

Australian filmmaker James Ricketson demands release of Julian Assange

By Richard Phillips
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Australian documentary filmmaker James Ricketson spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* this week to denounce the arrest of Julian Assange as a dangerous attack on freedom of speech and basic democratic rights, and demand his immediate release.

In June 2017, Ricketson was arrested in Cambodia, where he was making a film about poverty-stricken families in Phnom Penh, and falsely accused of spying for unspecified “foreign states.” He was incarcerated in Cambodia’s notorious Prey Sar prison for 15 months, found guilty after a three-week trial in August 2018, and sentenced to six years’ jail.

Human Rights Watch Asia denounced the frame-up of Ricketson as a “politically manufactured farcical plot.” Abandoned by the Australian government for months, he was eventually released and returned to Australia on September 21, after being pardoned by Cambodian authorities.

Ricketson told the WSWS that he rejected the slanderous attacks on Assange by mainstream media journalists. “I’m mystified and disturbed by these crude personal attacks,” he said.

“Are these journalists not aware that this is a time-honoured technique used by those in power throughout history to de-personalise those whom they wish to exterminate? Are these journalists not aware of the role they are playing in preparing the public to accept whatever punishment the US sees fit to impose on Assange?”

“When I was in jail in Cambodia. I got a lot of support from the Australian public. Certainly a lot of people think that I’m a pain in the arse, but this was never an issue. People signed petitions for me to be released because I was being illegally detained in Cambodia on false charges and that was all that mattered. Personalities didn’t come into it.

“I don’t agree with the article by Peter Greste in Saturday’s *Sydney Morning Herald* insisting that Assange is not a journalist. This is a stupid claim and a red herring. I don’t even understand why people engage in that particular argument.

“I’m not a professional journalist. I happen to be a trained filmmaker who has practised some journalism. I’ve run five or six different blogs and have been exposing corruption in high places in the same way that journalists do. The ramifications of Julian receiving a long jail sentence or worse in the US can’t be reduced to semantics about whether he’s a journalist or not.

“American politicians have called for Assange’s assassination, in other words, an extra-judicial killing. This is serious. I fear it is the beginning of something that we are all going to look back on in two, three or five years’ time with great regret and say ‘Why didn’t we stand up and fight for Julian?’

“What I noticed, arriving back in Australia after 15 months in Prey Sar prison, was how radically the world had changed in relationship to journalism. Shortly after I arrived in Australia there was the murder of the *Washington Post* journalist in the Saudi embassy in Turkey. In the last couple of years since Trump became president, the rate of murders and incarcerations, and torture of journalists has increased dramatically.

“We’re living in dangerous times but if we let them get away with doing whatever they like with Julian, who will be next? People accuse some of us of being paranoid but I’d much rather err on the side of paranoia, in this instance, and be proven wrong, than say ‘Oh well, stuff Julian’ and do nothing to help. Who is going to be next? Will it be John Pilger?”

“The aim of my jailing in Cambodia was to intimidate Cambodian journalists and others into silence. It’s the same with Julian. Washington is trying

to intimidate other journalists and whistleblowers like Manning and Snowden. The US doesn't want any others like Assange coming along. They are determined to nip this in the bud.

“We face a huge battle but I hope that what has now happened to Julian will make people think about the value of investigative journalism and why it has to be protected.

“If I had a chance to speak with Julian now I'd say my heart goes out to you. I fully understand because of what I experienced in Cambodia on a smaller scale, what you face. I understand how difficult it is to lose your liberty, to be cut off from your family, friends, and unable to make choices about your life. Hang in there Julian. There's a lot of people out here who have got your back and we are working as hard as you can to get you out of there.”

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