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PRESS FREEDOM IN ASIA: THE PHILIPPINES PERSPECTIVE

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I APPROACH with trepidation the topic of press freedom in Asia, being fully aware that it is a contentious issue. Asian nations enjoy varying degrees of freedom of the press, and I am sure each one of us has a different conception of press freedom. When we talk about press freedom, we are not speaking about the same thing. It is like talking about democracy or human rights -- issues that continue to provoke debate and excite political sensibilities within Asian societies and between Asians and the West. We have, for example in some Asian societies, single party states and single newspaper cities, with the papers being monopolies controlled by the state. The single paper phenomenon is not the result of the world trend towards one-paper city determined by the rigors of press competition.

Equally contentious is the issue of "Asian values" to define the polities of Asian nations, although I have often heard arguments that Asia is so culturally and politically diverse that it is hard to identify a homogeneous Asian value system.

In the Asia-Europe meeting in Bangkok last March, leaders of the two continents fudged their differences over observance of human rights and environmental concerns in relation to economic assistance in the interests of facilitating a mature dialogue between the industrial democracies and dynamic economies of Asia. It was believed in ASEM that with the East Asian economies posting
phenomenal growth rates that outshine those in Europe, the seat of old colonial system, Asia has attained parity with Europe and it would serve no purpose to highlight the meeting with a confrontation of political and environmental issues that divide the two regions.

I shall take the same approach in examining press freedom in the Philippines. Common to most Asian countries is the acceptance of the market economy as a catalyst of growth. But not widely shared among them is the notion that the so-called free market of ideas can co-exist with high and sustained economic growth. The operation and expansion of market economies do not always result in the expansion of the free market of ideas, as you very well know.

Rather than emphasize the differences in the political environment of press freedom in Asia, this paper examines the political and cultural context of this freedom in the Philippines and points out its unique features. This context brings out new themes in addressing issues of press freedom as the Philippines struggles to attain the status of a newly industrializing economy.

The Philippines has a historic reputation as home to having probably the "freest press" in Asia. It has, however, also an undeserved reputation for being "irresponsible" -- an accusation often heard from our own democratically elected government.

The extent of press freedom in the Philippines is a function of its political experience in democracy. The models that guide and inspire the exercise of press freedom in the Philippines are unique to its political culture. While Filipinos are familiar and comfortable with the terms of relationship between their press and government, these terms may not work in other Asian societies. Freedom of the press is explicitly guaranteed as a political right in the Philippine Constitution, and although governments and officials have complained over the way the right is exercised (or "abused") by the press, the press is never lacking in zeal to assert it.

The operating principle of the adversarial relationship between government and the press was very well expressed by President Fidel Ramos, himself a target of scathing press criticism, who last March said at the Manila Overseas Press Club that:

"As a nation, we are great believers in the notion of a marketplace of ideas wherein citizens and groups can freely present their views and hear the views of others. We subscribe to the principles of public access to information and open government as integral parts of being a democracy. Some may not always realize the lofty purposes that these
principles are supposed to foster, but there is no question that it is in open exchange that the public interest is served."

The debate over the relationship between government and the press has acquired a new dimension as the Philippines struggles to find its place in the sun of Asian economic dynamism. The issue is whether economic growth and development can be achieved in a political culture that emphasizes individual rights and political liberties over community rights. Some of our friends have criticized American style democracy in the Philippines as prescription for stalemates that stifle development. In this system of checks and balances, of which the press is an important player, it is claimed that nothing gets done. Indeed, there is evidence that phenomenal economic growth has taken place in a number of Asian societies ruled by restrictive regimes. But the record is not the an unbroken series of successes. Some politically restrictive regimes have failed as economic managers and in promoting growth.

The thesis that authoritarianism is a precondition for growth proved invalid in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship. As shown by a number of studies, some authoritarian regimes have succeeded as economic performers, and so have some democratic regimes. Their success or failure lies not in regime types but in other variables that have little to do with the Confucian ethic or "Western values."

The return to the democracy as framework for economic reconstruction was a pendulum swing from the failure of the dictatorship as an approach to sustained economic growth. The People Power Revolution of 1986 ended a short-lived deviation of the Philippines in 1972-1986 from the post-war period of political stability and economic growth to authoritarianism that was the path of development taken by most of the post-colonial states in Asia. That deviation was an economic and political failure highlighted by the emergence of probably the most corrupt authoritarian regime ever to see light in Asia. If many of the Asian regimes fostered robust growth with tough political restrictions, the formula did not work for the Philippines.

It was this failure in both economic and political terms that drove the Filipinos to go back to the more participatory political order. It defined the political environment and the mandate in which economic recovery had to be made. This is the reason why the sitting Philippine government of President Ramos, a leading figure in the 1986 popular rising, has no choice but to obey this mandate and stake the future of Philippine economic progress on the democratic method.
The restoration of democracy in the Philippines also nurtured a free press that is probably one of the most unshackled in Asia today. It is an outspoken and free-wheeling press -- probably as free as that in India whose press belongs to the same libertarian tradition as the Philippine press. There has never been an absence of debate over whether the exercise of press freedom whose limits are defined by the journalists themselves rather than by government is unhealthy or dangerous for democracy during a transition period. The Philippine democratic transition was highlighted by a series of military-led coups d'etat, and even in those dangerous times, press freedom was exercised to the utmost.

It can hardly be argued, based on the experience of the transition, that the exercise of press freedom, in which responsibility was defined by the journalists and their own judgements on citizenship and patriotism, posed a danger to the fragile democratic restoration. If democracy is endangered, the danger clearly does not come from a free press but from something else that is associated with governance.

The concerns of the Philippine press today have been refocused on the critical examination of economic policies and administrative capacity of a democratically-elected government. The press put firmly behind its concerns over military adventurism and Bonapartism after the restoration of the cycle of democratic election as a method to transfer political power peacefully. With the deepening of the roots of the democratic institutions restablished after the People Power Revolution, the Philippine press has increasingly addressed economic issues together with the political perspectives in which growth and development are taking place.

This economic focus, clearly a consequence of a highly economic international environment flowing out of the end of the Cold War, provides the current battleground of contention between government and the press. The contention is less fierce than that over plots to overthrow the constitutional system but examination of policies and political capacity of government to carry out reform provokes rigorous, and often emotional, debate in the Philippine press. There is a civilized exchange taking place, but the stakes are high for Philippine democracy.

The robust exercise of the press to discharge its function as a social critic of public policy is accepted by the public and government, albeit grudgingly by government. Not that government is happy with this condition. Press freedom is part of the package of the democratic restoration and it is a heavy cross for the government to bear. But the Philippine thesis that its democracy can be a framework for
sustained economic growth is bearing fruits. Growth is taking place and the economy is taking off — notwithstanding the inconvenience of having a noisy and inquisitive press.