

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER IS NOT A CRIME: DROP CHARGES AGAINST WALDEN BELLO, DECRIMINALIZE LIBEL & CYBERLIBEL

9 August 2022

Focus on the Global South

We at Focus on the Global South condemn in the strongest terms the arrest of our founding director and co-chair of our Board, Dr. Walden Bello, over libel and cyberlibel charges filed by Jefry Tupas—former staff of current Vice President Sara Duterte—over statements made by Dr. Bello during the electoral campaign regarding Tupas' reported involvement in a November 2021 drug raid conducted by the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) in the Province of Davao de Oro.

Yesterday, August 8, the warrant was issued at around lunchtime in Davao and was electronically transferred through email to the Quezon City Police District (QCPD). The warrant was served a few minutes past 16:00 yesterday and Dr. Bello was arrested in his residence in Quezon City. Since the said arrest was done late afternoon, there was not enough time for Dr. Bello's legal team to post bail as government offices have shortly closed down for the day. Consequently, Dr. Bello spent the night in detention within the Camp Karingal Police Headquarters.

Today, August 9, although Walden was temporarily released on bail, there have been reported delays in the signing of the order of his release (more information and updates about the arrest and detainment of Dr. Bello can be found [here](#).)

It must be pointed out that we are still in the middle of the pandemic, daily cases are on the rise, and people are still vulnerable to being infected. Dr. Bello himself was only starting to recover from COVID-19 when the arrest warrant was served in his home. Overall, the timing of his arrest and the delays in the signing of the order of his release are all inconsiderate of vulnerabilities created by the pandemic and of Dr. Bello's condition.

The charges and the consequent arrest of Dr. Bello are clear acts of political persecution intended to intimidate, humiliate, and repress dissenters. Libel and cyberlibel have on numerous occasions been weaponized by those in power to silence individuals asserting truth, justice, freedom, and human rights.

Dr. Bello himself has for many decades been a fearless advocate for democracy, social justice, and human rights. As an activist-scholar, he has been at the forefront of exposing the injustices engendered by the elite-dominated political and economic systems both in the Philippines and internationally. His call for transparency in the November 2021 PDEA drug raid allegedly involving Tupas, is consistent with his stance to push for justice and accountability in the so-called "war on drugs" initiated by the Duterte administration. Since 2016, Dr. Bello has asserted that the government's violent approach that narrowly seeks to eliminate alleged drug

users and pushers will not address the root cause of the drug problem. Simply for demanding the truth, Dr. Bello was unjustly arrested.

In light of this, we demand the dropping of charges against Dr. Bello. We also call for the decriminalization of libel and cyberlibel, as criminal libel has often been used to undermine freedom of expression and of the press and has been weaponized to go against political opponents. Authorities must well be reminded that these freedoms, being enshrined in the Philippine constitution, are fundamental and therefore should have primacy: Without them, other rights cannot be realized.

Finally, we call on civil society and social movements to continue exercising vigilance as we expect the ruling elites to adopt the same if not a more intensified and systematic approach to repressing ordinary peoples' fundamental rights and freedoms. The libel and cyberlibel charges against Dr. Bello constitute not just a legal but more importantly a political battle, and it is one among many cases of repression that would have grave consequences on the state of our already fragile democracy. As such, we must continue to forge stronger solidarities in asserting ordinary Filipinos' rights amidst these threats and reprisals. We also express gratitude to the international community that has outpoured their support for Dr. Bello and condemned his arrest.#

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