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Chapter 17. Facing authoritarian regimes¹

From Hong Kong, Yangon, Istanbul, Moscow, Manila and Minsk, pictures of peaceful protests and civil disobedience went around the world. Unarmed young women are confronting police and the military in riot gear. People go to prison, risk their lives and die for their ideals and hopes. We are on their side. We support their protest. Governments express grave concern. Resolutions are adopted. Targeted sanctions are designed to punish dictators and their closest henchmen without hurting ordinary people and business opportunities.

However, unlike the late Soviet dictators or British imperialism in India after World War II, today's strongmen are neither impressed by the masses on the street nor by western outrage or sanctions. Protest leaders are in jail or forced into exile. Brutal repression prevails. Ethnic minorities are imprisoned in detention camps. Dissidents are murdered even abroad. The military is shooting and bombing their own people. Civilian aircraft are hi-jacked. Putin and Xi Ji Ping are bullying neighbouring countries and show nothing but contempt for freedom, democracy and basic human rights. The Russian dictator has now ordered his troops to bombard neighbouring Ukraine into subordination. After finishing up with freedom and democracy at home, he wants to also bring Ukrainian people into his 21st century Russo-Slavic 'prison of nations' (Lenin, 1972).

1 The article was largely written before Putin started the war against Ukraine. The outstanding international support for the Ukrainian people confirms the thesis of this article that while human rights, freedom and democracy are universal values, solidarity and support tend to be selective. The article rejects military intervention to pursue democratisation or human rights. Going to war to advance human rights and democracy in a foreign country is a contradiction in itself. However, solidarity with people taking up arms to defend their human rights and freedom against military aggression is another matter. In the post-Berlin-Wall period, the rise of authoritarianism was ignored or downplayed in favour of free trade and business opportunities. Ukraine is hopefully not only a wake-up call for reinforced military deterrence, but for a paradigm shift towards a trade and investment regime that is serious about supporting inclusive democratic societies and puts a heavy price tag on human rights violations. When war starts it creates its own escalating logic; therefore the art of policy remains to find peaceful solutions to even the most antagonistic conflict without giving up on the fundamental [CC BY-NC-SA](#) of freedom and human rights.

In the long run, dictatorial rule is unsustainable and the people will win, we hope. But repression can last for many years. Nevertheless, external regime change is, in most cases, no option. It is not only morally questionable, it does not work. People can't be bombarded into democracy. Furthermore, it carries the high risk of war and large-scale destruction and has rarely resulted in free and democratic societies.

At the end of the day, dictatorships collapse when the people rise up. It's not outside pressure and sanctions, it's also not the courageous resistance of individuals, but mass protests, strikes and rebellion of the people themselves that ultimately topple regimes. Striking workers organising themselves in independent trade unions were instrumental in regime change in many countries such as South Korea, Brazil, the Soviet Union, Poland, South Africa and Sudan. However, it greatly matters whether internal opposition forces can count on international solidarity and support during their struggle or whether they are abandoned in the name of *realpolitik*.

Principles without credibility cannot convince

Gone is the Western post-Berlin-Wall triumphalism. The optimism that the world would enthusiastically or from lack of alternatives, willy-nilly, embark on liberal capitalism, including democracy, freedom of expression and respect for human rights, did not materialize. The vast majority of the people in the eastern bloc had regarded the Western world of freedom, democracy and market economy as the better and also morally superior option. This was one, if not the greatest, asset of the West during the cold war. The American dream and inclusive European welfare states both strongly appealed to people suffering under the gerontocratic systems east of the iron curtain. However, when painful and reckless shock therapies resulted in peripheral integration of transforming countries into the global economy, the collapse of familiar ways of life, the devaluation of earlier life accomplishments and the scrupulous enrichment of very few, disappointment and disillusion became widespread.

Thirty years after the triumph over the Soviet Union, the West has lost a lot of its glittering image. Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are a disgrace. The financial crisis devastated the livelihood of millions of people and the trust in the economic efficiency of the system. The election of bizarre personalities such as Berlusconi, Trump or Johnson raises doubts about contemporary democracy's ability to select qualified national leaders. Fox News led the way in turning media freedom into 21st-century right-wing agitprop (Gertz 2022). The Trump presidency, culminating in storming the

White House, showed the fragility and weakness of democratic institutions even in the USA. Orbán and Kaczynski make a mockery of the alleged common values of the EU. Vaccine nationalism trumps all talk about global solidarity during the Covid-19 crisis.

For years, human rights concerns have been abandoned in favour of business opportunities in Russia or China. It was even argued that business and economic growth would lead more or less automatically to democratization (Groitl 2021) as if the more BMWs we sell to China, the faster it becomes a democracy. Indeed, the plutocratization and the technocratic hollowing out of democratic decision making led to the admiration of and the desire for strongmen even in Western societies themselves. Both Western self-confidence in being the credible custodian of universal values and Western moral authority in the eyes of others are in tatters.

The current overwhelming unity for a strong response against Russia's onslaught against Ukraine created a Western unity reminiscent of Cold War times and rhetoric. Whether this rejuvenation will be sufficient to paper over the cracks and devastation created by decades of globalisation tailored to the desires of capital is an open question.

Still the best bet

Nevertheless, only in democratic societies can people exert pressure on governments to respect, defend and enforce human rights. Wherever trade unions, civil society organisations and human rights activists try to mobilise international solidarity in support of people facing authoritarian rulers, they call on democratic governments to stick to their self-proclaimed values as part of their foreign policy. They want them to use their leverage vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes to enforce respect for basic human and workers' rights. Being aware and critical of their own governments' often incoherent human rights policies, they nevertheless see them as allies or at least as actors who can be convinced or pushed to take a stance against human rights violations.

However, as the USA and its allies are not only defenders of human rights but also a hegemonic superpower that sees human rights advocacy as an instrument in geopolitical power play, certain double standards occur. Not surprisingly this is used by human rights violators to dismiss international criticism as part of a Western plot, and is nothing but geopolitics. In some instances, self-proclaimed anti-imperialists on the left share this reasoning and end up as defenders or apologists of the indefensible (Bilous 2022). Others, following postcolonial theory, argue against human rights missionaries and value-paternalism. And indeed, imposing any set of values

on any society from the outside is not only morally questionable, it regularly fails.

If people are peacefully living in agreement with traditional, religious or even authoritarian regimes, who are outsiders to impose their hegemonic view and tell them to change? However, that is not the case in Hong Kong, Yangon, Moscow, Beijing or Minsk. People are suppressed because they themselves are demanding basic human rights, freedom and fair elections. The issue is therefore not whether Western trade unions, NGOs or governments should pursue a crusade for Western values, but whether to support people who value freedom, democracy, respect and dignity at least as much as we do.

Human rights: universal with priority for the likeminded

In this complicated environment, international solidarity campaigns need to simultaneously provide direct support for persecuted people and demand government action against the violation of universal human rights. Being active, direct supporters and not only demanding government action is essential for the effectiveness and credibility of international solidarity campaigns. Left just to governments, human rights are too often conveniently forgotten or deprioritized. The voices of trade unions and other civil society organisations are indispensable for bringing human rights violations into the public focus and providing direct practical solidarity, especially when governments are unwilling or hesitant to do so.

Concerns about human rights violations are not independent of the political priorities of governments, the values of the campaigners, the world view and ethnicity of the victims and the place of the perpetrators on the geopolitical chessboard. International solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria was largely absent, despite them being suppressed and shot by the military after winning democratic elections. Parts of the left turn a blind eye to human rights violations in Cuba. Pinochet enjoyed US support for overthrowing a democratically elected government and killing and torturing thousands of Chileans. Margaret Thatcher expressed strong sympathy for trade unions and strikes only as long as they were in Poland. While Europe generously opens its borders for desperate refugees from Ukraine, refugees from Syria or Afghanistan still drown in the Mediterranean. Show trials in China and Russia are a cynical display of totalitarian power. However, any criticism loses moral authority when, at the same time, incarceration for 20 years without any trial or access to judicial assistance in Guantanamo meets only lukewarm protest

or resigned acceptance or the relentless persecution of Julian Assange, who disclosed evidence of possible US war crimes.

Recognizing that international solidarity is not solely motivated by the unconditional defence of universal human rights principles but also by support for the like-minded helps to explain the different reactions to human rights violations under different circumstances. International solidarity is often selective and the willingness to act varies considerably.

Furthermore, human rights themselves are constantly evolving. Human rights are global standards that are formally adopted after global deliberations, but have been and are dominantly shaped by Western views and values. Newly formulated visions and priorities of human rights are somehow imposed on those who are on the receiving rather than the shaping end of these global deliberation processes. Some deeply religious and patriarchal societies, for example, disagree with the current Western understanding of gender equity or LGBTQ+ rights. They regard them as morally wrong and even as blasphemy - a view, by the way, that was also quite widespread in the West not so long ago. Therefore international solidarity in defence of human rights is most convincing and has the most potential for success when supporting issues and needs anchored in social movements in a country, and not first and foremost the priority of those that want to help.

With the relative decline of Western economic and military power, emerging rivals are also more daring and confident to not only practice but also to advocate authoritarian models rejecting individual freedom and democracy as culturally alien to their societies. Successful modernisers such as China or Singapore and their admirers tend to frame the debate as freedom versus prosperity. Development and authoritarian rule, they argue, are preferable to democracy and hunger. To the extent that the universality of values is based on the dominance of underlying hard power, credibility becomes ever more important to maintain and defend these rules and principles.

Competing policy objectives

Government actions against human rights violations are not only selective; they are also competing with other concerns such as peace or business. A confrontational human rights strategy might have negative repercussions for the already fragile multilateral system. It might further complicate cooperation in areas where global cooperation is urgently needed. Should freedom in Hong Kong and the rights of Muslim minorities take priority over business interests or the all-important cooperation against the climate crisis in

dealing with China? Choices have to be made. China tends to respond to criticism with sanctions - something Norway realised after giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo as well as Lithuania after giving prominent diplomatic recognition to Taiwan. Knowing that China fiercely retaliates against any criticism, trade unions representing workers in export industries certainly also see the risk of damaging the business prospects of companies and jobs by being too outspoken about the repression of workers' rights in China, especially as their protests will most likely not have any immediate positive impact, but will have direct economic repercussions.

Given that geopolitical and business interests tend to prevail over human rights concerns, civil society mobilisation is indispensable to push governments, in particular in those cases when human rights concerns do not coincide with other policy priorities. The EU, for example, cannot - even in a straightforward case of reckless human rights violations such as Myanmar - get itself to withdraw the special 'Everything but Arms' trade preferences that are specifically designed to promote and strengthen human and labour rights in the receiving countries. By failing to live up to its own principals and officially stated policies in the case of Myanmar, the EU makes a mockery of its value-based trade policy.

Sanctions - the illusionary silver bullet

Economic sanctions, for understandable reasons, are frequently demanded from campaigners as well as from internal opposition forces as the ultimate non-military instrument, but they are not the panacea often hoped for. Iran - subject to one of the harshest sanctions regimes ever - is suffering, but not crumbling. Economic sanctions create hardship for the people in the targeted country and they are economically costly also for the imposing countries. They lack effectiveness, if not applied by all major trading partners, which has hardly ever been the case. Economic sanctions create economic costs for repressive regimes and can function as a warning to other countries not to go down the same route. Threatening military action or economic sanctions are instruments of deterrence to restrain and push back an aggressor. The historically unprecedented massive sanctions against Russia will show whether economic sanctions can crumble an aggressor and, for the first time in history, stop a war.

However, using sanctions to advance human rights in authoritarian regimes is another matter: not on principled grounds, but most likely as a question of effectiveness. Rarely has outside pressure motivated dictators to become democratic. No one can seriously believe that economic sanctions

will force Russia or China to respect the human rights of their citizens. Moving from economic sanctions to so-called smart sanctions that focus on the leading crooks of a regime are less costly and look good, but have yet to prove any great effectiveness. Up till now, there is no evidence that stopping dictators, oligarchs and their families from enjoying the Cote d'Azur, blocking their Swiss bank accounts or excluding their children from elite universities has had any major impact.

What needs to and can be done

The limited possibilities to change dictatorial regimes must not lead to cynical realpolitik that just ignores the way regimes treat their citizens. The issue of human rights violations has to be raised bilaterally and in the multi-lateral system. Silence about human rights violations is complicity. Constant vigilance from civil society organisations is required against government indifference to human rights. Governments and businesses must feel the public heat in order not to conveniently ignore human rights violations.

Providing political, moral and financial support to the courageous people fighting dictatorial regimes is indispensable. Those standing up against dictatorial regimes need visible international, moral and political support as well as financial help – open and transparent where possible, clandestine where necessary. Solidarity must be firm without being prescriptive and, at the same time, careful not to raise false expectations about the possibilities and limits of international support. Assistance must also be aware of the potentially corrupting role financial aid can play.

Prioritizing economic cooperation with countries striving to respect human rights and democratic principles must be part and parcel of governments' foreign trade policies. Long term economic ties and cooperation need to support those countries committed to internationally recognised human rights including labour rights. Picking the right partner is more credible and sustainable than trying or merely pretending to make a difference through ad-hoc punishment of human rights violators. Instead of subscribing to an amoral concept of free trade and business opportunities, those sharing the values of human rights, freedom and democracy must be the privileged beneficiaries of development aid and have privileged market access. Only countries meeting these basic criteria should benefit from state credits or state guarantees for private investment. Human rights criteria must be obligatory for public procurement. There need to be penalty taxes or even a ban on imports from countries competing to oppress their people.

The elites of dictatorial regimes must be deprived of the opportunity to hide their wealth in the Virgin Islands and similar places. The corrupt global financial industry that serves the rich to stash their billions must be dried up.

Whoever is at risk in her or his home country must have easy access to political asylum in the free world. Furthermore, offering skilled people from these countries free entry to democratic societies would not only allow people to vote with their feet but would be a very effective alternative to economic sanctions. Historically, nothing undermined the repressive regime in East Germany more than the willingness of West Germany to immediately give every East German crossing the border West German citizenship. For ageing Europe to open their borders to skilled people from Russia, Belarus or Hong Kong might be, even for purely egoistic reasons, a smart migration policy. Of course, brain drain, in general, is highly problematic, but as an instrument to undercut the socio-economic base of repressive regimes, it has some advantages compared to economic sanctions that try to weaken regimes by generating economic hardship.

Finally, the most powerful way to undermine and change repressive regimes is being the better alternative. Nothing succeeds like success. Being a promising model of modern society by delivering on its own promises of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* is the most powerful challenge of democratic societies against repressive regimes. On the other hand, all talk about democracy and human rights becomes shallow if Western democracies themselves degenerate into plutocratic regimes governed by reckless political clowns. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the outside pressure to be the better alternative disappeared and a rawer form of capitalism reappeared. The deterioration of democratic standards, the rise of extreme inequality, the inability to control financial markets, the decline of social cohesion, the incapability of dealing with the global migration crisis to name just a few, allow dictatorships to claim that the west is no better or even worse than their regimes of orderly repression. Further deterioration of the West serves them well.

The ‘relief’ of many commentators that, by firmly supporting Ukraine, the West has regained its common values and a renewed sense of purpose (McTague 2022) will be short-lived without fundamental policy changes beyond increasing defence expenditure. Fostering universal values globally is impossible without being serious about them at home. The one can’t be done without the other.

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