



"It is apparent that when Internet freedom conflicts with self-declared US national interests ... it immediately becomes a crime.", China Daily writes in an op-ed.

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BEIJING -- Government officials of the United States have been busy apologizing to countries around the world for the huge embarrassment and political damage caused by the confidential diplomatic cables released by the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks two weeks ago.

One important explanation it owes to the world, however, is whether it was behind the arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in London last Tuesday on charges of alleged sex crimes in Sweden.

People are naturally questioning the timing of the arrest and the refusal of bail for Assange, although some US\$150,000 in surety has already been guaranteed.

Somewhere there must be a confidential US diplomatic cable that would shed light on this.

New York Congressman Peter King has called on the US government to go after Assange and to prosecute the New York Times, which published some of the cables. Senator Joe Lieberman

has also suggested investigation into the New York Times and described its action as "an act of bad citizenship".

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has depicted the leak as an attack on the fabric of responsible government. President Barack Obama has condemned the WikiLeaks' actions as "deplorable." The US government is considering legal action against WikiLeaks.

Under such pressure, Amazon.com, Visa, MasterCard and PayPal have all suspended their services to WikiLeaks. And the WikiLeaks website is no longer accessible in the US.

The US has also been trying numerous ways to press charges against Assange, including using the outdated World War I-era Espionage Act, although some cables suggest that some US diplomats should also be worried if that happens.

All these have been happening in a country, which loudly boasts of its First Amendment guaranteeing the freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Obama addressed Internet freedom in a town hall-style meeting in Shanghai in November 2009. Hillary Clinton also went on at great length about Internet freedom in her speech at the Newseum in Washington in January, pointing an accusing finger at China and several other countries.

But the Assange case reveals such rhetoric is just so much hypocrisy. It is apparent that when Internet freedom conflicts with self-declared US national interests, or when Internet freedom exposes lies by the self-proclaimed open and transparent government, it immediately becomes a crime.

The power of new media should never be underestimated. Even in China, many of the scandals, such as corruptions and coal mine disasters, are broken first by new media.

Up until recently, Obama must have loved new media and social media because they helped him raise funds and garner support to defeat John McCain during the 2008 presidential campaign. Now, he may be having second thoughts.

The arrest of Assange has triggered widespread concern and protest both inside the US and

around the world. In the US, academics and professionals have talked about its possible implications for a free press. In other parts of the world, people are protesting against the attacks on Internet freedom.

Censoring the Internet by pushing for charges against Assange would only inflict more damage on the US. While the leaked cables may have damaged some trust between the US government and foreign governments, the crusade against WikiLeaks and Julian Assange would destroy people's trust in the freedom of the press preached by the US.

Remember, Assange is a fellow journalist, or a citizen journalist in the age of new media, and uncovering the secrets of governments, corporations and interest groups is part of a journalist's job.

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