

Media freedom and responsibility in developing countries

Political leaders in developing countries are sometimes known for their hate of free-speaking and independent media, which they accuse of 'harming national interests' and 'inciting revolt'. In reality, this is only a masquerade. They fear that outspoken media might uncover and expose their weapon of mass destruction: abuse of power and state resources. But the message from Ninez Cacho-Olivares, one of the world's fearless reporters to her fellow comrades, is: "Get up, stand up and don't give up the fight."

 Bylssa Sikiti da Silva ^{29 Nov 2006}

Cacho-Olivares, editor-in-chief of *Daily Tribune*, a prominent daily newspaper in the Philippines, conducted a media discussion themed "Media Freedom and Responsibility in Developing Countries" yesterday evening, Tuesday, 28 November 2006, at the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in Parktown, Johannesburg.

MISA (Media Institute of Southern Africa), SANEF (South African National Editors' Forum) and FXI (Freedom of Expression Institute) facilitated the event, which reminded those who attended that the road to media freedom in the third world is a long and a spiky one.

Veteran journalist

Cacho-Olivares, a veteran journalist with a career spanning three decades, has exposed several government scandals and infuriated many in the past and present Philippines government, including the notorious Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda. But she has survived their onslaught made of money and power, and at 65, she is still defiant and fairly outspoken.

"I believe that no government can take away my right of freedom of expression," she says. "It is like a birthright, which we must exercise to the fullest without fear."

"But the best thing to do against this adversity is to continue fighting and never give up regardless of the circumstances."

Intense battles

The Philippines is a country with a long and dirty history of tyranny, human rights violations, fraud and economic mismanagement. The government is responsible for issuing licences for broadcast media - and can cancel if it 'does not like the broadcast contents'. From Marcos to Corazon Aquino, Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada and presently Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, all hated independent media and have fought intense battles with Cacho-Olivares.

And every time she has emerged the winner.

She says: "Even at the time of Marcos, I used to write a column and frequently took a swipe at both him and mostly his wife Imelda for her exaggerated love of shoes and excesses. Eventually, President Marcos sent a word to my editor to tell me to stop or fire me."

But she carried on and had to move on to another publication. "What kind of journalist are you every time a politician barks an order, you stop writing the truth?" she asks.

Hot water

Her determination to tell it as it is constantly landed her in hot water with the authorities. Her not-so-financially sound but very influential newspaper is very often raided without a search warrant and her staff detained without arrest warrant and trial several times. Last February under the state of emergency declared by President Arroyo, her newspaper was again raided, and she and two columnists were charged with seditio

There were times when the government told what she calls the 'big boys' (big companies) to stop advertising with her newspaper to get her to 'toe the line'. And they did. At some stages, the government even asked her to have control of the editorial contents of her newspaper. She was dragged before the courts for defamation and libels. But none of these 'strategies' made her to back off.

Now, she and 42 other journalists have brought a class action suit against the government to stop it from threatening journalists. As things stand, the action might even reach the international court just after the local court gives them a green light.

"The situation is so bad that European governments continue to express concern and now she [President Arroyo] is feeling the pressure," she says.

This Philippines veteran journalist was hoping that by exposing these misdeeds, the South African Government could help in some way, such as use its influence to press her government to ease its squeeze on the media.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

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