ECONOMICS CRISIS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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The global economic crisis is accelerating processes of change, whereby economic – and ultimately political – power is shifting away from European and North American states which have dominated the world for most of the past two centuries. These dramatic changes will have significant impacts in many sectors, including on development and humanitarian activity. Any decline in the west's economic and strategic power means that in future there will be less financial and political capital to back international interventions based on human rights.

SHIFTS IN THE GLOBAL BALANCE OF POWER HAVE REDUCED THE ability and willingness of western actors to promote values of liberalism and democracy, and to intervene in conflict-affected countries, such as Burma or Zimbabwe. They may also have an impact on struggling opposition groups in such countries, which rely on the support of those powers.

Especially since the end of the Cold War, international interventions to aid the victims of natural and man-made disasters have focused not only on emergency relief, but have sought also to address the social and political structures which cause suffering among vulnerable populations. Such initiatives have been based on ideas of justice and human rights derived from a dominant strand of European and North American historical tradition – a political and cultural heritage which was already in decline before the credit crunch.

In the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a doctrine emerged in the United Nations and the broader international community which placed the rights of civilians caught up in natural disaster and armed conflict at the centre of debate. Instead of 'victims', the new narrative saw beneficiaries as 'rights-holders' – vulnerable populations, with entitlements to a range of basic goods, services and forms of social, political and economic participation.

To deal with cases where the nation state was unable or unwilling to protect these basic rights, the UN Security Council adopted in 2005 the principle of the Responsibility to Protect vulnerable civilians, and if necessary intervene to provide humanitarian aid. This period also saw the emergence of 'failed state' doctrines, according to which western powers intervened in conflict-affected countries, purportedly to safeguard the rights of citizens, and ensure their problems did not exacerbate regional or global conflicts.

CONTROVERSIAL AND CONTESTED

These liberal-democratic approaches were always controversial, and are increasingly contested. Over the past few years, international economic and political systems have undergone seismic shifts. In particular, the renewed power of China and Russia has been accompanied by challenges to the post-Cold War orthodoxy of rights-based approaches to humanitarian and political interventions. Such ideas are now under even greater strain, as a result of the global financial crisis, which is challenging the power and legitimacy of western social, political and, above all, economic models.

Even before the latest and most desperate phase of the financial crisis, agencies such as the UN World Food Program were complaining about a lack of funding, which in its case amounted to a shortfall of $500, to cover the cost of feeding more than seventy million of the world's poorest people. The collapse of wealth over the past few months makes it likely that traditional, western donors to humanitarian and development activities will reassess their financial commitments to aiding distant strangers, in favour of shoring up banks and welfare systems closer to home.

Such trends were confirmed on October 11, when International Monetary Fund Managing Director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, expressed concern that donor states might not be willing to provide the same levels of overseas aid in the coming year as they had in 2008. In the mid-to-longer term, the decline in overseas development aid may be exacerbated by the impact of climate change, especially if western nations are hit by expensive disasters such as the 2006 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

End of Intervention?

At the same time, non-western – mostly Asian and Latin American – countries, which have opposed the extension of rights-based approaches, are likely to see their hand strengthened. Less badly affected by the financial crisis, those states which resisted the Responsibility to Protect will mobilise to curtail its implementation.

DISASTER AND DILEMMAS

Despite the rhetoric of western leaders – particularly from Britain – the international community has demonstrated only very limited leverage over the situation in Zimbabwe. Although President Robert Mugabe's government has for the present agreed an uneasy compromise with the opposition, life for most people is extremely difficult. To the extent that a political settlement remains on the cards, this is mostly a result of internal domestic pressures, and the brokering of an African solution, rather than because of interventions from beyond the region.

Meanwhile in Burma, where Tropical Cyclone Nargis struck the Irrawaddy Delta in early May, killing at least 130,000 people, the military government has been able to control and co-opt international humanitarian agencies, while continuing to sideline the recovery efforts of its own population.

The international community's failure to follow through on calls, made, among others, by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, to mobilise the Responsibility to Protect approach, left advocates of humanitarian intervention looking powerless. In early June, American and other warships which had been waiting off the Burma coast steamed away to Thailand to unload aid supplies. The Burmese military regime had successfully called the international community's bluff.

Key aspects of the international response in Burma were led by Asian states, many of which are characterised by authoritarian political cultures, and are therefore unlikely to prioritise the human rights-based principles which underpin the global humanitarian regime. The response to Cyclone Nargis might therefore be said to herald a new era of regionalised 'humanitarianism with Asian values'.

REASSESSMENT

Any decline of human rights-based international humanitarian and political interventions would have far-reaching consequences, beyond the aid sector. The waning of rights-based approaches to the problems of 'failed states' would have a serious impact on the promotion of socio-political transitions. In particular, any decline in the west, and associated weakening of the liberal-democratic view, will present challenges to pro-democracy groups in conflict-affected and other developing countries.

Opposition networks in countries such as Zimbabwe and Burma are likely to have to rely less on the patronage of western supporters. These movements include many who struggle – often with great heroism – for democracy and justice. They need realistically to assess their positions, and re-orientate their strategies towards more localised, or at least regional, centres of power and legitimacy.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the opposition has entered an uneasy coalition with the government, at the prompting of South Africa and other regional states. In Burma, the opposition's dilemma is whether and how to compete in elections scheduled for 2010, given the military government's continued suppression and manipulation.

A new American president – especially a President Barack Obama – might be more disposed than his predecessor to internationalism, and the promotion of liberal values. However, if the economic cupboard is bare, and the liberal-democratic ideology seen as bankrupt – or at least, increasingly open to challenge – such changes in leadership may constitute little more than rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. This is not to deny the legitimacy of liberal-democratic values, but to recognise their historical contingency, and therefore limited universal applicability, and declining political capital.