



ABS-CBN and the free media: the Duterte Regime's latest victims

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Seoul, South Korea - The Asia Democracy Network condemns the sudden closure of ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corporation, an underhanded attack against the independent press in the Philippines while the country suffers from a global pandemic. ABS-CBN's closure does not serve the public interest. Instead, it worsens the situation by depriving the citizens of an accessible means to get information.

On May 5, 2020, Filipinos witnessed the country's largest television network, the ABS-CBN, went off-air at 6 pm, Manila time. It was an event reminiscent of the same network's closure in 1972 during the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos -- a prelude to the country's darkest days under Martial Law. Indeed, when the chilling presence of autocracy starts to seep within a society, the free press and freedom to express are among the first and inevitable casualties.

Under the Philippine Constitution, only the Congress has the sole power to grant, revoke, or modify franchises. ABS-CBN's closure was the effect of the Duterte-controlled Philippine Congress's refusal to hear any of the broadcasting network's pending franchise renewal bills, the earliest of which was filed as early as November 2016. Upon the expiry of the broadcast network's latest franchise, the National Telecommunication Commission then released a cease and desist order, at the insistence of the Solicitor General, for the network to halt its operations. Unlike ABS-CBN, other similarly situated networks in the past did not experience forced closure.

It is worth noting that ABS-CBN has been targeted by President Duterte and his massive base for releasing news reports critical of the current administration. The network's closure further aggravates the situation of the media in the Philippines, a country often cited by various press freedom watchdogs as among the most hostile environments for journalists. If freedom to operate by media institutions are subject to the whims of an individual or a sector, it can be expected that such conditions in the Philippines will only continue to deteriorate sharply.

Harms brought by this closure far outweighs whatever political benefits the Duterte Government sees in this action. In the midst of a pandemic, it is important to ensure the smooth flow of information to provide the citizens with vital information crucial for their comfort and survival. The closure of ABS-CBN, as one of the networks with the widest reach in the Philippines, only hampers the flow of information which is an important factor to properly stem the further spread of the Covid-19. Furthermore, the move inhumanely placed the livelihood of around 11,000 Filipinos employed by the broadcast company under uncertainty at a period of economic and health insecurity.

It has only been three days since the globe celebrated the World Press Freedom Day. We call on the Government of the Philippines to do the right thing by rescinding the cease and desist order against ABS-CBN. The Duterte Government should instead nurture a free press and ensure an environment conducive to their existence and operation, which can greatly help in curbing the Covid-19 Pandemic, and ultimately promote vital discourse. It will better benefit the Filipino society if their Government will instead focus its power in protecting the health of the citizens and ensure they are provided with proper and enlightened information, than involve itself in repressive actions at this vulnerable time.

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