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### Global politics

# Human rights

This sample Edexcel-style essay should be read alongside 'Human rights: are they protected in the international system?' (pp. 30–33)

**Question: Evaluate the view that the international protection of human rights has been ineffective.**

The international protection of human rights has been central to global governance since the establishment of international institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), in the aftermath of the Second World War. These institutions were designed to safeguard the rights and dignity of individuals worldwide through legal frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and mechanisms like the International Criminal Court (ICC). Despite significant progress, the effectiveness of these efforts remains widely debated. Critics argue that human rights protections are hindered by factors such as state sovereignty, the selective nature of interventions, and weak enforcement mechanisms, which have often resulted in ineffective protection. Conversely, supporters highlight successful interventions and the growth of international cooperation, suggesting that, despite challenges, the international protection of human rights has yielded demonstrable results. Overall, international protection of human rights has been inconsistent, but is not wholly ineffective.

A primary obstacle to the international protection of human rights is the principle of state sovereignty. Enshrined in international law, sovereignty grants states control over their internal affairs without external interference. This has led to significant reluctance in enforcing international human rights protections when they conflict with state sovereignty. This is shown by the lack of practical opposition to China's treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. Despite widespread condemnation, China's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, wielding veto power, has allowed it to deflect external pressure, demonstrating the geopolitical complexities that can hinder meaningful intervention. This highlights a major flaw in the international human rights system: the inability to challenge powerful states when their actions contravene human rights norms. However, the emergence of the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine – following the failures to prevent genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s – presents a potential challenge to traditional sovereignty. R2P allows for international intervention when states fail to protect their populations from mass atrocities. The 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya, for example, was framed under R2P to prevent a massacre by Gaddafi's forces. These actions, while controversial, underscore the growing recognition that sovereignty should not be an absolute shield against human rights violations. Nevertheless, the selective application of R2P, particularly in cases involving influential states like China, undermines its potential, demonstrating that there are challenges based upon the consistency and fairness of international human rights protection. While sovereignty continues to present a significant challenge, R2P demonstrates an evolving international norm that challenges the notion that sovereignty is a shield for human rights violations. However, its inconsistent application reveals the need for reform in international institutions to ensure their effectiveness.

Another key weakness in the international protection of human rights is the selective nature of international interventions. Interventions are often driven by geopolitical interests rather than a genuine commitment to human rights. The Syrian civil war (2011–25) offers a stark example of this selectivity. Despite the Assad regime's responsibility for widespread human rights violations, international efforts to intervene were stymied. This reluctance to take decisive action can largely be attributed to Syria's alliances with Russia and Iran, both major international powers with substantial influence in global politics. When President Assad used chemical weapons in 2013, the global outrage was notable, but the UN Security Council failed to authorise military intervention due to Russia's use of its veto. This demonstrates how political and strategic interests often override the moral imperative to protect human rights. Yet, despite the selective nature of interventions, there have been notable examples of effectiveness. In the Central African Republic, the UN deployed peacekeeping forces in 2013 under R2P to protect civilians. Similar interventions in Mali (2013) and Côte d'Ivoire (2011) have led to substantial improvements in human rights protection, showing that selective interventions can have meaningful outcomes when properly conducted and when humanitarian concerns are prioritised. Although the selective nature of international interventions remains a significant challenge, the successes in these African countries demonstrates that when interventions are well-targeted and driven by humanitarian goals, they can lead to improvements in human rights. The key to effective international human rights protection lies in ensuring that interventions are motivated by the need to protect human life rather than political calculations.

Arguably the most significant barrier to the effectiveness of international human rights protection is the lack of enforceable mechanisms. Many human rights agreements, such as the UDHR, are not legally binding, and institutions tasked with overseeing compliance, such as the UN Human Rights Council, often lack the authority to enforce their rulings. The case of Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya minority illustrates this weakness. Since 2017, Rohingya people have been subjected to genocide and forced displacement. While the International Criminal Court (ICC) is investigating these crimes, Myanmar has refused to cooperate, and its government remains largely insulated from external pressure. This demonstrates the significant gaps in enforcement, as states can refuse to comply with rulings. Nevertheless, international legal mechanisms have had successes in holding perpetrators to account. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), for example, has increasingly asserted its authority in cases related to environmental and civil rights. In 2024 the ECHR ruled that Switzerland's failure to address climate change violated the European Convention on Human Rights. This case demonstrates the growing influence of international legal institutions in enforcing human rights protections. Further, the prosecution by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) of individuals responsible for the Rwandan genocide and the ICC's ongoing investigations show that accountability is possible, even when states are unwilling to act. Thus, while the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms remains a significant challenge, the growing power of international legal institutions such as the ECHR and the ICC offers hope for improving the accountability of states and individuals for human rights violations. Strengthening the enforcement capabilities of these institutions and ensuring broader compliance will be crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of international human rights protection.

Overall, it is clear that significant challenges remain in effectively protecting human rights, particularly with regard to state sovereignty, selective interventions and weak enforcement mechanisms. However, despite these obstacles, there have been notable successes in the field of international human rights protection. The establishment of the responsibility to protect doctrine, the increasing influence of international courts like the ECHR and the ICC, and the positive outcomes of selective interventions in countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic indicate that international

human rights protection can be effective. Through reforms in international law and stronger enforcement mechanisms there is the potential to achieve more universal and effective protection of human rights.

### ***Student task***

- 1 Highlight the areas of AO1, AO2 and AO3 (assessment objectives) in the essay.
- 2 Add some more up-to-date examples to each paragraph.

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