

REVIEW ESSAY

Human Rights Awards for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

JOHANNES THOOLEN*

Abstract

The use of awards in human rights is relatively recent. The oldest is the Nobel Peace Prize (1901), followed by the Freedom Award (1943) and the Nansen Medal (1955). From the mid-1970s until the end of the twentieth century their numbers increase steadily with one or two awards created each year. This century has seen a remarkable increase in human rights awards, with more than 50 new awards created in just 12 years. This relatively recent development is perhaps one of the reasons why there is no systematic research on human rights awards, their impact and effectiveness. The aim of this essay is to give a brief review of human rights awards and discuss issues in regard to the protection function of awards. This essay reviews 100 awards,¹ of which 88 are international in scope (with potential winners coming from anywhere in the world) and 12 are regional (winners must come from a specific region).²

The awards landscape

More than half of the awards surveyed do not use the word ‘human rights’ in their name. Instead, their name reflects other elements, such as the name of an inspirational figure whose spirit is celebrated through the award (e.g. Mandela, Alison des Forges, Havel, Edelstam, Mignone, Sakharov), the name of the founder/funder of the award (e.g. Nobel, Sagan, Dodd, Hilton, Magsaysay) or the name of the issuing organization (e.g. Council of Europe, United Nations (UN), Friedrich Ebert Foundation). The term ‘human rights defender’ (HRD) started to be used in the mid-1980s and many recent awards

* The author worked in human rights at the national as well as the international level, in non-governmental as well as intergovernmental organizations and established a number of NGOs.

- 1 There is considerable variety in the terms used, such as award, prize, medal, grant, honour, acknowledgement, or recognition, and consequently the person as awardee, prizewinner, winner, recipient, laureate, or honoree.
- 2 Purely national awards (i.e. meant only for persons from a specific country) were left out of this review. It would have been difficult to include them, given the inaccessibility of many local languages which would have skewed the result towards a few countries. Data on the awards surveyed for this essay has been given to the True Heroes Foundation, which will use it to create an up-to-date, searchable web-based database of awards which is freely accessible to all (see <http://www.trueheroesfilms.org>).

carry this term.³ Very few awards exclude individuals,⁴ while the large majority have a clear preference for individuals.

The creation of a new award tends to be announced with pomp, but when it ceases to exist there is rarely a public statement. The Nelson Mandela Award for Human Rights Defenders, for example, was announced in 2006 by the African Union but not followed by any action,⁵ while the Reebok Awards ceased to exist in 2006 (after 18 years) with no formal announcement and no reason given—although there have been Internet discussions on the appropriateness of accepting a human rights award from a company with doubtful labour practices.⁶

Many awards are given by human rights organizations and are embedded in their outreach or protection work. However, the majority of award-giving entities are universities, special foundations, ministries of foreign affairs, inter-governmental bodies or cities, which do not automatically have access to in-house expertise. Generally there is little information published on the decision-making process (that is, who makes or vets nominations, who makes the final decision, and the composition of the jury, if any). Often the composition of decision-making bodies is only described in vague terms, involving ‘independent personalities’, ‘experts’, and so on. However, there are some exceptions. The Nobel Peace Prize, the Martin Ennals Award (MEA), the Hilton Prize, and the Nansen Award, for example, have websites that state clearly the persons or organizations on the jury.

The Nobel Peace Prize deserves special mention because it is by far the best known human rights award in the world. This is somewhat ironic as the award is in the first place a peace award. However, many recent laureates belong to the category of human rights defenders and the high profile of the award has extraordinary media impact.

Purpose and impact of human rights awards

To understand the protection function of human rights awards, one first has to consider the extent to which protection really is the main purpose of the award. Most awards seem to have been created spontaneously, without much investigation and research into their effectiveness. When stating the purpose of the award there is usually a vague but positively-worded assertion that the award will contribute to the promotion or protection of human rights, democracy, freedom of expression, and so on. An underlying premise in these

3 For more information on the emergence of the concept, see the introductory article by the co-editors of this issue.

4 Best example: the 1.5 million US dollar Hilton Humanitarian Prize is only for organizations <http://www.hiltonfoundation.org/prize> (referenced 16 April 2013).

5 <http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/Conferences/Past/2006/June/award/announcement.htm> (referenced 16 April 2013).

6 <http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/02/04/why-i-rejected-the-reebok-human-rights-award> (referenced 16 April 2013).

awards is that certain individuals or organizations deserve to be recognized more than others, and that this public recognition is beneficial to the cause and the people concerned. The laureates themselves confirm this by stressing the importance of the award to their cause. Whether this is done out of politeness to the host or because they truly believe it is an open question.

Most awards state publicly one or more of the following purposes: 1) protection (protective publicity for the winners); 2) recognition (moral, psychological) of the winners; 3) providing material support (such as cash, lobbying, introduction to decision makers, paid travel, access to project funding, training); 4) honouring the memory of the founder or an inspiring human rights hero;⁷ and 5) promotion of a specific cause or group.⁸ In practice, quite a few also pursue unstated purposes, such as publicity or fundraising for the organization issuing the award.⁹

Measuring the impact of awards against their stated purposes is hard. While stated purposes 2 to 5 could normally be satisfied with limited resources and a reasonable amount of media attention in the country of the award giver, it is the first purpose, *protection*, the one that stands out in the human rights toolkit, that is the hardest to achieve and prove.

The first problem of assessment is that common to all human rights advocacy work, namely the difficult of measuring and establishing a causal link between a particular intervention and an outcome. Repressive governments do not admit to giving in to pressure and, short of an official statement that a particular HRD was released or tortured less than others, only anecdotal evidence can demonstrate that a human rights award and its associated campaign was successful. Measuring the impact of human rights advocacy has been the subject of a few studies but assessing advocacy for individual cases is the least developed. A study by the International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP, 2012: 1) expresses doubt about the current tools:

While better understanding and analysis of the successes and failures of human rights work is undoubtedly necessary, there are widespread

7 Remarkable is the overlap between the Sakharov Freedom Award (Norway, 1984) and the Sakharov Prize (European Parliament, 1988), and the creation of the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize by the Council of Europe in 2013, one year after the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent by the Human Rights Foundation in New York.

8 For example, Tibet (Truth of Light Award), the Roma – Sinti award, or awards for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights and the fight against HIV – AIDS discrimination.

9 The relevance of the difference between stated and unstated purposes is illustrated with the following fictitious example: a Chicago-based civil rights non-governmental organization (NGO) gives its award to fight racial discrimination (2,000 US dollars) to the great Nelson Mandela. The South African Embassy sends a message from the winner thanking them for the honour. The ceremony combined with fundraising dinner is a success. The *Chicago Herald* carries a big picture with a short report the next day. While the argument ‘no harm done’ is valid, it will be clear that assessing the impact solely on the basis of stated purposes is fraught with difficulty.

concerns that current assessment and evaluation techniques are not sufficient to measure the complexities of social change processes, especially those driven by human rights. For the most part this concern stems from the understanding that the methods and approaches used are not specifically developed for human rights work or by human rights practitioners, but rather are transplanted from development.

Other debates (Desormeau, 2005) have centred on the question of quantitative versus qualitative measuring but without reaching a consensus. In a study on the work of nine non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Landman and Abraham (2004: 8) recognized that ‘the contribution of any one human rights NGO in the improvement of the situation is difficult if not impossible to disentangle’. On 13 May 2008, Mutabar Tajibaeva, a HRD in detention in Uzbekistan, was announced as the MEA Laureate of that year. Almost two weeks later, on 2 June, she was released from prison on medical grounds, on parole. A few months later she was allowed to travel abroad and, having come to Geneva to receive the MEA in person, declared publicly that the award saved her life. However, one cannot state categorically that her release was a direct result of the award; many other actors contributed to the pressure that resulted in her release from prison.¹⁰ Ian Gorvin (2009: 481) makes a strong case for the need to produce evidence that human rights advocacy works and how to go about building indicators, but he also admits that ‘more often it is a convergence of multiple groups doing advocacy, prominent local activism . . . , press exposure, diplomatic pressure, or just felicitous timing’. If this is the case for ongoing projects of a single, established NGO like Human Rights Watch, it certainly applies to awards which tend to be one-off events.

The second problem is that for the target audience—especially the governments involved in repressing the work of HRDs—to take notice, there must be media attention which reaches the country in question and not just authorities and public opinion in the country of the award-giving institution. This requires the involvement of international or regional broadcasters, of which there are not many (e.g. BBC, CNN, France 24, Deutsche Welle, Russia Today, Al-Jazeera) or local media (if free enough, which is often not the case in countries where HRDs are in trouble). Award organizers thus rely often on the Internet and social media, which have the potential to bypass official (government) media channels. There is even a role for old-fashioned DVDs, which are not dependent on Internet access and bandwidth.

10 For example, Germany, France, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the USA and international organizations such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), a large number of international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Front Line, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), and Human Rights First, as well Uzbek solidarity groups.

A crucial issue is the use of local languages. It would seem that many awards—perhaps satisfied with reaching the unstated goal of home consumption—do not muster the resources and energy to get publicity into the country of origin of the winner with the languages that matter.

Certainly there is a dearth of factual and statistical reporting on media impact, and an evaluation of this aspect of human rights awards seems overdue.

The third problem is that even if there is good publicity reaching the country of origin, it is often unclear whether the publicity generated by the award protects the award winner or worsens his/her situation. It is regularly suggested that human rights awards endanger the lives of the laureates. While there is always the risk of an award backfiring, the best judge of the balance between increased risk and greater protection remains the HRD in question. Generally, those who have already chosen to speak out seem to regard publicity and exposure foremost as a form of protection, perhaps reflecting the increased importance of the media even in tense situations. Moreover, the fact that an award winner may be singled out for increased persecution does not mean that the award caused this to happen. In Iran and Syria, MEA laureates of 2009 and 2010 were told in detention by their interrogators that their ‘so-called friends’ abroad should know that they were making things worse for them. However, human rights experts suggest an alternative, more positive, interpretation—that the authorities in these cases, in fact, were keenly aware of the pressure upon them.

Aside from publicity through the media, there are other ways in which awards can contribute to protection of HRDs. Travel to the ceremony is, in some cases, combined with visits to government leaders, decision makers, universities, and solidarity groups. A few awards offer security training, language courses, or time for rest and respite in a safe environment. More complex, however, is the monetary aspect of awards. Money cannot buy protection but it can assist HRDs in strengthening their organization and helping them to acquire security tools. However, only half the awards state or imply that there is any monetary component and only about a third give an exact amount. The others are silent on this point. Some awarding organizations, especially in the USA, see their award ceremonies as a fund-raising opportunity, with dinners for which a contribution is required or expected and with no indication that the money collected is for the award winner.¹¹

Another issue about the monetary component of awards is that repressive governments increasingly try to control human rights organizations through restricting external funding. These governments sometimes count prize money as such (*Observatory for the Protection for Human Rights Defenders, 2013*).

11 For example, this occurs with Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and others.

A word of caution with regard to ‘governmental’ awards is in order. While it is one thing for a government to ‘support’ (e.g. financially) an otherwise independent award with an autonomous jury, the notion that governments (such as the USA, the Netherlands, France, Poland, Sweden, Canada¹²) should run their own awards, select the winner, have the Minister hand it out and promote the award through the diplomatic service, does not sit well with the desire to protect HRDs from the charge of being ‘foreign agents’, a frequent claim by repressive governments trying to depict HRDs as being supported and funded from abroad (Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, 2013). A degree of distance would benefit governments¹³ and would also serve the laureates themselves who usually want to be seen as spearheading the *non*-governmental human rights movement. Intergovernmental organizations face similar problems in having awards, as was demonstrated by the controversy surrounding UNESCO’s decision in 2010 to launch an award paid for and named after the president/dictator of Equatorial Guinea, Obiang Nguema (*The Economist*, 2010).

While the large and growing number of international human rights awards may seem superfluous and sometimes confusing, the amalgam of awards may in fact have a (unintended) role in discerning value in the growing world of human rights defenders by picking out those whose work is remarkable enough to inspire others. There are now tens of thousands of persons called human rights defenders who may all deserve the protection afforded by (international) law but do not necessarily *all* deserve to be elevated to role models. Some are simply civil servants,¹⁴ others are persons seeking money, some have used or advocated violence, others again are active solely for their own rights or those of their family. Then there are those who are clearly (social) activists but whose human rights activities are made completely subservient to their political ambitions. The totality of awards, then, has the advantage of creating a group of prominent HRDs, which is important, as the media and the public at large—especially students—often use stories of individual human rights defenders as their entry point into human rights.

The argument cannot be reversed to imply that only those who get awards (still a good thousand) are worthy of support. Firstly, there are simply not enough awards in the world—even if their ubiquitous growth were to continue in the next decade—to cover all deserving cases. Secondly, there is quite a bit of overlap among award winners, with some having accumulated a pile

12 The now defunct Gaddafi Prize for Human Rights (started in 1988) is the worst example but not representative in substance for other governmental awards.

13 Even with the plausible deniability of an independent jury, the Norwegian government finds it hard to cope with the negative response from states offended by a particular Nobel Peace Prize.

14 In December 2012 the Pakistan government announced that it would create human rights defenders in the Ministry; see: <http://thoolen.wordpress.com/tag/ministry-of-human-rights> (referenced 18 April 2013).

of awards. Thirdly, choices are sometimes less than optimal due to considerations of regional and gender balance that most awards seem to employ.

Considering these issues, I believe that the protection potential of awards could be increased by more transparency concerning the goal of the awards and the independence of selection processes. In other words I recommend that the organizers state the main goals of their award clearly and openly; build in, from the start, methods of assessing intended results, especially in terms of measuring media impact; provide greater transparency with regard to the independence of the decision-making process (i.e. the role of the jury); and provide more clarity about concrete benefits for winners (such as the amount of money provided).

Conclusion

The surge in new awards over the last decade seems to indicate that awards are nowadays seen as accepted tools in the human rights movement. However, more work is needed to assess the protective function of these awards, in particular, that related to heightening the visibility of HRDs through publicity. It is also important to bear in mind that awards have other goals, such as providing moral and concrete support to human rights defenders, galvanizing their home base, and drawing more attention to their specific cause. Further growth in the number of awards in existence is therefore likely, but reaching the impact and prestige of the Nobel Peace Prize is likely to remain elusive for most of them.

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