



HUMAN RIGHTS VS. “NATURAL RIGHTS”

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Trump administration is working to reframe the concept of human rights, moving from the widely accepted doctrine of universality to what the administration calls “natural rights.” A project of the Christian nationalist movement, this is more than a rhetorical shift in U.S. foreign policy. It signals a dramatic departure from the belief that all rights apply equally to everyone and toward the belief that certain rights can be elevated and others deprioritized.

Though it may sound harmless, the “natural rights” agenda has the potential to reverse protections on which millions have long relied for dignity, safety, and security. Adopting a “natural rights” framework is a sign that the United States is undergoing a transition—from leading the world on human rights accountability to either ignoring or advocating for governments often found to violate international standards.

What are human rights?

Present-day understanding of human rights is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948. Drafted by people from diverse legal, cultural, geographic and religious backgrounds, the Universal Declaration established that fundamental human rights must be universally enjoyed and protected, and not limited by citizenship, religion, political orientation, race, color, sex or any other trait or characteristic. As U.N. members, nations affirm that all people possess “inherent dignity and... equal and inalienable rights.”

Since World War II, these principles have been codified in binding treaties and implemented through U.S. diplomacy in foreign aid, sanctions, oversight, and reporting. Since 1948, the United States has acted as a leader, holding nations to account for violating the Universal Declaration with the explicit understanding that governments cannot pick and choose among them.

While this system is not perfect, its aspirations have advanced participatory government, equal protection under the law, the right to trial, and freedom of assembly, among other rights, for all people over more than 75 years.

WHAT ABOUT FREEDOM OF RELIGION?

While freedom of religion is an essential human right articulated in the Universal Declaration, there is no freedom to impose religious beliefs on others.



Dominican activist Flor Ángel of AJWS grantee Mujeres Sociopolíticas Mamá Tingó, an anti-racist and feminist collective of organizations fighting for equal rights for Black women and girls. Photo by Fran Afonso.

What are “natural rights”?

During the first Trump administration, the “natural rights” doctrine began to take shape through a State Department Commission on Unalienable Rights, which sought to shift how U.S. diplomacy defines and defends human rights worldwide. Led by then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Commission cited American founding documents for inspiration, selectively, ranking some rights, namely religious freedom and property, as more fundamental than others.

In the wake of more recent changes to U.S. foreign policy, the definition has expanded to include only rights that come from “man’s nature and dignity,” not those affirmed and protected by agreements like the Universal Declaration or by lawmaking. Arguing that some rights are politically motivated or socially constructed, this rhetoric holds that only “God-given rights” like religious freedom merit monitoring and legal protection.

The doctrine of “natural rights” asserts that individual rights supersede those of any group, which absolves governments from their responsibility to ensure equal access for all. It also offers that national values can be taken into consideration when human rights are considered, which may yield policies that are arbitrary or deliberately target anyone out of favor with the government.

Since the U.S. government has embraced this ideology, human rights reporting has been diluted and invalidated, compounding danger for human rights activists around the world.

Differences in practice, distilled

UNDER THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS MODEL:

- » All rights apply equally to all people.
- » Rights are indivisible and mutually reinforcing.
- » Governments must adhere to shared international standards.

UNDER THE “NATURAL RIGHTS” MODEL:

- » Rights are based on theological and ideological criteria.
- » Governments select which rights merit protection.
- » Accountability may be applied capriciously due to national sovereignty.

Why this matters for AJWS

The shift toward “natural rights” threatens AJWS partners by narrowing which rights the U.S. is willing to recognize and protect. As U.S. foreign policy becomes increasingly selective, governments that violate the rights of marginalized communities may no longer be held accountable. Foreign assistance may be denied to some governments who do not adhere to this new standard.

This marks a significant change. In the past, AJWS partners have reported that U.S. embassy engagement and broader U.S. foreign policies have contributed to major movement success. In countries where rights violations are codified in law, diminished U.S. pressure may heighten risks to activists and the communities they serve. If the U.S. chooses to export this constricted definition of rights, the harms that might come to our partners could be even more dramatic.

Inspired by Judaism and its belief in *b'tzelem Elohim*, the idea that all people are created in the image of the Divine, AJWS understands human rights as the highest—and only acceptable—standard of existence for all people. When these rights are threatened, everyone suffers.

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