

Do Not Surrender Human Rights: For an International Movement of Movements

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1. Introduction

The international human rights system is coming under increasing pressure. What was long considered a cornerstone of a rules-based multilateral order is now being deliberately weakened across many contexts—by authoritarian governments, economic interests, religious fundamentalist movements, and far-right networks operating even within democratic states. The universal validity of human rights is being questioned, binding standards are being relativized, and civic participation is being curtailed. This is not merely about symbolic struggles—it is about real power relations and the defense of fundamental rights and freedoms.

What is often missing from the debate is a clear recognition of the consequences: human rights are not only being violated—they are increasingly being disregarded without consequence. Whether committed by states, corporations, or other powerful actors, these violations are rarely sanctioned. More troubling still, the erosion of human rights norms is becoming normalized. Actions that once provoked outrage or diplomatic response now often meet with indifference, deflection, or even open support. This depoliticization of human rights not only weakens their protective function—it undermines the very foundation of any international claim to justice and peace.

2. Human Rights Under Pressure: Why Their Defense Is More Political Than Ever

It is precisely where human rights protection is most urgently needed that the international system is increasingly failing. It is underfunded, politically blocked, and applied selectively. The erosion of human rights standards is advancing rapidly—internationally in multilateral forums, regionally through the weakening of binding agreements, and nationally through authoritarian legislation, aggressive rhetoric, and the targeted weakening of civil society spaces.

Human rights articulate a universal claim: that all people—regardless of gender, origin, religion, social status, or geographic location—should be able to live in dignity, safety, and equality. Yet in practice, this claim is repeatedly limited, instrumentalized, or ignored. The idea that human rights form the foundation of a just international order is losing its force—not only through open attacks, but through their gradual erosion in everyday political practice.

In this situation, what is needed is not only legal defense, but a political reappropriation of the human rights claim. Human rights must not be treated as a technocratic framework, but understood as a strategic tool—for the redistribution of resources, the recognition of societal diversity, and the strengthening of international solidarity.

3. Between Aspiration and Reality: Human Rights as a Political Strategy

Today's global crises painfully expose how fragile human rights protection has become—especially where it is needed most. Whether in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, or Myanmar: grave violations of international law, systematic human rights abuses, and humanitarian catastrophes affect populations whose rights should be safeguarded by international mechanisms—yet these often fail to deliver meaningful consequences. What unites these cases is not only the scale of violence, but also the political and institutional silence that surrounds them.

This is not about isolated incidents. The human rights crisis is structural—and it is also a crisis of political imagination. Human rights are too often reduced to legal procedures, when in fact they offer a strategic framework for advancing social justice, civic participation, and international solidarity. When taken seriously, they provide not only protection but also opportunities to expand political agency—if they are actively claimed and defended.

A human rights-based internationalism must therefore go beyond protecting institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, the WHO, or social commissions—it must redefine them politically. These multilateral spaces are under growing pressure: from budget cuts, political manipulation, the exclusion of civil society voices, and the erosion of binding decisions. And yet, they are more urgently needed than ever—as arenas in which rights can be negotiated and enforced.

The debate over financing these structures often misses the point: human rights work must no longer be approached from a budgetary perspective. What is needed first is a clear political strategy—and then the necessary resources to implement it.

4. Human Rights Blind Spots: When International Response Fails

The reality in many conflict regions reveals how selectively human rights standards are applied—and how often international institutions fail in their protective responsibilities.

In the Gaza Strip, a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding. Fundamental principles of international humanitarian law—such as the protection of civilians, the distinction between military and civilian targets, and access to humanitarian aid—are being systematically violated. Reports of deliberate attacks on medical personnel, humanitarian workers, and UN facilities are mounting. At the same time, political

statements—such as Donald Trump’s cynical proposal to turn Gaza into the “Riviera of the Middle East”—expose a dehumanizing economic logic. The debate over the legitimacy of UNRWA illustrates how quickly long-established protection mandates can be delegitimized. Multilateral institutions are increasingly sidelined. Where moral clarity is needed, geopolitical interests and strategic silence prevail. What once provoked diplomatic protest is now often relativized—or even justified—contributing to the normalization of serious violations of international law.

In the context of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, the human rights dimension is frequently marginalized. While the invasion is widely condemned, issues such as the situation of internally displaced persons, survival through winter, access to education in occupied territories, or civilian mental health are largely absent from dominant security-focused discourse. Solidarity with Ukraine—however justified—stands in contrast to the absence of comparable responses to other wars and crises. This selective visibility raises fundamental questions about global justice and the equal worth of lives.

In Sudan, a brutal civil war has raged for months. Documented atrocities include mass displacement, ethnically motivated killings, sexual violence, and the destruction of vital infrastructure. Yet international responses remain weak or entirely absent. The lack of action and limited public attention reflect deeper global hierarchies: access to protection, visibility, and solidarity still appears to follow colonial patterns.

Myanmar, too, illustrates the failure of the international human rights system. Since the 2021 military coup, violence has escalated, minorities are being systematically persecuted, and state structures have collapsed. The recent earthquake further deepened the humanitarian crisis—yet the international response has been slow and fragmented. Power politics in the UN Security Council have blocked decisive action, while human rights violations have become part of the new normal. This case exemplifies how protection loses meaning when it cannot be enforced.

5. Structural Crises: When Inequality Becomes a Human Rights Issue

Even beyond armed conflicts, the fragility of human rights protection becomes evident—especially where global inequality, economic interests, and political inertia intersect.

The climate crisis is no longer merely an environmental challenge; it is one of the most severe threats to the realization of human rights worldwide. Droughts, floods, resource scarcity, the loss of habitats, and restricted access to food and water primarily affect those who have contributed least to global warming. The Global South bears the brunt—without adequate compensation, without a voice in decision-making, and without legally anchored protection. While wealthier states promote technical solutions and carbon offsetting, there is a lack of binding obligations to ensure reparations, redistribution, or long-term support for affected populations.

A human rights-based approach to climate protection would begin here: with historical responsibility, global justice, and the right to a future. Yet this perspective is often sidelined in international negotiations—or reduced to voluntary partnerships with little accountability.

Food security, too, is under threat—not only due to armed conflict, but through speculation, land grabbing, the concentration of seed and food production in the hands of a few corporations, and a global trade system based on competition rather than solidarity. Millions of people go hungry despite a global surplus of food. This structural contradiction between abundance and deprivation is not a natural condition—it is the result of an economic system that disregards human rights whenever they interfere with profit.

In many international forums, the link between structural violence and human rights violations is acknowledged—but rarely treated with political seriousness. The human rights agenda is often reduced to matters of representation, while issues like social inequality, economic exploitation, or colonial legacies are dismissed as peripheral to foreign policy.

Yet the perspective must be reversed: It is not human rights that must conform to the rules of global finance or national economic strategies—but rather those systems that must be measured against the demands of human rights-based justice.

6. Between Aspiration and Reality: Human Rights as a Global Commitment

Despite their selective application and structural contradictions, the universal claim of human rights remains a vital political project. Precisely because they are so often undermined in practice, their promise of equality, dignity, and protection remains necessary—as a point of reference, a foundation for mobilization, and a political commitment.

International human rights law is more than a legal framework. It is the part of international law that protects the fundamental rights of every person against state action—enshrined in instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two UN Covenants, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It obliges states to uphold minimum standards and creates spaces in which rights can be defined, claimed, and politically defended—even though enforcement mechanisms remain weak.

Its roots lie not in diplomatic consensus, but in social struggles: in anti-colonial movements, feminist networks, trade unions, and Indigenous organizing. It is a system in the making—open to development, vulnerable to attack, but also capable of transformation.

But defending this system cannot stop at its legal architecture. Human rights must be understood as a political instrument—for the redistribution of resources, for exposing power structures, and for democratizing global institutions. They are not a product of consensus, but a line of conflict. And they derive their power only when connected to concrete social struggles.

A human rights-based internationalism therefore also means defending this normative system against its own depoliticization—and aligning it with the struggle for a more just world order.

7. Global Struggles, Local Silos: Why a Global Human Rights Movement (Still) Doesn't Exist

Given the global reach of human rights norms, one central question arises: Why is there still no strategically coordinated, transnational movement dedicated to their full realization?

In fact, countless organizations, networks, and initiatives exist around the world—from local human rights defenders to movements for climate justice, reproductive rights, or the right to the city. They operate in different contexts, with different tools—but often in isolation. What is missing is a shared political space that connects these struggles, makes them visible, and translates them into influence within international structures.

One key reason lies in the political economy of civil society work: unequal access to resources, linguistic and institutional barriers, fragmented funding logics, and increasing repression all hinder coordinated collaboration. Grassroots movements from the Global South, in particular, often lack the means to participate in international processes—even though their work is central to the realization of human rights on the ground.

Moreover, structural inequalities are also mirrored within civil society itself: between actors from the Global North and South, between internationally recognized NGOs with institutional access (e.g., via ECOSOC status) and grassroots movements whose work is rarely formally integrated. There are also conceptual differences—regarding understandings of human rights, strategic priorities, or political framings.

Many of these movements operate in thematic or geographic silos—not due to a lack of interest, but because there are few sustainable structures for cross-border collaboration. And yet, such a movement is more necessary than ever: an alliance that links individual rights with collective struggles, that integrates feminist, decolonial, and ecological perspectives—and that does not merely use the human rights system but transforms it.

8. Gender Justice as a Litmus Test for Human Rights and Peace

One of the central battlegrounds in the struggle for human rights is the protection of gender-based rights. Authoritarian attacks on human rights often begin with assaults on the rights of women, queer people, and marginalized gender identities—through restrictions on reproductive autonomy, smear campaigns against feminist organizations, or the criminalization of gender diversity. These are not marginal issues but strategic attacks on equality, autonomy, and democracy.

The global rollback of abortion rights, the vilification of feminist voices, and the murder of activists reveal how closely gender-based violence is tied to authoritarian agendas. Gender justice is not a niche concern—it is a measure of how seriously a society takes human rights.

This perspective is also indispensable in international peace and security policy. The United Nations’ “Women, Peace and Security” agenda—especially Resolution 1325 and its follow-up resolutions—has provided important impetus: for the participation of women in peace processes, protection from gender-based violence, and the integration of gender perspectives in conflict transformation.

But implementation remains patchy. Women continue to be systematically underrepresented in peace negotiations, and their perspectives are often sidelined. A feminist peace policy therefore goes beyond institutional participation. It asks who defines security—and for whom. It centers care, social infrastructure, reproductive justice, and collective safety in a broader political vision of peace. And it insists that peace policy must not stop at ceasefires, but must aim at structural justice.

Feminist movements around the world have long been pioneers in this field. They connect anti-militarism with social justice, reproductive rights with economic autonomy, and care politics with human rights advocacy. Their struggles are not an addition to the human rights agenda—they are at its core. They are essential for a human rights-based conception of positive peace.

9. Human Rights Mechanisms: Creating Leverage Despite Blockades

Despite political gridlock and structural power imbalances, there are mechanisms within the international system that allow for human rights pressure and accountability. While their reach remains limited, they offer vital entry points for political mobilization and international visibility.

A key component is the UN human rights treaty bodies, which regularly review state compliance with international obligations. They assess state reports, allow for individual complaints in some cases, and issue recommendations that, while not legally binding, carry significant political weight. Especially for civil society actors—particularly from the

Global South—these mechanisms offer platforms to document structural injustices and gain international attention.

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) operates in a similar way, subjecting all UN member states to regular peer reviews of their human rights performance. Civil society organizations can submit shadow reports and actively participate in the process. The UPR remains one of the few formally egalitarian mechanisms within the UN system—though its effectiveness often depends on how well its outcomes are integrated into national policy frameworks.

UN Special Rapporteurs also play a crucial role. Appointed with thematic or country-specific mandates, they investigate human rights violations, conduct country visits, publish reports, and issue recommendations. Often operating under precarious conditions—short-term contracts, limited funding, and political pressure—many nonetheless manage to create space for public discourse, visibility, and empowerment, particularly in environments where other voices are silenced.

This system is complemented by regional human rights courts—such as the European Court of Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Their rulings are legally binding, although implementation often depends on the political will of individual states.

These mechanisms are far from perfect—but they are usable. Their strength lies not only in legal procedures, but in their capacity to connect with social movements, transnational alliances, and local struggles. Human rights create political leverage—when they are used strategically and linked to collective demands.

10. Human Rights Internationalism: Reform, Not Resignation

Criticism of the international human rights system is legitimate—and necessary. It comes from many directions: from those who view its universalism as Western and hegemonic; from movements that denounce its selective application and lack of enforcement; and from people whose rights have been promised, but never fulfilled. These critiques reflect deep disappointment—but also powerful political potential.

The real alternative to the ongoing erosion of international human rights protections is not a better or fairer system—it is a regression to a global order where power overrides rights: characterized by unilateralism, economic domination, and authoritarian control. Abandoning the current system cedes ground to those who seek to dismantle it entirely—not to improve it, but to delegitimize the very idea of universal rights.

That is why we need a critical defense: an approach that refuses to idealize human rights, but sees them as a political project—open, evolving, and contested. A 21st-century human rights internationalism must also rethink representation: not only states, but also social movements, cities, Indigenous communities, and networks of care

workers should have a voice when global standards, resource distribution, or crisis response are decided.

The claim to human rights is always also a claim to participation—and to a just world order grounded not in economic utility, but in universal dignity.

11. This World Is Not Enough: For a Global Movement That Realizes Rights

Human rights are not a technical issue for experts. They concern everyone—and today, they are under attack around the world: by authoritarian regimes, economic interests, and political indifference. What is at stake is more than a set of legal norms. It is the question of whether justice, participation, and protection can still be claimed as universal—and whether they can be translated into binding political action.

The international human rights architecture is fragile. But precisely because it is incomplete, it is indispensable. And more than that: it needs people and movements who are willing to defend it, to develop it further, and to rethink it—beyond bureaucratic routines and diplomatic rituals.

Human rights are not a moral luxury. They are a political tool—against exploitation, discrimination, and violence. And they are a language through which different struggles can come together: for climate justice, for reproductive autonomy, for social protection, for democratic participation.

The movement we need already exists—in fragments: in feminist coalitions, in labor struggles, in the climate movement, in anti-racist protests, in Indigenous networks, in mobilizations for social rights. What has been missing is the connective tissue—the shared understanding that all of these struggles are, at their core, also fights for the validity, visibility, and realization of human rights.

What we need now is an international movement of movements. A movement that does not defend human rights as abstract norms, but lives them as collective practice. A movement that does not delegate the defense of rights, but takes it into its own hands—locally, transnationally, in solidarity.

Because human rights are not granted. They are claimed.