

Assange's French legal advisor Juan Branco: "We've experienced a strong shift that we now need to nurture"

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16 January 2020

The WSWS contacted Juan Branco, a prominent French media figure and legal advisor to Julian Assange, after he made powerful comments last month condemning illegal surveillance conducted against the WikiLeaks founder and his associates, including his lawyers.

Branco tweeted a video of himself in a confidential discussion with Assange in Ecuador's London embassy, where the publisher was granted asylum in 2012. The video was apparently taken by UC Global, the private Spanish firm which was contracted by the Ecuadorian government to manage security at the embassy.

UC Global founder David Morales is accused of conducting a vast spying operation in the building on behalf of the US Central Intelligence Agency, beginning in 2015. This allegedly included recording Assange's private conversations with lawyers, including Branco, in a flagrant violation of the right to attorney-client privilege. The spying exposes the utter criminality of the attempt to extradite Assange from Britain to the US, where he faces espionage charges and life imprisonment, for having exposed Washington's war crimes, diplomatic intrigues and human rights violations.

Branco has been a legal advisor to Assange and WikiLeaks for a number of years. He was the Paris-based media contact for the organisation in 2015 when WikiLeaks exposed the US National Security Agency's illegal surveillance of French and other European government officials. He has made representations on Assange's behalf to the United Nations and the French authorities.

Branco has previously worked for the International

Criminal Court and the French foreign ministry and has published commentary in a number of media outlets, including *Le Monde diplomatique*. He answered a series of questions from the WSWS by email earlier this week.

The WSWS began by asking Branco to comment on the significance of the CIA spying against Assange, and its implications for the extradition case.

Juan Branco: We believe this is a crucial element in our battle to avoid Julian Assange's extradition. The gross violation of the principles of a fair trial, including the right to a fair defense, are epitomized in this episode.

The lack of secrecy of his exchanges with his lawyers was not only the fruit of covert operations: the dispositives were probably also used to collect evidence that could be used in trial, i.e., that could be legalized. In these conditions, in which the material basis of an indictment is based on illegal spying operations that violate the basic rights of the defense, it seems to us extremely difficult to argue that an extradition to the US would not violate the basic requisites that apply in these circumstances.

WSWS: You noted that you also appeared on footage secretly taken by UC Global. Could you speak about the way in which your legal rights, and those of all of Assange's visitors were also violated?

JB: The Bar of Paris and I are going to file a complaint in France over the violation of the rights of the defense, professional secrets and the violation of my privacy. What we are trying to do is to fight against the normalization of practices that are devastating the privacy not only of our client, but more broadly of millions of citizens. In our case, the situation was

particularly intense, with a few of us being the subject of tailing operations, photo operations, burglaries and so forth.

WSWS: When you addressed a Web Summit in Portugal last November, attended by thousands of people, you remarked on stage that Tony Blair had been present at the event. You commented that while the war criminals exposed by WikiLeaks are free, Assange is behind bars. Could you elaborate on this point?

JB: Tony Blair was responsible for a war that triggered hundreds of thousands of deaths and a wave of violence that hit Paris, London and many cities across the world as a consequence.

The fact that he still is a guest of honor at many conferences, while Assange and Chelsea Manning, who unveiled the crimes committed during these wars, are at the same moment behind bars, is a scandal that reveals the lack, not only of democracy, but also of firmness of our civil societies. It is a miracle that I was able to take the stage in front of 15,000 start-uppers a few minutes after Tony Blair to remind the organizers and attendees of how unnatural this situation was.

WSWS: You also described the way in which the attacks against Assange are part of a broader assault on alternative media. Could you speak on the way in which this is the case?

JB: We live in a paradoxical era in which tools of oppression—social networks—allow us to make visible the distortions and manipulations of the media of the previous era—mainstream outlets. A shift in power is happening, and in the intertwinement of this process, monsters are exposed and reveal their true nature.

I think Gramsci wasn't fully right: monsters are not born during those periods, they are revealed. These situations, which are extremely embarrassing for all those who pretended to fight for ideals and are actually exposed in their corruption and compromises, create intense waves of violence through which apparatuses of power try to save face by crushing whoever tries to expose them.

WSWS: The persecution of Assange has gone hand-in-hand with a growth of state repression, including directed against the “yellow vest” protest in France and other oppositional movements, along with major police crackdowns in Spain. Could you speak about the relationship between the persecution of Assange and this broader turn to authoritarianism?

JB: I think they are separate subjects. Catalonia's situation can't be equated to the French situation, and so forth: we have to be very careful with political comparativism. What I'm certain of is that structural changes are happening in the public sphere that allow for strong expressions of dissensus and a recomposition of political structures. The technological revolution we're experiencing couldn't be without consequences. Apparatuses of power are now trying to resist the unavoidable changes that are being called for.

The state, because of its nature, is the last to adapt, while citizens and private interests are embarked on a speed race. Citizens have their mass and geniuses like Julian Assange on their side—private interests have their economical power, cynicism and capacity to corrupt on theirs. The state becomes more and more the spectator of this struggle, and the vehicle for both forces to interact. Until a crackdown reconfigures the scene and gives birth to a new era.

WSWS: Over the past month, there has been a growth of support for Assange, reflected in open letters opposing his persecution by hundreds of lawyers, doctors and journalists. Have you noted mounting support for the WikiLeaks founder, and what do you think accounts for it?

JB: I think the situation is extremely favorable. It has been extremely complicated to work with Julian and WikiLeaks at times. The extraordinary pressure put on all his collaborators and lawyers has been huge, and often created a feeling of isolation and doubt.

But over the last months, especially thanks to movements like the “yellow vests,” we've experienced a strong shift that we now need to nurture. It creates a huge responsibility. A lot of people are putting their faith and trust into our hands. We now must fight as hard as we can to correspond to that expectation and help Julian Assange be set free and WikiLeaks continue to do his work.



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