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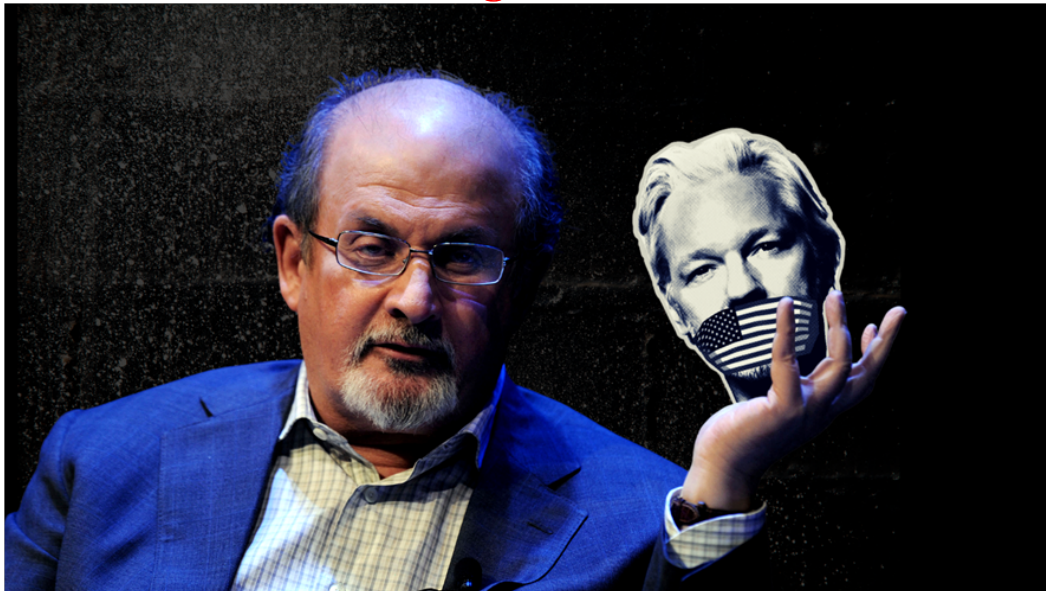
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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Jonathan Cook Free Knowledge
21.08.2022

Rushdie-Assange double standard



Sources: Source: Mintpress [Graphic Design: Mintpress News]

Translated for Rebellion by Paco Muñoz de Bustillo

Many of those outraged by the stabbing of the Indian writer have not raised their voices in the face of a far greater threat to our freedom.

Nothing I am going to write should be interpreted in any way to the detriment of my sympathies for Salman Rushdie or my outrage at his terrible stabbing. Those who put a fatwa on his head more than 30 years ago, when he wrote the novel "The Satanic Verses", made this attack possible. They deserve all my disdain. I wish him a speedy recovery.

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But my natural compassion for a victim of violence and the support I periodically express for free speech should not blind or blind us to the verbiage and hypocrisy generated by his stabbing last week, when he was about to give a talk in the state of New York (USA).

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was "horrified that Salman Rushdie has been stabbed for exercising a right we should never stop defending." His chancellor, Rishi Sunak, one of Johnson's two suitors for the crown, described the novelist as "a champion of free speech and artistic freedom."

Across the Atlantic, President Joe Biden underscored Rushdie's qualities: "Truth, courage, resilience. The ability to share ideas without fear... we reaffirm our commitment to all those deeply American values in solidarity with Salman Rushdie and all those who defend freedom of expression."

The truth is that the vast majority of those who claim that this is an attack not only on a prominent writer, but on Western society and its freedoms, have not opened their mouths in recent years, while the greatest threat to those freedoms was developing. Or, in the case of Western government leaders, they have actively conspired to undermine those freedoms.

Prominent figures or organizations that now express their solidarity with Rushdie have kept their heads down or spoke half-heartedly — or even worse, acted as spokespersons — of another, much more serious attack: on our right to know about the mass crimes that have been committed on our behalf against third parties.

Rushdie has earned the resounding support of Western liberals and conservatives alike, not for having clearly expressed difficult truths, but for who his enemies are.

The truth that the mirror shows us

If what I have said is insensitive or meaningless, consider the following. Julian Assange has spent more than three years in an isolation cell of a high-security prison in London (and, before that, seven years confined to a small room in the Ecuadorian embassy), in

conditions that Nils Melzer, the former United Nations expert on torture, has described as extreme psychological torture.

Melzer and many others fear for Assange's life if authorities in Britain and the United States manage to prolong the detention of the Wikileaks founder based on purely political accusations much longer. Assange has already suffered a stroke – as Melzer points out, one of the many potential physical reactions suffered by those who are subjected to prolonged confinement.

And remember that all this is happening to you for one reason only: to have published documents that show that, under the cover of a false humanitarianism, Western governments were committing crimes against peoples from distant lands. Assange faces charges under the draconian Espionage Act *only* because he made public [the gruesome truth](#) of Western military operations in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Of course, there are differences between Rushdie and Assange's respective cases, but those differences should raise more concern for Assange's plight than rushdie's. In practice, what happened is exactly the opposite.

Rushdie's right to free speech has been defended because he exercised it to imagine an alternative history of the formation of Islam and implicitly question the authority of clerics and governments in distant lands.

Assange's right to freedom of expression has been ridiculed, ignored or, at best, weakly and equivocally supported because he exercised it to hold a mirror to the West, showing exactly what our governments are secretly doing in many of those same distant lands.

Rushdie's right to life was threatened by clerics and faraway governments for questioning the moral basis of his power. Assange's right to life is threatened by Western governments because he questioned the moral basis of his power.

Victims worthy of attention

If we in the West lived in functioning democratic societies – in which power was not so deeply entrenched as to blind us to its exercise – no journalist, no media commentator, no

writer, no politician would fail to understand that Assange's situation deserves far more attention and expressions of concern than Rushdie's.

It is our own governments, not Iran's "crazy mullahs," who threaten the free society that allowed Rushdie to publish his novel. If Assange is crushed, so is the basis of our fundamental democratic rights: to know what is being done in our name and to hold our leaders to account.

If Rushdie is silenced, we will still have those freedoms, although, as individuals, we will feel a little more nervous about saying something that can be interpreted as an insult to the Prophet Muhammad.

So why is the vast majority of us so much more concerned about Rushdie's fate than Assange's? Simply because they have made us feel much more sympathy for one of them than for the other.

Ultimately, that has nothing to do with one or the other being more worthy of compassion, more victim. It has to do with how much they have served, or not, the interests of a Western discourse that constantly reinforces the idea that we are the Good Guys and they are the Bad Guys.

Rushdie and the fatwa against him became a cause célèbre for Western elites because the writer expressed with literary sensibility one of the modern beliefs most cherished by the West: that Islam poses an existential threat to the values of an enlightened West. A man born into a Muslim family in India was attacking the religion he supposedly knew best. He was an insider, asserting what other Muslims felt too cowed to admit in public.

Although it was certainly neither his intention nor his fault, he was quickly adopted as a literary mascot by Western liberals who promoted their own thesis of the "clash of civilizations". This is not a judgment on the merits of his novel – I am not qualified to make that assessment – but a judgment on the motivations of many of his defenders and on why his work has had such an impact on them.

Racist worldview

Actually, this is true for all literature. It achieves its status within a cultural environment, watched over by media elites who have their own goals. It is they who decide whether a manuscript is published or discarded, whether the subsequent book is reviewed or ignored, whether it is celebrated or ridiculed, whether it is promoted or condemned to obscurity.

We tell ourselves, or are told, that this purification process is decided strictly on the basis of merit. But if we stop to think, the reality is that a work only finds an audience if it remains within a socially constructed consensus that gives it meaning or if it challenges it at a time when consensus is being lost and another alternative is sought.

George Orwell is a good example of how this works. The British writer thrived – or at least his reputation did – by the fact that he questioned the certainties about the "natural order" that had long been imposed by Western elites but were difficult to maintain after two world wars in rapid succession. At the same time, it exposed the dangers of an authoritarianism that could easily be attributed to the West's main adversary: the Soviet Union.

Orwell's literary work contains ideas that speak of universal values. But that's only part of the reason it's endured. It also benefited from the fact that the ambiguity inherent in those universal lessons could be used for much more specific purposes by Western elites, who were preparing for a Cold War about to become the tragic legacy of the two hot wars that preceded it.

The same goes for Rushdie. His novel served two functions: first, its main theme resonated with Western elites because it assured them that their prejudices against the Muslim world were fully justified, especially since the novel provoked a violent reaction that seemed to confirm those prejudices.

And secondly, "The Satanic Verses" assured Western elites against the accusation of racism. Rushdie inadvertently provided the much-needed alibi to promote his racist worldview, that of a civilized West opposed to a barbaric and insecure East. She served as a midwife for the ravings of Islamophobic treatises such as Melanie Phillips' "Londonistan" and Nick Cohen's "What's Left?"

Literary sedition

Over the past two decades, we have experienced the terrible consequences of the West's conceited condescension, its savage stances, its violent humanitarianism, all to mask the thirst for the Middle East's most precious resource: oil.

The result has been the destruction of entire countries; the end of more than a million lives, leaving millions more homeless; a reaction that has unleashed even more terrifying forms of Islamist extremism; a growing self-righteousness among Western elites that has given way to an all-out assault on democratic controls; a strengthening of the power of the war industries and their lobbies; and a relentless weakening of international institutions and international law.

And all this has served as an endless excuse to delay the implementation of solutions to the real problem that afflicts humanity: the imminent extinction of our species, caused by our addiction to the same resource that got us into this mess in the first place.

Unfortunately, the attack on Rushdie and the ensuing outrage will only intensify the trends noted above. None of that is Rushdie's fault, of course. His desire to question the authority of the clerical thugs among whom he grew up is a matter entirely different from the ends for which Western elites have harnessed his personal act of literary sedition. He is not responsible for the fact that his work has been used to prop up and weaponize a more general and misguided Western narrative.

However, last week's violent attack will once again be used to underpin an alarmist narrative that empowers politicians, sells newspapers and, if we can see the global picture, rationalizes the West's dehumanization of more than a billion people, its continued sanctions against many of them, and the advance of wars that fabulously enrich a small part of Western societies that follows. avoiding scrutiny.

A bad joke

Those elites have eluded scrutiny precisely because they are so successful at vilifying and eliminating anyone who tries to hold them accountable. Like Julian Assange.

If they believe that Assange has sought trouble himself, unlike Rushdie, who is simply a hapless victim caught in the crossfire of a menacing "clash of civilizations," it is because they have been trained – through their consumption of the establishment media – to make that distinction totally unfounded. And those who have trained you through their dominant narratives are not a disinterested party, but the very actors who have to lose the most if you come to a different conclusion.

In Assange's case, there has been an endless stream of lies and manipulations that I and many others have tried to expose on our fringe platforms before Google and Facebook, the richest corporations on the planet, make us fall into oblivion.

As Melzer points out in great detail in his recent book, Swedish authorities knew from the beginning that Assange had nothing to answer about sexual allegations they had no intention of investigating. But they pretended to pursue him anyway (and left in the air the threat of his future extradition to the United States) to make sure he lost the sympathies of the public and looked like a fugitive from justice.

Anyone who writes about Assange knows all too well the army of social media users who insist on saying that Assange was accused of rape, or that he refused to be interviewed by Swedish prosecutors, or that he skipped bail, or that he colluded with Trump, or that he recklessly published classified unedited documents, or that endangered the lives of informants and agents.

[None of that is true](#) — nor, more significantly, is it relevant to the cause that the United States, aided by the U.K. government, is promoting against Assange through British courts, to lock him up for the rest of his life.

For Assange, the much-vaunted Western principle of free speech is nothing more than a joke in bad taste, a doctrine used as a weapon against him – to, paradoxically, destroy him and the free speech values he espouses, including the transparency and accountability of our leaders.

There is one reason why we invest so much energy in worrying about a supposed threat from Islam, rather than worrying about the threat we have at home: our rulers; for which

Rushdie appears in the headlines, while Assange is condemned to oblivion; for which Assange deserves his punishment, and Rushdie does not.

That reason has nothing to do with protecting free speech, but it has anything to do with protecting the power of unaccountable elites who fear free speech.

Protest by all means the stabbing of Salman Rushdie. But don't forget to protest even louder about the silencing and disappearance of Julian Assange.

Translator's Notes:

*British journalist and political commentator of Jewish religion defending the values of the West as derived directly from the Bible ("Today's Western civilization can only be rescued if it reaffirms its religious roots... its foundation in the Hebrew Bible").

**British far-right journalist and commentator supporter of military intervention in Iraq and Libya and critic of the asylum provided to Assange by Ecuador in 2012.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Journalism Award. His books include "*Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East*" (Pluto Press) and "*Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair*" (Zed Books). Their website is: www.jonathan-cook.net

Source: <https://www.mintpressnews.com/salman-rushdie-stabbing-julian-assange-freedom/281757/>

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Rebellion 20.08.2022