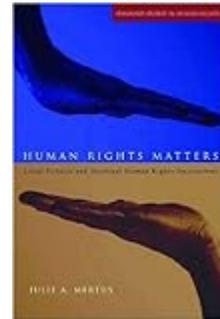




Julie Mertus. *Human Rights Matters: Local Politics and National Human Rights Institutions.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. xi + 223 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6093-5; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-6094-2.



Reviewed by Sonia Cardenas (Trinity College)

Published on H-Human-Rights (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Rebecca K. Root (Ramapo College of New Jersey)

Localizing Rights: National Human Rights Institutions in Europe

If international human rights norms are to be influential, they must become embedded in the domestic context. This well-established claim is at the heart of Julie Mertus's new book on national human rights institutions (NHRIs). Focusing on five European cases (Denmark, Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany, and the Czech Republic), Mertus sets out to assess how NHRIs matter in practical terms—in improving the lived realities of people experiencing human wrongs (p. 1). The book's aims, choice of cases, basic argument, and concern for real-world effects are all commendable. Its conciseness, at 140 pages—with an introduction and conclusion together totaling fewer than 25 pages—makes it an accessible read for anyone interested in these novel institutional actors.

Human Rights Matters offers insights and illustrations to highlight the effects of NHRIs, contributing to the large volume of descriptive and prescriptive work on the subject. Mertus asserts productively that the local context both shapes and is shaped by NHRIs. International norms do not get domesticated evenly or uniformly, since

they are filtered through the complex prism of local politics. Descriptively, Mertus reviews NHRIs in regions that have been largely overlooked, with much of the research on NHRIs focusing instead on the potential of these institutions to promote democratization and human rights compliance in developing countries. Mertus further enlivens her study with direct quotes from in-country interviews.

Each country-case chapter covers both the broader domestic context and the experience of the NHRI. The first half of each chapter opens with an overview of the politics, economics, and salient human rights issues facing a country; there is also an unstated emphasis on a country's political culture (e.g., values, traditions, political psychology). While some may view these introductions as quite basic, Mertus is correct to assume that the relevant context in which an institution operates is not always directly connected to the institution itself. Discussions of NHRIs in the second half of each chapter begin with a brief look at issues of creation and formal structure and then turn to challenges and assessment.

The end result is a solid introduction to NHRIs in five European countries and a glimpse into some of the dynamics associated with the domestication of international human rights norms.

Given the book's potential, the reader is often left wanting key points elaborated. For example, in analyzing Denmark's NHRI, Mertus discusses the national controversy that ensued after a Danish newspaper printed a caricature of the Muslim prophet Mohammed. Surprisingly omitted from the discussion, however, is the reaction of Denmark's own NHRI to the crisis. Similarly, in reviewing ombudsman offices in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the emphasis is on general functions but relatively little detail of what these institutions actually *do* or of their significant contributions ... to peace and justice in the region (p. 84). In the Czech case, moreover, Mertus notes interestingly that the country is the only EU member that has not ratified the Rome Statute (which created the International Criminal Court), without addressing the reasons for the opposition. And in a somewhat consequential oversight, Mertus asserts that "Plans to bring NHRIs to the Middle East are currently being developed" (p. 158, n. 35), though eight countries in the region already have internationally accredited institutions (the first of these created in the early 1990s).

On balance, *Human Rights Matters* offers a positive assessment of the institutions reviewed, though the author does provide criticism of each NHRI. Many NHRI experts would nonetheless be far more critical of the effec-

tiveness of the Danish and German NHRIs, for example, compared to international standards and their counterparts elsewhere. Greater development of the case studies would have gone a long way towards clarifying questions of institutional impact.

Mertus concludes *Human Rights Matters* with two broad points worthy of fuller consideration. First, Mertus claims that an NHRI's local reception will depend on the nature of the demands it faces, itself reflecting the period during which the institution was created (i.e., during Cold War democratization, following the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, and post-September 2001). NHRI scholars are certain to debate these divisions, including the assertion that the United States has actively promoted NHRIs in the purported war on terror, but the possible influence of global changes over time should not be discounted. Second, Mertus highlights the role of local stakeholders and domestic reception, certainly a significant point that would have been worth exploring more explicitly in the cases and that other researchers should explore.

Overall, *Human Rights Matters* is a valuable addition to the growing literature on NHRIs. The focus on European cases and the importance of local politics are both welcome contributions to the existing research. As a useful introduction to the work of NHRIs in Europe, Mertus's latest book sheds light on the potential power of these institutions to domesticate international human rights norms.

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Citation: Sonia Cardenas. Review of Mertus, Julie, *Human Rights Matters: Local Politics and National Human Rights Institutions*. H-Human-Rights, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

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