

The Trials of Julian Assange. Why Washington Sees Wikileaks as an Existential Threat

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Stefania Maurizi is an investigative journalist working for the Italian daily La Repubblica. She has worked on all WikiLeaks releases of secret documents and partnered with Glenn Greenwald to reveal the Snowden Files about Italy. She has authored two books—Dossier WikiLeaks: Segreti Italiani and Una Bomba, Dieci Storie. In an exclusive (electronic) interview with renowned journalist Eresh Omar Jamal, Maurizi talks about the continued arbitrary detention of Julian Assange, why powerful governments see WikiLeaks as an existential threat, and the implications for global press freedom if Assange is prosecuted for publishing secret government documents.

Eresh Omar Jamal: You recently had the chance to visit Julian Assange at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. When was this and can you describe the state he is in?

Stefania Maurizi: I was able to visit him on November 19, after 8 months of failed attempts, because last March the Ecuadorian authorities cut off all his social and professional contacts, with the exception of his lawyers, and in the preceding 8 months, I had asked for permission to visit him nine times without success—the Ecuadorian authorities didn't reply at all to my requests.

When I was finally granted permission to visit the WikiLeaks founder at the Ecuadorian embassy in London last November, I was literally shocked to see the huge impact his isolation has had on his health. Because I have worked as a media partner with him and his organisation, WikiLeaks, for the last nine years, I have met him many times and can tell when there are any changes in his body and mind. I wondered how his mind could keep working; but after talking to him in the embassy for two hours, I have no doubt that his mind is working fine. I still wonder how that's possible after six and a half years of detention without even one hour of being outdoors. I would have had a physical and mental breakdown after just 6 months, not after 6 years.

Detention and isolation are killing him slowly, and no one is doing anything to stop it. The media reports, the commentators comment, but at the end of the day, he is still there; having spent the last six and a half years confined to a tiny building with no access to sunlight or to proper medical treatment. And this is happening in London, in the heart of Europe. He is not sitting in an embassy in Pyongyang. It is truly tragic and completely unacceptable. And I'm simply appalled at the way the UK authorities have contributed to his arbitrary detention, and have opposed any solution to this intractable legal and diplomatic quagmire.

EOJ: Having bravely defended Assange for years, the Ecuadorian government in late March cut off almost all his communications with the outside world. What prompted this turnabout and what is its purpose?

SM: Politics has completely changed in Ecuador, and more in general, in Latin America, since 2012, when Ecuador granted Julian Assange asylum. I have never had any interviews with the current Ecuadorian President, Mr Lenin Moreno, but based on his public declarations, it's rather obvious to me that he does not approve of what Julian Assange and WikiLeaks do.

With all his problems, Rafael Correa (former president of Ecuador) protected Assange from the very beginning, whereas Lenin Moreno considers him a liability. Moreno is under pressure from the right-wing politicians in Ecuador, and also from very powerful governments, like the US and UK governments, who will leave no stones unturned to jail Assange and destroy WikiLeaks. I am not sure how long Lenin Moreno will hold out against this immense pressure, provided that he wants to hold out at all.

EOJ: Assange was vindicated not so long ago as to why he cannot leave the embassy when the US Department of Justice "accidentally" revealed in November that the founder of WikiLeaks had been secretly charged in the US. What do you think those charges are for?

SM: It's hard to say unless the charges get declassified and I really appreciate how the US organisation, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, is fighting before the court in the Eastern District of Virginia, US, to have the charges declassified.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the US authorities have always wanted to charge him for WikiLeaks' publications. They have wanted to do so from the very beginning, since 2010, when WikiLeaks released its bombshell publications like the US diplomatic cables.

But the US authorities have been unable to do so due to the fact that WikiLeaks' publication activities enjoy constitutional protection thanks to the First Amendment. So it will be very interesting to see how they will get around this constitutional protection in order to be able to charge him and other WikiLeaks journalists and put them all in jail.

EOJ: Why have some of the most powerful governments and intelligence agencies invested so much resources to attack Assange and WikiLeaks?

SM: You have to realise what it meant for the US national security complex to witness the publication of 76,000 secret documents about the war in Afghanistan, and then another 390,000 secret reports about the war in Iraq; followed by 251,287 US diplomatic cables and 779 secret files on the Guantanamo detainees; and to watch WikiLeaks save Edward Snowden, while the US was trying everything it could do, to show the world that there is no way of exposing the NSA's secrets and keep your head attached to your neck having done so.

You have to realise what this means in an environment like that of the US, where even the most brilliant national security reporters didn't dare to publish the name of the head of the CIA Counterterrorism Center, Michael D'Andrea, even though his name and the abuses committed by his centre were open secrets within their inner circles. Although the New York Times finally did, later on. But this was and still is the reality in the US, and even though it may not be as bad in the UK, it's still quite bad. Look at what happened with the arrest of Glenn Greenwald's husband, David Miranda, at the Heathrow Airport during the publication

of the Snowden Files. Look at what happened with The Guardian being forced to destroy its hard drives during the publication of those files.

There are different levels of power in our societies and generally in our western democracies, criticism against the low, medium and high levels of power via journalistic activities is tolerated. Journalists may get hit with libel cases, have troubles with their careers; however, exposing those levels is permitted. The problem is when journalists and media organisations touch the highest levels, the levels where states and intelligence agencies operate.

WikiLeaks is a media organisation that has published secret documents about these entities for years, and Julian Assange and his staff have done this consistently, not occasionally like all the other media organisations do. You can imagine the anger these powerful entities have towards WikiLeaks—they perceive WikiLeaks as an existential threat and they want to set an example that says, “Don’t you dare expose our secrets and crimes, because if you do, we will smash you.”

EOJ: If Assange is prosecuted, what impact might it have on other publishers and journalists and on press freedom globally?

SM: It will have a huge impact and that is why organisations like the American Civil Liberties Union are speaking out. Never before in the US has an editor and media organisation ended up in jail for publishing information in the public interest. If Julian Assange and the WikiLeaks’ staff end up in jail, it will be the first time in US history and will set a devastating precedent for attack on press freedom in the US, but actually, not only in the US. Because if a country like the US, in which the activities of the press enjoy constitutional protection, treats journalists this way, you can imagine how other countries where the press doesn’t enjoy such strong protection will react. It will send a clear message to them: “Your hands are free.”

At the end of the day, I think there are two sides to this Assange and WikiLeaks saga: the US-UK national security complex, but more in general, I would say, the people within the national security complex, who want to destroy Julian Assange and WikiLeaks to send a clear message to journalists: “Don’t mess with us if you don’t want your lives to be destroyed.” While on the other side, there are the freedom of the press guys, meaning journalists like me, who want to demonstrate the exact opposite: that we can expose power at the highest levels, we can expose the darkest corners of governments and come out alive and well. And actually, we must do this, because real power is invisible and hides in the darkest corners.

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