

Ecuador Continues Playing Hardball With Assange

A day after she was elected president of the UN General Assembly, the Ecuadorian foreign minister said Julian Assange would remain incommunicado in Ecuador's London embassy, as James Cogan explains.

By James Cogan



On Monday Ecuadorian Foreign Minister María Fernanda Espinosa was elected to a one-year term as president of the United Nations General Assembly. On Tuesday she declared that her government would continue blocking WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange from all communications and deny him any personal visitors. On Wednesday it became 10 weeks since Ecuador's government deprived Assange of his rights, which it is obliged to honor after granting him political asylum in its London embassy in 2012.

The General Assembly vote in support of Espinosa was a substantial: 128 votes for 62 votes for the other nominee, Honduras's UN ambassador, Mary Elizabeth Flores Flake. There were two abstentions. Washington was believed to favor Honduras because its right-wing government supported the provocative relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. After the vote, Espinosa again hinted that Ecuador is working to force Assange out of the embassy into the clutches of waiting police and the prospect of extradition to the United States on charges of espionage. She stated she was in discussion with both British authorities and Assange's lawyers. "I think all parties are interested in finding an outlet, a solution, to this complex situation," she declared.

Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno last year slandered Assange as a "hacker" and described the granting of political asylum to him by the previous president as an "inherited problem."

Washington is demanding Assange's head. Then CIA director Mike Pompeo, now U.S. secretary of state, asserted last year that WikiLeaks was a "non-state hostile intelligence agency," due to its publication of documents exposing the operations of U.S. intelligence.

It appears Assange is being used as a bargaining chip in sordid negotiations between the U.S. and Ecuador. On June 4, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence met Moreno. Amid the stepped-up persecution of Assange, Pence issued a statement lauding their discussion on "opportunities to reinvigorate the bilateral relationship" between the two countries. In words dripping with what sounded

like imperialist deceit, Pence said the two countries would work together “to protect and promote freedom” and “build prosperity, security and democracy.”

Such “freedom” apparently does not include freedom of speech or freedom of the press, at least as far as WikiLeaks is concerned. “Democracy” apparently does not include the right to expose war crimes and other misdeeds of the U.S. and other Western governments. The “freedom” espoused by Pence means submitting to the world’s wealthiest interests.

Moreno’s evidently friendly discussion with Pence, and Espinosa’s victory in the UN, follow Moreno’s own attacks on Assange last week.

On May 30, Moreno again hinted that Ecuador will renege on the political asylum that the previous government granted to the WikiLeaks editor in 2012. Moreno declared that Assange could remain in the London embassy only on the condition that he accept a permanent ban on “speaking out about politics or intervening in the politics of other countries.”

Espinosa stated on Monday that such flagrantly anti-democratic terms were “not a matter of censorship.” In reality, Assange has been delivered an unacceptable ultimatum. Unless he renounces the mission of WikiLeaks, which is to publish and comment on whistleblower leaks that expose government and corporate criminality and abuses around the world, he will be forced out of the embassy to be arrested and imprisoned by waiting British police on a bail-related charge.

Assange defied the terms of his bail in June 2012 and sought asylum from Ecuador because his life was in danger. The sole motive behind efforts to extradite him to Sweden, to purportedly answer “questions” in an investigation into allegations of sexual offenses, was to silence him while Washington sought his extradition to stand trial on espionage charges that potentially carry the death penalty.

UN Body Called for His Release

After years of delay, in late 2016 the Swedish police and prosecutors agreed to Assange’s repeated offer to be “questioned” in London. It belatedly took this action after a December 2015 ruling by the UN [Working Party on Arbitrary Detentions](#).

That ruling stated: “The Working Group considered that Mr. Assange has been subjected to different forms of deprivation of liberty... detention was arbitrary because he was held in isolation during the first stage of detention and because of the lack of diligence by the Swedish Prosecutor in its investigations, which resulted in the lengthy detention of Mr. Assange.”

The ruling concluded: "The Working Group also considered that the detention should be brought to an end and that Mr. Assange should be afforded the right to compensation."

In May 2017, Sweden finally abandoned its investigation. Assange was still unable to leave the embassy, however, because the British government of Prime Minister Theresa May insisted it will seek his imprisonment for jumping bail. Moreover, it refused to rule out continuing to hold him in custody while his legal defenders fought protracted court action against a U.S. extradition warrant.

With each passing day, the danger facing Assange increases. For six years, he has been confined inside a small building with no access to direct sunlight. He has been denied medical and dental treatment for serious conditions. Now he has been inflicted with the additional pressure of being prevented from continuing his work as a journalist, and denied outside communication or contact, even with his family.

The vindictive operation underway is intended to either force Assange to "voluntarily" leave the embassy, or create conditions in which Ecuador evicts him via claims he has "violated" its terms.

Demonstrations Called

Crucial demonstrations and vigils have been called to defend Assange. They must be understood not as one-off protests, but the renewal of a determined campaign to win his freedom, especially if he is forced into a British prison and faces a protracted legal struggle against extradition to the U.S.

Journalist John Pilger has endorsed the June 17 demonstration in Sydney, Australia. Pilger said:

"The demonstration called for Sunday, 17th June, in support of Julian Assange, is one of the most important and urgent for many years. Two days later, it will be six years since Julian was forced to take refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

If he steps outside the embassy, it's more than likely he will face extradition to the United States on concocted charges of espionage. What this means is that he and WikiLeaks have performed an extraordinary public service by revealing the lies and crimes of great power. This is true journalism.

Julian is a courageous editor persecuted for exercising a right enshrined in the United States Constitution. Today, he has never been more isolated, with communication and his right to visitors cut off. Here, in his homeland, we must

let him know he is not alone, and we call on the Turnbull government to fulfill its responsibility under international law and to bring Julian home.”

Around the world, millions of working-class and other oppressed people are entering into immense struggles for their social right to decent living standards, education and health care, and against the persecution of refugees and immigrants, police-state policies and the threat of war. These struggles are inseparable from the fight for democratic rights, including an end to Internet censorship and the defense of a free, critical and independent media, such as WikiLeaks.

A version of this article originally appeared on WSW.

James Cogan is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party Australia.
