

Princeton in the service of Maria Ressa

As graduates, teachers and staff members of Princeton University, a community that counts the author of the First Amendment among its members, we are proud to stand in solidarity with journalist and alumna Maria Ressa '86.

In the Philippines, her home country, President Rodrigo Duterte has labeled Maria a criminal. We see her as the opposite: an exemplar of the right of free speech that Princetonian James Madison, Class of 1771, wrote into the U.S. Constitution.

For the past four years, Maria has fearlessly withstood a campaign of online and legal harassment blatantly aimed at intimidating journalists and stifling any criticism of the government's authority.

Her groundbreaking journalism has called the world's attention to the role that powerful members of the Duterte government have played in this campaign — and to the role U.S. companies have played in enabling the most depraved kinds of slander to proliferate on their social media platforms.

The phoniness of the charges against Maria are underscored by the absurd number of them: In 2018, she and the innovative news outlet she founded, Rappler, were hit with 11 separate legal complaints. Last year, Ressa had to post bail eight times in order to stay out of jail. At the same time the Philippine government shut another news outlet, the country's largest broadcast network.

Authoritarians throughout the ages routinely attack the press as the enemy, a strategy calculated to avoid accountability and undermine democracy. Our Princeton education instilled in us an understanding that a government is only accountable to its people when journalists are free to report on its activities without retaliation. That is why we denounce these politically motivated charges against Ressa and her colleagues.

Ressa is a Filipina and an American citizen. She is standing up for the most American of values: The right to speak truth to power.

Presidents throughout the history of this country have used their leverage against authoritarian governments that violate the rights of U.S. citizens abroad; the current administration should do the same. To do otherwise would only diminish America's role as a leader of the democratic world.

We appreciate the strong statement of support for Maria from the Congressional Freedom of the Press Caucus, a group that Vice President Mike Pence co-founded when he was a member of the House of Representatives. We urge congressional appropriators to reexamine the hundreds of millions of dollars the Philippines receives each year in U.S. military aid. Why should U.S. taxpayers underwrite a government that is so egregiously violating our values?

Our government must use its influence to convince the Duterte government to drop all charges against Maria and her journalist colleague Rey Santos, and against Rappler.

Last year, some of us who had been student journalists at Princeton and who taught journalism there signed [a statement of support](#) for Maria. The group signing this letter include many who have no connection to journalism. All of us know that the rights Maria is fighting for are not just the rights of journalists. Freedom of speech is a human right; each of us recognizes we must join Maria in this battle.

Princeton taught us the importance of intellectual freedom and “the service of humanity.”

Maria Ressa is the embodiment of those values. We recommit ourselves to them in standing with her.

To sign this letter, [please go here](#).