Global Campus of Human Rights

Podcast Series 3 - Reimagining politics through human rights

Episode 6 - Reimagining power: geopolitics and human rights

Karim Bitar

Hi, this is To The Righthouse, a new podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights. From scepticism to hope, from utopia to empathy, we discuss human rights, riding waves, but also signalling where the light is. This podcast was recorded in Venice, Italy, on the island of Lido at the Global Campus headquarters.

Graham Finlay (GF): Hello and welcome to this new episode of 'Reimagining politics through human rights'. I'm Graham Finlay and today I'd like to take you through another step in our journey. In particular, we'd like to discuss 'Reimagining power: geopolitics and human rights'. For this, I'm delighted to introduce you to Karim Bitar, Associate Professor of International Relations at St. Joseph University, one of the members of the Global Campus of Human Rights. Welcome Karim, and thank you for joining us.

Karim Bitar (KB): Thank you, Graham, thank you for having me.

GF: Well, it feels like we are experiencing a time of, if not unprecedented, at least new and difficult crises. What role do - or should - human rights play in current geopolitical tensions?

KB: The word crisis is indeed, today, sort of a euphemism. What we are going through is really a very harsh backlash against human rights, against liberal democracy, against the values of the Enlightenment. I'm really struck by the fact that when I was studying political science in France and in the US and in Canada in the early '90s and mid-'90s, it was some sort of enchanted parenthesis - as a philosopher called it - in the sense that there was a sense of hope after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Europe, the mirage of the Oslo Peace Accords in the Middle East, the liberation of Nelson Mandela and the collapse of Apartheid in South Africa. So we had a feeling that the international human rights movement and liberal values and progressive politics throughout the world were progressing. And we had a series of very important United Nations conferences that were held in Latin America or elsewhere about the environment, about women's rights, about inclusion. So we were in an optimistic state of mind during this unipolar moment, between the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9-11, the Iraq invasion and the complete debacle of the so-called rules-based order that was, to a large extent, triggered by the illegal invasion of Iraq.

And today in 2024, we have the feeling that the dominant forces, whether in politics or even in the media and sometimes in academia, have become ideological forces that do not really consider human rights as a priority. And again, I'm using a euphemism, sometimes they are deeply hostile to human rights and liberal values. We are witnessing throughout the world a resurgence of authoritarian nationalism, tribal nationalism, a rejection of modernity. We are seeing this in the United States with the Trump phenomenon, we are seeing this in Latin America with Bolsonaro, who was only defeated with a small majority, and goes all the way to Narendra Modi's India, and of course Putin can be considered to be the head of this new international authoritarian nationalist alliance that many people think has replaced the former Communist International.

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So the global climate is really suffocating, indeed, and there is a fundamental role to be played by the human rights community throughout the world. At a time when we are witnessing devastating wars in Ukraine and in Gaza, the time has come to try to switch the pendulum again and to give a new emphasis on the values of the Enlightenment. If we think in terms of the history of political ideas, the dominant force today is what Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell, the late historian of fascism, called 'the anti-enlightenment'. We are witnessing basically a revenge of Edmund Burke over Jean-Jacques Rousseau, we are witnessing the return of reactionary thought, and even Western liberal democracies are not immune to this. This is what is particularly worrying: even in the heart of Europe, in certain countries, there is this backlash against human rights, against liberal progressive values. So, yes, you were perfectly spot on when you started this podcast by mentioning the crisis. A few years ago, the Global Campus organised in Beirut a major international conference called The Beirut Human Rights Week in which Professor George Ulrich and many others discussed global scepticism against human rights. Today, I think we have seen the situation deteriorate even further: it's not even scepticism; it is, in many intellectual circles, a rejection of human rights and the reappearance of ideologies that we thought were going to stay in the dustbin of history. So we are living very dangerous days; however, there are reasons to hope: we are seeing a new generation of activists throughout the world, using social media, creating elective affinities amongst themselves, building bridges, and hopefully this new generation can help reopen this optimistic phase of the 1990s.

GF: I think that is a really important context, and I was there as well. And I'm wondering whether people like me, maybe it sounds like you, who remember the early to mid-'90s as a particular time - and I was recently reflecting that the Beijing Conference on the Status of Women and the Platform of Action just could not happen in Beijing now in the form it took - and, you know, it was an exciting time, but at the same time I'm wondering if we're still hampered by our expectations that this is the norm, as you suggested, and including the geopolitical context of a unipolar world. And so, I guess one question is, and especially I think in the movements you're thinking about, I guess there are two strategies to cope with the new reality: one is to emphasise a minimalist understanding of human rights, one, which, you know, at least list some minimal standards for all these different situations, different states, different countries, different movements. But another one is a more muscular, you know, form of human rights, which takes on the characteristics of a different kind of politics, but also might involve maybe more controversial appeals to human rights. What do you think is the role for either of these? Or both? And where do you see promising developments happening?

KB: So this is an interesting question because I see pros and cons for everyone of these approaches. The minimalist approach has an advantage, the fact that the reason we are so depressed today is because high expectations led to very low returns. So all these expectations we had in the '90s after the Beijing Conference, the Rio Conference and all the other good news that were coming at this time, we really did not expect such a rapid and violent backlash. This is particularly true also in the Arab world: we had the global protest movement in 2011 that was dubbed 'the Arab Spring' and we did not expect the counterrevolution to triumph so rapidly. So adopting a minimalist approach trying to manage the expectations could make sense from a tactical perspective. However, I do think that the situation having become so tragic today and, considering the arrogance of the forces that we are confronting, the forces trying to basically bring back the anti-enlightenment, take us back to the eras that preceded liberal modernity, these appeal to strong man, to authoritarianism and sometimes to outright fascism - I think as the fact that we are facing such an arrogant, egregious intellectual currents that is becoming sometimes hegemonic, and trying to basically portray all defenders of human rights and all liberal democrats, progressives across the world as delusional idealists or woke Islam or leftist or… I do not know what new

pejorative expression will emerge in the next few months. Considering we have reached this stage, I think [what] I would tend to favour today is the second approach you alluded to, which means a more muscular approach to reaffirm the universality of human rights.

And the reason I mention this it's because many people in what we call the Global South today still did not internalise this very important point that human rights should never again be presented as a Western import. Amartya Sen wrote important articles on this, focusing on the universality of human rights, on the fact that the ideas that underpin liberalism and democracy emerged at several points in history, in Africa, in Asia, in India in Latin America, that we should not succumb to this western fetishization of the ballot box and of elections. Elections do not make a liberal democracy. Voting once every few years is definitely not enough. The ideas that human rights are universal, should be constantly reaffirmed.

So, when we organised this conference I mentioned, The Beirut Human Rights Week, we were celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, and today, as I was saying, the scepticism has morphed into a deliberate attempt in many countries to treat all human rights defenders as deluded young idealists that should not even be given airtime. A case in point is the fact that in France the expression 'Droit-de-l'hommiste', which means defenders of human rights, was previously used exclusively by the extreme right, by Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the 1980s. He used this pejorative expression of 'Droit-de-l'hommiste' to refer to students who are active against racism or in favour of solidarity and inclusion. And today this pejorative expression referring to human rights activists as 'Droit-de-l'hommiste' has become the norm, and even people who are in government, who belong to centre-right or centre-left political movements have started to adopt this rhetoric, as if the simple fact of caring about human rights was becoming dépassé, démodé [outdated], a thing of the past, and that we are all supposed to get with the programme, and the programme on the international level today is to stand behind strong men who would supposedly protect us against the others.

We are back to tribal nationalism, which Hannah Arendt defined as 'dividing the world constantly between us and them, and perceiving them as representing an existential threat in which we have to use all means at our disposal to protect our tribe, our family, our ethnic group'. And I think this is extremely dangerous. So I tend to believe that the time has come for all members of the international human rights community to no longer be shy to adopt a... you call the muscular, but we could call it... we could find another word, it definitely has to be assertive, we need to move away, we need to stop shying away from affirming our commitment to these values that triumphed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that have a legacy, or at least I should say, not a legacy, a heritage going way back in the Arab world in the 1860s and 1870s, we witnessed a fantastic school of thought called the Arabic Nahḍa, the Renaissance, initially of the Arabic language, but also the introduction of ideas of democratic citizenship, liberal modernity, equal rights for women. And these ideas were carried by Christian intellectuals, Muslim intellectuals, free thinkers, and for a while they gained traction. There is this famous book by Albert Hourani, 'The liberal age in the Arab world', focusing on a few intellectual figures, and unfortunately, today, many people would have us believe that it's only ideas that are imported by a few westernised intellectuals. It is simply not the case, there is a liberal tradition in the Arab world, just like there is a well established liberal democratic feminist tradition in Africa, in Asia and in most parts of the world.

We definitely need to regroup all those who still believe in emancipation, who have not succumbed to resignation, who refuse the return of these authoritarian, proto-fascist movements across the world. However, it's not enough to talk about human rights from an academic perspective, we also have to make

sure that the powers that be, those who are in office in these countries, realise that it's not only the moral thing to do, that it's also the political avenue that would allow them to maintain their dignity and also to win elections. So I'm using this rather cynical argument because many people, many politicians in the West and elsewhere tend to believe that public opinion no longer cares about human rights. There is a sociologist from Mauritania who called it 'despotism by popular demand', who said that [what] we are witnessing today is completely different from the 1970s, where you had a general Pinochet sending his tanks, making a coup d'etat, sending 30,000 persons to jail, torturing his opponents, and basically everyone would have to remain silent. Today, it's something completely different, because we see that the authoritarian leaders that are dominating the world stage, from Mr. Putin, to Mr. Erdoğan, to Mr. Trump, to Bolsonaro and Duterte, and even a few European leaders, (they) still have considerable popular support. So we should make sure that the moral stand is also capable of mobilising popular, popular opinion so that it becomes fashionable again to support human rights, to make human rights appealing again, so that these reactionary forces can no longer rely on our resignation, on the fact that we have given up and, that said, we are okay with the re-emergence on the world stage of strongman and authoritarianism.

GF: Well, I have to say as a philosopher I'm really delighted that you are pointing out the importance of philosophy and theory and intellectuals to this problem. And one thing which has struck me is that we need to take seriously the reactionary intellectuals who are having quite an influence, maybe outside of, you know, philosophy departments, or political theory departments, or political science departments, like Dugin in Russia and so forth. But then we can also, we can also recognise that our values, including our human rights values are based in theories, which are connected to real world political movements, and we've seen in Europe, but also maybe more importantly and especially outside of Europe, in every different possible way, in lots of different countries, a number of theorists emerging who have, you know, their own distinctive voice, which is critical, particularly of maybe the complacency and the limits of a Eurocentric form of human rights, but are also connecting it to practice. And I'm thinking about Ghannouchi in Tunisia or Mbembe from Cameroon, and they are connecting, I mean, I think we can see them as making a human rights case. If we see it, we get away from a sort of legalistic or, you know, again, minimalist notion of human rights and focus on what kind of social movements they're critiquing, or what kind of structures they're critiquing, what social movements they're inspiring.

KB: Yes, I totally agree. Initially I mentioned that we were witnessing a revenge of Edmund Burke over Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and what you were just saying about Alexander Dugin and some others reminds me that this battle is not over yet. Today, many quote-unquote 'intellectuals' who are very close to certain political leaders are trying to gain this intellectual hegemony in order to impose a very dangerous agenda. So you have Dugin of course in Russia, you have Yoram Hazony, who is trying to put together this nationalist conservative alliance, to a large extent, that would be supportive of ethnic nationalism in Israel and elsewhere. Even in France, you have someone who posed as an intellectual, Éric Zemmour, and who ended up entering politics and becoming a presidential candidate, even though he lost the election, and he speaks fondly of speakers, sorry, of thinkers like Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès who were openly antisemitic - Maurras rejected Protestants, Jews, Freemasons, immigrants, of course, he viewed them as enemies from within that needed to be confronted.

And, today, this current is back in force. iIn the United States, Corey Robin wrote a book about the politics of fear and then another book about… called"The Reactionary Mind: [Conservatism] from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump". And I'm afraid these reactionary intellectuals are today giving the tempo. They have become very vocal, even though their intellectual status is not particularly impressive, they are very close to

political circles. And someone like Steve Bannon is trying to bring together all these supporters of authoritarian nationalism worldwide, all these paleoconservatives, and sometimes the neoconservatives tend to join forces with those paleoconservatives on certain issues, and it becomes an extremely dangerous mix. So one would have hoped that liberal progressive voices would have been more assertive in the current phase.

Unfortunately, we are not seeing enough of an intellectual rebuttal to these reactionary thinkers who are becoming very strong. You still have a few elderly figures: in France, I'm thinking of sociologist Edgar Morin, who is over 103 years old, and yet is still tweeting almost every single day and he's still waging these battles. Many people in the Middle East were sort of disappointed with Jürgen Habermas' latest stance with regard to the war on Gaza. You have certain independent voices emerging in the United States, a new generation of thinkers, even within the American Jewish establishment, who are now starting to criticise Israeli policies - I'm thinking of Peter Beinart, who is now the editor of the Jewish Currents magazine.

But at the same time, we have to be careful not to give ammunition to these reactionary forces. When I hear an academic like Judith Butler going too far by claiming that movements like Hamas or Hezbollah are part of the global left, or national liberation movements, I think it's an auto goal, she is not helping the cause, she wants to help all of us who live here in the Middle East. No, or most of us at least, view Hezbollah and Hamas as forces that could be classified on the extreme right, who adopt neoliberal economic policies and who are identitarian extreme right forces. So, when you have an academic based in California depicting them as part of the global left, it does not necessarily help the global struggle for human rights.

So, what we need today is a new progressive alternative that connects the dots, that brings together the economy, the environment, the struggle for social justice, and the struggle for political liberalism. So we would need basically the disciples of John Rawls to work with economists who care about inequalities like Thomas Piketty and others with all those who care about environmental justice, and all Westerners who still realise that what is happening in the Middle East is central. [With] the tragic events that we have been living after the October 7 crimes against humanity that were committed by Hamas, and the subsequent devastating attacks that Israel - and I think they should also be described as crimes against humanity until the International Court of Justice gives its decision - the time has come for everyone to realise that this question remains central. There is a persistence of the Palestinian question, a centrality of the Palestinian question and a universality; so we can no longer brush aside all these issues that are a bit controversial in certain European countries. The struggle in favour of human rights and against authoritarianism cannot do with double standards and [we] should find the courage to address all these issues openly. It's all interrelated. It's not an anecdote that right after coming out of jail, Nelson Mandela declared 'our freedom will only be complete when Palestinians are also free'. It's not a coincidence that it was South Africa, who decided to ask the International Court of Justice in the Hague to prosecute Israeli crimes.

Having said that, I do not think that we should romanticise the so-called Global South and I also see this tendency here in Beirut and in many Arab countries, people feel that the Global South is going to stick together and confront the collective West. I think we have to avoid these wide generic terms that are meaningless. Talking about Islam as a monolithic block or about the West as a monolithic block is completely meaningless and it is also counterproductive. We are still stuck in this Orientalist state of mind, we view civilizations as being blocks homogeneous, fighting or negotiating between one another, whereas civilizations are not actually actors of international politics, they do not have unity of objectives. So it is very important not to romanticise this newly emerging Global South, because in this Global South you have

movements, I mentioned Narendra Modi earlier, and this form of very radical nationalism that is emerging in India is quite worrisome to me. Today, everyone is embracing President Lula of Brazil because he made a few statements in support of Palestine. I think we should not forget that it's only 2 or 3% of the electorate that got Lula to defeat Bolsonaro, and Bolsonaro would have taken a completely different stance, because he's very close to evangelical circles, he is nostalgic of the military dictatorship in Brazil, and he tends to be extremely supportive of Mr. Netanyahu.

So even within this Global South, there is a battle to be fought. And we should build bridges with liberals, progressive human rights activists across the world and not limit ourselves, not think that the collective West is collectively responsible for colonialism and imperialism and support for Arab authoritarian regimes or support for Israel, we should realise that within every country, within every civilization, we have intense culture wars. I was surprised to see that many members of the US Republican Party feel closer to Vladimir Putin, then to their own President Joe Biden. So these culture wars today are present in most countries, in France, in Italy, in the United States, and in many countries of the Global South. So I think even though we as Global Campus tend to try to regroup as many liberal and progressive thinkers based in the South, and of course help them cooperate with their colleagues in Europe and elsewhere, it is important not to romanticise armed struggle. I'm also seeing a dangerous trend: people thinking that there is purity that will come... revolutionary purity that will emerge out of violence committed by Hamas or other groups. And this was not what Franz Fanon had in mind. My friend Adam Shatz, who writes for the London Review of Books, recently published a fantastic biography of Franz Fanon, and he made it very clear that this was not in line with what Fanon really felt deep down. However, people in the South have been so traumatised by Western hypocrisy and by all these wars of aggression, they see the West making a mockery of every single value, it says it believes in, they tend to go to the other extreme and to romanticise movements that are also repressive and that are far from being on the side of the Enlightenment, of human rights, of liberal values.

GF: I think that's a really crucial insight because it's really important for us to remember that culture wars matter, it's very easy to see them as a sort of social media phenomenon and as sort of a transparent attempt to rile up your base if you're in a particular country, but they do matter and both internal to states and including states in the Global South, but also internationally. I mean, so again you've been talking about France quite a bit, and, you know, this has become quite a central understanding, when President Macron talks about 'Islamogauchisme', Islamist leftism as a way of attacking his sort of more leftist critics possibly in the universities. It's not just, you know, finding a bogeyman, but it's a way of asserting a certain kind of politics of culture. And similarly, I'm really glad that you drew attention to this on the global level, because it has global ramifications. I'm wondering and, you know, maybe in this context of conflict, and even conflict resolution, I'm wondering whether there's a similar problem to what I posed in terms of thinking about human rights, in terms of trying to overcome these very real struggles, which are happening in countries all over the world and between countries… is… you know, there's the minimalist version, where we just in terms of governance, and in terms of navigating and negotiating these conflicts, where you, you just bracket all of these higher questions of cultural sensitivity, or power dynamics, or inclusivity, all the values piece, and just try to resolve them in a stripped down form of governance, or do we need a different form of governance at international level, regional level, which has more concrete understandings of what solidarity, democracy and perhaps dialogue, as opposed to this sort of hegemonic non dialogue of the clash of civilizations, you know. Is there a more culturally robust and maybe I'll use the word muscular, again, form of governance, which can help us address as an international community, but maybe also as regional communities, all of the conflicts you refer to?

KB: I definitely hope we could build this robust, muscular, assertive coalition, but let's keep in mind that it's a double edged sword, because in the political phantasmagoria, in the political imagination of the people we are confronting, again, we are in the midst of very intense cultural wars. And people on the far right tend to be extraordinarily paranoid. You know, this book by Richard Hofstadter '*The paranoid style in American politics*' is still at work 50 years later. We are witnessing a new McCarthyism, a new paranoid vision. And whenever they hear us talking about building bridges, and rethinking governance, they immediately depict us as proponents of a so-called New World Order, or of a world government, and it becomes easier for us to dismiss what we are trying to do. So we should make it clear that we are not part of some giant conspiracy to completely dismantle nation states, that we are trying to make sure that these nation states respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, respect the values on which they were based, whether France or the United States, or most countries were built on this idea of individual emancipation, of democratic citizenship, of tolerance, of respecting minorities. And today, all these ideas are being trampled upon by those who are rejecting political modernity, and who are stuck in this idea that things were better in the past. Throughout the world, there is this nostalgia for a golden age that has never really existed. So we have to be very smart in the way, very tactical, in the way we approach this, so as not to give ammunition to our enemies who are already extremely paranoid, thinking that there is a giant conspiracy, you know, the great replacement series, and all these other ideas that human rights activists are in cahoots with NGOs and nefarious forces that are plotting against Western civilization. So these ideas that were on the fringes of the US political spectrum, when Hofstadter published his essay in Harper's, I think it was in 1964, these ideas are now mainstream, the lunatic fringes are becoming the rulers. This is why all of us who still believe in democratic citizenship, in liberal values, should be very assertive, reaffirm our principles, but at the same time be able to address the anxieties, the social and economic and identitarian anxieties of those who are giving their votes to these populist, neo-fascist movements, whether in the West or in certain countries of the Global South.

GF: Well, It's been fascinating talking to you, Karim, thank you for your insights and best wishes for your ongoing work.

KB: Thank you, Graham. It was great being with you. It's always impressive to see what Global Campus is trying to do in so many different parts of the world. And I really think this institution can play a fundamental role in helping us overcome these dark times that you were referring to at the beginning of this podcast. Thank you for having me.

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