

Pope Affirms Freedom of Press While Myanmar Journalists Remain Jailed

Freedom of the press is a crucial component to a virtuous, flourishing society, as Pope Francis affirmed on June 20 when he called for greater liberty for the press. The pope's comments come six months into the detention of two Reuters reporters by the Myanmar government.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were investigating a massacre of Rohingya Muslims by the military and Buddhist civilians in September of last year. They were invited to meet with a police officer, given some documents, and then arrested for possession of official secrets when they tried to leave. Police Captain Moe Yan Naing is [also in prison](#) after testifying in court that Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were "set up." He says his detention is meant to stop "other police officers from saying the truth."

The situation in Myanmar is drastic; the country's ranking has fallen six places on the Reporters Without Borders [World Press Freedom Index](#). Myanmar is now ranked 137th out of 180 countries.

Francis has [previously addressed](#) the crisis faced by the Rohingya, but in this interview on the detained journalists, he seemed to want to stress a larger point than the specifics of those atrocities. "The right to information is a right that must always be protected," the pope said, "and not only with regard to the Rohingya." The Myanmar government has been widely criticized since August, 2017 for what the United Nations has described as a "textbook example of [ethnic cleansing](#)" of the Rohingya people in the northern Rakhine province of Myanmar.

The freedom of the press is essential to the freedom of society at large. Governments who try to restrict the press often do so by claiming that the press is lying or deceiving the public. That might be true, but it does not justify setting up and arresting journalists. In his classic treatise on the free society, *The Law*, Frederic Bastiat writes: “We may be distressed to see writers delight in stirring up all forms of evil passion. However, to hobble the press is also to hobble truth as well as lies. Let us, therefore, take care never to allow the freedom of the press to die.” To restrict the press might stop one’s political enemies, but it also restricts the people who are telling the truth.”

Likewise, Pope Francis argued in his [Reuters interview](#) that “States that have something they don’t want to be seen, always stop the media and freedom of the press and we must fight for freedom of the press. We must fight.”

The U.S. Constitution establishes freedom of the press in the First Amendment, along with freedoms for religion, speech, assembly, and petition. This is very telling of the importance of purpose of the freedom of the press. Freedom of the press is more than whistleblowers and shielding sources, although that is a very important part of what the press does today. The freedom of the press encompasses the rights of all citizens to write, express, and disseminate their ideas. Almost every church in America has its own newspaper, bulletin, or weekly letter. Advocacy groups publish pamphlets and books to try and sway public opinion and change the laws. All of this and more is protected by our rights to speech and press. The freedom of the press and of speech work together to uphold each other: without freedom of speech, the press is meaningless; without the press, your freedom of speech extends only as far as your own voice.

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