

25-Nation Poll Finds Worldwide Support for Principles in Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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Most Favor UN Taking a Larger Role in Promoting Human Rights

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A WorldPublicOpinion.org study of 25 nations from around the world has found a remarkable degree of consensus in support of the principles enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which will celebrate its 60th anniversary on December 10. But there are certain limits--when presented difficult conditions, such as the potential for political instability, publics in a few nations back away from unequivocal support for some rights, though most publics do not.

Majorities or pluralities in all nations polled (on average 7 in 10) support the idea that the UN should make efforts to promote the human rights established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In nearly all nations, majorities (on average 65%) favor the UN making even greater efforts and a similar number favor the idea of giving the UN power to go into countries to investigate human rights abuses.

Majorities in all the nations polled, including those with authoritarian governments, endorse the principles that:

- people should be free to express their opinions, including criticism of the government;
- people should have the right to demonstrate peacefully;
- the media should be free of government control;
- people should be treated equally irrespective of religion, gender, race or ethnicity;
- governments should be responsible for ensuring that their citizens can meet their basic needs for food, healthcare and education;
- the will of the people should be the basis for the authority of government and government leaders should be selected through free elections with universal suffrage.

Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org comments, "It is quite remarkable to find this high degree of consensus on so many questions regarding human rights, especially given how much conflict there has been on these issues over the last decades." He adds, "While practices sometimes lag behind principles, the norms expressed in the UDHR are prevalent around the globe."

At the same time, in some nations, though not most, when there is a threat of political instability people show a readiness to let the government impose limits on various forms of expression and the media.

The poll of 25 nations was conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org, a worldwide network of research centers managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. Interviews were conducted primarily in two waves, from December 2007 to April 2008 and from July to October 2008. Sample sizes within a wave ranged from about 600 respondents to as high as 3,200. Thus, the margins of error per public ranged from 1.9 to 4.1 percent. Overall, approximately 20,000 respondents were interviewed in the first wave and approximately 26,000 in the second; a total of more than 47,000 respondents participated in the study. Funding for this study was provided by the Oak Foundation and the Calvert Foundation.

The study was conducted in 25 nations, plus three additional Chinese publics (Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), that include over 60 percent of the world's population. Most nations were polled in both waves, but some participated in only one wave. Also, in each wave a few questions were not asked in all countries.

Polling data on the Universal Declaration in general, the role of the UN, freedom of expression and freedom of religion are being released for the first time, while some material on other rights was released previously.

Large majorities in all nations polled say that it is important for people to have the right to express any opinion, including criticism of the government (69% to 98%--on average 88%), and to demonstrate peacefully (53% to 94%--on average 75%). Majorities or pluralities in 16 out of 20 nations say that their government should not have "the right to prohibit certain political or religious views from being discussed," with an average of 57 percent holding this view. However, majorities in Kenya (67%), Thailand (63%), and Indonesia (55%) say the government should have such a right. A common feature of these three countries is that they have all recently experienced political instability.

Similarly, large majorities in all nations say that it is important "for people of different religions to be treated equally" (74% to 99%--on average 89%). When asked whether followers of "any religion" should be allowed to practice in their country, majorities or pluralities in 16 out of 20 nations say they should--but majorities say there are "some religions that should not be allowed" in Egypt (67%), Ukraine (54%), and Jordan (51%), while views are divided in South Korea. Views are also divided on whether people should have the right to try to convert members of other religions to join theirs, with more nations saying that they should not (14) than saying that they should (6). Publics in European nations and in Muslim nations express the highest levels of discomfort about proselytizing activities.

The study also addresses whether views on human rights in majority-Muslim nations differ from the views in other nations. In response to some questions majority-Muslim nations appear disproportionately among those who deviate from the dominant norm, but in every case there are other majority-Muslim nations that strongly align with the global norm. Turks and Indonesians, for example, often give responses supportive of human rights that are above world averages.

Thus there is not a consistent basis for concluding Islam itself is a factor at odds with the principles of the Declaration.

Another part of the world sometimes designated as having different values regarding human rights and democracy is East Asia. Yet for the region as a whole, there is no pattern that distinguishes people's views clearly from those of the world as a whole. China has majorities higher than the world average saying it is very important that the media be free to publish without government control; that people should be free to read anything on the Internet; and that the Chinese media should have more freedom than they do now.

The United States is often assumed to be resistant to the concept of social and economic rights. In fact, belief in a government responsibility to ensure that citizens can meet their basic needs for food, healthcare and education is below the world average in the United States--but in no case is it below three in four Americans.