

Human Rights in International Relations

This fourth edition of David P. Forsythe's successful textbook provides an authoritative and timely analysis of the place of human rights in an age of upheaval in international politics. Human rights standards are examined at the global, regional, and national levels, with separate chapters on transnational corporations and advocacy groups. Completely updated and revised, the fourth edition takes account of new sources and recent scholarship, as well as recent events, such as the Syrian war, the rise of ISIS, refugee flows, South Sudan crises, and the resurgence of nationalism. A new chapter has been added on the media and human rights, covering both traditional and social media. Examining attempts to protect human rights by various actors, such as the United Nations, the European Union, transnational corporations, and the media, the book stresses that the open-ended fate of universal human rights depends on human agency in context. Containing further reading suggestions and discussion questions, this textbook is a vital resource for courses on human rights in an international context.

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Fourth Edition

David P. Forsythe



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-18391-9 — Human Rights in International Relations
David P. Forsythe
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi – 110002, India
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107183919

DOI: 10.1017/9781316874929

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First published 2000

Second edition 2006

Third edition 2012

Fourth edition 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Forsythe, David P., 1941– author.

Title: Human rights in international relations / David P. Forsythe.

Description: Fourth edition. | Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017014550 | ISBN 9781107183919 (Hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781316635186 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Human rights–Political aspects. | International law and human rights. | International relations.

Classification: LCC K3240 .F67 2017 | DDC 341.4/8–dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017014550>

ISBN 978-1-107-18391-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-63518-6 Paperback

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Preface to the fourth edition

My preface to the third edition was written at the time of the Arab Spring, with its popular demand for more democracy and human rights, but before its widespread failure. One can note the reinstatement of military rule in Egypt, humanitarian disaster in Syria, and chaos in Libya. Five years after 2011, there are ample reasons to be cautious if not pessimistic about the future of human rights. This is not only because of developments in the Arab-Islamic world, but also because of clear repressive trends in important states like China and Russia. Even in the West, almost every democratic government was under pressure from nativist and xenophobic forces hostile to – or at the least indifferent to – the notion of universal human rights. Many persons felt threatened by international forces, often described as socio-economic globalization. In addition, the prevalence of terrorism in much of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and its occasional occurrence in the West, created a political climate conducive to violation of many human rights in the name of national security. Counter-terrorism policies led at times to enforced disappearances, torture, administrative detention, and trial in military commissions offering “rough justice.”

Broad feelings of alienation and insecurity are not conducive to protection of human rights. Yet defense of the individual, his integrity and her dignity, is most needed precisely in those times of stress. It is easy to be in favor of human rights in times of peace and prosperity. The challenge is to respect the fundamental dignity and autonomy of persons in times of violence and economic distress. This means finding some workable and relatively humane blend of national security, economic prosperity, sustainable development, *and* human rights. This is what international law requires and this is what many governments profess to endorse. But making the law on the books into the law in reality is no easy path – especially given the insecurities and competitions inherent in the nation-state system of world affairs.

The objective of the fourth edition is finding the right synthesis between positive and negative developments in the quest for a more

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rights-protective world. All governments go through the motions of paying lip service to this goal. All states have accepted the 1949 Geneva Conventions designed mainly to protect human dignity in war. At the United Nations, the acceptance rate of most human rights treaties is about 70 percent. States want to be associated with the idea of human rights. Even China and Russia go through the motions of holding (controlled) elections. Yet numerous rights violations are evident.

In part because the commercial media emphasizes the negatives (“if it bleeds, it leads”), we tend to overlook areas of progress on rights – e.g., more international trials for atrocities, more abstract agreement on limiting state sovereignty in the name of rights, more tolerance for gay rights at least in Europe and the Americas.

The fourth edition seeks to establish the right balance between optimism and pessimism on internationally recognized human rights, arguing throughout that the future of rights depends on human agency in changing contexts. Nothing is guaranteed.

I would like to update the list of those who gave me helpful comments on various draft chapters for this fourth edition, with many thanks to: Charlyne Berens, Roger Clark, Barb Flanagan, John Gruhl, Courtney Hillebrecht, Ari Kohen, Patrice McMahan, Kurt Mills, Mahmood Monshipouri, and Jay Ovsiovitch.

Preface to the third edition

My preface to the first edition explains the objectives of this book, and they have not changed. My preface to the second edition explains the considerations that guide revisions, and they have not changed either. As before, revisions seek both to clarify the presentation and to incorporate recent developments. In particular I have now added some brief case studies to provide more specificity to certain rights in political context. My overall approach, hence the structure of the book, remains unchanged.

From the origins of this work as a gleam in the author's eye, the tension between personal rights and the workings of the state system of world affairs has been highlighted. If anything, the new edition emphasizes this tension even more. It is now even clearer that when states perceive a serious threat to their interests, above all their physical security, it becomes more difficult to get serious attention to human rights, especially the rights of those perceived as enemies. Moreover, when ruling elites elevate perceived challenges to the level of existential threats, sometimes to the nation but often just to the nature of their rule, serious attention to human rights suffers. Complicating analysis is the fact that some non-state actors see the existing situation as so objectionable that unrestricted violence is justified. This then feeds into a downward spiral of animosity and violence that tends to push human rights to the margins of public policy. Pursuit of victory in total war is not a mindset conducive to human rights.

Still, such is the power of the idea of human rights, defined to include humanitarian law, that states continue to profess their commitment to at least some of those standards, even as their record of compliance is often far short of what it should be. And armed non-state actors who attack civilians and kill prisoners face an uphill journey as they try to explain why they should be considered the new legitimate elite with the right to rule. The Arab Spring of 2011, with its demand for more democracy and other human rights, was a rejection of the militancy of Al Qaeda and other Islamist violent actors. Al Qaeda and its allies were not completely

spent forces, but they were mostly irrelevant to major developments in Tunisia, Egypt, and many other places.

After the demise of European communism some thought the world had entered a golden age of human rights. Forces such as militant Islam and the globalized but impersonal for-profit corporation, however, showed that the promised land remained distant. But the story is yet to be concluded, and the competing tensions are yet to be fully resolved. This third edition is an attempt to indicate the contemporary synthesis between clashing trends over human rights.

As the cliché has it, one thing is perfectly clear. Not only in the West but around the world the teaching of human rights in schools and universities has increased. There are now more scholarly journals focused on human rights, and more articles are being published on human rights in disciplines such as political science. Even in places such as China and Iran, human rights is now a subject of lively and officially sanctioned discussion. This gives some reason for long-term optimism. In the meantime, I sadly note the passing of some of those educators who led the way in this domain, such as Louis Henkin and Richard P. Claude in the United States, Kevin Boyle in the United Kingdom, and Peter R. Baehr in the Netherlands. Three of the four were affected by their family origins whether in Belarus, Northern Ireland, or Nazified Berlin. The lives of each of these three demonstrated that repression can produce human rights progress over time through personal commitment. Surely it is now evident that it is precisely human wrongs that lead to the demand for more practice of human rights, and that this dynamic has yet to run its course. (This is a good spot to refer the reader to Richard Pierre Claude, “Right to Education and Human Rights Education,” in David P. Forsythe, ed., *Encyclopedia of Human Rights* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], vol. II, 97–107.)

As with earlier editions I had the help of many persons who called material to my attention or who were kind enough to read passages for accuracy and clarity: Danny Braaten, Jack Donnelly, Kathleen Fallon, Barb Flanagan, John Gruhl, Jorge Heine, Courtney Hillebrecht, Rhoda Howard-Hassmann, Mark Janis, Alice Kang, Bert Lockwood, Peter Malcontent, Jay Ovsiovitch, Scott Pegg, David Rapkin, David Richards, Bill Schabas, Fusun Turkmen, Andy Wedeman, David Weissbrodt, and Jake Wobig.

As before, the production team at Cambridge University Press was efficient and helpful, especially my editor John Haslam.