

Attack on WikiLeaks Is an Attack on Independent Journalism

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Nozomi Hayase, Ph.D, is a trained liberation psychologist and widely published journalist. She has authored the book “Wikileaks, the Global Fourth Estate: History Is Happening”. In an exclusive interview with **Eresh Omar Jamal**, Hayase talks about WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange, and the most recent developments in Assange’s US extradition case currently happening in the UK.

Eresh Jamal: On October 21, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange appeared in Westminster Magistrates’ Court in his fight against extradition to the US, where Judge Vanessa Baraitser denied Assange’s legal team’s request for a trial extension. Can you tell us about this move?

Nozomi Hayase: At the case management hearing, Assange’s lawyer Mark Summers requested a three-month delay of extradition hearing, and also asked for a preliminary hearing to hear arguments that the extradition request was prohibited, on the grounds that the prosecution and charges against him are politically motivated.

The extension request was made because Assange has been denied access to legal documents and computers in Belmarsh prison and has not been able to adequately prepare for his defense. Also, evidence has emerged indicating that the CIA ordered a Spanish security firm to conduct surveillance inside the Ecuadorian Embassy while Assange was living there. They have spied on the women’s bathroom, and also privileged conversation between Assange and his lawyers. Now, a Spanish Court has initiated a case and it requires more time for his defence team to incorporate the evidence in their argument.

The judge denied this routine extension request because she was just doing what was expected of her to be doing, which is to serve the interests of the US government. By looking at Assange’s case, I think by now, many people can clearly see how the British court system has lost its independence.

Her move is only shocking to those who still believe the legal system has something to do with justice. The UK judicial system has proven to have become an instrument used for political means. Assange’s case really exposes the truth that the US empire rules the world. This superpower can expand its judicial authority to bring charges against anyone it dislikes and physically capture and possibly even put someone to death. This is carried out under the guise of legal process, such as the government making an extradition request etc., but in essence, it is just one state acting in a rogue and lawless manner.

The public has to be informed about what has been taking place in this kangaroo court, and

truly be witness, to challenge this US dictatorship of the world. If we don't stand up for Assange, our societies will quickly turn into despotism, or maybe we are already in it.

EJ: UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer said at the UN General Assembly that during Assange's "prolonged arbitrary detention", he has been exposed to what amounts to "psychological torture". Given your psychology background, how do you assess this?

NH: During his prolonged arbitrary detention inside the Ecuadorian Embassy, his basic human rights have long been violated. He has been denied access to medical treatment, fresh air, sunlight and adequate space to exercise. Journalist John Pilger who visited Assange reported that the embassy had turned into a prison by proxy.

This already untenable situation got worse during the last year of his political asylum, when the President of Ecuador, Lenin Moreno cut Assange's communication to the outside world. Human Rights Watch's Legal Counsel Dinah PoKempner at that time described Assange's living conditions as more and more like solitary confinement.

Now, Assange is in London's Belmarsh Prison, where he spends 23 hours a day in complete isolation. Those who know Assange's situation like Craig Murray, the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, indicated that Assange is prohibited from fraternising with other inmates and visitors are not allowed to see him or when they see him, severe restrictions are placed.

He is being treated worse than a murderer. The serious effect of solitary confinement has been well recognised. It can have a destructive effect on a person's personality and their psychological well-being that may be irreversible. This is why the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture designated solitary confinement as a form of torture and banned the use of prolonged solitary as a punishment or extortion technique.

Those who know what to look for can see clear signs of psychological torture in the way Assange presented himself in court last week. After the hearing, clinical psychologist Lissa Johnson also confirmed that Assange exhibited signs of psychological torture.

Being subjected to this psychological torture, for such a long time, has had serious consequences on Assange's health. The anxiety and stress caused by long deprivation of liberty endangers his life. When Assange's mother, Christine Assange, described how the state is slowly murdering her son, she wasn't exaggerating. This is the truth of what has been, and continues to be done to Assange.

EJ: Why has the western mainstream media remained silent about this? Doesn't the prosecution of Assange and WikiLeaks for publishing secret documents open the door for the US government to go after other media outlets?

NH: For those who are willing to look at, it is very clear that this prosecution of Assange will inevitably lead to the end of national security reporting. Anyone who is engaged in real journalism should be scared, and recognise the fact if the US government can go after Assange and WikiLeaks for publishing classified documents, then they can be next. You would think this would make them speak up for Assange, not necessarily to defend him as an individual, but at least out of their own self-interest of protecting themselves. But as we can see, there aren't enough journalists coming forward to do that.

This apparent silence on Assange's plight for freedom is a clear indication of where their allegiance lies. Those who remain silent are on the other side of truth and justice and by not speaking up for Assange now, they are betraying the public, which they have been doing for a long time. They might even feel they are immune from any of the things that are happening to Assange.

To me, Assange's case brings a real test for journalists to show whether they can live up to their own principles and demonstrate their commitment to the idea of free press. We are now seeing how most journalists don't have values and integrity and that's why they have been able to keep their job within the media institutions in a first place.

EJ: Why is the US government seeking to prosecute Assange and WikiLeaks in this unprecedented manner?

NH: The existing structure of power is based on what is often described as "an anonymity of corporate state" or "networks of conspiracy". In this system, force of control is kept hidden and maintained through secrecy and manipulation of public perception. At the core, this lucid power relies on deception created through the notion of liberal democracy. Media plays a critical role in sustaining this illusion of democracy so as to aid the ruling class to exert its power over the populace. So, freedom of speech became conditional—we can speak freely as long as we don't challenge the existing power structure, with people not fully realising the restrictions being placed. What WikiLeaks did was shatter this illusion of democracy and expose reality, letting the public see how the world really works.

With WikiLeaks' disclosures of government secrecy, the public's trust in governments and institutions weakened. This has led to a global crisis of legitimacy, creating a spark for revolutions and protests around the world. The establishment is fighting back because they are quickly losing their grip on people. They are now desperate to try to reclaim their authority by deploying the old tactics of character assassination and smearing. That is why they demonise Assange to discredit WikiLeaks and are trying to distract public attention from the actual documents that his organisation has released.

EJ: Do you believe this case is bigger than just Assange and WikiLeaks? How?

NH: Yes, this is definitely bigger than just Assange as a person and WikiLeaks as an organisation.

The prosecution of Assange is an attack on freedom of the media. The Trump Administration bringing criminal charges against a foreign national, who published information in the public interest outside of the US working with other media organisations, possibly under the Espionage Act, will set a perilous precedent for press freedom around the world. This will enable extra-territorial prosecution of media across the globe!

This will not only lead to the criminalisation of journalism, but also bring a tragic death of free speech everywhere. Mario Savio, a prominent figure of the free speech movement in the '60s once said, "Freedom of speech represents the very dignity of what a human being is". The US government's prosecution of Assange is an assault on free speech and it concerns our fundamental right to be a human.

Restriction of free expression through this kind of total control that the US government is trying to exert around the world brings stagnation and rigidity of thoughts. This force of

monotony destroys our creativity and homogenises unique cultures, forcing us all to adapt our identities to a single vision of elite control. Being denied our autonomy, we become automatons and cease to fully exist as a living being. That is what makes this a battle that involves not just Assange and WikiLeaks. It is not a fight that concerns only journalists and media organisations, but all of us. WikiLeaks has been, and is on the frontline of this battle. It is crucial that we all, too, engage and participate in it.

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