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# Why human rights violations in Toronto should concern all Canadians, and lawyers more than others

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## Human Rights . . . Here & There

Written by Vincent Greason

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**Canada's reputation as a country where human rights are respected took a step backward this summer as national and international television cameras focused on state and police repression of fundamental citizen rights during the G20 meetings in Toronto.**

With more than 1,000 people caught in the police sweep — and only 300 charged — this represents the largest mass detention in Canadian history. Had these events been an isolated occurrence, they would merit attention, but because they are part of an emerging pattern, they merit the concern of all sectors of Canadian society and in particular its legal community.

### The event

As expected, the assembly of world leaders drew a counter gathering of citizen groups wishing to voice concerns on a broad range of issues. While similar alternative events around previous G20 summits in Pittsburgh and London were largely peaceful, they had given rise to isolated expressions of vandalism and civil disturbance. Consequently, Canadian police and politicians spent the weeks before the Toronto summit preparing the media, and through it the general population, for the inevitable “turmoil” which was to be expected during the weekend of June 25-27.

As predicted, some windows were broken and a couple of police cars were burned in downtown Toronto on Saturday afternoon, through actions undertaken by what officials later described as “thugs and criminals.” Global TV estimated that “Black Bloc” tactics were responsible for a total of \$250,000 in damage to Toronto storefronts and police cruisers.

While there are questions around why the police did nothing to stop the vandalism, it is the state-sanctioned police use of preventive mass arrests that opens the troubling issue of human rights violations which occurred. The planned, tactical, and arbitrary detention of hundreds of citizens, many of whom were unfortunate bystanders, should sound warning bells to all Canadians who value their fundamental rights.

### Rights violations

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association had independent observers monitoring events throughout the weekend. The recently released [CCLA report “Looking Back, Moving Forward: Two Months After the G20”](#) identifies human rights violations related to arbitrary arrest, degrading conditions of detention, the use of plastic bullets and tear gas on innocent people, and abusive behaviour by police.

For its part, the Ligue des droits et libertés du Québec gathered statements from dozens of detained citizens which confirm the pattern of human rights violations identified by the CCLA including detention without charges, refusal of medication, and inaccessibility to water.

The independent reports gathered by these two human rights organizations reveal a disturbing pattern of police behaviour based on what can only be described as political profiling: youth, francophones, and people wearing black were particularly targeted for detention.

## **A pattern**

Police action in Toronto, undertaken with state complicity if not in direct compliance to state directives, is not an isolated event. It is part of an emerging and recurrent pattern of behaviour. During a demonstration in Montebello, Que., during the 2007 “Three Amigos Summit,” three undercover agents provocateurs, members of the *Société de la Liberté du Québec*, were found out and unmasked, rocks in hand, as they were inciting the (small) number of demonstrators to violence. Shortly after, they disappeared behind security force lines. The police then used rubber bullets and tear gas to “calm” a peaceful crowd.

This incident will be presented to United Nations’ human rights committee during Canada’s upcoming review under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In fact, this committee has already been made aware of similar behaviour by Canadian police. When Canada last appeared before this body in 2005, a series of incidents were reported demonstrating Canadian security forces’ abusive use of the power of arrest to stifle political expression, notably during the 2001 Quebec Summit and during events related to the International Day Against Police Brutality in Montreal.

Already in 2005, the human rights committee had stated its concern about the fact that Canadian police “have resorted to large-scale arrests of demonstrators.” While noting that Canada’s contention that none of the arrests in Montreal were arbitrary “since they were conducted on a legal basis.” The committee recalled nonetheless “that arbitrary detention can also occur when the deprivation of liberty results from the exercise of the rights or freedoms guaranteed by the Covenant, in particular under articles 19 and 21,” respectively the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

It concluded: “The state party should ensure that the right of persons to peacefully participate in social protests is respected, and ensure that only those committing criminal offences during demonstrations are arrested.”

All Canadians should be concerned with the observable, increasing tendency of the Canadian state and its police forces to criminalize certain forms of the right to protest. The use of mass arrests as a means of preventing citizens from expressing themselves places this country squarely on the proverbial slippery slope: arresting 700 people indiscriminately, only to release them *after* a political event and *without* charges, detention under degrading conditions, humiliation, and the use of plastic bullets on peaceful demonstrators.

From John Humphrey to Louise Arbour, Canadian jurists have demonstrated their commitment to building a country respectful of human rights. It is this legacy which is presently being eroded.

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