

USDOS – US Department of State

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Philippines

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of a state religion. 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. At year's end, two Catholic priests continued to face charges of conspiracy to commit sedition over their alleged involvement in the production and release of a 2019 video linking President Rodrigo Duterte and his family to the illicit drug trade. Muslim groups expressed objections to an antiterrorism law passed in July, citing fears that it could lead to restraints in the free practice and free expression of their faith. Several Muslim lawmakers, lawyers, and citizens who said they were arbitrarily designated as members of terrorist groups, filed petitions before the Supreme Court stating that the definition of terrorism in the law infringed on the freedom of religious expression. In addition, Catholic and Protestant groups expressed concern over reported cases of church workers 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.

During the year, killings, bombings, and kidnappings by ISIS-affiliated and other terrorist groups continued. In May, alleged Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) terrorists killed two children, aged 10 and seven, and injured 13 others when a mortar shell landed in a residential area in Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao, during a BIFF attack against the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) on Eid al-Fitr. ISIS claimed responsibility for several attacks, including an August suicide bombing in Jolo that killed 15 people and wounded 75 others. Following the attack, the Vicar Apostolic of Jolo, Bishop Charlie Inzon, called for peace.

Violent incidents, particularly in rural areas in the south of the country where Muslims are the majority of the population, 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 Province. The National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) reported no formal incidents of discrimination during the year but stated that subtle forms of anti-Muslim societal discrimination existed throughout the country, such as private companies requiring information on religion in job applications and discriminatory comments from private citizens. Religious communities continued to participate in interreligious efforts to alleviate friction, foster connections, and address discrimination.

The U.S. embassy conducted a broad range of engagement throughout the year with the government to highlight the importance of international religious freedom. In June, the Ambassador met with leaders of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and assured them of continued U.S. government support. Although the COVID-19 pandemic limited in-person engagements, the embassy continued to use online platforms and virtual engagements to emphasize strong U.S. support for religious freedom and protection of civil liberties for persons of all faiths. The embassy supported a virtual iftar event with 25 former participants of U.S.-sponsored exchange programs, during which participants discussed religious tolerance and its importance in building community trust. An embassy program continued to train religious leaders and youth organizations and encourage dialogue to foster social cohesion in religiously diverse areas of Mindanao.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 109.2 million (midyear 2020 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 in the Philippines (UCCP), 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 or IFI); 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, while the NCMF estimates a figure of 10 to 11 percent. The NCMF attributes its higher estimate to a number of factors, including 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 belonged to other faiths, 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. Muslims constitute a majority in the BARMM. 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 in 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 during 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 to the SEC in order to register 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 BARMM is a Muslim-led autonomous region, established by the central government in January 2019 following the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, with jurisdiction over five provinces and three major noncontiguous cities. The Bangsamoro Organic Law 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

A report released in October by the Uniting Church of Australia (UCA) in partnership with the UCCP found that 16 Christian church leaders and members were killed between 2017 and 2020 by unknown assailants, although in some cases, witnesses accused local police of committing the killings. Of the victims, three were Catholic priests, one was a UCCP pastor, one was a Kings Glory Ministry pastor, and 11 were lay members, including five from the IFI and one from the UCCP. In August, unknown assailants on a motorbike shot and killed Zara Alvarez, a Church Workers Solidarity Group ecumenical volunteer who documented extrajudicial killings by security forces and other human rights abuses for a UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights report. The government had included Alvarez on a list of individuals accused of being terrorists (a list that also included a UN special rapporteur), a label which, according to the report, often led to targeting by death squads.

The UCA report also documented 29 church leaders and members who received death threats and harassment after speaking out against the Duterte government between 2017 and 2020. Incidents of harassment and intimidation included arbitrary arrests on what church groups described as false charges. The report stated that the government frequently labeled critics and human rights activists as "terrorists." The UCA report noted that on July 9, a UCCP clergyman was arrested on accusations of involvement in a 2018 armed ambush against the military. Church members said he was presiding over a worship service at the time and could not have been involved. The clergyman was released on July 24, but soldiers continued to file charges against him.

On March 28, media reported on a video in which a Santa Ana police officer beat a member of the Golden Mosque compound for violating curfew. Philippine National Police (PNP) police chief General Archie Gamboa ordered an investigation of the incident.

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 again reported being harassed, intimidated, and threatened with death by unknown perpetrators. As of the end of the year, Catholic priests Albert Alejo and Flaviano Villanueva continued to face charges of conspiracy to commit sedition. The government originally charged the two priests, as well as four bishops, a third priest, and members of the opposition, with sedition, cyberlibel, libel, and obstruction of justice in July 2019 over their alleged involvement in the production and release of a video earlier that year linking President Duterte and his family to the illicit drug trade. Various ecumenical groups condemned the charges, filed through the PNP Criminal Investigation and Detection Group. Prosecutors dropped all charges against the four bishops and the third priest for lack of evidence.

Several Muslim groups filed objections with the Supreme Court to the Antiterrorism Act of 2020, passed in July, citing fears that the law could result in arrests made due to mistaken identity and stereotyping, which could lead to restraints in the free practice and expression of their faith. Muslim lawmakers and lawyers stated that the provision in the law that punishes those "inciting" acts of terrorism specifically restrains them from teaching the concept of jihad, which they said has been erroneously related to terrorist attacks. Three Muslim citizens who said they were arbitrarily designated as members of terrorist groups filed a separate, similar petition. The Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines, a Catholic group, also filed a petition to the Supreme Court stating that the definition of terrorism in the law would lead to missionaries and Christian faithful being labeled as terrorists. They stated that church workers often work with the poor and other marginalized sectors of society – the same sectors that, they said, "overzealous" members of the national police and armed forces often accuse of having terrorist ties.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) expressed concern over reported cases of Church workers being publicly labeled as members or supporters of the NPA, the armed insurgent wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, also known as "red-tagging." In May, Catholic priest Raymond Montero Ambray accused the AFP of falsely linking him to the NPA in a post on a Facebook account that was subsequently deactivated. Ambray worked with the indigenous Lumad peoples, whom the AFP frequently accused of harboring NPA fighters, and said that the post was intended to end his work with the Lumads through intimidation. The AFP denied Ambray's allegations.

In January, the PNP Manila Police District internally released a memorandum requiring schools to identify Muslim students in all high schools, colleges, and universities in Metropolitan Manila as part of the PNP's countering violent extremism efforts. Muslim leaders in Mindanao, including BARMM authorities, and the interfaith organization Duyog Marawi expressed outrage, saying that the move promoted Islamophobia and discrimination, particularly against the Muslim minority in Metropolitan Manila. The reactions led to the Metropolitan Manila police chief recalling the memorandum and announcing the PNP would organize a dialogue between the PNP and Muslim student leaders. As of the end of the year, the PNP had not confirmed whether the dialogue took place.

The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, passed in March, granted special powers to the President to manage the COVID-19 outbreak. Mass gatherings, including religious gatherings, were prohibited from March 13 through June 1. Gatherings continued to be prohibited throughout Manila and Luzon until August. Restrictions were then gradually eased to 10 percent, 20 percent, and then 30 percent of capacity as of October. Public Holy Week celebrations and travel were also prohibited. Many religious leaders stated that religious institutions were being unfairly treated, with malls and other establishments allowed to open before religious services. On June 7, Catholic Archbishop of Lingayen-Dagupan Socrates Villegas said, "I am very afraid that there is an implied persecution of our faith because going to Mass, attending the Eucharist, worshipping the Lord, is lumped together in the same group as going to the barber shop and going to the theater to watch a movie."

In June, media reported that the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict designated the National Council of Churches Philippines (NCCP) and two of its member churches, the UCCP and the IFI, as "open sectoral organizations" of the NPA. The NCCP, one of the largest associations of Protestant and non-Roman Catholic Christian denominations in the country, described the designation as an attack on its "right to exercise the freedom of religion." The IFI also condemned the designation and said that red-tagging encouraged government agents and other individuals to violently attack church members.

President Duterte continued to criticize the Catholic Church despite a 2018 vow not to do so. In January, in a public speech containing explicit language, he stated that he had won the presidential election in 2016 despite insulting the Pope and Catholic bishops and said that such criticism was needed to win a "war" against the Catholic Church. Media reported that the criticism was related to the Church's public comments about human rights abuses linked to Duterte's antidrug campaign. Some clergy continued to raise concerns that the manner in which the President denounced the Church promoted violence against its priests and leaders.

In July, prior to the President's State of the Nation Address, police confiscated protest materials from parishioners during a Mass at the Quiapo Catholic Church in Manila after a church security officer reported to police that attendees were holding placards. The materials protested the Antiterrorism Act. Senator Risa Hontiveros, who also attended the Mass, spoke to the PNP and said the materials were not being used during the Mass.

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 more. For the 2018-19 school year, 1,686 public elementary schools administered the voluntary ALIVE program for 145,591 students, compared with 1,622 schools and 158,093 students the previous year. The program aims to integrate madrassahs into the public education system while preserving Islamic education for Muslim Filipinos.

Madrassahs continued to have the option of registering with the NCMF or the Department of Education, both, or neither. Registered madrassahs received government funding and produced curricula that were subject to government oversight. The Department of Education did not provide updates during the year. 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 or 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 Department of Education did not provide updates during the year. The overall funding for and attendance at private madrassahs increased by 25 percent from 2018 to 2019. During 2019, the Department of Education provided funding of 90,960,000 pesos (\$1.89 million) to 18,192 private madrassah students, compared with 67,510,000 pesos (\$1.4 million) allocated to 13,502 private madrassah students in 2018.

Since the inauguration of the BARMM in March 2019, the transition government suffered some setbacks and delays in establishing the permanent legal framework for a Muslim-led autonomous region due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front-led interim authority conducted consultations with Christian minority groups and indigenous peoples with the stated purpose of ensuring their concerns are addressed.

NCMF officials said that anti-Muslim discrimination continued to occur in government offices but cited no specific examples. Some Muslim leaders continued to express concern about the low percentage of Muslims in senior government and military positions. There were 13 Muslims in the 301-member House of Representatives, but no Muslims in the 24-member Senate. There was one Muslim member of the cabinet, the head of the NCMF, and President Duterte appointed Muslims to a small number of senior positions, such as commissioner of the Social Security System, member of the Board of Directors of the Cooperation Development Authority, and Undersecretary at the Department of Agriculture.

The PSA estimated during the year that 40 percent of a total of five million unregistered residents were children who were 14 or younger, primarily among Muslim and indigenous groups. Citizenship derives from birth to a citizen parent. The government initiated a pilot program in Metropolitan Manila that provided 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, school, 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, having a secondary form of identification 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 continued to report 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 NCMF's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment is responsible for administering 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 it was at the height of its Hajj operations when the Philippine government imposed COVID-19 quarantine measures. It continued to assist Hajj travelers until the Saudi embassy informed the NCMF in June that the 2020 Hajj would be limited to Saudi citizens and foreign expatriates residing in Saudi Arabia only. 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.

Actions of 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 of which are designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. government – the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and other ISIS-related terrorist groups. In May, alleged BIFF terrorists killed two children, aged 10 and seven, and injured 13 others when a mortar shell landed in a residential area in Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao, during an attack by the BIFF against the AFP on Eid al-Fitr. ISIS claimed responsibility for an August suicide bombing in Jolo in Sulu Province that killed 15 people and wounded 75 others. The attacker detonated the bombs a few yards from a Catholic church that ISIS suicide bombers had

previously attacked in January 2019, killing 20 and wounding 102. Following the attack, the Vicar Apostolic of Jolo, Bishop Charlie Inzon, called for peace. 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 where Muslims comprise the majority of the population, 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 Province. Social media comments denigrating the beliefs or practices of Muslims continued to appear.

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. For example, the NCMF reported that private companies often required job seekers to list their religion on job applications. The NCMF also said that private citizens made discriminatory comments linking Muslim Filipinos to violence, especially following a violent incident either in the country or abroad. Following the August suicide attack in Jolo, Sulu Province, the NCMF reported that a text message circulated among non-Muslims in Mindanao warning them to take extra precautions.

In August, the Commission on Human Rights reported that a female member of the Apostolic Pentecostal Church wearing conservative attire was denied entry to a provincial sports complex for not wearing proper sports attire.

Religious communities continued to participate in interreligious efforts to alleviate friction, foster connections, and address discrimination. The CBCP collaborated with other Christian groups and the government Interagency Council against Human Trafficking to combat trafficking in persons and partnered with other Christian groups to campaign against the death penalty and the Antiterrorism Act of 2020. The CBCP also engaged with other faith-based organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to vulnerable communities and to promote solidarity, peace, and harmony. In February, Equal Access International – a peace promotion NGO – hosted the OURmindaNOW 2020 peace summit in Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao, which enabled interreligious dialogue among more than 400 participants. The summit encouraged participants, brought together from different faith groups, to craft a shared vision of the future of Mindanao by considering how to transform violent extremism, empower youth, and highlight positive narratives using alternative media.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The embassy conducted a broad range of engagement throughout the year with the government to highlight the importance of international religious freedom. In June, the Ambassador met with leaders of BARMM and assured them of continued U.S. government support.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic limited in-person engagement, the embassy continued to use online platforms and virtual engagements to emphasize strong U.S. support for religious freedom and protection of civil liberties for persons of all faiths, including highlighting subjects such as freedom to worship and the importance of religious tolerance.

The embassy posted a series of articles and videos on social media in observance of Religious Freedom Day on January 16. In one of the posts, the embassy highlighted the work of Philippine President Manuel L. Quezon, who in the 1930s offered a safe haven in the country to Jews fleeing the Holocaust in Europe.

In February, embassy social media amplified the launch of the U.S.-led International Religious Freedom Alliance and also provided funding support to a Mindanao peace summit in Cagayan de Oro that enabled interreligious dialogue among more than 400 participants.

In May, the embassy supported a virtual iftar program organized by Muslim former participants of U.S.-sponsored exchange programs in Mindanao to demonstrate U.S. support for religious freedom and tolerance. The event concluded with a virtual iftar with 25 former participants of different U.S. exchange programs, including the governor of Lanao del Sur, who provided messages of support and contributed to the discussion of religious tolerance and its importance in creating community trust.

Other embassy initiatives included a series of social media postings on completion of the reconstruction of a church in Guiuan, Eastern Samar. The rehabilitation was led by the National Museum of the Philippines, with the support of the U.S. government through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation.

An ongoing U.S. program continued to engage religious leaders and youth organizations to stimulate social cohesion in select religiously diverse areas of Mindanao that were vulnerable to violent conflict, including violent extremism. The program is aimed at fostering social cohesion by training and engaging religious and youth leaders to effectively represent their groups in support of peace. The project is also aimed at creating opportunities for dialogue to mitigate and address violent conflict and violent extremism.

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