Arrest of Julian Assange

Why in news?

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was convicted by a London court of breaking bail terms of 2012.

What is the case all about?

- Julian Assange is the head of the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks.
- Mr. Assange made international headlines in early 2010 when WikiLeaks published a classified U.S. military video.
- It showed a 2007 attack by Apache helicopters in Baghdad that killed a dozen people, including two Reuters news staff.
- Mr. Assange was facing charges related to theft of classified information from government computers, conspiring with former U.S. Army intelligence officer Chelsea Manning.
- In 2012, authorities from Sweden wanted to question him as part of a sexual assault investigation.
- To avoid being extradited to Sweden, Mr. Assange took refuge in Ecuador's London embassy in June 2012.
- Sweden dropped that investigation in 2017, but Mr. Assange broke the rules of his original bail (2012) in London.
- Eventually, he had eluded authorities in the U.S. and the U.K. for nearly 7 years, to escape arrest.
- Now, Ecuador President Lenin Moreno withdrew his country’s grant of asylum to Mr. Assange that was on for 7 years.
- Ecuador had earlier limited Mr. Assange’s Internet access.
- Asylum was withdrawn after repeated violations to international conventions and daily-life protocols by Assange.
- Mr. Assange was thus arrested by British police and carried out of the Ecuadorean embassy, paving the way for his possible extradition to the U.S.

Why is the arrest disputed?

- His arrest has renewed a global debate on balancing between freedom of expression (or the right to information) and national security concerns.
- There exists a question if Mr. Assange is a “journalist” and WikiLeaks a "news organisation" in the traditional sense.

- But Whistleblower and former Central Intelligence Agency contractor Edward Snowden had condemned the arrest as “a dark moment for press freedom”.
- He said that the charges pressed by the U.S. against Mr. Assange are incredibly weak.
- WikiLeaks was producing things that people ought to know about those in power.
- It had opened up the space for holding people in power accountable.
- So despite the disputes, Mr. Assange’s indictment is seen to pose a threat to all journalists.
- This could suppress whistle-blowers everywhere and ultimately weaken democracy itself.

What is the dilemma now?

- Sexual assault charges against Mr. Assange have become less significant than the issues that link nation states with the Official Secrets Act.
- Jess Phillips, a UK MP, argued that Mr. Assange’s case made it clear that women’s rights are still secondary to political games.
- She emphasised that the first and most pressing case he should answer is the one where he has delayed and therefore denied possible justice to two Swedish women.
- A Swedish lawyer representing the alleged rape victim too said she would push to have prosecutors reopen the investigation.
- Jess Phillips thus called for the U.K. government to support his extradition to Sweden before even considering any pressure from the U.S.
- The UK government will now have to decide on Mr. Assange's extradition.

Source: The Hindu, BBC

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