



Committee to Protect Journalists

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CPJ's 2020 Gwen Ifill Press Freedom Award Acceptance Speech

As delivered on November 19, 2020

Good evening, everyone. I'm sorry not to be seeing you in a beautiful ballroom in New York as we had planned. And I regret missing the opportunity to share a stage with the brilliant Meryl Streep. Meryl, thank you so much for your kind words introducing me. You are an inspiration, as a woman, as an artist, as a press freedom advocate. I know I can't ever hope to win the number of awards that you've won, but it does occur to me that we have something special in common, which is that we've both been married to my husband. And honestly, the fact that you did it as Mr. and Mrs. Fantastic Fox just makes that so much less awkward. So thank you, Meryl and thank you to the Committee to Protect Journalists, for this tremendous honor. And for shining a light on the importance of press freedom at a time when many of our fundamental freedoms have been under threat.

We often hear Martin Luther King's words that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. And I think that's true. In most places in the world, it is better to be black or gay or female, today than it was a hundred years ago, but we have a long way to go in the struggle for equal opportunity. And the rights that we take for granted today can all too easily be lost, even in democracies. Ask the people of Hong Kong. They know that. They lost basic freedoms almost overnight. The citizens of Hungary, Poland and the Philippines know it too. And even in the United States, the world's most powerful democracy, the head of state has treated the electoral process with a contempt reminiscent of his counterpart in Belarus.

Human rights are in crisis when the leader of the free world does not stand up for them. And when in so many places in the world, those who commit egregious human rights abuses are free, while those who report on them are not. Yet, this is what I see time and time again in my work. A few years ago, I represented Khadija Ismayilova, a reporter who uncovered corruption by the President of Azerbaijan, in a series of articles that were later validated in the Panama Papers.

When I took on her case, she was serving a seven-year sentence following a series of spurious charges designed to intimidate her. I successfully petitioned the European Court Of Human Rights and ultimately her sentence was overturned. But she is still subject to a travel ban. She still works under the constant threat of arrest. Meanwhile, President Aliyev has never been investigated for corruption.

Last year, I represented Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, two young journalists who worked for Reuters in Myanmar. They were arrested for possessing secret documents that had been planted on them seconds earlier by the police. This clumsy operation was designed to silence the journalists. Why? Because they had gathered evidence of a massacre of Rohingya civilians, the victims of genocide in their country. Reuters was about to publish the piece, including a photograph of 10 Rohingya men kneeling in front of a mass grave. And when the journalists refused to drop the story, they were sentenced to seven years in prison.

I worked closely with Reuters general counsel, and we were able to secure their release, but they can no longer work in their country. No more reports like theirs ever came out. And those who are responsible for the genocide have yet to be held to account. My client in the Philippines, Maria Ressa, has been sentenced to up to six years for libel and faces the rest of her life behind bars in a series of bogus prosecutions. All because her news site criticized President Rodrigo Duterte, who has been accused of crimes against humanity, following the killings of thousands

of civilians in his country. Maria faces death threats and is in contact with me almost daily to try and face off all the legal challenges. But Duterte's reign of terror continues uninterrupted.

Unfortunately these cases are emblematic of a global trend that is making journalism one of the most dangerous professions in the world. That's why the foundation that my husband and I set up, The Clooney Foundation for Justice, focuses on the need for a global response. Through our Trial Watch initiative, we have monitored dozens of trials like this all over the world, including in recent months, the trials of journalists, and bloggers in Malaysia, Nigeria, Russia, Tunisia, and India who have been prosecuted merely for questioning their government's response to the coronavirus pandemic. We all know how important it is to monitor elections, but somehow we forgot to monitor trials. So our team aims to be in every courtroom in which a journalist is prosecuted for doing their job, so that we can report on what's happening when the journalists can't. So that we can push for the release of those who have been unjustly imprisoned and reduce the chilling effect on the press. And so that in time, we can use the data we gather to produce global justice rankings of States that will help us advocate for systemic reform.

I want to thank the Committee to Protect Journalists for believing in this work and being such an important partner in it. I'm also particularly honored to receive an award named after a trailblazing and inspirational woman who made it to the top of the broadcasting world at a time when things were designed to keep her decidedly close to the bottom. I recently went back and read some of Gwen Ifill speeches and something that she said rang very true for me at this time. She said that hope springs eternal, even in politics. And I just wish she could have been here to watch the citizens of the United States who turned out in record numbers earlier this month to elect their new President. Americans voted in a new leader who can reclaim moral leadership on the world stage. They rejected the candidate who called the press enemies of the people and shrugged off the murder of a *Washington Post* columnist.

They chose the candidate who has vowed to stand up to dictators, over an incumbent who praised them and allowed authoritarianism to spread. They have ushered in a new leader of the free world who brings back hope for human rights. So it's true that hope springs eternal and I believe this is a time for optimism. But optimism should not mean complacency. Those who seek to oppress and silence others, will always be united and determined to achieve their aim. We must be more united and more determined in opposing them.

What we see happening in the world should remind us that rights must not only be secured, but jealously guarded. Democracy must constantly be defended and the press vigilantly protected. So I'd like to accept this honor on behalf of all the lawyers who work to protect journalists and others being persecuted around the world. And I'd like to dedicate it to all those who fought for the rights that we enjoy today, because progress is not inevitable. And the arc doesn't just bend towards justice on its own. Courageous individuals bent it for us. And now it's our turn to play our part. Thank you so much for this great honor. And thank you for listening.