

Philippines: President Duterte turns against a leading critical outlet, Rappler - Authoritarian trend accelerates

Sunday 21 January 2018, by [REGENCIA Ted](#), [SMITH Tom](#) (Date first published: 16 January 2018).

Contents

- [Philippines' dictator Duterte](#)
- [Government targets Rappler](#)

Philippines' dictator Duterte turns on the media that helped elect him

Journalism in the Philippines has long been a dangerous trade [1], one that carries a very real risk of murder with little likelihood of accountability. Yet it is vitally important that Filipinos have a robust critical press to question a government up to its neck in human rights abuses [2]. That's why many are despairing at the news that the authoritarian administration of President Rodrigo Duterte is trying to ban a leading critical outlet, Rappler [3].

Rappler is a social media-driven digital news platform. Initially based on Facebook, it was founded in 2011 by author and journalist Maria Ressa, who now finds herself cast as an opposition figure - taking her place alongside other notable female figures standing up to Duterte [4]. Many of them are being marginalised, silenced, or worse.

Duterte's vice-president, Leni Robredo, is effectively gagged by her position in office [5], and Duterte's plan to federalise the country's political system [6] would see her post abolished. Senator Leila De Lima [7] is still in prison on trumped up charges after almost a year; the judicial process is moving at a glacial pace [8].

By banning Rappler, Duterte is not just removing a key platform for dissent, but one of the vehicles that put him in office - effectively pulling up the ladder behind him. Rappler exposed how Duterte's campaign and administration deployed an aggressive (often abusive) digital strategy [9], using an army of trolls [10] against anyone asking critical questions - myself included [11].

But before he became a serious contender for the presidency, Duterte was all too happy to exploit both Rappler's rapidly growing and politically engaged young audience and its dynamic platform to speak directly to people through their phones. His strategy provided plenty of video clips for social media, and left traditional outlets lagging behind.

Riding the tiger

Lessons can be learnt from Rappler's story without doling out blame. It's hard to assess just how much the site influenced Duterte's victory, but the questions are awkward enough as it is. Did its journalists ask enough critical questions early on? Did they inadvertently help create this monster? And is digital media responsible for helping breed these leaders and agendas?

After his victory, Duterte initially continued to offer Rappler remarkable access and a stream of lurid quotes, successfully raising his and Rappler's international profiles. Between repeatedly insulting the Pope (this in a staunchly Catholic country) and former US president, Barack Obama, Duterte took two female journalists [12] (including Rappler's Pia Ranada) on a "ride-along" through his home town of Davao, where they visited his "watering hole".

This was a man who has all but admitted to running death squads while he was mayor, yet Rappler publicised his "transformation" [13]. Less than a week later, the other journalist on that assignment, GMA7's Mariz Umali, was hardly shown much professional respect when Duterte wolf-whistled her on live TV [14].

It might seem harsh to look back on this tawdry backstory, especially given the country was enthralled by Duterte at the time. But Rappler's is a cautionary tale. The Philippines needs its journalists to be sceptical and on constant guard. Media outlets who curry favour with leaders can expect no guarantee that those leaders won't turn on them in the end.

Dark times

Rappler is just the most recent casualty in Filipino journalism. According to the the International Federation of Journalists, for a quarter of a decade now, only Iraq has been a more dangerous beat [15]. But Duterte is waging a culture war on an already perilously weak fourth estate, mobilising sympathetic forces to frame events in his favour. Witness the viral footage of the BBC's Jonathan Head [16] being cornered by pro-Duterte blogger Sass Sasot, or the appointment of singer/blogger Mocha Uson to the office of presidential communications [17].

While Ressa, Rappler's CEO, is now pitched against Uson in a pantomime tabloid spat [18], the country slides into authoritarian rule. The unpleasant odour of the Marcos dictatorship, whose legacy Duterte has hardly shied away from [19], is in the air once again.

Duterte has embarked on various ambitious plans to change the Philippines as he sees fit. He is determined to roll out a dangerous and poorly conceived plan to federalise the country and devolve power away from Manila. Known as #PHederalism, this plan risks legitimising local warlords and clan-based politics, with all the corruption and violence they entail.

Many Filipinos remember the Maguindano massacre [20] before the 2010 elections, where 58 people - including 32 journalists - were hacked to death, allegedly by members of the Ampatuan clan [21]. The perpetrators used an industrial-sized excavator belonging to the provincial government to bury the victims in mass graves [22]. The chief suspect, Andal Ampatuan Sr [23], head of the notorious clan and elected governor of Maguindanao, died in custody in 2015; the trial of the rest of the clan has barely progressed in five years.

With Rappler muffled, who will be left to ask the tough questions about #PHederalism? Or about justice for those massacred at Maguindano? Or the victims of drug war and Duterte's notorious death squads? [24] Regardless of who's asking them, those questions will have to be posed to Duterte's spokesman, Salvador Panleo [25] - the Ampatuan clan's former lawyer. As the Philippines' authoritarian turn accelerates, the risks that come with dissent and scrutiny are becoming ever more dangerous.

Tom Smith

Senior Lecturer in International Relations, University of Portsmouth

* The Conversation. 16 janvier 2018, 14:34 CET:

<https://theconversation.com/philippines-dictator-duterte-turns-on-the-media-that-helped-elect-him-90>

* Republish nos [The Conversation] articles gratuitement, sur papier ou en ligne, en utilisant notre licence Creative Commons.

Government targets Rappler, website critical of Duterte

The Philippine government has sought to shut down an independent news website, which has published critical stories about President Rodrigo Duterte, a move observers and journalists say is an attack on press freedom and democracy.

The Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) announced on Monday that it has revoked the registration of Rappler, citing violations of foreign ownership and control of the Manila-based news organisation.

The SEC, an agency under the president, is responsible for enforcing securities and investment laws in the country, as well as maintaining company registry.

It is the first time the SEC has invoked the closure of a Philippine media company.

The agency said Rappler used a “deceptive scheme” in running the company, and decided to revoke a 2015 legal document that allows foreign investment.

The so-called “depository receipt”, which allows investors to hold “unissued shares”, is also being used by other Philippine media companies to attract investments.

In the case of Rappler, the document allowed the Omidyar Network to invest in it.

The company was set up by eBay founder and billionaire Pierre Omidyar, who also has an interest in the news site, The Intercept.

In a news conference streamed online, Maria Ressa, CEO of Rappler, decried the “very political nature” of the decision.

She said “due process” was not followed, and that Rappler was not given a chance to respond to the findings of the investigation.

“This is the last part of the kind of harassment journalists have had in the last year or so,” she said.

“What we will do is prepare to fight. We stand tall, we stand firm. This is a moment that we will say that we stand for press freedom,” Ressa, a former CNN foreign correspondent, added.

She also said that journalists, not investors, have full editorial and management control of her news site.

Chay Hofilena is head of Rappler’s investigative desk and is responsible for news operation.

She said the company is willing to question the decision “all the way to the Supreme Court”.

The order to shut down Rappler comes months after Duterte declared, before a joint session of the Philippine Congress, that he wants the ownership of Rappler investigated.

Among other investigations, Rappler had been responsible for a story on the citizenship of Duterte's first foreign affairs secretary. That led to the resignation of Duterte's top diplomat.

The news website, which launched in 2012, had also published a series of reports putting into question the Duterte administration's deadly war on drugs.

Since Duterte became president, many of his social media supporters attacked Rappler as "fake news" and threatened violence against its journalists, including Ressa.

Other media organisations also drew the ire of Duterte, including the largest newspaper, Philippine Daily Inquirer, and the largest television network, ABS-CBN.

Owners of the Philippine Daily Inquirer were later forced to sell ownership of the company to an ally and political financier of Duterte, billionaire businessman Ramon Ang.

Duterte has also continued to threaten ABS-CBN, vowing to block the renewal of its franchise. In December, he said he would be willing to forgive the news channel if it supports his administration's push for constitutional change and shift to a federal form of government.

Outrage

In a statement on Monday, the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) expressed "outrage" over the government's decision against Rappler.

"We call on all Filipino journalists to unite and resist every and all attempts to silence us," NUJP said, adding that it declares its "full support" to media outfits the state "has threatened and may threaten to shut down".

The Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines has also denounced the government's decision, saying it is "tantamount to killing the online news site." "The decision ... sends a chilling effect to media organisations in the country," it said. "Journalists must be able to work independently in an environment free from intimidation and harassment. An assault against journalists is an assault against democracy." "Three of the four members who participated in the SEC decision were appointed by Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino. Only one is a Duterte appointee." "The moves by the Philippines authorities to shut down Rappler is an alarming attempt to silence independent journalism," said Amnesty International's director of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. "This is a politically motivated decision, pure and simple, and just the latest attempt to go after anyone who dares to criticise the government."

"Rappler has been fearless in holding those in power to account, including by consistently criticising the government's murderous 'war on drugs'. It has faced persistent harassment by government supporters and even the president himself."

In a press conference, Duterte spokesman Harry Roque denied the decision was an attack on press freedom, saying the issue is about "the compliance of 100 percent Filipino ownership and management of mass media".

Ana Santos, a Manila-based journalist whose work has been published on Rappler, however, said the decision shows a "2018 version" of martial law, which was declared by Ferdinand Marcos, former president, in 1972.

“Perhaps having learned from the playbook of old dictators, President Duterte is resorting to other means to clamp down on press freedom,” she told Al Jazeera.

“What the administration didn’t quite figure out is that Rappler is a purely online news outlet. You can’t shut down the internet.”

Human Rights Watch joined calls for the agency to reverse its decision, saying: “If Duterte succeeds in silencing Rappler, it will have a profound chilling effect on Philippine media freedom, encouraging self-censorship by reporters and media outlets fearful of government reprisals for critical reporting at a time when the watchdog role of a free press is more urgently needed than ever.”

Ted Regencia

* AL JAZEERA NEWS, 16 Jan 2018:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/philippine-government-seeks-close-rappler-website-180115084959311.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/04/asia/philippines-deadly-for-journalists/index.html>

[2] <https://theconversation.com/rodrigo-dutertes-first-year-a-human-rights-disaster-the-world-prefers-to-ignore-80442>

[3] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/193725-amnesty-international-rappler-sec-statement>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/07/rodrigo-duterte-strong-filipinas-philippines-cory-aquino-gloria-arroyo>

[5] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/172938-leni-robredo-evolves-duterte-first-year>

[6] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/193612-leni-robredo-camp-abolish-ovp-federalism>

[7] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38362274>

[8] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/193021-de-lima-more-difficult-2018>

[9] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-12-07/how-rodrigo-duterte-turned-facebook-into-a-weapon-with-a-little-help-from-facebook>

[10] <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/07/24/1721044/duterte-camp-spent-200000-troll-army-oxford-study-finds>

[11] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/03/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-nofilter-president-no-joke-journalists-women>

[12] <https://twitter.com/rapplerdotcom/status/735843622340300801>

- [13] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2016/134743-transformation-rody-duterte-president>
- [14] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/02/philippines-duterte-accused-of-disrespect-after-wolf-whistling-female-journalist>
- [15] <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/135916/ph-2nd-most-dangerous-country-for-journalists-in-past-25-years-ifj>
- [16] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/945007/philippine-news-updates-mocha-uson-sass-rogando-sasot-bbc-jover-laurio-pinoy-ako-blog>
- [17] <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/185560-mocha-uson-posts-news>
- [18] <http://www.manilatimes.net/maria-hate-mocha/293147/>
- [19] <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/will-reburying-marcos-be-dutertes-downfall/>
- [20] <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/189284-maguindanao-massacre-trial-updates>
- [21] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11139653>
- [22] <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/706031/maguindanao-massacre-widows-cannot-forgive-ampatuan-sr>
- [23] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/99713-maguindanao-massacre-suspect-andal-ampatuan-sr-dead>
- [24] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/02/philippines-president-duterte-drugs-war-death-squads>
- [25] <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/133490-rodrigo-duterte-presidential-spokesperson-salvador-panelo>