

Sweden, Assange and the USA

It is almost a certainty that the editor of WikiLeaks will be turned over to the United States if he is extradited to Sweden

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Sweden has requested the extradition of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange from the United Kingdom, and legal proceedings are expected to commence at the start of the new year. Due to the extraordinary behaviour of the prosecutor in charge of the case, questions have been raised about the prospects of Assange receiving impartial justice in Sweden.[1]

Far more serious is the risk that he might in turn be extradited from Sweden to the United States, where he has been the target of hysterical accusations and violent threats in a lynch-mob atmosphere that has been stirred up by the government, mass media and political demagogues.

Thus, a key issue to be considered in the U.K. extradition process is whether or not Mr. Assange's civil and legal rights will be ensured if, as seems certain, the United States requests/demands his extradition from Sweden in the event he is returned to that country.

This is an especially vital issue in the case of Sweden, in that it has long enjoyed a reputation as a paragon of virtue in such matters. It has also been regarded as a neutral country that has maintained its independence and integrity in a world dominated by the U.S. superpower.

To cite one of many similar examples: In his 2005 Nobel Prize speech, Harold Pinter excoriated the U.S. empire and noted that it "now occupies 702 military installations throughout the world in 132 countries, with the honourable exception of Sweden, of course".

Alas, he was misinformed about the honourable exceptionalism of Sweden. Around the same time that the mortally ill Pinter was video-recording his speech, an official of its Defence Ministry correctly observed that Sweden was already so deeply involved in USA/NATO that no one would be able to tell the difference if it were to formally become a member. A parallel process has taken place with regard to the Swedish government's attitude toward international law and the care of foreign citizens under its presumptive protection.

Vassal-state

The process by which Sweden has been transformed, from a comparatively independent nation with a strong peace tradition to a vassal-state within the U.S. empire, is the subject of *From Neutrality to NATO*, a review of the various large and small steps involved.[2] The following excerpts illustrate the transformation that has taken place:

20 August 1998. Swedish Public Television interrupts a prime-time programme for an important announcement, live from the U.S. White House: President Clinton explains why he feels compelled to bomb “terrorists” in Afghanistan and Sudan, two nations that have never dropped so much as a leaflet on the United States.

The following day, Foreign Minister Lena Hjelm-Wallin states her belief that the attacks — crystal clear violations of international law — were “unavoidable”, but that she hopes other countries do not indulge in similar behaviour because “that would be taking the law into their own hands” (p.23).

7 October 2001. Assisted by the United Kingdom, the United States launches a massive assault on Afghanistan. The aggression is justified by reference to the U.N. Charter’s Article 51 which, claims the Bush II administration, entitles the U.S. to respond in this way to the September 11 terror attacks in New York city and Washington D.C.

It is a patently false argument (see “Article 51 and Wars of Aggression”). But numerous so-called legal experts and political leaders choose to accept it as a valid. Among the latter is Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson who states that the twisted rationale is a welcome “further development of international law” (p. 31).



Photo: Wikimedia

Afghan children victimized by what Prime Minister Persson proclaimed to be a “further development of international law”.

17 December 2001. Submitting to pressure from the United States, the Social Democratic government of Göran Persson abruptly revokes the political refugee status of two Egyptians accused by the U.S. of terrorism. Ahmed Agiza and Mohammed al-Zari, are delivered to a C.I.A. kidnap squad waiting at a Stockholm airport and then transported to Egypt where they are subjected to torture and other abuses. Sweden thus becomes the first country to collaborate with the U.S. programme of “extraordinary rendition” (see “The superpower issues a decree” on p. 31). It is a scandal with several dimensions, including....

- The removal of the political refugees is implemented without due process of law. It is rationalized on the basis of blindly accepted “evidence” supplied by the C.I.A. which the victims are not permitted to challenge or even to learn. According to Kjell Jönsson, attorney for one of the victims, this and other cases indicate that, “There is a wide-open highway from U.S. assessments to the Swedish government.”
- The decision is made by a handful of government officials and implemented within hours so that the victims’ attorneys will be unable to file appeals with the European Court of Justice, which almost certainly would have ruled against the government.
- The decision is made in response to a U.S. threat to impose a trade embargo on Sweden and possibly on the European Union if the two Egyptians are not surrendered to their torturers....

[Prime Minister Persson] tries to justify the deportation by proclaiming that the two victims have received proper justice in Egypt. One was convicted of a crime, asserts Persson (albeit not the alleged crime used to justify his deportation), and the fact that the other one was set free proves that the Egyptian legal system works properly. He also persists in denying that the two men were tortured, even though that has been established by Swedish officials and several human rights organizations.

“It knocks the wind right out of you,” responds attorney Kjell Jönsson. “That Göran Persson, head of government in a democratic society based on the rule of law refers to an Egyptian military court to support his assertions regarding Agiza, and also refers to legal guarantees in Egypt where the process includes torture and it is obvious that neither of the men has been given a fair trial — I find that frightening. One has to question his credibility and trustworthiness in matters of fundamental human rights.”

[Observes] Theo van Boven, U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture. “Returned persons have indeed been subjected to torture [in Egypt], despite assurances given.... It turns out that these guarantees have often been loopholes rather than guarantees. If a country like Sweden — I respect Sweden a great deal. It has a long history, tradition and reputation for human rights. Now, if they start to ‘shake’ on these kinds of issues — to accommodate, to make concessions — what can we expect from other countries?” (pp. 32-34.)

20 January 2009. While [Conservative] Prime Minister Reinfeldt is visiting Afghanistan to support the so-called war on terrorism, it is reported that two of its victims remain stuck in Egypt, more than eight years after they were transported to that country — by the C.I.A. in collaboration with Swedish officials — for torture and other abuse (see “Delivering political refugees to torturers”, p. 32 ff.).

Since then, the Swedish Ombudsman for Justice has determined that the human rights of the two men were seriously violated.... But [the one who has been released] is not allowed to return to Sweden, to the dismay of his Swedish attorney: “It is incomprehensible that the centre-right government does not apply human rights law, which says that we are obligated to let him return to this country. He has a right to the restoration of his health [after being tortured in prison] and he needs rehabilitative treatment that he cannot get in Egypt.”

Instead, he is confined to an Egyptian village where he is kept under surveillance by security police and is forbidden to meet journalists. “The Swedish

Security Service (“SÄPO”) does not want him back in Sweden.... The question is whether the government is afraid to challenge SÄPO or if it is still listening to the C.I.A.,” says the attorney.

The extradition warrant of the other kidnap/torture victim was rescinded by the Swedish government in 2007. But that is of little current use to him, as he is serving a 15-year sentence handed down by an Egyptian military court of highly doubtful probity (pp. 68-69).

Love for the USA

In the context of the Assange case, it is of some relevance that the current centre-right government—which is more right than centre, especially in matters of foreign policy, and is dominated by the Conservative Party of Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt—is even more submissive to the United States than its predecessor, the Social Democratic government which secured for Sweden the dubious distinction of becoming the first country to collaborate with the U.S. programme of “extraordinary rendition” (see above).

The U.S. embassy in Stockholm has underlined this fact in a cable to Washington which notes that the Reinfeldt government is “better-disposed toward working with the U.S. than its predecessor. Reinfeldt comes from a new political generation and is not bound by the same U.S.-critical traditions.... While Sweden's official foreign policy doctrine emphasizes non-alignment, in practice Sweden is a pragmatic and strong partner with NATO, having troops under NATO command in Kosovo and Afghanistan.” [3]

The U.S. embassy has also noted that the Reinfeldt government’s foreign policy is almost entirely in the hands of Carl Bildt, the current Foreign Minister and a former prime minister. With few exceptions, Bildt’s entire political career has been based on loyalty to the United States, whose propaganda and rationalizations for war he has consistently promulgated to the Swedish public. That tendency can be traced as far back as the Vietnam War, when Bildt sharply criticized Swedish public television for broadcasting indisputable evidence that the United States was heavily bombing civilian targets in northern Vietnam, despite repeated assertions to the contrary.

More recently, Bildt played a leading role in efforts to sell the most recent U.S. war against Iraq to the citizens and governments of Europe:

January-March 2003. Carl Bildt signs on as co-chair for the European branch of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, a lobby group with close ties to the White House. Its function is to generate public opinion for the next war against Iraq, currently being prepared by the Bush II administration. Among the other collaborating propagandists are three army chiefs from the Iraq war of the Bush I administration in 1991, Republican congressmen John McCain and Newt Gingrich, executives from the weapons industry, a former head of the C.I.A., union leader James Hoffa, and more of that ilk.

The head of the Committee, a former advisor to U.S. minister of war Donald Rumsfeld, would later explain that it “played a decisive role in building a coalition against Saddam Hussein.... Someone of Carl’s stature, with his background—and from Sweden to boot — was of course very important. Thanks to his personal network and his endorsement, we were able to recruit several other [collaborators].

Carl Bildt in 2007 meeting with Nouri Al-Malik (far right), head of the Iraq puppet regime. "Sweden's change of course has certainly been noted," said a U.S. official. "Your foreign minister's visit to Baghdad in September to show support for the political process was especially appreciated."



Photo: Regeringskansliet/Diana Jansen

"Their most important contribution was to provide us with a variety of voices in several languages in a number of major European cities.... Our task was to serve as a communications channel and a sort of media centre that reporters could call upon when they were preparing to write about developments in Iraq. Carl was deeply involved in that aspect, and was himself a strong voice in public debate." [4]

Cables from the U.S. embassy in Stockholm during 2009 reported that, "Both Bildt and Reinfeldt have strong interests in working closely with us.... Bilateral relations are very close and collaborative, and you will find good partners in FM Carl Bildt and his team." [5]

According to another cable from the Stockholm embassy, Bildt's collaboration with the United States and its "specially related" allies in the U.K. has been so intimate that it has jeopardized his chances of becoming the foreign policy spokesman of the European Union: "For many European observers, he is seen as too close to the British and the Americans to get full French or German backing to replace Solana in the High Representative role." [6]

Another devotee of the United States in the Reinfeldt government is Minister of Defence Sten Tolgfors, also of the Conservative Party. According to the U.S. embassy in Stockholm, "The Ambassador has cultivated a close working relationship with Tolgfors.... Tolgfors went to high school in the U.S. and told the Ambassador he loves the U.S." [7]

The significance of all this for the Assange case is, of course, that it will be Carl Bildt and perhaps other members of the Reinfeldt government who will decide— openly or, more likely, furtively behind a facade of legal formality— on whether or not to approve the anticipated U.S. request for extradition. Everything in their past clearly indicates that any such request will be granted.

"Selling out its own people"

Among the 251,287 cables from U.S. embassies around the world that WikiLeaks began to publish in late November, there are a reported 671 from the embassy in Stockholm. Only a few dozen of those have been published to date, with the rest expected to follow during the coming year.

But even the limited sample currently available reflects the ready willingness of the Swedish government to do the bidding of the United States, often behind the backs of its own people, in contradiction of its declared policies, and in violation of the Swedish Constitution.

One example dated 7 November 2008 concerns a request by the United States for access to large volumes of data on Swedish citizens, to be analysed for signs of involvement in “terrorism”. The request is backed up with a threat to reimpose a visa requirement for Swedes travelling to the U.S. if the data is not supplied. The Reinfeldt government is reportedly eager to comply, but is reluctant to enter a formal agreement due to concerns about constitutionality and risks of both political difficulties and the disclosure of other secret arrangements:

On 23 October 2008, a joint State (CA)/Terrorist Screening Center (TSC) team met separately with Swedish MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] and MOJ [Ministry of Justice] counterparts to discuss possibilities and arrangements for exchanging of terrorist screening information with Sweden....

The MOJ team... expressed a strong degree of satisfaction with current informal information sharing arrangements with the U.S., and wondered whether the putative advantages of an HSPD-6 agreement for Sweden would be offset by the risk that these existing informal channels, which cover a wide range of law enforcement and anti-terrorism cooperation, would be scrutinized more intensely by Parliament and perhaps jeopardized. Dr. Svensson reiterated MFA concerns about the current political atmosphere in Sweden. She believed that, *given Swedish constitutional requirements to present matters of national concern to Parliament* and in light of the ongoing controversy over Sweden's recently passed surveillance law, it would be politically impossible for the Minister of Justice to avoid presenting any formal data sharing agreement with the United States to Parliament for review. *In her opinion, the effect of this public spotlight could also place other existing informal information sharing arrangements at jeopardy. [Emphasis added.]*

The MOJ's notion of a one-sided, informal data exchange arrangement reflects Swedish constitutional restrictions on the use of intelligence, combined with a willingness to continue feeding information to the U.S. through existing informal channels.[8]

The delicate nature of the “other existing informal information sharing arrangements” had been stressed in an earlier cable which explained that, “Due to domestic political considerations, the extent of this cooperation is not widely known within the Swedish government and it would be useful to acknowledge this cooperation privately, as public mention of the cooperation would open up the government to domestic criticism.” [9]

The “recently passed surveillance law” to which the November 2008 cable refers was forced through Parliament by the Reinfeldt government in conformity with the USA-led “war on terrorism”, but in defiance of unusually strong public opposition. Two years later, warnings about the associated risks to privacy and personal integrity have been confirmed by recent disclosures, as explained by Camilla Lindberg who in 2008 resigned from her post as a Member of Parliament in a rare act of repudiation of the coalition government that includes her Liberal Party.

In an opinion piece entitled “They lied to us about the FRA Law”, Camilla Lindberg observes that, “In recent days it has been disclosed that FRA [National Defence Radio Establishment] is leaking information about ordinary citizens. Unfiltered data has been turned over to the USA and perhaps other countries, as well. This means that details

about ordinary Swedish citizens' e-mail, telephone conversations and social networks are ending up in the hands of foreign intelligence agencies....

"I often wondered why so much energy was expended on passage of the FRA Law in 2008, despite the massive criticism both external and internal. No means were spared to push through the law— lies, pleadings and outright mobbing. In retrospect it is clear that this exchange of information was already taking place, and that Sweden had promised the United States that FRA would collect the data. The law had to be passed, no matter what the cost....

"By selling out its own people, the government has sought to curry the favour of the United States.... Step by step, we continue to dismantle democracy." [10]

Other steps are documented by the recent WikiLeaks disclosures, as pointed out by The Pirate Party (*Piratpartiet*) which emerged a few years ago from a broad-based protest movement against the random collection and storage of information on Swedish citizens, efforts to place restrictions on the Internet and related issues.

According to party chairman Rick Falkvinge, the WikiLeaks material reveals that, "Every law, every public inquiry during recent years that has been hostile toward the Internet, young people and the rights of citizens here in Sweden has been ordained by the U.S. government and business establishment.... It was a co-ordinated programme and the Swedish government was given a checklist to work through. The government is described in the cables as 'very co-operative' and 'completely in step'....

"The way it works in practice is that branch organizations in the U.S. go to the U.S. Dept. of Commerce, which in turn goes to the State Dept., which goes to the embassies, which then speak with governments, including Sweden's, to demand changes in the law to benefit U.S. companies," writes Falkvinge, who concludes that the Swedish government has endeavoured to fulfil all demands conveyed by the U.S. embassy in Stockholm.[11]

"Peculiar subculture" of secret collaboration

As a result of these and other disclosures, "the U.S. view of Sweden that emerges is striking," observes Prof. Wilhelm Agrell of Lund University, one of Sweden's foremost authorities on intelligence gathering, security and related issues. "Sweden appears as a close or even very close partner, not least in matters of national security.

"If the embassy cables place anything under the spotlight," writes Agrell, "it is the permanent democratic deficit in the area of security policy. That is a consequence of a two-track policy, which has continued for over sixty years, whereby the true extent and implications of the [bilateral] relations cannot be divulged to Sweden's citizens. They are assumed to be incapable of grasping the utility [of the co-operation] to the nation, and can therefore be expected to cause confusion and disarray. Matters must therefore be dealt with in secret chambers, as small as possible, with unauthorized persons excluded. Among the latter over the years have been cabinet ministers, the parliament, various review and control agencies, and of course the media.

"That the citizens are among the unauthorized is more or less self-evident. It is therefore entirely consistent for President George W. Bush to be advised by his ambassador in Stockholm that, if Prime Minister Reinfeldt is to be thanked for Sweden's close co-operation in the war on terrorism, it should be done in private.

“What remains in place is, above all, a peculiar subculture in which it is easier [for the government] to reach agreement with a foreign power than with its own citizens, their elected representatives, and various control agencies that have been established to not find out anything.” [12]

It follows from all this that any public declarations issued by the Swedish government in relation to the Assange case, or in any other matter of interest to the United States, must be interpreted with extreme care and caution.

NOTES

1. See for example:
 - (a) Brita Sundberg-Weitman “Gripandet av Assange väcker allvarliga frågor om den svenska rättsstaten.” *Newsmill*, 2010-12-07.
Internet: www.newsmill.se/artikel/2010/12/07/fd-lagman-gripandet-av-assange-v-cker-allvarliga-fr-gor-om-den-svenska-r-ttsstate
 - (b) James D. Catlin. “When it comes to Assange rape case, the Swedes are making it up as they go along.” *Crikey*, 2 Dec. 2010.
Internet: <http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/12/02>
2. Al Burke. *From Neutrality to NATO*. Stoppa smyganslutningen till NATO.
Internet: www.stoppanato.se/english/neutral.htm
3. WikiLeaks. Cable from U.S. embassy in Stockholm:
Reference ID 07STOCKHOLM506 dated 4 May 2007.
4. *From Neutrality to NATO*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
5. WikiLeaks. Cables from U.S. embassy in Stockholm:
Reference ID 09STOCKHOLM266 dated 2009-04-29 and
Reference ID 09STOCKHOLM384 dated 2009-06-24.
6. WikiLeaks. Cable from U.S. embassy in Stockholm:
Reference ID 09STOCKHOLM266 dated 2009-04-29.
7. WikiLeaks. Cable from U.S. embassy in Stockholm:
Reference ID 08STOCKHOLM272 dated 2008-04-11.
8. WikiLeaks. Cable from U.S. embassy in Stockholm:
Reference ID 08STOCKHOLM748 dated 2008-11-07.
9. WikiLeaks. Cable from U.S. embassy in Stockholm:
Reference ID 07STOCKHOLM506 dated 2007-05-04.
10. Camilla Lindberg. “De ljög för oss om FRA-lagen.” *Aftonbladet*, 7 Dec. 2010.
11. Rick Falkvinge. *Piratpartiet Nyhetsbrev*, 25 Dec. 2010.
See also: “Cables: US driving Swedish Data Retention”.
www.piratpartiet.se/cables-us-driving-swedish-data-retention
12. Wilhelm Agrell. “”Det är samma gamla lik som trillar ur garderoberna.”
Dagens Nyheter, 7 Dec. 2010.