

Australian government claims credit for release of detained Bahraini footballer, but refuses to assist Julian Assange

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Hakeem Al-Araibi, a football player and refugee with permanent residency in Australia, was freed by authorities in Thailand yesterday after they dropped court proceedings to extradite him to Bahrain, where he faced politically-motivated charges. Al-Araibi flew to his home in Melbourne, Australia overnight.

The release of Al-Araibi is undoubtedly a welcome development. Had the 25-year-old been extradited to his native Bahrain, Al-Araibi would have faced abuse, imprisonment and possibly worse at the hands of the despotic US-backed Middle Eastern regime.

The footballer, who was granted refugee status in 2017, is from the Shiite minority, which is routinely persecuted, along with other dissidents, by the absolutist Bahraini monarchy. He is being pursued for allegedly participating in anti-government protests in 2011. Al-Araibi has stated that he was tortured before he was able to flee Bahrain in 2014.

The Australian political establishment has responded to Al-Araibi's release with an outpouring of utterly hypocritical self-congratulation.

Senior politicians responsible for abrogating the right to asylum and democratic rights have postured as the champions of an oppressed refugee.

Labor and Liberal-National MPs who have supported the US-led vendetta against Julian Assange—an Australian citizen being persecuted for his role in WikiLeaks' exposures of mass spying, illegal diplomatic intrigues and war crimes—have made pious statements about the responsibility of governments to protect their citizens and permanent residents.

The federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison has trumpeted the fact that it made representations on Al-Araibi's behalf, including by dispatching Defence Minister Marise Payne to Thailand to

convey "concerns" over the prospect of his extradition.

Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten Tweeted: "Thank you to the Thai authorities for understanding our concerns and the Thai court for respecting Hakeem's right to return to Australia." Representatives of the Greens and the Australian Council of Trade Unions similarly lauded Al-Araibi's return as a victory for democratic rights.

The celebratory statements have, in the first instance, served to suppress serious questions about the role of the Australian authorities in Al-Araibi's initial detention.

On November 8, Bahrain secured an Interpol red notice for Al-Araibi's arrest.

Before he departed to Bangkok for a holiday, the Australian National Central Bureau, which is staffed by Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers, alerted Thai authorities of the Interpol notice, guaranteeing that he would be arrested. It is unclear whether the Bahraini government, which appeared to have advanced knowledge of Al-Araibi's travel plans, was also tipped off by the AFP.

The record of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, moreover, underscores the cynical character of their professed concerns for Al-Araibi's plight. Both parties have spearheaded the persecution of refugees, consigning those who arrive by boat to concentration camps in the Pacific in violation of international law and the right to seek asylum.

As they are hailing Al-Araibi's release, Labor and the Liberal-Nationals are today finalising amendments to refugee transfer legislation, to ensure that the government can prevent asylum-seekers in offshore detention from travelling to Australia when they need urgent medical attention.

This coincides with a broader "visa crackdown," which has resulted in the deportation of hundreds of permanent

residents who have lived in Australia for years.

At the same time, the entire political establishment is whipping-up anti-immigrant sentiment and anti-Chinese xenophobia, to divide the working class and legitimise Australia's role in the US confrontation with China. Last week, it was revealed that the Australian government has stripped Chinese billionaire Huang Xiangmo of his permanent residency, amid unsubstantiated allegations by the media and the intelligence agencies that he functioned as a representative for the Chinese regime.

Most glaring of all, however, is the contrast between the statements of Liberal-National and Labor politicians on the Al-Araibi case, and their refusal to take any action in defence of Julian Assange. Shorten's declaration that Al-Araibi had a "right to return to Australia," and similar comments by the government, apply no less to Assange.

But since 2010, successive Australian governments have participated in the US-led persecution of the WikiLeaks founder. In that year, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard branded WikiLeaks a criminal organisation over its publication of logs from Iraq and Afghanistan, which documented US-led war crimes, and diplomatic cables detailing Washington's sordid and often illegal intrigues around the world.

Assange sought asylum in London's Ecuadorian embassy in June 2012 only after he had lost a protracted legal battle against prejudicial rulings by British courts that he be extradited to Sweden, on bogus sexual misconduct allegations. Assange was compelled to seek assistance from Ecuador because he was given no diplomatic, political or even legal support by the Gillard Labor government.

Every Australian government since has continued to support the persecution of Assange. They have rejected calls to defend him, even as his claim to political asylum has been upheld by the United Nations and international rights organisations.

The Australian political establishment has done nothing to assist the WikiLeaks founder since his internet and communications were cut off by the Ecuadorian government, acting under pressure from the US and its allies, in March 2018. Doctors have warned that Assange's effective detention in the Ecuadorian embassy is jeopardising his health, and that he is being prevented from accessing necessary medical care.

Nor did any Australian government or opposition MP issue a statement on the confirmation late last year that the US has sealed charges against Assange related to WikiLeaks publishing activities. Morrison, however,

explicitly reaffirmed his government's refusal to take any action in defence of Assange.

The stance of successive governments is inextricably tied to their unconditional support for the US-Australia alliance, which serves as a vehicle for predatory wars and attacks on the democratic rights of the population. The entire Australian political establishment has supported Australia's integration, since 2011, into a vast US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific region, aimed at preparing for war with China.

A particularly shameful role has been played by the Greens, the trade unions, pseudo-left organisations and media representatives, who claimed to support Assange in 2010 and 2011, but have since abandoned the WikiLeaks founder. By their silence, they are signalling their support for the state persecution of a journalist whose only "crime" has been to publicly expose the illegal actions of governments and the ruling elites.

A movement in defence of Assange and democratic rights must be built among workers, students and young people, who are increasingly entering into struggle against war, austerity and the turn to authoritarian forms of rule.

This underscores the importance of rallies called by the Socialist Equality Party in Sydney on March 3, and in Melbourne on March 10. They will raise the demand that the government immediately exercise its full diplomatic powers and legal discretion to secure Assange's right to leave the London embassy and return to Australia if he chooses to do so, with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

The record demonstrates that an Australian government will only take such action if it is forced to do so by a mass movement from below.

The author recommends:

Rally to demand the Australian government acts to free Julian Assange! Sydney Martin Place Amphitheatre, March 3! Melbourne State Library, March 10!

John Pilger to speak at March 3 Sydney rally to defend Julian Assange

Acclaimed musician Roger Waters calls on people to demonstrate in Australia to defend Julian Assange
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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact