

## The Editors' foreword

The year 2018 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the proclamation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). A major anniversary – yet this is also a period of the contestation of human rights, with an uncertain outcome as to the fate of liberties and democratic institutions in some of the countries concerned. The present issue of COJOURN therefore focuses on the politics of international human rights.

The recent years have seen major changes in international politics with the rise of populism and a counter-systemic movement formulating its identity around the opposition to liberal values. Terms such as „political freedoms“, „civil society“ and „human rights advocacy“ have taken on a negative meaning for some. Having said that, there is still a strong contrast between the truly well-functioning democracies of this world and its worst autocracies.

Democracies, even where populist forces have risen to power, persist in efforts to advance the cause of human rights around the globe. This is due partly to the fact that the „human rights agenda“ as such can be pursued in different ways, and partly because different actors may articulate considerably different human rights *agendas*, leaving room for manoeuvre in this respect even to leaders and administrations with mixed or ambiguous preferences regarding the subject. The politics of international human rights is thus very interesting to investigate in this context.

Take the example of the United States of America, where President Donald Trump is often criticised for praising strongman-like counterparts in spite of their human rights records and for himself acting in an anti-democratic spirit at times. It is indeed a surprising set of developments shaping the domestic political situation in the US at the present: conflict-of-interest issues around a President who has refused to leave control of his corporate and financial assets to a blind trust, vicious verbal attacks against the media as well as specific newspapers and journalists, and an immigration policy of „zero tolerance“ that saw, over the span of several months this year, an extreme (and, even with that in mind, poorly implemented) policy of separating children from their parents.

Nonetheless, human rights work did not end with the advent of the new administration. The „low policy“ machinery of the US bureaucracy continues major efforts at keeping human rights issues on the agenda, for example through the State

Department's annual reports on human rights. The presidency itself, including Donald Trump, has in the meantime become involved in certain aspects of this line of activity, and has not fully turned its back on the human rights agenda as such – for example with a view to the situation in Iran, Venezuela and Cuba, where, at least out of the convenience of an overlap with other agendas, there are indeed issues to raise in this respect.

Hoping our readers will agree that once again we have managed to assemble a collection of timely and insightful analyses on related subjects, thanks to our authors, we hereby conclude looking forward to the new year – already the fourth year in COJOURN's existence!