



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Human rights at risk in the era of Trump and American decline

Regilme, S.S.; Hadiprayitno, I.

Citation

Regilme, S. S. (2022). Human rights at risk in the era of Trump and American decline. In I. Hadiprayitno (Ed.), *Human rights at risk: global governance, american power, and the future of dignity* (pp. 123-139). New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
doi:10.36019/9781978828469-008

Version: Accepted Manuscript

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3486237>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Please cite as:

Regilme, Salvador Santino F. Jr. "Human Rights at Risk in the Era of Trump and American Decline". *Human Rights at Risk: Global Governance, American Power, and the Future of Dignity*, edited by Salvador Santino F. Regilme and Irene Hadiprayitno, Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2022, pp. 123-139. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978828469-008>

Chapter 8

Human Rights at Risk in the Era of Trump and American Decline

Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr.

Human rights and political freedoms have been under siege in quite unprecedented ways since the end of the Cold War.¹ Based on the Freedom House (2019) report, people from sixty-eight countries experienced severe deterioration in civil and political rights in 2018, while only fifty countries registered net improvements. In addition, the same report recorded a global deterioration of political freedoms for the previous thirteen consecutive years, from 2005 to 2018. While the post–Cold War era facilitated the emergence of liberal democracies worldwide, a considerable number of those countries that transitioned toward democratization have faced significant hurdles in consolidating their regimes. Similarly, CIVICUS (2019), a global consortium of civil society organizations, finds that a majority of countries worldwide have an “obstructed,” or even worse “repressed,” civic space, where political dissent against state abuses could flourish.² Globally, very few countries have an “open” civic space, many of which are located in Northern Europe as well as Australia and New Zealand. In the entire American continent, only four countries have an “open” civic space classification, namely, Canada, Uruguay, Suriname, and Costa Rica. Accordingly, the civic space in the United States, however, deteriorated and “narrowed” under the Trump administration. Particularly, the Human Rights Watch (2019, 1) report maintains that the United States has “continued to move backward on human rights at home and abroad in the second year of former president Donald Trump’s administration,” which “were able to pass laws, implement regulations, and carry out policies that violate or undermine human rights.”

This perception of decline in the U.S. government’s commitment to human rights becomes more worrying, especially when we consider the U.S. government’s long-standing reliance on human rights and humanitarian discourses to justify and to legitimize its foreign policy interventions abroad (Forsythe 2011). Many of these so-called humanitarian actions have generated enormous damage to human

societies beyond the U.S. territory, as illustrated by the millions of lives that perished in the U.S.-led wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere (Herman 2011; Ralph 2013; Shafiq 2013; Regilme 2018, 2020).

The core puzzle of this chapter constitutes several interrelated questions: While such violent interventions certainly preceded the Trump administration, how do we make sense of the Trump administration's discursive stance and policy actions in regard to the long-standing exceptionalist narrative of the United States stands as the world's most powerful promoter of democracy and human rights? Amid the perception of American decline, how does the Trump administration undermine America's commitment to international human rights, within and beyond the United States? How does the Trump administration differ from his predecessors in regard to international human rights, particularly when China, the most serious challenger to U.S. dominance in world politics, seldom invokes international human rights in its actions abroad?

This chapter reflects on the uniqueness of the Trump presidency and the emerging authoritarian politics elsewhere. My core argument states that while neoliberalism's detrimental consequences to human rights within and beyond the United States constitute a relatively long history, Trump and his allies have abandoned the legitimization tactics that their predecessors had so willingly used. Also, I maintain that American decline not only pertains to the decreasing economic vitality underscored by the concrete detrimental effects generated through sharpening material inequality within the United States but also constitutes its increasingly tarnished legitimacy as a dominant actor in the international system. In building my core argument, this chapter proceeds as follows. The next section examines the status of the United States as a dominant power in the international system and its implications to the international human rights regime. Next, I analyze the deterioration of the international human rights regime vis-à-vis the emergence of authoritarian politicians elsewhere. The penultimate section underscores the principal ways that the Trump administration undermined the U.S. government's domestic and international commitments to human rights. This chapter concludes by underscoring the patterns of continuity and change in the exercise of American power abroad as well as their implications for the global human rights regime.

The State of American Power in Domestic and Global Orders

The apparently intractable social conflicts fueled by material insecurities constitute one of the key elements of the decline of American power, while also considering that such a model of governance is

not purely an American phenomenon but is also projected across various national constitutional orders worldwide. As Carla Norrloff (2018, 64) rightfully argues, the “challenge confronting the United States today is not an international redistribution problem but a domestic redistribution problem, which ‘America first’ will only make worse of the available gains to create more severe distributive pressures,” and she further contends that the uneven material gains in what is supposedly the international order is further reinforced by the uneven domestic distribution of economic gains within the United States. In the long term, the sustainability of a state’s claim to world dominance depends on its ability to effectively manage internal sociopolitical unrest, which is often triggered by increasingly unmanageable economic inequality and the perceived lack of social mobility. Indeed, severe material insecurities in a society could generate various transformative forms of political instability (Houle 2016; Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011; Lessmann 2016).

There are some indications that the Trump presidency had accelerated America’s trajectory toward potentially transformative forms of political instability. Recognizing that “deepening polarization and radicalization of the Republican Party” have debilitated America’s democratic institutions since the 1980s, several scholars predicted that the Trump administration would facilitate the emergence of “competitive authoritarianism—a system in which meaningful democratic institutions exist yet the government abuses state power to disadvantage its opponents” (Mickey, Levitsky, and Way 2017). Trump’s attempt to discard constitutional democratic processes became much clearer on January 6, 2021, when his supporters attempted to cancel Biden’s electoral victory by launching violent attacks and riots at the U.S. Capitol. This unfortunate episode threatened not only the fate of electoral democratic processes but also the lives of many members of Congress and other government leaders.

Moreover, the Trump presidency advocated unregulated markets and the absence of domestic state interference in the national economy only to the extent that allies are given undue advantages (Stokes 2018). Trump resisted divesting from his corporate interests, opposed openness to full disclosure of his wealth, and strongly favored elites with clear interest in blatantly influencing governmental policies in exchange for holding events and engaging in transactions in Trump-related businesses (Yglesias 2018). Even so, the Trump administration was committed to punishing wealthy capitalists who publicly criticized him. For example, Trump threatened to use antitrust laws to punish Amazon, in retaliation of billionaire Jeff Bezos, who also owns the *Washington Post*, which has been persistent in its investigations of Trump’s scandals (Heer 2018).

The decline of American dominance in the international system illustrates the inability of the current global order to legitimize itself using its own moral logic as well as the endogenous mechanisms for self-correction. For example, emerging liberal democracies in the Global South regularly elect their

ruling leaders at various levels of government. Yet, abusive elites have manipulated electoral processes and institutional checks and balances in their respective democratic societies in ways that state agents could openly and systematically abuse their power and undermine the individual rights of the governed populations—a process that can be blamed for the democratic recession that the world has experienced since 2005 (Diamond 2016). Even before Trump, big corporate interests and established political dynasties persistently dominated federal and state levels, thereby suggesting the persistent “oligarchic-democratic” features of governance in the United States (Regilme 2019).

The emergence of Bernie Sanders and the eventual political success of Donald Trump (in 2016)—both of whom are widely considered as outsiders to their respective political parties—demonstrate the profound dissatisfaction in the often saturated and predictable policy positions of establishment politicians, who control either the Republican or Democratic parties. Yet, there are two key factors that facilitated the recent rise of Trump and Sanders in mainstream American political imagination. The first factor pertains to the “growing distrust of the formal institutions that organize social, economic, and political power within” individual states, while the second aspect refers to the “discontent with systems of power that appear to preserve and entrench prevailing class structures” (Hadiz and Chrysogelos 2017). The rise of Trump reflects the “the erosion of the legitimacy of political elites, representative institutions and the globalist orientation that has long dominated US politics” (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017). In other words, the rise of authoritarian neoliberal politicians worldwide demonstrates a fundamental decline in the legitimacy of the American imperium. The second dimension, meanwhile, refers to the economic aspects of the contemporary decline of American power. I refer to the increasing economic inequality within many national political systems worldwide. While the extremely rich elites continue to accumulate scandalous levels of wealth, a large number of people worldwide are suffering from extreme poverty. The continued slimming down of welfare states in the Global North has made it more difficult for the most vulnerable citizens to escape from the systemic vicissitudes of poverty. Many Western states face severe pressures in sustaining their programs primarily because of their stagnant economic growth and weakened levels of economic competitiveness relative to the emerging economies in the Global South and the complex challenges posed by neoliberal globalization (Razin and Sadka 2005; Bromund 2018). American power’s sustainability depends on its internal domestic stability, whereby economic growth and robust welfare provisions foster satisfaction and undermines social conflict.

Yet, domestically, the Trump administration unashamedly overturned the universal health care reforms that the previous administration fiercely struggled to implement amid highly contentious politics across party lines. In the face of peaceful resistance brought by the majority, who are disadvantaged by

neoliberalism, electoral democratic states have evolved to becoming what is now called by some scholars “authoritarian neoliberalism,” which is constituted by two features: (1) coercion and criminalization of political opposition and (2) deployment of the state’s apparatuses that deters any form of external resistance against neoliberalism (Tansel 2017).

With the United States as its epicenter, the 2007–2008 financial crisis highlighted the fundamental failures of the American political economy that systematically privileges the logic of capital accumulation regardless of their domestic consequences to human rights. This political-economic logic becomes more evident when one looks into how Western governments, including the U.S. federal government, generously and unhesitatingly doled out billions of dollars as bailout funds for failing financial conglomerates. Even though Trump’s rhetoric highlights an economic nationalist strategy, business elites within and beyond the United States, as it was shown in the 2018 World Economic Forum in Davos, have somehow discarded Trump’s sexism and racism. Accordingly, “much of the moneyed elite who pay the bills for many Davos festivities are willing to overlook what they portray as the American president’s rhetorical foibles in favor of focusing on the additional wealth he has delivered to their coffers,” especially that Trump “has made good on his words, having slashed corporate taxes and ditched regulations they view as anti-business” (Goodman 2018, 4–5).

Also, a part of this decline in American power constitutes the severe budget problems that the U.S. federal government has been facing. Mick Mulvaney, the most senior official on budget management issues in the Trump administration, confirmed that the “challenge of great stakes” refers to the fact that “\$20 trillion national debt is a crisis, not just for the Nation, but for every citizen” and that “each American’s share of this debt is more than \$60,000 and growing” (Office of the President of the United States, Office of Management and Budget 2017). In order to purportedly resolve the budget crisis, the Trump administration embraced a probusiness strategy by easing taxes for businesses and the rich as the preferred policy strategy, while equitable economic growth remained outside Trump’s policy agenda (Office of the President of the United States, Office of Management and Budget 2017, 15). This commitment to lift the tax burdens of the elites had detrimental consequences for the already unreliable U.S. welfare system.

Even before Trump, the Obama administration faced severe challenges in building a moral consensus among politicians and their constituencies that it is the state’s obligation to guarantee an effective health care system that can be reliably accessed by all Americans. Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration, during its first year, quickly spent its political capital in publicly vilifying and trying to dismantle the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Yet, it failed in fully repealing the ACA, and the White House focused on gradually introducing provisional amendments instead. This breakdown in political

consensus that was needed for building and sustaining a robust social safety net system emerged amid the Trump administration's efforts to eliminate regulatory measures and to reduce, if not totally eliminate, the tax burden of wealthy business actors. In fact, during the early months of the Trump administration, the Republican Party tried to repeal Obamacare and proposed instead the American Health Care Act. In effect, the proposal constituted abolishing the health insurance of millions of U.S. citizens while the U.S. Congress pushed for \$600 billion worth of tax cuts for the richest 0.1 percent of the U.S. population—an outcome that would save the most affluent Americans almost \$200,000 worth of tax obligations each year (Matthews 2017).

What does the problem of the neoliberal-induced weakening of the domestic American welfare mean for American power? First, the increasing economic inequality within the United States and its constitutive entrenched patterns of racial and gender stratification pose enduring difficulties for the federal government to effectively govern the polity. This means that domestic and foreign policy proposals evade open, deliberative, and representative discussions involving diverse constituencies across American society. Essentially, governance becomes an exclusively elite undertaking rather than a truly democratic and deliberative task of diverse sectors of the American polity. Second, the continuous weakening and perhaps eventual dissolution of a system of state-supported welfare entitlements could further increase the level of public distrust of state institutions, an outcome that would further delegitimize the domestic authority of the U.S. government (Regilme 2014). Third, the prospect of serious political instability in the United States tarnishes the global moral appeal of open and democratic societies and consequently bolsters alternative models of governance, including authoritarian political systems. Based on a 2018 Gallup World Poll survey, the United States registered a remarkably low 30 percent median approval rate across 134 countries (previously 48 percent in 2017 under the Obama administration), which places it approximately level with China (31 percent) and Russia (27 percent) (Ray 2018). This low approval rating suggests that it would be difficult for the United States to project its economic and political interests in its bilateral relations with other states as well as in various global governance institutions. Perhaps this low rating could also be attributed to the global public sphere's dissatisfaction with the United States as an exemplary governance model.

At the transnational level, the remarkable deterioration of the U.S. economy and its failure to equitably distribute wealth across society have radically undermined American power abroad. The sharp decline of U.S. relative productivity and share of world merchandise since the start of the millennium increases the probability that rival states could use their expanding relative economic growth in challenging the already fragile American imperium (Mandel 2012). Meanwhile, China, the world's second largest economic power, boasts an average of 10 percent GDP annual growth in the last two

decades—although this growth rate is expected to decline in the short term to around 7 percent. During the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party in Beijing, Chinese president Xi Jinping proudly declared that China contributes 30 percent of global economic growth and, most notably, laid out his “three-decade road map toward great power status, saying by 2050 the country would be a global leader in innovation, influence and military might” (*Bloomberg* 2017). Also, other non-Western countries, including Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, and many others in the Global South, have continued to enlarge their share of the world economy (Gray and Murphy 2013; Regilme and Parisot 2017a, 2017b; Hameiri and Jones 2018). Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, “China’s economy grew at the slowest pace in more than four decades last year, official figures show, but remains on course to be the only major economy to have expanded in 2020” (BBC News 2021).

The rapid economic growth of non-Western powers poses new challenges and uncertainties in what used to be a world economic system that has been usually underwritten by American imperium (Regilme and Hartmann 2019; Regilme and Hodzi 2021). To further expand or at least sustain their economies, emerging markets from the Global South have to push for their interests in various global governance institutions and geostrategic areas in ways that could facilitate such an expansion—and those efforts could, at times, clash against American interests. An example of this is the highly contentious rivalry between the United States and China in the development aid sector in the African continent, whereby Beijing uses foreign aid to gain access to valuable African natural resources and commodities that are needed for the continued growth of the Chinese economy (Regilme and Hartmann 2018). The extent to which such clashes could be detrimental to U.S. power is an open question, although reemerging powers in world politics tend to use their newly acquired economic wealth to fund their coercive apparatus that would then be used for further global expansion of political and economic power (Shlapentokh 2004; Viola 2017). For instance, since 2012, the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has been rapidly constructing and developing artificial islands in and militarizing the South China Sea, where 60 percent of economic goods pass (Regilme 2018b). For China, future economic growth also requires the ability to rewrite the terms and conditions of the key global maritime trade routes through which China’s economic lifeblood flows.

What does a weakened American power mean for the future of world politics? First, multilateral cooperation as a crucial mechanism of global governance could be undermined in favor of blatant and crude nationalist interests firmly entrenched in Trump’s “America First” paradigm as well as in the programs of other similar politicians in Europe and elsewhere. If reemerging powers such as India, Russia, and China, among others, continue to exert their influence in their immediate home regions and in global governance and justify such actions through the prism of blatant nationalism, then we are

likely to see a world system with “multiple power centers, with the principal actors stressing the objective of vindicating their own national interests” (Carpenter 2017, 43). Second, the rise of blatant nationalism could severely undermine basic principles that protect individuals against abuses both from state and nonstate actors. In contrast to authoritarian nationalism that has recently gained traction, liberal internationalism represents one of the key principles of the post-1945 world order, and it “embodies many bi-partisan principles: support for freedom, democracy, human rights, a free press, as well as an open world economy for the movement of goods, services, people, and ideas” (Chaudoin, Milner, and Tingley 2017, 1). If authoritarian nationalist politicians including Donald Trump continue to gain widespread support in various places worldwide, then arbitrarily defined notions of national interests—which are often abusively instrumentalized by domestic political elites—become bases of justification for increased domestic state repression of individual rights and welfare.

Human Rights and the Crisis of Neoliberal Authoritarianism

The global neoliberal crisis, as shown by failures in the U.S. political economy, suggests that the current international human rights regime is in the midst of a critical juncture. Particularly, the three key organizing principles of world order—human rights, multiculturalism, and tolerance—are in distress.

First, authoritarian politicians and social movements that explicitly and consistently uphold racist, sexist, and discriminatory political discourses and policy strategies have gained traction both in the public sphere and also in the corridors of power. Facilitated by neoliberalism, the global tidal wave of nationalist crony capitalism, which constitutes a “reaction to social dislocations tied to processes of neoliberal globalization,” emerged from the “new kinds of social marginalization, precarious existence and disenchantment with the broken promises of liberal modernity” (Hadiz and Chrysogelos 2017, 399). As a key pillar of American dominance at the global level, the European Union’s self-proclaimed identity as a “normative power” (Regilme 2011, 2013) or as a key global promoter of democracy and human rights has yet to make a formidable defense of such norms against some of its most discriminatory politicians from within its domain. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party in Germany in 2021 won almost 10 percent of the vote and has now sixteen seats in the German Parliament—thereby making the AfD the fifth largest party in the EU’s most influential member state. In France, although Marine Le Pen’s National Front (NF) lost to Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche! during the 2017 runoff elections, the party has aggressively promoted anti-EU sentiments, nationalism, economic protectionism, and racism. Even the Netherlands, which is usually touted as one of the world’s

most tolerant societies, was unable to escape the tidal wave of illiberal populism. Although Geert Wilders of the anti-Islam and racist Freedom Party (PVV) did not succeed in becoming the prime minister of the Netherlands, he remains in power as a parliamentarian and his PVV party won seventeen of the hundred fifty seats in the House of Representatives—making his party the third largest in the Dutch government. Such challenges from these movements can also be seen in other key countries within the EU, including Austria, Hungary, Sweden, Bulgaria, and Slovakia, among others. Thus, within the Global North, many racist, sexist, and intolerant politicians and public figures have gained traction not just in the mainstream public sphere. Many of these political movements have now occupied important positions in the ruling government of some of the largest electoral democracies in the world. A key U.S. ally in the Asia-Pacific region, Thailand, after the fall of the corrupt regime of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, entered a period of political recession where a military junta has effectively replaced a system of competitive elections and a state that effectively upholds civil liberties and rights (Regilme 2018c, 2021). The Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte, meanwhile, has unashamedly abandoned the country’s human rights commitments and democratic reforms, in favor of killing poor people, harassing and detaining political dissidents, and empowering new and traditional elite groups (Johnson and Fernquest 2018). Those dynamics are also replicated in Turkey, where the Erdogan-led government has radically pursued neoliberal economic policies through authoritarian measures and dismantlement of democratic checks within the Turkish state (Lancaster 2014). Thus, even some American allies in the Global South are now caught by this pandemic of authoritarianism.

With neoliberalism at its core, American power has consistently failed to uphold the moral principles of material equality and global justice. American foreign policy—through its wide range of aid programs and vigorous public diplomacy—has championed the role of the state as a guarantor of free markets, property rights, and capital accumulation, which paved the way for other states worldwide to entrench further inequality while emboldening the political power of economic elites. In many Global South countries, a robust welfare state tradition did not exist as U.S. global dominance in the era of decolonization did not champion the principles of material justice—to the extent of advocating for equitable material distribution within and across newly formed national constitutional orders. Rather, U.S. power has contented itself with civil and political rights as organizing principles within subservient states, while substantive issues of global governance focused upon only free trade, deregulation, and capital accumulation. As human rights historian Samuel Moyn accurately notes, “The age of human rights has not been kind to full-fledged distributive justice, because it is also an age of the victory of the rich” (2018, 2). No wonder, even Philip Alston (2017, 9), the former UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial and arbitrary executions, contends that “economic and social rights must be an important

and authentic part of the overall agenda.” Alston’s experience in the UN Human Rights Council is telling: a very small percentage of all self-professed human rights nongovernmental organizations in the council have a specific substantive focus on economic and social rights. The dominant global human rights narrative has parochially focused only on the procedural elements of legitimation rather than the more pressing and morally compelling issues of material inequality and global justice.

Human Rights under the Neoliberal Trump Administration

The Trump administration represented a new kind of departure in human rights rhetoric in U.S. policy. Donald Trump’s political rhetoric reflected profound disdain for peaceful political opposition, competitive electoral processes, and constitutional checks and balances within the state. Despite the failures of neoliberalism, Trump’s predecessors somehow effectively concealed them through the legitimating discourses of procedural democracy and civil and political rights. Trump, on the other hand, shamelessly threw away those legitimation discourses and consequently embraced authoritarian neoliberalism—although the full panoply of its material consequences has yet to fully unfold within and beyond the American society, even after Trump’s 2020 electoral loss and the emergence of the Biden presidency in early 2021.

There are several behavioral patterns that show how Trump departed from his predecessors’ human rights commitments in terms of both discursive rhetoric and actual practice. First, Trump openly and proudly articulated his admiration for authoritarian leaders such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, and Recep Erdogan (Beauchamp 2017). For example, Trump’s discursive rhetoric consistently suggested his preference for the use of violent repression over peaceful means (Calamur 2018). In April 2017, when the notorious Philippine president Duterte boasted that he was directly involved in the killings of suspected drug dealers during his time as a city mayor, Trump fervently congratulated him. Second, Trump and his cabinet officials persistently discredited the legitimacy of Washington DC’s press corps and established news media agencies by incorrectly alleging them as promoters of “fake news.” Third, Trump’s foreign and domestic policy strategies seldom invoked human rights as a foundational basis of public policy (Margon 2017). During his time as America’s top diplomat, Rex Tillerson systematically avoided media coverage of his foreign diplomatic missions, and more tellingly, his absence during the launching of the annual Human Rights Report produced by his office suggests the low priority placed upon American human rights promotion abroad. In the landmark America First Document, the first federal budget strategy of the Trump White House, references to

human rights were nonexistent (Office of the President of the United States, Office of Management and Budget 2017). Moreover, the 2018 budget strategy also mandated severe cuts to foreign aid and contributions for multilateral institutions, many of which have been conduits of U.S. interest in promoting human rights abroad. In the summer of 2017, the U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley unashamedly threatened U.S. withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council “unless reforms are ushered in including the removal of what it sees as an ‘anti-Israel bias’” (Nebehay 2017, 1). It is unprecedented for the White House to directly and explicitly use its long-standing commitment to global human rights institutions as a pawn in exchange for geostrategic considerations such as its relationship with Israel. Finally, the Trump administration asked the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to form a task force that would review cases of naturalized U.S. citizens who allegedly lied in their citizenship applications—a policy that has long been in place yet was rarely implemented during the Obama era. That same dynamic can be seen in the horrifying Trump policy of separating child immigrants caught at the U.S.-Mexico border from their parents. Suggesting a sense of continuity from his predecessor, this policy from Trump “opens the door to him using a tactic Obama used in 2014: the wide-scale detention of immigrant families for as long as it took to complete their immigration cases and deport them” (Lind 2018, 2). Though Obama rhetorically committed himself to human rights, albeit falling short in practice, the Trump administration miserably failed in human rights rhetoric and practice—and was particularly proud in doing so.

Trump’s bellicose rhetoric and quite consistent disregard for human rights discourses did not fully constitute an unprecedented rupture on U.S. foreign policy. Rather, such changes should be regarded as a continuation of the U.S.-led war on terror’s disregard for civil liberties and physical integrity rights. In doing so, U.S. officials and their neoliberal elite allies invoke military security as the justificatory premise to quell political dissidence and claims for material justice in favor of wealth accumulation. Especially after the post-9/11 war on terror, state officials and elites worldwide instrumentalized human rights to justify violence, political killings, and enforced disappearances of both civilians and armed individuals. Rebecca Sanders (2018, 2) calls this discursive tactic of authoritarian actors the “plausible legality” of highly controversial policies, whereby they use “evasive language, they manoeuvre through and around legal rules in order to justify human rights abuses, claiming that law means what they want it to mean.” That strategy has been quite evident since the post-9/11 global war on terror, when the United States and its allied states deployed intensified violent repression not only to kill terror groups but also to quell peaceful political dissidence as a way of consolidating their fledgling domestic authority. Another example is Obama’s use of human rights rhetoric despite his strong reliance upon increased drone warfare that systematically killed civilians in the context of the war on terror (De

Groot and Regilme 2020). Moreover, even before Trumpism, authoritarian nationalist discourses were on the rise in the past few years, and the post-9/11 security climate has conditioned many people worldwide that public security can be achieved only through a state's intensification of political violence. No wonder that even after the end of the Bush presidency, there seems to be a "constant drumbeat of comments demanding a return to methods of interrogation" (Alston 2017, 3). That is why, in the broadest sense, Trumpism was not necessarily a radical rupture in post-Cold War world politics; rather, "Trump's election and his foreign policy are not *sui generis* but the result of ongoing transnational structural transformations, including the failures of globalization and relative hegemonic decline" (Viola 2017, 329).

Indeed, the United States has been quite inconsistent "regarding human rights in foreign policy, practiced by not only the Obama administration from the start, but at the end of the day by all administrations," (Forsythe 2011, 767)—not perhaps in terms of rhetoric and diplomacy but in terms of tangible policy outcomes. There are three plausible factors for such an outcome in U.S. human rights policy abroad. First, in a highly competitive, nation-based world order, the United States still perceives (unfortunately!) its compelling national interest as foundationally based upon military security and facilitating a neoliberal economic order upon which U.S. capital and trade interests would thrive. Second, the U.S. foreign policy agenda has to thrive amid the competing interests of nation-states, numerous intergovernmental organizations, and various binding international human rights commitments. Third, a wide array of domestic and foreign pressures within the U.S. federal government and beyond makes foreign policy unstable and unpredictable rather than persistently fixed in actualizing its human rights commitments. Thus, as David Forsythe (2011, 768) rightfully describes, "Administrations may aspire to realist, liberal, or ultra-nationalist (neo-con) goals in foreign policy, but in the end, they have inconsistent records on human rights issues" (see also Renouard 2016; Regilme 2018c). Lobby groups funded by wealthy elites and interest groups made it possible for domestic and foreign U.S. policies to be less committed to human rights than they should have been (van Apeldoorn and de Graaff 2014).

While procedural democracy, political liberalism, and neoliberalism constitute the U.S.-dominated world order (Brown 2006), those principles are bound to fail due to their fundamental contradictions (Bridoux 2013). What Trump's presidency and the rise of authoritarian populism reveal are exactly those inherent weaknesses of the global order's organizing logic.

First, despite the collapse of formal European colonialism and the subsequent era of decolonization, the current world order constituted by material inequalities within and between nation-states is unlikely to be sustainable—and that exactly is the ontological defect that the American-

dominated world system is built upon. As theorist Michael Zürn rightly argues (2018, 96), “If the powerful founders (established powers or incumbent states) have institutionalized inequality from the beginning, and if there is no separation of powers to control this inequality, a shift in the underlying power constellation leads to contestation from the rising powers.” Several reemerging powers—especially China, India, Russia, Turkey—have been more assertive in articulating their national interests and the distributive inequalities within the current world order, particularly in terms of the distribution of power in various global governance institutions. That contestation—fueled by material grievances and identity-based insecurity brought by hierarchical differentiation—could lead to decay and instability of societies, especially in established powers such as the United States and its rival states, especially China.

Second, perceptions of systematic hypocrisy in U.S. foreign policies and the political-economic strategies of the Global North, especially in the policy areas of democracy and human rights promotion, have been gaining traction to the extent that they diminish the legitimating appeal of American power. For example, although the U.S. Democratic Party complains that the rise of Trump was brought by the surreptitious yet systematic interference of the Russian government under Vladimir Putin, whose main objective was to destabilize the United States from within, American power has always been interventionist—and, in many occasions, the United States has systematically used organized violence upon civilians in order to further militaristic, geostrategic, and capitalist objectives.

Third, American power has promoted a very shallow notion of human rights that undermines the emancipatory hope that dignity should be enjoyed by Americans regardless of their varying backgrounds. Within the United States, the racial wealth gap remains at an abominable scale, whereby the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 Population Survey reported that “black families in America earn just \$57.30 for every \$100 in income earned by white families,” or “for every \$100 in white family wealth, black families hold just \$5.04.” (Badger 2017). Based on 2016 data, American women earn “an average of only 79 cents for every dollar earned by a white man,” while “single women own a mere 32 cents for every dollar that single men own”—and such a gap becomes much sharper when classified along racial backgrounds (Mahathey 2016). Amid these problems of material justice, governments of the Global North have wholeheartedly supported the bailout of failing corporate banking behemoths using ordinary people’s hard-earned money paid to the state as taxes. Those hefty billion-dollar bailouts proceeded amid scandalous levels of reductions in state support for welfare goods such as education, health care, and other basic social services.

Conclusion

The legitimacy and effectiveness of international human rights norms rest on the commitment of state and nonstate actors in discursively articulating the importance of protecting human dignity in a consistent manner. Yet, it is clear that the Trump administration's abandonment of discursive support for promoting political freedoms, human rights, and democracy abroad constituted another serious risk for the corrosion of the global human rights regime.

The political crisis brought by Trumpism—amid the rise of neo-Nazism in Germany, Erdogan's authoritarianism in Turkey, Bolsonaro's autocratic rule in Brazil, Geert Wilders's racism in the Netherlands, and Rodrigo Duterte's ongoing genocide of poor people in the Philippines—is a crisis of our political economy. Trump, like his predecessors, used his privileged position and his presidential powers to enrich himself. Europe's crisis emerges from its accelerated speed of neoliberal regional integration amid a shrinking welfare state and a weakening commitment to public goods provision. Racist, sexist, and authoritarian politicians blame marginalized groups and identity politics as the main culprit—rather than the neoliberal capitalism that has empowered Trump and his peers elsewhere. Trumpism is distinctive only to the extent that it has unmasked the underlying logics of American power since 1945, albeit in very unconventional ways through blatantly offensive discourses and publicly supporting policies that favor wealthy elites—tactics that were not openly used by Trump's recent predecessors. In other words, as Inderjeet Parmar (2018) accurately describes it, the U.S.-led liberal world order is “imperialism by another name.” This imperial logic constitutes racialized differentiation and hierarchization, gendered exploitation, and authoritarian discipline underpinned by the logic of wealth accumulation. If the global human rights regime has to save itself from the current crisis, then imperial modes of thinking and practices have to vanish—and perhaps that means the dissolution of neoliberal logic upon which American power and imperium have faithfully depended for decades.

References

- Alston, P. 2017. “The Populist Challenge to Human Rights.” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9 (1): 1–15.
- Badger, E. 2017. “Whites Have Huge Wealth Edge over Blacks (but Don't Know It).” *New York Times*, September 18.
- BBC News. 2019. “Covid-19: China's economy picks up, bucking global trend”.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-55699971>
- Beauchamp, Z. 2017. “A top adviser says the leaders Trump “most admires” are all authoritarians”. *Vox*, December 14. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/12/14/16776728/trump-admires-putin>
- Bloomberg. 2017. “China Propels Global Economy through Best Performance in Decade.” October 19.
- Bridoux, J. 2013. “US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion: In Search of Purpose.” *International Relations* 27 (2): 235–240.
- Bromund, T. 2018. “Europe Paves the Way for Its Decline.” Heritage Foundation.

- Brown, W. 2006. "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-democratization." *Political Theory* 34 (6): 690–714.
- Calamur, K. 2018. "Nine Notorious Dictators, Nine Shout-Outs from Donald Trump." *Atlantic*, March 4.
- Carpenter, T. 2017. "The Populist Surge and the Rebirth of Foreign Policy Nationalism." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37 (1): 33–46.
- Cederman, L.-E., N. B. Weidmann, and K. Gleditsch. 2011. "Horizontal Inequalities and Ethnonationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison." *American Political Science Review* 105 (3): 478–495.
- Chacko, P., and K. Jayasuriya. 2017. "Trump, the Authoritarian Populist Revolt and the Future of the Rules-Based Order in Asia." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71 (2): 121–127.
- Chaudoin, S., H. V. Milner, and D. Tingley. 2017. "A Liberal International American Foreign Policy Under Trump? Maybe Down but Not Out." Princeton University.
- CIVICUS. 2019. "State of Civil Society Report 2019." https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2019/state-of-civil-society-report-2019_executive-summary.pdf.
- Groot, Tom de, and S. Regilme. 2020. "Drone Warfare and the Obama Administration's Path-Dependent Struggles on Human Rights and Counterterrorism." *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*. 6(1), 167–202. doi: DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v6n1p167
- Diamond, Larry. 2016. *In Search of Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Forsythe, D. P. 2011. "US Foreign Policy and Human Rights: Situating Obama." *Human Rights Quarterly* 33:767–789.
- Freedom House. 2019. "Freedom in the World 2019." <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019>.
- Goodman, Peter. 2018. "Bottom Line for Davos Elite: Trump Is Good for Business." *New York Times*, January 24. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/24/business/trump-davos-follow-the-money.html>.
- Gray, K., and C. N. Murphy. 2013. "Introduction: Rising Powers and the Future of Global Governance." *Third World Quarterly* 34 (2): 183–193.
- Hadiz, V. R. and Chrysosgelos, A. 2017. "Populism in world politics: A comparative cross-regional perspective." *International Political Science Review*, 38(4): 399–411.
- Hameiri, S., and L. Jones. 2018. "China Challenges Global Governance? Chinese International Development Finance and the AIIB." *International Affairs* 94 (3): 573–593.
- Heer, J. 2018. "Why Conservatives Tolerate Trump's Crony Capitalism." *New Republic*, March 30.
- Herman, S. 2011. *The War on Terror and the Erosion of American Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Houle, C. 2016. "Why Class Inequality Breeds Coups but Not Civil Wars." *Journal of Peace Research* 53 (5): 680–695.
- Human Rights Watch. 2019. "World Report—United States—Events of 2018." <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/united-states>.
- Johnson, D. T., and J. Fernquest. 2018. "Governing through Killing: The War on Drugs in the Philippines." *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 5 (2): 359–390.
- Lancaster, C. 2014. "The Iron Law of Erdogan: The Decay from Intra-party Democracy to Personalistic Rule." *Third World Quarterly* 35 (9): 1672–1690.
- Lessmann, C. 2016. "Regional Inequality and Internal Conflict." *German Economic Review* 17 (2): 157–191.
- Lind, Dara. 2018. "What Obama What Obama Did with Migrant Families vs. What Trump Is Doing." *Vox*, June 21. <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/21/17488458/obama-immigration-policy-family-separation-border>.
- Mahathey, A. 2016. "We Need to Talk about the Gender Wealth Gap." *Huffington Post*, September 27.

- Mandel, B. R. 2012. "Why Is the U.S. Share of World Merchandise Exports Shrinking?" *Current Issues in Economics and Finance* 18 (1). https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/current_issues/ci18-1.html.
- Margon, S. 2017. "Trump's Damning Global Retreat on Human Rights." *Foreign Policy*, April 6.
- Matthews, D. 2017. "The GOP Health Bill Is a \$600 Billion Tax Cut—Almost Entirely for the Wealthy." *Vox*, March 7, 1–2.
- Mickey, R., S. Levitsky, and L. Way. 2017. "Is America Still Safe for Democracy? Why the United States Is in Danger of Backsliding." *Foreign Affairs* 96:20–29.
- Moyn, S. 2018. *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nebehay, S. 2017. "US Poised to Withdraw from UN Human Rights Council over 'Anti-Israel Bias.'" *Independent*, June 6.
- Norrlöf, C. 2018. "Hegemony and Inequality: Trump and the Liberal Playbook." *International Affairs* 94 (1): 63–88.
- Office of the President of the United States, Office of Management and Budget. 2017. "America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again." White House, July 5. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2018_blueprint.pdf.
- Parmar, I. 2018. "The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?" *International Affairs* 94 (1): 151–172.
- Ralph, J. 2013. *America's War on Terror: The State of the 9/11 Exception from Bush to Obama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ray, J. 2018. "World's Approval of U.S. Leadership Drops to New Low." Gallup, January 18.
- Razin, A., and E. Sadka. 2005. *The Decline of the Welfare State*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Regilme, S., and O. Hodzi. 2021. "Comparing US and Chinese Foreign Aid in the Era of Rising Powers." *The International Spectator* (56) 2: 114–131.
- Regilme, S. 2011. "The Chimera of Europe's Normative Power in East Asia: A Constructivist Analysis." *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 5 (1): 69–90.
- . 2013. "It Takes Two to Tango: A Constructivist Analysis of EU-ASEAN Interregional Relations." In *Global Power Europe*, vol. 2: *Policies, Actions, and Influence of the EU's Relations*, edited by Astrid Boening, Jan-Frederik Kremer, and Aukje van Loon, 237–252. Heidelberg: Springer.
- . 2014. "Bringing the Global Political Economy Back In: Neoliberalism, Globalization, and Democratic Consolidation." *International Studies Perspectives* 15 (3): 277–296.
- . 2018a. "Beyond Paradigms: Understanding the South China Sea Dispute Using Analytic Eclecticism." *International Studies* 55 (3): 1–25.
- . 2018b. "The Global Politics of Human Rights: From Human Rights to Human Dignity?" *International Political Science Review* 212 (2): 279–290.
- . 2018c. "Does US Foreign Aid Undermine Human Rights? The 'Thaksinification' of the War on Terror Discourses and the Human Rights Crisis in Thailand, 2001 to 2006." *Human Rights Review* 19 (1): 73–95.
- . 2019. "Constitutional Order in Oligarchic Democracies: Neoliberal Rights versus Socio-Economic Rights." *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, (May 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872119854142>.
- . 2021. *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Regilme, S., and H. Hartmann. 2018. "Mutual Delegitimization: American and Chinese Development Assistance in Africa." *SALIS Review of International Affairs*. <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/61074>
- Regilme, S. and O. Hodzi. 2021. Comparing US and Chinese Foreign Aid in the Era of Rising Powers. *The International Spectator* 56 (2): 114–131.

- Regilme, S., and J. Parisot. 2017a. "Conclusion: The Future of Global Cooperation and Conflict." In *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers*, edited by S. Regilme and J. Parisot, 216–219. New York: Routledge.
- . 2017b. "Introduction: American Hegemony—Global Cooperation and Conflict." In *American Hegemony and the Rise of Emerging Powers*, edited by S. Regilme and J. Parisot, 3–18. New York: Routledge.
- Renouard, J. 2016. *Human Rights in American Foreign Policy: From the 1960s to the Soviet Collapse*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Sanders, R. 2018. "Human Rights Abuses at the Limits of the Law: Legal Instabilities and Vulnerabilities in the 'Global War on Terror.'" *Review of International Studies* 44 (1): 1–22.
- Shafiq, A. 2013. "The War on Terror and the Enforced Disappearances in Pakistan." *Human Rights Review* 14 (4): 387–404.
- Shlapentokh, D. 2004. "Lessons from China: Russian Foreign Policy and Its Implications." *Crime, Law Social Change* 41:235–259.
- Stokes, D. 2018. "Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order." *International Affairs* 94 (1): 133–150.
- Tansel, C. 2017. "Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Towards a New Research Agenda." In *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*, edited by C. Tansel, 1–28. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- van Apeldoorn, B., and N. de Graaff. 2014. "Corporate Elite Networks and US Post–Cold War Grand Strategy from Clinton to Obama." *European Journal of International Relations* 20 (1): 29–55.
- Viola, L. 2017. "US-amerikanische Außenpolitik unter Trump und die Krisen der Globalisierung." *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 10 (3): 329–338.
- Yglesias, M. 2018. "Trump's Administration Can't Clean House Because Its Leader Is Too Soaked in Scandal." *Vox*, July 11.
- Zürn, M. 2018. *A Theory of Global Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Notes

¹ This essay is based on a previously published article: S. S. F. Regilme Jr., "The Decline of American Power and Donald Trump: Reflections on Human Rights, Neoliberalism, and the World Order," *Geoforum* 102 (2019): 157–166. I thank Elsevier, the publisher of the journal, for permission to use the material in this volume.

² In the annual CIVICUS report, there are five types of civic space: (1) open, (2) narrowed, (3) obstructed, (4) repressed, and (5) closed.