

Ecuador's president issues new threat to Julian Assange

Mike Head
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In a tweet and television interview, Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno has declared he will “take measures” against WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange unless he stops “intervening” in the politics and affairs of countries.

Moreno's tweet yesterday stated: “To Mr. Assange we have put a condition: That he stop intervening in politics and self-determination of the country. Otherwise, measures will be taken.”

These “measures” can only mean forcing Assange out of Ecuador's London embassy, to be immediately arrested by the British police and imprisoned, pending extradition proceedings by the Trump administration.

Moreno's talk about Assange “intervening” in the politics of other countries is absurd. The journalist has been totally gagged by the Ecuadorian government: he has been denied all visitors and has had his internet access blocked by electronic jammers. To talk about Assange “intervening” in the politics of other governments under these conditions is nothing but a cynical attempt to create a pretext for handing him over to the notorious war criminals in Washington and London.

These measures are aimed at denying basic political free speech to Assange and WikiLeaks, the best-known site in the world for exposing the war crimes, coup plots and mass surveillance of the US government and its allies.

The demand for “non-interference” essentially means to permit these crimes to continue, and worsen, under conditions in which the Trump administration's belligerent “America First” trade war measures and military threats point to the danger of another world war.

It is also a violation of the very principle of the political asylum that Ecuador granted Assange in 2012

when he entered the country's London embassy to avoid being extradited to Sweden and then to the US to face likely espionage, conspiracy and breach of secrecy charges.

The Ecuadorian president, who is desperately seeking close relations with Washington and US investment, seems to be trying to condition public opinion in Ecuador and internationally for Assange's imminent eviction from the embassy.

Moreno elaborated on his threat in an interview broadcast on Sunday night by Univision, a US Spanish-language television network. On Assange's possible removal from the embassy, Moreno said: “It is a problem that we inherited; Assange has problems with the English justice system, with the justice system of the United States. Our principal concern has been to protect his integrity, his human rights and fundamentally his life. Ecuador does not have the death penalty and we would be unable to deliver Mr. Assange to a country where he could be sentenced to death ...

“We have placed Mr. Assange under conditions that stop him from intervening in the politics, in the economy, in the self-determination of every people and principally those of friendly countries,” because otherwise, “we will make a decision.”

These comments follow Moreno's explicit statement last week that his government was willing to hand over Assange to Britain to be extradited to the US, provided only that the authorities in Washington offered what would be a worthless promise not to assassinate Assange or seek the death penalty against him.

While pretending to be trying to save Assange's life, Moreno has made it clear since he was installed as president in May last year that he regards Assange as a “problem” he inherited from his predecessor Rafael Correa, who had adopted a more left-wing posture. For

months, Moreno and his ministers have been conducting closed-door talks with the US and British administrations on ways and means to hand Assange over to them.

On Spanish- and Catalan-language news sites, Moreno's Univision interview was placed in the context of Assange's condemnation of the Spanish government's repression of Catalan voters and leaders in March. Ecuador's government cut off Assange's internet and other communications with the outside world, placing him in solitary political confinement, after WikiLeaks denounced Germany for taking Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont as a "political prisoner" at Spain's request.

Moreno made an official state visit to Spain last week, after a trip to Britain, seeking to forge ties to the European imperialist powers. However, his threats, and the now three-month-old isolation of Assange clearly seek to protect the governments of all the "friendly countries" that Moreno is trying to please. Above all, Moreno's actions are aimed at accommodating himself to the requirements of the US ruling class.

Another inherited "problem" for Moreno appears to be that Ecuador's previous foreign minister granted Assange Ecuadorian citizenship in a failed bid to arrange a way for the WikiLeaks editor to leave the embassy without being immediately detained by the British government.

In a recent podcast, *Intercept* journalist Glenn Greenwald reported he had been in contact with Assange's lawyers as well as the Ecuadorian government in recent weeks, and said Ecuador has been under pressure for months from Spain, Britain and the US over Assange.

Greenwald said Moreno was ready to finalise an agreement to hand over Assange and withdraw asylum, but may be wanting to first retroactively rescind Assange's citizenship, because the Ecuadorian-UK extradition treaty contains restrictions on "turning citizens over."

There is no doubt as to why the Trump administration, like the Obama administration, is intent on silencing Assange and WikiLeaks for good. Before being granted asylum in 2012, Assange coordinated a series of highly-revealing document dumps through WikiLeaks, including the 2007 release of secret military hardware used by US forces in Afghanistan,

the 2010 "collateral murder" video of US aerial killings in Iraq, and the 2010 release of 250,000 incriminating State Department cables, widely known as "Cablegate". There was also the 2011 publication of Guantanamo Bay prison details.

Despite Assange being trapped inside Ecuador's embassy since 2012, the damaging leaks have continued, including 400,000 classified files about the illegal invasion of Iraq and, more recently, huge troves of files exposing the computer hacking operations of the CIA.

Leading figures in the Trump administration have made no secret of their determination to get their hands on Assange. In April, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions again declared: "We are going to step up our efforts and already are stepping up our efforts on all leaks. We will seek to put some people in jail."

Despite Assange being an Australian citizen, successive Australian governments, starting with Julia Gillard's Labor administration in 2010, have colluded closely with the US authorities and refused to secure his release from the threat of extradition to the US.

In Australia, the Socialist Equality Party is the only political party campaigning for Assange's defence, which is part of the broader fight necessary for the defence of all fundamental democratic rights. A globally-broadcast rally conducted by the SEP, with the support of investigative journalist John Pilger, in Sydney's Town Hall Square on June 17, demanded that the Australian government secure Assange's right to return to Australia, if he so wishes, with guarantees that he not be handed over to the US.

The Australian government's refusal to meet its obligation to defend a citizen underscores the necessity to build a working class movement to secure Assange's freedom, against the political, trade union and media establishment that has abandoned him. As part of this campaign, we urge our readers to join protests if Assange is forced from Ecuador's embassy and then faces a protracted struggle against plans to extradite him to the United States.



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