

Defend Julian Assange!

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26 February 2011

The ruling by Judge Howard Riddle at Belmarsh Magistrates Court in London that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange can be extradited to Sweden represents a grave threat to his liberty and even to his life.

The decision is only the latest episode in a massive, internationally coordinated campaign headed by the Obama administration and US intelligence agencies to discredit and destroy WikiLeaks.

Assange is the victim of a politically motivated attempt at character assassination and legal frame-up based on trumped-up charges of sexual misconduct. Washington's chief collaborators are the British government and courts, the Swedish government and its legal system, and the Gillard government in Australia, which has done nothing to defend one of its own citizens.

Julian Assange has emerged as a major figure in journalism, fighting for a genuinely independent press. As opposed to the *New York Times* and the rest of the establishment media, which routinely and systematically collaborate with the state to conceal the truth and keep the public in the dark, he has worked to expose the crimes of American imperialism. For this reason he has been targeted for destruction.

The frame-up is aimed at silencing WikiLeaks, which has made public thousands of secret US military documents exposing the criminal character of the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and US diplomatic cables documenting the filthy conspiracies that have been carried out against the world's people by Washington and its allies.

The determination of the United States to destroy Assange has only grown as the revelations made by WikiLeaks have helped spark mass popular revolts in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries, cutting across the efforts of the US and Europe to portray themselves as benevolent advocates of democracy.

Assange engaged in consensual sex with two women in Sweden last August before being subject to allegations of sexual assault. Within 24 hours, any action against him was dropped by Swedish chief prosecutor Eva Finne, who

declared the accusations to be groundless.

But Finne's decision was overturned after leading Social Democratic Party figure Claes Borgström intervened to act for the two women. One of the women making the allegations is associated with the Christian wing of Swedish Social Democracy.

On November 18, 2010, Director of Prosecution Marianne Ny passed a European arrest warrant to police in the UK, just ten days prior to WikiLeaks releasing the US diplomatic cables.

Borgström's partner in his legal firm is Thomas Bodström, minister for justice in the 2000-2006 Social Democratic government. In 2001, Bodström was involved in the case of two asylum-seekers named as terrorist suspects who were handed over to the Central Intelligence Agency and later reportedly tortured in Egypt. The Social Democratic Party government participated in the US-led war in Afghanistan.

The Alliance for Sweden coalition elected in 2007, under Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, is just as close to Washington. Karl Rove, the former adviser to President George W. Bush, has worked as an adviser to Reinfeldt for the past two years.

If extradited to Sweden, Assange faces an extended period in custody as there is no system of bail for those held on charges of rape. He would then be subjected to a secret trial in which evidence is heard in private, presided over by a senior judge and three lay judges who are political appointees. If found guilty, he faces up to four years in prison.

To speak of Britain's close political relationship with Washington would be superfluous. London has been embroiled in every US crime exposed by WikiLeaks and Assange, above all those related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the so-called "war on terror."

One needs only to contrast the treatment meted out to Assange to that afforded to Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet to understand how politically motivated Britain's actions have been.

Judge Howard Riddle ruled that Assange can be

extradited, even though he has not been charged with any crime. He summarily dismissed any and all concerns raised by Assange's legal team.

The mass murderer Pinochet was held in Britain on October 17, 1998 under an international arrest warrant issued by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón. Unlike Assange, who has committed no crime and has not even been officially charged with one, Pinochet spent his time in the UK in luxury while being feted by leading politicians such as ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. His defence team included Clare Montgomery, the lawyer for the Crown who argued for Assange's extradition.

Montgomery famously argued before the Law Lords that only Chile could mount a prosecution of Pinochet because "where torture is committed within the context of the military enforcing some internal security policy... it still falls within the definition of sovereign or government functions. And sovereign or public acts are entitled to immunity."

In January 2000, Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw intervened directly to rule that Pinochet should not be extradited but returned to Chile on grounds of ill-health.

If he is extradited to Sweden, Assange faces being sent to the United States, where he could face the death penalty. Leading figures in the US have described him as a "terrorist" and "traitor," including Vice President Joseph Biden, while prominent figures calling for him to be killed include former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee and Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin.

These are not idle threats. Last year, President Obama himself ordered the "targeted killing" of Anwar al-Awlaki, a US-born Muslim cleric accused of terrorism and reported to be in hiding in Yemen.

One needs only consider the barbaric treatment being meted out to US Army Private Bradley Manning, who is being held at a US base in Quantico, Virginia simply on *suspicion* of leaking classified documents to WikiLeaks. Awaiting trial, he has been physically and psychologically tortured for more than nine months, kept in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day, denied exercise or even a pillow or sheets. He is allowed to wear his prescription glasses only when reading, rendering him virtually blind for most of the day.

The media, including the liberal and pseudo-left press, has played a politically criminal role in legitimizing and promoting the vendetta against Assange. The *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, which initially agreed to publish

and disseminate the WikiLeaks documents, did so only in order to suppress the most damaging information. The *New York Times* even admits to having consulted the State Department and senior White House figures before publishing a small number of documents.

Once the decision was taken to go for Assange, the *Times* and the *Guardian* led the media frenzy aimed at portraying Assange as a criminal and lending credibility to the empty charges of sexual abuse and rape against him. Numerous feminist commentators were wheeled out to claim that anyone defending Assange was not only a conspiracy theorist, but guilty of blackening the name of his accusers and being indifferent to the crime of "rape."

A warning must be made. The US government and its accomplices have gone a long way towards crippling WikiLeaks and creating the conditions where Assange will likely end up spending a long time in prison. Their ability to do so testifies to the vast erosion of democratic rights in the US and internationally.

If the current political conditions had prevailed in 1969, Seymour Hersh, who authored the exposé of the My Lai massacre, and the soldier who gave him information would have both ended up in jail.

In contrast, none of those responsible for the mass killing, torture and destruction in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere exposed by WikiLeaks has been held to account.

This cannot be allowed to stand. The decision to extradite Assange to Sweden must serve as a rallying cry for a mass movement of protest, mobilising working people, students and all those concerned with democratic rights to demand his release.



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