

Julian Assange appoints new WikiLeaks' editor-in-chief

By Patrick O'Connor
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WikiLeaks announced last Wednesday that Julian Assange has appointed Icelandic investigative journalist Kristinn Hrafnsson as editor-in-chief, taking over one of his roles within the whistle-blowing media organisation.

Assange remains the site's publisher. WikiLeaks explained in a brief statement: "Due to the extraordinary circumstances where Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, has been held incommunicado (except for visits by his lawyers) for six months while arbitrarily detained in the Ecuadorian embassy, Mr. Assange has appointed Kristinn Hrafnsson Editor in Chief of WikiLeaks."

Since founding WikiLeaks in 2006, Assange has played a courageous and principled role in disseminating censored and suppressed information that has uncovered numerous crimes of governments and corporations around the world. For his exposures of the crimes of US imperialism—most notably the "collateral murder" Apache helicopter massacre in Iraq, the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs, and the "cablegate" release that documented Washington's global diplomatic intrigues—the journalist has been subjected to a vicious witchhunt.

Following baseless allegations of sexual assault in Sweden, Assange was threatened with a series of bogus criminal charges in the US. He claimed political asylum in 2012, when he entered the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. He has since been illegally subjected to arbitrary detention by British authorities, who have threatened his arrest, and, therefore, certain extradition to the US, if he sets foot outside the embassy. The siege was escalated in March, when the Ecuadorian government, capitulating to enormous pressure from Washington, cut off Assange's communication with the outside world and indicated it was preparing to evict him. This threat could still be enforced at any time.

Kristinn Hrafnsson's appointment is testament to WikiLeaks' invaluable contribution to genuine journalism. It also points to the base of support that Assange still retains among a group of principled journalists, who have refused to either denounce the embattled journalist or remain silent as

US government pressure mounts, as the majority of their colleagues within the global media establishment have done.

Hrafnsson is an acclaimed investigative journalist in Iceland, having worked for several newspapers as well as television news. He has led numerous exposés of high level corruption, including in the Icelandic banking sector, and was awarded the country's "journalist of the year" award in 2004, 2007 and 2010. Hrafnsson began working with WikiLeaks after Assange published documents detailing unscrupulous lending practices by Iceland's largest bank, amid the collapse of the Scandinavian country's financial system.

Hrafnsson travelled to Iraq in April 2010 to speak with the children of the civilians killed by American troops, captured in the leaked "collateral murder" video. He then served as WikiLeaks' spokesperson for several years, and was the only individual other than Assange authorised to receive sensitive information on behalf of WikiLeaks.

In 2014, he explained his perspective on the growth of state surveillance: "It is very strange that we live in times where the privacy of individuals is becoming practically non-existent, but the secrecy of those in power is increasing day by day. That is something that is totally against every principle and value of society, and of course it should be reversed. We need more transparency for those in power. We need more privacy for the powerless—the individual."

On accepting the editor-in-chief position last week, Hrafnsson said, "I condemn the treatment of Julian Assange that leads me to my new role, but I welcome the responsibility to secure the continuation of the important work based on WikiLeaks' ideals."

Despite the extraordinary campaign against Assange that has been waged by the US government—first under President Barack Obama and now Donald Trump—and its allies, WikiLeaks continues to publish important material that would otherwise have remained hidden from public view.

Last Friday, two days after Hrafnsson's appointment, WikiLeaks published a secret document from the International Chamber of Commerce's International Court

of Arbitration that related to a disputed commission payment for a \$3.6 billion arms deal between a state-owned French tank and weapons manufacturer and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The multi-billion-dollar deal involved the sale of 436 French tanks and other armoured vehicles (with German-manufactured motors) that were deployed to Yemen from 2015, and used to back the brutal government offensive against Houthi rebel forces. The ongoing US-backed Saudi-UAE assault on Yemen has led to tens of thousands of deaths and now threatens mass famine. WikiLeaks partnered the story with three European media outlets, *Der Spiegel* in Germany, Italy's *La Repubblica*, and the French *Mediapart*.

Der Spiegel explained: "It's unclear how many of those deaths were because of the tanks the Emiratis sent, but it is possible to reconstruct just how the machines found their way to the Arabian Peninsula. The whistleblowing platform WikiLeaks has published a rare document that pulls the curtain back on the international arms trade."

The exposé again underscores the slanderous character of the denunciations of WikiLeaks as an accomplice of the Russian government, or, as former CIA chief and current US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put it, a "non-state hostile intelligence service." Pompeo's rant—which he explicitly tied to a rejection of the First Amendment's protection of freedom of speech—continues to be echoed in the establishment press, by various contemptible figures, aptly characterised by independent journalist John Pilger as "Vichy journalists."

The latest is Frida Ghitis, a former CNN correspondent and producer, who last week published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* titled, "The image of Julian Assange grows darker by the day."

Ghitis recycles all the foul slanders against Assange that have been promoted by the Democratic Party-aligned political establishment in the US ever since Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election in November 2016. Ghitis declares: "Assange, we now know, was a key player in the Russian operation to undermine the 2016 U.S. presidential election—by actively helping Donald Trump to become president and undercutting Americans' trust in their democracy, the twin goals of Russian President Vladimir Putin's interference campaign."

How, precisely, does Ghitis know this? The op-ed piece presents not a shred of evidence. For Ghitis and her ilk, the say-so of the CIA and other state agencies is sufficient grounds for weighing in against a journalist who has been subjected to virtual house arrest for more than six years.

Assange, Ghitis gleefully tells her readers, is a "power-mad intriguer." Towards the end of her piece, the

columnist lets slip what constitutes Assange's real crime in her eyes, namely, allowing the American people to know the truth about the rigged Democratic Party nomination. "In July 2016, just before the Democratic Convention—the launch of the final stage of the Clinton campaign—WikiLeaks released DNC emails that suggested the party had favored Clinton over Sen. Bernie Sanders," she notes. "The timing roiled the convention, forced resignations among top Democratic officials, and unquestionably hurt Clinton's efforts to gain the support of Sanders's supporters."

How dare Assange or anyone else "hurt Clinton's efforts!" Ghitis has a long record of support for US imperialist operations, in the name of "humanitarian intervention"—in the Balkans, Africa, and Syria—and support for feminist identity politics, including Hillary Clinton's election campaign. ("The tests of the campaign show Clinton has the toughness to face a relentless assault and psychological gamesmanship of her prospective foes," she wrote fawningly in October 2016. "But there's more: Having a woman assume the presidency of the world's most powerful country for the first time could prove educational for men and inspirational for women in the Middle East and, indeed, across the globe.")

Working people around the world must reject the slurs and slanders aimed at destroying Assange, and continue to support WikiLeaks. The demand must continue to be raised that Julian Assange be afforded his basic democratic rights, and allowed to leave the Ecuadorian embassy, unharmed and unimpeded, and with a guarantee against extradition to the US.

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