

M.I.A. visits Julian Assange in prison: “It’s about truth—and that’s something people have to uphold and fight for”

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Singer and rap artist M.I.A. visited Julian Assange at Belmarsh Prison on Saturday, calling for his freedom. The WikiLeaks publisher and journalist faces extradition to the United States under the Espionage Act, with charges that carry a 175-year prison term.

M.I.A.’s visit followed a brief court hearing Friday at Westminster Magistrates Court. Assange appeared via remote video-link to hear Judge Tam Ikram confirm his remand at the maximum-security prison while a US extradition request is heard. He will appear in court again on October 21.

Speaking at a press conference outside Belmarsh late Saturday afternoon, M.I.A.—Sri Lankan-born Mathangi ‘Maya’ Arulpragasam—condemned Assange’s tormentors, indicting the US and UK governments, the courts and the corporate media. M.I.A. is a long-time friend and supporter of Assange.

Asked about Assange’s condition, she replied, “I think when you know there are people outside who are criminals, and you are inside for advocating peace, while people that profit from war are outside, and celebrated and given Nobel peace prizes, that hurts. I think that’s hard for anyone.”

Former US President Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel prize in 2009, as his administration escalated US military operations across the globe, including a drone assassination program he personally supervised.

M.I.A. explained that she and Julian had discussed conditions “for everyone” inside the prison “and the concept of freedom and what that really means.”

A WSWWS reporter asked M.I.A. to comment on the UK government’s assertion that it “does not participate in or condone the use of torture.” The UK government last week rejected UN Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer’s findings (published May 31) that Assange is the victim of

unprecedented state persecution and “psychological torture.”

She responded, “I’ve been trying to get a yoga book to him for a month now and I come here every week trying to hand it in and it’s been impossible... To me that’s a very extreme method they are using where you’re denying even reading books. I wasn’t able to take in sketchbooks where he could write thoughts or draw and I haven’t been able to take puzzles which might help stimulate the mind.

“I first thought that maybe all prisoners were treated like that, where they’re not able to have some sort of dignity and own the space between their ears and have that mental freedom... I can sympathise with people who feel that he’s been treated unfairly... I think there is an element of discrimination.”

Asked for her opinion on media coverage of Assange, M.I.A. said, “I think there should be more, given that now we know the truth and that the debate is about extradition to the US. It’s no longer about all the other things people have accused him of. Now it’s about truth—and that’s something people have to uphold and fight for especially in these years.”

M.I.A. replied forthrightly to a question about bogus sexual misconduct allegations against Assange in Sweden: “It’s now really about extraditing Julian to the US. I wish there was more emphasis given to that truth and people really making a statement about that.

“The basic bottom line is he’s in there because he exposed some war crimes and he just campaigned for peace. This cannot be the example. We can’t make that an example to society where we penalise people for that and not a single person has been convicted for the financial crisis of 2008. Nobody has been convicted for the war crimes before then of the Bush era, no one’s been

convicted from the Obama era and everything the Democrats did. Nothing has happened legally, so why trust the legal system, that hasn't come through on any of those things?"

M.I.A.'s press conference was boycotted by the major news networks and the BBC, despite having been widely advertised. Only Sputnik and Ruptly published live footage. A Press Association report was picked up by the *Independent* and the *Belfast Telegraph*, while the *Daily Mail* carried a report that recycled false and defamatory statements about Assange. Its headline set the tone, "Singer MIA becomes Julian Assange's latest celebrity supporter..."

M.I.A. has defended Assange for years and is herself an outspoken opponent of imperialist war and oppression. In November 2013, she opened her concert in New York City with a 10-minute address from Assange, via video livestream. Assange used his appearance to champion the cause of whistle-blower Edward Snowden. He warned of the dangers of the National Security Agency's spying operations and urged M.I.A.'s fans to become politically aware and active in seeking to change the world for the better.

On Saturday, M.I.A. explained, "I support Julian because I think someone like this is valuable to society because of his knowledge about so many different things.

"I try not to be prejudiced in a time where things change and evolve at such a fast rate. People's values are changing, people's beliefs are changing, the political climate is changing, the social climate is changing, the financial situation is changing—and throughout all of this change, we're so constricting this man."

M.I.A. concluded her press conference by urging attendance at an event for Assange being staged with fellow rap artist Lowkey outside the UK Home Office on November 5. The free event follows last month's live performance outside the same building by Pink Floyd singer Roger Waters that saw hundreds gather to show their support for the WikiLeaks founder.



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