

Two Years in the Ecuador Embassy: Assange and Wikileaks Continue Their Work

Just over two years ago, Wikileaks publisher Julian Assange took refuge in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. A few weeks later, Ecuador granted Assange political asylum for the political persecution he faced after publishing hundreds of thousands of classified documents concerning US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as 250,000 US diplomatic cables demonstrating double dealing, criminality, and corruption.

Together, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the United States have ignored their legal obligations to recognize the grant of asylum to Assange. The UK blocks his right to safe passage out of the Embassy to Ecuador; Sweden refuses to guarantee that, should he travel there to face questioning on allegations of sexual misconduct—questioning that Assange has agreed to undergo at the Embassy, but that Sweden has refused to conduct, continuing their investigation for four years without filing charges—he will not face extradition to the United States; and the United States holds the threat of criminal prosecution over his head.

But his situation could—and should—change. As Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*, “truth will come to light [...] at length truth will out.” Pressure has increased on these countries to comply with law.

The UK Parliament changed the law that ordered Assange to Sweden, so that only a decision to charge him, not allegations, can prompt extradition. Lawyers in Sweden filed suit to set aside the warrant for Assange’s arrest, arguing that the Swedish government has violated his rights by continuing their investigation without actually questioning him, while 59 legal and non-governmental organizations have filed a complaint with United Nations stating that the almost unlimited power of prosecutors in Sweden does not comply with various international human rights treaties. Fifty-one organizations, including Human Rights Watch, have asked the US Department of Justice to end the criminal investigation of Julian Assange.

Meanwhile, despite confinement in the embassy, Assange has continued the work of Wikileaks. When Edward Snowden leaked information about massive NSA surveillance programs, Wikileaks helped ensure that Snowden could remain free and gain asylum. As Glenn Greenwald, the journalist who published many of the Snowden leaks, wrote, “Snowden was able to remain free and thus able to participate in the debate he helped trigger because of the daring, indispensable support given by WikiLeaks and its official, Sarah Harrison.”

Recently, Wikileaks published the secret draft text for the Trade in Services Agreement (TISA) Financial Services Annex, which will decrease regulation of the big banks, as well as the secret text for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a treaty that could have a range of negative consequences on civil liberties, Internet freedom, access to medicines, and more, for the sake of corporate profit. Wikileaks also began publication of the Syria files, a collection of 2,000,000 emails from Syrian politicians.

But as the important work of Wikileaks continues, so does government oppression. In April of this year the United States admitted that Wikileaks and Julian Assange remain under criminal investigation by the national security division of the Department of Justice—in fact, there may already be a secret indictment against him. But Assange isn't the only one facing persecution. The Obama Administration has initiated more prosecutions against whistleblowers under the espionage act than all other Presidents combined. Snowden has been indicted for espionage, Wikileaks source Chelsea Manning received a punitive 35-year prison sentence, and journalists are being compelled to reveal their sources on pain of prison.

The US has doubled down on persecuting whistleblowers and their publishers, thinking it will stop others from pushing for the transparency that is necessary for a democracy. But it hasn't worked. Snowden made his revelations after Manning had already been imprisoned and tortured. Assange has kept going despite incredible repression. In a few short years, our knowledge of government criminality and surveillance has dramatically increased. We need to all make sure that the heroes who have made that possible are protected.