



Who Will Be Free? The Battles for Human Rights to 2050

By Josh Calder

As geopolitical power around the world shifts, so will the global consensus on human rights. There are challenges ahead, but the expansion of affluence, education, and digital technology may lead to a freer and more humane world in the long run.



The future of human rights looks promising. That may seem surprising, in light of the oppressive regimes that continue to brutally suppress dissident uprisings and rig elections, but several powerful, positive trends are at work, centered around changes in values and new technology. These trends will drive three contests that will define the evolution of human rights over the next few decades:

- Freedom-enhancing technology versus repressive technology.
- The rise of new powers versus the influence of the legacy great powers.



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- Clashes within societies over values.

The definition of human rights has evolved and will continue to do so, but for purposes of this article they encompass traditional political rights—democracy and self-determination and their components, such as the freedoms of conscience, association, and information—along with the absence of punishment for exercising those political rights. This



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definition also includes basic physical protections for the person—freedom from extrajudicial killing and torture.

The Technological Arms Race

The potential contribution of technology to human rights has become increasingly clear, especially after the prominent role attributed to social media in the 2011 Arab Spring unrest. Several trends are at work here.

The Internet and mobile networks are spreading, giving people more open access to information and the ability to generate it themselves. With 70% of the world’s population carrying mobile phones, individuals increasingly have the technological means to document and publicize rights abuses.

Such crowdsourced information

gathering is finding new forms. Efforts such as Syria Tracker gather reports of human rights abuses in real time from the field and map them for the world.

Some governments and organizations are backing technologies intended to aid dissidents in sharing information. These include technologies to support clandestine use of the Internet and mobile phones, and software to document human rights abuses. For instance, the U.S. State Department is reportedly helping create an “Internet in a suitcase” to provide dissidents mobile Internet access that can elude government censors.

Human-rights groups are using satellite images and other large-scale, centralized technology, as well, to detect and document human rights abuses. One monitoring effort in Sudan is even partly funded by actor George Clooney.

And new technologies continue to come online: Activists have called for the deployment of unmanned drones to monitor human rights crises.

Overall, transparency is rising in the world, making it harder for governments to hide human rights violations from their own people or global observers. However, technology is also being deployed in ways that harm human rights, or have the potential to do so. Surveillance technologies of all kinds are proliferating and tracking people’s shopping habits, locations, political preferences, and myriad other factors.

The private sector collects much of this information, compiling it into hundreds of millions of dossiers that go beyond what the most totalitarian government of the past could have dreamed of. Such techniques and the information itself could be put to political purposes in the future. For example, Facebook is granting researchers access to anonymized data on the political preferences of all of its members based on their private postings. A similar company might do the same for a government someday.

Surveillance could also go much farther. Technology could track

where most people are most of the time and provide clues to their activities and concerns multiple times a day, with the data fed to centralized information repositories. The U.S. intelligence community has already noted the potential utility of the “Internet of things,” with any component of the smart environment potentially feeding data about targets of interest. As one article put it, “We’ll Spy on You through Your Dishwasher.”

All this data could be automatically and continuously mined for patterns that indicate that a person is of concern. People could even be monitored indirectly: Studies have found that much can be discovered about members of social networks even if they keep all their own information private. The characteristics of their associates still reveal facts as intimate as sexual orientation—predictable with 78% accuracy in one study—and this would be the case with political and social views.

Technology could also intersect with human rights much more directly, as armed robots are deployed in policing and warfare. Robots could violate human rights deliberately or through faulty performance, and they will add a level of deniability for violations, potentially reducing accountability for soldiers and policy makers.

New Powers versus Old

Rising non-Western powers such as China and India hold views of human rights that are distinctly different from those in the West. As new powers gain an ever-growing share of global economic, political, and cultural power, approaches to human rights and freedoms will shift.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Western nations have slowly and often only partially adopted the idea of universal human rights. Rising powers are almost uniformly wary of the concept of promoting human rights across borders. Many have serious human rights problems of their own, and others see human rights as a tool that the West uses to impose

its views on others. The latter group includes democratic states such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, and Turkey.

The right of self-determination may falter. The West has endorsed this right only slowly and reluctantly in many cases—such as East Timor, Eritrea, and South Sudan—and rising powers are even more skeptical. Many, including China, India, Indonesia, Russia, and Turkey, face active internal self-determination issues and will oppose any strengthening



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of such rights in ways that could be applied within their borders.

The rising influence of emerging powers could shift the role of technology in human rights. Technology companies and the systems they run will increasingly reflect the preferences of the largest economies. Early signs of this have begun to emerge. Twitter has modified its system to censor tweets country by country, so that it can comply with local laws. Activists noted that this could enable compliance with information-control laws such as those of China.

As China grows more powerful, it is likely to pressure global companies and other countries to facilitate its information-control efforts. China and other rising powers may determine the degree to which the Internet remains open. Commercial control—as in diminished “Net neutrality”—may be a backdoor to state control as global corporations become more responsive to emerging powers.

Emerging powers’ stance on human rights is evolving. China and Russia did not block the imposition of a no-fly zone by the United Nations in Libya in 2011, departing from their customary views on intervention in “internal matters,” and the Arab League voted later that year for sanctions against Syria due to its violent crackdown against protesters.

The cost of indifference to human rights may be rising. China and Russia were condemned by demonstrators for protecting the Syrian regime from international pressure during the uprising. If global popular opinion shifts far enough, the policy of more countries might come to resemble that of the United States and Europe: selective promotion of human rights, in cases where their sympathies and their perceived interests align. On the other hand, Louise Arbour of the International Crisis Group counters that the influence of new great powers may matter less than it once would have, as the internal evolution of societies is now the driving force in democratization and human rights.

Struggles over Values

Much will depend on the third struggle over human rights: the evolution of values, especially within rising powers. The trend line is positive: Observance of human rights has improved almost universally over the last 50 years, even in authoritarian countries. Viewed over longer time periods, the upswing is even starker. The most humane governments of a few centuries ago were crueler than almost all governments are today. Even mainstream Christian churches were torturing and executing people for mild intellectual dissent a few hundred years ago.

China provides a clear example. Though it is still rated “not free” by Freedom House, it has retreated from mass killing of political opponents to far more limited and selective repression. The slightest deviation in hairstyles or artworks could bring harsh penalties a few decades

ago. Though the country remains authoritarian, what would once have been forbidden dissent is now readily discussable and publishable.

This trend of improving human rights could continue globally, due both to changing global norms and to underlying economic drivers. The world may get much richer—and wealthy countries generally treat their citizens better than poorer countries do.

The observable pattern today is that all countries with per capita purchasing-power incomes over \$20,000 have high levels of civil liberties and personal freedom (unless their economies are based on natural resource extraction; Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates are cases in point). University of Michigan political scientist Ronald Inglehart, director of the World Values Survey, offers an explanation for why attitudes



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toward human rights tend to vary with level of development. Put most simply, people raised amid material security tend to have “postmaterialist” values, including tolerance for self-expression, absence of xenophobia, and reduced deference to au-

thority. All of these are conducive to freer, more humane societies.

So, too, are rising educational levels, which are a byproduct of rising prosperity (the natural resource exception is likely due to resource-based economies' rapid expansion with no need for an extended process of socioeconomic development or broad distribution of wealth).

This pattern matters because many forecasts suggest that very large numbers of people will become much wealthier over the next 40 years. For instance, middle-class and wealthy people could number 2 billion in the G20 developing economies by 2050, according to Uri Dadush and William Shaw in their 2011 book, *Juggernaut*. They estimate that 1.1 billion Chinese and 273 million Indians could be middle class.

The Asian Development Bank forecasts that Asia could achieve an average per capita purchasing power of \$41,000 by 2050, similar to Europe's today, in a strong-growth scenario. And more-cautious estimates still have Chinese income per capita surpassing \$17,000 (in constant 2000 dollars) by 2050.

Overall, it seems fairly likely that ongoing values changes around human rights will continue, helped along by rising levels of wealth and education. Still, several caveats apply. The recent spread of human rights and democracy may have been a historical accident. Culture and values may have driven those forces in Europe and its offshoots, and other countries (such as those in East Asia) may have gone democratic because they happened to become rich during the period of Western dominance.

In his book *No One's World*, international affairs expert Charles Kupchan argues that democracy might spread in the future, but that new powers will transform the global system before they are likely to democratize.

Even if rising powers greatly improve their own human rights records, internal evolution is no guarantee of external behavior. Western countries engaged in or

supported serious human rights violations through the 1980s with few qualms; in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere, the United States and Western European countries backed some of the cruelest governments on the planet. Deterioration of human rights is always possible, especially if Inglehart is correct that a prosperous and secure environment profoundly shapes attitudes. Populations that are fearful of losing



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ground economically might put a lower priority on human rights. Note, for instance, the American slippage on waterboarding, which was punished as torture in the past but was accepted after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

And a final caveat: A wealthier world may not come. Development of emerging markets could stagnate at lower levels than discussed above, or prosperity could even decrease globally, if the theorists of economic or ecological collapse are correct.

Even with substantial convergence of values, there are still likely to be deep-rooted collisions across cultures over human rights issues. If nations such as China turned to promoting a humane vision, the rights they emphasized would be different, reflecting profound differences in

views of the individual, society, and future generations. Biotechnology could trigger human rights disputes based on fundamental ideas of what constitutes human nature and human dignity.

Key Trends to Watch for Human Rights

Through 2050, human rights will be shaped by technology, changes in geopolitical power, and sociopolitical evolution in the non-Western world. These are some key indicators and variables:

- The relative balance between top-down surveillance and information control versus bottom-up technologies that enhance freedom.
- The degree to which the Internet remains an unfettered information conduit, especially in its core structures.
- Whether emerging middle classes grow, and whether they push for more rights (even if not full democracy).
- Whether governments engaged in human rights violations leverage the strength of rising powers to evade pressures over their policies.
- How India, China, Turkey, and other rising powers adjust their own self-determination policies.
- How these rising powers approach protecting human rights beyond their borders.

Over the next few decades, advocates for human rights will have to push technology toward doing more good than harm, and adjust their strategies for a world in which the West is no longer at the center. It is likely to be a challenging but ultimately hopeful environment for human rights. □



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views expressed in this article are his own.