

RIGHTS REVEALED

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ESCALATION OF AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD PART 1

AN HR EDUCATIONAL EXPLAINER

This guide is for anyone who wants to understand how the tactics of authoritarian power can silence, divide or control. It is not about which political affiliation or government system is best. It is about understanding how fear and division are used politically, how narratives are manipulated to justify authoritarian practices, and how we can start to question the systems and stories that allow injustice to grow.



UNPACKING AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES OF FEAR, REPRESSION AND CONTROL

INTRODUCTION

Across the world, many people are sensing deep changes in their societies. Communities are experiencing growing divisions or instability. People feel unsafe because of who they are, where they come from, or what they believe. Others feel uncertainty, fear or frustration over what lies ahead. Many feel their voices are not heard and their fears not addressed, leaving them disconnected from decisions that shape their lives.

In such times, it becomes easier for leaders and other powerful people to instil fear and exploit difference, to drive a wedge between communities and protect their own interests. They often blame already marginalized groups for society's problems. They may tell us “they are the problem” or “we need to take back control”. This scaremongering perpetuates fear, sows division and exploits a rhetoric of “us versus them”.

These narratives of fear are a powerful tool. They allow those in power to justify extreme measures, which they use to restrict freedoms, rewrite the rules, undermine

institutions, evade accountability and concentrate power and control in the hands of the privileged. Over time, these actions erode the systems designed to protect everyone and make it more difficult to hold those in power accountable.

These are not random acts. Across history and in many places today, governments and leaders use **authoritarian practices** to consolidate power. These include silencing critics, scapegoating certain groups, undermining courts and media, controlling information, and weakening public institutions. Often, such practices are introduced under the guise of “restoring order” or “protecting the nation”. This is how the erosion of human rights begins – sometimes quietly, sometimes openly.

DID YOU KNOW?

HUMAN RIGHTS are the fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to every individual, regardless of nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, or any other status. They are inherent to all human beings and are based on principles of dignity, equality, and respect. All governments have an obligation to respect human rights under the rule of law.

THE RULE OF LAW means no one is above the law, including government institutions and officials, and that everyone is treated equally and held accountable to the same laws through clear and fair processes in an independent judiciary. These pre-requisites are essential to guarantee human rights for all.

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR), adopted in 1948, was the first comprehensive and globally agreed statement of human rights. Since then, many other human rights treaties have been adopted, creating legal obligations for states to respect, protect, and fulfil these rights.

THE UNITED NATIONS (UN) is central to promoting human rights and the conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from human rights treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, through its Charter, specialized agencies, and independent human rights mechanisms. Multilateral efforts are essential for addressing human rights challenges and ensuring that states are held accountable.

**Nothing
strengthens
authority
as much as
silence**

Leonardo da Vinci



At first, authoritarian practices may seem to affect only a few. But as human rights safeguards are weakened, everyone's freedoms are diminished. People become afraid to speak out, and information is manipulated to benefit only some sections of society. Rights that once felt secure can quickly disappear.

Human rights and the freedoms they guarantee are not privileges or political talking points. They are the foundations of peaceful and fair societies. From the right to education and equality, to the right to seek asylum and be treated with dignity, **these are rights for everyone, everywhere**, not just for those in power or those who fit the so-called "norm". No matter who we are or where we live, human rights are universal and should always be upheld. **Human rights are not optional.**

To understand why this matters, we need to briefly return to the foundation of human rights. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, most states have committed (at least in theory) to upholding human rights for all. These include the right to express ourselves, to come together (and protest) peacefully, to take part in public life, and to hold those in power accountable.

Yet today, we see growing disrespect and disregard for these universal principles, with a clear intention of concentrating power and evading accountability. Some governments cherry-pick which rights they uphold and who they apply to. They act as though they are above the law, withdrawing from international agreements, disregarding the United Nations system, and weakening the international rule of law.

THE POWER OF WORDS: BREAKING DOWN FEAR-BASED STORIES THAT SHAPE WHAT WE BELIEVE

WORDS DON'T JUST DESCRIBE REALITY; THEY CREATE AND SHAPE IT. WORDS CAN BE USED TO FORGE UNITY OR DIVISION.

When those in power use words to shape stories and messages about your community or your country, they will present them to you as common sense or facts. But are they? These stories are rarely neutral. They can reflect biases, political agendas, or deliberate attempts to influence how we perceive reality and what people believe. They are narratives carefully designed by political leaders, powerful corporate figures, religious institutions, mainstream media (such as newspapers, television and radio), internet outlets, social media platforms and other powerful voices.

Take messages like: “our country is being invaded by migrants”, “our traditional values are under attack”, or “we are at war against dangerous ideas”. These are all conflict and war metaphors: they turn difference into a battle. It creates fear and urgency, making people feel they’re being attacked – not by an army, but by neighbours, migrants, or activists. This type of language, these messages, have intention: to divide communities and to promote one narrow version of society. Through fear, they create the foundations for authoritarian practices to more easily protect the interests of those in power and take away the rights of critical voices and marginalized groups.

WAR

ATTACK

VALUES

DANGEROUS

INVADE

MINI EXERCISE: SPOT THE NARRATIVE

Take a moment to think of a story or message you’ve seen in the news, on social media, or heard in your community that made you feel unsure, angry, or afraid.

- ▶ What was the message?
- ▶ What do you think it was really saying?
- ▶ Who benefits from that story, and who might be harmed?
- ▶ Is there a different way to look at the situation using a human rights lens?
- ▶ What could you say next time you hear these types of messages?

Even one conversation, one question, or one counter-narrative can shift how people think. That’s how change starts.



WHO GAINS FROM THIS? BLAME, SCARCITY AND ZERO-SUM STORIES

“Us versus them” narratives are a tactic. They build public support for exclusion, justifying discriminatory laws to “defend the nation”, and enabling expansions of police powers or even mass deportations. Leaders and governments use them to restrict human rights, such as banning student protests on campus, censoring education, cracking down on freedom of expression, restricting protection to certain groups, or access to housing and healthcare, or ignoring legal processes.

What they are really achieving, by doing this, is:

- ▶ Deflecting responsibility for underlying problems like poverty or housing shortages, and how power is distributed;
- ▶ Redirecting fear and frustration toward marginalized groups, instead of unjust systems and failed policies;
- ▶ Building support for a concentration of power by creating an “enemy” that needs to be stopped; and
- ▶ Undermining institutions that check on executive power and are crucial for accountability.

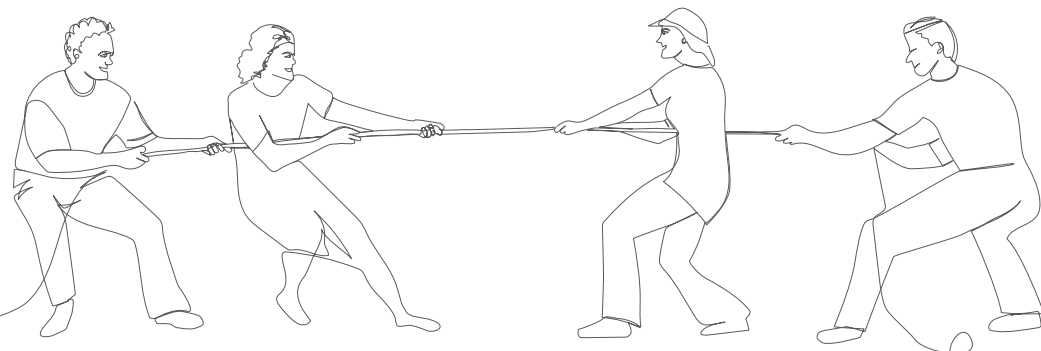
We’re often told that there simply aren’t enough resources to go around, not enough jobs, housing and healthcare, and that if some groups gain rights, recognition or resources, others must lose. This story shows up in many forms: gender equality (“men are being left behind”), LGBTIQ+ rights (“traditional families are under attack”), racial diversity (“white lives matter too”), and refugee rights (“they are draining the system”).

Scarcity becomes the story to justify exclusion, repression, and rights rollbacks. Instead of asking how we can distribute resources more fairly, we are told to fear those who already have the least. The contributions of the poorest and other communities, such as migrants, are often hidden or denied. These often-repeated stories lead us to believe in scarcity.

But that’s not the full story. Scarcity alone doesn’t create injustice: political choices do.

The idea that one group’s gain must come at another’s expense is called “zero-sum thinking”. And when that story spreads, it shuts down real solutions. It turns neighbours and communities against each other. And it protects those who benefit most from the way things are.

That’s why it is important to pause and reflect on the underlying message: What is really being said here? Who benefits from this story, and who might be harmed by it? How might this pave the way for the escalation of authoritarian practices that result in human rights violations? Let’s look at some real examples of fear-based messages and deconstruct these together.



CARD 1: "THEY ARE NOT WELCOME HERE, BECAUSE ..."

"THEY DON'T BELONG HERE"

"THEY CAME HERE ILLEGALLY"

"THEY ARE VIOLENT MEMBERS OF CRIMINAL GANGS"

"THEY DON'T SHARE OUR VALUES OR RESPECT OUR TRADITIONS"

"THEY COME TO STEAL OUR JOBS"

"THEY'RE ABUSING THE SYSTEM"

"THEY WANT TO CHANGE OUR CULTURE"

- ▶ Have you ever seen or experienced a version of this message? Who was it directed towards?
- ▶ How did it affect you or others?
- ▶ What deeper fears or beliefs does this story rely on? Who gains from this?
- ▶ How could you reframe this story using a human rights lens?

LET'S UNPACK!

This message often targets anyone perceived as "different", "foreign", or a threat to dominant norms of "success": refugees and asylum seekers, migrants, racialized and ethnic minority communities, LGBTIQ+ people, religious minorities, people living in poverty, those living with disabilities or mental health conditions, or with a criminal record.

These groups differ in status, identity and lived experience, but the tactic is the same: to cast them as "others" who don't belong, who can be scapegoated for any sort of problems, and whose rights, safety, or humanity can be questioned. At its core, this story suggests that belonging, and by extension safety and human rights, are a conditional privilege. It implies that some people are "real" members of the community, while others can be cast out. It tells us that rights are earned, not inherent, and that those in power get to decide who counts and who doesn't.

LET'S LOOK AT SOME MORE EXAMPLES AND ASK WHAT IS ...

TRUE FALSE

1. Someone is "an illegal" if they cross a border without documents.
2. Ethnic and racialized minorities are more likely to commit violent crimes.
3. Blaming migrants is a way for governments to avoid accountability for harmful policy.
4. Cultural diversity threatens national unity and social cohesion.
5. Everyone has equal rights to safety and protection

DID YOU GUESS CORRECTLY?

1. Seeking asylum is a human right, even if someone enters a country without permission or documents. This is clearly protected under international law (Article 31 of the 1951 Refugee Convention). Irregular migration (for other reasons, like work or family) can break administrative rules and be considered unlawful under national immigration laws. But people are never illegal, only their migration status might sometimes be. And being undocumented does not equal being a criminal. It's a civil (administrative) issue in most countries, not a crime. This statement is **false**.
2. This is a racist stereotype and is therefore **false**. Studies show no link between race, ethnicity and criminality. Racialized communities are often over-policed, face harsher sentencing, and are more likely to be criminalized for minor offences.

3. An often-heard argument is that “migrants come to take advantage and leave us with nothing”. This is a common political strategy. But in most countries, migrants contribute more to the economy through taxes and essential labour than they receive in support. Access to health, housing, jobs, education, or social welfare are shaped by government policies. When those systems fail, we see leaders shifting blame onto migrants instead of addressing structural issues. So this statement is **true**. Blaming migrants distracts from the root causes and lets those in power avoid responsibility. It divides people who are all affected by the same failing systems.

4. Dominant culture often reflects the values of those in power, not what is “authentic” or neutral. Cultural practices matter, but they must evolve when they harm, exclude or discriminate others. No tradition justifies violating human rights. Culture is not static or owned by one group. It has always evolved, and will keep evolving through contact, migration and exchange. So this statement is **false**. Most people want to live in coexistence, not impose on others. Everyone has the right to their own identity, culture, and beliefs, and to live in dignity and safety wherever they are. Human rights protect everyone's freedom, including freedom of belief, freedom from discrimination *and* freedom from coercion.



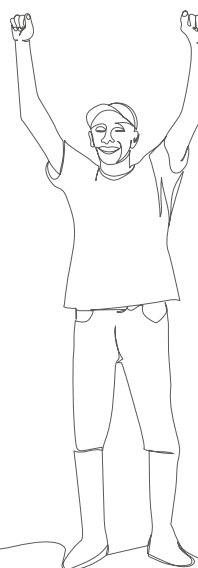
DID YOU GUESS CORRECTLY?

5. Human rights equally apply to everyone: Not just the accepted few or those belonging to the dominant group. So, this statement is **true**. No matter their religion, background, identity or beliefs, no group is inherently a threat to “our way of life”. That’s a political narrative, not a fact. Human rights are not conditional. People cannot be excluded from protection because they are homeless, undocumented, poor, racialized, criminalized, or labelled a “threat”. When authorities target these groups through abusive policing, arbitrary detention or policies that remove them from public view, it can result in serious rights violations, including enforced disappearance. These practices must be exposed and challenged, not ignored.

These narratives are a tactic of exclusion, and depending on the group being targeted, the use of them violates or threatens various rights, including:

- ▶ The right to equality and non-discrimination;
- ▶ The right to a nationality;
- ▶ The right to seek asylum and protection;
- ▶ Cultural rights and the right to take part in public life;
- ▶ The right to privacy and family life;
- ▶ The right to freedom of religion and belief.

No matter where we are born, what language we speak, what we look like, or who we are, we all have the right to equality and non-discrimination and to be treated with dignity. No one can be excluded just because they don’t match the dominant group’s idea of who belongs. Being different from one another is part of who we are, and it’s protected under international human rights law. Human rights don’t depend on your passport, your religion, your background, or your past. Governments don’t get to choose who deserves rights: They are obligated to uphold them, for everyone.



CARD 2: “THEY’RE INDOCTRINATING OUR CHILDREN, BECAUSE ...”

“THEY’RE CONFUSING THEM ABOUT GENDER”

“THEY’RE SEXUALISING KIDS”

“THEY’RE ATTACKING FAMILY VALUES”

“THEY’RE SPREADING DANGEROUS IDEAS”

“RACISM IS SOMETHING OF THE PAST”

“THEY WANT TO ERASE OUR TRADITIONS”

- ▶ Have you seen or heard this message? Who says it, and why?
- ▶ Who is being portrayed as a threat to children?
- ▶ What are the deeper fears or values being appealed to?
- ▶ How could you reframe this story using a human rights lens?

This message often targets educators, LGBTIQ+ people, youth activists, gender and racial justice advocates, human rights defenders, and anyone teaching or speaking about identity, equality or critical thinking.

The message claims to protect children, which is essential when they are exposed to hate, violence or exploitation. But in many contexts, “protecting children” is used to silence different beliefs, erase identities and restrict rights. It suggests that only one worldview is acceptable or true, and both the present and the future must reflect “us”. Therefore, “we” must control what and how children learn, think, and become.



LET’S LOOK AT SOME MORE EXAMPLES AND ASK WHAT IS ...

TRUE FALSE

1. *Schools shouldn’t be political. Topics like racism, colonialism or human rights don’t belong in the classroom.*
2. *Gender identity and sexual orientation are not problems to solve.*
3. *Comprehensive sexual education encourages children to become sexually active at a younger age.*
4. *Our traditional family values are unchangeable, nothing can interfere with them.*

DID YOU GUESS CORRECTLY?

1. Understanding structural inequality, power and rights is essential to building informed, responsible individuals. Education is never neutral. Banning these topics doesn't depoliticize learning; it reinforces dominant power structures. So, this statement is **false**. Fear-based rhetoric like this has led to curriculum bans, book censorship, criminalisation of teachers and parents, and increased hostility against LGBTIQ+ individuals and anti-racist educators. But the right to education includes the right to learn about justice, equality and history from multiple perspectives. It helps children grow into responsible, respectful and open-minded people.

2. Diversity isn't something to tolerate, it's something to respect, so this statement is **true**. LGBTIQ+ identities are not problems to be corrected or issues to be silenced. The idea that people must be "normalized" to fit into social norms violates the right to self-expression, safety, and dignity. That's not unity, that's repression. Everyone has the right to express their identity and live free from discrimination. Education that recognizes diverse identities helps foster inclusion, protection and safety for everyone.

3. Studies show that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) delays sexual activity and increases safety.¹ So, this statement is **false**. Age-appropriate, science-based CSE teaches consent, boundaries and respect. It helps prevent abuse, sexually transmittable diseases and unwanted pregnancies. It doesn't promote sexual behaviour; it promotes responsible decisions.

¹ Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education – ScienceDirect

4. Around the world, "family values" have been politicized to restrict rights, control expression, and suppress dissent. Appeals to tradition are often used to block progress on gender equality, censor education, and silence those who challenge dominant norms. But human rights are not subject to tradition. They apply equally in public and private life, including within families. No belief system or cultural ideal can be used to justify authoritarian control, exclusion or the denial of rights. So this statement is **false**. Tradition may guide personal values, but it cannot override legal obligations to protect everyone's freedom, dignity and equality.



HUMAN RIGHTS AT RISK

This tactic for controlling knowledge and suppressing diversity and differences, puts the following human rights at risk:

- ▶ The right to education that fosters respect, truth, and inclusion;
- ▶ The right to equality and non-discrimination;
- ▶ Freedom of expression;
- ▶ Freedom to access information;
- ▶ Cultural rights and academic freedom.

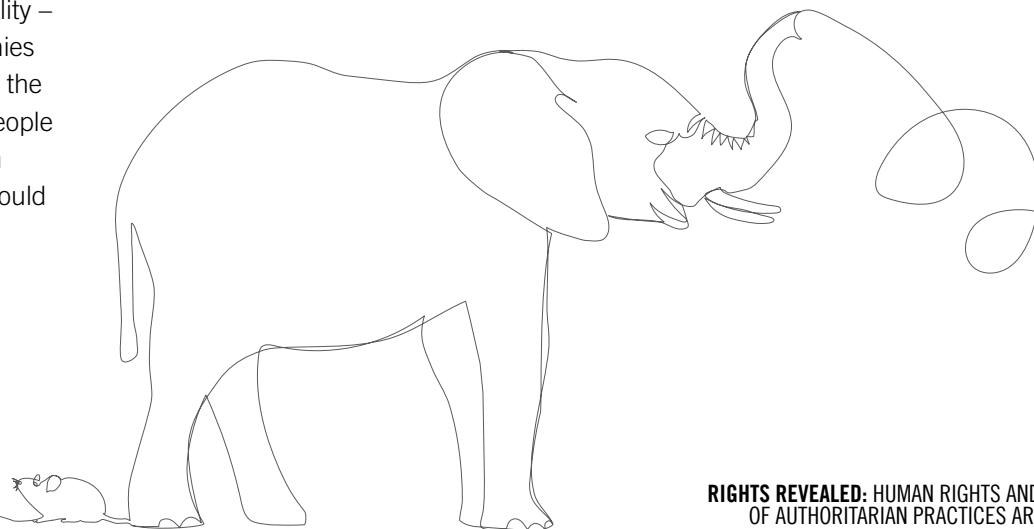
Every young person has the right to learn, question, and understand the world around them, in all its differences. Censoring books, restricting curricula, or banning discussions about race, gender, and sexuality – often under the guise of “protecting children” – denies children the tools to think critically and engage with the world. True protection means empowering young people with knowledge, fostering respect and helping them grow into thoughtful, informed adults. Education should open minds, not close them.

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality

Desmond Tutu

TAKE AWAY:

Authoritarian practices don't always come from someone wearing a uniform. Sometimes it speaks calmly, using the language of “patriotism”, “sovereignty”, or “family values” as cover. Fear-based narratives don't only shape opinions, they lay the groundwork for exclusion, repression, and abuse. When leaders frame diversity, protest or education as threats, they justify censorship, surveillance and crackdowns in the name of safety, traditional values or national unity. These messages and practices undermine the rule of law, set the ground for human rights crackdowns and sabotage the international system that nations have built together through their membership of the United Nations and the signing of international human rights conventions.



BEHIND THE HEADLINES: DOES CHAOS, POWER, AND PRIVILEGE SERVE SOMEONE'S PURPOSE?

When people are afraid or confused, those in power often say: “Let us handle it, trust us. No time for debate.” But chaos and silence often benefit a few powerful people or sections of society. What we need is to face this fear and confusion with care, instead of handing over more power without question.

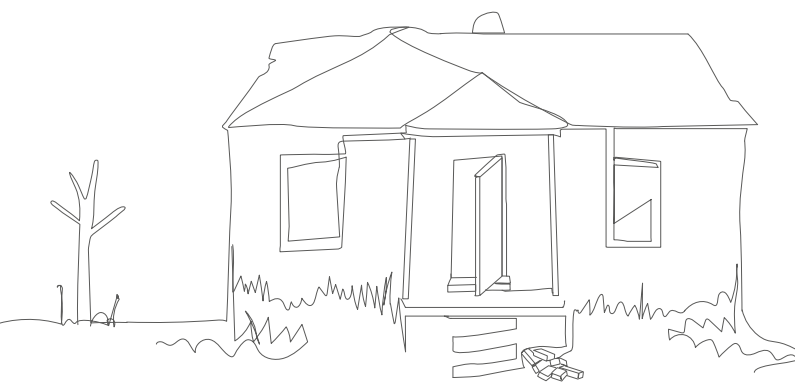
Imagine you live in a beautiful, historic house where the pipes are bursting, the roof is leaking and the walls are cracking. You could blame the rain. But the real problem? The foundation is crumbling. That's what many of today's crises are like. The story we are told is to blame the rain, but that can be a politically convenient distraction.

SOME OF THE AREAS WHERE AUTHORITARIAN NARRATIVES CREATE DIVISION:

- ▶ economic uncertainty, instability;
- ▶ political polarization;
- ▶ widespread discrimination, racism, xenophobia;
- ▶ public health crises;
- ▶ cultural identities or exclusivist understandings of “morals”;
- ▶ displacement and migration, climate change;
- ▶ violence against minorities, women, and LGBTIQ+ people; People with Disabilities;
- ▶ technological disruption and misinformation;
- ▶ armed conflicts and genocide.

Today, across many countries, the issues that are shaking our societies (see box) may seem sudden, but they're built on long histories and deep injustices. You might think, “*we didn't build this house, it's not my fault*”, but we do live in it now. And as much as we're just looking for a safe space to exist, we're also a part of what makes the house a home. We can keep patching the leaks and blame the rain, or we can strengthen its foundation.

The good thing is, we don't have to do that alone. Around us, **civil society** (community groups, independent media, cultural spaces, trade unions, non-governmental organisations, and networks of mutual care and aid) act like the beams and scaffolding that keep the house standing. They help protect our space to speak up, care for one another, and rebuild together. When these supports are weakened or removed, the whole structure becomes more fragile. A flourishing civil society – where people from across communities can access information, engage in dialogue, express dissent or disagreement, and join together to express their views – is key to a healthy society and countering authoritarian narratives and practices (this idea is explored further in the second part of this explainer).



WHO HOLDS POWER, WHOSE NEEDS ARE IGNORED

So, if we want a fairer, safer, and more peaceful society, we must strengthen its foundations – equality, respect, and dignity – instead of just patching the cracks.

To understand what's cracking the foundations of our societies, we need to look at who holds power and whose needs are ignored. Within any given country, a small number of people often control vast wealth and influence. They shape laws, own media, and fund politicians – these same people are often the political leaders of countries or political parties.

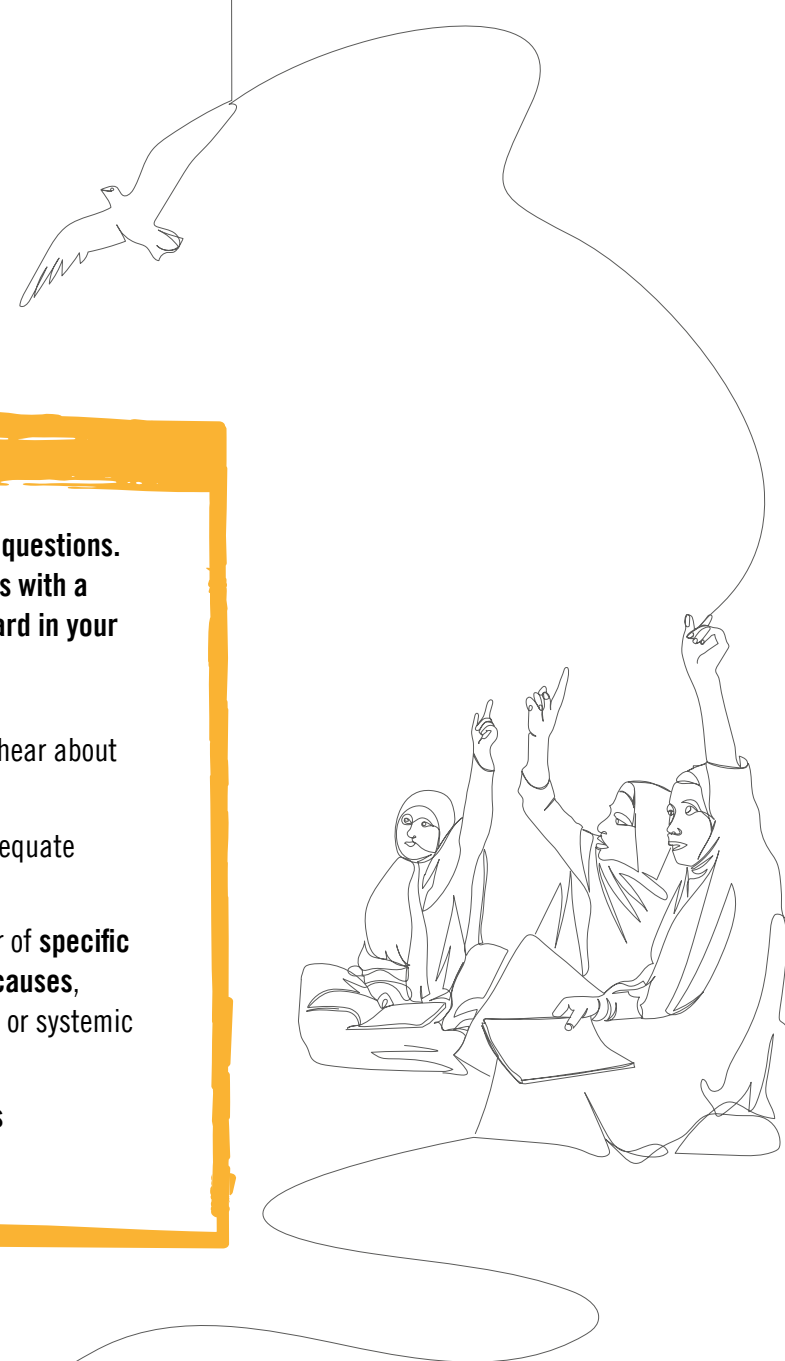
The inequalities within and between countries have been growing over the years. According to research by Oxfam, 45% of global wealth is owned by just the richest 1% of people.² Meanwhile, most people work long hours and still can't pay rent, afford food or access healthcare – all of which are human rights – as 44% of the world's population live below the poverty line (as calculated by the World Bank). Whose needs get prioritized? Who gets to rest, and who is told to “work harder”? And who in our societies are often blamed for the problems?

² Oxfam International, Takers Not Makers: The unjust poverty and unearned wealth of colonialism, 20 January 2025, https://issuu.com/oxfamca/docs/english_davos_full_report_2025_unembargo_oca

REFLECT, WRITE AND DISCUSS

Take a few minutes to consider the following questions. Write brief responses (for yourself, or discuss with a friend) based on what you've observed or heard in your country, community or media feeds:

- ▶ What kinds of **stories** or narratives do you hear about the causes of housing shortages?
- ▶ Who tends to get **blamed** for the lack of adequate housing? Why do you think that is?
- ▶ Do these explanations reflect the behaviour of **specific communities**, or do they consider **deeper causes**, such as policy decisions, funding priorities or systemic discrimination?
- ▶ Do these stories reflect the **responsibilities of government**, or distract from it?



WHOSE INTERESTS

WHAT REFLECTIONS DID YOU HAVE?

This shouldn't be about holding individuals responsible for the world they were born into. It's about asking: What systems cause the same people to suffer, again and again?

We need to ask: Who really benefits from these systems? Whose interests are prioritized and whose voices remain unheard or are deliberately silenced? Our society, and the systems we rely on, didn't emerge by chance. They were built by people to serve people *like them*. This has given some groups unearned advantages or privileges, while others were left out of the design and face barriers those systems were never meant to remove.

Instead of addressing the “crumbling house” and fixing the pipes and roof, many governments find it easier to blame “the rain”. They ignore their obligations to deliver adequate housing or other human rights; instead, they use stories of fear and hate to distract and divide. These are clear practices of authoritarian leaders designed to silence dissent or criticism. Their goal: to further concentrate power.

SO WHO GETS TO SHAPE THE FUTURE?

While it's easy to think that power only lives in parliaments or presidential offices, power also lives in corporations and boardrooms, newsrooms, police stations, in algorithms and artificial intelligence tools. The narratives of fear, repression and control are invisibly woven into everyday stories, creating the space for authoritarian practices to expand, undermining human rights and the rule of law.

The more hopeful part of this story is that power also lives in families, in classrooms, in youth groups, and in community kitchens. It lives in songs, speeches and books. The future, and a change for the future, doesn't only come from the top: It can rise from below. And yes, power can feel far away. But it's also shaped every time someone says: “you belong”; “we are a source of strength”; “I have rights and so do you”; or “I stand in solidarity”.



SO WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US?

Across the world, people are facing deep challenges. Inequality, human-induced climate change, armed conflict, and rising costs of living. But instead of solving these problems through care and justice, many governments are responding with crackdowns: silencing dissent, limiting freedoms and blaming the most marginalized.

We live with the systems that we have inherited; systems that were built over time, not by accident, but by people with power. Often shaped by inequality, exclusion and control, they reflect certain choices and interests. But we are not powerless in the face of them. We are part of what keeps the system going, and we are part of what can change the system.

Human rights provide a foundation for a world built on dignity, justice and freedom for all. In a just society, power is not left unchecked. Governments must respect and uphold rights, including for the most marginalized. No one is above the law. The rule of law is what keeps the foundation standing. If human rights are not respected, there is no rule of law. Where there is no rule of law, human rights are not respected.

Understanding how power operates – and how it can be challenged – starts with recognising the stories we are told. Who shapes the message? Whose voices are missing? Who is portrayed as a threat, and why? These messages shape our societies and can be used to justify repression, exclusion, discrimination and even violence. But we can learn to question them. Speaking out, organising, standing in solidarity: these are ways people everywhere are reshaping the future. Not by waiting for change from above, but by claiming our human rights from below.

Because human rights are not conditional. They are fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to everyone. It does not depend on where you were born, what you believe, or who you love. Human rights are for all of us. Full stop.



In the next part of this series, **“HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ESCALATION OF AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD PART 2:**

RESISTING AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES IN DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS”, we’ll explore how these dynamics

translate into concrete warning signs, from censorship and surveillance to enforced disappearances and the criminalisation of protest.

As you navigate the complex realities of fear, control and injustice, remember: Understanding how rights are taken away is the first step in protecting them.

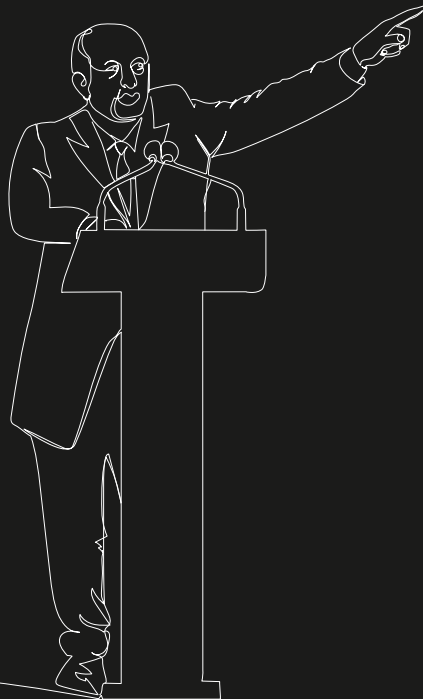
The more clearly we see how power operates, the more effectively we can challenge it when it is misused.

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AI Index: POL 32/0336/2025
Original language: English
amnesty.org



Layout & Design: Off Colour Design
Editorial Support: Claire Mahon