

Contemporary Challenges in Securing Human Rights

edited by Corinne Lennox

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Institute of Commonwealth Studies
School of Advanced Study
University of London
Senate House
Malet Street
London WC1E 7HU

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Foreword

James Manor

In the early 1990s, all but one Master's degree programme on human rights in the world approached the topic from a narrowly legal perspective. They were mostly located in departments or schools of law. They had great virtues, as I had discovered when interacting with the programme at the Harvard Law School during the mid-1980s. But they largely omitted scholars from other disciplines – the social sciences, history, philosophy, etc. – who could offer crucial insights for a rounded understanding of human rights.

With this in mind, I began investigating the possibility of launching a multi-disciplinary Master's programme at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in the University of London where I then taught. The sole exception to those law-based programmes was located not far away, at the University of Essex. But we had one major advantage over Essex. We had a rich array of human rights organisations on our doorstep, in London. Indeed, just one part of London – Islington – contains more headquarters for international rights organisations than does Vienna, Geneva, Paris or quite possibly New York.

That implied that a Master's degree programme in London could benefit enormously if practitioners from these organisations would share their rich experiences with students. So our setting argued not just for a multi-disciplinary approach to *understanding* human rights, but also for a degree programme that paid great attention to the problems and opportunities that arise for practitioners who focus on *securing* human rights. Out of this grew our MA programme in 'Understanding and Securing Human Rights'.

Our idea for such a programme received a warm welcome from Pierre Sané who then presided over the international headquarters of Amnesty International, which was within walking distance of the Institute. He agreed to provide practitioners, free of charge, to explain their work to students. In exchange, the Institute agreed to take on as students, free of charge, practitioners from Amnesty. Other human rights organisations in London – and certain organisations which engaged with rights as part of larger activities (such as the Trades Union Congress) – also agreed to send practitioners for seminars. This enabled us to mount a complete set of weekly seminars with practitioners throughout the academic year.

Several of these organisations were also willing to allow our students to do voluntary work as interns. Those arrangements started small since the numbers of students in the early years were rather limited, but they have blossomed mightily over the years as student numbers have expanded.

Some students, after completing their degrees, managed to find employment in these or other rights organisations. Others have obtained jobs in government agencies around the world, and in international organisations which deal with a broader range of issues, but for whom a background in human rights is highly relevant. At a dinner in Myanmar, in early 2015, I encountered a young woman from the staff of the United Nations Development Programme who offered perceptive assessments of changes in that country. When I asked where she had studied before joining UNDP and she replied that she had done the MA in Understanding and Securing Human Rights at the Institute.

It has attracted many able and committed students over the years. This was true from the start. During the MA's first year, we organised a party at the Institute in the depths of January, mainly as a morale booster amid the short days and the wretched weather. It was attended by Sir Robert Fellowes, a member of the Institute's board and the principal Secretary to the Queen. He was impressed by the idealism and intelligence of the students, and a few days later, they were invited to attend one of the summer garden parties at Buckingham Palace. That has become unworkable in more recent years as student numbers have risen, but the quality of the students has remained high.

I have often been asked why an Institute of *Commonwealth* Studies should have created an MA in human rights. This is actually not at all strange. Consider three things.

First, it was in the Institute that the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative had been established, and when the MA got started, its main office was still within the walls (it later moved its headquarters to New Delhi).

Second, the Commonwealth, as an organisation, was then deepening its commitment to rights and to democratic politics. It was in that era that a Commonwealth Secretary-General led discussions at a Heads of Government Meeting in which the presidents of three member states with illiberal one-party regimes rose to announce, one after another, that they were relaxing constraints and adopting competitive multi-party systems.

Finally, the MA was established in the period when Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa. That carried especially potent meaning for the Institute. For decades, it had run a famous seminar series on southern Africa where leading scholars in the anti-apartheid movement exchanged insights on the way forward. Albie Sachs, a prominent figure in that movement and later a justice on the new South Africa's Constitutional Court, had been in residence – drawing together ideas that went into his country's new Constitution with its strong commitment to rights. And most startlingly, a safe in the Institute library had been the secret repository of Mandela's papers throughout his time

in prison – including the text, in his hand, of his historic speech from the dock in Rivonia. Events in South Africa created a special sense of hope in the Institute which made it seem an appropriate place for an MA in human rights.

Hopes have dimmed somewhat since those days. In 2013, the Commonwealth betrayed its record as a force for human decency when it agreed to hold its Heads of Government Meeting in Sri Lanka which was then ruled by a squalid clique that was brazenly contemptuous of human rights – although voters there later shamed the Commonwealth by throwing the abusers out. In Britain, the Blair government eroded the freedoms of speech and of assembly, the right to a jury trial, and *habeus corpus*. It also sustained a change made by the Conservatives that undermined the right to silence by persons under police questioning, which brought the presumption of innocence into question. It did all of those things *before* 11 September 2001. Thereafter, excessive responses to terrorism by the Bush administration and others eroded rights still further. Several important countries have become increasingly contemptuous of rights: Hungary, Russia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, and most of Southeast and Central Asia. China has intensified its assault on rights, and its baleful influence is felt across much of the developing world – not least in Africa.

As the challenges have grown, so has the need for the kind of work that is done in the MA programme – and latterly, in the Human Rights Consortium that grew out of it. This book celebrates the work in recent years, but more importantly, it demonstrates a firm resolve to persist.