

Dark Day For Press Freedom: British Court Orders Assange Extradition

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A British magistrates court ordered the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States and sent the request for his extradition to Home Office Secretary Priti Patel for approval.

The order came a little more than a month after the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom [refused](#) to hear Assange’s appeal. In December, the UK High Court of Justice granted the US government’s appeal and [overturned](#) a district court decision that spared Assange.

Chief Magistrate Senior District Judge Paul Goldspring contended he was “duty-bound” to send the extradition request to Patel. Goldspring also told Assange he had a right to appeal if the Home Office approved the extradition before issuing the order.

Mark Summers QC, an attorney for Assange, asserted there were “fresh developments” in the case and bemoaned the fact that the defense was not permitted at this stage to raise this evidence, according to Computer Weekly’s [Bill Goodwin](#).

Assange’s legal team has until May 18 to submit evidence to the Home Office and argue why the department should block the extradition request. In two months, Patel is expected to make a decision.

If approved by Patel, attorneys for Assange may request permission to appeal to the British High Court of Justice. His attorneys may appeal the decision of the district judge to send the case to the Home Office for approval and may also appeal the Home Office secretary’s order.

While the defense for Assange objected to District Judge Vanessa Baraitser’s ruling on January 4, 2021, particularly as it related to issues of press freedom, they never had an appropriate opportunity to raise their objections. She denied the extradition request after determining it would be “oppressive” for mental health reasons.

His attorneys would likely challenge many of Baraitser's conclusions about Assange if Patel allowed the request. (Note: Baraitser is no longer a district judge at the Westminster Magistrates Court.)

Assange is detained at Her Majesty's Prison Belmarsh. He faces 18 charges brought against him by the US Justice Department, 17 of which are under the Espionage Act. All the charges relate to documents WikiLeaks released in 2010 and 2011, which were provided by US Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The prosecution makes Assange the first publisher to be charged under the 1917 law, and globally the case has been condemned by virtually all reputable civil liberties, human rights, and press freedom organizations.

Patel and the Home Office support an expansion of the Official Secrets Laws in the UK, which Elmaazi [reported](#) "would expand possible imprisonment for leakers, recipients of leaks and secondary publishers—including journalists—from the current maximum of two years to as high as 14 years in prison."

The Home Office [contends](#) there is no longer much of a difference between "espionage and the most serious unauthorized disclosures." That includes what Patel would call "onward disclosure." The department treats journalism as an act capable of "far more serious damage" than traditional espionage.

In the UK, the Office for Security and Counterterrorism is a part of the Home Office. The division is responsible for MI5 (Britain's FBI) and anti-terrorism police operations.

Operation Pelican, the name for the [pressure campaign](#) to force Assange out of the Ecuador embassy in London, was supported by the Home Office. But as Declassified UK chief investigator Matt Kennard [noted](#), the Home Office claims it does not "hold" any records containing details related to the operation, even though eight officials from the department were involved.

Kennard also [reported](#) that Patel was on the advisory council for a right-wing group linked to the CIA called the Henry Jackson Society, which has attacked Assange in the press for over a decade.

"[Prime Minister] Boris Johnson and Priti Patel, don't extradite Julian to the country that conspired to murder him," Stella Assange [declared](#). "They can stop this nightmare today and return to Julian to his family. They can do the right thing and enforce Article 4 of the US/UK extradition treaty, which prohibits extradition for political offenses."

"This is a political case, and with the signature of the magistrate, this now passes squarely into the political domain," Stella added.

"The next four weeks will prove crucial in the fight to block extradition and secure the release of Julian Assange," [stated](#) Rebecca Vincent, the director of operations and campaigns for Reporters Without Borders (RSF). "The Home Secretary must act now to protect journalism and adhere to the UK's commitment to media freedom by rejecting the extradition order and releasing Assange."

RSF, a global press freedom organization, [launched](#) a "Free Assange" petition urging supporters to sign on before May 18, the last day Assange can make any submissions to the

Home Office.

The National Union for Journalists (NUJ) in the UK renewed their call for his release from Belmarsh prison and charges to be dropped.

Assange defense groups and a coalition of civil liberties, human rights, and press freedom organizations will build on prior work and use the next several weeks to ramp up their campaigning. Their intent will be to make the extradition request a political issue in the UK and throughout Europe.

He will remain in detention at Belmarsh until Patel's decision and during any appeal.

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Featured image: Westminster Magistrates Court in the United Kingdom, where Julian Assange's extradition hearing was held. (Photo by Ludhi85)

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