

[Statement] Philippines: Government must uphold freedom of expression, repeal blocking order against websites

FORUM-ASIA is deeply concerned over the Philippine Government's continued silencing of dissent as evidenced in its order to block websites linked to independent alternative media outfits and progressive groups in the country.

Alternative news outfit Bulatlat filed a civil case seeking to nullify the said blocking order in July 2022. However, as of June 2024, the case remains pending.

The next hearing—brought by Bulatlat through its publisher, Alipato Media Center, Inc.—is scheduled for 27 June 2024 at the Quezon City Regional Trial Court Branch 104. The National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) is expected to present its only witness at the hearing.

'Censorship'

In early 2024, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion, Irene Khan, made an official visit to the Philippines. Khan stated that the government's order to block such websites constitutes a "direct form of censorship."

Khan emphasised that any restriction on free expression should comply with international standards of legality, necessity, and proportionality.

Following Khan's visit, Bulatlat and 26 other groups whose websites were affected demanded the NTC to repeal its blocking order.

The NTC responded after three months, stating that the National Security Council decided that the matter "is best left to the sound discretion of the Court." The NTC refused to rescind its order, opting to wait for the local court's decision.

Silencing dissent through repressive laws

The case stems from 6 June 2022, when then National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr. requested the NTC to [block](#) 27 websites belonging to organisations allegedly affiliated with terrorist groups, citing the repressive [Anti-Terror Act](#) as justification. The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020—replacing the Human Security Act of 2007—endangers human rights defenders, activists, and marginalised groups by subjecting them to wrongful terrorism accusations.

The NTC then ordered the blocking through a memorandum dated 8 June 2022. Among the identified websites were that of alternative news outlets Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly.

In July 2022, Bulatlat sought court intervention, requesting to [void](#) NTC's memorandum. Bulatlat filed a civil lawsuit through its legal counsel from the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers), seeking the issuance of a temporary restraining order and/or a writ of preliminary injunction on the NTC's memorandum.

On 11 August 2022, Bulatlat's petition was [granted](#) preliminary injunction, with the Court [citing](#) Bulatlat's "clear and unmistakable" right to protection under the Constitution's articles on press freedom and freedom of speech. The Court then directed the NTC to lift the blocking order, making Bulatlat's website [accessible](#) on 22 August 2022. However, the 26 other websites remain inaccessible

In 2024, the Philippines slipped two places on the [Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index](#), ranking 134th out of 180 countries.

Call to Action

FORUM-ASIA urges the Philippine Government to uphold its commitment to international human rights standards and principles, particularly regarding free speech, freedom of expression, and press freedom.

"Restricting people's access to independent alternative media infringes on their right to access information as enshrined in the Philippine Constitution. It is troubling how cyber censorship, which began under the Duterte administration, continues through the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.," said Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

We also call on the international community to closely monitor the situation.

FORUM-ASIA is in solidarity with Bulatlat and all other Filipino journalists and media workers whose devotion to truth-telling is being challenged by repressive laws and red-tagging—the act of labelling groups and individuals as terrorists or communists.

We call on the Philippine Government to rescind its blocking order and to refrain from using censorship to silence dissent and to restrict people's right to access information.

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About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

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