

Freedom for Julian Assange

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Julian Assange's agony has now lasted more than 11 years. In June this year, the UK Supreme Court rejected all eight grounds of Assange's appeal against his extradition to the United States where he may face a life sentence. The judge responsible, Jonathan Swift, built a career as a lawyer for various government agencies and ministries, including the Home Office and Defence. That such a judge can decide Assange's fate is just one of many illustrations that his case is not getting a fair hearing and that he is a political prisoner who should serve as an example to deter other whistleblowers.

Julian Assange must pay for exposing the dirty face of war and power. He helped reveal evidence of wrongdoing and war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, of torture and years of detention of innocents at Guantanamo or of spying by US intelligence agencies against the United Nations and various world leaders.

Ironically, the world's most powerful spy country is now seeking the extradition of Julien Assange under a 1917 espionage law. This is a dangerous precedent because it is the first time the law has been brought out to sanction a journalistic practice. Journalists are being sent the message that obtaining and publishing classified documents can have serious criminal consequences. The Assange case thus transcends the individual case. His prosecution is a model for an era where free speech and the free press are under threat worldwide, including main so called 'democracies' like the United States.

It was about time five major news organisations from the US, UK and EU wrote a joint open letter late last year asking for the charges against Assange to be dropped. After all, a journalist's job in a democracy is to be a watchdog of political power and inform the public if it indulges in wrongdoing.

But so far media and politicians are doing far too little to stand up for Assange. Both for their own and public interest, they should systematically campaign against this and other clear attacks on press freedom. They should shake up public opinion and put pressure on those in power to respect fundamental freedoms.

Whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, who died a few months ago, and who himself faced prosecution for his revelations of US war policies and crimes in Vietnam (the 'Pentagon Papers'), rightly warned that if Assange is extradited and convicted, any journalist anywhere in the world could be extradited to the US for revealing classified information.

As a rapporteur from the Parliament of the Council of Europe stated a few months ago, Julian Assange has made powerful enemies in the US. Assange is now awaiting the verdict of his latest domestic appeal. If he is actually extradited, he risks serious human rights violations and a disproportionately harsh sentence.

Assange has now been held in Britain's Belmarsh prison for four years without being judged and condemned. Before that, he spent years in the Ecuadorian embassy escaping persecution as a political refugee. His mental and physical health deteriorated as a result.

On 3 May 2023, President Biden issued a statement to mark International Press Freedom Day in which he said, "*As enshrined in the First Amendment of our Constitution, Congress shall pass no law "abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." That's because a free press is a pillar of democracy. It allows our government and our society to be self-critical and self-correcting. It educates, illuminates, exposes, and uncovers. It serves as a guardian of truth.*"

Biden concluded with: *"We must all stand with journalists around the world. We must all speak out against those who wish to silence them. And we must all continue to support a free press that is essential to our democracy and democracies everywhere."*

Every single word of the US president applies to the Assange case. But his words stand in total contradiction to his own practice. For now, Biden refuses to drop charges against Assange and consequently to apply his self-proclaimed principles.

Along with many others, human rights activists, critical journalists and politicians, I call on the US government to put its money where its mouth is and drop all charges against Assange. From the British government we expect the immediate release of Assange so that he can finally rejoin friends and family. The Belgian government, press and MPs, must denounce such attempts to curtail press freedom loudly and clearly with dogged conviction. That is how we should expect it to be in a democratic state.