The Influence of International Law on State Sovereignty and Human Rights

Dr Anwar ul Mustafa Shah
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh, Jamshoro
amustafa.shah@usindh.edu.pk
Dr. Farhana Kousar
PhD in International Relations from Federal Urdu University Karachi, Pakistan.
farhanakausar1212@gmail.com
Abdul Sattar Khokhar
Lecturer in Pakistan Studies, Sindh Government College Education
khokhar.sattar@gmail.com

Abstract
This article examines the evolving relationship between international law, state sovereignty, and the promotion of human rights in the contemporary global order. Historically, the principle of sovereignty, rooted in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, has granted states the supreme authority within their territories, free from external interference. However, the post-World War II era marked a paradigm shift, with the rise of international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, establishing norms that transcend national boundaries. These developments introduced new legal and moral obligations that often challenge the traditional concept of absolute sovereignty. The paper explores the historical evolution of sovereignty, the legal mechanisms that promote human rights, and the theoretical tensions between state autonomy and international norms. It analyzes key legal instruments, including the ICCPR, ICESCR, and ECHR, alongside institutions like the ICC, ICJ, and UNHRC. The study also discusses state practice in human rights compliance, highlighting issues of selective enforcement and the challenges faced by developing nations in integrating international norms into domestic legal systems. Regional perspectives, such as those of the African Union, European Union, and ASEAN, are evaluated for their unique approaches to balancing sovereignty and human rights. Contemporary challenges including populism, digital sovereignty, and climate-induced human rights crises underscore the urgency of rethinking how sovereignty and international law can be harmonized. The article concludes with policy recommendations aimed at enhancing legal cooperation, strengthening institutional mechanisms, and fostering global consensus on the universality of human rights. Overall, the research provides a comprehensive overview of how international law influences, constrains, and complements state sovereignty in the pursuit of a more just and accountable international system.
Keywords: State Sovereignty, International Law, Human Rights, R2P, ICJ, UNHRC, Digital Sovereignty, Customary Law, Global Governance, Enforcement Mechanisms.

Introduction

International law has historically served as a critical tool for structuring inter-state relations, rooted in the principle of sovereign equality that emerged from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This classical model of sovereignty asserted that states possess supreme authority within their borders, protected from external interference in internal affairs (Shaw, 2021). Such legal autonomy granted states near-absolute control over their legislative,

judicial, and executive functions. However, over the centuries, especially during the twentieth century, the scope of international law expanded to include human rights, environmental protection, and transnational accountability, thereby exerting influence beyond traditional state-centric confines (Besson, 2011). This development created a normative tension between respecting sovereign jurisdiction and enforcing global legal norms that transcend national boundaries.

The end of World War II marked a paradigm shift in global governance and international law, most notably with the establishment of the United Nations and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. For the first time, human rights became central to the global legal order. Instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights institutionalized mechanisms through which individuals, rather than states, could become subjects of international law (Alston & Goodman, 2013). These frameworks shifted the locus of accountability, allowing for external legal critique of domestic policies, especially those that violate fundamental rights. This transition implied that sovereignty was no longer merely a right, but also a responsibility a concept increasingly invoked through doctrines such as the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P), which assert that when states fail to safeguard their populations from gross human rights violations, international intervention may be morally and legally justified.

This evolution, however, has sparked significant tension between the normative goals of international human rights law and the practical realities of state behavior. Many states view international scrutiny of their domestic affairs as a challenge to their sovereignty, especially when interventions appear selective or politically motivated. For instance, states like Sudan, Myanmar, and even powerful democracies have expressed resistance to international adjudication of their internal policies, often invoking non-interference principles. This reflects the broader debate between universalism the belief in globally applicable legal norms—and relativism, where cultural, historical, and political contexts are deemed critical to interpreting rights obligations (Chesterman, 2019). Furthermore, while some states willingly adopt international treaties, enforcement often depends more on political will than legal obligation, especially in the absence of robust compliance mechanisms. The resulting dynamic illustrates that sovereignty and human rights frequently exist in a state of uneasy coexistence.

Against this backdrop, the central question guiding this research is: *How does international law influence or constrain the sovereignty of states, particularly in relation to the enforcement of human rights?* This inquiry is significant because it addresses a persistent paradox in global governance—one where international legal frameworks advocate for universal justice, yet enforcement remains contingent upon the consent and cooperation of sovereign states. From humanitarian crises and refugee flows to digital surveillance and freedom of expression, human rights challenges increasingly transcend borders. However, without reconciling the gap between legal norms and political realities, these frameworks risk losing legitimacy or effectiveness. This study aims to explore how legal doctrines, institutional mechanisms, and political dynamics interact to either reinforce

or undermine the balance between sovereignty and international human rights commitments.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to:

1. Examine the historical and conceptual development of the tension between international law and state sovereignty.
2. Analyze how international human rights norms challenge traditional notions of absolute sovereignty.
3. Investigate the legal instruments and enforcement mechanisms that influence state compliance with human rights obligations.
4. Evaluate the extent to which state practice aligns or conflicts with international human rights norms in different regional and political contexts.
5. Provide policy recommendations for harmonizing sovereignty with international human rights law in an increasingly interdependent world.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal methodology. Primary legal sources such as international treaties, conventions, and case law (e.g., ICJ, ICC decisions) are analyzed alongside secondary sources, including scholarly articles, legal commentaries, and policy papers. The research also incorporates comparative legal analysis to assess regional human rights frameworks and how they interact with national sovereignty. Furthermore, a case-based approach is used to evaluate specific instances of humanitarian intervention and state compliance, particularly in the Global South. This methodology enables a critical examination of both normative frameworks and empirical state behavior within the evolving landscape of international law.

Historical Evolution

The concept of sovereignty, as we understand it in international relations today, has its roots in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe. This agreement established the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, laying the foundation for a state-centric international legal order (Shaw, 2021). Under this framework, states were considered legally equal, with exclusive authority over their territories, and no external actor—be it religious, imperial, or supranational—could intervene in a state's internal governance. This "Westphalian sovereignty" emphasized autonomy, territorial integrity, and political independence as sacrosanct principles. For centuries, international law operated within this rigid understanding, with treaties and customs primarily governing relations *between* states, not *within* them. Consequently, issues such as how a state treated its own citizens remained outside the purview of international legal scrutiny, barring instances of war or treaties expressly limiting sovereignty.

However, the 20th century witnessed a gradual transformation in this rigid legal paradigm, particularly after the devastation of World War I and II. The League of Nations, created in 1919, marked the first major attempt at formalizing international cooperation and collective security, though it lacked enforcement capabilities and failed to prevent further global conflict (Cassese, 2005). Its failure gave way to the establishment of the United

Nations in 1945, with a more robust institutional structure aimed at maintaining peace, preventing atrocities, and promoting development. While the UN Charter retained the principle of sovereign equality (Article 2.1) and non-interference (Article 2.7), it also introduced Chapter VII powers allowing intervention in cases threatening international peace and security. This dual structure reflected the emerging recognition that state behavior toward its population could have transnational consequences, warranting international legal concern. Gradually, international law began moving beyond state-to-state relations, embracing new norms that would have once been dismissed as violations of sovereignty.

A watershed moment in this shift was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, which signaled a new era in international legal thought by affirming the inherent dignity and equal rights of all human beings (Alston & Goodman, 2013). Though not a binding treaty, the UDHR became a foundational reference point for subsequent legal instruments like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). These treaties, forming the so-called "International Bill of Human Rights," redefined the scope of international legal obligations to include state conduct toward individuals, irrespective of borders. This marked a shift from classical sovereignty to a model of conditional or responsible sovereignty, wherein the international community could legitimately scrutinize state practices in areas like genocide, torture, or discrimination (Donnelly, 2013). Over time, these principles influenced the development of regional human rights systems (e.g., the European and Inter-American Courts of Human Rights), international criminal accountability mechanisms, and doctrines like Responsibility to Protect (R2P). This historical evolution illustrates a fundamental transformation: sovereignty, once a shield against external accountability, became increasingly contingent upon respect for universal human rights.

Conceptual Framework

The relationship between state sovereignty and international human rights law is fundamentally shaped by how each is defined and understood in international legal discourse. State sovereignty is traditionally defined as the supreme authority of a state over its territory, people, and internal affairs, free from external interference. This Westphalian understanding has been foundational in international relations since 1648, establishing the principle of *non-intervention* (Krasner, 1999). In contrast, human rights are generally understood as inalienable entitlements inherent to all human beings by virtue of their humanity, regardless of state boundaries or domestic legal systems (Donnelly, 2013). Codified in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and subsequent treaties like the ICCPR and ICESCR, these rights impose moral and legal obligations that transcend national jurisdictions. The tension between these two principles arises when a state's internal policies—shielded by sovereignty—violate internationally recognized human rights norms. As globalization and international cooperation have increased, the classical notion of absolute sovereignty has been increasingly contested, replaced by a more interdependent understanding where states are both sovereign and accountable to international norms (Shaw, 2021). This evolving dynamic

necessitates a conceptual reconciliation of sovereignty with binding human rights obligations, which remains a core debate in both legal theory and international relations.

At the philosophical core of this debate lies the dichotomy between natural law and legal positivism in international law. Natural law theorists assert that legal norms must align with universal moral values, often grounded in the intrinsic dignity of human beings. According to this tradition, the legitimacy of sovereignty itself is contingent upon the protection of fundamental human rights (Finnis, 1980). Consequently, if a state violates these rights, its claim to unqualified sovereignty weakens. This perspective underpins many humanitarian interventions and justifies international oversight on the basis of a higher moral order. In contrast, legal positivists maintain that law derives its authority from formal sources—such as treaties, state consent, and customs—and not from moral or ethical considerations (Kelsen, 1945). Within this framework, state sovereignty remains the cornerstone of international legal order, and human rights obligations are only binding to the extent that states have voluntarily accepted them. Hence, for positivists, sovereignty takes precedence unless a state has explicitly waived it through legal instruments. This dichotomy remains unresolved, but in practice, international law has increasingly moved toward a hybrid approach that acknowledges the role of moral imperatives while retaining the structural emphasis on consent and sovereignty.

The theoretical interpretation of sovereignty and human rights in international relations is further enriched by three dominant schools of thought: Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism.

Realist scholars view international law as subordinate to the interests and power of states. Sovereignty, in this view, is not just a legal principle but a strategic asset—states comply with human rights norms only when doing so aligns with their national interests (Mearsheimer, 2001). Realists are skeptical of the efficacy of international legal instruments, arguing that power politics ultimately determine whether and how international human rights obligations are enforced.

In contrast, Liberalism posits that international institutions, law, and cooperation can regulate state behavior and promote global norms, including human rights (Slaughter, 2004). From a liberal perspective, sovereignty is not an obstacle but a vehicle for responsible governance when embedded within a system of shared values and institutional checks. International courts, treaties, and transnational civil society actors are all tools to reconcile state autonomy with global accountability.

Constructivism adds a sociological dimension, arguing that state behavior is shaped not only by material interests but by ideational factors such as identity, norms, and legitimacy (Wendt, 1999). In this framework, sovereignty and human rights are not fixed entities but social constructs that evolve through discourse, interaction, and normative pressure. States may internalize human rights norms over time, especially when they wish to be perceived as legitimate members of the international community. This theory explains why even powerful states, while selective in compliance, still engage with international human rights mechanisms.

Each of these approaches offers a different lens for understanding the dynamic between sovereignty and international human rights law. While

realism highlights the limits of enforcement, liberalism underscores the potential for legal and institutional frameworks to facilitate compliance. Constructivism, meanwhile, captures the normative shifts that are reshaping both sovereignty and the global human rights regime. In sum, the conceptual framework for this study is grounded in a multidimensional analysis that spans legal definitions, normative philosophy, and international relations theory. This enables a holistic understanding of how sovereignty and human rights interact, compete, and potentially converge in contemporary international law.

Legal Instruments and Human Rights Regimes

Legal instruments and human rights regimes form the backbone of the international legal framework dedicated to the promotion and protection of human dignity worldwide. Among the most significant treaties are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). These treaties articulate binding obligations upon states to uphold fundamental freedoms, such as the right to life, freedom of speech, fair trial, education, and access to health. The ICCPR and ICESCR, both adopted in 1966 and entering into force in 1976, transformed the aspirational goals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into enforceable legal standards. Their optional protocols have further enhanced their justiciability by permitting individual complaint mechanisms (Nowak, 2005). The ECHR, operational since 1953 under the Council of Europe, is distinguished by its robust judicial mechanism, allowing individuals to directly challenge states at the European Court of Human Rights—a model many scholars consider a benchmark for regional human rights systems (Mowbray, 2012).

In addition to treaty law, customary international law and the concept of jus cogens (peremptory norms) play a crucial role in reinforcing human rights. Customary norms, derived from consistent state practice and opinio juris, offer a universal layer of protection even when states are not parties to specific treaties. Examples include the prohibition of torture, slavery, and genocide. Jus cogens norms occupy an even higher legal status and are non-derogable under any circumstances, compelling states to adhere regardless of treaty obligations. This hierarchy of norms underscores the moral and legal imperative of protecting core human rights as fundamental principles of the international order (Cassese, 2005). The interplay of customary and treaty law helps close legal gaps and ensures that human rights obligations are applicable even in cases of treaty withdrawal or non-ratification. It also informs the development of regional instruments and provides a legal basis for humanitarian intervention under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), although such doctrines remain contested in state practice.

Mechanisms of enforcement remain one of the most debated aspects of the international human rights regime. Bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) offer varied avenues for addressing violations. The UNHRC, though lacking direct punitive powers, uses Universal Periodic Reviews and special rapporteurs to exert political pressure and promote compliance. The ICC, established under the Rome Statute in 2002, prosecutes individuals for crimes such as genocide, war

crimes, and crimes against humanity, embodying the shift from state to individual accountability. The ICJ, as the principal judicial organ of the UN, adjudicates inter-state disputes and issues advisory opinions on legal questions—including human rights obligations—though its jurisdiction is limited to consenting states. Despite criticisms regarding selectivity, limited enforcement power, and political influence, these institutions collectively represent a growing architecture for accountability and norm-setting in international human rights law. They signal an ongoing transformation in the balance between sovereignty and global moral responsibility, even as states negotiate the boundaries of their legal commitments.

State Practice and Compliance

The internalization of international human rights law by states is often shaped by political systems, domestic legal traditions, and strategic interests. States adopt and interpret these norms through a combination of constitutional incorporation, legislative alignment, and judicial practice. For instance, democratic regimes tend to integrate international human rights treaties more readily into their domestic legal frameworks due to institutional checks and vibrant civil society engagement (Neumayer, 2020). However, the process is not always uniform or sincere. Some states engage in "legal transplantation" where laws are adopted without robust implementation, primarily to gain international legitimacy or donor support (Landman & Carvalho, 2022). Additionally, states may selectively prioritize certain rights—civil and political—over economic, social, and cultural ones, reflecting historical inequalities and institutional constraints. Even in systems where human rights are formally protected, enforcement often relies on political will and capacity. This gap between ratification and realization reveals the complexities of state practice and underscores the importance of institutional robustness, civic accountability, and sustained external pressure.

Selective compliance remains a persistent issue in the global human rights regime. States may comply with international norms only when it aligns with their national interests or external incentives, often disregarding obligations that conflict with strategic, security, or economic goals. For instance, powerful states frequently avoid accountability for violations, either by withdrawing from international mechanisms or blocking adverse judgments (Risse & Sikkink, 2021). The United States' withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council in 2018 and its reluctance to ratify major treaties like the CRC and CEDAW exemplify such resistance. Similarly, authoritarian regimes may engage in what scholars call "human rights mimicry"— symbolic compliance meant to deflect criticism without actual reform (Ginsburg & Simpser, 2021). This duality fosters a culture of double standards in international law, where smaller or developing states are subjected to greater scrutiny and sanction than their more powerful counterparts. The credibility of the global human rights system, therefore, is undermined not just by non-compliance but by this uneven application of norms and mechanisms, raising fundamental questions about fairness, equality, and the politicization of international law.

Developing countries face unique structural and systemic challenges in aligning domestic legal orders with international human rights norms. Limited administrative capacity, resource constraints, and institutional

fragility often hinder implementation even when political will exists (Elkins et al., 2023). Moreover, many developing states contend with legal pluralism—where customary, religious, and statutory legal systems coexist—complicating the harmonization of international and domestic norms (Merry, 2022). In some contexts, the perception that human rights are Western-imposed or incompatible with local traditions adds another layer of resistance. For instance, rights related to gender equality, LGBTQ+ issues, or freedom of expression are frequently contested in conservative societies where traditional or religious values dominate public discourse. Furthermore, aid conditionalities and global governance dynamics can fuel resentment, prompting states to view compliance as external imposition rather than internal necessity. These dynamics suggest that fostering genuine compliance requires not only legal and technical interventions but also inclusive dialogue, localized frameworks, and capacity-building initiatives tailored to national contexts.

Regional Perspectives

Regional organizations play an increasingly important role in shaping the interface between state sovereignty and human rights enforcement. Among these, the African Union (AU) has gradually evolved its stance on sovereignty, especially through its African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). The AU emphasizes the principle of non-indifference over non-interference, a shift evident in the AU's endorsement of interventions in member states in cases of gross human rights violations (Murray & Long, 2021). The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, though limited in jurisdiction and state acceptance, has issued important rulings such as in *Tanganyika Law Society v. Tanzania*, demonstrating the court's ability to challenge national laws in favor of broader human rights norms. However, implementation remains inconsistent due to political resistance from member states that view such rulings as threats to their domestic jurisdiction. Despite these limitations, the AU represents a bold example of regional efforts to advance human rights, balancing respect for sovereignty with the continent's historical legacies of colonialism and authoritarianism.

In contrast, the European Union (EU) has developed one of the most robust regional human rights systems globally, centered on the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and enforced by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). EU member states have ceded significant legal authority to supranational institutions, reflecting a post-sovereign model of governance. The ECtHR's binding judgments often compel states to revise domestic laws and practices, as seen in cases involving minority rights, press freedoms, and due process. A prominent example includes *Hirst v. United Kingdom (No. 2),* where the UK was ordered to amend its blanket ban on prisoner voting. While such rulings sometimes face domestic pushback—as seen in Brexit-era discourses—the EU legal framework remains a powerful testament to how regional integration can both constrain and enhance state sovereignty by embedding human rights in shared legal standards (Krommendijk, 2015).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) presents a different model, characterized by a strong emphasis on non-interference and consensus. Its ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD), adopted in 2012, has been criticized for subordinating human rights to regional and national

particularities, allowing states to interpret obligations subjectively. Moreover, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) lacks enforcement power, operating primarily as a consultative body. This reflects ASEAN's prioritization of regional harmony and respect for sovereignty over enforceable norms. Nonetheless, civil society engagement and international scrutiny have pressured some ASEAN members, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, to take more concrete human rights measures, although inconsistently. The region's cautious engagement with human rights illustrates the tension between sovereignty preservation and normative convergence, revealing that sovereignty remains a contested and negotiated principle in regional frameworks.

Together, these regional experiences reveal diverse approaches to the intersection of sovereignty and human rights. The African Union experiments with conditional sovereignty based on collective responsibility; the European Union advances a post-sovereign legal regime rooted in binding supranational judgments; and ASEAN maintains a guarded approach, prioritizing state autonomy. The effectiveness of regional human rights courts and institutions depends not only on their legal mandates but also on political will, public support, and broader geopolitical contexts.

Contemporary Challenges

In recent years, the rise of populism and nationalism has posed significant challenges to the international human rights regime. Across democracies and authoritarian states alike, populist leaders have increasingly invoked sovereignty to justify withdrawal from or non-compliance with international obligations, often portraying human rights as foreign impositions that threaten national identity and security. This trend is evident in countries such as Hungary and Poland, where governments have curtailed judicial independence and media freedom while resisting decisions from supranational bodies like the European Court of Human Rights (Grimm et al., 2017). Nationalist rhetoric reframes sovereignty as absolute and unaccountable, undermining the post-WWII consensus on universal human rights. These developments reveal the fragility of multilateral norms in the face of domestic political realignments and the need for international legal frameworks to better engage with local democratic processes and national anxieties.

Another frontier in the sovereignty-human rights tension is the digital domain, where questions of cyber sovereignty intersect with civil and political rights. States increasingly claim control over data flows, online speech, and digital infrastructure, citing national security and cultural autonomy. China's "Great Firewall" and Russia's efforts to establish a sovereign internet exemplify state-led efforts to control the digital sphere (Deibert, 2020). At the same time, digital surveillance, internet shutdowns, and algorithmic censorship raise serious human rights concerns, particularly regarding freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information. International law is currently ill-equipped to regulate these rapidly evolving domains, as no comprehensive treaty governs digital rights globally. While soft law instruments like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights offer some guidance, enforceability remains weak. Thus, the cyber age demands new normative frameworks that preserve legitimate

sovereignty claims while ensuring accountability and the protection of digital human rights across borders.

Finally, climate change, global inequality, and migration represent profound transnational challenges that both transcend and reshape traditional notions of sovereignty. Climate-induced displacement, for instance, raises complex legal questions about state responsibility and the rights of climate refugees, who often fall outside existing protection regimes like the 1951 Refugee Convention. Small island nations, disproportionately affected by rising sea levels, have called for stronger global cooperation and legal innovation, arguing that the right to a sustainable environment is inseparable from broader human rights protections (Knox, 2018). Similarly, global migration flows have triggered restrictive border policies in many developed countries, often justified on sovereign grounds but criticized for violating international refugee and human rights law. Inequitable access to resources and vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights how global inequalities undermine the realization of socio-economic rights. These challenges reveal that sovereignty cannot be treated as a zero-sum concept in a globalized world shared problems require shared solutions, and the human rights regime must evolve to reflect this interdependence.

Conclusion

The complex relationship between international law, state sovereignty, and human rights continues to evolve in an increasingly interconnected and contested global order. While sovereignty has traditionally been viewed as the cornerstone of statehood—denoting supreme authority within territorial boundaries—this concept has been steadily redefined under the influence of international human rights norms. Since the end of World War II, the emergence of universal declarations, conventions, and institutions has challenged the absolutist interpretation of sovereignty, emphasizing that states are not only autonomous entities but also responsible actors within a broader international legal framework. The tension arises when these two imperatives—respect for national sovereignty and the enforcement of universal human rights—collide, particularly in contexts where domestic practices are at odds with globally accepted norms. However, this friction is not necessarily a contradiction; rather, it reflects an ongoing dialogue between legal obligations and political will, as states navigate their roles in an interdependent world.

Contemporary challenges such as rising populism, digital governance, climate change, and forced migration further complicate this landscape. These issues demonstrate that sovereignty is no longer confined to territorial control but must be understood in terms of functional and cooperative responsibilities. In this context, the ability of international legal instruments and institutions to influence state behavior depends not only on legal legitimacy but also on political commitment and public engagement. To bridge the gap between legal obligation and political will, a balanced and pragmatic approach is required—one that acknowledges legitimate state interests while reinforcing the universality and indivisibility of human rights. This necessitates stronger multilateral cooperation, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and greater inclusivity in international legal processes. Ultimately, the reconciliation of sovereignty and human rights is not a zero-

sum game but a shared global imperative essential for maintaining peace, dignity, and justice in the 21st century.

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