

The censored press

By Vergel O. Santos, July 6, 2016



For all our freedom to seek and tell, a freedom we could not stop flaunting as one unsurpassed in any other democracy, we of the Philippine press found ourselves useless one night forty-four years ago.

The day is done, and we can't wait to begin making a night of it. Saturday and Sunday being lean news days, materials have been readied for the slack; weekend work won't begin until mid-afternoon or even later.

That is if everything goes normal.

In fact nothing is going normal nothing at all. No sooner have the newspapers gone to bed than the thief in the night strikes and steals freedom wholesale: Ferdinand Marcos imposes martial law unannounced and deploys the first weapons of dictatorship roundup, checkpoints, and censorship.

Censorship impacts furthest and widest. A nation of 39 million awakes to a day without newspapers, a day of soundless and picture-less television, a day of voiceless radio, radio plays some music, but music of the funereal sort, doubtless meant to heighten the air of graveness.

Troops have descended on the media to ensure that no newspaper copy gets out of the plants, into the streets, and that no voice escapes onto the airwaves; censorship works as the first salvo of artillery meant to intimidate and soften the target. In time media voices are heard again, but only as mouthpieces. Any voice that strays out of line is, again, silenced, its possessor punished.

Two friends who happened to be with me at a recent forum arranged for us to tell our martial-law stories were among the journalists who had had about the worst of it:

Pete Lacaba had suffered beatings during his two years of detention, but could not be stopped once released he returned to the underground press (it was to his press that we who worked safely above ground secretly passed stories we were forbidden to print or air); the other was Ceres Doyo (now a columnist of the Inquirer), who took the fight to the dictator continuously and suffered harassment at every turn threatened, picked up, taken to court.

Me – I had it the easiest, although I have my own firsthand stories to tell, not to mention impressions too fearsome to keep to myself. Indeed, it somewhat eases my conscience retelling them, as puny as they may be in the larger scheme of things, such scheme as saw 75,000 of my countrymen tortured.

As it happened, my first of only two collisions with the regime stemmed precisely from a piece about its brand of censorship. I had written that about the only types of news published in martial-ruled Manila were positive news that is, news that makes everybody happy and passive news news that makes nobody unhappy. The piece, given lead play in the U.K. Press Gazette, the British publication on the trade, caught the notice of the new and apparently eager-to-impress Philippine ambassador to the Court of St. James'. As difficult as it is to pronounce, let alone remember, his name, I cannot forget it.

Jose Manuel Stilianopolous was a Bicolano who obviously had picked up the wrong philosophies from his Greek forbears. He sent a copy of my piece to his patrons in Manila, who in turn sent me an invitation to an overnight tutorial bullying on patriotic journalism. Delivered in the night in the office, where, surely by no coincidence, I was working overtime, and working alone, the invitation was to be complied with at that very moment. Understand that martial law is a season of emergencies, a season that in our case was to last fourteen years.

My second case happened six years later, for two stories of group journalism in which my role, as a rewrite man, was only to fashion them together as we say in the newspapers, wrap it up. The first was a story of Ninoy Aquino's murder, the only one to come out on the same day as the murder; it was published in an extra edition of a popular tabloid. The second, published a week later, in the same newspaper, was an account of Ninoy's two-million-mourner funeral.

Both stories had been passed upon by the house censor, the editor-in-chief himself, but, again, do understand that martial law is also a story about fall guys a common criminal falling for the murder of Ninoy, and a workaday newsman falling for the revelation of the wrong truth. The day following the second offense I floated around the office desk-less and eventually got thrown out on the street. The other fall guy, of course, did not live to tell you his own story.

Over time, in any case, indignation builds up until dictatorship and censorship finally meet their match in a nation's exploding desire to be free and to be heard, and in our case the explosion was edsa.

Nothing in fact was special about Marcos's censorship it was standard. Censorship can scarcely be improved on; it works perfectly enough as it is. Nothing either was special about his dictatorship it was standard, too, murderous and covetous; if anything, it carried those qualities to extreme. Anyway, we're supposed to be rid of all that.

But are we really? Indeed, I wonder whether we have not worked censorship into our systems and in fact done so to the advantage of the very characters that gave us censorship. For how explain other than by the expedient Shakespearean irrationality of outrageous fortune such forebodings of a Marcos revival as we've been observing since too early on?

A mere six years after being driven out of power, into American exile, the dictator's family was back, unpunished and unrepentant, in fact blatantly extolling its patriarch, demanding a hero's funeral for him. He has been lying in a preserved state, awaiting the patently undeserved honor, which should come in time if the media persist in what seems now a habit of self-censorship and, in complicity, the nation stays true to its shallow, self-seeking culture.

The odds actually have been going the Marcoses' way. Ferdinand's family has reestablished itself in positions of power and patronage his widow sits in Congress, one daughter is governor of his native province and the other has reclaimed her place in high society, and his only son, although losing narrowly in the contest for vice-president after serving his statutory three senatorial terms, has no less than the new president for a self-proclaimed rehabilitator.

Rodrigo Duterte vows to make Ferdinand Marcos Jr. deputy president, a concocted title that completes the insult to the elected vice-president, Leni Robredo, whom he has marginalized. But it's to the whole nation that he has reserved the more definite insult: he will bury Ferdinand Sr. a hero, on his birthday, September 11.

Indeed, it feels like a lost thirty years; in fact it feels as if we had gone backwards from edsa and, by self-censorship and other defaults, begun raising the dead dictator to give him another go at it maybe this time he'd finish us all off.

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