

Ecuador arrests Swedish associate of Assange amid threat of crackdown

By Bill Van Auken
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In the wake of Ecuador's surrender of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to a British police snatch squad invited into its London embassy last Thursday to drag him into a waiting van, Ecuadorian authorities have jailed a Swedish software developer for an alleged plot to "destabilize" the regime of President Lenin Moreno.

Ola Bini, 36, was grabbed by Ecuadorian police as he was about to board a flight to Japan, where he was going for a vacation. A court ruled on Saturday that he be held in preventive detention, while his bank accounts were blocked.

Carlos Solia, the head of a group of Ecuadorian lawyers who have come to Bini's defense, said that his client did not understand why he had been arrested and asked "where is the evidence proving what I'm accused of?"

The original arrest order against Bini identified him as a Russian, not Swedish citizen. This mistake fits in with a witch-hunting campaign being waged by the Moreno government and its Interior Minister, María Paula Romo, claiming that the government has been the victim of a plot involving two unnamed "Russian hackers" allegedly working together with WikiLeaks, Bini and the country's former foreign minister, Ricardo Patiño.

The sole evidence against Bini is that he is a personal friend of Assange who had visited him at the London embassy several times between 2015 and this year. The attorney Solia denied that Bini had any connection whatsoever with WikiLeaks.

Solia described the judge's decision to jail Bini as "incomprehensible and surprising," adding that the court had "allowed itself to be influenced by non-judicial factors."

"They are trying to link him to some sort of possible espionage case without any proof or evidence," he told the Reuters news agency. "He is a personal friend of Julian Assange, he is not a member of WikiLeaks, and being friends with somebody is not a crime—neither is

having computers in your home."

Also coming to Bini's defense and visiting him at the jail where he was being held Monday in Quito was David Ochoa, the president of the Asociación de Software Libre de Ecuador. He insisted that Bini had no involvement in any cyber-attacks and that his arrest without any evidence of a crime represented a serious violation of due process.

Ochoa said that during the five years he has lived in Ecuador, Bini has worked in and provided support for internet privacy, security and cryptography. Employed at the Quito-based Center for Digital Autonomy, Bini maintained a blog which included no link or even reference to WikiLeaks.

"All of us should be afraid that there have been these violations of due process," Ochoa said outside the Quito jail.

The Center for Digital Autonomy issued a statement saying: "People working for open source and privacy should not be criminalized," and calling Bini a "world-renowned figure in the field of free software and defender of digital rights and privacy."

The arrest of Bini is part of a wider crackdown by the Moreno government in the wake of the handing over of Assange, who was granted asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London in 2012 because of the real and present danger to his life posed by Washington's attempts to punish him for revealing US war crimes and conspiracies by having him extradited to face charges including espionage, which carries the death penalty.

The government also issued arrest orders for the former foreign minister, Ricardo Patiño, whom it accused of traveling with Bini to Peru, Spain and Venezuela and collaborating with the alleged Russian hackers. Patiño, who was involved in granting Assange asylum, said he had never met Bini, much less traveled with him. "Nor do I know Russian hackers," he added. "The only Russians I know are: President Putin, the foreign minister Lavrov

and the Russian ambassador.”

The Ecuadorian authorities have sought the jailing of both Patiño and Virgilio Hernández, a former legislator. Both are involved in the calling of a demonstration today against the Moreno government and in defense of democratic rights and of Julian Assange. They are both leading figures in the opposition Movimiento Revolución Ciudadana (Revolutionary Citizens’ Movement), which is associated with ex-president Correa.

Correa is a bourgeois nationalist politician associated with the Latin American “Pink Tide,” which began in 1998 with the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. While granting asylum to Assange in 2012, he also began the attempt to silence him after WikiLeaks’ release of the emails and documents exposing the Democratic National Committee’s rigging of the 2016 primaries in favor of Hillary Clinton, and her own closed-door speeches pledging support for Wall Street.

Right-wing Ecuadorian politicians and native capitalist interests had pressed for Assange to be handed over to the British and the US in the hopes that his sacrificial offering would speed up talks for a free trade agreement with Washington.

Moreno, the vice president and hand-picked successor of Correa, signaled soon after taking office that he would betray Assange, whom he described as an “inherited problem” and a “stone in our shoe.” Within a week of his 2017 inauguration, Moreno met with Paul Manafort, the ex-chief of the Trump campaign, to discuss the possibility of trading the surrender of Assange for US financial aid.

On Sunday, just three days after ordering the doors of the Ecuadorian embassy in London thrown open to the British police, Moreno began a five-day visit to Washington, ostensibly for meetings with the World Bank—which offered a \$500 million loan—the Inter-American Development Bank and the Organization of American States. It is doubtless that the trip will also include talks with the Trump administration and the US military and intelligence apparatus, whose representatives have been invited back into Ecuador.

In an interview published Sunday by the British daily *Guardian*, Moreno justified his handing over of Assange with the claim that the Australian-born journalist had turned Ecuador’s embassy in London into “a center for spying,” a nonsensical charge that dovetails neatly with the charge made by US Secretary of State and former CIA director Mike Pompeo that WikiLeaks represents a “hostile non-state intelligence service” and making the case that Assange deserves to be tried for espionage, a

crime punishable by death in the US.

The Moreno government has also signed a bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for \$4.5 billion in credits in return for “structural adjustment” measures that have included the gutting of labor laws, the layoffs of over 10,000 public employees and sharp cuts to government services.

These measures have led to mass protests, a general strike and the plummeting of Moreno’s approval rating in recent polls.

This crisis has been sharply exacerbated by the anonymous release of documents establishing that Moreno is deeply implicated in a scheme that funneled millions in bribe money from a Chinese construction firm building a hydroelectric dam in Ecuador into an offshore shell company controlled by his family.

The government has blamed WikiLeaks for these revelations, on the sole evidence that the group’s Twitter account called attention to the story, which was already well known and the subject of investigations in Ecuador.

The geysers of mud unleashed by the Ecuadorian government against Assange—including a bizarre claim by the country’s ambassador in London that the journalist used his cat to spy on embassy employees—is aimed at both justifying its unlawful and despicable collaboration with US and British authorities in setting up his rendition, and distracting public attention from the clear evidence that the Ecuadorian president is a crook.

Moreno, who began his political career as a member of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR), a Castroite movement, is representative of the putrefaction of left nationalism throughout Latin America.

For millions of Ecuadorian workers, his betrayal of Assange and collaboration with US imperialism will be seen as an extension of domestic policies aimed at placing the full burden of Ecuador’s economic crisis on the backs of the working class. These measures are creating the conditions for a revolutionary explosion.

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