Shaming a country for human rights abuse can have varying results

September 21 2016

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Whether foreign-aid donors are willing to help states that abuse human rights may depend on how much the donor stands to gain, according to new research from Rice University and the University of North Texas.

Justin Esarey, an assistant professor of political science at Rice, and

Jacqueline DeMeritt, an associate professor of political science at the University of North Texas, joined forces to answer the long-debated question in political science of whether naming and shaming a country for human rights abuse results in tangible consequences for the shamed country.

They concluded that a donor state's response to naming and shaming varies according to the identity of the recipient, the organization doing the shaming and the larger context in which the shaming occurs. Their research paper, "Political Context and the Consequences of Naming and Shaming for Human Rights Abuse," was recently published in the journal International Interactions.

"States do not oppress their own people because they want to," DeMeritt said. "They do it because they find it to be an effective tactic in achieving certain goals, such as maintaining power and putting down their opposition."

For nations that can offer strategic benefits to donors, such as geographic resources or military cooperation, abusing human rights often leads to increased aid from donor states, which further supports the politically beneficial relationship.

"States that receive a lot of aid already tend to get even more aid when they are shamed for human rights abuse by the United Nations," Esarey said. "States that do not receive a lot of aid tend to suffer aid reductions when they are named and shamed."

The paper supports the claim that if a foreign-aid relationship is politically, economically or militarily beneficial to the donor, human rights abuses by the receiving state do not threaten the relationship. However, if that aid relationship is humanitarian in nature, the donor will punish the condemned state.

"On the one hand, you can look at this and think it's really depressing, but we find that moral principles do play a role, which suggests that states are not governed by pure self-interest," Esarey said. "On the other hand, if a state has a tremendous interest in a state relationship, moral considerations will not be a determining factor in decision-making."

The paper also finds that the source of naming and shaming for human rights abuse plays a significant role in subsequent consequences. States react more strongly to a condemnation issued by a multilateral organization, such as the United Nations' Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), while public shaming by human rights nongovernmental organizations is not associated with decreased bilateral aid. Esarey and DeMeritt speculated that this difference may exist because organizations like UNCHR issue decisions that involve several states and an explicit political process.

"I do think ethics play a role in states' reactions to human rights abuse, but I think that role is often tempered by politics," DeMeritt said. "I think the challenge for policymakers and those looking for ways to improve behaviors is to find where the ethics can supersede the politics."

Esarey and DeMeritt believe their results have important implications for developing a strategy to protect human rights and provide a starting point for a deeper understanding of how naming and shaming influences bilateral foreign aid.

"We know that human rights abuse keeps some leaders up at night," DeMeritt said. "We need to understand how to influence the people facing those dilemmas. There are ways to do that, which gives reason for optimism."

More information: The study is available online at jee3.web.rice.edu/naming-and-shaming.pdf

Provided by Rice University

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