

Edward Snowden warns that Assange and Greenwald prosecutions mark new stage in assault on press freedom

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In an opinion piece published in the *Washington Post* on Sunday, National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden warned that US charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and a Brazilian prosecution of *Intercept* journalist Glenn Greenwald are the spearhead of a campaign by governments around the world to abolish press freedom.

Calling for all supporters of democratic rights to rally to the defence of both Assange and Greenwald, Snowden wrote: “The most essential journalism of every era is precisely that which a government attempts to silence. These prosecutions demonstrate that they are ready to stop the presses—if they can.”

Snowden’s voice carries the weight and authority of a courageous individual who risked everything to alert the population to government crimes. In 2013, Snowden revealed mass NSA spying on the American and world population, as well as on the political rivals of US imperialism, including its own formal allies, in violation of the US constitution and international law.

For these actions, he has been relentlessly hounded by the US government and its intelligence agencies. His successful flight to Russia and bid for political asylum were carried out with assistance from WikiLeaks.

Snowden’s appeal comes at a crucial stage in the fight to free Assange. British court hearings for the WikiLeaks founders’ extradition to the US, where he faces Espionage Act charges and the prospect of life imprisonment, begin on February 24. If extradited, Assange would be prosecuted over his role in WikiLeaks’ publishing activities, including its exposures of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and human rights abuses at the US military prison at Guantánamo Bay.

The British judiciary, and all of the official political parties, have already greenlighted what can only be

termed an extraordinary rendition operation. The US Department of Justice has made clear Assange would be denied the First Amendment protections for freedom of the press and free speech, despite the fact that he has been charged under domestic US law.

Glenn Greenwald was charged last week in Brazil with conspiracy and hacking offences for his role in exposing how Brazilian officials used an anti-corruption probe to railroad political opponents of the country’s fascist President Jair Bolsonaro in the lead-up to the country’s 2018 national election. Snowden described the prosecution of Greenwald as “a straightforward attempt to intimidate and retaliate against Greenwald and the *Intercept* for their critical reporting” on the Brazilian government.

In his article, headlined “Trump Has Created a Global Playbook to Attack Those Revealing Uncomfortable Truths,” Snowden noted that this attack was a direct application of the “Assange precedent.”

The NSA whistleblower wrote: “The legal theory used by the Brazilian prosecutors—that journalists who publish leaked documents are engaged in a criminal ‘conspiracy’ with the sources who provide those documents—is virtually identical to the one advanced in the Trump administration’s indictment of [Assange] in a new application of the historically dubious Espionage Act.”

The arrest and unveiling of a US indictment against Assange last year has also been followed by police raids against journalists in Australia, and threats by the French government to prosecute journalists for exposing its complicity in the Saudi-led war on Yemen.

The connection between the US attacks on Assange and Brazil’s move against Greenwald is likely even more direct. In comments this week, the *Intercept* journalist noted that the Bolsonaro government would not have

initiated a prosecution without receiving the go-ahead from the Trump administration. The US State Department has said nothing about the charges against Greenwald. In other words, the same political forces are spearheading the persecution of both Assange and Greenwald.

Snowden pointed to the way in which the Trump administration has accelerated a protracted government assault on press freedom.

The NSA whistleblower commented that while former US President Barack Obama initiated the US-led vendetta against Assange, his administration did not publicly unveil charges against the WikiLeaks founder over his publishing activities, for fear of triggering a constitutional crisis. Instead, the Obama administration used US allies, including Sweden and Britain, to concoct a sexual misconduct frame-up against Assange that was used to blacken his name and deprive him of his liberty.

The attempt to prosecute Greenwald similarly represented a rapid escalation, after an August 2019 order from a Brazilian Supreme Court judge banned the police from even investigating the journalist.

Snowden's article followed an opinion piece in the *New York Times* by *Intercept* reporter James Risen, who warned that "the cases against Julian Assange and Glenn Greenwald may be models for a crackdown." It noted that the charges against Greenwald were "eerily similar" to those contained in the US Espionage Act indictment of Assange.

Risen wrote: "Both cases are based in part on a new prosecutorial concept—that journalism can be proved to be a crime through a focus on interactions between reporters and their sources. Prosecutors are now scrutinizing the processes by which sources obtain classified or private information and then provide it to journalists. Since those interactions today are largely electronic, prosecutors are seeking to criminalize journalism by turning to anti-hacking laws to implicate reporters in the purported criminal activity of their sources in gaining access to data on computers or cellphones without authorization."

He noted that if this model were successful, it would provide the government with a "detour" around the First Amendment protections of the US constitution and would imperil journalists everywhere.

The publication of articles defending Assange in two of the largest daily newspapers in the US underscores the fears of the major media corporations that this campaign could disrupt their decades-long collaboration with governments and state authorities and their lucrative business models.

New York Times and the *Washington Post* and other mainstream publications have aided the assault on press freedom, including by repeating the official smears used to discredit Assange. Both publications promoted the bogus Swedish sexual-misconduct allegations against him.

The *Times* collaborated with Assange in 2010 on the very publications over which Assange has been charged. By 2011, however, they had thrown the WikiLeaks founder to the wolves and undermined his First Amendment protections by falsely claiming that he had functioned as a "source" and not a co-publisher.

Risen's piece, even as it warned against the implications of Assange's persecution, gave succour to the unsubstantiated assertions of the Democratic Party and the intelligence agencies that Assange functioned as an agent of the Russian government in 2016.

In reality, WikiLeaks 2016 publications proved that the Democratic National Committee had sought to rig the Democratic Party primaries against Bernie Sanders in favour of Hillary Clinton, in violation of its own rules. They demonstrated that Clinton had promised multi-billionaire bankers that she would govern in their interests and support more predatory US military interventions.

Risen has long promoted the discredited "Russiagate" conspiracy theory, including by slandering Assange. This underscores the fact that there will be no genuine defence of the WikiLeaks founder, or of democratic rights, from the corporate press, which is thoroughly integrated into the state apparatus. It demonstrates that the fight to free Assange and all class war prisoners, and to defend Greenwald, requires the development of an independent political movement of the working class.



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