

The Right to Self-Determination, Political Participation and the Road to Peace

Student ID Number: 18279789

The history of the past century is soaked with the blood of generations of oppressed peoples who have fought and died for the right to self-determination. African, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Asian, Indigenous and other exploited nations and peoples have struggled through every means possible for the right to vote and elect their own leaders, choose their form of government and manage their own economic, social, political and economic affairs without interference from external powers.

In this essay I will argue that the United Nations has failed to promote political participation by oppressed communities, reflecting a global power imbalance. Governments pursuing imperial aims exert inordinate influence and control in the UN Security Council and General Assembly. I believe the UN should aggressively work to uphold and defend the right of all peoples to self-determination and must actively work towards reparations for Africans and other victims of colonialism as a precondition for the fulfillment of the right to full and democratic political participation. Finally, I will argue that the struggles by oppressed peoples for national independence will bolster the application of international law as means towards justice and self-determination for all. This is the road to peace between nations.

The right to vote and the right to self-determination are codified in the principles of international law established by the United Nations. The right to vote is enshrined in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 16, 1966, stating: "Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity [...] to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors" (UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Part 3, Article 25). The right to self-determination was established by the United Nations in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples on December 14, 1960, stating: "All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (UN General Assembly Resolution 1514).

These noble phrases have all too often rung hollow for billions of people in countries where imperialist and colonialist powers, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Belgium, have repeatedly stifled democratic political participation by intervening to stage coups, overturning democratically elected leaders and installing puppet dictators who impose economic policies favorable to their foreign sponsors (Coatsworth, 2005).

Regime change operations in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Congo in 1961, and Chile in 1973, are among the most notorious examples of Western imperialists forcibly abrogating the democratic will of sovereign nations (Stuster, 2013). In each case, the consequences were utterly catastrophic for the poor and working people in those countries. The United Nations and its legal

institutions, such as the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, have seldom delivered justice on behalf of the powerless when they have struggled to defend themselves against imperialist intervention. The U.S. and Israel, for example, have repeatedly circumvented prosecution for war crimes simply by refusing to join the International Criminal Court (Falk, 2012).

I argue that the ability of the United Nations to promote political participation by systematically exploited countries and peoples has been hamstrung by the constraints of an unjust global imbalance of power in which the United States and European governments wield an outside, dominant position. The barriers to progressive action by the United Nations are evinced by the fact that only the five permanent members of the UN Security Council hold veto power, which includes the United States and the United Kingdom (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). As an example, this inherent disparity has enabled the U.S. to block the Palestinians, a stateless people deprived of sovereignty, from attaining full membership status and a meaningful voice and vote on the United Nations General Assembly. Even when a majority of UN Security Council members have voted in favor of Palestine's recognition as a member state, the United States uses its veto power to block it (United Nations Press Release, 2024).

In 1982, Omali Yeshitela, the anti-colonialist political theoretician who serves as the chairman of the African People's Socialist Party, put a spotlight on the systemic injustice within the international legal order. Yeshitela convened a Reparations Tribunal in Brooklyn, NY to issue an indictment of the U.S. government's treatment of Black people within the U.S. as a violation of the UN Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide. A wide and impressive array of Black political and intellectual figures provided stirring testimony and quantifiable data to calculate that 4.2 trillion dollars were owed to Black people in the U.S. for unpaid labor alone. The express mission of the 1982 tribunal, according to Yeshitela, was to "establish a precedent for the ability of a people without possession of state power to bring before the international community those states, those forces, organizations who do possess state power and who are responsible for its oppression" (Yeshitela, 2023).

In his opening statement, Yeshitela disclosed the historical origins of the modern international legal superstructure: "[W]hen much of the law that today is respected as international law was recognized, the vast majority of the world's population was under some kind of colonial bondage. Of the more than 150 recognized existing nations today, there were only 55 member nations of the United Nations upon its founding, some 75 percent of the other recognized nations existing under a state of colonialism. This means that some 75 percent of the world's population had nothing to say concerning the development of this international law. Clearly this state of affairs could not promote a respect for international law – law which was determined and interpreted by those who hold state power" (Yeshitela, 2023).

Based on Yeshitela's analysis, I conclude that the United Nations, as it stands today, bears an enormous moral and legal obligation to aggressively promote political participation and self-

determination by actively supporting the liberation struggles of the oppressed, defending their right to freely vote and otherwise participate democratically in choosing their leadership and form of government.

The UN must recognize that the Black community in the United States is chief among those oppressed groups who have shed blood in pursuit of their right to self-determination and political participation, including the right to vote. For Black people in the United States the right to vote was secured only as a consequence of their multi-generational, life-and-death struggle for civil and democratic rights. Today the suppression of Black voting rights in the U.S. “continues through tactics like gerrymandering, felony disenfranchisement, and local preemption laws,” as documented by the Economic Policy Institute (Perez, 2024).

I believe the UN must work to enforce a comprehensive redress of grievances for the legacy of crimes against humanity inflicted upon African people throughout the world that has persisted from the advent of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade until today. These atrocities have included lynchings, Jim Crow, convict leasing, mass imprisonment, redlining, gentrification, disenfranchisement, separation of children from their families and other oppressive conditions that meet the legal definition of genocide. Black activists, beginning in the early 1950s, have sought to bring this charge before the UN (Civil Rights Congress, 1951). Distinguished scholars on the study of genocide have corroborated their claim (Hinton, 2021). Therefore, I conclude that the UN can and must play a powerful role in advocating for repairing the damage caused by the colonial legacy that has frustrated and undermined the rights of oppressed nations to self-determination and democratic political participation.

Peace between nations will blossom on a foundation of justice and reparations. When all peoples and nations, from the Palestinians to the Black and Indigenous populations within U.S. borders, are free and self-determining, only then can there be a measure of restitution for the billions of human beings who have languished for centuries under the cruelty of foreign rule.

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