

Thirteen former national presidents demand an end to the British show-trial of Julian Assange

Oscar Grenfell
22 September 2020

A group of 161 prominent international political figures, including thirteen former national presidents, past prime ministers and current or retired members of national parliaments, have announced their opposition to the British extradition show-trial of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and have joined demands for his immediate freedom.

The signatories endorsed a letter to the British government issued last month by the Lawyers for Assange group, which comprises more than 150 legal experts from around the world, as well as bar associations covering major countries and entire continents.

That document was a meticulous exposure of the litany of abuses perpetrated against Assange by the British and US governments, including the denial of access to his lawyers, his inability to engage in his own defence, and his imprisonment in the maximum-security Belmarsh Prison, despite the fact that he has not been convicted of a crime.

The lawyers were unequivocal, branding the attempt to extradite Assange from Britain to the US, where he faces life imprisonment for publishing evidence of war crimes, as a violation of international law that must be immediately halted. They warned that Assange would face torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment if dispatched to his American state persecutors, and insisted on the necessity for his unconditional freedom.

The politicians who have taken up this demand include José Luis Zapatero, prime minister of Spain (2004–11), Alberto Fernández, president of Argentina (2019–), Dilma Rousseff, president of Brazil (2011–16), Evo Morales Ayma, president of Bolivia (2006–19), Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, president of Brazil (2003–10), Rafael Correa, president of Ecuador (2007–17), Kevin Rudd, prime minister of Australia (2007–10 and 2013) and Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the British Labour Party (2015–2020).

Fernández of Argentina and President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela are the only two current heads of state to have

endorsed the initiative. Other signatories include prominent current national politicians from Australia, Britain and Germany, as well as a host of officeholders from Latin America, spanning from mayors to governors and leading members of national assemblies.

Several signatories accompanied their endorsements with statements of support for Assange. Lula of Brazil declared: “If the democrats of the planet Earth, including all journalists, all lawyers, all unionists and all politicians, have no courage to express themselves in defence of Assange, so that he is not extradited, it means we have a lot of democrats out there who are liars. Assange should be perceived as a hero of democracy. He does not deserve to be punished.”

Kevin Rudd warned that a successful US prosecution of Assange would open the door for broader attacks on press freedom and journalists.

The range of signatories is an indictment of the US, British and Australian governments, and all those who have facilitated Assange’s persecution.

The statement provides a glimpse of the real global public opinion concerning the Assange case, which is suppressed by a pliant corporate media.

Britain, the land of the Magna Carta, and the US, founded on a revolution that declared the sanctity of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” are increasingly viewed as rogue states, which trample on international legal norms and use their military and diplomatic power to bully and oppress the world’s population. Assange, meanwhile, is widely regarded as a heroic figure, who has risked all to reveal the truth to ordinary people.

The opening weeks of the resumed British extradition hearings undoubtedly provided an impetus to the signatories. The proceedings have been marked by further abuses, including the filing of a late indictment by the US Justice Department, aimed at preventing any possibility of a defence, attempts to limit witness testimony and assertions by prosecutors that the American government has the

“right” to determine what journalists may or may not publish, wherever they are in the world.

This has only deepened the latent popular support for the WikiLeaks founder, under conditions of a global breakdown of capitalism, mass hostility to the criminally-negligent response of governments to the pandemic and a reemergence of the class struggle. It can hardly be an accident that so many of the signatories are from Latin America, where the masses have endured decades of US imperialist military interventions, coups and dictatorships, and the poverty and oppression that have accompanied them.

By giving a pale reflection of sentiments from below, the signatories are undoubtedly expressing concerns from within the national political establishments.

Firstly, they are fearful that the naked lawlessness of the pursuit of Assange risks further discrediting the entire political set-up which they defend, and could become the focal point for broader opposition to war and authoritarianism. Secondly, they are worried that the Trump administration’s assertion that US law applies extraterritorially, in every corner of the globe, will be used not only to target courageous journalists, but also political opponents and anyone perceived as an obstacle to American imperialism.

Many of the politicians who have endorsed the letter are representatives of the South American “pink tide,” the wave of bourgeois nationalist governments that came to office over the past two decades, by posturing as opponents of US imperialism and deploying vague left-populist rhetoric to mollify the masses.

This project has collapsed, with the installation of US-backed authoritarian regimes throughout the continent, in many instances directly facilitated by the leaders of the “pink tide” itself. Figures such as Brazil’s Lula, of the misnamed “Workers Party,” won office by posturing as champions of ordinary people, only to impose the dictates of the banks and the financial elite.

To describe their record on democratic rights as patchy would be a gross understatement. To a man, the leaders of the “pink tide” repressed strikes and protests of workers, sought to come to an accommodation with imperialism, and leaned heavily on the military.

Former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, for instance, granted Assange political asylum in 2012 in an important blow to the US conspiracy against the WikiLeaks founder. By 2016, however, his government shut off Assange’s internet access for several weeks, at the direct behest of the US government.

Correa facilitated the installation of Lenín Moreno who acted on the precedent of his predecessor by severing Assange’s communications in early 2018, before handing

him over to his US and British persecutors the following year, the same time his government responded to mass demonstrations against IMF-dictated austerity measures by imposing virtual martial law.

A similar story could be told for many of the Latin American signatories. Their political project having come crashing down, a number of them are in exile, or face the threat of politically-motivated prosecutions, undoubtedly heightening their sensitivity to the judicial frame-up of Assange.

Other signatories, to be blunt, are simply political scoundrels.

Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is one of the Australian political leaders who directly facilitated the persecution of Assange when he was in office, only to “discover,” years later, that prosecuting a journalist for publishing truthful information would establish a dangerous precedent. It must be stated that such individuals, if it were in their interests, could just as easily turn against Assange once again and throw him to the wolves.

Jeremy Corbyn, former Labour Party leader, and his Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, similarly refused to mobilise support for Assange when they were in influential positions, not even mentioning him during last year’s British election.

To the extent that both have since made several statements in defence of Assange, it has been to foster illusions that the fight for his freedom can go forward through feckless appeals to the British courts, the parliament and the state apparatus, i.e., the very forces persecuting Assange.

The record of the decade-long US pursuit of Assange has more than demonstrated that this perspective is a dead-end, which, if not challenged, will result in Assange’s extradition and his death in a CIA prison.

The turn must not be to parliaments but to the working class, and the popular sentiment that the politicians who have endorsed the initiative, are seeking to contain and corral behind the official political establishments. The basis for a mass movement to secure Assange’s freedom exists in the immense political disaffection among ordinary people everywhere and the resurgence of working class struggle, including in the United States and Britain.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact