Australian raids on Chinese journalists mark escalation of US-led witch hunt

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Reports surfaced this week that further reveal the provocative anti-China agenda driving the secret Australian intelligence raids on four Chinese journalists on June 26. A US-instigated witch hunt against China is being stepped up, fuelling a rapidly sharpening conflict between China and Australia.

Operating on a warrant personally issued by Attorney-General Christian Porter, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic political spy agency, mounted dawn raids on the journalists, as well as a state Labor Party parliamentarian and a part-time member of his staff.

Thanks to ASIO and its media conduits, the 6.30 a.m. raid on New South Wales MP Shaoquett Moselmane, the son of Lebanese immigrants, was splashed all over the media, with headlines falsely accusing him of being a "Chinese agent."

It was reported to be the first activation of the US-backed "foreign interference" legislation introduced by the Liberal-National government, with Labor's full support, in 2018.

What was kept secret at the time was that journalists from Chinese publications were also raided. After questioning the journalists for "several hours" and seizing mobile phones, computers and hand-written notebooks, the ASIO officers ordered the journalists not to inform anyone of the raids, the Chinese media reported this week.

These police-state powers were first introduced under the cover of the "war on terror." They give ASIO the power to secretly conduct interrogations and "special intelligence operations." Anyone, including the targeted victims, who alerts the public to such operations can be jailed for up to 10 years.

Following the ASIO raids, the journalists left Australia. According to media reports, they included Tao Shelan, the Australia bureau chief of the China News Service, and Li Dayong, China Radio International's Sydney bureau chief.

Around the same time, the Australian government, citing ASIO advice, revoked the visas of two Chinese academics. One is Professor Chen Hong, who has been director of the Australian studies centre at East China Normal University in Shanghai since 2001 and a frequent visitor to Australia for decades. The other is Beijing Foreign Studies University Professor Li Jianjun, who is currently on a PhD scholarship at Western Sydney University.

ASIO has refused to make any statement about the basis for the raids and visa cancellations. According to media reports, the journalists and academics shared chats with Moselmane on WeChat. Such is the apparently flimsy evidence of "foreign interference."

Professor Chen told Beijing's *Global Times* it was "preposterous" that the chat group, where they shared jokes and photos of personal excursions, was regarded as a covert means of political influence.

Chinese authorities only revealed the ASIO raids on the journalists this week in response to the latest chapter in the escalating anti-China campaign by the Australian media and political establishment—sensational headlines about two Australian journalists being questioned by Chinese police.

The timeline of this affair is significant.

On March 2, as part of a deepening US military, economic and diplomatic offensive against the Chinese regime, the Trump administration cut the number of visas for Chinese citizens working at Chinese media organisations in the US to 100, effectively expelling 60 journalists.

The US government also declared Chinese media outlets, including the official news agency Xinhua, to be "foreign diplomatic missions." As a result, they were publicly placed under heightened surveillance, with limits on their property and locations. In return, the Chinese government expelled most journalists from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*.

In Australia, the corporate media outlets soon turned their attention to Moselmane, armed with material supplied by the intelligence agencies. On March 31 it was reported that he had posted an article on his website praising Chinese President Xi Jinping's leadership in alerting the world to COVID-19 and containing the pandemic in China.

Moselmane was immediately publicly reprimanded by his state parliamentary leader, Jodi McKay, for making

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"inappropriate comments." That underscored Labor's bipartisan support for the alignment behind the US confrontation with China.

A few days later, media outlets reported that Moselmane had written a commentary on February 5, saying that government and media efforts to blame China for the spread of the supposed "Wuhan virus" were xenophobic and designed to incite anti-Chinese hatred.

For voicing this political opinion, the Labor Party immediately stripped Moselmane of a parliamentary post. Several weeks later, on June 26, ASIO raided his home and parliamentary office, and those of his part-time electorate officer, John Zhang. Labor then forced Moselmane to take indefinite leave from parliament.

Despite the politically and personally damaging "foreign interference" accusations against them, which they both deny, no charges have been laid against Moselmane and Zhang. Zhang has launched a High Court challenge, exposing the nebulous nature of the accusations hurled against him and charging the government and ASIO with violating the implied freedom of political communication in the Australian constitution.

Next, on August 14, Cheng Lei, a dual Chinese-Australian citizen working as a journalist for a Chinese government television network, was reported to have been arrested in Beijing. She was "suspected of carrying out criminal activities endangering China's national security," the Chinese Foreign Ministry said.

Little is known of these allegations, but the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs then ramped up the conflict. It advised the only two journalists employed by Australian outlets in China to leave the country. They were the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's China correspondent Bill Birtles and *the Australian Financial Review* 's Shanghai correspondent Michael Smith.

Acting on this official advice, Birtles and Smith booked flights out of China for September 3. The night before, Chinese officials visited both and told them they could not leave until police had interviewed them about a legal case, apparently relating to Cheng Lei.

The Australian embassy then told the two journalists to flee into Australian diplomatic residences. There they remained for five days before agreeing to answer questions from the police if they were granted exit permits. After one-hour police interviews, which Smith described as "unremarkable," they flew out of China.

One can only imagine the political and media furore if the Chinese embassy in Australia had taken similar action to block or delay the ASIO raids and questioning of the Chinese journalists.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian accused Australia of hypocrisy and double standards. "The Australian side describes its 'questioning' of Chinese journalists as normal procedure, but accuses the Chinese side of engaging in 'hostage diplomacy,'" he said.

These developments are part of an accelerating campaign, designed to poison public opinion against China and create a wartime-like atmosphere.

Last month, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government announced—also with Labor's bipartisan support—an unprecedented Foreign Relations Bill, essentially designed to tear up or prohibit all agreements with Chinese entities by universities, as well as state, territory and municipal governments.

A few days later, the government launched McCarthyite-style parliamentary hearings into "foreign interference in the university sector."

These actions are all part of sharp intensification of the anti-China propaganda drive that has been underway for years, spearheaded by the US-integrated intelligence apparatus and the corporate media.

The Australian ruling elite has placed the population on the frontlines of an aggressive US confrontation with China that could lead to a catastrophic nuclear war as the US seeks to reassert the hegemony it obtained via World War II.

As in the US also, the nationalist agitation against China is an attempt to divert the rising unrest being generated by the disastrous, corporate profit-driven response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the soaring levels of unemployment and social inequality.

The use of the draconian ASIO powers under the "terrorism" and "foreign interference" laws is a warning that the drive to military conflict is being accompanied by attacks on democratic rights that will increasingly target domestic social and political opposition, not just academics and journalists.

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