

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS ALWAYS SIDE WITH VICTIMS

Michael Walzer



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Human rights can be defended and, in part, realised in non-democratic states. You can have religious freedom in a non-democratic state as well as equality and employment for men and women; so there are lots of battles for human rights that can be fought and won in a society even if democracy isn't achieved.

However, the **idealism of human rights activists in authoritarian countries is more enhanced**. Of course, they should also have more courage than their colleagues in developed democracies. Moreover, many human rights activists believe that the right to free speech, free assembly and the right to oppose the existing government are fundamental human rights, even though they don't specifically relate to democracy.

The activity of human rights activists in the United States during the Bush years certainly overlapped with the activity of the Democrats, but these two spheres never merged into one. Furthermore, a lot of Democrats were nowhere near as bold or as critical as the individuals in the human rights community.

In the US, human rights activists often monitor the policies and the actions of the government, quite often playing the role of its critics. One example of this is Human Rights Watch, who criticised the actions of the Bush Administration for its expansion of executive powers, treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo, and proposal to hold military tribunals.

In fact, despite its efforts, the Bush Administration could not organise a single military court process. A very strong opposition formed against their plans, formed both by human rights organisations and, more importantly, by the legal community, which included the bar association and its judges. Individuals from the Bush Administration actually wanted to have military courts operating in Guantanamo, but they failed to do it.

This is why **human rights activities can, in a certain sense, be called effective**, though it seems to me that they owe much of their success not to human rights organisations

themselves, but rather to lawyers and judges, including some conservative lawyers and judges, who did not like the Bush Administration's radicalism.

Sometimes, when a liberal government comes to power in the United States, it attracts individuals from human rights organisations, offering them positions as ministers, deputy ministers, and assistants. Today, such individuals inhabit the offices at the State Department and in the Department of Justice. These individuals should focus on the highest principles of human rights in the way that they are understood on the international level. I believe that there is, at the very least, a minimum requirement for human rights that is universal. I have always claimed that each country should strive to obtain at least the minimum and work to adapt **universal human rights to the historical and cultural specifics of each respective region**.

However, human rights organisations in the US are not as strong as I would like them to be. After 9/11, many Americans felt that their country was at war, and since then it has been hard for human rights and civil liberties organisations to attract the attention of the general public.

Of course, the Russian human rights movement is similarly weak. However, I don't really know enough about the politics of Russia or of any of the other former Soviet nations to speak with any authority about this issue. Nevertheless, I do believe that, as nations with a long history of powerful central government and **a very short history of active civil society, their situation is self-explanatory enough**.

But human rights activists should not acquiesce to this compromise, they should set forth their reasons with as much conviction as possible

for the protection and security of the public, while at the same time continue to pay respect to human rights. Let the advocates of censorship and rigorous interrogation express their ideas, and a political dispute will surely ensue.

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The biggest challenge for human rights activists occurs in a situation when a nation faces terrorism and terrorist attacks similar to the ones that occurred in the Moscow metro, in London, and in New York. It is during these times that human rights activists lose the support of many individuals. Traditionally, human rights activists always side with the victims, and with the

exception of a completely authoritarian or totalitarian state, where the law is openly flouted, the public doesn't always identify themselves with the victims of state policies.

I believe that Amnesty International has always been helping specific people. Moreover, I believe that the reports by Human Rights Watch, in which violations of human rights are documented from different parts of the world, are quite valuable. Up until recently, the governments, to say the least, have worried when criticised in these reports. However, **I don't think that organisations like Human Rights Watch will ever become a mass movement.**

There are no lone heroes in organisations such as Amnesty

International or Human Rights Watch, although, they apparently have activists, probably militants, whose names we often never hear about. Therefore, it is the organisation itself that must be celebrated rather than individuals. But, I am sure that there are such people in Russia who should be remembered, such as the dissidents from 20-30 years ago, who fought against totalitarianism before 1989.

Undoubtedly, they, as well as such American civil rights activists as Martin Luther King and other leaders of the equality movement during the sixties, have been real defenders of human rights. ■

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INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS — A LIFE IN A POLITICAL VACUUM



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Achieving common standards of democracy is, technically, not possible and, moreover, not even desirable. There is an old joke among political scientists to the effect that the best democracies in Europe are all monarchies: Britain, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries and so on, which are usually thought as being mature democracies. Nevertheless, they are all, in fact, monarchies. I believe, in fact, that the attempt to impose common standards through international organisations is always negative because international organisations, unlike those that are national in nature, actually have no electorate and thus, they hold no accountability. I do not agree with the activities of Amnesty International, but to their credit, they do try to concentrate more narrowly on human rights issues. With respect to Freedom House — yes, this is an overtly political organisation, and I think

of its influence as being wholly negative. Freedom House is one of the organisations that I was thinking of when I said that they would congratulate a country if it has a pro-Western orientation and criticise it if it doesn't. **One of the most pernicious results of internationalism — of the internationalism of the human rights movement — is that it gives power to international organisations that are structurally decoupled — that are, in effect, structurally separate — from any electorate.**

The Council of Europe is obviously an organisation that is never elected. While, as a body, the Council of Europe has gotten itself into a very extremist position with respect to a number of issues which, in my view, does not correspond to either democracy or human rights. I'm thinking particularly of its stance on secularism. For instance, the European Court of Human Rights' decision that crucifixes should not be displayed in Italian schools. Now there is absolutely no way that this is a human rights issue. In my opinion, there is absolutely in no way that the court should have ruled on this matter at all and it should definitely not have taken the ruling that it did. That ruling is an example, in my view, of an organisation that has simply overstepped its powers.

All international organisations operate in a political vacuum, which contrasts with national organisations, such as parliaments, law courts, and prison/penitentiary systems. All of these national bodies operate within a legal context where there is, at the very least, a possibility of holding them accountable for their performance. And that is exactly why, in my view, any attempts to establish common standards and universal principals are *a priori* negative. ■

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