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Int'l groups condemn order to close Rappler

International human rights groups, media watchdogs and lawmakers have condemned the move to shut down the on-line news organization Rappler, saying press freedom is under

siege and rallying support to defend it.

"This is a politically motivated decision, pure and simple, and just the latest attempt to go after anyone who dares to criticize the government," James Gomez, Amnesty International's director for Southeast Asia

and the Pacific, said in a statement on Monday night.

In a Jan. 11 ruling made public on Monday, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) revoked Rappler's certificates of incorporation and registration for allegedly violating the constitutional restriction on

100-percent Filipino ownership of mass media entities.

"The order to close Rappler amounts to a direct assault on freedom of the press in the Philippines," said Steven Butler, Asia program coordinator for the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

Rappler chief executive officer Maria Ressa told CNN Philippines on Tuesday she would do "everything in my power not to let Rappler go down."

The Center for International Law (Center Law), which was cofounded by presidential

spokesperson Harry Roque, said in a statement on Tuesday that the SEC ruling could be considered unconstitutional for denying due process to Rappler and for undermining freedom of ex-

pression, which is "at the top-most rungs of constitutional freedoms." **A4**

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CenterLaw said the SEC should have given Rappler the opportunity to correct its ownership structure. "Instead, the SEC got down to business right away with guns blazing," it said.

Phelim Kine, director for Asia of Human Rights Watch, said the foreign ownership allegations only served to "mask the [Duterte administration's] vendetta against a critical website" and was just part of the government's continuing "attacks on media freedom" and any critical institution.

Human rights watchdog Karapatan said the SEC action "attests to the reality that this regime is gradually moving toward a dictatorship."

"History then teaches us that now is the most urgent time to speak up and to resist, lest this government thinks it can get away with underhanded maneuvers," said Karapatan secretary general Cristina Palabay.

Melinda Quintos de Jesus, executive director of the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR), on Tuesday said the SEC order had "symbolic force" that showed to everyone "that if you are seen as overly critical or troublesome, then we would find ways to get back at you."

"This assault on press freedom is the worst kind ... It is prior restraint," De Jesus said.

Luis Teodoro, former dean of the University of the Philippines' College of Mass Communication, said the SEC's decision, along with talks of a "no-election" scenario and the extension of terms of office of officials, resonated from the days of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship.

"Everyone should look at this as an issue that concerns us all," Teodoro said. "It is about freedom and the future of Philippine democracy—or what remains of it."

Press organizations

Press organizations in Hong Kong, Thailand and the Philip-

ines released statements urging the government to reverse the SEC ruling.

"The order for Rappler to be shut down is part of a broader trend by Duterte to silence his critics," Hong Kong's Foreign Correspondents Club said in a statement.

Lawyer Jocelyn Clemente, acting chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), said her group would support Rappler in the legal fight against the closure order.

In a statement on Monday, NUJP rallied "all Filipino journalists to unite and resist every and all attempts to silence us."

The Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines (Focap) said the SEC decision was "tantamount to killing the online news site."

Lawmakers

"An assault against journalists is an assault against democracy," Focap said.

At the House of Representa-

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tives, ACT Teachers Rep. Antonio Tinio on Tuesday said the SEC move was "the biggest threat to press freedom since Marcos."

The SEC ruling showed that the Duterte administration is "hell-bent on eliminating all dissenters," said Kabataan Rep. Sarah Jane Elago.

At the Senate, Sen. Risa Hontiveros slammed the SEC's "Marcosian" decision.

"It's a move straight out of the dictator's playbook," Hontiveros said in a statement. She urged Filipinos "to defend press freedom and the right to speak truth to power."

In a statement, Sen. Richard Gordon commended the SEC for showing "no one is exempt and has special privilege in our justice system."

"However," he added, "the SEC should be ready to present convincing and factual evidence to back its ruling on Rappler because the freedom of the press is sacrosanct in every democracy."

He asked the SEC to explain why it took action against Rappler more than five years after approving its registration and urged Rappler to show "the paper trail of its investors" during those years. —WITH REPORTS

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