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OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

Statement on Maria Ressa's Arrest: Laws should protect, not harass, citizens

Office of the Chancellor
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The arrest of much-awarded journalist Maria Ressa, editor of the popular online news outlet Rappler, reflects the continuing deterioration of civil liberties in the Philippines.

Rappler has published many no-holds barred stories about human rights violations, particularly the extrajudicial killings in President Duterte's war on drugs.

Ressa's arrest should be seen as an assault on press freedom, conducted in the evening, when she could not obtain legal relief. Fortunately, she was able to post bail a few hours later.

In 2017, the government accused Rappler and Ressa of being foreign-owned leading to the Securities and Exchange Commission filing charges, but the case was thrown out by a Court of Appeals. Next were charges of tax evasion, a case for which Ressa was arrested last year. The case is still pending.

The cyber libel charge was filed in connection with a Rappler article published in 2012 alleging connections between Filipino businessman Wilfredo Keng and then Chief Justice Renato Corona, who was going through impeachment proceedings. Keng filed a defamation lawsuit against Ressa in 2017. Now, the Department of Justice has allowed the case to be revived, using a cyber libel law that was passed four months after the Rappler article was published.

Ressa has been released on a P100,000 bail, leading her to comment: "This is the sixth time that I have posted bail. . . I will pay more bail than Imelda Marcos."

We must make our voices heard, to uphold the rule of law. As a university that teaches law, we must let government know we are keeping watch. We will speak up when there is a flexing of judicial muscle to intimidate, and to stifle dissent.
