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Is the Human Rights Era Ending?

By MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. -- Since the end of the cold war, human rights has become the dominant moral vocabulary in foreign affairs. The question after Sept. 11 is whether the era of human rights has come and gone.

If that sounds alarmist, consider some of the evidence. Western pressure on China to honor human rights, never especially effective, has stopped altogether. Chinese support for the war on terror has secured Western silence about repression in the Xinjiang region. China now says it has a problem there with Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists, and it is straining to link them to Al Qaeda.

Meanwhile, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany, presented with evidence of Qaeda involvement in Chechnya, calls for a "differentiated evaluation" of Russian policy there. This new evaluation seems certain to involve forgetting that Moscow's war against terror has actually been waged against a whole people, costing tens of thousands of lives.

A similar chill is settling over world politics. Australia's government uses the threat of terrorism to justify incarcerating Afghan refugees in a desert compound. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have leveraged their provision of bases and intelligence into a carte blanche for domestic repression. Egypt, which for many years has used detention without trial, military courts and torture to keep control of militants, now demands an even freer hand. Sudan, which was under attack from a coalition of liberals and black churches determined to end slavery and stop Khartoum's war against the south, is now accepted as an ally against Osama bin Laden. And President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has decided that his longtime political opponents are really "terrorists."

Human Rights Watch has condemned these developments as opportunism, but something more durable than that may be at work. Rome has been attacked, and Rome is fighting to re-establish its security and its hegemony. This may permanently demote human rights in the hierarchy of America's foreign policy priorities.

Of course, just because the United States has other priorities doesn't have to mean that, in global terms, the era of this movement is over. Human rights has gone global by going local, anchoring itself in struggles for justice that can survive without American inspiration or leadership. The movement does not have its headquarters in Washington. But if Washington turns away, the movement loses the one government whose power can be decisive in stopping human rights abuses.

Activists may not see it this way, but their influence may have peaked in the 1990's. That was the decade when new constitutions brought human rights principles to the states created in the Soviet breakup, when United Nations agencies finally got the courage to tackle violations by member states, when America's State Department actively promoted human rights and democracy abroad. This was the era of humanitarian intervention in Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor, the heyday of the United Nations tribunals in The Hague and Arusha, Tanzania.

In the humanitarian interventions of the 1990's, political figures like Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain believed that they were ushering in a new era, backing human rights principles with political will and military steel. In reality, it was only an interregnum, made possible because Western militaries had spare capacity and time to do human rights work. Now with America launched on an indefinite military campaign against terrorists, will there be the political energy necessary to mount humanitarian interventions? The intellectual and political climate of a war on terror now resembles the atmosphere of the cold war. Then the imperative of countering Soviet and Chinese imperial advances trumped concern for the abuses of authoritarian governments in the Western camp. The new element in determining American foreign policy is what assets — bases, intelligence and diplomatic leverage — it can bring to bear against Al Qaeda.

Some veterans of the human rights campaigns of the cold war refuse to admit that the climate is any worse now than it was then. But in the Reagan years, the movement merely risked being unpopular. In the Bush era, it risks irrelevance.

Divided between horror at the attacks and alarm at being enlisted as moral cheerleaders in a war on terror, many European human rights groups are sitting on the sidelines. American groups like Human Rights Watch have turned themselves into war reporters, subjecting American military conduct to tough scrutiny on issues ranging from prisoner detention to collateral damage.

Still others have teamed up with civil libertarians to defend rights and freedoms at home.

But the movement will have to engage soon in the battle of ideas: it has to challenge directly the claim that national security trumps human rights. The argument to make is that human rights is the best guarantor of national security. The United States, to encourage the building of secure states that do not harbor or export terror, will have to do more than secure base agreements. It will have to pressure these countries to provide basic political rights and due process. As the cold war should have taught us, cozying up to friendly authoritarians is a poor bet in the long term. America is still paying a price for its backing of the shah of Iran. In the Arab world today, the United States looks as if it is on the side of Louis XVI in 1789; come the revolution in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, American influence may be swept away.

The human rights movement is not in the business of preserving American power. But it should be concerned about stability, about moving strategically vital states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia from closed to open societies without delivering them up to religious fundamentalists. Nobody's rights in Egypt will be furthered if the state collapses into anarchy or fundamentalist absolutism. If the movement hopes to have a future, it has to advocate its objectives — freedom, participation, due process — in a way that addresses the necessity to create political stability. This doesn't mean suddenly going silent about arbitrary arrests and military courts. It means moving from denunciation alone to engagement, working with local activists, and with the parts of the government that will listen, moving these societies back from the precipice.

The movement aims at defending the rights of ordinary people. To do this, it has to help them construct strong civil societies and viable states. If it can't find new ways of achieving that goal, it will be remembered as a fashionable cause of the dim and distant 1990's.

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