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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Human rights, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Structural adjustment programs

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Human Rights and Structural Adjustment by Rodwan Abouharb & David Cingranelli. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 276pp.

Abouharb and Cingranelli ask the crucial question: how have the World Bank's and International Monetary Fund's Structural Adjustment Agreements with developing countries affected those countries' respect for human rights? Although it is generally well known that Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), and the Washington Consensus ("stabilize, privatize, and liberalize") of which they are a part, have failed to generate economic growth as promised, this volume is the first to simultaneously (1) combine the World Bank's (WB) and International Monetary Fund's (IMF) SAPs in a large scale (131 country), long-time period (1981-2003) econometric study to (2) examine their influence on the entire range of human rights (civil, political, economic, and social), while (3) controlling for selection effects, that is, the factors behind why countries would enter into Structural Adjustment Agreements (SAAs) in the first place.

The first three chapters outline the theoretical and empirical issues and review the relevant literature. The book covers enormous territory, and one of its outstanding features is how carefully the authors place each of the book's arguments in context by extensively reviewing the relevant literatures. The neoliberal argument for why SAPs should promote respect for human rights rests on the positive effects of rapid economic liberalization. Economic liberalization requires a limited role for recipient governments, which in turn promotes respect for physical integrity rights because there is less government to meddle in everyone's affairs. Indirect effects include a higher level of economic development, which in turn induces more democracy and more respect for both physical integrity rights and economic rights. The critical perspective offers a more negative assessment. For critical perspective scholars, there is a direct link between rapid economic liberalization and less respect for physical integrity rights and economic rights, which in turn induces more civil conflict and less democracy. The question is: who is right? That question is particularly important because, as the authors suggest, there are alternatives to SAPs. The WB and IMF could issue direct financial assistance toward promoting diversified exports, infant industries, regional trade, land reform, and democracy, and could make initial and continued assistance contingent on meeting human rights benchmarks.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the empirical estimation methods, data, and the method used for controlling for selection effects. The key (independent) variable is the duration of time a country experiences under a WB and/or IMF SAA. This new variable is important because most countries enter SAAs with both institutions, but most previous research focuses on just one institution. It is worth mentioning that the authors assume that the longer a country has been under a SAA, the more it has implemented its (liberalization) provisions. That seems reasonable to me, but it might not satisfy some SAP proponents who would not like the results of this study.

Controlling for selection effects is crucial because if it turns out that countries do not fair well under SAAs, it might be because they were in terrible shape to begin with, and they would have been even worse off without SAAs. The authors find that governments are more likely to enter into a SAA the higher their national debt, the less their participation in international trade, and the more respect they show for both physical integrity rights and worker rights. This evidence

suggests that the WB and IMF enter SAAs with governments that are not particularly repressive. Moreover, having an alliance with the United States does not statistically improve the chances of getting a SAA.

The empirical findings in Chapters 6 through 10 provide the book's real contribution. I will report the main, statistically significant findings—that is, those effects that are statistically different from 0 (I cannot comment on the relative magnitude of the effects because that information is not given). First up are economic and social rights. It turns out that duration under a SAA negatively affects respect for economic and social rights, as does having a United Kingdom colonial heritage (a bit surprising). Economic growth shows a positive effect, while selection effects do not matter in this model. The key finding, of course, is that the longer a country is under a SAA the worse is its respect for economic and social rights.

For the authors, worker rights refer largely to the rights of workers to form trade unions and to strike. The authors find that again, duration under a SAA makes matters worse, as does economic growth and the amount of international trade. Positive effects on respect for worker rights include GDP per capita, the level of democracy, and UK colonial heritage. Importantly, selection effects do matter in this model and their exclusion would have erroneously rendered the duration variable insignificant.

An increased duration under a SAA also decreases respect for physical integrity rights and increases the probability of rebellion. A host of other factors are associated with respect for physical integrity rights, including more GDP per capita and democracy. Selection effects are also important in this case. Not surprisingly, a higher degree of ethnic fragmentation is associated with an increased probability of rebellion.

While the results so far tend to favor the critical perspective of SAAs, the final results do not. Duration under a SAA is *positively* associated with procedural democratic rights, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of speech, and free and fair elections. Selection effects are of mixed importance here. In these regressions, the authors also include respect for economic and social rights as an explanatory variable. It turns out that respect for economic and social rights is positively associated with respect for the political and civil rights mentioned above.

Overall, the book's results require a careful, nuanced interpretation. No single doctrine prevails to explain SAA effects. But I predict political scientists, economists, and other empirical researchers will relish analyzing, re-estimating, dissecting, and extending this seminal contribution from Abouharb and Cingranelli for years to come.

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