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# Missing the Message: Advocating for Action in Human Rights

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Missing the message: Advocating for action in human rights

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28 July 2017

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in  
Sustainable Development at SIT Graduate Institute, DC Center in Washington, DC, USA

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Date: 29 July 2017

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### **Acknowledgements**

*I began this research, and this program, looking at the connection between human rights and cultural preservation, and how as an international community we could universally secure both. After a year of deliberation, the conclusion I've come to is--we can't. It's impossible. (And who was I to think I could find a way to do so when decades--centuries--of experts, of philosophers and policymakers, strategists and analysts, activists and advocates, the United Nations with their security councils, peacekeeping missions and conventions on human rights, could not?) Once I accepted the inevitability that I had set an impossible goal, my next question was why. Specifically, what was so wrong with this seemingly valiant, altruistic and universally beneficial goal to make it so impossible to achieve? That is the question this research seeks to answer.*

*For helping me to focus on the question to be answered, I thank Davina Durgana, Phyllis Thibodeau, and Suzanne Simon.*

### Terms of reference

**Advocacy;** Advocacy is at its core an appeal for action. That action can be policy change, funding, or virtually any other behavior; it can be a formal and well-planned process, or informal and impromptu, coming from experts, or celebrity spokespeople or the public at large. Advocacy experts VeneKlasen and Miller summarize advocacy as “an organized process involving coordinated efforts of people to change policies, practices, ideas, and values.” They also surround this definition with a discussion of how advocacy can take on drastically different forms and functions depending on the type of advocacy: public interest, policy, social justice, people-centered, participatory, or feminist advocacy. These are only the types acknowledged in their *Action Guide* book, and special interest groups of course have their own version (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). Advocacy as referenced in this paper encompasses a wide variety of methods, messages and messengers, but at their core, all are ultimately appeals for action.

**Bias;** Bias is an automatic psychological method of processing large amounts of information in a small amount of time, or as *Psychology Today* states, “A bias is a tendency...But cognitive shortcuts can cause problems when we're not aware of them and apply them inappropriately, leading to rash decisions or discriminatory practices” (2017). It is this element of discriminatory practices that dominates popular use and understanding of bias, more similar to definitions of ‘prejudice’ than a ‘tendency.’

**Culture;** Culture is a complex and ephemeral concept to define, and infinite definitions exist. In an effort to ease some of the complexity, this paper will generally operate on a simple understanding of culture as a set of ideas, beliefs, behaviors, norms and knowledge that tie a group of people together within a society. These qualities are often historically passed down

through generations through unspoken norms, meaning it is often exercised not through a specific set of rules but rather an “intuitive grasp” of those norms (W. Dilthey, 1883, as cited in Williams, 1981, p. 15).

***Cultural imperialism***; Originally traced to Antonio Gramsci, the most basic definition of cultural imperialism is the power or influence of one group over another. A more modern definition states “Cultural imperialism is the economic, technological and cultural hegemony of the industrialized nations, which determines the direction of both economic and social progress, defines cultural values, and standardizes the civilization and cultural environment throughout the world” (Sarmela, 1975).

***Cultural relativism***; Relativist views of human rights or any other societal behavior, custom or policy argue that these qualities are all dependent on cultural interpretations and cannot be standardized across diverse societies. “Many agree that universal human rights norms simply do not conform with the extreme diversity of cultural and religious practices found around the world and that universal rights should be modified to conform with local cultural and religious norms...The variability in social and psychological characteristics across human groups is relative to--depends on--cultural variability” (Zechenter, 1997). A “radical relativist” view goes farther to claim that culture is more than just a modifying factor: “culture is the sole source of the validity of a moral right or rule” (Donnelly, 1984).

***Democratization***; Put simply, democratization is the change from a non-democratic government to a democratic one, which provides the opportunity for participation in choosing a leader and the peaceful transfer of power from one leader to the next. The less simple aspect of the spread of democratization is the debate over whether the desire and the right to a democratic society is

indeed universal or a product of western influence and self-interest (see ‘cultural imperialism’). “Some analysts have also claimed that democracy is not an event or process but rather a journey, involving several transitional phases before it can reach maturity over a period of time...It is equally pertinent that democratisation is not something that can be imposed from outside as long as the conditions in the subjected society are not favourable. Some posit a universal craving for democratic choice (in other words, a preference for being asked rather than simply told who one’s rulers are to be); others emphasise strengths of democratic systems that make them models for emulation; others point to the role of evolving norms of ‘democratic governance’. In reality, a number of these may reinforce in each other. But much also depends on elite orientations, on cultural orientations, and on the wider regional and international environments in which territorial units find themselves” (Saikal, n.d.). “The question of the optimal political regime for governing human communities has been core to Western political philosophy since Antiquity (Plato’s *Republic*), as has been the question of the causes of change between political regime (Aristotle’s *Politics*)” (Samuels, 2011).

***Dissent***; Dissent is a subjective term, often only distinguished from protest or criminality through historical hindsight. Collins and Skover describe dissent as an engagement with larger society involving three key aspects: civic participation involving criticism of existing systems, intention to confront power from a relatively powerless position, and willingness to accept the consequences (2013).

***Human rights***; Human Rights Watch defines human rights as “a set of rules that govern what governments must do and what they must refrain from doing to respect the dignity each person has” (Roth, 2015), and human rights violations as the state failing to honor its obligations to protect and serve its citizens or its obligations to international law; additionally when the state



does not have mechanisms in place to put violent criminals on trial and offer recourse to victims (Sanei, 2015). The specific lists of what those rights include has been laid out by various authors throughout history and criticized every step of the way, for reasons to be analyzed in this paper.

***Intervention***; Intervention as discussed here almost exclusively refers to international humanitarian intervention, which can be defined as “a means to prevent or stop a gross violation of human rights in a state, where such state is either incapable or unwilling to protect its own people, or is actively persecuting them” (Jayakumar, 2012). However, the analysis presented here critiques that definition as rather idealistic, and presents a broader idea of intervention as any action to stop or change a current behavior in a foreign government, whether altruistic or strategic. The legality of international humanitarian interventions is complicated because the non-altruistic motivations are endless; “The legal status of humanitarian intervention poses a profound challenge to the future of global order” primarily due to the “concern that states would use the pretext of humanitarian intervention to wage wars for ulterior motives” *or* “in important respects *discourage* wars with ulterior motives” (Goodman, 2006).

***Morality***; The set of conditions and experiences shaping morality or moral values are almost as subjective as moral values themselves. Morality includes elements of culture, experience, individual traits and ethics; put simply, “both morality and ethics loosely have to do with distinguishing the difference between “good and bad” or “right and wrong.” Many people think of morality as something that’s personal and normative, whereas ethics is the standards of “good and bad” distinguished by a certain community or social setting” (Grannan, 2016).

***“Otherness”***; This is essentially the layman’s version of outgroup homogeneity effect. Otherness describes the quality ascribed when broadly categorizing outgroups as significantly different

from ingroups, therefore unknown and unrelatable. This stereotyping (sometimes to the point of dehumanizing) effect can be exacerbated, sometimes intentionally, by messaging from authority, media, or public opinion.

***Outgroup homogeneity***; This is a form of bias that is to some degree automatic, but can be weakened or strengthened according to environment and the willingness to seek out contradicting information. The effect is “ that in-group members perceive their own group as more variegated and complex than out-group members” (Park & Rothbart, 1982), leading to assumptions or stereotypes that groups to which one does not belong (like a particular religion or nationality) are generally in agreement about beliefs, attitudes and behaviors.

***Tipping point***; While not a word central to the thematic vocabulary of human rights and policy advocacy, tipping points are discussed often in this paper and so merit an explanation here. In this context, this refers to the point at which conditions change enough to lead to a new action or policy. Specifically this is used to describe the moment when the cost of inaction becomes greater than the cost of action, creating the possibility for intervention.

***Tradition***; The specifics of tradition are introduced here only to distinguish the larger concept of *culture* from more specific *cultural traditions*. Cultural traditions are a specific “pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom)” that provide “cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions” and are inherited or handed down from one generation to another (Merriam Webster, 2017).

***Universalism***; Debates about universalism and relativism can apply to many issues: human rights, optimal forms of government, moral values, etc. Universalism can refer to any basic features of humanity that apply to equally to every individual in the world. In the context of

human rights, universalism “holds that there is an underlying human unity which entitles all individuals, regardless of their cultural or regional antecedents, to certain basic minimal rights” (Zechenter, 1997). This disputes that cultural relativism has any role in determining basic rights, put bluntly: “culture is irrelevant to the moral rights and rules, which are universally valid” (Donnelly, 1984).

**Abstract**

This research addresses two basic yet exhaustive questions dictating the field of human rights advocacy. The first question surrounds the feasibility of implementing a universal list of human rights across contexts, and whether the attachment of moral values to discussions of human rights further obfuscates the ability to enforce them. *What are universal human rights, and how do culture and politics challenge efforts to implement them?* Three case studies, the Iranian revolution, the Rwandan genocide and the Salvadoran civil war, provide the backdrop to discuss practical strategies underlying ostensible human rights interventions and the tipping points at which those strategic goals led to intervention. The second question addresses the practical approaches to elicit action against human rights violations and provide protections for those in need. *How can local groups or actors most effectively appeal to international audiences for intervention in human rights violations?* The goal is to provide clear analysis of how those advocating for intervention can effectively appeal to relevant strategies rather than morality in order to reach the tipping point sooner.

## Introduction

Human rights law and advocacy efforts to adequately live up to that law are hotly contested concepts. There are many explanations for inconsistency; first, diverse cultural perspectives and priorities make standardized protections impossible. Second, there is a distinct lack of realistic, enforceable guidelines or consequences for violations. Arguably the most difficult explanation to confront, human rights protections for *all* in actuality take a backseat to the political and economic priorities for *some*. Critics claim that human rights are in fact just a facade for government actions toward strategic priorities. When human rights are violated, those appealing to the global community for action struggle for recognition and are too often ignored while those with the power to intervene chase other goals.

Human rights and cultural preservation are two concepts that seem inextricably linked while at the same time, directly at odds with each other. Both rights and culture are based in value systems, the roots of which are often simple and shared, but represent behaviors that become complex and distinct in diverse contexts (Zechenter, 1997). Culture can help or hinder protections and interventions in human rights; it can create bias, provide excuses to avoid involvement, or prevent understanding and collaboration between advocates, victims, and interveners. Culture defines our understanding of rights and morality and how both can evolve and adapt.

Advocacy for human rights protections often take the form of morality, calls to “do the right thing.” This type of message sets up both parties for failure before the debate can even begin. In any society that is not completely homogenous, there exists no single standard moral code just as there exists no single standard culture. The differences abundant in moral interpretation weaken policies based on supposedly universal morality--including human rights--

rather than setting a useable standard. As David Kennedy observed, “As an absolute language of righteousness and moral aspiration came to be used strategically, human rights became less compelling, easy to interpret as nothing but strategy, cover for the political objectives, particular interests clothing themselves in the language of the universal” (Kennedy, 2012, p.22).

The primary role of government is not to standardize moral guidance, but to serve the measurable needs of their constituents: security, shelter, food, work, health care, and education (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011)--though ideally they try to provide these in a way morally acceptable to all their constituents. When a choice is faced between serving measurable needs and serving a moral code (i.e. immeasurable needs), measurable success always come first (Schlangan, 2014). When moral values are present in policies, they are values specific to those in power (Tudoreanu, 2012). Morality in government is a convenient disguise for strategy when all is well, and an inconvenient nuisance to be tabled for the sake of security (or other measurable need) when all is not.

Despite this rationale that governments cannot operate on moral values while representative of diverse populations, people still critique leaders and actions based on their perceived morality. This may be due to the emotional power of morality outweighing rational analysis--morality is intuitive, so all constituents have an understanding of their own moral values, albeit different understandings--or due simply to the fact that few people can understand all the political and economic strategies of the public sector, which are not intuitive but complex and learned.

To serve these needs, the practical inclination in government is to 1) maintain order and stability; and 2) avoid costly intervention in international conflicts with little reward (Binder, 2017). Intervention has a clear cost, whether money, resources, lives or political capital, while

avoiding intervention has hidden costs instead--hidden because those costs are paid by populations kept out of the public sphere by systematic oppression. Non-intervention most directly affects the populations being oppressed, but can have costs to the government with the potential to intervene as well (Binder, 2017). There is a tipping point at which the cost of non-intervention becomes greater than the cost of intervention, and only then will action happen. That cost can be any category: economic trade or sanctions, market price changes, political capital, loss of resources exported from the country in question, increase in refugees, or mounting pressure from the public at a level that jeopardizes job security for those in power (re-election).

This assessment is at best pragmatic, at worst pessimistic--no universal human rights, no morality in government--but the point is not to stop trying to pursue those goals, rather to avoid standardizing them. Standardization when culture is involved, while potentially increasing efficiency, leads to an absence of critical growth as well as stifled diversity and inequitable expectations (Au, 2009). These are not gains but severe and irreversible losses. To maintain human rights and protective government policies, advocates cannot demand adherence to their own moral codes; they must do the work to construct pragmatic messages calling for specific actions in alignment with those moral codes that also serve measurable needs of the population in order to allow the government (or other advocacy targets) to heed the message.

## **Literature Review**

### *Human rights, universalism, and cultural relativism*

The universalist idea of human rights has been evolving for centuries, from ancient philosophers and theologians discussions of ethics and the role of governments, to the first official list agreed upon by most countries beginning in 1948. Socrates saw human rights less as

the freedom for particular actions and more as the freedom to be the true form of one's self; Plato disagreed with the egalitarian view, claiming rights should be based on intellect and potential contributions to society; Thomas Hobbes saw human rights as the "civil rights required for peaceful relations between individuals-- right to be left in peace." (Butler, 2008, p. 5). Benjamin Franklin succinctly outlined basic rights as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights first developed by the United Nations (UN) in 1948 included "life, liberty and security of person" in the third of its 30 articles (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Both cultural relativism and individual constructs of morality make the discourse on human rights one that will never and can never come to an objective and universal conclusion.

Since its inception, the UN's attempt to implement standardized rights across the world has faced heavy criticism for western bias, vague interpretations and unenforceable guidelines. Article 29 in the 1948 declaration actually states "everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society" (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). The assumption of a democratic society preempts any denials of the biased nature of this declaration, and the "just requirements of morality" establishes a precedent of ambiguity and subjective interpretation that still plagues every discussion of the concept today.

As much as policy makers and advocates try, there can be no perfect international union free from bias (at best) or cultural imperialism (at worst). The United Nations attempted this, and is consistently criticized for bias toward top donor countries and five permanent members of the security council. Eric Posner explains how the original list of human rights was contested



between the United States and Soviet Union because the US focused on political rights while the USSR focused on social rights, eventually leading to separate covenants acknowledging both versions (Posner, 2014).

The two resulting treaties adopted in 1966, the The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, include 31 and 53 articles respectively (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1966), and ample opportunity for confusion, criticism and avoidance. The Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner lists the “Core” human rights instruments and monitoring bodies, and of the 18 instruments listed, nine of the titles include the word “optional” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2017). This immediately casts a shadow of “options” in the discussion of human rights as a whole, and the ability to choose which are necessary and which are not, invalidating the notion that any of them are universal at all. The sheer volume of rights listed requires prioritizing some over others when managing complex situations, and interpretations of those priorities and the rights themselves is anything but consistent. Posner highlights the example of US prioritizing free speech while China prioritizes economic opportunity, and many Islamic countries outlaw defamation of Islam to prioritize freedom of religion (2014).

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine emerging in 2005 attempted to counter the challenges allowing members to avoid action in previous declarations of human rights by invoking calls to morality. This immediately set up the new effort on a platform of intrinsic bias, closer to efforts of a colonial past than a utopian future. Pingeot and Obenland summarize this well: “Indeed, many progressively-minded groups in the 19th and early 20th centuries were mobilized in favor of colonial intervention and enthusiastically endorsed the idea that

colonialism would lift native people out of ignorance, backwardness, and misery. Today, R2P resonates well with governments keen to demonstrate international moral leadership in the protection of human rights and with civil society organizations that advocate for similar values” (2014).

Setting aside discussions of bias among the rights themselves, bias involved in the ability to implement them directly serves to hurt developing countries (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012). If the legal system and more importantly social structure of a country already exists within the image of these rights, maintaining them is plausible. If adherence to the 84 articles in the international covenants, or even just the 30 articles in the universal declaration, requires significant change to the legal or social systems (which is more often than not the case in non-western, non-democratic societies), it is undeniably impossible to change that many laws, behaviors and attitudes overnight, or even over a generation.

Rights and behaviors are exercised not according to laws themselves, but rather societies’ interpretations and acceptance or rejection of the laws. In an exploration of the parameters of dissent, Collins and Skover eloquently describe law as “both a mirror and a mold of how [citizens] think, speak, and act” (2013, p. 59). Collins and Skover’s analysis limits the power of interpretation to lawmakers rather than society as a whole, or more precisely, “the beneficence of lawmakers. The length and breadth of a right is determined less by constitutional declarations than by legislative decrees” (2013, p. 111). To put this argument into tangible context, Mona Eltahaway describes conversations with multiple high ranking members of the Egyptian leadership and the Muslim Brotherhood related to regulating the hijab or niqab among Egyptian women. Eltahaway illustrates how different interpretations of the same Qur’an passages effectively changed the meaning of existing law to require veiling without having to change the

law itself (Eltahawy, 2015, p. 47). Laws, rights and responsibilities are subject to interpretation. The interpretation of human rights in a society determines the behavior of its citizens, the law only serves to provide legitimacy to the prevailing interpretation. Changing a system to adhere to a new principle of rights requires far more than changing a law--it requires changing the attitudes and beliefs of those who follow the law and those who enforce it--police, judges, juries, witnesses in court, even neighbors who might make the call to the police.

*Intervention: Enforcing interpretations*

Cultures evolve, and with them interpretations of laws and rights, and eventually, the written form of those laws and rights. The natural evolution of culture can be stifled however, through oppression, or misdirected insistence on preservation of aspects that might otherwise change. Along with oppressive authorities is the tacit support shown when others decline to challenge that authority, whether out of self-interest, apathy, or ignorance. "Culture evolves, but it will remain static if outsiders consistently silence criticism in a misguided attempt to save us from ourselves. Cultures evolve through dissent and robust criticism from their members. When westerners remain silent out of "respect" for foreign cultures, they show support only for the most conservative elements of those cultures. Cultural relativism is as much my enemy as the oppression I fight within my culture and faith" (Eltahawy, 2015, p. 28)

Many reluctant arguments exist to avoid intervention in international human rights violations, and culture provides several. This claim of silence due to cultural "respect" or neutrality is a common argument for western countries in international conflicts. However, if culture is shaped and reshaped through national traumas (Lewis, 2007, p. 5), implying that revolutions and civil wars are in effect processing cultural change, that nullifies the argument that the pre-conflict cultural norms are unchallengeable. Revolutions happen when members

within a culture enact change from the inside, leading their own culture to evolve and adapt (Collins & Skover, 2013). Outsiders avoid acknowledging the change and the differences between members of the same culture through a bias called outgroup homogeneity.

What psychologists describe as “outgroup homogeneity” can be simplified with the increasingly common and less sophisticated label “otherness.” The basic concept is that humans have the tendency to see more diversity within groups to which they belong--their own race, religion, nationality, socio-economic status, education level, etc.--and see groups to which they do not belong as homogenous, whether in appearance, intellect or attitude (Park & Rothbart, 1982). This is a natural psychological tendency, but one that can be either dispelled or reinforced through environment. Authorities take advantage of this principle by dehumanizing “others” regarded as a threat. Nazi Germany launched broad media campaigns depicting Jewish people as inferior and comparing them with rats; Hutu controlled Rwanda did the same toward the Tutsi; America has seen broad group defamation towards Native Americans as brutal savages in the early 1800’s, Japanese as enemy invaders during WWII, communists as treasonous Russian spies in the 1950’s, and Muslims as terrorists following 9/11.

Drawing attention to the use of violence (or labeling actions as violence) committed by a group of “others” is an effective and convenient way to manipulate the dehumanizing stereotype of an entire group, and to cast them as anything from ignorant to angry to criminal. “[Violence] creates delusion--it allows both sides to see themselves as the victim and the other as the aggressor” (Lewis, 2007, p. 16). This is nearly universal in war; all parties involved see the harm done to them by the other as devastating and unwarranted, but the harm done by them to the other as necessary tactical success. Clear manipulation is evident in the case of Iran before and after the revolution; pre-revolution, the Shah’s regime executed dissidents as violent criminals,

and post-revolution, the Ayatollah's regime executed former Shah supporters as corrupt murderers (Cottham, 1980). Both were done in the name of social justice, both were murder. Power carries with it the ability to create the narrative through authority, trust, or control.

Dissent is a means of criticism or inciting change that does not inherently include violence, described by Collins and Skover as a combination of civic participation and criticism of existing systems, intention to confront power from a relatively powerless position, and willingness to accept the consequences (2013). Revolution, civil war, social change movements, and advocacy efforts almost always begin with small acts of dissent and grow to the scale required by the situation. Dissent connotes a kind of noble image of standing up for one's moral code, while violence carries the opposite image of abandoning morality. "The currency of dissent is devalued when aligned with violence" (Collins & Skover, 2013, p. 69), despite the hypocrisy that dissenters in oppressive societies are usually met with state-sanctioned violence designed to suppress their criticism of the state. Regardless of what the authority may do with impunity, dissenters--including advocates for intervention on human rights violations--are labeled at the first sign of violence or even civic disruption, as violent criminals and thereby discredited. Only hindsight can reframe a "criminal" act as worthwhile dissent after the cause has been won or public opinion shifted (Collins & Skover, 2013, p. 124).

Those with power to determine the narrative control how an act is broadcasted to the world, and more easily still, how it is remembered in collective historical memory. An appropriate sentiment and perfect example: "history is a set of lies agreed upon," is a quote widely credited to Napoleon Bonaparte though in actuality has been traced in various forms to so many well-known individuals across centuries that citing it is meaningless. Public narratives can

determine after a conflict which side was “right,” and either build up political figures as heroes or condemn them as criminals (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Public narratives cannot be shaped by power alone, they are interpreted by and through the media. Power depends on the public accepting it, or electing it. Examinations of public acceptance (i.e. election polls) often add and subtract voters as uncritical masses to be easily controlled, following the media-driven public rhetoric at the time. As Cohen summarized, the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*” (Cohen, 1963, as cited in McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). This is true to the extent that the people trust the media, but once the standard shifts to become untrustworthy, public attention can and will grow to match the need. The public can and will seek out or create alternate forms of information sharing if the media does not. Social media makes this simple today, though the practice has always existed. In the days of the revolution, the Ayatollah and others routinely distributed cassette tapes with messages to followers (Eltahaway, 2015). In WWII, the French resistance printed secret pamphlets and transferred coded messages through everything from songs to supermarkets (Kehoe, 1997). There is an ebb and flow to trust and complacency between the public and publicity, and international attention and action matches this ebb and flow in a delayed reaction akin to a boat adjusting to changes in the tide.

### *Strategic priorities versus human rights*

While culture, laws and interpretations of rights all evolve, slower to evolve are the global authority systems that implement and enforce these rights. Even judgements from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) take decades to conclude after the potential role of justice in resolution of the conflict has passed. Global Policy Forum’s annual lists of key documents and

articles from ICJ show a significant number of cases still being processed from the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's (Global Policy Forum, 2017). The delay is in part due to the cultural subjectivity in doing so, and in part to the competing demands of political and economic obligations and goals. Though the specifics of how to do so vary widely, philosophers, and multinational organizations generally agree on the primary role of government as providing order and basic needs for their own people (Butler, 2008, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). This means sovereign governments without exception have first and foremost a self interest in maintaining and protecting their state, and second, maintaining and protecting its role in the international community. Furthermore, the ability of the ICJ and other international authorities to enforce international judgements on sovereign governments is extremely limited without their consent (Schlamp, 2012). (While this is necessarily the case, some governments are quicker to respond to the needs of those around them than others, particularly clear in international crises (Pinoget & Obenland, 2014). This might be interpreted as a culturally determined moral act, or it might be in the self-interest of socio-political capital.)

Part of that self-interest involves maintaining order and stability at the geopolitical level, but more importantly in any country or region in which the government in question has a vested political or economic interest. Policies tend to favor maintaining "order and stability" as the opposite of war and chaos (Lewis, 2007). However, maintaining order means maintaining the status quo, and the status quo can certainly be chaos to many people while those in power controlling the public narrative enjoy a level of order the rest do not. Order and stability are not synonymous with freedom, justice or general welfare, and can in fact be at their highest in brutally oppressive regimes. In many cases, the mere appearance of order and stability allows the foreign government to conduct its business without acknowledging the chaotic or brutal reality

(Human Rights Watch, 1999). Typically regimes with the most egregious human rights violations and corruption have policies in place that are generally positive and progressive; the problem lies in the implementation, or lack thereof. In the cases presented here, Iran, Rwanda and El Salvador illustrate this dissonance between policy and practice (Cottham, 1980; Human Rights Watch, 1999; Michaels, 1987).

Clear as that dissonance may be, the fact remains governments acting internationally have business to conduct, security to maintain, and social capital to build. They have a vested interest in prolonging that order and stability and wherever possible, resolving issues of instability through diplomatic processes rather than direct intervention. The United States sees itself as the prototype for democracy, and though its own “roots lie in revolution,” the US actively works to prevent other countries from revolution unless it can guarantee success and positive relations with the new leadership to deliver a higher level of order and stability to American interests (Katovich, 1993, p.48). This is why leaders in undeniably oppressive regimes like King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, can be “hailed as a ‘reformer’--even by those who ought to know better” for advances like promising to give women the right to vote in 2015 despite the fact that being a victim of rape was still punishable by jail time (Eltahawy, 2015, p. 9). This illustrates how supposedly committed rhetoric from both the regime and the commentators is all for show. Empty promises are enough to mollify international attention and excuse the actual behavior.

It can be self-interest, apathy or ignorance, or a combination of the three driving this apparent desire to accept empty promises and call for patience, to prolong making any investment in a situation until it is impossible to avoid. This is evident in government action in



any sector, both internationally and domestically. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. criticized this reluctance during the civil rights movement:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season. (King, 1963).

Unfortunately justice, like morality, is subjective. While a government is obligated to operate on strategic value over morality, they still claim moral motivations when useful to garner support. "When nations send their military forces into other nations' territory, it is rarely (if ever) for "humanitarian" purposes. They are typically pursuing their narrow national interest - grabbing territory, gaining geo-strategic advantage, or seizing control of precious natural resources. Leaders hope to win public support by describing such actions in terms of high moral purposes - bringing peace, justice, democracy and civilization to the affected area" (Pingeot & Obenland, 2014). In advocacy campaigns, advocacy experts know this and plan accordingly. (However, major advocacy campaigns do not only include experts, they include the public at large, voters, media, celebrities--people who do not operate according to the experts' plans, nor are accountable to them (Aly, 2015).)

It is not government but the private and social sectors with the power and obligation to push the importance of human rights policies, and to increase the cost to governments for failing

to live up to their word. In situations where human rights are being violated, there is a direct and indirect cost of both action and inaction. Every context has a different tipping point at which the cost of inaction becomes greater than the cost of action, and only then do governments act.

Binder breaks down the calculation of this cost as a combination of four distinct areas, including: human suffering, potential regional instability, chances of success of an intervention, and material or reputational resources (2017). Only when those four categories indicate an intervention is “worthwhile” does that tipping point occur. In governments that are accountable to mitigate the cost of every action they take against the benefit to their own citizens, public pressure (as effects either re-election or the “reputational resource” of political capital) has some influence in bringing on the tipping point that will compel governments to act.

Intergovernmental bodies like the UN can build monitoring mechanisms for international human rights agreements, though they lack real power until the public gets involved. The Council on Foreign Relations confirms “these mechanisms are far from consistent. Generally, when they are effective, they change states' conduct by publicizing abuses rather than by providing technical advice or applying punitive measures. For example, no global body was capable of forcing the United States to stop its mistreatment of detainees at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Facility, but mounting international pressure did encourage fundamental U.S. reform of its detention and interrogation policies in 2009. As a result, skeptics also counter that other grassroots movements or organizations hold greater responsibility for rights improvements than global institutions” (2012).

Once the tipping point has been reached and intervention is imminent, culture is again a vital determinant for the long term success or failure of an intervention. Despite this, “culture, comprised of all that is vague and intangible, is not generally integrated into strategic planning

except at the most superficial level. And yet it is precisely ‘all that is vague and intangible’ which defines low-intensity conflicts” (Belbutowski, P., as cited in Lewis, 2007, p. 10). Lewis goes on to describe how a lack of understanding of the opponents prevented positive outcomes in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Militarily, the US possessed the strength necessary to secure a defeat in war, but strategically, did not possess the cultural knowledge to facilitate an intervention that would lead to a constructive end. Cultural understanding and navigation can mean the difference between effective intervention and imperialistic invasion. In Iraq specifically, US leadership “did not understand the cultural tenets of Iraq, believing the Iraqi people would welcome US soldiers as liberators” (2007, p. 10).

Perhaps if the goal were really to benefit the suffering people of another country by intervening to prevent violations of human rights, cultural understanding and constructive solutions would prevail. If the goal is to further economic and political gains and maintain self-serving order, then the complicated task of culturally relevant strategic planning is an unnecessary cost. There is little evidence to demonstrate the cost benefit of incorporating cultural training into strategic planning as it is rarely done, but there is ample evidence to suggest that the absence of doing so can lead to interventions that cause more problems than they solve (Lewis, 2007).

To synthesize the critical views described here, 1) human rights are subject to cultural interpretation and priority, and therefore cannot be enforced infallibly through standardization; 2) governments cannot operate based on morality because that would require utilizing cultural bias, and instead operate on strategic priorities; 3) strategic goals determine a tipping point at which intervention in international human rights violations becomes possible; 4) public pressure plays a significant role in forcing that tipping point to occur; 5) without an understanding of the cultural

forces at play in the situation itself, international intervention has an uneven effect on the long term outcomes.

The three cases that follow are examples of drastic and long standing human rights violations by regimes supported in western countries who overlooked those violations to prioritize economic or political stability. Each case saw years of advocacy efforts and appeals to action before international intervention finally occurred. Each conflict had cultural elements used by the international community to delay intervention, and each had a leader maintaining a facade of order and stability while the reality was deteriorating quickly. These case studies will examine the tipping point when the cost of intervention became worthwhile, and how that point arrived.

## **Methods**

Research and conclusions presented here are a result of analytical desk review of existing discourse on human rights policy, interventionist strategy and cultural relativism. Research included peer reviewed literature, UN publications, declassified internal CIA reports, autobiographical and historical analysis books, and popular media sources. Each of these subjects, as well as each of the three case studies from Iran, Rwanda and El Salvador, can and have filled thousands of pages of books and journals, so the research presented here provides a very brief synthesis.

The role of bias is a key feature in this analysis of human rights and intervention. The research process made every attempt to seek out a variety of sources and authors from differing perspectives and origins in order to create as unbiased an analysis as possible, though acknowledges that this is an impossible feat. The ideals of equality and freedom to express individual rights are tenets of democracy, and the spread of democracy is arguably a western

ideological goal. Nevertheless, equality and freedom in human rights are presented here as goals deserving of advocacy and international intervention. Each author is subject to the bias of environment, ideology and current events, though as discussed here in the context of cultural relativism, an understanding of the unique bias in a particular situation can serve as a useful framework to understand the arguments being made and to either put them into practice or deliver a constructive counterargument.

## **Results**

### *Iranian Revolution: 1979*

The Iranian revolution of 1979, like the other two cases examined here, represented the convergence of a series of complex situations, events, strategies, and social changes. Neither this revolution nor any other revolution can be summarized based on one simple set of circumstances. This case study does not intend to simplify or neglect any aspects, but acknowledging that they cannot all be captured in a short analysis, those aspects focused on here will be the cultural clash between Iranian leaders and western influences, advocacy appeals to western audiences for intervention, and the underlying strategic goals.

Cultural relativism is a prevalent theme in debates about Iran's past and future (Afshari, 2001). Simplistic comments about the revolution of 1979 characterize it as an Islamic revolution, and credit the modernizing, western reforms of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi as a catalyst to resistance from a traditional conservative public. Deeper analysis shows that the Islamic motivators for the revolution were limited, as was the support for Ayatollah Khomeini among other Islamic leaders (Arjomand, 1986). Ayatollah Khomeini was not the beloved charismatic leader he claimed, and not only the left wing academics and entrepreneurs disagreed with his

vision, but many of his own religious peers distanced themselves from him as well (Keshavarzian, 2009). Because he was already well-known in his opposition to the Shah and represented everything the Shah did not, he gave the revolution the best chance to succeed so varied opposition groups rallied behind him.

Several factions came together to make the revolution happen, including religious followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, secular academics, and low income laborers. Each of these groups reacted to different aspects of the Shah's regime, and each had different goals in revolution, though none had the strength or support necessary to accomplish revolution alone (Cottham, 1980). Motivations and goals for each of the three groups included adherence to the constitution and pillars of Islam that were not being followed by the Shah, freedom of education and press, and economic reform in response to the high inflation of the mid 1970's (Nelson, 2016). As the Shah began making (or claiming to make) advances toward political and economic freedoms, each of these groups exercised their growing rights to demonstrate opposition, only to be met with brutal crackdowns in retaliation (Cottham, 1980). Each very public supposed step forward toward human rights policies were followed less publicly by two steps back. It wasn't until US President Jimmy Carter and his human rights commitment at the beginning of his new administration that the separate groups began working together toward a shared mission of overthrowing the Shah.

A key advocacy action taken by a group of Iranian citizens demonstrates the direct contradiction between stated human rights policy and action by Carter's administration. Carter began his 1977 administration with a supposedly committed pledge to secure and protect human rights across the world, and in response to his own pledge and ongoing relationship with the Shah, a group of activists wrote a comprehensive letter detailing human rights abuses under the

Shah's regime and requesting intervention--intervention that Carter's own declaration should have required (Cottham, 1980). This call to action was blatantly ignored, and the authors of this letter were persecuted. Even after demonstrators were killed in 1978 en masse (actually numbers vary by source), Carter affirmed ongoing support of the Shah's regime and congratulated progress toward improving human rights conditions (Nelson, 2016).

Carter, like any president, might have had a personal commitment to human rights, but he had a more demanding political commitment to the system before him to maintain the status quo between the US and Iran. Iran has long been a strategic ally fought for by both the US and Russia, concerning influence in the region and military operations, as well as oil price control and other trade. So strong is the strategic importance, that in opposition to his own platform of human rights just three years prior, Jimmy Carter made the following statement in a State of the Union address in 1980: "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force" (Jones, 2012). Military force was considered necessary means for protecting the "vital interests of the US" though it was not considered necessary to protect those suffering human rights violations within the region.

Oil proved to be the most significant of those vital interests of concern during and after the revolution. "These concerns proved to be correct because the Iranian revolution resulted in the curbing of one-fifth of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) production capability. This Iranian oil cutoff strained the oil market immediately. American media automatically began speculating on how high oil prices would rise because of Iran's policies. The U.S. bought approximately 200 million fewer barrels of oil during 1979. By

December, world oil prices were approximately fifty percent higher than when Iran first cut back the oil supply” (Wyse, 2011, p. 9). The importance of Iranian oil was just one, albeit extremely significant, reason the US was highly motivated to maintain the authority of the Shah.

The US had a major stake in maintaining the government of the Shah beyond oil and the stability in the region; American support had been backing the Shah and his royal family since the 1953 overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq that brought him to power. Declassified CIA documents published in the National Security Archives officially label American involvement in the 1953 coup unequivocally as a “Campaign to Install a Pro-Western Government in Iran” with the recorded objectives stating “through legal, or quasi-legal, methods to effect the fall of the Mossadeq government; and to replace it with a pro-western government under the Shah’s leadership” (Central Intelligence Agency, 1953). The Shah was in effect brought to power due to his American allegiance, hence the US had every strategic reason to support a guaranteed ally. After he was ousted by the revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini, he was granted asylum in the United States to live out his dying days. The citizens of Iran demanded his return to be put on trial and the US government refused, protecting its ally, leading to the storming of the US embassy in Tehran and the ensuing hostage crisis (Cottham, 1980).

Despite the countless reports of human rights violations under the Shah and in later years under the Ayatollah, the only American military intervention surrounding the revolution was in an attempt to recover its own hostages. The UN since appointed a Special Representative to examine the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with little results. “Despite the passage of many years of intense interaction with the UN human rights organs and the Special Representatives, and the issuance of hundreds of UN reports, resolutions and pleas, the



[Iranian] diplomats still refused to treat the issues related to the charges of human rights violations with a modicum of straightforwardness and honesty” (Afshari, 2001, p. 285).

Officials within the regime validated this refusal with the argument of cultural relativism.

Cultural relativist exceptions have been claimed in the exercise of human rights within Iran by many members of the Ayatollah’s regime, stating that the regime is in fact operating within a different but equally valid, culturally determined parameter of human rights. Iran’s Foreign Minister Kharrazi called current UN human rights policies “restrictive bonds of monopolistic claims of a particular culture and ideology” (Kharrazi, as cited in Afshari, 2001, p. 285) and demanded that Iran be exempt to follow its own ideology. International observers struggle with whether to respect this argument while simultaneously observing systematic oppression of women, political prisoners and leftist journalists. This debate sparks the question of how to see past bias when determining whether international conflicts merit intervention, or if intervention would serve as just a new form of western cultural imperialism (Zechenter, 1997).

Internal dissent provides a key factor for determining the validity of cultural relativism as an exception; if the members within that culture do not consistently accept the system as just, then culture cannot be an overriding factor. Unfortunately, even large scale dissent or opposition sometimes struggles to be recognized by outside observers. “Most studies of nondemocratic countries neglect oppositional groups and concentrate on the institutions, policies and social bases of the ruling regimes...This overall neglect of oppositional activity in nondemocratic regimes can easily lead to an overestimation of these regimes’ stability” (Chelabi, 1990, p. 2). This means even when the regime is providing just a facade of human rights policies while facing dissent and impending revolution, outside forces may be blind to the reality.

Intervention in this case can be critiqued as either imperialistic influence from the Carter administration for the Shah to make advances in human rights, or it can be viewed as the events preceding and following the hostage crisis. Influence from the Carter administration resulted in further instability in the Shah's administration via oppression and opposition once it proved to be nothing but lip service, satisfied by reciprocal lip service from the Shah. It was actually the hypocrisy of Carter's position rather than his position itself that instigated further response from Iranian activists (Afshari, 2001). The direct military involvement was also a strategic failure that led to the deaths of several hostages and further alienated (and validated) the new extremist regime.

In this case, the strategic goals of American interest in Iran promoted maintaining a stable if troubled ally in a contested region, as well as oil market prices. Confronting the Shah on his violations would have meant disrupting both, and pushing Iran closer to the arms of Russia. Both Carter and the Shah spoke about improving conditions of human rights to smooth some of the outcry, though neither was particularly believable. The US did not commit fully to take action in the region until after the revolution had occurred, and then only to protect its own citizens, none of the suffering activists of Iran. Even in ensuing years, economic sanctions claiming to target Iran's human rights abuses are weak attempts focused on nuclear proliferation (self-serving security interests of the US) rather than on human rights of Iranians. "Last month the Treasury Department imposed the first human rights-related sanctions designations against Iranian individuals and entities since December 2014, and we will continue to pursue initiatives around the world that uphold our core values of promoting and protecting human rights...The action reflects concern with Iran's continued development of ballistic missiles, which is inconsistent with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231...The State Department will continue to

partner with our colleagues at the Department of the Treasury to ensure our national security in the face of Iranian threats” (United States Institute of Peace, 2017).

The Carter administration’s inaction toward the human rights violations of the Shah failed to prevent the coup and directly led to the hostage crisis and ensuing years of animosity between the two countries. International influence supported order and stability under the Shah (and after transfer of power was imminent, under the Ayatollah as well) rather than an actual demand for rights and justice to be served to those responsible for violations of rights. This case demonstrates how using human rights as a facade to maintain even tenuous economic and political relationships led to decades of animosity rather than order and justice. It is also a stark example of cultural relativism serving as a handicap to the implementation of human rights policies and law.

#### *Rwandan Genocide: 1994*

The genocide that killed 800,000 Tutsi over 100 days in Rwanda in 1994 did not come as a surprise to anyone paying attention to rising tensions in the region. Brutality from the Hutu controlled government had been building, propaganda attacking the Tutsi had been increasing, and militarization of civilians was clear (Adelman, 1996). International actors within the country reached out to their counterparts to request action, and were denied. Some were even recalled and replaced with new ambassadors more favorable to the Hutu regime under President Juvénal Habyarimana and maintaining the existing status quo. “Among the African countries, only the Ambassador of Tanzania took a strong, outspoken position on human rights violations. As a result – and in consequence of Tanzania’s weak economic leverage – Habyarimana asked in late

1993 that the Ambassador be replaced with another one. Tanzania complied” (Adelman, 1996, p. 30)

Violence between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority in Rwanda was no new phenomenon by the 1990’s, nor were rebel groups challenging the regime in power among several countries in the region. These facts made it easy for the international community to write off building tensions between the Rwandan government and the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) opposition as “business as usual” unworthy of closer attention (Harsch, 2004). As drastic human rights abuses and violent confrontations increased from 1990 to 1993, concern and resources were focused elsewhere. In 1994, warnings had been issued by human rights groups and representatives in country to governments and to the UN, which were largely ignored. Even after the massacres had begun, UN troops withdrew after 10 Belgians were killed (10 Belgians defending the some 100,000 Tutsi already killed by that time). Only weeks later did the UN vote to send additional troops, and it was months before they actually arrived (Harsch, 2004).

At the time, international attention was more focused on ongoing conflict in the former Yugoslavia, an area with more immediate relevance to western powers, particularly European powers and peripherally the US as a strong ally of the European Union. Rwanda held little strategic value in terms of political relationships in the region and economic potential, and the government itself was stable enough to avoid. “From 1990 on, influential donors of international aid pressed Habyarimana for political and economic reforms. But, generally satisfied with the stability of his government, they overlooked the systematic discrimination against Tutsi which violated the very principles that they were urging him to respect” (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The same report goes on to compare the relationship between maintaining the status quo and maintaining democracy. “Some policymakers, particularly in France and in Belgium, were

wedded to the notion that an ethnic majority was necessarily the same as a democratic majority. They could not bring themselves to condemn the genocide because they feared increasing the likelihood of an RPF victory and the subsequent establishment of a government dominated by the minority” (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

When the violence was too obvious to ignore, officials cited cultural excuses to avoid intervention; “At the time, Western politicians even refrained from describing events in Rwanda as genocide. Then US President Bill Clinton instead called it a ‘tribal war’” (Pelz & Corbett, 2009). This refusal to acknowledge perpetrators and victims of violence separately and the depth of damage being done is a clear example of dehumanizing “otherness” by western governments reluctant to invest. A New York Times article from June of 1994 epitomizes how the association with violence is used to characterize both sides as criminal: “Witnesses have said Tutsis were the victims of the worst violence, much of it carried out systematically by Government troops and Hutu militias, but Hutus have been killed in reprisal and in battles with the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led rebel group that now controls half of Rwanda” (Jehl, 1994).

Despite his article contributing to the unsympathetic portrayal of ethnic massacre, Douglas Jehl goes on to criticize the Clinton administration for its own blatant avoidance of responsibility. “Trying to avoid the rise of moral pressure to stop the mass killing in Rwanda, the Clinton Administration has instructed its spokesmen not to describe the deaths there as genocide,” as the mounting moral pressure did not yet outweigh the complete lack of strategic gains to be had from Rwanda: “a landlocked African country to which the United States has no historic ties. Without oil or other resources as a rationale, the case for military intervention would have to be based on whether ending the killing is worth the cost in American lives and dollars.” By the time this article was published, human rights groups had demanded action on the

basis of fulfilling the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention, “But Administration officials say they believe the treaty does not carry an absolute obligation to act” (Jehl, 1994).

As action was first called for in the early 1990’s, western countries took weak steps toward reducing aid on the basis of human rights violations, and were quick to accept the image of steps taken towards progress. In 1990 and 1991, international policies gave humanitarian aid to Rwanda and supported democratization processes as the answer to reducing civic violence, so by 1992 and 1993, those countries supporting democratization had obliged themselves to continue supporting that process (Adelman, 1996). This meant the appearance of steps taken by the regime towards that end had to be recognized and they could not terminate aid.

In addition, while many donor countries struggled to reconcile the ongoing need for humanitarian aid (which had since been relabeled as relief assistance) with reports of human rights abuses, the decision to impose conditions on aid was circumvented by administrative gaps. The position of Minister of Justice was vacant for most of 1993, meaning distribution of funds and reform in the justice system had virtually no leadership, and were suspended. Through this and other complications, aid packages were reduced for “bookkeeping and administrative reasons” rather than human rights conditions, giving up on any possible gains through that mechanism (Adelman, 1996, p. 32).

It is logical to understand the inclination to avoid military action in an international conflict, and to minimize the cost and the risk to one’s own nation, however, in hindsight this inclination can look very different. In some cases, like Rwanda, it is possible to imagine that decisive international military intervention might have ended the conflict sooner and prevented a genocide that cost the lives of 800,00 people in less than three months. Human rights groups can

only advocate to those in power to do more than issue reports, and governments will only act on those reports when they are sufficiently pressured to do so. “Advocates also note that military force is sometimes the only option to prevent mass atrocities, and argue that the Rwandan genocide could have been avoided had nations used military force. Merely naming and shaming is often criticized as a paper tiger, and rights violators can simply ignore UN Human Rights Council resolutions—which are not legally binding—or UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that do not threaten military force. Moreover, during UNSC negotiations, resolutions are often severely watered down” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2012).

Once the massacres ended in July of 1994, the RPF took power and with tenuous acceptance from the international community, began the process of rebuilding a society in which the Tutsi and Hutu could coexist. Similar to the Ayatollah in Iran, the post-conflict leader of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, has since committed his own version of oppression toward his opposition and free speech in the name of social justice. He has also, however, presided over decades of significant growth and reconstruction lending him the approval of most international leaders (The Economist, 2016). Again, only hindsight determines which regimes and which acts of violence are determined to be criminal violations or positive stability.

This case demonstrates how economic and political strategy take priority over human rights, and even human lives. This tendency in government is the reason it is the social sector and public at large responsible to demand action; those few individuals in government to do so were ignored or replaced, and only when public attention grew to a level of widespread advocacy campaigns including international organizations and celebrity spokespeople did action occur. This is also a case where cultural differences were blatantly used as a dehumanizing tactic to circumvent taking action through simple language choice in labeling the violence as “tribal

wars” rather than “genocide.” The UN and most of the international community look back in hindsight at the reluctance to intervene in Rwanda as a stark failure of global human rights policy and enforcement, though recent years of unanswered violence in nearby Darfur imply the system has not changed.

#### *El Salvadoran Civil War: 1980-1992*

The civil war that ravaged El Salvador for more than a decade has many similarities with Iran’s revolution. Both involved several groups in opposition to the regime coming together to pool power and influence despite their differing values and goals. Both saw the US supporting the existing regime in an effort to maintain a self-serving order. Both came as challenges to a regime consistently committing constant human rights violations while publicizing progressive policies to increase protections. The international response to the two conflicts however, differed. Iran saw virtually no intervention to ensure human rights protections at all, and direct action took place only after the revolution. Conversely in El Salvador, the UN was successfully compelled to carry out a “Truth Commission” to investigate human rights violations, though the effectiveness of that commission is debateable (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016).

El Salvador provides another stark example of a US backed brutal regime providing enough stability to the outside world that egregious acts of violence toward its own citizens were overlooked time and again. A series of loans from American banks in the 1920’s led to the creation of El Salvador’s wealthy elite, the “fourteen families” that ruled the economic system--plantations--and the political system, for decades (Michaels, 1987). When the working class majority rebelled in 1932 and 30,000 people were massacred by the government in “la matanza,” the international community was silent. In 1968, when the government created authorized groups within the Ministry of Defense to maintain order by exterminating dissidents, the death squads



were literally named Spanish for ‘order,’ ORDEN (Organización Democrática Nacionalista). ORDEN was left unchecked to murder Salvadoran citizens for 12 years before four American nuns were killed, finally prompting action (Michaels, 1987).

American intervention after the deaths of its citizens illustrates obvious self-interested strategy. Jimmy Carter responded to the murders by cutting off aid to El Salvador in 1980, implying that four American lives that year were worth more than the thousands of Salvadoran lives lost the same way in the previous 12 years. Even worse, the following year Ronald Reagan’s new administration reinstated aid to the government to maintain “order” as a Cold War ally fighting back leftist opposition across the globe (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016).

The following years of war portray any attention paid to human rights as an optional suggestion. The opposition had, until that point, consisted of many groups and individuals and only came together in 1980 to form the FMLN, or Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, after the assassination of human rights activist Oscar Romero and 42 others at his funeral. After aid was reinstated from the US to the right wing government in 1981, it came with calls to improve the situation of gratuitous violence and extrajudicial killings (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016). A 1984 CIA intelligence memorandum states the government’s so-called efforts to do so “have made little progress and have been aimed almost exclusively at placating Washington” (Central Intelligence Agency, 1984). Washington was indeed placated enough to continue aid and avoid more extreme measures until 1989.

The 1989 murder of four Jesuit priests and their housekeeper prompted the international intervention in peace processes and investigations that eventually led to the end of the war. In a significant reversal, after confirming that “19 of the 26 Salvadoran officers responsible had

received military training at the U.S. Army School of the Americas” (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016), American aid turned to support of the UN assisted peace accords. “This indicates that in situations where the American government is culpable for a potential bloodbath, policy makers are loath to take on that responsibility, which significantly shapes their policy toward revolution in a way that it did not when President Carter called the commitment to human rights ‘absolute’” (Nelson, 2016). The violence committed by these officials was not in itself enough to cause the US to separate itself from the brutal government, until the US government was in danger of being associated too closely with sharing the blame.

Long term accountability to resolving the conflict and securing justice was less than fully committed by the international community even after UN involvement. Support to both the government and the FMLN taking direct action had decreased, but investment to officially resolve the situation was also waning after the fall of the Soviet Union and end of cold war when battling the global leftists became less of a priority (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016). El Salvador’s war officially ended after long failing negotiations with a mutual agreement to a UN Truth Commission report, though no real agreement was made to enforce accountability to what the report actually found (Boutros-Gali, 1993). The UN released the report denouncing massive abuses of rights and atrocities, and five days later the government announced blanket amnesty for those responsible. The amnesty protection is still active today with no enforcement of justice from the UN or anyone else (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016).

The complete lack of accountability is primarily due to the inadequacy of the judicial system within El Salvador to prosecute vast numbers of its own members, though no outside solutions have been proposed. “One painfully clear aspect of that situation is the glaring inability of the judicial system either to investigate crimes or to enforce the law, especially when it comes

to crimes committed with the direct or indirect support of State institutions...The Commission does not believe that a reliable solution can be found to the problems it has examined by tackling them in the context which is primarily responsible for them” (Boutros-Gali, 1993, p. 178). The report concludes rather apathetically that there is no “reliable solution” within the context of El Salvador’s judiciary, and does not follow this up with any indication of possibilities to change the context.

Mathematicians say two points determine a pattern, a third confirms it. The same can be said in the case of El Salvador confirming the pattern laid out by the previous two cases of Iran and Rwanda. International interventions claiming to be protecting human rights had little to do with human rights realities or those who had suffered abuses of their rights, and everything to do with self-interest and political or economic strategy. The pattern of enforcement and accountability is also clear; even when the international community has absolute confirmation of violent and widespread violation of international human rights law, there is virtually nothing done to enforce consequences once stability has been re-established.

## **Discussion**

It is useless to criticize a perceived lack of morality in government, or a focus on self interest over justice. These are facts of government for the reasons discussed in the literature review, and will not change. It is useless to criticize human rights appearing as a facade for strategic intervention, because it will not change. What can be useful is the acceptance of these facts among advocates for change, and the ability to work within them. The first step: drop the facade. It is clear that governments act for strategic aims, so appeal to the strategy. It is clear they prioritize security and economic prosperity, so appeal to security and economic gains.

Those advocating for action should be aware not only of the strategic goals of their targets and the priority of those goals, but also a deep understanding of the direct and indirect costs of both action and inaction. The indirect or hidden costs are often much higher than the direct cost, and bringing these to light in a clear and specific message within the framework of national security or economic effects can force the government to a tipping point of action.

Rights, priorities and accountability are interpreted and accepted or rejected by the public, not the government. The government has the power to respond or not to public demands, and the public has the power to pressure the government. The power of the public and the responsiveness of the government of course depend on the type of government in a given country, and sovereignty gives each country the power to determine their own type of government. Sovereign governments protecting their own interests and differing interpretations of international rights and obligations make enforcing “universal” rights a daunting battle.

Governments may not be able to be held accountable to a moral standard, but they can be held accountable to their own policies. Unfortunately they are too often not, which provides a practical starting point for an advocacy campaign aiming to protect human rights. El Salvador’s Truth Commission report succinctly describes government hypocrisy in all three cases outlined here, as well as countless others across the world: “The political, legislative and institutional mechanisms required to ensure the existence of a society subject to the rule of law existed in theory, at least in part, but the reality was not what it should have been, perhaps as a consequence of excessive pragmatism” (Boutros-Gali, 1993, p. 182).

A particularly grim but undeniable pattern in all three cases here suggests that the “excessive pragmatism” determining the tipping point for western countries to act can be traced to western lives, or specifically white lives. In all three cases, direct intervention by western

countries was immediately preceded by attacks on white westerners: American embassy workers taken hostage in Iran, Belgian peacekeepers killed in Rwanda, and American nuns killed in El Salvador. In each situations thousands of “others” had been killed unanswered, but with only a small handful of white westerners the cost suddenly became too high. This is not meant as strategic analysis to inform future advocacy, but a commentary on the dangers of systematic “otherness” bias.

### *Key takeaways*

Advocates should...

- Frame aid and intervention requests first and foremost within the framework of national security impacts to the country from which action is being requested
- Package advocacy messages into specific, strategic actions being requested that are in line with the strategic goals of the advocacy targets as well as being morally acceptable by both the targets and the advocates; avoid messages using morality as the basis to act
- In public awareness campaigns aimed at raising public support to pressure governments to act, push understanding of the government’s political and economic strategic goals to the public in way that presents them as pragmatic rather than pessimistic or immoral
- Collaborate with other groups only when specific outcomes and how to manage them in the long term are clear to avoid outcomes that favor only one group’s needs or goals
- Accept small concessions and steps toward progress only when doing so will not cost the momentum or attention required for long term goals

Intervening governments should...

- Recognize internal dissent and advocates appealing to international audiences from within sovereign states; recognize diverse ideologies in foreign states rather than homogenizing the “other”
- Examine the cultural implications of intervention and incorporate these into planning and trainings
- Build culturally appropriate relationships with those with whom they will be working throughout and after the intervention
- Develop ongoing enforceable accountability and monitoring mechanisms in conjunction with local leaders

Culture cannot be preserved within human rights law because culture evolves. Traditions can be preserved, though this is not inherently a positive goal as not all traditions are positive. Freedom and tolerance of diversity can be preserved, and freedom and diversity allow the expression of culture and traditions as they adapt and evolve. Western democracies looking to spread this particular ideology should exercise caution, however, to avoid the cultural imperialism of forced democratization across the world and setting impossible policy expectations.

Human rights policies should be looked at the way MDGs and SDGs are--as a set of goals to aspire to with action plans created to implement a process of change. They should not and cannot be taken as current standards, in part because that is unrealistic and unenforceable, and also because they are not standardizable. When governments, international bodies, and the advocates holding them accountable can look at complex and subjective issues of human rights and interventions with a strategic analysis, each group will be more equipped to understand the messages and requirements of the other. When these messages are understood, appeals for

intervention can be more effective, and hopefully the interventions themselves can be more effective. The international community will never resolve all debates on these issues, and will never be free from human rights violations for good, but can certainly improve the efficiency and effectiveness with which those in power respond.

**Brief reflection on sustainable development**

Sustainability requires strategic, contextual and achievable planning. Current human rights laws and policies are not constructed to be strategic, contextual or realistically achievable. Policies and systems to implement them are virtually unenforceable, which means interventions can be purely based in self-interest. Interventions themselves are often equally lacking in strategic and contextual planning, giving the minimum commitment necessary.

If this research can approach the idea of how to incorporate sustainable, strategic solutions into human rights policy or interventions, it will have achieved its goal. Maintaining human rights across the world is a joint effort; it requires collaboration and motivation from governments, multilateral organizations, the social sector, the private sector, and the public at large. Without each of these groups accountable to another for providing and portraying accurate information and acting on it, egregious violations of human rights will be allowed to continue. Only with sustained efforts and vigilant attention can the global community prevent or stop these mass violations when they occur.

Developing nations--perhaps even more so nations in the process of reconstruction following war or other disaster--are at particular risk of allowing human rights violations as a trade off for economic growth and short-term political stability. The international community and human rights advocacy groups have a significant role to play in assuring these development and re-development efforts are built upon a stable base of rights and justice if they are to continue to provide order and stability for a sustainable future.



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