Ecuador’s government negotiating Julian Assange’s fate with the UK

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Within the last week, Ecuador’s President Lenín Moreno and Foreign Minister José Valencia have issued public statements indicating that they are in negotiations with the UK government of Prime Minister Theresa May regarding the fate of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange, who has spent the last six years in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he sought asylum in June 2012.

The Moreno government cut off Assange’s access to the Internet in March and denied him both phone calls and visitors, outside of his attorneys, leaving him effectively under incommunicado detention with less rights than a convict.

Assange is confronting a coordinated plot by London and Washington to have him arrested and extradited to the US to face charges of treason and espionage—punishable by long imprisonment or even death—for WikiLeaks’ exposure of US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, State Department plots and CIA electronic surveillance and cyberwarfare.

Last Thursday, Moreno told a press conference held for the foreign media in Quito that his government is in talks with the May government in London to “resolve” the issue of Assange.

He criticized the decision to grant Assange Ecuadorian nationality, which was made by Ecuador’s former foreign minister, María Fernanda Espinosa, who has since been replaced by Valencia, a US-educated diplomat with strong ties to Washington.

“It was a failed attempt that accomplished nothing,” Moreno said of Fernanda Espinosa’s decision. “On the contrary, far from solving the problem, it only made it more difficult to do so.”

Moreno indicated that Quito had adopted a new strategy relating to Assange. “In this new stage, we have begun where we should have started: discussing with the authorities in England.”

“We have initiated a very fruitful dialogue, in which they have given us a certain type of information for us to use to the benefit of international law, and to the benefit of the rights of the life of Mr. Assange.”

He added that neither the Ecuadorian government nor Assange wanted him to “remain in refuge all his life” and that “we have to find a solution, and if we do it together with the English government, all the better.” The case of Assange, he concluded, could be resolved in “the medium term.”

Moreno’s remarks were followed on Monday by a statement from Foreign Minister Valencia lamenting the fact that granting Assange asylum “has affected” Quito’s relationships with the UK.

He insisted, however, that the Moreno government had developed “contacts of various kinds” with London and that “We hope that when in the future the issue of Mr. Assange can be happily resolved for all parties, the relationship with Great Britain will be strengthened even more.”

Assange first sought asylum in 2012 under conditions in which the Swedish government was demanding his extradition to Sweden to face “questions” in relations to trumped-up allegations of sexual misconduct that never rose to the level of a criminal charge. He justifiably feared that the real purpose of this legal stratagem was to have him arrested and then extradited to the US.

While Swedish authorities have since dropped their manufactured investigation of Assange, the British government has made clear it will arrest him the moment he sets foot outside the embassy on charges of a bail violation, again leaving him prey to extradition to face treason and espionage prosecution in the US. An Australian citizen, Assange has been denied the assistance due to him from the government of Australia, which is an accomplice in Washington’s conspiracy against him.

The statements of Moreno and Valencia are ominous.

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They both indicate that the Ecuadorian government is proceeding in its efforts to "solve the problem of Assange" not on the basis of international law and the basic democratic right to asylum, but rather according to national and international political expediency, under conditions in which the government in Quito is turning sharply to the right and coming under intense pressure from both US and British imperialism.

Since taking power last May, Moreno, the vice president and hand-picked successor of former president Rafael Correa, has sharply accelerated the right-ward shift that had already begun under Correa, a bourgeois nationalist politician who had previously employed the rhetoric of "21st century socialism" and the "Bolivarian revolution," pioneered by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Breaking with Correa's Citizens Revolution Party, Moreno has since backed the judiciary in seeking Correa's extradition from Belgium to face trumped-up charges of complicity in the botched kidnapping of a right-wing Ecuadorian politician who had fled to Colombia after his involvement in a 2010 coup attempt.

Implementing IMF policies designed to subsidize domestic and foreign capital at the expense of the Ecuadorian working class, Moreno has also sought to shift Ecuador's foreign policy into line with the drive of US imperialism for hegemony in Latin America.

Last month, US Vice President Mike Pence visited Quito for talks with Moreno that were centered, at least publicly, on seeking Ecuador's support for an escalation of Washington's campaign to isolate and economically strangle Venezuela. Before Pence left the US, however, a group of 10 prominent Democratic senators issued a statement demanding that the vice president pressure Moreno to rescind Assange's asylum and expel him from the London embassy. It is highly likely that, behind the scenes, Pence made demands along these lines.

After the visit, the US ambassador to Ecuador, Todd Chapman, declared, "Ecuador is our ally in the Americas; it is a long-time friend, we can now express that with more frankness and more substance … We are recovering the time we lost, that's important."

Since Pence's visit, Moreno has dutifully ratcheted up tensions between Ecuador and Venezuela, denouncing Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro for expressing support for Correa and halting the return of Ecuador's ambassador to Caracas.

The sharp US pressure on Ecuador found a grotesque expression this spring in Geneva at the United Nations-affiliated World Health Assembly.

Ecuador was the sponsor of a seemingly innocuous resolution promoting the health benefits of breastfeeding for children—with one study estimating that its universal adoption could prevent 800,000 child deaths a year—and calling for restrictions on false advertising promoting infant formula.

US delegates intervened aggressively against the resolution, motivated by the profit interests of the food industry and infant formula manufacturers seeking to capture markets particularly in the more oppressed countries, where lack of clean water renders these products deadly.

While profit interests drove the US intervention, its aggressiveness in response to Ecuador was extraordinary. According to the *New York Times*, which first reported the incident earlier this week, US officials threatened to impose trade sanctions against Ecuador, while the US ambassador in Quito said that Washington would cut off all military aid to the country unless it withdrew its support for the resolution.

The Moreno government swiftly bowed to the US threats, dropping its sponsorship of the measure, which ultimately passed only after the Russian government agreed to introduce it.

The episode served as a means of conditioning the Moreno government to toeing Washington's line. The clear danger is that it will similarly respond to demands that it renege on its provision of asylum to Julian Assange.

These developments underscore the necessity to intensify the struggle throughout the working class, in Latin America, the UK, the US and internationally, for Assange's freedom and against any attempt to deliver him into the hands of the legal lynch mob in Washington.

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