

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS ARE NOT ACCOUNTABLE TO ANYONE

John Dunn



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Democracy is a set of ideas and a set of practical institutional formulae for implementing ideas about how to regulate political power and how to take and justifiably enforce collective decisions. Human rights is a rather diffuse agenda concerned with the protection of different sorts of human interests, without any definite political standing. In a way, it is an extra-political standard, invoked to criticise the exercise of power in society and used to protect particularly vulnerable human beings. Democracy is one of the key terms related to the coordination of soci-

ety and to the management of public life. On the other hand, human rights activists vest themselves with the authority of protecting human rights, carrying out their own initiatives to this end. Human rights activists work out their own initiatives on the basis of certain standards, which, in a sense, can go beyond the scope of organising public life. But this tells us nothing about their standing.

Human rights activists cannot be called authorised political representatives of the citizens, despite the fact that many of them pursue wonderful goals, are courageous, possess indefatigable energy, and so forth. The basis of their activities is very different from that of politicians, who are elected by society to perform regulating functions. It is a totally different structure of activity, and it does not have a firm legal standing. Human rights activists claim that they have a very valid basis for their activity, but in fact they are not accountable to anyone. They remain external to democratic procedures. Most often, **common citizens become human rights activists, which means that their political standing is that of a citizen, equal in his rights with other citizens.** Human rights activists are not above other citizens; but in most cases they are the citizens who desire the accountability of authorities more than any other, and they are more eager to defend their values.

forced to become political. They just don't have a choice, because they struggle with the political authorities and strive to obtain as much authority and influence as possible.

If human rights activists are trying to get involved in political life, i.e. if they start living off politics and demand the same political power as the people, who come to power through elections, then they need political victories for ruling and shaping society. But they also gain political responsibility if they do this. In this case, they would effectively be challenging the current political leaders in order to replace them. But human rights activists don't necessarily need to come to power to achieve their goals. Yet it is not the major mistake of human rights activists if they were to do so. The biggest danger is that once in power they begin to live off politics, turning their activity into a sort of business. When that happens, human rights policies and activities cease to be regarded with any degree of respect by the population.

The danger for human rights activists also lies in the possibility that, together with converting politics into business, they begin to demand the privilege of political irresponsibility, while at the same time desiring the entitlements of those who must exercise political responsibility. From a political point of view, this is how human rights activists can sometimes find

From a political point of view, human rights activists can often find themselves in rather dishonest relations with society

Human rights activism is differentiated across time and space. The more they confront the state, the more contempt they show to authorities, the more they are

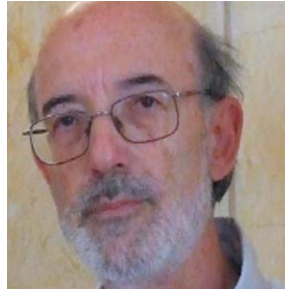
themselves in rather dishonest relations with society. Eventually, human rights activists come to believe that they no longer represent the interests of the whole

society, because they no longer do. One needs to be elected to represent the interests of the population. And that's exactly the major provision of democracy - citizens elect those who will represent their interests. Human rights activists take the function of human rights protection upon themselves, yet they are not authorised to do so by other citizens. They are not chosen in the course of democratic elections. Human rights activists represent a certain sociological category, they are not a random sample of the population. Of course, they may have different educational profiles, and live in different geographical locations, but there remain many sociological similarities between them.

Whether these people are perceived as representatives of public interests in the future largely depends on the given society and specific situation. Indeed, despite all the negatives related to the activities of human rights activists, they can still come to represent public interests. Let's remember what happened in 1989 in Czechoslovakia. Human rights activists became political representatives, and the society perceived them as such. Historically, this situation did not last for a very long time, but it did happen, and for some time human rights activists represented the interests of the majority. However, human rights activists better not associate themselves with political activities unless they are ready to be held accountable for their actions by their citizens. ■

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DEMOCRACY IS WORTHLESS WITHOUT HUMAN RIGHTS



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Human rights are constitutive of democracy. Democracy is more than just a system of government where legislators are elected by a universal and equal ballot, it also includes, among other things, constitutionally protected human rights.

Human rights organizations are important factors in determining international standards for human rights and for monitoring their enforcement, while democratic politics are an important safeguard for human rights, which are not sufficiently protected without strong and vigilant opposition. But **even strong opposition alone does not protect human rights**; other safeguards include an independent judiciary, free press, and human watch groups. Human rights groups often defend the rights of unpopular minorities and sometimes those who they defend are not in reality their allies but in fact their enemies. For example, they defend

the right to free speech for individuals whose views they may find despicable.

It is no wonder that, at times, they provoke popular hostility, even in constitutional democracies based exactly on the protection of unpopular minorities' rights. **In my opinion, it is not the job of human right activists to consider issues of national security. They must defend human rights** rather than seek compromises between their needs to successfully fulfill this duty and other interests. Human rights groups do well to seek influence on politics, but the influence they have to strive for is not that of lobbyists. Their power is that of publicity.

The standards for democracy include more than those of human rights. Nevertheless, human rights organizations are important factors in establishing international standards for human rights and for monitoring their enforcement. ■

