The End of Shame?
How Governments Resist
International Human Rights Pressure

Ida Braad Albek

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PhD Dissertation

Politica

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Acknowledgements

As a PhD student, you are frequently asked to explain what exactly your project is about. This can be a daunting question for a new PhD student who has not quite figured that out yet. When I started my PhD, I would say that the project aimed to examine when and how international human rights pressure can reduce human rights abuses. Knowing full well that this sounded a little naïve, I would often add "hopefully it *does* work, otherwise this will be three depressing years." As is often the case, reality turned out to be a little more complicated than I had hoped, and while the past three years did not in fact turn out to be depressing, this has much more to do with the wonderful and supportive people around me than the rather disheartening findings of my dissertation.

First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisors, Jakob Tolstrup and Thomas Olesen, I could not have asked for a more competent, supportive, and engaged team of supervisors. From the outset, you have taken a genuine interest in my project and always encouraged me to follow my interests and ideas. Writing this dissertation has at times been both difficult and frustrating but you have always provided brilliant suggestions, words of encouragement, and more optimism than I could muster when dealing with research ideas falling apart, poor data quality, or reviewer comments. Jakob, thank you for initially encouraging me to pursue a PhD, for pushing me to step out of my academic comfort zone, and for always offering great advice on issues small and large. Thomas, thank you for providing a sense of calm, for asking the necessary tough questions, and for ensuring that I had an actual research question (and that my titles were not *too* boring).

One of the true privileges of doing a PhD at this department is that you get to be part of a kind, caring, funny, and absolutely brilliant group of other PhD students. This community is truly special, and I owe a huge thanks to all the lovely people I have met during my time as a PhD student. The (in)famous IR hallway is home to the best and most supportive colleagues I could have hoped for. Ashraf, sharing an office with you has been a highlight of my PhD. Academic life can be a rollercoaster, and having an office mate who is always ready to celebrate the highs and lament the lows is invaluable. Thank you for listening to all my complaints and for always being appropriately outraged at the state of the world. Thank you, Aske, Karl, and Nanna for welcoming me on day one and helping me adjust to life as a PhD student. Without your friendship and open door, the first few semesters would have been a much lonelier and more confusing experience. I also want to thank Esther, Hannah, Julia, Liza,

Lucas, Maria, and Signe for making the hallway such a loud and welcoming place. Thank you for our countless trips to the lounge, for establishing the Cake Council™, for all the frivolities, and for being my (and each other's) biggest cheerleaders. Louise, it has been such a joy to have you at my side throughout this journey. Thank you for all our talks, laughs, and shared RCR trauma. The PhD group is also home to the two best clubs in town: the PhD book club (*The Idas*, Anna, Ali, Aske, Maria, MJ, Oksana, and Signe) and the highly exclusive knitting club (Anna and Anna).

Many other great colleagues at the department have contributed to this dissertation. I wish to thank the members of the International Relations Section, in particular, Clara Neupert-Wentz, Laurits Florang Aarslew, and Tanja Marie Hansen, for taking an interest in my research, providing excellent feedback, and for many interesting discussions of research and life in academia. Christopher Green-Pedersen, Helene Helboe Pedersen, and Lasse Lindekilde also deserve praise for being excellent PhD coordinators and always having our backs. I want to thank the amazing TAP at the department, who make sure that everything runs smoothly. Thank you in particular to Ruth Ramm for sorting out all the finances and for picking up the bill when I was stranded in NYC, Annette Bruun Andersen for fixing all my mistakes, Olivia Elsebeth Belling-Nami and Susanne Vang for solving any practical issues. A special thanks to Njall Beuschel for being the true heart of the department.

I am also grateful to Amanda Murdie for inviting and warmly welcoming me to the University of Georgia. Getting to be part of a small but dedicated group of extremely talented human rights scholars has truly been a privilege. Thank you for letting me join life at the department without reservations and for engaging with my work. At UGA I also owe a huge thanks to Asia Parker, Gabriel Soyer, Jay (Hyunjoo) Lee, and Joowon Yi. Thank you for constantly complaining about life in Athens but nonetheless taking me under your wing, showing me around, and inviting me into your friend groups. You played a huge part in making my stay so memorable!

Doing a PhD can at times feel all-encompassing, and I wish to thank all my friends and family for reminding me that this is not in fact the case. Your love and support mean the world to me, and I truly could not have done this without you. My flatmates in Mejlgade, past and present, deserve special thanks for Sunday dinners, New Year's trips, trash TV, and karaoke nights. You guys have helped keep me sane through this crazy process, and it is a privilege to call you all my friends. Finally, I want to thank my family. Magnus and Anton, thank you for listening to my ramblings and never failing to make me laugh. Mom and Dad, thank you for all your love and support and for instilling in me an innate sense of curiosity and a passion to learn. You have always encouraged me to take an interest in the world around me and feel compassion for

its people, these qualities have proved vital for this dissertation and in life, thank you.

<div align="right">
Ida Braad Albek,
Aarhus, May 2025
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All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act
towards one another in a spirit of brother[sister]hood.
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1

Preface

This report summarises my PhD dissertation *The End of Shame? How Governments Resist International Human Rights Pressure*, which consists of the present summary report and the three research papers listed below. The summary report presents the main theoretical arguments, methodological approaches, and core findings of the three papers. The individual papers contain a more detailed account of the relevant theory, methods, data, and analyses. I use the shorthand, Paper A, Paper B, and Paper C to refer to the articles throughout the summary report.

Paper A: Escaping Human Rights Pressure: How Governments Rhetorically Defend Human Rights Violations. *Under review.*

Paper B: The Politics of Shame: Government Framing and Public Support for Human Rights Abuses. *Under review.*

Paper C: Human Rights Rhetoric and African Agency: Rethinking the Consequences of Chinese Aid and Trade. *Working paper.*

Chapter 1
Introduction

The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.

Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth*

On September 16, 2022, Zhina Mahsa Amini died after being brutally beaten while in the custody of the Iranian morality police. Enraged by Amini's death and the treatment of women in Iran, tens of thousands of people took to the streets demanding better protection of women's and human rights in Iran (Rehman, 2023). The Iranian regime responded to the protests in a predictable but ruthless fashion, and by December 2022, an estimated 481 protesters had been killed, more than 18,000 were detained, and untold numbers had been beaten by security forces (HRANA, 2022). These acts committed by the Iranian regime against Amini and peaceful protesters violate the most fundamental norms for how governments ought to treat their citizens (UN, 1948).

The events in Iran did not go unnoticed by the international human rights community. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) helped document abuses and condemned the regime's indiscriminate use of violence (Amnesty International 2022; HRANA, 2022), and solidarity protests broke out around the world. Western governments in particular were quick to criticise the Iranian regime and call for a stop to the violence against women and protesters (Associated Press, 2022). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Iranian regime did not crumble under the international pressure but sought to defend itself against the criticism. Authorities maintained that Amini died from a heart attack, and official rhetoric portrayed protesters as violent troublemakers sponsored by enemies of the Islamic Republic (BBC, 2022; Motamedi, 2022). As of January 2025, these efforts appear to have been successful: the protests were suppressed, and the perpetrators of human rights abuses have evaded accountability.

The example above illustrates the processes at the heart of this dissertation, namely how the international human rights community puts pressure on abusive governments and subsequent attempts by target governments to resist pressure and avoid committing to and complying with basic human rights norms. Governments worldwide continue to violate the rights of their citizens, and the human rights community routinely responds by publicly condemning violations and putting pressure on the responsible government. While the hope is that these efforts can pressure governments to reduce violations and

commit to human rights norms, examples like the one from Iran show that this is not always the case. Instead, governments adopt strategies to resist pressure and avoid changing their behaviour. In Iran, one strategy was to deny allegations of abuses and portray government repression as a legitimate policy to contain violent protesters. These rhetorical responses were designed to refute the claims of the international community and argue that the Iranian government did not violate human rights norms. This dissertation takes its point of departure in these empirical patterns and delves into *rhetorical responses* to human rights pressure. The central claim of the dissertation is that governments respond to international pressure by constructing counter-narratives that challenge criticism and aim to decrease the costs of being criticised. To evaluate this claim, I pose the following guiding research question:

> *How do governments respond rhetorically to international human rights pressure, and what, if any, are the consequences for public opinion?*

Understanding the dynamics of human rights pressure, government rhetoric, and public opinion is crucial for several reasons. First, from a normative perspective, we should be concerned that violations of fundamental human rights persist to this day. Every day, the freedom, lives, and well-being of countless individuals are under threat from governments, insurgent groups, and terrorist organisations. The continued prevalence of human rights abuses constitutes an abject failure by the international community to protect the humanity and dignity of all human beings (UN, 1948). This is not to say that there has been no progress in the realisation of human rights. Since the end of the Cold War, under US leadership, the international human rights regime has expanded tremendously to include a long list of international treaties, instruments, and strong transnational networks of activists and NGOs (Risse et al., 1999; Simmons, 2009) to the point where human rights norms have become entrenched in international politics. There are also indications that this has translated into overall improvements in the respect for human rights (Fariss, 2014, 2019), though this question remains contested (Cingranelli & Filippov, 2018). Regardless of the aggregate level of human rights abuses, it is indisputable that widespread violations persist, and how best to prevent future abuses should be a key concern for the international community.

Second, the rise of illiberal great powers such as China is likely to challenge the existing liberal world order and hamper efforts to promote and protect human rights norms going forward (e.g., Acharya, 2017; Foot, 2020; Hopgood, 2013; Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019). The expansion of the international human rights regime took place under American unipolarity when human rights norms and democracy were at the forefront of international relations. Today, China offers an alternative approach to human rights with a

strong focus on state sovereignty (Foot, 2022; Kinzelbach, 2012) and has the political and economic power to shield target states from the costs of being criticised for abuses. Therefore, it is critical to understand the dynamics of human rights promotion today and to take changing international power relations into account.

This dissertation focuses specifically on *international human rights pressure* because it is the primary tactic employed by the human rights community to promote human rights norms and hold abusive governments accountable. I define international human rights pressure as efforts by the international community to compel or persuade foreign states to commit to and comply with human rights norms. Despite the widespread use of the strategy, its effects remain unclear. Some find that the tactic holds great promise, while others find it ineffective or even to have adverse effects.

The tactic first received significant attention in the 1990s when several important contributions highlighted the prospects for sustained international pressure to generate improvements in respect for human rights (Brysk, 1993; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999). One iteration of this argument is the *spiral model*, originally introduced by Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999), which describes how international pressure, combined with domestic mobilisation, can lead to a gradual socialisation process and eventual compliance with human rights norms. This model posits that international pressure leads governments to make tactical concessions in the form of commitments to human rights norms. These commitments are initially insincere, but sustained pressure may eventually entrap governments in their own rhetoric and lead to gradual internalisation of and compliance with human rights norms. A long list of case studies supported these arguments, suggesting that international pressure increased respect for human rights in several Latin American countries and South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Black, 1999; Brysk, 1993; Hawkins, 2002; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Ropp & Sikkink, 1999). These positive cases all transpired during a unique *world time* at the end of the Cold War when international conditions for human rights and democracy were exceptionally advantageous (Risse & Ropp, 1999). The concept of *world time* was introduced by the original spiral model to explain this temporal cluster and denotes the international environment human rights pressure takes place in. Thus, there was great initial optimism about the positive effects of international pressure but also an acknowledgement that these positive effects occurred in a uniquely favourable international environment.

Quantitative studies focusing on *naming* and *shaming*[1] have since failed to replicate these encouraging findings (Allendoerfer et al., 2020; Hafner-Burton, 2008; Hafner-Burton & Ron, 2009) instead suggesting that the effectiveness of naming and shaming is highly dependent on contextual factors (see e.g., Franklin, 2008; Hendrix & Wong, 2013; Murdie & Davis, 2012). Recently, the potential for shaming to generate backlash effects has received more attention. From the outset, researchers acknowledged that international pressure might generate rally-round-the-flag effects, as target governments could mobilise nationalistic sentiments in the population and increase popular support (Risse et al., 1999). Several recent contributions have argued that shaming can cause populations to become defiant or outraged and react negatively to shaming (Snyder, 2020; Terman, 2023). Particularly shaming from geopolitical rivals is thought to generate backlash effects because it is interpreted as a politically motivated attack on the nation (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Terman, 2023; Terman & Voeten, 2018), but even shaming from international NGOs has been shown to make citizens more supportive of their government and less supportive of ending human rights abuses (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; Terman, 2023). Thus, the prospects for international pressure to promote and protect human rights are unclear at best, and the tactic can generate backlash in the population.

An additional explanation for why many pressure campaigns fail is that governments try to resist pressure by adopting strategies to defend themselves, for example, substituting to other forms of abuse to avoid scrutiny (DeMeritt & Conrad, 2019; Payne & Abouharb, 2016), outsourcing repression to pro-government militias (Diblasi, 2020), or setting up commissions to hold perpetrators accountable without any real power or intention to do so (Cronin-Furman, 2022). In the Iranian example above, the government tried to contest criticism from abroad by denying any responsibility for the death of Amini and claiming that security forces responded appropriately to violent protesters (Motamedi, 2022). These types of *rhetorical responses* can similarly serve to resist human rights pressures and escape accountability by appeasing international criticism and rallying domestic populations behind the abusive government, thereby suspending the mechanisms that lead governments to cease their abuses. Governments can design rhetorical responses that aim to reduce the costs of pressure, without outright rejecting the validity of human rights norms (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Búzás, 2016; Dixon, 2017; Terman, 2023). However, the concrete strategies governments use to this end remain

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[1] Naming and shaming denote efforts by the international human rights community to document human rights abuses and publicly condemn the responsible government. This is a form of international pressure.

understudied and undertheorized. The dissertation addresses these questions and examines the dynamics of human rights pressure and government responses in a changing international environment.

1.1 The Core Claims of the Dissertation

The dissertation has two aims: to advance our understanding of rhetorical government responses to human rights pressure and to integrate changes in the international balance of power in the study of human rights pressure. Its core argument is that governments tend to resist international pressure because they wish to continue human rights abuses and avoid commitment to basic human rights norms.

My argument takes its starting point from two fundamental assumptions. First, governments derive significant benefits from human rights abuses and some depend on repression to survive (Davenport, 2007a; Hafner-Burton, 2013). Second, international pressure imposes both economic (Peterson et al., 2018) and reputational costs (Risse et al., 1999; Towns & Rumelili, 2017) on governments and increase domestic anti-government mobilisation (Hendrix & Wong, 2013). To avoid the costs of international pressure and maintain the benefits of repression, a government may act strategically and adopt defensive strategies (e.g., Cronin-Furman, 2022; DeMeritt & Conrad, 2019; Hafner-Burton, 2008; Payne & Abouharb, 2016). I argue that one such strategy is to construct counter-narratives that challenge the pressure and aim to reduce the international and domestic costs of pressure. These narratives do not reject human rights norms but rather argue that they do not apply to the concrete government action, thus signalling compliance with the norm while violating its purpose. This allows governments to avoid accountability without outright denying human rights norms, which could draw the ire of the international community. Such tactics have previously been described as *evasion* (Búzás, 2016), *norm avoidance* and *interpretation* (Dixon, 2017), *deflection* (Terman, 2023), and *stigma rejection* (Adler-Nissen, 2014), but their concrete manifestations have not been explored systematically.

This dissertation makes both theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of human rights pressure by developing and testing the prevalence of three concrete, generally applicable counter-narratives that governments are expected to use when they are criticised for human rights abuses. I draw on insights from the literature on framing, social identity theory, and securitisation to theorise the three counter-narratives, which target both at domestic and international audiences. We currently have little systematic evidence of the prevalence of rhetorical responses to human rights pressure, and I introduce novel evidence of how these are constructed and their use across different contexts. Further, I aim to contribute to our knowledge of the conse-

quences of shaming for public opinion, which currently remains mixed. I examine the effects of both shaming and government counter-narratives on public support for human rights abuse and the responsible government. Existing studies of government framing and human rights shaming have almost exclusively been conducted in Western, liberal democracies (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; McEntire et al., 2015; Morse & Pratt, 2022). This dissertation provides evidence from a novel empirical setting, by conducting a survey experiment in the Philippines.

A second aim of the dissertation is to integrate the international power balance in the literature on human rights norms and international pressure. Originally, the literature on human rights pressure emerged in a time of liberal optimism following the end of the Cold War, and the tactic showed great promise to generate positive changes in Latin America and South Africa in the 1990s. During this period, the West was in a unique position to promote its preferred vision for human rights, and this advantageous international environment was an important driver of these positive cases (Risse & Ropp, 1999). While human rights norms remain a cornerstone of the international system, the US is no longer the uncontested superpower, and the rise of China potentially threatens the liberal world order and international human rights norms. China has a vastly different view on human rights that it might want to promote (Foot, 2022; Kinzelbach, 2012) and can shield states from some of the economic and reputational costs associated with being criticised (Zhu, 2011). These factors likely reduce the effectiveness of human rights pressure and potentially threaten existing norms.

In examining this second aim, I take a broader look at human rights pressure and efforts to uphold international human rights norms. Over the past 20 years, China has surpassed the West as the primary economic partner on the African continent (Carmody et al., 2020), which has led to widespread fears about how China will translate this newfound economic power into political influence and to accusations of *rogue aid* (Naím, 2009), *debt-trap diplomacy* (for a discussion see Brautigam, 2020), and *a new scramble for Africa* (Mlambo et al., 2024). A specific concern is that Chinese influence can undermine international human rights norms and disrupt Western pressure on African states to commit to these norms. This is problematic, as the existence of the human rights regime is dependent on states continuing to acknowledge and commit to human rights norms (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In this dissertation, I aim to reintroduce African agency into debates about changing economic dependencies in Africa and human rights norms. I argue that access to Chinese development finance in Africa increases the bargaining power of African states and allows them to pursue their own human rights preferences. This challenges the conventional

view that African states will align their foreign policies with China to maintain the flow of trade and finance (Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013). I argue that introducing a competitive element to the system decreases the leverage of *both* Western donors and China, thus allowing African states to resist human rights pressures to commit to human rights norms. Instead, African states are increasingly free to pursue their own preferred understanding of human rights norms, which can also undermine existing norms.

1.2 Summary Outline

The dissertation consists of the present summary report and three single-authored papers. Figure 1.1 illustrates the overall project and how the three papers relate to each other. At the centre of the project is the link between international human rights pressure and government human rights rhetoric. This includes both government responses to naming and shaming (Paper A) as well as more diffuse pressures to commit to human rights norms and the link to international human rights rhetoric (Paper C). The dissertation also considers the consequences of these responses on public opinion (Paper A) and the impact of economic ties to China (Paper C).

Figure 1.1: Project Overview
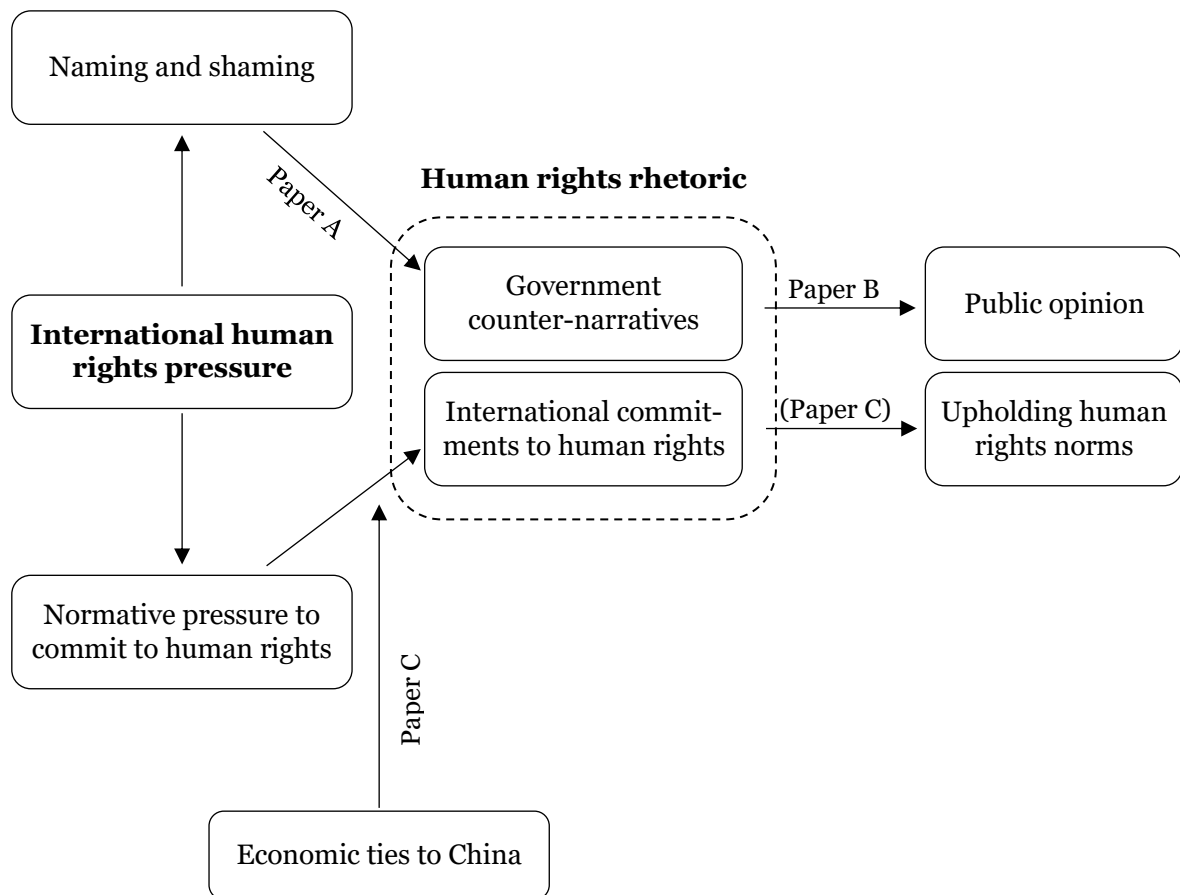
In Paper A, I delve into the construction of rhetorical government responses to human rights shaming. Researchers and practitioners acknowledge that governments often respond rhetorically to shaming, but this is either based on anecdotal evidence or context-specific case studies (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Jetschke, 2011), which gives rise to the question: Do governments respond to human rights shaming and if so, how? To examine the question systematically, I conducted a medium-N study, in which I collected and coded government responses to international shaming across 20 diverse cases between 2003 and 2021. My central argument is that governments, regardless of democratic credentials and respect for human rights, defend themselves against shaming by constructing counter-narratives that challenge the content or the legitimacy of international criticism. I propose three concrete narratives that I expect governments to use, drawing on the principle of state sovereignty, aiming to justify human rights abuses, or trying to undermine the credibility of shaming. I examine whether and how these narratives are constructed and how individual narratives interact with each other.

In Paper B, I examine how human rights shaming and the identified counter-narratives affect public opinion. I argue that shaming can generate backlash in the population, causing citizens in the target state to defend their government in the face of foreign criticism. Building on the findings of Paper A, I argue that counter-narratives aim to sway public opinion and make citizens more supportive of their government and more willing to accept human rights abuses. To test my theoretical arguments, I conducted a pre-registered survey experiment in the Philippines (n = 2,194). Respondents were exposed to a vignette describing police responding violently to peaceful protests on orders from the Filipino government. A control group received no further information, while a shaming group also received a shaming cue from Amnesty International, and three treatment groups received both the shaming cue and one of three individual counter-frames from the government. This allowed me to test the effects of human rights shaming and government counter-framing on public support for the repressive act and the responsible government. Additional tests allowed me to examine whether such effects were limited to citizens who initially supported the government.

Paper C departs from the narrow focus on shaming and considers human rights pressure more broadly. Specifically, I focus on how the changing international environment affects mechanisms of human rights pressure and international commitments to human rights norms. I argue that the emergence of China as a key economic player increases the autonomy of African states to pursue their own preferred human rights positions, regardless of the actual strength of their economic ties to China. This challenges many existing positions, which argue that stronger economic ties to China lead African states to

align their foreign policy with that of China to preserve their relationship. In this paper, I focus on international human rights rhetoric, specifically statements made in the UN, for two reasons. First, rhetorical commitments to international human rights norms are crucial to uphold the existing human rights regime, and the UN system is a key forum for upholding these norms. Second, by studying rhetoric I can distinguish between commitments to different types of human rights. The aim is to tease out whether any changes in rhetoric are best ascribed to African autonomy or Chinese pressure. I do so in a comparative case study of Tanzania and Zambia between 1991 and 2023. I collect and analyse all statements made in the UN General Debate and statements made in human rights debates in the UN General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, and the Committee of Human Rights.

1.3 Roadmap

The dissertation is structured as follows. In Chapter 2, I outline the theoretical framework. I begin by introducing the concept of human rights and the literature on international human rights pressure. I combine these insights with insights from the literature on framing, social identity theory, and securitisation to argue why and how we should expect governments to respond to shaming. I then introduce the international environment and argue why changing economic dependencies might affect efforts to promote human rights norms.

In Chapter 3, I outline the key methodological choices and how the different methodological approaches complement each other and contribute to answering the research question from different perspectives. I then discuss the key methodological challenges in studying government rhetoric and public opinion formation and consider the data sources utilised in the dissertation.

In Chapter 4, I summarise the core findings of the dissertation. First, I give an empirical overview of the pervasiveness of human rights shaming and the cases targeted. I then present the findings on the prevalence and construction of government counter-narratives and their impacts on public support for human rights. Last, I address how changing economic relations between China and African states affect governments' human rights rhetoric in the UN.

Chapter 5 concludes the summary report and recapitulates the key findings and contributions of the dissertation. I discuss its limitations and point to potential avenues for future research. Finally, I discuss the dissertation's implications for policymakers and practitioners in designing new policies to promote and protect human rights in the future.

Chapter 2
Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical framework of the dissertation. I start by defining the concept of human rights and reflecting on Western biases in human rights promotion and research. I then present and synthesise existing expectations for how international pressure affects human rights outcomes. In the second part of the chapter, I introduce the central argument of the dissertation and the individual arguments of the three papers contained therein. I argue that governments try to defend themselves against criticism by constructing counter-narratives that challenge international human rights shaming and theorise three concrete narratives that I expect governments to employ. Last, I consider how economic relationships restrict or expand governments' bargaining power and argue that the economic rise of China has allowed African states to control their own human rights rhetoric.

2.1 What Is a Human Right?

Human rights are inherent to all people simply by virtue of their humanity (Donnelly, 2013; Landman, 2006; Landman & Carvalho, 2010). They are moral or normative prescriptions for how members of humanity ought to act towards one another. Human rights are said to be *inalienable* because they cannot be separated from our humanity. They are *indivisible* and are all necessary to live a full life in dignity. Last, they are *interdependent*, as a one right cannot meaningfully be enjoyed if individuals are denied the breadth of human rights.

Human rights are special because the state is both the ultimate guarantor and the principal violator of these rights. International human rights law imposes obligations on states to ensure the rights of their citizens and as such regulate the relations between states and their citizens (Donnelly, 2013, p. 32; Landman & Carvalho, 2010, pp. 10-12). At the same time, the state is the primary violator of human rights. If one citizen kills another, we typically think of it as a criminal offence and a question for the ordinary legal system. If the government, or an agent of the government, kills an innocent civilian, it might constitute a human rights violation. Thus, the obligation falls on individual states to guarantee the rights of their citizens and refrain from violating them.

The idea of fundamental rights is often traced back to the European Age of Enlightenment and the concept of Natural Rights (Donnelly, 2013), but the modern conception of human rights are typically associated with the adoption

of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (Landman, 2006, p. 8). This foundational text contains a list of 30 articles that establish a set of basic rights and fundamental freedoms, which have since been codified in several legally binding international and regional human rights instruments. The individual rights protected under these instruments are often divided into three broad categories: i) civil and political rights, ii) economic, social, and cultural rights, and iii) solidarity or collective rights.

Civil and political rights ensure the physical integrity of individuals and protect their ability to participate freely in political life. Civil rights include the right to life, a fair trial, and religious freedom, and protect the personhood of individuals from state interference. Political rights include the right to vote, freedom of expression and association, and generally guarantee individuals' rights to participate in public and political life (Landman, 2006, p. 9). Civil and political rights also cover the category of physical integrity rights, which is a subcategory often used in human rights research. These rights specifically concern "the integrity of the person (i.e., which directly threatens human life)" (Davenport, 2007b, p. 487) and generally cover freedom from extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearance, torture, and political imprisonment (Cingranelli et al., 2021). Civil and political rights are codified in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), its optional protocols, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. They are often thought of as negative rights that only require the absence of violation to be respected.

Economic, social, and cultural rights ensure that the fundamental needs of individuals are met. Economic and social rights include the right to a family, education, adequate healthcare, and the right to work and fair enumeration, while cultural rights protect the rights of minorities including the right to speak one's own language and participate in cultural practices (Landman, 2006, p. 9). These rights are commonly considered positive rights, and the realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights is heavily dependent on states' economic capabilities to provide basic economic and social services. Therefore, the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights mandates state parties to take steps "to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights" (UN General Assembly, 1966). Thus, creating flexibility in the implementation of the Covenant and imposing different obligations on states depending on their level of economic development (Alston & Quinn, 1987; Felner, 2009).

Finally, *solidarity rights* are distinct from other rights in that they go beyond the rights of individuals and instead focus on the rights of groups, communities, or peoples. This covers a broad spectrum of rights that aim to ensure

that all peoples have access to the benefits of economic development and a safe planet to live on. This includes, for example, the rights to development, self-determination, and a healthy environment (Landman, 2006, p. 9). Solidarity rights are a relatively new group of rights and have not received much attention among Western nations. In 1986, the UN adopted the Declaration on the Right to Development, but collective rights generally take a less prominent place in UN treaties and declarations. However, they feature prominently in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Union, 1981).

2.1.1 Western Bias and Non-Western Conceptions of Human Rights

A persistent criticism of the international human rights regime and the academic literature is that they tend to privilege Western understandings of human rights (Cobbah, 1987; Mutua, 2001). The existing human rights regime is largely built on Western conceptions of liberalism and individualism, concepts that do not necessarily resonate outside the West. This poses a fundamental question as to whether human rights can be considered universal and apply to peoples from non-Western cultures (Cobbah, 1987). Individualistic notions of human rights tend to privilege civil and political rights, and these have often been prioritised at the expense of other rights, breaking with the indivisible and interdependent nature of human rights (Landman, 2006, p. 9).

Many non-Western conceptions of human rights place much more emphasis on the rights of social groups and economic, social, and cultural rights (Mutua, 2001). These differences have both cultural, historical, and economic roots. Experts point to the role of, for example, colonial legacies and the much more central role community plays in many African cultures where the rights of the individual tend to be balanced against the needs of the group (Cobbah, 1987). This focus is reflected in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which, for example, recognises peoples' rights to freedom from oppression and self-determination (African Union, 1981) as a way to rectify historical injustices committed by colonial powers. Similarly, Chinese approaches to human rights emphasise state sovereignty and national independence (Foot, 2020; Inboden & Chen, 2012), which is attributed to Chinese experience with imperialism and foreign intervention (State Council Of the People's Republic of China, 1991; Zhu, 2011). Many developing countries also value economic, social, and cultural rights and argue that these should take precedence over other types of rights (Foot, 2022; Kinzelbach, 2012; Primiano, 2020). This focus likely reflects economic realities on the ground, since many developing states struggle to guarantee the basic economic and social rights of their population.

The tendency to privilege civil and political rights is present in both human rights promotion and research. Practitioners highlight that economic, social, and cultural rights are harder to protect because there is no clear attribution of blame, and the appropriate remedies are uncertain (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Roth, 2004). Even less clear are the prospects for solidarity rights such as the right to development and a safe, clean environment, which have not been fully recognised by the international human rights regime. This one-sided focus has been reflected in much human rights research, at least partly due to a lack of accurate measures of, for example, respect for economic, social, and cultural rights (Felner, 2009; Kalantry et al., 2010). This bias risks undermining local efforts to end human rights abuses due to different understandings of what the problem is (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Lahti, 2018) and fails to address the needs of millions of people worldwide suffering the consequences of underdevelopment, poverty, and environmental degradation.

This dissertation in some ways falls trap to these same biases. Paper A and Paper B focus only on civil and political rights, specifically physical integrity rights. This focus is necessary because these papers examine the dynamics of human rights shaming, which most frequently targets violations of physical integrity rights (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Roth, 2004). In Paper C, I take a more inclusive approach to human rights and consider the breadth of human rights norms without prioritising one type over another. Instead, I utilise differing conceptions of human rights to distinguish between Western, Chinese, and African preferences. In Chapter 5, I will briefly discuss the potential for reducing Western biases in addressing challenges in current approaches to human rights promotion. However, a more detailed examination of these biases is outside the scope of the current dissertation but should be addressed in future.

2.2 What Are the Effects of Naming and Shaming?

In this section, I present the concept of naming and shaming, and the key mechanisms hypothesised to cause shaming to increase compliance with human rights norms. In the next sections, I build on these insights and present an argument for how governments seek to suspend these mechanisms and avoid the costs associated with being shamed.

Naming and shaming is a form of international pressure and a key strategy used to hold governments accountable for failing to live up to international commitments in various areas, including human rights, climate politics, and military alliances (Becker et al., 2024; Tingley & Tomz, 2022). In the realm of human rights, naming and shaming have become a key tactic to hold abusive governments accountable. The strategy entails collecting evidence of human

rights abuses, *naming* the responsible government,[2] and condemning the abuses to *shame* the government into complying with human rights norms (Davis et al., 2012; Krain, 2012). Naming and shaming is often associated with NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, but individual states and international organisations also frequently participate in shaming campaigns, and news media play an important role in disseminating information (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Park et al., 2021; Terman, 2023). The hope is that a shaming campaign induces compliance with human rights norms by applying both international and domestic pressure on the target government. However, shaming also has the potential to generate backlash in the population and boost the government's popularity among citizens. Figure 2.1 summarises the hypothesised effects mechanisms driving the effects of shaming.

Figure 2.1: Effects of Human Rights Shaming
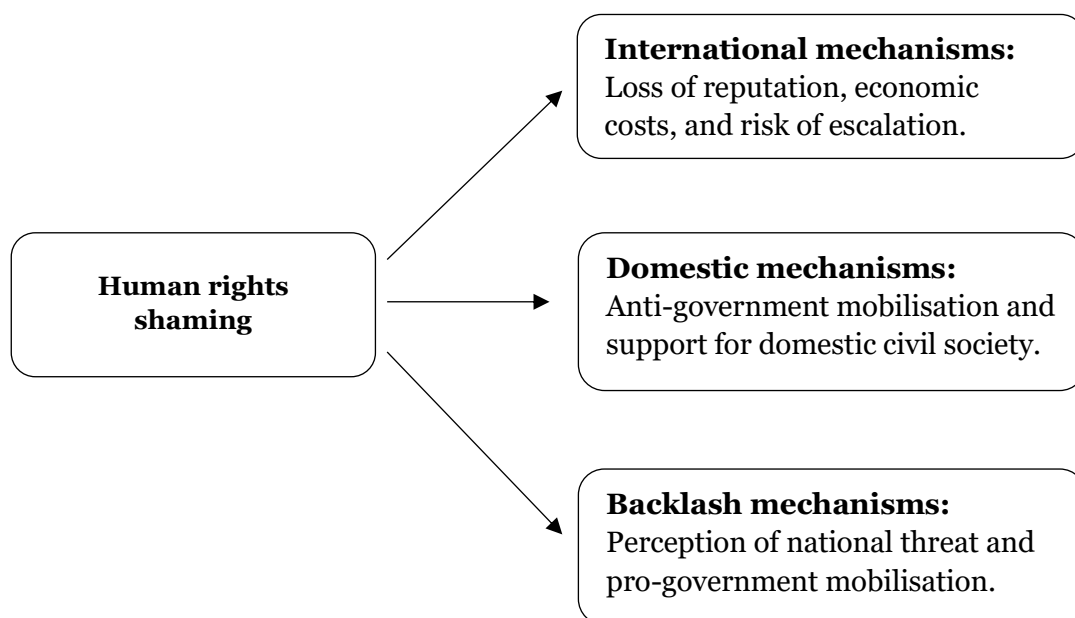
Why then would we expect naming and shaming to result in increased respect for human rights norms? Conventional wisdom dictates that naming and shaming apply pressure both from "above and below" (Brysk, 1993). At the international level, naming and shaming aim to put the violating government in the spotlight and encourage third-party states to put additional pressure on it. This can impose reputational costs on the government and portray it as a pariah outside the civilised community of states (Risse et al., 1999; Towns & Rumelili, 2017). Being shamed for serious human rights abuses also

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[2] Terror and rebel groups are also frequent targets of shaming campaigns and are responsible for serious human rights abuses worldwide. However, the dissertation focuses on governments.

commonly entails economic costs to the target government in the form of reduced foreign direct investment (Barry et al., 2013) and decreased exports (Peterson et al., 2018). All this is costly for the target government and might eventually compel it to reduce human rights abuses. Shaming also serves as a warning from the international community that more severe steps, such as economic sanctions, will be taken if the government does not comply (Murdie & Peksen, 2013).

Shaming is also thought to have an impact at the domestic level. Domestic civil society and activists often play a vital role in activating the international human rights community (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Shaming provides citizens with information about the misconduct of their government and informs them that it constitutes a human rights violation, which may encourage domestic groups to mobilise against the abusive government (Hendrix & Wong, 2013; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999). Particularly in autocratic settings, shaming provides a crucial source of information about government conduct and human rights norms. Existing evidence shows that human rights shaming can make citizens more critical of their government, particularly when personal stories are used to invoke emotion (Koliev et al., 2022; McEntire et al., 2015, 2017). International attention may also change the opportunity structures for domestic civil society by creating space for domestic groups and protecting the physical integrity of activists (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 2013). The hope is that domestic pressure will eventually mount, and the target government will either be forced to give concessions or risk losing power.

Domestic populations and civil society are key actors applying pressure to abusive governments from below. In democracies, the population holds governments accountable at the ballot box, whereas citizens in non-democratic settings do not have a direct avenue for punishing abusive leaders. However, even autocratic regimes care about public opinion. Non-democratic governments try to maintain a degree of legitimacy and popularity in the citizenry, for example by holding elections, ensuring public order, and generating economic growth to reduce the risk of challenges to their power (Dukalskis & Gerschewski, 2017; Gerschewski, 2013). Citizens can also hold governments accountable through popular protests, which are costly to governments as they threaten the regime's stability and often require government action (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Davenport, 2007a; Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2014). Thus, domestic mobilisation against abusive governments can potentially pressure states to reduce human rights violations.

2.2.1 Risk of Backlash

Contrary to conventional wisdom, shaming may generate backlash in the population and cause citizens to mobilise in support of their government. This risk

has traditionally been acknowledged, but the tendency has been to assume that sustained pressure would eventually cause these effects to wear off (Risse et al., 1999, p. 25). However, several more recent contributions suggest that the risk of backlash should be taken seriously (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; Terman, 2023). Shaming entails a fundamental threat to the status of the target country, and citizens are likely to become defensive of their government if they perceive the shaming to be politically motivated or unwarranted (Terman, 2023). These concerns are particularly acute for shaming from other states, particularly geopolitical rivals, as it is likely to be interpreted as an attempt to harm the target state for political gain (Gruffydd-Jones, 2022; Terman, 2023; Terman & Voeten, 2018).

Unlike foreign states, human rights NGOs are often considered credible sources of information because they are politically neutral and experts in the human rights sphere (Hill et al., 2013; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Nevertheless, they have also been accused of Western bias and being political in their application of pressure (Hafner-Burton & Ron, 2009; Hendrix & Wong, 2014; Ron et al., 2005), potentially leading citizens to perceive NGOs as biased. In that case, shaming from NGOs can also lead to backlash and make citizens defensive of their government. Evidence, for example, shows that American citizens become less critical of prison conditions after being exposed to NGO shaming (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; Terman, 2023, p. 107). In this dissertation, I argue that NGO shaming is particularly likely to generate backlash effects in non-Western countries. Outside the US and Western Europe, NGOs such as Amnesty International are more likely to be seen as *foreign* and a threat against the target state. Some might even perceive NGOs to be puppets of Western governments and dismiss the shaming as an attack from a geopolitical adversary. In this case, populations may be more likely to mobilise to defend their government against shaming.

2.3 Resistance to International Pressure: The Role of Governments

In this dissertation, I argue that governments do not simply fold under international pressure but instead try to resist human rights norms and escape accountability. While evidence suggests that international pressure did result in increased respect for human rights norms in some cases including South Africa and several Latin American states (Black, 1999; Hawkins, 2002), most quantitative studies find little or no effect of shaming (Hafner-Burton, 2008). One explanation is the risk of backlash from shaming, which could undermine any positive effects of shaming; another explanation is the strategic choices of governments with strong preferences for continuing human rights abuses. I

argue that governments respond strategically to shaming to avoid the potential costs associated with being shamed while continuing their abuse.

Governments do not abuse human rights just for the sake of doing it, but rather because they expect to benefit from it (Hafner-Burton, 2013). In non-democratic settings, governments often rely on repression to contain threats to their rule by targeting dissenters or cracking down on popular protests (Davenport, 2007a; Hafner-Burton, 2013). Democratic governments also frequently violate human rights, particularly the rights of marginalised groups like immigrants and the incarcerated population (Bhambra, 2017; Haschke, 2018). The benefits of human rights abuses are often high and are unlikely to be outweighed by the costs associated with shaming. Thus, both democratic and non-democratic governments are likely to resist human rights pressure.

Governments have several potential avenues for escaping accountability for their violations and reducing the costs of international pressure. They may try to conceal their responsibility, for example by substituting for other types of human rights abuse that are harder to detect (DeMeritt & Conrad, 2019; Payne & Abouharb, 2016) or outsourcing abuses to paramilitary groups (Diblasi, 2020). Governments also try to appear compliant, by setting up institutions to investigate and hold violators accountable, but without any real intention or powers to do so (Cronin-Furman, 2022). These strategies allow governments to continue violations and give them plausible deniability for violations. Some governments also use their economic power by threatening to cease economic engagement with states criticising them (Shinn, 2023; Wang et al., 2023), but this option is likely unavailable to many smaller states. These strategies aim to reduce the international costs of shaming by preventing third-party states from joining the pressure or prevent escalation. Some have also considered whether shaming might inadvertently cause governments to increase repression in the short term to quash the domestic opposition, thereby reducing the threat from below and avoiding giving concessions (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Risse et al., 1999). While these are all important defence strategies for governments, I argue that a key strategy that is often overlooked is rhetorical responses to shaming.

2.3.1 Government Counter-Framing

Rhetorical responses to shaming can reduce the costs of shaming by rallying domestic support for the target government and convincing the international human rights community to stop the pressure. I argue that a key rhetorical strategy governments employ is to construct a counter-narrative. This involves the government constructing a counter-narrative that challenges the shaming and highlights the government's innocence. Below I explain how

government counter-narratives are constructed and why they effectively reduce the costs associated with being shamed.

Counter-narratives are important to study for several reasons. First, they are cheap for governments to implement and are likely a widely occurring phenomenon. Unlike the other strategies briefly presented above, the construction of a counter-narrative is available to all governments, regardless of the size of the state and does not require changes in a government's repressive policies. Both practitioners and researchers acknowledge that governments respond to shaming, but despite this implicit knowledge, government counter-narratives remain undertheorized and understudied. Dixon (2017) distinguishes between four different forms of *rhetorical adaptation* to diffuse pressure to comply with human rights norms and argues that governments can *disregard* norms by simply ignoring the relevant norms or *signal* support for norms without changing government behaviour. She also highlights that governments can *avoid* the norm by arguing that government behaviour falls outside the boundaries of a given norm or seek to *reinterpret* the norm itself to a similar end. These types of responses avoid rejecting the validity of a norm, which might increase scrutiny, and aim to appear compliant with the norm while continuing violations. Others have termed similar tactics *evasion* (Búzás, 2016), *deflection* (Terman, 2023), *disassociation (Morse & Pratt, 2022),* and *stigma rejection* (Adler-Nissen, 2014). However, we lack a basic understanding of how the arguments are constructed and how they work.

Second, counter-narratives are highly relevant to study because they challenge a key assumption in the literature that shaming campaigns resonate with the population in the target country and encourage anti-government mobilisation (Brysk, 1993; Hendrix & Wong, 2013; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999). We know from the literature on framing that political elites can strategically affect public opinion by emphasising a subset of relevant considerations in communications to the population, thereby encouraging individuals to focus on these when forming their opinion on an issue (Benford & Snow, 2000; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

At the centre of any shaming campaign is a narrative that draws on the principle of human rights and claims that the target government violated these. Drawing on insights from the framing literature, I argue that governments challenge this by constructing a competing narrative that presents a trade-off between human rights and a set of different values. Audiences are less likely to be persuaded by the shaming and apply pressure to the target government if they favour this specific set of values over human rights norms. Thus, a crucial part of this strategy is to construct persuasive counter-narratives that appeal to the domestic population and international audiences. I theorise three narratives that I expect governments to use for this purpose:

these either challenge the *content* of the shaming, i.e., whether human rights abuses occurred, the *legitimacy* of the shaming, or both. Both types of challenges signal that the shaming is misguided and should not be trusted, thus potentially suspending the mobilising potential of shaming and preventing international pressure from mounting. Below I present the three narratives, which governments can use to increase government support among domestic populations and potentially reduce international pressure.

The first narrative draws on the principle of *state sovereignty*. It targets the legitimacy of the shaming by arguing that shaming constitutes undue interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign country. At the heart of the sovereignty narrative is the inherent trade-off between human rights enforcement and respect for state sovereignty (Forsythe, 1983; Krasner, 1999). State sovereignty is a foundational principle of international law and is a crucial argument used to oppose human rights enforcement at the international level. Portraying shaming as a threat to the sovereignty and independence of the state can invoke the need for citizens to protect their country. Individuals partly derive their self-concept from membership in social groups, including national identity (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). They are motivated to maintain a positive image of their group relative to others (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and try to protect it from any threat. When governments use the sovereignty narrative, they aim to portray the shaming as a foreign attack on the nation, which can activate the same mechanisms and make citizens defensive of their government.

The second narrative draws on the language of security and aims to *justify* human rights abuse. The central argument is that repression is necessary and a appropriate government action to protect the security of the state and therefore does not constitute a violation of human rights. A state's right to defend itself and its citizens is a highly legitimate principle enshrined in international law (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017, p. 246; Hafner-Burton et al., 2011). Security threats are powerful signals, and individuals are willing to curtail the fundamental rights of outgroups perceived to threaten their security (Conrad et al., 2018; Piazza, 2015; Viki et al., 2013). To justify human rights violations, governments construct an internal threat and must define i) the object or value being threatened, often the survival of the state or the security of the citizens, ii) the group that threatens said object, and iii) how this group constitutes a threat, for example, by portraying the group as violent. Once the threat has been constructed, the government will argue that repression is necessary to combat the threat and protect the state and citizens.

Last, governments can try to undermine the *credibility* of the shaming. This includes challenges to both the content and the legitimacy of the shaming. The credibility of the source is an important factor in how individuals

process information and how persuasive they find it (Druckman, 2001; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kahan et al., 2010; Slater & Rouner, 1996). Many factors influence credibility, but two key factors are expertise and trustworthiness (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Slater & Rouner, 1996). Expertise refers to whether the source is perceived to be capable of making correct judgements about an issue, and trustworthiness implies that the source is perceived to communicate these truthfully. The target government can try to undermine the shamers' expertise by questioning the factual accuracy of the shaming campaign or whether the interpretation of an event is correct. Additionally, governments can question the legitimacy of the shaming by arguing that the shamers are motivated by biases or political reasons. Discrediting the shaming likely reduces its persuasiveness and may prevent both domestic and international actors from joining the pressure.

These three counter-narratives all draw on powerful frames that likely appeal to domestic populations, but whether they are persuasive likely also depends on whether individuals perceive the government as credible (Druckman, 2001; Slater & Rouner, 1996). This could depend on, among other things, individuals' support for the government, as we know that shared partisan identity (Druckman et al., 2013; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010) increases the likelihood that framing affects individuals' opinions. Alternatively, individuals could be more easily persuaded by their government, regardless of partisan affinities, in the face of foreign criticism. Whether counter-frames are also useful in persuading those who oppose the government is ultimately an empirical question, which is addressed in Paper B.

2.4 Resistance to International Pressure: The Role of Economic Relations

So far, this chapter has primarily focused on international pressure to hold governments accountable for concrete instances of human rights abuse, but the international community also applies pressure to promote human rights norms more generally. A key tenet of the post-Cold War liberal world order has been the promotion of civil and political rights, spearheaded by the US and Western Europe (Hopgood, 2013). The West has spent significant resources promoting these rights and encouraging states to "talk the human rights talk", ratifying international treaties, and enshrining protections in domestic legislation. These efforts aim to increase compliance by tying states closely to the human rights regime and leaving them vulnerable to future criticism (Risse et al., 1999). A key goal is to pressure states to make rhetorical commitments to human rights norms and contribute to upholding the international human rights regime.

Strong economic ties to the states applying the pressure likely exacerbate the international costs associated with human rights pressure and increases the likelihood that target states comply with the pressure. After the end of the Cold War, many states were highly reliant on the US for aid and trade. However, over the past 20 years, China has emerged as a key economic and political power and has slowly started to challenge the liberal world order and promote its own version of human rights with a much stronger focus on economic, social, and cultural rights and state sovereignty (Foot, 2020). Many have considered how China's economic power translates into political influence (Carmody et al., 2020; Dreher et al., 2018; Strüver, 2016), perhaps particularly in the area of human rights (e.g., Brazys & Dukalskis, 2017; Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013).

At the centre of this argument is the assumption that states need to maintain a good relationship with their economic partners to continue the flow of resources and protect the local economy. International economic partners can threaten to withdraw investments or stop trade to extract policy concessions and promote human rights norms in recipient states. Western donors have used official development aid (ODA) to influence politics in African states by attaching conditions to aid, including requirements for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Li, 2017; Stokke, 1995; Tripp, 2013; Wright, 2009). As China has become a key economic player on the African continent, Western leverage to push for human rights reforms is likely diminishing, and stronger economic ties to China may lead African states to align their positions with Chinese preferences. China does not traditionally attach policy conditions to development finance, but African states might still seek to appease their new economic partner and prevent foreign policy conflict that would disrupt the flow of trade and finance (Hirschman, 1945; Kirshner, 2015). Thus, a potential consequence of increased Chinese engagement with African states is that the West loses leverage to promote its preferred vision for human rights, while China gains influence to do just that.

I argue that an alternative outcome is that access to Chinese development finance and trade can increase African bargaining power and allow governments to pursue their own human rights preferences. Previously, African governments had few alternatives to Western donors and were in a weak bargaining position. The presence of Chinese development finance introduces a competitive element in the system and potentially allows African states to play donors out against each other (Power & Mohan, 2010; Prizzon et al., 2017). Consequently, the bargaining power of African states has increased, as they now have a credible alternative to Western aid and trade that allows them to resist human rights pressures from both the West and China. The presence of an

alternative source of finance could allow all states to pursue their preferred policies, regardless of the actual strength of economic ties to China.

I expect states to align their human rights rhetoric with Western preferences for civil and political rights in periods of high reliance on Western ODA. The emergence of China as a key economic partner likely decreases Western leverage to push for human rights, reducing alignment with Western preferences. States that become more dependent on Chinese economic flows potentially start highlighting state sovereignty, in line with Chinese preferences. Alternatively, all African states gain the autonomy to determine their own human rights rhetoric.

2.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the dissertation's theoretical framework. I have argued that governments act strategically and try to resist international human rights pressure by constructing counter-narratives. I have conceptualised three such narratives that I expect governments to employ in response to shaming: the sovereignty, the justification, and the credibility narrative. I expect the proposed narratives to influence public opinion and make individuals more willing to accept human rights abuses and support the responsible government. Second, I have argued that international economic relations can enable or constrain states when they try to resist international human rights pressure. In periods of high economic dependence on a single partner and no credible alternative, governments might find it costly to resist pressure from their key donor. However, the emergence of an alternative economic partner can increase the bargaining power of governments and allow them to resist human rights pressure without incurring economic costs.

Chapter 3
Methodological Approaches

This dissertation asks: How do governments respond rhetorically to international human rights pressure, and what, if any, are the consequences for public opinion? In this chapter, I outline the overall methodological approach and discuss key methodological choices of the dissertation. I then present the data collection and sources employed in each paper. For a more detailed account of the research designs and analytical strategies employed, see the individual papers. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the research design, cases, and data sources used for each paper.

Table 3.1: Overview of Research Designs and Data Sources

Paper	Research Design	Cases	Data Sources
A	Medium-N study (20 cases)	Australia (2016), Azerbaijan (2013), Brazil (2008), Burundi (2017), China (2017), Cuba (2003), Egypt (2013), The Gambia (2016), Guinea (2007), Honduras (2012), Iran (2009), Myanmar (2017), Nigeria (2016), Peru (2009), The Philippines (2016), Tanzania (2020), Thailand (2003), Turkey (2016), USA (2004), and Zimbabwe (2008)	Own coding of Amnesty International Annual Reports 2003-2021 Government statements in response to shaming
B	Survey experiment	The Philippines	Survey of 2194 respondents
C	Comparative case study	Tanzania and Zambia	Data from aiddata.org on Chinese development finance UN speeches 1991-2023

3.1 Methodological Pluralism

The dissertation uses a mixed methods approach and combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to elucidate the central research question. The combination of different methodological approaches provides a more complete understanding of the phenomena at hand (Johnson et al., 2007) and enables me to address the different sub-questions of the dissertation. Several methodological and substantial shortcomings exist in the literature and these must be addressed to improve our understanding of international human rights pressure and government responses to this pressure, including i) lack of systematic evidence of whether and how a government responds to shaming, ii) poor understanding of the effects of shaming and counter-framing on public opinion, particularly outside the US, and iii) lack of attention to African agency and preferences for human rights in literature on Chinese influence in Africa. The individual methodological approaches were chosen based on how best to address these shortcomings and the research questions of the individual papers.

As is clear from Table 3.1, the papers in this dissertation vary in their methodological approaches. Papers A and C both rely primarily on qualitative content analysis to understand how government rhetoric is constructed over time and across cases. This qualitative approach is useful in answering these questions because I can directly observe the object of interest, human rights rhetoric, and analyse it in depth. This is necessary to generate credible insights into the construction of human rights rhetoric and maintain an understanding of the context in which statements were made. In Paper A, I examine whether and how governments respond to human rights shaming across a representative sample of 20 cases. In Paper C, I conduct a comparative case study of two cases over time to examine how changing economic ties to the West and China affect human rights rhetoric.

Paper B relies on a survey experimental approach to examine the effects of shaming and government counter-narratives on public opinion. In Paper A, I identified three counter-narratives governments use to respond to shaming. Based on this, I designed and conducted a survey experiment to test the effects of government counter-narratives on public support for repressive governments and policies. Thus, insights from the qualitative parts of the dissertation inform the experiment and provide the basis for causal inference (Seawright, 2016). Combining the detailed understanding of government rhetoric from Paper A with the experimental approach in Paper B enables causal identification of the effects of government narratives that are firmly entrenched in the empirical reality. In the next section, I briefly introduce the main methodo-

logical choices made in each paper. All methodological details and specifications can be found in the individual papers.

3.1.1 Qualitative Medium-N Approach

A key shortcoming in the literature is that we lack systematic evidence of whether and how governments respond to shaming. Existing studies focus on a small number of cases and a limited geographic area (Dixon, 2017; Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Jetschke, 2011) and tell us little about the prevalence of government counter-narratives more broadly. Furthermore, we lack a basic understanding of how government counter-narratives are constructed and whether they interact with each other. These shortcomings are problematic because shaming is a key tactic pursued by the international human rights community, and it is paramount to understand governments' responses. Apart from the intrinsic value in understanding a key process of human rights promotion (Gerring, 2012), the lack of a systematic understanding of the empirical phenomenon is problematic for our ability to ask relevant questions and develop theoretical explanations (King et al., 1994, p. 34) regarding the consequences of government responses to shaming.

In Paper A, I conducted a medium-N study of government responses to shaming. This setup is ideal for examining how government counter-narratives are constructed and how prevalent they are. The medium-N approach makes it possible to examine the construction of counter-narratives across a representative sample while maintaining a detailed understanding of each case and conducting an in-depth analysis of government rhetoric. For the analysis in Paper A, I selected 20 highly diverse cases to increase the representativeness of the sample and the potential for generalisation (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The selected cases vary widely across theoretically relevant parameters such as level of democracy and repression, type of abuse, as well as geographical region and time. This broad geographic and temporal scope contributes to generating systematic evidence for the prevalence and construction of counter-narratives, which is currently lacking in the literature.

The advantage of the medium-N setup is that it ensures the sample's representativeness without sacrificing the ability to collect government rhetoric and analyse it in depth. Lack of data and access to government rhetoric is a challenge for generating systematic evidence of government counter-narratives. A central task in Paper A was to identify and collect relevant government rhetoric through domestic news media, official press releases, and NGO reports. Such an undertaking would be extremely difficult and demanding to do at a larger scale (for further discussion of data collection efforts see section 3.3). Further, a detailed analysis of government rhetoric is necessary to generate credible and useful insights into the phenomenon of counter-narratives.

The qualitative analysis makes it possible to identify different types of arguments, parse out how different narratives interact, and keep the broader context of the case in mind when interpreting the narratives. Thus, the qualitative medium-N approach combines the ability to examine and interpret individual government statements, which is necessary to understand how these are constructed and interact, with the ability to generalise beyond a single case.

3.1.2 Experimental Approach: Causal Identification

Paper A identified three government counter-narratives that are frequently employed across highly diverse cases, but the effects on public opinion of these narratives and human rights shaming remain poorly understood. In Paper B, I examine how shaming and government counter-framing affect public support for a repressive policy and the responsible government in a preregistered survey experiment conducted in the Philippines. Survey experiments are a useful tool to study public opinion, because they combine experimental controls with larger and more diverse samples (Mutz, 2011), including populations that would otherwise be hard to reach, such as the Filipino population. The experimental approach allows for the identification of causal effects due to the random assignment of treatment status. This solves the issue of selection bias because the potential outcomes of respondents are independent of treatment status, and any observed differences in outcomes can be attributed directly to the treatment rather than to confounding variables (Angrist & Pischke, 2015; Mutz, 2011). Thus, I can examine the causal relationship between human rights shaming, government counter-framing, and public opinion

Survey experimental approaches have previously been used to study the effects of shaming and government framing on public opinion formation, but they have been conducted almost exclusively in the US and Western Europe (e.g., Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; McEntire et al., 2015; Morse & Pratt, 2022; Zvobgo, 2019), which are not representative of the breadth of states subjected to shaming. To address this bias in existing research, the survey experiment was conducted in the Philippines. Based on the findings of Paper A, the Philippines constitutes a fairly typical case of human rights shaming, and the Filipino government has previously responded to shaming by using the proposed narratives, making it an ideal case. The Philippines was selected to be representative of a group of non-Western states with high levels of repression and flawed democracy, which are commonly subjected to shaming. The study relies on a single case, and the external validity of the study, i.e., the ability to generalize across different settings and persons, is potentially limited (McDermott, 2011). Generalisations based on a single case warrant caution, but we might expect the results to travel to states that share important characteristics,

that can affect how individuals perceive human rights shaming and government counter-framing, with the Philippines, such as a vibrant political and media landscape with flawed multiparty elections.

I conducted a vignette experiment in which respondents were asked to read short texts describing a fictional event in which peaceful protesters were attacked by police on the orders of the government. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five groups. A control group only received a description of the event, and a shaming group received the description of the event and a shaming cue from Amnesty International. The remaining three groups received the description of the event, the shaming cue, and a counter-frame from the government, corresponding to each of the three proposed counter-narratives presented in Chapter 2. A common concern regarding survey experiments is whether the experimental treatment reflects how people would encounter such information in a real-world setting. A major concern is that the treatments are overly strong, which could lead to an overestimation of the effects (Barabas & Jerit, 2010). I address this issue by relying on the empirical insights from Paper A, in which I analysed the use of shaming and counter-framing in the Philippines in 2016. The overall wording of the vignettes was constructed to closely mimic how repressive events and shaming are covered in Filipino news media, and each counter-narrative was modelled after arguments previously used by the Filipino government in response to shaming. The insights from the qualitative content analysis of Paper A ensured that the treatments were realistic and that I examined government counter-frames that are relevant to how human rights shaming plays out empirically.

3.1.3 Comparative Case Study and Rhetorical Analysis

Paper C addresses the question of African agency and whether stronger economic ties to China can reduce the impact of Western human rights pressure. This paper focuses on a different type of pressure and examines changes in government rhetoric at the international level.

Existing literature, that studies the impact of stronger economic ties on foreign policy positions, consists almost exclusively of quantitative studies using data on voting patterns in the UN (e.g., Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013; Strüver, 2016). These provide important insights into how stronger economic ties to China affect foreign policy positions, but voting patterns only capture whether states vote alongside China or the US, which says little about the mechanisms driving these decisions. Instead, I focus on rhetoric in the UN and analyse rhetorical commitment to human rights norms. By analysing rhetoric qualitatively, I capture which *types* of human rights norms states express support for as well as the *strength* of their support. This allows me to get closer to the mechanisms driving changes in rhetoric and distinguish between

statements that could be explained both by African agency and Chinese influence and those that are more strongly associated with one explanation. Working qualitatively also enables me to consider the context of the statements, including the topic of a given debate, ongoing domestic issues that influence international human rights rhetoric, and references to statements made by other states. Last, it is relevant to study human rights rhetoric in its own right, as rhetorical commitments play an important role in upholding norms (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) and socialising states into the human rights regime (Creamer & Simmons, 2020; Risse et al., 1999).

In Paper C, I examine whether and how changing economic relations affect government rhetoric in a comparative case study of Tanzania and Zambia between 1991 and 2023. A comparative case study of two cases over a long period offers several advantages. First, a long time series is necessary since economic dependencies change slowly over time. I can make comparisons *within case*, comparing Zambian human rights rhetoric in periods of high reliance on Western donors to rhetoric in periods when Chinese financing plays a key role. Within-case comparisons keep many potentially confounding factors constant and examine how the rhetoric changes over time. Second, I can compare *across case*s, comparing Zambian rhetoric to that of Tanzania. Zambia and Tanzania share several potentially relevant characteristics including stable and similar levels of democracy and repression throughout the period, and neither case experienced regime change between 1991 and 2024. Both countries have traditionally received large amounts of ODA from Western donors, but in Zambia, China has increasingly taken over as the main source of finance and trade (Custer et al., 2023). Tanzania has also experienced an increase in Chinese trade and finance, but not to the same extent (Custer et al., 2023). Comparing rhetoric across the two cases allows me to examine whether changes in human rights rhetoric reflect a more general shift over time, regardless of the actual level of dependence on China.

To determine whether human rights rhetoric is driven by African agency or Chinese influence, I distinguish between commitments to different types of human rights and the timing of changes. Commitments to civil and political rights are interpreted as a sign that African states are aligning their rhetoric with Western donors, while a strong emphasis on state sovereignty is indicative of Chinese influence. Economic, social, and cultural rights feature prominently in both African and Chinese approaches and commitments to these norms could be an expression of either African agency or Chinese influence. This approach offers some insights into the driver of changes in human rights rhetoric, but decoding the motivations of governments is a challenging task. The significant overlap between African and Chinese human rights

conceptions, for example, makes it difficult to differentiate between the two potential mechanisms. A related issue pertains to linking changes in rhetoric to the strength of economic ties to China. I use the timing of changes in rhetoric as a key indicator that economic ties to China impacted African rhetoric. This method guarantees that changes in economic ties precede changes in human rights rhetoric but does not necessarily show a causal effect, as other factors may be causing changes in rhetoric. In the analysis, I consider whether any alternative explanations are more probable and rely on the types of commitments made by states as an additional indicator. Regardless, distinguishing between different mechanisms driving changes in international human rights rhetoric remains a challenge.

3.3 Data Sources and Collection

Poor data quality, particularly across time and space, is a key challenge to studying human rights shaming and government responses (e.g., Murdie & Davis, 2012; Ron et al., 2005). To identify the relevant case universe for Paper A, i.e., cases where a human rights violation was committed, and the government was subsequently shamed, I hand-coded Amnesty International's annual regional overviews between 2003 and 2021. I use inclusion in the regional overviews as an indicator of whether a shaming campaign was ongoing more broadly. Amnesty International is a key actor in human rights shaming, they take part in most ongoing shaming campaigns and are likely to include cases they have devoted time and resources to shaming in their regional overviews to signal to donors that the organisation is active in combatting human rights abuses. The coding was limited to violations of physical integrity rights, i.e., political imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, because these are the most frequent targets of shaming and have a clear attribution of blame (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Consequently, the coding represents an undercount of the total number of shaming campaigns between 2003 and 2021. The resulting dataset served as the foundation for identifying the relevant case universe for Paper A and informed the case selection for Paper B. The systematic identification of the universe of potential cases allows me to avoid bias in the selection process and include a more diverse set of cases in the analysis, including cases that did not necessarily receive much attention in mass media.

Based on this coding, I selected 20 cases for the analysis in Paper A, and for each case, I collected all government statements made in response to the shaming. Comprehensive data on government responses to shaming is non-existent, and no single source contains all relevant responses, which makes it difficult to study them on a larger scale. Previous research on government responses to shaming has focused on one or two cases in which authors were

able to identify relevant government rhetoric (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Jetschke, 2011). One option would be to rely on speech data from the UN, for example, in the Universal Periodic Review (Terman & Voeten, 2018), and I do include government statements made in the UN. However, relying only on UN rhetoric would not capture government counter-narratives aimed at the domestic population, which is a key concern of Paper A and an important foundation for Paper B. Thus, collecting relevant government rhetoric across 20 cases between 2003 and 2021 was a major challenge. For each case, I identified relevant domestic and international English-language news media, speech repositories, and NGO reports. I then went through all relevant material to identify statements and speeches by government officials and political leaders that addressed human rights shaming. I included all statements that directly addressed international criticism and statements that were made after the government had acknowledged the criticism. While I attempted to uncover all relevant rhetoric access to reliable data was a challenge in some cases and the diverse landscape of sources may have led me to miss relevant statements. The data collection identified between 5 and more than 50 government statements addressing human rights shaming for each case.

In Paper B, I conducted a preregistered survey experiment in the Philippines. I recruited 2,194 respondents using the survey platform Cint. Quota sampling was used to approximate the adult Filipino population regarding age, gender, and geographical region. Data collection was carried out in June 2024.

For Paper C, I collected Tanzanian and Zambian human rights rhetoric in the UN between 1991 and 2023. This included all speeches made as part of the General Debate, a yearly debate at the opening of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in which all states can address the Assembly. Speeches from the General Debate were taken from the UN General Debate Corpus (Baturo et al., 2017). I also collected all statements made in debates about human rights issues in the UNGA, the Human Rights Council (HRC), and the Commission on Human Rights (CHR). Statements made in the General Debate, UNGA, and CHR are available through the UN Digital Library. Many debates from the HRC are unavailable, and instead I used video recordings made available through the UN Audiovisual Library and transcribed them using the Whisper tool. All states participate in the yearly General Debate and are free to decide the content of their speeches, which provides a valuable source of information on government rhetoric across time and cases (Baturo et al., 2017). Including statements made in debates in the UNGA, HRC, and CHR allows me to capture the breadth of human rights rhetoric and to include statements that are more closely tied to decision-making, potentially making them more vulnerable to outside pressure (Baturo et al., 2017).

3.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the research designs and data sources used in the dissertation and the three papers. Each of the three papers uses different methodological approaches and data sources to overcome shortcomings in the existing literature and examine the central research question.

In Paper A and Paper C, I rely on qualitative content analysis which allows me to collect and interpret government rhetoric. These approaches provide an in-depth understanding of how government rhetoric is shaped by international pressures. Paper A addresses a key shortcoming in the literature, by examining the use of government counter-narratives across a representative sample of cases between 2003 and 2021. Paper C provides a crucial qualification to existing quantitative studies, by offering a more nuanced view of international human rights rhetoric and allowing for better distinguishing between different mechanisms driving changes in human rights rhetoric.

The detailed accounts of government rhetoric are used to inform the experimental setup used in Paper B. The survey experiment allows me to examine the effects of government counter-narratives on public support for human rights abuses, by randomly assigning respondents to receive different counter-narratives. The next chapter presents the principal findings of the dissertation, based on these research designs.

Chapter 4
Findings

In this chapter, I present the core findings of the dissertation. I first provide an empirical overview of the prevalence of human rights shaming and the states subjected to this tactic. I then examine whether and how governments respond to shaming. In the subsequent section, I test the effects of international shaming and government counter-framing on public support for human rights violations and responsible governments. The last part of the chapter concerns the role of international economic linkages and how these constrain or enable African states' ability to determine official human rights rhetoric.

4.1 Empirical Overview of Human Rights Shaming

A central concept in this dissertation is human rights shaming, which has become a core strategy for the international community to hold abusive governments accountable. In 2024 alone, Amnesty International published more than 1,500 reports, press releases, and news updates condemning human rights violations across the globe. In this section, I provide an empirical overview of human rights shaming based on my coding of Amnesty International's annual regional reports. I use these reports as an indicator of whether a state was shamed by Amnesty International, and whether a shaming campaign was ongoing more broadly. For each annual report, I coded whether states were accused of committing physical integrity violations and the characteristics of the abuse. This data was used to construct the case universe for Paper A.

Shaming campaigns are a common occurrence, and a significant number of states globally are shamed each year. Figure 4.1 illustrates that the number shamed is consistently high throughout the period and increases after 2010. An average of 68 states are shamed yearly, and many are mentioned in connection with several human rights violations. It is worth keeping in mind that this count only includes violations of physical integrity and thus represents an undercount of the total incidents of shaming. Figure 4.1 shows that shaming is prevalent across all regions. African states are the most frequently targeted, but in relative numbers, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is vastly overrepresented in the sample, likely due to the high number of ongoing internal conflicts in both regions. Europe and Central Asia are the least frequent targets, likely due to the high number of liberal democracies, but even these states are at times shamed.

Figure 4.1: Number of States Shamed for Physical Integrity Violations
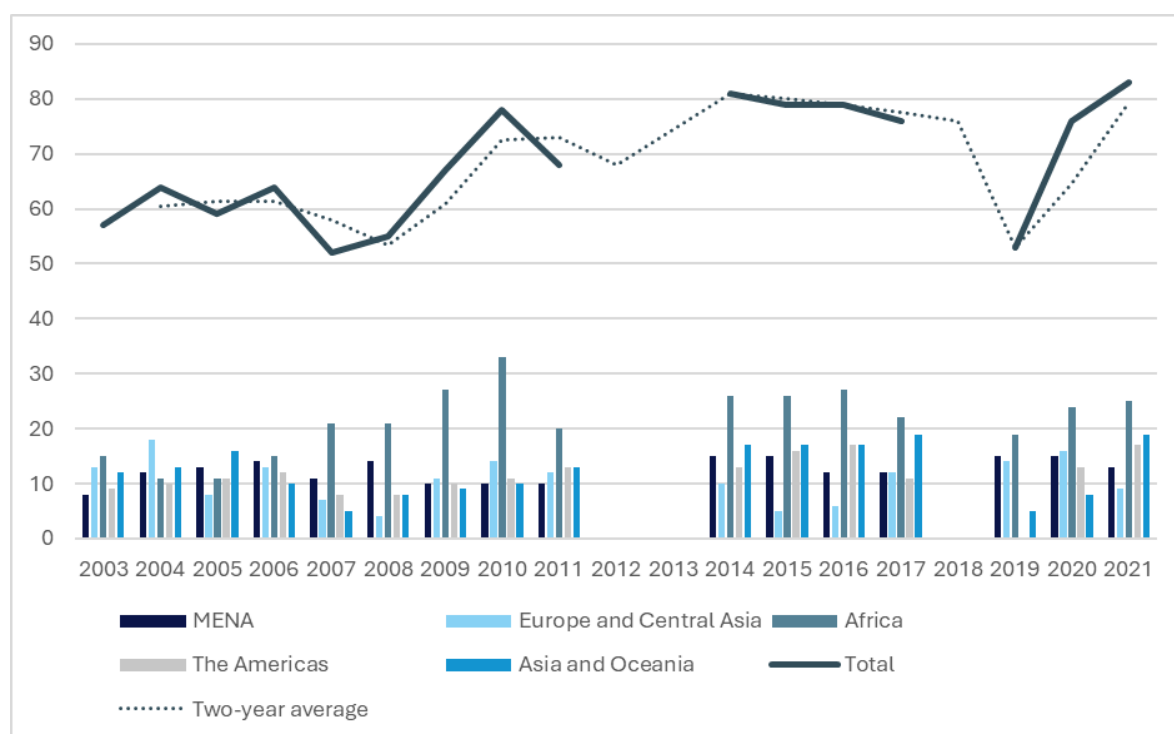
Note: Based on the author's coding. No regional overviews were published in 2012, 2013, and 2018.

Amnesty International devotes significant attention to specific states, which appear almost every year between 2003 and 2021. Table 4.1 displays the most frequently mentioned states in the regional overviews between 2003 and 2021. This list includes highly autocratic and repressive regimes such as Myanmar, Syria, and Zimbabwe, and states that experienced armed conflict throughout the period, such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan. These are the countries we would expect to find at the top of the list since serious human rights violations are rampant. However, the US and Israel also feature among the most frequently shamed states, and these states are markedly more democratic than the other top contenders. Most shaming targeting the US concerns violations committed as part of the War on Terror, including the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse and accusations of torture in the Guantanamo prison. These abuses were committed against foreign citizens on foreign soil and, thus, differ from the typical cases of shaming.

Table 4.1: Most Shamed States

| Country	Freq.	Country	Freq.
Democratic Republic of the Congo	16	Iraq	15
Egypt and	16	Libya	15
Israel	16	Pakistan	15
Myanmar	16	Yemen	15
Russia	16	Zimbabwe	15
Sudan	16	China	14
Syria	16	Iran	14
Turkey	16	Mexico	14
Afghanistan	15	Saudi Arabia	14
Algeria	15	Somalia	14
Brazil	15	Thailand	14
Chad	15	Tunisia	14
Colombia	15	United States	14
Guatemala	15		

Note: Based on the author's coding. The table shows the 27 most shamed states (targeted in at least 14 of the 16 years).

While the top targets of shaming are generally highly repressive and non-democratic, the broader set of states shamed by Amnesty International is relatively diverse. Figure 4.2 shows the distribution of cases shamed across different levels of democracy and repression.[3] The top left corner of Figure 4.2 contains the highly democratic and non-repressive states such as Canada (2014) where police used excessive force against protesters, and several Northern European states (2006) shamed for their role in US torture during the War on Terror. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Israel (2003-2004 and 2008-2009) is the sole occupant of the top right corner, exhibiting an unusual combination of high levels of democracy and very high levels of repression. Israel is also among the most shamed countries and was primarily targeted for the use of force against Palestinians and conditions in the occupied territories. These are outliers, and most states targeted with shaming exhibit medium levels of

[3] Levels of democracy are captured using Varieties of Democracy's electoral democracy index (Coppedge et al., 2023), and repression is captured using the Political Terror Scale (Haschke, 2017).

repression (3) and medium-low levels of democracy (0.25-0.49). This covers a variety of cases, including violent repression of protests in Belarus (2017) and Jordan (2021), arrest of human rights defenders in Cambodia (2005) and Honduras (2010), as well as use of torture in Mauritania (2017) and Niger (2009). Unlike the more democratic and less repressive states, these states typically violated the rights of their own citizens who in some way threatened the regime's hold on power.

Figure 4.2: Cases Shamed Across the Level of Democracy and Repression
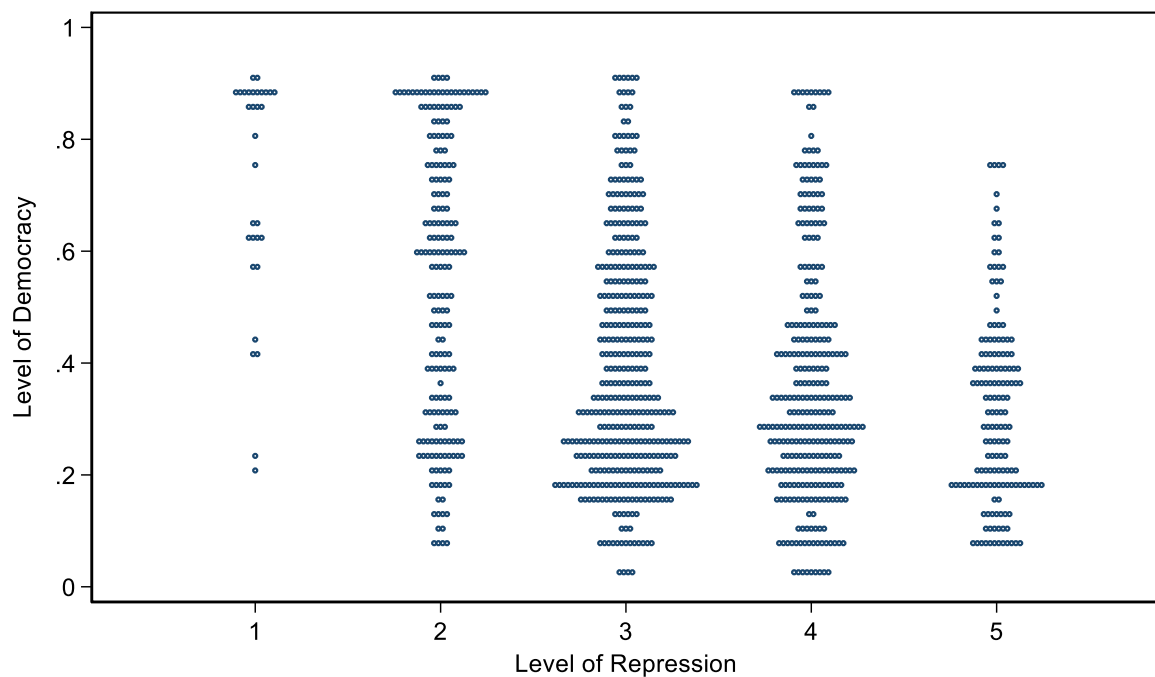
Note: Based on the author's coding. Each point represents a case of shaming, i.e., a year in which a given state was shamed. Democracy is captured using Variety of Democracy's electoral democracy index, scaled from 0-1. Repression is captured using the Political Terror Scale, scaled from 1-5.

4.2 Government Counter-Narratives: Construction and Effects

The previous section gave an empirical overview of human rights shaming, and I will now examine government responses to this shaming. First, I examine *how* governments respond and whether they use the counter-narratives proposed in Chapter 2. I then test the effects of shaming and the identified government counter-narratives on public support for human rights abuses and the responsible government.

4.2.1 Paper A: How do Governments Respond to Shaming?

In Paper A, I examine the construction and prevalence of government counter-narratives and ask: Do governments respond to human rights shaming, and if so, how are these responses constructed? This question was examined using a medium-N setup. I selected 20 diverse cases in which a violation was committed and the government subsequently was shamed for its behaviour. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, cases were selected to be as diverse as possible across various theoretically relevant parameters such as level of democracy and repression, type of abuse, as well as geographical region and time (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). I collected and analysed government responses to shaming in each case and examined what narratives, if any, were used. In Chapter 2, I theorised three concrete narratives that I expect governments to use to defend against shaming. The material was coded to determine whether arguments in line with these three narratives were employed. I also maintained a more explorative approach, and the coding process was open to alternative narratives appearing in the material.

Table 4.2 summarises my findings and illustrates which narratives governments employed in each case and whether some were more dominant than others. The table reveals three key findings. First, almost all states responded to shaming, using at least one of my proposed narratives. Only in Honduras (2012) did the government completely ignore the shaming, and the government of Guinea (2007) did not directly address the shaming but offered policy concessions. Both cases were characterised by comparatively low levels of shaming, which potentially explains the lack of response. Across all other cases, governments used at least one of my proposed strategies to challenge the shaming. This suggests that government responses to shaming are much more prevalent and consistent across diverse contexts than previously known.

Second, it is worth noting that all states that did respond incorporated arguments consistent with the justification narrative, which in many cases is also the most prominent narrative. This indicates that the justification narrative is uniquely appealing to governments accused of human rights violations. Notably, governments use extremely similar arguments regardless of whether they were defending the arrest of members of the opposition in Azerbaijan (2013) or mass internment and genocidal acts against members of an ethnic minority in China (2017). The threatened object, the group targeted, and the severity of the threat invoked vary, but the arguments used are very similar. In China, the government argued that the Uyghur population constituted a terrorist threat to the Chinese state (Reuters, 2018), and the Azerbaijani government accused the opposition of organising a violent protest threatening the stability of the state (HRW, 2013).

Table 4.2: Overview of rhetorical strategies

Case	Ignore	Concessions	Justification	Sovereignty	Credibility
Australia (2016)			**✓**		
Azerbaijan (2013)			✓		**✓**
Brazil (2008)		✓	**✓**		✓
Burundi (2017)			**✓**	**✓**	✓
China (2017)			**✓**	✓	✓
Cuba (2003)			✓	**✓**	✓
Egypt (2013)			**✓**		✓
The Gambia (2016)			**✓**	**✓**	✓
Guinea (2007)	✓	✓			
Honduras (2012)	✓				
Iran (2009)		✓	✓	**✓**	✓
Nigeria (2016)			**✓**		✓
Myanmar (2017)		✓	**✓**	✓	✓
Peru (2009)		✓	**✓**	**✓**	✓
The Philippines (2016)			**✓**	✓	✓
Tanzania (2020)			**✓**		
Thailand (2003)			**✓**	✓	✓
Turkey (2016)			**✓**	✓	✓
USA (2004)		**✓**	✓		✓
Zimbabwe (2008)			✓	**✓**	✓
Total	2	6 (**1**)	18 (**13**)	11 (**6**)	14 (**1**)

Note: Coding is based on analysis of government statements. The primary strategies are highlighted in **bold**.

The third point I want to highlight is that most governments use more than just one strategy when defending their human rights abuses. Only two cases stuck to a single narrative, while the remaining 16 cases used two or all three narratives, indicating that governments tend to employ various arguments and see what sticks. Closer analysis reveals an interesting pattern in how the sovereignty and justification narratives, specifically, interact. Some cases use

much more abstract references to the principle of sovereignty that typically do not interact with attempts to justify human rights violations. These governments seem to reserve their sovereignty arguments for international audiences. In Myanmar, for example, a representative to the UN rejected a resolution on the genocide against the Rohingya arguing that this was "unwarranted" and that the UN ought to uphold "the principles of respect for national sovereignty" (Permanent Mission of Myanmar, 2017). In this group of cases, references to the principle of sovereignty are largely absent at the domestic level, and the government relies primarily on justification arguments.

A second group of cases combine the two into a single coherent narrative in which sovereignty arguments are used to justify human rights violations. These narratives are common in states with a colonial history or traditional adversarial relations with the US. In Gambia, for example, President Yahya Jammeh accused the opposition, which had been detained and allegedly tortured, of being "slaves for the West" and wanting "to destabilise [the] country" (Jammeh, 2016). Jammeh thus portrayed the opposition not only as a threat to the stability of Gambia but as a threat acting on behalf of Western governments. The alleged link to Western governments was used to undermine the opposition's legitimacy and justify violations of their basic human rights. This finding indicates that international shaming, rather than offering protection to local civil society organisations, can inadvertently undermine their legitimacy.

This section has demonstrated that most governments respond to shaming by constructing counter-narratives that challenge the shaming, indicating that government counter-narratives are much more prevalent than previously assumed and not limited to a small set of cases (e.g., Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Jetschke, 2011). The prevalence of these strategies suggests that we should take them seriously in the study and practice of human rights promotion. The widespread use of such strategies also potentially explains why shaming often fails to increase respect for human rights norms (e.g., Hafner-Burton, 2008). Last, the analysis revealed that international shaming can undermine the legitimacy of domestic groups and help justify abuse against these groups. This is notable because it breaks with a key assumption in much of the literature that international attention serves to protect local activists and generate new political opportunities domestically (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999). Instead, the findings of Paper A suggest that such linkages to international movements can be exploited and undermine the legitimacy of domestic activists and civil society.

4.2.2 Paper B: How Does Shaming and Counter-Narratives Affect Public Opinion?

Paper A found that governments across vastly different contexts respond to shaming by using sovereignty, justification, or credibility arguments. The theoretical expectation is that governments employ these arguments to garner support in the population and avoid anti-government mobilisation. In the following section, I test whether human rights shaming and government counter-framing affect public support for human rights abuses and the responsible government. I do so in a preregistered vignette experiment among 2194 Filipino respondents who were randomly assigned to either a control group or four treatment groups. The vignettes describe a fictional event in which peaceful protesters, on orders from the government, were met with violence from the police, which injured several and left two dead. The vignettes are fictional to avoid deceiving respondents and describe a typical form of human rights abuse, though one that has rarely been studied (e.g., Bracic & Murdie, 2019; Gruffydd-Jones, 2022). The control group only received a description of the repressive event, while a second group received both the description and a shaming cue from Amnesty International.[4] The remaining three groups received the description of the event, the shaming cue, and one of three government counter-frames, identified in Paper A. I then probed respondents' support for the repressive policy and government, respectively, by asking, "Do you approve of the way the government handled the protests?",[5] and "Do you support the government following the handling of the protests?"[6]

Figure 4.3 presents the main results from the experiment. First, shaming tends to generate backlash and make respondents *more* likely to express support for the repressive policy and the government. Compared to the control group, those who received the shaming cue are 7 and 4 percentage points, respectively, more supportive of the repressive policy and government. Notably, these adverse effects are not isolated to the approval of the repressive policy alone but extend more broadly to increased support for the responsible government. This finding breaks with the fundamental assumption that shaming increases opposition to abusive governments and encourages domestic mobilisation and instead suggests that shaming does more harm than good. One

[4] Amnesty International was chosen as the sender of the cue because it is a frequent source of shaming (e.g., Hendrix & Wong, 2014; Keck & Sikkink, 1998, pp. 88-89) and likely to be familiar to Filipino respondents (e.g., Loreto, 2024; Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2023).

[5] Respondents answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly approve" to "Strongly disapprove".

[6] Respondents indicated their level of support on a 10-point scale.

explanation is that populations do not consider shaming a credible source of information on their government's actions, which is often assumed in the literature (Hendrix & Wong, 2013), and interpret shaming as an attack on the nation, which may lead them to defend their government and its actions. Studies that find that shaming increases opposition to human rights violations are typically conducted in Western, liberal democracies. My findings demonstrate that in cases such as the Philippines, the public is more likely to become defensive, potentially because they consider Amnesty International a foreign threat to their nation.

Figure 4.3: Treatment effect – support for repressive policies and governments
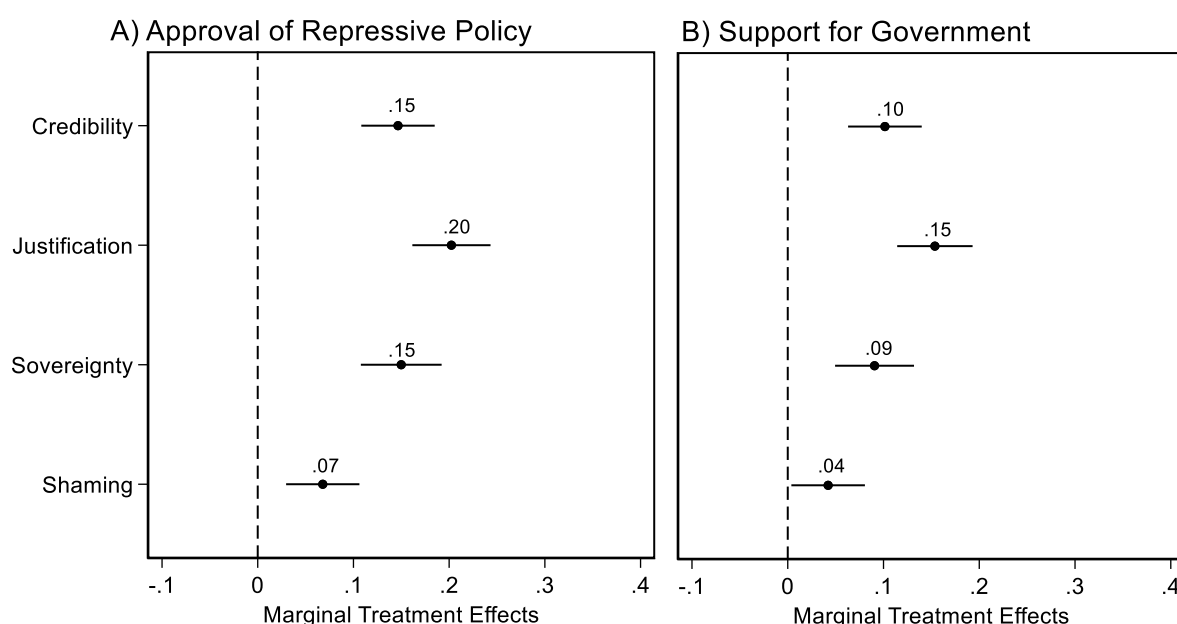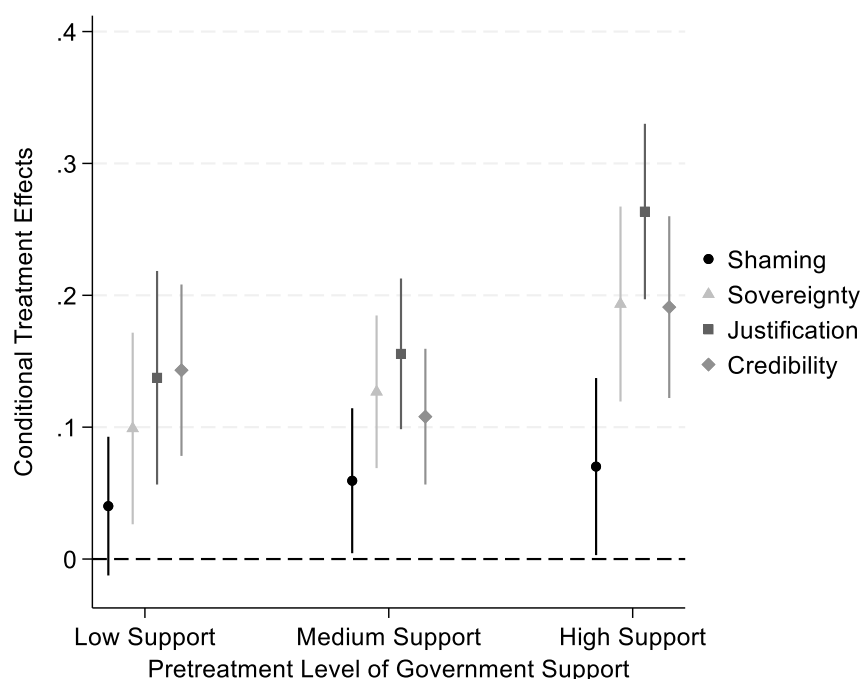

Note: OLS regression estimates of treatment effects on approval of repressive policy and government support. Figure displays 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors. Dependent variable was rescaled to range between 0 and 1. *N* = 2185 (Panel A). *N* = 2176 (Panel B). Figure from Paper B.

Second, all three government counter-narratives significantly increase respondents' support for both the repressive policy and the responsible government. The justification frame in particular seems effective, and respondents who received this frame are 20 and 15 percentage points more supportive of the handling of the protest and the responsible government, respectively, compared to the control group. These effects are significantly larger than that of the other two counter-frames. Interestingly, Paper A revealed that this narrative was by far the most frequent response to shaming, implying that governments are aware that justifying human rights abuses is exceptionally useful in manipulating public opinion. While sovereignty and credibility frames are

less impactful, they have a substantial effect on respondents' support for human rights abuses. Thus, governments have access to several counter-narratives that can effectively manipulate public opinion in their favour.

One might be concerned that these effects are driven exclusively by those who supported the government pre-treatment. Government supporters are presumably more likely to interpret shaming as an attack on the nation and to be persuaded by counter-framing to defend the government. Figure 4.4 shows the treatment effects across pre-treatment levels of government support. It reveals that the backlash effect of shaming is indeed limited to those with medium and high levels of government support, while shaming has no impact on respondents with low levels of government support. However, Figure 4.4 also shows that government counter-frames can influence public support for the repressive policy across all levels of pre-treatment government support. Even among those with the lowest level of pre-treatment government support, all three counter-frames significantly increase support for the handling of the protests, compared to the control group. This indicates that counter-frames are extremely effective in manipulating public opinion.

Figure 4.4: Conditional effects of shaming and counter-framing

Note: OLS regression estimates of treatment effects on approval of repressive policy conditional on the level of pre-treatment government support. Figure displays 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors. Dependent variable was rescaled to range between 0 and 1. $N = 2168$. Figure from Paper B.

In summary, shaming can generate backlash and make citizens more willing to accept human rights abuse, though not among those who oppose the government. This finding challenges the usefulness of shaming as a tactic to promote human rights and even suggests that it can have adverse effects. A potential explanation why this study finds backlash effects, while others find that shaming increases opposition to the responsible government (e.g., Koliev et al., 2022; McEntire et al., 2015), is that the experiment was conducted outside the US and Western Europe. The Filippino public was potentially more likely to perceive the shaming cue from Amnesty International as a foreign threat against the nation. This suggests that the potential for backlash among domestic populations when shaming human rights violators should be taken seriously, particularly in cases such as the Philippines. One solution is to refrain from criticising states outright and communicate information about repressive events in more neutral language. Such an approach would resemble the control condition more closely and *name* rather than *shame* human rights violators. Additionally, the findings revealed that government counter-frames further increase public support for human rights abuses and the responsible government among all respondents. Combined with the findings from Paper A, this indicates that not only is shaming ineffective in mobilising domestic populations against their government, it may harm respect for human rights norms by generating support for abusive governments.

4.3 Paper C: How Does Economic Relationships Impact Human Rights Rhetoric

In this section, I present the findings from Paper C on the link between economic ties and human rights rhetoric and ask: How do changing economic relations affect official human rights rhetoric in African states? In this paper, I take a broader look at international pressure and how the effectiveness of such pressures is related to changing economic linkages in Africa. I analyse Tanzanian and Zambian human rights rhetoric in the UN between 1991 and 2023. Zambia represents a case that gradually became less dependent on Western donors and more dependent on Chinese trade and development finance. Tanzania experienced a more modest influx of Chinese finance. Conventional wisdom suggests that states would align their human rights rhetoric with Western donors in times of high reliance on ODA but increasingly converge with the Chinese position as they become dependent on economic flows from China. However, I argue that an alternative consequence of Chinese development finance is that African states' bargaining power increases, and they can pursue their own preferred human rights rhetoric. Statements expressing support for civil and political rights are interpreted as a sign of Western

influence, while a strong emphasis on state sovereignty indicates Chinese influence. Last, commitments to economic, social, and cultural rights could reflect either African or Chinese preferences. I analyse the strength and timing of commitments to these forms of human rights norms, to assess the impact of African states' economic ties to China.

The analysis in Paper C revealed three main findings. First, both Tanzania and Zambia made strong rhetorical commitments to civil and political rights in periods of high dependence on Western donors. Particularly between 1991 and 2010, both states made strong commitments to these rights and also participated actively in criticising human rights abuses abroad including the Apartheid regime in South Africa (UN General Assembly, 1993), a crackdown on protesters in Myanmar (Human Rights Council, 2007), and the massacres of civilians in Timor-Leste (UN General Assembly, 1999). However, both states also actively pursued human rights rhetoric in line with their own preferences - even in this period, when Western aid constituted up to 50 pct. of the state budget (Rakner, 2013). One reflection of African agency is the abuses they chose to criticise, as many of these took place within a wider struggle for independence and self-determination, most notable with regard to Apartheid South Africa and in Timor-Leste. Self-determination and independence are key features of many African states' human rights conceptions, and Tanzania and Zambia seemingly chose to signal their support for civil and political rights in cases that also aligned with their concern for the right to self-determination. Thus, there are clear signs that Western donors were able to exert influence over Tanzania and Zambia between 1991 and 2010, but they were also able to pursue their own interests.

Second, the increased availability of Chinese finance in the late 2000s seemingly undermined Western leverage to push for rhetorical commitments to civil and political rights. Around 2011 the amount of attention paid to civil and political rights dropped sharply in Zambia and Tanzania and they completely stopped criticising human rights abuses abroad. The drop indicates that Western donors were no longer able to influence African rhetoric, but this did not translate into clear alignment with Chinese human rights preferences. Some references to civil and political rights remain in both cases, particularly commitments to democracy. These statements often followed domestic elections and indicate that both states continued to find value in signalling support for democracy (UN General Assembly, 2015, 2016). Commitments to democracy could either reflect signals to Western donors who continued to supply large amounts of aid even after 2010 or indicate that Zambia found these important for other reasons, for example, to boost their democratic legitimacy to domestic audiences. Regardless, it shows autonomy from Chinese influence,

and I interpret the decreased focus on civil and political rights primarily as a consequence of diminished Western leverage and African agency.

Last, the clearest indication of Chinese influence would be increased attention paid to state sovereignty in periods when Zambia is highly reliant on Chinese development finance. There are some indications that this is the case, starting around 2018 sovereignty rhetoric increased in Zambia. In a marked departure from previous rhetoric Zambia, for example, retracted its support for country-specific resolutions and argued that "the universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council was the only universally agreed mechanism for reviewing the status of human rights at the country level" (UN General Assembly, 2023a). This could indicate increased Chinese influence, but curiously most of these statements were made *after* a dramatic drop in the influx of Chinese finance around 2019. During this same period, Zambia also experienced democratic backsliding (Hinfelaar et al., 2022), which could have altered the preferences of the Zambian government and caused it to emphasise state sovereignty. This change likely also reflects domestic preferences, which happen to align with Chinese preferences.

One area where China seemingly was able to translate its economic power into political influence, was when Chinese human rights violations in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang were debated. On several occasions between 2020 and 2023, Tanzania and Zambia actively defended China against criticism (Human Rights Council, 2021; UN General Assembly, 2023b). This pattern potentially demonstrates that China wields a much larger influence on the African continent than I have argued until now. However, it is worth noting that these statements concern a key concern for the Chinese government – avoiding criticism for its human rights violations. It may be that China is more willing and better able to dictate African human rights rhetoric on narrow issues of special importance to China. These statements were made in a period when Chinese economic flows to Africa were relatively modest, and indicate that on important issues, China can exert its influence regardless of economic dependence.

In summary, the analysis suggests that Tanzanian and Zambian human rights rhetoric was vulnerable to Western pressures between 1991 and 2010 when no credible alternative to Western development finance existed. This supports existing research on voting patterns in the UN (Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013; Kastner, 2014) and on the impact of aid conditionality (Li, 2017). After 2010, the West seemingly lost leverage to pressure both states, and references to civil and political rights dropped despite varying levels of dependence on China. Following a sharp increase in economic flows from China, Zambia placed a larger emphasis on state sovereignty. However, this change could also be explained by a period of democratic backsliding in Zambia and

commitments to democracy persisted. This analysis offers a different inter-
pretation than much of the existing literature, as I argue that changes in hu-
man rights rhetoric are driven by African agency rather than direct Chinese
influence (Brazys & Dukalskis, 2017; Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013). While Af-
rican states are to some extent influenced by economic partners, they struggle
for autonomy and aim to pursue their own preferences when circumstances
allow it (Carmody et al., 2020).

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has addressed three central questions of the dissertation based
on the three papers. First, do governments respond to human rights shaming
and, if so, how are these responses constructed? The dissertation shows that
most governments do respond to shaming by using at least one of the pro-
posed counter-narratives. The most common response is to try and justify hu-
man rights abuses by arguing that it was necessary to protect the stability of
the state, but most governments used several counter-narratives to challenge
the shaming. These findings improve our understanding of how governments
respond to shaming and suggest that rhetorical defence strategies are much
more prevalent than previously assumed.

The relevance of studying government counter-narratives were further
supported by the findings from Paper B, which asked: How do human rights
shaming and government counter-framing affect public support for human
rights abuses? The findings indicate that all three narratives make citizens
more willing to accept human rights abuses and support the responsible gov-
ernment. Equally concerning is the finding that shaming generates backlash
in the population and increases public support for the repressive policy and
government, at least in cases outside the liberal West. This effectively sus-
pends the domestic mechanisms hypothesised to increase respect for human
rights. While shaming could still have other benefits, serving as a signal of fu-
ture sanctions or imposing international costs on the target state, the negative
impact on public opinion is cause for concern.

Last, Paper C aimed to answer how changing economic relations affect of-
ficial human rights rhetoric in African states. The evidence suggests that West-
ern donors were able to exert influence over human rights rhetoric between
1991 and 2010, which supports previous research on the effects of ODA on
human rights (Li, 2017). The data demonstrated that the emergence of China
as an alternative donor has undermined Western leverage and potentially al-
lowed African states to escape human rights pressure from Western states.
However, it is not clear that China has been fully able to translate economic
relationships into political influence, and changes in human rights rhetoric
might instead be attributed to increased African agency. This challenges the

predominant tendency in the literature to emphasise China's ability to translate economic relations into political influence while overlooking the role of African agency.

Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusions

> Thoughts and dreams do not die. Belief in freedom and
> justice does not perish with imprisonment, torture or
> even death and tyranny do not prevail over freedom.
> Narges Mohammadi, *Acceptance Speech; the Sakharov Prize*

In this dissertation, I set out to examine How do governments respond rhetorically to international human rights pressure, and what, if any, are the consequences for public opinion? I have done so in three research papers utilising diverse data sources and research designs. In this chapter, I summarise my answers based on the findings of the three papers and discuss the key contributions and limitations of the dissertation. Finally, I discuss the implications for human rights policy

5.1 Summarising Main Findings

A long research tradition has examined the potential for international human rights pressure to make abusive governments commit to and comply with human rights norms. In many ways, this literature grew out of a sense of liberal optimism following the end of the Cold War and argued that international pressure can generate lasting improvements in respect for human rights. This dissertation has flipped conventional wisdom on its head and focussed on the unintended consequences of international pressure. The central claim is that governments respond to pressure by constructing counter-narratives that challenge the criticism and to reduce the costs of being criticised. To assess this claim, I have examined the construction of counter-narratives, their effects on public opinion, and considered how economic ties to China alter the ability of states to resist international human rights pressure. Paper A and Paper B provide novel evidence of the prevalence of government counter-narratives and their effects on individuals' willingness to accept human rights abuses and support the responsible government. These findings calls into question the utility of international pressure as a strategy to promote respect for human rights norms. Moreover, Paper C examines whether the emergence of China as a key economic power allows African states to resist pressures to commit to human rights norms at the international level.

First, in Paper A, I examined how governments respond rhetorically to human rights shaming. I argued that governments try to resist shaming by constructing counter-narratives and proposed three concrete narratives that I expected governments to use. To evaluate this argument, I analysed government responses to shaming across 20 diverse cases between 2003 and 2021. I demonstrated that all but two cases in the sample used arguments consistent with my three narratives. Specifically, the analysis revealed that responses trying to justify human rights abuses were prevalent, as the remaining cases all tried to justify their transgressions. Most governments did not limit themselves to a single narrative but used arguments consistent with several narratives. Particularly sovereignty and justification narratives seemed to interact in interesting ways. In one manifestation of this relationship, the two were combined into a single cohesive narrative in which accusations of links to foreign organisations served to undermine the legitimacy of domestic civil society and justify human rights abuses against it. All in all, the findings of Paper A suggest that rhetorical responses to shaming are ubiquitous and that highly diverse governments tend to use similar counter-narratives.

Second, building on the findings of Paper A, Paper B examined the effects of human rights shaming and government counter-narratives on public support for a repressive policy and government. Using a preregistered survey experiment conducted in the Philippines, I found that both shaming from Amnesty International and government counter-framing *increase* support for a repressive policy and the responsible government. Moreover, the findings indicate government counter-frames are effective regardless of individuals' pretreatment government support. This illustrates that shaming can generate backlash in the population and that these effects are further exacerbated by government counter-frames.

Third, Paper C tackled the international environment in which human rights promotion occurs. Specifically, I examined how the strength of economic ties to China affects international human rights rhetoric in Tanzania and Zambia. This paper challenged the predominant view that stronger economic ties to China on the African continent will lead African states to align their human rights positions with China to appease their new partner. Examining Tanzanian and Zambian rhetoric in the UN, I found evidence that Western states have gradually lost leverage to push for rhetorical commitments to civil and political rights. However, evidence also suggested that Zambia's increased economic dependence on China has not translated into a strong Chinese influence over the Zambia's international human rights rhetoric. Instead, the evidence indicates that the presence of a credible alternative to Western finance increases the bargaining power of African states and allows them to pursue their own preferred human rights positions, regardless of the actual

strength of ties to China. This implies that African states are not weak, passive partners and that we should take their autonomy and human rights preferences seriously.

The dissertation reveals the limitations of international pressure as a strategy for improving support and respect for human rights norms. Shaming was shown to decrease public support for human rights and target governments proved capable of manipulating public opinion, by constructing counter-narratives. Paper C embedded the questions of human rights pressure in the broader debate on changes in the international power balance. The paper suggested that international pressure might be even more difficult going forward, as Western states have lost an important avenue of leverage: economic dependencies. The rise of China as an economic superpower and the increasing bargaining power of African states can enable target states to resist pressure and stop rhetorically upholding human rights norms.

5.2 Key Contributions

The dissertation makes several important contributions to the literature on human rights, enforcement of international norms, and the impact of Chine economic rise. A long and prominent research tradition has argued that international pressure is a useful tool to hold abusive governments accountable and increase compliance with human rights norms (Brysk, 1993; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999). These studies highlight how international pressure can generate international reputational and economic costs and increase anti-government mobilisation, and existing evidence shows that shaming makes citizens more likely to oppose human rights abuses (Koliev et al., 2022; McEntire et al., 2015, 2017). However, a recent strand of literature argues instead that shaming generates backlash effects in domestic populations and makes them defensive of their government (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Snyder, 2020; Terman, 2023). Paper B makes an important contribution to this literature and demonstrates that shaming, from Amnesty International, can have unintended, negative consequences for support for human rights norms. Existing contributions primarily focus on shaming from other states, particularly geopolitical rivals (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Terman, 2023), but my findings indicate that criticism from international NGOs is also prone to backlash effects (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; Terman, 2023).

Paper B further makes a novel contribution to our understanding of the effects of shaming outside Western countries. Empirical tests of shaming effects have almost exclusively been conducted in the US and Western Europe (Bracic & Murdie, 2019; Koliev et al., 2022; McEntire et al., 2015, 2017). Paper B addresses this shortcoming and offers empirical evidence from the

Philippines, a novel setting that is more representative of the breadth of shaming campaigns. In such settings, human rights norms and international NGOs are more likely to be interpreted as something foreign and potentially threatening, which increases the risk of backlash and potentially explains why some studies conducted in the West find positive effects of shaming (Koliev et al., 2022; McEntire et al., 2015, 2017). These findings also contribute to the broader literature on shaming as a tool to enforce international norms and agreements. Shaming is used in several policy areas outside human rights, and also here is evidence for the effectiveness mixed (Becker et al., 2024; Blankenship, 2024). Recent evidence shows that shaming is useful in the realm of climate policy (Koliev et al., 2024) and can increase support for compliance with the Paris Agreement (Koliev et al., 2022; Tingley & Tomz, 2022). Climate policies are, perhaps, a better target for shaming, as demands for climate action are likely less threatening to governments than human rights reforms. These studies also focus on the US and Western Europe, and based on my findings, we might be concerned that climate shaming can generate backlash in populations outside the West.

Second, the dissertation makes several important theoretical and empirical contributions to our knowledge about government responses to international pressure and legitimisation of repression. At the theoretical level, I have proposed three narratives that governments are expected to use to defend themselves against outside criticism and legitimise their repression. Previous literature has distinguished between broader rhetorical strategies to resist human rights pressure, for example, ignoring, rejecting or interpreting norms (Dixon, 2017) but has not disentangled these strategies more closely. This dissertation focuses on rhetorical strategies that do not outright reject human rights norms but instead seek to reinterpret the norm or government behaviour to signal compliance with the norm while violating its purpose (Búzás, 2016). I developed three concrete, generally applicable narratives that I expect governments subjected to shaming to use. Understanding how government counter-narratives are constructed is crucial for examining their effects and designing policies that are less vulnerable to manipulation by governments. In addition to the theoretical contribution, Paper A offered the first systematic empirical examination of government responses to human rights shaming. Comparative case studies have detailed how governments construct elaborate counter-narratives to defend themselves against international pressure, but they are based on a small number of cases and often employ context-specific arguments (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018; Jetschke, 2011). Paper A showed that government responses are much more prevalent than previously known and that the use of counter-narratives is highly consistent across cases and time.

In addition, Paper B demonstrated, that these narratives can sway public opinion and make individuals more willing to accept human rights abuses and more supportive of the responsible government. The paper offers novel evidence of the effects of government counter-narratives in response to shaming. Previous literature has found government framing to be effective in defending violations of international law (Kreps & Wallace, 2016; Morse & Pratt, 2022) and the use of torture (Conrad et al., 2018; Viki et al., 2013). Nonetheless, these have not addressed government responses to shaming or merely focused on government denials (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022). Combined with the findings from Paper A, this indicates that government counter-narratives are a serious side effect of international pressure. Not only can shaming generate backlash and make citizens more willing to accept human rights abuses and support the responsible government, but government counter-frames further exacerbate these negative effects.

Last, I contribute to the literature on the rise of China, specifically Chinese influence on the African continent, and the consequences for international human rights norms. I do so by focusing on the notion of African agency. Many have argued that China would use its newfound economic power to undermine the international human rights regime and influence foreign policy abroad (Brazys & Dukalskis, 2017; Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013; Naím, 2009). I argue that these fears are exaggerated and that changes in African human rights rhetoric may be driven by increased African bargaining power rather than by direct Chinese influence. Existing literature that finds China to have a strong influence over African policy positions has mainly looked at voting alignment between China and African states. This discrepancy has at least two possible explanations. On the one hand, China presumably cares more about garnering support for UN resolutions and therefore is more likely to use its economic power to influence voting decisions. On the other hand, vote alignment could be driven by increased African autonomy and wrongfully attributed to Chinese influence. If, for example, African states start to oppose resolutions on civil and political rights, this is generally interpreted as alignment with Chinese. However, as I have argued, it could also be an expression that African states are free from Western pressure and stop emphasising these rights due to their own preferences. Attributing all voting similarities between China and African states to Chinese influence on the continent is likely to overestimate this influence and overlook the agency of African states. Looking instead at rhetorical commitments to human rights, a key factor in upholding international human rights norms, I offer a more nuanced analysis and attempt to distinguish between different mechanisms driving changes in African human rights rhetoric. Teasing out the different mechanisms driving these changes is challeng-

ing, but going forward, we should do more to take African agency into consideration and reflect on how we to handle this task.

The findings of Paper C also have implications for the West's ability to promote human rights norms and offer both good news and bad news. First, it does not appear that China has been able to completely dictate African human rights rhetoric, and fears of Chinese influence on the African continent might be overstated. Officially, China pursues a *no-strings-attached* approach to development financing, and my findings support that notion. However, they also show that the rise of China can enable states to resist pressure and avoid committing to civil and political rights, which spells trouble for international pressure as a tool to promote human rights norms going forward. Much of the early optimism regarding international pressure was based on a few iconic positive cases in the late 1980s and 1990s, including Chile (Ropp & Sikkink, 1999) and South Africa (Black, 1999). The fact that the West is losing influence, combined with the other key findings of the dissertation, potentially suggests that the heyday of international human rights pressure is over and that early positive cases were driven by uniquely permissible international conditions following the end of the Cold War.

5.3 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

In this section, I address key avenues for future research based on the dissertation's findings. Although the dissertation has shed light on important questions about how governments respond rhetorically to human rights pressure and the implications of these responses, several questions remain unanswered. First, Paper B revealed that shaming from Amnesty International and government counter-narratives can increase support for a repressive policy and government in the Philippines, but it did not consider shaming from other NGOs or other types of senders. Amnesty International is a well-known source of human rights criticism and contributed to the realism of the vignettes used in the survey experiment. However, shaming from Amnesty might be more likely to cause backlash and future research should examine whether the effects of shaming on public opinion are conditional on the sender of the shaming. It could be that the UN and its subsidiaries are considered more trustworthy and politically neutral (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022) and that domestic NGOs are less prone to Western biases and can design better campaigns that align with domestic conceptions of human rights issues (Lahti, 2018).

Further, the empirical evidence of Paper B was limited to a single country, which has implications for my ability to generalise these findings beyond the Philippines. Ideally, the study should be repeated across multiple countries to test the hypotheses in different contexts. The Philippines was selected with generalisability in mind, as it constitutes a fairly typical case of human rights

shaming in terms of political competition and level of repression. Thus, the results may be transferable to other non-Western countries with a degree of political competition, a vibrant political landscape, and widespread state repression. Furthermore, two studies show that shaming from NGOs can generate backlash effects in the US and increase citizens' willingness to accept human rights abuses (Greenhill & Reiter, 2022; Terman, 2023). I have argued that backlash effects are more likely to materialise in non-Western countries, and the findings from a less likely case, such as the US indicate that the phenomenon is widespread. But this is ultimately an empirical question that future research should address.

The findings of Paper C were based on a comparative case study of Tanzania and Zambia, again raising questions about the generalisability of the findings. First, are the findings of Tanzania and Zambia generalisable to other African states? Tanzania and Zambia were specifically chosen because they have had stable regimes with a degree of political freedom. These characteristics were important to *detect* changes in human rights rhetoric but are not necessarily crucial for the impact of economic dependencies. Other states could have preferences that divert from those of Tanzania and Zambia, but I would expect the tendencies identified in the rhetoric to be similar. Second, do similar patterns exist in other regions, including Latin America and Asia? Here, the potential for generalisability is more questionable. Latin America is, for example, markedly more democratic and has a longer history with human rights than many African states, and China is potentially more prone to exert influence in its backyard in Asia. It remains to be seen whether the findings from the African context are transferable to other regions of the world, and what the broader impact for international human rights norms are.

5.4 Policy Implications

The findings of this dissertation have important implications for human rights policies and enforcement of international norms more broadly. First, the dissertation seriously calls into question the utility of international pressure as a strategy for promoting and protecting human rights. While its effectiveness has been questioned, it has often been seen as a benign alternative to more direct modes of enforcement such as economic sanctions and military interventions. Both economic sanctions and military interventions have devastating costs for the target country and its population and can lead populations to rally around their government and turn against the states imposing these measures (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2014; Grossman et al., 2018; Sejersen, 2021; Valentino, 2011). It is notable that even the more minor reputational costs imposed by shaming may invoke these same mechanisms in citizens and make them rally around their government. The tendency of populations to

reject efforts to enforce human rights norms underlines the difficulty in changing domestic policies from the outside and that the international community should be careful before applying pressure to violating states.

Furthermore, these risks are even more acute going forward, as China increasingly offers an economic alternative to Western power and challenges the existing liberal world order. With access to Chinese trade and finance, states are likely better able to resist pressures to commit to and comply with civil and political rights. However, Paper C did suggest that this is likely an expression of states' own preferences rather than direct pressure from China, which also has important implications. Rather than trying to thwart Chinese influence, policies might be better aimed at changing domestic human rights preferences, for example through capacity building and human rights education locally.

It is, perhaps, premature to completely reject the use of human rights shaming. I have demonstrated negative effects on public opinion, but shaming may also have positive consequences. Shaming can, for example, serve as a signal of future escalation (Murdie & Peksen, 2013), and it is hard to predict what would happen if the international community stopped shaming tomorrow. But this dissertation suggests that the international human rights community should take the risks involved very seriously and, for example, consider whether it is possible to design campaigns that are less vulnerable to challenges from the target government. Once we know how government counter-narratives are constructed, we can try to circumvent them by making the pressure appear less threatening and, for example, making sure that the narrative in a pressure campaign aligns with domestic understandings of human rights violations (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Lahti, 2018) and preventing states and organisations with an adversarial relationship to the target state from joining the pressure. Such changes may help reduce Western biases in human rights promotion and prevent domestic audiences from perceiving the pressure as something foreign and threatening. In the future, researchers should examine whether it is possible to design such campaigns and circumvent the risk of government counter-frames.

Last, the international human rights community might be better off focussing on *naming* rather than *shaming*. Traditionally, international pressure and shaming have played a key role in supplying domestic populations with information about the conduct of their government (Hendrix & Wong, 2013; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). The experimental setup used in Paper B did not allow me to test the effects of providing citizens with information about the human

rights abuses of their government.[7] A naming approach would focus on sharing information more neutrally without directly criticising target states but letting domestic populations form their own opinions, which potentially is less threatening and less likely to provoke a defensive reaction. Future research should try to disentangle the two and examine whether naming is a fruitful avenue for protecting human rights in the future.

5.5 Concluding remarks

The starting point of this dissertation was the murder of Zhina Mahsa Amini and hundreds of protesters in Iran in 2022. Across the three papers and the summary report, I have painted a bleak picture of the prospects for holding perpetrators accountable for their human rights violations. This leaves one of the key motivations of the dissertation unresolved: How do we protect the most vulnerable members of society from having their basic rights violated? Based on this dissertation, the answer seems to be, *not by doing what we currently do*. This is not a call to do nothing and accept that gross human rights violations are a necessity of human life. But it does suggest that we need to develop better policies and not ignore the harmful consequences of our well-meaning efforts.

The dissertation takes a step in that direction. Only when we understand how and why our policies might fail can we design better ones that avoid those pitfalls. I have demonstrated that international pressure has adverse effects on public support for human rights norms in the target country and unintentionally boosts the popularity of repressive regimes, which is further exacerbated by government counter-narratives. While there are other potential positive effects of international pressure, domestic populations play a key role in demanding human rights reforms, and this finding is concerning. These patterns are likely to be exacerbated in the future, as an increasingly powerful China with a strong economy can shield target states from the international economic costs that have traditionally been associated with human rights pressure. Going forward, the international human rights community and researchers alike should focus on developing policies that avoid these pitfalls and have the potential to end impunity and ensure greater respect for human rights.

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[7] To test the effect of shaming on support for human rights abuses, the main outcome of interests, it was necessary to provide the control group with information about the repressive event. Barring this information, I would only have been able to test the effect of shaming on generalised support for human rights norms.

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Summary

Human rights abuses continue to threaten the lives and freedoms of individuals all over the world. This constitutes a core challenge for the international community: states, international organisations, NGOs, and activists which devote significant resources to promoting and protecting fundamental human rights. A key strategy is to put pressure on the violating government and publicly criticise abuses when they occur. By shining the spotlight on violations, the international human rights community hopes to deter third-party states from supporting abusive governments and encourage domestic anti-government mobilisation. Traditionally, both literature and practice have put great stock in this method of human rights promotion, but increasingly the strategy's effectiveness has been called into question.

The dissertation casts light on three challenges to the effectiveness of international human rights pressure. First, a key assumption is that international pressure resonates with the domestic population and encourages mobilisation against abusive governments. However, foreign criticism or *shaming* may also make citizens defensive and cause them to rally around their government. Second, governments targeted with human rights shaming can defend themselves by constructing counter-narratives that challenge the shaming and portray the government as innocent. If the government can construct a persuasive narrative, this might convince international audiences to cease their pressure campaign and boost popular support at the domestic level. Drawing on theories of framing effects, social identity theory, and securitisation, the dissertation proposes three concrete counter-narratives that governments are expected to use when faced with international pressure. Third, the rise of China may complicate processes of human rights pressure on the African continent, given its different approach to human rights and ability to shield allies from criticism. Consequently, Western states are losing leverage to push for commitments to human rights norms, while African states increasingly have the autonomy to determine their own rhetoric.

These propositions are examined in three studies. The first study employs a medium-N setup to examine whether governments respond to shaming by constructing counter-narratives. The study analyses government responses across 20 cases of human rights shaming between 2003 and 2021. It shows that governments, across highly diverse contexts, generally respond to shaming by constructing at least one of the proposed counter-narratives. Governments seemingly believe that these are effective in reducing the costs of being shamed and boosting popularity amongst the domestic population.

The second study examines whether this is actually the case. Using a survey experiment conducted in the Philippines, the study test how international pressure, and the identified counter-narratives affect public support for human rights abuses and the responsible government. The study reveals that shaming can have adverse effects, making individuals more willing to accept human rights abuses and increasing support for the responsible government. All three narratives also proved highly effective in manipulating public opinion and increasing support for a repressive policy and government.

The third study focuses on how changes in the international environment can make human rights pressure less effective in ensuring rhetorical commitment to human rights norms. This paper utilizes a comparative case study of changes in Tanzanian and Zambian human rights rhetoric in the UN between 1991 and 2023. Evidence demonstrates that Western states have gradually lost leverage to credible push for commitments to civil and political rights, as China has begun to offer an alternative source of development finance. Further, the study argues that China has been unable to translate economic power into direct influence over African human rights rhetoric and that the rise of China has increased African agency to pursue their own preferences.

Overall, the dissertation calls into question the continued utility of international pressure as a strategy for promoting human rights norms and preventing abuses. While it is premature to retire the strategy altogether, the dissertation has demonstrated that international human rights pressure can generate backlash in domestic populations and is vulnerable to government manipulation. This dissertation thus provides important first steps in designing human rights policies that are less prone to unintended, negative consequences.

Dansk Resumé

Menneskerettighedskrænkelser udgør fortsat en trussel mod individers liv og frihed over hele verden. Dette er en central udfordring for det internationale samfund og stater, internationale organisationer, NGO'er og aktivister bruger mange ressourcer på at fremme og beskytte grundlæggende menneskerettighed. En vigtig strategi er at lægge pres på den ansvarlige regering og offentligt kritisere overgreb, når de finder sted. Ved at sætte fokus på krænkelser håber det internationale menneskerettighedssamfund at afskrække tredjepartsstater fra at støtte repressive regeringer og at øge national mobilisering mod regeringen. Traditionelt har både litteratur og praksis sat stor lid til denne form for menneskerettighedspromovering, men der er i stigende grad blevet sat spørgsmålstegn ved strategiens effektivitet.

Denne afhandling kaster lys over tre udfordringer med at anvende internationalt pres til at fremme menneskerettighederne. For det første er en vigtig antagelse, at internationalt pres vækker genklang hos den lokale befolkning og kan tilskynde befolkningen til at mobilisere sig mod repressive regeringer. Men udenlandsk kritik eller *udskamning* kan også gøre borgerne defensive og øge deres støtte til regeringen. For det andet kan regeringer, der udsættes for menneskerettighedskritik, forsvare sig ved at konstruere konkurrerende narrativer, der udfordrer kritikken og bedyrer regeringens uskyld. Hvis regeringen kan præsentere en overbevisende fortælling, kan det overbevise internationale aktører om at reducere presset og øge den folkelige støtte til regeringen. Med udgangspunkt i teorier om framing-effekter, social identitetsteori og sikkerhedsliggørelse udvikler afhandlingen tre konkrete narrativer, som regeringer forventes at bruge, når de står over for internationalt menneskerettighedspres. For det tredje kan Kinas fremmarch komplicere brugen af internationalt pres på det afrikanske kontinent, da Kina kan beskytte allierede mod kritik og tilbyde en alternativ tilgang til menneskerettighederne. Som konsekvens af dette mister vestlige stater muligheden for at presse stater til at forpligtige sig til menneskerettighedsnormerne, mens afrikanske stater i stigende grad bliver frie til at beslutte deres egen menneskerettighedsretorik.

Disse påstande undersøges i tre studier. Det første studie anvender et medium-N-setup til at undersøge, om regeringer svarer på international kritik ved at konstruere konkurrerende narrativer. Studiet analyserer regeringers reaktioner på tværs af 20 tilfælde af menneskerettighedskritik mellem 2003 og 2021. Det viser, at regeringer, på tværs af meget forskellige kontekster, generelt reagerer på udskamning ved at konstruere de foreslåede narrativer.

Regeringerne mener tilsyneladende, at disse er effektive til at reducere omkostningerne ved at blive udskammet og øge populariteten i befolkningen.

Det andet studie undersøger, om dette rent faktisk er tilfældet. Studiet anvender et surveyeksperiment i Filippinerne til at teste, hvordan internationalt pres og de identificerede narrativer påvirker befolkningens støtte til krænkelser af menneskerettighederne og den ansvarlige regering. Undersøgelsen demonstrerer, at udskamning kan have en negativ effekt og gøre individer mere villige til at acceptere menneskerettighedskrænkelser og øge støtten til den ansvarlige regering. Derudover viste alle tre foreslåede narrativer sig i stand til at manipulere den offentlige opinion og øge støtten til en repressiv politik og regering.

Det tredje studie fokuserer på, hvordan ændringer i den internationale magtstruktur kan mindske effektiviteten af menneskerettighedspres til at sikre retorisk tilslutning til menneskerettighedsnormer. Denne artikel anvender et komparativt casestudie af ændringer i Tanzanias og Zambias menneskerettighedsretorik i FN mellem 1991 og 2023. Studiet viser, at vestlige stater gradvist har mistet indflydelse til at presse stater til at forpligtige sig til civile og politiske rettigheder. Dette er sket i takt med, at Kina er begyndt at tilbyde en alternativ kilde til udviklingsbistand. Desuden argumenterer studiet for, at Kina ikke har været i stand til at omsætte økonomisk magt til direkte indflydelse på afrikansk menneskerettighedsretorik, og at Kinas fremgang i stedet har øget afrikanske staters mulighed for at forfølge deres egne præferencer.

Samlet set sætter afhandlingen spørgsmålstegn ved den fortsatte anvendelighed af internationalt pres som en strategi til at fremme menneskerettighedsnormer og forhindre krænkelser. Selv om det ville være forhastet helt at droppe strategien, så har afhandlingen vist, at internationalt menneskerettighedspres kan give bagslag i befolkningen og er sårbart over for manipulation fra regeringers side. Dette udgør et vigtigt første skridt i at designe fremtidige menneskerettighedspolitikker, der medfører færre utilsigtede, negative konsekvenser.