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Mila Astorga-Garcia

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Surviving media repression before and during Martial Law in the Philippines

MILA ASTORGA-GARCIA

There is the general perception that media repression in the Philippines, at its worst, happened only during the Martial Law years from 1972 to 1986.

Indeed, Martial Law was the time when almost all media establishments were shut down, as publishers and journalists critical of the dictatorship were thrown into jail.

There is an abundance of documentation on media repression during and after then President Ferdinand E. Marcos had declared Martial Law. One of them is a book published in 2019 titled *Press Freedom Under Siege: Reportage that Challenged the Marcos Dictatorship* and edited by Ma. Ceres P. Doyo. It compiles literature produced during Martial Law by writers who exposed the abuses of the dictatorial regime. Included is a research piece I wrote for *Business Day*, “The Philippine Press during the Martial Law Years.” What the literature generally indicates is that journalists who expose abuses in the system are the ones who are persecuted for the work they do.

Take the case of the Women Writers in Media Now (WOMEN) who were subjected to intimidating inquisitions by the military on the pretext that they were just being “invited to the camp.” Actually it was the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) and Defense top brass who led the

interrogation, asking journalists questions that delved into their personal and professional lives, including why they wrote their human rights exposés, insinuating they were possibly members or supporters of the Communist Party of the Philippines. For why, they were asked, would they write stories about the killing of village doctor Bobby de la Paz who devoted his life helping treat poor people in the island of Samar; or Macli-ing Dulag, the Kalinga chieftain who led his people in the fight against the construction of the Chico River dam which could have resulted in the flooding of entire villages, leaving his people homeless and their means of livelihood destroyed. The interrogations were meant to sow fear in the journalists so they would stop writing stories like these. WOMEN, with the support of human rights lawyers, fought back to legally stop the interrogations, bringing their case all the way up to the Supreme Court. Somehow the military had to step back. In effect the journalists won, and undaunted by the experience, they continued to write even more human right stories.

Other forms of media persecution ranging from harassment, libel, media closures, threats to harm, and even death continued even during succeeding regimes after Marcos.

Mila Astorga-Garcia is managing editor of *The Philippine Reporter*, a Toronto-based newspaper published twice a month. The commentary is an edited version of her speech at the online forum “Persecution of the Press and Suppression of Truth” organized by Migrante Alberta on December 11, 2020. Email: info@philreporter.com

However, some of the harshest media persecution cases occurred before Martial Law, and happened in the provinces, far from Manila where the media centers were located. There is a dearth of documentation on these cases where media practitioners, especially those in relatively more isolated and far from mainstream media reach in the provinces were more vulnerable to all forms of repression. This was the time before the age of mobile phones and social media.

Whether or not Martial Law exists, media repression will always happen in the Philippines, as long as the oligarchs use it as a powerful weapon to suppress the truth that is harmful to their interest.

Allow me to tell you about a case of media repression before Martial Law that I know best, having lived through it myself: the *Dumaguete Times* story.

In the summer of 1969, my husband Hermie Garcia and I worked for a newly established newspaper that covered news in Dumaguete City and other nearby towns in Negros Oriental. Calling itself “an independent and progressive newspaper,” the *Dumaguete Times* published a variety of stories reflecting issues that affected the community, including the student protests in Siliman University, the inadequate power service in the city, land-grabbing cases and other forms of oppression of peasants by the landlords.

While the paper was welcomed by residents who wanted to know what was happening in their city and surrounding areas, not everyone was happy about it, especially the landlords and powerful politicians.

We experienced early forms of harassment and intimidation. The office was pelted with stones at night. We would sometimes notice strangers following us around town as we delivered newspapers to market stalls and other outlets. We somehow learned the military was not happy with our presence.

Shortly after the publication of the story of a land-grabbing case where peasants were shown barb-wired inside the land they were being forced

to vacate, the newspaper office was raided and we were arrested on the strength of a warrant that falsely linked us to a crime committed in a place we had never been to before. Our home office was in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental and the reported crime happened in another province, Negros Occidental.

Our arrests followed news reports of an encounter between armed rebel groups and police officers somewhere in Victorias, Negros Occidental, where two police officers were killed and three were wounded.

We, the newspaper’s staff, were all so surprised and shocked to find ourselves in jail being charged with the serious crime of double murder and triple frustrated murder when all the while we were in Negros Oriental when the reported incident happened. A clear case of trumped-up charges.

It was even infuriating as the initial military reports had reportedly claimed we were among those who were part of the ambush, armed with high powered rifles, fighting it out with the police officers like crazy Rambos, when in fact I had never even seen, much less touched, a real gun (long or short) in my whole life. A clear case of fake news.

National newspapers reported that three armed rebels were caught and were being held in custody in Cadiz City, Negros Occidental where one of the armed encounters happened. Meanwhile, newspapers also reported that four “Huks” (or Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan, also known as People’s Liberation Army), referring to us four *Dumaguete Times* staff, were apprehended, based on charges linking us to the armed encounter. Clearly, a red-tagging tactic meant to support the military’s concocted story to justify the staff arrest and the closure of the newspaper.

That was not all: New People’s Army (NPA) expansion in the south “nipped in the bud” became an oft-quoted phrase used in national newspaper headlines quoting military sources and their politician bosses who must have wanted credit for what they believed were their trophy catch of the day or week. Another sensational attempt at fake news

being peddled by national defense or military reporters quoting their military sources.

The four of us were flown from Dumaguete City Philippine Constabulary (PC) Headquarters to Cadiz City, one of the places where the encounter was supposed to have taken place, and where the captured rebels were being held. While the three male newspaper staff including my husband were brought to the Cadiz City jail, I was transported by a military jeep to a mansion of a warlord and politician somewhere in the middle of a huge sugar plantation.

My interrogators would not allow me to rest or even sleep a wink in a room with bright blinding lights left permanently on. They were forcing me to sign a statement admitting to the charges and even asked me to become a state witness against my husband and the other staff, in exchange for my freedom. At one point, they tried to bribe me with the prize of having our own newspaper, should I comply with what they were asking for. At times a PC major would bring in almost a dozen uniformed soldiers to the room, threatening that harm could come my way if I continued resisting the signing of the papers. Or they would bring me to the mountains where there were more sex-hungry PC soldiers who had not seen their wives for days, and were resentful of the red alert situation they were in because of the trouble they insisted we had created, insinuating that I would therefore eventually be gang raped.

One night in the course of the interrogation, there was a sudden commotion outside and I heard a series of gunshots. The next day, they showed me photos of a man so badly bruised with torture marks and gun shots in the head, his arms twisted and badly broken, and they asked me if I knew him. I said, no, then they threatened me that if I still would not cooperate, I could be the next one in the picture. It turned out, the young dead man was one of the captured rebels that the military claimed was killed when he tried to escape from the Cadiz City jail where my husband and the two other newsmen were being held. Even some military sectors believed he was executed. He was the

rebel who was supposed to have linked us to the encounter.

All the time, I kept telling my interrogators I had the right to a lawyer, and to be moved from the mansion to the City Jail where my husband and the others were being held, for purposes of official accountability for my whereabouts. I felt that in that isolated scary place, I could easily be made to disappear or killed just like the young man.

The place where I was interrogated was actually a radio station attached to the mansion of a powerful legislator who was one of my interrogators. At first, I did not know that the lead interrogator who presented himself to me as the representative of Malacañan Palace sent over to investigate the situation, was the legislator himself. He apparently had control of the PC in the region, whose chief was working very closely with him, and was in his beck and call. It was there where I first saw in my own eyes a case of direct landlord-military collusion. I had heard before of the existence of the infamous “blackshirts,” or private army of landlords, and I thought, would this be it? I also saw how the powerful who owned the media controlled the news. During our incarceration, radio broadcasters repeatedly called the jailed journalists “communists,” again, a red-tagging tactic to bolster the false accusations or the fake news about us.

Fortunately for us, then National Press Club (NPC) President Antonio Zumel learned of our predicament through the news reports. Zumel did not know us personally, but he strongly believed ours was a case of press freedom blatantly trampled upon in such a harsh manner that he was compelled to write Senator Salvador Laurel, then head of the Senate Justice Committee, to look into our situation. The latter sent the late Enrique Voltaire Garcia to Cadiz and assigned him to be our lawyer.

Meanwhile, in the Cadiz City Jail, my husband Hermie was not being spared from the same continuous interrogation, harassment and intimidation as he was being forced to sign a statement which he adamantly refused to do so, that in punishment, he was thrown into and locked up in an underground dungeon, so small, damp, filthy, smelly,

filled with mosquitoes, and so cramped, one could not stand or lie down, with a can as urine container as the only object inside that place. No human being would survive long in that torture chamber that must have been constructed by the most inhuman creatures in the world.

Luckily for us, Enrique Voltaire Garcia came in time to demand that our jailors end all interrogation, intimidation and infringement of our rights as detainees. He assured us that information we may have been forced to give to our interrogators were to be considered statements taken under duress.

He then flew back to Manila and filed his report right away. The next thing we knew, Senator Laurel, Zumel and other journalists (including *Sunday Times* editor Rodolfo Tupas and *Philippine Free Press* senior writer Jose Lacaba) traveled by plane from Manila to Cadiz City Jail to interview us about how we were being treated, and to investigate the circumstances surrounding our incredible case which resulted in the complete shutting down of an entire news organization that was starting to reveal inhuman practices of the powerful people in the country's sugar granary.

After that visit by the senator and journalists, the word "Huks" used to describe us earlier was suddenly dropped from the national newspaper headlines and in its place was written "the newsmen" of the *Dumaguete Times*. Instead of the negative slant of the stories on us, all of a sudden newspaper headlines announced President Marcos was ordering then Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile to ensure the jailed journalists were not being denied their rights.

A successful fundraising started by the NPC and supported by various colleges and universities in the Philippines, raised enough funds for our bail, ending our detention. As for the concocted criminal case linking us to the armed encounter, purportedly by the armed rebel captured then killed under mysterious circumstances, it was considered a case without any merit as early as the initial preliminary investigation hearings, and was eventually dropped. It was also one of the demands – the dropping of the case – of student demonstrators

during a dialogue that Marcos had called at Malacañan Palace, apparently to placate protesters after one of the biggest demonstrations held at the height of the First Quarter Storm.

There just was something fishy in the way the case against the *Dumaguete Times* staff was handled by local authorities that raised red flags even within the military. When the Manila offices of the military were asking for documentation of the alleged statements that had supposedly linked the staff to the armed encounter, as purportedly contained in the confession of the slain rebel, the local police had reportedly responded that they could not release any documents without the permission of a local politician. At that time, the Manila-based national military headquarters had already entertained doubts about the supposed escape of the killed rebel, as there were reports he was executed.

There is something I learned as a young 20-year-old journalist at that time who had just experienced my first year in journalism through this baptism of fire more than five decades ago. And this lesson has resonated in affirmations through the years of continuing my journalism practice. It is about what makes a newspaper, or a journalist for that matter, an enemy of the powerful but a friend of the oppressed.

Tupas, in an interview in Cadiz City Jail, asked Hermie what the editorial policy of the *Dumaguete Times* was, apparently curious as to why the newspaper had so riled up the powerful in the Negros islands. Tupas quoted Garcia as saying: "If you will read the editorial of our last issue, you will read that the *Dumaguete Times* is the newspaper of the poor and underprivileged, that it refuses to be the tool of publicity-hungry politicians and profit-motivated crooks."

It was a great relief when I was finally transferred from the mansion to the city jail through the intercession of our lawyer. At first though, it was a scary experience to be placed in the same cell where the rebel who had supposedly escaped by sawing off the window grills was held (an incredible claim as it would have been a noisy escape that

would be easily heard in any part of that small jail, and where would he get a saw?), and then had purportedly engaged the police officers trying to re-arrest him in a gun battle that killed him (where would he get a gun?).

But I had my heartwarming moments of grace and redemption in that small jail cell, when ordinary townsfolk secretly dropped off packages of cooked food wrapped in banana leaves and plastic, and even coins and paper money through the slit between the remaining bars and the boarded-up windows of my cell – welcome moments that in a way had debunked the false claims of our oppressors that the townspeople of Cadiz were angry at us for disturbing their “peace.” I could only hear the townsfolk’s lively voices, trying to tell me something in their own dialect, which I could not discern well, except for the words “para sa peryodista (for the journalist),” and, then, just as they had arrived suddenly, they were fast gone before the guards knew what had happened.

Throughout our ordeal lawyers from Manila (including the late Senator Jose Diokno, Lorenzo M. Tañada and Juan T. David) and Bacolod City volunteered their services to help in the case, with Enrique Voltaire Garcia as our principal lawyer.

Upon my release, with the *Dumaguete Times* gone, I accepted an offer by Tupas to write for the Manila-based *Sunday Times* stories involving human rights and the protest movement. So I covered a lot of protest actions including incidents of police brutality in demonstrations, and interviewed human rights activists. Before long, the writ of habeas corpus was suspended and Martial Law was declared, forcing my husband and I and so many of my colleagues to go underground to evade arrest and continue writing about what was happening during those tumultuous times.

However, I was arrested again and detained in the notorious 5th Constabulary Security Unit (CSU) where I was tortured and later brought to Camp Bicutan. Again I was charged in a case I had nothing to do with – arms smuggling involving a foreign country – and we see here a pattern of linking one to an existing case even without one’s involvement. The

only dossier they had of me was actually a thick folder of my published news and feature articles written for mainstream newspapers and magazines. It took two-and-a-half years before I was released with my nine-month old baby born and raised inside, even as the military captors had admitted much earlier to my relatives in an informal meeting at the camp that I was not in any way involved in the arms smuggling case where over a hundred activists – including other journalists including my husband – were being charged with. “But why did you include them in the case if they were not involved, that you had even published the story in headlines of national newspapers?” my angry relatives asked our military captors. The military’s response was: we were arrested at almost the same time that the actual people allegedly involved in the case were also arrested; that’s why we were just all conveniently lumped together in one press release. A clear case of very fake news made sensational.

I was finally released with my nine-month old baby, together with another nursing mother Marie Hilao, and her also nine-month old baby born inside, only after the successful 14-day hunger strike of 140 political detainees in Camp Bicutan, demanding our freedom, as a non-negotiable condition for ending the protest. The hunger strike was already attracting a lot of local and international media attention, with many of the detainees collapsing from hunger and dehydration, that it became so embarrassing for the dictatorship then trying to create an image of humane detention out of the Bicutan Rehabilitation Center, built as a showcase for that purpose.

We tell these stories because they strongly convey the message why it is important that media persecution in all its forms, occurring before, during or after Martial Law, should be exposed, challenged and stopped by journalists themselves and everyone else who care about press freedom; otherwise telling the truth about the inequities and abuses in society will substantially and significantly be suppressed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).