# The crisis of the United Nations and its universal human rights system

## Contested Multilateralism and the Challenges Facing Indigenous Peoples

Antonia Urrejola

IWGIA

# The crisis of the United Nations and its universal human rights system

## Contested Multilateralism and the Challenges Facing Indigenous Peoples

Antonia Urrejola

**The crisis of the United Nations and its universal human rights system**

Copyright: Antonia Urrejola and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, IWGIA

**CATALOGING HURIDOCS CIP DATA**

Title: The crisis of the United Nations and its universal human rights system

Author: Antonia Urrejola

Pages: 54

ISBN: 978-87-93961-89-0

Language: English

Index: 1. United Nations – 2. Human Rights

Geographical area: Global

Publication date: March 2026

INTERNATIONAL WORK GROUP FOR INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS (IWGIA)
Prinsessegade 29 B, 3rd floor, DK 1422 - Copenhagen, Denmark
E-mail: iwgia@iwgia.org
www.iwgia.org

# Table of Contents

**I. Introduction** — 5

**II. Origins and Evolution of the UN Human Rights Architecture** — 7

a. From Dumbarton Oaks to San Francisco — 7

b. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) — 10

c. The participation of Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations system — 13

**III. The Current Context of Authoritarian Regression** — 17

a. Magnitude of the democratic crisis — 17

b. Human rights situation, particularly for defenders — 19

c. The "Trump Effect" and global trends — 20

d. Social media as infrastructure for the capture of democracy — 20

**IV. The Current Situation of the UN Universal System** — 23

a. The role of the Security Council — 23

b. The Pact for the Future and the paradox of empty promises — 26

c. The UN80 initiative and the review of mandates — 29

d. The OHCHR financial crisis — 33

e. The withdrawal of the United States from 66 international organizations — 36

**V. The Contemporary Debate: Sovereignty, International Law and Human Rights** — 38

a. Trump's position: "My own morality" as a limit — 38

b. Limited sovereignty and supranational values — 39

c. "State erosion" as a concept distinct from "democratic backsliding" — 43

**VI. Critical Assessment of the Post-2026 Order** — 44

**VII. Some Ideas for the Future and Final Conclusions** — 48

a. A historic crossroads — 49

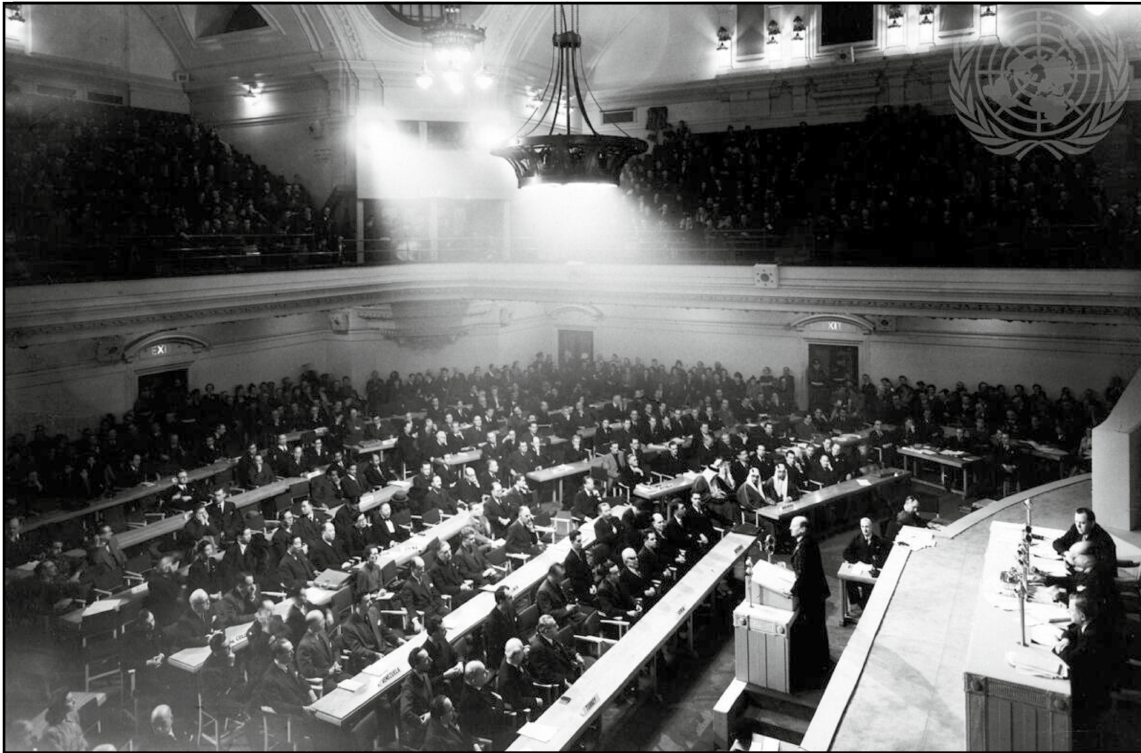
b. Democratizing the architecture of power — 50

c. Sustainable financing for human rights — 50

d. Giving the universal system “teeth” — 50

e. Rebuilding the link between democracy, the state, and multilateralism — 51

## I. Introduction



***First Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Central Hall, London, 10 January 1946. Photo: UN Photo / Marcel Bolomey (United Nations).***

When representatives from 50 nations gathered in San Francisco between April and June 1945, the world was emerging from two world wars that had claimed more than 100 million lives and exposed the darkest depths of human cruelty. The Preamble of the Charter they signed on June 26, 1945, began with a fundamental commitment: we are "determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind."

However, the path to that organization was less of a linear progression toward progress and more of a series of rectifications of previous failures. The League of Nations, created in 1919 after World War I and promoted by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, had collapsed spectacularly. Its inability to stop the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (1931), the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935), and the rise of Nazism demonstrated that an international architecture based on goodwill and without effective enforcement mechanisms was unworkable.

1. United Nations. (1945, June 26). Charter of the United Nations. Preamble. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/preamble

When Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie traveled to Geneva to denounce Italian atrocities before the Assembly, he uttered words that would resonate 80 years later: "It is us today. It will be you tomorrow."[2] At that time, Mussolini's fascist Italy had invaded Ethiopia in 1935, using chemical weapons and waging a war of colonial conquest that the League of Nations condemned as aggression but did little to stop, leaving the African country isolated in the face of attack.

The UN was conceived then not as a journey toward utopia, but as a mechanism to prevent the worst. As Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General, evoked in the context of the looming Cold War: "It has been said that the United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell"[3]. This phrase, uttered just ten years after the organization's founding, captures its pragmatic essence: it is not about world government or international liberal utopia, but rather an institutional mechanism for managing conflict between powers in a world overshadowed by nuclear weapons.

However, 80 years later, that fragile agreement is once again in crisis.

According to the 2025 V-Dem Report, for the first time in more than two decades, the number of autocracies (91) in the world exceeds that of democracies (88), and 72% of the world's population currently lives under authoritarian regimes, the highest level since 1978[4]. This global democratic regression has dramatically eroded the foundations of the multilateral system.

The situation worsened during 2025 and in the first weeks of 2026, with events marking turning points in the international order. On January 3, 2026, the United States conducted a unilateral military intervention in Venezuela that resulted in the capture of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, in flagrant violation of international law and the United Nations Charter[5]. This action has been described by international analysts as the end of the rules-based international order as it had been known since 1945[6].

---

2. Selassie, H. (1936, June 30). Speech by His Majesty Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, to the League of Nations Assembly. League of Nations, Geneva. Library of Congress. Retrieved from https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667904

3. Hammarskjöld, D. (1954, May 13). Address at University of California Convocation, Berkeley, California [Press release SG/382]. United Nations, Department of Public Information. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1291161

4. V-Dem Institute. (2025). Democracy Report 2025: Autocracies on the rise. University of Gothenburg. https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/

5. CNN. (2026, January 4). Inside the operation: How the US moved to capture Nicolás Maduro. https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/03/politics/nicolas-maduro-capture-venezuela; WOLA. (2026, January 3). Unilateral U.S. military intervention to remove authoritarian dictator. https://www.wola.org/2026/01/military-action-venezuela-united-states-maduro-trump/

6. Hakimi, M., & Cogan, J. K. (2025). The end of the U.S.-backed international order and the future of international law. American Journal of International Law, 119(2), 279-301. https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2025.1 Molina, I. (2026, January 22). The Maduro operation: Five insights on power and international relations. Real Instituto Elcano. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-maduro-operation-five-insights-on-power-and-international-relations/; Foundation for the Analysis of Futures. (2026, January 3). Empire unchained: How the US capture of Maduro shattered the post-war international order. FAF. https://www.faf.ae/home/2026/1/3/empire-unchained-how-the-us-capture-of-maduro-shattered-the-post-war-international-order; Bramston, T. (2026, January 2). The unravelling of order: Venezuela and the price of unilateralism. Bramston Associates. https://bramston.associates/venezuela-us-intervention-unilateralism-global-order/

As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney stated in a historic speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 20, 2026: "Let me be direct. We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition."[7] Carney urged an end to empty rhetoric: "Stop invoking 'rules-based international order' as if it still functions as advertised. Call it what it is – a system of intensifying great power rivalry, where the most powerful pursue their interests, using economic integration as coercion."[8]

## II. Origins and Evolution of the UN Human Rights Architecture

### a. From Dumbarton Oaks to San Francisco

The institutional architecture that emerged in 1945 was the result of a tortuous process of negotiation between powers with radically divergent visions of what the postwar "world organization" should be. Far from being a linear process toward universal cooperation, it was a series of diplomatic battles in which the most powerful imposed their vision of "collective security" while weaker actors pushed to include human rights, decolonization, and limits on the arbitrary power of the great powers.

At Dumbarton Oaks, a Georgian mansion in Washington, D.C., representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China met between August and October 1944 to design the basic structure of the future organization. The central objective was to avoid the failure of the League of Nations: to create a body with real authority to make binding decisions on international peace and security[9].

What emerged was revolutionary in institutional terms: a Security Council with the power to impose sanctions and use military force, a General Assembly with universal representation, an International Court of Justice to resolve legal disputes, and a permanent Secretariat to execute mandates. But what did not appear was robust human rights language. The expression "human rights" is mentioned only tangentially, without a catalog of specific rights or protection mechanisms[10].

This omission was not accidental but deliberate. The great powers—particularly the United Kingdom and France, with their intact colonial empires, and the USSR, with its repressive system—

7. World Economic Forum. (2026, January 20). Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada [Video and transcript]. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/

8. Ibid

9. Hilderbrand, R. C. (1990). Dumbarton Oaks: The origins of the United Nations and the search for postwar security. University of North Carolina Press. ISBN 978-0-8078-1894-7

10. Mazower, M. (2009). No enchanted palace: The end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations. Princeton University Press. ISBN 978-0-691-13521-2

believed that strong human rights language could challenge their internal and external dominance. The United States, although rhetorically committed to rights, feared that provisions on racial equality could be used to challenge segregation in the American South[11].

Colonial issues were deliberately excluded. The Dumbarton Oaks draft avoided any reference to decolonization or self-determination, issues considered "explosive" that could fracture the fragile alliance between European colonial powers and the two emerging superpowers[12].

Subsequently, in February 1945, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met at Yalta, on the Crimean Peninsula, to seal political agreements on the future of Europe and the world organization. Here, the thorniest issue left open by Dumbarton Oaks was resolved: veto power in the Security Council[13].

The logic was explicit: the five great powers that had won World War II (the United States, the USSR, the United Kingdom, France, and China) demanded permanent seats with veto power over any substantive decision of the Council as a condition for joining the system. Without veto power, they argued, they would never agree to submit to decisions that could affect their "vital interests"; with veto power, they agreed to participate in a common legal system in which they would at least have to publicly justify their actions[14].

The "price" of having a universal system was, therefore, to institutionalize from the outset a permanent asymmetry among the states: formally "equal" sovereignty in the language of the Charter, but radically unequal power in the body that makes the most important decisions. As historian Paul Kennedy would observe decades later, the veto was the pragmatic concession necessary for the powerful to accept any legal restrictions on their behavior, but at the same time, it sowed the seeds of the Council's future paralysis[15].

When the San Francisco Conference was convened between April 25 and June 26, 1945, 50 states arrived with the Dumbarton Oaks draft and the Yalta agreement under their arms. But they also arrived with their own agendas that the major powers had not contemplated: countries from emerging Africa, Latin America, and Asia pressed for greater emphasis on human rights, economic development, and the right to self-determination for colonized peoples[16].

---

11. Lauren, P. G. (1998). The evolution of international human rights: Visions seen. University of Pennsylvania Press. ISBN 978-0-8122-1521-4

12. Mazower, M (2009). Op. Cit.

13. Foreign Relations of the United States. (1945). Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Malta

14. Schlesinger, S. C. (2003). Act of creation: The founding of the United Nations: A story of superpowers, secret agents, wartime allies and enemies, and their quest for a peaceful world. Westview Press. ISBN 978-0-8133-3324-3

15. Kennedy, P. M. (2006). The parliament of man: The past, present, and future of the United Nations (1st ed.). Random House. ISBN 978-0-375-50165-4

16. Glendon, M. A. (2001). A world made new: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Random House. ISBN 978-0-679-46310-8

On institutional matters, 17 states submitted amendments to limit or eliminate the veto power: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Cuba, Egypt, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, France, Greece, Guatemala, Iran, Norway, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The Australian representative requested that the veto not be applied to the peaceful settlement of disputes, arguing that it was absurd that a power could block even the mediation or investigation of a conflict[17].

US Senator Tom Connally's response was brutal. In one session, he dramatically tore up a copy of the Charter in front of the delegates and snapped, "You may go home from San Francisco, if you wish, and report that you have defeated the veto. But you can also say: We tore up the Charter!" [18] The message was clear: without the veto, the major powers would abandon the project. Small states had to choose between an imperfect organization and no organization at all.

The final vote on the paragraph enshrining the veto revealed deep divisions: it was approved with two votes against (Colombia and Cuba), 15 abstentions, and three absences[19]. This founding debate foreshadowed tensions that persist 80 years later: then as now, small and medium-sized countries denounce an undemocratic system, while the major powers fiercely resist giving up privileges they consider a sine qua non condition for their participation.

But San Francisco was also the moment when, under pressure from small and medium-sized states, especially Latin American ones, elements that Dumbarton Oaks had excluded were incorporated:

- A strong reference to "human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion" in the Preamble and in Article 1.3 of the Charter.

- The obligation to create a Human Rights Commission within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which was not contemplated in Dumbarton Oaks.

- Chapters XI, XII, and XIII on non-self-governing territories and the trusteeship system, the result of pressure from countries seeking to pave the way for decolonization without directly confronting the colonial powers.

Delegations from Mexico, Panama, Chile, Cuba, Uruguay, the Philippines, India, and other emerging "Global South" states played a crucial role in these advances, often allying themselves with NGOs that, for the first time, participated as observers in a diplomatic conference of this magnitude. Organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in the United States and international feminist groups, among others, lobbied intensely

---

17. United Nations. (1945). Documents of the United Nations Conference on International Organization, San Francisco, 1945 (Vol. XI). United Nations Information Organizations. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1300969

18. Schlesinger, S. C. (2003). Op.cit.

19. United Nations. (1945). Documents of the United Nations Conference on International Organization, San Francisco, 1945 (Vol. XI). Op.cit.

for the Charter to include explicit language on racial and gender equality, as well as the protection of rights.[20]

In summary: Dumbarton Oaks designed the architecture of power; Yalta sealed the pact on the veto as a condition for the participation of the great powers; and San Francisco, pushed by small states and NGOs, incorporated the language and the first institutional mechanisms for human rights and decolonization that the powers had deliberately left out. The UN Charter is, therefore, a tense compromise between the realism of power and universalist normative aspirations—a tension that defines the system to this day.

### b. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Just three years after San Francisco, another battle was being fought over what "human rights" really meant in a world divided by the incipient Cold War, persistent colonialism, and deep cultural and religious differences surrounding the relationship between the individual, the community, and the state.

The Commission on Human Rights, created in 1946 as the first subsidiary body of ECOSOC, was mandated to draft an "International Bill of Human Rights." Its composition, although dominated by Western powers, reflected a certain multipolarity: chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt (widow of the US president and a figure of enormous moral prestige), it included personalities from diverse political, cultural, and religious traditions.[21]

Among the key drafters were René Cassin (France, jurist and war veteran, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1968), Charles Malik (Lebanon, philosopher and diplomat educated at Harvard and Fribourg), Peng Chun Chang (China, Confucian philosopher, playwright, and diplomat), Hernán Santa Cruz (Chile, jurist, diplomat, and promoter of ECLAC), Hansa Mehta (India, educator, feminist activist, and independence fighter), and representatives from the USSR, Yugoslavia, Australia, the United Kingdom, and other states.[22]

### Three major tensions in the drafting process (1947-1948)

#### 1. Civil and political rights vs. economic and social rights

From the outset, Soviet bloc countries and several Latin American countries pressed for the draft to include robust social rights: the right to work, social security, education, health, protection

---

20. In Anderson, C. (2003). Eyes off the prize: The United Nations and the African American struggle for human rights, 1944-1955. Cambridge University Press; and in Glendon, M. A. (2001). Op.cit.

21. Glendon, M.A (2001). Op.cit.

22. Morsink, J. (1999). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, drafting, and intent. University of Pennsylvania Press. ISBN 978-0-8122-1747-6

against unemployment, rest, and leisure. Soviet representatives argued that without guaranteed economic rights, civil liberties were "formal" and benefited only the propertied classes.[23]

Western delegations, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, sought to prioritize civil and political freedoms—freedom of expression, association, due process, free elections—arguing that these were fundamental "universal" rights, while social rights depended on available resources and particular economic systems.[24]

As a result, the compromise reached in the UDHR was a comprehensive vision in which both types of rights appear without explicit hierarchy: Articles 3-21 cover civil and political rights, and Articles 22-27 cover economic, social, and cultural rights. However, this tension would make a strong reappearance in the 1950s, resulting in the separation into two Covenants in 1966: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), with radically different enforcement mechanisms.[25]

### 2. Universalism vs. cultural relativism

The second major tension revolved around the universal applicability of certain rights in the face of particular cultural and religious traditions.

Saudi Arabia raised systematic objections to several articles:

- Article 16 (marriage): the right of men and women "without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion" to marry and "equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution." Saudi Arabia argued that this contradicted Sharia law.
- Article 18 (freedom of religion): the right to "change religion or belief." Saudi Arabia objected that this implied recognition of the right to apostasy—that is, the ability to leave one's religion—which is considered a crime under strict interpretations of Islam.

South Africa opposed the provisions on racial equality (Articles 1, 2, 7), anticipating a head-on collision between apartheid—which would be formally institutionalized that same year, in 1948—and the universalist language of rights.[26]

The compromise was to maintain the universalist language but to include in Article 29 a reference to duties towards the community and limits determined by law "solely for the purpose of

---

23. Cassese, A. (1992). The General Assembly: Historical perspective 1945-1989. In P. Alston (Ed.), The United Nations and human rights: A critical appraisal (pp. 25-54). Clarendon Press ISBN 978-0-19-825453-3

24. Normand, R., & Zaidi, S. (2008). Human rights at the UN: The political history of universal justice. Indiana University Press. ISBN 978-0-253-21934-3

25. Moyn, S. (2010). The last utopia: Human rights in history. Harvard University Press. ISBN 978-0-674-04872-0

26. Morsink (1999). Op.cit.

securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society."[27] This article has been the subject of controversial interpretation: for some, it legitimately recognizes that rights are not absolute; for others, it opens the door to abusive restrictions justified on grounds of "public order" or "morality."

### 3. Universalism vs. sovereignty and the Cold War

The third major tension was explicitly political and ideological. The USSR and its allies (Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia) raised systematic objections, arguing that the Declaration:[28]

- Reflected a "bourgeois" vision focused on formal freedoms that served capitalist interests.
- Did not sufficiently protect economic and social rights or explicitly condemn fascism. In fact, the USSR proposed amendments to Articles 19 and 20 to deny fascists and Nazis the rights of expression and association; when these were rejected, it voted against those specific articles during the drafting of the Universal Declaration.[29]
- It did not include the right of peoples to self-determination or condemn colonialism with sufficient clarity.

Eleanor Roosevelt attributed the Soviet abstention in particular to Article 13, which enshrines the right of everyone to leave any country, including their own—a right that the USSR considered unacceptable due to its system of restrictions on emigration. The Soviet bloc abstained in the final vote, but strategically avoided voting against it so as not to be internationally isolated as an opponent of human rights. The head of the Soviet delegation explained that they abstained because the Declaration "did not go far enough," not because they were opposed to it.[30] Saudi Arabia and South Africa also abstained.

For their part, the colonial powers—the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands—feared that the Declaration would be used to question the legitimacy of imperial rule. The reference in Article 2 to the rights applying "without distinction of any kind [...] on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs" was the result of pressure from anti-colonial states to ensure that the inhabitants of

27. United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-hu-man-rights

28. Cassese, A. (2005). International law (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

29. Morsink (1999). Op.cit

30. Glendon (2001). Op. cit.

colonies could invoke the Declaration. However, given the non-binding nature of the UDHR, the colonial powers accepted this language without fear of immediate legal consequences.[31]

### December 10, 1948

When the General Assembly voted on the Universal Declaration at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, it was a moment of rare apparent unanimity. The vote was 48 in favor, 0 against, and 8 abstentions (USSR, Ukrainian SSR, Byelorussian SSR, Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa); Honduras and Yemen were absent.[32] But those abstentions reveal the deep cracks that lay beneath.

The UDHR is therefore an unstable balance between three normative projects that coexist tensely: the Western liberal (with an emphasis on civil and political liberties), the socialist (which gives priority to economic and social rights), and the emerging anti-colonial (focused on the self-determination of peoples and racial equality).[33]

### c. The participation of Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations system

Although the organized emergence of Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations system is usually placed in the 1970s, there are significant precedents for the pursuit of international dialogue from much earlier.

In 1923, Haudenosaunee leader Deskaheh traveled to Geneva to try to present his people's case to the League of Nations, in one of the first direct indigenous appeals to an international forum. Deskaheh wanted to obtain international recognition of his sovereignty and protection from Canadian abuses. He sought recognition of his people's right to live on their own lands, follow their own laws, and practice their own religion, denouncing the Canadian state's interference, the loss of lands (Haldimand Tract), and the violation of their treaties. Deskaheh's campaign failed in the immediate term: the League of Nations never recognized him as the representative of a sovereign entity, nor did it formally admit his case to the agenda. Canada and the United Kingdom argued that it was an "internal matter" and Deskaheh had to leave Geneva without being heard by the plenary body. However, from a historical perspective, it is considered a milestone: it was the first time that an Indigenous leader attempted to use an international forum to directly

31. Normand, R., & Zaidi, S. (2008). Op. cit.

32. United Nations General Assembly. (1948, December 10). Resolution 217 A (III). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/217(III)

33. Moyn (2010). Op. cit.

challenge the authority of a state and defend the sovereignty of his people, preceding by several decades the strategies that would later be deployed at the UN.[34]

Under the League's mandate system, the inhabitants of colonial territories—including indigenous populations—were also able to file petitions against abuses by the mandatory powers, creating an incipient channel for drawing attention to colonial violations. When the UN Charter was negotiated in San Francisco in 1945, this background was indirectly reflected in the chapters on non-self-governing territories and trusteeship, which referred to the welfare of "Indigenous Peoples" under colonial administration, although they were not yet recognized as collective subjects of rights.[35]

***In 1923, Haudenosaunee leader Deskaheh travelled to Geneva to present the case of his people before the League of Nations. Photo: IWGIA.***

After World War II, the new architecture of the United Nations indirectly incorporated some of these elements. General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) of 1960 enshrined the right of colonial peoples to self-determination, but its implementation was limited almost exclusively to overseas territories, leaving out Indigenous Peoples living within already independent states through the

34. Rigney, A. (2019). Deskaheh, the League of Nations, and international legal discourse on Indigenous Peoples' rights. Leiden Journal of International Law, 32(3), 377–399. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156519000013

35. League of Nations. (2019). The mandates system: Origin, principles, application. United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL). https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-176218/ (Original work published in 1945)

so-called "saltwater thesis".[36] At the same time, in 1957, the International Labor Organization adopted Convention 107 on indigenous and tribal populations, the first international treaty to expressly mention them, albeit from an openly integrationist approach that conceived of Indigenous Peoples as "backward" and destined to be absorbed by national societies.[37] These norms illustrate the ambivalence of the postwar period: on the one hand, the universalization of the language of rights and self-determination; on the other, the persistence of an assimilationist model that denied Indigenous Peoples their status as peoples with the right to exist as distinct groups.[38]

However, the 1970s marked a historic turning point when, for the first time, they began to participate in an organized manner in the United Nations system, initiating a process of transnational mobilization that would transform international law.

The first formal step was taken in 1971, when the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities commissioned Ecuadorian special rapporteur José Martínez Cobo to conduct an exhaustive study on the situation of indigenous populations around the world.[39] This study, which would take more than a decade to complete before its final publication in 1983, was the United Nations' first systematic investigation into the discrimination faced by Indigenous Peoples and laid the conceptual foundations for the subsequent development of specific international standards.[40]

At the same time, in October 1975, the first World Conference of Indigenous Peoples was held in Port Alberni, Tseshaht territory, in British Columbia (Canada), giving rise to the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP). This organization, led by Shuswap activist George Manuel, brought together indigenous representatives from 19 countries in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific, becoming the first transnational network of Indigenous Peoples with the capacity to engage in dialogue with international organizations[41]. Manuel, who had been president of Canada's National Indian Brotherhood, articulated a vision of the "Fourth World"—the colonized peoples within nation-states—that challenged the dominant narratives of development and modernization. [42]

---

36. Anaya, S. J. (1996). Indigenous Peoples in international law. Oxford University Press.

37. International Labour Organization. (1957). Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 (No. 107). International Labour Organization. https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C107

38. Stamatopoulou, E. (2008). Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations: Human rights as a developing dynamic. Columbia University, Human Rights Studies Series

39. United Nations. (2014). Mart nez Cobo Study. United Nations. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/publications/2014/09/martinez-cobo-study/

40. Mart nez Cobo, J. (1987). Study of the problem of discrimination against Indigenous populations (UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1986/7). United Nations.

41. Kemner, J. (2011). The World Council of Indigenous Peoples (1975–1997): Transnational activism in the shadow of the Iron Curtain. Comparativ, 21(3), 68–86

42. Manuel, G., & Posluns, M. (1974). The Fourth World: An Indian reality. Collier-Macmillan Canada

The turning point came in September 1977, when more than 100 representatives of indigenous organizations from across the Americas participated in the International NGO Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. This was the first time that indigenous leaders had direct access to a United Nations forum to present their demands to the international community.[43] The conference produced the historic Declaration of Principles for the Defense of the Indigenous Nations and Peoples of the Western Hemisphere, a foundational document that articulated the right to self-determination, territorial sovereignty, and recognition as peoples with collective rights.[44]

Among prominent participants at the 1977 Conference was the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), an organization founded in 1974 by the American Indian Movement (AIM) that obtained consultative status with ECOSOC in 1977, becoming the first indigenous organization to be formally recognized by the United Nations.[45] The IITC presented the document "Declaration of Continuing Independence" to the conference, which directly challenged the assimilationist policies of states and called for the recognition of historical treaties between indigenous nations and colonial governments.[46]

The pressure exerted by this transnational indigenous mobilization led to the establishment in 1982 of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, the first United Nations body dedicated exclusively to the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Chaired by Greek jurist Erica-Irene Daes, the WGIP became an unprecedented space for direct participation: unlike other UN mechanisms, it allowed indigenous representatives to participate on an equal footing with states and international organizations, without the need for government credentials[47]. Between 1982 and 2006, the WGIP received testimonies from thousands of indigenous leaders and activists from all continents, documenting systematic violations of rights and progressively developing the standards that would eventually crystallize in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[48]

This emergence of Indigenous Peoples in the United Nations system during the 1970s represented a paradigm shift in international law. For the first time, historically excluded communities were able to articulate their collective demands in multilateral spaces, challenging homogeni-

---

43. Coulter, R. T., & Tullberg, S. M. (1984). Indian land rights. In M. A. Jaimes (Ed.), The state of Native America: Genocide, colonization, and resistance (pp. 185–213). South End Press.

44. International NGO Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas. (1977). Declaration of Principles for the Defense of the Indigenous Nations and Peoples of the Western Hemisphere. United Nations.

45. International Indian Treaty Council. (2011). About IITC. International Indian Treaty Council. http://www.iitc.org/about-iitc/

46. Coulter, R. T. (1984). Commentary on the UN Draft Declaration on Indigenous Rights. Fourth World Journal, 1(1), 7–19

47. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2013). Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations human rights system (Fact Sheet No. 9, Rev. 2). United Nations.

48. United Nations. (2007). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. United Nations. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html

zing state narratives and paving the way for the recognition of collective rights that had previously been systematically denied.[49] This process, initiated by a generation of visionary leaders such as George Manuel, was the result of both decades of local resistance and a deliberate strategy to internationalize demands that national systems had ignored.

Since the early 2000s, these advances have been complemented by the creation of new specialized mechanisms within the United Nations system. In 2000, the Economic and Social Council established the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), conceived as a high-level advisory body responsible for making recommendations on economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health, and human rights from the perspective of Indigenous Peoples. In 2001, the position of Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples was created, with a mandate to examine obstacles to the protection of their rights, receive complaints, conduct country visits, make recommendations, and promote the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Finally, in 2007 the Human Rights Council established the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP), a body composed of seven independent experts that advises the Council through thematic studies and recommendations for the implementation of the Declaration, thus closing an institutional triangle that combines policy advice, thematic oversight, and the production of specialized knowledge.

## III. The Current Context of Authoritarian Regression

### a. Magnitude of the democratic crisis

The figures from multiple international organizations converge toward an alarming diagnosis: global democracy is facing its most sustained and profound period of decline since the third wave of democratization in the 1970s-1990s.

According to the 2025 V-Dem Report, for the first time since 2001, the number of autocracies (91 countries) exceeds that of democracies (88 countries). Seventy-two percent of the world's population—approximately 5.7 billion people—currently lives under authoritarian regimes, the highest level since 1978.[50]

V-Dem identifies three weapons favored by authoritarian rulers to dismantle democracy without formally abolishing it:

1. Government censorship of the media: through the purchase, intimidation, biased regulation, or capture of public media.

---

49. Anaya, S. J. (1996). Op.cit.

50. V-Dem Institute. (2025). Op. cit

2. Erosion of the freedom and fairness of electoral processes: manipulation of rules, gerrymandering, control of electoral bodies, and restrictions on opposition.
3. Systematic repression of civil society organizations: through "foreign agent" laws, restrictions on funding, and criminalization of protest.

For its part, International IDEA's Global State of Democracy 2025 report confirms that 2024 marked the ninth consecutive year in which more countries experienced democratic decline than improvement.[51] Of the 173 countries assessed:

- 94 countries (54%) experienced declines in at least one area of democratic factors.
- Only 55 countries (32%) recorded improvements.

The weakest area globally is the rule of law: in 2024, 71 countries (41%) were classified as low performers in rule of law, and 32 countries suffered declines in this category, concentrated mostly in judicial independence. The Representation category also fell to its lowest level since 2001, with seven times more countries declining than advancing in 2024.

The protection of rights experienced the most substantial decline: press freedom fell in 43 countries, almost a quarter of those assessed—the steepest drop since the dataset began in 1975. Freedom of expression, access to justice, and economic equity also faced pressures in most countries.

In turn, the World Justice Project (WJP), through its Rule of Law Index 2025,[52] documents a dramatic acceleration in the global decline of the rule of law. Sixty-eight percent of the 143 countries evaluated recorded a drop in their scores in 2025, compared to 57% in 2024.

The most alarming findings of the WJP 2025 report were:

- Government accountability declined in most countries: independent audit and oversight of government powers declined in 63% of countries; legislative checks on the executive fell in 61%; and judicial limits on government power fell in 61%.
- Essential freedoms for civic space eroded: freedom of opinion and expression declined in 73% of countries; freedom of assembly and association declined in 72%; and civic participation declined in 71%.
- Judicial independence, the last line of defense against executive abuse, is weakening: indicators measuring whether the judiciary constrains the executive and whether civil and criminal

51. International IDEA. (2025). The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the move. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move

52. World Justice Project. (2025). WJP Rule of Law Index 2025. https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/

justice are free of improper government influence recorded declines in 61%, 67%, and 62% of countries, respectively.

The convergence between V-Dem, International IDEA, and WJP is remarkable. The three organizations use different methodologies (V-Dem relies on expert assessments; IDEA combines quantitative data and institutional indicators; WJP uses surveys of the general population and legal professionals), but they arrive at similar conclusions:

1. Global quality of democracy is in steady decline for the ninth consecutive year.
2. The most eroded pillars are the rule of law (especially judicial independence), freedom of expression and association, and executive accountability.
3. This deterioration affects both consolidated autocracies and established democracies, suggesting a structural phenomenon linked to the crisis of legitimacy of liberal institutions, economic inequality, political polarization, and the digital capture of public space.

### b. Human rights situation, particularly for defenders

While the aggregate figures on democratic decline are alarming, specific data on human rights defenders, journalists, Indigenous Peoples, women, and LGBTIQ+ individuals reveal an ongoing humanitarian crisis: hundreds of people are killed each year for their peaceful activism, while thousands more face criminalization, enforced disappearance, torture, and death threats.

Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis 2024/25 report[53] documents the killing of at least 324 human rights defenders in 32 countries during 2024, an increase from 300 killings in 2023. The actual figures are likely to be higher: in contexts such as Afghanistan, China, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Myanmar, Libya, Palestine, and Sudan, documenting killings is extremely difficult or impossible due to the collapse of institutions, war, or severe repression.

Colombia hit a devastating record high: 157 murders of defenders in 2024, the highest number ever documented by Front Line Defenders in a single country in one year. Colombia is followed by Mexico (32 murders), Guatemala (29 murders), and Brazil (15 murders).

Meanwhile, Global Witness's "Missing Voices" report[54] documents 196 murders of land and environmental defenders in 2023, bringing the total since 2012 to 2,106 documented murders. Colombia again leads with 79 murders in 2023, followed by Brazil (25), Mexico (18), and Honduras (18).

---

53. Front Line Defenders. (2025). Global Analysis 2024/25. https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/global-analysis-202425

54. Global Witness. (2024). Missing voices: The violent erasure of land and environmental defenders. Annual Defenders Report 2023/2024. https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/missing-voices/

Both Front Line Defenders and Global Witness document that impunity is the norm, not the exception. In Colombia, with 157 murders in 2024, the conviction rate is less than 5%. In Mexico, with 32 murders, the impunity rate exceeds 95%. This impunity is not accidental, but structural: it reflects the capture of judicial systems, the complicity of local authorities with armed actors, and the lack of political will to investigate crimes against defenders.

A particularly worrying symptom of this crisis is the systematic increase in acts of intimidation and reprisals against those who cooperate with the United Nations. Since 2010, the Secretary-General has submitted a specific report to the Human Rights Council each year on reprisals for cooperation with the UN in the field of human rights, compiled by the Office of the High Commissioner and the mechanism on acts of intimidation and reprisals. The most recent reports document a growing pattern of abductions, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, smear campaigns, and surveillance—both online and offline—against defenders, journalists, trade unionists, victims, and family members who submit information, participate in sessions in Geneva, or use UN procedures.[55] According to the presentation of the 2024 report to the Human Rights Council,[56] defenders, women, young people, indigenous people, and those involved in peace operations face particularly high risks, and cases are rarely investigated or adequately redressed.

### c. The "Trump Effect" and global trends

Amnesty International[57] and other organizations have documented how the second Trump administration has amplified pre-existing authoritarian trends, creating a "multiplier effect" that legitimizes repressive practices globally. U.S. foreign policy has, like never before, demonstrated double standards on human rights, providing weapons to Israel without restriction despite widespread atrocities in Gaza, while condemning similar violations in Ukraine. This selective approach undermines the credibility of the international human rights system and empowers anti-liberal leaders around the world to follow suit.

### d. Social media as infrastructure for the capture of democracy

More recently, various analyses have identified one factor that had not been considered in previous debates on authoritarianism: the internet and digital platforms have become central political actors, not merely means of communication. The architecture of these platforms—their

---

55. United Nations. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (n.d.). Annual reports on reprisals for cooperation with the UN. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from https://www.ohchr.org/en/reprisals/annual-reports-reprisals-cooperation-un

56. United Nations. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024, October 26). UN human rights chief warns of ongoing reprisals against those cooperating with the UN [Press release and UNifeed video].

57. Amnesty International. (2025). The state of the world's human rights: Amnesty International Report 2024/25. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/7200/2025/en/

recommendation algorithms, their advertising business models based on maximizing attention and polarization, their opaque content moderation systems—has been increasingly captured and manipulated by authoritarian actors and like-minded networks to reconfigure the digital public space.

In practice, this translates into at least three dynamics. First, the massive amplification of disinformation and divisive narratives that erode trust in elections, courts, and independent media, through armies of automated accounts, the micro-targeting of messages, and coordinated troll campaigns. Second, the coordination of digital repression against political opponents, journalists, and rights defenders through hate attacks, mass complaints to take down content, and the use of "anti-terrorism" or "anti-fake news" legislation to criminalize their online expression. Third, the creation of information bubbles in which separate groups of citizens receive radically different information flows, living in parallel realities that are difficult to reconcile in a democratic dialogue.[58]

***President of the United States Donald J. Trump addresses the general debate of the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 23 September 2025. Photo: UN Photo / Laura Jarriel (United Nations).***

58. Tran, M. V. (2025). Pro-democracy platform advocacy: Resisting Big Tech–mediated authoritarianism in Southeast Asia. Current Trends in Psychology, 35(4), 197–214.

A body of recent research shows that platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and X have been instrumentalized in this way, particularly in authoritarian contexts in the Global South, where the combination of high mobile penetration and weak regulatory frameworks facilitates the capture of the digital ecosystem by governments and allied elites. Comparative reports on internet freedom have documented that, over the past decade, both authoritarian regimes and declining democracies have used these platforms to orchestrate disinformation campaigns, block sensitive political content, sabotage communications during protests, and track activists and journalists who organize or report abuses online. According to the latest analyses by organizations such as Freedom House, dozens of countries already employ an "authoritarian digital playbook" that combines mass surveillance, algorithmic manipulation of information, and coordinated attacks on critical voices: governments do not need tanks in the streets if they can colonize the information reality of millions of citizens, defining what is seen, what is hidden, and who is stigmatized as an internal enemy.[59]

***United Nations Security Council meeting at UN Headquarters, New York, 2026. Photo: UN Photo / Laura Jarriel.***

59. Freedom House. (2024). Freedom on the Net 2024: Countering the authoritarians' digital playbook.

## IV. The Current Situation of the UN Universal System

### a. The role of the Security Council

The Security Council was designed in 1945 as the body with primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. However, for 80 years, it has been repeatedly paralyzed by the veto power of its five permanent members.

Data from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library reveals a pattern of veto abuse from 1946 to September 2025:[60]

- Russia/USSR has used the veto 129 times — nearly 50% of all vetoes.
- The United States has used the veto 89 times, 51 of which were specifically to protect Israel.
- United Kingdom: 29 times
- China: 19 times

France: 16 times

France and the United Kingdom have not used their veto since 1989, meaning that, over the last three decades, Russia, the United States, and China have been responsible for 100% of vetoes, with Russia and the United States accounting for the vast majority of vetoes issued since the end of the Cold War.

The Security Council Report's analysis of the Security Council in 2024[61] documents 7 resolutions that failed due to vetoes, the highest number since 1986. A total of 8 vetoes were issued (some drafts received multiple vetoes):

- Russia vetoed four draft resolutions: on genocide in Gaza, weapons of mass destruction in outer space, the panel of experts of the North Korea sanctions committee, and the conflict in Sudan.
- The United States vetoed three draft resolutions, all related to the genocide in Gaza and the protection of Palestinian civilians.
- China vetoed one draft resolution on Myanmar.

This paralysis has helped the powers continue to operate without consequences. Russia vetoes resolutions on Ukraine despite being the aggressor; the United States vetoes resolutions on Pa-

---

60. Dag Hammarskjöld Library. (2025). Veto list: United Nations Security Council, 1946–2025. United Nations. https://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/scact_veto_table_en.htm

61. Security Council Report. (2024, December 29). In hindsight: The Security Council in 2024 and looking ahead to 2025. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-01/in-hindsight-the-security-council-in-2024-and-looking-ahead-to-2025.php

lestine even though the International Court of Justice has determined that Israel is committing violations of humanitarian law; China vetoes resolutions on Myanmar while supporting the military junta.

### The Oxfam "Vetoing Humanity" report

An Oxfam report published in September 2024, entitled "Vetoing Humanity", studied 23 of the world's most protracted conflicts over the past decade—including Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Libya, Niger, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen—and determined, among other findings, that:

27 of the Security Council's 30 vetoes on these conflicts were concentrated on just three: Gaza, Syria, and Ukraine. The other 20 conflicts studied received virtually no attention from the Council.

More than one million people have been killed in these 23 conflicts, and more than 230 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance today—an increase of more than 150% since 2015.

***Installation Ceremony of Non-Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council for the 2026-2027 term, UN Headquarters, New York, 2 January 2026. Photo: UN Photo / Mark Garten (United Nations).***

62. Oxfam International. (2024, September). Vetoing humanity: How a few powerful nations hijacked global peace and why reform is needed at the UN Security Council. https://www.oxfam.org/en/vetoing-humanity-how-few-powerful-nations-hijacked-global-peace

Nearly half of these conflicts (11 out of 23, or 48%) have had fewer than five resolutions each over the past decade. Myanmar had only one resolution; Ethiopia and Venezuela had no Security Council resolutions despite massive humanitarian crises.

Oxfam concludes that the five permanent members are exploiting their exclusive voting and negotiating powers to suit their own geopolitical interests. In doing so, they have undermined the Council's ability to maintain international peace and security.

The report also criticizes another mechanism of power used by the P5, known as pen-holding, whereby one or more permanent members take control of the drafting of texts on a given issue: they prepare the drafts, decide when (or if) they are circulated to the rest, and what language is ultimately put to a vote. This allows them, in practice, to block uncomfortable discussions from the outset or hollow out potentially more robust resolutions, without even needing a formal veto. The study shows that, in the 23 crises analyzed, this combination of pen-holding and the threat of veto has led to radically unequal treatment: some conflicts have dozens of resolutions and standing agenda items, while others—such as Ethiopia, Venezuela, and Myanmar—have been the subject of only one or no resolutions in the last decade.

### Absence of democratization: the geopolitical map of 1945

The Council continues to reflect a geopolitical map from 1945 that no longer fits the reality of the 21st century. The five major powers that won World War II maintain permanent seats, while entire regions of the world lack proportional representation. For example, India is the world's most populous nation (~1.4 billion) but does not have a permanent seat; Brazil is a regional power in Latin America with the world's ninth largest economy but does not have a permanent seat; Germany is Europe's largest economic power and the world's fourth largest economy but does not have a permanent seat; Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa represent an African continent of 1.4 billion people, but Africa has only rotating non-permanent seats, with no veto or permanent voice. Representation of the Global South is practically non-existent, even though it accounts for 85% of the world's population.[63]

This anachronistic composition is not only unfair but also detrimental to the Council's legitimacy. As Secretary-General António Guterres warned, the Security Council today faces "a problem of legitimacy and effectiveness" because its structure and composition "no longer correspond to the reality of today's world" and it lacks permanent representation from regions such as Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.[64]

63. Security Council Report. (2020). Reforming the Security Council: What’s at stake?

64. United Nations. (2025, October 24). Guterres calls for urgent reform of the Security Council.

Attempts at reform have failed systematically for decades. Since the General Assembly formally opened the issue in 1993 through Resolution 48/26, there have been cycles of "intergovernmental negotiations" that have never gone beyond conceptual debates on membership categories, possible Council sizes, or regional criteria, because any substantive change requires ratification by the same five states that currently enjoy veto power.[65] In this context, the most recent initiative within the "Pact for the Future" of September 2024 achieved only a generic statement of "commitment to Security Council reform," without defining how many new members would be created, which regions would benefit, or when a concrete proposal would be presented to the General Assembly. This type of aspirational language, which promises future reform but indefinitely postpones any binding decision, has become the standard response since the 1990s and fuels the perception that the Council's architecture is shielded from real change.[66]

### b. The Pact for the Future and the paradox of empty promises

The Summit of the Future, held in September 2024,[67] represented an ambitious attempt to renew multilateralism in the face of contemporary challenges. The Pact for the Future, adopted by consensus, is the most far-reaching international agreement in many years, addressing entirely new areas as well as issues that have been pending for decades.[68]

The Pact is structured around five key areas with 56 concrete actions:

1. International peace and security
2. Sustainable development and financing for development
3. Science, technology, and innovation and digital cooperation
4. Youth and future generations
5. Transformation of global governance

In terms of peace and security, the Compact reaffirms the goal of "comprehensive" reform of the Security Council and includes calls to reduce nuclear risks and move toward a world without nuclear weapons, but it does so through general statements rather than new legally binding obligations. In digital cooperation, it incorporates the Global Digital Compact as the first glo-

65. Patrick, S., Gowan, R., et al. (2023). UN Security Council reform: What the world thinks.

66. Innovapolis. (2024, May 11). Global governance for the Global South: A case for greater country representation in the UNSC.

67. UN News. (2024, September 22). Pact for the Future: World leaders pledge action for peace, sustainable development. https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154391

68. United Nations General Assembly. (2024, September 22). Resolution 79/1: Pact for the Future. https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future

bal framework for cooperation on artificial intelligence governance, anchored in human rights, which provides for a high-level scientific panel and ongoing political dialogue on AI. In the area of human rights, the text does not create entirely new mechanisms, but reaffirms existing obligations and calls for stronger implementation architecture and consideration of additional forms of monitoring and accountability. Finally, the section on future generations adopts the first Declaration on Future Generations and proposes steps to systematically integrate the intergenerational perspective into national and international decision-making, although its effectiveness will depend on how States internalize it in their policies and legal frameworks.

The Pact inevitably represents the lowest common denominator on which Member States can currently agree. The United Nations has a history of promoting ambitious agreements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but it remains to be seen whether the Pact will be more than a set of noble aspirations. For example, in June 2024, the UN reported that only 17% of the SDG targets were on track, with nearly half showing minimal or moderate progress and more than a third stalling or regressing.[69]

One of the main limitations is the lack of effective pressure mechanisms to ensure that states fulfill their commitments. The current geopolitical context exacerbates this situation: geopolitical divisions and mistrust block effective action.

Criticism of the Pact centers on its lack of a genuine vision for the future beyond mere rhetoric. Three critical issues require urgent resolution: general artificial intelligence, climate change, and peace and security. Without a firm and practical consensus on these issues, much of the Pact will remain precarious and risk losing its existential relevance.

### The paradox of empty promises

With regard to the Pact and the SDGs, it is worth reflecting on the real effectiveness of these global agreements. While they represent important advances in the promotion of multilateralism, in practice they have negligible impact on the very states that negotiate and agree on them, which often ignore or fail to fulfill them. This contradiction needs to be addressed in order to better understand the limits and challenges of these international commitments.

Academic research has identified what is known as the "paradox of empty promises":[70] governments often ratify human rights treaties as a mere facade, radically dissociating policy from practice and, at times, exacerbating negative human rights practices.

---

69. Sachs, J. D., Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., & Woelm, F. (2024). Sustainable Development Report 2024.

70. Hafner-Burton, E. M., & Tsutsui, K. (2005). Human rights in a globalizing world: The paradox of empty promises. American Journal of Sociology, 110(5), 1373–1411.

***United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres addresses the AI Impact Summit Opening Ceremony, New Delhi, India, 6 November 2025. Photo: UN Photo / Ishan Tankha (United Nations).***

A 2022 meta-analysis published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) [71] found that human rights and environmental treaties have not been shown to consistently improve state practices and, in many studies, have led to unintended harmful effects, such as an increase in torture.

How is it possible that signing a treaty against torture leads to more torture? The answer is perverse: repressive governments face few negative consequences and reap diplomatic rewards for signing human rights treaties without meaningfully implementing provisions that may run counter to their interests. A country can ratify the Convention Against Torture, receive applause from the international community, and simultaneously intensify torture in secret prisons, knowing that the international oversight mechanism is weak, that other governments (with their own dark secrets) will not exert real pressure, and that public exposure is controllable through media capture.

In contrast, trade and financial treaties work because they have effective enforcement mechanisms, such as tariffs, trade sanctions, and market exclusion. A country that violates a trade agreement faces real economic retaliation. Human rights agreements lack such tools.

---

71. Sethi, T., et al. (2022). International treaties have mostly failed to produce their intended effects. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 119(32), e2122854119.

This gap between the universal normative framework and its selective application connects with Francis Fukuyama's warnings about the crisis of the liberal order and the growing loss of credibility of multilateral institutions. Fukuyama has insisted that the erosion of trust in liberal democracies and the international system fuels both internal cynicism and authoritarian temptation, weakening the ability of international law and human rights mechanisms to uphold their universalist promise. This crisis of legitimacy manifests itself, among other symptoms, in the instrumental use of human rights treaties, ratified as a facade while repressive practices are consolidated internally.[72]

Fukuyama diagnoses the problem as not merely external (rival powers) but internal: the savage neoliberalism of the last four decades has blown up the postwar social pact, generating obscene inequalities that have fueled populist rage. Good faith in the indestructibility of democracy can be as fatal as apocalyptic catastrophism. Without rebuilding the social contract that underpins liberal democracy from within, no number of international institutions can save it.[73]

### c. The UN80 Initiative and the review of mandates

As part of the 80th anniversary of the United Nations, Secretary-General António Guterres launched the UN80 Initiative in 2025[74], led by Guy Ryder, current UN Under-Secretary-General for Policy[75], with the aim of modernizing and streamlining the organization's operations so that it can better respond to current global challenges: armed conflicts, mass displacement, growing inequalities, the climate crisis, and rapid technological change.

The initiative is structured around several lines of reform:[76]

1. Review and streamlining of mandates: eliminate duplication, merge entities that perform similar functions, and establish automatic mechanisms for reviewing and terminating obsolete mandates. The goal is to move from more than 40,000 mandates accumulated since 1946 to a more coherent and manageable architecture.
2. Financial reform: increase mandatory contributions from Member States, reduce dependence on voluntary donations (which generate political capture of agencies by donors), and establish predictable funding mechanisms for essential functions, such as human rights.

---

72. Fukuyama, F. (2023, June 12). Liberalism and its discontents [Lecture]. Jarislowsky Chair in Trust and Political Leadership.

73. Fukuyama, F. (2022). Liberalism and its discontents. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

74. United Nations. (2025). UN80 initiative. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from https://www.un.org/en/un80

75. United Nations. (2025). Guy Ryder, Under-Secretary-General for Policy. https://www.un.org/sg/en/appointments/eosg/guy-ryder

76. UN Geneva. (2025, June 22). UN80 initiative: What it is – and why it matters to the world. https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/06/107708/un80-initiative-what-it-and-why-it-matters-world

***United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres (on screen) speaks at the informal plenary meeting of the General Assembly on the UN80 Initiative, UN Headquarters, New York, 1 August 2025. Photo: UN Photo / Evan Schneider (United Nations).***

3. Modernization of working methods: digitization of processes, reduction of bureaucracy, improved coordination between agencies, and adoption of impact indicators to measure program effectiveness.
4. Strengthening response capacity: creating rapid deployment mechanisms for humanitarian crises, improving early warning systems, and strengthening mediation and conflict prevention capabilities.
5. Limited democratization: in general terms, steps toward more transparent and inclusive governance, but without directly questioning the existence of the veto in the Security Council.

The presentation of the UN80 Initiative at the General Assembly in September 2025 sparked a debate that reopened traditional divisions over United Nations reform.[77] Statements made by several states from the Global South—including African, Latin American, and Asian countries—emphasized that any administrative modernization would lack credibility if it were not accompanied by a substantive reform of the power architecture, in particular through the creation of new permanent seats for Africa and other underrepresented regions, as well as a review of the functioning of the Security Council. These demands echo positions already expressed in formal

77. United Nations. (2025). General Debate of the 80th session of the General Assembly.

statements by the African Group and the G4 group (Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan) in the annual debates on Security Council reform, which insist that for the UN to be legitimate, it must reflect the demographic and political weight of the Global South.

For their part, the permanent members and other Western states placed greater emphasis on the need to improve efficiency, inter-agency coordination, and the financial sustainability of the system, welcoming with interest the streamlining of mandates and modernization of working methods proposed by UN80, but avoiding committing to specific changes in the composition of the Security Council or restrictions on the veto.

In this way, the debate on UN80 reproduced the asymmetry that has characterized intergovernmental discussions on Security Council reform since the 1990s: a broad declarative consensus on the need for structural change and continuing reluctance by the actors with the most formal power to accept changes that would alter their privileged position.

Various think tanks and networks of civil society organizations have pointed out that, despite its transformative rhetoric, UN80 risks being nothing more than a largely administrative reform. Analyses such as that of the Center on International Cooperation[78] warn that the initiative responds to the UN's liquidity crisis and avoids structural recalibration of its purpose, mandates, and priorities, producing reform without redesign. Other critical comments emphasize that the proposals known to date do not correct the unequal power architecture, prioritize cutting costs over strengthening the pillars of human rights and peace, and have insufficiently involved civil society, particularly actors from the Global South.[79]

At the end of 2025, the General Assembly adopted a resolution[80] that:

- Recognizes the need for reform (aspirational language without binding commitments)
- Establishes a working group to continue discussions (without a clear mandate or timetable)
- Requests that the Secretary-General submit additional proposals in 2026 (with no guarantee of implementation)

In his public statements, Guy Ryder has insisted that UN80 will only make sense if it breaks with the logic of previous reforms, which were limited to marginal adjustments without altering the

---

78. Center on International Cooperation. (2025, September 15). Unlocking reform capacity: What UN80 reveals about the limits and possibilities of UN reform.

79. International Council of Voluntary Agencies. (2025, September 9). An open letter on civil society inclusion in the UN80 Initiative.

80. United Nations. (2025, September 2). Decision 79/571: Establishment of the Informal Ad Hoc Working Group on Mandate Implementation Review.

underlying incentives.[81] Ryder stresses that "we cannot continue with business as usual" and that the UN faces a "crisis of effectiveness and credibility" because its way of working "is not responding adequately to current crises," ranging from wars to inequality and climate change. He cautions that, in the past, states agreed to streamline structures or cut costs without seriously reviewing mandates, political priorities, or the distribution of power among the main bodies, leading to reforms that "ease budgetary pressure" but do not improve the organization's ability to protect the most vulnerable. Hence his call for UN80 to be more than just an accounting exercise: if states do not explicitly recognize that current systems have failed to protect the majority and are unwilling to make difficult decisions about governance, financing, and accountability, any new package of changes risks repeating exactly the same mistakes that have led to the current state of multilateralism.

In short, the UN80 Initiative illustrates the central paradox of multilateralism in 2026: there is consensus on the need for reform, but the actors with the power to implement it are precisely those who benefit from the dysfunctional status quo and systematically block any significant structural change.

### Report on the Mandate Implementation Review (UN Mandate Review):[82]

The UN80 Initiative has produced detailed reports revealing an organization in administrative collapse due to an overload of underfunded mandates. The 2025 Mandate Implementation Review provides a devastating picture of structural dysfunction:

- Since 1946, more than 40,000 mandates have been issued through resolutions, decisions, and presidential statements by the General Assembly, the Security Council, and ECOSOC.
- Resolutions have tripled in length over the past 30 years.
- More than 15% of General Assembly resolutions in 2024 mandate new work "within existing resources," a bureaucratic euphemism for "let's do it without paying." The number of resolutions requiring implementation "within existing resources" is more than four times higher now than in 2000.
- Approximately 50% of active mandates include instructions directed at specific entities, limiting flexibility in task assignments and creating bureaucratic rigidity.

---

81. UN News. (2025, June 23). Why the UN80 initiative matters for multilateralism: A conversation with UN policy chief Guy Ryder.

82. United Nations. (2025). Mandate implementation review: Report of the Secretary-General. https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en/report-mandate-implementation-review

- More than 85% of active mandates lack instructions on review or termination, leading to "zombie" mandates that persist decades after they have lost their relevance. Once a mandate is created, it remains in effect indefinitely unless there is explicit consensus to terminate it.

In the case of human rights, this proliferation, without adequate coordination or funding, has resulted in an architecture that is simultaneously bloated (too many mandates) and underfunded (insufficient resources).

As an example, there is a Special Rapporteur on the rights of people affected by leprosy and their families, with a highly specialized mandate on a disease that mainly affects marginalized populations in certain countries. Meanwhile, there is no special rapporteur on artificial intelligence or digital governance, issues that affect 8 billion people and pose unprecedented challenges to fundamental rights.

There are three distinct mechanisms for addressing violations against women: the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, and specialized subcommittees within treaty bodies. Each generates separate reports, subjects the same governments to redundant parallel reviews, and competes for limited funds.

The proliferation of mandates occurred without exit mechanisms: once created, a mandate persists indefinitely unless there is explicit consensus to terminate it. This has led to a human rights architecture that is simultaneously bloated and underfunded.

### d. The OHCHR financial crisis

The Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) are currently facing an unprecedented financial crisis that threatens the operation of all their mechanisms, including those for Indigenous Peoples.

In June 2025, the High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a letter to all Permanent Missions informing them of activities planned for 2025 and 2026 that would not be possible due to the liquidity and budgetary crisis affecting the United Nations.[83] OHCHR received only 73% of its regular budget allocation, leaving a shortfall of at least $60 million in 2025.

According to the United Nations Human Rights Appeal 2026[84] published by OHCHR in November 2025:

83. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2025, July). Implications of the UN liquidity and budgetary crisis for OHCHR mandated activities.

84. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2025). United Nations Human Rights Appeal 2026.

- OHCHR received only 78% of its approved regular budget for 2025 ($191.5 million out of $246 million), resulting in a shortfall of $54.5 million.

- Extrabudgetary funding (voluntary contributions) amounted to approximately $262 million in 2025, with a further reduction of $60 million projected for 2026, which would consolidate a funding gap of close to 22% relative to estimated needs.

- Overall, the Office recorded a deficit of tens of millions of dollars in 2025, due to a combination of regular funds not received and a decline in voluntary contributions, which forced widespread cuts.

- The outlook for 2026 is even worse, with an additional projected reduction of $60 million in voluntary contributions.

High Commissioner Volker Türk described the situation as "survival mode" when launching the Human Rights Appeal 2026.[85] For her part, Deputy High Commissioner Nada Al-Nashif, in her remarks to the Human Rights Council in Geneva, warned that the liquidity crisis has affected "all aspects" of the Office's work, forcing them to reduce or cancel mandated activities and take drastic measures to address the cash shortage.[86]

The practical consequences of this budget crisis on human rights mechanisms are already visible. In July 2025, the Human Rights Committee held an emergency meeting with States Parties to warn that, for the first time in its 50-year history, its third annual session had been canceled due to lack of resources, causing serious delays in the review of state reports and in the adoption of decisions on individual communications.[87] The Office warns that additional cuts amounting to 1% of the OHCHR budget would result in the loss of more than 20 country visits or the annual cost of several Special Procedures mandates, limiting the ability to monitor critical situations, respond to urgent communications, and support treaty bodies.[88] On the ground, the combination of a smaller regular budget and falling voluntary contributions has already forced a rethinking or closure of operations in several countries, as well as a reorganization of staff in regional offices, with the sole aim of reducing costs, leading to a weakening of direct monitoring of violations and support for victims.

---

85. United Nations. (February 4, 2026). “Human rights cannot wait”: Türk launches $400 million appeal for 2026.
RTE News. (February 4, 2026). UN human rights agency in “survival mode”, says chief.

86. Al-Nashif, N. (2025, December 8). Statement by the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights to the organizational meeting of the Human Rights Council.

87. Human Rights Committee. (July 9, 2025). Human Rights Committee holds emergency meeting with States parties as the United Nations’ financial crisis threatens its survival.

88. International Service for Human Rights. (2026, January 14). Protect UN human rights pillar from devastating funding cuts.

### Impact on mechanisms for Indigenous Peoples

Unsurprisingly, this financial crisis directly affects the operational capacity of the three mechanisms specializing in Indigenous Peoples' rights:[89]

- Limited resources for EMRIP: budget constraints limit the Expert Mechanism's ability to conduct engagement missions in countries and comprehensive thematic studies.
- Pressure on the Special Rapporteur: The mandate depends on OHCHR support in terms of human resources, logistics, research, and dissemination of information. Staff and resource reductions threaten the Rapporteur's ability to respond effectively to communications, conduct country visits, and produce quality reports.
- Threat to the Special Procedures system: With 42 thematic and 14 country mandates, the Special Procedures system faces overload and insufficient resources.

The Secretary-General presented a regular budget for 2026 that is approximately 15% lower than that of 2025 and urged all Secretariat entities to adjust their plans in light of the liquidity crisis and the Human Rights Council to take this into account when creating future mandates or renewing existing ones.[90] This situation creates a vicious circle: while human rights violations are increasing worldwide, the mechanisms designed to protect them face severe budgetary constraints.

Less than 5% of the regular budget of the United Nations is allocated to OHCHR[91], reflecting an insufficient structural prioritization of human rights within the UN system. This crisis is exacerbated by the drastic reduction in contributions from donor states, especially the United States, which has historically accounted for almost a quarter of the UN budget.

### Credibility of the Human Rights Council

The Council's credibility is also compromised by the election of states with problematic human rights records. In October 2024, the General Assembly elected 18 countries for the 2025-2027 term. Civil society organizations pointed out that the election of authoritarian countries undermines the Council's credibility, given that potential atrocity crimes are being perpetrated by several current Council member states on their territories or abroad, including Cameroon, China, Eritrea, the United Arab Emirates, and Sudan.[92]

---

89. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2025). United Nations Human Rights Appeal 2026.

90. United Nations. (2025, October 16). United Nations risks bankruptcy as resources shrink, needs urgent action, Secretary-General tells Fifth Committee, as he presents proposed programme budget for 2026.

91. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024). Funding trends.

92. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. (2024, October 8). UN Human Rights Council elections for 2025–2027 and the responsibility to protect.

***Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations Headquarters, New York, April 2023. Photo: Lola García-Alix.***

The fact that potential atrocity crimes are being perpetrated by Council member states contradicts General Assembly Resolution 60/251,[93] which stipulates that elected states must demonstrate their commitment to the highest human rights standards and their full cooperation with all UN mechanisms.

The funding crisis affecting OHCHR and other UN mechanisms reflects a lack of real political will on the part of states to prioritize human rights. While global military spending reached a historic high of $2.443 trillion in 2023,[94] the investment gap in SDGs in developing countries amounts to $4 trillion annually.[95] It is a tragic irony that the billions spent on weapons are not available for sustainable development and human security, which are essential for peace.

### e. The withdrawal of the United States from 66 international organizations

On January 7, 2026, just four days after the military intervention in Venezuela, President Donald Trump signed an executive order withdrawing the United States from 66 international organiza-

93. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. (2024, October 8). UN Human Rights Council elections for 2025–2027 and the responsibility to protect.

94. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2024). Trends in world military expenditure, 2023.

95. United Nations Development Programme. (2025, September 8). Record military spending threatens global peace and development, new UN report warns.

tions, 31 of which are United Nations entities[96]. This measure, presented by the White House as a course correction on organizations "that no longer serve U.S. interests,"[97] constitutes the most systematic withdrawal of a permanent member of the Security Council from the multilateral framework since 1945.

The institutions affected include pillars of global cooperation: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which underpin international climate governance; the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), key to sexual and reproductive health in developing countries; the World Health Organization (WHO), from which the United States formally notified its withdrawal at the end of January 2026; as well as various funds, commissions, and programs specializing in migration, labor rights, disarmament, and scientific cooperation.

The official justification, set out in a press statement by the Department of State and a White House fact sheet, argues that many of these organizations are "redundant in their scope, mismanaged, unnecessary, wasteful, [and] captured by the interests of actors advancing their own agendas contrary to our own," and that they represent a burden on US sovereignty and prosperity.[98]

The impact of the decision generated immediate reactions both within the UN system and among political leaders. Secretary-General António Guterres, through his spokesperson, said he "regrets" the US decision to withdraw from numerous UN entities and recalled that assessed contributions to the regular budget and peacekeeping operations are legal obligations derived from the Charter[99]. The WHO stated that it "regrets" the US withdrawal notification, warning that it is a decision that "makes both the United States and the world less safe," by weakening cooperation in the face of global health threats.[100] UNFCCC Executive Secretary Simon Stiell described the US withdrawal from the UN climate regime as " this latest step back from global leadership, climate cooperation and science " and a "colossal own goal" that will damage the country's economy and employment, although he stressed that the doors remain open for an eventual return.[101] The IPCC, for its part, took note of the US decision to leave the Panel, expres-

---

96. White House. (2026, January 6). Withdrawing the United States from international organizations, conventions, and treaties contrary to American interests (Executive Order 14199)

97. White House. (2026, January 6). Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump withdraws the United States from international organizations that no longer serve American interests. Earth.org. (2026, January 8). US withdraws from 66 international bodies, including key climate treaties. Deutsche Welle. (2026, January 7). Trump withdraws US from 66 international organizations.

98. U.S. Department of State. (2026, January 7). Withdrawal from wasteful, ineffective, or harmful international organizations. "We will not continue expending resources, diplomatic capital, and the legitimizing weight of our participation in institutions that are irrelevant to or in conflict with our interests."

99. Reuters. (2026, January 8). UN chief Guterres regrets US decision to withdraw from some UN entities.

100. World Health Organization. (2026, January 23). WHO statement on notification of withdrawal of the United States.

101. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (2026, January 7). Step back from climate cooperation will hurt US economy – statement from UN climate chief on US withdrawal.

sed its regret, and highlighted the historic contribution of US science to its assessments, reaffirming that it will continue to provide rigorous scientific analysis to all governments.[102]

According to Euronews reporting on January 8, 2026, lawmaker Catarina Vieira said the U.S. decision to withdraw from the UNFCCC was "reckless" and "profoundly damaging."[103]

There were also reactions from civil society. Amnesty International stated: "This is a vindictive and reckless assault on the legitimacy and integrity of the United Nations and the rules-based international order that has been the bedrock of global cooperation for the past 80 years."[104] The organization warned that the withdrawal from peacebuilding mechanisms "directly contradicts the US government's calls for the UN to prioritize 'peace and security,'" especially when Trump "threatens several countries with military action." For its part, Human Rights Watch noted that the US withdrawal empowers governments with poor human rights records, such as Russia, China, and Iran, which have sought for years to defund UN human rights mechanisms in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly.[105]

## V. The Contemporary Debate: Sovereignty, International Law and Human Rights

The contemporary debate on sovereignty, international law, and human rights has reached an existential crisis point following the US military intervention in Venezuela on January 3, 2026, and the subsequent withdrawal of the United States from dozens of international organizations. These events have intensified the discussion among jurists, constitutionalists, and international relations theorists about the limits of international law and the viability of the multilateral order established since 1945.

### a. Trump's position: "My own morality" as a limit

In an extensive interview with The New York Times, published on January 8, 2026,[106] President Donald Trump claimed that the only limit to his global power is his own moral judgment. When asked about the constraints on his ability to act on the international stage, he replied: "Yeah,

---

102. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2026, January 7). IPCC statement on the US announcement to withdraw from the Panel.

103. Euronews. (2026, January 8). 'Profoundly damaging': EU leaders condemn Trump's withdrawal from UN climate treaty

104. Amnesty International. (2026, January 14). USA: International withdrawals are a vindictive effort to tear apart a global system for cooperation.

105. Human Rights Watch. (2026, January 11). US retreat from global climate cooperation threatens rights.

106. Baker, P., Sanger, D. E., & Haberman, M. (January 8, 2026). Trump lays out a vision of power restrained only by 'my own morality'. The New York Times.

there is one thing. My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me." When the journalist pressed him, "Not international law?", Trump was categorical: "I don't need international law. I'm not looking to hurt people. I'm not looking to kill people."

From an academic perspective, these statements have been interpreted as an explicit break with the idea that state power is legally constrained by international norms, and as a revival of a pre-Charter logic based on the moral self-restraint of the ruler rather than institutional controls or normative commitments. Many commentators have interpreted this position as a regression from the postwar consensus that force is regulated by the UN Charter and by specialized regimes of human rights, international criminal justice, and limitations on the use of force.[107]

### b. Limited sovereignty and supranational values

The US military intervention in Venezuela has reignited one of the oldest and most contentious debates in international law: what are the legitimate limits of state sovereignty in the face of

***President of the United States Donald J. Trump addresses the general debate of the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly, UN Headquarters, New York, 23 September 2025. Photo: UN Photo / Laura Jarriel (United Nations).***

107. International Bar Association. (2026, February 1). The new age of aggression.

values considered "supranational," such as peace, human rights, and the protection of populations? Does the international community have a right—or even a duty—to intervene when a state commits mass atrocities against its own population? And if so, who decides when and how to intervene, and what institutional mechanisms prevent "protection" from turning into neocolonialism or selective intervention based on geopolitical interests?

Far from being a purely theoretical debate, these questions have immediate consequences for the legitimacy of humanitarian interventions, the scope of the International Criminal Court, the functioning of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, and ultimately the stability of the rules-based multilateral order.

In Latin America, internationalists like Alejandro Álvarez[108] and other interwar authors were early advocates of the idea of "international solidarity" that limits classical Westphalian sovereignty, arguing that states cannot use sovereignty as a cover to commit atrocities against their populations or to shield themselves from international scrutiny. This tradition is particularly relevant because it emerged from the Global South in a context dominated by European powers, prefiguring contemporary debates on responsible sovereignty.

In a series of recent columns, Colombian jurist Rodrigo Uprimny[109] revisits and updates this line of argument. In summary, Uprimny argues that:

1. Sovereignty is legally limited by supranational values such as peace and human rights, enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration, and the main human rights treaties.

2. No state can invoke sovereignty to massively violate the rights of its inhabitants or to legitimately reject international scrutiny of those violations.

3. Protection of these values must be collective and institutionalized—through the ICC, regional human rights systems, and, when it functions, the Security Council—and not through unilateral military interventions by individual powers, which would subject weaker states to the arbitrary discretion of stronger ones.

This position seeks to escape both absolute Westphalian sovereignty—which would allow internal impunity—and unilateral interventionism—which would normalize a humanitarian neo-imperialism—by proposing what we might call "multilateralism with teeth," in which universal values are enforced through representative institutions and legal procedures, not brute force.

108. Wolkmer, A. C. (2006). Pluralismo jurídico: Fundamentos de una nueva cultura del Derecho [Legal pluralism: Foundations of a new culture of law]. Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre.

109. Uprimny, R. (2026, January 24). Soberanía, derecho internacional y derechos humanos (II) [Sovereignty, international law, and human rights (II)]. El Espectador / Dejusticia.

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine represents the most articulated normative attempt to channel this tension between sovereignty and the protection of populations. Initially formulated in the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS)[110] and endorsed by heads of state and government in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (paragraphs 138 and 139),[111] R2P redefines sovereignty as a responsibility of states toward their populations in the face of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

The 2005 consensus articulates three pillars: the primary responsibility of the State to protect its population from such atrocities; the responsibility of the international community to help states fulfill that obligation through cooperation, technical assistance, and capacity building; and, ultimately, the responsibility of the international community to respond, primarily through peaceful means, but also, if necessary and in accordance with the UN Charter, through collective measures—including force—authorized by the Security Council when a state manifestly fails to protect its population.

In the specialized literature, R2P has been described by Anne-Marie Slaughter as "the most important shift in our conception of sovereignty since the Treaty of Westphalia," and by Louise Arbour as "the most important and imaginative doctrine to emerge on the international scene for decades," declarations that have become recurring references in academic debates.[112] At the same time, its implementation—especially since the case of Libya in 2011—has raised a wide range of objections. Authors such as Patrick Quinton-Brown[113] and others warn that R2P can operate as a device to legitimize interventions aimed de facto at regime change, which may have eroded trust and the fragile political consensus that made it acceptable to many states. Legal scholars such as Terry Nardin and Chris Brown also emphasize that the doctrine does not offer sufficiently clear and operational criteria for deciding when to intervene or how to avoid selective or abusive decisions. For their part, Daniele Archibugi and other authors argue that the R2P framework leaves the power asymmetries of the Security Council intact, such that its application tends to be selective and strongly conditioned by geopolitical interests.[114]

Other recent debates revolve around proposals for legal organization above the state. Luigi Ferrajoli,[115] with his idea of a "Constitution of the Earth," and David Held,[116] with his theory of global

---

110. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. (2001). The responsibility to protect. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre.

111. United Nations General Assembly. (2005, October 24). 2005 World Summit Outcome (A/RES/60/1), paras. 138–139.

112. Welsh, J. M. (2013). Norm contestation and the responsibility to protect. Global Responsibility to Protect, 5(4), 365–396.

113. Quinton-Brown, P. (2013). The responsibility to protect and the future of humanitarian intervention. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 7(4), 1–20.

114. Hehir, A. (2013). The responsibility to protect: Rhetoric, reality and the future of humanitarian intervention. Palgrave Macmillan.

115. Ferrajoli, L. (2024). ¿Por qué una Constitución de la Tierra? Fundamentos y proyecto de Constitución [Why a Constitution for the Earth? Foundations and draft Constitution]. Palestra Europa.

116. Held, D. (1995). Democracy and the global order: From the modern state to cosmopolitan governance. Cambridge: Polity Press.

democracy, advocate the creation of a supranational regulatory framework with effective guarantees for fundamental goods such as peace, human rights, and the environment, overcoming the limitations of a system composed solely of juxtaposed sovereign states. However, authors such as Adam Lupel[117] draw attention to the problem of legitimacy of origin: it is difficult to democratically justify such a legal order when large sectors of the world's population have not been able to freely consent to its institutional design, which fuels perceptions of the imposition of Western models of political organization.

Other analyses focus on how the very meaning of sovereignty has changed. Jack Donnelly[118] argues that sovereignty and human rights are not mutually exclusive, because current international law redefines sovereignty through obligations assumed by states themselves, although he acknowledges that the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms limits the real effect of these obligations. Robert Jackson[119] distinguishes between "positive sovereignty," linked to the effective capacity of the state to govern, and "negative sovereignty," associated with mere legal recognition by the international community, while Christian Reus-Smit[120] has shown how human rights and decolonization norms have contributed to transforming the content of sovereignty and delegitimizing colonialism and certain forms of domination.

In the face of these tensions, various proposals seek to articulate intermediate paths. Anne-Marie Slaughter has proposed a "Regional Responsibility to Protect," which devolves to regional organizations part of the capacity for action to implement R2P and other forms of cooperation between states.[121] Other authors propose strengthening the International Criminal Court by expanding its jurisdiction and providing it with effective enforcement tools, so that accountability for mass atrocities does not depend on unilateral military decisions.[122] Finally, thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas[123] argue that the basic problem lies in the institutional structure of the international order: as long as decisions on shared norms and values depend on bodies that are unrepresentative and subject to the veto of a few powers, any progress will be fragile and uneven. From this perspective, the current crisis of sovereignty, international law, and human rights cannot be resolved either by a return to absolute sovereignty or by ad hoc interventions, but rather by a profound transformation of the structures of global governance that currently prevent these values from being applied effectively and equally.

---

117. Lupel, A. (2009). Tasks of a global civil society: Held, Habermas and democratic legitimacy beyond the nation-state. Globalizations, 6(2), 115–137.

118. Donnelly, J. (2004). State sovereignty and human rights. Human Rights & Human Welfare, 4, 1–18.

119. Jackson, R. H. (1993). Quasi-states: Sovereignty, international relations and the Third World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

120. Reus-Smit, C. (2001). Human rights and the social construction of sovereignty. Review of International Studies, 27(4), 519–538.

121. Slaughter, A.-M. (2014). A regional responsibility to protect. In D. Held & K. McNally (Eds.), Lessons from intervention in the 21st century: Legality, legitimacy and feasibility (Global Policy e-book).

122. Kress, C. (2024). Expanding the ICC's jurisdiction over the crime of aggression. Journal of International Criminal Justice, 22(3–4), 543–575.

123. Habermas, J. (2001). The postnational constellation: Political essays. Cambridge: Polity Press.

### c. "State erosion" as a concept distinct from "democratic backsliding"

While "democratic backsliding" describes attacks on democratic institutions (electoral independence, freedom of the press, separation of powers), Mejía Acosta and Pérez Sandoval argue that there is a parallel and more insidious phenomenon: "state erosion," which "cuts into the very sinews of the State—its ability to regulate, administer, and provide basic public goods such as education and security."[124]

This distinction is fundamental because, as the authors emphasize, "while democratic backsliding may often be reversible at the ballot box, state capacity is hard to build up and thus hard to get back once it is gone. Voters can elect politicians who respect constitutional democracy, but they cannot simply elect a capable state.[125] "In other words, when an authoritarian leader captures the judiciary or shuts down independent media, a subsequent government can—at least in principle—reverse those decisions by appointing independent judges and restoring press freedoms. But when that same leader has dismantled the bureaucratic capacity of the state—firing technical officials, eliminating specialized agencies, hollowing out regulatory institutions—rebuilding requires decades of patient work that transcends electoral cycles.

Mejía Acosta and Pérez Sandoval document how populist leaders of different ideological orientations have deliberately eroded state capacity through four main tactics:

1. Dismissal of career officials, prioritizing political loyalty over technical competence: purges in specialized bureaucracies (tax services, regulatory agencies, statistical institutes), replacing experts with unqualified loyalists. This reduces administrative efficiency and destroys institutional knowledge accumulated over generations.

2. Eliminating, merging, or dismantling state agencies in the name of efficiency: closing or consolidating independent agencies under direct executive control (e.g., abolishing specialized ministries or independent regulatory agencies). This tactic is particularly insidious because it is presented as "administrative reform" or "bureaucracy reduction" when, in practice, it eliminates institutional checks and balances.

3. Centralization of spending and manipulation of budgets: concentration of budgetary discretion in the executive branch, elimination of guaranteed allocations for social programs or independent agencies, and use of public funds as a tool of political coercion. Oversight agencies—such as those that investigate corruption or monitor human rights—see their budgets cut, while loyal structures receive generous funding.

4. Attacks on judicial credibility to turn courts into partisan instruments: openly political appointments, increases in the number of judges (court-packing), threats against judges,

---

124. Mejía Acosta, A., & Pérez Sandoval, J. (2026). Why populists hollow out their states. Journal of Democracy, 37(1), 5–19.[ journalofdemocracy ]

125. Ibid.

and campaigns to delegitimize decisions unfavorable to the government. This does not formally suppress judicial independence, but it hollows it out by generating fear of reprisals among judges.

The authors warn that state erosion has more persistent effects than democratic backsliding: "While state capacity is painstakingly built over generations, it can be quickly dismantled. The hollowing out of state capacity represents a pervasive threat to the survival of legitimate democratic governance."[126]

Mejía Acosta and Pérez Sandoval extend their analysis to the international system: when the powers that uphold the multilateral order experience internal state erosion, this is reflected in the global system. The dismantling of a state's internal bureaucratic capacity to execute coherent foreign policy, the hollowing out of specialized agencies, and the subordination of career diplomats to political loyalties have cascading effects throughout the United Nations system.

As the authors conclude: "State erosion is not only a domestic threat to democracy; it is an existential threat to the liberal international order, which requires states capable of fulfilling long-term commitments, implementing complex treaties, and sustaining multilateral institutions. When the central powers of the system experience state erosion, the system itself collapses."[127]

## VI. Critical Assessment of the Post-2026 Order

The second Trump administration has marked a critical turning point in the United States' stance toward the international system, going beyond foreign policy disagreements and calling into question the principles that the United States itself helped to enshrine in 1945–1948.

An analysis by Foreign Policy entitled "Welcome to the Age of Chaos"[128] describes the rupture as follows: with several years still to run in his term, Trump is already being presented as "the most consequential and transformative US president since Franklin D. Roosevelt, what some would call a world-historical figure—one who alters the course of history, and likely not for the better," and the United States appears to many as "a predatory rogue actor, a major destabilizing force with Trump diminishing the value of alliances and multilateralism that have been the hallmarks of US foreign policy since 1945."[129]

The sequence of decisions during his second term shows a consistent pattern of dismantling multilateral commitments:

126. Ibid.

127. Ibid.

128. Drezner, D. W. (2025, December 15). Welcome to the age of chaos. Foreign Policy.

129. Ibid.

- February 2025: US withdrawal from the Human Rights Council for the second time (following its departure in 2018 during his first term).

- March–December 2025: Progressive dismantling of USAID, which had historically funded democracy, human rights, and development programs in more than one hundred countries.

- November 2025: Imposition of sanctions and visa restrictions against prosecutors and judges of the International Criminal Court in response to arrest warrants against the Israeli prime minister for alleged war crimes in Gaza.

- January 2026: Withdrawal from 66 international organizations, including 31 UN entities such as the UNFCCC, UNFPA, IPCC, and subsequently the WHO.

- January 3, 2026: Unilateral military intervention in Venezuela without Security Council authorization, in open contradiction to the principles of the UN Charter.

The same Foreign Policy article summarizes the impact of this shift: "The militarization of US cities; the dissolution of US soft power (e.g., USAID, Voice of America); the slashing of research and development budgets, the secret sauce of US innovation; and abandonment of US-led multilateral institutions (...) have fostered worries of a rogue America out to destroy itself and the system it created."[130]

***General Assembly Hall on the opening morning of the general debate of the 66th session of the United Nations General Assembly, UN Headquarters, New York, 21 September 2011. Photo: UN Photo / Susan Markisz (United Nations).***

130. Ibid.

### The "Donroe Doctrine": Trump and the Western Hemisphere

The Guardian Weekly devoted the cover of its January 9, 2026, edition to the concept of the "Donroe Doctrine"—a play on words combining "Donald" with the Monroe Doctrine of 1823—to characterize the intervention in Venezuela and the subsequent US multilateral retreat.[131] The report argued that "Donald Trump consigned the remnants of the rules-based international order to the bottom of the Caribbean Sea as US forces extracted Nicolás Maduro to face trial in the United States."[132]

Columnist Nesrine Malik noted that "there is little effort to frame the coup in Venezuela in any terms other than those of US interests,[133] "highlighting the absence of a multilateral legal justification. This reading contrasts with the traditional rhetoric of US foreign policy since 1945, which, at least formally, invoked international law, universal human rights, and the authorization of multilateral bodies as bases for legitimacy.

The Stimson Center report "Top 10 Global Risks for 2026"[134] identifies the "U.S. pivot to the Western Hemisphere" as one of the top geopolitical risks of the year. The report warns that the attempt to "establish a dominant sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere, while sidelining the United States' other regional commitments, has most Washington strategists scratching their heads." [135]

The same analysis highlights that China seems to have a better understanding of the region's priorities: trade between China, Latin America, and the Caribbean "soared from $12 billion in 2000 to $315 billion in 2020, with projections indicating it could surpass $700 billion by 2035," and, for example, "Brazil's trade with China exceeds its trade with the United States by more than two to one." [136]

A commentary published in JURIST (Journal of Law) in January 2026[137] warns that if the United States claims a unilateral right to overthrow authoritarian regimes in the name of democracy, other states could invoke similar reasoning—for example, Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine or China vis-à-vis Taiwan—to justify future aggression.

---

130. Ibid.

131. The Guardian Weekly. (2026, January 9). The Donroe Doctrine: Donald Trump stakes his claim to the Western Hemisphere.

132. Ibid.

133. Malik, N. (January 9, 2026). Venezuela and the “Donroe Doctrine.” The Guardian.

134. Stimson Center. (2026, February 3). Top ten global risks for 2026. Washington, DC: Stimson Center.

135. Ibid.

136. Ibid.

137. Crane, D. M. (January 1, 2026). Sliding toward aggression: America’s Venezuela campaign and the unraveling of international law. JURIST.

### The Munich speech: Rubio and decolonization

In this context, reference must be made to the speech given by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026. Rubio framed 20th-century decolonization as a process that accelerated the "decline" of Western empires, lamenting that, after five centuries of expansion, "the great Western powers had entered into terminal decline, accelerated by godless communist revolutions and by anti-colonial uprisings that would transform the world." [138]

This narrative reinterprets processes that the postwar consensus—articulated in the General Assembly and in the practice of the Committee on Decolonization—had enshrined as an expression of the right of peoples to self-determination, and which gave rise to an "anti-colonial consensus" around the sovereign equality of states. In this sense, Rubio's discourse is in direct tension with the UN's normative heritage on decolonization, which sought to delegitimize colonialism as a form of international organization and transform imperial relations into legally egalitarian ones.

### Carney's proposal: middle powers as the last line of defense

Against this backdrop, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney presented an alternative roadmap at the World Economic Forum in Davos: middle powers must coordinate to resist coercion from aggressive superpowers and contribute to a more pluralistic and democratic order.

Carney opened his speech with a forceful statement: "We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition." [139] In doing so, he distinguishes between the gradual transition from one order to another—with institutional continuity—and the abrupt collapse of existing structures. He also called for an end to the ritual invocation of the "rules-based international order as though it still functions as advertised" and for recognition that, in practice, the great powers use economic and financial integration as tools of coercion.[140]

In this context, he proposed a strategy of "variable geometry": flexible coalitions of middle powers around specific issues, based on shared interests and values, rather than rigid blocks. His central message was that " middle powers must act together, because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu," emphasizing that strict bilateral negotiation with a hegemon tends to result in subordination.[141]

---

138. Marco Rubio, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio's Remarks at the Munich Security Conference," February 14, 2026, U.S. Department of State.

139. Carney, M. (2026, January 20). Special address by Prime Minister Mark Carney at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2026 [Speech]. World Economic Forum, Davos.

140. Ibid.

141. Ibid.

The speech was met with an ovation in Davos, and some analysts interpreted the conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement between India and the European Union on January 26, 2026, as an early example of the logic of coalitions among middle powers in the face of coercive trade policies by major powers.[142]

However, an article in IP Quarterly entitled "The Carney Doctrine Needs a Dose of Realism—and Honesty" [143] highlights the limitations of this agenda. The analysis summarizes the paradox of his proposal as follows. Taken to its logical conclusion, Carney's call for middle powers to unite is based on sound analysis. He correctly pointed out that "when we only negotiate bilaterally with a hegemon, we negotiate from weakness. We accept what is offered." He urged middle powers to "combine to create a third path with impact" rather than competing "with each other to be the most accommodating." However, taken to its conclusion, that call would imply an anti-coercion solidarity mechanism when individual members are subject to coercive measures by major powers. This would require, for example, Europeans and Canadians to show tangible solidarity with Japan when Beijing adopts coercive measures, or India and Brazil to impose sanctions on the United States for coercion against Colombia. "As desirable as such a solidarity mechanism is, we are currently a long way from it, given the heterogeneity of middle powers and their hesitation to upset great powers." [144]

Carney is aware of these challenges. In his speech, he insists that this is not about a new "naive multilateralism" or blind trust in existing institutions, but about building functional coalitions, issue by issue, "with partners who share enough common ground to act together," and concludes that middle powers "are not powerless; they have the capacity to build a new order that encompasses our values, such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the various states."[145]

### VII. Some Ideas for the Future and Final Conclusions

Talking about recommendations at the present time is almost an exercise in paradox. This report has shown that we are not facing a temporary crisis of multilateralism, but rather a structural breakdown in which the 1945 power architecture, the very idea of a rules-based international order, the operational capacity of the UN, and, most notably, the functioning of its universal human rights system are simultaneously being eroded. In such a context, projecting linear roadmaps or proposing closed "solutions" may seem not only naive but also methodologically mis-

---

142. European Commission. (2026, January 27). EU and India conclude landmark Free Trade Agreement (IP/26/184). Brussels: European Commission.

143. Roth, M. (2026, January 27). The Carney doctrine needs a dose of realism—and honesty. IP Quarterly, 18(1), 45–52.

144. Ibid.

145. Carney, 2026. Op. cit.

guided: the very foundations—the validity of the Charter, the centrality of the Security Council, the basic funding of the Office of the High Commissioner and monitoring mechanisms—are in question.

That said, the impossibility of offering ready-made solutions should not be confused with resignation. Precisely because there is a risk that multilateralism will fade into irrelevance while an order governed by force becomes normalized, a minimal constellation of urgent priorities becomes more visible, without which any debate on the "future" of the UN is little more than ritual, especially in the field of human rights. The following lines do not constitute an exhaustive reform program, but rather some guiding ideas, anchored in the preceding analysis, on where political and normative energy should be focused if we are to avoid a definitive collapse of the universal human rights system and the advances made by Indigenous Peoples and other historically excluded actors.

### a. A historic crossroads

At 80 years old, the UN faces a historic crossroads that, given the intensity of the disputes, is reminiscent of the debates of 1945. At that time, the architecture that emerged from Dumbarton Oaks, Yalta, and San Francisco was the result of a tense compromise between the realism of power and universalist normative aspirations, where small states, especially in Latin America, together with civil society organizations, succeeded in inserting the language of human rights and the first mechanisms of decolonization into a structure initially conceived without them. In the current situation—marked by democratic setbacks, strong economic asymmetries, and a public space increasingly mediated by digital platforms—old questions about the distribution of power, the allocation of resources, and subjects deemed expendable by the system are reappearing, albeit in a different language.

As Dag Hammarskjöld said, the organization was not created to take us to heaven, but to save us from hell; in that pragmatic sense, it has fulfilled its central role. The United Nations system has served as a space in which serious conflicts have been managed, albeit imperfectly. However, the current challenges are of a different nature: they combine an anachronistic architecture that reflects the world of 1945 and not that of 2026; a structural financial crisis that undermines the system's operational capacity, especially in the area of human rights; an uncontrolled proliferation of mandates without review mechanisms; the active withdrawal or systematic obstruction of key powers; and a global democratic regression that has led to 72% of the world's population living under authoritarian regimes.

In this context, initiatives such as the Pact for the Future or UN80 reproduce, in a way, the scene in San Francisco: a basic text negotiated between powers, a group of medium and small states trying to introduce more demanding commitments on human rights, equality, and participation, and a civil society—including Indigenous Peoples—struggling not to be confined to a decorative role. The difference is that unlike in 1945, today there is no minimum consensus on the value of

rules, and the gap between an increasingly sophisticated regulatory framework and increasingly selective practice has become unsustainable.

### b. Democratizing the architecture of power

Given this backdrop, the first priority is to democratize the architecture of power in the system, with a focus on its capacity to protect human rights. Primarily, this means moving toward a reform of the Security Council that reflects the demographic and political weight of the Global South, through the creation of new permanent seats for Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and the introduction of effective restrictions on the use of the veto in situations of mass atrocities. This is a matter not only of correcting a historical injustice, but also of restoring a minimum of legitimacy to a body that is currently paralyzed in the face of conflicts in which millions of people are in urgent need of protection.

Secondly, the criteria and consequences of membership in the Human Rights Council need to be reviewed so that Resolution 60/251 ceases to be a dead letter. States responsible for heinous crimes should not be able to use their seat as a shield for impunity: election to the Council should be linked to verifiable commitments and a regime of consequences when systematic violations are found, including suspension and, in extreme cases, expulsion. Finally, democratizing the system means expanding meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, civil society organizations, and other non-state actors in setting agendas, following the examples of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, the Permanent Forum, and the Expert Mechanism, but giving them greater political weight in substantive decisions.

### c. Sustainable financing for human rights

A second inescapable priority is to ensure sustainable financing for the human rights pillar. The fact that the Office of the High Commissioner receives less than 5% of the regular UN budget, while mandates are multiplying and treaty body sessions are being canceled, is a concentrated expression of the crisis. Raising this proportion gradually through a binding commitment—for example, to a minimum threshold of 10%—is a necessary condition for existing mechanisms to operate meaningfully.

At the same time, the growing dependence on politically conditioned voluntary contributions must be reduced. Exploring innovative sources of funding specifically earmarked for the protection of human rights would make it possible to decouple the survival of these mechanisms from the vagaries of the political will of a handful of donors. Without stable resources, any promise of a "human rights-centered approach" will remain empty rhetoric.

### d. Giving the universal system “teeth”

The third urgent focus is to give the universal human rights system effective "teeth." The paradox

of empty promises shows that treaties without robust enforcement mechanisms can even correlate with a worsening of repressive practices when governments use them as a facade without facing the full costs of noncompliance. Correcting this asymmetry requires a gradual shift from a purely declarative model to staggered enforcement mechanisms that combine incentives and sanctions.

Possible avenues include developing mechanisms for gradual political and economic pressure on states that systematically fail to meet their treaty obligations; strengthening regional systems with binding jurisdictions, following and expanding on the experience of the Inter-American Court; supporting a careful expansion of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, especially in relation to heinous crimes; and better coordinating the various components of the system—treaty bodies, Special Procedures, the Universal Periodic Review—to avoid duplication that consumes resources without increasing the capacity for real impact. On all these fronts, the active participation of Indigenous Peoples, human rights defenders, journalists, and social movements is key.

### e. Rebuilding the link between democracy, the state, and multilateralism

Finally, any reflection on the future of the UN must recognize that the crisis of multilateralism is inseparable from the internal crisis of states, and that both disproportionately affect those on the front lines of human rights defense: defenders, Indigenous Peoples, women, and LGBTIQ individuals. Democratic backsliding, the deliberate erosion of state capacity by populist leaders, and the capture of national institutions by authoritarian elites have cascading effects on the international system: they weaken the will to fulfill obligations, hollow out professional diplomacy, and turn multilateral forums into extensions of internal battles.

This means that the defense of the universal human rights system must not be limited to institutional technicalities. It requires rebuilding the social contract within states—reversing extreme inequalities, strengthening professional bureaucracies, protecting civic space—while promoting variable-geometry coalitions among middle powers and actors in the Global South who are willing to bear real costs to defend multilateralism with teeth. The decision by the United States to withdraw from or freeze its participation in dozens of UN agencies is, in this sense, an additional warning sign. It has highlighted the extent to which the multilateral system—including the human rights pillar—has become structurally dependent on a handful of powers and major contributors, such that a unilateral decision by one of them can paralyze budgets, block essential mandates, and leave entire populations unprotected. A key lesson from this crisis is that no organization that aspires to be truly universal can be sustained on such a narrow financial and political basis: diversifying contributions, strengthening the weight of contributors from the Global South, and reducing the decisive influential capacity of one or two states is not an abstract ideal, but a condition for survival.

As Guy Ryder has warned, if it is not explicitly recognized that the current systems have failed to protect the majority, no reform will be possible; and as Mark Carney reminded us, if we are

not at the table, we are on the menu. The choice, ultimately, is between accepting the normalization of an order ruled by force or undertaking profound transformations—democratization, financing, enforcement—that will allow multilateralism to once again become an effective tool for protecting the human rights of all individuals and all peoples, particularly those who have historically been marginalized, including Indigenous Peoples.

***General Assembly Hall during the opening of the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addresses the high-level plenary meeting, UN Headquarters, New York, 22 September 2014. Photo: UN Photo / Cia Pak (United Nations).***

### About the author

**Antonia Urrejola Noguera** is a lawyer from the University of Chile, specializing in human rights and transitional justice, with more than 30 years of experience in international law, democratic governance, and international relations. She was president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2018-2021), leading the first all-female Board of Directors in the history of the organization; Chile's Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Gabriel Boric administration; senior advisor to the Secretary General of the OAS; international expert on the implementation of the Colombia Peace Agreement, appointed by the United Nations; and international mediator in social conflicts in northern Cauca. She has worked as a consultant for international organizations such as the UNDP, ILO, IDB, and CAF, and has participated in election observation processes for judicial authorities in Guatemala and Ecuador. She is currently Special Representative of the Secretary General of the OAS for Belize-Guatemala affairs, board member of the National Human Rights Institute of Chile, Senior Fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue, and member of the Board of Directors of the Center for Migration Policy. She has published numerous academic works on human rights, indigenous rights, the inter-American system, and feminist foreign policy, and has served as a visiting professor at various universities in the region. Her expertise spans international law.

The United Nations stands at a structural crossroads that calls into question the future of multilateralism and the international human rights system. In this report, Antonia Urrejola, together with IWGIA, examine how the institutional architecture established after the Second World War—shaped by enduring tensions between geopolitical power and universal ideals—is now facing profound erosion amid the global rise of authoritarianism, the spread of disinformation, and open violations of international law. The analysis pays particular attention to the marginalisation of Indigenous Peoples and the risks faced by human rights defenders in increasingly restrictive environments. It also assesses recent reform initiatives, including the Pact for the Future and the UN80 initiative, questioning whether administrative adjustments can address a deeper systemic crisis marked by financial constraints and persistent gaps in accountability.

IWGIA