

BOOK REVIEWHuman Rights and Development in Africa,

Edited by

Calude E. Welch and Robert I. Meltzer,
New York: State University of New York Press,
1984, pp.349, Price: Not stated.

Perhaps the most topical, international and political theme of the current world order is human rights. Not only have these rights been enshrined in international documents but also in national organic laws. Although in approach a whole world separates their efficacy in the Western democracies and the Socialist nations, mainly because of the insistence of the Western nations that the rights be confined to the "traditional" rights... the right to life, the person and property, freedom of speech, assembly, conscience, movement... etc... and the insistence of the Eastern countries of extending the rights to cover the economic and social rights - housing, education, employment, medicare, pensions etc - of citizens, yet the universality of the theme is incontrovertible.

In the African region itself the importance of the theme is sometimes minimised and castigated as a bourgeois concept. African leaders argue that the problems of industrial development and rapid economic change cannot be solved while people make a song and dance about human rights especially the traditional ones. The period immediately following independence is akin to an emergency requiring tough, if not draconian measures to consolidate the gains of political independence and to usher in the millennium of economic prosperity. Human rights, it is argued must necessarily be sacrificed for the attainment of accelerated industrialisation and economic sufficiency.

Fallacious as these arguments are, they have been propagated by some of Africa's most respected leaders. The topics covered by these readings belie the views of these African leaders. At the same time, they set out to establish a moral basis for Africa's opposition to the apartheid system of South Africa - see for example the chapter by R. W. Weisfelder, titled 'Human Rights under Majority Rule in Southern Africa the Mote in Thy Brother's Eye'.

Again the tendency to treat the human rights theme as a foreign contraption has been shown to be palpably erroneous by L. Merasinghe whose essay titled: 'Traditional Concepts of Human Rights in Africa' deals with the traditional African (Yoruba) family system and rights of members, the right to own property, freedom of religion and conscience... etc.

The OAU Charter on Human and People's Rights comes under scrutiny in three separate chapters. The treatment of the background of the Charter by Edward Kannyo pitches it admirably in the context of the savagery of the rule of Amin, Bokassa and Macias. Against the background of the norm of respect for the sovereignty and independence of member nations, he analyses the invasion of Uganda in 1979 by Tanzanian forces.

The controversial nexus between development and Human Rights is treated in the chapter by Jack Donnelly titled: 'The Rights to Development: How Not to Link Rights and Development'.

The international aspect of the theme is not left out and several contributors attempted to define 'Human Rights' a not-altogether-fruitful undertaking because of the dangers inherent in any attempt at definition.

All told, this volume is an invaluable addition to the ever-growing literature on the Human Rights theme.

H.A. AMANKWAH,
Faculty of Law.
University of Papua New Guinea.