

Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City

FOURTEENTH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL No. 3535

Introduced by Representatives SATUR C. OCAMPO, TEODORO A. CASIÑO,
LIZA L. MAZA, LUZVIMINDA C. ILAGAN and CRISPIN B. BELTRAN

EXPLANATORY NOTE

The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Specifically, Section 4, Article III of our fundamental law, in part, provides that “*(N)o law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press...*”

Notwithstanding this present constitutional fiat, the law on libel which was enacted during the American colonial regime by the United States Philippine Commission as Act No. 277 on October 24, 1901, and which clearly obviates these fundamental rights, continues to be enshrined in our penal statutes under Article 353 to Article 362 of the Revised Penal Code.

Accordingly, our libel law was enacted to protect private citizens from unwarranted damage to reputation. Today, however, the law has been increasingly used by public officials as a tool to cow and muzzle an independent press. Indeed, the law is meant to shield the subjects of reporting and comment from media abuse. Yet, it has become the convenient and predominant way for those in power to harass and silence critical and opposing voices.

The growing number of cases filed against journalists highlights how the mighty and the powerful in our land regularly abuse the libel law to curtail the democratic right of the press to delve into the truth behind matters of public interest, and consequently, the people's right to know.

Truly, the libel law has been increasingly used to stifle press freedom and inhibit media criticism of government officials and their acts and decisions. Journalists critical of government officials or government acts and decisions speak or write under the threat of criminal prosecution. The net effect of this abuse of the libel law by the powers-that-be is the gagging of media practitioners, the suppression of the truth from becoming public, and the resulting inability of the people to gain a meaningful understanding of the various public issues that are of paramount concern.

As part of its sworn duty to uphold and strengthen the democratic rights of the Filipino people, Congress must immediately work to repeal the law on libel in order for the press to enjoy the free exercise of its duties and function, and as a corollary, for the people to have an unfettered access to information involving matters of public concern.

It must be stressed that a free press is an essential component of a democratic society. A free press ferrets out graft and corruption wherever it may occur and exposes its perpetrators, reveals dishonest and inept administration, contributes to the exchange of ideas, and advances communication between the governed and those who govern. In other words, a free press acts as the watchdog for the governed.

Decriminalizing libel, then, will remove much of its potency as an instrument to intimidate and harass. It will allow journalists to do their work without fear of being jailed because of criminal complaints by those who are offended by their reporting. Without doubt, the decriminalization of libel is a step in favor of freedom of speech, of expression, and of the press.

However, this does not mean that a person who has indeed been libeled by the media can no longer seek redress for the wrong done against him or act to enforce his right. The victim has the remedy of filing an action for damages based on the Civil Code of the Philippines, such as Article 19 and Article 26 thereof.

A media practitioner may be held civilly liable for damages if he/she violates Article 19 of the Civil Code which enjoins him/her to act with justice and to observe honesty and good faith when exercising his/her rights and while performing his/her duties.

On the other hand, Article 26 of the Civil Code should remind the media of their duty to respect the dignity, personality, privacy, and peace of mind of others, otherwise, they may be held civilly liable for damages for violations thereof.

The repeal of the libel law, without derogating the right of a person to enjoy privacy, dignity, good reputation and a peace of mind, will be a giant step towards strengthening democracy in our land, when freedom of expression shall be enshrined not just in books but more so in practice.

Thus, the approval of this bill is earnestly sought.

Approved,

SATUR C. OCAMPO
Bayan Muna Party-List

TEODORO A. CASIÑO
Bayan Muna Party-List

LIZA L. MAZA
Gabriela Women's Party

LUZVIMINDA C. ILAGAN
Gabriela Women's Party

CRISPIN B. BELTRAN
Anakpawis Party-List

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**AN ACT DECRIMINALIZING LIBEL, REPEALING FOR THE PURPOSE ARTICLES 353, 354, 355, 356,
357, 360, 361, AND 362 OF ACT NO. 3815 AS AMENDED, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE
REVISED PENAL CODE**

*Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Philippines in
Congress assembled:*

Section 1. Articles 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 360, 361, and 362 of Act No. 3815 as amended, otherwise known as the Revised Penal Code are hereby repealed thereby decriminalizing libel.

Section 2. All laws, presidential decrees, letters of instruction, and other issuances, orders, rules and regulations inconsistent with this Act are hereby likewise repealed.

Section 3. This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in two (2) national newspapers of general circulation.

Approved,