

Halal Accessibility to Muslim Persons Deprived of Liberty and Trainees

Darwin J. Absari and Camille Lucille A. Bello 



Islamic Studies Program

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Cover Image Credit

"Assistant Professor Darwin J. Absari delivering a lecture during the Halal Validation Meeting for the project "Halal Compliance in the Philippine Correctional Facilities and Security Institutions."

Photo taken during the validation meeting at UP Diliman, Quezon City on 16 April 2026.

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Halal Accessibility to Muslim Persons Deprived of Liberty and Trainees

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Key Highlights

■ Main Argument

While the Philippines is actively developing its halal industry as part of its national economic strategy, institutional gaps persist in ensuring that Muslim individuals in state-controlled environments—particularly Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) and trainees in security institutions—are able to fully exercise their religious rights. Halal compliance is not merely a dietary concern but a constitutional and human rights issue tied to religious freedom, dignity, and equal protection.

■ Policy Landscape

The expansion of the halal industry is aligned with national development priorities, including the government's broader socioeconomic agenda. Existing initiatives—such as Senate inquiries, inter-agency cooperation, and the development of the Handbook on Islam in Places of Detention—reflect growing recognition of the need to protect Muslim rights. However, these efforts remain uneven, with limited standardization, weak enforcement mechanisms, and the absence of comprehensive institutional policies on halal compliance across correctional and security institutions.

■ Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, field-based approach, drawing on interviews with personnel from selected institutions, including the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), Philippine National Police (PNP) training units, and the New Bilibid Prison (NBP) under the Bureau of Corrections. These are complemented by document analysis and insights from validation meetings to assess how halal practices are operationalized in institutional settings.

■ Key Findings

Findings reveal a pattern of partial and inconsistent halal accommodation across institutions. While some good practices exist—such as dedicated halal kitchens in NBP, informal food segregation in PCG, and religious accommodations in PNP training—compliance is often based on informal arrangements, personal initiative, and trust rather than standardized systems. Key gaps include the absence of halal certification, lack of trained personnel, shared facilities that risk contamination, and limited institutional awareness of halal requirements beyond food consumption. These gaps expose Muslim PDLs and trainees to potential violations of their religious rights.

■ Policy Recommendations

The study recommends the institutionalization of clear, standardized, and enforceable policies on halal compliance and religious accommodation across security and correctional institutions. This includes adopting certified halal systems, strengthening monitoring and accountability mechanisms, integrating cultural and religious sensitivity training, expanding inclusive chaplaincy services, integrating Islam-informed rehabilitative approaches, and designating Muslim focal persons. It also highlights the need for post-release reintegration support for Muslim PDLs and the development of practical tools—such as halal compliance checklists—to support consistent implementation at the facility level.

Introduction

Halal food holds profound religious significance for Muslims, as it forms part of the broader Islamic concept of purity, which the Prophet Muhammad described as constituting half of faith.³ For observant Muslims, adherence to halal dietary requirements is not a matter of preference, but a religious obligation closely tied to spiritual integrity and moral accountability. The deliberate or negligent serving of haram (prohibited) food is therefore not perceived as a minor oversight, but as a serious violation of religious conscience and dignity, particularly when accompanied by mockery or discrimination.

Public incidents in recent years have drawn attention to the gravity of such violations. In one widely reported case, a Muslim congresswoman reacted strongly after discovering that food she had been assured was pork-free in fact contained pork (GMA News 2006). On August 7, 2023, a more severe incident occurred when Master Sergeant Alraquib Aguel, a Muslim Police Chief in Taguig, shot his fellow officer, Executive Master Sergeant Heriberto Saguiped (GMA News 2023). While initial reports framed the event as the result of a heated argument, subsequent investigation revealed repeated discrimination and ridicule directed at Aguel, including the alleged deliberate serving of pork. Although the act itself cannot be justified, the circumstances illustrate how disregard for halal observance may intersect with broader patterns of religious humiliation and marginalization, and how similar incidents may remain underreported.

3 Sahih Muslim 223. <https://sunnah.com/muslim:22the 3>.

The issue gained further prominence through the intervention of Senator Robinhood “Robin” Padilla, whose inquiry indicated that the shooting was not an isolated occurrence, but part of a wider pattern of discriminatory behavior toward Muslim personnel. Testimonies showed repeated acts of mockery and disregard for Islamic practices, particularly halal dietary rules, raising concerns about systemic weaknesses in the protection of Muslim religious rights within institutions.

In response, Senate Resolution No. 743 was filed to investigate these matters and to consider legislative measures safeguarding religious freedom and equal treatment. Findings from the inquiry revealed regulatory deficiencies, particularly in halal certification, where products labeled as halal contained pork and were certified by unaccredited bodies. These findings exposed gaps not only in compliance but also in oversight and enforcement mechanisms.

Similar concerns have surfaced within state institutions. Reports indicate instances in which pork was served to Muslim inmates despite established agreements regarding religious diets, as well as allegations that Muslim trainees in military and police training facilities were provided non-halal food. At the local level, unsafe and non-halal food practices in public markets further demonstrate the absence of consistent safeguards for Muslim consumers.

Taken together, these cases represent only a fraction of comparable incidents, many of which may not reach public attention. They reveal a recurring pattern of institutional neglect in accommodating Muslim religious practices across national and local systems. Such neglect often stems from limited awareness and insufficient sensitivity to the religious significance of halal observance, allowing violations to be dismissed as minor administrative lapses rather than recognized as serious infringements of religious rights. These patterns underscore the need for clearer policy frameworks, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and greater institutional accountability.⁴

However, these contemporary challenges should not be understood solely as the product of deliberate hostility. Rather, they may be situated within a longer historical trajectory shaped during Spanish colonial rule, when Muslims

4 Senate of the Philippines, “Robin Seeks Probe on ‘Discrimination’ that Triggered Taguig Police Shooting,” legacy.senate.gov, 20 August 2023, https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2023/0820_padilla2.asp.

were frequently portrayed as adversaries in dominant narratives. Elements of this historical framing were subsequently embedded in governance structures, educational systems, and public discourse, and continue to influence general awareness of Muslim religious practices today. In this sense, gaps in understanding obligations such as halal observance reflect inherited historical narratives, rather than isolated individual or institutional failure.

Historical Background

Long before the arrival of the Spaniards in the Philippines in the early 16th century, religion was not a divisive issue among the inhabitants of the archipelago. Muslims and non-Islamic communities were actively engaged in inter-island and international maritime trade networks linking Southeast Asia to China and the wider Indian Ocean world. In 1011, the King of Butuan sent a tribute mission to China accompanied by an Arab named Ali Bakti. In 1405, another tribute mission dispatched from Mao-li-wu (identified as either Marinduque or Mindoro), together with Luzon, was led by a Muslim named Taonu Makaw (Scott 1989). When Magellan reached Cebu in 1521, Raja Humabon was recorded to have had a Muslim adviser (Pigafetta 1906). Until 1547, Luzon mercenaries and Mindanao merchants—most likely Muslims—were documented during the siege of Martaban in Burma (Scott 1989).

At the height of the Sulu Sultanate in the 16th century, several areas in Luzon and the Visayas, including Mindoro and the Calamianes, were said to have been tributary to Sulu prior to Spanish arrival (Majul 1999). Muslim participation in commerce facilitated not only the gradual spread of Islam in Luzon and the Visayas, but also enduring linguistic and cultural exchanges, reflected in loanwords from Arabic and Malay such as *sumba*, *hukum*, *asal*, and *saliksik* (Scott 1989; Absari 2023). Thus, prior to European intervention, Islam in the archipelago appears to have expanded primarily through maritime trade networks, diplomatic engagement, and sustained cultural interaction within the broader Southeast Asian region.

This pattern of relatively fluid regional exchange was fundamentally altered with the onset of Spanish colonization. Spain's long history of conflict with Muslim polities in Iberia—where successive Muslim dynasties governed most of the peninsula for nearly eight centuries (711–1492)—deeply shaped its colonial outlook in the Philippines and informed its policies toward Islamized communities. Rather than encountering Muslim societies as commercial partners within an interconnected maritime sphere, Spanish authorities

approached them as political adversaries and obstacles to imperial consolidation (Majul 1999). Colonial discourse reinforced this framing, portraying Muslims as “Moro” enemies, pirates, and civilizational outsiders—images popularized in religious theater such as the moro-moro plays organized by Jesuit missionaries. Consequently, earlier patterns of trade-based interaction were gradually supplanted by sustained militarized confrontation and territorial campaigns that redefined relations between Christianized and Muslim communities in the archipelago.

Over more than three centuries of Spanish attempts to subjugate Muslim societies, colonial authorities enlisted the support of Luzon and Visayas natives whom they had converted to Catholicism. Within this divide-and-rule framework, hardened religious identities and intercommunal suspicions began to take institutional form. In response to Spanish military campaigns, Muslims in Sulu and Mindanao conducted raids on Christian settlements to weaken Spanish power in the region. Male captives taken during these raids were sold into slavery in other territories. Moro watchtowers constructed as defenses against such incursions continue to symbolize the historical memory of conflict (Dery 1997). While these conflicts left enduring grievances, historical accounts suggest that systems of captivity in Muslim-controlled areas operated under different social norms than those in Spanish-held territories, with some captives able to obtain manumission, marry, and integrate into local communities (Warren 1985). American occupation (1898–1946) did not dissolve these divisions; instead, it reframed them within a regime of military pacification and centralized administration. American colonial authorities exhibited enduring prejudices toward Muslim communities that had taken shape during the Spanish period, framing them through racialized and civilizational hierarchies as resistant to modern governance (Gowing 1983). The phrase “a good Moro is a dead Moro” became emblematic of pacification campaigns that enlisted members of the Philippine Constabulary—largely composed of Christian Filipinos—against Muslims who resisted American rule. Campaigns against Muslim resistance thus combined armed suppression with institutional restructuring, gradually incorporating Muslim-majority territories into a colonial state oriented toward political consolidation and territorial integration.

The Japanese invasion of 1941 again altered the political landscape of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. In contrast to earlier periods marked by colonial confrontation, Muslim communities actively participated in resisting Japanese occupation. Muslim and Christian guerrilla units coordinated operations in Mindanao, while resistance movements in Sulu and Lanao challenged Japanese

control (Baclagon 1988; Espaldon 1997; Kawashima 2002). This episode demonstrated the possibility of intercommunal cooperation under shared political objectives, particularly in defense against a common occupying force.

Another significant contribution to national defense during the American period was made by Hadji Butu, who in 1915 was appointed by the American colonial government as the first Muslim senator representing Mindanao and Sulu in the Philippine Legislature. He sponsored legislation supporting the establishment of the Philippine Military Academy and the Philippine Naval Academy, as well as the expansion of military training programs in colleges and schools across the country. His legislative initiatives reflected early Muslim participation not only in armed resistance or local defense, but also in shaping the institutional foundations of the country's formal security structures.

Following the defeat of Japan and the formal independence of the Philippines in 1946, Muslim-majority regions were consolidated within a republic politically dominated by Christian Filipinos. For many Moro leaders, independence was perceived as the transfer of Mindanao and Sulu into a state they had not fully consented to join. Nevertheless, incorporation into the new republic created avenues for participation in national institutions, particularly within the armed forces and the constabulary. Military service became both a livelihood strategy and a means of asserting belonging within the national framework. Beyond livelihood considerations, enlistment was often associated with enhanced social standing and the attainment of community respect.

As Muslim participation in the security sector expanded, however, integration unfolded unevenly. A retired Philippine Constabulary (now Philippine National Police) officer who enlisted prior to the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 recalled that Muslim trainees frequently encountered discrimination during training. He described instances in which Muslim personnel were bullied and pressured to violate dietary prohibitions. In one case, harassment ceased only after the trainee resorted to an act of intimidation to deter further abuse. Such accounts illustrate the absence, at that time, of institutional mechanisms safeguarding religious accommodation and protecting minority personnel within military structures.

These tensions intensified amid the political upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Jabidah massacre of 1968 marked a decisive turning point in Muslim-state relations. The killing of Muslim trainees allegedly recruited for a covert operation to reclaim Sabah intensified grievances in Mindanao, contributing to the emergence of the Moro National Liberation Front

(MNLF). Following the declaration of Martial Law in 1972, armed conflict between the MNLF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) escalated into large-scale hostilities that claimed thousands of lives and significantly strained state resources.

Yet even during periods of armed confrontation, Muslim personnel within the Philippine Constabulary and the AFP occupied complex roles. While engagements between government forces and Moro rebels were ongoing, some Muslim officers were reportedly deployed to guide Christian soldiers operating in Muslim communities in order to prevent abuses and violations. Their presence reflected the dual function of Muslim servicemen as both representatives of the state and cultural intermediaries within conflict-affected areas.

A significant institutional shift occurred with the signing of the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the MNLF. The agreement provided for the integration of 5,750 MNLF members into the AFP, marking a formal transition from armed resistance to participation within the state's security sector (Final Peace Agreement 1996, II-20). It also advanced commitments toward autonomy and political inclusion in Muslim-majority areas, thereby institutionalizing Muslim participation within the country's defense framework.

Following the 1996 agreement, the number of Muslim soldiers in the Armed Forces increased substantially. As recalled by a retired Army Official who was a member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), this period marked one of the most constructive phases of integration. The expansion in Muslim personnel was accompanied by more deliberate accommodation of religious obligations, including the provision of halal food and designated prayer spaces within training camps. Such measures enabled Muslim soldiers to fulfill professional responsibilities without compromising their religious commitments. At the same time, he observed that these accommodations were not always consistently sustained, underscoring the importance of institutional continuity in preserving cohesion and morale. Taken together, this historical trajectory—from precolonial exchange to colonial confrontation, post-independence incorporation, armed conflict, and peace agreement integration—demonstrates that Muslim participation in Philippine security institutions has been continuous rather than peripheral. However, the depth of inclusion has varied according to the extent of institutional recognition and structural accommodation of religious practice. The question emerging from

this history is no longer whether Muslims belong within state institutions, but whether those institutions adequately respond to the practical implications of religious inclusion.

It is within this broader historical and institutional context that issues of halal compliance in correctional and security institutions must be situated. The challenge is not simply theological or cultural; it is institutional. In environments where food provision is centralized and compulsory—such as military camps, police training centers, and detention facilities—the ability of the state to accommodate religious dietary obligations becomes a concrete measure of its commitment to constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and equal protection. Drawing on data gathered from selected institutions, including the Philippine Coast Guard, the Philippine National Police, and the New Bilibid Prison under the Bureau of Corrections, the succeeding sections examine how halal standards are operationalized in practice, identifying both institutional strengths and structural gaps that warrant policy attention.

Halal Compliance in the Philippine Coast Guard

Recognized as the country's premier armed and uniformed maritime law enforcement agency, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) was established as an attached agency of the Department of Transportation and Communications through Republic Act No. 9993, otherwise known as the "Philippine Coast Guard Law of 2009." Pursuant to this law, the PCG is mandated to enforce regulations in accordance with relevant international maritime conventions, treaties, and instruments to which the Philippine government is a signatory, as well as applicable national laws.⁵ As the country's maritime vanguard, the PCG performs a wide range of functions, including maritime search and rescue, maritime law enforcement, maritime safety, maritime environmental protection, and maritime security.⁶ To effectively carry out these mandates, the PCG operates through 14 Personnel Service Command (PSC) Centers and 29 PSC Divisions nationwide. According to reports by the Philippine

5 Republic Act No. 9993, "Philippine Coast Guard Law of 2009," 13 February 2010, <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/2/17034>.

6 Philippine Coast Guard, "Functions," [coastguard.gov](https://coastguard.gov.ph/index.php/transparency/functions), accessed [date of access], <https://coastguard.gov.ph/index.php/transparency/functions>.

News Agency, the PCG has expanded the creation of uniformed positions to further enhance its operational capabilities. As of 2024, the agency has a total of 34,430 authorized positions (Esguerra 2024). Internal estimates suggest that approximately 4,000 personnel across the organization identify as Muslim, comprising around 20 to 25 percent of the total workforce.

Given this significant representation, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has long permitted Muslims to serve without formal restriction. Religious affiliation has not been used as a basis for exclusion in recruitment, training, or promotion. This inclusivity is further reflected in the geographic diversity of Muslim personnel. Muslim recruits are no longer concentrated solely in the southern Philippines but also come from Northern Luzon and the Visayas, including both born Muslims and converts.

In practice, halal compliance within the PCG is shaped by a centralized institutional food system, where meals are prepared within training centers. While there is no dedicated halal kitchen, internal measures have been developed to minimize potential violations of Islamic dietary laws. For instance, pork is prepared separately from chicken, beef, fish, and vegetables, and designated portions are reserved for Muslim trainees. During communal meals, including traditional boodle fights, food items are separated and clearly identified. Catering personnel also employ an informal verbal assurance “*walang kalaban*” to indicate that the food contains no pork, alcohol, or ingredients that have come into contact with prohibited substances. In the absence of formal certification, this practice functions as an informal system of trust.

Despite these efforts, PCG officials acknowledge that their system lacks full halal compliance because there is no halal certification process, no standardized halal supply chain, no separate kitchen, and no Muslim cook officially assigned to supervise food preparation. In addition, shared utensils and cooking spaces remain potential sources of contamination, and kitchen staff receive no structured training on halal principles.

Compliance mainly depends on personal trust instead of clear and measurable standards. Because of this, Muslim chaplains and senior personnel have repeatedly recommended improvements. Since at least 2007, there have been calls to hire Muslim cooks and to provide halal-awareness training for stewards, kitchen staff, drill instructors, and commanders. It has also been suggested that Muslim cooks be assigned to training centers with many Muslim trainees, instead of placing them in every facility.

The need for halal awareness became particularly evident in cases involving Muslim stewards. In one instance, a Muslim personnel assigned as a steward was instructed to purchase, cook, serve, and clean utensils used for pork. From an Islamic perspective, involvement in any stage of handling prohibited food is considered equivalent to consumption. As a result, the steward experienced significant distress and even considered resigning, believing that his religious obligations had been compromised.

There was no indication that the commanding officers acted with ill intent; rather, the incident stemmed from a lack of understanding, as halal restrictions were assumed to apply only to the act of eating. This highlights a critical gap in institutional knowledge and underscores the need for formal halal-awareness education within the chain of command.

Overall, although the PCG continues to face limitations in achieving full halal compliance, particularly due to the absence of formal certification and dedicated halal kitchens, it demonstrates significant institutional strength in other areas of religious accommodation. The organization maintains a mosque at its headquarters, provides official funding for major Islamic observances, and has institutionalized an Imamate Division alongside Catholic and Protestant chaplaincies. A nationwide Interfaith Dialogue Program further reinforces interreligious cooperation within the service. The hijab is formally recognized as part of the official uniform, Ramadan practices are operationally accommodated, and Muslim prayers are included in official ceremonies. These measures indicate that while halal systems require further development, the PCG has made substantial progress in broader areas of religious inclusion.⁷

Cultural and Religious Accommodations in the Philippine National Police Training Institutions

Originally rooted in the Philippine Constabulary, the Philippine National Police (PNP) was formally established in 1991 through the enactment of Republic Act No. 6975, otherwise known as the “Department of the Interior and Local Government Act of 1990.” This legislation created the PNP under

7 Interview with the Philippine Coast Guard, Manila, 29 January 2026.

the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), consolidating various police forces into a unified national police organization. The PNP became operational on January 29, 1991, marking a significant transition toward a centralized system of law enforcement in the Philippines.⁸

In February 1998, Republic Act No. 6975 was amended by Republic Act No. 8551, or the “Philippine National Police Reform and Reorganization Act of 1998.” This law strengthened and expanded the PNP’s mandate, including the administration of police entrance examinations, enhancement of training systems, and institutional reforms aimed at professionalizing the police force.⁹

Guided by the core philosophy of service, honor, and justice, the PNP is mandated to enforce the law, prevent and control crime, maintain peace and order, and ensure both public and internal security with active community support. In line with these functions, the PNP also supervises and regulates the training and operations of security agencies.¹⁰ Training is primarily conducted through its Regional Special Training Units (RSTUs) and Regional Training Centers (RTCs). These units are responsible for delivering both specialized and mandatory training programs for PNP personnel. Each RSTU and RTC is headed by a training manager, typically holding the rank of Police Colonel or Police Lieutenant Colonel.

For this study, the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies–Islamic Studies Program (UP CIDS-ISP) conducted interviews with training managers from three training units: RSTU 8 in Leyte, RTC 4A in Laguna, and the RSTU in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), particularly in Maguindanao del Norte.

Among the three, RSTU BARMM reported the highest number of Muslim trainees. In 2024, it recorded a total of 254 trainees, of whom 219 were Muslims and 35 were non-Muslims. In contrast, the two training centers reported no

8 PNP PIO, “Module 2.1 Historical Development of Policing System in the Philippine Setting,” YouTube video, accessed 27 March 2026, http://youtube.com/watch?v=ennWsDiCt_c.

9 Republic Act No. 8551, “Philippine National Police Reform and Reorganization Act of 1998.” 27 February 1998. <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/2/4042>.

10 Philippine National Police, Revised Philippine National Police Operational Procedures (POP) Manual, PNPM-DO-D-0-2-13-21 (Quezon City: Directorate for Operations, 2021), accessed 27 March 2026, <https://akg.pnp.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/POP-Manual-2021.pdf>.

Muslim trainees during the same period, although Muslim personnel were present among their staff.

Despite being assigned to different regions, all three training managers shared prior experiences working with Muslim trainees and personnel. Some had previous assignments in BARMM, while others had worked alongside Muslim colleagues in their respective units. These experiences informed their perspectives on cultural and religious accommodation within the PNP.

According to the respondents, the PNP upholds respect for religious and cultural diversity, particularly given the heterogeneous composition of its trainees. One common practice is the collection of information on dietary restrictions, including allergies and food prohibitions based on religious beliefs. However, food provision is typically outsourced to external caterers. As a result, minor lapses occasionally occur, such as the distribution of incorrect meal packs. These incidents are usually addressed promptly through replacement and coordination with the caterer.

Training managers emphasized that trainees themselves play an active role in communicating their dietary requirements to mess providers and unit leaders. In RSTU BARMM, dietary concerns are less problematic, as meals are generally non-pork in consideration of the predominantly Muslim trainee population. Additionally, the segregation of utensils is practiced in several training centers, although the absence of separate kitchen facilities in some units limits full compliance with halal standards.

Training managers also play a crucial role to ensure that dietary accommodations are observed. These efforts, however, are largely driven by personal initiative and a general commitment to cultural respect, rather than formal institutional policy. Notably, respondents reported that they have neither received nor reviewed official PNP memoranda specifically addressing halal compliance. This indicates a gap between practice and policy, where accommodations exist but lack formal standardization.

In terms of religious practices, Muslim trainees are generally allowed to observe their daily prayers. They may perform prayers at dawn prior to physical conditioning activities and are permitted to use available spaces, including tents, for this purpose. During the month of Ramadan, adjustments are made to training schedules to accommodate fasting, with physically demanding activities conducted after the breaking of the fast (*iftar*). Trainees are also allowed to attend congregational prayers in mosques, particularly during

significant religious occasions such as Eid. Despite these accommodations, there are instances where some Muslim trainees abuse this consideration by staying out longer than necessary and, in some cases, using it as an opportunity to leave or evade their assigned duties. Not all who are permitted to go to the mosque necessarily do so for prayer. This underscores the need for proper monitoring and clear guidelines.

However, several institutional gaps remain. Training managers acknowledged the need to further enhance their awareness and understanding of religious practices—not only of Muslims but also of other faith groups represented within the PNP. They noted that having Muslim colleagues is advantageous, as these individuals often serve as cultural mediators and sources of guidance. Increasing the representation of Muslim personnel within the PNP was also identified as a strategic approach to strengthening engagement with Muslim communities.

To address these gaps, respondents highlighted the importance of institutionalizing cultural and religious awareness through formal training programs. This includes integrating lectures on Muslim customs and traditions into both trainee curricula and staff development initiatives. The role of Salaam Police personnel was also emphasized, as they can serve as key partners in bridging cultural gaps within the organization. Strengthening coordination and partnerships with such groups was identified as a critical step toward fostering a more inclusive, culturally competent, and responsive police force.¹¹

Halal Compliance in the Bureau of Corrections: The Case of New Bilibid Prison

In 1940, the New Bilibid Prison (NBP) was established in Poblacion, Muntinlupa City. It operates under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor), which is attached to the Department of Justice (DOJ).¹²

11 Interview with PNP RSTU and RTC training managers, March 24, 2026.

12 City Government of Muntinlupa, “Bagong Bilangguang Bilibid,” City Government of Muntinlupa, accessed [date accessed], <https://muntinlupacity.gov.ph/tourism/bagong-bilangguang-bilibid/>.

The NBP's mandate is aligned with that of BuCor: the safekeeping of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) and the implementation of reformation programs aimed at their rehabilitation. In carrying out this mandate, the institution ensures the provision of basic necessities in accordance with existing domestic and international laws, rules, and regulations.¹³

To fulfill these responsibilities, the NBP implements six core programs: (1) work and livelihood; (2) moral and spiritual development; (3) sports and recreation; (4) education and skills training; (5) healthcare services; and (6) the therapeutic community program. These initiatives collectively aim to support the holistic rehabilitation of PDLs.¹⁴

However, the implementation of these programs takes place within the context of severe congestion. Based on the December 2025 Statistics on Prison Congestion, the NBP spans a total land area of 375.61 hectares but houses 20,999 PDLs, far exceeding its estimated capacity of approximately 7,000 and resulting in a 296 percent occupancy rate (Bureau of Corrections 2026). Of the total PDL population, around 1,000 are Muslims, with most confined in the Maximum Security Compound. Reports indicate that most are involved in drug-related offenses, while a smaller number are associated with extremist activities, including alleged involvement in the Marawi siege.¹⁵

With approximately 1,000 Muslim PDLs, the NBP strives to promote religious and cultural awareness by allowing PDLs to practice their faith. One of its most significant initiatives is the construction of Al-Rahman Mosque in the NBP's Maximum Security Camp, which serves as the center of religious life for Muslim PDLs, particularly for communal prayers. In other camps, *musallahs* or designated prayer rooms are also provided. It was also noted that Muslim PDLs are able to observe Ramadan, women are permitted to wear the hijab, and prayer mats are made available (Aben 2024).

13 Bureau of Corrections, "Mandates and Functions," Bureau of Correction, accessed 27 March 2026, https://bucor.gov.ph/?page_id=2304.

14 Bureau of Corrections, "Programs," Bureau of Corrections, accessed 27 March 2026, https://bucor.gov.ph/?page_id=2306.

15 Interview with a New Bilibid Prison Personnel, Muntinlupa, 16 February 2026.

With regard to food provision, NBP considers the dietary requirements of Muslim PDLs, particularly the prohibition against pork and pork-derived products. To institutionalize this effort, two Muslim personnel have been designated as focal persons to oversee halal compliance within the facility.

One focal person operates at the program level and takes the lead in ensuring that halal control points are observed. This includes monitoring the delivery of goods to ensure proper segregation of pork and non-pork products, overseeing food inspection processes, and addressing kitchen-related concerns that affect Muslim PDLs. The second focal person is assigned to the Maximum Security Camp and is responsible for implementing activities under the Moral and Spiritual Program for Muslim PDLs. Among his functions is ensuring that Muslim PDLs are able to observe their faith, including adherence to dietary restrictions.

NBP maintains three separate kitchens: one for the general population, one for Seventh-day Adventist PDLs, and one dedicated to Muslim PDLs. In the Muslim kitchen, food preparation is undertaken by Muslim PDLs themselves to promote proper handling in accordance with halal standards. According to facility personnel, this system has been in place for a considerable period, reflecting a longstanding institutional recognition of religious dietary needs.¹⁶

A significant and tangible initiative undertaken by NBP is its contribution to the development of the *Handbook on Islam in Places of Detention: A Practical Guide for Custodial Officers in the Philippines*, published in 2024. The handbook was co-authored by the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), the Bureau of Corrections (BuCor), the Philippine National Police (PNP), the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF), and the Commission on Human Rights, with technical support from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and funding from the Australian Government through its Department of Foreign Affairs. The publication aims to enhance custodial officers' understanding of Islam and its practices in order to better support Muslim PDLs during incarceration and to facilitate programs that improve their welfare and prospects for successful reintegration.¹⁷

16 Interview with a New Bilibid Prison Personnel, Muntinlupa, 16 February 2026.

17 Bureau of Jail Management and Penology, Bureau of Corrections,; Philippine National Police, National Commission on Muslim Filipinos et al., *Handbook on Islam in Places of Detention: A Practical Guide for Custodial in the Philippines*, (United Nations, 2024).

Chapter Three of the handbook, titled “Accommodating Islamic Practices in Places of Detention,” includes specific guidance on food and diet. Section 3.4 defines halal and outlines measures to ensure compliance with the dietary preferences of Muslim PDLs. It emphasizes that custodial officers must ensure, as far as practicable, that food served to Muslim PDLs complies with halal requirements. This includes the use of separate and dedicated cooking materials and eating utensils to prevent cross-contamination with non-halal items, even in small jails and police lockups.

Despite these commendable practices, several areas for further strengthening were identified. First, it was suggested that the Muslim kitchen undergo formal halal certification from a recognized halal certifying body in the Philippines to institutionalize and validate existing practices. Second, there is a need to enhance the provision of nutritious food, such as fruits and other permissible items, given that many PDLs lack the financial capacity to supplement their meals and rely solely on food provided by NBP. Third, expanded information and orientation initiatives on cultural and religious sensitivity within security institutions were recommended. The adoption of a formal policy reinforcing existing practices on halal compliance and religious accommodation would further solidify these gains. Finally, the conduct of research and data-driven studies was proposed, not only to address misinformation regarding NBP, but also to document and promote its programs, including halal initiatives, through evidence-based reporting.¹⁸

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that security institutions adopt clear and consistent policies to ensure respect for religious practices, halal compliance, and cultural sensitivity. The challenges identified underscore the need for stronger institutional systems, more robust monitoring mechanisms, and sustained support from both institutional leadership and lawmakers. Institutional efforts toward halal compliance should move beyond informal or ad hoc accommodations and instead be anchored in standardized and enforceable policies implemented consistently across agencies. At the same time, these policies should incorporate safeguards to ensure that religious accommodations are exercised responsibly and do not undermine institutional discipline or accountability.

Security institutions should adopt and replicate the good practices demonstrated by the BuCor, particularly in the management of major correctional facilities such as the New Bilibid Prison and its continued compliance with International Organization for Standardization (ISO) frameworks. Aligning institutional processes with recognized standards can help ensure accountability, consistency, and regular policy review. These standards should explicitly incorporate religious accommodation measures, including designated prayer spaces, respect for dietary requirements, and adherence to halal food preparation. Embedding these measures within formal quality management systems ensures that religious accommodation becomes a structured and monitored institutional obligation rather than a discretionary practice.

Similarly, security institutions—particularly training-oriented agencies such as the PNP—should institutionalize clear and standardized guidelines on halal compliance and religious accommodation across all units. This includes formal protocols on food preparation, utensil segregation, and coordination with accredited halal providers to ensure uniform implementation. Clear policies should also regulate movement and time allocation for religious activities to prevent misuse while safeguarding the right to religious practice. These measures help reduce inconsistencies and ensure that accommodations are applied fairly and systematically across institutions.

To strengthen implementation, security institutions should establish and reinforce institutional structures that support religious accommodation, particularly through inclusive chaplaincy programs. Chaplaincy services should represent diverse faiths, including Islam, to provide equitable spiritual care for personnel, trainees, and PDLs. Religious instruction and activities within institutions should be subject to appropriate screening and review mechanisms to ensure alignment with moderate, lawful, and non-violent teachings. This approach supports both religious freedom and institutional security while promoting responsible religious engagement.

Within correctional settings, these chaplaincy-based efforts may be further strengthened by aligning Islamic instruction with rehabilitative goals—particularly through concepts such as repentance (*tawbah*), purification, and personal reform. Insights from the validation meeting¹⁹ further highlight the

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value of developing structured modules on Islam as a values-based intervention, enabling inmates to reframe incarceration as an opportunity for reflection and transformation. At the institutional level, chaplaincy services can facilitate the observance of Islamic practices, including halal compliance, access to prayer spaces, and guidance on religious obligations. Institutions should also address the social and institutional isolation of Muslim PDLs by integrating them into broader rehabilitation and reintegration programs while respecting their religious identity. Ensuring inclusion alongside accommodation supports both individual well-being and institutional cohesion.

Security institutions should also designate qualified Muslim focal persons to oversee the proper implementation of religious accommodation programs. These focal persons can ensure compliance with halal standards, monitor fair treatment, and address religious concerns effectively. They should coordinate with the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos and accredited Muslim organizations to expand access to religious support, social services, and legal assistance. Strengthening these linkages enhances institutional responsiveness and provides additional support mechanisms for Muslim personnel and PDLs.

Complementing these institutional structures, security institutions should integrate mandatory cultural and religious sensitivity training into both trainee curricula and staff development programs. These modules should cover Islamic practices, Muslim customs, and broader religious diversity, and may be developed in partnership with academic institutions and subject matter experts. Training should also address discrimination, bias, and respectful engagement with religious minorities, ensuring that it is both informative and transformative in fostering inclusive institutional cultures.

Additionally, regular orientation programs on religious and cultural awareness should be conducted for all personnel and trainees. These programs should include practical guidance on prayer times, dietary restrictions, and appropriate attire across different religions. Such efforts should be institutionalized as part of regular training cycles rather than one-time activities, with built-in evaluation and feedback mechanisms to ensure continued relevance and effectiveness.

For trainees of security institutions, incidents of bullying—such as forcing Muslim trainees to consume prohibited food—highlight the need for stronger enforcement and accountability mechanisms. Institutional policies should be reinforced with clear rules, sanctions, and consistent monitoring. Confidential

reporting channels and protective measures should also be established to encourage reporting without fear of retaliation. These safeguards are essential in promoting a safe and respectful training environment.

Furthermore, security institutions should strengthen engagement with Muslim personnel and specialized units such as Salaam Police. Increasing the recruitment and representation of Muslim personnel can enhance cultural competence and improve institutional responsiveness to diverse communities. These personnel can serve as cultural intermediaries, offering guidance on religious practices and supporting inclusive approaches to law enforcement. Such engagement also contributes to building trust between institutions and Muslim communities, particularly in historically marginalized areas.

All security institutions should ensure the provision of appropriate prayer spaces for Muslim personnel, trainees, and PDLs, as well as for other religious groups where feasible. These spaces enable individuals to practice their faith freely, support their well-being, and contribute to positive behavior within institutional settings. Providing designated prayer spaces not only facilitates religious observance but may also encourage personal discipline and moral development, thereby contributing to overall institutional cohesion. At the same time, these accommodations should be accompanied by clear guidelines and monitoring mechanisms to prevent misuse, ensuring that such provisions are exercised responsibly and in accordance with institutional rules.

Beyond institutional accommodation, attention should also be given to post-release support mechanisms for Muslim PDLs. Reintegration initiatives may include the utilization of mosques and community-based centers as transitional or “middle” institutions that provide structured support prior to reintegration into society. These centers can offer spiritual guidance, psychosocial support, and access to livelihood and legal assistance, thereby reducing isolation and the risk of recidivism. Partnerships with established religious institutions may serve as practical entry points for these efforts.

Building on these measures, strengthening implementation at the facility level requires the development of clear operational guidance and practical tools for personnel directly responsible for halal compliance. As emphasized during the validation meeting, the absence of such instruments poses challenges in day-to-day implementation. The development and institutionalization of standardized tools—such as halal compliance checklists and procedural guides—can assist chaplains and facility personnel in consistently applying halal standards,

improving oversight, and reinforcing accountability mechanisms across facilities.²⁰

To ensure long-term and consistent implementation, these recommendations should be supported by formal policies, internal guidelines, and, where necessary, legislation at the national level to standardize religious accommodation practices across security institutions.

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List of Interviews and Meetings

1. Interview with a Retired Official of the Philippine Army and a former member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Zamboanga City, July 29, 2025.
2. Interview with the Philippine Coast Guard, Manila, January 29, 2026
3. Interview with a New Bilibid Prison Personnel, Muntinlupa, February 16, 2026

4. Interview with a Retired Member of Philippine Constabulary (PNP), Manila, February 17, 2026.
5. Interview with the Philippine National Police, Zoom interview, Manila, March 24, 2026.
6. Validation Meeting on the Results and Policy Recommendations for the Project “Halal Compliance in Philippine Correctional Facilities and Security Institutions,” University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies–Islamic Studies Program (UP CIDS–ISP), Quezon City, April 16, 2026.

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