

Diplomatic secrecy and imperialist crimes

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The release by WikiLeaks of the first of some quarter of a million classified US embassy cables from around the world has provoked expressions of outrage and demands for retribution from Washington and its allies.

US Attorney General Eric Holder reiterated on Monday that the Justice Department, aided by military intelligence, is conducting an “active, ongoing, criminal investigation,” presumably aimed at WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange.

Both Democratic and Republican politicians joined in the denunciations and threats. Some went so far as to call for prosecution for treason and execution of Army Private First Class Bradley Manning, charged with leaking to WikiLeaks the so-called “Collateral Murder” video depicting the 2007 massacre of Iraqi civilians by a US helicopter gunship.

Manning has been named as a “person of interest” in the subsequent leaks, which have included WikiLeaks’ posting last July of some 92,000 battlefield reports from Afghanistan documenting the killing over 20,000 Afghan civilians, and another 400,000 documents on Iraq in October, exposing thousands of unreported killings of civilians as well as the use and cover-up of torture.

Congressman Peter King (Republican, NY) called for WikiLeaks to be designated as a “Foreign Terrorist Organization,” a ruling that presumably would make its members subject to assassination by US intelligence or military death squads.

One of the more curious denunciations of WikiLeaks came from Senator Joseph Lieberman, the chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, who called the latest leak “an offense against our democracy and the principle of transparency,” because the organization had acted to “short circuit” the “democratic process” by deciding to make public documents that the government had deemed secret.

A similar position was put forward by a French minister speaking on behalf of the Élysée Palace. “We

are very supportive of the American administration in its efforts to avoid what not only damages countries’ authority and the quality of their services, but also endangers men and women who worked at the service of a country,” said the spokesman, François Baroin. “I always thought that a transparent society was a totalitarian society.”

This perverse attempt to equate state secrecy with freedom and democracy—and exposure of secrets to the public as antidemocratic and totalitarian—speaks volumes about the fraudulent character of “democracy” in the US and the rest of the capitalist world as well as the rabidly reactionary character of the attacks on WikiLeaks.

Delivering the main response to the posting of the new documents by WikiLeaks was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who also called for those responsible to be punished.

Clinton insisted that, while there have been past instances in which “official conduct was made public in the name of exposing wrongdoing, this is not one of those cases.” The leaked cables, she claimed, merely showed “that American diplomats are doing work we expect them to do” and “should make every one of us proud.”

Clearly, Clinton is banking on no one reading the cables and on a pliant media suppressing much of their content. Among the exposures that have come out so far are:

- A January 2010 cable describing a conversation between Gen. David Petraeus and the corrupt dictator of Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh in which a deal was hatched for the Yemeni regime to take responsibility for air strikes secretly being carried out by the US military. Just weeks earlier a US cruise missile had devastated a Yemeni hamlet, leaving 55 people dead, at least 41 of them women and children.
- State Department cables instructing US diplomats to gather personal information ranging from credit card

and frequent flyer account numbers to Internet passwords, work schedules and even DNA samples on officials of foreign governments and the United Nations.

- A cable describing how the US government worked to intimidate Germany into dropping arrest warrants against CIA agents involved in the kidnapping, detention and torture of an innocent German citizen.

- An October 2009 cable from the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa recognizing that the overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup. The cable documents Washington's support and cover-up for that coup and the repression that followed.

This comes from the posting of a small fraction of the documents to be released by WikiLeaks over the coming months. If US officials are demanding that the organization and its leaders be prosecuted—or worse—it is not because the exposure of the secret cables is disrupting “efforts to work with other countries to solve shared problems,” as Secretary Clinton claimed Monday. It is because they lay bare crimes that have been carried out by the US government which have real victims, from the murdered Yemeni civilians to the imprisoned, tortured and assassinated workers and peasants of Honduras.

It is in the interests of working people in the United States and all over the world that these secrets be laid bare.

In the media's coverage of the WikiLeaks, its massive exposure of classified material is almost invariably described as “unprecedented.” In reality, there is one historical precedent. It accompanied the conquest of state power by the Russian working class in October 1917.

One of the first acts of the new workers' government was to publish the secret treaties and diplomatic documents that had fallen into its hands. These treaties laid bare the predatory war aims of Britain, France and Tsarist Russia in World War I, which included the redrawing of national boundaries and re-division of the colonial world. In exposing them, Russia's new revolutionary workers' government sought to advance its program of an immediate armistice to end the slaughter.

Leon Trotsky, then People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, explained the principles underlying the

exposure of these state secrets. “Secret diplomacy,” he wrote, “is a necessary tool for a propertied minority, which is compelled to deceive the majority in order to subject it to its interests. Imperialism, with its dark plans of conquest and its robber alliances and deals, developed the system of secret diplomacy to the highest level. The struggle against imperialism, which is exhausting and destroying the peoples of Europe, is at the same time a struggle against capitalist diplomacy, which has cause enough to fear the light of day.”

Ninety-three years later, these words stand the test of time. Underlying the outraged denunciations of the Obama administration and the Republicans over WikiLeaks' undermining of US “national security” is the anger of a ruling financial aristocracy that must pursue its own predatory and reactionary interests in secret because they are opposed to the needs and aspirations of working people in the US and around the world.

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