

Amid corruption scandals and deals with IMF and Washington, Ecuador's government betrays Assange

Bill Van Auken
12 April 2019

The decision by the Ecuadorian government of President Lenín Moreno to invite the British police into its London embassy to drag out Julian Assange, opening the way to the extradition of the WikiLeaks founder to the US, is a flagrant violation of international law and a shameful new chapter in the cowardice and submission of Latin America's national bourgeoisie to US imperialism.

Not only did the Ecuadorian government throw open the doors of its embassy to the British police snatch squad, it announced on Thursday that the day before, without any notification to Assange or his attorneys, the country's foreign ministry had summarily stripped the journalist of his Ecuadorian citizenship, which he had been granted in 2017 as part of an attempt to secure his release from the embassy under diplomatic cover.

Government officials claimed that there had been unspecified "irregularities" in the decision to grant Assange citizenship. The motive for abrogating the decision was clear: the Ecuadorian constitution prohibits the extradition of the country's citizens and requires that they be tried for any crime under the country's laws.

President Lenín Moreno announced his filthy deal with US and British imperialism in a video posted on his Twitter account, in which he claimed that he had secured guarantees from London that Assange would not be extradited to "a country where he could face torture or the death penalty." This lie was exposed immediately, as the US Justice Department released an indictment, and UK authorities made it clear they were awaiting proceedings for extradition to a country where the death penalty is in use and that has practiced torture on an international scale.

Assange's Ecuadorian lawyer, Carlos Poveda, denounced the government's arbitrary, antidemocratic and extralegal actions. "At the minimum, we should have been notified so that we could exercise the right of defense," he said. He insisted that the law establishes that any termination of asylum must be first reviewed with the asylee, who has the right to argue his case.

Ecuador's Foreign Minister Jose Valencia went before the country's National Assembly on Thursday to justify the illegal act carried out by the government in summarily stripping Assange of his asylum.

Valencia's presentation, which was interrupted by shouts of "traitor" and "*vendepatria*" from opposition legislators, consisted of nine points, comprised of lies and absurdities.

He claimed that Assange, who has been held under increasingly draconian conditions in the embassy, largely cut off from the outside world, had engaged in "countless acts of interference in the internal

affairs of other states," had behaved badly toward embassy officials, and had made "insulting threats" against the Ecuadorian government, including the "infamous and slanderous" charge that it was "acting under pressure from foreign countries."

The same Valencia had last week denounced the "insulting" warning by WikiLeaks that his government had reached an agreement with UK authorities to turn Assange over to the British police.

Valencia went so far as to claim that the handing over of Assange was done in part out of concern for his health, and then went on to complain about how much the embassy had spent on his food, medical expenses and laundry.

The immediate context for the Ecuadorian government's action is a raging corruption scandal implicating President Moreno and his family. The so-called INA Papers, an extensive set of documents, emails and other social media communications, have implicated Moreno in crimes ranging from official corruption to perjury and money laundering.

At the center of the scandal is a scheme in which the Chinese company Sinohydro, which built a hydroelectric dam in Ecuador, deposited \$18 million in payoffs in an offshore company, which in turn transferred the money to a set of 10 shell companies that included INA Investments Corp, owned by Edwin Moreno, the president's brother. The company's name was taken from the common syllable in the names of the president's three daughters, Irina, Cristina and Karina.

An opposition legislator, Ronny Aleaga, who said he received the dossier anonymously, has insisted that the documents establish that the company was placed under the directorship of figureheads to conceal the president's connection to the scheme.

The documents were first published in February 2019, prompting a congressional investigation. On March 26, WikiLeaks' Twitter account called attention to the investigation, while citing a *New York Times* report that Moreno had been in discussion with the Trump administration—via a May 2017 trip to Quito by Trump's former campaign chairman Paul Manafort—on handing over Assange in return for debt relief.

Foreign Minister Valencia responded immediately to the tweet, calling it "an absurd lie to harm the dignity of our country" and vowed the Ecuadorian government would take action.

Subsequently, Moreno and his subordinates tried to twist the WikiLeaks tweet of news already reported and well known in Ecuador into proof that Assange, held virtually incommunicado in the London embassy, was personally responsible for hacking the president's

phone and emails.

Within two days of the WikiLeaks tweet, the Ecuadorian national assembly, in which Moreno's party and other right-wing parties hold the majority, passed a resolution calling on the Foreign Ministry to retaliate against Assange over the leak of the INA Papers.

The Ecuadorian president mounted a cynical campaign, claiming that he was the victim of an invasion of privacy and that the INA Papers had included "private photos" of himself and his family, all for the purpose of distracting public attention from the extensive evidence of his wholesale corruption.

With the expulsion of Assange from the London embassy, Moreno's government has escalated this campaign. Maria Paula Romo, Ecuador's interior minister, stated that Assange and WikiLeaks were involved in a plot to "destabilize" the Moreno government, which allegedly involved two "Russian hackers" working inside Ecuador, Ricardo Patiño, a former Ecuadorian foreign minister, and, possibly, the Venezuelan government of President Nicolas Maduro. She claimed that evidence of this plot would be turned over to Ecuadorian prosecutors imminently.

All of this is a geyser of mud aimed at diverting attention from the corruption charges against Moreno and deflecting the growing popular anger against his right-wing government. Recent opinion polls have placed his favorable rating at barely 17 percent.

Moreno made clear his intention to betray Assange from the moment he took office in 2017. He referred to the Australian-born journalist as a "hacker," an "inherited problem" and "a stone our shoe."

The previous government of President Rafael Correa had granted asylum to Assange in 2012 because of the clear evidence that he faced political persecution for exposing imperialist war crimes of the US government, mass surveillance and antidemocratic conspiracies carried out by Washington, other governments and transnational corporations.

When the government in Quito decided to grant Assange asylum in its London embassy, its then-foreign affairs minister, Ricardo Patiño, declared that Washington's vendetta against the journalist "could endanger his safety, integrity and even his life." He continued: "The evidence shows that if Mr. Assange is extradited to the United States, he wouldn't have a fair trial. It is not at all impossible that he could be subjected to cruel and degrading treatment and sentenced to life imprisonment or even capital punishment."

What has changed in the nearly seven years that Assange has spent trapped in the Ecuadorian embassy? The Trump administration has only made the threats against the journalist more explicit, with former CIA director and now Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declaring WikiLeaks a "non-state hostile intelligence service," whose activities are not protected by the First Amendment. Former attorney general Jeff Sessions insisted that bringing Assange back to the US in chains to face a rigged trial was a "priority" for the US Justice Department.

The change is not in the threat to Assange, but rather in the sharp turn to the right by the government of Lenín Moreno, part of a wave of reaction that has accompanied the ebbing of the so-called Pink Tide throughout Latin America.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in the policies pursued by Moreno, who was the handpicked successor of the former president, Correa, who had declared himself a supporter of "Bolivarian revolution" and "21st century socialism."

Moreno has pursued a policy aimed at subordinating Ecuador to the international banks and financial institutions economically and to US

imperialism politically. Earlier this year, he concluded deals with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other international financial institutions for \$10 billion in credit in exchange for implementing draconian austerity measures that have seen the axing of over 10,000 public-sector jobs, along with half of the government's ministries, as well as the slashing of taxes on the rich, the gutting of labor laws and the scrapping of subsidies for fuel prices.

These policies have provoked mass protests and a general strike against the Moreno government.

At the same time, Moreno has courted the approval of the State Department and the Pentagon, becoming one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the US-instigated coup in Venezuela and the so-called "interim president" Juan Guaidó.

Correa, Ecuador's former president, condemned the action of the Moreno government. "The biggest traitor in Ecuadorian and Latin American history, Lenín Moreno, allowed the British police to enter our embassy in London to arrest Assange," he said. Moreno, he added, "has demonstrated his lack of humanity to the world, turning in Julian Assange—not only an asylee, but also an Ecuadorian citizen—to the British police," which both placed his life "at risk" and "humiliates Ecuador."

Similarly, former Ecuadorian foreign minister Guillaume Long issued a statement Thursday denouncing the arrest. "The surrender of Julian Assange, dragged by the British police after entering our diplomatic mission to remove him, is a national shame and a historical error that will leave a deep mark on Ecuador for a long time," he said.

Long added that the government's decision violated rulings of the United Nation and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and "will be remembered by future generations of Ecuadorians as an act of servility, vileness and ethical degradation."

The betrayal of Assange is part and parcel of the Moreno government's turn to the right and accommodation to US imperialism, which have spelled a frontal attack on the Ecuadorian working class. The defense of Assange and of basic democratic rights depends upon the struggle to unite the working class in Ecuador, Britain, the US and internationally in struggle against the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)