

The Downfall of Human Rights

22/02/2010 08:39 by admin

By Joshua Kurlantzick | NEWSWEEK

Published Feb 19, 2010

From the magazine issue dated Mar 1, 2010

Touring Asia in November, Barack Obama hit all the usual presidential themes, including free trade, investment, and strategic alliances, except for one: human rights. During a scripted press conference in Beijing, Obama barely mentioned it. In Shanghai he offered only mild criticism of China's Internet blocks, saying he was a "big supporter of noncensorship." Obama's nonstatements amount to a clear break from nearly three decades of U.S. policy. From its engagement with the brutal Burmese junta to its decision to avoid the Dalai Lama when he first visited Washington during Obama's tenure to its silence over the initial outbreak of protests in Iran, Obama's administration has taken a much quieter approach to rights advocacy than his predecessors George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. "Conceding to China upfront doesn't buy you better cooperation further down the track," says Sophie Richardson of Human Rights Watch.

Obama's waffling was hardly unique. Across Europe, Asia, and Latin America, many democracies have abandoned global human-rights advocacy, trotting it out only for occasional speeches or events like International Human Rights Day. With the prominent exception of Canada, the developed world has fallen mum. Earlier this year European nations handed the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, one of the major organizations tasked with promoting human rights in Eurasia, to Kazakhstan, a country accused by human-rights groups of arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture. In Japan, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama has promised a new dialogue with North Korea, rather than pressuring Pyongyang to first release alleged Japanese abductees. In contrast to predecessors such as Junichiro Koizumi, Hatoyama prefers a soft approach to China as well, calling for far closer ties while all but ignoring the growing climate of repression under the government of Hu Jintao.

The Australian government, once known for stinging critiques of China, Burma, and other autocratic regimes, now collaborates with Indonesia and other neighbors to prevent refugees from Sri Lanka and elsewhere from entering the country, instead detaining the migrants in a Guantánamo-like camp on remote Christmas Island. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has refrained from criticizing China, even for the arrest of an Australian mining executive on what many observers see as a trumped-up spying charge. In France, President Nicolas Sarkozy has failed to deliver on his campaign promise to champion human rights and end the country's old ties to African dictators. Instead of the "new relationship" with Africa that Sarkozy promised, his government has backed the new ruler of Gabon, Ali Bongo Ondimba, despite widespread claims of fraud in his election, and offered a state welcome to Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the general who launched a coup in Mauritania. Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, the cofounder of Médecins Sans Frontières, a unique kind of human-rights organization, admitted in an interview, "There is a permanent contradiction between human rights and the foreign policy of a state."

In the developing world, too, young democracies that once seemed ready to stand up for human rights have beat a retreat. After apartheid ended, many activists had high hopes for South Africa's ruling African National Congress, which had benefited from a global pressure movement when it was fighting white rule. Yet the ANC has used its influence at the United Nations to protect not only the brutal regime in Zimbabwe—where South Africa has security and economic interests—but tyrants as far afield as Burma. In December, Thailand, which during the Vietnam War era sheltered tens of thousands of Indochinese refugees, forced some 3,000 Hmong back to Laos, where they could face persecution. Cambodia deported a group of Uighurs back to China, despite the fact that Uighurs previously returned to China have been executed.

Rallying For Democracy

<http://www.rallyingfordemocracy.org>

The age of global human-rights advocacy has collapsed, giving way to an era of realism unseen since the time of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon. In the West, the failure of George W. Bush's moralizing style of democracy promotion, combined with the pragmatism inspired by the global financial crisis, has made leaders far more reticent to assert a high profile on rights issues. In private, Obama officials say that they deliberately took a humbler tone because of the global rejection of Bush's claim that he was fighting in Iraq to advance the cause of democratic rights. But such a strategy, initially appreciated by countries tired of Bush, can go too far. "The administration wanted to send the message that the U.S. is listening to the world again, that they are the anti-Bush," says one former senior State Department official, who did not want to be quoted by name criticizing his old colleagues too harshly. "Rather than saying, 'OK, we have made some mistakes, but we are correcting them, and that doesn't mean we are going to ignore what's going on in Russia, or China, or Iran,' instead they've just gone silent."

And in hard times, human-rights advocacy starts to look like a luxury, particularly when some of the countries whose cooperation is critical to rebuilding the global economy, such as China and oil-rich Kazakhstan, also rank among the worst human-rights abusers. In the flush early 2000s, Tony Blair could afford to make improving governance in Africa a British government priority, but his successor, Gordon Brown, spends most of his time trying to fix Britain's debt morass. In the U.S., the Obama administration's domestic agenda makes it leery of alienating potential partners abroad. As Hillary Clinton said during her first visit to China as secretary of state, "Our pressing on those issues [human rights] can't interfere with the global economic crisis."

The changing global balance of power may now prevent human rights from ever gaining the international attention it did in the 1990s and early 2000s. At that time, leaders and techno-evangelists argued that new technologies would give human-rights campaigners an edge over repressive governments. President Clinton warned Beijing that controlling the Internet would prove as tough as "trying to nail Jell-O to a wall." Well, consider the Jell-O nailed: even though Twitter, Facebook, and other tools have helped Iranian protesters bring their stories to the world, authoritarian governments have figured out how to monitor and block the Internet and other new tools. China's "Great Firewall" is now so extensive that many Chinese Internet users have no idea how much information they are actually missing out on, and countries such as Saudi Arabia and Vietnam have brought in Chinese Internet specialists to learn how to build their own Great Firewalls. And in a tough business climate, few Western technology companies—or Western governments—seem willing to stand up to this Internet censorship. Google's public condemnation of Beijing's alleged hacking drew headlines, but another story got far less notice: no other Silicon Valley giant publicly supported Google's stance.

Many current world leaders also happen to have strongly realist instincts, low-key demeanors, and little inclination to push the cause. Brown, Hatoyama, and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh do not have the idealistic instincts and charisma of a Blair or Koizumi. While Bill Clinton's dynamism helped him make a strong case for human rights in places such as Vietnam and China—the likes of the dour Brown cannot follow that act. In the office of the U.N. secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon is no Kofi Annan. He cuts a retiring pose, meekly leaving Burma last July after the regime refused to allow Ban to meet opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The one leader who has the popularity and flair to press the case for human rights does not have the inclination. Obama's desire to be a consensus builder, even when dealing with brutal governments, also pushes him toward nonconfrontation. He seems to think he can find common ground with anyone, even Sudan's Omar al-Bashir and North Korea's Kim Jong Il. As the historian Walter Russell Mead notes in a lengthy essay in *Foreign Policy* magazine, the president falls into the Jeffersonian tradition of American leaders, in that he wants to "reduce America's costs and risks overseas by limiting U.S. commitments." He believes "that the United States can best spread democracy and support peace by becoming an example of democracy at home." In contrast, the heirs of Woodrow Wilson, such as John F. Kennedy, Paul Wolfowitz, and, in many ways, Bill Clinton, believed that promoting democratic values abroad helps global stability.

In most democracies, the public has also become far less interested in global human rights. In 2005 crowds around the world attended the Live 8 concerts designed to increase support for aid to Africa; though aid is not solely a human-rights

Rallying For Democracy

<http://www.rallyingfordemocracy.org>

issue, the concerts were a sign of the rich world's international engagement. Don't expect to see any Live 9. With unemployment skyrocketing, the residents of democracies have turned inward, fighting against immigration, rethinking free trade—and paying far less attention to what happens in Iran or Sudan or North Korea. One poll by the Pew Research Center, released in December, found that 49 percent of Americans believe that the U.S. should "mind its own business" internationally, leaving other nations to work out their problems themselves. That was the highest percentage of Americans expressing isolationist sentiment in four decades.

Today the lack of interest in human rights has been virtually institutionalized in Washington and other capitals. A decade ago, policymakers could move up the ladder within bureaucracies like the U.S. State Department, the British Foreign Office, or Germany's Foreign Ministry by focusing on human rights, but today advocating for global freedom will get you nowhere. In many Western democracies, increasingly partisan politicians apply far greater scrutiny to every detail of diplomats' records, and human-rights work requires aggressive, often controversial statements and actions—just the types of activities that could get a promotion blocked by elected legislators. When Britain's ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, criticized that regime's abuses (and Britain's tolerance of them), he was recalled to London and removed from his post. Britain's relationship with Uzbekistan was deemed critical to the war on terror, and Murray's bosses apparently thought he was freelancing too much with his opinions. As a result, government bureaus that focus on human rights often have become dumping grounds for the weakest diplomats and places "where Foreign Service officers don't want to serve," according to one former staffer in that bureau.

Other structural changes bode poorly for human-rights advocacy. While the major democracies dominated the world stage in the 1990s, today autocracies like Russia and China have found that economic success can co-opt the middle class, normally the main source of support for human rights. In China, the government has boosted salaries for opinion leaders like professors, opened up membership in the Communist Party to entrepreneurs, and taken other steps to ensure that the regime's success enriches the middle class as well. This strategy works: in polls conducted by the Pew research organization, Chinese respondents had a higher level of satisfaction with conditions in their country than almost any other people in the world. Now the autocracies are effectively exporting this model. Growing aid from China makes it easier for lesser autocracies to dismiss Western pressure on human rights. In December, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has ruled for three decades and stands accused of creating a climate of fear for political opponents, praised China for building roads and bridges with "no complicated conditions."

China and Russia have started to twist the concept of human rights in ways that gut its meaning. In a paper issued in June, Freedom House notes that Chinese President Hu Jintao's report to the 17th Party Congress in 2007 used the words "democracy" and "democratic" some 60 times, without ever explaining how China qualifies as a democracy. "Russia and China are working to muddy the waters abroad as well," wrote Freedom House. Indeed, the Kremlin backs organizations operating in Central Asia and the Caucasus that mimic Western groups like Amnesty International or America's National Endowment for Democracy, but work to promote Putin-style "managed democracy," essentially authoritarianism with a thin veneer of social freedoms. Similarly, China now runs training programs for as many as 15,000 foreign officials annually, including many legal specialists and local authorities, who learn how China has managed to open its economy without allowing real political liberalization.

It's possible that the old idealism will return, just as Jimmy Carter followed Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon. The yearning for freedom remains, and after a slow start, Obama's administration has begun making human-rights advocacy a higher priority, finally meeting with the Dalai Lama, stepping up its criticism of Zimbabwe and Iran, appointing a special envoy for human rights in North Korea, more aggressively condemning Internet censorship in China, and taking China to task for its alleged attacks on Google. But the fact is that the past year has been one of the toughest in decades for prominent dissidents. Freedom House's report "Freedom in the World," released in January, revealed a global decline in political freedoms and civil liberties for the fourth year in a row, the longest drop in the almost 40 years that the survey has been produced. The decline stems from repressive governments cracking down harder, and leading democracies apparently "losing their will" to speak out in response. A recent string of major dissident cases—including China's

Rallying For Democracy

<http://www.rallyingfordemocracy.org>

rounding up signers of the Charter 08 call for rule of law, and sentencing activist Liu Xiaobo to 11 years in jail, as well as crackdowns in Vietnam and Central Asia—has received what Chris Walker of Freedom House considers "astonishingly little attention and support from the democracies."

It's only going to get tougher. The global recession may give way to a long period of slow growth, particularly in the leading democracies. If China can stymie democracy today, how much more influential will it be when its economy is the world's largest? Though Obama may be focusing more on rights now, the president's power is decreasing after his first, honeymoon year in office, and has taken a hit from the recent loss of the Democrats' super-majority in the Senate. New and potential future leaders in other major democracies—Jacob Zuma, David Cameron—haven't demonstrated much interest in international human-rights advocacy. And realism and isolationism, once ingrained, can be hard to shake off. In the past, it has required cataclysmic historic events to spark idealism, like the fall of the Berlin Wall or the 9/11 attacks, to shake Western populations out of their torpor.

Kurlantzick is a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Find this article at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/233914>