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The Right Side of the Coin: Focus on the Human Rights of People, Not the Failure of States

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Abstract

US policy toward failed states should focus on strengthening civil society and social movements so that people are better able to hold their leaders accountable.

The language of "failed states" disassociates foreign policy from international dialogue about human rights. Instead, "failed states" is a contemporary sound bite that connotes a lack of sovereignty, suggesting that intervention would not violate national sovereignty because in a failed state, there is none. Of course, we could have a similar cynicism about the use of human rights concerns to justify invasion. Certainly, states have tried to choose when to reference international human rights norms to justify their foreign policy. But the contemporary reference to "failed states" is no less prone to political manipulation and introduces a misleadingly simplistic narrative to discuss complex political circumstances.

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US policy toward failed states should focus on strengthening civil society and social movements so that people are better able to hold their leaders accountable.

The language of "failed states" disassociates foreign policy from international dialogue about human rights. Instead, "failed states" is a contemporary sound bite that connotes a lack of sovereignty, suggesting that intervention would not violate national sovereignty because in a failed state, there is none. Of course, we could have a similar cynicism about the use of human rights concerns to justify invasion. Certainly, states have tried to choose when to reference international human rights norms to justify their foreign policy. But the contemporary reference to "failed states" is no less prone to political manipulation and introduces a misleadingly simplistic narrative to discuss complex political circumstances.

Many factors contribute to state failure. Indicators of failed states include demographic pressures, internally displaced peoples and refugees, uneven economic development, and factionalized elites. These are different reasons for "failing." Yet, these many reasons have two things in common: whether due to unwillingness or inability, failed states' governments are not accountable to their people, and the human rights of their people are not secure. These things should be the focus of foreign policy, with strategies tailored to the other dimensions of state failure. Such an approach may mean dampening the focus on the security risk that "failed states" pose and focusing instead on the humanitarian and economic responsibilities to which they appeal.

In theory and in practice, human rights and accountability are the cornerstones of democracy and peace (Goodhart 2005; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005). Research by Mary Caprioli and Peter Trumbore in international relations has shown that those states that violate the human rights of their citizens are more likely to enter into international conflict (2006). Additionally, states that systematically oppress women, ethnic minorities, and popular movements are more likely to turn international disputes into violent ones (2003). Further, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and co-authors find that broad popular participation in multiparty elections and accountability of leadership are key factors in respect for human rights (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005).

The implications of these findings for foreign policy are clear. A foreign policy intended to decrease international violent conflict should focus on increasing respect for human rights of citizens by strengthening popular political participation and political empowerment, such that people—particularly women, repressed ethnic groups, and those in popular movements for justice—can hold their governments accountable for the treatment of citizens.

Furthermore, "human rights" better for framing concern about the impact of domestic conditions on international peace than "failed states" because human rights is based on an international norm, one with growing international and grassroots support. Human rights are international norms whose boundaries have been tested. The interventions of the 1990s (Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone) and of the new millennium (Afghanistan, Iraq,

Libya) have given the international community a varied political and empirical body of knowledge from which to defend the humanitarian basis for intervention.

The Responsibility to Protect is an emerging international norm that guides states' commitment to support human rights. The doctrine continues to be a focal point for international political reflection about human rights-based humanitarian intervention, but it is limited in scope to genocide and other war crimes. However, as the political science research shows, a commitment to support human rights more broadly suppresses the tendency toward international conflict. Moreover, in contrast to military intervention, supporting human rights by strengthening civil society strengthens national sovereignty while weakening the authoritarian hold of a government over its people.

Before we dismiss as too expensive strengthening the human rights and political authority of civil society (especially the political participation of women, marginalized ethnic or geographic groups, and marginalized low income economic sectors), we should calculate the cost of military intervention under Responsibility to Protect or other approaches to "failed states" and ask how much support for internally displaced peoples, human rights, civic participation, public services, and economic development an equivalent amount distributed through civil society and social movement organizations could achieve.

If people do not have political power—that is, if their governments are not accountable to their people—then the focus of US foreign policy on "failed states" is misplaced. Rather, we have a national security interest in a foreign policy that is focused on enabling populations to assert their human rights and hold their governments accountable. International relations scholars and social movement actors agree that these are the dimensions of the failed state index that reduce conflict.

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Professor Ackerly's research interests include democratic theory, feminist methodologies, human rights, social and environmental justice. She integrates into her theoretical work empirical research on activism. Her publications include Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism (Cambridge 2000), Universal Human Rights in a World of Difference (Cambridge 2008), and Doing Feminist Research with Jacqui True (Palgrave Macmillan2010). She is currently working on the intersection of global economic, environmental, and gender justice. She teaches courses on feminist theory, feminist research methods, human rights, contemporary political thought, and gender and the history of political thought. She is the winner of the Graduate Teaching Award and the Margaret Cuninggim Mentoring Prize. She is the founder of the Global Feminisms Collaborative, a group of scholars and activists developing ways to collaborate on applied research for social justice. She advises academics and donors on evaluation, methodology, and the ethics of research. She serves the profession through committees in her professional associations including the American Political Science Association (APSA), International Studies Association (ISA), and the Association for Women's Rights and Development. She has been a member of the editorial board for Politics and Gender (Journal of the APSA, Women and Politics Section) since its founding.