

The international witch-hunt of Julian Assange

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The prosecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange at London's Westminster Magistrates Court is a travesty of justice that will forever stain the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden and Ecuador, as well as all the individuals involved.

Appearing alongside Assange in court Monday morning, Assange's attorneys revealed that they had been given only two hours to meet with their client at Belmarsh prison to review what lawyer Gareth Peirce called "volumes" worth of evidence.

Expressing the practiced cynicism of British class justice, District Judge Vanessa Baraitser said this was "not an unreasonable position," citing a lack of space in the prison interview room. With the bang of her gavel, Baraitser sent Assange back to his dungeon at Belmarsh, where he awaits his February extradition hearing under conditions UN Rapporteur Nils Meltzer has called "torture."

At this stage in the near decade-long international witch-hunt of Assange, nobody should be surprised by such shameless lawlessness on the part of the world's most powerful governments. Ever since Swedish, British and American prosecutors conspired in 2010 to issue a warrant for Assange's arrest in connection with an investigation into bogus sexual misconduct allegations, these "advanced democracies" have trampled on their own laws and traditions, subjecting the journalist to a pseudo-legal process that would have been deemed unfair even by the standards of the Middle Ages.

Monday's mockery of justice is an escalation of the attack on Assange's right to counsel. It takes place after the Spanish newspaper *El País* published a detailed account of how a security firm, UC Global, secretly spied on Assange's privileged discussions with

his lawyers and fed the illegally obtained surveillance to the CIA. UC Global also shared footage from cameras it installed throughout the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, where Assange was forced to seek refuge from 2012 to 2019 to avoid US extradition. *El País'* reporting showed that UC Global recorded every word Assange spoke and live-streamed these conversations to the CIA.

Despite the support of a criminally compliant media, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the US and British governments to downplay the profoundly anti-democratic precedents they intend to set through the Assange prosecution.

In an opinion article published Monday in the *Hill*, titled "Will alleged CIA misbehavior set Julian Assange free?" American attorney James Goodale wrote a scathing attack on the CIA's spying on Assange's privileged attorney-client communications.

Goodale is among the most prominent and well respected attorneys in the US, best known for representing the *New York Times* when the newspaper was sued by the Nixon administration for publishing the Pentagon Papers in 1971. The Pentagon Papers were leaked by RAND Corporation analyst Daniel Ellsberg, who has also called for the release of Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The Pentagon Papers revealed how the US government for years lied to the public in expanding the Vietnam War, which led to the deaths of 55,000 US soldiers and 3 million Vietnamese people. Their publication triggered an explosion of public anger and fueled anti-war protests.

Goodale wrote: "Can anything be more offensive to a 'sense of justice' than an unlimited surveillance, particularly of lawyer-client conversations, livestreamed to the opposing party in a criminal case?"

The alleged streaming unmasked the strategy of Assange's lawyers, giving the government an advantage that is impossible to remove. Short of dismissing Assange's indictment with prejudice, the government will always have an advantage that can never be matched by the defense."

Goodale explained that "the Daniel Ellsberg case may be instructive."

Ellsberg, like Assange, was prosecuted under the Espionage Act for leaking documents to the *Times* and the *Washington Post*. During the trial, Nixon's "plumbers" broke into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist and wiretapped his phone. In that case, Judge William Matthew Byrne ruled that the surveillance had "incurably infected the prosecution" and dismissed the charges, setting Ellsberg free.

Goodale wrote that "for similar reasons, the case against Assange should be dismissed."

He added: "The usual remedy for warrantless surveillance is to exclude any illegally obtained information from the trial, but that remedy is inapplicable here. The government's advantage in surveilling Assange is not the acquisition of tangible evidence but, rather, intangible insights into Assange's legal strategy. There is no way, therefore, to give Assange a fair trial, since his opponents will know every move he will make."

Fifty years after the collapse of the prosecution of Ellsberg, there is no faction of the American or British ruling class capable of defending basic democratic principles.

Three decades of permanent war and financial speculation have transformed the capitalist world into the fiefdom of a global oligarchy, protected by garrison states, in which the imperatives of imperialist plunder demand increased repression and censorship worldwide. Assange and Manning, who exposed US war crimes and helped inspire social opposition internationally, are test cases for dictatorial forms of rule that are to be imposed on millions.

It is a grave danger to the rights of all that the British "justice" system is now moving to place Assange in the hands of the very same officials who plotted for months to carry out the murder of Iran's General Qassem Suleimani.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and

the British Extradition Act of 2003 bar the British government from extraditing any individual to a country where the government assassinates its opponents and is incapable of guaranteeing that the individual will not be killed or tortured.

Suleimani's death underscores that the US is legally incapable of making such a guarantee.

The pseudo-legal process shows that what the British and US governments are attempting to carry out is not an extradition, but an extraordinary rendition, defined by the European Court for Human Rights as detention "outside the normal legal system," which, "by its deliberate circumvention of due process, is anathema to the rule of law and the values protected by the [Geneva] Convention."

This travesty of justice has been ignored by the entire spectrum of what passes for the left wing of the imperialist political establishment, including Jeremy Corbyn, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders, Ilhan Omar and all those associated with the Labour Party in the UK and the Democratic Socialists of America faction of the Democratic Party in the US.

Their silence is not an oversight, it is a class position. The affluent upper-middle class layers on whose behalf these politicians speak have tossed their decades-old anti-war placards in the garbage and enlisted as cheerleaders for US and British imperialism. Behind their sophistic arguments that "humanitarian" considerations justify US-led wars in Libya and Syria, the real motivations reside in their bulging stock portfolios, amplified by imperialist plunder.

There is only one social force capable of leading the fight to free Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, defend democratic rights and stop the global drive toward dictatorship and war. The end of 2019 saw the working class, billions strong and more internationally interconnected than ever before, moving into struggle on a scale not seen in decades. It is the urgent task of socialists to endow this movement with a revolutionary socialist perspective to transform the world on an egalitarian basis, free of war and dictatorship.



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