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The Effectiveness of International and Regional Human-Rights Institutions

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Abraham Omatule Victor

Center for Peace and Security Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Correspondence: Abraham Omatule Victor, ritzyvic@gmail.com

Abstract

This article critically evaluates the institutional architecture, operational efficacy, enforcement mechanisms, and systemic limitations of international and regional human-rights institutions. Spanning the United Nations human-rights treaty bodies, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and regional systems such as the European, Inter-American, and African human-rights courts and commissions, this study examines the perennial tension between sovereign state autonomy and supranational legal accountability. Utilizing a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework combining Legal Positivism, Institutional Realism, and Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) Theory, the paper analyzes why certain human-rights regimes achieve compliance while others suffer from chronic enforcement deficits, diplomatic interference, and structural underfunding. Through empirical case synthesis, the findings demonstrate that institutional effectiveness is not merely a function of formal legal mandate, but depends heavily on domestic political mobilization, judicial independence, and regional peer pressure. The study concludes by proposing an integrated reform model designed to strengthen compliance mechanisms, enhance institutional synergy, and bridge the gap between normative pronouncements and ground-level human-rights protection.

Keywords: International, Regional, Human-Rights Institutions, Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) Theory, Legal Positivism

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Introduction

The establishment of the modern international human-rights architecture following the Second World War marked a revolutionary shift in international law. For centuries, the treatment of citizens within a sovereign state was regarded as an exclusively domestic matter shielded by the doctrine of state sovereignty. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and subsequent global and regional treaties shattered this Westphalian insulation, positing that human dignity is a matter of legitimate international concern. To operationalize these norms, states created a complex network of international and regional human-rights institutions (HRIs). These include UN charter-based bodies (such as the Human Rights Council), treaty-monitoring bodies (such as the Human Rights Committee), international tribunals (the ICC and ICJ), and robust regional systems like the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), and the African Court and Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACtHPR/ACHPR).

However, a persistent institutional paradox defines the human-rights regime: While normative legal standards have expanded exponentially, enforcement mechanisms remain structurally weak, relying fundamentally on the voluntary consent and compliance of sovereign states. When powerful states commit systemic abuses or authoritarian regimes ignore binding judgments, supranational institutions frequently lack the physical or coercive power to compel compliance. Evaluating the real-world effectiveness of these institutions is essential to diagnosing structural failures and reforming global human-rights governance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the proliferation of human-rights treaties and monitoring bodies, gross violations of fundamental rights including war crimes, systemic discrimination, suppression of dissent, and extrajudicial executions persist globally. A primary institutional challenge is the compliance gap. International and regional HRIs are frequently plagued by structural deficiencies: chronic underfunding, massive backlogs of individual communications, lack of direct enforcement powers, and profound vulnerability to political manipulation by powerful member states. Furthermore, the global rise of authoritarian populism, democratic backsliding, and nationalist pushback has severely tested the resilience of regional courts, with several states threatening withdrawal or non-compliance. The core research problem is how international and regional human-rights institutions can overcome their structural reliance on state consent to achieve meaningful compliance and accountability, particularly when confronted with defiant sovereign governments.

Aim and Objectives of the study

The primary aim of this study is to critically evaluate the operational effectiveness, enforcement mechanisms, and systemic limitations of international and regional human-rights institutions in contemporary global governance. The Specific Objectives of the study include to:

1. examine the theoretical frameworks explaining state compliance with international and regional human-rights law.
2. evaluate the institutional structure, reporting procedures, and enforcement capacities of United Nations human-rights mechanisms.
3. compare the jurisprudential impact and compliance records of regional human-rights systems (European, Inter-American, and African systems).
4. analyze the political, structural, and financial obstacles that hinder the operational effectiveness of international courts and tribunals.
5. propose a comprehensive institutional reform model to enhance compliance, enforcement, and

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transnational coordination among human-rights bodies.

Research Questions

1. Why do sovereign states choose to comply with or defy decisions rendered by international and regional human-rights courts?
2. How effective are UN charter-based and treaty-monitoring bodies in pressuring states to reform domestic human-rights practices?
3. What are the key institutional differences explaining the varying success rates of the European, Inter-American, and African regional human-rights systems?
4. How do political interference, state sovereignty assertions, and financial constraints undermine the efficacy of global tribunals like the ICC?
5. What structural and institutional reforms are necessary to bridge the gap between human-rights adjudication and state compliance?

Significance of the Study

This research contributes significantly to international law, political science, and human-rights jurisprudence in several ways:

i. **Empirical Diagnostics:** It provides a rigorous comparative analysis of institutional strengths and weaknesses across global and regional systems.
ii. **Policy Guidance:** It offers actionable reform recommendations for policymakers, international organizations, and civil society actors seeking to optimize human-rights oversight.
iii. **Theoretical Integration:** It bridges legal formalism with political realism, offering a realistic assessment of how human-rights law operates in a decentralized international system.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework combining **Institutional Realism**, **Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) Theory**, and **Legal Compliance Constructivism**.

Institutional Realism and Rational Choice

Realist scholars (Mearsheimer, 1994; Posner, 2009) argue that international institutions possess little independent enforcement power. States comply with human-rights judgments only when it aligns with their national self-interest, geopolitical alliances, or desire to avoid diplomatic costs. When high-stakes national security or regime survival is at stake, human-rights institutions are routinely sidelined.

Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs)

Contrasting pure realism, Keck and Sikkink (1998) demonstrate that international norms are enforced through Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs). When domestic governments abuse human rights and block internal accountability, local activists utilize the "boomerang effect" appealing to international institutions and foreign allies to exert external pressure on the abusive state, thereby altering domestic political calculations.

Methodology

The methodology adopted here is descriptive design based on content analysis. It was employed in analyzing, describing and interpreting data since it is predominantly a desk research, which means data was sourced basically from secondary sources. Through the content analysis the paper arrived at the following findings and conclusion.

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Results and Analysis

Theoretical frameworks explaining state compliance with international and regional human-rights law.

The central puzzle in international human-rights law is why sovereign states choose to comply with non-coercive supranational rulings in the absence of a global police force. Political science and international legal scholarship have developed three primary theoretical models to explain this dynamic (Hathaway, 2002; Simmons, 2009):

i. **Legal Positivism and Formalism:** Positivist theory posits that states comply because they have entered into binding legal agreements through sovereign consent (pacta sunt servanda). However, real-world experience demonstrates that formal legal obligation alone is insufficient to secure compliance when high-stakes domestic political interests are threatened (Posner, 2009).

ii. **Institutional Realism and Rational Choice:** Realists argue that international institutions possess negligible independent coercive power. States calculate compliance rationally based on material costs and benefits—such as avoiding trade sanctions, securing foreign aid, or maintaining favorable diplomatic reputations. When compliance imposes an unacceptable threat to regime survival or national security, realists contend that states routinely ignore international rulings (Mearsheimer, 1994; Posner, 2009).

iii. **Constructivism and Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs):** Constructivist scholars argue that compliance is driven by norm diffusion, social identity, and domestic political mobilization. Keck and Sikkink (1998) demonstrated how **Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs)** utilize the "boomerang effect"—bypassing repressive domestic governments to appeal to international bodies, which in turn pressure local elites. Furthermore, Simmons (2009) established that human-rights treaties succeed when they empower domestic litigants, opposition parties, and civil society actors to use international law as a domestic political tool to alter local governance outcomes. Recent scholarship emphasizes that compliance is increasingly mediated by digital civil society mobilization and real-time transnational monitoring (Simmons, 2023; Bodansky, 2025).

Institutional structure, reporting procedures, and enforcement capacities of United Nations human-rights mechanisms

The United Nations human-rights architecture operates through a dual system of Charter-based bodies and Treaty-based monitoring bodies (Alston & Goodman, 2013):

i. **Charter-Based Bodies (The Human Rights Council & UPR):** Created under the UN Charter, the Human Rights Council (HRC) addresses global violations and conducts the **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)**—a peer-review mechanism where every UN member state's human-rights record is evaluated every four and a half years. While the UPR successfully engages all states in a continuous diplomatic dialogue, critics note that it suffers from diplomatic backscratching, political bloc-voting, and a lack of binding enforcement against persistent abusers (Donnelly, 2013).

ii. **Treaty-Based Bodies (Expert Committees):** Ten core human-rights treaties (such as the ICCPR, ICESCR, and CAT) establish independent committees of experts that review state party reports, issue general comments, and adjudicate individual communications.

iii. **The Enforcement Deficit:** Despite their rigorous jurisprudential output, UN treaty bodies face severe structural bottlenecks: chronic underfunding, massive reporting backlogs, non-binding recommendations, and a reliance on voluntary state compliance. Without independent coercive enforcement or direct punitive mechanisms, UN bodies rely entirely on moral suasion and diplomatic shaming (Alston & Goodman, 2013; Bodansky, 2025).

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Compare the jurisprudential impact and compliance records of regional human-rights systems (European, Inter-American, and African systems).

Regional human-rights systems frequently outperform global UN mechanisms because geographical proximity, shared legal traditions, and regional peer pressure foster higher compliance incentives (Burgorgue-Larsen, 2024):

i. **The European System (ECtHR):** Anchored by the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, this is the most legally enforceable and binding regional human-rights regime in the world. ECtHR judgments are legally binding on member states of the Council of Europe, and the Court has pioneered innovative enforcement tools like the pilot-judgment procedure to address systemic domestic human-rights violations (Wildhaber, 2006).
ii. **The Inter-American System (IACtHR):** Operating under the Organization of American States (OAS), the Inter-American Commission and Court have generated groundbreaking jurisprudence on transitional justice, indigenous land rights, and state accountability for enforced disappearances and state terror. However, compliance varies significantly across Latin America, constrained by deep political polarization and pushbacks from populist administrations (Pasqualucci, 2019).
iii. **The African System (ACHPR & ACtHPR):** The African regional system uniquely integrates individual civil rights with collective peoples' rights and duties under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Viljoen, 2012). While the African Court (ACtHPR) has issued landmark binding judgments protecting indigenous property rights (e.g., the Endorois case) and freedom of expression, its efficacy is chronically undermined by low state ratification of the Court protocol, restrictions on direct individual access, and outright non-compliance by defiant member states (Mutua, 2013; Viljoen, 2024).

Political, structural, and financial obstacles that hinder the operational effectiveness of international courts and tribunals

International criminal tribunals and human-rights courts operate in a hostile political environment characterized by state sovereignty assertions and structural vulnerabilities (Schabas, 2017):

i. **The Crisis of the International Criminal Court (ICC):** Established by the Rome Statute, the ICC was designed to end impunity for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. However, its effectiveness has been hobbled by major structural hurdles. Because the ICC lacks its own police force, it relies entirely on state cooperation to execute arrest warrants. This dependency explains why high-profile suspects evade custody for years. Furthermore, geopolitical friction—including non-membership by major global powers (the US, China, Russia) and past diplomatic friction with African Union member states over perceived selective prosecution—has severely tested the Court's institutional legitimacy (Kersten, 2016; Schabas, 2017).
ii. **Financial Underfunding and Case Backlogs:** Supranational bodies across the UN and regional systems face deliberate financial starvation by member states seeking to weaken independent oversight. Chronic budgetary constraints result in debilitating case backlogs, delaying justice for victims by years (Alston & Goodman, 2013; Burgorgue-Larsen, 2024).
iii. **Democratic Backsliding and Sovereign Pushback:** The global rise of authoritarian populism has triggered a wave of institutional backlash. Several governments have launched smear campaigns against international judges, restricted the domestic operations of human-rights NGOs, or threatened complete withdrawal from regional human-rights treaties (Posner, 2009).

Comprehensive institutional reform model to enhance compliance, enforcement, and transnational

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coordination among human-rights bodies

To bridge the gap between human-rights adjudication and state compliance, institutional architecture must be modernized through structural and cooperative reforms (Simmons, 2023; Bodansky, 2025):

i. **Strengthening Enforcement and Sanctioning Mechanisms:** Regional organizations (such as the African Union, OAS, and Council of Europe) must codify clear political and economic consequences including voting suspensions and financial penalties for member states that systematically ignore binding court judgments.
ii. **Enhancing Institutional Synergy and Cross-System Dialogue:** Create permanent coordination channels between UN treaty bodies, regional courts, and domestic constitutional tribunals. Establishing institutionalized judicial dialogue ensures that supranational jurisprudence is seamlessly integrated into domestic legal systems (Shelton, 2015).
iii. **Securing Sustainable Financial Autonomy:** Move away from volatile voluntary state contributions by transitioning UN and regional human-rights bodies toward independent, protected budgetary allocations that insulate judicial institutions from political funding manipulation (Alston & Goodman, 2013).
iv. **Empowering Domestic Civil Society and TANs:** Because international institutions cannot enforce judgments alone, reform models must actively invest in protecting domestic human-rights defenders, civil society organizations, and local legal aid networks. Empowering local actors ensures that international rulings are forcefully championed within domestic political arenas (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Simmons, 2023).

The United Nations System

The UN system operates through two primary mechanisms: **Charter-based bodies** (such as the Human Rights Council and its Universal Periodic Review - UPR) and **Treaty-based bodies** (committees monitoring core conventions like the ICCPR and CAT).

Strengths: Universal state participation, standard-setting, and diplomatic peer review.

Weaknesses: Lack of binding enforcement powers, reliance on voluntary state reporting, and vulnerability to political bloc-voting within the Human Rights Council.

Regional Human-Rights Systems

Regional systems often achieve higher compliance rates than global bodies due to shared legal traditions, cultural proximity, and regional peer pressure.

i. **The European System:** Anchored by the ECtHR, it represents the most legally binding and structurally enforceable human-rights court globally, with judgments directly impacting domestic legislation.
ii. **The Inter-American System:** The IACtHR has developed powerful jurisprudence on transitional justice, indigenous land rights, and state accountability, though enforcement varies across politically volatile states.
iii. **The African System:** Integrating the African Commission and the African Court (ACtHPR), this system uniquely incorporates collective peoples' rights and duties. However, low state ratification of the Court protocol and non-compliance with provisional measures remain significant hurdles (Viljoen, 2012; Mutua, 2013).

Summary of Findings

1. **The Enforcement Deficit:** Supranational human-rights institutions lack independent coercive

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apparatuses (police or military forces), making compliance contingent on domestic political will and international diplomatic pressure.

2. **The Power of Regional Courts:** Regional systems (particularly Europe and parts of the Inter-American system) outperform global UN bodies in enforcing judgments because of institutional proximity and binding legal mechanisms.
3. **The Crucial Role of Civil Society:** International institutions rarely succeed in isolation; their effectiveness is directly proportional to the strength of domestic civil society actors and Transnational Advocacy Networks leveraging international rulings locally.
4. **Political Backlash and Sovereignty Assertions:** Increased nationalist populism and sovereignty rhetoric have led several states to restrict NGO operations, withdraw from regional courts, or ignore binding human-rights judgments.

Conclusion

International and regional human-rights institutions occupy a paradoxical position in global governance: they possess immense moral and normative authority, yet operate with fragile institutional enforcement mechanisms. While they cannot unilaterally stop state atrocities, they establish vital normative baselines, provide justice for individual victims, and empower domestic civil society movements. Enhancing their effectiveness requires strengthening institutional independence, securing sustainable funding, and fostering robust domestic enforcement coalitions. The evolution of international and regional human-rights institutions (HRIs) over the past eight decades represents one of the most remarkable developments in modern supranational jurisprudence and global governance. By transforming fundamental human rights from domestic matters protected behind sovereign Westphalian borders into legally binding international obligations, HRIs have established an unprecedented normative baseline for state behavior.

However, as this comprehensive study has demonstrated, the real-world operational efficacy of these bodies remains defined by a central institutional paradox: supranational human-rights institutions possess immense moral, legal, and interpretive authority, yet operate with inherently fragile enforcement mechanisms that depend fundamentally on voluntary state consent and domestic political cooperation. A foundational theoretical contribution of this research is the rejection of simplistic assessments that label human-rights institutions as either total successes or absolute failures. Viewed through the lens of Institutional Realism, HRIs lack independent coercive apparatuses (such as standing armies or police forces) to enforce compliance when powerful states actively defy supranational rulings.

Yet, when evaluated through Constructivist Theory and Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) Models, the primary power of these institutions lies not in physical coercion, but in their capacity to reframe domestic political incentives. Rulings from international and regional bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR), and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACtHPR) serve as authoritative legal levers. They empower domestic civil society networks, litigants, opposition movements, and independent national human rights institutions (NHRIs) to mobilize locally, utilize the "boomerang effect," and pressure state elites to enact legislative, judicial, and structural reforms.

Therefore, institutional effectiveness is best understood as a co-dependent, multi-tiered dynamic: supranational rulings provide the normative standard and legal legitimacy, but domestic political mobilization and judicial independence remain the essential engines of real-world compliance. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, international and regional human-rights systems confront severe headwinds. The global resurgence of authoritarian populism, democratic backsliding, and aggressive assertions of national sovereignty has placed unprecedented strain on global human-rights governance.

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Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Binding Enforcement Mechanisms:** Member states and regional organizations (such as the African Union and the Council of Europe) must establish robust political and economic sanctions for persistent non-compliance with binding human-rights judgments.
2. **Enhance Institutional Resourcing:** International donors and UN member states must drastically increase budgetary allocations for treaty bodies and regional courts to eliminate crippling case backlogs.
3. **Protect Civil Society and TANs:** International institutions must create robust protective frameworks for human-rights defenders, journalists, and NGOs facing state reprisals.
4. **Foster Domestic Judicial Dialogue:** Encourage continuous judicial dialogue between supranational courts and domestic constitutional tribunals to embed international human-rights norms into domestic legal systems.

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