

Silencing Julian Assange

On March 28, Julian Assange, Editor of Wikileaks, had his internet disconnected by the Ecuadorian government, shutting down his communications with the outside world. US based journalist Elizabeth Lea Vos, Editor-in-Chief of Disobedient Media, who was one of the panellists at an online vigil held for Assange hours after the imposition of the ban, talks to Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, about the latest restrictions placed on Assange and its implications for press freedom around the world.

Why did the Ecuadorian government decide to shut down Julian Assange's internet access at the Ecuadorian embassy in London and not allow him any visitors?

The Ecuadorian government released a statement on why they had Julian Assange's embassy internet connection cut off. It said that Assange's recent behaviour on social media had "put at risk the good relations [Ecuador] maintains with the United Kingdom, with the other states of the European Union, and with other nations." Basically saying that Assange had broken an agreement not to interfere in the affairs of a foreign state.

Kim Dotcom [a friend of Assange] instantly surmised that Ecuador had bowed to pressure from Spain in response to Julian's ardent support for the Catalan people to have the right to self-determination. Wikileaks confirmed via Twitter that this was the issue in question, narrowing it down to one factually correct Tweet Assange had sent, comparing the arrest of the Catalan president with a historical arrest by the Gestapo, both at the behest of Spain. It further said that Ecuador had demanded "that he remove" the Tweet that I mentioned.

What are the implications of such a decision, especially in regards to press freedom?



Elizabeth Lea Vos

The implications of this decision are that the human rights of an arbitrarily confined political prisoner are now negotiable according to Ecuador. This is a horrific precedent to set and cannot be tolerated. Ecuador has stood up to international pressure for years in their protection of Assange, and to bow to pressure from Spain in this instance is very sad to see. It also demonstrates Assange's selflessness. He would have known very well that Ecuador is close to Spain, yet he spoke out continually in defence of the Catalan people without pause. This type of selflessness was also evident when Assange rescued Edward Snowden from Hong Kong, as mentioned by many on the panel.

Julian Assange's isolation represents not only an attack on his human rights, on his right to free

speech and to contact his loved ones, but is also a direct attack on his ability to function as a journalist. So Ecuador's decision is also an attack on press freedom. Assange is a citizen of that country and has been given diplomatic immunity. Ecuador demeans itself when it treats its citizens in this manner.

Julian is just one man, one journalist, yet we saw an incredible furor across the internet in response to the Ecuadorian government's decision. Why is that?

Assange represents and brings people

the truth about the operation of their governments. Everyone is harmed when that truth is silenced. He is also one of the strongest anti-establishment or anti-imperialist voices in existence. He has huge support from those outside the plutocratic class. Assange brings factual documents to light with unblemished accuracy, so anyone who prioritises truth above ideology supports him and his work. He inspires genuine support across partisan lines among everyone who loves truth. The vigil was a microcosm of that.

It had amazing participants such

as former CIA analyst and daily morning briefer for numerous US presidents, including President John F Kennedy, Ray McGovern, former CIA officer and whistleblower John Kiriakou, journalists Caitlin Johnstone, HA Goodman, Cassandra Fairbanks and many other incredibly talented and highly respected individuals. Together we spent 10 straight hours live-streaming the event which was one of the most positive experiences of my life. The love for Julian that everyone shared was incredible, which again illustrated that he truly brings out the best in people.

Can you tell us how he is doing from any communication that you may have had with him?

I haven't had any communications with Assange, and he doesn't have the means to communicate with anyone right now to my knowledge.

Cassandra Fairbanks, who had last visited him at the embassy on Thursday, let us know during the #ReconnectJulian vigil that he does have his lawyers with him, and that they are not considered "visitors". All other visitors are banned from contacting him—through phone calls or the internet.

She said he appeared to be in good spirits, seemed sharp and smart, as he usually does, and as he presents himself to the public.



Julian Assange on the balcony of the Ecuadorian embassy.

PHOTO: DANIEL LEAL-OLIVAS/AFP

What can journalists and others do to help support Julian Assange and also press freedom?

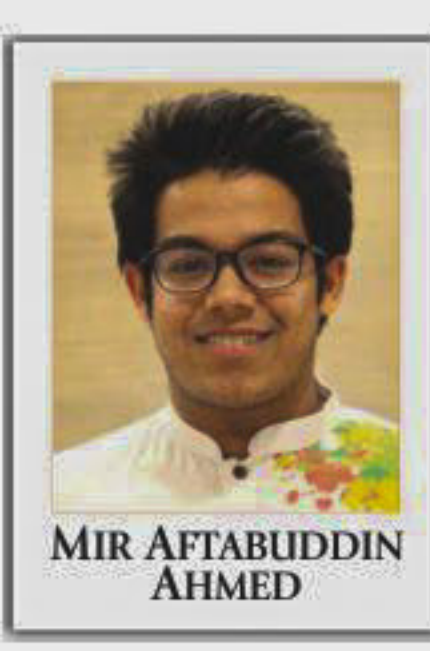
Journalists everywhere should do everything in their power to report on this latest development concerning Assange, especially those anti-establishment and truly independent journalists who would scarcely be able to function in the absence of the evidence Wikileaks provides for them and the rest of the world.

I know that an amazing group of activists are outside the embassy right now who are peacefully protesting the ban and showing their support for Assange, and I would encourage anyone who is in the UK to consider going to the embassy to literally stand with Assange during this difficult period. Another extremely powerful method of showing support is to help Wikileaks financially—for Assange's legal defence fund.

Sharing information about Assange and the information he has provided on social media across all platforms is just as important and effective, as we know that all legitimate news surrounding Assange and Wikileaks receives a massive amount of censorship. As Kim Dotcom said during the online vigil, everyone should speak directly to their friends and family to explain the situation that Assange is in and why it is so critical that he receives full support from the public.

Taking a step back to move forward

We mustn't lose the values that Bangladesh was founded upon



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

BA^{NGLA}DESH celebrated its 48th Independence Day recently, and today we stand proud to be able to call ourselves a sovereign and independent

nation. Yet, one questions whether we successfully practise the spirit of our liberation movement, imbued in the ideals of *Mujibism* as it was called. Socialism, secularism, nationalism and democracy are, in reality, big words which most have no idea about. And such is because, we have never been able to consistently practise what these values represent to the extent for them to be internalised. I am no legal scholar, so I have no ability to delve into these tenets in depth. But as citizens, we must speak about what is visible to the naked eye.

There is no doubt that we should be proud about Bangladesh's eligibility for graduation from least developed country status. But concerns remain. Can we truly say that our legal system is fair in nature? Is our media free of self-censorship or legal censorship? Does the opposition have relative political space to carry forth its basic activities? These are questions to which there is no simple answer. Yet these are real concerns with regard to the future of our development and the future of our democracy.

For various reasons, the current government has initiated a strange, yet widely circulated argument which

dents the very ideals of *Mujibism*. The development-versus-democracy argument is disappointing to say the least—and from what I have learnt by taking basic history courses at university, it is that development only becomes sustainable if it is acquiesced with a democratic agenda.

In economics, there is a concept called middle-income trap, whereby a country gets stuck at a certain level of economic progress, after attaining a certain level of national income. Why does this happen? Well primarily because the country loses its competitive edge and such may arise from both economic and non-economic factors, such as the rule of law in a country, the state of a free press and general price levels. Today, Bangladesh sees its largest opposition party in shatters. Simultaneously, the BNP is trying to recreate its image of being one of two major parties, which can form a government following the next election. BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia is in jail. Its acting chairperson remains in London. In this climate, one would think that permitting the BNP to hold a mass rally at Suhrawardy Udyan or a meeting in front of their office, would be of little to no concern for the state. Alas, we would be wrong to think such.

During the 1960s, Pakistan's erstwhile President Ayub Khan promoted the notion that his tenure represented the "golden years" of the country. He may have been right in a way—as nominal GDP growth rates during his term have indeed been the highest in Pakistan's history. Nevertheless, it is this very Awami League, which was burdened by the Ayub regime—that too for putting the

fundamental rights of Bengalis front and centre. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was jailed several times for voicing his constitutional rights and opinions—and the rest is history. Therefore, the Awami League knows very well what political oppression and curbing of political space truly mean in the context of development. It would be wise for the party which led us to independence on the basis of secularism,

It would be wise for the party which led us to independence on the basis of secularism, democracy, nationalism and socialism to practise these values.

democracy, nationalism and socialism to practise these values, especially at such a crucial time in our national journey. We do not want to get stuck in a middle-income trap, that too because of the unwise and unforeseen political decisions of two parties which have led Bangladesh in its most significant stages.

If the BNP is indeed allowed to host rallies or participate in some social gatherings to demand the release of their chairperson, it does not hurt the current government in

any way. In fact, it will show a refreshing brand of magnanimity of the ruling party, towards an opposition which is depleted by legal, external and internal problems. Staying as quiet as possible over Begum Zia's legal process is also something which seems like the best decision for Awami League policymakers. If this issue is brought up across the political aisle, then the people will undoubtedly question the sheer politicisation of a trial, that too of a three-time former prime minister who happens to be the only other plausible prime ministerial candidate, other than Sheikh Hasina. It creates distrust towards the legal system and in turn does have a social impact on matters of the court.

Given the state of our country today, there are certain lessons we need to take from our day-to-day politics. Development does not automatically equate to a democracy. Today, Bangladesh is on a path of rapid economic advancement, but the ideals of democracy that the country was founded upon seem to be considerably depleted. From engaging

with anti-liberation forces, to the modern-day acceptance of fringe right-wing elements in the country, our two main parties have taken the country so far from the secular society that we dreamed of, that attacks on the likes of Zafar Iqbal do not seem surprising anymore.

The inequality in wealth and political power is an issue to which we pay little to no attention, and this again is a sad reality which is camouflaged by the nominal successes of our economy. Nationalism has been used by our political actors as a mechanism to create ideological divides. And this brand of nationalism is not only harmful, but if looked at from a historical lens, has been categorically destructive for societies. In summary, we tend to forget that there is one Bangladesh where people of different income groups, ideals and values all live under the banner of an independent society. Some indicators of these include the division of Bangladesh into a pro-liberation versus anti-liberation camp, increasing post-graduation

unemployment levels, treatment of opposition groups as enemies and the fragile state of our banking sector.

If Bangladesh does not get its politics in order in the near future, the problems arising from the Rohingya crisis, attacks on progressive intellectuals, and the long-term worries regarding climate change will only add to the woes holding Bangladesh back from transition towards a sustainable and progressive economy. We do not want to be stuck in a middle-income trap in the immediate future or in the long run. And the responsibility undoubtedly falls towards the incumbent regime to portray a message of unity, in what is expected to be turbulent times in the near future. Let us not stray away from those values which made Bangladesh what it is today—a country which was established on the basis of the right to self-determination, freedom of speech and constitutional privileges.

Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a student of economics and international relations, University of Toronto.
Email: aftab.ahmed@mail.utoronto.ca

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(1878-1967)
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Revolt and terror pay a price. Order and law have a cost.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Eastern monks

6 Jousting need

11 Downloadable read

12 Korean or Thai

13 Sweating

15 Tax org.

16 Spike of film

17 Guy's friend

18 Pittsburgh pro

20 Really impress

21 Danson of "The Good Place"

22 Lingerie buys

23 Act the coquette

26 Leaves rolling in the aisles

27 Road division

28 African grazer

29 Braying beast

30 Bravery

34 Touch lightly

35 Greedy one

36 Campaign pro

37 King, for one

40 TV's DeGeneres

41 T size

42 River part

43 Door sign

DOWN

1 Clark's partner

2 Scrub, as a mission

3 Telegraphy pioneer

4 Fine, to NASA

5 Cook's pan

6 Brewery product

7 Cabinet wood

8 River from Lake Erie

9 Seed for rye

10 Infinite

14 Must have

19 To be, to Balzac

22 Unfocused sight

23 Beat, as wings

24 Louisiana explorer

25 Load, as software

26 Get cozy

28 Thug

30 Russia neighbour

31 Isolated

32 Ravine

33 Town leader

38 To date

39 Beans buy

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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