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IN BRIEF ...

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE OF AUTHORITARIANISM - USING HUMAN RIGHTS TO ANTICIPATE AND PREVENT CONFLICT

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SUMMARY

- While authoritarianism does not necessarily lead to violent conflict, its strong tendency to drive inequality amongst groups and limit access to resources makes it a risk multiplier for human rights decline and conflict. Most instances of deeply entrenched authoritarian rule involve violations of human rights – both political, civil and legal rights and economic, social and cultural rights.

- The UN human rights system produces unique and actionable early warning signals of violent conflict, especially in highly centralized settings where political power and resources have been consolidated into a small elite in an authoritarian system. In some cases, the human rights system may generate the best indicators that a system is beginning to tilt towards violent conflict.

- Evidence from the UN human rights system's reporting on Nicaragua, Türkiye, Hungary, and Mozambique demonstrates that authoritarian practices are rarely isolated but tend to coalesce into overlapping patterns of repression, marginalization, and corruption that weaken institutions and intensify social divides. Human rights defenders, activists, journalists, academics, members of the judiciary, asylum-seekers, ethnic and religious minorities - among other groups - have faced discriminatory policies and discourses, state-led repression, scapegoating, and unequal access to justice and resources.

- Preventing violent conflict in authoritarian settings requires a sharper integration of human rights analysis into early warning systems, more decisive international responses to documented violations, and sustained support to civil society. In the context of the UN80 initiative and the Peacebuilding Architecture Review, a prevention agenda grounded in all human rights is essential to prevent the slippery slope from repression to violence.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE: HUMAN RIGHTS FACTORS PRECEDING CONFLICT

Early warning and conflict prevention are central to the UN's approach to sustaining peace and protecting global security. However, the UN system is failing to respond quickly and effectively to emerging conflict risks. Key reasons include geopolitical constraints, the unwillingness of Member States to agree on collective responses to fragile situations, as well as siloed information and analysis within the UN system.

Meanwhile, recent trends appear to support a link between the erosion of human rights and growing authoritarian practices. Freedom House argued that in settings where conditions worsened in 2025, the spread of authoritarian practices was a key factor driving the degradation in rights and liberties.[1] These practices - legal reforms, emergency laws, security narratives to institutionalize control and normalize repression, among others - are adaptive and resilient. Over time, these corrode the independence of the judiciary, silence the media, and entrench inequality in access to resources. The UN human rights system produces an enormous quantity of information linking the deterioration of human rights and increasing concentrations of political and economic power.

Drawing on the UN human rights system's reporting on four settings of increasing concentrations of power - Nicaragua, Türkiye, Hungary, and Mozambique - as well as past research, this brief highlights how authoritarianism increases the risk of human rights violations that tend to precede violent conflict.[2] Our research identifies ten human rights factors that tend to cluster in the lead up to conflict outbreaks, grouped into three categories:[3]

1. **Erosion of inclusion and participation:** normalization of discriminatory policies, exclusionary policies and/or discourses; rising hate crimes; use of dehumanizing propaganda (including through hate speech); targeting of minorities and/or specific population groups.
2. **Erosion of accountability and rule of law:** state-led repression (including through security laws targeting dissent); unequal access to justice/rule of law; systemic, institutionalized corruption.
3. **Erosion of socio-economic equality and civic space:** unequal access to resources (including land); restrictions on press and academic freedom; rise of nationalist rhetoric and scapegoating.

KEY FINDINGS

While each setting is unique, increased centralization of political and economic power often interacts with human rights risks in a similar manner. First, structural inequalities are a central risk factor. Where authoritarian systems restrict access to land, education, or healthcare, grievances deepen, particularly among marginalized communities. This echoes the 2018 United Nations and World Bank 'Pathways for Peace' report which highlighted inequality between groups as one of the strongest drivers of violent conflict.[4] In the contexts examined, these inequalities were not incidental but actively reinforced by state policies. This suggests that within authoritarian settings, where the concentration and consolidation of economic power or influence in the hands of a few can increase structural inequalities, unequal or restricted access to resources is an important factor driving violence and potential violent conflict.

Second, whereas the loss of political rights is often visible (e.g. laws restricting political party formation, crackdowns on protestors), the loss of economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) is often less visible - but matters equally. In Nicaragua, the human rights system has consistently reiterated concern over growing unequal access to land and its effects on the enjoyment of ESCR, particularly for women, Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples. Similar reporting on Türkiye, Mozambique and Hungary has raised issues of unequal access to resources including education and health, particularly for ethnic and minority groups.[5] This suggests that addressing economic, social and cultural rights is as crucial to conflict prevention as safeguarding civil and political freedoms.

Third, divisive rhetoric is a powerful early warning tool. The UN human rights system produces significant data on how national leaders target and scapegoat minorities and/or specific population groups through media and public discourses. It also highlights similar strategies across contexts and settings, for example increasing restrictions on press freedom through government legislation in Nicaragua, Mozambique, Hungary and Türkiye, and campaigns of intimidation and delegitimization of targeted individuals and groups through government-supported media, discourses and public statements. These suggest that an important trend in the lead-up to conflict is rising nationalist rhetoric and scapegoating in the media. However, cases also highlight how restrictions on academic and artistic freedom, less frequently addressed, have also brought serious consequences on individuals' political, civil and legal rights, particularly where authoritarian leaders deliberately target academics, artists, musicians and others to suppress and restrict opposition voices and activities.

Finally, corruption and human rights are deeply connected. Corruption facilitates the targeting, discrimination of specific population groups, and suppression of dissenting voices as a way for elites to maintain dominance within centralized settings. Our previous 'From Signals to Action' report highlighted corruption as a key human rights indicator of violent conflict.[6] Across the four cases examined, the Human Rights Council has drawn direct links between the presence of systemic, institutionalized corruption and increasing concentrations of power and resources. Moving forward, the Peacebuilding Architecture Review (PBAR) offers a unique opportunity to more systematically address the role of corruption as a risk multiplier of violence, armed conflict and insecurity.[7]

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

UN human rights mechanisms provide detailed, credible evidence of risks that, if acted upon, can slow or even prevent a slide into violent conflict. The main challenge is translating signals of human rights decline into timely preventive strategies.

USE THE HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM

1. **Pay attention to regime type.** A highly militarized or personalized regime appears far more likely to slide quickly and directly into conflict. However, this does not mean that institutionalized, single-party systems are immune to conflict risks. So-called 'competitive authoritarianism' can mask significant conflict risks beneath a veneer of institutional independence and capacity, requiring even greater attention to underlying signals of inequality.
2. **Move beyond political headlines.** Many of the cases involved attention grabbing headlines where leaders grabbed power, stayed beyond constitutional limits, and/or cracked down on political opposition. While these are important indicators of unrest, these do not tell the whole story. Instead, questions of access to justice, fair distribution and access to resources, and even cultural preservation are often unseen drivers of conflict. The multilateral system's preference for political indicators over more economically and socially-driven factors means leaders often miss important early warning signs.
3. **Analyze the political marketplace.** Across many of the cases, we found that a political marketplace approach illuminated early warning signals better than other disciplines. This means thinking about the relationship between the distribution of power and resources, how national and local policies may affect livelihoods and access, and the influence of trends like prices, scarcity, and prospects for young people.

ENTRY POINTS FOR ACTION

1. **Land and resources.** Whereas most mainstream conflict prevention approaches focus on equitable political settlements amongst parties and politicians, our findings suggest that an under-utilized entry point may be land and other natural resources. Building up a capacity to support the administration of these resources may open up key partnerships and opportunities for more innovative, impactful programming.
2. **Justice institutions.** One of the clearest advantages of the UN human rights system is its focus on justice institutions. Given that one of the most common factors preceding violent conflict is a sense of injustice and lack of recourse to judicial institutions, this is an important entry point. Building a check on unfettered executive authority may be the most important step that can be taken, particularly in highly authoritarian settings.
3. **Civil society as a partner.** Much attention has been given to the importance of political space for opposition parties in highly authoritarian settings. This is important, but may overlook a more constructive role that civil society groups can play in partnering with governments to build resilience and governance capacities. A key argument in Rachel Kleinfield's *A Savage Order* is that "an escape from endemic violence, and from the consequent polarization of society, is only possible when governments and civil society work closely together."[8] This suggests that government initiatives and social movements must work together to achieve success.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION ACTORS

1. **Resist the gravitational pull of the executive.** There is a strong tendency within the international system to focus on executive power and processes. International electoral support is often provided to executive elections, and most conflict prevention efforts are directed towards political actors at the national level. This creates unintended consequences: leaders find that executive power is the route to partnership with international players, realizing that the penalties for concentrating power are far less than the benefits.[9] Conflict prevention actors should explore how to direct resources and political attention more towards local processes (e.g. municipal elections) where the risks of elite capture are lower and possibilities for more inclusive outcomes are higher.
2. **Focus on narrative spaces and tools.** Conflict prevention and resolution often targets the principal actors in conflict, aiming to shift their narratives about a given situation. However, public narrative spaces and social media are often where the most prominent trends appear. Dehumanizing and stigmatizing rhetoric can replicate and spread quickly, becoming a sort of political backdrop for harsh crackdowns, escalating positions, and violence. The UN human rights system is uniquely placed to capture these problematic trends.
3. **Make inclusion an end as well as a means.** Conflict prevention actors often focus on inclusion as a means to resolving the risks of escalation. This means building mediation practices that include all parties as well as traditionally neglected groups such as women and youth. While this is crucial and should not be overlooked, our findings suggest that insufficient attention is being paid to inclusive political settlements themselves – how power and resources are distributed as a result of a mediation or resolution process. Conflict prevention actors should more clearly set benchmarks for success that indicate whether people have fair access to justice, resources, and existing levers of power.

END NOTES

1 Y. Gorokhovskaia and C. Grothe, *Freedom in The World 2025: The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights*, Freedom House, 2025, p 2.

2 Previous research includes A. Day and E. Bapt, *From Signals to Action - How the UN Human Rights System Can Deliver Early Warning and Conflict Prevention*, Geneva Academy and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU- CPR), December 2024, https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/From%20Signals%20to%20Action.pdf (last accessed 23 October 2025); A. Day and E. Bapt, *Operationalizing Prevention - How the UN Human Rights System Can Connect Early Warning to Action*, Geneva Academy and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU- CPR), December 2024, https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/Operationalizing%20Prevention.pdf (last accessed 23 October 2025).

3 E. Bapt and A. Day, *The Slippery Slope of Authoritarianism: Using Human Rights to Anticipate and Prevent Conflict,* Geneva Academy, November 2025, https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/Using%20Human%20Rights%20to%20Anticipate%20and%20Prevent%20Conflict.pdf (last accessed 18 November 2025).

4 United Nations and World Bank Group, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, 2018, p 155.

5 E. Bapt and A. Day, *The Slippery Slope of Authoritarianism: Using Human Rights to Anticipate and Prevent Conflict,* 2025, p 17-18.

6 A. Day and E. Bapt, *From Signals to Action - How the UN Human Rights System Can Deliver Early Warning and Conflict Prevention*, p 34.

7 See Transparency International's proposed recommendations for the 2025 Peacebuilding Architecture Review: Transparency International Defence & Security, 'Shared Priorities: Anti-corruption, Security, and Sustaining Peace,' February 2025, https://ti-defence.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/TI-DS-Submission-for-2025-PBAR.pdf (last accessed 27 October 2025).

8 N. Borroz, "A Review of Rachel Kleinfield's 'A Savage Order: How the World's Deadliest Countries Can Forge a Path to Security'," Council on Foreign Relations, 1 November 2018, https://www.cfr.org/blog/review-rachel-kleinfields-savage-order-how-worlds-deadliest-countries-can-forge-path-security (last accessed 28 October 2025).

9 A. Day, et al, *Peacebuilding and authoritarianism: the unintended consequences of UN engagement in post- conflict settings*., United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, April 2021, https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8035/UNU_Peacebuilding_FINAL_WEB.pdf (last accessed 27 October 2025).

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