

Navalny vs Assange, or the geopolitics of selective outrage

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The hearts of political leaders in the United States and its imperialist allies are bleeding for imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Jailed on February 2 this year, after returning from Germany where he received treatment for an alleged poisoning by the Russian state, Navalny has since gone on hunger strike.

The outrage over Navalny's imprisonment and resulting health crisis is an object lesson in imperialist cynicism and intrigue. Those most passionately invoking his democratic rights are the architects of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's continuing and vastly more severe persecution.

There is nothing remotely comparable between the two men, and the differences are not in Navalny's favour.

Assange is a heroic journalist who played a leading role in the exposure of some of the worst imperialist crimes of the 21st century, from covered-up details of the brutal occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan to US torture camps and extraordinary renditions.

Navalny is a right-wing, nationalist politician, who has referred to migrants from the Caucasus as "cockroaches" that should be killed. He represents a wing of the Russian oligarchy opposed to President Vladimir Putin and in favour of opening Russia up more widely to Western imperialism.

It is this difference which underpins their night and day treatment.

The WikiLeaks founder's work was a spur to global antiwar sentiment and contributed to popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. He is being made an example of as retribution for the damage he inflicted to imperialist interests. The same interests mandate support for Navalny, who offers himself up as a tool for realising their designs on Russia.

The contrasting treatment tears apart claims by the likes of US President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to be supporting Navalny on human rights

grounds while pursuing Assange on supposedly legal ones.

Assange's persecution began more than a decade ago when Sweden launched a politically manufactured sexual assault investigation to secure his extradition. This would have been a staging post to the United States. Assange was forced, in 2012, to claim political asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he was kept arbitrarily detained by British police for the best part of seven years.

Following his illegal seizure and arrest in April 2019, he has spent the past two years in Belmarsh maximum security prison—on the charge of skipping bail for 25 weeks—on remand while the US pursued an extradition request for over a year, and since then for close to four months while the US appeals a ruling against extradition on health grounds.

His politically motivated case is a litany of abuses of legal and democratic rights, carried out alongside a slander campaign involving the world's media and pseudo-left groups, designed to blacken his name and psychologically destroy the WikiLeaks founder.

Were Assange to be sent to the US, he faces a sentence of 175 years on charges under the Espionage Act.

Every government in the world lined up behind this imperialist conspiracy to have Assange, denounced as a "high-tech terrorist" by Biden, "face justice," in the words of Johnson. German Chancellor Angela Merkel summed up the stance of the European powers with the comment in 2019 that Assange's case "is a matter which doesn't concern Germany and is in the hands of British justice." Australia, Assange's home country, washed their hands of him.

In contrast, when Navalny was arrested this year, also for violating parole, in connection with a 2014 embezzlement case, and sentenced to two years and eight months' imprisonment, this gang of criminals

miraculously discovered their democratic sensibilities.

Johnson praised the “brave” Navalny and said the Russian ruling “fails to meet the most basic standards of justice.” US national security adviser Jake Sullivan condemned the “violation of human rights.” Merkel declared the Navalny verdict “far from any rule of law standards.” French President Emmanuel Macron stated, “respect for human rights such as democratic freedom are not negotiable.”

Especially severe condemnations were made of the “outrageous attack on his [Navalny’s] life,” referring to his alleged poisoning by the Russian state. Yet nothing was said when an investigation into Spanish security firm UC Global, which provided surveillance for the Ecuadorian embassy, revealed a CIA plot to either kidnap or poison Assange.

As Navalny’s health has deteriorated due to his hunger strike, these officials have reiterated calls for his freedom, citing the danger to his life. Biden called Navalny’s treatment “totally unfair and totally inappropriate,” while his administration warned of “consequences” if he were to die. Josep Borrell, the European Union’s High Representative for foreign affairs demanded, “Russian authorities must grant him immediate access to medical professionals he trusts.” The UK’s Foreign Office said the same in its statement: “Mr Navalny must be given immediate access to independent medical care.”

This is precisely the demand made by campaign group Doctors for Assange and United Nations special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer, but which was disparaged by the British government. Assange has been repeatedly denied bail despite the serious risk posed to his life by COVID-19 and by his own mental health.

UK Judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against his extradition to the United States solely on the grounds that to do so would endanger his life and might lead to his suicide. The response of the Biden administration was to insist, as Trump had previously, “We continue to seek his extradition.”

The criminal agenda of the ruling class is echoed by their paid chorus in the media, who have been working overtime to fabricate progressive credentials for Navalny while leaving Assange to rot.

Since January this year, the *Guardian*, Britain’s leading nominally liberal paper, has published 78 articles and videos on Navalny. It published 16 on Assange, with just one since February. It only belatedly adopted a for-the-record opposition to Assange’s extradition in a November 2019 editorial, after waging a decade-long smear

campaign against him. It wrote another in December 2020 and then again in January this year. It has written three on Navalny this year alone.

Amnesty International refused to acknowledge Assange as a prisoner of conscience for years but was so quick to apply the label to Navalny that they were forced into an embarrassing retreat in acknowledgment of his record of “hate speech” a few months later. US Democratic Party Senator Bernie Sanders has maintained near total silence on Assange, issuing a single tweet opposing his indictment in May 2019 that succeeded in not mentioning the WikiLeaks founder by name. He tweeted this Monday: “Make no mistake about what is happening here: activist Aleksei Navalny is being murdered in front of the world by Vladimir Putin for the crime of exposing Putin’s vast corruption. Navalny’s doctors must be allowed to see him immediately.”

Phrases like “human rights” and “democratic freedom” turn to ash in the mouths of Sanders, Biden, Johnson and their ilk. Their support for the politically filthy Navalny is a calculated provocation against the Russian state. They hope to use his fate as a pretext for a further escalation of military aggression against Moscow. Assange has had his democratic rights eviscerated with the consent of all the major powers to suppress opposition to this imperialist war drive.

The only real constituency for democratic rights in the world today is the international working class, which can only defend those rights through a combined struggle against the imperialist governments, their stooge Navalny and the Russian oligarchy represented by Putin. The demand for the immediate release and unconditional freedom of Julian Assange must be placed at the centre of that struggle.



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