

18 Challenges for the human rights movement

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In 1941 Franklin Delano Roosevelt outlined what he called the Four Freedoms upon which government policies should be based. One of them was the freedom of religion, and another was freedom of speech. Then he gave two warnings – that progress would be impossible unless people enjoy freedom from want, or poverty, and the freedom from fear of violence and warfare. Roosevelt understood that basic social and economic well-being are just as important to democratic life as civil and political rights. He also pointed to the danger posed by a fearful population and the importance of channelling our resources into constructive enterprises that would reduce fear and increase hopefulness. This comprehensive view of human rights, security and governance is just as relevant now as it was all those years ago, as free speech and religious freedom are under assault, the extremes of wealth and poverty are widening and warfare and violence are increasingly normalised.

I was on a battleship in the Atlantic Ocean in 1945 when the world's powers got together and formed the United Nations with a clear and express purpose of preventing war in the future. A few years later, the same global powers assembled and, under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, adopted the UDHR. The United Nations became the only organisation that would include every nation in its deliberations on peace, security, as well as human rights and development. Now, those two great commitments have largely been abandoned by the world. The United Nations is no longer a repository and guarantor of peace, and even the greatest of nations have not met the expectations of the UDHR.

Recently, the leaders of the United States announced that no longer will we try to have as a key to one of our foreign policy commitments the upholding of the standards that have made our country and others admirable and trustworthy. This is very troubling to me. When I was a young man listening to my president on that battleship, I was proud of my country and the role we would play in advancing human freedom. I never dreamed that the United States of America would cease to be the most admired democratic country in the world, but the

erosion of human rights is a reality we are facing, and it is even worse in some other countries.

When I was elected, and later when awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, I quoted my high school teacher, Miss Julia Coleman, who told us students that we must accommodate changing times but cling to principles that never change. That has been a guiding statement for me throughout my life; we must accommodate what is happening now, make the most of it, improve it if we can, but never default on our commitment to the principles expressed in our Constitution, The Lord's Prayer, and in our own ideals, which never change. Those things that never change include a commitment to peace and a commitment to the UDHR.

As President of the United States, I decided to emphasise human rights in our foreign policy because I believed that human freedom would be the best guarantor of stability and peace within and among nations. I still believe this to be true. During my administration, the United States signed the major global human rights treaties, invested in the United Nations' human rights agencies and supported democratic movements in many countries, sometimes securing the release of political prisoners who suffered abuse and torture for their activities on behalf of human rights. We even confronted our Cold War allies, especially the military dictators of Latin America, when they abused, tortured and disappeared non-violent human rights activists. I was criticised for this by those who believed geo-political allegiances should have been a singular priority. Over time, however, it has been shown that the hemisphere's nations that are committed to expanding freedom for more people become more successful and stable partners.

We did not believe that instigating violence and warfare would serve American interests or hasten the advent of democracy throughout the world, so we sought to resolve conflict with diplomacy and dialogue. We knew that democracy and human rights must be fought and won from inside, and that the most productive approach would be to offer various types of encouragement. As much as possible, we backed this up with a commitment to peace and reciprocity that would signal our belief that human rights, including the right to peace, are universal and should be constantly demanded, even of our own government when warranted.

A broad global embrace of human rights took hold in subsequent years, and we saw a dramatic increase in the demand for accountable governance and justice in more nations. The promise of equal rights for women and girls came into greater focus, and a global consensus began to emerge that women's rights must be protected to the same degree as the basic rights of freedom of speech and religion, or the right to a fair trial. The United Nations built upon the promise of the UDHR by establishing and strengthening institutions like the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Criminal Court and the Human Rights Council. The Carter Center and I participated in these efforts directly, working with other human rights organisations and like-minded governments to create these and other institutions that would monitor and intervene in cases of human rights abuse when conditions demanded.

However, after the attacks against the United States in 2001, these many gains in the field of human rights were eroded. The threat of terrorism led even established democracies to embrace an overly militaristic approach to national security. My own country launched a “pre-emptive war” in violation of the United Nations Charter, which limits the use of force to cases of self-defense. While military force obviously is sometimes justifiable or necessary, the distinction between justifiable self-defense and aggressive war has been undermined because of the global war on terror, which continues to be expanded into more and more nations.

The grave consequences can be seen throughout the Middle East and the entire world, as the reach of terror groups has only expanded. Young people are being recruited into terror groups under the banner of righteous warfare against what they see as Western invasion, and many nations face a growing threat of homegrown terrorism. Taking advantage of the understandable public anxiety about this threat, many governments are actively fomenting fear and xenophobia to justify the expansion of authoritarian policies and broaden their powers. Torture against people suspected of terrorist crimes has been carried out with impunity, including in my own country; the right to privacy has disappeared; and freedoms of religion, association and speech are under attack in many nations.

The deployment of excessive military force has been extended to the wars on drugs and crime as state-sanctioned violence has become normalised in the form of police brutality and mass incarceration. Governments also increasingly use force against citizens, especially indigenous communities, protesting economic and environmental exploitation, including by private corporations.

Meanwhile, the concentration of wealth at the very top has eroded public trust in political elites and parties. This disparity between the rich and the poor is growing both within nations and between nations. In the United States, average hard-working middle-class people believe that they are being cheated by the government and by society; they feel that their basic rights to healthcare, quality education and a political voice are being taken away. Unlimited amounts of money going into political campaigns means that an average person’s vote is almost cancelled out because of the influence wielded by those who use their wealth to exert political influence, causing the average person to believe that her/his choice of a candidate is not equally valuable as a rich person’s choice. Once that candidate gets into office, quite often the average person feels that the elected official must re-pay the contributions with their support of policies that favour the rich. This is a form of legal bribery that has undermined the confidence that citizens once had in our institutions.

America’s criminal justice system has also become weaker. When I left office in 1981, only one out of a thousand Americans was in prison. Now, seven out of every thousand, seven times more people, are in prison. There can be no doubt that continuous racial discrimination in our country has resulted in African Americans bearing the brunt of this expansion of a massive private prison industry that profits from high occupancy of its facilities. A disturbing level of anger toward and even hatred for immigrants has risen in recent years, and now many

immigrants seized in a growing number of government raids are also filling private prisons or simply being deported, sometimes to countries where they have never lived and have no family.

I have described here a loss of trust that we have had previously, in democracy and freedom, in our political leaders and institutions, in the sanctity of truth and basic fairness. This has come about due to the lack of adherence to the high ideals of peace and human rights in the broadest possible terms. That our nation's top leaders would actively undermine the trust of the people in our institutions and founding principles by fanning flames of hatred and fear is shocking.

Many of these trends came to a climax in 2016, including in my country's presidential election. The dissatisfaction of the average person with our political system resulted in many voters taking a chance on a leader who would obviously place less emphasis on human rights because they have lost trust in the major political parties. They were willing to abandon even basic principles of democracy and human rights just to try something new, no matter what it was. Similar political trends are present in nearly every region of the world, and it will take a concerted effort to turn the tide in favour of peace and human rights.

We have a great challenge before us if we are going to revitalise a global human rights movement. But, we have faced such challenges before, and we have seen incredible progress. During the darkest days of the two World Wars that engulfed Europe, we could barely imagine that one day the continent would become, even with all its challenges, an integrated community committed to resolving its differences peacefully. We must rededicate ourselves to an even higher aspiration than we have held in previous generations by promoting peace, an adequate standard of living, and the full inclusion and empowerment of women as basic human rights.

Where the threat of war exists, let us devote every possible effort to reduce fear and promote dialogue and understanding. When any brave human rights defender faces retaliation for shedding light on important information or government abuses, let us raise our voices to ensure their safety. When women and girls are excluded from decision making or are subjected to discrimination or violence, let us stand up and demand equality of representation and treatment. When religion is misused to promote violence or justify the oppression of anyone, let us remember that the essential teaching of every major religion is love and reciprocity. When a policy or law is debated in the parliaments and congresses of the world, let us consider whether the policy will give people opportunity and hope, alleviate suffering and dispel fear, or will it foment hatred or produce suffering among our fellow human beings?

If we are to revitalise a global human rights movement, we must work to strengthen our societies' commitments to peace and human rights so that future generations inherit a less violent and more just world.