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Human Rights Pragmatism Under Obama

Abstract

Bypassing realists and idealists, President Obama has staked out a boldly pragmatic approach to human rights. Critics depict the policy shift as “the downfall of human rights” and a set of “empty promises.” The problem is not with Obama’s embrace of pragmatism, or his rejection of ideology, to advance human rights. The problem is in the emphasis: human rights pragmatism should not privilege external inducements over vital on-the-ground domestic realities.

Keywords

Human rights, United States foreign policy, Barack Obama

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Human Rights Pragmatism under Obama

by Sonia Cardenas

Bypassing realists and idealists, President Obama has staked out a boldly pragmatic approach to human rights. Critics depict the policy shift as “[the downfall of human rights](#)” and a set of “[empty promises](#).” The problem is not with Obama’s embrace of pragmatism, or his rejection of ideology, to advance human rights. The problem is in the emphasis: [human rights pragmatism](#) should not privilege external inducements over vital on-the-ground domestic realities.

The new pragmatism rejects self-righteous moral condemnation and adopts a strategy of engagement—a willingness to sit down with repressive rulers, refrain from overly vocal criticism, and offer incentives for reform. The logic is captured in President Obama’s [Nobel Peace Prize remarks](#):

The promotion of human rights cannot be about exhortation alone. At times, it must be coupled with painstaking diplomacy. I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation. But I also know that sanctions without outreach—condemnation without discussion—can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.... There’s no simple formula here. But we must try as best as we can to balance isolation and engagement, pressure and incentives, so that human rights and dignity are advanced over time.

Balancing accusation with conversation is bound to alienate purists of all kinds, but not the majority of Americans who in recent [polls](#) have favored moving “cautiously” in promoting human rights abroad. “[Principled pragmatism](#),” to borrow Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s term, resonates with a public wary of hypocritical pronouncements and costly activism.

Skeptics highlight the policy’s inconsistencies and mixed signals. Yes, President Obama moved to correct abuses in fighting terrorism and to tame the arrogance of earlier rights discourse. But the administration is also charged with perpetuating “[the spirit of Guantánamo](#)”; being overly deferential to repressive leaders; [demoting rights abuses](#) in foreign policy; and delaying crucial treaty ratifications. Human rights advocates recoil from engaging with repressive regimes—painfully reminiscent of “constructive engagement” with apartheid South Africa—and demand moral outrage instead.

Reconciling extremes is not easy, and President Obama is correct to resist hanging America’s human rights policy on one-sided indignation and isolation. He is correct that human rights reform occurs over time, simple formulas are pointless, and a broad mix of strategies is critical. These insights, however, do not necessitate the current policy of engagement, so central to the administration’s human rights approach.

The [turn to engagement](#) is apt to disappoint. It is too fixated on the external engines of change, while insufficiently attentive to the domestic sources of reform. The key is not just to balance isolation and engagement. The key is to focus on the internal, unintended effects of U.S. policy. Is engagement undermining domestic supporters of reform? Is it reinforcing the structural underpinnings of repression (e.g., armed conflict and poverty, exclusionary ideologies,

non-democratic processes)? Public condemnation matters because it bolsters domestic human rights claims; and against a coercive state, such claims can be essential in raising the transnational costs of repression.

Engagement makes sense only if it does no harm—if it does not itself contribute to human rights abuses. Engagement that unwittingly fuels domestic incentives to repress (through trade or security relations) or that diminishes societal groups (by not condemning abuses publicly) is at best worthless and at worst dangerous. In steering clear of ideological posturing, the Obama administration must guard against pragmatism itself becoming the new ideology: pragmatism for its own sake, after all, can be self-compromising. Obama's human rights pragmatism still holds great promise, as long as it takes seriously the local contexts in which real people are coerced and struggle for change

Sonia Cardenas is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Human Rights Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She is the author of numerous publications, including Conflict and Compliance: State Responses to International Human Rights Pressure (2007), Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope (2009), and Chains of Justice: The Global Rise of National Human Rights Institutions (forthcoming), all from the University of Pennsylvania Press.