



## THE FATE OF JULIAN ASSANGE



Australian hacktivist Julian Assange stayed [2,487 days](#) in Ecuador's London embassy. The ordeal began in August 2012 when former Ecuadorian socialist President Rafael Correa granted him asylum as a way to build [his own global stature](#). Assange, the founder of whistleblowing site Wikileaks, claimed that sexual-assault charges pressed against him in Sweden were an excuse to extradite him to the United States, where he would be tried for his leaks of government information. Seven years later, the Ecuadorian government had spent over [\\$6.5 million](#) to house Assange and the United Kingdom over [\\$20 million](#) to surveil him.

Two months after his arrival, Assange [gave](#) a press conference from the embassy's balcony and asked then US President Barack Obama to stop the attacks against Wikileaks.

In June 2014, the hacker announced he would soon leave the embassy, but the British police warned him that they would arrest him as soon as he stepped outside. Assange asked France for asylum in 2015 to no avail. In November 2016, he agreed to be [interrogated](#) by the Swedish prosecutors inside the embassy. In the meantime, the watchdog group Focus Ecuador [reported](#) that Ecuador's intelligence service Senain had mounted an operation to spy Julian Assange and prevent information leaks.

The 2017 presidential election in Ecuador [became a threat](#) to his embassy stay. The main opponent to Correa's regime, Guillermo Lasso, promised that he would ask Assange to leave, and the current President Lenín Moreno said he would protect Assange only if he did not interfere in political affairs.

Since the hacker refused to comply, Moreno [devoted](#) considerable efforts to resolve the case, including a written agreement to give him the Ecuadorian citizenship in exchange for his silence. Assange kept commenting on sensitive political issues, such as the [Catalonia independence crisis](#), so the embassy blocked his communication channels and took away his electronic devices.

Supporters of Assange then launched an online [petition](#) in March 2018 to give Assange back his internet access. After they gathered 100,000 signatures in October, the Ecuadorian government partially restored his communications, but the hacker's presence continued to be a burden. He [was disrespectful](#) toward staff, hacked embassy computers, and vandalized the installations.

### **What is Assange accused of, and do the charges stand?**

**In Sweden:** Two Swedish women [accused](#) Assange of forcing them to have unprotected sex with him. In 2017, Sweden prosecutors dropped the charges and withdrew their arrest warrant, citing a lack of resources. However, after Assange's detention, they are considering reopening the case.

**In England:** The British courts have consistently [ruled](#) in favor of Sweden's extradition request since 2011. However, Assange violated the terms of his bail by refusing to appear in court and instead holed himself up in the Ecuadorian embassy. On April 11, a judge found him [guilty](#) of this transgression, and on May 1 he was [sentenced](#) to 50 weeks in prison.

**In the United States:** Soon after Assange's arrest, the US Justice Department [unsealed](#) a March 2018 grand jury indictment for [computer-hacking conspiracy](#) with a maximum penalty of five years in prison and requested his extradition. If US prosecutors eventually press espionage charges, he could even face the [death penalty](#). The British courts must decide whether to grant the extradition request. His hearing is set for May 2.

### **What ultimately led Lenín to expel Assange?**

President Lenín Moreno claims that Assange violated the conditions of his asylum.

1. Interference in political affairs: Assange vocally sided in international conflicts and weaponized leaks; the latest instance was [the release](#) of confidential Vatican documents in January 2019.
2. Disrespectful behavior: Assange operated forbidden electronic devices, [was violent](#) with the staff, and hacked the embassy's computers.
3. Hacking against the Ecuadorian president: Moreno [accused](#) WikiLeaks and Julian Assange of spreading his private photos, videos, and conversations.
4. Overstaying his welcome: arguing that Ecuadorian taxpayers were bearing the costs of Assange's seven-year stay and that isolation was a health hazard, Moreno [worked](#) a deal with the involved nations.

---

### **The significance for Ecuadorian politics**

1. This event amounts to a major [break](#) with the previous Correa administration on foreign policy. Assange had become a symbol of anti-US sentiment for the Ecuadorian left.
2. Moreno and Ecuador might face backlash [from human-rights](#) organizations if the UK approves the extradition to the United States, where Assange could face life imprisonment and even the death penalty.
3. Assange's arrest [coincides](#) with a scandal calling into question Moreno's image as an anti-corruption advocate. Controversial documents dubbed "the INA papers" link Moreno and his family to dubious offshore companies. It paints Ecuador as a nation that favors censorship rather than transparency and human rights.
4. President Moreno was Correa's vice-president for six years and he successfully ran for president under the same political banner, Alianza PAIS, in 2017. However, Moreno has distanced himself from the previous administration, often openly clashing with Correa and his supporters. Assange's eviction [is also a political response](#) to Correismo's efforts [to destabilize](#) the Moreno administration. The latter claimed that two Russian agents and a WikiLeaks collaborator had traveled to Ecuador to cooperate with Correa's former Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño. Ecuadorian authorities interrogated WikiLeaks member Ola Bini, but Patiño managed to [leave the country](#) before they pressed charges against him.

### **Correistas opposed the move**

- Former President Rafael Correa [denounced](#) Moreno's decision to allow UK police into the embassy to arrest Assange as a crime, a betrayal, and an infringement on the nation's sovereignty.
- Correa's former Foreign Ministers Patiño and Guillaume Long [criticized](#) the move, arguing that it violated international law.
- The governments of Russia, Venezuela, and Bolivia also [opposed](#) the way in which Ecuador handed Assange over to the British police. They believe that Moreno's decision was inhumane.

### **To what extent is Assange involved with Russian intelligence actors?**

According to [the Mueller Report \(volume one, p. 42 and 46\)](#) on Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, Wikileaks directly discussed the emails that compromised Hillary Clinton and her Campaign Chair John Podesta with Russia's military intelligence agency (GRU). The Special Counsel said it identified messages and documents coming from GRU's personas Guccifer 2.0 and DCLeaks to Wikileaks.

Although the direct participation of Julian Assange in the email leaks remains unclear, the Mueller Report [revealed](#) that he communicated directly with the GRU while he had internet access in the Ecuadorian embassy.

---

### What comes next?

Julian Assange will be sentenced to up to 12 months in jail for his bail violations and has yet to face the extradition hearing on May 2. A UK court will decide whether the offense Assange is accused of in the United States would be also a crime in the United Kingdom.

Another legal impediment is that the United Kingdom does not allow extradition for crimes that carry capital punishment in the destination country. That is why US prosecutors have not brought espionage accusations and instead accused Assange of a lesser offense. According to English Extradition Lawyer [Ben Keith](#), "The most likely outcome is that he will be extracted to the United States." However, the process could [take years](#) in different forums. If Sweden decides to reopen the sexual-assault case, Assange will face another extradition request.

### What is the impact for global press freedom?

Assange's arrest has rekindled the debate on the limits of press freedom and the role of the United States in international affairs.

For instance, the London-based Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ), which has collaborated with WikiLeaks before, [issued a statement](#) declaring that any charges related to Assange's work or attempts to extradite him to the United States are an attack against all journalists.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) also [argued](#) that prosecution against Julian Assange in the United States for Wikileaks' publications would be unconstitutional and would open the door to similar criminal investigations against controversial publishers. It would also set a dangerous precedent for American journalists who report on international issues by flouting foreign secrecy laws.

Security Analyst Michael Weiss, on the other hand, [believes](#) that "Julian Assange got what he deserved" and said he must face the British and US justice systems. Several progressive commentators and Democratic politicians [applauded](#) his arrest. The *Washington Post* even wrote [an editorial](#) arguing that Assange is not a real journalist and "is long overdue for personal accountability."

Assange is not alone and has received support from people across the political spectrum. By 2017, WikiLeaks received over [4,000 bitcoins](#) (around \$22 million at the current exchange rate) and [9.6 bitcoins](#) (around \$50,000) since his arrest.

### Previous Econ Americas Coverage

["Petitioners Demand End to Julian Assange's Blockade,"](#) Econ Americas, by Paz Gómez

["Ecuador's Election Spells Likely Eviction for Julian Assange,"](#) Econ Americas, by Paz Gómez

**Author:** Paz Gómez

**Editor:** Daniel Duarte