

## Human rights NGOs facing the collapse of the liberal order

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As the United States abandons the liberal order, the international human rights movement must urgently adapt its strategies and break free from reliance on public institutional funding. A critical question looms: is the dismantling of international human rights architecture permanent, or can we expect global governance to find its way back to equilibrium eventually?



### **The United States' withdrawal from the global order**

For decades, the United States drove the [creation and support](#) of the United Nations, NATO, the International Monetary Fund, and other international institutions born from the need for regulation accompanying globalization and the growing interdependence of states. Once built, these structures accelerated globalization, which in turn brought new regulatory needs. It is no coincidence, then, that the number of international NGOs quadrupled between 1990 and 2000, rising from 6,000 to 26,000. Today there are an estimated [78,000](#).

However, the United States' dominance as a stabilizing force in the international community has been gradually declining. First, economically: de-dollarization of international trade has continued (while [72%](#) of international transactions were conducted in dollars in 2000; this fell to [57%](#) in 2025). The United States has steadily marginalized the role of international institutions as well. This can be seen, for instance, in the World Trade Organization. In 2001, the WTO was growing: it admitted China with the aim of expanding international trade. Two decades later, the [organization is stalled](#) and no longer central to regulating global economic exchanges.

President Trump's antiliberal policies and tariff hikes are already producing a slowdown in economic activity in the United States that will ripple across the world. On the political front, the Trump administration is also fueling international disunity and distrust by undermining the UN. In a violation of liberal ideals, the United States has threatened many countries with economic sanctions to achieve political ends. The [withdrawal from 66 international organizations](#) and the creation of a "Board of Peace" leave no doubt: the country is disengaging from the whole UN system. These decisions are part of a broader distrust of the multilateral international system generally growing since the 2000s. This skepticism is particularly visible in responses to the international justice

system, from George W. Bush's refusal to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) to Trump's [sanctioning of ICC judges](#).

Trump's decisions reflect a deep-rooted desire to slow economic and political globalization that transcends political factionalism. The "America First" discourse has progressively reshaped the US perception of the country's role in the world. Thomas Massie, a prominent Republican opponent of Donald Trump, wants to [withdraw from NATO](#). Trump is part of a broader US movement that rejects the rules-based liberal order, and he has convinced Americans that the international system operates contrary to their interests. With less intense economic and political exchange, the multilateral system will require less regulation, likely leading to a reduction in the size of both governmental and non-governmental international organizations.

### **The human rights movement can no longer rely on the UN system**

Human rights NGOs depend on the international system exemplified by the UN to carry out advocacy work and to secure funding. This system relies largely on the United States, which alone contributes [25% of the UN's total budget](#). But the United States is no longer meeting its obligations, leading the UN Secretary-General to announce in January 2026 that the organization faces the risk of "[imminent financial collapse](#)." Some UN offices dedicated to human rights work in Africa, for example, have already cut their budgets by 40% and halved their support operations. International and local African NGOs have already begun to disappear. At the international level, [the consequences are even worse](#). Half of Special Rapporteurs' visits scheduled for 2026 have been canceled, and treaty body sessions have been called off.

Meanwhile, the world's largest development agency, [USAID, has cut its activities by 85%](#). Populist leaders ascendant globally repeatedly [call into question](#) the role of development agencies. Institutional national actors are reducing their support to small organizations in favor of large NGOs that redistribute funds to their smaller counterparts—a strategy that diminishes the need for multilateral regulation. In the coming years, there will be fewer interactions between NGOs and states at the UN. Some NGOs in Geneva are already seeing these risks and are [calling for the preservation of a crumbling multilateralism](#).

### **How NGOs can adapt**

A diminishing need for systemic regulation globally means that international NGOs will have fewer opportunities, less financial support, and less impact. Since international activities will shrink, could it be worthwhile to redirect efforts to the national level? International NGOs rarely share their expertise with the public. However, as voters in Western democracies are increasingly tempted by "illiberal" forms of governance, it may prove worthwhile to redirect this expertise toward strengthening citizens' knowledge of democracy and the rule of law—areas NGOs know well. And far greater priority should be given to the European Union, which is here to stay.

Benno Torgler has demonstrated that [citizens' distrust of their national institutions carries over to international bodies](#), and the erosion of US public confidence in the UN, which [fell from 61% in 2022 to 52% in 2024](#), corroborates these findings. However, the current situation is by no means a dead end. If international NGOs work to strengthen the rule of law at the national level, they will indirectly help reduce skepticism toward international institutions.

Whatever the future of the United States, the upheavals now wracking the international system are too seismic to reverse. The new reality we are heading toward is unknowable, but it is clear that

we will need to defend the principles of solidarity and democracy more vigorously than ever. Some NGOs are better equipped than others to face the challenges ahead, but the future will require everyone's deep commitment to international activism, rediscovering a mindset increasingly rare in the professionalized international human rights movement.

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