

U.K. and Ecuador Conspire to Deliver Julian Assange to U.S. Authorities

by Gareth Porter via james - OpEd News *Tuesday, Nov 27 2018, 11:39pm*

international / prose / post

The accidental revelation in mid-November that U.S. federal prosecutors had secretly filed charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange underlines the determination of the Trump administration to end Assange's asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, where he has been staying since 2012.

Behind the revelation of those secret charges for supposedly threatening U.S. national security is a murky story of a political ploy by the Ecuadorian and British governments to create a phony rationale for ousting Assange from the embassy. The two regimes agreed to base their plan on the claim that Assange was conspiring to flee to Russia.

Trump and his aides applauded Assange and WikiLeaks during the 2016 election campaign for spreading embarrassing revelations about Hillary Clinton's campaign via leaked DNC emails. But all that changed abruptly in March 2017 when WikiLeaks released thousands of pages of CIA documents describing the CIA's hacking tools and techniques. The batch of documents published by WikiLeaks did not release the actual "armed" malware deployed by the CIA. But the "Vault 7" leak, as WikiLeaks dubbed it, did show how those tools allowed the agency to break into smartphones, computers and internet-connected televisions anywhere in the world -- and even to make it look like those hacks were done by another intelligence service.

The CIA and the national security state reacted to the Vault 7 release by targeting Assange for arrest and prosecution. On March 9, 2017, Vice President Mike Pence called the leak tantamount to "trafficking in national security information" and threatened to "use the full force of the law and resources of the United States to hold all of those to account that were involved."

Then came a significant change of government in Ecuador -- an April 2, 2017, runoff election that brought centrist Lenin Moreno to power. Moreno's win brought to an end the 10-year tenure of the popular leftist President Rafael Correa, who had granted Assange political asylum. For his part, Moreno is eager to join the neoliberal economic system, making his government highly vulnerable to U.S. economic and political influence.

Eleven days after Moreno's election, CIA Director Mike Pompeo resumed the attack on Assange. He accused WikiLeaks of being a "hostile non-state intelligence service." That was the first indication that the U.S. national security state intends to seek a conviction of Assange under the authoritarian Espionage Act of 1917, which would require the government to show that WikiLeaks did more than merely publish material.

A week later, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that arresting Julian Assange was a "priority." The Justice Department was reportedly working on a memo detailing possible charges against WikiLeaks and Assange, including accusations that he had violated the Espionage Act.

On Oct. 20, 2017, Pompeo lumped WikiLeaks together with al-Qaida and Islamic State, arguing that all of them "look and feel like very good intelligence organizations." Pompeo said, "[W]e are working to take down that threat to the United States."

Moreno's Government Under Pressure

During this time, the Ecuadorian foreign ministry was negotiating with Assange on a plan in which he would be granted Ecuadorian citizenship and diplomatic credentials, so that he could be sent to another Ecuadorian embassy in a country friendly to Assange. The Ecuadorian government reached formal agreement with Assange to that effect, and Assange was granted citizenship on Dec. 12, 2017.

But the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which was responsive to U.S. wishes, refused to recognize Assange's diplomatic credentials. The foreign office stated that Ecuador "knows that the way to resolve this issue is for Julian Assange to leave the embassy to face justice." On Dec. 29, 2017, the Ecuadorian government withdrew Assange's diplomatic credentials.

The Trump administration then took a more aggressive stance toward Assange and the policy of the Moreno government. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas A. Shannon Jr. visited Ecuador in late February 2018, and he was followed in March by the deputy commander of the U.S. Southern Command, Gen. Joseph DiSalvo, whose task was to discuss security cooperation with the Ecuadorian military leadership.

The day after DiSalvo's visit, the Ecuadorian government took its first major action to curtail Assange's freedom in the London embassy. Claiming that Assange had violated a written commitment, reached in December 2017, that he not "issue messages that implied interference in relation to other states," Ecuadorian officials cut off his access to the internet and imposed a ban on virtually all visitors. The government's statement alluded to Assange's meeting with two leaders of the Catalan independence movement and his public statement of support for the movement in November 2017, which had provoked the anger of the Spanish government.

Ecuador's economic situation offered further opportunity for U.S. leverage at that time. The steep drop in the price of Ecuador's oil exports had caused the South American nation's politically sensitive domestic fiscal deficit to increase rapidly. In mid-June of 2018 an International Monetary Fund delegation made the organization's first trip to Quito in many years in an effort to review the problem. A report by J.P. Morgan released immediately after the IMF's mission suggested that it was now likely that the Moreno government would seek a loan from the IMF. The regime had previously sought to avoid such a move, because it would create potential domestic political difficulties. Seeking an IMF loan would make Ecuador more dependent than before on political support from the United States.

The day after DiSalvo's visit, the Ecuadorian government took its first major action to curtail Assange's freedom in the London embassy. Claiming that Assange had violated a written commitment, reached in December 2017, that he not "issue messages that implied interference in relation to other states," Ecuadorian officials cut off his access to the internet and imposed a ban on virtually all visitors. The government's statement alluded to Assange's meeting with two leaders of the Catalan independence movement and his public statement of support for the movement in November 2017, which had provoked the anger of the Spanish government.

Ecuador's economic situation offered further opportunity for U.S. leverage at that time. The steep drop in the price of Ecuador's oil exports had caused the South American nation's politically sensitive domestic fiscal deficit to increase rapidly. In mid-June of 2018 an International Monetary Fund delegation made the organization's first trip to Quito in many years in an effort to review the problem. A report by J.P. Morgan released immediately after the IMF's mission suggested that it was now likely that the Moreno government would seek a loan from the IMF. The regime had previously

sought to avoid such a move, because it would create potential domestic political difficulties. Seeking an IMF loan would make Ecuador more dependent than before on political support from the United States.

But the story was an obvious fabrication, intended to justify the agreement to deprive Assange of his asylum in the embassy by linking him with the Kremlin. The only alleged evidence it offered was the claim by unidentified sources that the former Ecuadorian consul on London and confidant of Assange, Fidel Narvaez, had "served as a point of contact with Moscow" on the escape plan -- a claim that the Narvaez had flatly denied.

A second Guardian piece published five days later implicitly acknowledged the fictitious nature of the first. It failed to even mention the earlier article's claim that the Russians had concocted a plan to get Assange out of the embassy secretly. Instead the article, by Dan Collyns, cited a "classified document signed by Ecuador's then-Deputy Foreign Minister Jose Luis Jacome" that showed the foreign ministry had assigned Assange to serve in the embassy in Moscow. But the author acknowledged that he had not seen the document, relying instead on a claim by Ecuadorian opposition politician Paola Vintimilla that she had seen it.

In a Sept. 28, 2018, story for ABC News, reporters James Gordon Meek, Sean Langan and Aicha El Hammar Castano reported that ABC had "reviewed and authenticated" Ecuadorian documents, including a Dec. 19, 2017, directive from the foreign ministry on posting Assange in Moscow. They noted, however, that the documents "did not indicate whether Assange knew of the Ecuadorean directive at the time." The ABC story relied on unnamed Ecuadorian officials who, the reporters said, had "confirmed" the authenticity of those documents.

Former U.K. Ambassador Craig Murray, who had been forced out of the British diplomatic corps in 2004 for having having refused to recant his reporting about rampant torture by the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan that was then supplying the United States with military bases, was a close friend of Assange and was helping him during the negotiations on a diplomatic post. "I was asked to undertake negotiations with a number of governments on receiving [Assange], which I did intensively from December to February last year," Murray recalled in an email. "Julian instructed me which governments to approach and specifically and definitively stated he did not wish to go to Russia."

Although Murray would not identify the countries with which he had conversations about Assange, his blog and social media postings between December 2017 and March 2018 show that he had traveled to Turkey, Canada, Cuba, Jordan and Qatar.

Murray also said that, to his knowledge, Assange had never been informed of any proposed assignment in Moscow. "Neither the Ecuadorian Embassy, with whom I was working closely, nor Julian ever mentioned to me that Ecuador was organizing a diplomatic appointment to Russia," Murray said. According to the former ambassador, the Ecuadorian Embassy correspondence with the British Foreign Office, which the embassy shared with him, did not mention a posting to Russia.

Murray believes that there are only two possible explanations for those reported documents. The first is the Ecuadorian government was working on its own plan for Assange to go to Russia without telling him, and "intended to present it as a *fait accompli*." But the more likely explanation, Murray said, "is that the documents have been retrospectively faked by the Moreno government to try and discredit Julian and prepare for his expulsion, as part of Moreno's widespread moves to ingratiate himself with the USA and UK."

On Oct. 12, the Moreno government took a further step toward stripping Assange of asylum status by issuing a "Special Protocol" that prohibits him from any activities that could be "considered as political or interfering with the internal affairs of other states." It further required all journalists, lawyers and anyone else who wanted to meet with Assange to disclose social media usernames and the serial number and IMEI codes of their cellphones and tablets. And it stated that that personal information could be shared with "other agencies," according to the memorandum reported by The Guardian.

In response, Assange's lawyers initiated a suit against the Ecuadorian foreign minister, Jose Valencia, for "isolating and muzzling him." But it was yet another sign of the efforts by both the British and Ecuadorian governments to justify a possible move to take away Assange's protection from extradition to the United States.

When and whether that will happen remains unclear. What is not in doubt, however, is that the Ecuadorian and British governments, working on behalf of the Trump administration, are trying to make it as difficult as possible for Julian Assange to avoid extradition by staying in the Ecuadorian Embassy.

Copyright applies.

Follow link below for additional embedded information:

<https://tinyurl.com/y8vzlv3b>

Inverse Times Open Publishing. <http://inversetimes.lingama.net/news/story-363.html>