

Appointing the Iglesia Ni Cristo head as special envoy - Philippines, Duterte, and church-state separation

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The recent appointment by President Duterte of the leader of Iglesia Ni Cristo, executive minister Eduardo V. Manalo, to a government position presents an interesting case that may test once again the meaning of church-state separation, a principle enshrined in all Filipino constitutions. Apart from the legal issues, it is also worth examining the sociological implications of this appointment.

The appointment is formal and official, and carries the title “Special Envoy of the President for Overseas Filipino Concerns.” The scope of the job is quite broad, encompassing the concerns not just of overseas Filipino workers, but of all Filipinos living abroad. Viewed in the light of the INC’s active push to strengthen its ecclesiastical districts abroad and to create new ones, it would be interesting to know how Mr. Manalo manages to separate his role as the President’s special ambassador for overseas Filipino concerns from his evangelical function as the leader of a church that is actively engaged in extending its global reach.

Mr. Manalo’s new role will no doubt involve frequent travels abroad, something he has been doing as INC head. While the position carries no compensation, it is hard to imagine that the job will not entail expenditure of public funds. The law prohibiting this seems clear. “No public money or property shall be appropriated, applied, paid, or employed, directly or indirectly, for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, sectarian institutions, or system of religion, or of any priest, preacher, minister, or other religious teacher, or dignitary as such, except when such priest, preacher, or minister, or dignitary is assigned to the armed forces, or to any penal institution, or government orphanage or leprosarium.” (Art VI, Sec. 29 [2], 1987 Constitution)

Even if the government refrains from allocating public funds for Mr. Manalo as he goes about performing his work as special envoy for overseas Filipinos—precisely to avoid violating this legal restriction—one can still argue that his official diplomatic appointment gives undue preference to his church. While other churches are not explicitly excluded from reaching out to Filipinos abroad, the official appointment certainly lends to the Iglesia Ni Cristo a special cloak of authority that belongs to officials of the state alone.

And, this is so not just in relation to foreign governments, but, more particularly, when dealing with offices in the Philippine bureaucracy that have anything to do with the concerns of overseas Filipinos. We may have no reason to doubt Mr. Manalo’s readiness to serve the interests of all overseas Filipinos, irrespective of their religious affiliation. But, surely, there is something fundamentally wrong, and perhaps unconstitutional, when one church is placed in a privileged position to promote itself by virtue of the special access to the civilian bureaucracy that is conferred upon it.

Justifying Mr. Manalo's appointment, Mr. Duterte's spokesperson Harry Roque and Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III reasoned that, more than anything else, this is a case of the government being able to ride on the stature and overseas networks of the INC. Roque said: "Mr. Eduardo Manalo was appointed because he has networks in different countries. They (INC) have six million congregations and have been working with overseas Filipino workers for a long time." Bello chimed in, thus: "Considering his stature, religious leader, worldwide known advocate of human rights, he is very much welcome in the bureaucracy."

I think every church in the Philippines worth its name has worked hard not only to shepherd the millions of OFWs in their spiritual lives but, as important, to provide them with all kinds of assistance and support as they navigate the harsh settings into which they are thrust, away from their families and communities. To single out the INC for special praise is to ignore the quiet work that has been done by various religious communities since the Philippine government undertook, more than 40 years ago, the profitable but extremely costly move to deploy its citizens for mass employment abroad.

As a minority church that is known to vote as a block under the explicit guidance of its leaders, the Iglesia Ni Cristo has held an influence in Philippine politics that is not commensurate to its size. During elections, candidates for national and local positions piously make a beeline to the INC central office to plead for endorsement. The public rarely objects to this astounding form of abasement because nearly every politician is known to do it. Though seldom publicly brought up as an issue, the payoff for the INC usually comes in the form of appointments to government of individuals it endorses.

The Duterte administration seems to take this game a notch higher. It has dropped all pretenses concerning the link between religion and politics. Short of actually establishing the INC as its official church, this administration makes no attempt to hide the fact that the Iglesia, which supported the President in the last elections, is its favored church. Both seem determined to keep this partnership strong and enduring.

I can't imagine the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, or the head of its episcopal commission for overseas Filipino workers, accepting an appointment like this from a political leader. It would breach not just a legal line but also the boundary that protects the autonomy of religion from politics in the modern world.

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P.S.

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