

Betraying my principles is “a much worse prison than the government can construct”

After nearly two months in jail, Chelsea Manning submits powerful appeal for release

By Niles Niemuth
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Whistleblower and political prisoner Chelsea Manning submitted an appeal Monday to the federal court in the Eastern District of Virginia asking for her release from jail.

Manning has been held in the Alexandria City Jail since March 8. She was detained for contempt of court after she refused to testify before a grand jury impaneled to bring frame-up charges against WikiLeaks publisher and journalist Julian Assange.

“She is convinced that to cooperate with this grand jury would be a betrayal of her beliefs about the grand jury process, and this grand jury process in particular,” Manning’s attorneys told the court in a written statement on Monday. “She is prepared to suffer the consequences for her beliefs, and it should surprise nobody to find that she has the courage of her convictions.”

Manning’s eight-page statement is a powerful declaration of political principles. She is being targeted by the Trump administration as part of a nearly decade-long vendetta against her and Assange for exposing the US government’s war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“After two months of confinement, and using every legal mechanism available so far, I can—without any hesitation—state that nothing that will convince me to testify before this or any other grand jury for that matter,” Manning declared. “With each passing day my disappointment and frustration grow, but so too do my commitments to doing the right thing and continuing to refuse to submit.”

“The idea I hold the keys to my own cell is an absurd

one, as I face the prospect of suffering either way due to this unnecessary and punitive subpoena: I can either go to jail or betray my principles,” Manning stated. “The latter exists as a much worse prison than the government can construct.”

Manning served seven years of a 35-year sentence in a military prison after she was convicted of leaking classified and sensitive documents exposing US war crimes to WikiLeaks in 2010. Most notably, she released the “Collateral Murder” video, which shows the 2007 attack by US Apache helicopter gunships in Baghdad that killed two Reuters journalists and at least a dozen Iraqis.

While Manning has not been charged or convicted of any new crime, she has been treated as a convict, held in the solitary confinement for her first 28 days in jail. UN Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez, has declared that prolonged isolation amounts to torture when used as a punishment, in pre-trial detention, indefinitely or when the person already suffers from a mental disability.

As her attorneys have noted in a previous appeal for her release, Manning indicates that she has already given the government everything she knows about her interactions with WikiLeaks and Assange during trial in 2013 and that any testimony before the grand jury would be duplicative. The real purpose of the government’s efforts to force her to testify before the grand jury is to undermine her testimony as a defense witness for Assange.

Manning’s statement describes the terrible impact of the enforced isolation on her mental health, which has

been compounded by the year of solitary confinement she suffered when she was imprisoned by the Obama administration.

“I experienced difficulty keeping attention on anything, sometimes referred to as a ‘dissociative stupor.’ Thinking and concentrating get harder. Anxiety, frustration with minor things, irritation, and a spiraling inability to tolerate each symptom take hold,” she explains. “At one point I started feeling ill during a short visit in a non-contact visit booth while struggling to have even a normal conversation. After weeks of under-stimulation, I became nauseated with vertigo and vomited on the floor, ending my visit prematurely.”

Making matters worse, Manning also noted that she has been denied access to necessary medical attention for a recent gender reassignment surgery, putting her at risk for permanent injury or a potentially deadly infection. She has also been denied regular access to sunlight, must keep her mind busy with puzzles without access to good literature or friends, and has gained 20 pounds since March due to poor nutrition.

Manning is taking a courageous stand to defend Assange, who was snatched from the Ecuadorian embassy in London on April 11 by British police after his asylum was illegally cancelled by the government of Lenin Moreno.

Assange was sentenced to 50 weeks in prison for bail jumping over spurious sexual assault allegations and now faces rendition to the United State. He faces an initial charge of attempted computer hacking that carries five years. He is accused of seeking to assist Manning to crack a password so that she could conceal her identity while using military computer networks.

Once in the United States, it is certain that the Justice Department will unseal further charges against Assange, including under the Espionage Act, which opens him up to the possibility of the death penalty.

“I believe this grand jury seeks to undermine the integrity of public discourse with the aim of punishing those who expose any serious, ongoing, and systemic abuses of power by this government, as well as the rest of the international community,” Manning explained.

“Therefore, participating in this fishing expedition—which potentially exposes other innocent people to the grand jury process—would constitute an unjustifiable and unethical action. Now, after sustaining serious psychological injury from my

current confinement, I don’t wish to expose any other person to the trauma and exhaustion of civil contempt or other forms of prison or coercion.”

Manning noted her appreciation for the dozens to hundreds of daily letters of support, which provide her with “warmth and strength” from “colleagues, educators, lawyers, diplomats, activists, factory workers, veterans, journalists, union leaders, store clerks, gardeners, chefs, airplane pilots, and politicians...”

While Manning and Assange are cruelly pursued by the US government for their efforts to expose the truth, they have won the support and admiration of millions of workers and others around the world who will fight for their freedom.

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