

COMMITTEE GUIDE

GLS



Global Leaders Summit

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CCBMUN **XXIII**

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1. Presidents' Letter

Dear leaders,

We welcome you to this year's CCBMUN, and more specifically to our committee, the Global Leaders Summit (GLS). We are Stefania Jaramillo and Luciana Lozada, 12th grade students at Colegio Colombo Britanico. Having participated in various models over the years, we are very passionate about them and we recognise the significant influence they have on students. Our experience in MUN has been nothing but enriching and exciting, and we hope that this version of the model upholds this legacy for us. Our goal is to contribute to creating a memorable experience as you participate in this special committee, inspiring meaningful debate and leadership throughout the conference.

GLS is an exciting committee that differs from the others, having a few special procedures you will later learn about in the guide. You will be representing some of the most important figures in history in discussions related to ethics, philosophy, and politics that will help you become more aware of the reality of the world we live in, and will lead you to face questions you probably would have never asked yourself before. We are aware this is considered to be a challenging committee, but we will guide you through every step of the way so you can make the most out of this unique experience.

We hope that your participation in this committee will be not only gratifying, but also one that is enriching; where you use your knowledge and skills to make relevant interventions that uphold your leader's perspectives throughout the debate. We also hope this experience will allow you to open your mind to new possibilities about how our world works, and has worked, throughout history and in the present.

What we advise the most is for you to brush up on your political and philosophical knowledge, use your critical thinking and analytical skills, thoroughly read all the support documents we have prepared for you and most of all, challenge yourselves to reach your full potential. We both believe you are capable of achieving whatever you set your mind to, so use this model as an opportunity to not only grow as a student, but as a person.

It is both a pleasure and a privilege to be able to be part of your experience this year, and we cannot wait to see you all!

If you have any questions or doubts, do not hesitate to contact us at glc@ccbcali.edu.co

Kind regards,
Stefania Jaramillo and Luciana Lozada



2. Special Procedures

I. Structure

The committee is a discussion setting for leaders chosen to participate because of their relevance to the issues; there is a diversity of members. The committee comprises people who can bring their experiences to the debate; all delegates are fully aware of what has happened before and after their lifetime. As such, the leaders are informed of contemporary technologies and concepts.

Leaders should have all their experiences as a reference point for proposing and finding solutions to the debate. To expand on this idea, all delegates should be concerned with maintaining the perspective and personality of their leader by referring to what the leader did in life during their interventions. This is how they determine their position based on those convictions.

II. Special procedures and expectations

As a result of its unique structure, GLS differs from other committees in several respects:

Parliamentary language: Delegates use the first person, so they are allowed to use personal pronouns such as "I," "me," "my," and "we." They may also address other leaders directly throughout the debate; the formality "such as" is unnecessary.

Dress code: Delegates are encouraged to attend the role model wearing a dress code that alludes to their leader; they may also attend wearing a full costume of the person to whom they have been assigned. However, students will still be required to abide by the dress code of the role model while remaining respectful and tolerant of all cultures.

Resolutions: The summit does not have the authority or responsibility to draft resolutions. Instead, at the end of the discussion, leaders organise themselves into groups according to their beliefs and create a Working Paper. Essentially, this is a guidance document in which the bloc drafts a description of the issue, particularises its position, and outlines a process for dealing with it. The document should be prescriptive, rhetorical, and supported by reliable data.



III. Portfolio

The presentation of a portfolio to the model is a requirement for all delegates. In this committee, delegates can write their portfolios in the first person.

Three essential documents make up the GLS portfolio:

Biography: a summary account of the leader's life to become familiar with their background, character and historical role.

Position paper: also known as a research paper, this document includes information on both topics and provides the leader's perspective.

Opening Speeches: One per topic will be presented in the same format as the other committees.” (Mejía, Ordóñez, 2024)

IV. References

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Topic 1: *Jus ad Bellum*: Evaluating the Legitimacy of Military Intervention in the South Sudan Conflict

I. History/Context

Jus ad Bellum

Jus ad bellum is a Latin term meaning “the right to go to war”. In both ethical philosophy and international law, it refers to the set of criteria which must be satisfied in order for a state to lawfully and legitimately resort to the use of armed force as a means of resolving conflicts. Prior to the 20th century, the decision to go to war was commonly understood to be a sovereign right, meaning that states could initiate conflict without needing to justify their actions to the international community. However, the immense devastation caused by World War I drastically changed global attitudes towards armed warfare, leading to the drafting of legal mechanisms to restrict the use of force.

One of the first attempts to codify such restrictions was the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, also known as the Pact of Paris, which aimed to officially reject war as a tool that states could use to achieve national goals. Although it lacked enforcement mechanisms, and failed to prevent the outbreak of World War II, the pact marked a significant turning point in the evolution of international law.

This principle was later solidified with the adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945. This document explicitly prohibits the threat or use of force by states, except in cases of self-defense under Article 51 or when authorized by the Security Council under Chapter VII (United Nations, 1945).

These criteria serve to limit unjustified aggression and to ensure that the decision to go to war meets both legal and moral standards. The following are the core principles that must be satisfied for a war to be considered just:

a) Just Cause

Armed conflict must be commenced for a morally legitimate reason. Acceptable justifications include self-defence of a state against an armed attack, collective defence of an allied state, humanitarian intervention to counter widespread suffering, or the prevention of large-scale human rights violations.



b) Legitimate Authority

Only lawful and recognized entities have the right to authorize the use of armed force. This typically includes sovereign states and the United Nations through the Security Council.

c) Right Intention

The primary goal of using force must be to achieve peaceful and ethically justified solutions. It must not be driven by ulterior motives such as revenge, political or territorial domination, or economic gains.

d) Last Resort

The use of armed force is permissible only after all peaceful means of resolving conflicts have been exhausted. This means negotiations, international institutions and/or economic sanctions must be attempted before engaging in military action.

e) Reasonable Chance of Success

War should not be initiated if it is unlikely to accomplish its goals. It would be unethical to engage in conflict with no chance of success as doing so will risk lives and contribute to greater instability.

f) Proportionality

A war must not cause destruction or suffering that is excessive in relation to the intended outcome, avoiding unnecessary harm to civilians or infrastructure.

Unlike some areas of international law, the principles of *Jus ad bellum* are not contained in a single treaty but are built upon multiple sources, such as the UN Charter, the Hague Conventions, rulings from the International Criminal Court (ICC) and customary international law.

It is also important to distinguish between *Jus ad bellum* and *Jus in bello*. While *Jus ad bellum* determines the standards for when a state may engage in war, *Jus in bello* refers to the rules that regulate how war is conducted once it has begun. These rules include the distinction between combatants and civilians, proportionality in the use of force and the humane treatment of prisoners of war. A war that is justified under *Jus ad bellum* can still



be fought unjustly, such as through indiscriminate torture, therefore violating *Jus in bello*.

Origins of the South Sudanese Conflict

Prior to its independence in 2011, South Sudan formed part of the Republic of Sudan. However, the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) marked the end of more than two decades of civil war between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army, a rebel movement that sought autonomy and political representation for the non-Arab population of the south.

Following the terms of the CPA, a peaceful referendum was held in 2011, in which 98.83% of voters opted for independence (UNMIS, 2013, para. 6). As a result, South Sudan became the world's newest sovereign state on July 9 of that same year.

Despite the optimism surrounding independence, South Sudan descended into internal conflict just two years later. The long-standing rivalry between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups, both Nilotic¹ cattle-herding communities native to the land which competed over grazing land, water sources and livestock, remained unresolved even with the creation of the new state.

Political power struggles

Tensions quickly escalated in 2013 between President Salva Kiir, a member of the Dinka ethnic group, and Vice President Riek Machar, a member of the Nuer ethnic group. Initially, both leaders were part of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and both communities had cooperated in the broader struggle for independence during the Second Sudanese Civil War. Nevertheless, political rivalry and mutual distrust emerged when Machar accused Kiir of becoming increasingly authoritarian and began to publicly question and oppose the President's way of governing. In July 2013 Kiir dismissed his entire cabinet, including Vice-President Machar in an attempt to consolidate power, but the situation deteriorated further in December of that year when Kiir accused Machar and his supporters of attempting a coup d'état² against him.

¹ **Nilotic:** Ethnolinguistic communities originating from the Nile Valley in East Africa.

² **Coup d'état:** A sudden and unlawful takeover of a government, usually by the military or a small group, to remove existing leaders and take control of a state.



Civil war soon erupted in Juba, the capital, as political tensions led to direct confrontations between factions of the national army. Soldiers from the Dinka ethnic group aligned with Kiir and those from the Nuer group supported Machar. Both factions started targeting civilians along ethnic lines, conducting door-to-door searches, arbitrary arrests, executions, and widespread sexual violence. Additionally, the recruitment and use of child soldiers became a common practice among armed groups, further intensifying the conflict.

The armed confrontations also prevented farmers from planting or harvesting crops, causing a food crisis throughout the whole state. In July 2014, the UN Security Council declared South Sudan's famine "the worst in the world" (BBC, 2014, para. 1).



Figure 1: Outbreak of violence in the streets of Juba
(Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2019)

Attempts at peace

Under the threat of international sanctions, Kiir signed a peace agreement with Machar in 2015, who returned to Juba in 2016 after spending two years in exile and resumed his role as Vice President. However, soon after his return the ceasefire was violated by both sides, as violence broke out between Dinkas and Nuers. In the following years, the

fighting spread across the country, and by 2017 100,000 people faced starvation, while another 5 million were at risk (BBC, 2017, para. 2).

After nearly five years of civil war, Kiir and Machar entered a power-sharing agreement in August 2018. Consequently, both sides agreed to the formation of a unified national army, and elections were also promised after a three year period. While the agreement marked a significant step towards reconciliation, its implementation was hindered by the state's weak institutions, local violence and ongoing ethnic tensions. The war came at a devastating humanitarian cost, as it is estimated that 400,000 people, including 42,000 children were killed during this period, and an additional four million were displaced (Cfr *Global Conflict Tracker*, 2025, para. 5).

II. Current Situation

In February 2020, after multiple delays, a unity government was formally established. However, the implementation of several elements of the peace agreement remained incomplete, and local violence continued to destabilize the country. The government repeatedly postponed elections from December 2022 to February 2023, and later to December 2026.

Local militias and armed youth groups carried out cattle raids, attacks on villages and revenge killings, which resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and displacements. Despite the presence of the UN Mission in South Sudan ([UNMISS](#)), the violence often went unchecked as government forces lacked the capacity to intervene effectively. In the meantime, severe flooding and the entry of refugees fleeing conflict in neighbouring Sudan exacerbated the state's humanitarian crisis. By 2023, two-thirds of the population (around 7.7 million people) faced food insecurity (*World Food Programme*, 2023, para. 1).

On March 4, 2025 the White Army, a Nuer youth militia which opposed the government, launched a coordinated attack against South Sudan's national army in Nasir. The next day government forces put Vice President Machar under house arrest, and incarcerated several of his supporters, as he was accused of orchestrating the offensive. In response to the attack, the government intensified airstrikes against areas it believed supported opposition fighters, escalating the conflict.

On May 3, 2025, a *Médecins Sans Frontières*³ hospital in Jonglei State was deliberately bombed by government forces, leaving at least seven people dead and twenty injured. The attack also destroyed vital medical supplies and facilities that served over 110,000 people (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, 2025, para. 4). Kiir's government justified this attack by saying the White Army was using an area near the hospital to launch attacks against the government, but several international and non-governmental organizations, including the UN and the Red Cross viewed the bombing as a violation of international humanitarian law.



Figure 2: Destruction of Médecins Sans Frontières Hospital in Jonglei State (*Le Monde*, 2025)

³ **Médecins Sans Frontières:** An international humanitarian organization that provides medical care to people affected by conflict, natural disasters, epidemics and hardship.

Kiir's government has also launched barrel bomb and incendiary attacks on communities in the Upper Nile State targeting White Army fighters, but civilians described these attacks as worse than the ones in the 2013-2018 civil war. More than 130,000 civilians have been recently displaced (*thenewhumanitarian*, 2025, para. 9), most seeking shelter in neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, where overcrowded refugee camps have limited access to food, water or medical health. Meanwhile, President Kiir promoted his close ally Benjamin Bol Mel to deputy chair of the SPLM, which was seen as an effort to marginalize Machar and consolidate his authority on the state, while also diminishing hopes of free and fair elections in the future.

External actors have also become increasingly involved in this humanitarian crisis. Ugandan troops were deployed to Juba in March of this year to safeguard President Kiir, while Kenya and the African Union have shown mediation efforts to end the tension between factions. However, their progress has been limited, and distrust between the Dinka and Nuer continues to deepen today.

Vice President Machar's house arrest and recent airstrikes carried out by the government marked a turning point, which many have described as the collapse of the 2018 peace agreement. The violence has raised concerns about ethnic cleansing⁴, as civilians and analysts have increasingly described government offensives as targeting the Nuer community in general, not just armed groups. The UN warns that South Sudan is on the brink of falling into Civil War yet again, with millions of civilians at risk of displacement, mass atrocities and famine.

Assessing the legitimacy of the use of armed force in South Sudan

The ongoing use of armed force in South Sudan raises serious questions under the principles of *jus ad bellum*. The government justifies its military operations, including airstrikes, attacks on opposition forces and the incarceration of Machar and his supporters as a way to maintain national security, though under this legal principle this justification is problematic:

a) Just Cause

The government claims it is defending itself against armed groups such as the White Army. However, many of these operations have involved indiscriminate

⁴ **Ethnic cleansing:** The deliberate and systematic removal of an ethnic, religious, or cultural group from a particular area, often through violence, intimidation or forced displacement, with the aim of ensuring that only one group remains in control of that region.



attacks on innocent civilians, such as the one on the *Médicins Sans Frontières* hospital, undermining the legitimacy of its cause.

b) Legitimate Authority

As the government of an internationally recognized state, President Kiir has the authority to deploy force within South Sudan's borders.

c) Right Intention

Military action is carried out with the purpose of consolidating power and undermining the opposition, rather than protecting the population's rights or promoting peace.

d) Last Resort

Local mediation efforts, such as the ones proposed by the Kenyan government, the African Union or the UNMISS, were not fully supported or prioritized. In exchange, Kiir's government decided to resume the use of armed force and bypass opportunities to peacefully resolve the conflict.

e) Reasonable Chance of Success

The use of harsh military force alone is not likely to achieve long-lasting peace, as it is worsening the ethnic divisions the Nuer and Dinka tribes have been facing for years.

f) Proportionality

The government's excessive harm to civilians and infrastructure appears disproportionate to the threats posed by other smaller armed militias.

External military intervention as a way to resolve the conflict

As the situation in South Sudan deteriorates, some actors have begun to consider the possibility of external military intervention, but the question of whether armed intervention would be legitimate is controversial.

While some leaders will consider that the ongoing humanitarian crisis, the repeated use of incendiary weapons and the threat of ethnic cleansing constitutes a just cause for intervention, others will emphasize the importance of respecting South Sudan's



sovereignty⁵ and avoiding the mistakes of the international community's past interventions, such as the controversial [2011 Libya intervention](#) under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine.

Leaders will be encouraged to evaluate the existing conflict through the eyes of *jus ad bellum*, while also considering potential benefits and risks of armed intervention could bring to South Sudan. At the same time, leaders will also be allowed to explore alternative solutions that might address the crisis without necessarily resorting to military force.

III. Key points of the debate

- Legitimacy of external military intervention in South Sudan based on *jus ad bellum* principles
- Legitimacy of the ongoing conflict and use of force within South Sudan based on *jus ad bellum* principles
- Impact of military intervention in South Sudan's national stability
- The role of the international community in the conflict
- Respect for South Sudan's sovereignty vs. responsibility to protect civilians
- Other conflict resolution methods

IV. Guiding questions

1. Does your leader consider that Jus ad Bellum provides an adequate framework for determining the legitimacy of military intervention in modern conflicts? Why or why not?
2. If the answer is yes, how does your leader interpret and prioritise the principles of Jus ad Bellum?
3. Does your leader consider the current humanitarian crisis in South Sudan sufficient grounds for military intervention? Could it lead to long-term stability or could it risk exacerbating the conflict?

⁵ **Sovereignty:** The full right and power of a state to govern itself without any outside interference. It means that a government has authority over its internal affairs and other states are expected to respect its independence.



4. What other conditions would your leader require to be met before supporting military intervention in South Sudan?
5. What other alternatives to military intervention does your leader support to resolve the South Sudan conflict?
6. Does your leader consider frameworks beyond Jus ad Bellum, such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P) when assessing the legitimacy of military intervention in South Sudan?
7. How should the upholding of South Sudan's sovereignty be weighted against the international community's duty to protect vulnerable populations?

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Figure 2: Le Monde with AFP. (2025, May 3). *Doctors Without Borders says South Sudan hospital bombed*. Le Monde.
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Topic 2: Are Human Rights Universal or Culturally Relative?

I. History/Context

Long before human rights as a defined concept existed, certain civilizations included codes and frameworks for rules on justice, morality, dignity, and attributions of each individual within their society. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1754 BCE) was one of the first written laws based on the idea of punishment due to punishable behaviour and the attributions a person is entitled to. While these were not nearly universal and only applied at a local level, they were one of the first attempts to define and limit power and authority.



Figure 1: The Code of Hammurabi (Sarr, 2012)

Similarly, the Edicts of Ashoka were a set of texts created by Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire in India in the third century. Centuries before contemporary frameworks were developed, these edicts, which were inscribed on rocks and pillars throughout the



Figure 2: Inscription on Ashoka pillar (Standage, 2025)

empire, included one of the earliest known accounts of a ruler advocating for principles. They are closely tied to what we now understand as human rights, but within their cultural and periodical context. These first introduced the concepts of non-violence, religious tolerance, moral and ethical behaviour, and welfare of the people, among others.

Religion also provided early frameworks for what is now defined as human rights. The Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) first introduced the idea that all humans were created in the image of God, and therefore suggested a form of inherent worth, this was radical in the context of ancient Near Eastern societies, where status was typically only accessed by kings or elites, as they were the only ones considered worthy of divine status. In Islam, the *Charter of Medina* (622 CE) outlined principles of mutual rights

and responsibilities between Muslims, Jews, and other tribes in the early Islamic state. By the early modern period, religious thinkers began to reinterpret these traditions with growing ideas about universal rights. During the Abolitionist movement, for instance, Christian activists used the *imago Dei* (humans being created in the image of God) principle to argue against slavery, while Jewish humanists opted for prophetic calls for justice to advocate for civil rights.

Modernisation of human rights

The modern concept of human rights began to be formed during the age of enlightenment, around the 17th-18th centuries, which was a period characterized by a shift towards critical and reasoned thinking, science and individualism. Philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant first developed theories of “natural rights” that influenced political thought. John Locke argued that all humans are born with natural rights to life, liberty and property, and that these rights are inherent and universal, therefore not granted by governments, but rather protected by them. In his view, people form governments through a social contract to protect their rights, and if a government fails to do so, citizens have the right to rebel.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in contrast, believed that freedom was not just individual but found in collective participation: in his work “The Social Contract” he introduced the idea of the general will, which said that laws should reflect the common interest of the people. True freedom, for Rousseau, means obeying laws one has a hand in creating, but he also criticized inequality and argued that private property led to social injustice.

Finally, Immanuel Kant focused on moral philosophy; he claimed that all people possess inherent dignity and must be treated as such. His concept of the categorical imperative (acting only according to principles that could be universalized) supports the idea of rights as moral duties.

These philosophers’ ideas, and particularly those of Locke, were used in the American and French Revolutions.

The American Declaration of Independence marked a major shift in how people understood political authority. It was issued by the thirteen American colonies as they fought against the British, and the document declared that all individuals have “Unalienable Rights,” which include “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” It clearly stated that governments get their legitimacy from the consent of the governed, not from divine rights or inherent power. This declaration was revolutionary because it defined



rights as inherent to all human beings, instead of privileges granted by rulers, who were then considered superior to the population. In doing this, it offered a moral and philosophical basis for fighting against tyranny and helped develop the idea of human rights as political entitlements based on human dignity.

However, the Declaration also had significant limitations. While it proclaimed equality, it excluded entire groups of people. Women, enslaved Africans, and Indigenous peoples were not included in the political community it addressed, therefore, the phrase “all men are created equal” was narrowly interpreted to be white, land-owning men. Despite these contradictions, the principles in the document laid the foundation for future claims to rights.



Figure 3: Liberty leading the people - Delacroix 1830 (Zelazko, 2018)

Similarly, the French Declaration of Independence also provides an early basis for human rights. Issued after the French Revolution, it stated that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights”, listed rights such as liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression, and proclaimed the rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and equality before the law. The Declaration significantly altered the dynamic between the state and the individuals living in it. It maintained that laws must represent the collective interest of people, and that sovereignty belongs to the nation, not only to the rulers. This marked a significant departure from theocratic and monarchical governance and affirmed

that the body of citizens, not kings or divine authority, is the source of legitimacy. As a result, the Declaration formed the ideological basis of contemporary secular democracy.

However, the French Declaration was not widely applied, just like its American equivalent - women and racially profiled individuals were not included, and it only pertained to men. Thus, early criticisms were prompted by the fact that it suggested universal application but instead was of selective application, this criticism most notably came from Olympe de Gouges, who responded with her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen (1791), demanding full equality for women.

20th Century and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

During the 20th century, some of the most violent episodes of modern human history occurred. The devastation of World War I had already revealed the destructive capacity of modern warfare, and the consequences of extreme nationalism and imperial competition. However, it was World War II, with its unprecedented scale of destruction - the Holocaust and the use of nuclear weapons - that truly pushed the international community to create a global framework for the protection of human rights.

In 1945, in the aftermath of WWII, the United Nations (UN) was established with the primary goals of maintaining international peace and security, promoting development, and protecting human rights. The UN Charter, signed in San Francisco, included several references to human rights, yet the Charter did not define specific rights or mechanisms for their protection, and later the Commission on Human Rights, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, was created. The commission's goal was to draft a document that would articulate a common standard of human rights for all people, regardless of race, nationality, religion or culture. After two years of debate and negotiation, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948, in Paris, with 48 countries voting in favour, none against, and eight abstentions (including the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa) (Oxford, N.D).

The UDHR was revolutionary for numerous reasons. Firstly, it was the first international document to create a universal set of rights that were not dependent on nationality, religion or social class. Secondly, while it was not legally binding, it established a moral and normative framework that influenced the development of binding international treaties such as the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1966, forming the basis of what is now known as the International Bill of Human Rights.



The Declaration also inspired national constitutions (not necessarily in a positive way, which will be explained later), post-colonial legal systems, and regional human rights instruments, such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The UDHR helped internationalize the notion that human rights are the concern of all, and that state sovereignty does not excuse rights violations.

As stated above, the impact the UDHR had on the international community was not completely beneficial. Yes, it laid the groundwork for human rights, but it also raised questions on its universality, with some claiming it to be culturally relative.

Cultural relativism is defined as the belief that moral values and (in this specific context) human rights should be understood within the context of a specific culture, rather than imposed as universally applicable norms. According to this view, what is considered a “right” in one society may not carry the same meaning in another. This became particularly evident during the drafting of the UDHR, as many non-Western states questioned the extent to which the document genuinely reflected a diversity of cultural and political perspectives.

For example, the emphasis on individual liberty, property rights, and secularism reflected western intellectual traditions and did not necessarily align with collectivist or perhaps spiritual values found in many African, Asian or indigenous cultures. Moreover, critics pointed out that several major cultural and political perspectives were neglected in the process of drafting the UDHR. Predominantly Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia abstained, particularly denying articles on freedom of religion and equality within marriage. Soviet bloc countries, while supporting economic and social rights, viewed the document’s protections of political freedom and private property as too capitalist. Since South Africa was under apartheid, it also abstained, unwilling to approve racial equality.

This ideological division deepened during the Cold War, leading to the division of human rights into two tracks, civil-political rights (endorsed by the West) and economic-social rights (endorsed by the Global South and socialist states).

In the decades following its adoption, debates over the universality versus cultural relativity of the UDHR continued. Some nations began drafting regional human rights documents to address their own values and challenges, a prime example being the [Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam](#), and the [Bangkok Declaration](#). These documents sought to express human rights from non-Western perspectives, while also reaffirming the universality of core principles such as dignity and justice.



II. Current Situation

In the contemporary world, the complexity of human rights has increased due to the growing multifaceted character of the concept. This has subsequently increased the debate on whether they should be regarded as universal, or if they should be considered within the context of the country in which they are being applied.

The original framework set by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 is still a reference point, but its implementation and interpretation is different in different parts of the world. For instance, in global spaces like the UN Human Rights Council, countries including China, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iran frequently argue that the human rights system imposes Western values, particularly when it comes to political rights, individual freedoms or gender equality. These governments claim that their cultural traditions must guide how rights are enforced within their own borders, and that the universality promoted by the West fails to account for differences in values; such claims are increasingly reflected in national legislation and in the rejection of international rulings or recommendations.

For example, China continues to defend its treatment of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang (which clearly violates several articles of the UDHR) painting it as part of a campaign rooted in national security and cultural integration. Despite global scrutiny and detailed reports from UN bodies about human rights violations, the Chinese government maintains that its policies are justified by its own legal and cultural standards, and that external critiques are politically motivated. Similarly, countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia have rejected policies of international human rights law related to freedom of religion, women's rights and sexual orientation, arguing that these contradict Islamic principles. For example, when Saudi Arabia ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it included a reservation stating that the Kingdom is "not under obligation to observe the contradictory terms of the Convention" where they conflict with Islamic law (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). Saudi Arabia's support for the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam further shows its endorsement of a culturally relativist view that aligns rights with Sharia rather than international legal norms.

Approval of cultural relativism is not limited to authoritarian regimes, and democracies such as India have, in recent years, pushed back against international scrutiny over internal matters such as the treatment of minorities in Kashmir, or the use of internet shutdowns during civil unrest. In defending these practices, the Indian government has said that criticism is a violation of its sovereignty and unlawful interference by bodies that do not fully understand India's legal system or cultural complexities. These types of





Figure 4: Protests against brutality towards ethnic minorities in Kashmir (Ali & Dieterich, 2022)

responses show a broader trend in which governments use relativist arguments to shield themselves from international accountability, particularly when they feel that criticism reflects bias or fails to appreciate local context.

Despite the reluctance of non-western nations to adopt these principles, many social movements around the world continue to use universal human rights within their movements. Activists around

the world and particularly in vulnerable populations often appropriate universal norms to demand change in their own societies, even when their governments reject those norms. In Iran, for example, the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 made allusion to the rights to life, bodily autonomy and freedom of expression, drawn from international human rights law, and used by feminist movements to stop or challenge compulsory veiling and broader gender inequality. In Nigeria, the End SARS movement against police brutality also included claims to universal rights such as dignity and protection from arbitrary violence. In these cases, individuals who belong to communities often labeled as culturally distinct use universal principles to critique domestic oppression, suggesting that human rights frameworks can, and perhaps should, be both global and local.

The Digital Era

Beyond regional politics, technological developments have also introduced new complexities to the debate. In an era of mass surveillance and the growth of artificial intelligence, governments around the world are defining and, in some cases, restricting digital rights in different ways. In China, the state's use of digital surveillance to monitor citizens is defended as a tool for maintaining harmony and preventing instability. Conversely, the European Union has passed legislation like the GDPR that emphasizes data privacy as a fundamental human right. The divergence in how digital rights are understood and implemented has led to calls for new global standards, but agreement remains elusive. The fragmentation of cyberspace reflects a deeper fragmentation in the global consensus on rights.

More recently, the EU adopted the AI Act, the world's first legal framework to regulate artificial intelligence, categorizing systems based on risk levels and banning certain applications aspects such as real-time biometric surveillance in public spaces. Although regulations like these are becoming increasingly popular, AI has made the debate over whether human rights are universal or culturally relative more complex. Unlike older technologies, AI is built using data from all over the world, but it's often developed in one place (typically Western nations) and applied in another. This means that the values built into AI systems can reflect certain cultural assumptions, while ignoring others. As highlighted by Global Voices (2025), AI systems are often built using the labour, data, and cultural narratives of the Global South, while the benefits and decision-making power is prominently in the North. This phenomenon raises serious concerns about the claim that AI can or should operate under universal human rights standards.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that if AI simply replicates and scales existing global power dynamics, then universalist claims about fairness and equality will become less effective than ever.

Is universality possible, then?

As global power structures shift and new technologies change traditional boundaries, the questions of this debate grow more pressing: who decides what "rights" mean, and whose realities are reflected in those decisions? The ways in which societies and governments choose to define and defend rights continue to shape the principles that will guide justice tomorrow. Delegates are encouraged to consider not only the legal and cultural frameworks that influence the interpretation of rights, but also the broader ethical and political implications that privilege certain values over others would have, and question whether this is our current panorama as a society.

III. Key points of the debate

- How human rights are protected within sovereign boundaries
- Cultural relativism in religious and extremist legal systems
- Digital rights and their contested universality
- The national impact of the local utilization of universal human rights in non-western countries
- The future of universality and the possibility of a global framework



IV. Guiding questions

1. Is the UDHR truly universal, considering it was developed within a post-World War II context dominated mainly by Western powers?
2. If cultural relativism were widely accepted as a principle, how might this affect the global response to human rights violations in authoritarian nations?
3. Does your leader view cultural relativism as a genuine argument for justifying rights-violating practices, or as an excuse?
4. Does your leader believe that it is or should be possible to achieve a globally accepted framework for human rights that accommodates cultural diversity?
5. How does your leader view the responsibility of states under the Responsibility to Protect doctrine when cultural practices result in mass human rights abuses?
6. Is it necessary to redefine human rights to make them more inclusive of non-Western values?

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