

# STANDING FOR HUMANITY

Changing Amnesty to overcome the politics of “us vs them”



AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL





People attend a protest against police brutality and the death in Minneapolis police custody of George Floyd, in Nantes, France, June 8, 2020. © REUTERS/Stephane Mahe

# FOREWORD

We are one humanity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed yet again the frailty and inadequacy of government built on narratives of “us vs them”, of blame and fear. Demagoguery and truth twisting have no power over a pandemic, which ruthlessly exploits the weaknesses in our politics and our societies.

In recent years many leaders, supported by tech algorithms and media tycoons that stand to benefit from growing polarization, have invested great energy in dividing us and offering this as the route to a better future.

Again and again, we have seen the hollowness of this political

vision, how it offers nothing but chauvinism and misery. We have seen how demonizing and undermining the humanity of anyone demeans us all. We have seen how questioning the rights of any person because of who they are is a threat to the rights of all of us.

We also know that Amnesty International has not spoken out powerfully enough. We need to do more to persuade people that human rights offer far more real, more compelling answers than narratives of blame.

It is time to stand up to the politics of “us vs them”, to assert that we are one humanity. This paper is about how Amnesty International can play its part in doing that.

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STANDING WITH  
**HUMANITY**



Letter writing event at Amnesty  
Korea's offices in Seoul, South  
Korea 20 December, 2019.  
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# INTRODUCTION

The advance of the politics of demonization in recent years has posed a huge challenge to human rights.

The cynical discourse of division is ideologically opposed to the core idea why?of human rights that we are all equal as members of the human family. The assault on human rights from those who espouse a politics of “us vs them” has been strong and unrelenting, and it is vital that human rights organizations understand the nature of this challenge and how we should respond to it.

This is the second edition of a paper originally produced in 2017 for internal use only. When we shared the first edition with partners, they told us it was useful and asked to share it further, so we decided to update it and make it available publicly.

This is not a typical Amnesty International report. It is not seeking to expose or investigate a defined set of human rights violations and make recommendations to those responsible for addressing them. Nor does it set out a formal and binding strategic framework; it sits alongside our current Strategic Goals and aims to inform our next Global Strategy.

Rather, it is a reflection on the context in which we find ourselves and an honest reckoning of our limitations in dealing with this. It is a warning to ourselves and a set of recommendations that we will take up.

This paper recommends four approaches for changing how Amnesty International works. First, we need to ensure that a significant part of our work in each country is on human rights issues that resonate widely and address the struggles and concerns of most people in society and carry out long-term campaigns

that specifically focus on shifts in public opinion.

Second, we need to speak to people’s hearts as well as their minds and counter the narratives of those who undermine human rights through demonization. We need to foreground our positive message of how we all benefit when we move forward in unity rather than division, a message that challenges their cynicism. We need to communicate about human rights in a way that relates to people’s own emotions, identity, values, beliefs and lived experiences, as well as to their reason. We have to spell out how threats to human rights are threats to society’s values.

Third, we need to enhance our diversity and ensure that our movement and its workforce reflect the diversity of the societies in which we operate and with which we want to engage.

The fourth approach is to engage more with those seeking change at the local level. To do this we need to demonstrate better the interconnection between the international, national and local.

We believe it is useful to share this paper with others in the human rights and social justice movement who are confronting similar challenges. We hope it will contribute to the wider debate. However, the recommendations in this paper are addressed to ourselves; we do not presume to advise the human rights movement as a whole. The recommendations are designed to address challenges Amnesty International faces and the role that it can play in supporting the aims of the wider human rights movement. We anticipate that other organizations and groups may adopt very different strategies to achieve our shared goals, making the human rights movement as a whole stronger, more resilient and more innovative as a result.

It is important to stress that, although this paper is critical of those who use the politics of demonization, it is not a political manifesto. Amnesty International is politically non-partisan. Our role is to secure human rights for all – we do not take positions on issues outside of that mandate. We advocate for changes to government conduct to ensure compliance with human rights law and standards, but do not take a position on which particular political party or political leader should be in power, no matter how objectionable their conduct or political record is.

This paper describes bigotry and xenophobia deployed by a range of political leaders. Amnesty International opposes this conduct and seeks to convince them to end it and to encourage their people to demand this. We do not, however, endorse their political opponents. We seek to change political culture, not individuals. Demonization is a disease that afflicts centrists as well as radicals, the left as well as the right, elitists as well as populists. Human rights are a cure that any and all of them can, and should, deploy. That is what societies must demand and the purpose of this paper is to suggest how Amnesty International can play its part in making this happen.

Numerous people from all corners of the world, both within the Amnesty International movement and beyond, have contributed to the analysis and ideas expressed in this paper. We are grateful to each of them for their contributions. The first version of the paper was the work of Osama Bhutta, David Griffiths, Gauri van Gulik and Ashfaq Khalfan. This second updated version contains additional input from Paola Roberta Gioffredi.

# SECTION I – UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICS OF DEMONIZATION

Over the past several years, we have witnessed a global rise in the politics of demonization.

From the USA to India, from Brazil to Hungary, and from Turkey to the Philippines, political leaders and opinion shapers are skilfully peddling narratives of fear and division, successfully exploiting anxieties and blaming entire groups for social or economic grievances. As the world tries to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders taking advantage of the crisis to extend their powers and suppress human rights could deepen this trend and cause still more harm to the prospect of a just recovery.

These narratives are not new. Political leaders and opinion formers have always resorted to “othering” as a way to cope with rapid social change.<sup>1</sup> Today, divisive narratives of “us vs them” are poisoning public discourse and, aided and abetted by technology, becoming progressively normalized. They are not only intensifying polarization in societies – promoting ethnic, racial, religious and gender discrimination – but increasingly they are setting the political agenda.

In the words of John Powell and Stephen Menendian, “in a world beset by seemingly intractable and overwhelming challenges, virtually every global, national, and regional

conflict is wrapped within or organized around one or more dimension of group-based difference. Othering undergirds territorial disputes, sectarian violence, military conflict, the spread of disease, hunger and food insecurity, and even climate change”.<sup>2</sup>

The groups that political leaders demonize vary according to context, but usually include those seen as easy targets – religious minorities; migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers; women’s rights advocates; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people; human rights defenders; and those challenging the status quo, such as protesters and climate activists.<sup>3</sup>



This continued, systematic demonization has had alarming consequences on a spectrum from exacerbating inequality, discrimination and violence, to ethnic cleansing. The apartheid system that excluded Rohingya people in Myanmar, followed by violent attacks to drive them out of the country and China's social re-engineering efforts targeting Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in Xinjiang, offer some of the bleakest warnings about the ultimate consequences of failures to address the long-term and systematic demonization of particular communities based on their identity.

In a growing number of countries, and often with public support, leaders and opinion formers are combining discriminatory policies with undermining international cooperation and norms by criticizing or ignoring international institutions and expressing open hostility towards human rights. The rise in the politics of demonization represents a profound challenge – perhaps an existential threat – to human rights mechanisms and to the whole idea of human rights.

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly exposed flaws in social and economic systems and the weaknesses of the international system. The “us vs them” approach adopted by many political leaders has both exacerbated harmful pre-existing inequalities and hampered effective and timely responses to the crisis. COVID-19 has

brought into sharp relief the threats faced by marginalized communities and individuals<sup>4</sup> and the potentially damaging impact of a lack of trust in governments and institutions.<sup>5</sup> It has also created cover for leaders seeking to entrench and expand their own power at the expense of people's rights. The pandemic provided them with a new platform to relaunch their scapegoating narratives and to deepen the polarization they have been fostering for years.

Yet this experience of crisis has also led many to see the world anew and reassess the possibilities for building just and equal societies. It is a moment for a fresh vision to shape a sustainable recovery that embraces solidarity and breaks down the moribund ideologies of “us vs them”. This is a time for bold action showing that human rights are indispensable for everyone. This unprecedented shared challenge can be turned into an opportunity to end the divisiveness of the past and bring people closer together.

## THE POLITICS OF DEMONIZATION:

### WHAT IS IT?

The politics of demonization is the deliberate and systematic scapegoating and marginalizing of groups of people based on their identity or political beliefs by political leaders and other opinion formers. It is used to acquire, withhold or negotiate power for political gain and to reinforce existing power structures. It often takes the form of narratives of hate in the media targeting marginalized groups, creating a dangerous self-reinforcing mechanism in moulding public opinion.

Three key components of the politics of demonization are:

**Opportunism:** capitalizing on irrational fears and stirring up social and economic frustrations.

**Divisiveness:** simplifying complex societal problems and dividing society into an “us” (those who deserve security and rights) and “them” (those who are less deserving or represent a threat).

**Victimhood:** feeding a false sense of victimhood among, for example, ethnic and religious majorities.

Many of those who engage in the politics of demonization have used populist approaches, casting themselves as representing “the people” against a corrupt establishment. Their rhetoric often directs blame, either explicitly or implicitly, at an “other”. However, not all populists engage in demonization and not all who engage in demonization are populists. Populism is a style of politics based on anti-establishment approaches which involves challenging elites and may or may not involve demonizing marginalized groups. Amnesty International takes no position for or against populism.



*A Tibetan exile shouts slogan during a protest to support Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors, in New Delhi, India, 30 August, 2019.*  
© REUTERS/Adnan Abidi

# 1. FERTILE GROUND FOR THE POLITICS OF DEMONIZATION

Since 2015, the politics of demonization has increased markedly and taken root in different contexts. The particular forms it takes and the conditions which allow it to proliferate vary widely from country to country and there is a significant risk of over-generalization when trying to describe this as a global phenomenon. Nevertheless, its international dimensions are clear: partly because its enabling factors are comparable in different contexts and partly because those who promote the politics of demonization emulate each other.

Uncertainty, disenfranchisement and discontent in many countries has been fostered and manipulated for electoral advantage. This may well increase in a world recovering from the COVID-19

pandemic, but politicians and parts of the media have long intentionally tapped into people's sense of fragility – whether linked to shifting political power, global financial volatility, technological disruption, the climate crisis, or other issues. They have leveraged this to stoke feelings of cultural displacement and to undermine faith in political institutions and the rule of law, challenging their promise of guaranteeing long-lasting equality, stability and justice for all.<sup>6</sup>

One theme which has been exploited extensively (especially but not exclusively in majority white societies) is the combination of economic grievances and migration. In the past decade, it has become increasingly mainstream for politicians to blame migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers for real or perceived economic hardships in order to gain popularity. These grievances are often rooted in people's experiences of inequality, corruption, economic stagnation, exclusion from economic and

political power and government failures to fulfil their economic and social rights, including the rights to work, an adequate standard of living, health and housing. These underlying concerns may not be new, but in some parts of the world they have been accentuated by shifting labour markets, austerity, automation and, in some developed economies, by deindustrialization.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed in a new way the scale of existing structural inequalities and the economic fallout could well exacerbate these grievances. We are already witnessing how it has become easier for politicians and others in power to instrumentalize or weaponize economic grievances.

Politicians have long fomented and taken advantage of anxieties about national security and terrorism, creating stereotypes to justify restrictions of human rights and generalized repression of particular groups. Together with the media, they have generated and



*A burnt Make America Great Again (MAGA) hat lies on the ground during a protest against racial injustice near the site of a rally by U.S. President Donald Trump in Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S., 20 June, 2020.  
© REUTERS/Lawrence Bryant*

reinforced a causal link between increased migration flows and (real or perceived) rising crime levels and terrorist threats. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán described immigration as a “Trojan horse of terrorism”.<sup>7</sup> Immigration was at the core of Donald Trump’s toxic rhetoric during the 2016 USA presidential campaign when he referred to Mexicans as “drug dealers, criminals and rapists”.<sup>8</sup> This narrative went on to inform President Trump’s introduction in 2018 of a “zero tolerance” immigration policy under which undocumented migrants crossing the USA-Mexico border were jailed and their children put into shelters or foster care.<sup>9</sup>

In the aftermath of violent attacks by al-Qaida and ISIS in Belgium, France, Germany and Turkey between 2015 and 2017, politicians advocated for stricter asylum policies, criminalized certain acts of solidarity by human rights defenders and civil society organizations,<sup>10</sup> and targeted Muslims. By conflating Muslim migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees with terrorists, politicians contributed to reinforcing both the public perception that closing borders is the most viable way to guarantee national security<sup>11</sup> and fomented generalized prejudice against Muslims.<sup>12</sup>

Those promoting the politics of demonization have also made successful appeals to cultural anxieties, fear of identity and culture loss, as well as disquiet over major demographic shifts.<sup>13</sup> Some analysts argue that cultural anxieties are at the heart of demonization projects and that mainstream politicians and the media have shifted public attitudes by racializing economic anxieties.<sup>14</sup> For example, in the 2018 Italian national elections, anti-establishment parties gained traction from soaring anti-immigrant sentiments among large segments of Italian society, fanned by the often alarmist media coverage of boat arrivals across the Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> Economic grievances, security fears and negativity about migration were brought together in a narrative about losing national identity and cultural homogeneity.

## 2. TARGETS OF DEMONIZATION

In recent years, there has been a strengthening of ethnic or religious supremacist narratives<sup>16</sup> and discrimination across many of the world’s most influential countries, from Brazil to China to India to the USA. This is not accidental; it is systematically stoked by politicians.<sup>17</sup> Overt racism is becoming increasingly normalized and institutionalized in public discourse. President Trump’s attacks on four Congresswomen of colour he accused of hating the USA and urged to go back to the “totally broken and crime infested places from which they came” was a particularly crude example of racist and misogynistic rhetoric aimed at legitimizing hatred and division.<sup>18</sup>

The longstanding issue of systemic racism in the USA reached a new tipping point in the first half of 2020. A string of acts of racist violence by police forces against unarmed Black Americans – Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and, more recently, George Floyd – reignited the debate about structural discrimination in the country and the issue of police reform in the USA and globally. People protesting in the streets have been met with the very same police repression and excessive force they were protesting against.<sup>19</sup> President Trump and various members of his Administration have denied the existence of systemic problems in USA police departments and attributed the recent events to a few “bad apples” in the police forces. Also, in several occasions, President Trump resorted to antagonizing and violent language to address the protesters.<sup>20</sup> His actions play to, and risk further galvanizing white supremacists and exacerbating the polarization around social justice issues that have been systemic in the country for years.

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racist sentiments erupted globally.<sup>21</sup> The consistent use of scapegoating language and its normalization by leaders and

opinion formers has created fertile ground for such episodes of racism and xenophobia. The labelling of COVID-19 as “the Chinese virus” by President Trump and members of his Administration, for example, carried an insinuation of blame that is hard to separate from heightened anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment in the USA.<sup>22</sup> And in France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain anti-immigrant politicians turned to the old trope of ethnic minorities and migrants as carriers of diseases in order to justify their stance.<sup>23</sup>

People on the move (migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum) have been a consistent target of demonization across the world, not just in Europe and the USA. From Australia to South Africa, political figures present generalized claims that migration will “swamp the majority”, dilute the country’s cultural and religious identity, undermine “national values”, weaken the welfare state and create new security threats.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these racist narratives, xenophobic and discriminatory policies have also increasingly been adopted. Denmark’s so called “anti-ghetto laws” of 2018 are a case in point. By forcing the assimilation of “non-Western” migrants who live in low-income neighbourhoods and by imposing strict sanctions on those who do not comply, these measures exacerbate marginalization and inequality.<sup>25</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated this trend. In various European countries, for example, the “lockdown” measures enforced have disproportionately impacted individuals and groups from ethnic minorities who were subjected to violence, discriminatory identity checks, forced quarantines and fines.<sup>26</sup>

In recent years, levels of hate crime against ethnic and religious minorities have soared in countries such as India,<sup>27</sup> Myanmar,<sup>28</sup> the UK<sup>29</sup> and the USA.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, levels of hate crime targeting people because of their gender identity and sexual orientation are increasing in several countries, including Russia, Turkmenistan and Ukraine.<sup>31</sup>



Rohingya refugees are evacuated by locals at a coast of North Aceh, Indonesia, 25 June, 2020.  
© Antara Foto/Rahmad/Reuters

Hatred towards religious and ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples has substantially increased in the past decade.<sup>32</sup> By fabricating and feeding identity and security concerns, leaders often deliberately stoke this hostility. For example, in the latest Pew Research Centre Index for Social Hostilities, India ranked as the country with the highest level of social hostility towards religious minorities.<sup>33</sup> This can be attributed to the country’s longstanding structural issues, such as lack of adequate laws on hate crimes, historical impunity for such crimes and the debilitating caste politics. In recent years, the resurgence of the Hindutva ideology which aims at building a Hindu nation, further exacerbated social hostilities towards religious minorities. In 2019, Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured a second term as prime minister with an aggressive Hindu-first agenda. Under his premiership, inter-religious tensions have soared; 90% of the religious hate crimes in the last decade have occurred since he came to power in 2014, mainly targeting

Muslims and Christians.<sup>34</sup> One of the most recent examples was the targeting of Muslims as responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.<sup>35</sup>

In China, in line with the struggle against the so-called “three evils” – terrorism, separatism and religious extremism – the government has presented the mass detention of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang province as an innovative and effective way to counter an alleged terrorist threat.<sup>36</sup> For some years, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have documented a systematic escalation of human rights violations against Xinjiang’s Muslim population, amounting to institutionalized persecution on a scale not seen in China for decades. China’s policy in Xinjiang is implemented through internment in camps, where torture and other ill-treatment are used to “transform through education”; a tight surveillance regime; arbitrary detentions; and restrictions on the right to freedom of religion and belief.<sup>37</sup> This industrial-scale

demonization project has set a shocking and dangerous global precedent.

The 9/11 attacks in the USA in 2001 and later the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015-16 have been instrumentalized by politicians and the media in ways that have led to anti-Muslim sentiment becoming rampant in North America and most of Europe and resurgent in various countries in South and East Asia. As Aristotle Kallis puts it:

***“the Islamophobic rhetoric of the radical right has become more and more pervasive, more radical in content, more extreme in scope and more potent in reach... But above all, Islamophobia, like interwar antisemitism, seems to have become so widely normalized because it has mined deeply held beliefs and activated fears located well within the so-called political and societal mainstream. In this process, the radical right has functioned as the taboo-breaker and arch-normalizer of Islamophobia, straddling fractious***

***boundaries between the extreme fringes of the political system and the heart of the supposedly liberal centre. When it comes to Islamophobia, the radical right has been pushing at the mainstream's half-open door***.<sup>38</sup>

Again, it should be noted that racist discourse occurs across the political spectrum.

Fanning the flames of anti-Muslim sentiment has become an indispensable component in the toolkit of politicians harnessing the politics of demonization.<sup>39</sup> Examples abound around the world: from the banning full of face veils for women in string of European countries, including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France and the Netherlands,<sup>40</sup> to President Trump's travel ban;<sup>41</sup> from Italian politician Matteo Salvini's declaration that "if we do not take back control of our roots, Europe will become an Islamic caliphate"<sup>42</sup> to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's discriminatory remarks about Muslim women who wear full face veils, which coincided with a spike in anti-Muslim hate crime in the country;<sup>43</sup> and from Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi lamenting the growing Muslim population,<sup>44</sup> to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government introducing a law restricting citizenship to migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan to non-Muslims.<sup>45</sup> The effects of these leaders' toxic narratives about Muslims, as well as their overtly discriminatory policy measures, are the demonization of and discrimination against millions of people.

A new wave of acts of violence and hate targeting Jews and/or Jewish community and religious institutions has affected multiple countries in Europe<sup>46</sup> as well as the USA<sup>47</sup> in recent years. As Ruth Wodak states: "Anti-Muslim sentiments have not been substituted for anti-Semitic beliefs; quite the contrary, in fact, as they frequently occur together."<sup>48</sup> According to experts, what is new with this resurgence of anti-Jewish sentiment is the convergence of parties on both sides of the political spectrum as well as Europe's radical Islamist fringe, and even politicians from both US parties

and European mainstream parties. Right wing and national-conservatist parties, for example in Hungary and Poland, have portrayed Jewish people as a cosmopolitan threat to national identity. At the other end of the political spectrum, some left-wing politicians and groups associate Jewish people with the economic oligarchy or with the conduct of the State of Israel. But anti-Jewish discourse is becoming increasingly adopted, hence normalized, by mainstream politicians and party leaders as well.<sup>49</sup> Events such as the mass shooting at the Pittsburgh synagogue in the USA in 2018, the vandalization of the Basateen Jewish cemetery in Cairo, Egypt, in 2018 and the string of acts against Jewish communities in Paris in 2019, as well as other, less visible, expressions of anti-Jewish sentiments,<sup>50</sup> show how this normalization is emboldening those who spread anti-Jewish hatred and causing Jewish communities to feel increasingly targeted and unsafe.<sup>51</sup>

Discrimination, violence and systematic persecution targeting Christians has also escalated in the Middle East and Africa in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan and Syria,<sup>52</sup> and throughout Asia, for example in China, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, North Korea and Sri Lanka.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, many politicians and public figures are deploying toxic narratives against advances in gender equality. They portray advances in respect for the rights of women and LGBTI people as threats to "traditional" values or religious identity. "Gender ideology" is a catch-all term that has served as a basis for a disturbingly effective narrative and rallying cry to attack human rights gains related to gender and sexuality in recent decades – from access to abortion to gender equality to LGBTI rights and comprehensive sexuality education.<sup>54</sup> For example, in 2017, the Minister of Education in Paraguay removed all materials from the national curriculum related to "gender"<sup>55</sup> and in 2019 a municipality in Paraguay banned a pro-LGBTI rights march on the grounds that it was considered contrary to "public morals".<sup>56</sup> In 2016, the Peace

Agreement in Colombia was rejected in a public vote after accusations that "gender ideology" had been "encrypted" into it.<sup>57</sup>

In Europe, anti-gender campaigns were launched for public mobilization in Spain (2004, against a same-sex marriage bill), Croatia (2006, against sex education), Italy (2007, against same-sex civil partnership), Slovenia (2009, against marriage equality) and France (2012, against same-sex marriage).<sup>58</sup> Polish debates on "gender ideology" started in 2012 in opposition to the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).<sup>59</sup> In 2018, Bulgaria did not ratify the Istanbul Convention after its Constitutional Court declared it unconstitutional because it contained the term "gender".<sup>60</sup> Following this example, Slovakia's Parliament voted against ratification in 2020.<sup>61</sup> And in several European countries those who embrace the politics of demonization are targeting academic and universities teaching gender studies, representing them as a threat to the "natural family" and a propaganda tool to indoctrinate young students.<sup>62</sup>

Demonization of professionals such as social workers, sexuality education teachers and abortion clinic workers, as well as disinformation about sexual and reproductive health rights are also part of the offensive against advances in gender equality taking place across Europe and the Americas. For example, in Bulgaria, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social workers were accused of kidnapping children to give them away for adoption by gay couples in Norway.<sup>63</sup> In Spain, sexologists were threatened by religious and anti-human rights groups for giving talks in community colleges<sup>64</sup> and a Vox party deputy offered ultrasounds to women outside clinics to dissuade them from having abortions.<sup>65</sup> In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-feminist groups in the USA welcomed lockdowns as an opportunity for women to "go back" to their "traditional" roles at home and around the world many politicians and activists celebrated the stalling of key debates on women's rights caused by the COVID-19 emergency.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. POLITICS OF DEMONIZATION TAKING ROOT

Although the politics of demonization is nothing new, in recent years a growing number of political leaders have actively and systematically propagated narratives of demonization for political gain, increasingly setting the agenda. They have used these narratives to boost their legitimacy, appeal and resonance among different demographic groups, emboldening others to follow suit.

“Strongmen” leaders – and it is mostly men – have made a comeback. Roger Eatwell has identified four characteristics of so called “charismatic leaders” that contribute to their electoral success and popularity: radical mission (presenting themselves as embodiments of a special mission), personal presence (confidence and attention to their image), symbiotic hierarchy (portraying themselves as ordinary people) and binary narratives of demonization (targeting either internal or external “enemies”).<sup>67</sup> These traits can be seen among many of today’s “strongmen” leaders. Whether convinced ideologues, fervent nationalists or opportunists, they are peddling simplistic and extreme solutions to complex societal problems. Many such politicians are undermining checks and balances, like the independence of the judiciary and other safeguards to protect marginalized groups from discrimination and other violations of their rights.

Authoritarian tendencies and ideas are emerging across and within different countries.<sup>68</sup> In countries such as Hungary and Turkey, the balance of power has tilted strongly towards the executive, allowing the rule and the cult of the “strongman” to flourish.<sup>69</sup> This trend appears to be on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic provided leaders around the world with a pretext for grabbing more power. In the name of a greater good, namely protecting public health, they are using emergency legislation to

introduce measures or laws that restrict human rights beyond what is permitted under international law and without any safeguards to ensure the protection of human rights.

For example, in Hungary, the government stepped up its efforts to undermine the rule of law by introducing an emergency law that allows the Prime Minister to rule by decree without any review or wtime limitations. The Orbán Administration has also used this as an opportunity to push its “anti-gender” agenda, submitting an omnibus bill to parliament to ban gender recognition in law for transgender people. In the context of a doubling of levels of domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown, the Hungarian parliament has also declared it will not ratify the Istanbul Convention.<sup>70</sup>

Poland sought to rush through two highly controversial bills banning abortion and criminalizing sex education under the cover of the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>71</sup> In the Philippines, President Duterte gave police and military officials orders to “shoot to kill” what he called “troublemakers” protesting during the quarantine.<sup>72</sup> In Cambodia, the recently proposed State of Emergency Law is a blatant power grab that seeks to manipulate the COVID-19 crisis in order to severely undercut human rights.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, some governments are introducing disproportionate digital surveillance measures under the guise of tracking the spread of the virus, without adequate safeguards or sunset clauses, which leaves open the possibility for abuse of rights in the future.<sup>74</sup>

In recent years, leaders have become more strategic in their rhetoric, playing off rights and communities against each other. For example, Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy’s League party, has targeted Muslim communities in the name of gender equality. In some cases, racist groups have moderated their image to appear more “acceptable”, built networks of activists and think-tanks<sup>75</sup> and developed news outlets or a strong social media profile to “market” their views.<sup>76</sup> They have created an environment in which more mainstream politicians employ parts of their political

messaging, mainstreaming less overtly xenophobic elements of their calls.

Leaders who employ exclusionary rhetoric and policies support and cite each other approvingly, mutually reinforcing each other and their messages. Prime Minister Orbán addressed Matteo Salvini as his “fellow combatant” in the fight for the “preservation of European Christian heritage and against migration”.<sup>77</sup> President Trump consistently expressed his support for leaders such as Prime Minister Modi, President Bolsonaro and President Duterte and was himself praised by them.<sup>78</sup> Recently, attempts to build transnational alliances have also been made, although so far they have not proved successful.<sup>79</sup>

In this context, state authorities have often chosen to suppress dissenting voices, thereby causing a culture of fear to take root. Increasingly they have silenced or created negative consequences for those who challenge the repression of demonized groups. Attacks on human rights defenders and civil society organizations are escalating globally.<sup>80</sup> State control over the media is growing, even in countries with a relatively free media, such as India and the USA.<sup>81</sup> The authorities in many countries, from Egypt to Iran to Venezuela, have a long track record of quashing protests violently in order to muzzle critical voices. Now this playbook is being adopted more widely, including in Chile and Hong Kong.<sup>82</sup>

Oversimplification and the increasingly binary nature of complex societal debates around migration has generally favoured those who propagate anti-immigration and overtly racist or xenophobic messages. In various European countries, including Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain and Switzerland,<sup>83</sup> as well as Australia<sup>84</sup> and the USA,<sup>85</sup> people seeking to protect the rights of refugees and migrants are increasingly criminalized. The few voices attempting to present a compelling positive vision for migration and refugee protection, including in the human rights movement or among political leaders, have been highly stigmatized and often met with repression.



©  
Policemen wearing face shields  
inspect motorists at a quarantine  
checkpoint on 2 April, 2020  
in Marikina, Metro Manila,  
Philippines.  
© Ezra Acayan/Getty Images



During the COVID-19 crisis, many leaders have chosen to exploit people's sense of uncertainty and fear. Some are instrumentalizing the emergency provisions introduced to prevent the spread of disinformation or misinformation about the pandemic to muzzle real critics and dissenting voices, restrict freedom of expression and hamper people's access to timely and accurate information, a core feature of the right to health. In March 2020, for example, the Russian authorities passed amendments to the Criminal Code and to the Code of Administrative Offences that introduced criminal penalties for the "public dissemination of knowingly false information" in the context of emergencies and administrative penalties for media outlets that publish such information.<sup>86</sup>

Hungary's emergency law provides for up to five years' imprisonment for those convicted of causing public alarm or hindering government efforts to control the pandemic by spreading false information.<sup>87</sup> Cambodia's draft emergency law envisages unprecedented disproportionate powers, including provisions for conducting surveillance on all telecommunications mediums "using any means necessary" and the power to ban or restrict the "distribution of information that could scare the public, cause unrest, or that can negatively impact national security, or cause

confusion in response to the state of emergency".<sup>88</sup> From India to Turkey, from China to Venezuela, and from Singapore to Tunisia, journalists, bloggers and watchdogs are being targeted, intimidated and arrested for allegedly spreading "fake news".<sup>89</sup>

Demonization has benefitted from bigotry promoted by the mass media going back several decades. Such media outlets have helped create narratives that make it easier for politicians to target particular groups and limit the scope for manoeuvre for their opponents. For example, Rupert Murdoch-owned outlets in Australia, the UK and the USA have consistently spread fear of refugees, migrants and Muslims.<sup>90</sup> The role of social media platforms in mobilizing hate rests upon a bedrock built by traditional broadcast and print outlets over decades. Technology corporations are also playing a key role in exacerbating political and ideological polarization, providing an ideal space for the politics of demonization to thrive. The global dominance and reach of online platforms like Facebook and Google mean they form a crucial part of the system that amplifies demonizing narratives and enables them to reach mainstream audiences.

Growing political segregation and the surge in prejudice and hatred on social media against marginalized and oppressed groups and against women<sup>91</sup>

are no accident. They are in part a consequence of the way algorithms filter users' online experiences.<sup>92</sup> The major social media platforms recommend and promote new content based on opaque algorithmic processes to determine what will best engage users. Because people are more likely to click on sensationalist or incendiary material, the so-called "recommendation engines" of these platforms can send their users down what has been called a "rabbit hole" of toxic content.<sup>93</sup> In addition to the role played by algorithms in heightening the levels of prejudice and hatred, technology companies have often failed to address the issue of hate speech on their platforms.<sup>94</sup>

Sensationalism in the mass media is, of course, not a new phenomenon and it is not limited to the internet. But the "recommendation engines" of social media go well beyond the adage "if it bleeds, it leads". They can systematically privilege demonizing content, including conspiracy theories, misogyny and racism, to keep people on their platforms for as long as possible and create echo chambers that give the appearance of momentum to toxic ideas. For example, a study into the spread of anti-refugee sentiment on Facebook found that "anti-refugee hate crimes increase disproportionately in areas with higher Facebook usage during periods of high anti-refugee sentiment online".<sup>95</sup> A UN fact-finding mission on Myanmar highlighted that before and during the Rohingya crisis, "Facebook has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate, in a context where, for most users, Facebook is the Internet".<sup>96</sup> Similarly, the algorithms behind Google's YouTube platform have been shown in multiple studies to privilege false and incendiary content.<sup>97</sup>

The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which data from 87 million people's Facebook profiles were harvested and used to micro-target and manipulate people for political campaigning purposes, drew attention to the capabilities of the largest tech platforms to influence people at scale

– and the risk that these could be abused. Although shocking, this was only the tip of the iceberg, a logical extension of the very same model of data extraction and analysis inherent to both Facebook and Google’s business. This raises important questions about the human rights responsibilities of technology companies around the development of these algorithms, as well as their harvesting and analysis of users’ data.<sup>98</sup>

Linked to this is the phenomenon of online disinformation. Digital platforms are used tactically to disseminate false information with the sole purpose of manipulating opinions, behaviours and choices on a vast scale. For example, during the 2016 US presidential campaign, Russian troll farms attempted to manipulate the election results by disseminating divisive content through fake Facebook accounts.<sup>99</sup>

In recent months, President Bolsonaro’s denialist stance regarding COVID-19 has been sustained by spreading false and misleading information online regarding the virus’ symptoms, risks and cures, as well as by encouraging risky behaviours. A Parliamentary Commission is currently conducting an investigation into online profiles spreading misinformation related to the pandemic which is likely being coordinated by a structure linked to the Office of the President.<sup>100</sup> Bolsonaro’s approach has resulted not only in a patchy response to the health crisis, but has also led to increased polarization and heightened levels of social unrest and mistrust which are pushing the country to the edge of a political crisis.<sup>101</sup>

The instant messaging application WhatsApp is also widely used to circulate false news and incendiary content with

the potential to exacerbate divisions and swing people’s political choices. This was the case in both Brazil’s presidential election campaign in 2018 and India’s general election campaign in 2019.<sup>102</sup>

The use of digital platforms to spread false information is intensifying ideological polarization and incentivizing the advocacy of hatred, violence and discrimination.<sup>103</sup> Yet, despite consistent calls from international human rights mechanisms and civil society organizations, these corporations continue to fail in their responsibility to respect human rights.<sup>104</sup>

## 4. CONSEQUENCES FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The politics of demonization creates many threats to human rights around the world, in multiple and complex ways. The following highlights four particular challenges that arise.

### THE UNIVERSALITY CHALLENGE: SELECTIVE REJECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Few leaders directly criticize the human rights framework in its entirety, but many do criticize the idea of particular rights for particular groups

of people and attack the institutions designed to protect rights.

Human rights actors have long been associated by their detractors with foreign values or agendas, or manifestations of an internationalist elite, or a globalized worldview which is undesirable or even dangerous. Such narratives are on the rise in most regions and increasingly in countries that have traditionally seen themselves as protectors of human rights. For example, Denmark, one of the original initiators of the Refugee Convention, has challenged the very concept of such a convention and questioned whether the full spectrum of rights applies to refugees and migrants.<sup>105</sup> Human rights are now frequently portrayed as a mechanism to frustrate national interests or protect criminals or terrorists. Strikingly, in the Philippines, human rights defenders have been vilified as “protectors of demons”.<sup>106</sup>

Controversial proposals to review and reform the whole concept of human rights in both public policy and academia have emerged as a new challenge. In July 2019, the USA State Department launched a Commission on Unalienable Rights tasked with providing “fresh thinking about human rights” and proposing “reforms of human rights discourse where it has departed from our nation’s founding principles of natural law and natural rights”.<sup>107</sup>



Solidarity action by  
Amnesty International  
Spain, Madrid, July 2017.  
© Xavier Gil Dalmau



Lahore based NGO  
Justajoo’s food  
distribution operations  
in the city, providing  
essential food relief  
supplies to communities  
in need, May 2020.  
© Ema Anis

Members of the Commission had previously spoken out against established sets of rights such as reproductive, LGBTI and women's rights.<sup>108</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis represents a perfect storm for those political leaders who have been sowing hatred and divisions in recent years. A moment of global emergency and widespread uncertainty, when people feel vulnerable and in need of protection and clear answers, can be exploited to frame human rights and public health as an either/or choice. Yet COVID-19 has shown how economic and social rights – such as the right to health, job security, safety in the workplace and fair working conditions – are crucial to human security and resilience.

Another common feature of the politics of demonization is attempting to delegitimize national and international institutions designed to safeguard human rights – such as the European Court of Human Rights, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights,<sup>109</sup> the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights<sup>110</sup> the International Criminal Court (ICC)<sup>111</sup> and the World Health Organization.<sup>112</sup> A common line of attack is to claim that these institutions represent the agendas of other countries or of elites and to invoke nationalist defences based on sovereignty.<sup>113</sup>

### THE SOLIDARITY CHALLENGE: SUPREMACIST POLITICS SETTING THE AGENDA

The demonization agenda is not a political project in which the general public is a passive participant. On the contrary, leaders who deploy the politics of demonization and argue that it is necessary to look after “our own first” enjoy significant popular support.

Across the world, many politicians who have traditionally been supportive of human rights have shown a lack of leadership and vision in their responses to the rise of the politics of demonization. They have lacked the courage of their convictions and this has contributed to a perceived lack of alternatives to narratives of demonization that claim to be “in the name of the people”. Some potential opponents have either retreated (willingly or otherwise) into a defensive posture, allowing demonizing narratives to set the agenda. Others have absorbed parts of those narratives – from loosening hate speech protections in Australia to tightening immigration controls in Europe,<sup>114</sup> and negotiating highly problematic international agreements, such as the European Union's refugee deal with Turkey<sup>115</sup> and Italy's deal with Libya.<sup>116</sup>

Supremacist views may experience a revival in the post-COVID-19 world,

but the crisis has clearly exposed their limits. It has shown how the fate of countries is deeply interconnected and international cooperation and solidarity are crucial when responding to global crises. No one can afford to look after “our own first” if we are to recover sustainably.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 we have also seen how human rights can be part of the solution, if countries deepen and expand on their human rights obligations of international cooperation and assistance.<sup>117</sup> While some countries have imposed trade restrictions on the import and export of essential commodities, which have included personal protective equipment and other crucial goods to address the effects of the pandemic, several states have worked to provide materials and resources to others.<sup>118</sup> Development banks and international financial institutions, including multilateral institutions, have also responded to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>119</sup> But they and the most economically powerful nations must do far more to meet the challenge, including cancelling the debt of the world's poorest countries, scaling up investments in health and social protections and phasing out fossil fuels, to ensure a just and sustainable recovery from the pandemic.<sup>120</sup>

### THE PRIORITY CHALLENGE: HUMAN RIGHTS VS SECURITY AND THE ECONOMY

Demonizing narratives and actions often rest on the argument that the demands of security and development – and perhaps, in the post-COVID world, public health – require human rights to be restricted. Often politicians take it as a given that security and economic concerns,



*Wasanii Sanaa Youth Organization in Kibera, Kenya, the largest slum in Africa, this group of young activists are spreading the importance of hope and human rights through action-packed theatre, poetry and dance. 8 May, 2018. © Amnesty International*



which are often legitimate and enjoy popular support, require limiting human rights and take primacy over human rights considerations in a zero-sum game. More than anyone, it is groups and people who face discrimination who bear the brunt of these limitations. Human rights are often marginalized in debates about security or development, or portrayed as an inconvenience, an indulgence to be overcome.

In some countries, the security agenda – whether framed as protecting national security or preventing crime – is based on the implied idea that populations need to be protected against whole segments of people based on their identity. Counter-terrorism has become a highly effective cover for limiting human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. For example, Egypt launched a crackdown on the rights of people identified as linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and portrayed them as a threat to national security.<sup>121</sup> In France, the long-term state of emergency after the violent attacks of 2015 imposed disproportionate restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly, many elements of which were made permanent in 2017.<sup>122</sup> In the Philippines, thousands of people, most of them poor, have been killed since President Duterte launched a “war on drugs” in 2016 vowing to wipe out crime within six months and announcing a policy that would target those using and selling drugs.<sup>123</sup>

Human rights are also subordinated or presented as obstacles to achieving economic development or protecting the welfare state. In India, human rights and environmental groups are demonized for opposing controversial projects.<sup>124</sup> Across Latin America, land and environmental defenders are threatened, arrested or killed for opposing governments or companies seeking to profit from their land and natural resources.<sup>125</sup> In several European countries, refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants are presented by the press and politicians alike as a threat to the sustainability of the welfare state.<sup>126</sup>

Such narratives have been propagated by a broad array of actors, whether political figures, corporations or media organizations. In many cases they have been exploited by sitting governments to justify repressive policies which demonize and target particular groups of people based on their identity.<sup>127</sup> The COVID-19 crisis and the new economic and security threats that arise in its wake are likely to intensify and exacerbate this challenge.

### **THE EFFECTIVENESS CHALLENGE: HUMAN RIGHTS DON'T RESONATE WITH MAJORITIES**

Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, have not been effective in convincing the majority of people around the world that human rights are for everyone and speak to their aspirations.

In a number of countries, notably the USA, human rights are often seen by people as something for “other people” and therefore less relevant to present political debates about “us”. In much of Africa and Asia, with the exception of social movements and grassroots groups that base their work on human rights ideals, the term “human rights” is too often identified with secular or elite groups that are seen as “westernized” and divorced from the religious and cultural values of society. In parts of Europe, human rights are viewed as a liberal, cosmopolitan concern and appear remote to many less privileged groups. And for many people around the world, human rights campaigns have often been too complicated or technical to resonate widely.

In part, this is a legacy of the fact that many human rights NGOs, including the larger organizations both globally and nationally, have focused on certain areas of human rights – primarily civil and political rights and non-discrimination – and paid much less attention to economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR).<sup>128</sup> Most organizations have focused more on overt discrimination, such as clear racial discrimination, and less on other forms of discrimination, such as exclusion from public resources

on the basis of socio-economic status or poverty. These choices reflect the fact that civil and political rights were historically deemed more important by much of the human rights movement and therefore became more clearly established. There are, of course, important exceptions to these statements and the human rights movement as a whole has made substantial changes in recent years, but this organizational self-reflection is important to continue and deepen such changes.

It was not until 2001 that Amnesty International decided to work on ESCR issues. Subsequently, in many countries, its campaigns on ESCR drew attention to the discrimination faced by women, particular minority ethnic groups, migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. Only in some countries did our work include violations facing a wider range of groups in society, such as the forced evictions of people living in informal settlements and those denied sexual and reproductive rights. It was not until 2018 that Amnesty International issued its first reports on the systematic effects of austerity.<sup>129</sup>

These choices, by Amnesty International and others, may have contributed to three outcomes. First, we have missed an opportunity to draw attention to the full range of different ways in which people are denied their rights. Second, we have missed the opportunity to identify commonalities between groups facing different forms of discrimination and who are often cynically set against each other by politicians. This has made it harder to show how politicians are deliberately seeking to divide groups facing disadvantage and block potential alliances between them to push for more equal societies. Third, our approach has perhaps contributed to a prevalent view in some countries that human rights are for “the other”. We have struggled to create understanding of human rights issues through continued awareness raising and education efforts and our effectiveness in engaging people at community level has been, at best, patchy.



*Hashim, an essential worker in the healthcare industry, greets his daughter through the closed door as he maintains social distance from his family as he works amid the coronavirus outbreak in New Rochelle, New York, U.S., 11 April, 2020. Picture taken April 11, 2020. © REUTERS/Joy Malone*

# SECTION II – RESPONDING TO THE POLITICS OF DEMONIZATION

How should human rights organizations respond to these challenges? Amnesty International is adopting four approaches, relevant to our role, which we would like to share. These are not mutually exclusive and can be combined and adapted, depending on the context.

It is no longer sufficient to assume the moral and legal high ground and expect to win people over. Far too many world leaders have successfully positioned human rights as subordinate to people's real or projected anxieties about security, welfare, development and identity. Political narratives of naked self-interest in a globalized zero-sum game have become more persuasive to many than the narrative of international cooperation and assistance, universal standards and shared humanity.

The COVID-19 crisis, like any watershed moment, presents important opportunities where choices can be made. For those who embrace the politics of demonization, it is an opportunity to continue to divide, polarize, sow hatred and gain more power. For the human rights movement, it is a moment to project a vision of a more equitable, sustainable and just world. It is in this context that Amnesty International should mobilize people in response to a widespread desire for societal change and to combat widespread narratives of demonization.

There is a sizeable and committed set of people in most regions and countries who provide a ready source of support for the human rights movement – those who are ideologically committed or who use human rights as the vehicle to advance their struggle. At a time when human rights are under attack, human rights organizations can be effective in rallying them and strengthening their advocacy.

This is important but in the long term it is not enough. Although human rights

are universal, they need the consent of a critical mass to be effective. Those who are actively and ideologically antagonistic to a human rights agenda (such as those with overt and deep-seated xenophobic, racist, sexist or homophobic views) may not be won over in the short to medium term. But there are always groups of people in the middle – people who are sympathetic to the objectives of human rights, but may have competing concerns about their country's security, their economic prospects or a loss of culture. These are the groups we must identify and connect with, whom we can call “unpersuaded” (see box below). These groups will vary in size from country to country (and from issue to issue) and comprise many different segments. They are likely to cross political and other spectrums, including people on the left and right, nationalists and internationalists and secular and religious people.

Amnesty International should proactively try to connect with these groups in the middle. Our proposed four approaches can enable us to do this.

## WHO ARE THE “UNPERSUADED”?

Audience research by Amnesty International and others in a range of countries around the world shows that only a minority of the population are either unquestioningly committed to or actively hostile to human rights for others. Large segments of society can be described as groups that “support human rights, but...”

Such groups appear to believe in human rights in principle but have concerns that prevent them from fully subscribing to a human rights agenda, for example supporting rights for non-nationals. They are open to the ideals of human rights but not yet convinced.

A survey carried out for Amnesty International UK showed that 67% of respondents agreed that, “universal human rights are an important basic foundation for a fair and just world”. However, only 33% agreed that we should uphold the human rights of “those that wish us harm” and 43% agreed that “sometimes human rights have to be relaxed to protect national security”.

Amnesty International Australia reports that on the issue of refugees, a broad middle section of people (about 50%-60% of the adult population) reluctantly tolerate the Australian government's inhumane and abusive policies towards people seeking asylum and refugees because they have not been offered alternative policies that are more humane and still address their security concerns. They are not fully on board with human rights-centred arguments on refugees, nor completely set against them.

## **APPROACH ONE: CHOOSING ISSUES THAT RESONATE WIDELY**

Connecting with these groups in the middle means addressing the struggles and concerns of a majority in society (by which we mean a majority of people in society from different groups, including, but not limited to, ethnic majorities). It is not enough to rely on those who are committed to human rights “for others”. At a time when human rights are increasingly seen, in many societies, as elitist or as favouring only minorities rather than as a tool to improve everyone’s lives,<sup>130</sup> we need to focus our energies on building wide and sustained support for human rights as something that benefits everyone.

This will have implications for the issues we choose to focus on in any given country – and these choices have a critical impact on how we and the human rights movement more generally are perceived. Amnesty International has a choice in each country it operates in. We can focus on a narrow set of human rights issues and affected groups and we may potentially win short-term victories but have little impact on the broader struggle for human rights in the country. Or we can tackle human rights issues that affect both a broad swathe of society as well as the most marginalized groups, with a view to winning over society at large. This second option may yield less short-term impact but is essential in the medium and longer term.

We also need long-term campaigns that specifically focus on shifts in public opinion to make it easier to achieve change, as opposed to campaigning solely for legal or policy change. To be clear, we are not advocating any dilution of our core principles. In fact, we are advocating a more principled approach over favouring short-term successes. Amnesty International should speak out on the most important human rights violations in the countries where we operate. We need to ensure we address all forms of discrimination and recognize they can interact to affect different groups in multiple ways.

For example, our work on refugees and migrants in Greece will have limited traction if we do not also address the catastrophic impacts of austerity on health and other rights of the host population.<sup>131</sup>

Amnesty International should have a balanced approach – some work that better resonates with majorities in society and some work on the rights of marginalized groups, irrespective of public support. The need to connect with the broad middle section should not be used as an excuse to avoid less popular issues – indeed, by working on human rights issues that affect majorities, we think we will be in a stronger position to work on these issues and to encourage alliances between groups facing different forms of oppression.

We will keep defending everyone’s human rights, including the rights of those who themselves oppose human rights. And we will continue to advance human issues that are controversial. But our objective is to bring a critical mass of people to the frontier, not to stand alone at the frontier. Amnesty International as a membership based organization is very well placed to achieve this and it would be a dereliction of duty if we did not aim to widen support for human rights. This does not mean taking a “middle-of-the-road” approach that aims to please everybody. It means effective persuasion that inspires and convinces rather than alienates large groups. We must project a vision that benefits everyone.

To do so, we envisage three possible ways forward.

First, we should be fully conscious of our overall portfolio of work in a given country. We should also ensure that some of our work in each country addresses the most prominent human rights concerns faced by a majority of the population. We know that people become more positive about human rights when they see their relevance to their everyday lives.<sup>132</sup> In particular, we need to ensure that our work reflects the needs of communities who are alienated from or ignored by establishment or elite decision makers.

Many politicians advocating xenophobia are seeking to build their support base to include those motivated by economic concerns. They shrewdly portray themselves as guarantors of social welfare, while seeking to blame “the establishment” or foreigners for worsening standards of living. These narratives have not been adequately challenged by many parts of the human rights movement, including Amnesty International. We have not focused sufficiently on the socio-economic realities and alienation felt by communities. Less privileged groups or lower-income communities are no more likely than other groups to support demonizing narratives. Indeed, many less privileged communities have a long and proud history of leading and championing rights-based organizing and campaigns. However, human rights groups, particularly those like Amnesty International whose original base in many countries comprised lawyers, academics and journalists, do not naturally speak to such constituencies – at least in the global North. Where individuals from marginalized communities feel unrepresented by or alienated from human rights arguments or are supportive of demonizing narratives, we believe this partly reflects the failure of the human rights movement to engage sufficiently with and address their human rights concerns.

Second, in order to demonstrate that human rights benefit all people and offer answers to people’s social, cultural and economic grievances, we need to better understand and address the root causes of those grievances. In particular, we know the human rights concerns of a majority of people in many countries relate to ESCR<sup>133</sup> and we believe that we therefore need to focus more on ESCR issues than we have done so far, especially in light of the COVID-19 crisis. Civil and political rights predominate in most of Amnesty International’s work; in future we need a more balanced approach that reflects the full spectrum of human rights and the interconnectedness between civil and political rights and ESCR, both for majority as well as minority communities. The COVID-19 crisis shows that the most marginalized groups, denied their economic and social rights, often bear the brunt of



violations such as punitive policing and restrictions on their rights to protest. Lack access to resources also means that they are less able to challenge these violations. We must push countries to guarantee all rights for everyone so that no one in society is left behind. This should include paying more attention to the right to work and rights at work (in the face of automation, informal economies and deindustrialization), housing rights, healthcare rights, social security, the climate crisis and austerity, and doing so in a way that addresses discrimination and exclusion on a variety of grounds including gender, race, age and class. For example, we cannot ignore the fact that, because of entrenched or imposed gender-based discrimination, women do not enjoy full access to ESCR and make up the majority in society affected by discrimination, exclusion from public services and resources, conflicts, natural disasters and climate-related harms.<sup>134</sup>

Amnesty International should be at the forefront of calling for social and economic security measures which are fit for purpose

in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and making the case that human rights can play a key role in tackling social and economic inequality. While we are impartial on political ideologies, we can and should challenge economic practices that clearly undermine human rights, such as taxation levels and practices that starve the state of the resources it needs to fulfil human rights, the appalling use of public resources to heat the planet in the case of fossil fuel subsidies and practices that permit private companies to have undue influence over policymaking at the cost of the human rights of the wider population.

Such work is necessary as a matter of principle as well as strategy – we need to ensure that our work no longer disproportionately addresses only one half of the International Bill of Rights, namely civil and political rights, but rather tackles civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights in an integrated way.

In order to choose issues that resonate, we need to better understand the audiences we are seeking to engage. This requires

significant investment in focus group research and audience analysis. Such work will help us gauge what kind of human rights concerns people have in a specific context. It can also help us develop a more nuanced understanding of factors behind public support of or tolerance for the politics of demonization, including concerns that might be harder to address, such as fears of cultural displacement.

Finally, as part of our ongoing strategic thinking and planning, we should be consulting broadly with people across the political spectrum who are open to persuasion but as yet unconvinced, inclusive of all genders, classes and other demographics, in order to better understand their human rights aspirations and concerns, and the best ways to fulfil and address them.



*Women pay tribute to human rights activist and councilwoman Marielle Franco, to mark the second year of her murder, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 14 March, 2020. © REUTERS/Amanda Perobelli*

## APPROACH TWO: SPEAKING TO THE HEART

Persuasive communication is key to the struggle for human rights. Many of those who undermine human rights through demonization are able to connect well with people; we must take up the challenge to counter their cynicism with our positive message of how we all benefit when we move forward in unity rather than division.

The advocates of demonization gain traction when they speak to people's emotions. We need to learn from that. Working on the right issues, having good evidence of human rights violations and showing the impact of violations on people's lives is essential but it is not enough. While it will help us mobilize people who are likely to agree with us, it will not motivate many of those who have yet to be convinced. We need to communicate about human rights

in a way that relates to people's own emotions, identity, values, beliefs and lived experiences, as well as to their reason.<sup>135</sup> We have to spell out how threats to human rights are threats to society's values. We need to understand the anxieties people may have about national security, welfare or identity and shape messages that better take account of such anxieties. In short, we need to communicate better than those who resort to the politics of demonization.

One approach is to highlight the connections between human rights and national or community values or aspirations. Amnesty International as a global movement does have to speak with a voice that is universal and does not identify with any particular country. But we can and should refer to universal values in terms that resonate with a society's self-perception. For example, the Executive Director of Amnesty International Indonesia has highlighted in many public events how respect for transgender people is rooted in

Indonesia's historic experience. In the aftermath of the Christchurch terrorist attacks of March 2019, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern focused her attention solely on finding those responsible of the attacks, without engaging in a "war on terror" rhetoric. She stressed the country's multi-ethnicity and welcoming attitude towards newcomers, and called on everyone to prevent hate speech and discrimination against Muslim people.<sup>136</sup>

The "Together for Yes" campaign to abolish the abortion ban in Ireland appealed to the idea of Ireland as "a compassionate country, which needs laws that reflect the reality of people's lives". A broad and diverse range of civil society groups, including Catholics, joined forces under the campaign's umbrella.<sup>137</sup>

The Scottish government expressly interweaves Scottish nationalism and a multiculturalism and is one of the few governments in Europe that would run a campaign like "One Scotland, many



*Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern hugs a mosque-goer at the Kilbirnie Mosque on 17 March, 2019 in Wellington, New Zealand. © Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images*

cultures”. Notably, Scottish flags are flown proudly on anti-racism marches.

Secondly, there is much talk in the NGO sector and beyond about creating counter-narratives. But in fact, we should come up with our own narrative, not one trying to rebut the other side. Something that can excite and galvanize people, most probably by presenting solutions which benefit people rather than solely criticizing the world as it is.

There is a huge appetite among the public to consider bold ideas, especially in a world recovering from COVID-19. Organizations like Amnesty International have a responsibility to put forward such ideas and argue for them. Merely calling out the worst aspects of demonization and complaining about shrinking civic space is defensive. Instead, we need to present incisive solutions. Organizing predominantly around what the other side is doing bolsters them, focuses public discourse on their demands and does not build the large movement that we want for our cause.

For our messages to cut through, they need to be innovative and courageous. They should be ambitious and expand the possible. They need to command attention in a noisy world.

Thirdly, our messages need to project confidence. Advocates of demonization often benefit from being perceived as having the safety of the people at heart. They paradoxically do this by raising a set of real or perceived fears, disempowering people and then making them feel stronger by promising to ensure the safety of the nation. Human rights work cannot and should not follow this pattern, but we need to deal with how people feel. Research has shown that racist attitudes lessen when people feel strong and confident.<sup>138</sup> By campaigning on our bold policy proposals and a vision of a better future, we can come together as a courageous movement, strong thanks to our joint action and able together to solve problems.

Those advocating for bigotry are often seen as having an advantage because

they appeal to the basest aspects of human nature. But humans are a social species that built the modern world thanks to cooperation. This is why Amnesty International developed a new brand platform in 2019 of “Humanity”:

- *Within everyone is the power of humanity. This power lifts us all. With it, we can change society for the better.*
- *Together, we act in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere, connected in our shared humanity.*
- *Amnesty International offers a global movement which mobilizes the humanity in everyone so that we can all live with care and respect for each other.*

Our platform is built on four pillars – to show that change is possible, to appeal to the moral courage in everyone, to display strength in unity and to make human rights relatable.

This brings us to the fourth point in this section – we should reject jargon in our public-facing work in favour of plain, accessible language. We cannot ignore the fact that demonizing leaders are able to connect with people at a deep emotional level. If we are to share our messages effectively, we need to present what we have to say in a way that will be heard by most people. This does not mean weakening what we are calling for, rather it is about strengthening the way we call for it.

Lastly, we cannot simply produce smart materials and then sit back. They have to reach people. The 2016 USA presidential election was significantly influenced by “fake news” produced, in some cases by teenagers in Eastern Europe, and hyper-targeted to swing voters. The social media propaganda war has been a huge leveller; anyone can participate directly and to potentially devastating effect. To have an impact requires not only good data and strong and accessible content, but crucially it needs the ability to deliver it on a scale that will make sure it is seen by those who need to see it.

## APPROACH THREE: BUILDING MOVEMENT DIVERSITY


Globally, human rights movements are becoming ever more diverse. They are creating new partnerships and alliances that embrace people from across the economic spectrum. They are also adopting approaches that recognize people’s different experiences of oppression based on their identities and how different forms of discrimination interact and shape their exposure to human rights violations and their ability to seek redress for them. It is paramount that we learn from this and invest in the diversity of our movement.

To live up to Amnesty International’s vision of global solidarity we need to ensure our movement is made up of and defends people across the divides which the politics of demonization create and foster. As a matter of principle, the composition of the Amnesty International movement and its workforce should reflect the diversity of the societies in which we operate and with which we want to engage. Our analysis indicates that a broad membership base also strengthens our position to stand up to the politics of demonization effectively.

Human rights are increasingly stereotyped as the concern of educated, global-minded and middle-class people. As a membership organization, who we are influences what we do. Many parts of Amnesty International do not consistently appeal to, engage with or mobilize groups facing disadvantage, for example on the basis of gender, class or ethnicity.

Our International Executive Committee recognized in 2011 that: “The majority of people in the organization are middle class, with relatively easy access to academic education, and from the global North. Thus, there is a stark contrast between our membership and the people whose cases we campaign on”.<sup>139</sup> Since 2011, this situation has changed,




 Youth activists in Salvador, Brazil,  
 14 December 2018. © Shona  
 Hamilton/Amnesty International

particularly with our significant growth in the global South and East, but with the exception of a few national Sections, we remain a predominantly middle class organization. This limits our ability to speak to and mobilize the majority of people we need to effect change. In 2017, our International Council adopted a plan aimed at continuing to improve Amnesty International's practices, culture and outcomes with respect to gender and diversity.<sup>140</sup> This needs to be fully implemented.

In each country, Amnesty International needs to be an organization whose membership cuts across class, ethnicity and other identities. If our movement does not reflect the diverse composition of our societies, we will not be in touch with the concerns of key groups. We will lose legitimacy and therefore undermine our effectiveness. Amnesty International needs not only to partner and work with people from disadvantaged groups, but to encourage them to be part of the organization and help them achieve their objectives.

We suggest three avenues that could lead to a more diverse Amnesty International.

First, we need to diversify our mobilization and engagement strategies. We need to focus our efforts on engaging people from a wider range of socio-economic, class and educational backgrounds, listening to them and building dynamic partnerships with them.

Second, we need to invest in human rights education to equip new generations to stand up for themselves and their rights in the face of those promoting demonization. This involves promoting a better understanding of what human rights are, how they work and how they affect everyone's life. Human rights education initiatives can bring people together and provide spaces to learn about realizing human rights together.

Third, as an organization we need to diversify the composition of our staff and volunteer roles. This should include

measures such as reviewing our hiring practices or making it easier for students and young people from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds to access professional opportunities. We should partner with schools and universities from disadvantaged areas with a view to establishing fellowship schemes, training and career programmes for students.

## **APPROACH FOUR: FOCUSING ON COMMUNITY ORGANIZING**

In order to connect with those who are as yet unpersuaded, Amnesty International needs to engage more with those seeking change at the local level. To this end, we need to demonstrate better the interconnection between the international, national and local. International human rights organizations are in danger of appearing ineffectual

and irrelevant where they do not connect with local struggles.

Demonizing narratives often play to people's anxieties about the dilution of their common identity and the loss of a sense of community or belonging. Leaders promote these narratives by attacking a supposed "transnational elite" that poses a threat to national identity. The human rights movement, with its internationalist connotations, is often linked to this purportedly harmful "elite", in opposition to national interests.

However, as a movement of people, Amnesty International has the potential to play a key role within communities, promoting both global and local solidarity. We can help to provide a sense of belonging if we get the mechanisms right, with the necessary blend of activity, anger, approachability and ability to make change. We need to use our convening power smartly – on a local as well as a global stage – projecting the

idea of human rights being for "us" and our communities, as well as for others far away. This will take different forms in different contexts and it merits bold experimentation. We suggest two possible approaches, noting that parts of the movement are already working in these ways.<sup>141</sup>

Firstly, we should focus on equipping people to take action within the communities and networks where they are already active, such as political parties or faith communities. This will require us to share power and support others to build power – a top-down approach to activism cannot enable the kind of local relevance which we need to foster. It will also require us to focus more on organizing, namely helping identify and empower those who would like to step up and take a more active or responsible role in leading campaigning and activism locally. In this respect, the human rights movement in the global North should learn lessons from many parts

of the global South where community organization is at the heart of activism.

Secondly, we should enable more local forms of activism for human rights, encouraging and supporting activist leaders to engage their own local and national authorities and enabling activists to find and test their own ideas for campaigning and exerting public pressure.

This means that there should be a good balance between activism focused locally and nationally, on the one hand, and international activism, on the other. Activists who are well engaged in local struggles have greater legitimacy to be part of a global community that links together local struggles.

## **STRENGTHEN EXISTING PARTNERSHIPS AND BUILD NEW ONES**

Providing an alternative to narratives of demonization requires a collective effort.

For these four approaches to work, Amnesty International needs to invest in partnerships with both traditional and non-traditional actors at the global, national and local levels.

We need to recognize and be open to the human rights movement's diversity. We should break down the barriers that still exist within the NGO sector. We should instead open ourselves up to better and more fruitful cooperation and develop stronger connections with other institutions and informal networks – big and small – working for and with communities. We should think of this in terms of a spectrum diverse enough to cover communities which cohere around shared values, beliefs and practices, and technology platforms which bring people across the world into communication with each other.

Amnesty International should be open to partnerships with groups that rely on values which have commonalities with human rights but may resonate better with particular parts of society. We often work with groups that advance social justice and environmental protection and these are often based on values and goals that are clearly linked to the human rights framework. We need to focus on deepening such partnerships.

Where there is common ground there is also scope for more collaboration with faith-based groups that speak the language of faith on human rights issues.<sup>142</sup>

Amnesty International is independent from any religion and would not use religion as the basis for its work. And we should not presume to teach religion to religious people. However, we should work with and provide a platform to partners who support human rights from a faith perspective. For example, our human rights education efforts have involved Imams opposing female genital mutilation. In addition, individual Amnesty International members who are members of faith groups should be encouraged to promote human rights and Amnesty International's work within those communities.

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*(Cover) A demonstrator offers a flower to a police officer as teachers and students take part in a protest demanding immediate political change in Algiers, Algeria March 13, 2019. © REUTERS/Ramzi Boudina*



*People take part in a Gay Pride event which has been down-scaled amid coronavirus disease (COVID-19) fears, in Jerusalem 28 June, 2020. © REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun*

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