

Opinions | Julian Assange

Julian Assange is on his way to freedom – but the fight is far from over

The forces that imprisoned Julian for the 'crime' of doing journalism are still not defeated.



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Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, has been set free after fighting a long-running legal battle against extradition to the United States, where he could have been jailed for life on espionage charges [Wikileaks]

During one of the many conversations I had with Julian Assange while he was at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, I asked him what he would do first if he could get out of the building.

“I would look at the sky,” he said, calmly.

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This was in 2016, and at that time he had already spent more than 2,500 days without seeing the sky.

Three years later, in April 2019, he was finally “allowed” to leave the embassy, but was not given a single moment to look up at the sky.

British police barged into the building, arrested him, and quickly transferred him to the high-security Belmarsh Prison in South London, where he would remain imprisoned and basically in solitary confinement, for the next five years.

I've known Julian for over nine years, but never got to meet him as a free man.

His two children, now five and seven years old, never got to see their father as a free man either.

This injustice, finally and hopefully, seems to be coming to an end.

As I write this, Julian is in a plane in the sky, flying towards an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean that is under US jurisdiction.

Once he gets there, he will face an American judge and plead guilty to a "crime" – one count of conspiracy to obtain and disclose classified US national defence documents. He will then be sentenced to "time already served", and hopefully, return to his native Australia as a free man.

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So, today is a day for celebration. One of the most courageous publishers of our age is – finally – on his way to freedom.

As we celebrate Julian's freedom, however, we must not turn a blind eye to the grave crime simultaneously being committed against not only him, but also journalism and freedom of speech.

Today, Julian is being forced to plead guilty to a made-up "crime" after years of arbitrary detention, but those who are responsible for the very real crimes that he exposed – the killing of Reuters journalists and Iraqi civilians by US forces among others – are still walking free.

Today, in freeing Julian Assange under these conditions – forcing him to plead guilty to the "crime" of doing journalism and holding power to account – the US empire is once again attempting to intimidate journalists, publishers and activists everywhere who dare to put a spotlight on its own very real, very deadly, crimes.

I cannot help, but ask: Can any of us truly consider ourselves free if the basic principles of journalism, such as protecting sources and revealing the crimes of our governments, are now being treated as crimes?

Are we really free, if it is not those who committed the crimes Wikileaks exposed, or the crimes being livestreamed today on our phones from Gaza, but Julian Assange who is being made to "plead guilty"?

On this day, as Julian flies to his freedom, I want to be hopeful, and say, "Yes, we are, against all odds, still to a certain degree free."

And we will remain free as long as there are people like Julian Assange, like Chelsea Manning, like Edward Snowden, who dare to question the conduct of our governments and expose their brutality. We will remain free as long as principled journalists and publishers, whistleblowers and political prisoners all around the world continue to speak truth to power no matter the consequences.

We are free and we will remain free as long as those who campaigned for Julian's freedom for so many years, thousands of people from all walks of life all over the world, continue to fight for journalism, freedom of speech, and justice.

All those years ago, during our conversation at the Ecuadorian Embassy, Julian had told me while he wanted to "look at the sky", he did not resent not being able to.

"This is not a price I have stumbled across, because I didn't understand how the world works," he told me. "That's the price I knew I would pay, not this particular price, but a price like this. Yes, the situation is tough, but I'm confident there are prices to pay for what you believe in".

Julian indeed paid a heavy price for what he believed in. He faced unimaginable abuse for doing courageous, crucial, indispensable journalism. He spent years without being able to look up to the blue sky as a free man.

But in the end, he won. And he taught us all a very important lesson. During his years of arbitrary, unlawful, unjust detention, he managed not to abandon his principles. He knew how the world works, and the heavy price he would need to pay to change it. And he took on that price with pride and conviction.

He showed us all how to fight for what we believe in.

Wikileaks just published a photo of him looking at the sky from the window of his plane. I found so much joy and hope in that photo. Sure, the war criminals, from the US to Israel, are still free, and so many around the world are still facing persecution, abuse and lawfare for daring to expose their excesses. But seeing Julian on his way to freedom makes me believe we are making progress. The movement for justice and accountability is now stronger, more united and determined than ever before.

Let's celebrate Julian's freedom, once he safely reaches Australian soil and reunites with his family. Let's rejoice the fact that once he gets there, he will be able to look up at the sky whenever he pleases.

But then, let's remember that the forces that took away his freedom in the first place, the forces that are still threatening our freedoms today, are not yet defeated. And let's continue with the hard work of fighting for what we believe in.



Srećko Horvat

Srećko Horvat is a philosopher from Croatia.

Srećko Horvat is a philosopher from Croatia. His latest books include "After the Apocalypse" and "Poetry from the Future". He features in Al Jazeera's documentary film "Europe's Forbidden Colony".

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EXPLAINER

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Iraq to NSA spying: The biggest revelations by Julian Assange's WikiLeaks

WikiLeaks unearthed documents ranging from conflicts within the US Democrats to toxic waste dumping in West Africa.

By [Al Jazeera Staff](#)

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On Monday, Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, was [released from prison](#) after fighting a legal battle spanning more than [14 years](#).

In 2006, Assange launched the whistleblower website WikiLeaks, a platform that allows users to anonymously submit secret, classified documents and videos. The most recent publication by the platform was in 2021.

The New York-based Nation magazine reported in January 2024 that Assange said WikiLeaks was no longer able to publish documents since potential whistleblowers were thwarted following his imprisonment, United States government surveillance and funding cuts.

During the years it functioned, the whistleblower platform published classified documents that had been never seen before – embarrassing governments, causing diplomatic standoffs and forcing policy changes.

Here is a look at [10 such leaks by the platform](#):

Report about toxic waste in the Ivory Coast

In 2009, WikiLeaks released the Minton Report that exposed how an internal report commissioned by Singapore-headquartered multinational company Trafigura concluded that its dumping of 540,000 litres of toxic waste, including harmful chemicals, in the Ivory Coast potentially led to “burns to the skin, eyes and lungs, vomiting, diarrhoea, loss of consciousness and death”.

The United Nations reported that [108,000 people](#) were affected by this dumping of waste.

Cablegate

In 2010, WikiLeaks started building out its Public Library of US Diplomacy (PLUSD), which is a growing collection of 3,326,538 US diplomatic cables between American diplomats posted to 274 consulates and embassies from 1966 to 2010, and their colleagues and bosses, including back home at the State Department.

In the first round of these leaks, 250,000 cables were released to the public – arguably the single largest such dump of confidential documents ever released.

The leaks included embarrassing details of how US diplomats perceived some of their foreign counterparts and nuggets of conversations where foreign officials, including many in high positions today, expressed frustrations with their own governments.

Afghanistan war files

In October 2010, the whistleblower site released 90,000 classified documents on the US [war in Afghanistan](#).

The United States launched the Afghanistan war in 2001, following the September 11 attacks that year, finally [withdrawing](#) its forces from the country in 2021.

The documents painted a picture of the war – and the US struggle against the Taliban – that was very different from the public posture of confidence adopted by Washington.

Iraq war files

Also in October 2010, WikiLeaks made public almost 400,000 secret US [files on the Iraq war](#).

In 2003, the US government under President George W Bush invaded Iraq.

The documents, from 2004 to 2009, showed that the civilian deaths in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were much higher than the numbers being reported. The leaks represented the largest security breaches of their kind in US military history.

Collateral murder – Iraq helicopter video

Among the most prominent of WikiLeaks revelations, in April 2010, was the release of [video footage](#) showing a US Apache helicopter attack which killed a dozen unarmed people, including two Reuters journalists, Namir Noor Eldeen and Saeed Chmagh, in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

The video, filmed from the chopper's cockpit shows a US missile strike and shooting on a square in a Baghdad neighbourhood in July 2007, according to WikiLeaks.

The Guantanamo files

In April 2011, [WikiLeaks released](#) secret documents spanning thousands of pages to select US and European media outlets.

These documents unearthed how the Geneva Conventions were being violated routinely in the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba. The documents, dating from 2002 to 2008 showed the abuse of 800 prisoners, some of them as young as 14.

At least 150 of these prisoners were found to be innocent Afghans or Pakistanis who were rounded up as part of frantic intelligence gathering and then imprisoned for years, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the so-called “war on terror”.

The Syria files

In July 2012, WikiLeaks began making public two million emails from 680 Syrian political figures and ministries working with the Bashar al-Assad regime between August 2006 to March 2012.

The emails unearthed the involvement of European companies in the surveillance and crackdown on Syrian civilians. One such company was Italian-government-owned Selex, which continued to expand its contract with the Syrian police, despite sanctions.

The emails also exposed how PR company Brown Lloyd James (BLJ) was paid to engineer a now-deleted Vogue article about al-Assad's wife Asma, according to WikiLeaks.

NSA spying

In 2015, the whistleblower website released details of illegal intercepts from the US electronic spy organisation, National Security Agency (NSA).

In a series of publications released from 2015 to 2017, WikiLeaks said the US, using the NSA, was also routinely spying on foreign officials from [Japan](#), the European Union, Israel, Germany and Brazil.

Additionally, the whistleblower said the NSA intercepted communications between former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

WikiLeaks said that the NSA was not only spying on international politicians but also civilians. In 2017, it tweeted that the NSA could hack Pakistan's mobile networks.

Sony Pictures hack

In 2015, WikiLeaks released at least 170,000 emails and more than 20,000 documents from a 2014 cyberattack on Sony Pictures Entertainment.

The leak was around the same time Sony was set to release the film about a fictional American plot to kill North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The emails also revealed that female celebrities such as Amy Adams and Jennifer Lawrence were paid less than their male counterparts in the 2013 crime comedy film American Hustle.

US Democratic Party emails leaked

In 2016, WikiLeaks exposed 19,252 emails and 8,034 attachments from the US Democratic Party national leadership.

The emails exposed that even though the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the party's principal committee, pledged impartiality in the [2016 presidential race](#), it appeared to act against Bernie Sanders in favour of Hillary Clinton.

The leaks resulted in the resignations of five top DNC officials including the chair, CFO, CEO, communications director and finance director. Clinton accused WikiLeaks and Assange of colluding with Russia to raise questions about the credibility of the US election process. She lost the 2016 presidential race to Donald Trump.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA