

Julian Assange sentenced to 50 weeks in jail for bail violation in vindictive political ruling

By Robert Stevens
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WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was sentenced to 50 weeks imprisonment in a show trial Wednesday at Southwark Crown Court.

Assange has been incarcerated in London's Belmarsh prison, in conditions amounting to solitary confinement and without access to visitors, following his illegal seizure April 3 from the Ecuadorian embassy.

The sentence on bail charges is just two weeks short of the maximum one-year sentence he could have received, despite already being held in arbitrary detention by the British authorities since he was first detained in London in December 2010.

Assange took refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in June 2012 after having his fundamental democratic rights trampled on by the British legal system, fearing that he would be extradited to Sweden on trumped up allegations of sexual misconduct and from there be sent to the US.

Assange was found guilty last month of being in breach of the Bail Act. His treatment and sentencing by Judge Deborah Taylor yesterday was even more vindictive than that meted out by Judge Michael Snow two weeks ago, who had described Assange during a politically biased hearing as a "narcissist".

With Assange fearing for his life, after a series of senior US politicians said they favoured him being put to death, Snow said callously that Assange should "get over to the US" and "get on with your life."

Taylor was more venomous still. Assange had put himself "deliberately out of reach" in the embassy and, since 2012, had been "exploiting your privileged position to flout the law and advertise internationally your disdain for the law of this country."

Numerous legal experts have refuted such assertions, pointing out that the bail charge was effectively resolved years ago as Assange had forfeited bail money

in 2012. Moreover, he spent far more time involuntarily detained in the Ecuadorian embassy than the maximum sentence for bail violations.

Assange's legal team listed numerous mitigating factors. Mark Summers QC provided evidence that in 2012 Assange had been "gripped" by fears of rendition to the US due to WikiLeaks' exposure of war crimes carried out by US government. "As threats rained down on him from America, they overshadowed everything as far as he was concerned. They dominated his thoughts. They were not invented by him, they were gripping him throughout."

Summers referred to contemporaneous reports that "inside the US [Obama] administration that he could be kidnapped wherever he was, with or without the approval of the country in which he was residing and be brought to the US."

Were Assange extradited to Sweden, he would be at the mercy of a legal system with a "well documented and unfortunate history" of sending "people to states where they were at significant risk of ill treatment including torture and death."

Assange's health had seriously declined as a result of being confined in a small room in the Embassy, and he had been unable to access treatment for a number of medical issues. "He's been a resilient man, but this has taken its toll," Summers said.

Assange's defence told the court that the background to the bail case—including the granting of political asylum to Assange in 2012—was "unusual and different" than those usually confronted by the court and should only be dealt with as a minor "Category C" issue.

The prosecution demanded it be treated as an A1 case, meaning Assange must be sent to prison. Taylor rejected all the defence's arguments.

Assange submitted a letter apologising “unreservedly to those who consider that I have disrespected them by the way I pursued my case.” But, the letter continued, “I found myself struggling with terrifying circumstances for which neither I nor those from whom I sought advice could work out any remedy.”

Taylor ignored this plea and proceeded to read out a prepared sentence.

Assange’s bail breach, she claimed, was even more serious than the A1 category, which covers “a failure to surrender” and “represents a deliberate attempt to evade or delay justice.”

Assange’s claims that he took refuge in the Embassy in order to avoid “kidnap and torture” in the US were “unrealistic,” she said, despite full knowledge that Assange faces the start of a US extradition hearing tomorrow.

It took her approximately two minutes to reject all claims of mitigation—almost as if she hadn’t listened to a word of what the defence said! Basic precepts of due process and international law were trampled underfoot, as Taylor dismissed the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruling in 2015 that Assange was arbitrarily detained by Britain and that he should be freed and compensated for his unlawful captivity.

“As far as the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention opinion is concerned, this is not binding on this court,” she declared, asserting the UN’s ruling was “underpinned by misconceptions of fact and law.”

No lie was too brazen. Prior to sentencing, Taylor falsely claimed Assange had faced extradition to Sweden over “charges” of sexual abuse and one of rape. Assange interrupted her, pointing out, “I wasn’t charged” and Taylor was forced to backtrack.

This didn’t prevent her continuing to rail against Assange for “continued residence in the Embassy” that “necessitated a concentration of resources, and expenditure of £16 million of taxpayers’ money...”

Around half an hour after proceedings began, Taylor sentenced Assange to 50 weeks in prison—to the obvious approval of most of the 45 members of the assembled press. In contrast, members of the public who had gained entry were outraged. As Assange was led away, he turned to acknowledge his supporters in the gallery. There was a spontaneous eruption of “Free Julian Assange!” followed by “Shame on You!” as the judge exited the courtroom.

Outside the court, WikiLeaks editor in chief Kristinn Hrafnsson condemned the sentence as an “outrage” that was “vindictive in nature... It doesn’t give us a lot of faith in the UK justice system for the fight ahead.”

Asked by a WSWs reporter on the court’s dismissal of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruling that Assange is a political refugee arbitrarily detained by the UK, Hrafnsson replied, “It’s outrageous... Have we seen the end of all decency in this world?”

WikiLeaks tweeted, “Julian Assange’s sentence is as shocking as it is vindictive. We have grave concerns as to whether he will receive a fair extradition hearing in the UK.”

A second tweet explained that “Julian Assange’s sentence, for seeking and receiving asylum, is twice as much as the sentencing guidelines.” It contrasted Assange’s treatment with Jack Shepherd, who fled to Romania in 2018 to avoid manslaughter charges and yet was “only sentenced to six months for failing to appear in court.”

Taylor’s sentence is part of ongoing efforts to ensure that Assange is extradited to the US, where he faces the savage wrath of the US ruling elite whose war crimes WikiLeaks courageously exposed. The sentence means that he will likely be imprisoned throughout legal proceedings on the US warrant. Hrafnsson said that challenging the US extradition “will be a question of life and death for Mr Assange.”

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