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Exporting and Negotiating Human Rights

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Exporting and Negotiating Human Rights

Abstract

In 2000, renowned Egyptian activist-sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and 27 colleagues were tried, convicted and imprisoned by the Egyptian government on a range of politically-motivated charges. In 2003, Ibrahim was released after three years of imprisonment and torture and a concerted campaign to secure his release by concerned academics, activists, and political leaders. Two years later, physically weakened but morally indefatigable, he visited colleagues at the University of Colorado and talked about his experiences as an academic and activist.

Keywords

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Exporting and Negotiating Human Rights

by Randall Kuhn

In 2000, renowned Egyptian activist-sociologist [Saad Eddin Ibrahim](#) and 27 colleagues were tried, convicted and imprisoned by the Egyptian government on a range of politically-motivated charges. In 2003, Ibrahim was released after three years of imprisonment and torture and a concerted campaign to secure his release by concerned academics, activists, and political leaders. Two years later, physically weakened but morally indefatigable, he visited colleagues at the University of Colorado and talked about his experiences as an academic and activist. At the end of his talk, I asked Dr. Ibrahim how he intended to contribute to the upcoming Egyptian presidential elections. His response, which took me completely by surprise, was that he intended to stand in the election. In the event, Dr. Ibrahim was not allowed to run and [Ayman Nour](#), a more mainstream progressive politician, finished second with 7 percent of the vote. Such dispiriting returns for progressives are common throughout the world, in developed and developing nations, in elections fair and not so fair (e.g., [Ralph Nader in the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election](#)).

I could not help thinking of underappreciated political martyrs like Saad as I was reading Negar Azimi's thoughtful review of the detention and torture of the Queen Boat 52 in Cairo and the subsequent entrapment and torture of homosexuals throughout Egypt. Who could begrudge a man who was tortured, abused, and wrongly imprisoned—just like you or so many of your friends and relatives—simply because you do not share or understand his cause, or because her cause is shared by Westerners?

And yet, as Azimi chronicles, [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW) and other rights groups faced just this situation in facing down both these injustices and the ensuing public hostility towards its victims. Instead of basing its appeal on “gay rights,” HRW situated its advocacy “in the larger context of torture.” This seems a novel and useful approach to addressing an issue that, whether correctly or not, is identified as being of greater concern to Western activists than those in developing countries. Rather than advocating in support of a “universal right” that is in fact still subject to angry debate even in the West, HRW chose to focus on the right to equal protection under the law.

Egypt's official politics are democratic only in name, yet active political discourse and civil society act as both a check against and a barometer of the shrinking legitimacy of the Egyptian government. In such a political atmosphere, progressive candidacies may wither on the vine even when those candidates' views on human rights are shared by the majority. We can debate or inquire as to which rights are viewed as inalienable in any society, but a “short list” would probably include equal protection under law, freedom of movement, freedom of speech—though what is meant by each of these values could still engender years of argument. Two things should be clear, however: there is far greater variation from society to society with regard to sexual freedom than freedoms that might be considered more basic, and even in the most progressive societies a less substantial majority is committed to sexual freedom.

We should not forget the multiplicity of reasons why sexual freedoms may be lower on some societal agendas. It may be true that some societies, due to economic or political

underdevelopment, are not yet ready or able to discuss, much less guarantee, such rights. On the other hand, the priority given to certain human rights does not cascade like a waterfall in a clear ordering of importance; rather, for a number of reasons, some rights may be more important to some societies than others. Perhaps a society simply does not place as much emphasis on sexuality. Or perhaps, as Azimi suggests for Egypt, a society feels successful in integrating alternate sexualities in a manner that is less noisy, still repressive, yet in some ways efficacious. Today such societies are confronted with Western societies which, having overcome a repressive and repressed approach to sexuality to the point where gay marriage is legal in many nations, would like to share—or spread, to be less charitable—that notion. Rather than accept this progressive wisdom, some societies reject it, associating the message and the messenger with other, more insidious forms of Western intrusion, and, worst yet, crack down in ways they never had before.

This story could serve as a wake-up call for Western activists and citizens. In a world where U.S. foreign policy is driven by narrow political economic concerns at best, and [grabbing oil](#) at worst, the perceived [export](#) of a “homosexual” agenda or any other agenda rooted in a particularly Western understanding of rights can be pegged as imperialism. But this becomes more likely when our approach to “diplomacy” reeks of racism, paternalism, hypocrisy, or self-indulgence.

While we can debate this within our own society, one could argue that the effective exertion of positive influence abroad begins with the consistent and self-conscious promotion of values and human rights that are truly universal. The promotion of rights that are already regarded as universal will find purchase even in undemocratic societies: witness the Egyptian government’s tepid but largely positive response to HRW appeals. Second, compassion and empathy towards those who do not agree with us, rather than acting out of hatred and exclusion, is an altogether more appealing message that is too rarely practiced by American activists, much less governments. Most important is a consistent approach to both universal and non-universal human rights: unbending, unconditional, and honest commitment to those that are most universal, no matter that strategic or economic importance of the country, and a humble and open debate about those that remain subject to debate.

Azimi closes his article with a potent reminder of the plight of those who are caught in the middle; those who, as one of his informants put it, “get branded as Western, fifth columnists” (§ 40). Can the West provide constructive support to these “prisoners of sex?” To say yes we need only look to figures who have spoken out against systematic human rights failures even as they acted to alleviate the suffering of those who bore the brunt: Mahatma Gandhi and [Mohammad Yunus](#) come to mind, as do academic/activists like Saad Ibrahim. For these revolutionary individuals, pointing out systemic injustice does not require that they take up arms, but it also does not obviate the need to ease individual suffering. For those in immediate peril, we may offer asylum. For those in less imminent danger, we can offer support, accompaniment, resources, and a constant reminder of what we have achieved and have yet to achieve in our own struggles.

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