

London: Ecuador embassy vigil marks six years since Julian Assange granted asylum

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Supporters of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange took part in a demonstration outside the Ecuadorian embassy in London Thursday to mark six years since he sought refuge there and was granted political asylum.

Chanting slogans including “Protect all journalists, free Assange!” protesters held placards reading, “Free Julian Assange,” “Free Press! Free Assange!” “No Internet Censorship” and “Bring Julian Home.”

Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno, under pressure from the United States with which he seeks closer relations and investment, has stepped up moves to eject Assange from the embassy.

If Assange is forced out, he faces immediate arrest by waiting British police and imprisonment on minor bail infringement charges relating to a case dropped by the Swedish authorities over a year ago. Assange fears that if detained by the British authorities he will be extradited to the US.

The WikiLeaks editor is now the subject of the investigation headed by US Special Counsel and former FBI director Robert Mueller into alleged “collusion” between the Trump campaign and Russia during the 2016 presidential election.

Following his indictment of 12 Russian intelligence officers last month, Mueller is now seeking to prove that WikiLeaks was part of a conspiracy to hack and publish emails sent by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton’s campaign chair, John Podesta.

Assange continues to face a secret grand jury trial in Virginia, home of the Pentagon and CIA, on multiple charges under the 1917 Espionage Act. These moves are aimed at denying free speech to Assange and WikiLeaks, who over the last decade have exposed the war crimes, coup plots and mass surveillance carried out by the US government and its allies.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to some of those at the protest. Mr. Tan from Singapore, who is holidaying in the UK, said he fully supported Assange and was pleased to see people still defending him.

“I think Julian Assange has done more than anyone this century to promote freedom of speech. In my own country, Singapore, we have been a so-called democratic state since independence [in 1965 from Britain] but it has been the same party in power, the People’s Action Party [PAP], ever since.

“For a lot of that time the same man, Lee Kuan Yew, was the prime minister. So you could say Singapore is a one-party state. And even though it has absolute power the PAP uses the courts and all sorts of underhand ways to stop opposition parties growing.

“We are ranked as one of the worst countries in the world in terms of press freedom. And it is getting worse, with more and more restrictive laws.

“Although the government says it does not censor political opinion on the internet, nearly all the online news channels are owned by the big newspaper companies which are tightly controlled or censor themselves. I will have to look at the *World Socialist Web Site* when I get back home.

“The government says we have freedom of speech. They say you can go to Speakers Corner in Hong Lim Park and say what you want. But you have to register with the park authorities, and everywhere else all demonstrations have to get a permit from the police, who can stop them if they decide it has political purposes. Foreigners, and remember we have hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers, are not allowed to take part in political activity.

“In Singapore, people can be held in a detention indefinitely without being charged. The government can also spy on you when it wants. So you can see why

I am sympathetic to Julian Assange and the way he revealed what was going on.”

Another protester, Khoo, cited the case of the young internet blogger, Amos Yee, and said he “flew to the US and was given asylum [in 2016] after being jailed for his political beliefs. He criticised religion, which is more or less forbidden in Singapore.

“I agree with you that increasing repression is linked to increasing inequality. I had not thought about it like that before. Singapore is the richest country in Asia, but I think it is also the most unequal. There were lots of stories in the press last month about how the top billionaires increased their wealth by 11 percent last year. It is absolutely incredible, especially when you think the government has been talking about inequality being the biggest threat to Singapore and made it a top priority.”

Saleh and Ameena are young Saudi nationals. Saleh spoke to the WSWs, while Ameena wanted to hold a Socialist Equality Party placard reading, “Defend Assange.”

Saleh said, “I feel strongly about the right to freedom of speech. Assange is a prisoner here, getting lower treatment than a prisoner. All he has done is show the truth to the people of the world, with WikiLeaks.

“Freedom of speech is very important: the right to say what you think is as basic as the right to have food or water.

“There is no freedom of speech where I come from. When I am here, I feel free to be myself and talk about what I want. When I am back home, I have to behave like an actor.

“When there is no free speech, it means that those in power can do what they like and can also lie. The attacks on Iraq, Syria, Libya were all based on lies.

“The Islamists also are against free speech, in the same way as the UK and US governments. Maybe that is why they are on the same side in Syria.

“With more freedom of speech comes more social justice and less poverty. In Saudi we have a lot of poverty, it is hidden and it is controlled ... No one can talk about it freely.”



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