Global Human Rights Challenges and Solutions

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Mondays, April 16th - May 28th (no class May 21st)
1:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.
Room 124, Leeds House Building

Week 1

What is international law and how can we expect it to reinforce basic human values around the world? Where does it come from and how does it work? Is it really law or just a kind of politics? How is international enforced without a world police force and court system? Is it too easy to be cynical about it and say that many states agree to international rules when they have no intention to comply with it? Is it really just a vision of utopia?

Week 2

Canadian corporations operate businesses, especially in the resource extractive industry, through subsidiaries outside Canada that own the resource and employ local labour to do the work. Human rights issues have arisen in some cases. It has been alleged in one case, for example, that the local labour supply was recruited and the work carried out in inhumane ways. It has been alleged in another, that local protests were suppressed by subsidiary company security forces, breaching the human rights of protesting citizens of the country in which the industry was operating. When and if justice for these breaches of rights cannot be had in those countries, can the victims seek remedies in Canada, in the home of the Canadian parent corporation? Can they ask the courts to apply international law?

Week 3

Ironically, war is a highly regulated human activity. These “regulations” consist of Conventions such as the Geneva Conventions dating back to the last century and other rules that have developed by participants choosing to obey well-worn principles as though they were legally binding on them and their opponents. We’ll look at some of the issues posed by the international law of war.

Week 4

A doctrine of humanitarian intervention is developing in response to terrible atrocities visited on civilian populations by their own governments. For example, in the late 1990s there were huge human rights violations in the former Yugoslavia, but observing States had no mandate to act from the UN, no clear right to intervene, no invitation from the oppressor government and no Security Council resolution authorizing force. But some observing States went ahead anyway to stop some tragedies but not others. More recently, the UN has overseen the development of a theory of State and global responsibility for these kinds of atrocities bringing it back within the UN mandate.
Week 5

The International Criminal Court is one of the latest international courts established to prosecute and punish war crimes and crimes against humanity. From the Nuremburg Tribunal to the latest Specialist Chambers of the Kosovo courts, perpetrators of these serious crimes have been tried in special hybrid tribunals. The ICC has experienced growing pains but is already meting out justice around the world. We will look at and discuss the growth of these courts and the ICC in its capacity to bring offenders to justice and to provide reparations for victims.

Week 6

When the internal order of a State is destroyed by war or insurrection, breaching the rights of citizens and subjecting them to treatment that breaches international standards, how is the order restored so that life may go on? What is retributive justice? Restorative justice? Reparative justice?

Recommended readings for continued learning:


Other interesting resources: