In the last two decades, no other ideas have gained the totemic status that ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ have attained in global and African public policy and academic discourses. From Cambodia to Kenya, democracy and human rights were the rallying cries of the 1990s reform movements that have radically reshaped the politics of most African states. While initially rejected and rejected as Western impositions by many African leaders (many of them relics of the Cold War), the indignity of the voices for democracy and human rights were never in doubt, particularly among the victims of injustice and misrule in Africa.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that no matter how benign, ideas and concepts are always intertwined with power and the values of their promoters; that, indeed, every idea and concept, and even more so those which speak the language of liberation and freedom, should be subjected to critical analysis. This is the meaning of Isra Shavit’s caution, long before the onset of the ‘Democracy and Human Rights’ in the 1990s, that the idea of human rights in Africa was not politically innocent (Shivji 1989: viii).

We need to dispense with a possible preliminary misconception, however. The approach of this paper is not a rejection of the well intentioned promotion of democracy and human rights in Africa by Western activists, academics or even states. Far from it. Indeed, the work of committed activists and ordinary Westerners who support groups such as Amnesty International can be seen in many places in Africa, pro-democracy and human rights work has gained immensely from grants by Western governments.

However, democracy and human rights are promiscuous concepts, sometimes appropriated by the powerful and recruited for morally problematic ‘causes’. Good ideas can also end up serving bad ends when their theoretical and pragmatic premises are taken out of context. Bad ideas can also end up serving good ends when their theoretical and practical premises are taken out of context.

Most policy and international affairs experts understood that argument to apply to contexts of mass slaughter or genocide, similar to what happened in Rwanda in 1994. In practice, however, the appetite for the use of Western military force to ‘do good’ in the developing world has been growing with new grounds for humanitarian intervention ‘being promoted in policy think-tanks and academic circles.

What has come to be known as ‘humanitarian intervention’ gained ascendancy in policy and academic circles in the West following NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The failure of the international community to decisively act to prevent the Rwanda genocide in 1994 has also heavily influenced the discussion surrounding the use of military force to ‘save strangers’ faced with the peril of genocide or mass slaughter.

Filtered through the language of morality and ethics, this new form of humanitarianism rejects any suggestion that it is imperialistic. In fact, Paul Collier, writing in the July-August 2009 issue of Boston Review, has sharply rejected this criticism of Western humanitarian and human rights’ organizations and the United Nations. That the use of the weapons of war in “rescuing” others has also led to a conceptual shift in the principles of humanitarianism. Where, in the past, the humanitarian movement stressed its neutrality in contexts of armed conflict, certain sections of the humanitarianism movement now advocate the use of military force in the name of humanity. In fact, the earliest advocate of an international ‘right to intervene’ is Bernard Kouchner, the founder of the Human Rights and Humanitarian Rescue

However, the humanitarian justification advanced by scholars like Paul Collier is not universally accepted in those countries where military interventions take place. Certainly, it was not accepted in Iraq, even though some in official Washington and think-tanks circles pushed the argument. Having failed to stop the United States from invading Iraq, the UN’s attempt to be a part of the post-war normalization and reconstruction of the country was seen by the insurgents as an attempt to legitimate the US military intervention. In 2003, the UN headquarters in Baghdad was attacked and its representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was among the victims.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), universally known as the very symbol of humanitarian neutrality, was also attacked in Iraq in 2003. In his book, The Humanitarians, David Forsythe, as a leading expert on the ICRC, has pointed out that the ICRC was well known in Iraq, having operated in the country since the days of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. The reason the ICRC was targeted this time was because it was no longer seen as neutral—the consequence of the erosion of the idea of neutral humanitarianism.

For some, the ICRC was probably attacked for the same reason the UN headquarters had been attacked some weeks earlier, leading to the death of Sergio de Mello, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Iraq, among others. No matter how much the UN or the ICRC might try to signal that they were separate from the US-led coalition forces, for example by not fortifying their in-country headquarters, their work for the Iraqi people dovetailed with US objectives. In working for human conditions in war-torn Iraq, the ICRC inherently contributed to the US strategic objective of creating a stable Iraq for a new regime. Those carrying out the attacks most likely wanted chaos, disorder, insecurity—just at a period when foreign occupation before a new pro-Western regime was secure. Probably for these same reasons, the head of CARE in Iraq was kidnapped by unknown persons in the fall of 2004 (Forsythe 2005: 99).

Conor Foley, writing in the UK Guardian in May 2004, has noted that in places like Iraq and Afghanistan these humanitarian ‘emblems’ designed to protect NGOs and other humanitarian actors, are now identified as ‘legitimate targets’ (Foley 2004). In other cases, the humanitarian agencies and the United Nations saw them as extensions of the American military mission.

Development experts and humanitarian actors who continue to assume that their mission in such contexts is not serving the interests of intervening state only delude themselves. At the onset of the war in Afghanistan, the US Secretary of State Colin Powell invited NGOs as subcontractors to the US mission, noting that ‘NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of the team [that we are] all committed to the same, singular purpose to help humankind...’ (Brauman and Saligoun 2004: 269-70).

Even such apparent supporters of the war in Iraq such as the Canadian scholar and politician Michael Ignatieff have concluded that the humanitarian governance imposed after intervention is ‘imperial because it requires imperial means: garrison troops and foreign civilian administrators, and because it serves imperial interests’ (Ignatieff 2003: 59).

Moreover, while the politics of human rights and humanitarian rescue by the insurgents as an attempt to legitimize the US military intervention. In 2003, the UN headquarters in Baghdad was attacked and its representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was among the victims.

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Moreover, while the politics of human rights and humanitarian rescue
Africa (Collier 2009a: 203) Collier is not alone in viewing ethnicity as Africa’s destiny. Many analysts share the view that ethnicity is the basic identity of most Africans and not the nation-state. This explains why Collier, in his book, makes ethnicity a central theme in his discussion of the problems of bad governance. The impact of ethnicity on the political life of Africa is considerable and the recognition of this fact is long overdue. While Collier’s book is a significant contribution to the understanding of the problems of bad governance in Africa, it is not a complete solution. To study Africa as though everything about it is binary - good versus evil, black versus white, or African versus Western - is not useful. The African continent is a complex and multicultural place, and understanding it requires a holistic approach.

The ascendency of the discourse on security which is often collapsed into development, as Collier does in his work, should also concern Africans and others in the developing world. While it is important to view security as a right that the state should guarantee, security is not the basis for all rights. The temptation to “securitize rights” – to view all other rights and social needs through the lens of security – should be avoided. (Lazarous and Goold 2007). Otherwise, in the name of securing rights, the development world and Africa in particular will have opened itself up for military adventurism. States still act in their selfish interests on international affairs. Pure humanitarian motives is a good idea, but to act as though that idea is the reality is very unwise.

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Note

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