

'DENIED' IN FRONT OF A RAINBOW FLAG

Manila

The Philippine government promptly rejected the first same-sex marriage licenses applied by two couples in the conservative Catholic nation.

Maria Arlyn Ibanez and her partner Joanne Reena Gregorio joined Pastor Crescencio Agbayani and his partner Marlon Pelipe in trooping to a civil registry office in Manila, hoping to raise awareness about gay rights.

"We expected it would be denied but we tried it anyway.... We thought maybe

there would be a miracle and it would be approved," Ibanez, a 33-year-old call centre worker, said.

After the government agency turned them down, Ibanez and Agbayani, who runs an informal church for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, brandished a sign saying, "We were denied" in front of a rainbow flag.

Officials at the agency told reporters it was the first time a same sex couple had applied for a marriage licence.

Government officials have

previously said no same-sex unions will be recognised unless a law is passed for the purpose, adding that it would likely be blocked by legislators allied with the Catholic church.

The Philippines - where 80 per cent of a population of 100 million is Catholic - is the only country where divorce is not legal, largely due to church influence.

Abortion is also illegal. Gay rights lawyer Clara Rita Padilla said the marriage license applications reflected

the need to legalise same-sex unions in the Philippines. "The right to marry is guaranteed by our constitutional rights to equality, equal protection of the law, privacy, and religion," she said in a statement.

Ibanez said yesterday's rejection will not stop her and her partner from taking part in a "wedding" ceremony slated later this month at Agbayani's church.

The union would not be legally recognized, but would show her commitment to her partner, she said.



Maria Arlyn Ibanez (L) and pastor Crescencio Agbayani

Uproar and disruptions

INDIA'S PARLIAMENT SUSPENDS 25 MPs

New Delhi

India's parliament yesterday suspended 25 opposition lawmakers following days of uproar and disruptions that have so far thwarted the government's hopes of passing major economic reforms in the current session.

The lawmakers, from the main opposition Congress party, have been banned from the lower house for five days amid mounting government fears that the current session will be a washout.

"You have come to the well of the house... and are persistently, wilfully obstructing the house," parliamentary Speaker Sumitra Mahajan said to jeers and heckling from the opposition benches.

The opposition has been demanding the resignation of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and a number of other

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scandal-hit ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's right-wing government, which swept to power last year on a pledge to revive the economy, wants to push through a series of reforms including a new national sales tax.

But, Modi's appeal for opposition support at the start



The opposition has been demanding the resignation of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj

of the session in July has been ignored.

Congress vowed yesterday to push on with the disruptions for the session's remaining eight days, with party president Sonia Gandhi calling the suspensions a "black day for democracy".

The government needs the support of the opposition in the upper house where it lacks a majority to pass its bills.

Modi is keen to pass a long-pending national goods and services tax, which aims to replace a myriad of overlapping state duties that

often deter investment, as well as a controversial bill that makes it easier for businesses to buy land.

The opposition is demanding Swaraj quit over her role in helping corruption-hit former cricket boss Lalit Modi to obtain a passport.

The government has branded the disruptions irresponsible but the BJP was also accused of continuously disrupting parliament during its decade in opposition until 2014.

An exasperated Mahajan said she had no choice but to suspend the MPs who had been storming the well of the chamber, chanting and waving posters.

"I repeatedly called meetings, even warned about these placards, disruptions etc over the last few days," the Speaker said.

India orders hundreds of porn sites blocked

New Delhi

India has ordered more than 800 porn sites blocked for "objectionable" content, a government official said yesterday, igniting a row about freedom of speech in the world's biggest democracy.

The telecommunications department has directed Internet service providers (ISPs) to block 857 websites, in the right-wing government's first major crackdown on online pornography.

"We have written to the ISPs asking them to control free and open access to objectionable websites," N.N. Kaul, a department spokesman, said.

Since the weekend, users across India have been hit with blank pages when they try to access adult sites, many of them based outside the country - sparking anger on social media about moral policing.

According to the adult site Pornhub, India was its fourth largest source of traffic behind the United States, Britain and Canada in 2014.

Deepening rift

Mullah Omar's family refuses to back new leader



Members of the Pakistani Jamiat Nazriati party shout slogans in a rally to pay tribute to Afghanistan's deceased Taliban chief Mullah Omar, in the southwestern city of Quetta

Kabul

The family of deceased Taliban leader Mullah Omar has refused to pledge allegiance to his successor, calling on religious scholars to settle a deepening rift within insurgent ranks over the power transition.

Mullah Akhtar Mansour was announced as the new Taliban chief on Friday after the insurgents confirmed the death of Mullah Omar, who led the militant movement for some 20 years.

But, splits immediately

emerged between Mansour and those who challenged his appointment, including the late leader's son Yakoub and his brother, Mullah Abdul Manan.

"Our family... has not declared allegiance to anyone amid these differences," Manan said in an audio message released on Sunday, without naming Mansour.

"We want the ulema (religious scholars) to resolve the differences rather than declaring allegiance to any side," said the audio message,

which Taliban sources confirmed was from Manan.

"Our family will serve the new leader... if he is elected with consensus."

The comments highlight the Taliban's biggest leadership crisis in recent years at a time when the rival Islamic State group is making gradual inroads into Afghanistan.

Mansour on Saturday called for unity in the Taliban in his first audio message since becoming head of the group, in comments apparently aimed at averting a factional split.

A Taliban source said Yakoub and several other members of the Taliban's ruling council walked out of the meeting at which Mansour was declared leader, refusing to pledge loyalty to him.

"Part of the insurgency is troubled and needs answers from Mansour and his allies: why did they hide Mullah Omar's death all these years? Did they deceive us by putting out fake statements in his name just to serve their own interests?" he said.