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International Sociology 2008; 23; 115

DOI: 10.1177/0268580907084388

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International Human Rights Law and the Politics of Legitimation

Repressive States and Human Rights Treaties



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abstract: This study explores, with quantitative data analyses, why nation-states with very negative human rights records tend to sign and ratify human rights treaties at rates similar to those of states with positive records. The study's core arguments are (1) that the deepening international human rights regime creates opportunities for rights-violating governments to display low-cost legitimating commitments to world norms, leading them to ratify human rights treaties without the capacity or willingness to comply with the provisions; and (2) that among repressive regimes, autonomous ones that are less constrained by domestic forces are more likely to ratify human rights treaties as symbolic commitment, because these sovereigns are free to entertain high levels of decoupling between policy and practice, while constrained governments are more reluctant to incite domestic (and foreign) oppositions and interest groups. The combined outcome is that repressive states ratify human rights treaties at least as frequently as non-repressive ones – particularly those repressive states that have greater autonomy. Our cross-national time-series analyses provide supportive evidence for these arguments.

keywords: human rights ♦ international treaty ♦ world society

The world human rights movement has been an enormous and surprising success in putting forward high standards for states and societies to follow. It has created a striking array of international treaties (Buergethal, 1995;

International Sociology ♦ January 2008 ♦ Vol. 23(1): 115–141
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SAGE (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore)
DOI: 10.1177/0268580907084388

Cole, 2005; Donnelly, 1986, 1998a; Wotipka and Tsutsui, 2001) as well as a mass of international governmental and non-governmental organizations devoted to human rights (Gaer, 1995; Korey, 1998; Smith et al., 1997; Tsutsui and Wotipka, 2004; Wiseberg, 1992). The 'norm cascade' involved has been extraordinary (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999), and at the normative level, the opposition is in considerable disarray (Donnelly, 1998b).

The success of the normative human rights movement has led, ironically, to a great deal of pessimism in both academic and more public discussions. In mundane reality, human rights violations – often of the most extreme sorts – are found everywhere. They do not go away, and the best available data suggest few trends toward improvement (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2007; Poe and Tate, 1994; Poe et al., 1999). Indeed, given the upgraded human rights *norms* that now obtain, common human rights *practices* look, to thoughtful people, worse than ever, although the relationship may not always be causal. In a previous world, people's perceptions could downplay the subordination, exploitation or mistreatment of women, children, minority groups, the handicapped, prisoners or agricultural workers as inevitable reflections of backward cultures. Now, perceptions have changed, and what was once culture is seen as rampant injustice.

More striking is the fact that formal agreements by national governments intended to improve human rights practices have not only done little to achieve the goal but also seem to have sometimes resulted in worse practices (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005; Hathaway, 2002). Given this situation, research and policy concern have naturally gone toward what are seen as failures in the implementation of widely shared human rights norms. From most normative points of view, this seems an entirely reasonable approach.

From an analytic point of view, however, the problem may be more tractable if we turn the question around. Along with the common inquiries into why countries do not implement their normative policy and treaty commitments, it may be fruitful to ask the parallel question: why countries sign onto policies and treaties with which they will probably lack the will or capacity to comply? That is, if implementation is a distant prospect, why do they subscribe to the norms?

Exactly because human rights norms are among the most legitimate standards in the world, subscribing to them has great legitimating value for nation-states. The subscribing sovereign gains, or claims, legitimacy in the eyes of superior sovereigns, peers, internal and external competitors, and internal subordinate groups and interests. And the price for this commodity is low, as enforcement is often little called into question. This clearly helps explain why, as we show later, very large numbers of nation-

states ratify human rights treaties – far beyond those few states that have some prospect of effectively implementing these treaties in practice. The neoinstitutionalists in sociology call this process ‘decoupling’, and treat it as routine in modern organizations that are built to conform to elaborately rationalized environments (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer et al., 1997). This approach helps overcome conceptual difficulties that are insurmountable in theories committed to a view of the sovereign nation-state as a highly integrated or unitary actor.

In this article, we use the concept of decoupling to attack a narrower issue – the tendency of states with very negative human rights records to ratify human rights treaties at rates similar to those of states with virtuous records. Even if we assume little implementation following the typical ratification of a typical treaty, it seems obvious that states with negative human rights records might be somewhat more reluctant than others to ratify treaties that subject them to intensified internal and external criticism. The empirical data contradict this intuitive expectation. Why would repressive states ratify international human rights treaties, which might invite greater internal and external criticisms and do not offer much tangible return?

This study seeks to solve this puzzle by focusing on strong external pressures on governments to commit themselves to human rights norms, and on the internal political structure that may or may not allow a government to make that commitment. We argue that the low levels of internal political integration, i.e. great autonomy of the government, often characteristic of states with high levels of rights violation, coupled with external normative pressures help to account for the surprising inclination of repressive states to subscribe to human rights treaties. Ratifying human rights treaties is an ideal response to criticisms about human rights practices, especially for repressive states that come under close scrutiny. When the government subject to such criticisms has great autonomy over domestic society, it can ratify without worrying much about domestic (or even international) constituencies that might hold it accountable for its promises. We draw on neoinstitutionalism in sociology, and our analysis contributes to this literature by clarifying the political mechanisms of normative convergence in the field of human rights.

Background and Arguments

The growing normative strength of the international human rights regime in the last several decades poses special problems for scholars of international politics. The primary goal of the regime is to promote human rights ideas and prevent human rights violations across the globe. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the seven key international human rights

Table 1 International Human Rights Treaties as of 2002

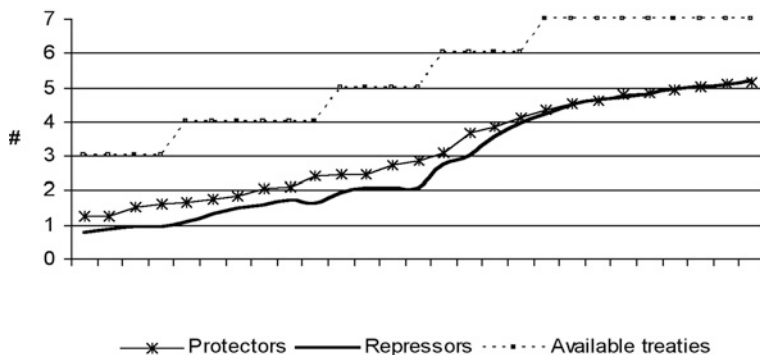
Instrument	Monitoring body	Year adopted	Year in force	No. of states party
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)	Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination	1965	1969	157
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	1966	1976	144
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	Human Rights Committee	1966	1976	147
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women	1979	1981	167
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)	Committee against Torture	1984	1987	124
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	Committee on the Rights of the Child	1989	1990	191
Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of the Families (MWC)	Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	1990	2003	20

treaties on which we focus.¹ The last column (listing number of states that are party to the treaties) shows that, by now, an overwhelming majority of states in the international system have committed themselves to respect the fundamental human rights embedded in one or more of the treaties.

Figure 1 summarizes the number of international human rights treaties available for ratification, and the average number of the treaties ratified by protector states – whose governments are assessed by external evaluations as providing reasonable protection of basic human rights – and repressor states – where serious human rights violations take place routinely.² It shows that repressive governments everywhere have participated in the norm cascade since the very beginning. By 2006, many of the world's most violently repressive governments had made substantial commitments to the human rights regime: Sudan had ratified four of the seven major human rights treaties; China had ratified five and signed two more; while Algeria, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo had ratified six. Such extreme repressors have been much more than a silent minority. They account for a substantial percentage of the international community supporting the treaty regime. In the last year of our sample, 2002, the majority of states that Amnesty International and the US State Department had identified as the world's extreme abusers had made substantial treaty commitments: 68 percent ratified the CAT, 86 percent ratified the ICCPR and CEDAW, 91 percent ratified the ICESCR, 95 percent ratified the CRC, while 100 percent ratified the CERD. Furthermore, since the early 1980s, repressive governments have often been in the majority, ratifying the treaties more often than their liberal counterparts (whose practices are generally much more in line with the treaty norms).

By most accounts, this behavior is mystifying. International human rights laws are made to constrain governments' authority to treat citizens as they see fit, empowering individuals to make states accountable for their domestic activities. This should be particularly disturbing to repressors, as it opens the door for its citizens to hold the government accountable for its repression. Why would so many governments, particularly the repressive ones, commit to a set of ideas designed specifically to constrain state sovereignty without offering any obvious tangible returns? As we discuss, main lines of theory in the field of international relations do not explain this puzzle, and we need a different approach.

First, to scholars in the realist approach, state commitment to international human rights law is not of much interest. In this tradition, states are conglomerates of rational decision-makers concerned with maximizing national power in an international system of self-help (Mearsheimer, 1994/5; Waltz, 1979). Since human rights treaties provide little tangible return, few realists would expect governments to ratify these treaties.



Third, an 'ideational' approach in political science emphasizes the socialization process through which governments become convinced of the value of complying with international norms (Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996; Risse et al., 1999). In the case of human rights norms, rights-protecting governments and transnational advocacy networks persuade other governments to espouse human rights values and to subscribe to human rights treaties. States with better human rights practice are more likely to do this as a natural expression of claimed identities. Repressive states commit to the regime when active encouragement and pressure by norm-carrying entrepreneurs convince them that protecting their citizens' human rights is in their national interest. The ideational approach expects repressive governments to actually change their attitudes, once interests to comply are created, and perhaps more slowly practices, when they ratify human rights treaties.

Empirical studies on the relationship between ratification of international human rights treaties and domestic human rights practices have mainly found otherwise: many repressors commit to the regime without any apparent intention of changing their human rights practices, and strong evidence now shows that ratifications of human rights treaties do not often predict subsequent changes in practice (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005, 2007; Hathaway, 2002) – only democratizing states seem to benefit from treaty ratification.

Thus, none of the main lines of theory in international relations explain the patterns of human rights treaty ratification by repressive states.

The Argument

Our core argument is two-fold: (1) the emergence of a global human rights regime in the last several decades has produced a normative expectation for every state to commit itself to human rights protection; but (2) reaction to this normative pressure depends on variations in perceptions and realities of accountability for non-conformity.

These arguments draw insight from the institutionalist approach in sociology (Meyer et al., 1997). According to this approach, states follow 'global scripts' in their search for legitimacy in international society and adopt globally legitimated policies and political structures somewhat independent of local environments. Human rights ideas are certainly part of the 'global script' in the contemporary world, and ratification of human rights treaties increases the legitimacy of the state, thus leading to an isomorphic outcome: ratification by an overwhelming majority of the nation-states in the world. Combined with the very low level of enforcement mechanisms for most human rights treaties, decoupling between professed commitment to human rights ideas and actual domestic human rights practices persists in many countries. However, our story departs from standard institutionalist explanations in that we recognize the role of domestic politics, or percep-

tions of them, to a greater extent than a typical institutionalist account. We argue that domestic political environments play a central role in sovereigns' behavior regarding human rights treaties and compliance with them.

It is worth noting here the differences between our approach and the international relations theories examined earlier. Our arguments differ from realist and liberalist arguments in that we see potential legitimacy benefits of the act itself of ratification of human rights treaties (Goodman and Jinks, 2004). In the explanatory models of realism, states are not concerned with legitimacy benefits at all, only power. In our approach, power can and does account for some treaty ratification but legitimacy benefits also motivate some commitments. For liberals, the potential benefits refer to domestic gains in political stability that accrue to leaders as a result of ratification of these treaties. In our approach, the benefits are also in the act of ratification, which, in and of itself, confers some legitimacy on the state.³

Our arguments are also distinct from the ideational (or constructivist) arguments in that we do not assume that governments are necessarily convinced of the ideal of human rights or acquire substantively meaningful identities as human rights protectors. We suppose that states may ratify human rights treaties without being convinced of the value of ideas codified in the treaties. In other words, the difference between constructivism and our approach lies in the prediction about state's intentions in ratifying human rights treaties. The former sees the state as having intentions to carry out its promises in ratifying the treaties, while the latter expects more extreme decoupling between state's external commitment and internal practices.

Human rights violating states may have more strongly developed preferences to repress than their more liberal democratic counterparts, yet they are undoubtedly under tighter scrutiny than others for their human rights practices. Once a country is identified as a human rights violator by international human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, by other states such as the US and European countries, or by intergovernmental organizations such as UN human rights organs, the country carries the onus of displaying that it does pay attention to its human rights practices. The external pressure to conform is substantial, disproportionately unleashed on repressive states that abuse people, and probably creates especially persuasive enticements for these states to adopt international human rights norms and laws.

However, these same governments may well find themselves with compelling incentives to abuse domestically, which are at odds with external pressures to conform. It is our core assumption that repressive states violate human rights willingly as a matter of power and routine. Without some intervening factor, despotic leaders tend to prefer the status quo use of repression to a change in their behavior toward better

protection. Consequently, when repressive governments perceive that acceptance of the human rights legal regime will lead to some form of credible and costly penalty, their leaders may have significant incentives to reject external norms to protect citizens' rights that they do not favor in the absence of law. But we also presume the opposite: that repressive governments that expect to sidestep payment of some costly price for violating global norms of protection will have considerable incentives to accept world legal norms that they do not favor in practice.

This perception of penalty may come from threats enacted by other states who favor policy change inside the target state; however, such threats are rare in an international system that places a high value on sovereignty and are seldom enacted in specific instances for violations of human rights. This failure to make non-compliance costly is both widespread around the world and observable; states witness only the most limited repercussions of violations of human rights treaties and, over time, have learned that non-conformity is relatively inexpensive. Repressive governments accordingly are likely to perceive ratification of human rights treaties as an easy way to deflect criticism about their domestic violations and improve their standing in the international community. To be sure, repressors are not only free to sign human rights treaties, but have a special legitimacy-seeking incentive to do so, as they are often rewarded in the media and international political forums for acceptance of the norm. The end result is a massive number of repressive states committing to human rights treaties, and an expectation that repressive states are likely to have even stronger incentives than liberal ones to commit formally to the regime.⁴ This leads to our first set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: (a) States with observable records of repression are more likely than states that observe human rights to commit themselves to the human rights legal regime, and (b) are more likely to commit extensively by ratifying more treaties.

A more compelling source of penalty perception than external intervention may come from domestic forces, as the degree of autonomy of the sovereign varies across different types of integration of state and society.⁵ Such variations across domestic governance structures inside repressive states are important; they are likely to contribute to these states' degree of conformity with international norms of protection by shaping sovereigns' perceptions of penalty for non-conformity with international law. A repressive government with greater integration between state and society is apt to experience some non-trivial measure of feedback from social groups, channeled through various political limitations on the sovereign's degree of autonomy. When state and society are more highly integrated, such feedback will be present even under a repressive regime, and may

help to account for significant variations across repressive governments' behaviors. We focus here on the degree of autonomy of the sovereign as the key factor in determining the behavior of a government.⁶

While commitment to human rights treaties can be symbolic for those governments that are not held accountable, it can also be more costly for repressive governments than rights protecting ones, as legal treaties provide domestic social forces some leverage to criticize government practices. For repressive regimes that do not have dominance over domestic opposition forces, this is a greater concern, since human rights treaties give domestic opposition groups some influence and access to the 'boomerang process' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Non-sovereigns can now appeal to international human rights monitoring bodies that accompany the treaties and use the government's commitment to implement law to criticize their failure to respect rights in practice (Tsutsui, 2004). By contrast, repressive governments that have greater autonomy from domestic society need have less concern about domestic forces gaining strength by human rights treaty ratification; such governments can prevent and quell domestic oppositions relatively easily. Thus, we expect that among rights-violating governments, those with greater political autonomy from social input are more likely to ratify human rights treaties (because they are less likely to be held accountable for violations of law), while those with non-trivial limitations on the sovereign's autonomy are less likely to do so (because they might suffer some degree of domestic accountability for their behavior).

For instance, Tunisia is a country that has had a repressive regime that operates without much domestic constraint and has ratified most of the key international human rights treaties. In the Tunisian political system, the president holds enormous power. Typical of such a dictatorial polity, suppression of domestic oppositions from activists, labor unions or organized Islamic groups has been commonplace. Domestic human rights movements, however, mobilized with transnational activists and pressured President Bourguiba to improve rights practices in the 1980s. As the president tried to respond with greater repression, a 'constitutional coup' in 1987 replaced him with President Ben Ali, who pledged to promote human rights and improve human rights practices in Tunisia (Gränzer, 1999). With hindsight, this may well have been Ben Ali's strategic decision to use human rights rhetoric to gain support for his new regime (Waltz, 1995). President Ben Ali made good on his pledge initially, establishing a domestic Human Rights Commission, integrating leaders of domestic human rights organizations to the government, and ratifying remaining key human rights treaties, CAT in 1988 and CRC in 1992 (Gränzer, 1999).⁷ This effectively silenced the international criticisms that were mounting until his takeover. However, these institutional reforms did not take hold, as President Ben Ali increased repression in the 1990s. Because the

political system does not hold the president accountable to the people, all these tactical concessions amounted to no substantial improvement in actual practices and allowed the regime to increase its repression after the storm of criticisms had subsided.

Malaysia, on the other hand, is an example of a repressive government that is held more accountable by domestic forces. The regime of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, in power for 22 years (1981–2003), had been fairly repressive. It routinely used force to quell demonstrations stemming from ethnic tensions between majority Malays and economically more successful ethnic-Chinese and in response to the politically motivated arrest and trial of Anwar Ibrahim, a deputy prime minister and presumed successor of Mahathir (Freedom House, 2004). The political system, however, is democratic and political leaders are selected through free elections. There is a vibrant although constrained civil society sector with about 100 NGOs promoting such issues as women's rights and the environment (Gurowitz, 2000). This produces an interesting political dynamic, in which the government represses domestic opposition groups but has to satisfy the majority of citizens since it needs votes to sustain itself. For instance, after forcibly suppressing the widespread large-scale demonstrations for political reform triggered by Anwar's arrest, the ruling coalition parties, fearing that the opposition might take advantage of the controversy and unseat them from power in the next election, sought to gain Malay voters by promoting their credential as the Islamic government that has united the country and achieved economic success, as well as by attacking the credibility of the Islamic faith of the opposition parties. In this political environment, the Malaysian government has ratified only two key human rights treaties, CEDAW and CRC (both ratified in 1995). This is despite sustained international criticisms for its repression, particularly during the Anwar trial (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Thus observers argue that, even if the Malaysian government secretly wishes to ratify human rights treaties to look good in international society, it fears empowering domestic oppositions with ratification and justifies non-ratification by criticizing global human rights principles as the imposition of western values (Gurowitz, 2000; Verma, 2002).

As these cases illustrate, our second set of hypotheses is as follows:

Hypothesis 2: (a) Repressive states, where the sovereign has greater political autonomy from domestic oppositions and interest groups, are more likely to commit themselves to the human rights legal regime than repressive governments that have limited autonomy, and (b) are more likely to commit themselves extensively by ratifying more treaties.

Figure 2 summarizes our core arguments. The straight lines in the figure represent strong causal influence, while the dotted lines signify weak

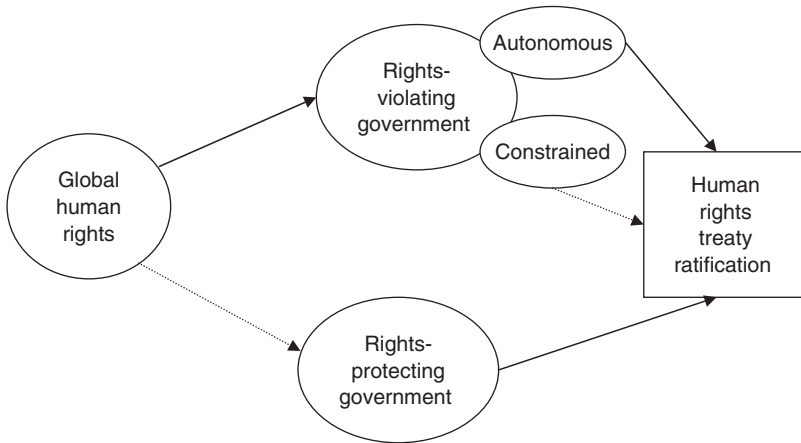


Figure 2 Schematic Representation of the Theoretical Argument

influence. In sum, we expect first that, given the deepening of the international human rights legal regime, rights-violating governments face a greater need to respond to criticisms about their human rights practices than rights-protecting governments. Repressive governments, under mounting pressure to commit to the regime but increasingly aware that few are punished for violations of the regime's core principles, have good reasons to commit to laws protecting human rights even without the intention or capacity to comply.

Second, this process demonstrates great variation, as some repressive governments are more likely than others to commit to the legal regime. Autonomous rulers are more likely to ratify human rights treaties as symbolic commitment, because these sovereigns are free to entertain even more extreme forms of hypocrisy than characterize normal states (Brunsson, 1989; Krasner, 1999), while constrained rulers are more apprehensive for fear of inciting a process of resistance by domestic opposition and interest groups.

The combined outcome of these processes is an equally great, or in some cases a greater, number of repressive states ratifying human rights treaties as non-repressive ones, particularly in those states where rulers have greater political autonomy.

Thus, our argument draws on the institutionalist approach to explain the empirical puzzle of decoupling between human rights treaty commitment and actual practice and at the same time contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of domestic political environments and specifying the mechanisms through which policy convergence among diverging types of states emerges.

Data and Method

In the following pages, we analyze pooled cross-sectional time-series data from the entry into force of the most important human rights treaties, the two international covenants, in 1976 to 2002 and test our core hypotheses. We begin by estimating the following models, with variables and measures defined below.

- (1) Any Treaty Commitment_{it} = $\alpha + \beta_1$ Constraints_{it-1} + β_2 Repression_{it-1} + β_3 Durability_{it-1} + β_4 GDPpc_{it-1} + β_5 Population_{it-1} + β_6 Trade_{it-1} + β_7 Constraints_{it-1} * Repression_{it-1} + ϵ_{it}
- (2) Number of Treaty Commitments_{it} = $\alpha + \beta_1$ Constraints_{it-1} + β_2 Repression_{it-1} + β_3 Durability_{it-1} + β_4 GDPpc_{it-1} + β_5 Population_{it-1} + β_6 Trade_{it-1} + β_7 Constraints_{it-1} * Repression_{it-1} + ϵ_{it}

Dependent Variables

In order to consider our first proposition concerning states' commitment to international human rights treaties, we introduce two dependent variables. Any Treaty Commitment_{it} is a dichotomous variable coded 1 if a state *i* in year *t* has made a formal commitment to any international human rights treaty by ratifying, acceding, or succeeding to an agreement. Number of Treaty Commitments_{it} is an ordinal variable ranging from 0 to 7, derived from the total number of the seven core international human rights treaties that a state *i* has committed into national law in time *t*.

Independent Variables

One of the key independent variables in our study is the level of human rights violations in each country. Here, we follow an increasing number of human rights scholars in the use of data measuring the most basic repression of human rights – political terror: murder, torture, or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; prolonged detention without charges; disappearance or clandestine detention; and other flagrant violations of the right to life, liberty and the security of the person. We draw upon two existing data sources: Poe and Tate offer data on 153 governments' reported levels of repression (or political terror) from 1976 to 1993⁸ and Mark Gibney offers repression data from 1980 to 2002 across a different sample of 141 states and territories.⁹ Data were collected in all cases through content analysis of annual human rights reports issued by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the US State Department and by Amnesty International.

We combine information from the two data sets to create repression indicators on a total sample of 177 states over 27 years, 1976 to 2002. For each source, the observed value of repression is ordinal, ranging across five levels of behavior:

1. where countries are under secure rule of law, political imprisonment and torture are rare and political murders are extremely rare;
2. where imprisonment for non-violent political activities is limited, torture and beating are exceptional, and political murder is rare;
3. where political imprisonment is extensive, execution and political murders may be common and detention (with or without trial) for political views is acceptable;
4. where the practices of level 3 are expanded to a larger segment of the population, murders and disappearance are common, but terror affects primarily those who interest themselves in political practice or ideas;
5. where levels of terror are population-wide and decision-makers do not limit the means by which they pursue private or ideological goals.

The US State Department and Amnesty data are very highly correlated (0.85). The data drawn from the US State Department offer the significant advantage of reporting on more states over more years than Amnesty International, which reports only intermittently on many states and tends to focus attention on the worst repressors. The State Department data have been criticized by some scholars as ideologically biased in favor of US trade partners (Poe et al., 2001). We therefore calculate our core independent variable – Repression_{it-1} – by adding together the source data from both the US State Department and Amnesty International sources. As a result, our analyses consider those 133 states that both sources rank.

Repression_{it-1} thus ranges from 2 to 10 and equals 2 if state i received a score of 1 from both sources in year t , and so forth. We consider any state with a score of 5 or higher to be an unambiguously repressive state, although we distinguish between severe and systematic repression ($Y = 10, 9, 8$), and those cases where repression is more limited or is subject to debate among our coding sources ($Y = 7, 6, 5$). We lag all the independent variables by one year, hence the ' $t-1$ ' in the subscript.¹⁰

Our second key independent variable is autonomy of the government. We use a measure collected by Jagers and Gurr, $\text{Constraints}_{it-1}$, which measures the decision rules that constrain executive sovereigns, imposed by any 'accountability group'. In western-style democracies, these constraints are typically imposed by legislatures. But ruling parties in one-party states, nobles or powerful advisors in monarchies, military groups in coup-prone states and independent judiciaries may all impose some level of constraints. The variable is ordinal and ranges from 1 to 7:

1. where executives operate under unlimited authority – there are no regular limitations on the executive's actions;
2. intermediate category;
3. executives operate with slight to moderate limitations on their authority;
4. intermediate category;
5. executives operate with substantial limitations on their authority;
6. intermediate category;
7. accountability groups have effective authority equal to or greater than the executive in most areas of activity.¹¹

This indicator is often used as a component of a democracy variable and is highly correlated with the democracy variable (0.93), but especially focuses on the dimension we are interested in. The interaction effect of Repression and Constraints is expected to be negative; our second hypothesis is that among repressive regimes, those that are less constrained are more likely to ratify.

Other variables control for factors that are considered relevant in state decisions on treaty ratification. First, in order to distinguish between our argument about sovereigns' strength and state institutional inertia, we control for Durability_{*it-1*} by counting the number of years since a state has undergone a structural regime transition. This variable is commonplace in the literature and we control for it accordingly. A transition is defined as a movement on the Polity IV scale of three points or more. Polity is measured as an index of five primary institutional features: the competitiveness of the process for chief executive selection; the openness of that process to social groups; the level of institutional constraints placed on the chief executive's decision-making authority; the competitiveness of political participation; and the degree to which binding rules govern political participation. The Polity variable takes on values ranging from 10 (most democratic) to -10 (most autocratic), while the Durability variable ranges from 0 to 193 years.¹²

To control for economic factors that may influence treaty commitment, we employ gross domestic product per capita in constant US dollars, logged, to control for the effect of economic development. The data on pcGDP_{it-1} are taken from the World Bank. Trade_{*it-1*} controls for the possible effects that international market transactions may have on human rights, independent from the organizations of the international political economy. Past studies that have examined the effects of global economic flows on government commitment to human rights treaties suggest negative effects, as market competition tramples concerns for human rights (from 'race to the bottom' theories of international trade), and positive effects, as human rights principles spread with economic globalization (from 'socioeconomic integration' theories of the virtues of trade)

(Hafner-Burton, 2005a). We propose no particular hypothesis, but use the variable, simply, as a control. We draw upon data from the World Bank in order to measure Trade_{*it-1*} as the sum of a state's total exports and imports of goods and services measured as a share of GDP. The measure is logged in order to reduce the skew of its distribution. Finally, Population_{*it-1*} measures the population density per kilometer, logged, and is employed here as a control variable.

Results

The logit estimates presented in Table 2 consider government commitment to *any* human rights agreement. The results provide support for two of our expectations. First, the effect of Repression is consistently positive although the level of significance is marginal. This indicates that repressive states are just as likely as protectors to commit to a human rights treaty. More importantly, our second proposition finds strong support in the negative significant effect of the interaction effect between repression and autonomy of sovereigns in Models 2 and 3. Repressive sovereigns operating in a domestic policy environment characterized by substantial limitations to their rule, such as Georgia, South

Table 2 Multivariate Analyses: Any Treaty Commitment_{*it*} (1976–2002)

	Model 1: base model	Model 2: interaction	Model 3: fixed time effects
Constraints	.365*** (.132)	.765*** (.211)	.680*** (.235)
Repression	.064 (.127)	.258* (.147)	.129 (.169)
Durability	-.020*** (.006)	-.023*** (.006)	-.031*** (.007)
GDP per capita (log)	-.212 (.155)	-.268* (.163)	-.158 (.191)
Population (log)	-.079 (.155)	-.093 (.150)	-.113 (.164)
Trade (log)	-.401 (.411)	-.298 (.408)	-.838* (.456)
Constraints * Repression		-.085** (.038)	-.096*** (.037)
N	2591	2591	2591
Likelihood	-756.61	-741.39	-608.83
Wald χ^2	23.32***	25.11***	287.77***

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

Note: Values in parentheses are panel corrected standard errors.

Africa, or Turkey, have been less likely to commit themselves to the human rights regime than are strong repressive sovereigns operating more autonomously (or less responsibly), such as Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, or Bahrain. Model 3 simply verifies the integrity of our results over time, controlling for fixed time effects that allow us to control for the autocorrelated structure of the data over time.

The other control variables in the analyses work about as one might anticipate. The positive effect of Constraints shows that constrained sovereigns with a high degree of public accountability are, all in all, more likely to commit to the human rights regime. We imagine that this largely indicates a general democratic effect, i.e. the cultural or institutional match between democratic principles of accountability and the human rights regime. Population density has weak effects. Trade shows weak negative effects on human rights subscriptions; and GDP per capita also shows weak negative effects.

The non-linear quality of these models presents some difficulties for simple interpretation about the ways in which our core independent variables influence Any Treaty Commitment_{*it*}. In order to decipher our results as simply as possible, we compute predicted values for our observations, which we allow to vary across low and high levels of Constraints_{*it*}, our core measure to test our expectations about variations across accountability (Hypothesis 2). Probabilities tell us quite plainly at what probability we are likely to observe information in our data sample that conforms to a set of constraints that we specify. For example, how likely is it that a state experiencing extreme repression (equal to 10) and low sovereign constraints (equal to 1) will commit to the human rights regime, given our model? The values presented in Table 3 were calculated at the mean of all variables in Model 3 (excluding, of course, Repression_{*it*} and Constraints_{*it*}) and provide us with several pieces of information given our 2591 observations of country years.

Table 3 *Predicted Probabilities of Any Treaty Commitment: Variation across Repression and Constraints*

		Sovereign constraints	
		Low	High
Extreme Repressor	(Repression=10)	93.44%	72.90%
	(Repression = 9)	93.23%	82.21%
	(Repression = 8)	93.02%	88.82%
Moderate Repressor	(Repression = 6)	92.57%	95.91%
Protector	(Repression = 2)	91.60%	99.51%

Note: Probabilities are calculated using coefficients from Model 3, Table 2.

The numbers are easy to interpret. Given our model and our data, a protector state with low constraints has a 91.6 percent chance of being observed in our data to commit itself to any human rights treaty, while a protector state with high constraints has a 99.5 percent chance of being observed to do so, and so forth. Among the protectors and moderate repressors, weak sovereigns actually have a greater probability in our data of making a commitment to the human rights regime than strong ones. Among the most extreme repressors ($y = 10$), on the other hand, a strong sovereign with low executive constraints has a 93.44 percent chance of committing to human rights treaties, compared to a dramatically lower 72.90 percent chance for a weak sovereign with high executive constraints. This provides further evidence for our argument that combination of repressive tendencies and strong autonomy make sovereigns likely to ratify human rights treaties, but it also suggests that there are important differences between moderate and extreme repressors' behavior.

We turn now to the analysis of our second dependent variable, focusing on the numbers of human rights treaties countries subscribe to, rather than their inclination to subscribe to any single treaty. Ordered logit estimates in Table 4 thus speak to our propositions about *the extensivity* of commitment. First, Models 1 through 3 consistently show that Repression has a positive significant effect, indicating that repressors are more likely than protectors to make more profound commitments to the regime, ratifying multiple treaties. Although repressive governments are not any more or less likely than protector governments to 'initially' join the regime – to make a first commitment – they are more likely to commit with depth once they have joined, i.e. to join more and more treaties. This result suggests that the decoupling between policy and practice is more radical than we imagined and that the legitimating value of human rights treaties is reasonably high, while the costs of commitment remain especially low. Repressive states want the legitimacy that the human rights treaties confer on them more than non-repressive states because they are under tighter scrutiny for their practices. This need for legitimacy, coupled with awareness that commitment to the regime is seldom costly in practice, produces radical decoupling between policy decisions to ratify and actual human rights behaviors.

Second, Models 2 and 3 provide further evidence that our second hypothesis has merit. The estimate on the interaction term, Constraints * Repression, is consistently negative and significant; repressors are more likely to commit themselves extensively, but this likelihood decreases as sovereigns experience greater constraints on their authority. Tight linkage between state and society limits the government's ability to ratify human rights treaties and reduces decoupling between behavior and commitment

Table 4 *Multivariate Analyses: Number of Treaty Commitments_{it} (1976–2002)*

	Model 1: base	Model 2: interaction	Model 3: fixed time effects
Constraints	.378*** (.058)	.625*** (.107)	.537*** (.148)
Repression	.154** (.061)	.367*** (.077)	.249** (.097)
Durability	-.007 (.005)	-.008 (.005)	-.015** (.008)
GDP per capita (log)	-.019 (.074)	-.066 (.077)	.127 (.108)
Population (log)	-.078 (.091)	-.083 (.089)	-.109 (.109)
Trade (log)	-.245 (.217)	-.264 (.209)	-.436 (.275)
Constraints * Repression		-.051** (.021)	-.066** (.029)
N	2591	2591	2591
Likelihood	-4814.16	-4794.096	4098.98
Wald χ^2	55.06***	81.49***	420.78***

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

Note: Values in parentheses are panel corrected standard errors.

to the norms of the human rights regime. In effect, stronger repressive sovereigns with unconstrained power over domestic affairs are more likely to deeply commit themselves than weak ones. Again, Model 3 tests the robustness of this finding, controlling for fixed time effects.

Other control variables in the analysis again perform as we might have expected. The positive effects of Constraints show that sovereigns that are more accountable to domestic interest groups, such as legislatures, councils of nobles or the military, are not only more likely to join the human rights regime, but they are also more likely to ratify multiple agreements. As noted earlier, we interpret this as a general 'democracy' effect arising from the parallels between democratic systems and the human rights regime. Trade, population density and GDP per capita all have insignificant effects, while regime durability has a modest negative effect.

As before, it is important that we interpret our results, and we again offer predicted probabilities for several of our observations as they vary across levels of Constraints_{it}. Tables 5 through 7 display probabilities, calculated at the mean of all variables in the Model 3 (naturally, excluding Repression_{it} and Constraints_{it}), given our 2591 observations. We here consider variation

Table 5 *Predicted Probabilities of Ratifying Human Rights Treaties for Protectors: Variation across Repression and Constraints*

Human rights treaties ratified	Sovereign constraints	
	Low	High
Two treaties	13.22%	3.20%
Four treaties	13.59%	21.82%
Six treaties	3.31%	27.43%

Note: Probabilities are calculated using coefficients from Model 3, Table 4.

across both the number of human rights treaties a state has ratified (we consider for the purposes of illustration probabilities of ratifying two, four and six treaties) and the degree of political constraints imposed on the sovereign.

While the overall dynamics found in Number of Treaty Commitments_{it} are similar to those of Any Treaty Commitment_{it}, Tables 5 through 7 add an important new insight: that it is the extreme repressors that ratify without consequences. Among the protector states in Table 5, those with high constraints are more likely to commit themselves to more treaties (four or six treaties in our example), than those with lower constraints, while the pattern is the opposite for commitment to fewer treaties (two treaties in our example).¹³ This shows that human rights protecting governments that place greater limitations on their sovereign's political accountability have a much greater observed probability in our data of committing *extensively* to the international legal regime. This is consistent with the general 'democracy' effect we found in the earlier analyses. The same pattern holds among the moderate repressors, explored in Table 6, which is counter to our more general expectations expressed in our hypotheses.

When we turn to the extreme repressors in Table 7, however, the pattern is reversed, and it is undoubtedly the experiences observed in this group of states that are driving our statistical findings. Extremely repressive governments with lower constraints on their political autonomy – such as

Table 6 *Predicted Probabilities of Ratifying Human Rights Treaties for Moderate Repressors: Variation across Repression and Constraints*

Human rights treaties ratified	Sovereign constraints	
	Low	High
Two treaties	10.60%	6.40%
Four treaties	20.27%	24.79%
Six treaties	6.61%	13.99%

Note: Probabilities are calculated using coefficients from Model 3, Table 4.

Table 7 *Predicted Probabilities of Ratifying Human Rights Treaties for Extreme Repressors: Variation across Repression and Constraints*

Human rights treaties ratified	Sovereign constraints	
	Low	High
Two treaties	6.91%	10.70%
Four treaties	24.59%	20.08%
Six treaties	12.76%	6.48%

Note: Probabilities are calculated using coefficients from Model 3, Table 4.

Colombia, Nigeria, or Israel – have a much greater observed probability of ratifying deeply (four or six treaties), as we expected for repressive states more generally, while similar states more constrained by domestic forces ratify fewer (two) treaties. This further underscores the plausibility of our second proposition, but it also shows that the dynamic we observe is not created by moderate repressors but by the world's more extreme abusers, that have tremendous incentives to ratify more and more human rights treaties while at the same time brutally violating the very rights they commit to uphold.

Finally, we perform several robustness checks to make certain our results have merit. We treat all treaties as interchangeable on the matter of legitimacy. However, the treaties regulate different norms, have different enforcement bodies and speak to different audiences, possibly making our assumption unjustified. To address this concern, we re-ran all of our models on binary variables measuring ratification of each human rights treaty individually. Our results are consistent, providing further support for our arguments. We also include a binary variable to control for Europe, a region characterized by substantially stronger enforcement mechanisms than other parts of the world. This is to address a concern that countries that face strong enforcement mechanism might experience different political dynamics. Our results are again consistent when enforcement is taken into account.

Discussion and Concluding Reflections

In this article we have considered why national governments with records of repressing human rights show such a strong inclination to commit themselves to international human rights treaties. We develop the institutionalist idea of 'decoupling' to interpret the situation – modern nation-states seek external legitimation by following 'global scripts', which give great and increasing normative emphasis on human rights. At the same time, global trends of non-accountability create a vicious cycle, where governments already apt to violate human rights learn that commitment to the international legal regime is

symbolic and virtually cost free. Repressive states, we argue, are especially eager to show legitimating commitment to human rights norms, placating their critiques, and are especially able to subscribe to appropriate ideologies precisely because of their internal weakness and their knowledge that violations will go unpunished.

This has led us to two main findings in our analysis of national commitments to human rights treaties since 1976. First, the absence of a negative effect of repression on subscription to human rights treaties stands up in multivariate analyses. Second, and more central, repressive states with especially weak domestic linkages between state and society are especially able to subscribe to human rights treaties: thus we show an interaction effect between internal constraints on the government and repression on human rights commitments.

Our empirical analyses, however, have also led us to an unexpected and novel observation. Sovereigns committing extreme acts of repression, as we predict, are more likely to make strong and many legal commitments to the international human rights regime when they have the power to rule autonomously, free from executive constraints. Sovereigns committing only moderate forms of repression, on the other hand, are more likely to commit themselves under these very constraints, compelled, perhaps, by national legislatures, competing political parties, public interest groups, or the military.

Two broad interpretive conclusions follow from the observations of this study. One is straightforward: the intensified international human rights regime, given the situation we have analyzed, is filled with efforts to press nation states to (1) take responsibility for their internal affairs, and (2) to manage these affairs in accord with human rights agreements. As the norms of the human rights regime have come into place, a wide variety of mechanisms have arisen to enhance enforcement and implementation, and more are advocated as time goes on. Human rights enforcement mechanisms tend to be built into trade treaties, international regional associations and access to them (most intensely, with the EU), World Bank loans and so on (Hafner-Burton, 2005b).

Second, however, note that the intensifying power of the human rights regime is by no means restricted to those states that have ratified the relevant treaties. Countries can now be properly criticized by internal and external bodies whether or not their sovereigns have signed some pieces of paper. This suggests a core insight into the nature of international regimes like the human rights one, and into the logic of human rights reformers over the years (who may be more sophisticated than they seem). Reforms are put forward as general normative models, not as instruments of immediate effectiveness. Thus their proponents often neglect issues of implementation in order to try to produce a Durkheimian normative

consensus (for similar arguments, see Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2005; Hathaway, 2002). The ultimate purpose is to generate a global consensus of such intensity that long-run impacts on behavior are produced – of ratifiers and non-ratifiers, of states and supra-state organizations and also social groups internal to national societies.

Thus the international human rights regime has produced pressures for enforcement, but has also expanded precisely by focusing on universal normative aims rather than the mechanics of enforcement. At the normative level, it has certainly been a great success: stunningly, some of the most repressive states in the world help lead the normative band, as we show. One can of course see this as a failure of implementation, as is commonly noted. But it may be equally useful to see it as a major global cultural achievement to get the widest range of national polities in the world, including many of the ugliest, to subscribe, however hypocritically, to the great new human rights normative order. And the low entry cost, which can be criticized for allowing severe violators to join the regime, was critical in generating this global consensus.

Of course, the normative human rights revolution obviously can produce a situation in which perceptions of human rights abuse rise more rapidly than any possible decline in rates of actual abuse. Squadrons of international, national and subnational inspectors – very much including social scientists – patrol the world looking for human rights problems. They find them in massive numbers, of course. Interestingly, any improvements that may occur in human rights practice are washed out by such increases in global inspection capabilities – and the available time-series data report relatively constant levels of human rights violation over time (Hafner-Burton and Ron, 2007).

Notes

1. These treaties are considered important in the international community of human rights scholars and practitioners because they have monitoring bodies that at least putatively oversee the relevant practices of party states.
2. See the Data section for the measurement of protector and repressor states.
3. As discussed later in the case of Tunisia, legitimacy that treaty ratification confers on governments allows them to deflect criticisms of human rights violations at least in the short term.
4. The analyses of this article do not permit us to distinguish among several closely related arguments about why the internal decoupling of states and societies facilitates or encourages subscription to norms inflated beyond the possibility or likelihood of practice.
5. Integration of state and society here refers to the degree to which the sovereign's behavior is monitored and constrained by civil society groups and individuals in the country. It also refers to the degree to which a sovereign is organized around effectively managing civil society.

6. In our discussion, we use the terms 'government', 'sovereign' and 'state' interchangeably as the entity that controls the political decision-making processes of the country.
7. The government had already ratified CERD (1969), ICCPR (1976), ICESCR (1976) and CEDAW (1985), for all of which Tunisia was among the first to ratify, despite its record of severe human rights violations.
8. For details, see Poe and Tate (1994). Data are available at: www.psci.unt.edu/ihrsc/poetate.htm. Our thanks to Steven Poe and his team at the University of North Texas for sharing their data.
9. Data are available at: www.unca.edu/politicalscience/faculty-staff/gibney.html. Our thanks to Mark Gibney and his team at the University of North Carolina Asheville for sharing their data.
10. Readers who might suspect an 'information effect', whereby more violations are reported in recent years because of closer scrutiny by observers of human rights violations, are referred to the Appendix of Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005) for evidence that such effect is not a serious concern.
11. A guide to the coding rules, as well as detailed examples of each value, are available at: www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/polity/
12. We rely upon version Polity IV and we employ the variable, *Polity2*, which transforms Polity IV 'standardized authority codes' (i.e. -66, -77 and -88) to scaled Polity scores that may be used reliably in time-series analyses without losing critical information by treating the authority scores as missing values.
13. In Tables 5 through 7, each column would add up to 100 percent, if the probabilities for ratification of zero, one, three, five and seven treaties were presented.

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