

Human Rights and International Politics: From Universalism to Relativism

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Abstract

This research discusses the dynamics between universalism and relativism in the application of human rights in the international world, focusing on current phenomena that affect global politics. Universalism carries the principle that human rights are absolute and applicable in all countries, but in practice it often clashes with state sovereignty and national interests. In contrast, relativism emphasizes that the application of human rights must be adapted to the context of local culture and traditions. Through case studies such as the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the oppression of Uighurs in China, and the COVID-19 pandemic, this research shows that many states use relativism to defend domestic policies that are considered human rights violations by the international community. In addition, the role of international organizations such as the UN and Amnesty International in maintaining universal human rights standards is limited by the political power of large states. The conclusion of this study is that although universalism remains the basic framework of international human rights, its application often has to compromise with relativism due to political influences, culture, and crisis situations.

Keywords: Universalism, Relativism, International Politics, Sovereignty, Culture

Introduction

Since the end of World War II, human rights have emerged as a cornerstone of international political discourse, most notably with the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The UDHR embodies the principle of universalism, affirming that human rights are inherent to all individuals, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, religious, or national background (Katarzyna Gruszko, 2023) (Arvind Kumar, 2024). However, this universalist approach faces significant challenges from cultural relativism, which holds that human rights must be interpreted in the context of local cultural norms and traditions (Michael Krennerich, 2024). Proponents of cultural relativism argue that insisting on universal human rights can lead to cultural imperialism, undermining local practices and values (Michael Krennerich, 2024). In contrast, advocates of universalism argue that fundamental human rights must transcend cultural boundaries to ensure dignity and justice for all (Arvind Kumar, 2024). Thus, the ongoing dialogue between universalism and cultural relativism remains crucial in shaping the future of international human rights law and its application across diverse cultural landscapes.

The shift from a universal approach to human rights to relativism has significantly impacted the dynamics of international politics, as states and international actors grapple with

the tension between universal human rights and local cultural values. Universal human rights, enshrined in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), affirm that rights belong to every individual regardless of cultural context (Sylvia Dwi Andini, 2022). However, the rise of cultural relativism challenges this notion, arguing that human rights must be interpreted within a particular cultural framework, which can lead to justifications for rights violations in the name of cultural integrity (Seyidkhanim Abasova, 2024). This debate is further complicated by the principle of national sovereignty, whereby states assert their right to govern without external interference, often citing universal human rights standards as a violation of their sovereignty (Sylvia Dwi Andini, 2022).

The concept of human rights universalism holds that certain rights are fundamental and should be universally applicable, a view strongly supported by Western states and international organizations (Fahad A. S Al-Fahad, 2024). However, this perspective faces significant opposition from many countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, who argue that human rights cannot be separated from their cultural, religious, and historical contexts (Gabriela García Escobar, 2024) (B. B. АНТОНЧЕНКО, 2024). Critics of universalism argue that applying these standards often ignores local nuances, leading to political tensions and misunderstandings between developed and developing countries (Adil Çamur, 2023). This tension highlights the limitations of a purely universalist approach, as discourses around human rights are inherently context-dependent, suggesting that while aspirations for universality exist, their implementation must take into account local realities (Adil Çamur, 2023). The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights serves as a foundational document advocating these universal principles, yet its application remains contested across diverse cultural landscapes (O. Myroniuk, 2024).

In international politics, the interplay between universalism and relativism in human rights has come under increasing scrutiny, especially as powerful states leverage the human rights narrative to exert geopolitical influence. These dynamics often manifest through economic sanctions or military interventions, framed as responses to human rights violations, which can lead to perceptions of neocolonialism among developing countries (Vladimir Kartashkin, 2023) (Leilane Serratine Grubba, 2023). The use of human rights language serves as a diplomatic tool, raising questions about the sincerity of such advocacy and whether it truly reflects a commitment to global morality or is simply a strategy to advance particular political interests (Colton Heffington, 2024) (Anicée Van Engeland, 2022).

Literature Review

Universalism and Relativism in Human Rights

The early literature on human rights, particularly after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, placed great emphasis on the universalism of human rights, asserting that basic rights apply to all individuals without exception. Scholars such as Jack Donnelly and Henry Shue were instrumental in advocating this perspective, arguing that these rights are non-negotiable and should be universally upheld, regardless of cultural, ethnic, or religious differences (Rachminawati, 2023) (Zeynep Yücel, 2023). Donnelly's work highlighted the importance of recognizing human rights as essential to human dignity, which encouraged global respect for individual rights (Fatima Idrees, 2024).

This universalist approach argues that human rights should serve as a global standard, transcending cultural variations and reinforcing the idea that all individuals deserve equal protection and respect under international law (O. Myroniuk, 2024). The UDHR, as a foundational document, has played a crucial role in establishing these principles, ensuring that human rights are not merely aspirational but recognized as binding obligations within the international community (O. Myroniuk, 2024).

The debate between universalism and cultural relativism underscores the need for a nuanced approach that respects communal autonomy while recognizing the importance of international human rights law. This middle ground can allow for limited deviations from universal standards, encouraging a more inclusive dialogue that recognizes the legitimacy of diverse cultural practices (Adil Çamur, 2023) (Shubham Jain, 2023). Ultimately, the challenge lies in balancing the universality of human rights with the rich tapestry of local cultural values (Nataliia Gaivoroniuk, 2023) (Essodina Bamaze N'Gani, 2022).

The Role of Human Rights in International Politics

In the realm of international relations, human rights have increasingly been used as a diplomatic tool by powerful states, especially in the West, to enhance their legitimacy and international standing. Andrew Moravcsik highlights this trend, noting that human rights advocacy serves not only to promote ethical standards but also to enhance a state's moral authority on the global stage (Vladimir Kartashkin, 2023). This is in line with the human rights spiral model proposed by Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, which illustrates how international pressure can catalyze progressive change in human rights policies in states that have historically violated these rights (Katarzyna Gruszko, 2023).

In addition, the concept of human rights diplomacy underscores the dual role of human rights as a tool of persuasion and a tool for political influence, often used by states to achieve

broader foreign policy goals (Colton Heffington, 2024). This dynamic interplay between human rights advocacy and state interests exemplifies the use of soft power, whereby states seek to influence others through attraction rather than coercion (Clooney Amal, 2023). Ultimately, the international human rights legal framework provides the legal basis for these diplomatic efforts, setting standards that states are expected to uphold (Naeli Fitria, 2023). Thus, human rights diplomacy has emerged as a critical component of contemporary international relations, reflecting the complex motivations behind state actions.

Thus, disaster categories can be distinguished as based on Law No. 24 of 2007, namely:

- 1) Natural disasters, disasters caused by events or a series of events caused by natural phenomena including earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, hurricanes, and landslides.
- 2) Non-natural disasters, are disasters caused by events or a series of non-natural events including technological failures, modernization failures, epidemics, and disease outbreaks.
- 3) Social disasters are disasters caused by events or a series of events caused by humans including social conflicts between groups or between communities, and terror.

A series of disaster events in Indonesia, if it may be called a "trend" has indeed often increased. Since 2016 - 2019, the occurrence of natural disasters has increased; in 2020, natural disasters tended to decrease and the existence of non-natural disasters (namely Covid - 19) which were declared national disasters, and disasters in the form of floods, landslides, and tornadoes, still seemed to dominate disaster events.

The escalation of disasters that recur every year, actually makes all of us Indonesian citizens, need a mental preparedness for what will happen. In the period of January - December from 2015 to 2020 alone, if the average number of events of various types of disasters in Indonesia is 2,838 disaster events. This can be seen in the various types of disasters and the impacts of the disaster in this graph.

Power Dynamics and Human Rights Advocacy

In international politics, human rights are often used by powerful states as a tool to maintain or expand their influence, a practice criticized by Macao Mutua and David Kennedy. They argue that this approach often prioritizes geopolitical interests over genuine humanitarian concerns, effectively turning human rights into an instrument of moral imperialism. Mutua emphasizes that the promotion of universal human rights can impose Western standards on developing countries, undermining their sovereignty and cultural context (Catia Eliana Gentilucci, 2024) (Michael Krennerich, 2024). This critique is in line with Kennedy's assertion

that powerful states manipulate human rights discourse to serve their strategic goals, thereby strengthening their hegemonic status in the global system (Colton Heffington, 2024) (Vladimir Kartashkin, 2023).

The concept of Hegemonic Stability Theory further explains this dynamic, stating that international stability is maintained when dominant nation-states use human rights advocacy to increase their influence, often at the expense of authentic human rights promotion (Katarzyna Gruszko, 2023). Thus, the intersection of human rights and hegemonic practices reveals a complex landscape where moral imperatives are often overshadowed by the strategic interests of powerful states.

The Influence of Human Rights on Sovereignty and Local Culture

The debate on universal versus relative human rights is closely related to the concept of state sovereignty, as highlighted by scholars such as Stephen Krasner and Francis Fukuyama. Krasner emphasizes the tension between human rights and state sovereignty, especially when states perceive international human rights standards as a violation of their autonomy (Rachminawati, 2023). Fukuyama further explores this dynamic, noting that states with legal systems rooted in indigenous religions or traditions often resist external pressures that challenge their sovereignty, viewing such interventions as violations of self-determination (O. Myroniuk, 2024). Cultural relativism argues that human rights are interpreted differently across cultures, leading to resistance to international human rights standards that are perceived as inconsistent with local norms (Seyidkhanim Abasova, 2024). Proponents argue that concepts such as individual liberty and gender equality can conflict with the values of communities and hierarchies prevalent in a given society, suggesting that uniform human rights standards cannot be applied universally (Sylvia Dwi Andini, 2022). These perspectives highlight the challenges faced by international human rights law, which must navigate the tension between universal applicability and cultural specificity (Adil Çamur, 2023). The philosophical foundations of human rights must clarify the extent to which universal claims can be justified, recognizing that while some aspects of human rights may be universally valid, others are sensitive to cultural interpretation (Sylvia Dwi Andini, 2022) (Leilane Serratine Grubba, 2023). Thus, the discourse on cultural relativism remains central to understanding the complexities of the application of human rights globally.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how the perspectives of universalism and relativism are debated in the context of human rights (HAM) in international politics. The research design used is a comparative case study. This study will compare several cases of countries that have different approaches to human rights, both from a universalistic perspective (e.g. Western countries) and relativistic (e.g. countries that prioritize local cultural values). This study will use secondary data and primary data where for secondary data, Literature review from international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), international human rights conventions, academic articles, reports of international organizations (UN, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch), and state policy documents related to human rights. While for Primary Data, In-depth interviews with human rights experts, academics in the field of international politics, and practitioners from international organizations working on human rights issues.

Results and Discussion

Universalism in Human Rights: A Principle Facing Challenges

Universalism in human rights is based on the idea that human rights are fundamental, indivisible, and applicable to all people, regardless of cultural, religious, or political background. This principle is contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) agreed upon in 1948 by the UN. However, several recent phenomena show that this concept of universalism continues to face challenges, especially from countries that emphasize the importance of cultural relativism.

Case Study

Rohingya Refugees in Myanmar: The humanitarian crisis experienced by the Rohingya ethnic group shows the friction between the principles of universalism and relativism. While the international community, through the UN and global human rights organizations, urges the Myanmar government to protect the basic rights of the Rohingya according to international standards, the Myanmar government refuses, arguing that the issue is an internal matter that cannot be intervened by outside parties. The argument often put forward is that local socio-political dynamics and cultural beliefs must be taken into account before adopting universal human rights standards.

China's oppression of the Uighur minority: China has faced widespread criticism from the international community over its treatment of the Muslim Uighur minority in the Xinjiang region. While many countries and human rights organizations have condemned China for its human rights violations, the Chinese government insists that its actions are a legitimate effort to maintain national stability and internal security. They argue that the concept of human rights

should be considered according to each country's social, economic, and cultural conditions, rejecting the application of universal human rights as defined by the West.

Relativism in Human Rights: Challenges and Acceptances

Cultural relativism in human rights emphasizes that human rights should be interpreted according to local cultural contexts and values. Countries such as China, Russia, and some countries in the Middle East often reject the application of human rights as universal, arguing that their values differ from Western concepts. This phenomenon has become increasingly visible in recent years, with certain political forces reinforcing the idea of national sovereignty as a shield from international interference in human rights.

Case Study

Repression of human rights activists in Russia, The Russian government, particularly under Vladimir Putin, has often invoked the principle of national sovereignty to rebuff international criticism of its repression of human rights activists and political opposition. Laws restricting freedom of expression and assembly are seen as legitimate measures to protect the country's stability and local political traditions. Russia has consistently claimed that Western human rights standards are not appropriate in the Russian context. • Religious Freedom Issues in Saudi Arabia, In Saudi Arabia, individual rights to freedom of expression and religion are often restricted by the strict application of Sharia law. Many Western countries and international human rights organizations view this as a violation of universal human rights. However, the Saudi government adheres to the principle of cultural relativism, arguing that Sharia law norms, which are rooted in local religious and cultural values, should take priority.

First, pre-disaster or before a disaster. With a high awareness that the territory of Indonesia is an area with great potential for repeated disaster events every year. At this stage, identify various potential disasters with various types of risks (in an effort to reduce risk), both material, non-material, and even psychological for affected residents; and also carry out recruitment activities (human resources) in order to provide understanding, education and disaster preparedness skills, so that there is a kind of simulation or field exercise.

In the pre-disaster stage process, it is necessary to carry out as an inseparable part of preventive measures, so that, from these activities, preparedness in facing disasters is prepared. Therefore, both for residents around the disaster and leading sector institutions, namely the Disaster Management Agency (BNPB / BNPBD) and there is coordination between related agencies.

Second, at the time of a disaster or called emergency response. Emergency response to disasters as explained in Law No. 24 of 2007, is a series of activities carried out immediately at the time of a disaster to deal with the negative impacts caused, which include rescue and

evacuation of victims, property, fulfillment of basic needs, protection, management of refugees, rescue, and restoration of infrastructure and facilities.

At the time of this disaster, preparations such as public kitchens and logistics, psychosocial support services, deployment or mobilization of human resources for disaster response personnel or volunteers, and provision of fulfillment of basic needs and other needs. This is as explained in Article 26 paragraph (2), "Everyone affected by a disaster has the right to receive assistance to fulfill basic needs."

Next, third, the stage after the disaster. Any type of disaster (natural, non-natural and social disasters) is recognized as having risks to those affected, whether as explained in the graph above, namely taking lives, being displaced, injured, educational facilities, health and worship, and residents' houses damaged by the disaster.

In this post-disaster, it is a series of activities that have been prepared in the pre-disaster stage, and during the disaster or emergency response, it is actually necessary to recover - recover both for the affected community, because psychologically they can experience trauma, or mental fatigue, as well as other material losses, as well as physical recovery, such as facilities for the construction of worship, schools and health, as well as damaged residents' houses, and road infrastructure. All of this is done in order to return home, so that normal life (before the disaster) can be restored.

Current Phenomenon: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Universalism vs. Relativism Debate

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the debate on human rights, particularly between universalism and relativism. The pandemic response policies implemented by various countries have highlighted the vast differences in how human rights are interpreted and implemented.

Case Studies

Lockdowns and Individual Freedoms in Europe and the United States: During the pandemic, many Western countries implemented lockdown policies that restricted people's movements, closed businesses, and suspended freedom of assembly. In the United States, these policies have faced resistance, with some groups arguing that the restrictions violate their basic rights. This has led to debates about how human rights can be implemented in a global health emergency.

Surveillance Policies in Southeast Asia: Several countries in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore and Vietnam, implemented strict surveillance policies through technology to track the spread of the virus. Although successful in controlling the pandemic, these policies have drawn criticism regarding privacy and individual freedoms. The governments of these countries

have justified their actions as part of national security measures, asserting that human rights must be considered in the local context.

The Role of International Organizations, Maintaining the Balance between Universalism and Relativism

International organizations such as the UN, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch continue to play an important role in maintaining global human rights standards. However, they face a dilemma in ensuring that human rights are respected without violating the sovereignty and cultural values of each country.

Case Studies

Sanctions on Human Rights Violations in Myanmar and China: International organizations often urge countries that are considered to have committed human rights violations to immediately improve the situation through various means, such as diplomacy or even economic sanctions. However, the responses of these countries vary, with many rejecting the sanctions as foreign interference that does not respect local sovereignty and culture.

The results of this study show that although the principle of universalism is still firmly held by many countries and international organizations, relativism is increasingly dominating international political discourse. Countries that emphasize national sovereignty and local cultural values often use relativism as a political tool to reject international pressure on human rights. This phenomenon illustrates how globalization, the pandemic, and the dynamics of international politics influence the way human rights are interpreted and implemented in various parts of the world. In this context, it is important for the international community to find a balance between the application of universal human rights standards and respect for local sovereignty and cultural values. In an era of increasingly fragmented international politics, a more collaborative approach and inclusive dialogue are needed to ensure that human rights are respected without violating state sovereignty.

Discussion

Universalism, Tension between Global Standards and State Sovereignty

Universalism is based on the belief that basic human rights are absolute and not bound by the cultural or political context of a particular country. However, in practice, current phenomena show that the application of this principle often clashes with issues of sovereignty and national interests.

The Rohingya case in Myanmar illustrates how countries reject international human rights standards on the grounds of sovereignty and domestic interests. The Myanmar government considers international pressure as a form of interference in domestic affairs, which

shows that countries that reject universal human rights tend to strengthen the idea of relativism in order to maintain the legitimacy of their domestic power.

China and the Uighur issue show the same dynamics, where universally defined human rights are considered irrelevant to be applied in their socio-political context. China uses the rhetoric of relativism to frame its internal policies as part of a larger national interest, rejecting standards imposed from outside.

These phenomena show that universalism cannot always be implemented effectively in all contexts. Although the international community recognizes that human rights are inalienable, this concept often clashes with the sovereignty of states that reject international involvement. Sovereignty becomes a strong bulwark to defend domestic policies, sometimes at the expense of global human rights principles.

Relativism: Political Tool or Embodying Cultural Values?

Relativism in human rights focuses on the view that local cultural values and traditions must be recognized and respected in upholding human rights. Many states that reject universal human rights standards use this approach to protect domestic practices that may be considered to violate basic rights in the eyes of the international community.

Russia, in discussing the repression of human rights activists, often claims that each state has the right to set the limits of human rights according to political circumstances, security, and social traditions. In this case, relativism is used as a political tool to avoid international criticism, by emphasizing that Western standards are irrelevant in countries like Russia that have different political systems and values.

Saudi Arabia faces criticism regarding religious freedom, but maintains that sharia law and Islamic values are the basis of state law. In this case, cultural relativism plays a central role in maintaining a social order governed by religious norms, and rejecting a concept of human rights that ignores the religious context. Cultural relativism is sometimes used as a shield to avoid international obligations on human rights. However, in some cases, relativism is also a real reflection of the values held by a society. Relativism as a political tool tends to be used by countries facing international pressure for change, while relativism as an embodiment of cultural values is often seen in the context of countries that are historically and religiously different from Western standards.

COVID-19 Pandemic: Contesting Individual Rights and Public Welfare

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to the application of universal human rights, particularly in relation to the restriction of individual freedoms in the interests of public health. Lockdown policies, digital surveillance, and restrictions on freedom of

movement raise major questions about how individual rights can be balanced with the collective need to protect society.

Cases of lockdown policies in Europe and the United States demonstrate that even in countries committed to universal human rights principles, individual rights can be overridden in a global health crisis. This has sparked debates about human rights in emergencies, challenging the flexibility of human rights universalism in the face of crisis conditions.

The tight surveillance in Singapore and Vietnam reflects how countries with a more collective or authoritarian approach regulate public welfare through methods that might be considered privacy-invading in democratic countries. This phenomenon shows that relativism in the application of human rights is often considered legitimate in countries that prioritize national stability over individual rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that even countries that support universalism in human rights can implement policies that limit individual rights, depending on national contexts and needs. This crisis situation highlights that human rights, while universal in principle, often have to be adapted in practice, opening up space for situational relativism.

The Role of International Organizations: Limitations in Defending Universalism

International organizations such as the UN and Amnesty International are often at the forefront of championing universalism in human rights. However, cases such as the sanctions against Myanmar and China show that pressure from these organizations is not always effective in forcing countries to comply with international standards.

Although international organizations aim to maintain universal standards, their effectiveness is limited by national sovereignty and global power politics. Powerful countries such as China and Russia have been able to resist international pressure and maintain their own interpretations of human rights. This shows that even though universalism is promoted as a global principle, relativism still has a strong place in international politics, especially when it involves countries with significant political power.

Conclusion

Human Rights Universalism Limited by State Sovereignty

Although human rights principles are universal and internationally recognized, their implementation is often hampered by state sovereignty. Many countries, such as Myanmar and China, have resisted international pressure on the grounds of protecting national interests and avoiding foreign interference. This shows that even though universalism is recognized, its practice often clashes with domestic political realities.

Human Rights Relativism as a Political Tool and the Embodying of Cultural Values

Relativism, which emphasizes the importance of cultural context and tradition in the implementation of human rights, is often used by countries to defend domestic policies that may be inconsistent with international standards. The cases of Russia and Saudi Arabia illustrate how relativism is used as a political tool to reject international criticism. However, in some cases, relativism also reflects cultural values historically held by local communities.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Situational Relativism

The COVID-19 pandemic is a test of the implementation of universal human rights, where individual rights are limited in the interests of public health. Countries, both democratic and authoritarian, have implemented policies that limit individual freedoms in an effort to overcome the health crisis. This phenomenon shows that even in emergency situations, situational relativism is acceptable in the context of protecting collective welfare.

The Limited Role of International Organizations in Upholding Universalism

International organizations such as the UN and Amnesty International play an important role in promoting universalism of human rights. However, this study shows that international pressure is often ineffective in dealing with politically powerful countries, such as China and Russia, which use relativism to reject universal standards.

The results of this study show that the shift from universalism to relativism in the application of human rights is greatly influenced by the dynamics of politics, culture, and international crises. Although universalism remains the main principle in international human rights doctrine, in practice, relativism is often a tool used by states to protect domestic interests and maintain local values. Current phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic and international conflicts further reinforce the idea that human rights cannot be fully applied uniformly, and compromises between universalism and relativism are becoming increasingly inevitable.

Overall, this study shows that although human rights are recognized as universal in principle, their application in international politics is highly contextual and depends on political, cultural, and crisis factors. The debate between universalism and relativism continues, with both approaches having a place in the dynamics of contemporary human rights.

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