



CALD Statement No. 4, S. 2020

CALD strongly condemns the shutdown of ABC-CBN and the systemic persecution of the media

CALD is outraged by the cease and desist order of the Duterte administration to prohibit ABS-CBN from broadcasting to deliver crucial news and information that is vital particularly when the whole country is struggling to survive and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

ABS-CBN, the largest broadcasting network in the country, was ordered to stop its broadcasting operations by the government's National Telecommunication Commission (NTC) after the network's congressional franchise expired on 4 May. ABS-CBN officially went off the air on 5 May at 7:72pm.

President Duterte made several threats prior to the shutdown. In April 2017, he said he would file a complaint and would block the network's franchise renewal. In December 2019, he said that he'll see to it that ABS-CBN is out and later said it is better to sell the network.

Congress has the exclusive right and jurisdiction on legislative franchises under the Philippine Constitution and it has yet to deliberate whether to grant, deny, extend, revoke or modify the franchise renewal application of the network.

During a congressional hearing on 10 March, NTC Commissioner Gamaliel Cordoba assured House of Representative members that NTC would issue a provisional authority to ABS-CBN so it could operate beyond 4 May.

However, like a thief in the night, the government broke its promise and delivered a huge blow not just on a particular TV network, but on the fundamental freedoms and basic human rights of Filipinos. Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra said that Duterte has total control of the executive department and has the power to reverse the NTC order, but no such actions were done.

ABS-CBN has the widest broadcasting reach in the Philippines and has been providing vital news to keep the public updated on the pandemic. In some places, ABS-CBN is the only news source of the people especially during this pandemic. The network, together with executives, employees and celebrity talents, has also been instrumental in helping Filipinos address their daily needs through relief operations and fund-raising initiatives.

CALD echoes the sentiments of the Liberal Party of the Philippines, a founding member of CALD, "That this government would shut ABS-CBN down in the midst of a pandemic - where media is both a lifeline and a source of comfort - calls into questions their motivations, their priorities, and their commitment to our people's well-being."

Philippine Vice President Leni Robredo, Chairman of the Liberal Party of the Philippines, said stopping the network's operations would leave 11,000 workers jobless and would cut off the free

flow of correct and timely information that gives direction to the country's actions in tackling COVID-19.

"There should be no space for harassment and personal agenda at this time when we should be working together...this free flow of information literally saves lives," Robredo emphasized.

Sadly, there is a systemic persecution of the media in the Philippines. ABS-CBN is only the latest case, but other media institutions such as Rappler, the leading online news website in the country, is facing closure as well due to legal and tax cases.

In this regard, the members of CALD are united in making the following calls to the Philippine government:

Curb the Virus, Not the Flow of Information

CALD condemns in strongest terms the shut down of ABS-CBN and calls for the government to allow the network to operate freely. CALD believes that the fast, fair and free flow of information, as successfully exemplified by the Democratic Progressive Party-led government in Taiwan, is crucial particularly during a crisis. This will definitely provide efficient delivery of services and effective coordination between and among stakeholders to flatten the curve and address the social and economic challenges.

No to Abuse of Power

During this health crisis, there should be no room for unnecessary vindictive agenda on the part of Duterte and his government against people and institutions that form the cornerstone of democracy. The Filipino people must remain vigilant of the authoritarian actions of the government and must always stand firm to hold them accountable.

Defend Press Freedom

When information is silenced, truth is silenced. This media shut down is clearly a setback to the collective efforts, sacrifice and unity of the country at a time when everyone, especially the leaders, should be focusing on beating the pandemic and protecting its people. Also, with the culture of impunity in the country, journalists and media people have been killed and continue to be at risk during the Duterte administration. The international community must closely monitor these alarming situations to protect and defend press freedom.

For the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats:


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Chairperson

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