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The UN can no longer protect human rights by itself

Authoritarianism is on the march, and crucial entitlements are being rolled back

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In 1948, 75 years ago this month, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a historic act of international co-operation and a powerful assertion of our common humanity. Drafted by a committee led by Eleanor Roosevelt, it codified the centuries-old human struggle to claim freedom and dignity. Over the decades the UDHR has inspired legal codes and norms improving billions of lives.

Today, however, human rights around the world are not in good fettle. Authoritarianism is on the march. Crucial individual rights are being rolled back, from the right to a girl's education in Afghanistan to a woman's right to choose in the US. Free speech is under attack on campuses. And as armed conflicts become more numerous and more deadly to civilians, old norms are giving way to a new age of impunity.

The UN — the cradle of the UDHR — still has a role to play. Its Human Rights Council is a deeply flawed but important monitor. Its peacekeepers help to prevent atrocities. And its voice is still raised, as we saw most recently on December 6 when secretary-general António Guterres invoked Article 99 of the UN charter to urge the Security Council to push for a new humanitarian ceasefire in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

But current events also expose an important truth: the UN is not enough. Often it finds itself on the back foot as the geopolitical tensions of a fragmenting international order stymie common action. Despite the service of the “blue helmets”, its peacekeeping missions have a much smaller footprint today than they did in the late 1990s and 2000s. The UN's moral force remains, but is impaired. Ever more states, however grim their crimes, simply will not brook criticism on human rights by its bodies. As its officials come to terms with these political roadblocks there is a rising sense of double standards.

The answer is not to dismiss the UN's role in the protection of human rights, but to acknowledge that in future it must be buttressed by new strategies and methods, rooted in the art of the possible, that go beyond it. Pragmatic approaches should govern these.

Although “naming and shaming” human rights abusers sometimes worked during the post-1989 unipolar heyday of the western-led order, that approach is rarely relevant in today's more multipolar world. As Jack Snyder of Columbia University has argued, progress must come from within societies by weaving human rights advances into wider big-tent campaigns for social and economic reform on everything from corruption to access to education and health.

We inhabit an “à la carte world” in which the west or China exert few permanent claims on the loyalties of most other countries, which are much freer to pick their own geopolitical courses and ignore western human-rights moralising. But in this new international landscape, vanguard

coalitions of the willing possess a new importance, advancing where universalist legacy institutions remain deadlocked, and modelling new norms and even new institutions. Witness, for example, how the small island developing states have promoted into the mainstream new concepts of group rights for an age of rising sea levels and climate chaos.

While a number of brave NGOs work to defend human rights globally, we also need a new generation of bottom-up initiatives led by local campaigners that draw on the demands of their communities rather than external finger-wagging. On recent visits to a favela in Rio de Janeiro and community organisations in Lebanon, I was continuously reminded that communities are their own best champions of human rights. It takes local knowledge and sensitivity. International allies must see themselves not as preachers imposing human rights from afar, but as enablers supporting the platforms on which local actors can enact change as they see fit.

In March we will mark another 75th anniversary in the story of the human rights movement, that of Roosevelt's speech on "Making Human Rights Come Alive", delivered at Columbia in March 1949. This deserves as much attention as the anniversary of the UDHR's adoption this month. In her address, Roosevelt acknowledged the declaration as a necessary but not sufficient condition for lasting progress. Such documents, as she put it, "carry no weight unless the people know them, unless the people understand them, unless the people demand that they be lived".

Three-quarters of a century on from the moment in which those rights were set down, that is an important entreaty from that time to remember. To write something down is one thing. To live by it is quite another.