

The sound of journalists turning in their graves: exploiting grief for political ends

HRWF (13.01.2014) - It was an incredible display of support and solidarity. It would have been even more so, had it not been for the curious array of world leaders that turned out to 'stand up' for freedom of expression in Paris on Sunday. Families and friends of those who were killed in last week's violence led the solemn stream of humanity that filled the streets of the French capital. Then followed dozens of foreign government officials, locked arm in arm in a supposed show of unity.

Diplomatic niceties aside, the fact is that many of those dignitaries marching and chanting 'Nous sommes tous Charlie' represent governments that are among the worse violators of press freedoms in the world.

One can only wonder what the slain Charlie Hebdo staff members would have thought of the scene, knowing that they were being honoured by high-ranking officials from Russia, Turkey, Algeria, Gabon and many other countries that routinely violate the very principles for which they fought to defend. Every year, many of these countries score near the bottom of the annual press freedom index of Reporters Without Borders. Other esteemed guests have been known for their policies of limiting freedom of expression or engaging in politically-motivated hate speech.

There were also reports of the Saudi foreign minister participating in the march. Two days earlier, Saudi Arabia had carried out the public flogging of Raif Badawi, a blogger who is accused of insulting Islam. Such a scenario would have been an easy target for satirical journalists, if it had not been for the pain of these last days.

Nobler were the intentions of the millions of citizens who stood for precious freedoms in the wake of last week's violence. They deserve more than the sad hypocrisy on offer from politicians that are more concerned with scoring political points than defending the truth. Likewise, those who were gunned down among the staff of Charlie Hebdo.
