



Razor's Edge

By
Joe Mari Mercader
Executive Editor
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Dawn Of Free Speech In Sight

NEW YORK, NY, Oct. 3 (PinoyGlobal) - I hope I am not dreaming or singing hosannas with my optimism that criminal libel is graveyard bound. If what is offing in the Philippine Senate translates into a concrete reality then indeed criminal libel is on its terminal stage. Unfortunately, aspirations are mere hopes that may never materialize unless those in power yield to the demands of the people for untrammelled freedoms basic in a democratic government. Candidly though, our expectations are divergent to the cold realities of life vis-à-vis with what is happening in our country under the demonic auspices of the Arroyo regime that has no respect for human rights.

Thus far free speech is a farce or better yet, a myth under Madam Arroyo's imperious regime where people's rights are blatantly trampled upon by no less than the president herself and her cohorts in the military and of course, the mercenaries in the Lower House orchestrated by super tuta Speaker Prospero Nograles. That's why until the law decriminalizing libel, which lately ground-swelled support among senators, remains to be wishful thinking that may or may not transform into that sweet dream we call reality.

But can you blame them when the status quo is the best proposition they can have? Where else can they have unhindered abuse of power with the media impotent to checkmate their orgasmic lust for graft and corruption without the usual intrusion of the militant watchdogs of the people - the media? Amassing unexplained wealth in careless abandon has been the passion of perverts in official trappings.

The people and the vanguards of freedom, the media, should not be barred from stopping the onslaught of

illegal deals, election rigging, assassination of disgruntled citizens and political enemies, and a host of crimes which otherwise could not thrive under a climate of true democracy which ironically ours is pegged to. Venal politicians and a renegade administration to the people's democratic spirit would be apprehensive to abuse their authority without fear of retribution. And this is validated by the fact that none of the corrupt dispensation heads, except for former Pres. Joseph Estrada, has ever been brought before the bar of justice to answer for their misdeeds. Fidel Ramos take a bow!

Clearly, our readers can see how the Arroyo governance amply disregards public censure because the people's grievances are hardly heard or read in newspapers, radio and television as they do in democratic countries like the United States, Great Britain and Canada to mention a few stalwart advocates for unpolluted democracies. And to think we patterned our government as a mini-size US democratic form of government, only for it to turn into a monstrous contrast.

When the late Sen. Raul Roco was here before the presidential elections of 2006, I had the occasion to interpolate him in a forum staged by a Filipino organization in Manhattan. Among the questions I asked him was why has he done nothing as a lawyer and senator to decriminalize libel in the Philippines, which has wrought havoc in the community of journalists not to mention the people in general? To my surprise, he was himself appalled that libel was a criminal offense in our bastion of democracy in Asia, because he said he did not know. However, even if I don't win in the election, I will do my level best to revert it to its pristine days, he said. I

believed him and thanked him in advance for his committed fight.

Lamentably, if my memory serves me, libel was criminalized during the Aquino administration, which is ironic because she virtually won hands down against the ruling dictator Marcos with the fearless collective effort of the media. It was an outrage for her to prosecute the late Louie Beltran and Max Soliven among others for writing that she hid under the bed when the first Gringo Honasan coup attempt raged fiercely in the streets fronting Malacanang.

Without journalists, commentators and columnists ganging up on the late despot Marcos, risking life and limb, Cory would just be a widowed housewife and the course of history would have been completely different from what it is today. Not that what we have now is a happy society, but she cannot ignore the fact that she won because the media insisted to restore democracy in the country ravaged by martial law, braving the dangers at the time. In all humility yours truly was one of the acid commentators battling for then candidate Cory Aquino. But this is now water under the bridge.

The issue at bar is the question of criminalized libel abused by the Arroyo dispensation that has gone into an orgy of prosecutions without let-up of independent journalists and commentators among the lucky ones who were not assassinated, murdered or jailed.

It is with our fervent hope that what has been initiated in the Senate to decriminalize libel will be adopted in the Lower House and congruously match the Senate Bill to bring once more democracy in our midst in its proper perspective.

For the moment here is our kudos to the senators who defy the sinister pressures from the powers that be by pushing the measure decriminalizing libel. May their tribe increase.

I don't think I will take it well if my expectation is foiled by the Lower House members orchestrated by Speaker Nograles, bowing to the imperial order of powerful mortals who gloat on the status quo (criminal libel) to keep the media in tow for that would mean Congress is merely wetting our hopes that criminal libel is bound to the graveyard. The Senate at least has already gone into the motions of decriminalizing libel. If I understand it right, it has in fact finalized its bill on this. The ball is now in the Lower House to approve a similar measure dovetailing that of the Senate and presto this nightmare hanging on the heads of journalists will be a thing of the past.

Freedom-loving Filipinos, or for that matter men with prudence, who are fighting to restore the media's freedom to expose venalities in the government, and to freely ventilate the sentiments of people who feel oppressed by those in power and affluent influential individuals in the Philippines without the usual threat of begging dragged to court or killed, are worthy of our eternal gratitude. Distance has not deterred me from joining the melee to bring back sanity in our libel laws.

Nobody should fear the media because the measure insures the right of anybody castigated, maligned or vilified in the press or electronics media, to respond with the same measure of space in the print media and air time on radio and television. That will also make newspapers and commentators responsible with what they print and verbalize in the air lanes. The balance is there. Each one will be on their guard.

(Although we might also ask how the government will enforce a "fairness doctrine" upon the media once they are required to give "equal time" to anyone who demands it! Such an idea has already been rejected as unworkable in democracies like the US).

Vigilance is the price of liberty. Onward to freedom my friends! #