

2007: The return to the traditional security paradigm?

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The start of each new year brings the familiar pundit forecasts for the political and economic year ahead. At continental level numerous issues are calling for attention. These include the burning violence in Sudan's Darfur region; northern Uganda's fledgling peace process between the Museveni regime and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA); and the now-deteriorating situation in the Horn of Africa – a result of the clashes between Ethiopian troops and the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) on Somali territory towards the end of 2006. The fallout from these hostilities has meant that the Horn of Africa may receive more prominent international attention, which it has not enjoyed since the ill-fated US foray into Somalia in 1993. At global level it is clear that the 'war on terror' remains the ultimate foreign policy imperative for the US administration. It can also be expected to play a major influencing factor on the foreign policy orientation for the UK and the European Union.

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One could therefore argue that 2007 will look very much like 2006. Aside from the political facts and fiction that will influence hardcore policy-making in the capitals of power, there are the traditional 'soft' issues such as humanitarian relief and development assistance to the so-called Third World that take a standard place on the foreign policy agendas. These humanitarian issues have largely been perceived as being part of the social and moral obligation to populations in the 'Third World,' rather than part of the wider political issues pertaining to governance and transparency.

The de-linking of issues between the economic and social realm has become somewhat established when approaching African conflicts. However, what is particularly interesting is the move from approaching the concept of refuge and asylum as political towards viewing refugees as security threats or mental/physical health victims. Certainly the tremendous increase in global migration through the rapid process of globalisation (some coupled with major changes in the post-Cold War era) has meant that the idea of 'citizenship' has been fundamentally challenged. Despite these shifts, however, the situation of stateless people has never been more precarious, emphasising that such status opens the individual to a constant state of flux which is relegated to the realm of the 'humanitarian' rather than seen as the concrete outcome of political realities.

These concerns have been eloquently summed up in a research paper for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) by Vanessa Pupavac (2006). She sees the current management of refugee concerns, which uses a health and bureaucratic paradigm, as a negative development and one that diminishes the agency of refugees. Using Hannah Arendt's key works as a base, Pupavac argues that the weak sense of political subjectivity of refugees excludes them from any sense of belonging. Arendt boldly asserts that the state-based model of citizenship has confined a large part of the world's population to the position of non-entities:

As long as mankind is nationally and territorially organized in states, a stateless person is not simply expelled from one country, native or adopted, but from all countries – none being obliged to receive and naturalize him, which means he is actually expelled from humanity.

The current use of the war on terror and its increasing imposition of militarism as foreign and domestic policy threaten to set back any gains made by civil rights and the human security approaches to human security. International policy towards refugees and other migrants has shifted towards seeing the refugee not as an individual, but as a collective problem and more often than not as a threat to the security of the host country. The stereotypes around the economic impact of accepting refugees and migrants have also fed a whole new discourse of xenophobia from within African countries. This is perhaps most aptly demonstrated by the recent attacks on a large number of Somalis who live in South Africa's Western Cape region. And while there is a great deal of contention around

whether these attacks are truly representative of an anti-foreign sentiment or merely part of the overall climate of crime in South Africa, they highlight an emerging and worrying trend of securitisation of sovereignty that in effect depoliticises questions of asylum and refuge. Thus, as Pupavac suggests, there is now marked change in emphasis from state threats to the threat of individuals. She writes that there is a

... shift in concern from security threats as other states to non-state actors. These changing security concerns have been discussed as a shift from geopolitics to biopolitics, which seeks to restrict mobility and keep people in their place rather than champion the rights of the stateless. The rights of man are still the rights of citizens (Pupavac 2006:10).

In the African context, the situation of the Somalis is perhaps the most acute, since they are stateless even within the borders of the territory of Somalia. However, the plight of thousands of people who have sought refuge from political or economic conditions of hardship in their countries of origin is perpetually determined by their individual 'responsibility' to their new host country rather than the reverse. This speaks to a new interpretation of the 1951 Convention on Refugees, which was steeped in responsibility to protect the individual. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that the global war on terror, and its accompanying paradigm that pits 'us' against 'them', has altered fundamental principles of human rights, particularly as they relate to the world's most marginalised people. The loss of political status of asylum seekers threatens to take us back to the Cold War understanding of human security.

Bibliography

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