

## what shapes the west's human rights focus?

*The severity of abuse may be less important than a nation's policy relevance to the West, the ability of journalists to investigate freely, and attention from rights activists.*

In spring 2005, Amnesty International published a hard-hitting report on human rights violations by a host of abusive governments. The media, however, focused on the group's stinging critique of the United States and its Guantanamo prison. These accounts infuriated American officials, who claimed they were excessive and misplaced.

The Bush administration's response was disingenuous, but may still have contained a grain of truth. Human rights abuses by some countries get more media attention than others, and even the most fair-minded activist devotes more resources to some areas than others. Why does this happen? Are nefarious biases at work, or are structural forces at play? The question is crucial, since respect for human rights has become a leading indicator of state legitimacy.

Look closely, and human rights terminology is everywhere. From asylum laws to development policies, "human rights" promotion, vaguely defined, has assumed pride of place alongside such standard policy phrases as "structural adjustment," "good governance," and "democratization." Western countries increasingly insert human rights conditions into their trade and aid agreements, and even their military interventions. For example, the campaigns in Kosovo, East Timor, and Iraq all cited human rights justifications.

Human rights rhetoric enjoys strong public support. In 2003, a Gallup poll of U.S. respondents found 86 percent support for policies friendly to human rights, while a survey of Western opinion leaders found more confidence in Amnesty International's "brand" than in that of many major corporations. Today, Western publics, journalists, and governments regard Amnesty and Human Rights Watch as trustworthy information sources.

The long-term effect of all this is unclear, since much of the rhetoric is empty verbiage. In fact, one recent study argues that

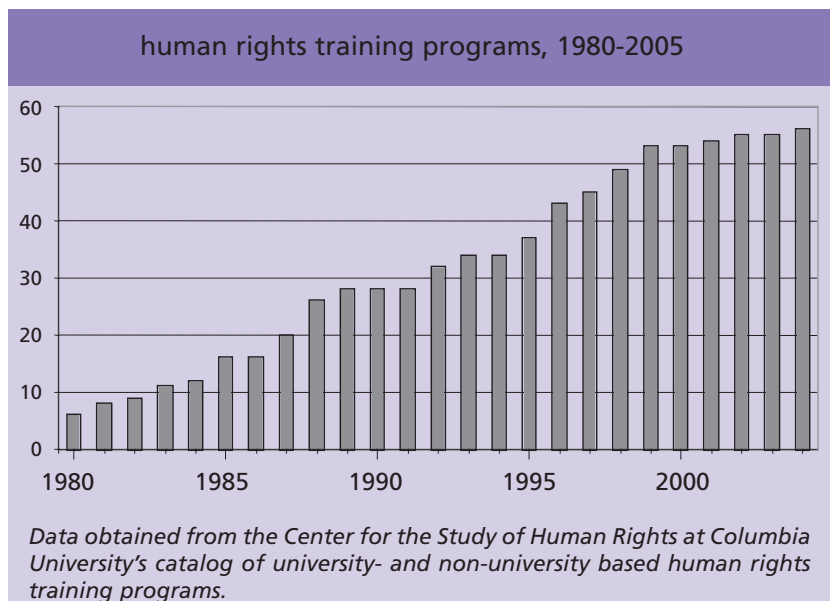
abusive governments are more likely than others to sign international human rights treaties.

Still, human rights pressures can and do make a difference, especially when governments are ripe for change, including those with competent bureaucracies, democratic leanings, and strong Western ties. Western influence per se does not help, but it often facilitates alliances between local human rights groups, journalists, international activists, and sympathetic Western officials.

Policy efficacy aside, the rhetoric of human rights is likely to be with us for some time, if only because a number of newly created training programs are educating an emerging group of officials, journalists, and activists. In 1981, there were only six such programs globally, but by 2005, there were at least 56.

### shaping the human rights agenda

Yet, like economic globalization, the wave of rights talk has not spread evenly around the world. Some countries



attract intense attention, while others languish in obscurity. The result is an imbalanced portfolio of Western human rights concern.

Consider ethnic cleansing and massacres, two acute human rights violations that spurred much reporting and institution-building over the last decade, including the creation of a standing international criminal court. During 1991–93, Serbian abuses in Croatia and then Bosnia attracted Western compassion and policy interest, including thousands of media stories, Security Council resolutions, NGO fact-finding missions, and a special, UN-backed war crimes tribunal.

By 1998, this human rights machinery was large, effective, and focused on Serbian security-force violations. When Serbian agents began abusing civilians again in Kosovo, the human rights wheels began furiously turning. NGOs and UN monitors reported on Serbian abuses in intimate detail, Western journalists diligently covered the events, and in the spring of 1999, NATO mounted a massive air assault. Although the war initially exacerbated Serbian ethnic cleansing and indirectly killed thousands, Serbian troops were ultimately forced to withdraw, and many refugees returned home. Ever since, an international force has ruled the region, with mixed results for all.

Compare this to the West's relative indifference to events in Congo-Brazzaville, a small country bordering on the larger Congo-Kinshasa. Civil war raged there throughout the 1990s, claiming thousands of lives and rape victims, and displacing one-third of the country's 2.1 million residents. These figures rivaled Kosovo's, but the Balkans attracted far more human rights scrutiny. Bosnia and Kosovo are run by international peacekeepers and receive substantial assistance, while Congo-Brazzaville has neither.

The legal ramifications can also be profound. Serbian paramilitaries and nationalists still hide their wartime experiences, fearing international war crime indictments from the Hague. In Congo-Brazzaville, by contrast, former fighters speak freely of their misdeeds, even while queuing for post-conflict aid in UN-supported camps. Abuses in the two regions were similar, but no one issued international arrest warrants for Brazzaville's warlords.

### is it racism?

Some argue that an anti-African racism underlies these

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*James Ron is associate professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University. Howard Ramos is assistant professor of sociology at Dalhousie University. Kathleen Rodgers is a doctoral candidate at McGill University.*

disparities, prompting the Western-dominated international community to focus more on European victims. These claims gained credence in 1994 and again in 2005, when the Rwandan and Darfur massacres unfolded without Kosovo-style interventions. But there are problems with this argument. True, Western militaries rarely intervene to stop African wars, but Western journalists, NGOs, and policymakers devote substantial attention to some African crises.

Consider Zimbabwe, a favorite site for contemporary human rights scrutiny. Western disgust with President Robert Mugabe's authoritarianism has skyrocketed in recent years, heaping opprobrium on the former guerrilla leader's increasingly brutal regime. In summer 2005, Western criticism peaked over the government's violent squatter evictions. Yet forced slum clearances are discouragingly common in the developing world, and similar abuses have occurred in Delhi, Jakarta, Beijing, and Lagos. Still, Western human rights attention has focused more on Mugabe's misdeeds, prompting the *Guardian's* John Vidal to note that Zimbabwe's strongman, like Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein before him, is the "international monster of the moment."

### politics and human rights

These and other disparities crop up regularly across the globe, infuriating governments over alleged distortions of their records. Conspiracy theories and backlash politics abound, and many argue that the Western human rights agenda is neocolonial and self-interested.

In Israel, nationalists find anti-Semitism lurking behind critiques of their policies regarding Palestine; in Pakistan, traditionalists detect racist paternalism in Western concern for women's rights; in Turkey, critics see human rights reporting as covert support for Kurdish separatism. These complaints are largely misguided since abusive governments rarely acknowledge evil deeds. Still, the severity of human suffering alone rarely explains levels of Western scrutiny, and profound imbalances exist in the deployment of human rights criticisms.

In Turkey, Western European concern with violations against Kurdish civilians is linked, in part, to Turkey's bid for European Union membership, a controversial move that many oppose. European officials say Turkey's membership depends on its human rights record, giving interested parties incentives to probe allegations of abuse. Large Turkish and Kurdish diasporas highlight the issue, as does advocacy by Armenian activists exasperated by Turkey's refusal to acknowledge their own genocide.

Other political factors are also at play. As the third largest recipient of U.S. military aid from 1981 to 2000, Turkey forms an integral part of NATO's southern flank, using

American weapons to fight Kurdish rebels. Given U.S. laws against aiding abusive regimes, American journalists, NGOs, and lobbyists are keen to probe Turkey's record. Everyone wants to be "policy-relevant" and effective, and Turkey's behavior, combined with existing U.S. laws, creates the potential for impact. Thus, Turkey's Western ties have transformed its human rights record into a topical issue for Western journalists, activists, and lawmakers.

Uzbekistan is another recent example. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, an increasingly abusive regime has repressed extremists and nonviolent protesters. In spring 2005, a demonstration in the city of Andijan was brutally put down by Uzbek security forces, who killed some 500 civilians. Although some protesters did use violence, the army's response was massively disproportionate.

The Andijan events triggered a wave of reporting by Western media and NGOs, fueled largely by the presence of a U.S. military base supporting America's Afghan operations. Embarrassed by the massacre and the resulting media furor, the United States vigorously condemned the crackdown; Uzbekistan is a staunch ally in the "war on terror," but the massacre was a public relations liability. Shortly thereafter, Uzbekistan angrily instructed America to close its base within six months.

## human rights and the united states

The "Washington connection" to violations in the developing world has provoked debate ever since the 1970s, when Jimmy Carter committed America to human rights-friendly policies. During the Cold War, the political left argued that abuses by Western allies attracted less attention than those of their enemies. As Noam Chomsky claimed, Western governments and media focused intensely on abuses by the likes of Nicaragua and the Soviet Union, but ignored violations by anticommunist allies.

These claims have merit, but they do not hold up over time. After all, U.S. Cold War allies such as El Salvador and Israel were heavily criticized by journalists and others during the 1980s. Indeed, the more U.S. officials defended these allies, the more the debate over their records intensified. U.S. government representatives were often slow to condemn allies, but the Western media and many NGOs were not.

A more plausible theory is that any connection to the United States or other powerful Western governments cre-

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ates incentives for greater human rights scrutiny. Western officials are keen to protect their allies' reputations, but overt ties to the West facilitate unofficial investigations and lobbying. Activists, journalists, and interest groups of all kinds want to be heard and to shape policy, and they do this best when speaking out on countries that are relevant to Western foreign policy.

Interestingly, this claim should hold true for major Western adversaries such as Russia, Cuba, or China, whose policy relevance comes from their challenger status. The more Western allies are criticized, the more Western officials

address their enemies' misdeeds. These duels feed on each other, pushing for greater scrutiny of friend and foe alike. In the process, abuses in countries deemed irrelevant to the Western policy agenda are often ignored.

## a systematic study

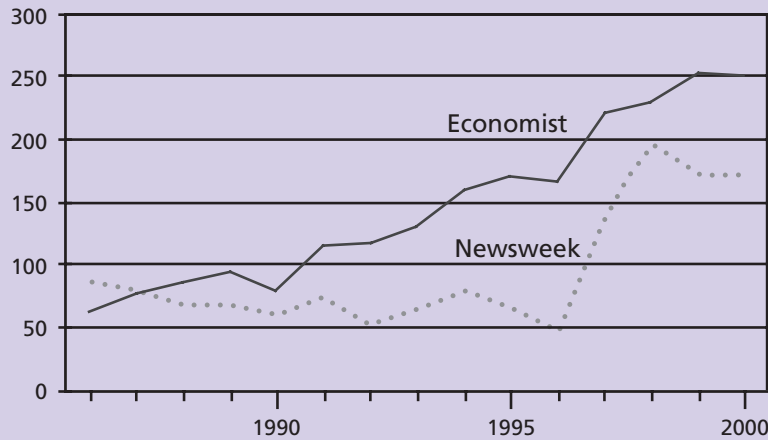
To investigate these and other theories, we studied the coverage of human rights criticism by two elite Western media sources, the U.K.-based *Economist*, and the U.S. magazine *Newsweek*. We assumed that these two magazines would reflect and help shape government and activist agendas. More important, we believed they would lend insight into the type of human rights reports consumed by the West's internationally oriented reading public.

As English-language weeklies covering domestic and foreign affairs, the two magazines share some important qualities, but they differ in crucial ways. While the *Economist*'s readers are financially better off and better educated, *Newsweek*'s readers are far more numerous. Together, the two provide a useful indicator of Western reporting.

Our team read all articles appearing in either publication that included the phrase "human rights," and then selected all stories with specific mention of an abuse in a particular country. Although this omits reports of abuse without the keywords "human rights," it does provide a consistent measure of the way in which the human rights discourse is used. We coded articles from 1981 to 2000, but due to other data limitations, confined our statistical models to 148 countries from 1986 to 2000. Our study focused on 1,027 articles published in the *Economist*, and 810 in *Newsweek*.

Our first observation was the dramatic growth in the number of articles containing any use of the phrase "human rights." In 1986, the *Economist* and *Newsweek* published 63 and 88 articles, respectively, with this keyword phrase. but in 2000, these figures had risen to 251 and 172. The number of

articles on human rights in the *Economist* and *Newsweek* from 1986-2000



Based on a Lexis-Nexis search of the term "human rights."

countries described as "human rights" abusers also grew. In 1986, the two sources jointly cited 24 countries for specific violations, while also mentioning "human rights"; by 2000, that pool had expanded to 61. As we suspected, journalists used the term more frequently, and applied it more broadly.

We then developed a "top ten" list of abusers appearing in stories with the human rights keywords. Two American adversaries, China and Russia (and the former Soviet Union), headed the list, lending credence to the left's suspicion that concern for human rights was a weapon used against Western enemies. Yet we could draw the opposite conclusion from the countries tied for third place: U.S. anticommunist ally Indonesia, and the United States itself. Of the remaining countries on the list, some, such as Turkey, Colombia, Chile, and the United Kingdom, were Western countries or their allies, while others, such as Serbia and Cuba, were adversaries. The only apparent outlier is Nigeria. Although it was not a major political ally of the West, it is an important economic ally, since its massive oil reserves are heavily exploited by Western petroleum companies.

The "most cited" list, in other words, lends support to the notion that Western policy relevance boosts media interest in the human rights records of both friends and enemies. Yet the list is also intriguing because of the countries that are absent. Missing are North Korea and Iraq, for example, two countries ranked during the 1986–2000 period as "very repressive" by Steven Poe's Political Terror Scale, a widely used indicator of government violations of civil and political rights. Similarly, the two countries with the most war-related deaths during 1986–2000—Sudan and Rwanda—received only marginal "human rights" attention. While the sheer magnitude of a country's suffering may matter, other factors are clearly at work.

statistical findings

Our list suggests that Western policy relevance matters, but our statistical analysis helps probe for other possibilities. Violations of civil and political rights do affect media coverage. A high Political Terror Score raised a country's media coverage, as did the intensity of armed conflict, measured by the percentage of the population directly killed in war. Moreover, the more closed a government's political rules and institutions were, the more likely the media were to report on its abuses.

Yet other factors also mattered, and it is here that the statistical story becomes interesting. Poverty, for example, has negative effects on media coverage. The poorer a

country, the less likely are *Newsweek* and the *Economist* to report on its abuses while citing "human rights." Controlling for actual levels of abuse, wealth seems to attract critical scrutiny.

This finding is counterintuitive, since poverty increases the likelihood of government abuse and civil war. Many feel that poverty itself is a human rights abuse because it violates essential economic and social rights. Why, then, were *Newsweek* and the *Economist* reluctant to mention abuses in poor countries?

We are not certain, but we have some plausible theories. Rich countries have better communications facilities and higher levels of education, both of which generate more information about government misdeeds. Wealthy countries also wield more influence internationally and may therefore be of greater interest to journalists. Historically, moreover, the West (and especially the United States) has downplayed

top recipients of *Economist* and *Newsweek* human rights coverage from 1986-2000

1	China	244
2	Russia/USSR	127
3	Indonesia & East Timor	89
3	USA	89
4	Chile	60
5	Turkey	53
6	Serbia and Montenegro	51
7	Colombia	50
8	UK	48
9	Cuba	45
10	Nigeria	43

respect for economic and social rights, seeing them as linked to a discredited communist agenda. This, too, may limit the media's willingness to define poverty-related problems as "human rights" violations.

A second intriguing finding was that human rights coverage increased with the number of NGOs formally registered in a given country. Like our finding on wealth, this was surprising, as countries bedeviled by civil war, government terror, or political extremism tend to have smaller NGO communities. Like wealth, however, such groups increase political participation, advocacy, and information about government behavior, and these may translate into greater media coverage.

Our findings on wealth and civil society highlight the information paradox noted by scholars of transnational activism. Countries with lower levels of actual abuse often produce more information about violations within their borders, since press freedoms, democratic norms, and vigorous activism all promote debate and exposure. Thus, politically open and wealthy countries attract more human rights attention, even though their abuses are comparatively less severe.

### the activists' impact

Statistically, the advocacy of Amnesty International also makes a difference. When we included that group's press advocacy in our models, we discovered that Amnesty press releases boosted media coverage in general. This is good news for the organization, since its work depends on the ability to publicly name and shame abusers.

Without doubt, international human rights activism has come a long way since the 1970s, when a handful of small groups used part-time volunteers to protest abuses in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Today, Amnesty International's London staff numbers 400, and its \$46 million budget is only one-quarter of the group's overall resources. New York's Human Rights Watch is equally influential, although its staff and budget are only half as large. Amnesty's activists engage with grassroots members as well as elites, but Human Rights Watch's media-savvy team focuses more heavily on the media and top policymakers.

Together, the two have achieved remarkable results. When governments shoot Uzbek protesters or bomb Afghan villagers, Amnesty and Human Rights Watch researchers appear soon after, using satellite links, media-savvy meth-

ods, and powerful legal arguments to broadcast their concerns. Abusive governments control bureaucracies and security forces, but their credibility is often shaky, and their information often stale. Global activists regularly use their information to discredit authoritarian rulers in weak countries. On occasion, they even make the most powerful Western official eat humble pie.

### the activists' dilemma

Yet the activists' growing media influence has been a mixed blessing. The more they hone their message for the Western media, the more they must cater to Western journalistic tastes. Journalists increasingly call on activists for information and comment, but they ask more questions about some countries than others.

This places Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and others in a painful bind. Although they are committed to exposing abuses wherever they occur, reports on "obscure" countries evoke little response. As one senior Amnesty manager noted, "You can work all you like on Mauritania, but the press couldn't give a rat's ass." As a result, activists are forced to adjust the flow of reporting to match media concerns. Consider again Kosovo and Congo-Brazzaville, two small regions with similar levels of violence during the 1990s. Amnesty issued 69 press releases on Kosovo during the relevant decade, compared to only two for Congo-Brazzaville. The media worried far more about the Balkans, and Amnesty's press officers were obliged to respond in kind.

Overall, the four countries most cited for their abuses in Amnesty press releases during 1986–2000 were the United

States and three of its allies, Israel, Indonesia, and Turkey. Cumulatively, these countries earned a total of 502 press releases. Compare this to the 148 press releases issued about violations in the four countries considered "most repressive" by the Political Terror Scale (North Korea, Colombia, Iraq, and Sri Lanka), or to 126 press releases about abuses in the four countries with the worst

armed conflicts (Sudan, Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Mozambique).

A similar picture emerges for Amnesty's background papers, which are aimed at more specialized, practitioner audiences. Here, the four countries most targeted were Turkey, Russia and the Soviet Union, China, and the United States, which cumulatively earned 1,474 reports. This compares poorly to the 441 papers Amnesty wrote about violations in the four countries with the worst Political Terror

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Scores, or the 259 papers on abuses in the four most war-torn societies.

We must interpret these figures cautiously, since Amnesty engages in other types of advocacy efforts. For example, its representatives participate in UN meetings and briefing sessions, which promote human rights concerns in less visible ways. Indeed, these methods are often used with countries with low media profiles. And as Amnesty officials note, many politically repressive countries refuse to grant research visas, making it difficult to report on their abuses. Statistically, moreover, we found that Amnesty's papers are less sensitive to media reports, suggesting that the group has a somewhat diversified portfolio of written products.

Still, the trends are clear, and they are not unique to Amnesty International. Human Rights Watch's record-keeping is not as detailed, but a survey of their catalogued reports during the 1990s shows that the United States, Turkey, Indonesia, and China topped their list. Indeed, Human Rights Watch is probably even more media-savvy than Amnesty, enmeshed as it is in the fast-paced environment of elite New York and Washington politics. The group is intensely strategic, and its written reports are always part of a broader lobbying strategy in which press visibility plays a key role. As the group's director noted, Human Rights Watch's job is to influence public debates, and this often requires "seizing moments of public attention—usually whatever is in the news—to make human rights points." In many ways, this is an excellent strategy. Still, the relevant "public attention" is often Western, shaped by parochial policies and interests.

NGO fund-raising is also at stake, since media visibility boosts charitable giving. According to one Amnesty manager, the group raises funds through work on high-profile venues, but then spends some revenue on less visible countries. Still, countries that attract little Western policy or media interest pose a huge challenge for activists. With many abuses occurring in high-profile countries, it is tempting to let "obscure" locales drift to the back burner.

These challenges have not escaped NGO attention. At Amnesty, some say they are concerned that the group is becoming too concerned with media impact; as one staffer noted, "Perhaps . . . we are not conscious enough of swimming with the tide." At Human Rights Watch, employees criticize the attention given high-profile emergencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, arguing that other, equally deserving countries get fewer resources. In both groups, senior managers readily acknowledge the risks of a media-savvy strategy, but remain

sensitive to the need for policy relevance and visibility.

These dilemmas are not easy to resolve. To grow and make a difference, Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and others must work with elite Western journalists. Yet even as activists struggle to boost public engagement with little-noticed countries and conflicts, Western media tastes and the potential for policy influence exert strong, countervailing pressures. In the years to come, NGOs may yet conclude that their media-savvy strategy was a Faustian bargain.

## recommended resources

Clifford Bob. *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Argues that the Western media and non-governmental organizations bestow attention on an isolated number of deserving cases.

Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Kiyoteru Tsutsui. "Human Rights in a Globalizing World: The Paradox of Empty Promises," *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (2005):1372-1411. Uses statistical methods to argue that while global human rights treaties do not have an independent effect on abusive governments, mobilization by global civil society activists can make a difference.

James Ron, Howard Ramos and Kathleen Rodgers. "Transnational Information Politics: Human Rights NGO Reporting, 1986-2000," *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2005):557-587. Argues that the volume of Amnesty International country reporting is shaped by actual human rights conditions as well as other factors, including previous reporting efforts, state power, U.S. military aid, and a country's media profile.

*Human Security Report: War and Peace in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2005), available online at [http://www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1). Review of the methods used to measure the human cost of violence, including a discussion of the Political Terror Scale.

The Websites of the world's two largest human rights organizations, Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)) and Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)), contain a wealth of information on human rights conditions in dozens of countries.