

A PRIMER ON



POLITICAL PRISONERS

IN THE PHILIPPINES



KARAPATAN

Who are the political prisoners (PPs)?

Political prisoners are citizens arrested, detained and imprisoned for acting on their socio-political beliefs or faith. They are arbitrarily denied their liberty and their constitutional right to due process of law. Many PPs endure different forms of torture. A number of them have been held incommunicado for days or weeks – denied to be seen and visited by anyone – their family, lawyer, doctor. They suffer living inside the severely mucky conditions of prison cells. Many of the PPs spend years and years in jail, much prolonged by the slow progress of their cases in court.

To make things worse, governments lessen the negative imagery of the term “political prisoners” by referring to them as “persons deprived of liberty” (PDL) as though they are like criminals serving their terms for the crimes that have committed.

Political prisoners come from different walks of life. In the Philippines, they are ordinary people like farmers, workers, fisherfolk, indigenous and Moro peoples, women, youth, activists, human rights defenders, leaders and members of organizations





THERE ARE 685
POLITICAL PRISONERS
IN THE PHILIPPINES*
172 ARE ARRESTED UNDER
FERDINAND MARCOS JR.
134 ARE WOMEN
89 ARE ELDERLY
88 ARE VERY SICK
10 ARE PEACE CONSULTANTS

*AS OF MARCH 2026

that promote the rights of the dispossessed, marginalized, and poor people in society. Mixed with them are those who are suspected members of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the New People's Army (NPA), and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).

The NDFP political prisoners are peace consultants who have participated in the peace talks between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the NDFP. Actually, these political prisoners should be protected from being arrested because on February 24, 1995, there was an agreement signed between the Philippine government and the NDFP called the "Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG). As inferred by its title, this agreement sees to it that peace talks consultants and their staff associated with the NDFP are guaranteed their freedom.

No matter what, political prisoners are all victims of government repression. Political repression is the usual government reaction to social dissent and criticism, political activism, and defense of human rights.



What does “criminalization of political offenses” mean?

The term “political offense” is a government term to criminalize how people act on their social or political beliefs or faith. It is a method for government to file, charge, prosecute or convict persons who act on their socio-political beliefs. Government even calls this act of faith as a common crime.

These so-called political offenses are actually acts of one’s socio-political beliefs/faith in pursuit of the greater good. Common crimes are all other crimes defined in the criminal code, and which are usually motivated by personal or self-seeking interests.

The government deliberately makes the reason for the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience to appear non-political, to make them look like common criminals, and to hide from the public that the government is persecuting and imprisoning citizens who have different socio-political beliefs than those in power.

More often than not, PPs are charged with criminal offenses to deny the sociopolitical nature of their alleged offenses and to stigmatize them as plain criminals guilty of heinous crimes. Hence, they are slapped with murder, multiple murder, frustrated murder, arson, kidnapping, robbery in band, illegal possession of firearms and explosives, among others. Recently, there is also the charge of “terrorism” since the enactment of the draconian Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA). Because many of these aforementioned cases are non-bailable, PPs are kept in jail for long periods of time. With court hearings proceeding at a snail’s pace, notwithstanding deliberate delays, PPs literally rot in prison.

Why does the Philippine government continue to arrest and incarcerate political prisoners?

There is an ongoing, protracted armed conflict in the Philippines with deep socioeconomic and political roots. There is also much social discontent and political dissent that are met with fascist repression that wields a continuing and blatant violation of people's rights. Trumped-up charges, illegal arrests and imprisonment, torture and unjust conviction on false criminal charges are government's responses to criticism and dissent.

This is also in keeping with the government's objective of hiding the true extent of illegal arrests and detention suffered by political/social activists, government critics, dissidents, and ordinary folk. They are not to be made public as political prisoners so as not to leave a damaging mark on the Philippine government's human rights record.

Arrest and imprisonment are government's response to public criticism of its anti-people programs and policies. The people demand genuine land reform, living wages for workers and employees, sufficient social services, elimination of corruption. People oppose a government subservient to the ruling few and foreign powers.

In a society ruled by an oppressive and repressive militaristic government, it is just that the people fight for their rights.

Political prisoners are not criminals. They are not terrorists. It is their right and mission to advance the interests and rights of the common people.



Why is the arrest and imprisonment of political prisoners unjust?

The arrest and continued incarceration of political prisoners violate basic human rights. It also violates local and international agreements and conventions that uphold people's civil and political rights. Even the rights of arrested persons that are defined in these international conventions are not followed in the Philippines.



No one can be prosecuted and imprisoned because of his or her political beliefs. This is according to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN UDHR); the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL) and; the international agreements that are both supported and signed by the Philippine government, like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Humanitarian Law (IHL).



It is not a crime, nor even a sin, to assert one's basic rights and fight for them. The right of persons to liberty, and against unjust arrest and imprisonment, should always be recognized and guaranteed under whatever circumstance.

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** states that:

Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

The **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** states, under Article 9, the following:

1. Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law.
2. Anyone who is arrested shall be informed, at the time of arrest, of the reasons for his arrest and shall be promptly informed of any charges against him.
3. Anyone arrested or detained on a criminal charge shall be brought promptly before a judge or other officer authorized by law to exercise judicial power and shall be entitled to trial within a reasonable time or to release. It shall not be the general rule that persons awaiting trial shall be detained in custody, but release may be subject to guarantees to appear for trial, at any other stage of the judicial proceedings, and, should occasion arise, for execution of the judgement.
4. Anyone who is deprived of his liberty by arrest or detention shall be entitled to take proceedings before a court, in order that that court may decide without delay on the lawfulness of his detention and order his release if the detention is not lawful.
5. Anyone who has been the victim of unlawful arrest or detention shall have an enforceable right to compensation.

The **CARHRIHL** states that:

Part III. Article 2. This Agreement seeks to confront, remedy and prevent the most serious human rights violations in terms of civil and political rights, as well as to uphold, protect and promote the full scope of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including:

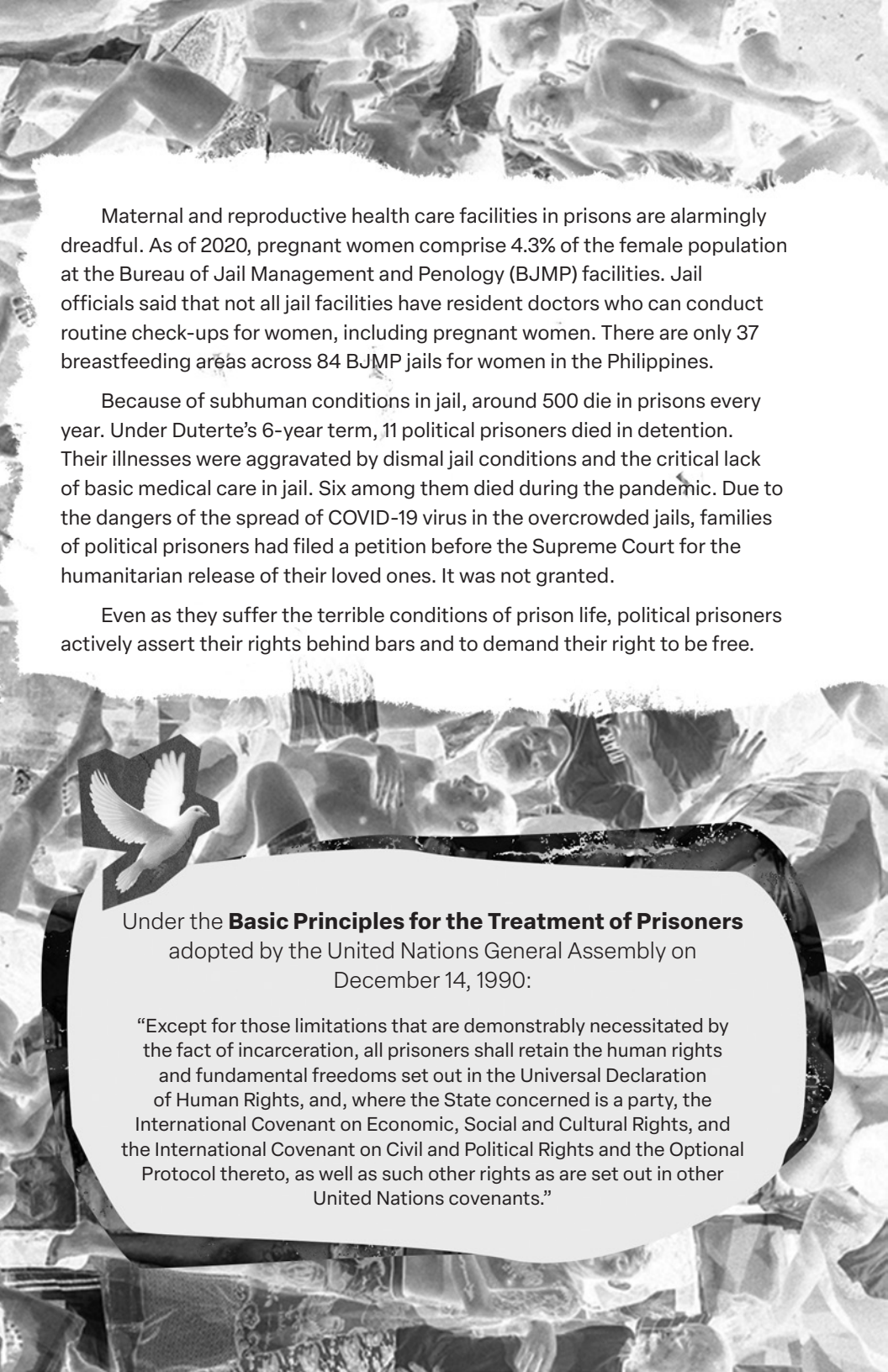
- The right to liberty, particularly against unwarranted and unjustified arrest and detention and to effectively avail of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus.
- The individual and collective right of the people and of communities to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects against unreasonable searches and seizures, and to effective safeguards of these rights against any illegal operations by GRP agencies.
- The right not to be subjected to physical or mental torture, solitary confinement, rape and sexual abuse, and other inhuman, cruel or degrading treatment, detention and punishment.
- The right to freedom of thought and expression, freedom of conscience, political and religious beliefs and practices and the right not to be punished or held accountable in the exercise of these rights.



What is the situation of political prisoners in jail?

In prison, political prisoners suffer from inhumane conditions – jam-packed jails lacking ventilation, scarce and uneatable food rations, inadequate and unclean water supply, poor healthcare, abusive jail guards and officers, unfair and arbitrary policies and procedures that prison officials keep inventing at their convenience.


The Duterte government's drug war since 2016 has increased by 40% the Philippine prison population to over 215,000, resulting in a congestion rate of 537%. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules) and the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules) are routinely ignored and violated, such as the outlawing of torture including psychological torture, physical or bodily punishment and degrading strip search of visitors. There is a dire lack of the provision for adequate sleeping facilities, sanitary and hygiene installations, health care services, nutritional food and drinking water, and access to books and newspapers. The Php39 to Php70 daily meal allowance is insufficient as it is.



Maternal and reproductive health care facilities in prisons are alarmingly dreadful. As of 2020, pregnant women comprise 4.3% of the female population at the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) facilities. Jail officials said that not all jail facilities have resident doctors who can conduct routine check-ups for women, including pregnant women. There are only 37 breastfeeding areas across 84 BJMP jails for women in the Philippines.

Because of subhuman conditions in jail, around 500 die in prisons every year. Under Duterte's 6-year term, 11 political prisoners died in detention. Their illnesses were aggravated by dismal jail conditions and the critical lack of basic medical care in jail. Six among them died during the pandemic. Due to the dangers of the spread of COVID-19 virus in the overcrowded jails, families of political prisoners had filed a petition before the Supreme Court for the humanitarian release of their loved ones. It was not granted.

Even as they suffer the terrible conditions of prison life, political prisoners actively assert their rights behind bars and to demand their right to be free.



Under the **Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners** adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 14, 1990:

“Except for those limitations that are demonstrably necessitated by the fact of incarceration, all prisoners shall retain the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and, where the State concerned is a party, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Optional Protocol thereto, as well as such other rights as are set out in other United Nations covenants.”

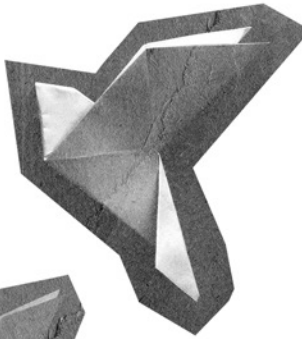
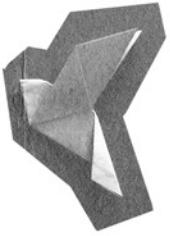
Should political prisoners be freed?

Political prisoners must be released. The continued existence of political prisoners is a reflection of the existence of a society without justice and the continued existence of impunity or lack of accountability.

The Philippine government continues to implement its campaigns of political repression that result in the gross violations of human rights, including unjust arrest and imprisonment. We must not allow this to continue.

However, freedom for political prisoners is not an easy task to achieve given the character of the Philippine state forces that are fascist with militarists inside and outside government, and given the opposition of the forces of imperialism, particularly of the US and its allies.

Thus, we are again calling for a people's struggle that can be won with a strong and broad political pressure, here and abroad.



What can we do?

- ✓ Discuss the plight of political prisoners with your families, friends, communities, social media chat groups, church ministries, etc. and encourage their support for the campaign for the PPs' release. Organize discussion groups, forum, and other events to make the general public know about the existence of PPs.
- ✓ Write to various government agencies, especially Malacañang, to demand the release of all political prisoners.
- ✓ Extend solidarity to political prisoners. Organize and join jail visits. Express support to their families. Write letters to political prisoners.
- ✓ Appeal for the immediate release for humanitarian reasons, particularly of the elderly, sick, longtime prisoners, pregnant women and nursing mothers.
- ✓ Contribute material (food, medicines, personal effects, books, art materials, etc.) and financial support to political prisoners and their relatives.
- ✓ Join mass actions, troopings to courts, solidarity fasting, and street protests to push for the release of PPs.



Get in touch with us if you are able to help us in helping the political prisoners of the Philippines through:

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Email: publicinfo@karapatan.org

Facebook: [facebook.com/karapatan](https://www.facebook.com/karapatan)

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