



## Authoritarian Practices and Humanitarian Negotiations

6 March 2024, book presentation at Stichting Vluchteling and online

### *Summary report*

**The Frontline Project**, an initiative to improve humanitarian access (by Stichting Vluchteling, INTERSOS and IRC), and KUNO organised a presentation of the book '**Authoritarian Practices and Humanitarian Negotiations**' (2024) edited and co-written by Andrew Cunningham. This book examines authoritarian practices in relation to humanitarian negotiations and offers humanitarian practitioners a framework for humanitarian negotiations in the context of authoritarian practices.

Utilising a wide variety of perspectives and examining a range of contexts, the book considers how humanitarians assess and engage with authoritarian practices and negotiate access to populations in need of assistance. Various chapters provide insights at the macro, meso, and micro levels through case studies on the international and domestic legal and political framing of humanitarian contexts (e.g. Xinjiang, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Russia, and Syria), as well as the actual practice of negotiating with authoritarian regimes (e.g. Ethiopia). A theoretical grounding is provided throughout the chapters elaborating on the ethics and trust-building dimensions of humanitarian negotiations, and an overview chapter provides a theoretical framework through which to analyse humanitarian negotiations against the backdrop of different types of authoritarian practices.

New insights on this study were discussed with the editor, some chapter authors and humanitarian practitioners. To watch the recording of the webinar you can follow this [link](#).

### **Speakers:**

- **Andrew Cunningham**, editor and co-writer of the book, Andrew works as a researcher, strategic evaluator, and governance advisor for various humanitarian organisations. He is also a board member of the International Humanitarian Studies Association.
- **Rodrigo Mena Fluhmann**, co-author of chapter 6: Dilemmas of humanitarian negotiations with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and author of Chapter 8 commentary: Between Instrumentalisation, depoliticisation, and legitimisation of humanitarian action in Venezuela. Assistant Professor Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University, Deputy Director Humanitarian Studies Centre (HSC), The Hague
- **Sayed Mahdi Munadi**, co-author of chapter 6: Dilemmas of humanitarian negotiations with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Lecturer at Sciences Po Paris, PhD candidate at Inalco University, Former Afghan diplomat in China, specialising in Afghanistan Affairs, Terrorism, and Regional.
- First reflections on the book were presented by:
  - **Barbara Boekhoudt**, Humanitarian Access Specialist at Stichting Vluchteling, Frontline Project.
  - **Essie Opoka**, Training and Capacity Specialist at the International Rescue Committee, Frontline Project.

## **Introduction to the book**

Andrew Cunningham started by explaining the key components of the book and what makes it so important today. Firstly, one of the key goals of this book was to conceptualise what authoritarianism exactly is, which is essential for humanitarian organisations in navigating challenging governmental landscapes. What is particularly distinctive about this research is its focus on authoritarian *practices* rather than authoritarian regimes. The important difference is that authoritarian practices can apply to all types of governments, so not only authoritarian but also democratic regimes. These authoritarian practices hinder the work of humanitarians. Secondly, the book introduces a nuanced framework encompassing macro-, meso- and micro-level analyses of humanitarian negotiations. Access negotiations unfold across multiple tiers — international/regional, national, and more local— underscoring the complexity of engagement. Thirdly, a unique aspect of the book is the structure of the book. The book consists of chapters, each complimented by a peer commentary, making the book feel like a written dialogue.

In addition, Andrew Cunningham touched upon a thought-provoking inquiry: Do humanitarians place themselves outside the civic space, from the standpoint of humanitarian exceptionalism, or part of the civic space and consequently part of that political system? This dichotomy significantly influences their interactions with authoritarian practices and, consequently, shapes humanitarian negotiations.

## **Case Study Afghanistan: Chapter 6. Dilemmas of humanitarian negotiations with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan**

Mahdi Munadi and Rodrigo Meno, the two authors of this chapter, briefly introduced negotiating with the Taliban just after the fall of Kabul (based on Chapter 6). In this chapter, the writers explain the multi-angle complexity of the context of this case study: highlighting Afghanistan's diverse religious practices, multiple ethnic groups, and the ban the Taliban enforced on female aid workers. The writers also applied the macro, meso, and micro framework to analyse the case of Afghanistan. Building on this concept of authoritarian practices, the writers explained that not only states but also other actors can be authoritarian or engage in authoritarian practices. Importantly, the writers explained frictions in the negotiations: there is a misconception that everything that is negotiated and decided at the macro level will be then implemented in the same way on the meso and micro level.

Objectives vary across different levels, and at each level, there is a process of translation and reinterpretation. Thus, in the case of Afghanistan decisions made at a higher level were renegotiated at the lower levels. An explanation can be the (unstable) nature of the Taliban authoritarian regime that affected the negotiations: Not everything that was decided on the national level was implemented by local actors, and unexpectedly, there was more liberty for talks at the local level since there was less oversight from the top actors (with similar findings and processes described by Rodrigo Mena in Chapter 8 commentary on Venezuela). One finding of this work is that while it is commonly believed that decisions made by authoritarian states can be implemented directly at lower levels without the need for negotiations, the case of Afghanistan demonstrates that decisions made by authoritarian leaders, even for totalitarian actors, can be renegotiated. Another finding is that it's essential to know whether you talk with a theocratic or an ideology authoritarian regime in negotiations.

### **First reflection by Essie Opoka**

From her own humanitarian experience and through the provision of technical support to the IRC team in Ethiopia, Essie Opoka shared interesting reflections on the book and noted how important it is to analyse the negotiations and the contexts at the different levels in order to better humanitarian negotiations. Essie Opoka explained the essence of understanding the concerned authoritarian regimes and the language they use. What do we know on the micro-level, about the culture for example, and why the regimes would act with these authoritarian practices as they do? Furthermore, the humanitarian community should try to understand how their organisations are perceived by others - f.e. Are they perceived as compliant with the regime when operating under the regime's policies? How does this perception align with their assertion of neutrality?

*“Understanding our counterparts really helps us decide what we can compromise.”*

Within all the complexities of negotiating, she also stressed the importance for the humanitarian community to reflect on their willingness to compromise in the negotiations, without crossing our red lines, and abstaining from the humanitarian principles, but also deciding when to say *no and walk away*. She closes her remarks by asserting that the humanitarian community lacks coordination and is instead fragmented. The actions of one humanitarian organisation can significantly influence the perception of authoritarian actors toward the entire humanitarian community.

### **Second reflection by Barbara Boekhoudt**

Barbara Boekhoudt approached the book through the lens of an Access Advisor providing support to humanitarians in complex contexts on the ground. From this viewpoint, the emphasis on authoritarian practices proves highly valuable, as individuals in these settings are primarily concerned with the tangible impacts of governmental actions rather than the labels affixed to regimes.

She explains that having to negotiate at these different macro, meso and micro levels, creates a lot of uncertainty and confusion. While decisions may originate at the national level, their interpretation often varies at a more regional or local level. A comprehensive understanding of all the levels is therefore important for effective negotiation. At the regional level for example in Venezuela there are very ad hoc agreements with regional authorities about providing humanitarian aid and often authorities are unresponsive. Barbara therefore says it is important to do a good discourse analysis to find out why this is and how the humanitarian community is perceived, which aligns with the comments Essie gave in the first reflection.

Something she missed in the book was more information about collective negotiation. When and how can humanitarian practitioners use this as a response strategy to authoritarian practices? Moreover, it needs to be figured out whether this approach is effective and what the barriers are to using this strategy. Additionally, she advocates for introspection within the humanitarian community, suggesting that self-reflection on our own role in engagement and in negotiation processes and critical internal discussions are as crucial as analysing authoritarian practices.

### **Reaction Andrew Cunningham**

According to Andrew Cunningham, it is important to understand that every context is different. There is often a generic way of working, but instead, we should look more at the history of engagement between government and society as well as the culture of the context you are negotiating in. Moreover, conducting discourse analysis could offer valuable insights into how states and other (authoritarian) actors perceive humanitarian actors.

Further, at the local level, humanitarians only deal with the immediate issues they need to solve to provide immediate care. However, some issues may benefit from being negotiated at the national level. Therefore, with a better strategic understanding of the regime, organisations could more effectively deal with issues on a wider scale.

**Further discussion:**

Multiple interesting comments were made by viewers of the presentation and questions were raised during the discussion. Below you can find some highlighted discussions.

*Pressure on principles and compromising?*

One of the issues that was brought up in the discussion, related to the dilemma of the humanitarian principles. What happens when you want to be impartial, but can only work on one side of the conflict? An example is the response to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, the authoritarian practices are hindering humanitarian service provisions and this builds into this narrative that humanitarian organisations are pro-western organisations as humanitarian organisations cannot provide aid in Russia and Russian-controlled territories. It was brought up that this is not reflected enough and to avoid this discourse analysis has to be done and meaningful partnerships need to be built.

Related to this, since the invasion of Russia in Ukraine, there has been a lot of interest from donors and organisations to support Ukrainians and they have done so. What is interesting however is that there is very little attention to Russia or Russian-controlled areas, even though most refugees from Ukraine went to Russia and the situation there is very dire. Furthermore, the government of Ukraine forbids humanitarian organisations from working in Russian-controlled areas. Surprisingly, no one talks about it or pushes back. This could all pose questions on how the humanitarian community compromises on its principles.

Another issue that was brought up in the discussion was the ban on women in the public space of Afghanistan, which caused a lot of debate in the humanitarian sector. Humanitarian NGOs are often mostly involved in providing emergency aid and less involved in human rights abuses. In this case, however, it concerned human rights abuses against their own staff, making it a unique situation. During the discussion, it was proposed that in such scenarios, aid could be made conditional, potentially forcing the Taliban to permit the involvement of female aid workers. However, implementing such conditions was deemed infeasible due to the overwhelming number of people in need, and imposing conditions on aid could compromise access to them.

Lastly, as a reaction to the issue of compromises, a reflection on the humanitarian principles in access negotiations was given. One participant stressed that in order to know what you can compromise you need to know what your ground principles are. If you do not internally determine how to apply these principles in a particular context and fully comprehend the consequences of potential compromises chances are high that you will cross red lines in negotiations. Moreover, the humanitarian community as a whole is not in unison and actions of one organisation can compromise other organisations. Therefore, more reflection together is needed to establish what these principles entail and what, when and to what extent the humanitarian community is willing to compromise.

*Localisation and shrinking civic space:*

One of the highlighted issues revolves around the reluctance of the international community to support local partners when they encounter risks or challenges like forced closure. This hesitance may stem from the detachment of INGOs from the national civic space. Consequently, INGOs may not be sufficiently ingrained in the local context to comprehend the impact of political constraints on their operations or understand the perspectives of their local partners, who are also very often affected by illiberal practices. Or INGOs might very well comprehend the impact or political constraint but are not willing to take the same level of risks and do not share risks sufficiently with partners; so in fact transferring risks down to the partner. When things go wrong the consequences are fully for the partner organisation.

The situation in Afghanistan exemplifies this, with INGOs being directly confronted with human rights abuses. This underscores the need for the humanitarian community to engage in discussions regarding their stance on human rights and the feasibility of maintaining neutrality in the face of violations. Additionally, it prompts reflection on whether it is feasible to operate outside the national civic space while effectively addressing such issues.

Did this book launch and the reflections spark your interest in reading the whole book? You can order the book *Authoritarian Practices and Humanitarian Practices* [here](#), and watch the book presentation [here](#).