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Assange's Battle: a Fight for Democracy

By Nozomi Hayase
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In its nine years of existence, WikiLeaks has become the first global 4th estate. Their 2008 release of the classified US military video documenting the slaying of Iraqi civilians in New Baghdad made the whistle-blowing site a household name. Despite the US government's efforts to stop their publications, the organization has proven itself to be the most effective publisher of last resort, with over 10 million documents in their library and a perfect record of authenticity.

This year, their vitality shone more than ever, with the release of the texts of secret trade agreements like TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) and TiSA (Trade In Service Agreement). Numerous other critical disclosures were also released, ranging from EU plans for military

intervention against refugee boats, a Trident whistle-blower's alert of potential nuclear disaster and CIA director John Brennan's unauthorized emails.

As WikiLeaks continues to liberate concealed information, shedding light on abuse by governments and corporations, the founder Julian Assange remains trapped in London. December 7, 2015 marked the fifth year of his detainment without charge, first in prison and solitary confinement, then house arrest, and now for more than three years in asylum at the Ecuadorian embassy.

Since Assange entered the embassy in June 2012, the UK government has spent over £13 million of UK taxpayer money on the embassy siege, with police encircling the building 24-hours a day, which has recently shifted into more covert measures. To this day, the UK government has obstructed his safe passage to Ecuador, vowing that, were he to leave the embassy, he would be arrested. They not only denied his right to asylum, but have also been denying his right to receive medical treatment.

What brought him to this situation? He is a refugee, abandoned by his own government, deprived of natural light and air, in a small room, under the diplomatic protection of a brave Latin American country. In a functioning democracy, these questions would be explored. Yet, before the public was even able to examine the issue, the corporate media quickly set the frame and gave a prescribed answer.

Sweden vs. Assange

This Australian, holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy surrounded by UK police, evokes a peculiar and unsettling image in the public mind. Tabloid journalism's false claims that Assange is a rapist or someone charged with crimes have severely damaged his reputation.

What happened to the presumption of innocence? Assange has never been charged. He is simply wanted for questioning by Swedish authorities with regard to alleged sexual misconduct involving two women in Stockholm in the summer of 2010. For those who are willing to look closely, it is clear from the beginning that this case had nothing to do with protecting women's rights or bringing justice.

In a recent article, the editor of Crikey, Bernard Keane, made this clear by pointing to the unwillingness of both the Swedish and UK governments to actually investigate what UK Prime Minister David Cameron's spokesperson described as "very serious allegations" against Assange. The history of this case has centered around the Swedish prosecutor's reluctance to question him, despite Assange's repeated efforts to cooperate with the investigation. In the past five years, while Swedish prosecutors were willing to go to the UK for 44 requests to question those who are accused of murder and other violent crimes, they would not do the same for Assange.

All this time, Assange has maintained his innocence. His DNA samples were given to British authorities and in recent years, new information has emerged showing that both women involved have explicitly denied the official accusations of rape.

The prosecutorial authorities' refusal to question Assange is a blatant obstruction of justice. This became undeniably clear when, in March of this year, months before the expiration of the statute of limitations would force her to drop most of the allegations of sexual assault, Swedish prosecutor, Marianne Ny finally agreed to question Assange at the Ecuadorian embassy. Although she managed once again to avoid it, this reveals how it could have happened years ago. Acting in collusion with the UK, the Swedish government has committed a fundamental injustice. Assange's right to prove his innocence and clear his name has been repeatedly denied. He is being kept in pretrial punishment; de-facto detainment without charge.

This enduring legal battle of Sweden vs. Assange reveals something larger: a scale of oppression that does not just concern this publisher, but more importantly, reaches to everyone who cares about the rule of law and basic democratic rights.

Hidden Hand of the Deep State

While this 44 year old award winning journalist gained global notoriety as the face of WikiLeaks, the sensationalism of his unfounded allegations put Sweden in the global spotlight. Swedish authorities' handling of the case exposed the reality behind the image of a 'free and open society', shaking the reputation of that country's justice system to the core. Perhaps the most alarming aspect that came to light was Sweden's close political ties to the United States, shown in their collaboration with the CIA in committing extraordinary rendition of people who had applied for asylum to Sweden.

The established media repeatedly misrepresented his case, particularly his reasons for avoiding extradition to Sweden. Assange actually sought refuge in Ecuador based on the risk of extradition to the United States from both Sweden and the UK. Ecuador granted him asylum, acknowledging a reasonable fear of persecution by the United States pertaining to his publishing activities with WikiLeaks.

Assange's fear of being sent to the US and what awaits him there, has repeatedly been dismissed and ridiculed. Yet, this threat is not something Assange made up. Anyone who has the ability to put themselves in another's shoes would see its validity. Vice president Joe Biden once called him a "high-tech terrorist". Along with politicians, other notable figures have openly incited for his murder, including Time Magazine's senior correspondent, Michael Grunwald, wishing for his death by drone strike and the writer of BBC's new comedy, Thom Phipps, advocating for Assange's murder two months after he received political asylum from Ecuador. This concern is quite justified, considering what happened to WikiLeaks source, Chelsea Manning, formerly known as Pfc. Bradley Manning. She is now serving 35 years behind bars for exposing American war crimes and was held in conditions which, according to the UN Special Rapporteur, amounted to torture.

Moreover, the US Department of Justice stated in Federal Court that there is an espionage case against Assange, along with an investigation for four other alleged crimes. On November 29, 2010, the US Attorney General also publicly confirmed the existence of a general investigation into disclosures of classified information made by WikiLeaks. Further confirmation came three years after Assange entered the embassy, when Google revealed that they were forced to hand

over data to the US government in order to assist the prosecution of WikiLeaks staff under US espionage charges relating to publication of US diplomatic cables.

What does this threat from the US reveal? The media frenzy that has now become a slanderous witch hunt emerged after WikiLeaks' publication of the Collateral Murder video and Afghan War Diary. At that time, the Pentagon reportedly already began searching for Assange, while Manning was detained without charge in Kuwait. Shortly after the release of documents pertaining to the illegal US war in Iraq and more than 250,000 US diplomatic cables began to create an avalanche of revelations, the strange case of Julian Assange quickly snowballed. Sweden issued an Interpol Red Notice, with UK authorities acknowledging the European Arrest Warrant under their law and putting him in jail on December 7, 2010.

Beneath the Swedish prosecution and what is presented as 'very serious allegations', there is a real case. This outrageous manhunt revealed hidden hands pulling strings behind the scenes. What has come to surface through all of this is the existence of a shadowy government that works in secret against the public interest. Some call this invisible apparatus the Deep State, while others call it the corporate state. It is an unchecked agency that operates mostly outside of law or oversight, run by some of the richest people in the world working behind corporations who are not democratically elected.

Enemies of Empire

The Deep State is a global empire that has no allegiance to any nation or to basic human rights. Having its base in the United States, it expands and maintains power through the control of resources, specifically the flow of oil, and by enacting financial supremacy through petrodollar hegemony. Anyone who challenges the secret agreements and unspoken rules of this patronage network is demonized and becomes a target of political retaliation.

Governments that don't subscribe to the Washington consensus are often portrayed as 'dictatorships' or 'regimes' and their leaders called pariahs, who are often simply assassinated. Countries that challenge this Anglo-American alliance are subject to military invasions and proxy wars that are often disguised as humanitarian intervention or are ostracized from the international community. Recall the invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and now the bombing of Syria, that is creating a mass migrant crisis as well as the sanctions that were put on Russia and Iran.

Whistle-blowers have become dissidents of the West. In the US, the crackdown on journalists and publishers has reached its height. Despite his campaign pledge to be "the most transparent administration", President Obama engaged in unprecedented persecution of whistle-blowers, worse than all other previous administrations combined. Those who communicate with the press and reveal the secrets of the deep state are seen as insider threats. They have become enemies of the state, often treated as traitors and criminalized.

Assange's case is a part of Obama's war on whistle-blowers. Just as Manning was thrown into a kangaroo court, Assange himself has undergone a kind of secret trial, where concocted allegations become 'evidence', while he is stripped of his right to defend himself before media

smear campaigns. Here, the banner of feminism was used to create hysterical denunciation of a man who is supposedly innocent till proven guilty. With accolades of blatant hypocrisy, a certain sector of UK based left-leaning feminist columnists passionately bashed Assange, while keeping strangely silent after the revelation of a decade of proven UK police violence against women and UK prosecutors' efforts to prevent a police spy from being jailed for raping female activists.

While Assange was taking the heat like a lightening rod, WikiLeaks faced massive coordinated attacks. In December 2010, Amazon removed WikiLeaks from their server after being pressured by U.S. officials. Their associates were harassed at the border. An extra-judicial banking blockade (the likes of which were recently ruled unconstitutional in the US) was imposed by Bank of America, VISA, MasterCard, PayPal and Western Union, which the website reported to have destroyed 95% of their revenue.

This interlocking power of the state and corporations has claimed jurisdiction over the entire world. This, of course is very apparent in the case of Assange, where Swedish authorities refuse to guarantee against extradition to the US and then never explain their reasoning. The US government also secretly asked Sweden to help extradite Edward Snowden back in 2013, when the NSA whistle-blower was seeking asylum.

The other example is Kim Dotcom who was branded a fugitive by the US Department of Justice. His site, Megaupload, which enables massive file storage and viewing, was legally attacked by the corporate-government information cartels. Dotcom, a resident of New Zealand, has never been to the US, yet was subjected to an egregious civil asset forfeiture process by the US government. He linked the massive threat coming his way from the US as partly due to the fact he is a major donor to WikiLeaks. All these vicious attacks have revealed the contour of an invisible force of oppression that had been somewhat faceless until now.

The Fog of War

The Empire State has been waging a war against the people, while most are kept ignorant about its operation. This is the new fog of war. Instead of engaging in violence and outright dictatorship, aggressors use the pretense of democracy as a shield to exert control through a process called 'manufacturing consent'.

Behind this façade of democracy and government secrecy, the global security state has quietly been built. As the Snowden revelations shocked the world with evidence of the largest global surveillance penetration the world has ever seen, intelligence agencies of this invisible government stretches across borders, controlling the flow of information through over-classification and voluntary leaks, while engaging in bulk collection and indiscriminate spying on entire populations.

Here, information is used as a weapon, not to foster communication, but to obfuscate and confuse. As the Greek tragic dramatist, Aeschylus once said, "In war, truth is the first casualty." Armies of professionals: journalists, correspondents and pundits assault the truth in order to guard the official version of reality. With the push of a button, the press sets into motion what

Orwell described as “political language” that is designed to “make lies sound truthful and murder respectable”.

So, what truth is being murdered in these secret wars? The words of the messengers, which have become targets of corporate media mass shootings, speak for themselves. At the providence inquiry, Manning elaborated her wish for the American public to see the everyday reality in the Middle East and those who are methodologically demonized by the ‘war on terror’. She noted how they are “people who were struggling to live in the pressure cooker environment of what we call asymmetric warfare”. It is this truth about our so-called enemies that is constantly being attacked. Assange has been locked down in Knightsbridge precisely for defending that truth by revealing the real victims of the propaganda wars.

WikiLeaks’ publication of the Collateral Murder video provided an uncensored view of modern war. After the release of the raw footage of this 2007 attack reaching a global audience, the Pentagon, which had already identified the whistle-blowing site as a threat to national security, was even more infuriated.

With bullets of repeated lies and twisted facts, the media echo-chambers distorted the unfolding images of the US Apache helicopter that gunned down a dozen people including two Reuters’ journalists. The camera lens swiftly changed focus from the army slaughtering innocent civilians to arguments about the rules of engagement and whether some of the Iraqi people in the video were carrying rocket propelled grenades or AK-47s.

In this deflection, what was silenced is the question that can lead to the essential truth: Why in the first place are soldiers killing people in a country that has never been a threat to the United States? And, what exactly is the legitimacy of the Iraq War and these other acts of conquest in the Middle East?

When WikiLeaks released the trove of US classified military records of the Afghan war, revealing around 20,000 deaths by assassination, massacre and night raids, The White House downplayed their significance, sweeping these documented war crimes under the rug. With smoke and mirrors, top officials who committed these serious abuses actively prevented the public from being able to confront who really has blood on their hands and from knowing who the real criminals are that need to be prosecuted.

The Court of Public Opinion

We are governed by invisible forces mostly unknown to us. The strategic dismantling of the free press brought a violation of due process and effective demolition of the court of public opinion. The authoritarian regime’s PR perception management is psyops in a war against the people; it is a kind of covert emotional rape that manufactures consent, railroading the public into supporting state sponsored terror overseas.

We have been kept in this fog, made to fight our own shadows. We have become complicit in murder, aiding the dehumanization of those who are placed on the other side of the empire’s

barrel of a gun. Many of us remain silent in the face of political persecution and, in doing so support those who nail truth-tellers to the cross-hairs of character assassination.

When democracy itself becomes doublespeak, how can there be justice for innocent casualties of illegal wars and political dissidents? Hope for democracy came from those who are inside the system and, in good conscience, decided to take enormous risks to bring change. They are the new generation of the Internet, who have been betrayed by Obama's promises of 'hope and change'. From Chelsea Manning and Jeremy Hammond to Edward Snowden, waves of whistle-blowers in recent years have begun to turn the tide in this war on truth.

In a speech at a SXSW conference in Austin, Assange noted the effect of whistle-blowing: "We are walking around constantly in this fog where we can't see the ground. These disclosures are a break in the fog."

The release of Collateral Murder made it possible for the public to witness what is covered up by euphemisms of 'collateral damage' and determine in their own eyes who those people are that are branded as enemy combatants. It also helped families of the victims in that iconic video that would not have had a chance to know what really happened until WikiLeaks released the footage of that fatal day in New Baghdad. With the publication of the Iraq War Logs, which was the largest leak in US military history, the Iraqi people and the international community could see 15,000 civilian casualties that were previously never reported.

There have also been cases where WikiLeaks documents were used to bring justice, such as in the case of a German citizen abducted by the CIA in 2003 who was able to build his case on evidence from the US diplomatic cables.

As the crisis of democracy exposes the beast within, attacks on free speech intensify. Assange remains confined. Yet, WikiLeaks editor in chief continues to give asylum to the most persecuted documents. His battle is our battle for democracy. Whistle-blowers at the front lines of this battle show us how informed citizens have the right to make decisions about their own lives.

The courage for truth reminds us that the highest court in a democratic society is the court of public opinion. It is not a President or Prime Minister who can determine the guilt or innocence of another human being, but the conscience of each person working toward consensus. Ordinary people armed with the truth can bring justice for all those who are wrongly persecuted and can end this imperial siege against democracy.