

Governance, law and ethics

Reclaiming human rights in a changing world order. Edited by Christopher Sabatini. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press and London: Chatham House. 2023. 386pp. Pb.: £38.00. ISBN 978 0 81573 975 3. Available as e-book.

75 years after the Universal Declaration on Human Rights came into effect, the international human rights system still faces an array of challenges. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Christopher Sabatini brings together 18 contributors, with diverse backgrounds and expertise, to examine the current state of the international human rights regime, to ignite momentum for reform and to offer practical steps forward. The book interweaves normative reflections and evidence-based considerations to outline progress and assess the challenges ahead. As Asli Ü. Bâli puts it, in the context of the Middle East ‘the magnitude of these crises can make human rights frameworks seem toothless’ (p. 312). The book’s preparatory consultations are one of the aspects that render it a unique contribution to the field: Chatham House convened young scholars and activists from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East to capture generational views on human rights. In addition, the recommendations presented at the end of the book build on a separate virtual discussion held between the contributors and front-line human rights activists from Africa, Asia, Latin America and North America. Bringing together different experts and perspectives, the book charts both a thematic and a regional approach over four sections.

In the first part of the book, the editor sets the scene for the recurring motif of unrealized socio-economic rights. Sabatini introduces the ‘never linear and certainly never balanced’ evolution of norms, instruments and institutions, pointing towards their failure to address inequality (p. 11). Rana Moustafa examines how and where the COVID–19 pandemic has exposed structural deficiencies in human rights institutions. Rosemary Foot, Nandini Ramanujam, Vishakha Wijenayake and Alexander Cooley tackle the contested role of human rights in relations with China and Russia in chapters two, three and four. Foot argues that China needs to be publicly challenged when its rhetoric threatens the universality and indivisibility of rights. Ramanujam and Wijenayake call for cautious engagement with Russia despite its egregious human rights violations, arguing that an isolation strategy could do more harm than good. Their focus on Russian civil society is an important nod to the diversity of actors within authoritarian systems. Taking an institutional lens, Cooley advises engaging with new Russia- and China-led security and regional organizations and tightening membership eligibility for the United Nations Human Rights Council. Overall, these chapters provide a comprehensive review as well as useful recommendations. Further research might explore areas of alignment or divergence between Russian and Chinese approaches and bilateralism.

Then, the second part explores how domestic politics often spill over into international human rights policies. Gerald Neuman examines the negative effects of exclusionary populism and sketches steps for international monitoring bodies and

rights-respecting states to address the causes and consequences of populism. Thus, Neuman makes a compelling case for states to start at home, working on their own democracies. Melani McAlister deep-dives into evangelical conservatism in the United States and introduces the lens of religious freedom to the definition of a moral framework. Undoubtedly, this lens would benefit from a wider exploration across diverse cases. Technology takes centre stage in the third part, as the contributors integrate technology expertise within human rights language and considerations. Emily Taylor, Kate Jones and Carolina Caeiro introduce another area for western and Chinese divergence: technical standards and the human rights implications of emerging technologies. The authors' summary of the standardization landscape is useful for readers without any technology knowledge, as is their series of targeted recommendations. Thompson Chengeta analyses the accountability gap for autonomous weapon systems (AWS) from a racial justice perspective and its impacts on the rights to non-discrimination and to remedy. Chengeta underscores the critical need for intersectional analysis, highlighting the risks of AWS use in law enforcement and counterterrorism operations outside armed conflict. This is a refreshing discussion, as these contexts are ordinarily excluded from the debate on the topic.

The fourth and last part considers ways forward for human rights instruments and institutions at the regional level. In each chapter, the contributors provide context, outline the historical evolution and identify gaps and new challenges around the globe: Urfan Khaliq examines Europe; Santiago Canton and Angelita Baeyens the Americas; Solomon Dersso Africa; and Asli Ü. Bâli looks at the Middle East, North Africa and Afghanistan. Bâli argues that the prospects for human rights remain more imperilled by geopolitics than by the actions and decisions of local powers.

Strong as a collective and as individual chapters, this book re-energizes research and the discussion on human rights with several ideas and concrete suggestions. The edited volume is a timely and useful tool for academics, practitioners and activists looking to deepen their understanding of a specific challenge to human rights, but also to apply cross-cutting methods and interdisciplinary thinking to the issues at hand.

Emily Venturi

The success of small states in International Relations: mice that roar? Edited by Godfrey Baldacchino. Abingdon: Routledge. 2023. 248pp. £130.00. ISBN 978 1 03232 378 7. Available as e-book.

In Thucydides's Melian Dialogue, the titular Melians famously call out the aggressive behaviour of the Athenians, arguing that justice is on their side in the battle with a significantly more powerful opponent. The story, as every student of International Relations knows, ends with the victory of the powerful as 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must'. It is no coincidence that Godfrey Baldacchino has included this famous quote, which is often used to illus-