

Why Ecuador Finally Wants Assange Out of Its London Embassy

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Rumors of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange getting booted from his refuge at Ecuador's Embassy in London have been floating around for months. But late last week, Ecuador's president, Lenin Moreno, confirmed the impending ouster, saying he is [negotiating](#) with British authorities to get Ecuador's highly complicated guest out of the embassy and ensure Assange's safety once he is evicted.

The announcement raises the question: Why now? The answer shines a light on the astonishing political transformation that has occurred in Ecuador in recent years—and how WikiLeaks, which is a key factor in the special counsel investigation in the U.S. into whether Donald Trump's presidential campaign colluded with Russia, has served to put Ecuador's gripping political drama on the global stage. It is an unlikely story that shows the surprising intersection of several seemingly unrelated developments, combining international intrigue, hacking and spycraft with local politics in a small South American country.

Assange took asylum in the Ecuadorean Embassy in London back in 2012, to avoid arrest on Swedish allegations of rape. Since then, Swedish prosecutors have dropped their investigation, but Assange still faces a British arrest warrant for violating the conditions of his bail by sheltering in the embassy. Assange has said he fears for his life after WikiLeaks published stolen U.S. diplomatic cables. Wikileaks was also a player in Russia's plot to help Trump win the 2016 U.S. election,

disseminating stolen emails from the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman. With the Trump-Russia probe escalating in the U.S., Assange has more reasons for concern.

Ecuador's irritation with Assange's presence at its embassy is nothing new. In 2013, Ecuador's ambassador to the U.K., Ana Alban, asked the British government for help in getting rid of Assange. "What are we going to do about the stone in the shoe?" she reportedly [asked](#) the Foreign Office minister in charge of Latin America. "Not my stone, not my shoe," was his answer.

Alban was later removed from her post. Assange stayed. The diplomat may have been unhappy housing the hacker, but the government of then-President Rafael Correa, a leftist leader fond of fulminating against Western powers, was committed to protecting him.

Assange had married his fate to Correa's when he walked into the embassy. Correa swept to power with Latin America's "pink tide," the wave of leftist leaders who took office across the region and enacted a blend of populist measures, like big spending on social programs and the nationalization of major industries, at the expense of fiscal sustainability. They also oversaw a [steady drift](#) toward authoritarianism that undercut free expression and fair elections.

When global commodity prices started to dry up the sources of income in many of those countries, including Ecuador, their economies contracted and deficits exploded. Correa came up with a plan. Instead of running for re-election, he anointed Moreno, his former vice president, to run in his place in 2017. Correa, Ecuadoreans believe, was staging a tactical retreat. Moreno would straighten out the country's finances through unpopular austerity measures. By then the people would be clamoring for Correa's return. He would heroically oblige.

But events did not unfold according to plan. Moreno, who uses a wheelchair since he was shot during a robbery in 1998, surprised just about everyone by [tossing the Correa playbook](#). The changes started immediately, when he offered a much more conciliatory approach to governing than his polarizing predecessor. But few could imagine how deep the rift would go, and how acrimonious [the break](#) would become.

Ten months after becoming president, Moreno put a referendum to the people. It had seven questions, mostly dealing with controversial measures enacted by Correa. The most crucial was whether to reinstate a two-term limit on the presidency, which had been lifted under Correa. The result was overwhelming. The people voted "yes" on all the questions, handing Moreno a spectacular political victory and [ending Correa's plans](#) for indefinite re-election.

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By then, Correa and his most steadfast supporters had come to realize that Moreno was not their friend, much less their ally. The party Correa founded, Alianza Pais, had already removed him as leader in October. In January, the former president and 28 lawmakers resigned from the party and started a new one, called the Citizens' Revolution.

Then, in April, the national prosecutor's office announced it was investigating evidence that Colombia's now-disbanded Marxist rebel group, the FARC, had illegally contributed to Correa's presidential campaign. Moreno accused Correa of links to the FARC, pointing to a trove of documents unearthed by investigative journalists. The FARC had frequently sheltered on Ecuadorean territory during Correa's presidency, and top FARC leaders had been killed inside Ecuador.

Relations between Correa and his former protégé became toxic. But the worst had not yet come. Last month, Ecuador's National Court of Justice ordered Correa's arrest on charges of kidnapping. The case centers on the abduction of a political foe, Fernando Balda, in Bogota in 2012.

Since leaving the presidency, Correa has been living in his wife's native Belgium, while working for Russia's state-controlled television network, RT, where Assange also hosts a program. Correa denies all the charges against him and says he is sure that Interpol will dismiss Ecuador's petition for his arrest and extradition.

Correa suggested that Moreno's actions are the result of his paraplegia. "Sometimes people who have suffered a tragedy," he told a Spanish newspaper, "...harbor bitterness, a frustration with life, a frustration toward others who have not lived their misfortune."

Moreno [says](#) he finds Correa's transformation dispiriting. "It scares me to know that the young idealist I met in 2006 has strangely and sinisterly turned into such a character." He is urging Correa to come home to face the kidnapping charges. Correa claims the kidnapping was approved by Moreno.

How does Assange fit into this saga of once-close comrades in Ecuador who are now bitter enemies? Simply put, Moreno's agenda is incompatible with spending millions to protect the WikiLeaks founder, a man whose presence and whose reluctance to stop interfering with other nations' internal affairs are undercutting Ecuador's own international relations.

Moreno has embarked in an austerity program that, predictably, has cut into his once-sky high approval ratings, but he is continuing to dismantle Correa's legacy. He has introduced a measure to [repeal](#) a communications law that for a decade made Ecuador "one of the most repressive countries in Latin America for the press,"

according to Joel Simon, the executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Assange made himself a player in the internal affairs of other countries. In a karmic twist, the affairs of Ecuador, Russia and the United States could now determine Assange's fate.

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