

Indictment against Julian Assange

"Then we lose our Democracy"

The new US administration could turn around the fate of the Wikileaks founder imprisoned in the UK since 2019.

Ahead of Angela Merkel's trip to the USA, supporters hope for an end to the criminal proceedings.

By Okan Bellikli

12.07.2021, 9.00 pm

It's a birthday, so there are balloons. Around 20 of them rise into the air in front of the Brandenburg Gate; red, yellow, green. The birthday boy is in London, in Belmarsh maximum security prison. They were released by visitors to a rally for the man who has been locked up there for two years: Julian Assange. He turns 50 on this day, which is why people have gathered in many places around the world to draw attention to his fate. It is already the third birthday that the Wikileaks founder has spent behind bars.

Unjustly, as his supporters think. And now more and more voices in Germany sharply criticise the way Assange is being dealt with.

including numerous members of the Bundestag.

At the beginning of 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Nils Melzer, drew public attention to what he called an international smear campaign against Assange.

Since then, at the latest, there have been groups all over the world organising regular actions in solidarity with Assange. Melzer speaks of "one of the biggest judicial scandals of all times".

Assange is to be made "a precedent - to deter anyone who wants to expose the dirty secrets of the powerful", he writes in a book published in April.

A court denied the US extradition request in early 2020, where Assange faces 175 years in prison, for the time being.

Last week, however, the appeal of the American prosecutors was allowed.

It is still unclear when the corresponding trial will be held. What is at stake?

The disclosure platform had published documents which, among other things, prove American war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. The SPIEGEL also published material on the subject. Shortly afterwards, Swedish authorities made questionable accusations of rape against Assange, and he was granted asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London for years.

After a change of government in Ecuador and political pressure from the USA, the Australian-born was handed over to the British police and judiciary after almost 7 years inside the building. Critics speak of a show trial and an attack on press freedom.

One of the supporters of his release is Marie Wasilewski. "I was shocked when I saw him being led out of the Ecuadorian embassy," says the woman who has since been active in the German-language "Free Assange" network. The movement is international, alongside well-known whistleblowers Edward Snowden and Daniel Ellsberg, celebrities such as the scientist Noah Chomsky, the artist Ai Weiwei and Pink Floyd singer Roger Waters.

According to Wasilewski, there are active groups in around 20 German cities; before the corona-related restrictions, there were around 35.

There are actions in many cities

The network is calling on people to write a letter or an email to US

Secretary of Justice Merrick Garland and ask him to drop the charges against Assange.

In addition, people can contact members of parliament, media or human rights organisations, says Wasilewski: "If we as a population do nothing, then we lose our democracy." The supporters regularly organise vigils, distribute flyers to raise awareness or organise readings with excerpts from Nils Melzer's book.

A website lists all the actions in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, provides background information and print templates for posters and the like. Lyrics can also be found online, such as a modified version of "thoughts are free" with the title "Release Julian at last!"

The local groups have not reached many people yet. The 200 or so people at the birthday vigil in Berlin were a very large number, says Wasilewski, who works in a university.

Wasilewski sees the reason for the low level of attention in one place in particular: "A lot of media should come to terms with their complicity in the fate of Julian Assange". They had participated in the accusations, they had participated in the "tall tale" of the authorities in Sweden, because it made good headlines.

Some media houses therefore were holding back because of this.

"If it gets to the point where we in the West put our journalists into jail for exposing inconvenient truths then that will be the end of freedom of the press," says the activist.

Dozens of human rights and media organisations share this view and are therefore also speak up against Assange's extradition to the USA - including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders.

The German government, on the other hand, has been cautious about the proceedings. Government spokesman Steffen Seibert said on Monday that the German government was confident that Assange would be tried in Britain according to the rule of law. Activist Wasilewski: "This is a bit like: We believe in the Easter Bunny."

Other well-known political figures are more active.

At the beginning of February 2020, former Federal Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) and ex-Minister of the Interior Gerhart Baum (FDP) together with the Left-wing Member of the Bundestag Sevim Dağdelen and the investigative journalist Günter Wallraff stepped into the limelight on the occasion of their campaign "Help Assange" at the Federal Press Conference. The group published a full-page advertisement in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper as well as a petition, which has since been signed by more than 45,000 people. Ex-Justice Minister Katarina Barley (SPD) is one of them, former Federal Minister of Justice Herta Däubler-Gmelin (SPD) and Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger (FDP) as well as the writers Elfriede Jelinek, Eva Menasse and the writers Navid Kermani and Daniel Kehlmann.

Shortly before the trip of Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) to the USA on Wednesday, investigative journalist Wallraff has now spoken out again.

Together with 119 well-known personalities, he is asking Merkel to help "to ensure that Julian Assange does not have to remain in detention, where he is systematically destroyed by prolonged isolation".

In addition to celebrities such as the journalist Alice Schwarzer, politicians from major parties (excluding the AfD and the CSU), including Green Party leader Robert Habeck, SPD chairman Norbert Walter-Borjans, Vice President of the German Bundestag Wolfgang Kubicki (FDP) and NRW State Secretary for Integration Serap Güler (CDU).

Wallraff says: "What was systematically done here, is what in the GDR during the Cold War was called 'decomposition'.

Critics of the regime were socially murdered with the help of smear campaigns, were declared a non-person, a monster.

In this case, the US secret services have been doing this for years to one person with a propaganda strategy."

The left-wing politician Dağdelen was the first representative of the Bundestag to visit Assange in the London embassy of Ecuador in 2012. Shortly before a visit in 2019, the Wikileaks man was arrested.

"It is important that the powerful do not get away with silencing someone and burying them alive in prison just because he wrote the truth and revealed war crimes committed by the US, torture and corruption scandals," says the MP.

He deserves a prize for that, not a punishment.

If Angela Merkel were to lobby President Joe Biden for Assange's release, it would be a great humanitarian gesture, Dağdelen said. She hoped that "the government recognises that the treatment of the dissident of the 21st century is a disgrace for the Western community of values. For where is the many times cited commitment for human rights, for freedom of opinion and freedom of the press when it comes to a dissident of the West whose life is at stake?"

German original source:

<https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/anlage-gegen-julian-assange-dann-verlieren-wir-unsere-demokratie-a-261b628a-ec1c-4921-8dd4-465e96daefdc>