

Attack on WikiLeaks is an attack on independent journalism

Nozomi Hayase, Ph.D, is a US-based liberation psychologist and widely published journalist. She has authored two books—Imaginative Cognition and Wikileaks, the Global Fourth Estate: History Is Happening. In an exclusive (electronic) interview with Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, Hayase talks about WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange, the importance of his organisation, and the most recent developments in Assange’s US extradition case currently happening in the UK.

On October 21, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange appeared in the Westminster Magistrates’ Court in his fight against extradition to the US, where Judge Vanessa Baraitser denied Assange’s legal team’s request for a trial extension. Can you tell us about this move?

At the case management hearing, Assange’s lawyer Mark Summers requested a three-month delay of extradition hearing, and also asked for a preliminary hearing to hear arguments that the extradition request was prohibited, on the grounds that the prosecution and charges against him are politically motivated.

The extension request was made because Assange has been denied access to legal documents and computers in Belmarsh Prison and has not been able to adequately prepare for his defence. Also, evidence has emerged indicating that the CIA ordered a Spanish security firm to conduct surveillance inside the Ecuadorian Embassy while Assange was living there. They have spied on the women’s bathroom, and also privileged conversation between Assange and his lawyers. Now, a Spanish court has initiated a case and it requires more time for his defence team to incorporate the evidence in their argument.

The judge denied this routine extension request because she was just doing what was expected of her to be doing, which is to serve the interests of the US government. By looking at Assange’s case, I think by now, many people can clearly see how the British court system has lost its independence.

Her move is only shocking to those who still believe the legal system has something to do with justice. The UK judicial system has proven to have become an instrument used for political means. Assange’s case really exposes the truth that the US empire rules the world. This superpower can expand its judicial authority to bring charges against anyone it dislikes and physically capture and possibly even put someone to death. This is carried out under the guise of legal processes such as the government making an extradition request, for example, but in essence, it is just one state acting in a rogue and lawless manner.

The public has to be informed about what has been taking place in this kangaroo court, and should challenge this form of dictatorship by the US over the world. If we don’t stand up for Assange, our societies will quickly turn into despotism, or maybe we are already in it.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer said at the UN General Assembly that during Assange’s “prolonged arbitrary detention”, he has been exposed to what amounts to “psychological torture”. Given your psychology background, how do you assess this?

During his prolonged arbitrary detention inside the Ecuadorian Embassy, his basic human rights have been violated. He has been denied access to medical treatment, fresh air, sunlight and adequate space to exercise. Journalist John Pilger who visited Assange reported that the embassy had turned into a prison by proxy.

This already untenable situation got worse during the last year of his political asylum, when the President of Ecuador, Lenin Moreno, cut Assange’s communication to the outside world. Human Rights Watch’s Legal Counsel Dinah PoKempner at that time described Assange’s living conditions as more and more like solitary confinement.

Now, Assange is in London’s Belmarsh Prison, where he spends 23 hours a day in complete isolation. Those who know Assange’s situation, like Craig Murray, the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan, indicated that Assange is prohibited from fraternising with other inmates and visitors are not allowed to see him or when they see him, severe restrictions are placed.

He is being treated worse than a murderer. The serious effect of solitary confinement has been well recognised. It can have a destructive effect on a person’s personality and their psychological well-being that may be irreversible. This is why the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture designated solitary confinement as a form of torture and banned the use of prolonged solitary as a punishment or extortion technique.

Those who know what to look for can see clear signs of psychological torture in the



Nozomi Hayase PHOTO: COURTESY

way Assange presented himself in court last week. After the hearing, clinical psychologist Lissa Johnson also confirmed that Assange exhibited signs of psychological torture.

Being subjected to this psychological torture for such a long time has had serious consequences on Assange’s health. The anxiety and stress caused by long deprivation of liberty endangers his life. When Assange’s mother, Christine Assange, described how the state is slowly murdering her son, she wasn’t exaggerating. This is the truth of what has been, and continues to be, done to Assange.

Why has the western mainstream media remained silent about this? Doesn’t the prosecution of Assange and WikiLeaks for publishing secret documents open the door for the US government to go after other media outlets?

For those who are willing to see, it is very clear that this prosecution of Assange will inevitably lead to the end of national security reporting. Anyone who is engaged in real journalism should be scared, and recognise the fact if the US government can go after Assange and WikiLeaks for publishing classified documents, then they can be next.

You would think this would make them speak up for Assange, not necessarily to defend him as an individual, but at least out of their own self-interest of protecting themselves. But as we can see, there aren’t enough journalists coming forward to do that.

This apparent silence on Assange’s plight is a clear indication of where their allegiance lies. Those who remain silent are on the other side of truth and justice, and by not speaking up for Assange, they are betraying the public, which they have been doing for a long time. They might even feel they are immune from any of the things that are happening to Assange.

To me, Assange’s case brings a real test for journalists to show whether they can live up to their own principles and demonstrate their commitment to the idea of free press. We are now seeing how most journalists don’t have values and integrity and that’s why they have been able to keep their job within the media institutions in the first place.

Why is the US government seeking to prosecute Assange and WikiLeaks in this unprecedented manner?

The existing structure of power is based on what is often described as “an anonymity of corporate state” or “networks of conspiracy”. In this system, the force of control is kept hidden and maintained through secrecy and manipulation of public perception. At the core, this lucid power relies on deception created through the notion of liberal democracy. Media plays a critical role in sustaining this illusion of democracy so as to aid the ruling class to exert its power over the populace. So, freedom of speech became conditional—we can speak freely as long as we don’t challenge the existing power structure, with people not fully realising the restrictions being placed. What WikiLeaks did was shatter this illusion of democracy and expose reality, letting the public see how the world really works.

With WikiLeaks’ disclosures of government secrecy, the public’s trust in governments and institutions weakened. This has led to a global crisis of legitimacy, creating a spark for revolutions and protests

around the world. The establishment is fighting back because they are quickly losing their grip on people. They are now desperate to try to reclaim their authority by deploying the old tactics of character assassination and smearing. That is why they demonise Assange to discredit WikiLeaks and are trying to distract public attention from the actual documents that his organisation has released.

Do you believe this case is bigger than just Assange and WikiLeaks?

Yes, this is definitely bigger than just Assange as a person, and WikiLeaks as an organisation.

The prosecution of Assange is an attack on the freedom of the media. The Trump Administration bringing criminal charges against a foreign national who published information in the public interest outside of the US working with other media organisations, possibly under the Espionage Act, will set a perilous precedent for press freedom around the world. This will enable extra-territorial prosecution of media across the globe!

This will not only lead to the criminalisation of journalism, but also bring a tragic death of free speech everywhere. Mario Savio, a prominent figure of the free speech movement in the ‘60s, once said, “Freedom of speech represents the very dignity of what a human being is.” The US government’s prosecution of Assange is an assault on free speech and it concerns our fundamental right to be human.

Restriction of free expression through this kind of total control brings stagnation and rigidity of thoughts. This force of monotony destroys our creativity and homogenises unique cultures, forcing us all to adapt our identities to a single vision of elite control. Being denied our autonomy, we become automatons and cease to fully exist as a living being. That is what makes this a battle that involves not just Assange and WikiLeaks. It is not a fight that concerns only journalists and media organisations, but all of us. WikiLeaks has been on the frontline of this battle. It is crucial that we all, too, engage and participate in it.

Weighing the ‘why’ behind education

RUBAIYA MURSHED

Once faced a question from someone I would have never imagined it to come from. It was a humid afternoon and we had assembled under the large banyan tree on the green field behind the Arts building in Dhaka University. I was trying to teach some homeless children to recognise letters from the Bangla alphabet. Hamida, a shy ten-year-old girl, suddenly asked me, “Apu, eigula shikhe ki hobe?” (Apu, what is the use of learning this?) I told her that knowing the letters would help her learn to read. “No,” she said, shaking her head, “porashona-i korte hobe keno?” (Why do we need to study at all?)

I’d have thought that this would be a question I’d have no trouble answering. I was wrong. Sadly, this is one of the most basic questions concerning education today. I gave Hamida a half-hearted reply that day. I told her that we needed to study because it would be hard to support ourselves otherwise. But the answer felt wrong from the moment I uttered it out loud. I wished I’d given the little girl a more inspired answer, something that would give her a purpose to study. It took a lot of thinking for me to realise what I should have said. That little girl helped me more than I ever helped her, because her question helped me start my own search for my purpose. It got me to ask myself, “Why did I pursue an education?”

Trying to find the right answer to Hamida’s question made me realise that “purpose” is perhaps the most important element of an education. I’d never actually thought about the purpose of my own education. I studied because I had to, because I was told to. With the world around us growing more chaotic by the day, I strongly feel that it is no longer enough to just tell someone, a child especially, to pursue education. We have to be able to tell them why. And the answer to this “why” is what makes all the difference.

In Bangladesh, one of the most common sayings we grew up with in our childhood is “Lekhapora kore je, gari ghora chore shey” (those who study get to ride cars). This basically means that if we study, we will grow up and earn a lot of money with which we can buy cars, build big houses, live our lives in luxury. I believe this saying holds the root to all our problems. It is why our education system is messed up. It is why some parents opt for buying exam questions illegally, it is why some teachers give more time to coaching



PHOTO: RASHED SUMON

centres than their main jobs, it is why a person succumbs to bribery, it is why even the most “educated” people cannot say “no” to corruption, it is why our youngsters today do not hesitate to harm others. It is all because everyone is after something—either money or power or social status. Chasing after these things is deeply rooted in our existing system. We have formulated our perception of success based on this. A corrupt person with a high-salaried job is more valued in our society than an honest schoolteacher. Why? How has it come to this? I believe it’s because we have a flawed notion of the purpose of education.

Imagine if we’d grown up with our parents not telling us about their dream for us to become a BCS cadre with money and power, but instead inspiring us to do something with our lives to make the world a better place for humanity. If we’d grown up listening to sayings like “Lekhapora kore je, manusher upokar kore shey” or “Lekhapora kore je, bhalo kaaj kore shey” or “Lekhapora kore je, shoth manush hoi shey”—would our society be in the pathetic state that it is today? If our children are taught that the purpose of education is to build and hone one’s abilities so that they can make a positive difference in the world through their work, that it will make them honest and good human beings won’t they think twice before doing something bad, before hurting someone else?

Think about the students who have to struggle financially. There are countless girls and boys who, despite the struggles in our society and education system,

strive to make their situation better, to help their families out of poverty. They study with the goal of earning enough money someday

and not having to worry about buying food. If these children are given the chance to earn money through corrupt means, can we really blame them for not being able to turn away? What other alternative have we structured in our 48 years of independence that assures that a boy or girl from a poor family will get the opportunity they deserve for their ability and hard work? Education should mean that even a poor individual would be able to say “no” to wrongdoings. What excuse do their richer counterparts have?

In behavioural economics, there is a concept called “reference dependence”. It says that people measure gains and losses in terms of what they fix as their reference point. For example, if someone’s reference point is earning a twenty-five-thousand-taka salary, then earning less than that is a loss and earning more is a gain for that person. Let’s think of this in terms of the purpose of education. If someone’s reference point in their child pursuing an education is that it will get their child a job with a salary as high as that of the son of the neighbour next door, then anything other than that will mean their child’s failure to them. In the process, the

pressure, the negativity, the competition not only rob the child of happiness and destroy their love for learning, but also may drive them someday to consider taking wrong steps which they were “motivated” to consider right. Thus, no sleep is lost over a little corruption to get that high-salaried job. The reference point matters. Sometimes the wrong reference points can rob a society of the practice of ethics and morality altogether.

No matter how much we talk about quality education, it won’t matter unless we rethink our purpose, our “why”. If education and enlightenment do not mean the same thing, education slowly starts to lose its reliability as an influential tool in changing the world for the better. Think about it and you, like me, will realise that everything that is going wrong around us could have been different had we gotten our priorities straight—if our purpose had been pure, if it had been for the sake of humanity. So if we want to rescue our society from the current situation, we must fix our purpose of education first.

Rubaiya Murshed is a lecturer at the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka.

OPENS TODAY

TECHNOLOGY FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE in Action

4 Halls

20 Countries

300 Exhibitors

2000 Products

Visit & Witness global technology showcasing, productivity, quality, innovation and Product Diversification solutions closer to your doorsteps. Turnkey solutions available for new entrepreneurs.
Leathertech Bangladesh - Technology Partner in your growth story

ASK

LFMEAR

CIE

20 YEARS

Entry Free !!
Show Timings : 11am - 7pm

Contact :
01711340056 / 01678447820
info@asktradex.com

7th International Tradeshow on **LEATHER, MACHINERY, COMPONENTS, CHEMICALS & ACCESSORIES** for Leather, Footwear & Leathergoods Sector

LEATHERTECH
BANGLADESH

2019

31st Oct - 2 Nov. 2019 (Halls 1/2/2A/3/4)
International Convention City, Bashundhara.

Natural / Synthetic Leather, Footwear Machinery, CAD/CAM Systems, Shoe Materials / Components, Accessories, Chemicals, Dyes & Moulds and many more