

# Ecuador to partially restore Julian Assange's access to communications and visitors

James Cogan  
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In a statement issued Sunday, WikiLeaks announced that the Ecuadorian embassy in London has informed its publisher Julian Assange that it intends to partially restore his ability to use the Internet and phone services, and receive personal visitors. Ecuador, on the dictates of the Trump administration and US military-intelligence apparatus, stripped Assange of these basic rights on March 28 this year.

According to WikiLeaks, the decision follows meetings last Friday in Ecuador between the country's president, Lenín Moreno, and two senior UN officials—the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression David Kaye. The partial restoration of communication, however, is conditional on Assange not expressing any political opinions.

Moreno's government, as part of sordid efforts to rebuild Ecuador's relations with Washington, silenced Assange under conditions in which he was drawing attention to US-directed censorship of the internet and had condemned the mistreatment of Catalan separatists in Spain. For over six months, he has been prevented from speaking with the media, his colleagues and even his children and parents.

To the extent that it alleviates the isolation and psychological stress that has been inflicted on Assange, the conditional restoration of his right to communicate and receive visitors is a welcome development. It does not, however, end the danger he faces or his effective imprisonment inside the small embassy building, where he has been confined without direct access to sunlight since he sought political asylum with Ecuador on June 19, 2012.

At this stage, there is no indication that Ecuador's actions are bound up with any shift by the American

government and police agencies away from their near eight-year campaign to arrest and prosecute Assange. He still faces the threat of extradition to the US on fabricated charges of espionage, stemming from the 2010 publication by WikiLeaks of documents that exposed numerous American war crimes and anti-democratic diplomatic intrigues.

In 2012, the then Ecuadorian government granted political protection to the WikiLeaks publisher because British authorities were preparing to extradite him to Sweden to answer "questions" about manufactured allegations of sexual assault. At the time, Ecuador agreed that Assange faced the danger that Sweden's real motive was to rapidly extradite him on to the US. Any show trial in the US would most likely result in a lengthy imprisonment or potentially even a death sentence.

Assange, an Australian citizen, was compelled to turn to Ecuador because the Labor Party-led government of Australia had fully lined up with Washington and denied him his right to assistance and protection against persecution.

The British government, acting in concert with the Obama administration and most likely Australia, responded to Ecuador's granting of asylum with the most vindictive measures. British authorities threatened that Assange would be immediately arrested on bail-related charges if he ever set foot outside the embassy. As a result, Assange has been unable to get adequate medical treatment for a range of serious conditions.

Even after the UN condemned Britain's treatment of Assange and Swedish prosecutors dropped their politically-motivated investigation in May 2017, the May government maintained its threat to arrest him and refused to give any guarantee that it would not extradite him to the US.

This was under conditions in which WikiLeaks was publishing the “Vault 7” leaks, which consist of thousands of documents revealing how the CIA hacked into computers, mobile phones, servers and even vehicle computer systems. Then CIA director and now US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had denounced WikiLeaks as a “non-state hostile intelligence agency” and US Attorney General Jeff Sessions asserted that the arrest of Assange was a “priority.”

Under Lenín Moreno, who assumed the presidency in May 2017, Ecuador shifted to collaborating with US imperialism against WikiLeaks and Assange. Since cutting off his communications in March, it has repeatedly threatened to renege on its 2012 grant of political asylum in an apparent effort to pressure him into “voluntarily” leaving the embassy.

Due to his inability to communicate or comment, Assange stepped down last month as editor of WikiLeaks, naming Icelandic journalist Kristinn Hrafnsson as his replacement. This decision may have been a factor in Ecuador’s agreement to partially lift the restrictions.

In its statement yesterday, WikiLeaks noted that the offer to restore some communications to Assange comes with profoundly anti-democratic conditions. “Ecuador,” it said, “has informed Mr Assange that the government intends to continue Moreno’s policy of restricting him from expressing his opinions under threat of expulsion” from the embassy.

In other words, it appears that Assange must self-censor himself. If he seeks to return to the position of WikiLeaks editor and comment on world events, he would risk being handed over to British police and then to the US.

New WikiLeaks editor Hrafnsson responded yesterday to the conditions imposed on Assange.

“It is positive,” Hrafnsson said, “that through UN intervention Ecuador has partly ended the isolation of Mr Assange although it is of grave concern that his freedom to express his opinions is still limited. The UN has already declared Mr Assange is a victim of arbitrary detention. This unacceptable situation must end. The UK government must abide by the UN ruling and guarantee that he can leave the Ecuadorian embassy without the threat of extradition to the United States.”

All defenders of democratic rights must likewise

continue to fight for the unconditional freedom of Julian Assange, as part of the broader struggle in defence of freedom of speech and the ability of an independent and critical media to exist and function.

Assange is not guilty of any crime. Rather, he has been subjected to relentless persecution because WikiLeaks, by publishing documents provided by courageous whistleblowers, has exposed, and continues to expose, government and corporate criminality.

Every available forum and means must be used to win support throughout the international working class for the following demands:

- \* The US government, intelligence-police agencies and courts must end their pursuit of Assange and WikiLeaks for publishing leaked information.

- \* The British government must drop the defunct bail-related charges, provide a guarantee to Assange that he will not be extradited to the US and allow him to leave the United Kingdom unhindered if he desires to do so.

- \* The Australian government must end its collaboration with the mistreatment of one of its citizens and immediately remonstrate with Britain, using all its diplomatic powers and legal discretion, to secure Assange’s right to leave the embassy. It must guarantee his unconditional right to return to Australia if he chooses to do so.

- \* Until Assange’s freedom is secured, the Ecuadorian government must honour the political asylum it gave him and fully respect his right to communicate, receive visitors and conduct his work with WikiLeaks.



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