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Book Review: All Human Rights for All, by Mehdi Zakerian

Mahmood Monshipouri Ph.D^{*}

This book review is about Mehdi Zakerian, *All Human Rights for All* Second Edition, Tehran: Mizan Publishers, 2021, pp. 160, plus Index. Widely regarded as one of the most renowned human rights scholars of the Middle East, Mehdi Zakerian has written an invaluable volume on the contemporary trajectory of human rights and social justice. The book begins by describing two broad goals: (1) eliminating harm suffered by the victims of human rights abuses and how those violations can be prevented in the future and (2) exploring the roots of dignified governance in a country whose political history is believed to be a pioneer of human rights. While some chapters deal with the post-1945 international organizations such as the United Nations and newly established international criminal courts (ICC), as well as regional organizations, others deal with the transformation of the idea of human rights in terms of desirability and feasibility within the context of changing geopolitics and emerging struggles for social justice and gender equality.

The discussions regarding the theory of human rights as they relate to three generations—civil-political rights, socioeconomic and cultural rights, and solidarity rights, which extend beyond the framework of individual rights to focus on collective concepts, such as community or people (p. 24)—are highly educational and suggestive. Zakerian rightly recognizes the interdependent and mutually supportive nature of these three generations of human rights taken

^{*} Teaches Human Rights and Middle East Politics at San Francisco State University and is a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley. / Email: mmonship@sfsu.edu

together. Concepts such as rights, the rule of law, institutional traditions, and economic development are also accurately contextualized in a world order featuring wide-ranging human rights—both chronologically and from a thematic standpoint.

Earlier in the book, the three dimensions of economic development—protecting the environment, fundamental freedoms, and socioeconomic progress—are elaborated within the context of globalization, universalism, high politics, and low politics (p. 32). The social construction of human rights are examined with a view toward explaining human agency and structural constraints, while exploring the impact of human rights council, transitional justice, international criminal courts, and the ways in which criminal accountability has been effectively established (pp. 76-87).

Perhaps the most important concept around which the entire book revolves is “*erga omnes*” (obligations are owed *toward all*) in relation to *jus cogens*, a peremptory norm that is a basic principle of international law and that is accepted by the international community of states as a standard from which no derogation is permitted (p. 68). Zakerian argues that the so-called “*erga omnes*” has led to international solidarity of sort, smoothing the path for the internationally recognized human rights (pp. 63-64). Some human rights experts, by contrast, underscore the importance of generating solidarity and empathy for distant others by relying on grassroots movements rather than human rights conventions and commissions.¹

The interaction of national and international contexts (pp. 63-64) is particularly germane in internalizing universal human rights. The discourse framed around four dimensions of the liberal world order: the campaign against global terrorism, economic inequality, multilateralism, and globalization (pp. 92-93) insofar as they relate to hard power, soft power, and human security is

¹ Carol C. Gould, *Interactive Democracy: The Social Roots of Global Justice*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

immensely helpful to the reader (p. 100). Although Zakerian provides a rich framework for theorizing about the link between human rights and human security, he pays, on balance, scant attention to the concerns that public policy-makers may have and the kind of challenges they may face. A focus on pandemics (such as coronavirus) has bolstered the significance and practical relevance of a human right to health care as never before. Some human rights scholars, such as Davie P. Forsythe, however, have noted that “rights talk needs to be accompanied by proper funding and a whole series of other pragmatic decisions. Individual health security requires a constantly changing calculations of medical science and proper public policy. The right to adequate health care, like other rights, does not implement itself.”¹

The book concludes with a valuable chapter on the efficacy of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and non-state actors and how they advance the cause of human rights worldwide (p. 147). The comparative analysis of three paradigms: realism (distribution of power), liberalism (R2P), and globalization (information and communication technologies) in constraining as well as advancing human rights is profoundly rich and insightful (pp. 153-154)

The author would have done well by sharpening his focus on the influence of international financial institutions and the long-term consequences of austerity measures for the poor. The book, however, does an excellent job of covering the issue of migrant workers and their basic rights—including labor rights, employment, and food security—in a globalizing world. The severe effects of climate change on human rights, especially to the extent it stirs unthinkable refugee crisis and internal displacement of millions of people, deserves further attention in this book. Increasingly, human rights experts view *climate change caused by human activity* as detrimental to the full enjoyment

¹ David P. Forsythe, *Advanced Introduction to the Politics of International Human Rights*, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, pp. 136-137.

of *human rights*. This would dovetail nicely with the author's cogent defense of the third generation of human rights, such as self-determination, development, and solidarity.

Zakerian goes on to argue that given the rise of extremism, sectarianism (i.e., the resurgence of Al-Qaeda and Daesh), and unilateralism, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic era, human rights and human security have assumed a salient status. While this is true, it is also important to bear in mind that a contrasting trend is simultaneously unfolding in some countries whereby their leaders tend to gravitate more and more toward adopting virulent nationalist and protectionist policies in the face of infectious diseases and negative consequences of the free trade and globalization. This paradox has become the prevailing aspect of today's world politics and has significantly diminished the practice of human rights.

These quibbles aside, the book is the definitive guide on the subject of human rights and it is essential reading and a valuable teaching resource for both undergraduates and graduate students. More importantly, those within policy-making circles as well as NGOs will immensely benefit from transformative and thought-provoking critical guidance that this volume offers. How to protect and promote human rights across the world in the wake of persistent poverty, inequality, injustice, and populist-authoritarianism¹ remains the central focus of this significant contribution to upholding human dignity and justice for all.

¹ Gerald Neuman, *Human Rights in a Time of Populism: Challenges and Responses*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.