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An activist holding a placard shouts anti-government slogans while protesting outside the presidential palace in Manila on March 8, 2016. In a statement on July 17, 2022, the religious superiors in the Philippines said "red-tagging" would not deter them from criticizing the regime of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., on issues such as corruption and graft. (CNS/Reuters/Romeo Ranoco)

by Catholic News Service

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Religious superiors in the Philippines have vowed not to back down from taking a strong stance against government mismanagement and corruption despite a political threat of being labeled "communists."

The religious superiors said in a statement July 17 that "red-tagging" would not deter them from criticizing the regime of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on issues such as graft, ucanews.com reported.

"Some among our ranks were red-tagged; irresponsible labels and name-calling will not cow us. To serve the people of God is never wrong. To be in solidarity with the struggles, dreams and hopes of our people is demanded by our life of consecration to God and his people," the group said.

Red-tagging is the malicious labeling of individuals or groups as "terrorists" or "communists" for criticizing the government.

Also known as red-baiting, the practice has been used by successive governments in the Philippines to crackdown on the New People's Army, the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, since 1969.

The authorities defended the campaign as part of counterinsurgency measures but continued to accuse activists, journalists, politicians, and various organizations of being directly involved in the fighting or supporting the New People's Army, Human Rights Watch said in a January report.

Red-tagging has led to extrajudicial killings and torture of alleged communists by the Philippine military in past decades.

The government of former president Rodrigo Duterte made red-tagging deadlier, the report said. Duterte created the National Task Force on Ending Local Communist Armed Conflict, led by former military officials. He made red-tagging an official policy that was carried out through the task force's social media posts and official pronouncements.

The administration in 2021 started labeling senior Catholic officials as communist sympathizers for criticizing Duterte's deadly war on drugs that left thousands of suspected drug dealers and users dead.

One of Duterte's communications staff once labeled missionary Benedictine Sr. Mary John Mananzan, a theologian, educator and author who helped develop an Asian feminist theology of liberation, as a member of an "international terrorist organization" for condemning the extrajudicial killings.

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Bishop Pablo Virgilio David of Kalookan, president of the Catholic Philippine bishops' conference, criticized red-tagging of church leaders, calling it "ridiculous." He said it had brought back memories of martial law under the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., the current Philippine president's father.

"I think there is a reason for people to be afraid when that becomes a trend. ... It sort of brings back to memory the times when we were under authoritarian rule," David said in 2021.

The superiors likewise asserted that they would continue to stand up for the truth because they could not remain neutral on moral and ethical issues.

"We must speak the truth within the ambit of systematic disinformation, misinformation, historical distortions, and the like, as the church will not and cannot be neutral on moral and ethical issues and concerns," they said.

They also called on Catholics to do their own fact-checking and avoid being duped by fake news.

"Let us align and work with truth-tellers, justice and peace and human rights defenders, environmental advocates and civil society organizations. These are our strengths," the superiors said.

Catholic clergy in the Philippines publicly backed former vice president Leni Robredo ahead of the May 9 presidential election.

Church leaders and critics said the younger Marcos' election campaign was characterized by disinformation and historical revisionism. Marcos' supporters allegedly attempted the whitewashing of Philippine history by claiming the martial law years were the "golden era" in Philippine history.