The purpose of this course is to assist students in understanding the origins, content, applications, and ongoing development of human rights principles and doctrines in both international and national politics. The idea that a respect for human dignity should constrain the actions of governments has influenced political activity for centuries, but it was not until comparatively recently that a movement sought to codify the principles of human rights in documents that could be enforced internationally. Although the first human rights treaties were developed in the mid-nineteenth century, it was the Second World War that inspired the modern human rights movement and led to the adoption of a number of human rights treaties, conventions, and protocols. These documents serve as a basis for an emerging area of international law that affects both how governments relate to their populations and how countries relate to one another.

Despite the substantial popular support that they have gained over the past six decades, human rights principles remain highly contested. Human rights doctrines directly challenge the principle of national sovereignty, the idea that governments are free to do as they choose within their own borders, among the main pillars of the international system of states for several centuries. Yet in the past several decades, even as human rights treaties were being adopted, the international community has failed spectacularly to halt major human rights abuses. Governments have frequently been reluctant to enforce human rights doctrines, as they seek to promote their own security and economic concerns. Furthermore, conflicts over the application of human rights doctrines abound. Some people challenge the claim that human rights principles are universal, asserting, for example, that the emphasis on individuals rather than on communities reflects a Western cultural bias. Tensions also exist between individual versus group rights and political and civil versus economic, social, and cultural rights. Meanwhile, demands for the recognition of additional rights continue to emerge, for example, for gays and lesbians, and most recently for transgendered individuals. In short, while a framework for human rights principles has emerged during the past half-century, the future direction of human rights enforcement remains unclear.

In this course, we study the historical development of human rights principles, exploring the roots of modern human rights documents in past religious, moral, and political movements. We also look extensively at human rights documents themselves, analyzing their content and implications. A major focus of the course is on how human rights doctrines are applied in specific contexts, drawing examples and cases from the African continent. This regional focus provides continuity to our analysis and allows us to gain a better grounding for analyzing how human rights principles are being debated and implemented.
Course Goals

After taking this course, students should:

- Understand the historical development of human rights principles and doctrines, including the religious and philosophical ideas that have contributed to their development.
- Understand the reasons for shifting from moral movements for human rights and national human rights doctrines to the codification of international human rights law.
- Be familiar with the major human rights documents and how they are applied.
- Understand the work of governments, multilateral, and international and local non-governmental organizations in the enforcement of human rights laws.
- Understand the major debates in the field of human rights, including debates over the limits of sovereignty, universality versus relativism, individual versus group rights, and first, second, and third generation rights.
- Understand the specific application of human rights principles in the African context.
- Be able to defend particular political positions using human rights doctrines and principles.
- Have stronger written and verbal communication skills and critical thinking skills.

Course Requirements

This course will mix lectures with more interactive activities that provide students a chance to engage with the topic and offer their input. Students are expected to read assigned texts in advance of their treatment in class and to come to class prepared to participate in discussion.

The course will have a mid-term and final examination, with a mix of short answer and essay questions. Essays will be graded based on the student’s demonstrated knowledge of the subject, understanding of key concepts, familiarity with course readings, lectures, and discussions, ability to present and defend an argument, critical thinking skills, and originality. The mid-term and final are each 35 percent of the grade.

Each student will be assigned to a team that will design and implement a human rights campaign on a specific African issue. Your team can pick a particular country on which to focus or a specific issue within a country or an issue that affects multiple countries. You will need to work together to research your chosen topic and develop a means of raising public awareness about the topic. You should provide the professor with a written background report that includes references to the research on which your campaign is based and copies of or access to any pamphlets, websites, videos, prezis, or other tools you are using for your campaign. Your team should work closely with the teaching fellow on developing the campaign. Your project counts for 30 percent of the course grade. Project grades are figured through both peer assessment and assessment of the overall project.

Course Materials

Required Texts:

In addition, you should familiarize yourself with the following websites and consult them periodically during the semester:

- Human Rights Watch: [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)
- Amnesty International: [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)
- International Crisis Group: [www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org)

**Course Calendar**

**I. General Introduction: What are Human Rights?**

January 19 – Introduction

January 21 – Defining Human Rights

• Donnelly, Introduction and Chapter 1.

**II. The Development of Modern Human Rights Discourse**

January 26 - Religious Foundations of Human Rights

• Selected readings from the Old and New Testaments

January 28 – Philosophical and Political Foundations of Human Rights

• Selected philosophical writings and political documents.
• Donnelly, Chapter 5

February 2 – The Laws of War

• Geneva Conventions I-IV, Protocols I and II (skim the documents, with particular attention to the common articles at the beginning of each. Read Protocol II more carefully).
• **Optional Reading:** Amnesty International, “‘If You Resist, We’ll Shoot You:’ The Democratic Republic of Congo and the Case for an Effective Arms Trade Treaty,” London: Amnesty International, 2012.

February 4 – Human Rights Documents

• Donnelly, Chapters 2 and 11.
• Universal Declaration of Human Rights
• International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
• Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Degrading, or Inhuman Punishment
February 9 – Applying Human Rights Principles: Burundi


No class Tuesday, February 16 – Substitute Monday

III. The Question of Universalism

February 11, 18 – The Argument for Universalism

- Donnelly, Chapters 4, 6, 7, 9, & 10.


- Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide
- Mamdani, Saviors and Survivors, entire book.

Thursday, March 3 – In-Class Midterm

Spring Break March 5-13

IV. Second Generation Rights

March 15 – The Roots of Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights

- Selected Philosophical Readings
- Donnelly, Chapter 3 (section on economic rights), 13, and 14.
- International Covenant on Economic, Cultural, and Social Rights

March 17 & 22 – Applying Second Generation Rights

- Uvin, entire book.

V. Expanding the Human Rights Agenda

March 24 – Group Rights

- Donnelly, Chapter 3 (section on group rights).
- The African Charter on Human and People’s Rights

March 29 – Gay and Lesbian Rights
• Donnelly, Chapter 13.

March 31 – Women’s Rights
• Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

April 5 – Environmental Rights

VI. Human Rights Enforcement

April 7 – Governments and The United Nations
• Donnelly, Chapter 11 (review) & 12.

*Thursday, April 14, Human Rights Country Presentations due*

April 12 – Human Rights Organizations and Activism
• Alex de Waal, “Human rights organizations and the political imagination: how the West and Africa have diverged,” *Journal of Human Rights*, December 2003.

April 14 – Group Project Presentations

April 19 & 21 – Transitional Justice

April 26 – Human Rights Enforcement: Kenya and the ICC

April 28 – Course Wrap Up

*Final Exam during Exam Period*