

# A HUMAN RIGHTS MANIFESTO:

## Amnesty International's proposals for the next UK government



### FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The UK is set to head to the polls for the first general election since 2019 and much has happened since then. At home, we have seen a huge rollback in human rights protections. From the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act to the Illegal Migration Act, the Judicial Review and Courts Act to the Public Order Act, our fundamental rights have been chipped away, often in contradiction to the UK's obligations under international law. The denial of structural inequalities, scapegoating of minorities and denigration of those fighting for a better world in the public sphere have fostered a climate of fear and hostility.

On the global stage, Amnesty International has been warning for more than a decade of a persistent deterioration in respect for human rights and the rule of law. In 2022, we saw new, renewed and protracted conflicts that led to appalling tragedies, including Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which triggered an extensive human rights, humanitarian and displacement crisis. States around the world are also continuing to repress universal freedoms, to the extent that in 2022 US NGO Freedom House reported that only 20 per cent of people now live in so-called 'free countries', down from 46 per cent in 2005.

A fundamental change of direction is needed and a general election provides an opportunity for this to take place. If the UK is to be seen again as a champion of human rights, the next government must be elected on a mandate that is ambitious and progressive with regards to rights protections. It is an essential task, but not an easy one, which is why Amnesty International UK has created a human rights manifesto – a range of commitments that we are calling on political parties to adopt and deliver should they form the next UK government.

Our manifesto for the next UK government covers a broad range of human rights issues across home and foreign affairs. **This shortened version only covers foreign affairs.**

## Global leadership and revitalised diplomacy for human rights

The next UK government should **champion human rights around the world**. It should:

- **Adopt a principled foreign policy that acknowledges and responds to human rights violations in a consistent manner, wherever they take place.**

For decades, major powers, including the UK, have flouted international law with impunity and shielded their allies from accountability. The result is conflicts and crises rife with human rights violations in every corner of the world and unprecedented threats to the international rules-based system, multilateralism and open societies. In 2022, Freedom House reported that only 20 per cent of people live in so-called 'free countries', down from 46 per cent in 2005. States interested in promoting multilateralism, internationalism and open, just and human rights-respecting societies must work strategically with allies to oppose the global trend towards authoritarianism. Central to this must be consistent and outspoken support for international law and human rights.

As long as international law is defied without consequences, ordinary people will continue to suffer. Impunity breeds more violations and encourages others to disregard their human rights obligations. The next UK government has a fresh opportunity to go beyond existing work and ensure the UK is truly a beacon for protecting and promoting human rights by developing a progressive foreign policy with human rights at its heart. Such a policy would be based upon the following principles:

1. People's rights are made central to international policy and practice
2. Policy coherence for credibility on women's human rights
3. Genuine partnerships with human rights defenders

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- 4. Modelling best practice domestically
- 5. Responsible business practices
- 6. Strengthening UN and other multilateral mechanisms for human rights
- 7. Sharing responsibility

• **Consistently support international justice and accountability mechanisms for crimes under international law.**

The next UK government should ensure that responses to conflicts and crises consistently place a victim-centered approach to international justice at the heart of any support offered by the UK. This would be done by increasing financial and diplomatic support to the International Criminal Court for all situations before it and through increasing support for domestic investigations (i) into all international crimes committed, regardless of who the victims and perpetrators are, and (ii) to guarantee that the rights of victims and survivors of war crimes and crimes against humanity who seek refuge in the UK are fully realised.

It is crucial for the maintenance and development of the international rules-based system and the protection of civilians worldwide that the next UK government ensures commitments to support international justice mechanisms are applied consistently. For example, numerous UN Security Council resolutions and statements concerning Israel's violations of international law against Palestinians, which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, remain unimplemented, with Israeli authorities facing no consequences for their actions. Worse still, many draft resolutions have been blocked, which only enables the culture of impunity in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

• **Ban the importation of products arising from activities that are a grave breach of international law.**

The next UK government should ban the importation of products arising from activities that are a grave breach of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, such as the use of forced labour in Xinjiang, forced evictions to make way for mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the construction of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Allowing the importation of such products facilitates and legitimises the unlawful actions from which they arise. Merely excluding such goods from trade preferences does not go nearly far enough.

Banning the importation of such products, in line with international law, is the right thing to do. It is also the sensible thing to do for any UK government committed to upholding the rule of law, promoting the international

rules-based system and establishing the country as a leading international force against impunity.

• **Prioritise the promotion of civil society space worldwide, including freedom of expression, association and assembly and support for human rights defenders and journalists.**

It is no coincidence that unprecedented attacks on civic space and human rights defenders (HRDs) are taking place against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism and growing attacks on the international rules-based system. HRDs are the canaries in the coal mine: attacks against them foretell increasingly repressive and regressive policies and practices. They are also the most important partners for exposing and opposing those policies and practices.

Civil society space is being restricted and HRDs oppressed in every region of the world. New laws imposing onerous registration requirements, labelling legitimate organisations as 'foreign agents' and restricting access to funding (among other things) have become commonplace. At the same time, HRDs face a surge in attacks and repression, with policies restricting freedom of expression and assembly being implemented at an alarming rate around the world.

Meaningfully partnering with HRDs overseas and defending civic space would be the most natural and effective way to protect freedom of expression worldwide and further a range of UK foreign policy priorities. The next UK government should prioritise well-funded, strategic approaches to promoting freedom of expression and defending civic space, including protection for human rights defenders.

• **Ensure UK exports of arms and security equipment are more responsible, with a clear focus on strengthening international treaties and regulations.**

The UK remains a global leader in the supply and manufacture of a wide variety of military, security and policing equipment and related technologies. Billions of pounds of ongoing arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the use of these weapons in the conflict in Yemen for serious breaches of international law demonstrate that the current UK government's arms export licensing system is not fit for purpose. They also show that the system is incompatible with our international legal obligations to prevent the sale of weapons when it is likely they will be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international law.

The next UK government should strengthen the national export control system by introducing a presumption

▶ against the sale of equipment to countries flagged in its own human rights reporting as being of concern. It should also introduce new controls on the trade, promotion and marketing of spyware and other communications monitoring equipment, as well as expand licensing controls to cover the provision of overseas military and police training.

As a key global player in this sector and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK government should take the lead in strengthening existing legal frameworks, including the implementation and enforcement of the Arms Trade Treaty, as well as championing the development of new international controls on lethal autonomous weapons systems and related technology, less-lethal policing equipment and tools of torture.

## • Work to abolish the death penalty around the world.

The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and needs to be opposed in all cases without exception. A total of 883 people were known to have been executed in 2022 across 20 countries. This does not include the thousands of executions believed to have been carried out in China, where death penalty data remains a state secret. Most of the other executions took place in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the USA.

By the end of 2022, 112 countries had abolished the death penalty in law and practice and an unprecedented 125 UN member states – nearly two-thirds of the UN's membership – had called for a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty. This shows the ever-increasing trend towards rejecting the death penalty as a lawful punishment under international human rights law.

The next UK government should **be a world leader on corporate accountability**. It should:

## • Commit to regulate to ensure companies prevent human rights violations across global supply chains.

The next UK government should put in place due diligence regulation to require companies to prevent human rights violations across their global supply chains, modelled on the UK Bribery Act S.7, as already recommended by parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights.

Such legislation would improve the impacts on human rights of UK businesses and the protections offered to human rights defenders and victims of corporate abuses. It would also ensure that the UK is at the forefront of

setting standards for sustainable trade and investment worldwide. This would help level the playing field for British businesses due to the rapid advances being made in other countries. Many businesses<sup>1</sup> and trade associations, including the British Retail Consortium, the John Lewis Partnership, Tesco and Sainsbury's, and 39 investors<sup>2</sup> representing £4.5 trillion in assets have joined the call for mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence legislation.

## • Repeal the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill (if passed) to protect the role of public procurement in incentivising ethical business practices.

This anti-Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Bill would make it almost impossible for public bodies to use their procurement and investment policies to incentivise ethical business conduct that is human rights compliant. It would prevent public bodies from holding companies to account when they abuse human rights or harm the environment and enable those practices to thrive. Businesses making an effort to adhere to global standards such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights may then find themselves at a competitive disadvantage.

The Bill also interferes with the right to freedom of expression by gagging public body decision-makers from even talking negatively about foreign state conduct in relation to procurement decisions. It uniquely privileges one state, Israel, at a time when the Israeli authorities continue to flagrantly breach international law, including through imposing a system of apartheid on Palestinians. It also treats Israel in the same way as its Occupied Territories, which is contrary to the UK's long-standing policy and endorsement of UN Resolution 2334. This resolution requires states to differentiate between their dealings with Israel in its recognised borders and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. If the Bill is passed, the next UK government should commit to repealing it at the earliest opportunity.

The next UK government should maintain that **no British national is left behind**. It should:

## • Grant all British nationals who are arbitrarily detained abroad a legal right to receive consular access and ensure there is a clear strategy in place to support them.

Safeguarding British nationals – including dual nationals – facing arbitrary detention abroad should not only be

1 [media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/UK\\_BUSINESS\\_STATEMENT\\_MHREDD\\_Sept22.pdf](https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/UK_BUSINESS_STATEMENT_MHREDD_Sept22.pdf)

2 [media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/Investor\\_Letter\\_for\\_UK\\_Human\\_Rights\\_Due\\_Diligence\\_FINAL\\_DRAFT.pdf](https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/Investor_Letter_for_UK_Human_Rights_Due_Diligence_FINAL_DRAFT.pdf)

placed at the heart of foreign policy and practice but become an overarching government priority. Until now, there has been an inconsistent approach to cases, which according to the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on the FCDO's approach to state-level hostage situations, points to the clear absence of a coherent strategy to support individuals or deal effectively with such cases.

The UK has failed to secure its right under international law to provide consular support to its nationals. Under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, states have a right to provide consular assistance to their detained nationals to ensure their basic needs are met and fundamental rights respected. Amnesty International takes the position that (second) states can assert their Article 36 rights to demand consular access, including communications and contact, with their citizens.

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- **Offer regular cabinet-level meetings with family members in the UK to provide support and guidance.**

While working on the cases of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Anoosheh Ashoori, Mehran Raouf and Alaa Abdel Fattah, we have often had to exert pressure for any high-level meeting from the UK government.

It should not have to take national public campaigning, political pressure or indeed dangerous hunger-strikes to force Ministerial attention towards the cases of British nationals facing arbitrary detention abroad.

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- **Secure the immediate and unconditional release of British nationals Mehran Raouf and Alaa Abdel Fattah.**

Mehran Raouf and Alaa Abdel Fattah remain in arbitrary detention abroad – the former in Iran, the latter in Egypt. The UK government has failed to secure their release and will not even name Mehran Raouf publicly. As for Alaa Abdel Fattah, the UK government now speaks out less publicly on his behalf than during COP27 in Egypt in November 2022.

## Rights, safety and choice for all women and girls

The next UK government should **protect and strengthen the rights of all women and girls**. It should:

- **Decriminalise abortion in England, Wales and Scotland.**
- **Ensure ongoing access to human rights-compliant abortion provision, and safeguarding against any rollback in these protections, particularly in Northern Ireland.**

While abortion in England, Wales and Scotland is accessible, it remains a crime potentially carrying a life sentence at any gestation under a law passed in 1861, the Offences Against Persons Act (OAPA), and common law equivalent in Scotland. For many reasons, some women, girls and pregnant people may have an abortion outside the requirements – for example, they might be in a coercive relationship or living in extreme poverty. Rather than being supported at one of the most difficult times in their lives, the OAPA means they face possible prosecution. This is not a theoretical issue: in June 2023 a woman was sentenced to 28 months in prison for taking abortion pills past the legal time limit, and over the past eight years at least 17 women have been investigated.

Abortion is healthcare – it should not be treated as a criminal justice matter. The next UK government should fully decriminalise abortion, ensuring other parts of the UK are in line with Northern Ireland, by urgently repealing sections 58 and 59 of the OAPA. In addition, the offence of concealment of birth should also be removed by repealing section 60 of the Act.

In 2019, abortion was decriminalised and made lawful in Northern Ireland. It is now the only part of the UK where this healthcare is decriminalised. But the Northern Ireland health minister failed to put in place commissioned abortion services in line with the new framework to ensure choice was enabled and provision accessible to all who need it. In the latter half of 2022, the secretary of state for Northern Ireland directed the Department of Health to commission services and allocated ring-fenced funds to ensure services could be set up. The next UK government should ensure that provision continues to meet its legal obligations and is sustainable, accessible and respects and protects choice.

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