

# **PHILIPPINES 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religious profession and religious worship and prohibits the establishment of religion by law. President Rodrigo Duterte approved a “strategic peace roadmap” which the government said would address the aspirations of Muslim and other separatist groups in Mindanao. Security procedures drafted in Davao City following the bombing of a night market drew criticism from the Muslim community for suggesting that Muslim women not cover their faces in public and at security checkpoints. In September President Duterte made remarks likening himself to Hitler when describing the need to kill drug dealers and addicts as part of his antidrug campaign, receiving criticism from international Jewish organizations and international media. The president also made several statements during the year opposing the Catholic Church in response to criticism of his policies. The Office of the President’s National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) continued to promote the rights of Muslims at both the national and local levels, and the Department of Education (DepEd) continued to promote the standardization of madrassah curriculum between private and public institutions.

During the year, the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and other Islamic militant groups carried out killings, attacks, bombings, and kidnappings for ransom. The government continued sustained law enforcement and counterterrorism operations against these groups.

There were instances of discrimination in economic opportunities and public statements – via the internet and social media – denigrating the beliefs or practices of particular religious groups, particularly Muslims.

The U.S. embassy routinely discussed religious freedom issues and the role of the peace process in increasing space for religious diversity, with government offices and nongovernmental organizations at all levels. The Ambassador gave remarks on the importance of religious freedom and tolerance at events around the country.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 102.6 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 census conducted by the National Statistics Office, approximately 81 percent of the population is Roman Catholic.

Approximately 9 percent belong to other Christian groups, including the following internationally based denominations: the 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 (Mormons); and the following domestically established churches: 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 and the remaining 4 percent did not report a religious affiliation or belong to other groups, such as the various animistic and syncretic religions of some of the Lumad, or indigenous tribes.

A more recent estimate, made in 2012 by the NCMF, indicates that approximately 10-12 percent of the total population is Muslim. Most Muslims are members of various ethnic minority groups. The majority of Muslims reside in Mindanao and nearby islands in the south. Although most are Sunni, a small number of Shia 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 existing 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 be registered 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 late filing of registrations with the BIR or failing to submit of registration datasheets and financial statements. There is no nontax penalty for failing to register, and some groups do not register.

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. In July congress passed a new law mandating that government agencies address religious issues and consult recognized experts on Filipino Muslims' and the history, culture, and identity of indigenous peoples in the formulation of the curriculum on Filipino history.

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 only handle 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 approved a “strategic peace roadmap” with the expressed aims of addressing the aspirations of 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 Moro National Liberation Front and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) agreements within constitutional parameters, including the role of sharia. An expanded and inclusive Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC) will be reconstituted and will involve additional stakeholders from the region with the aim of ensuring inclusivity. The new BTC will draft a bill designed to implement the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) with the goal of submitting it to congress by July 2017. Because religion, politics, and ethnicity are often closely linked in Mindanao, it was difficult to categorize the process of drafting a framework for peace in the region as being solely based on religious factors.

The Philippines Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) stated that, for many Muslims, the failure of the previous congress to pass the Bangsamoro Basic Law (draft legislation to implement the CAB with the MILF that preceded the “strategic peace roadmap”) amounted to failure of the government to implement an expansion of their religious freedom, which had been agreed upon by OPAPP and MILF negotiators.

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 received no complaints or cases involving the abuse of religious freedom again this year. The NCMF received at least one report of discrimination against Muslims on the basis of religion.

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 there were approximately 8,000 pilgrims 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 establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and other projects

Following the September 2 bombing of a night market in Davao City which left 15 people dead, Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio said it would be a good security practice to disallow garments that cover faces in public and issued a written statement

asking Muslims to refrain from wearing hijabs or burqas in public that cover their faces. The city government's public safety office discussed plans to require Muslim women to remove their hijabs and burqas upon entering malls and at other checkpoints as a security measure. The city government said, in addition to burqas, other accessories such as sunglasses, hats, and facemasks that conceal one's identity would also have to be removed. Some Muslim groups, including Suara Bangsamoro, criticized the plan saying it was discriminatory against Muslims and disrespectful of their religious belief and culture. At year's end, the policy was not adopted and was still under consideration by the Davao City Council.

DepEd continued to support the Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE) program for Muslim students in selected public elementary schools. For the 2015-2016 school year, a total of 1,638 public elementary schools administered the ALIVE program, including providing instructional materials and modules. Within those schools, 313,697 elementary students were enrolled in the ALIVE program.

Madrassahs continued to have the option of registering with the NCMF, DepEd, both, or neither; registration was not mandatory. A total of 104 private madrassahs were registered with DepEd. Only registered schools could receive financial assistance from the government. DepEd's Office of Madrassah Education managed local and international financial assistance to the private madrassah system. DepEd-registered madrassahs followed the Standard Madrassah Curriculum and received funding for teachers of the Revised Basic Education Curriculum subjects and for classroom and facility improvements. DepEd provided 27.9 million pesos (\$563,000) in financial support to the registered private madrassahs, which served 5,719 students. The funding level for and attendance at private madrassahs decreased by more than 50 percent from the previous year. DepEd stated this was likely due to the successful implementation of the ALIVE program as children from private madrassahs may transfer to public institutions and learn the same curriculum without the cost of a private institution.

In September President Duterte likened himself to Adolf Hitler during a press conference, saying, "Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now there is [sic] three million drug addicts, there are. I'd be happy to slaughter them." His statement drew criticism from the World Jewish Congress, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and the Anti-Defamation League. The president later apologized. The recently appointed Ambassador to the UN, Teodoro Locsin, Jr., tweeted in August, "I believe that the Drug Menace is so big it needs a FINAL SOLUTION like the

Nazis adopted.” Locsin later apologized and removed this tweet and another referencing Auschwitz as a solution to the drug problem.

In May then President-elect Duterte said the Catholic Church was the “most hypocritical institution” for questioning his morals in the lead-up to the May presidential election. In October President Duterte called members of the Catholic clergy “sons of whores” for questioning deaths resulting from an ongoing government-sponsored anticrime campaign. In December he said the Catholic Church was “only good in collection” in responding to poverty and drug addiction issues, referring to the practice of collecting cash donations during Mass, but said the Church “would not give anything.” President Duterte also said in December he did not believe in religion, especially the Catholic Church, which he said sowed fear into the faithful about hell. He said, “Be careful about religion, it is about gold.” As of the end of the year, there were no reports of governmental follow-up to these statements.

The government stated that 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. For example, the task force participated in the 7th UN Alliance of Civilizations Focal Points meeting that centered on building trust and relationships as a response to violent extremism. The government also participated in the World Interfaith Harmony Week by hosting a culminating event called “Festival of Harmony,” a gathering of leaders of many religious groups, members of the diplomatic corps, key government officials, leaders of interfaith movements, and peace advocacy organizations. The event highlighted mutual cooperation between the government and the religious community in promoting religious freedom, dialogue, and peace.

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

The government attributed a series of killings, attacks, and kidnappings for ransom to the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and other Muslim militants. The government continued sustained law enforcement and counterterrorism operations against the group and other violent extremist groups. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

In April the ASG beheaded a Canadian hostage after a ransom deadline passed. The group displayed symbols affiliated with ISIS in the video of the beheading. The group beheaded another Canadian hostage in June.

Also in April another small Muslim group known as Dawlah Islamiya in Lanao, or more commonly the Maute Group, kidnapped and subsequently beheaded two Christian sawmill workers they accused of spying for the government. The Mautes did not seek ransom.

A bombing on Mindanao outside a Catholic church during Christmas Eve Mass injured 13 people. Police said they suspected the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (a breakaway faction of the MILF) and the Maute Group were responsible for the attack.

### **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. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, incidents were difficult to classify as being solely based on religious identity.

There were instances of discrimination in economic opportunities and public statements – via the internet and social media – denigrating the beliefs or practices of particular religious groups, particularly Muslims. Religious scholars and leaders within the Muslim community and Catholic and Protestant churches said that while relations among religious groups in society were generally amicable, there were reports of tensions between different religious and ethnic groups, especially in conflict-affected areas.

Three days after being sworn in as the new Chairman of the Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) in September and after learning that Christian staff of the government body were reportedly growing apprehensive under his leadership as a Muslim, Abul Khayr Alonto told local media that non-Muslim personnel of MinDA would not be discriminated against or laid off. The University of the Philippines Institute of Islamic Studies reported instances where educational institutions had banned the use of the hijab, but indicated that the instances they were aware of were resolved through dialogue. The NCMF cited one example in which a qualified applicant for a food service job was told to apply elsewhere after indicating that he was Muslim.

Five Muslim students from Zamboanga City, which is predominantly Catholic, reported they felt discriminated against for wearing burqas and moved to Manila where they said they felt less discrimination.

Religious communities participated in interreligious efforts to alleviate friction and address discrimination. The PCEC participated in a dialogue with the leaders of the MILF in Sultan Kudarat and in another dialogue with religious leaders in Midsayap, Cotabato. Other interfaith groups, such as The Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, participated in the government's celebration of World Interfaith Harmony Week.

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

The U.S. Ambassador utilized public speaking engagements to deliver messages in support of religious freedom and protection of civil liberties regardless of religious affiliation. U.S. embassy officials met with the NCMF and Muslim civil society groups to discuss government protection and promotion of religious freedom. Among other things they discussed the impact of foreign donor financing on religious education in Muslim communities. Embassy officials also met with representatives from the Presidential Task Force on Interreligious and Intercultural Concerns to affirm the importance of support for all communities of faith.

On February 1, the Ambassador attended a Breakfast Dialogue Meeting hosted by Manila Catholic Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle as part of the celebration of World Interfaith Harmony Week. The dialogue, which commenced the week-long celebration, gathered other religious leaders, key government officials, and other members of the diplomatic corps to promote interfaith harmony and dialogue as key elements for nation building.

On June 8, 125 Muslim and Christian students attended an iftar hosted by the embassy in Cotabato City. The program emphasized interreligious dialogue and youth empowerment across faiths. On June 28, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for a mixed Muslim and Christian audience at the Taguig National High School where he delivered remarks on religious tolerance and the importance of interfaith service projects.

In August the embassy sponsored an American researcher and professor for a speaking tour to discuss her research on Islamic law and jurisprudence as it relates to gender equity, human rights, and democratic governance. During her visit, she met with the NCMF, university students and faculty, Muslim prosecutors and



lawyers, and civil society organizations in Manila, Cagayan de Oro, and Iligan City. CNN Philippines interviewed her. The theme throughout her lectures and public discussions was for all religions to be tolerant and receptive of each other's differences with a specific focus within and between different Muslim traditions or interpretations of the Quran.

Through grant funding, the embassy supported a program in Marawi City, which engaged 25 madrassah teachers from the Muslim community to improve their English language proficiency and pedagogy and to encourage the development of secular community engagement activities with participants of different religious and cultural backgrounds. Improved English language skills for the madrassah teachers allowed them to increase intercommunal interaction with their non-Muslim counterparts who generally speak English.