

Q&A: When does shaming work?

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Credit: Princeton University Press

Shame can be a powerful motivator—particularly on the world stage. Calling out human rights abuses can isolate a government; it can cause a public outcry and embarrass leaders into compliance. For many international relations scholars, shaming remains one of the best tools to combat human rights violations.

However, Rochelle Layla Terman, AB'08, knows that this tactic has serious drawbacks. While working for a human rights organization focusing on women in Muslim-majority countries, Terman found that shaming was often counterproductive.

"In many cases, shaming not only fails to induce compliance but incites a backlash, provoking resistance and worsening human rights practices," said Terman, an assistant professor in UChicago's Department of Political Science.

In a [new book](#), "The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works—and When It Backfires," Terman challenges [conventional wisdom](#) by taking a more nuanced approach. She argues that understanding the political, economic and historical relationships between countries is key to knowing how and when shaming can improve human rights conditions.

In the following edited Q&A, Terman discusses why governments [shame](#) each other and how they can do so more effectively.

What does 'naming and shaming' mean in a geopolitical context?

When international relations scholars talk about shaming, we're referring to the [international community](#)—states, human rights organizations like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, the U.N., other experts—coming together to exert moral pressure on countries that violate human rights.

For example, when Amnesty International asks you to sign a petition on behalf of a political prisoner in China, or the U.N. issues a resolution condemning state violence in Syria, they are shaming—putting that

country in the spotlight, condemning violations, urging reform.

What reasons might a state have for shaming or not shaming another state?

States shame for three reasons: (1) to enforce a desired norm of behavior, (2) to collect social rewards from audiences and (3) to stigmatize the target.

On the other hand, shaming has downsides. Criticizing other governments can generate serious political risks by upsetting a valuable strategic relationship.

For example, China's allies—including many Muslim nations—have refused to condemn China's alleged abuse of Uyghurs in Xinjiang because they fear undermining a profitable partnership. Likewise, the United States was reluctant to shame Saudi Arabia over the death of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. That's because human rights are a touchy subject, and Saudi Arabia—a US ally—did not appreciate being criticized in this area and threatened to retaliate economically.

What are the consequences when shaming backfires?

People typically resent being told what to do, especially by foreign actors, and respond very defensively. Contrary to some received wisdom, I find that international shaming exerts counterproductive effects on public opinion, increasing both nationalist sentiments and hostility toward human rights advocacy.

In light of this reaction, leaders are rewarded for standing up to international pressure. Meanwhile, leaders who "give in" have their political legitimacy undermined at home. The result is that violations

tend to persist or even exacerbate.

For example, after Western countries condemned Uganda and Nigeria for attempting to criminalize homosexuality in 2014, some observers reported a spike in [human rights violations](#) of L.G.B.T. people. Other research has observed similar dynamics in China, Israel, and other countries.

How would you describe the relational approach you present in your book?

We can't understand social sanctions (like shaming) without appreciating the specific relational context in which it occurs. States rely on each other for things they care about. These things could be material in nature—security, trade, etc. They could be intangible—things like status, esteem and recognition.

States shame their friends and adversaries in very different ways.

Typically, leaders only criticize their friends when they hold strong preferences for the norm they're enforcing. Even then, they take steps to avoid a super negative reaction so as to maintain a valued partnership. In contrast, leaders will condemn rivals regardless of genuine normative beliefs, because doing so provides a strategic advantage. As a result, states shame their rivals in particularly stigmatizing, sensationalist, and inflammatory ways.

The effects of shaming are also conditional on the relationship between source and the target. Shaming coming from strategic partners is more costly and more credible. The target is more likely to take this criticism seriously and comply in order to maintain the valued relationship.

Shaming from rivals, on the other hand, is less costly. Plus, accusations from adversaries are often less credible; they're seen as a cynical attempt to sully the target's reputation. All of that allows the target to easily deny and reject the accusations.

Are there ways for governments to shame more effectively, or in a way less likely to backfire?

The main policy implication is clear: When it comes to human rights diplomacy, the critic matters as much as—and perhaps more than—the criticism.

In practice, however, this principle is not so simple to implement. It's quite easy (and even politically beneficial) to condemn an adversary for abuses; unfortunately, such efforts are unlikely to work and often backfire. Leaders are most effective when shaming an ally, but that is very difficult to do precisely because of the strategic risks involved. As a result, shaming is most common in situations where it is least likely to be helpful.

Despite the political liabilities involved, governments are in a better position to influence states with which they share political or economic ties. This means that, if they really want to secure human rights, leaders must summon the political will to overcome the potential enforcement costs involved in shaming a strategic friend or ally.

They must be willing to put relational benefits—including security or economic benefits—on the line.

Provided by University of Chicago

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