News



Catholic devotees raise their hands as a carriage carrying the image of Jesus Nazareno passes by during its annual procession in Manila, Philippines, on its feast day Friday Jan. 9, 2026. (AP/Aaron Favila)

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A massive crowd of mostly barefoot Filipino Catholics joined an annual procession of a centuries-old statue of Jesus Christ in the Philippine capital Friday, with some using the gathering to express outrage over a corruption scandal involving influential legislators.

After a midnight mass joined by tens of thousands of worshippers at a seaside park in Manila, the wooden Jesus the Nazarene statue was placed on a four-wheel open carriage before dawn at the start of the procession that Manila Mayor Isko Moreno claimed could draw millions of devotees throughout the day and into the late night.

One of Asia's major religious spectacles, the often-raucous procession of the life-size statue meanders through nearly six kilometers (3.7 miles) of Manila's congested narrow roads near the heavily guarded presidential palace. The procession is also a security nightmare for the authorities.

About 15,000 police officers, backed by intelligence agents, were deployed to keep order. Authorities imposed a gun and liquor ban, prohibited drones and backpacks, and jammed cellphone signals along the route of the procession.

First-aid tents manned by government and Red Cross medics were set up throughout the route, where more than 250 worshippers were treated for bruises and sprains by midday. An hour before the procession started, a Filipino photographer collapsed on a nearby sidewalk and appeared to be having difficulty breathing. He died while being brought to a hospital by medics, according to officials and two Associated Press journalists, who tried to assist the photographer.

Hundreds of thousands of devotees, many wearing maroon shirts imprinted with images of the Nazarene, jostled and scrambled to get near the carriage carrying the statue by mid-morning. Many tried to climb up the carriage or threw small towels at volunteers on the carriage to wipe parts of the cross and the statue, in the belief that the Nazarene' figure would cure ailments and help provide good health, jobs and a better life.

This year's Nazarene procession coincided with growing public outrage over a major corruption scandal, which erupted last year and implicated dozens of members of the House of Representative and the Senate who allegedly received huge kickbacks from construction companies. The scandal involved thousands of substandard or non-existent flood control projects across an archipelago that is prone to some of the deadliest flash floods in Asia.

Several government engineers and construction company executives have been detained while facing corruption trials. Many Filipinos have expressed frustration over the delay implementing President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s vow to have legislators accused of wrongdoing locked up in jail by last Christmas.

As they marched, large numbers of worshippers repeatedly chanted: "jail them now, jail them now."

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The anomalies allegedly started years ago during the time of former President Rodrigo Duterte and could implicate a large number of government officials and legislators, whose lavish lifestyles, fleets of luxury cars, private jets and mansions have sparked street protests, some led by the dominant Roman Catholic Church.

In his homily during mass at the Rizal Park grandstand before the procession, Bishop Rufino Sescon criticized officials, who have been implicated in the corruption scandal by witnesses during televised congressional hearings, but have refused to resign despite a public outrage.

"In our country today, there are those who refuse to step down even though they made mistakes and got caught, even though they are causing hardship to the people, even though the poor are suffering, even though the country is being flooded and destroyed," Sescon said. "Enough is enough. Have mercy on the people.

Have some shame. Step down voluntarily in the name of mercy and love;"

Venus Lopez, a 62-year-old devotee, who carried a replica of the Nazarene statue, made a similar call.

"I hope those corrupt government officials will go away. They don't deserve to be seated in power," Lopez told The Associated Press and added that she would pray to the Nazarene to help banish corrupt officials from government.

The life-size statue, crowned with thorns and bearing a cross, is believed to have been brought from Mexico to Manila on a galleon in 1606 by Spanish missionaries. The ship that carried it caught fire, but the charred statue survived. Some believe the statue's endurance, from fires and earthquakes through the centuries, and intense bombings during World War II, is a testament to what they say are mystical powers.

The spectacle reflects the unique brand of Catholicism, which includes folk superstitions, in Asia's largest Catholic nation. Dozens of Filipinos have themselves nailed to crosses on Good Friday in another tradition to emulate Christ's suffering that draws huge crowds each year.