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Bandung, 1955: Asian-African Conference and human rights in Online Atlas on the History of Humanitarianism and Human Rights

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Participants at the Bandung Conference, 1955 (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library) [Public Domain] [CC BY-SA 3.0 nl], via Wikimedia Commons

The 1955 Asian-African Conference (also known as the "Bandung Conference"), took place on April 18–24 in Bandung, Indonesia. The conference, co-sponsored by Burma, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, brought together 29 newly independent nations of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The states in attendance comprised almost half of the UN membership and collectively represented about 1.5 billion people. They came together to discuss common concerns surrounding anticolonial nationalism, self-determination, non-interference, and Great Power dominance over international affairs. The conference also marked a major turning point in the history of universal human rights in that its framing of self-determination as a prerequisite to fully enjoy fundamental rights became a central reference point for anticolonial thinkers of the twentieth century.

The geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War cast an obvious backdrop for discussions in Bandung. Yet Bandung was not primarily about whether to take sides in the bipolar international conflict, despite Third World frustration caused by the superpowers' chronic aversion to consulting smaller nations in what was in effect an inherently global confrontation. Nor was the conference purely a denunciation of the corroding European empire or a breeding ground for anti-Westernism, though this sentiment was certainly present in some of the conference discourse. Rather, the meeting is perhaps best remembered for its distinct normative legacy regarding the relationship between self-determination and human rights. Seeking a voice and identity outside of the bipolar Cold War framework, delegates set out to assert a vision of how international affairs ought to be conducted in the context of the unfinished struggle against colonialism, laying the groundwork for what would soon become the Non-Aligned Movement. Although Bandung welcomed a range of states, many with conflicting ideological positions, participants found common ground in opposition to imperial rule and racism. A number of influential regional leaders, from Egypt's Nasser (1918-1970), to Burma's U Nu (1907-1995), to India's Nerhu (1889-1964), to Indonesia's Sukarno (1901-1970), gathered to articulate values that would guide newly decolonized states and their neighbours. As Secretary-General of the conference, Roeslan Abdulgani (1914-2005), put it, the Third World united "to determine the standards and procedures of present-day

international relations" and contributed "the formulation and establishment of certain norms." (Abdulgani 1964: p. 72, 103)

Abdel Nasser of Egypt with Jawaharlal Nehru of India at the Bandung Conference, 1955 (President Gamal Abdel Nasser Photo Archive) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Respect for universal human rights numbered one among many key issues of the Bandung conference. Participants adopted a ten-point declaration on the promotion of interstate cooperation in the conference's final communiqué, incorporating principles of the UN Charter and the Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence, the latter of which were negotiated by China and India in 1954. This ten-point declaration – the so-called "Bandung Principles" – emphasized the need for an international society founded on respect for self-determination, universal human rights, non-interference in internal affairs, sovereign equality, non-aggression, and multilateralism. The communiqué also encouraged economic cooperation and diversification, as well as cultural and technical exchange, in an effort to liberate oppressed peoples from colonial and neocolonial bondage. It followed three days of negotiations that marked for the first time a cross-continental meeting of African, Asian, and Middle Eastern peoples without the presence of larger Western states.

The document's clear reference to fundamental human rights, and the conference discussions that preceded, cast human rights as a political project that was both universal and anticolonial. The language of human rights was a key fixture of conference debate and its inclusion as official diplomatic lexicon reflected a nascent Third World embrace of the idea. As the Japanese delegate to the conference noted in his address to the opening session of the Conference, "I understand the chief objective of this Conference is to promote neighborly amity and mutual understanding among the peoples of the Asian-African region (…) This objective tallies exactly with the aim of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calculated to preserve peace, freedom, and justice. It will, I trust, appeal to all men and women who have at their hearts the progress of mankind." (Burke 2010: p. 13)

A diversity of viewpoints of the scope and application of human rights was initially present at the conference. This was in part a function of cynical Cold War rivalries, but also a result of more fundamental normative disagreements over the meaning of human rights in general: how should the international community balance collective rights and individual rights? What of the relative importance of civil and political rights, versus social, economic or religious rights? Though a vocal critic of colonial oppression, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (1898-1976) objected to any inclusion of human

rights references at all in the conference's communiqué. Not having contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, Communist China was especially suspicious of human rights as a Western political device. In the end, however, smaller Arab, Asian, and African states overcame the opposition of the Chinese delegates, and participants settled on a definition underpinned by the UN Charter and the 1948 Declaration.

Yet Bandung's definition of human rights came with a caveat: that self-determination was a prerequisite for the enjoyment of all other fundamental rights. The final communique declared, 'The right of self-determination must be enjoyed by all peoples, and freedom and independence must be granted, with the least possible delay, to those who are still dependent peoples' (Final Communiqué 1955: p. 9-11). Only once free from the colonial yoke were states to develop friendly cooperation based on the "Bandung Principles," the first of which made explicit reference to fundamental human rights and the UN Charter. Delegates had thus agreed to a broad universal understanding of human rights in 1955, which applied to colonizers, colonized peoples, and newly liberated nations alike, but which was also especially well-suited to challenging colonial rule.

At the same time, the conception of universal human rights forwarded by the Third World was firmly aligned with strong national state sovereignty, and within the context of non-intervention. An aversion to intervention, associated as it was with formal and, increasingly, informal imperialism, was a key foreign policy of the newly decolonized states. After all, of the ten principles enumerated at Bandung, five dealt with state sovereignty and territorial integrity. To the Bandung powers, human rights implied a pattern of national, not international, imposition. This perspective drew from discussions ignited by previous UN resolutions on the rights of peoples and nations to self-determination as early as 1952, as well as drafts of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights commissioned by the UN General Assembly in 1952 and completed in 1954. In this way, unlike some of the rights debates that would define the turn of the century onward, perceptions of antagonism between human rights and sovereignty were ignored in 1955.

The Merdeka Building in Bandung, Indonesia, during the Asia-Africa Conference. By Ron4 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

By attempting to take the reins of the human rights project, the conference called for ending the treatment of Third World states as 'infantile' novices unworthy of equal status in the implementation of such rights, as reflected by 'civilized' versus 'uncivilized' categorizations typical of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Human rights were no longer to be the exclusive domain of 'paternalistic' Western powers, nor were they to be selectively bestowed or exercised. Hence, by universalizing human rights and situating rights within a framework of self-determination, Bandung contributed to the unhinging of the educational project inherently behind the Declaration of 1948. The Third World would not take the same position three decades later, when cultural relativism and "Asian values" crept into Third World talking points.

The conference also contained some hindrances for the evolution of the international human rights project. One of them was Bandung's failure to address key normative dilemmas related to armed national liberation, even as the Algerian War (1954-1962) and other concurrent wars of decolonization loomed large over conference proceedings. The remaining colonies' intense desire for revolution, by force if necessary, raised questions regarding how to implement and uphold human rights, and what they implied in practice for both colonial powers and the revolting Third World. Liberation movements, and their armies in particular, stirred passions that would soon have serious consequences for the global human rights project, but the intersection of these concepts was left unresolved in 1955. This is despite a FLN delegation having participated in the conference in an attempt to draw international attention to the Algerian struggle.

In the end, Bandung represented a sort of mid-point in the twentieth-century history of human rights, rather than a beginning. For most participants, the question of human rights and decolonization was a topic of reflection at least since 1945. For some, such as Sukarno and Nehru, conference contributions were likely the maturation of thinking that began to emerge in places such as the 1927 Brussels gathering of the League Against Imperialism.

But the conference was crucial nonetheless. While decolonization may have initiated the global human rights debate, the political fault lines guiding this debate mattered, and in this sense Bandung deserves to be seen as an important shift. By its conclusion, Bandung had united the Third World and laid a political framework for what later became known as the Non-Aligned Movement, inspiring both the 1957 Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference in Cairo and the Belgrade Conference of 1961.

Further Reading

Historiographical debate over the place of Bandung in the history of human rights tends to focus on the conference's anti-Western dimensions, its influence in creating the Non-Aligned Movement, the relative agency exercised by participants in light of Cold War entanglements, and, more generally, the extent to which 1948-69 mattered in the development of the modern human rights project relative to the "big bang" movement of the 1970s.

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- See Sang Tan and Amitav Acharya, eds. *Bandung Revisited* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008).

Short Biographical Note on Contributor

Patrick Quinton-Brown is a DPhil candidate at the University of Oxford, where he researches Third World resistance and contestation in international society, especially in regard to human rights, intervention, and the legitimate use of force. He is also a graduate of the University of Toronto. Patrick was a participant of the Global Humanitarianism Research Academy 2016.

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