

The Law, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Future of the Global South

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Editor's Note: This essay forms part of the Conceptualizing the New (Global) South project at the New South Institute (NSI), which explores how knowledge, law, and governance from the Global South can shape a more just and multipolar world. In this piece, Miloš Hrnjaz reflects on the legal imagination of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its lessons for the Global South today.

“What law does,” [wrote University of Cambridge's Philip Allot in 1998](#), “is to allow a society to choose its future.”

That insight captures something profound about the story of the Non-Aligned Movement — a group of countries that, in the midst of Cold War tensions, dared to imagine a fairer and freer international order. NAM was not just a political alignment; it was a legal project. Leaders from Asia, Africa, and Latin America used international law to challenge colonial hierarchies, affirm sovereignty, and redefine what global justice could mean.

Today, as the Global South once again seeks to articulate its vision in a fractured world, NAM's legacy has renewed relevance. How can the legal creativity of the past help guide today's struggles for equality and justice?

The Non-Aligned Movement: Fighting for a Fair World Through Law

Emerging from the decolonisation wave of the 1950s and 1960s, the Non-Aligned Movement sought independence not only from empires, but also from the ideological control of East and West.

Behind its diplomacy lay a radical legal strategy: to transform international law from a shield of the powerful into a platform for emancipation. NAM's members used law to press for change in four defining areas:

- Decolonization – advancing political independence and the right to self-determination
- Disarmament – rejecting nuclear hierarchies and military coercion
- Defining aggression – ensuring that powerful states could be held accountable
- The New International Economic Order (NIEO) – demanding economic justice through equitable trade and development

Grounded in the principles of self-determination, sovereign equality, non-intervention, and cooperation through the UN, NAM's legal vision reframed international law as an instrument of solidarity and transformation.

It was, in many ways, one of the most creative legal revolutions of the 20th century. More than six decades later, that spirit endures.

The Global South continues to challenge a global order marked by economic inequality, ecological crisis, and digital divides. And, as NAM once did, it uses the tools of international law — reinterpretation, innovation, and negotiation — to push back against structural injustice.

From demands for climate reparations and vaccine equity to calls for reforming global finance, contemporary movements from the South are reimagining law as a living, evolving language of justice. This is the continuity that matters most: the belief that law can be reinterpreted, and that the marginalized can use it to speak power to power.

Yet the world has changed. The principles that once empowered newly independent states — sovereignty, non-intervention, and equality among states — now struggle to capture the realities of a deeply interconnected planet.

Global challenges such as climate change, corporate impunity, and technological inequality transcend borders and demand new legal imaginations. The Global South's legal project must therefore move beyond the state-centric model and embrace:

- New actors — including civil society, indigenous communities, and regional coalitions
- New principles — such as global solidarity, ecological responsibility, and shared accountability
- New forms of cooperation — that protect humanity, not just sovereignty

To pursue justice today, the Global South must reinvent the moral vocabulary that NAM once pioneered.

The Non-Aligned Movement's greatest legacy may not be its resolutions or declarations, but its imagination — the conviction that law could be used to change the world rather than merely describe it.

For today's Global South, that imagination is both a memory and a mandate. The challenge is to turn it toward the pressing injustices of our century: environmental collapse, economic inequality, and the uneven distribution of technological power.

NAM's dream was of a just and peaceful world order. The Global South's task now is to make that dream real — by transforming international law into a framework that reflects the realities and aspirations of all humanity.

In the end, as Allot reminded us, law carries our idea of the future. The question before us is: whose future will it carry next?

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