

# The Washington Post

## Julian Assange's asylum is at stake when Ecuador votes Sunday

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March 31, 2017

Julian Assange has defied the world's most powerful government and intelligence agencies for years. Now his fate will be decided by humble banana workers and Quechua-speaking shopkeepers in the Andean highlands.

Ecuadoran voters will elect a new president Sunday, and one of the two candidates, the conservative former banker Guillermo Lasso, has pledged to evict the WikiLeaks founder from the country's embassy in London within 30 days of taking office.

Lasso's opponent, Lenín Moreno, says he will allow Assange to stay. Moreno served for years as deputy to leftist President Rafael Correa, who granted asylum to Assange in 2012 when the Australian super-hacker sought protection from an arrest warrant, saying he feared he would be extradited to the United States.

Assange hasn't left the embassy since, but Ecuador's high-maintenance, long-term guest has not been a campaign issue in the race. Voters here are far more concerned with the country's tanking economy and the authoritarian tendencies and deep divisions created by Correa's decade-long rule.

Moreno, 64, and Lasso, 61, are virtually tied in the polls.

A Lasso victory Sunday would immediately place Assange in legal peril, given that British police could arrest him the moment he sets foot outside the embassy precinct. Assange is wanted for questioning over allegations of sexual assault in Sweden, although he has not been charged with a crime there or in the United States.

Lasso told the Miami Herald in a recent interview that he would work with other governments to rehouse Assange at another embassy, and it's possible another country could take him in. But it remains unclear how Assange could be safely transported through the streets of London, because diplomatic vehicles do not enjoy the same legal protections as embassies.

Political analysts in Ecuador say they do not doubt Lasso would follow through on his threat to remove Assange, because it would allow him to signal a clear break from the Correa government on an issue that is not of major concern to average Ecuadorans. But they say he would seek to

avoid the spectacle of Assange's forcible removal or his arrest outside the embassy with television cameras rolling.

"I think they would try to work out a solution through diplomatic channels," said Luis Verdesoto, an analyst in Quito.

If Moreno wins, he may also seek to negotiate an exit for Assange, Verdesoto said, because his indefinite residence at the embassy is not sustainable and WikiLeaks has increasingly become a liability for Ecuador.

Correa moved to protect Assange in 2012 because he viewed him as an "anti-imperialist" comrade and the initiative burnished his profile among foreign leftist supporters. Correa maintained his support even as the WikiLeaks chief clashed with Ecuadoran diplomatic staff who had to share the embassy's relatively small space with their sometimes volatile house guest.

But new strains emerged last year after WikiLeaks published hacked emails of Democratic Party staffers during the peak of the U.S. presidential campaign. Correa temporarily cut off Assange's Internet access in a bid to rein him in.

Assange was politically useful for Correa, but he wouldn't be for Moreno, Verdesoto said, noting that the candidate "has no interest in having an international profile" and would be facing an economic crisis at home. Moreno has also privately told diplomats he wants better relations with Washington. Correa kicked out then-U.S. Ambassador Heather Hodges in 2011 after WikiLeaks published a cable alleging the Ecuadoran president was turning a blind eye to police corruption.

U.S. officials have maintained a disciplined silence about Assange, insisting that his legal troubles are a matter for British, Swedish and Ecuadoran authorities to sort out. Assange and his attorneys may also be looking for new signals from the Trump administration about how they view his case.

President Trump appeared to praise Assange after an interview he conducted with Fox News host Sean Hannity at the Ecuadoran Embassy in January, during which the WikiLeaks founder denied being a tool of the Russian government.

"Julian Assange said a '14-year old could have hacked (Clinton advisor) Podesta,'" Trump wrote in a tweet. "Why was DNC so careless? Also said Russians did not give him the info."

Patrick Eddington, a former CIA agent who is now national security and civil liberties analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington, said he doesn't think either British or U.S. officials want a dramatic spectacle if Ecuador dislodges him, precipitating an arrest.

"It would just reinforce the martyr image Assange tries to project," Eddington said.

The U.S. Department of Justice has refused to comment on allegations that it has readied a secret indictment of Assange that remains under seal. WikiLeaks said in January that if Obama granted clemency to former U.S. soldier Chelsea Manning, Assange would "agree to U.S. extradition despite clear unconstitutionality of DoJ case."

But Assange appeared to backtrack on that proposal soon after Obama pardoned Manning, claiming the move was designed to put pressure on him.

It's unclear what the United States would potentially charge Assange with, Eddington said, given that the Espionage Act is not typically applied to foreign nationals and the WikiLeaks founder could make a strong case that his activities deserved journalistic protections.

Fear of WikiLeaks may also be a factor, Eddington added. "One other thing that may deter or at least give potential prosecutors pause is the virtual certainty that an indictment and extradition attempt would result in massive acts of online retaliation by WikiLeaks and its hacktivist supporters," he said.

"Would the personal lives of the prosecutors, FBI agents, and other involved in any anti-Assange action be seen as fair game?" Eddington said. "I'm betting the answer is yes."