**Human rights framework**

Ajamu Baraka

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International Human Rights Day is December 10. On that day in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was promulgated as the first in a series of covenants, treaties, and legal interpretations that would make up the post-war human rights framework.

However, the history of struggle that produced the UDHR, beginning with the 1945 convention in San Francisco that created the United Nations, is one that can only be characterized as contentious. It is not possible to cover all of that history here. However, it is important that the historiography of Black activism that saw Black activists as central players in UN processes and debates between 1945 and 1951 is well known. Suffice to say that the contentious ideological character around the concept of human rights is still being played out today.

The understanding of what constituted human rights mirrored the post-war ideological polarization that started to reemerge between the Soviet Union and the US and its allies. Human rights, according to the US and Western European powers, were civil and political with economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) – like the right to healthcare, housing, food, education, leisure, and the practice of one’s language and culture – being merely aspirational. Consequently, the breakdown between the two approaches was between the West and civil and political rights grounded in the individual, and the East that championed collective ESCR’s.

Operating from the narrow perspective that marginalizes ESCR’s, but champions political rights, US president Joe Biden is exploiting human rights day to advance the obscene notion that the US and by extension the colonial states of Western Europe are somehow the defenders of ‘human rights’.

The idea that Western colonial/capitalist states were defenders of human rights struck many in the colonized South as either delusional or an affirmation that in the eyes of the West they were not human. For the colonized and racialized who were burned alive, tortured, and murdered by these champions of human rights, it was understood that whatever human rights were supposed to be they did not include the racialized and colonized peoples of the world.

Yet, the fiction that Western societies were committed to human rights persisted in the colonial metropoles. Today, however, after the forty-year onslaught of the neoliberal counterrevolution that begin in the global South in 1973 before moving on to Northern economies, the brutal contradictions of capitalist accumulation meant that the capitalist bribe offered to workers in the North during the post-war years until the 1970s, was withdrawn.

The global economic crisis of neoliberal capitalism exacerbated by the Covid pandemic exposed the ethical, moral, and political contradictions of the liberal human rights framework. The massive economic displacements with hunger, unemployment and unnecessary deaths that occurred among the population the United States, with a disproportionate rate of sickness and hospitalization among non-white workers and the poor in the US, was never condemned as violations of human rights.

Why? Even though the liberal human rights framework gives a begrudging acknowledgement to ESCRs in its founding documents, in practice liberal capitalist states have been uneven in providing ESCR protections. The U.S., however, has been the most successful in separating the idea of fundamental ESCRs – like the right to health, food, housing, education, a means to subsist at an acceptable level of material culture, leisure, and real, life-long social security – from democratic discourse on what constitutes the responsibility of the state and the interests and rights the state should uphold in order to be considered legitimate.

Therefore, similar to Obama’s assertion that a war is only a war when U.S. military personnel die, US policymakers, the press and consequently, the public do not apply a human rights lens to state and private capitalist policies. In other words, human rights violations did not occur with Covid because it was determined that whatever occurred in the U.S. they would not be defined as human rights violations.

This categorical conversion and alternation of reality is precisely how the US can continue to assert that it is a champion of human rights, and get away with it, at least for the US public.

But the dangerous contradictions of liberal human rights do not stop at the level of domestic policies.

Operating from the ideological position that human rights are only civil and political such as the right to vote, speech, assembly, etc., and the false premise that human rights are natural, objective and politically neutral, the liberal framework was able to be further weaponized by neoliberals in the nineties as an ideological instrument that rationalized naked imperialist interventions.

Humanitarian interventionism (war) and the “responsibility to protect” became the contemporary expressions of the “white man’s burden” to save natives in the global South from their autocratic rulers. This insidious, white supremacist construction then metastasized from its liberal base into left circles and left discourses with the being left forces giving ideological cover for imperialist interventions and, consequently, making it very difficult to oppose attacks on non-European global South nations.

Liberal-left forces in the West did not recognize the white supremacist implications of aligning themselves with their bourgeoisie against nations in the Global South justified by the dubious position that white supremacist elites in the West were concerned about human rights and democracy in those nations.

It simply did not dawn on them that the ‘autocratic’ rulers to be deposed were usually in nations that were attempting to resist complete domination by the US and its European allies. From Cuba, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Iran to North Korea and Venezuela, subversion, direct military interventions, proxy wars, and sanctions were all deployed to ‘save’ the people from their oppressive rulers. And it did not matter if tens of thousands died from the wars and sanctions that denied population medicines, the white West determined in their privilege and safe capitals thousands of miles away that these losses were acceptable collateral damage to preserve democracy and ‘human rights’.

Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it. – Ella Baker

This cynical ideological manipulation of liberal human rights is the reason so many around the world turned away from using this framework. Yet, from WEB Dubois and Claudia Jones through to Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and on to the Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights of today, the radical Black movement still frames crucial elements of the struggles being waged by Africans within the vocabulary of human rights. Are Africans in the US mistaken by using terms like human rights or are we operating from a different framework?

Excerpted: ‘People(s)-Centered Human Rights – A Necessary Framework to Counter Neoliberalism’s Dangerous Contradictions’.

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