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USDOS – US Department of State

2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Philippines

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religious profession and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of religion by law. The government continued to implement the “strategic peace roadmap,” which it said would address the aspirations of Muslim and other separatist groups in Mindanao. On July 17, President Rodrigo Duterte received the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) from relevant stakeholders and expressed support for congressional approval. Local authorities in Paniqui, Tarlac Province in Central Luzon considered creating an identification system for Muslims in the region suggested by Muslims. 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. The president made several statements during the year critical of the Catholic Church when its leadership criticized his policies. The president also made statements toward developing a better relationship with the Catholic Church and among persons of all faiths.

In May the Maute Group (also known as Dawlah Islamiya-Lanao) and other related factions seized areas of the southern city of Marawi. These ISIS-affiliated groups carried out killings, attacks, and bombings, including against hospitals, schools, and city jails. These groups reportedly went house-to-house searching for Christians and killing them. They also burned churches and took several hostages, including a priest and staff members of a Catholic church. The government continued sustained military, law enforcement, and counterterrorism operations against these groups.

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. There were frequent public statements on the internet and social media that denigrated the beliefs or practices of religious groups, particularly Muslims.

The U.S. embassy routinely discussed with government officials and nongovernmental organizations the role of the peace process in increasing space for religious diversity. The embassy supported a visiting expert who discussed methods for improving engagement between the police force and religious minorities. The Ambassador also gave remarks at representational 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 104.3 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2015 census conducted by the National Statistics Office, approximately 79.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and approximately 9 percent belong to other Christian groups. These groups include internationally based denominations such as the Seventh-

day Adventists, the 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 (Mormons); and domestically 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 Philippine Statistics Authority, although the NCMF estimated that 12 percent of the total population is Muslim.

Approximately 4 percent did not report a religious affiliation or belong to other groups, such as the animistic and syncretic religions of the Lumad (indigenous tribes). 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 religious profession 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 buildings dedicated to religion as war crimes or crimes against international humanitarian law.

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 existing 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, whether 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 ensure the religious rights of students are protected. 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

In July President Duterte received a new draft of the BBL, designed to implement the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). The BBL would grant additional political autonomy in majority Muslim areas. The updated BBL was drafted by the Bangsamoro Transition Commission, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and MNLF representatives. The BBL remained in the legislature as of the end of the year. In 2016, President Duterte approved the “strategic peace roadmap” with the goal of continuing the implementation of previous peace agreements with Muslim and other separatist groups in Mindanao. According to the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), the roadmap aims to uphold all preexisting MNLF and MILF agreements within constitutional parameters, including the role of sharia. Observers said the government’s drive to build a roadmap towards implementation of previous peace agreements in Mindanao was not solely based on religious factors, but also on aspirations among the Muslim separatist groups to attain greater political autonomy.

The Catholic Church remained vocal against the rising number of alleged extrajudicial killings associated with the war on drugs under President Duterte. Duterte publicly denounced the Catholic Church and labeled some Church leaders as “corrupt” and “womanizers.” On several occasions, Duterte directed his disapproval toward specific priests and bishops who criticized his policies. Duterte, however, also expressed hope for pursuing an amicable relationship with the Catholic Church in the future.

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.

The Philippines Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) stated again during the year that many Muslims viewed the congressional failure to pass the BBL as a failure of the government to expand religious freedoms for Muslims agreed upon by OPAPP and MILF negotiators. The council, however, reported that it was hopeful that an agreement could be reached in the future. The PCEC

also said the Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity Expression bill, which emphasizes the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex community and passed the third reading in the lower house, potentially infringed on the rights of religious communities.

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and the Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns continued to monitor issues relating to religious freedom and again received no complaints or cases involving the abuse of religious freedom during the year.

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 5,868 Filipinos made the pilgrimage during the year, meeting the limit set by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj for pilgrims from the Philippines. 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. Following the September 2016 bombing of a night market in Mindanao's Davao City that left 15 persons dead, the city government discussed plans to require Muslim women to remove their hijabs and burqas upon entering malls and at other checkpoints as a security measure. The Davao City Council did not adopt this requirement, but citizens reported tightened security in public places such as malls and hotel entrances, particularly for women with Muslim headwear.

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 2016-17 school year, 1,622 public elementary schools administered the voluntary ALIVE program for 308,071 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 curriculum that was subject to government oversight. There were 80 private madrassahs registered with the Department of Education, and 24 more applied for registration but had not met all 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 the year, the Department of Education provided a subsidy of 5,000 pesos (\$100) per student to 12,284 private madrassah students within the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and to 2,250 private madrassah students outside the ARMM.

Local authorities in Paniqui, Tarlac Province in Central Luzon, considered an identification system for Muslims in the region. A local Muslim association had initially created the system for its community. After national expressions of concern, the CHR investigated media reports about the proposal and said the initiative came from the Muslim community and that authorities did not infringe religious liberties.

NCMF officials said that anti-Muslim discrimination occurred in government offices but cited no specific examples. There were 11 Muslims in the 292-member House of Representatives. Some Muslim leaders, including an NCMF official, expressed concern with the low representation of Muslims in senior government and military positions.

The government said it continued to promote interfaith dialogue to build mutual trust and respect among various religious and cultural groups. The Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns coordinated all interreligious and intercultural concerns and initiatives within the government on behalf of the Office of the President. The task force participated in February's World Interfaith Harmony Week and mandated all government agencies observe the week. The Philippine National Police Chaplaincy Services hosted a symposium that underscored the importance of acknowledging different religious beliefs, and attendees included the Imam Council of the Philippines and United Religious Initiatives. Furthermore, the University of the Philippines, in partnership with the NCMF, hosted an interfaith forum titled “Celebrating Women's Rights in the Light of Islam,” which coincided with World Hijab Day. The forum highlighted the importance of mutual respect and promoted solidarity with Muslim women worldwide.

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 ISIS-linked Maute Group, the terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), and other ISIS-related groups. 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.

In May the Maute Group, ASG, Ansar Al-Khalifa, the Bangsamoro Freedom Fighters, and an undetermined number of foreign fighters seized portions of Marawi City in Lanao del Sur, Mindanao. The group occupied and destroyed buildings, including churches, mosques, jails, schools, and private homes. These ISIS-linked groups reportedly sought out Christian residents to kill during the first days of the siege. The media reported that the militants killed nine Christians at a checkpoint, and killed at least one Christian man when he failed to recite the Shahada, a Muslim proclamation of faith. They also reportedly targeted Christians who refused to convert to Islam and Muslims who rejected violence. Media footage showed militants defacing a church and destroying religious symbols. The group took several hostages at the beginning of the siege, including a priest and more than a dozen staff members from a Catholic church. The priest escaped in September during a firefight between the military and the militants. The Marawi siege ended in October, and as of December, official government statistics estimated that 47 civilians were killed.

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 clan violence. Since religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, incidents were difficult to classify as being solely based on religious identity.

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, including in education. There were reports of discrimination by students against Muslim students displaced from Marawi. The Department of Education employed several outreach initiatives to welcome these students. Internally displaced Muslims also reported discrimination in private-sector employment and housing. Other Muslims witnessed negative reactions to Muslim names or forms of dress, and said they stood out in public places. Social media comments denigrating the beliefs or practices of Muslims continued to occur in the country.

Religious representatives report increasing tensions between communities of various faiths and within subsets of the Muslim community.

Religious communities participated in interreligious efforts to alleviate friction, foster connections, and address discrimination. Efforts included training Catholic leadership on interreligious dialogue and more than 100 attendees for events within World Interfaith Harmony week in February. The PCEC served as the co-convenor of the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform, which aims to ensure the continuation of the peace process between the government and the National Democratic Front.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador expressed support for religious freedom and the protection of civil liberties for persons of all faiths during his public engagements. U.S. embassy officials met with the NCMF and Muslim civil society groups to discuss government protection, the promotion of religious freedom, the attacks in Marawi City, radicalization, and the impact of foreign donor financing on religious education in Muslim communities. Embassy officials also met with government officials, including representatives from the Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns, to affirm the importance of supporting all communities of faith, particularly in conflict areas. Throughout the year, embassy officials met with Muslim, Christian, and other religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues.

On June 21, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an iftar for Muslim and Christian guests at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. He delivered remarks on religious tolerance, the importance of interfaith service projects, and the sacrifices of Muslim Filipinos protecting non-Muslims in the wake of the Marawi crisis. The iftar emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue and youth empowerment across faiths. As an example of interfaith cooperation, the Charge d’Affaires shared photographs of U.S. government exchange alumni organizing a similar iftar conducted for both Muslims and Christians displaced by the Marawi conflict. On January 16, the embassy’s Facebook page had two postings commemorating National Religious Freedom Day.

In September the embassy sponsored an American police lieutenant for a speaking tour to discuss his role in bringing law enforcement together with marginalized groups in order to address violence targeting at-risk communities. During his visit, he spoke with Muslim representatives about enhancing community-level cooperation between religious minorities and the police.



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