

Enforcement Challenges in Human Rights Protection Under International Law

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Abstract: *Despite the proliferation of international human rights instruments, the enforcement of these rights remains a persistent challenge in global governance. This article explores the structural, legal, and political obstacles that hinder the effective protection of human rights under international law. Drawing on a qualitative library research approach, the study examines the limitations of international courts and treaty bodies, the lack of binding enforcement mechanisms, issues of state sovereignty, and political selectivity in applying international standards. The findings suggest that although significant normative frameworks exist such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants, and regional human rights conventions their implementation is uneven and often undermined by geopolitical interests and weak institutional authority. This article contributes to ongoing debates by emphasizing the need for stronger compliance mechanisms, improved state accountability, and enhanced cooperation between international institutions and domestic legal systems. Ultimately, addressing enforcement gaps is essential for the realization of human rights as universal and justiciable standards.*

Keywords: *Human Rights, International Law, Enforcement, Legal Pluralism.*

INTRODUCTION

The modern international legal system has witnessed tremendous progress in the codification and promotion of human rights as universal and inalienable norms. Landmark documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948 laid the ethical and legal foundation for post-war international relations and influenced a wave of binding treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and regional frameworks like the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These instruments collectively reflect a consensus that individuals are entitled to certain basic rights regardless of their nationality, religion, ethnicity, or gender (Donnelly, 2013; Alston & Goodman, 2013).

Yet this normative success has not been matched by effective enforcement. Numerous reports and scholarly studies continue to document widespread violations of human rights across the globe, ranging from unlawful detention, torture, restrictions on freedom of expression, to systemic discrimination and even genocide. While legal mechanisms exist to address these abuses such as complaints procedures before treaty bodies or adjudication in regional human rights courts the practical enforcement of international human rights law remains inconsistent, selective, and subject to geopolitical influences (Hafner-Burton, 2013; Mutua, 2001).

This enforcement gap between legal commitments and actual compliance is one of the most critical challenges facing the international human rights regime today. The failure to adequately protect victims and hold violators accountable threatens not only the integrity of international law but also the legitimacy of global institutions. The principle of state sovereignty, often invoked to resist external interference, poses significant barriers to enforcement, particularly in regimes where human rights are subordinated to state control or national ideology (Davis, 2010). In such contexts, international mechanisms have limited capacity to intervene, especially when domestic remedies are weak or entirely absent (Simmons, 2009).

The political dynamics within key institutions like the United Nations Security Council or the Human Rights Council often result in selective enforcement, whereby certain states face scrutiny and sanctions while others with similar or worse records evade accountability due to their geopolitical power or strategic alliances. This double standard erodes the credibility of international enforcement and fosters perceptions of bias and politicization (Abebe, 2009; Sultany, 2013). For instance, powerful states such as the United States, China, and Russia have historically resisted international adjudication of their conduct or even withdrawn from bodies such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), undermining the universality of accountability mechanisms (Schabas, 2011).

In addition to institutional and political obstacles, many enforcement challenges arise from legal fragmentation. The international human rights regime is characterized by a complex network of treaties, monitoring bodies, and regional courts that often lack coordination and consistent jurisprudence. This institutional pluralism, while reflecting diversity, also leads to normative ambiguities and enforcement loopholes. Furthermore, many treaty bodies lack binding authority;

their findings or recommendations are advisory rather than compulsory, which weakens their ability to compel state action (Shelton, 2008).

The problem of enforcement is also linked to domestic implementation. International law relies heavily on national legal systems to give effect to human rights obligations. However, in many countries, domestic courts are either unwilling or unable to enforce international norms due to lack of judicial independence, capacity, or political will. National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), although emerging as important actors in monitoring compliance, often lack resources or authority to address structural violations effectively (Landman, 2005). Civil society plays a crucial role in mobilizing for enforcement, yet in many authoritarian states, human rights defenders face legal restrictions, intimidation, or violence.

Despite these challenges, important advancements have been made. The jurisprudence of regional courts such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) has contributed to strengthening accountability and inspiring domestic reforms. Similarly, strategic litigation, advocacy by non-governmental organizations, and transnational networks have increasingly succeeded in pressuring states to comply with international standards (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Moreover, the evolving concept of responsibility to protect (R2P) reflects a shift in how the international community perceives state sovereignty—not as a shield against intervention, but as a responsibility toward citizens.

This article aims to examine the underlying structural, legal, and political barriers to effective enforcement of human rights under international law. It argues that despite robust normative development, enforcement mechanisms remain inadequate due to a combination of institutional weaknesses, sovereignty concerns, and geopolitical selectivity. The paper adopts a qualitative library research approach, drawing from legal instruments, case studies, scholarly commentary, and reports by international bodies. It further proposes pathways to strengthen enforcement through enhanced compliance mechanisms, better coordination between global and domestic actors, and increased political will. Addressing enforcement deficits is essential not only for the protection of human dignity but also for maintaining the legitimacy of the international human rights order. A meaningful human rights regime must go beyond norm declaration to ensure real

remedies for victims and accountability for violators—only then can the promise of universality become a practical reality.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative library research approach to explore the enforcement challenges of human rights protection under international law. Library research, also known as doctrinal or normative legal research, is particularly suitable for analyzing international legal instruments, court decisions, and scholarly commentary (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012). This method enables a systematic exploration of legal norms, institutional mechanisms, and enforcement procedures by relying on existing legal literature and documentary sources rather than empirical field data.

The research primarily focuses on doctrinal legal analysis, which involves interpreting and critically assessing relevant legal instruments, such as treaties, covenants, conventions, and international court rulings. Key documents analyzed include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981). These foundational instruments form the normative backbone of the international human rights regime (Alston & Goodman, 2013).

In addition to treaty texts, the study draws on reports and publications issued by intergovernmental organizations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. These organizations offer regular assessments on state compliance, enforcement obstacles, and human rights violations, serving as key secondary sources for evaluating the practical effectiveness of international law (Amnesty International, 2022; OHCHR, 2023).

The research also incorporates case-based analysis by reviewing notable decisions from regional and international human rights bodies, such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), and the Human Rights Committee under the ICCPR. These decisions illuminate enforcement challenges by highlighting

how international courts and quasi-judicial bodies attempt to resolve disputes and ensure compliance (Steiner, Alston, & Goodman, 2007).

To ensure the relevance and credibility of the materials, sources were gathered from reputable academic databases, including JSTOR, HeinOnline, and Oxford Human Rights Hub, as well as official UN treaty repositories. The research employed purposive sampling, prioritizing publications and documents that directly address institutional limitations, legal enforcement mechanisms, and geopolitical or sovereignty-related constraints (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analytical framework of the study is structured around three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Legal-institutional limitations:** This includes the weaknesses in treaty enforcement mechanisms, such as non-binding recommendations from treaty bodies, limited jurisdiction of international courts, and the lack of a centralized global enforcement authority (Shelton, 2008).
2. **Political and sovereignty-related obstacles:** The research evaluates how the doctrine of state sovereignty, combined with political selectivity in enforcement, undermines the consistent application of human rights norms (Simmons, 2009).
3. **Domestic implementation:** Recognizing that international law must often be enforced through national systems, this dimension assesses the role of domestic courts, national human rights institutions (NHRIs), and civil society actors in bridging the global–local enforcement gap (Landman, 2005).

The research adopts an interdisciplinary perspective by integrating insights from international relations and political science to analyze how power dynamics, legitimacy concerns, and institutional fragmentation shape human rights enforcement globally (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). This qualitative library research methodology is well-suited to understanding the complexity of human rights enforcement under international law. By combining doctrinal legal analysis with institutional critique and comparative jurisprudence, the study seeks to offer both theoretical insight and practical relevance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Institutional Limitations

One of the most pressing challenges in enforcing human rights under international law lies in the inherent limitations of the global institutional framework. Despite the proliferation of international human rights treaties and monitoring bodies, many of these mechanisms lack the authority to impose binding legal consequences. For instance, treaty-based bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Committee (under the ICCPR) and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights can issue views, general comments, and recommendations in response to state reports or individual complaints. However, these outputs are non-binding, and thus depend entirely on the goodwill and voluntary cooperation of states for implementation (Shelton, 2008). This lack of enforceability weakens the authority of international human rights law and diminishes its practical impact on victims seeking redress.

Although judicial institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and earlier ad hoc tribunals like the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) have had notable successes in addressing gross human rights violations, including genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, their influence is significantly constrained. The ICC, in particular, has faced sustained criticism regarding accusations of selective justice—with the majority of its investigations and prosecutions targeting African states, while powerful countries such as the United States, China, and Russia remain outside its jurisdiction or actively resist cooperation (Mutua, 2001; Schabas, 2011). These limitations reveal the underlying political tensions that shape the implementation of international legal norms.

While regional courts such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) offer stronger enforcement models within their respective jurisdictions, they too face significant constraints. Their geographical limitations mean that many regions—such as Asia and the Middle East—lack comparable regional enforcement bodies. Consequently, millions of individuals live in jurisdictions where no effective regional mechanisms for human rights enforcement exist. Even in functioning regional systems,

compliance with court rulings is often uneven and sometimes met with state resistance, particularly in cases that challenge political elites or expose systemic abuses (Huneus, 2011).

Another critical institutional limitation is the fragmented and decentralized nature of the international legal system itself. With multiple bodies operating with overlapping mandates such as the UN Human Rights Council, various treaty committees, the ICC, and regional organizations coordination and coherence are difficult to achieve. This fragmentation creates gaps in protection, inconsistent jurisprudence, and potential duplication of efforts (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). Without a centralized enforcement authority, the global human rights system depends heavily on political will, state cooperation, and soft power pressure rather than legal compulsion.

Resource constraints further impede institutional effectiveness. Many treaty bodies and human rights mechanisms operate with limited budgets, personnel, and technical capacity. This is especially problematic when monitoring compliance in lower-income or conflict-affected states, where violations are often most severe. The lack of adequate funding and infrastructure prevents timely reporting, thorough investigations, and meaningful follow-up, rendering many institutional responses symbolic rather than substantive (Alston & Goodman, 2013).

Even where international institutions issue compelling findings or recommendations, enforcement mechanisms are often absent or weak. Unlike domestic legal systems that typically possess police and judicial branches to ensure implementation, international bodies must rely on naming and shaming, diplomatic pressure, or political negotiation—all of which are dependent on the relative power of the states involved. As a result, powerful violators often escape meaningful accountability, while weaker states may be disproportionately targeted for enforcement, further reinforcing perceptions of inequity and double standards (Simmons, 2009).

Institutional limitations significantly undermine the promise of international human rights law. From the non-binding nature of treaty body recommendations to the politicized functioning of international criminal courts and the fragmentation of the global legal order, these constraints contribute to a widening enforcement gap. Addressing these institutional weaknesses requires not only legal reform but also deeper political commitment and sustained investment in international accountability mechanisms.

Sovereignty and Non-Compliance

The doctrine of state sovereignty remains one of the most persistent obstacles to the effective enforcement of international human rights law. Sovereignty, in its traditional Westphalian sense, grants states supreme authority within their territorial boundaries and the legal autonomy to determine their internal affairs without external interference. This principle, while foundational to the international legal order, directly conflicts with the supranational aspirations of international human rights mechanisms that seek to hold states accountable for violations against individuals (Donnelly, 2003). As a result, many governments, particularly authoritarian regimes or those with weak democratic institutions, view human rights monitoring and enforcement as intrusions on national sovereignty.

This tension is compounded by the principle of non-intervention, enshrined in the United Nations Charter (Article 2.7), which has often been invoked to reject external oversight or criticism. States that are accused of human rights abuses frequently cite non-interference as a shield against international scrutiny, especially when dealing with issues deemed to be of domestic concern, such as national security, religious practices, or cultural norms (Evans, 2005). Even in cases of gross violations—such as ethnic cleansing, arbitrary detention, or suppression of free speech many states resist international involvement on the grounds that such actions represent an unjustified encroachment on their sovereignty.

The issue of non-compliance is further exacerbated by the absence of strong enforcement consequences. Unlike domestic legal systems that possess coercive tools such as police power, international human rights law largely depends on state consent and cooperation. States that ratify treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) or the Convention Against Torture may subsequently ignore reporting obligations, delay implementation of treaty body recommendations, or refuse to cooperate with special rapporteurs and fact-finding missions. Yet, in most cases, there are no effective punitive measures for such non-compliance, allowing violators to act with relative impunity (Shelton, 2008).

Political considerations play a significant role in enabling selective compliance. Geopolitical alliances and strategic interests often determine the level of international response to human rights violations. For instance, states that are economically or militarily powerful, or those that play key

roles in global security or trade networks, are less likely to face sanctions or serious pressure—even when they commit clear human rights abuses (Hafner-Burton, 2005). Conversely, weaker states with minimal geopolitical influence may be more readily condemned or subjected to punitive action, even for less severe violations. This double standard undermines the universality and impartiality of human rights norms.

Another related challenge is the limited jurisdictional reach of many enforcement mechanisms. For example, the International Criminal Court (ICC) can only exercise jurisdiction over crimes committed by nationals of, or within the territory of, a state party—or when referred by the UN Security Council. This jurisdictional restriction allows major powers that have not ratified the Rome Statute, such as the United States, China, and Russia, to evade accountability (Schabas, 2011). Furthermore, even when jurisdiction exists, cooperation from the concerned state is often lacking, as seen in cases where arrest warrants issued by the ICC have been ignored by member states hosting accused individuals.

Attempts to address the sovereignty-enforcement dilemma have included the development of concepts such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which redefines sovereignty not merely as control but as a responsibility to uphold human rights. According to this principle, when a state is unwilling or unable to protect its population from mass atrocities, the international community has a responsibility to intervene, through diplomatic, humanitarian, or even military means (Bellamy, 2009). However, R2P remains controversial and inconsistently applied, raising questions about its legitimacy and potential for misuse as a tool of foreign policy.

The persistence of sovereignty as a normative and legal principle, coupled with the lack of enforcement mechanisms and political selectivity, significantly weakens the global human rights architecture. To overcome these challenges, greater emphasis must be placed on strengthening international consensus, fostering legal reforms that balance state autonomy with human rights obligations, and building institutional mechanisms that encourage compliance without undermining legitimate national interests.

Political Selectivity and Geopolitics

One of the most persistent critiques of the international human rights enforcement regime is its susceptibility to political selectivity and geopolitical influence. While international law aspires

to universal and impartial application, in practice, enforcement decisions are often shaped by the strategic interests of powerful states and the political dynamics within multilateral institutions. This selective enforcement undermines the legitimacy of the human rights system and reduces its capacity to function as a neutral arbiter of justice (Abebe, 2009).

Numerous instances demonstrate how geopolitical alliances and international power asymmetries influence the scrutiny that states receive for human rights violations. Countries with limited strategic value or global influence, often in the Global South, tend to face disproportionate condemnation, sanctions, or referrals to international mechanisms. In contrast, states that wield economic or military power, or that hold veto power within institutions like the United Nations Security Council, are often shielded from meaningful accountability—even when credible allegations of abuse exist (Simmons, 2009). For example, repeated calls for investigations into violations in regions such as Palestine, Myanmar, and Xinjiang have faced political obstruction, while lesser violations in other contexts have prompted immediate international action.

A particularly illustrative case of political selectivity is the role of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in referring situations to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Under Article 13(b) of the Rome Statute, the UNSC has the authority to refer situations involving non-party states to the ICC. However, the Council's decisions are deeply political and subject to the veto powers of its five permanent members (P5). This has led to inconsistent application of justice, with some conflicts being referred—such as the Darfur situation in Sudan in 2005—while others, such as Syria or Yemen, are blocked due to the political interests of Russia, China, or other powerful allies (Chesterman, 2002; Bosco, 2014).

The withdrawal or non-participation of major powers from the ICC and other international legal mechanisms further reflects global skepticism toward supranational enforcement. The United States, for instance, signed but never ratified the Rome Statute and has actively resisted ICC jurisdiction over its personnel. Similarly, Russia withdrew its signature from the Rome Statute in 2016 following the Court's criticism of its actions in Crimea. These developments not only highlight a crisis of confidence in the impartiality of international criminal justice but also embolden other states to resist cooperation, citing precedent set by global powers (Schabas, 2011).

This double standard in enforcement contributes to what many scholars describe as a legitimacy gap in the international human rights regime. When states perceive that human rights are enforced selectively, based not on legal criteria but on geopolitical agendas, they are less likely to view international institutions as credible or to voluntarily comply with their recommendations. This weakens the moral authority of the human rights system and reinforces narratives—particularly among authoritarian regimes—that human rights are tools of Western interventionism rather than universal norms (Sultany, 2013).

Regional political blocs often influence voting and decision-making in human rights bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Regional alliances like the African Group, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, or the Non-Aligned Movement may rally to protect member states from condemnation, regardless of the substance of the allegations. While regional solidarity can be important for decolonial justice and preventing hegemonic domination, it can also obstruct accountability and contribute to the normalization of impunity (Rodley & Pollard, 2009).

To address these challenges, scholars and practitioners have proposed reforms aimed at depoliticizing enforcement mechanisms. These include enhancing the independence of judicial bodies, reforming the UNSC's referral process to the ICC, and strengthening the universal jurisdiction of international courts. There have also been calls for expanding the authority of independent fact-finding missions and strengthening civil society participation to serve as counterweights to state-led obstructionism (Hafner-Burton, 2008). The politicization of international human rights enforcement significantly undermines its universality and effectiveness. Until the international community addresses these structural biases and ensures more consistent and principled enforcement, the global human rights regime will remain vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy and instrumentalization.

Domestic Implementation Gaps

While the international human rights system provides a normative framework for the protection of individual rights, its effectiveness depends heavily on how these norms are translated and enforced at the domestic level. States are the primary duty-bearers under international law, and the role of national legal and political institutions—including courts, legislatures, and law enforcement agencies—is central to realizing human rights in practice (Landman, 2005). However,

in many contexts, there exists a significant gap between international commitments and national implementation, resulting in widespread impunity and denial of justice to victims.

One of the key obstacles to effective domestic implementation is the lack of political will. Governments may sign and ratify human rights treaties to gain international legitimacy or access to aid but often fail to incorporate these obligations into domestic law. In some cases, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes actively suppress human rights protections through restrictive legislation, censorship, and criminalization of dissent. Even in democratic settings, competing political priorities and populist pressures can sideline human rights enforcement, especially when it concerns vulnerable or marginalized communities (Heyns & Viljoen, 2001).

Weak judicial institutions further compound this problem. In countries with underdeveloped or compromised legal systems, courts may lack the independence, resources, or capacity to adjudicate human rights claims effectively. Judges may be subject to political influence, poorly trained in international human rights law, or unwilling to challenge executive authority. In some cases, legal frameworks are structured in ways that exclude international norms from having direct effect in domestic law, making it difficult for individuals to invoke treaty rights before national courts (Hirschl, 2004).

Corruption and institutional inefficiency are additional barriers that undermine the enforcement of rights at the national level. Police brutality, arbitrary detention, and unfair trials often go unpunished due to collusion among law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and political elites. These challenges are particularly acute in fragile or post-conflict states, where the rule of law is weak and justice systems are overwhelmed or dysfunctional (Carothers, 2006). In such contexts, international human rights mechanisms may identify violations and issue recommendations, but without domestic channels for enforcement, such efforts yield limited results.

Nevertheless some progress has been achieved through the establishment of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) and increased engagement by civil society organizations (CSOs). NHRIs, when properly mandated and resourced, serve as vital intermediaries between international human rights bodies and the national legal system. They monitor violations, educate the public, and advocate for legislative reforms. CSOs play a complementary role by documenting abuses,

litigating strategic cases, and exerting pressure on governments through public campaigns and international advocacy (Reif, 2000). Despite these efforts, their impact remains constrained in the absence of binding international enforcement mechanisms or credible threats of sanction.

Another critical dimension of the domestic gap lies in the uneven incorporation of international treaties into national legal orders. Some states follow a monist approach, where international law automatically becomes part of domestic law upon ratification. Others follow a dualist system, requiring enabling legislation to domesticate treaty obligations. In dualist states, the lack of political will to pass such laws results in human rights treaties remaining largely symbolic, without legal force in national courts (Shelton, 2008).

To close these implementation gaps, scholars and practitioners emphasize the importance of capacity building, judicial training, and legal reform at the national level. International organizations can support domestic actors through technical assistance, funding, and peer-review mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council. Lasting change requires sustained internal commitment by governments to uphold their human rights obligations not merely for international image but for the genuine empowerment of their populations (Alston & Goodman, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The enforcement of human rights under international law continues to face major challenges. Despite the development of comprehensive legal instruments and institutions, issues of state sovereignty, political selectivity, institutional weakness, and domestic resistance hinder effective compliance. Addressing these obstacles requires a multi-level strategy: strengthening the binding nature of treaty obligations, improving institutional coordination, enhancing the role of regional courts, and supporting domestic legal reform. International cooperation must go beyond norm-setting and focus on ensuring accountability, transparency, and consistency in enforcement. Only through such efforts can the promise of universal human rights become a reality for all, regardless of geography or political context.

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International Journal of Law

ISSN(Online): 3109-7243

Vol 1 no 1 (2025): June 2025

<https://journal.berkahopungpungan.com/index.php/IJL/index>

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International Journal of Law

ISSN(Online): 3109-7243

Vol 1 no 1 (2025): June 2025

<https://journal.berkahopungpungan.com/index.php/IJL/index>

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