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Global Government Revisited: From Utopian Vision to Political Imperative

Luis Cabrera



The current “separate but equal” sovereign states system stands as a roadblock to the fulfillment of core economic and civil rights for all persons. States are responsible for supporting their own citizens’ well-being, however unequal their capacity to do so, and they are inherently biased toward the interests of their own citizens and the presumed justice of their own actions. Achieving the sustainable fulfillment of core human rights will likely require much deeper regional and global political integration, ultimately in the form of a democratic world government. After falling out of favor during the Cold War, this ideal has enjoyed a recent resurgence of support among scholars and advocates from a range of disciplines and approaches. The challenge now is to expand this base of support and channel it into the creation of regional and ultimately global democratic institutions that can more effectively promote and protect the core rights of all persons.

Global government is a means of promoting and protecting core individual rights.

Introduction

Support for a global outlook suddenly appears to be in retreat, or at least on the defensive. Last year saw the unexpected decision by British voters to pull out of the European Union after more than forty years of membership, along with the equally unexpected ascendancy of Donald Trump to the US presidency on an openly xenophobic “America First” platform. Authoritarian regimes seem re-entrenched in countries such as Russia and the Philippines, while hard-right, nativist populism has been on the rise throughout Europe, in India, and elsewhere.¹ This nationalist resurgence threatens to further strain the liberal internationalist model of global cooperation embodied in the United Nations system and its affiliated organizations.

The recent trend towards authoritarianism and withdrawal, however, reinforces the arguments for a more, not less, integrated world system by illuminating how sovereign states perpetuate global disparities in wealth and rights. The structure of the current world order likewise impedes effective solutions to climate change, nuclear proliferation, and the race-to-the-bottom by multinational corporations on labor and environmental standards. These persistent injustices and failures of collective action point us toward the need for an integrated global alternative. Regional bodies such as the European Union and the African Union offer important partial models and laboratories for exploring the kinds of global, binding democratic institutions that could better promote global justice, security, and sustainability.

This essay makes the case for global government as a means of promoting and protecting core individual rights. The first section traces the history of the global government ideal through its heyday in the 1940s and resurgence after the Cold War. The next two sections explore barriers to justice in a sovereign states system and highlight reasons to think that deep global political integration could help to overcome them. The final sections discuss objections and obstacles to realizing this vision, as well as possible pathways forward. Without doubt, achieving the kind of global government envisioned here is a long-term prospect. In the near term, however, it provides a valuable framework for orienting efforts toward reforming current institutions and developing new ones capable of addressing persistent problems of global justice and sustainability.

The History of an Ideal

Ernest Bevin, the blunt-spoken former union leader who mobilized Britain’s wartime workforce as Labour Minister under Churchill, was hardly given to public flights of fancy. Yet in a speech in November 1945, Bevin, then Foreign Secretary, told the House of Commons that the newly created United Nations Organization should be viewed as a potential world government. A study should be launched, he said, of possibilities for developing the UN into “a world assembly elected directly from the people of the world, as a whole. . .[who] make the world law which they, the people, will then accept and be morally bound and willing to carry out.”²

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Perhaps most surprising to a contemporary audience is that Bevin's statement elicited no great surprise from his own. His remarks, in fact, followed a bolder call for world government the previous day from Birmingham-area Labour MP Henry Usborne. While Bevin soon scaled back his own ambitions to a union of Western countries, similar world-union appeals were made by prominent politicians, jurists, scientists (Albert Einstein foremost among them), authors, and other leading lights worldwide.

This was hardly the first time prominent figures had advocated world government. The poet Dante systematically argued for this ideal in the early fourteenth century; others had done so even earlier.³ The philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1795 proposed a still-influential scheme of global confederation among states to secure "perpetual peace," though he rejected the idea of a powerful, unitary world state. In the first half of the twentieth century, H. G. Wells, the author of *War of the Worlds*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and other science fiction classics, wrote numerous books and treatises in support of a fully binding world government. Indeed, some early proposals for the League of Nations (1920–1946) favored a binding, government-like structure.⁴

The 1940s brought an unprecedented surge in advocacy for a fully integrated global system. Many argued that, after the atomic annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the choice had become clear: embrace world government or risk a fiery end to human civilization. Many academics, journalists, and pundits promoted the idea of world government, and membership in advocacy organizations ballooned throughout the US, Europe, and elsewhere. Prominent political leaders were also on board. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, declared in a 1948 radio address, "I have no doubt in my mind that the world government must and will come, for there is no other remedy for the world's sickness."

Enthusiasm soon waned, however. With the onset of the Cold War, the idea of a global union came to be linked with presumed Communist designs for world domination, and it was pushed to the fringes of political, public, and academic discourse.

When the Cold War finally thawed, the new geopolitical and economic landscape inspired a resurgence of the world government ideal, particularly in academic circles. Leading democracy scholars highlighted ways in which economic globalization has significantly increased the amount of policymaking occurring at the global level. This, they argued, will exclude ordinary citizens from the governance process until new global institutions are created that can greatly expand democratic participation.⁵ Others advocated greater direct accountability from existing bodies such as the World Trade Organization, especially after the 1999 "Battle in Seattle" protests brought higher visibility to the ways such institutions were shaping the global economy. The goal of a fully global political community, whether embodied by formal institutions or more informal ones in the spirit of the World Social Forums, was once more getting serious attention.⁶

Cosmopolitan theorists of global justice begin with a straightforward assumption that all humans are morally equal.

Meanwhile, academics working in a revived cosmopolitan tradition argued not only for promoting democracy at the global level, but also for advancing more comprehensive global justice. Dating at least to Diogenes the Cynic (ca. 412–323 BCE) and running through Kant and beyond, cosmopolitanism has envisioned a global moral community that includes all individuals. In the contemporary context, institutional cosmopolitans go beyond moral claims and seek to show how intensive global political integration—up to and including some form of world government—could counter domination by powerful states in trade and other governance matters, and also strengthen efforts to address global poverty, security, and a range of other issues.⁷

In a parallel development, some international relations scholars have again begun to argue that the security threat of nuclear weapons is so great that it should spur the creation of global government.⁸ Other threats said to be so grave that they underscore the need for world government include devastating climate change, the coming weaponization of space, and the development of a possibly malevolent artificial intelligence.⁹

Cosmopolitan Vistas

The justifications for world government are many—from the democracy, justice, and security detailed above to other reasons like environmental sustainability—but the global justice case should be the most compelling. Cosmopolitan theorists of global justice tend to begin with a straightforward assumption that all humans are morally equal, though they diverge on where the assumption leads in practice. Some moderate, or “rooted,” cosmopolitans see a role for national citizenship in limiting global duties of justice. “Strong cosmopolitans” see some robust set of human rights, and duties to protect them, as fully global.¹⁰

The chief UN human rights covenants provide an important starting point for articulating these rights.¹¹ In these international agreements, all individuals are ascribed rights to basic necessities such as food, adequate health care, housing, and education. Individuals are also afforded civil and political rights such as protection from torture, slavery, and arbitrary detention; as well as rights to a fair trial, to free speech, and to freedom of religion. A strong cosmopolitanism would extend the list to rights against unjust discrimination globally, in particular discrimination by birthplace. Guaranteeing more equal opportunities for all persons, regardless of birthplace, would ultimately entail much freer international movement to enable many more persons to pursue opportunities wherever they arise.

Some more fundamentally statist or nationalist critics of strong cosmopolitanism argue that it gives too little attention to the relations and duties of state citizenship. The joint sacrifices co-citizens make for the common good and the national sentiments they share, these critics assert, offer a foundation for strong reciprocal moral duties. Many argue further that principles of justice apply inside a sovereign

state, while at the global level, only weaker, voluntary principles of charity apply. Such arguments, however, are ultimately circular: they hold that citizens of the same country *should be* in relations of reciprocal duty only with each other because they *are* in such relations only with each other. They cannot justify the way the world was carved up or why these arbitrary borders should make country of birth so significant to an individual's opportunities in life.

Consider that, despite widely reported reductions in the most extreme global poverty (spurred largely by economic growth in China), approximately 1.5 billion people still lack access to adequate food, shelter, education, health care, or other bare necessities. Another 900 million are estimated to be one setback away from such deprivation.¹² Only about 9 percent of the world population is classified as upper-middle-income, earning the equivalent of \$20 to \$50 per day, and just another 7 percent is high-income, earning more than \$50 per day (\$18,250/year). The rest of the world gets by on less than \$20 per day, with more than 70 percent struggling to make it on \$10 per day (\$3,650/year), and often far less.¹³

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A strong institutional cosmopolitanism prescribes deep regional and global integration as a means of transforming the "separate but equal" nature of the current global system, in which countries are viewed as equally sovereign and equally responsible for advancing their own populations' interests, regardless of their actual capacity to do so. The ultimate goal of integration would be the creation of regional and global institutions that promote the interests and rights of all. Such higher-level institutions would also offer mechanisms to challenge repression and rights violations at the national level.

Why Not Just a More Decent States System?

Other critics of strong institutional cosmopolitanism would reject the idea that global government is the right way to approach global justice, arguing that a separate-but-equal system of states that became more decent and democratic over time could do as well, or at least well enough. Yet, there are good reasons to be skeptical, especially if we presume that opportunities should be distributed on a more equal global basis and that individuals should be free to pursue them across national borders. Even for matters such as securing fair contributions to climate change mitigation, such a system poses major challenges. Each state ultimately determines how much it should and actually will do, and self-interest can encourage states' leaders and populations to shirk responsibilities, making global agreements unreachable or unsustainable.

Further, we can expect a system based on sovereign states to routinely produce unjust outcomes because of several inherent domestic biases other than plain national self-interest. First is an electoral or elite bias: leaders have powerful incentives to give strong priority to the interests of their own citizens, especially the most powerful among them. Democratic leaders favor the voters and elites

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responsible for putting or keeping them in power. Leaders of hierarchical states similarly favor the interests of their own stakeholders over other factions and outsiders' interests. This dynamic reinforces large average differences in life chances among countries.

Second is a fiduciary bias: states are seen as having a primary responsibility to protect their own populations. Consider the UN-backed "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine, where a state's claim to non-intervention and international recognition is based on the extent to which it actually does protect and promote the interests of its own population.¹⁴ By extension, a state that prioritized duties of global justice could be in violation of its fiduciary duties to its own people. Certainly, R2P has the potential to make some significant positive differences within the constraints of the current system. That said, a very strong fiduciary view can lead to an underemphasis on ways in which states are actually able to protect and promote global rights, and can seem to justify inaction (outside of clear emergency situations) on ensuring that the rights of "outsiders" are given due weight.

And third is an "own-case" bias: domestic insiders tend to *underestimate* their duties to outsiders and *overestimate* the justice of their own state's actions. In the absence of a neutral party empowered to define the extent of their duties and justice of their actions, insiders are left to be their own judges. And groups, like individuals, tend to rule in their own favor—even when they believe they can judge without bias.¹⁵ This insight is a staple of classic social contract theory, foregrounded, for example, in the work of John Locke, and in James Madison's advocacy of a strong federal US republic. Both saw this as a powerful reason why government is needed to fairly settle disputes and determine duties. Global political institutions would be developed in part to play the role of the neutral judge, helping to determine duties, distributions of resources, and opportunities in the broader global interest, rather than in the interest of a single state's population.

Also, in a more tightly integrated global community, states' leaders and individuals would have greater ability to challenge decisions by other states and to attempt to block harmful actions or inactions. Existing fora such as the UN General Assembly and the International Court of Justice offer an indication of how public challenges might be mounted, but decisions made within and by the institutions of a global government would be binding rather than advisory. The European Court of Justice, the affiliated European Court of Human Rights, and to some extent the European Parliament similarly provide important laboratories for exploring such dynamics.

EU compliance capacity, however, is more limited than would likely be the case under some genuinely rights-protective global integration, where at

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least some direct coercive capacity would be required to back intervention in cases of large-scale rights abuses. This need not take the form of the overwhelmingly powerful, offensively oriented global army presumed in some 1940s accounts, however. Some dispersal and balancing of policing and peacekeeping forces among global and regional institutions could suffice. Such a configuration—presuming it would ultimately prove possible in the long term to eliminate stockpiles of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction currently held by states—could strike the correct balance between capacity to protect rights and capacity to threaten them.

Overall, the challenges to fulfilling global justice aims in a system of competitive sovereign states should draw us toward *binding, global, and democratic* political institutions. They should be binding because higher-level bodies must have the capacity to obtain compliance from lower-level ones on laws or rules if core human rights are to be secured for all persons. Their reach must be global on issues such as climate change that require global cooperation or compliance to solve. And last, they should be democratic in order to give individuals due participatory voice and power in helping to ensure that their own protections are sustainable in the long term.

It is not possible to offer an exact blueprint specifying every agency and governing practice for such a world government system. However, past practice suggests that the architecture should include at minimum state, regional, and global parliamentary assemblies; a professionalized bureaucracy (the large UN bureaucracy offers a partial model); and a global executive and cabinet. It is possible also that the executive or a related commission would include direct representatives of member states' and regional organizations' ruling governments, similar to the current EU structure. Such a form would be less democratic than a more straightforward state-like one, where all representatives are directly elected by those they serve. As a concession in order to secure state support for a full global body, however, the compromise could be justifiable.

The principle of subsidiarity, also familiar from EU and federal state governance, could guide political institutions at all levels: decisions would be made at the lowest appropriate level. Finally, in keeping with the ultimate imperative to promote and protect the rights of all persons, we can presume that there would be some global constitutionalization of governing powers and individual rights—the UN Charter, alongside the UN human rights covenants, gives a very preliminary idea of the form this might take, as do the myriad global constitutions proposed since the 1940s.¹⁶ We can also envision the expansion of formal channels of accountability and challenge through regional and global courts, ombuds agencies, and related dispute-resolution bodies. Each could be vital to sustaining rights protections.

How Universal Are Individual Rights?

One potentially significant objection that some would raise against such a vision of global government is that the concept of universal rights itself is Western-centric or does not adequately take global diversity into account. Such objections should, of course, be taken seriously. However, it is important to consider whose interests would be served by rejecting the possibility of appealing to higher-level institutions as neutral judges. Claims about the threat to diversity posed by regional or global institutions typically come from one domestic group trying to make its voice stand for all voices in a society. Within a dominant religious or ethnic group, leaders may, for example, work to realize their vision of a “true national community.” Yet domestic societies invariably present scenes of deep ideological contestation and competition in discourse about fairness and identity. Presuming that each state contains a unified culture expressing a single set of ideas or political ideals can lead to international quiescence in the face of minority repression.

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In India, for example, the governing ideology of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is informed by Hindu nationalist thought, or “Hindutva.” Opposition parties and civil society groups have often accused the BJP of intolerance, especially toward the country’s large Muslim and Dalit (formerly “untouchables”) populations. Indeed, Dalit activists have reached out for international support under the current government as well as previous ones: the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights has engaged with the UN human rights regime, the European Parliament, US Congress, and other bodies, seeking such groups’ pressure on the government to do more against domestic oppression of Dalits. These Dalit activists have been portrayed in particular by Hindutva-oriented authors and BJP officials as disloyal citizens, effectively puppets of Western agents seeking to impose their own beliefs in place of Indian beliefs.¹⁷ The activists’ efforts underscore the importance of developing regional and global institutions in which rights-based challenges can be lodged by domestic groups.

Similar dynamics appear in Europe. Both officials and rank-and-file members of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which was at the center of efforts leading to the 2016 Brexit decision, evince a strong cultural essentialism based on a perceived “indigenous Briton” identity.¹⁸ This identity excludes people from countries such as Turkey, which has long been a candidate for EU accession, but whom UKIP and similar groups reject as not “fitting” their conception of a broader European identity, much less their conception of a narrow British one. UKIP members expressed alarm at the prospect of Turks being able to exercise the EU’s free movement to settle in Britain. Such attitudes, if widespread, can pose a challenge to integration between states as well as to the realization of equal democratic citizenship within states. In each case, a

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rights-protective approach would work to promote and protect all individuals' interests in common, and to provide the vulnerable and excluded with tools to challenge the violation of their rights.

Pathways to Political Integration

When we take the long view, it becomes clear that, rather than being in a retreat from the global, the world is more interconnected—and, in fact, more institutionally uniform—than ever. Consider that, whereas the global system contained an estimated 600,000 independent political communities in 1500 BCE, today some 200 states have carved up virtually all global territory among themselves.¹⁹ Will integration stop here? Is there something unique about the current sovereign states system that will prevent it from consolidating further? Perhaps, yet the European Union has for some time acted on the world stage—in trade negotiations, for example—as a single agent for all 28 members (27 if the UK does ultimately sever its ties). While regional organizations such as South America's Mercosur and the African Union have struggled to fulfill ambitious aims for regional economic integration, they continue to strive toward a single external tariff, standardized regional worker mobility rules, and other significant forms of unification—all concrete steps toward greater integration.

Moreover, the entire world economy now operates within a market-driven economic model. Merits of the model aside, it includes common global rules for trade tariffs, copyright protections, etc., many developed through the World Trade Organization, which includes almost every state as member or applicant. States are linked through myriad other international organizations, trade agreements, and long-term alliances. In addition, individuals around the globe are increasingly connected through shared technology platforms, with access to information about other cultures and unprecedented capacity to organize around shared interests.

What sorts of pathways can we envision, then, for promoting rights-enhancing regional and global political integration? One pathway would focus on accountability, demanding that global institutions provide individuals more of a say in their increasingly important decision-making processes. This is the strategy adopted by the Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly. It has been actively pursuing the creation of a second UN chamber, alongside the General Assembly, to more directly represent the interests of ordinary individuals within member states. The campaign has generated impressive levels of support, including from the European Parliament, the Pan-African Parliament, and nearly 1,500 current and former parliamentarians from 120 countries. It has done highly valuable work in highlighting global political alternatives, and in identifying some concrete means of enhancing oversight and accountability in the UN system.

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A UN parliament however, would not be attached, at least in the near term, to a supranational organization with broad capacity to bind states to its policies. The European Parliament came to accrue more powers in part over concerns about a “democratic deficit” in binding decision-making by EU institutions. The UN Security Council does have some significant powers to authorize intervention, and the various UN agencies perform vital work worldwide in promoting development, health care, human rights, etc. Thus, a UN parliamentary body could have important oversight and accountability roles to play. It could be well worth creating as part of a broader effort to expand the accountability powers of the more than seventy other inter-parliamentary institutions which operate within or alongside regional and global governance organizations, for example, Mercosur’s Parlasur body, the Pan-African Parliament, and the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Another pathway more central to a rights-based, institutional cosmopolitan approach would be the near-term promotion of regional integration, as well as regional and global human rights regimes. In the longer term, it would include the development of more empowered global institutions, encompassing the regional ones and operating according to the constitutionalized principles of rights, democracy, and subsidiarity noted above. Additionally, the cultivation of robust practices of global citizenship would be crucial to promoting movement down such a path. These would aim to problematize claims for a rigid and exclusionary conception of state sovereignty, promote a sense of global community, and build pressure on institutions to protect the rights of all persons in that community.²⁰ Global citizens are understood here as those who reach across state boundaries to contribute to rights protections. Many also will contribute to the development of rights-protective institutions beyond the state. Such a framework embraces not only efforts by globally minded activists from more affluent countries, but also those of actors from countries in the Global South who have not been typically understood as global citizens, such as unauthorized immigrants or the aforementioned Dalit activists.

Unauthorized migrants, for example, can be seen as enactors of “global civil disobedience,” or, more narrowly, a form conscientious evasion.²¹ They typically violate entry laws for reasons grounded in economic rights already widely affirmed in the global system. Like domestic civil disobedience, migration highlights structural injustices in the global sphere—including the continuing importance of the birth lottery—and, most importantly, contributes to pressures for institutional change. The Dalit activists can be understood even more directly as “institutionally developmental” global citizens. By their outreach, they highlight gaps in the global human rights regime and the need to develop more robustly rights-protective global institutions.

Looking Forward

In the 1940s, elected leaders, social thinkers, and civil society organizations around the world supported the creation of a world government to secure the peace. Although no comparable movement exists today, in some ways the current era offers a far more promising starting point. The democratic UN called for by UK Foreign Minister Bevin in the 1940s would have represented a global population of less than 2.5 billion. Today, more than 20 percent of that number already share common governance, democratic institutions, and laws in the European Union alone, and hundreds of millions more live in areas covered by similar regional arrangements.

Thus, one important means of promoting progress toward a global system which would protect the rights and interests of more persons in common is to support regional integration—to strive to act as regional citizens. In the near term, this can mean opposing isolationism and disintegration, from Brexit to the America-firstism that resists any deeper North American ties. It also means, however, demanding that economic and political integration be more people-centered: more accountable to those who fall under it, and more oriented toward a fair distribution of its economic gains.

We can also strive to act like global citizens in expanding the de facto integration of communities through the movement of persons—whether under regional free movement or worker mobility regimes, or standard migration channels to states, as well as for those asylum seekers fleeing mass violence and repression. In all such cases, global citizens can call for accommodation over exclusion, for understanding over division. And they can press their elected leaders to fully fund, support, and strengthen the United Nations system, especially its human rights regime. They can support such worthy global accountability efforts as the Campaign for a UN Parliamentary Assembly. They can tenaciously push back on nationalist rhetoric with their own globalist rhetoric—challenging strong and exclusionary claims for state sovereignty and demanding that leaders be open to more encompassing views.

The path to a world government firmly rooted in a commitment to ensuring and protecting human rights is a long and uncertain one. However, progress in the near term does not require certainty that such a government will ultimately emerge. Much can be done now at community and national levels to promote a more global outlook, while pressing for further integration and for strengthening and deepening the international human rights regime. Such efforts can pay significant dividends in the protection of rights and the expansion of opportunities, while paving the way for much deeper institutional integration over time.

Much can be done now at community and national levels to promote a more global outlook.

Endnotes

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About the Author



Luis Cabrera is Associate Professor of Political Science in the Griffith Asia Institute and School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. His research has focused on trans-state normative issues, including human rights, citizenship and migration, and the development of democratically accountable regional and global political institutions. His books include *The Practice of Global Citizenship* and *The Theory of Global Justice*, and he is currently working on a book that identifies best practices for supranational democracy by studying democracy under conditions of deep diversity, such as in India or the European Union. Before turning to academia full time, Cabrera worked as a staff reporter for the Associated Press in Seattle. He holds a PhD from the University of Washington.

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