

AI Index: ACT 30/11/98

When will the tyranny and terror end?

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations on 10 December 1948. I was born six months earlier, in June. At that time, my people were subjects of the French protectorate, and the other peoples of the region (Africa and the Arab world) had been reduced to a status that was little better: they were living in colonies, dominions and protectorates under English, French, Belgian, Portuguese or Spanish rule. Our leaders, the people who fought for our independence or autonomy, or even just our inclusion as citizens of the parent state, were pursued, imprisoned, tortured and exiled. It was not only our nationalist militants who were harshly repressed. Sometimes entire populations were massacred in their scores, hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands, when they rose up to demand their rights. Yet these “civilized nations” that were occupying our countries adopted and proclaimed the UDHR, which states in Article 1 that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. If these nations simultaneously held us under their sway, thus failing to respect the UDHR and denying us all dignity, it was because they did not really see us as human beings. In truth, that was not the only thing. There were some very material interests to be defended: the riches that had been extracted and remained to be extracted from nature and the labour of native people. The status quo had to be protected.

After battles and sacrifices, we finally gained our independence, at least officially, and we entrusted the running of our new states to our nationalist leaders. We were going to be rich! Eldorado was within our grasp! We were going to enjoy our right to dignity and all the other rights we had been denied! We were full of hope and expectations.

Our ambitions were immense and our determination to realize them enormous, and so most of us, to varying degrees, made use of the rights and places that we had previously been denied: schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and welfare centres, work in the administration, the right to choose our representatives — those who had fought for our independence.

Our new leaders gave speeches about the sacrifices we would have to make if we were to build a nation and create a new state. Since the cause seemed just and it was generally felt that the end justifies the means, critics and agitators of any kind were silenced. Thus we entered a strange period of change, during which liberation movements or parties became “single parties” and popular leaders became tyrants or despots. The process was self-perpetuating: political power extended into the economic sphere. “The party” became a source of favours and privileges of a highly material nature. Our leaders became an elite. Corruption became a virus that spread to every level of the state. And the protection of vested interests and the status quo demanded yet more silence.

Corruption and tyranny reached such a pitch that many states began to collapse, casting people into misery and poverty and the most desperate destitution. War, famine, forced displacement, massacre and homelessness — such was the outcome of the process of change when it reached its climax. The most fundamental right, the right to life — without which there is little point in even discussing other rights — became for many people nothing more than a dream, a mere fantasy. The right to life? To exercise their tyranny and spread terror, the established powers sometimes execute real or presumed opponents, including human rights activists. Sometimes, in the name of Islam, they put on a show in a public place, with hangings and beheadings. In the name of Islam — which ironically means “peace” — armed groups organize the massacre of innocent people, slitting the throats and cutting off the heads of scores or even hundreds of women, men, children

and old people, disembowelling pregnant women and dragging young women off to their lairs to rape them, sometimes not far from army barracks.

Under the pretext of this absolute lack of human rights, other corrupt, authoritarian powers imprison and torture dissidents and put an end to all rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom to organize and freedom to form political parties, depriving citizens of their citizenship. In their arrogance and contempt for the people, and with no fear of ridicule, they even go so far as to announce that they have won elections with more than 99.9 per cent of the vote. So where is this “international order based on respect of human rights” that we hear so much about? When is the tyranny and terror to which we are subjected going to end?

We have to surrender to the evidence: just as flowers will grow only if they are watered, so the UDHR will survive only if it is fought for. Any power — even the most democratic and popular at the outset — tends to become oppressive and corrupt in a climate of indifference and public apathy. We have to publicize violations — all violations of human rights, whoever the perpetrators and victims — and denounce the perpetrators, never resting until they have been brought to justice. They must realize that their crimes will not go unpunished and that a day will come when justice will triumph.

Of course, human rights activists seem powerless before tyrants and oppressors. Yet they have a formidable weapon — their dignity and honour. That is what all tyrants and oppressors fear above all else. And we, if we are to live, to savour a moment or enjoy a meal or a simple piece of fruit, we need to know that we have not utterly failed to help those who are being made to suffer, those who cannot savour the moment or enjoy a meal or a simple piece of fruit. We have to fight, just as the nameless activists who went before us had to fight. It is the only way we can live with dignity and honour. It is the only way we can, by the sheer force of our numbers, bring the oppressors down and return humanity to humanity.

This article is one of a series of opinion pieces written for Amnesty International’s campaign to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the UDHR. The views expressed do not necessarily represent Amnesty International’s position.

Find out more about Amnesty International’s campaign to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — visit www.amnesty.excite.com
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