CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY
HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

The Critical Human Rights Issues of 2022

YEAR IN REVIEW

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As 2022 draws to a close, the Carr Center and its affiliates are reflecting on events and issues around the world that continue to shape our approach to protecting human rights. As new developments unfold in the political, social, economic, and technological spheres, the strategies by which we protect our fundamental rights must continue to evolve and adapt to our changing world.

To honor International Human Rights Day this year, we are examining several of the top human rights issues the United States and the world have faced in 2022, including challenges to democracy, racial equality in the US, the Russia-Ukraine War, Iran's women's rights movement, and more. Comments from several of our Carr Center faculty and fellows identify how these issues can be better addressed to lay the groundwork for a better world.

Cover Art:
View of Saint Andrew's Church from the top of the Andriyivskyy Descent in Kyiv, Ukraine. Photograph by Ilya Cher.

Contents

Democracy Under Fire

Q Worldwide, many nations are experiencing challenges to democratic institutions and increasing political polarization. How may these changes hinder the human rights of citizens in these nations, and what must be done to ensure that these rights continue to be upheld?

MATHIAS RISSE

Faculty Director, Carr Center
Berthold Beitz Professor in
Human Rights, Global Affairs
and Philosophy, HKS

It's a long-established empirical result—one that also reflects the philosophical links between these notions—that democracy and human rights stand and fall together. Only in stable democracies are human rights robustly protected, and only regimes that reliably protect human rights are enduringly democratic. Polarization makes democracies unstable, and to that extent also threatens human rights. In highly polarized systems, people tend to place more importance on the success of their side than on the survival of the system itself. Since the days of the Roman Republic, this kind of change brought doom to both democratic governance and to the flourishing of individual citizens.

Once a system is polarized, there will always be actors who benefit from the polarization, and so escaping from such a state is hard. The key is to implement policies that make clear to all citizens that the state takes their interests seriously and cares about their flourishing, and to do so without conjuring up external threats or beggaring neighbors. It requires much political wisdom to make this happen, as well as a willingness of the better-off to shoulder a lion's share of the financial burdens involved in these measures, for the sake of preserving political stability.

KATHRYN SIKKINK

Ryan Family Professor of
Human Rights Policy, HKS

Political polarization in the context of misinformation and the widespread availability of weapons can lead to dangerous violence, like the mass shootings common in the United States, the January 6 insurrection in 2021, and the political violence leading up to Brazil's 2022 election, to give a few examples. Polarization itself is a feature and a challenge of democracies—while true autocracies are not polarized, because autocrats do not allow opposition parties and limit the population's ability to express dissent.

Rather than trying to create policies aimed at reducing polarization, democracies should aim to control the availability of weapons that are themselves the proximate cause of human rights violations.

Democracy Under Fire

Democracy is literally under fire when polarized and radicalized groups and individuals have near unlimited access to guns and decide to express their political views through violence.

The spread of misinformation is another factor that exacerbates polarization, but this is a problem whose solution is less clear than the problem of widespread weapons availability. Limiting the availability of guns will decrease the incidence of violence and human rights violations.

Political polarization erodes the legitimacy of democratic institutions, impairing their abilities to protect the rights of citizens. It draws attention away from what we have in common by emphasizing our differences, further dividing societies, and deepening chaos. Simply, it is a threat to a peaceful society.

Creating a responsible community of actors and social movements—strong civil societies—will be important to push back against this trend. It will mobilize people from the ground up to be able to defend democratic values and protect human rights, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized. Those who seek to divide us are less powerful and fewer in number—if those who are oppressed and abused turn up, they can turn the tide.

NICHOLAS OPIYO

Fellow, Carr Center

Q In the years since the protests for racial equality in 2020, what progress has been made, and what can we do to sustain the momentum?

AMINTA OSSOM

Clinical Instructor,
Harvard Law School

When tens of millions of people took to the streets following the murder of George Floyd, it was one of the largest protest movements in United States history. Inside the US, this led many communities to engage in processes of self-examination, truth-seeking, accountability, and reform. One big achievement was that the public came to understand racial inequality as encompassing more than just terrible acts perpetuated by individual bad actors. This was a big win for those of us who see injustice emerging from unequal systems and detrimental policy decisions.

However, there is still a long way to go. In the international human rights field, the concept of repair for past harm is fundamental. Thus, discussions about reparatory justice should go hand-in-hand with reflections on historical suffering and modern-day racial discrimination. We are also facing fatigue in terms of combating racism, which I believe international solidarity and comparative learning can help us overcome. For example, after the activism of 2020 and 2021, there was a renewed push for United Nations bodies that would focus on racial equality and the rights of people of African descent worldwide. Communities from the US have a lot to contribute to those institutions and could be re-energized by them as well.

LESLIE ALEXANDER

Fellow, Carr Center

In May 2020, the world watched in horror as George Floyd took his final breath. Just moments earlier, Floyd had been forced to the ground by several Minneapolis police officers. He remained pinned there for more than nine minutes, as Officer Derek Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck, slowly killing him.

In the days and weeks that followed, protests erupted across the globe, insisting that Black Lives Matter. People not only took to the streets in urban America, but also in small towns and rural hamlets. Even in places as far away as Hong Kong, South Africa, Germany, South Korea, and New Zealand. Never before had a movement for Black life been met with such widespread support by people of all colors, classes, and walks of life.

For many of us, it felt that we were witnessing history. That, perhaps, we were watching an actual shift in global consciousness. Maybe, just maybe, people were finally beginning to understand that as long as we continue to invest in the types of punitive systems of organized violence that have oppressed and controlled Black people for centuries—rather than in the programs, policies, and forms of structural change that Black communities need to thrive—we will never achieve a truly inclusive, egalitarian democracy that honors the dignity and value of Black lives.

But since that fateful spring, little has actually changed.

Certainly, the police abolition movement has flourished, and people are seriously debating the role of police in our communities and on college campuses. But since the year 2020, over two thousand more people have been shot and killed by police in the United States. And, like George Floyd, the victims are disproportionately male and Black. These statistics serve as a chilling reminder that the movement that began in March 2020 must only be a beginning—that we must unceasingly agitate until the killings stop. For if history has taught us anything, it is that none of us can be free until we are all free.

VICTOR RAY

Fellow, Carr Center

The 2020 protests over George Floyd's murder were the largest civil rights mobilization in United States history. Protesters called for change along multiple fronts, including increased education about America's racial structure, greater representation across industries such as publishing and higher education, and material reforms like defunding bloated police budgets.

Racial progress is often fragile, and unfortunately, opponents of racial justice have been hard at work undermining the goals of those who took to the streets to protest—by banning books, targeting teachers, and stoking a moral panic over critical race theory. This moral panic has been effective, as many states have passed laws banning or limiting what schools can teach about race and racism.

Sustaining positive momentum towards a racially just future means rejecting the misleading claims of the anti-critical race theory propagandists and shifting material resources from punishment to community investments in jobs and education.

Evolving Modern Technology

Q How is the continued evolution of modern technology impacting our human rights? What must be done moving forward to ensure that our rights are protected as technology becomes more ubiquitous in our daily lives?

SUSHMA RAMAN

Executive Director,
Carr Center

Trust in democracy, science, and the institutions of government and civil society is in decline, with "distrust now society's default emotion."[1] The dissemination of false and misleading information, through social media and platforms, has negative implications for human rights. Disinformation affects the right to free and fair elections, the right to health, and the right to non-discrimination, among others. Legislative proposals to counter this disinformation often restrict freedoms of assembly, association, and expression— and governments sometimes use disinformation as a pretext to crack down on journalists, human rights activists, and opposition leaders.

Online hate speech disproportionately targets members of racial and ethnic minority groups, particularly women. And with 40% of people worldwide still underrepresented in the digital age, efforts to bring communities and societies online must be complemented by efforts to protect and promote rights and freedoms in the technological sphere. A flourishing information ecosystem—or ecosystems—requires us to strengthen community and public media, promote pluralistic public spheres, uphold racial and gender equity and inclusion, and invest in civil society voices and leadership.

[1] *Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022*

MARTHA DAVIS

Fellow, Carr Center

Protecting individual privacy and autonomy are real concerns as modern technology continues to be exploited in the service of capitalist interests—but technology can also be a mechanism that brings about greater rights realization for the people. An increase in participatory governance at the local level is achievable and effective because of the technology that allows a greater number of voices to be heard on more issues. Because of that, technology can facilitate the involvement in policy development of those most affected, and it can increase the transparency of local government decisions. These benefits of technology can also be utilized to help

ensure that rights are protected, but that will only happen if rights holders themselves remain vigilant and demand that local government take a human rights-based approach to the use and regulation of technology.

The rapid embrace of the Smart City paradigm, without adequate concern for the rights impacts of increased networking and surveillance, demonstrates the peril of viewing technology as a neutral force. At the local level, a clear understanding of human rights norms must inform decision-making concerning technology, just as human rights should be integrated into other local government processes. Given the relative accessibility of local government, civil society can play a strong role in ensuring that rights are protected even as technology expands.

NNENNA IFEANYI-AJUFO

Fellow, Carr Center

One of the understated ways in which the evolution of modern technology impacts our human rights is the exacerbation of racial discrimination through the design of technologies. Digital technologies are not blind to human color, and we continue to see how people of certain races or ethnicities are treated with bias and discrimination with respect to digital technologies.

The continued evolution of modern technology forces a reconsideration of our conceptualization of the obligations of diverse actors toward the protection and promotion of human rights. We need more dialogue about normative and regulated obligations for the private (tech) sector in ensuring human rights standards. Voluntary measures may no longer suffice.

The need to promote "human rights by design" with an approach that gives utter regard to race, color, and people must be a prioritized agenda on international and national forums that focus on business and human rights discourses. We must intently push for a human rights-based approach to the designing of digital technologies.

Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Q After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, what are the human rights issues that are now being faced by citizens throughout the country? What must be done to improve the status of human rights in Afghanistan?

SIMA SAMAR

Fellow, Carr Center

With the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan for the second time in August 2021, the country again became the biggest open prison in the world for the female population. Women have been erased almost completely from public life. The Ministry of Women has been replaced with the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has been disbanded. The Taliban does not have a governance strategy. Instead, they issue decrees to restrict the freedom and rights of women in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is the only country in this century to place an official ban on girl's education from grades 7-12. Most recently, the Taliban closed public baths to women and prohibited them from entering parks.

The humanitarian crisis in the country is one of the worst, and will deteriorate further in the winter. Women, children, and other vulnerable groups are at higher risk. The violation of the human rights of women is not only a problem for women in Afghanistan, but it represents the commission of major international crimes against human dignity, with full impunity. The Afghan case was collective failure of the Afghan government, the people, and the international community, and requires collective action to end the culture of impunity for these crimes against humanity.

Iran's Women's Rights Movement

Q As the women's rights movement in Iran pushes forward, what potential does the movement hold to improve the status of women and girls throughout the country?

ERICA CHENOWETH

Frank Stanton Professor
of the First Amendment, HKS

The movement in Iran holds tremendous hope for improving the status of women and girls throughout the country. Over the past few months, people from all walks of life have continued to courageously challenge the patriarchal repression of the regime using the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," even as their stubborn opponent has used extreme repression.

Research from other cases shows that the stakes are high: when women-led movements like this succeed, the prospects for democratic transitions are high, but when such campaigns are defeated, retaliation against women as a social group can be very extreme. That is part of why it is so powerful to see so many women continue to defy the laws that try to subjugate them. In most countries, including Iran, mass movements are the only real catalyst for transformative change.

There have been protests in solidarity with the women's rights movement in Iran around the world. Clockwise from top right, protesters gather in Stockholm, Melbourne, and Berlin. Photo credits: Eric Luth, Matt Hrkak, and Amir Sarabadani.

# Iran's Women's Rights Movement

JAY ULFELDER

Research Project Manager,
Carr Center

Since Mahsa Amini's death on September 16, 2022, Iranian-Americans and allies across the United States have responded to calls from Iranian protesters to "be our voice" by organizing hundreds of rallies and demonstrations calling for women's rights and human rights in Iran.

As of December 7, 2022, the Crowd Counting Consortium—a joint project of the Carr Center's Nonviolent Action Lab and the University of Connecticut—had recorded nearly 300 actions in solidarity with Iran in 127 different cities and towns across the United States, including five in Cambridge, MA.

The largest rally so far saw as many as 20,000 people gather in front of Los Angeles City Hall on October 1, 2022. Since late September, weekly Saturday marches in Washington, DC, have routinely brought thousands into the streets.

This map shows nearly 300 actions in solidarity with Iran in 127 different cities and towns across the United States, including five in Cambridge, MA.
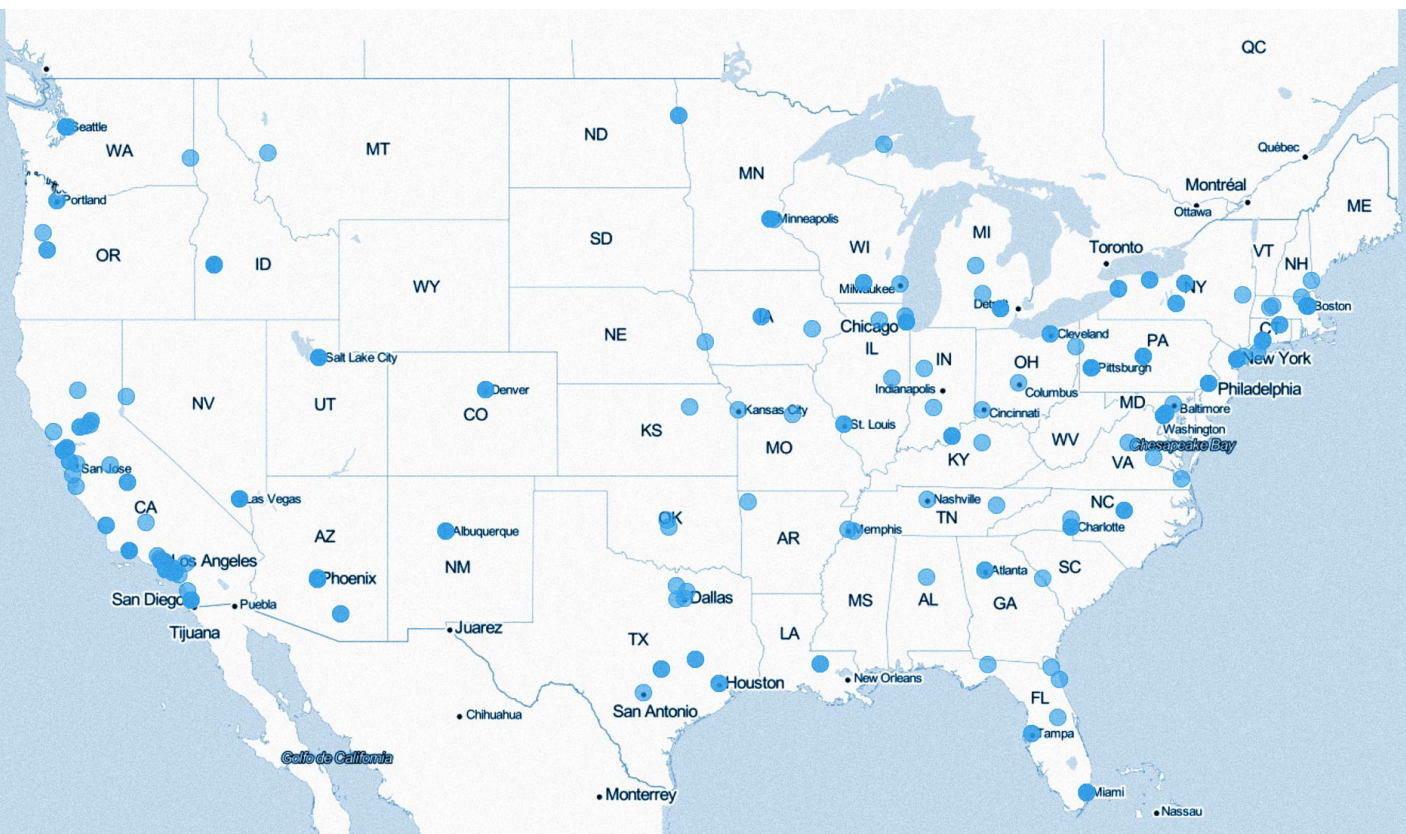
Russia-Ukraine War

Q As the Russia-Ukraine conflict continues, what human rights issues are these populations facing? How can we ensure that violators are held accountable, and that human rights are upheld during and after the conflict?

AUDREY COMSTOCK

Fellow, Carr Center

Throughout the current Russia/Ukraine conflict, there have been reports of torture, rape, sexual violence, executions, and other forms of human rights abuses. The United Nations, international governments, and human rights NGOs have criticized Russia's actions—and the international community's widespread condemnation of abuse highlights a strong consensus around human rights standards, laws, and norms. The shared understanding of what human rights are is illustrative of the significance of international law like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which codified global human rights standards, and Human Rights Day, established in 1945.

However, the human rights abuses also highlight the extreme difficulty in holding violators accountable and the limitations of international human rights law. Despite Russia's ratification of many UN human rights treaties, the system is known for lacking enforcement. The International Criminal Court is currently investigating allegations of crimes in Ukraine, however, it has been criticized for moving slowly and for failing to prioritize sexual violence cases. Most importantly, Russia is not a party to the ICC.

Providing resources to the UN, the ICC, and NGOs; training soldiers in human rights and humanitarian standards; and believing the stories of victims are just a few ways to ensure that cases of abuse are fully investigated and violators are held accountable.

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