

Ecuadorian president hints again at moves to renege on Julian Assange's asylum

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In a radio interview on December 6, President Lenín Moreno effectively demanded that WikiLeaks' publisher Julian Assange leave the Ecuadorian embassy in London. Assange was granted political asylum by Ecuador in its embassy in 2012 because he faces the danger of prosecution in the US in retaliation for WikiLeaks' publication of leaked information exposing US war crimes, diplomatic conspiracies, intelligence agency spying and political intrigues.

Hinting at the prospect that he will renege on the protection provided to Assange by his predecessor Rafael Correa, Moreno said: "I do not like the presence of Mr. Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy."

Moreno claimed that he had been given a "guarantee" by Britain that Assange would not be extradited if he faced the threat of a death sentence. "The road is clear," Moreno incredibly declared, "for Mr. Assange to take the decision to leave into near freedom."

The "near freedom" Assange would face if he walked out of the embassy would be immediate arrest and imprisonment by British authorities. He would be prosecuted for breaking the bail conditions he was forced to endure while he fought a legal battle against a Swedish extradition warrant to answer questions over the fabricated, and ultimately abandoned allegations that he may have committed sexual offenses in Sweden. While held in a British prison cell, the US would apply for his extradition.

Between November 2010 and June 2012, British courts repeatedly dismissed the case presented by Assange's lawyers that the Swedish warrant was nothing more than a pretext to have the WikiLeaks' editor rendered to a country where he would be imprisoned under harsh conditions while his extradition to the US was organised.

Throughout this protracted legal battle, Assange, an

Australian citizen, was denied the support that Australian authorities were responsible to provide. Instead, the Labor government at the time lined up completely with Washington and denounced him as a criminal. It refused to launch the necessary international diplomatic and legal campaign against his treatment and to secure his immediate and unconditional right to return to Australia. Under those conditions, Assange sought asylum from Ecuador.

Economic and geopolitical conditions have since changed and Moreno, on behalf of the Ecuadorian capitalist elite, has moved to restore relations with US imperialism. In exchange, he is prepared to throw Assange to the wolves. In March this year, his government vastly escalated the pressure on Assange to leave by cutting off his ability to communicate with the outside world and denying him any personal visitors apart from his legal representatives.

Taken at face value, Moreno's statements suggest that he is more than prepared to accept Assange facing extradition to the US and being sentenced to decades, or even life imprisonment, for publishing leaks that let the world know the truth. Britain's purported "guarantee" on the death penalty was not some concession in the Assange case, but simply a restatement of its longstanding policy.

Since June 2012, the British government has maintained it will arrest Assange if he leaves the small embassy building for any reason. He has been condemned to what the United Nations described as "arbitrary detention," deprived of access to direct sunlight and necessary medical and dental treatment.

Barry Pollack, a legal representative of WikiLeaks, rejected Moreno's position and Britain's purported "guarantee." Pollack told the British *Telegraph*: "The suggestion that as long as the death penalty is off the

table, Mr Assange need not fear persecution is obviously wrong. No one should have to face criminal charges for publishing truthful information. Since such charges appear to have been brought against Mr Assange in the United States, Ecuador should continue to provide him asylum.”

The fight for the freedom of Julian Assange is a matter of fundamental political principle. Anyone who refuses to defend him cannot make any credible claim to uphold any of the democratic rights won over centuries of struggle against despotism and which were extended and expanded through the mass struggles of the international working class.

The Australian government, controlled since September 2013 by the conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition, has never shifted from its shameless collaboration in the persecution of one of its own citizens. This year, the Coalition government and Labor opposition have ignored the demand, made at the June 17 demonstration in Sydney organised by the Socialist Equality Party and addressed by John Pilger, that Australia diplomatically and legally intervene on Assange’s behalf.

Moreover, media publications, the Greens, self-styled “independent” members of parliament, trade unions, and pseudo-left organisations, which all at one time declared that it was essential to defend Julian Assange, have joined Labor and Coalition in the vendetta. For years, they have assisted the persecution of Assange and the broader attack on democratic rights, by remaining silent and abandoning any action to secure his freedom.

The pro-imperialist positions and perfidy of the Australian ex-liberal and ex-left milieu is duplicated by their counterparts around the world.

In the United States, the Democratic Socialists of America, the International Socialist Organization and other pseudo-left formations follow the line of the Democratic Party and the US intelligence agencies, which denounce Assange as a “Russian agent” because WikiLeaks published leaks during the 2016 election that underscored the right-wing, anti-working class character of Hillary Clinton and her campaign for the presidency.

In Britain, the self-styled “left” Jeremy Corbyn, since becoming Labour leader has never repeated his previous declarations of support for Assange. May’s

government would not have been able to proceed with its threats to arrest the WikiLeaks’ publisher and hand him over to the Trump administration, without Corbyn’s tacit support.

Across Europe, the assorted pseudo-left parties, from Syriza in Greece, to Podemos in Spain, to the Left Party in Germany and Unsubmissive France, say nothing about the assault on media freedom, the censorship of oppositional voices on the Internet and the persecution of Assange and WikiLeaks.

The complicit silence is all the more pernicious now. Last month a US court document inadvertently revealed that the Department of Justice has filed and sealed unspecified charges against Assange, as he and his defenders have insisted is the central issue from the outset. The slander about sexual offences and over the exposure of Clinton’s campaign are simply pretexts to destroy WikiLeaks and intimidate and terrorise all independent media and would-be whistleblowers exposing great power and corporate criminality.

On Sunday, December 16, the SEP in Australia will be holding a public meeting, livestreamed around the world via Facebook, to outline and discuss the next stage in the campaign to secure the unconditional freedom of Assange, including his right to return to Australia if he chooses to do so, with a guarantee of protection from any extradition to the US.



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