

Julian Assange files appeal against extradition

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Yesterday afternoon WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange filed grounds of appeal against extradition to the United States in the UK's High Court.

The lodging begins the latest stage in a protracted legal battle over Assange's prospective dispatch to the US, where he faces 175 years imprisonment in a supermax facility for publishing true information, including material exposing American war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The British court proceedings are now into their fourth year, during which time Assange has been incarcerated in London's maximum-security Belmarsh Prison. For the vast majority of that period he has been held on remand, without having been convicted of a crime in Britain.

Hearings since January last year have primarily focused on Assange's health. His physical and psychological deterioration, stemming from more than a decade of persecution, has been brushed aside by prosecutors acting for the US and the British judiciary itself, despite warnings from hundreds of doctors that Assange could die behind bars and the acknowledgment of the first judge to hear the case in the District Court that extradition would effectively amount to a death sentence.

The criminal complicity of the British state in Assange's persecution was summed up by a British High Court decision approving extradition last October, a subsequent refusal by the same court to hear an appeal centred on health grounds and Home Secretary Priti Patel's announcement in June that she had ordered Assange's dispatch to the US.

The appeal filed yesterday by Assange is his last avenue within the British legal system. With the question of his health dismissed, the hearings, if the appeal is allowed, will focus on the political character of the attempted American prosecution and the innumerable abuses that have occurred during the US pursuit of Assange.

A press release by WikiLeaks yesterday explained that the appeal grounds include:

- * Julian Assange is being prosecuted and punished for his political opinions

- * Julian Assange is being prosecuted for protected

speech

- * The American request violates the US-UK Extradition Treaty and international law because it is for political offences, which are excluded as grounds for extradition

- * The US government has misrepresented the core facts of the case to the British courts

- * The extradition request and its surrounding circumstances constitute an abuse of process

WikiLeaks indicated that Assange's appeal would also "include arguments that Home Secretary Priti Patel erred in her decision to approve the extradition order on grounds of speciality and because the request itself violates Article 4 of the US-UK Extradition Treaty."

In an accompanying statement, Stella Moris, Assange's wife, said: "Since the last ruling, overwhelming evidence has emerged proving that the United States prosecution against my husband is a criminal abuse. The High Court judges will now decide whether Julian is given the opportunity to put the case against the United States before open court, and in full, at the appeal."

The appeal, if it is granted, will take the form of a challenge to the ruling of District Court Judge Vanessa Baraitser, handed down in January 2021. In those initial hearings, Baraitser blocked extradition on health grounds, which have been overturned by higher courts in favour of the US. Her ruling, however, upheld the substantive US case for extradition, effectively establishing a precedent for governments to prosecute disclosure of information that they wish to remain hidden.

That precedent, if the appeal is allowed, will be challenged in the courts.

The evidence that Moris referenced, which has come to light since Baraitser's verdict at the beginning of 2021, brands the US extradition request as the pseudo-legal figleaf for an extraordinary rendition operation that has involved methods most frequently associated with violent organised criminal gangs.

In June 2021, Sigurdur "Siggi" Thordarson, a star US witness against Assange, admitted that much of his testimony was lies proffered in exchange for immunity

from prosecution by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Those claims nevertheless remain prominent in the American indictment which forms the basis for the extradition request against Assange.

Thordarson had previously operated as an FBI mole in WikiLeaks. Prior to his latest collaboration with the American state, he had been convicted in Iceland on charges of child molestation and defrauding WikiLeaks of tens of thousands of dollars. His admission of lying for the indictment was broken by the *Stundin* biweekly in Iceland, but has never been reported in most of the Western press.

In September 2021, *Yahoo! News* published an extended article, revealing that in 2017, the US administration of President Donald Trump and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had discussed kidnapping or assassinating Assange. At the time, the WikiLeaks publisher was an internationally recognised political refugee residing in Ecuador's London embassy.

The *Yahoo! News* report was based upon information provided by 30 former and current US government and intelligence officials. Its contents have never been refuted. Mike Pompeo, Trump's CIA director and then US secretary of state commented that *Yahoo! News'* sources should themselves be prosecuted on national security grounds, all but acknowledging the veracity of their statements.

Pompeo was summoned earlier this year by Spain's National High Court to testify as a witness in a criminal case against UC Global, the private security firm that allegedly functioned as a secret US intelligence cutout at the Ecuadorian embassy. The firm and its executive are accused of a vast illegal spying operation against Assange on behalf of the CIA, as well as having discussed implementing the plans for his kidnap or murder.

Pompeo has not appeared before the court, despite it having announced a deadline for his appearance at the end of June.

Most significantly, it was only after they had allegedly considered killing or kidnapping Assange from London, that the American authorities drew up a legal indictment against him. It was initially conceived of as a mechanism for justifying a CIA extraordinary rendition.

There are no doubt immense fears in Washington, as well as the British government and state apparatus, over this material being discussed in an open court. It is a damning indictment of the criminality of the major imperialist power and all its allies, including Britain and Australia. There is no reason, therefore, to assume that the

High Court will agree to hear the appeal.

Even if it does, the experiences of the past decade have demonstrated that the British judiciary is a key prop of Assange's persecution. So too are the major parties in all the countries involved in the protracted pursuit.

In the US, the Biden administration is continuing the extradition request, initially lodged by Trump. In Britain, the Conservative government and the Labour opposition of Keir Starmer have demonstrated their intense hostility to Assange.

In Australia, where Assange was born and holds citizenship, the current Labor government has continued the line of the previous Liberal-National government and all earlier administrations. It is refusing to use its diplomatic and legal powers to secure Assange's freedom, instead deepening the country's alignment with the US confrontations with Russia and China.

This underscores the fact that the defence of Assange and the fight for his liberty depend on the development of a movement of the working class, directed against the entire political establishment. The basis for such a movement exists in the increasingly explosive struggles by workers against the soaring cost of living, austerity and the broader turn to authoritarianism by governments, of which the attack on Assange is a spearhead.



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