

# PHILIPPINES 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of a state religion. On January 21, citizens of the five provinces and three major cities of western Mindanao ratified the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), creating a new Muslim-led autonomous region and abolishing the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The measure provided the area's majority Muslim population a larger region of authority. Although the referendum was widely backed by national Muslim and Christian groups, some local religious minorities continued to express concerns about the new authority. On March 29, President Rodrigo Duterte led the inauguration ceremony of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). 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. Catholic Church clergy continued to criticize the president's policies, especially the drug war and his desire to reinstate the death penalty. Although the president agreed to stop denouncing the Church in 2018, he continued to express his displeasure with the conduct of its clergy. A number of priests critical of the government's drug war received explicit death threats and raised concerns that the president's negative statements promoted attacks against clergy. In July the government charged some members of the opposition, along with four Catholic bishops and three priests, with sedition, cyber libel, libel, and obstruction of justice because of their alleged involvement in the release of a supposed antigovernment video.

During the year, killings, bombings, and kidnappings by ISIS-affiliated and other militant groups continued. ISIS claimed responsibility for several attacks, including a January suicide bombing at a cathedral in Jolo that killed 20 persons and wounded several others. In August a cathedral in Baguio received bomb threats, allegedly from ISIS affiliates. Following the attacks, members of the Catholic and Muslim communities gathered in the cathedral to show solidarity against terrorism. On December 22, an explosion occurred outside a Catholic church during its Sunday Mass. By year's end no public claim of responsibility for the attacks had emerged, though authorities suggested ISIS-linked groups were the most likely perpetrators.

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

ethnicity are often closely linked, incidents were difficult to classify as solely based on religious identity. Religious scholars and leaders within the Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities stated relations among religious groups were generally amicable, but they reported some tensions between different religious and ethnic groups, especially in conflict-affected areas such as Marawi City and Sulu. The NCMF reported no formal incidents of discrimination during the year, but stated that subtle forms of anti-Muslim societal discrimination existed throughout the country. Religious communities continued to participate in interreligious efforts to alleviate friction, foster connections, and address discrimination.

In a U.S. embassy-organized forum in June, Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) representatives and legislative branch staffers discussed implementation of the BOL, including its implications for religious minorities and the importance of supporting all communities of faith, particularly in conflict areas. In meetings with religious groups, the government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), embassy representatives highlighted the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue and cooperation. The embassy sponsored the visit to the United States of two scholars, who had advocated religious tolerance and social inclusion, for a three-week law and leadership program, and encouraged a local NGO to incorporate a religious tolerance module into its teaching curriculum.

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 107.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2015 census (the most recent) 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 population is Muslim. The NCMF attributes the higher estimate to a number of factors: the reluctance of Muslims to officially register with the civil registrar office or to participate in the formal survey, the community's transience due to internal movement for work, and the government's failure to survey Muslim areas and communities thoroughly.

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.

A 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, Baguio, Dumaguete, Cagayan de Oro, Iligan, Cotabato, and Davao, a trend that accelerated after the May-October 2017 siege of Marawi in which local residents fled to other provinces for their security.

## **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. 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. The BIR may fine religious corporations for the late filing of registrations 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 affecting 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 BOL ratified on January 21 creates the BARMM, a new Muslim-led autonomous region. The BARMM replaces the former governing authority, the ARMM. The new entity has jurisdiction over five provinces and three major, noncontiguous cities. The BOL provides the framework for the transition to greater autonomy for the area's majority Muslim population.

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

### **Government Practices**

Some Catholic clergy who vocally criticized extrajudicial killings attributed to the war on drugs under President Duterte or who stated their opposition to the reinstatement of the death penalty reported being harassed, intimidated, and

threatened with death by unknown perpetrators following Duterte's threats against them in late 2018, which sources stated he and his government subsequently tried to walk back. In July following the release of a video linking President Duterte and his family to the illicit drug trade, the government charged some members of the opposition, along with four Catholic bishops and three priests, with sedition, cyber libel, libel, and obstruction of justice concerning their alleged involvement in the video's production and release. Various ecumenical groups condemned the charges, filed through the Philippine National Police (PNP) Criminal Investigation and Detection Group.

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) received a complaint through its social media account saying a local government office in South Cotabato prohibited Balik-Islam (Philippine converts to Islam) from constructing mosques within its village. Initially, the local government stated that the structures did not meet building codes, but after public pressure, it relented and allowed the mosque projects to move forward. After conducting an investigation into a refusal to erect a mosque by local officials in Panagasinan, the NCMF determined that local officials halted construction because residents cited concerns that having the religious structure in their community might incite terrorism.

The CHR Mindanao regional office expressed concern over reported cases of church leaders and faith-based organizations being publicly labeled as members or supporters of the New People's Army (NPA), the armed insurgent wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. In February leaflets containing names of alleged NPA members, reportedly including some religious leaders, were posted and distributed in public places and private gatherings by unknown individuals; the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and PNP publicly denied any involvement.

In November media reported that the AFP included the National Council of Churches Philippines (NCCP) in a list of 18 organizations it described or "red-tagged" as communist terrorist groups or groups wittingly or unwittingly providing funds to such groups. The NCCP, one of the largest associations of Protestant and non-Roman Catholic denominations in the Philippines, described the listing as an "attack on [their] Christian faith and tradition."

On several occasions, President Duterte expressed disapproval of the Catholic Church, despite his 2018 vow not to do so. In a public speech in February he said Catholicism may disappear in 25 years because of various criminal allegations, such as corruption and sexual abuse. Media reported that the criticism could relate more to the Church's criticism of human rights abuses in Duterte's anti-drug

campaign. Duterte added in a speech in September that he would not support the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' (CBCP) celebration in 2021 of 500 years of Catholicism in the country. Some clergy continued to raise concerns that the manner in which the president denounced the Church promoted violence against its priests and leaders.

The Department of Education continued to support its Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) program for Muslim students in private madrassahs and public elementary schools with a Muslim population of 10 percent or greater. For the 2018-19 school year, 1,686 public elementary schools administered the voluntary ALIVE program for 145,591 students, compared to 1,622 schools and 158,093 students the previous year.

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 85 private madrassahs registered with the Department of Education during the 2018-2019 school year. Many private madrassahs, however, choose to remain unregistered rather than allow government oversight, according to Department of Education representatives.

The Department of Education's Office of Madrassah Education managed local and international financial assistance to the private madrassah system. By law, only registered schools/madrassahs may receive financial assistance from the government. 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 25 percent from the previous year. During the year, the Department of Education provided funding of 90,960,000 pesos (\$1.8 million) to 18,192 private madrassah students, compared to 67,510,000 pesos (\$1.33 million) allocated to 13,502 private madrassah students in 2018.

A study by the Institute for Autonomy and Governance showed that 90 percent of 169 madrassahs surveyed in 2018 sought government recognition and support; however, the study stated that complicated accreditation processes and requirements hindered them from registering. The survey also conveyed the concerns of Muslim school leaders about the perception that terrorist groups used traditional madrassahs for recruitment, especially after the Marawi siege. The

NCMF distributed books in April in order to alleviate community concerns that all traditional Muslim schools bred violent extremist ideologies.

On March 29, President Duterte led the inauguration ceremony of the BARMM. The results of a January plebiscite added Basilan and Cotabato City to BARMM territories. Although the move was widely backed by Muslims and Christians nationwide, some local religious minorities continued to express their concerns about the new authority. The BARMM government designated two seats, one for a Christian and one for an indigenous delegate, to its council to allay minority community concerns. BARMM authorities, an amalgamation of members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and presidential appointees, continued setting up their government, establishing budget priorities, staffing offices, and implementing infrastructure projects. The BARMM government continued to reinforce existing legislation that governed the application of sharia and provided an alternative dispute mechanism for non-Muslims seeking redress in the courts.

NCMF officials said that anti-Muslim discrimination continued to occur in government offices but cited no specific examples. Some Muslim leaders, including an NCMF official, expressed concern about the low percentage of Muslims in senior government and military positions. There were 13 Muslims in the 301-member House of Representatives and one Muslim cabinet appointee. No members of the Senate were Muslim. In October seven Muslim lawmakers of the House of Representatives and the Federation of Free Workers issued statements calling for President Duterte to appoint a Muslim justice to the 15-person supreme court for the first time since 1995.

The PSA estimated during the year that 40 percent of five million total unregistered residents were children aged between birth and 14, primarily among Muslim and indigenous groups. Citizenship derives from birth to a citizen parent. The government initiated a pilot program in Metro Manila that provides undocumented Muslim Filipinos with an identity card – the Muslim Filipino Identity Card– stating that it was intended to help them access services, since many in this population did not have a birth certificate. Sources stated that the lack of a birth certificate did not generally result in a denial of education or other services, but it could cause delays in some circumstances. Undocumented Filipinos could use this secondary identification when applying for jobs, schools, and for other government services in lieu of a birth certificate or formal registry. The NCMF noted that this secondary identification helped overseas Filipino workers who found themselves in precarious labor situations. If their employers confiscated their passports, these secondary IDs could speed the government’s citizenship

assessment, thus providing fast repatriation services. Critics expressed reservations about the potential for abuse in similar initiatives in the past.

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 March the NCMF, along with other religious leaders, participated in an interfaith dialogue in Cebu City to highlight the importance of youth involvement in curbing violent extremism. NCMF Secretary Saidamen Pangarungan stressed that an effective way of achieving peace was through interfaith collaboration.

In January the Department of Tourism announced plans to make the country a significant “religious pilgrimage destination” by restoring and developing historic churches and Christian 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 7,232 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, but an increase of 1,419 persons from the previous year. 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.

In February the senate adopted a resolution filed by Senate President Vicente Sotto declaring the first Thursday of February “Synchronized National Interfaith Prayers for Peace and Reconciliation.” The resolution aimed to encourage Filipinos of all religious groups to participate in a universal prayer for peace.

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

The government attributed several killings, attacks, and kidnappings 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 Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and other ISIS-related terrorist groups. ISIS claimed responsibility for a January suicide bombing at a cathedral in Jolo that killed 20 persons and wounded several others. In August a cathedral in



Baguio received bomb and terror threats from alleged ISIS affiliates. Following these attacks, members of the Catholic and Muslim communities gathered in the cathedral to show solidarity against terrorism. Eleven soldiers and nine civilians were wounded in a December 22 grenade attack adjacent to a radio station and a Catholic cathedral in Cotabato City. The attack reportedly unfolded as soldiers dismounted from a military truck to provide security for a Mass taking place at the cathedral. Authorities suggested the attack, which came on the eve of a planned visit by President Duterte to Cotabato, may have been linked to ISIS-linked groups operating in the area, though no one claimed responsibility by year's end. The government continued sustained military, law enforcement, and counterterrorism operations against the Maute Group, ASG, and other ISIS-related groups.

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

Violent incidents, particularly in rural areas in the south of the country, were frequently associated with interclan *rido* (feud) violence. Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, incidents were difficult to classify as solely based on religious identity.

Religious scholars and leaders within the Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities stated relations among religious groups were generally amicable, but they reported tensions among different religious and ethnic groups, especially in conflict-affected areas such as Marawi City and Sulu. Social media comments denigrating the beliefs or practices of Muslims continued to appear.

The NCMF received several formal complaints of discrimination on the grounds of Muslim religious identity during the year. The organization reported that Muslims received stares in public for wearing hijabs, particularly in schools and banks. NCMF noted a successful legal intervention on behalf of a Muslim nursing student whose school, citing health concerns, initially prevented her from wearing a hijab. The NCMF also stated that subtle forms of anti-Muslim societal discrimination continued to exist throughout the country, particularly among detainees in correctional institutions.

Religious communities continued to participate in interreligious efforts to alleviate friction, foster connections, and address discrimination. The CBCP collaborated with other Christian groups and civil society networks to prepare for the implementation of the BOL. Other interfaith efforts by the CBCP, but not limited to religious freedom issues, included multi-sectoral consultations and meetings

with provincial and local governments on localizing humanitarian coordination and collaboration against human trafficking.

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

In June the embassy organized a forum with BTA representatives and legislative branch staffers to discuss the implementation of the BOL, including its implications for religious minorities and the importance of supporting all communities of faith, particularly in conflict areas, as the BARMM moved forward. Embassy officers also met with religious leaders, CHR, and the Department of Foreign Affairs to discuss religious freedom issues, including the BOL.

Cognizant of the vital role that faith and education play in fostering peace in Mindanao, the embassy continued outreach and training with madrassah educators through the Empowering Madrassah Educators (EmpoweringME) program. Since 2015, EmpoweringME has provided intensive teacher training for 325 madrassah educators and administrators in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Cotabato City, and Basilan. During the year, EmpoweringME introduced a module on social inclusion, which added matters relating to religious tolerance to its curriculum. The embassy also sponsored the visit of two scholars known for their work on religious tolerance and social inclusion to the United States for a three-week course on law and leadership. The program educated its participants not only on the law, but also on how to mitigate gender and religious intolerance they may face in their work. The embassy supported a two-year grant to a former participant of an embassy program to develop and implement a peace education curriculum, which included aspects of religious tolerance, in the 11 schools that comprise the Mindanao State University system. The Philippine Commission on Higher Education expressed interest in integrating elements of this peace curriculum across its entire nationwide network of colleges and universities. The embassy featured all these programs in press releases and on social media.

A senior embassy official hosted an iftar reception in May at a public university in Manila attended by more than 100 guests from the NCMF, civil society organizations, higher education, and religious and community sectors. He spoke about the importance of religious tolerance and emphasized the U.S. government's support in rebuilding the Islamic city of Marawi, as well as other forms of assistance across conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. The embassy also supported an interfaith forum to highlight the plight of the internally displaced persons of the Marawi siege and international religious freedom issues. In addition, the embassy

hosted an iftar in Davao that was attended by BARMM officials and Muslim scholars.

The embassy regularly highlighted support for religious freedom and the protection of civil liberties for people of all faiths on its various online platforms. It posted a tweet in observance of the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief on August 22. The Ambassador posted tweets for Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, while the embassy posted Facebook and Twitter content for the celebrations. Other notable posts included an ambassadorial tweet and embassy Facebook and Twitter posts publicizing the statement of the Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS; an embassy tweet on the confirmation of the identity of Maute group leader Abu Dar; ambassadorial and embassy tweets of condolences for the victims of the Jolo Cathedral Bombings; and an ambassadorial tweet on the Bangsamoro plebiscite and the establishment of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.

In October the embassy hosted a U.S. Muslim for five days of speaking engagements in Manila and Mindanao and programs on conflict transformation. The individual spoke on university campuses and at American Centers to engage emerging leaders on current issues in the BARMM.