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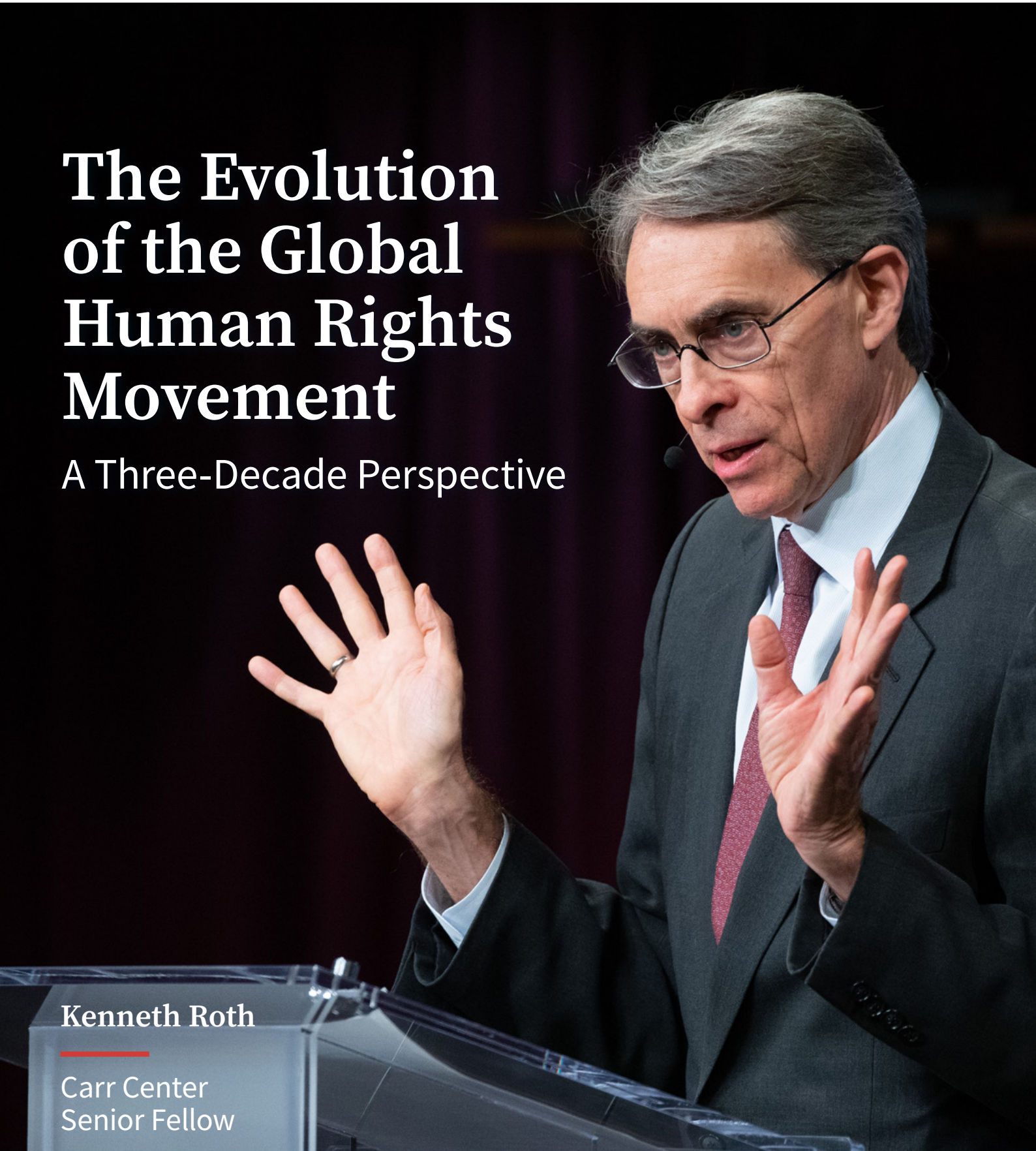
The Evolution of the Global Human Rights Movement

A Three-Decade Perspective



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The Evolution of the Global Human Rights Movement

A Three-Decade Perspective

Carr Center for Human Rights Policy
Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University
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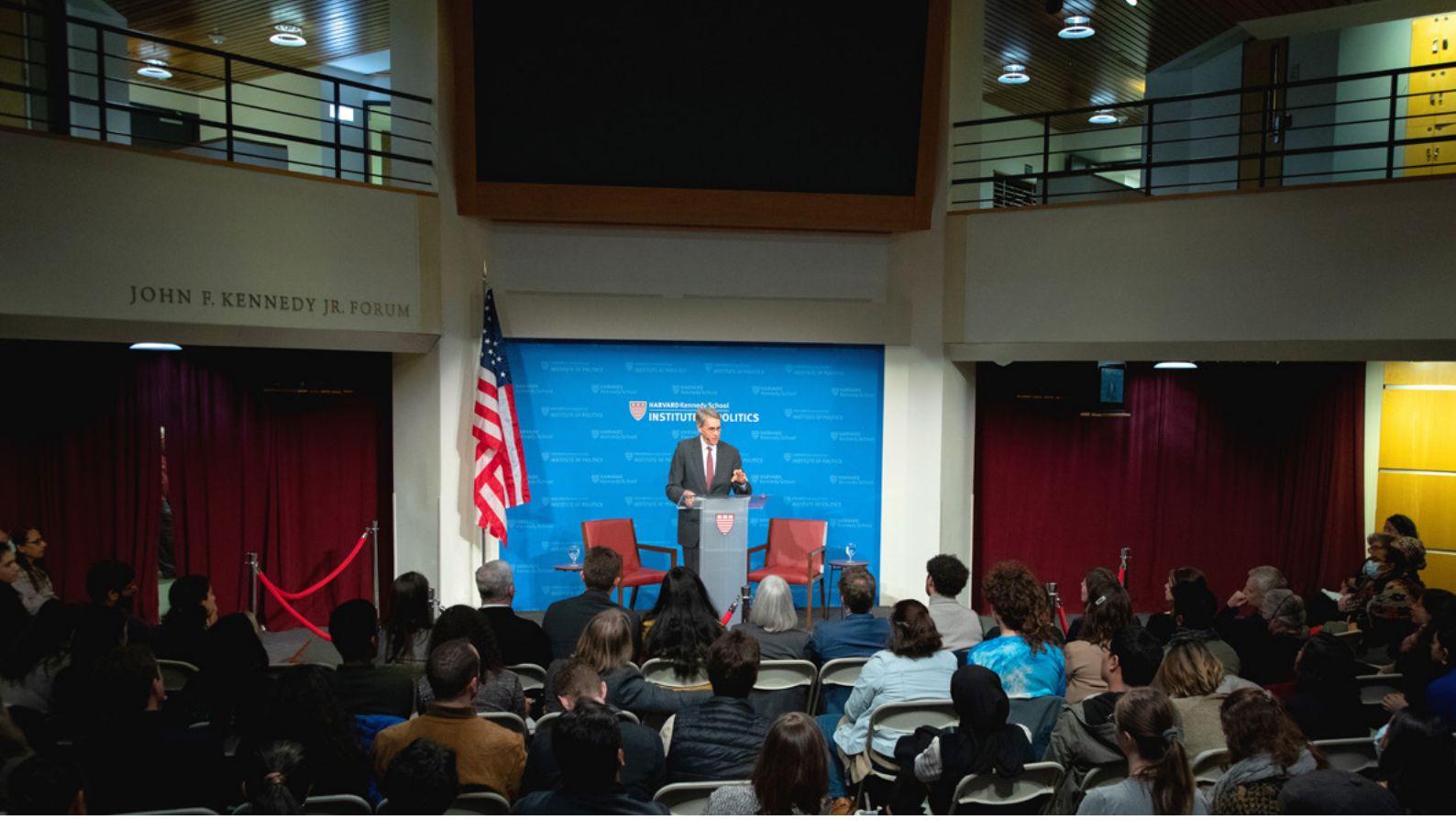


Kenneth Roth gave a lecture at the JFK Jr. Forum, discussing the evolution of human rights work, the strategic challenges and opportunities facing Human Rights Watch over the decades, and the future of human rights.

Roth's talk, co-sponsored by the Carr Center and the Institute of Politics, additionally featured an introduction by Mathias Risse (Berthold Beitz Professor in Human Rights, Global Affairs and Philosophy and Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy), additional comments from Kathryn Sikkink (Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy) and was moderated by Sushma Raman, the former Executive Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. This transcript has been edited for length and clarity. ***A complete recording of the event is available online*** *on the IOP's YouTube page.*

"Thank you for that warm welcome. I'm thrilled to be here, belatedly as it might be. And I'm grateful to the Institute of Politics for sponsoring this Forum tonight. As Mathias said, I'm going to talk about the evolution of the human rights movement, but I'm going to do that really as an introduction to what I hope will be a broader discussion, and when it comes to the question period, I'm happy to talk about any country, any issue, you know, whatever is on your mind.

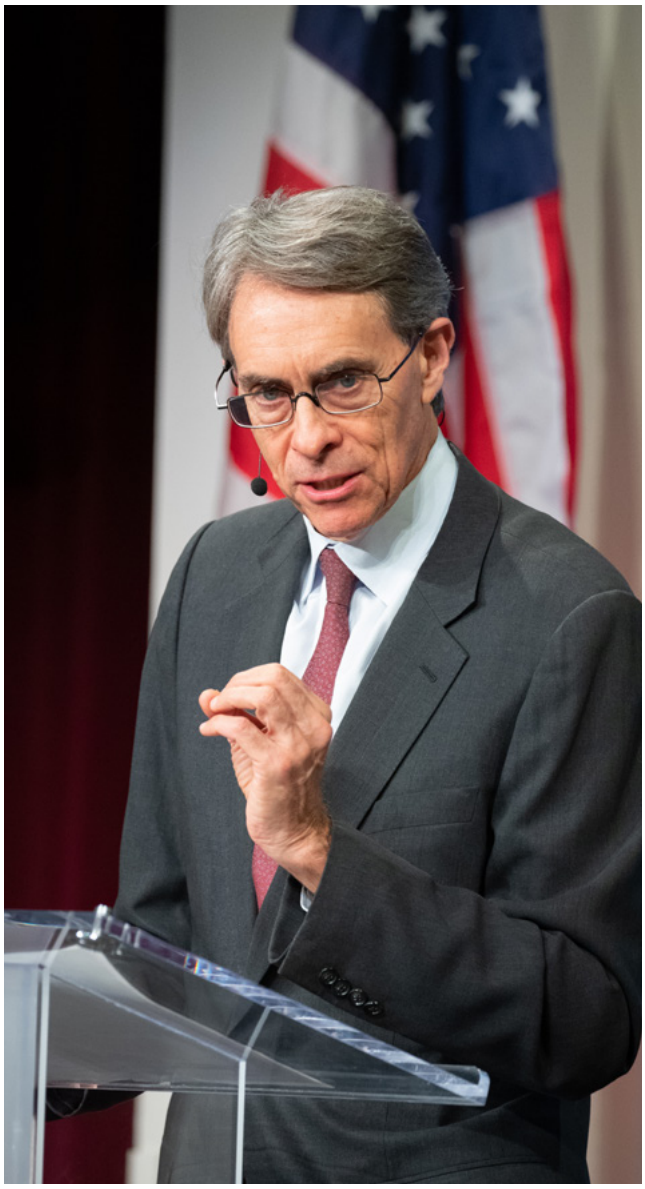
I have been fortunate to serve as Director of Human Rights Watch for three decades. I've been involved in the movement for four decades. And I'd like to talk about how I see it having evolved. And in the very quick 15 minutes that I'm all allocated, I'm going to try to touch on six areas. I'm going to talk about the role of communications technology, the breadth of our concerns, our advocacy, the kind of advocacy that we do, the role of the United Nations, international justice, and the human rights movement. This is going to have to be telegraphic, but I will touch on it and then I'm happy to talk more broadly.

First, communications technology. You may think it's weird for me to start with that, but the evolution of the human rights movement closely traces the evolution of communication technology. And that is because the essence of what we do is to shame governments, to spotlight the discrepan-

cy between their pretense of respect for human rights and the often ugly reality that falls short. But to do that, we need to know what's going on. You know, we need communication technology to learn about governmental conduct.

The kind of issues that we take on are actually a product of communication technology. Let me explain what I mean. In the earliest days of the human rights movement, information moved by steamship or by sailboat, very slowly. Meaning you could only know about big, slow-moving things. And so the first real human rights movements were the anti-slavery movement, the women's suffrage movement. Very important things, but things that were not changing day by day.

Now, in the early days of the modern human rights movement—Amnesty International was founded in 1961—it was still a moment when international phone calls were very expensive. You didn't do it very often. International travel was even more. And for the most part, you wrote letters. You know, "Dear minister so and so, could you tell me what happened with this political prisoner?" And so it was possible to report, but it was slow.



"It's much harder [today] for governments to hide what they're doing, because everybody has a mobile phone, everybody can post on social media... but of course it's double-edged because the bad guys also can convey information without having to go through the medium of a more responsible journalist or editor; they can just disseminate misinformation.

I remember when this revolutionary technology emerged: the fax machine. What the fax machine let you do is to send an entire page of information for the price of a quick phone call. That was revolutionary. We would sneak fax machines into the Soviet Union. It was just this great way to convey information. Now, when email came along, that was really transformative. It enabled, suddenly, a global campaign. The campaign that Human Rights Watch helped to lead to abolish anti-personnel landmines was possible because we built a global coalition, initially of NGOs, ultimately of governments, using email. It had never been done before.

Email also made possible real-time reporting. Up until then, human rights reports were retrospective. You would write something that happened about the last year's worth of events. It would come out a few months later—it was still big picture. Email meant that we could write about what happened today to try to influence it tomorrow. That was a huge shift. And of course today we have social media, meaning that it's much harder for governments to hide what they're doing because everybody has a mobile phone, everybody can post on social media. It is much easier for us to convey information. But of course it's double-edged because the bad guys also can convey information without having to go through the medium of a more responsible journalist or editor; they can just disseminate misinformation.

I still think it's a big net positive, but it's double-edged. There are two sides to it. Now the breadth of our concerns has also changed dramatically over the years. And let me begin with Amnesty, because early Amnesty did three things. They fought executions, the death penalty, they fought torture, and they fought political imprisonment—particularly prisoners of conscience. When Human Rights Watch came along, the big innovation we had was we looked at the full range of civil and political rights, so not just imprisonment. But that was still quite narrow. Over time, Human Rights Watch added the laws of war. So taking not just international human rights law, but international humanitarian law to monitor how wars were fought. We added economic and social rights. But I think in many ways the most important thing we did was to begin to add thematic programs.

One thing I noticed early on is that if you're a researcher assigned to a country, you tend to focus on the big political issues happening in the capital. Which at that stage in particular, you know, tended to be the elite, often male. It was ignoring huge sectors of society. And so we began to recognize that we needed to deliberately supplement our country-focused researchers with people who would focus on thematic issues. And we began adding programs: on women's rights, on children's rights, on LGBT rights, on the rights of people with disabilities, refugee rights, et cetera.

And each of these people would develop their own network, their own expertise. Their job was to push the country researchers to do work on their concerns, but also to do it themselves. And it meant suddenly that we were able to address a much broader set of people who were facing human rights problems. Now, I should note that this evolution, it sounds natural, it sounds like, why wouldn't you do this? It was opposed by some people. And I will give one example. The biggest donor at the time to the human rights cause was the Ford Foundation. Their response to our proposal that we create a women's rights program was, don't do that. That will dilute the stigma of a human rights violation. Amazingly. They said that they would cut our grant if we did it. We did it anyway, they cut our grant.

So this is a different era, it's not where Ford is right now, but that was the resistance we faced. They vehemently opposed our efforts to monitor wars because they didn't want to force local groups to report on both sides, as is required under the laws of war. We did it anyway. It now is completely central within the human rights cause, but these were not uncontroversial steps.

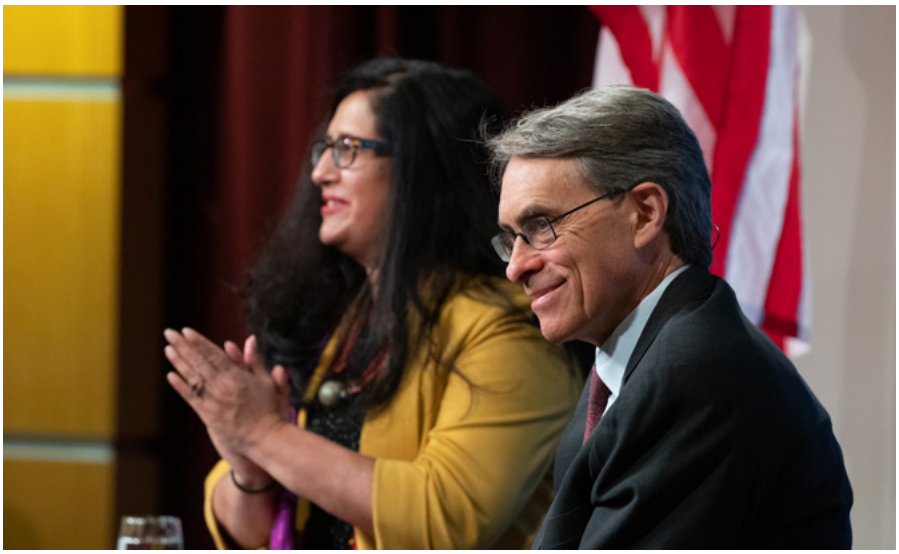
Let me say a word about advocacy. Now, Amnesty in its initial incarnation would mobilize its members, they would protest and the like. They didn't believe in going to influential third party governments. So they wouldn't go to the US government or the European Union because they felt that was using global imbalances unfairly. Now we at Human Rights Watch took a different perspective. I didn't feel that I could go to somebody and say, you know, yes, I could, you know, get your uncle released from prison, but I'm sorry I can't do that because I would be using a global imbalance. So we started doing that. Initially very much in Washington. It was very US-focused. That had to change of necessity, because the US government became, during certain periods, very discredited as a proponent of human rights. You know, we had Bush's global war on terrorism. You know, obviously we had Trump, who couldn't find a friendly autocrat he didn't want to embrace. But we had the traditional double standards of US foreign policy. And so we recognized that while we were never going to abandon the US, because the US is just too powerful, we needed to use them—we were going to broaden our concern. And so we gradually started building advocacy and media offices in a range of cities around the world. And so today we have them in Tokyo, Sydney, Beirut, Johannesburg, Kenya, San Paolo, Toronto—and then in Europe, we have them in Brussels, London, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, and then we have the UN offices in New York and Geneva. So it is a very multifaceted effort to figure out, you know, who has a relationship of influence with the target government. What does that target government want that we can prevent them from getting until they improve their human rights practices? And they always want something. They want an arms sale. You know, they want a military aid package. They want preferential trade benefits.

> **"We began to recognize that we needed to deliberately supplement our country-focused researchers with people who would focus on thematic issues... and it meant suddenly, that we were able to address a much broader set of people who were facing human rights problems."**

You know, often what they want, really, is to be invited to some fancy summit so they can be photographed with respectable leaders and show the folks back home that they're really a legitimate leader, even though they're just an autocrat. So we try to, you know, whatever it is, we try to prevent them from getting that. We've had some false starts. I opened up an office in Delhi and then Modi came along. I had one in Cairo and Sisi came along. I had one in Hong Kong and Xi Jinping came

along. So there have been some mistakes. But the idea has been there to make this a genuinely global effort on the advocacy side to match the global research effort that we do.

Let me say a word about the United Nations. The UN traditionally was hostile to the promotion of human rights, even though an ostensible purpose of the UN is promotion of human rights, because the UN is a club of governments, and governments didn't like to criticize each other. So they would use the kind of rhetoric you still occasionally hear, talking about human rights as interfering in our internal affairs. Now that doesn't resonate anymore, but that attitude is what informed the UN at the beginning. Now that's no longer the case, but there still are real obstacles. You know, the UN Security Council, which for a brief period after the Cold War functioned, is now paralyzed by the veto, and it's rare that we can get something done at the Security Council. Every once in a while we can step in with the General Assembly where there is no veto, but it's quite unwieldy: 193 nations, it's difficult to get things done there.



Kenneth Roth and Sushma Raman during the Q&A portion of the lecture

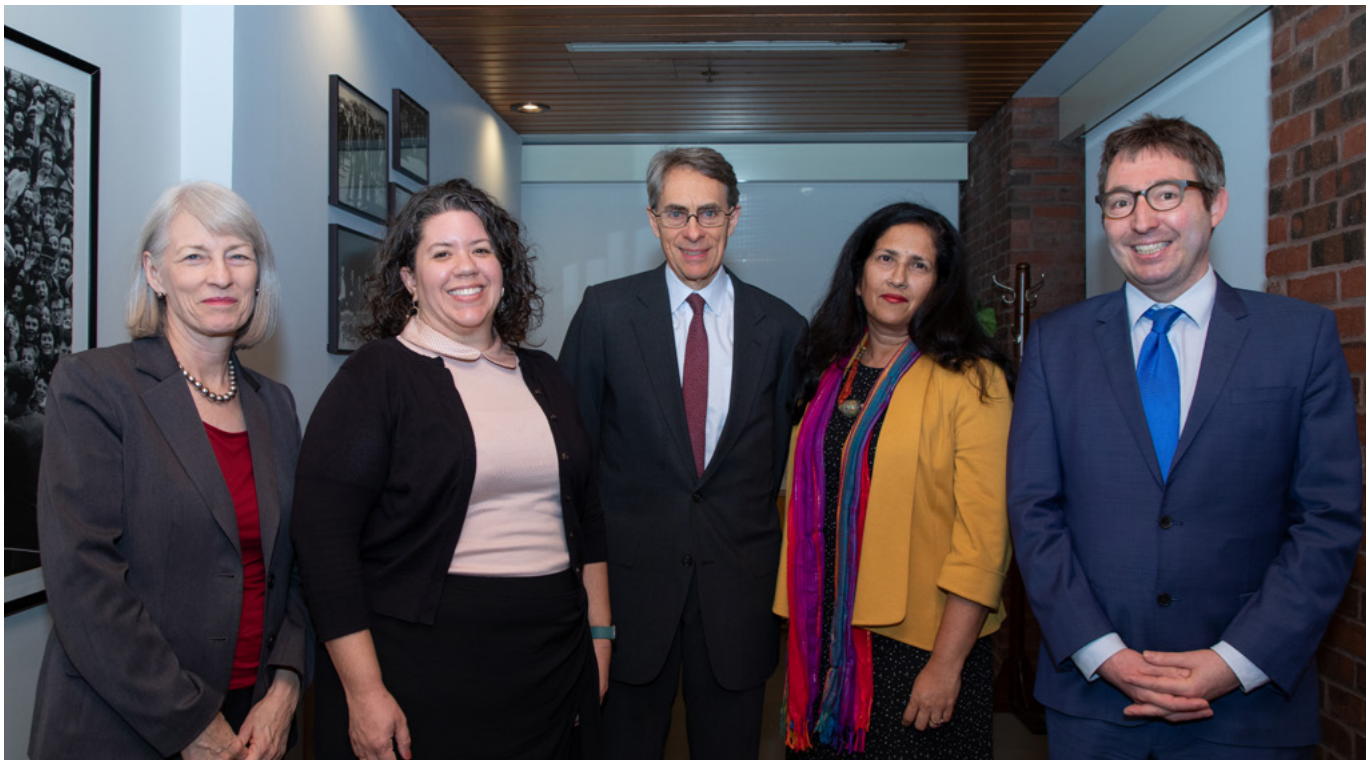
Mainly, what we do is we use the Human Rights Council, which is a smaller venue. It is still problematic. The Human Rights Council was created 20 years ago to replace the old Human Rights Commission, because the Human Rights Commission had come to be filled with the thugs and autocrats of the world who were trying to undermine the enforcement of human rights. So we introduced the idea of elections to the council. And for a while it worked. For a while we were able to get rid of the worst candidates, but then the government started gaming the system and only putting forward the same number of candidates as openings to prevent the possibility of an election.

So the council is less than ideal, but it's still a very important venue to get things done. Just to give one quick example: for four years we were able—despite Saudi opposition—to create a group to oversee the bombing of Yemeni civilians. The Saudis finally got that lifted through a series of threats and bribes in September a year ago. From the moment that was lifted, civilian casualties in Yemen doubled, until finally there was a ceasefire, which just shows that this kind of scrutiny does change behavior.

"Scrutiny does change behavior."

Let me say a quick word about international justice because I don't have a lot of time here, I realize. There was nothing on the international justice front for basically 50 years after Tokyo and Nuremberg. I remember in the early 90s trying to get some government to sue Saddam before the International Court of Justice for his 1988 Anfal genocide against the Kurds, and nobody would do it. They were all afraid, it was just too unconventional. Today, Gambia has gone and sued Myanmar for genocide against the Rohingya. So things are getting better in that sense. We finally got the tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. These were consolation prizes for not having stopped the genocide, but nonetheless, they really did bring to justice most of the architects of the slaughter in Bosnia, the architects of the genocide in Rwanda, but not Kagame or his senior leaders for summarily executing 30,000 people as they stopped the genocide. So there was some selectivity there. With the International Criminal Court, that was obviously a huge victory in terms of creating a permanent Institution of Justice.

We defeated the US effort to exempt any American from ever appearing before the court, mainly because the Clinton administration wanted to prevent territorial jurisdiction. They didn't want the court to have jurisdiction based on where the crime was occurring, because it might be an American who committed that crime. We won that battle. Trump, of course, tried to impose sanctions on the ICC prosecutor, because she had the audacity to open investigation into US torture in Afghanistan and Israeli war crimes in Palestine. But Biden has lifted those and indeed has even gone back on this objection to territorial jurisdiction in Ukraine where he's endorsed ICC action in Ukraine even though Russia has not joined the court. Now will he maintain that principle if the prosecutor goes after Israeli war crimes in Palestine? We don't know. But at least it's sort of a step in the right direction.



Carr Center affiliates from left: Kathryn Sikkink, Maggie Gates, Kenneth Roth, Sushma Raman, and Mathias Risse

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>
> **It doesn't mean that we always win, but there are people, every place, watching."**

Final comment is on the movement. Here, first I want to stress that the entire concept of shaming depends on public morality. You know, if you shine a spotlight and people applaud, you get nothing. You know, that's actually one of the dangers of populist autocrats, who are able to engender that kind of applause. But so we need the public. But what the human rights movement has shown is that you also need people who are dedicated, really professionally, to collecting information in a reliable way, writing it up and disseminating it in a way that will move governments.

That's not a movement in the sense that, you know, it's not a bunch of people mobilized in the street—it really does take a professional staff. Now the good news, and I've seen this dramatically change in my time in the movement, is that while human rights defenders were pretty exotic in the early days, and few and far-between, today there are professional human rights activists working on every country—either in that country, or nearby. If you even look at the Human Rights Watch staff, we have 80-some nationalities spread around the world. It has become a genuinely global movement. Now it doesn't mean that we always win, but it does mean that there are people, every place, watching.

Now, Martin Luther King is famous for saying that, I think it's, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." You know, with all due deference to Dr. King, I don't believe that. I actually believe that it is in the nature of governments to violate human rights. It's always convenient to repress the opposition, to somehow violate human rights, to stay in power. The duty of the human rights movement is to always push back, to raise the cost of human rights violations, to change the cost-benefit analysis of repression.

And the good news is that between our stronger movement and our strengthened tools, we are much more able to push back today than when I started this work three decades ago.

Thank you very much.

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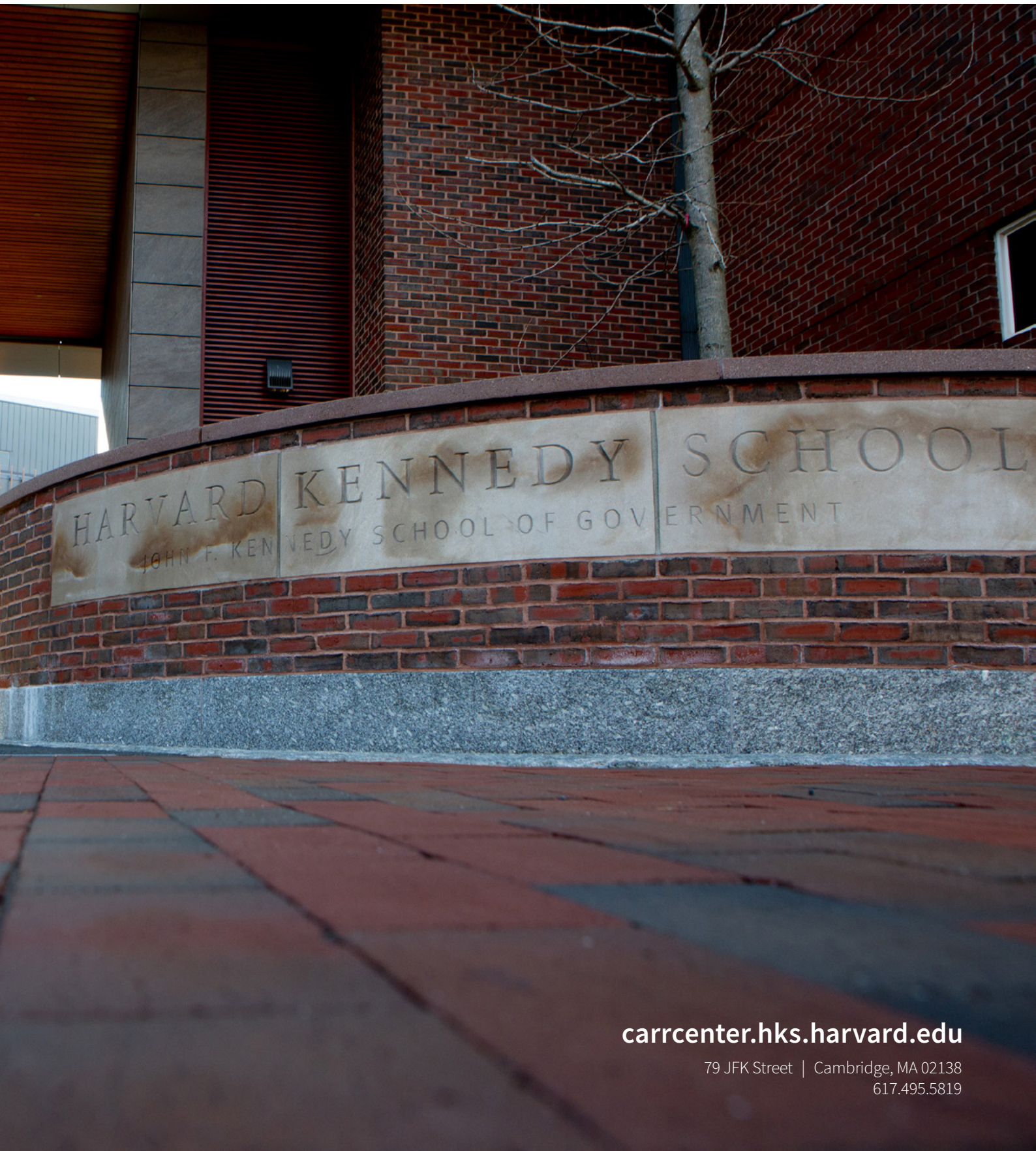

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