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Human rights activists overlook worst offenders

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At no other time in history have people around the world cared so much about one another. The interconnectivity of humanity today, mainly through the Internet, has permeated our lives and drawn more people to caring about others and to giving and supporting charities. That is the good news.

Because choosing your cause requires financial commitment, time and energy, it must speak to your heart and soul. More often than not, people become involved in causes they personally have a vested interest in from a historical context, or because of altruistic values they were raised with to help others and do the right thing to make our world a better place.

Unfortunately, we all have limited time and resources on our hands. For those of us interested in improvement of the condition of humanity - human rights, in other words - there are an infinite number of local and global social issues to choose from, most of which are worthy.

On a local basis, for instance, there is poverty, homelessness, crime, illness and disease, racism and intolerance, education, the environment, science and research, interfaith dialogue and religious institutions. Globally, one can apply the same issues and add to them conflict, genocide, war (or the threat of nuclear war), terrorism, famine, epidemics, national development, catastrophic emergencies (for example, Haiti or Japan), and so on.

At the same time, human rights activism has become complicated, and in many instances, individuals and institutions have found that some groups that preach human rights have questionable practices and links. There are plenty of organizations that run public programs such as food bank fundraisers, interfaith dialogues and community events, while privately demonstrating intolerance for others. These groups are simply cover operations that continue to be exposed by organizations that specifically monitor these issues, the media and government.

There is also the matter of upside-down human rights activism, often tied to an agenda counter to democratic values and sometimes bred from sheer ignorance or a myopic view

of the world. Navi Pillay, the UN high commissioner for human rights, was recently criticized by Canadians across the country for her critique of Quebec's handling of the student protests - arguing that Canadian laws were too restrictive.

Pillay conveniently left out real human rights abusers like China and Cuba, which do not provide their citizens with freedom, democracy and human rights, let alone the right to protest these systemic abuses.

This nasty trend set out by the world's ostensibly top human rights organization has watered down our understanding of human rights in an effort to turn civil society's focus away from real abusers and toward criticism of western democracies.

Many institutional human rights organizations justify this disregard for real abusers such as Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia by stating they must hold democracies to a higher standard - a twisted concept that explains how Syria's Bashar al-Assad continues his slaughter of more than 13,000 people with relative impunity. This double standard is furthermore racist because it presupposes that it is beyond the ability of oppressive nations to practice human rights.

In truth, democracies are easier to pick on and elicit a reaction from than are repressive nations - they also have posh five-star hotels, and are safe and secure locations for activists to visit and not get shot at. Groups like the United Church of Canada, CUPE Ontario, Queers Against Israeli Apartheid and others easily disregard really oppressive societies and self-select condemnation of westernized societies such as Canada or Israel, thereby undermining them and providing cover for truly abusive people and nations.

My recommendation to those involved or wanting to be involved in human rights activism: define human rights for yourself; ask yourself if western democratic rights and values are central to your being; look for double standards and political agendas and thoroughly research and investigate the cause.

In today's environment of transnational ties, it is an absolute must for anyone willing and wishing to become an activist to feel 100 per cent certain the organization is truly concerned about advancing human rights.

As Irish filmmaker Nicky Larkin recently realized upon investigating the anti-Israel Irish attitude, "sometimes the left can be right - as in, right wing."

The lines between right and left have blurred in recent years and society is quickly moving toward a values-based approach.

What are your core values?

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