

Julian Assange and the defense of democratic rights

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Over the past several months, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been the target of a state-orchestrated campaign based on trumped-up allegations of sexual misconduct. He was named in an international arrest warrant, detained in a London prison, initially denied bail and held in isolation for nine days. Assange's lawyers are fighting extradition to Sweden while he remains under virtual house arrest.

The extradition of Assange to Sweden could be followed by his extradition to the US. There are reports of discussions between the American and Swedish governments, and a grand jury has purportedly been convened in Virginia to charge Assange with violations of the US Espionage Act. Government officials and politicians have branded Assange a "terrorist." Some have called for his assassination.

The vendetta against Assange is a political provocation that has all the characteristics of a dirty tricks operation.

The exploitation of charges of sexual and personal misconduct as a cover for a political attack is a well-known modus operandi. Those who might be sufficiently gullible to take the charges in Sweden at face value should recall previous cases: the FBI's taping of bedrooms and hotel rooms used by Martin Luther King, Jr. to obtain evidence of extramarital affairs; Nixon's break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's therapist in search of personal information damaging to the leaker of the Pentagon Papers; more recently, the use of the Monica Lewinsky scandal by the Republican Party and its media backers in the rightwing conspiracy to drive President Bill Clinton from office.

The release of Assange on bail has been followed by an intensification of the campaign against him. Over the weekend, the *Guardian* published a lengthy account

of the allegations against him, loaded with prurient details and based on documents leaked by the Swedish police. This was accompanied by a dishonest editorial seeking to justify the publication of the information and legitimize the actions being taken against Assange.

The *Guardian* articles apparently came as a surprise to Assange and his lawyers, insofar as the newspaper is one of the few that continues to publish regular articles based on the secret US State Department cables being released by WikiLeaks. There is reason to believe that the articles were part of a cynical and unprincipled effort to demonstrate the newspaper's distance from Assange.

"It is wrong that the notion that the allegations are simply a conspiracy or smear should go unexamined," the newspaper wrote. "It is unusual for a sex offence case to be presented outside of the judicial process in such a manner [as the *Guardian* decided to do], but then it is unheard of for a defendant, his legal team and supporters to so vehemently and publicly attack women at the heart of a rape case."

The *Guardian's* equation of the attempt by Assange to defend himself—under conditions in which his very life is at stake—with a media-backed smear campaign is thoroughly dishonest. If Assange remained silent, it would likely be portrayed as a virtual admission of guilt.

The language used by the newspaper is deliberately provocative. Assange and his supporters have not "attacked" the women. They have sought to defend him against charges aimed at silencing him and undermining WikiLeaks.

Nor is the case about "rape," at least by any reasonable definition of the word. While the *Guardian* no doubt intended to scandalize its readers by publishing details of the police reports, what emerges

from the account, even assuming that it is all true, is a story of consensual and nonviolent relations with women who sought out relations with Assange.

For some reason, still unexplained, these relations were imparted a criminal character—several days after the event. As journalist John Pilger, a defender of Assange, noted in a recent column, “After, the ‘crime,’ one of the women wrote on Twitter that she was with ‘the world’s coolest smartest people.’ And when asked whether Assange should leave her flat, said, ‘No, it’s not a problem. He’s very welcome to stay here.’ Referring to their night together, she said that she ‘felt dumped’ when he left her bed to work on his computer.”

Yet, as a result of an unrelenting media campaign, about 50 percent of all references to “rape” on the Internet now also contain references to Assange.

Information that has emerged strongly supports suspicions that Assange is the victim, if not of a carefully orchestrated state provocation, then of the actions of highly unprincipled individuals. One of the accusers has been involved with a rightwing anti-Castro group and published a document detailing how to exact revenge on a past lover.

The attack on Assange is an attack on core democratic rights. The latest WikiLeaks cables are helping to expose the daily intrigues of US imperialism and its allies. Among the long list of revelations, the documents have exposed US collaboration with the German and Spanish governments to quash investigations into torture; the contempt of the State Department for international law and human rights; and secret discussions over the possibility of war with China and Russia.

Reading the documents is an education as to the aggressive, militaristic and criminal character of American imperialism. If, as it is claimed by the US government, their release will undermine US diplomacy abroad, then for this alone Assange and WikiLeaks deserve the appreciation of the world’s population.

The US government is determined to press ahead. Despite mobilizing US-based companies—including Amazon, PayPal, MasterCard, Visa and, most recently, Bank of America—the Obama administration has proven unable to prevent the continued leaking of the cables. One purpose of the sex charges is to divert attention

from the revelations contained in the WikiLeaks documents, while involving Assange himself in an extremely costly and exhausting legal battle.

On Sunday, US Vice President Joseph Biden took the very calculated step of calling Assange a “high tech terrorist.” Within the context of the police-state legal structures adopted by the US since the September 11 attacks, this outrageous charge—which bears absolutely no connection to any objective definition of the word “terrorist”—gives the government the power to arrest the named individuals without charge and hold them in a military prison, or assassinate them.

The response of many who claim to be on the left to this attack has been spineless and unprincipled. A typical example is Tariq Ali, the ex-radical “street fighter” turned bourgeois journalist.

In a masterpiece of British humbuggery, Ali, while proclaiming his support for Assange and WikiLeaks, declared in a recent interview that “every organization is larger than a single person within it, and WikiLeaks will survive whatever.”

Not true. The successful prosecution of Assange would not only destroy WikiLeaks, it would represent an enormous assertion of state power against free speech, the freedom of the Internet, and democratic rights as a whole. Under conditions in which a section of WikiLeaks has already broken off to form a new organization—more amenable to the interests of American imperialism—Ali’s comments can only be understood as a willingness to throw Assange to the wolves.

Julian Assange must be vigorously defended. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all working people—and all those seeking to oppose imperialism and the attack on democratic rights—to mobilize their collective strength to demand an immediate end to the persecution of Assange and WikiLeaks.

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