



Human Rights and the Declining State of Democracy

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There has been rising concern about the state of democracy in the world and if democracy as an institution is in retreat. The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2017 Democracy Index found that not a single region improved its ranking from the previous year. The average score fell, and 89 countries declined in score, 51 countries stagnated, while only 27 improved their score from the previous year. The USA, long regarded as a beacon of democracy, has been downgraded from a full to a flawed democracy. Spain, Venezuela, and countries in Eastern Europe such as Hungary and Poland were likewise downgraded. In an op-ed in the *New York Times* on Hungary's path and its newly re-elected leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orban, it was stated that he used to regard the West and liberal democracy as the path for Hungary but now regards it as a threat and instead is carving out a new path for authoritarianism by reducing an independent judiciary and media and stating that the will of the people is more important than constitutional checks and balances (Cohen 2018). This mirrors other paths in Europe and around the world such as the growing concentration of power within the Polish government by reigning in, and at times silencing, the decisions of regional and local courts and restricting the voice of public media, independent state institutions, and civil society while growing the power and authority of central government figures such as Justice Minister Ziobro (Bodnar 2018).

The retreat of democratic institutions has serious repercussions for the realization of human rights. The Economist Intelligence Unit's report notes that the right to free speech is especially vulnerable in these times. The threats to Articles 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have serious implications for the realization of other rights. The rise

of fake news is similarly expected to increase abuses of human rights, including by nations. The increasing ability to doctor or fake videos and photos, including satellite imagery, will hamper the ability of human rights investigators to determine the truth. As one example, the Russian government "modified" the downing of Malaysian Air Flight 17, as well as events in Syria including the bombing of a hospital. However, the fear for the future is that "evidence" of events that never occurred will be created and used to discredit individuals (Edwards and Livingston 2018).

The articles in this issue help both to elucidate these threats to the achievement of human rights as well as outline methods to help address them. Moyo's article on corruption in Zimbabwe outlines these issues, as well as its implications for social work and what can be done to address it. Malakouti and Talebi address another structural issue, that of the lack of an identity card and what that can mean for children in Iran. Dickinson's project developed a path to help address cultural and religious stigma against children with disabilities while Al-Sayed and Wildes conduct research with Syrian refugee children in Turkey, who at the time of the study were not allowed to attend school or receive other services, in order to assess their current strengths and difficulties.

Moving from examining issues that occur to educating social workers to address them, McPherson, as well as Chiarelli-Helminiak, Eggers, and Libal, explores how to move a rights-based approach in social work from theory into reality, which could help to address this erosion of democracy. Chiarelli-Helminiak and colleagues explore how to integrate human rights and the rights-based approach into social work education so that more social workers will learn how to do this before becoming practitioners. McPherson focuses her piece on practicing social workers who may not have received this education and discusses how to integrate the rights-based approach into their practice.

Social work and allied professions must fight against this erosion of democracy, and human rights are the tool to achieve this. The international community has clearly established these covenants and conventions as containing the rights to which their citizens are entitled, and social workers around the world must ensure that institutions to protect these rights remain strong.

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