

Naming and Shaming and Its Consequences on Civil Conflicts

Jacob Fortier

Context

When acts of violence against civilians are widely publicized, Canada is frequently rushed to join its allies in public denunciation campaigns aimed at raising the political cost for an actor to violate human rights. Canada, for example, has distinguished itself in the [anti-apartheid campaign](#) in South Africa by seeking ways to sustain the global attention towards its internal race-based violence and by trying to influence its allies to impose sanctions against those responsible for civilian abuses. Confronted with images and reports of atrocities, international pleas for state officials to name and shame the perpetrators involved are understandable, regardless of their political statuses. However, as intuitive and necessary as these denunciations may seem, they nevertheless influence the trajectories of civil conflicts and the subsequent risks of political violence. Indeed, [studies](#) indicate that naming and shaming practices often fail to end violence against civilians, and sometimes even exacerbate abuses by radicalizing those who commit them. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on how Canada and its allies should intervene publicly to ensure the protection of human rights, while preserving the political and security stability of the regions targeted by international denunciations.

The purpose of this policy brief is twofold. First, it seeks to define naming and shaming practices and the different impacts they can have on civil conflicts. Then, it aims to critically examine current Canadian policies of international denunciation and to propose avenues that would minimize the risks for these campaigns to further exacerbate the exact human rights violations that they seek to highlight. To do this, this paper underlines the tragic consequences of the recent Western naming and shaming campaign targeting the Burmese military junta in the aftermath of the February 2021 coup, and then attempts to hypothesize on what went wrong and what could be done to avoid the harmful consequences on civilians arising from international denunciation campaigns.

A Brief History of Naming and Shaming Practices

In the aftermath of World War II, issues of human rights protection gained global prominence. The increasing number of non-governmental human rights organizations, combined with the increased global accessibility of media coverage in conflict zones, raised public awareness of these issues, while also encouraging constituents to put pressure on their representatives for international action against oppressive regimes. This resulted in the creation of a global [human rights advocacy network](#) that worked to publicize atrocities and their perpetrators (naming) and ensuring that those guilty of rights violations are socially punished (shaming).

The post-Cold War context of the 1990s proved to be fertile ground for the establishment of new norms concerning the responsibility of states to protect their populations against human rights abuses and, conversely, the moral duty of the so-called international community to ensure the protection of these rights. Indeed, global attention to security challenges gradually shifted from the nuclear threat to issues of human rights protection as [intrastate conflicts multiplied](#) and became the chief source of instability in the world. Western leaders then began to adopt the idea of [humanitarian intervention](#), that is, law enforcement interventions in the service of universal humanitarian values, in order to materialize a sense of morality in the international society. In this manner, liberal globalization and American hegemony expanded the [ideological and normative](#) terrain on which intrastate disputes operate – human rights violations became a problem to be addressed internationally and, sometimes, at the expense of state sovereignty standards. Rebels would thus [market their cause and suffering](#) via mass media and international non-governmental organization (INGO) in an effort to attain international attention, which could in turn generate a moral outrage and force the international community to act against the ‘perceived’ culprit. Through this process, it often appeared both legitimate and necessary for western democracies to speak publicly against regimes accused of crimes against their own populations and, in some instances, to go so far as to [intervene militarily](#) to prevent further bloodshed.

The post-Cold War normative shift in international politics therefore caused the practices of naming and shaming to become a widespread foreign policy tool in Western Europe and North America. States would thus join INGOs and transnational networks in their public denunciations of human rights violations and threaten regimes to invoke the responsibility to protect and vote for economic sanctions in the Security Council, or to take other coercive measures aimed at ending state abuses. This sense of global awareness and moral responsibility therefore became a new force in world politics and forever changed the way in which intra-state conflicts are fought.

How International Outrage Can Turn the Tide of Violence

How blaming policies are likely to affect an actor's ability and willingness to violate human rights remains a matter of debate. The mechanisms generally identified are as follows. First, INGOs create knowledge about the abuses and share information with relevant journalists. The media then act as a transmission belt for the local violations to become an international controversy and spread beyond borders. Conversely, the moral outrage acts as a lever to encourage foreign actors to act against violators and show support for the victims. The benefit for states to engage in moral condemnations and economic sanctions is therefore twofold: on the one hand, they avoid the [reputational damage](#) caused by inaction toward gross human rights violations, on the other; they signal their commitment to the liberal international order and the norms it perpetuates. For those targeted by the denunciations, the consequences are major. Indeed, the international disapproval of the perpetrators makes them outcasts with whom no partner wants to do business or interact with, for fear of being in turn associated with crimes against human rights. As a result, abusers [change their repressive behavior](#) if they cannot risk the loss of power, resources, allies or legitimacy that inaction in the face of such condemnation would entail.

In reality, the process is not that simple, neither is it easy for victims of human rights violations to be heard on the international stage. A struggle for the narrative is likely to take place between the perpetrators and their opposition, which risks complicating victims' efforts to publicize violations. Indeed, state violence is often [reinterpreted or concealed](#) in order to avoid any backlash that would increase dissent. Likewise, rebel groups using [violence against civilians](#) often try to portray themselves as victims, or to legitimize their violence in reaction to abuses committed by their opponents. From this angle, whether the victims succeed in making the perpetrators accountable for their crimes is highly dependent

on their ability to transmit information in the days following repressive events. [Dissident entrepreneurs](#), who mobilize supporters and ensure that information about abuses reaches as many people as possible, thus play a crucial role in turning violence against those who carry it out. Moreover, not all countries are equally likely to attract international denunciations in the wake of harsh repression. In fact, the most powerful states in the system are often [partially immune](#) to denunciation and sanction campaigns, since they can retaliate and blackmail their accusers. Similarly, states are frequently reluctant to publicly condemn their allies and economic partners, as evidenced by the [very few critics](#) from European countries Spain faced when its government used political repression against Catalan secessionists.

Another point to consider about the influence of these campaigns on the use of political violence concerns the relationship between the oppressors and the group that is oppressed. When dissident movements represent [minority groups](#), state repression is more likely to occur than when movements mobilize a larger portion of the population that political leaders must rely on to remain in power. In other words, the relationship of dependence, or the lack of dependence between perpetrators and their victims, plays a key role in the decision of states to engage in political violence to suppress their opposition, while also having an impact on the extent to which such violence will succeed in crushing dissent. This is important because in cases of minority-led resistance campaigns, third parties appear necessary to affect the [dependency relationship](#) between repressed groups and those who repress them. Indeed, by identifying and denouncing violators, foreign actors increase the cost of repressing minorities and thus bind the political fate of the oppressed to that of their oppressor. A good example of this logic is the process of independence in East Timor. Although the Indonesian invasion of East Timor led to serious abuses against the civilian population, the government in Jakarta paid little political costs until an international controversy over the Santa Cruz massacre made political repression an [increasingly untenable strategy](#) to fight the secessionist movement in East Timor. The Indonesian authorities had previously managed to portray the Timorese minority to its national population as violent and dangerous. International support and mass non-violent protests have consequently redefined this portrayal – and saw the Timorese minority become politically significant enough for the repression to cease and for negotiations to be initiated.

The Unintended Consequences of Shame and Blame on Human Rights Abuses

Other case studies indicate, however, that international denunciation campaigns can have effects that go beyond the intentions of those who implement them, and even undermine the original objectives of improving a government's human rights record. For instance, the moral and social pressure exerted on a regime can paradoxically encourage it to restrict the activities of civil society organizations in order to hide [noncompliance with human rights norms and commitments](#). This is a particularly perverse consequence since it has been shown that [civil society organizations](#) play a crucial role in ensuring the protection of human rights. In addition, when targeted by international denunciations, state perpetrators may intensify some violations, while reducing others. This is due to the [varying ability](#) of governments to improve their human rights record depending on the type of violations committed and their control over the agents of terror. Moreover, governments may [substitute certain types of violations](#) for other violations in order to avoid international blame, or even resort to pro-government militias to '[distance themselves from the execution of violence while reaping the rewards of repression](#)'. In fact, these findings echo other works suggesting that alternatives to military intervention such as [economic sanctions](#) have often [worsened rather than improved](#) human rights conditions in the target state, namely because they increase the political instability and affect the government capacity to [control its security agents](#).

How these campaigns influence the struggles between local political forces is also of great relevance if one's purpose is to put an end to human rights violations. Indeed, international pressure on a government often [strengthens local opposition](#) and dissenting voices, which in turn can spur political leaders to resort to repression against their political opponents and to [quell dissent](#). Furthermore, non-state actors sometimes benefit from international publicity generated by acts of violence against civilians, and may therefore intentionally escalate violence with their state opponent to attract foreign actors into the conflict. Worse yet, when foreign states accuse repressive governments and allude to the threat of humanitarian military intervention, they can incite minority groups to rebel and confront the state, which can lead to an increase in political violence and thus engender catastrophic consequences for civilian populations. This phenomenon has been tragically demonstrated in the former Yugoslavia, where sub-state groups have sometimes [intentionally provoked](#) genocidal violence in order to trigger Western intervention.

Shaming Perpetrators in Myanmar

The Tatmadaw coup that toppled the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar in February 2021 sparked widespread violence in the state. Shocking images of unarmed protesters being beaten, arrested in the middle of the street and tortured appeared in Western media, coupled with poignant images of protesters waving banners conveying a clear message: [‘We need R2P’](#). Denunciations and international sanctions immediately followed. Canada participated in the naming and shaming campaign against the military junta, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau even criticized the military's repressive actions [on Twitter](#).

In fact, Prime Minister Trudeau's position is in line with Canada's long-standing foreign policy towards Myanmar, as targeted sanctions against certain listed persons and entities have been in place [since 2007](#). Neither it is new for Canada to engage in such type of statecraft or to position itself as a [leading voice](#) for global human rights. Indeed, Canada, concerned with multilateral cooperation on international security, has often followed its allies in international denunciation campaigns. For example, the crackdown on the secessionist movement in East Timor had been the subject of Canadian denunciations and sanctions against [Indonesian officials](#), which led to anti-Suharto protests in Canada and to a [scathing reply](#) from Jakarta to Ottawa. However, Myanmar's recent naming and shaming campaign does not yet appear to have had the same success as in East Timor. Negotiations between the junta and foreign actors have repeatedly failed, while the violence has [continued to escalate](#). Moreover, the [political quagmire](#) in which the state is now sinking is far from unrelated to the diplomatic campaign of exclusion and denunciation aimed at the junta. Indeed, international critics and sanctions have created a [mirage of interventionism](#) and undermined mediation efforts. As a result, demonstrators now expect a more sustained commitment from the [international community](#) in their favour and, consequently, dedicate a significant part of their resistance activities to the search for international support. Interviews with rebel groups also revealed that some took the [risky gamble](#) of escalating violence with the junta in order to trigger Western intervention. Even more worryingly, these condemnations have increased the pressure on the military regime, which therefore incited the junta to increase repression in order to consolidate its power. Finally, the lack of international leadership to respond to the crisis and the dimming hopes of the opposition convinced Myanmar's shadow government to call for a [“people’s defensive war”](#) against the state’s military. The worst is happening as humanitarian organizations alarm about a [flood of refugees](#) in neighbouring states.

In turn, what seems to have failed in Myanmar is the possibility of finding a compromise that could bring the junta to the negotiating table. Indeed, the sanctions and denunciations originated from the desire of the international community to isolate the junta in order to force it to negotiate with the opposition and stop the violations. What was not intended, however, was the signal the international condemnations

conveyed to the opposition: *keep fighting and we will support you*. This, in fact, hampered the likelihood of a peaceful resolution to the conflict in addition to increasing domestic violence as the belligerents felt a sense of emergency and decided to engage in an uncompromising strategy, which only paved the way for a [civil war in the making](#).

Considerations and Recommendations for Canada

The weight and influence of words sometimes exceed one's expectations. Naming and shaming practices generate consequences for civil conflicts that are difficult to predict and may change over time. Canada should thus be cautious and strategic when it engages in moral condemnations and public denunciations against abusive governments. What could be done to prevent further tragedies is not simple, but not impossible either. For Canada, there are four courses of favourable action:

First, naming and shaming campaigns should always be explicit in their motivations and objectives. Canada must ensure that there is as little vagueness as possible about its intentions and future commitment to the conflict in order to avoid false hopes for groups fighting against repressive governments. It must also be clear that the condemnation of a repressive regime does not constitute *de facto* support for its opponents.

Second, Canada should closely consult local human rights organizations before considering any public commentary on the violence that is taking place. Although the media often exert pressure for politicians to speak on the spot about international crises, Canada's words will have a more meaningful and beneficial impact if they are prepared in coordination with actors that can actually act on the ground to put an end to the violence. In addition, the links developed with these local organizations can later serve as a basis on which Canada can contribute to peacekeeping efforts.

Thirdly, the diplomatic exclusion measures and the economic sanctions imposed by Canada must be designed in such a way as to facilitate (and not to prevent) a possible dialogue with the perpetrators. In fact, Canada must make it known, in its public denunciations, that the reduction of punitive measures requires concrete actions by those in power to reduce violence. Likewise, the imposition of punitive measures in response to human rights abuses must be gradual, so that the targeted regime can back down and has no interest in persisting in repressing. It is important that the perpetrators recognize the real advantage in stopping the violations and not rather have an interest in dodging the international sanctions that target them. Thus, campaigns must be designed in such a way as to offer an honorable exit to the regimes concerned so that they abandon their repressive tactics.

Finally, Canada must continue to engage with its allies when widespread abuses are committed against civilian populations. Indeed, Canada's voice in a humanitarian crisis will have greater reach if it is aligned with those of its allies. In addition, by engaging in dialogue with its allies before speaking out, Canada minimizes the risks that denunciations send contradictory signals to actors on the ground.