic requirements for registration include a name verification of the religious corporation, articles of incorporation and bylaws, the name of a director, list of members, and a list of financial contributors. The BIR provides tax exemptions to newly established religious corporations that are then reviewed for renewal every three years. Established religious corporations may be fined for the late filing of registrations with the BIR or for failing to submit registration datasheets and financial statements.

The government permits religious instruction in public schools with written parental consent, provided there is no cost to the government. Based on a traditional policy of promoting moral education, local public schools give religious groups the opportunity to teach moral values during school hours. Attendance is not mandatory, parents must express in writing a desire for their child to attend religious instruction for a specific denomination, and the various groups share classroom space. Students who do not attend religious instruction, because no class was offered in their denomination or because their parents did not express a desire, receive normal supervised class time. The government also allows groups to distribute religious literature in public schools. The law mandates that government agencies address religious issues and consult recognized experts on Filipino Muslim beliefs, as well as the history, culture, and identity of indigenous peoples, when formulating the national history curriculum.

By law, public schools must protect the religious rights of students. Muslim girls may wear the hijab and are not required to wear shorts during physical education classes.

The government recognizes sharia in all parts of the country through a presidential decree. Sharia courts are organized into five sharia districts, all located in the south of the country; Muslims residing in other areas must travel to these districts to pursue an action in a sharia court. Sharia courts handle only cases relating to personal laws on family relations and property. Sharia does not apply in criminal matters and applies only to Muslims. The state court system hears cases involving Muslims and non-Muslims, and national laws apply in those cases.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On July 26, President Duterte signed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), previously known as the Bangsamoro Basic Law. Pending the results of a January 2019 plebiscite, the BOL will grant additional political autonomy in majority Muslim areas and establish the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). If ratified, the BOL will both reinforce existing legislation governing the application of sharia within the BARMM and provide an alternative dispute mechanism for non-Muslims to seek redress in the court system.

The Philippines Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) director, Aldrin Penamora, welcomed the passage of the BOL, saying that “the dream for peace, justice, and progress is at last becoming reality.” Catholic Archbishop Martin Jumoad of Ozamiz said the peace agreement would be “inclusive and not discriminate against others” by ensuring that religious freedom would be respected. Mujiv Hataman, Governor of the current Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, called the agreement a milestone and said the “struggle continues” as the inhabitants of Mindanao “seek to change a culture of discrimination against our people.”

Some priests in the Catholic Church vocally criticized alleged extrajudicial killings attributed to the war on drugs under President Duterte. In an official statement in July the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) called attention to reported abuses under the Duterte administration, particularly the drug war killings, exchange of insults and hurtful words on social media, arrested

“loiterers,” congested jails, blasphemy, and political motives. The Catholic Church expressed concern over the killings of three priests and other serious forms of harassment reported by the press to be politically motivated. Father Mark Anthony Venura and Father Richmond Nilo were shot in April and June 2018, respectively, and Father Marcelito Paez in December 2017. The CBCP denounced Nilo’s killing, and church leaders called on the president to stop the “verbal prosecution” of the Church, stating that this could lead to more crimes against priests. There were reports the motive of Nilo’s killing was his attempt to revive a rape case against an ex-seminarian. Senate President Vicente Sotto III rejected a resolution to open a senate inquiry into the killings filed by an opposition senator, Risa Hontiveros, calling the killings a “coincidence.” One Roman Catholic priest said there was a link between assassination attempts against him and his previous comments critical of the president regarding the war on drugs.

In November the NCMF began to issue standardized identification cards to Muslims to allow better access to services in government and private institutions. Issuance began in the central office in Quezon City, and in 2019, all regional offices were to issue the cards. The daily newspaper *Manila Bulletin* reported the cards contained a barcode with the identification number of the holder; and, according to the Facebook posting of an official, are to include other security features such as biometric data.

In April the Bureau of Immigration (BI) terminated the visa of 71-year-old Australian nun, Sister Patricia Fox, for political activism. Church officials and human rights advocates expressed disapproval of the decision. In July the BI ordered her deportation, which Fox appealed to the Department of Justice. In August Fox applied to renew her missionary visa, but the BI denied her request in September. Fox had lived in the Philippines for 28 years on a missionary visa prior to receiving a 59-day temporary visitor’s visa in September. Fox left the Philippines on November 3 after BI refused to extend her visa. The presidential spokesperson stated it was “a classic case of an unappreciative tourist.”

In August the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the Court of Appeals, which found Carlos Celdran guilty of “offending religious feelings” for his 2010 disruption of a Manila Cathedral service to express his views in support of “reproductive health” legislation, including access to contraception, which the Catholic Church opposed. Celderon had asked the court to find the law under which he was charged unconstitutional. He faced a jail sentence of two months and 21 days to one year, one month, and 11 days.

On several occasions, President Duterte expressed disapproval of the Catholic Church, describing it as a “hypocritical institution,” and discussed what he said were corruption, molestation of minors (including himself) by priests, and unaccounted donations in the Church. The president met with the CBCP president in July and agreed to stop comments against the Church. The CBCP issued an official letter the same day saying the persecution of church leaders was nothing compared to the suffering of the poor and of “drug addicts who are labeled as ‘non-humans.’” In August and subsequently the president again made remarks against the Church similar to those he made in the past. In December the president said the bishops were useless fools and told a crowd to “kill them.” His spokesperson later said the remark was hyperbole and the president was speaking for dramatic effect.

Muslim officials reported that while Muslim prison detainees were allowed to engage in religious observances, Roman Catholic Mass was often broadcast by loudspeaker to both Catholic and non-Catholic prison populations.

In February the senate approved a bill declaring the last Monday of January as National Bible Day to celebrate the Christian faith and reflect on the scriptures.

The PCEC, along with other church groups, said the Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity Expression bill, which emphasizes the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities and passed the third reading in the lower house in 2017, could infringe on the rights of religious communities.

The National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) stated in February that three missionaries from the United Methodist Church were forced to leave or their visas were not renewed following their participation in an international fact-finding mission to investigate alleged human rights violations. One missionary was held by authorities for weeks, while the other two had not been allowed to leave the country. By July 13, all three had their passports returned and left the country. The NCCP reported that BI barred one of the three from future travel to the Philippines.

The Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns, in partnership with the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), continued to monitor issues relating to religious freedom. From January to August the CHR noted six reported cases of human rights violations involving eight church workers. The CHR resolved three of the cases. The other three remained ongoing investigations as of September.

In January the Department of Tourism announced plans to make the country a significant “religious pilgrimage destination,” by restoring and developing historical churches and shrines throughout the country.

The NCMF’s Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment continued to administer logistics for the Hajj, such as obtaining flight schedules, administering vaccines, coordinating with the Department of Foreign Affairs to process Hajj passports, filing Hajj visa applications at the Saudi Embassy, and conducting predeparture orientations for pilgrims. The NCMF reported that 5,813 individuals made the pilgrimage during the year, lower than the 8,000-limit set by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj for pilgrims from the Philippines. The NCMF said that the armed conflict in Marawi, where a large proportion of Hajj pilgrims originate, resulted in lower participation from the area. The NCMF also administered the *awqaf* (an endowment for the upkeep of Islamic properties and institutions) and continued to oversee the establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and other projects.

The Department of Education continued to support the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) program for Muslim students in public elementary schools with a Muslim population of 10 percent or greater. For the 2017-18 school year, 1,622 public elementary schools administered the voluntary ALIVE program for 158,093 students.

Madrassahs continued to have the option of registering with the NCMF and Department of Education, both, or neither. Registered madrassahs received government funding and produced curricula that were subject to government oversight. There were 86 private madrassahs registered with the Department of Education, and 27 more applied for registration, but had not met all the requirements to receive funding. Many private madrassahs chose to remain unregistered rather than allow government oversight, according to Department of Education representatives. Some unregistered madrassahs preached radical ideologies, according to religious officials. Only registered schools could receive financial assistance from the government. The Department of Education’s Office of Madrassah Education managed local and international financial assistance to the private madrassah system. The madrassahs registered by the Department of Education followed the Standard Madrassah Curriculum and received funding for classrooms, facilities, and educators who taught the Revised Basic Education Curriculum. The overall funding for and attendance at private madrassahs increased by 10 percent from the previous year. During 2018, the Department of

Education provided a total of 67,510,000 pesos (\$1.29 million) to 13,502 private madrassah students.

NCMF officials said that anti-Muslim discrimination occurred in government offices but cited no specific examples. Some Muslim leaders, including an NCMF official, expressed concern with the low representation of Muslims in senior government and military positions. There were 11 Muslims in the 292-member House of Representatives. In March President Duterte spoke at the Philippine National Police Academy and urged more Muslims to join security forces and said “not all” Muslims in Mindanao were enemies.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

The government attributed several killings, attacks, and kidnappings for ransom in the south of the country to the Maute Group and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), both designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. Department of State; the BIFF; and other ISIS-related terrorist groups. ISIS claimed responsibility for a July vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attack in Basilan that killed 10 persons and wounded several others and that the government blamed on the ASG. ISIS also claimed responsibility for two improvised explosive device attacks at civilian locations in Sultan Kudarat, attacks that security officials linked to a faction of the BIFF. On April 29, a bomb went off outside St. Anthony’s Cathedral in the capital of South Cotabato Province, injuring two persons. Police said the bomb “bore the signature of an Islamic extremist group” and blamed the BIFF.

The government continued sustained military, law enforcement, and counterterrorism operations against the Maute Group, ASG, and other ISIS-related groups. Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In July police officers shot and killed a gunman who entered an archbishop’s residence in Cebu. Police did not establish a motive, but several media outlets suggested the gunman targeted the archbishop due to his criticism of extrajudicial killings.

Violent incidents, particularly in rural areas in the south of the country, were frequently associated with interclan *rido* (feuds) violence. Since religion and

ethnicity are often closely linked, incidents were difficult to classify as being solely based on religious identity.

The CHR investigated reports of alleged abuses against freedom of religion but provided no examples of cases in which they stated a violation of religious freedom was confirmed. In August the CHR received a complaint regarding the killing of Father Richmond Nilo, who was killed before saying a Mass. Reportedly, the motive of killing was his attempt to revive a rape case against an ex-seminarian.

Religious scholars and leaders within the Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities said that while relations among religious groups were generally amicable, there were reports of tensions between different religious and ethnic groups, especially in conflict-affected areas such as Marawi City. The NCMF received no formal complaints of discrimination on the grounds of Muslim religious identity during the year. The NCMF stated, however, that subtle forms of anti-Muslim societal discrimination existed throughout the country, particularly affecting Muslims displaced during the 2017 fighting in Marawi, relocating throughout the country. According to the National Housing Authority (NHA) and Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission, local government units were reluctant to accept Muslims in their NHA-funded housing projects. The NCMF reported that Muslims received stares in public for wearing hijabs.

Social media comments denigrating the beliefs or practices of Muslims continued to occur. For example, chat messages among university fraternity members promoting violence against Muslims became public in November.

Religious communities continued to participate in interreligious efforts to alleviate friction, foster connections, and address discrimination. Multiple religious organizations reported on interfaith collaboration and the mobilization of persons of different faiths to work on community rehabilitation projects in Marawi. Following the five-month campaign in 2017 by government forces to defeat ISIS-linked militants in Marawi, the CBCP led the interfaith “Duyog Marawi” – a peacebuilding and rehabilitation effort there. The NCCP and the Moro Christian People’s Alliance held interfaith dialogues with one another.

Other interfaith efforts by the CBCP included training Catholic leaders on interreligious dialogue and facilitating events during World Interfaith Harmony week in February. The PCEC served as the coconvener of the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform, which sought to ensure the continuation of the peace

process between the government and the National Democratic Front. Christian leaders from the region affected by the BOL initiated a series of dialogues in North Cotabato, Cotabato City, Lanao del Sur, Marawi City, Basilan, and Sulu aimed at engaging peace stakeholders, especially the Christian minority. Participants presented their concerns about their future under the BOL in a 17-point Christian Settlers Peace Agenda for the Bangsamoro Peace Process during a two-day Moro-Christian Leaders Peace Dialogue in September.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials met with government officials, including representatives from the Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns, and discussed the implementation of the BOL and its implications for religious minorities and emphasized the need to affirm the importance of supporting all communities of faith, particularly in conflict areas.

The Ambassador expressed support for religious freedom and the protection of civil liberties for persons of all faiths during his public engagements. The Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss interfaith efforts to combat extremism and support the reconstruction of Marawi following the armed forces' expulsion of ISIS-linked groups from the city in 2017. Embassy officials met with the NCMF and Muslim civil society groups to discuss government protection, the promotion of religious freedom, interfaith collaboration, rebuilding Marawi City, radicalization, and the impact of foreign donor financing on religious education in Muslim communities. In September the embassy organized an orientation seminar for interfaith organizations. The two-day seminar encouraged the integration of community-based interventions and facilitated the formulation of community-level cooperation between religious groups and authorities.

In March the embassy funded a 12-day Institute of Law, Leadership, and Conflict Resolution that brought together 40 female madrassah teachers, public school educators, and community leaders from Mindanao, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Burma. During the institute's first three days, the embassy sponsored two U.S. Muslim scholars who gave presentations on recognizing and countering extremist interpretations of Islamic thought, with special attention on protecting the rights of women in Muslim communities.

On May 30, the Charge d'Affaires hosted an iftar for Muslim and Christian guests at the University of the Philippines-Diliman, the country's premier university. He delivered remarks on religious tolerance, the importance of interfaith service

projects, and the sacrifices of Muslim Filipinos protecting non-Muslims during the Marawi siege in 2017. The iftar emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue and youth empowerment across faiths. Simultaneously, and as an example of interfaith cooperation, previous participants of U.S. government exchange programs organized an iftar for more than 2,000 internally displaced persons at two relocation sites in Marawi City. During these iftars, the university students launched an embassy-sponsored project to build the capacity of Muslim university student leaders throughout the Manila metropolitan area to lead service activities in their communities. On January 16, the embassy's Facebook and Twitter page had postings commemorating National Religious Freedom Day.