

When Rights Become Weapons: Human-Rights Instrumentalization, Institutional Power, and Social Fragmentation

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Abstract

Background: Human rights are indispensable restraints on arbitrary power, persecution, discrimination, and the denial of conscience. Their exceptional moral authority also makes rights language attractive for strategic use by states, courts, advocacy organizations, donors, corporations, and digital platforms. **Objective:** This article develops a disciplined framework for distinguishing legitimate rights protection from human-rights instrumentalization and coercive weaponization. **Methods:** A bounded critical integrative review combined ten structured searches conducted through the Consensus academic discovery interface on 18 July 2026 with citation chaining and targeted retrieval from official international and regional repositories. The selection process was documented using a PRISMA 2020-informed flow. Of 140 identified records, 127 remained after deduplication, 81 reports were assessed, and 68 sources entered the coded synthesis, comprising 61 scholarly works and seven authoritative legal or policy instruments. Because retrieval was relevance-ranked and limited to ten records per query, the review is transparent and reproducible at the query level but is not presented as an exhaustive systematic review. **Results:** Across legal mobilization, sanctions, donor conditionality, identity conflict, platform governance, and emergency regulation, four cumulative diagnostic conditions recurred: strategic rights translation, moral foreclosure, institutional insulation, and asymmetric coercion. The article integrates these conditions in the Rights Instrumentalization and Institutional Fragmentation (RIIF) Framework, a twenty-dimension diagnostic matrix, and eight propositions for empirical testing. **Conclusion:** The appropriate response is not to weaken human-rights protection, but to reconnect rights with correlative duties, proportionality, conscience, reciprocity, subsidiarity, transparent evidence, meaningful appeal, and the common good. The framework is explicitly symmetrical and includes safeguards against its misuse by authoritarian governments or dominant social groups.

Keywords: *human-rights instrumentalization; rights weaponization; lawfare; duties; institutional power; social fragmentation; African communitarianism; common good*

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1. Introduction

Human rights occupy a distinctive position in modern public life. To describe an interest as a human right is not merely to recommend a policy. The description marks the interest as fundamental, identifies duty-bearers, and often

narrows the range of acceptable disagreement. This authority is morally warranted when rights restrain torture, arbitrary detention, persecution, racial domination, political exclusion, or other assaults on human dignity. The same authority becomes vulnerable to abuse when rights language conceals institutional interests, ranks contested goods without reasoned balancing, immunizes norm-making

bodies from scrutiny, or distributes coercive burdens asymmetrically.

The problem is not that rights are incompatible with society. Just societies require enforceable protections against public and private domination. The problem is that rights depend on institutions and relationships that an absolutized form of rights discourse may weaken. Courts, habits of restraint, public trust, material resources, legitimate authority, and citizens willing to recognize obligations to others are preconditions of effective rights protection. A vocabulary of entitlement that obscures these supports can erode the social and institutional ecology on which rights themselves depend.

Several literatures illuminate parts of this paradox. Critical and postcolonial scholarship examines how human-rights institutions may reproduce hierarchy, depoliticize material struggles, or universalize culturally particular assumptions (Brown, 2004; Douzinas, 2000; Kennedy, 2002; Mutua, 2001, 2002). Liberal and institutional scholars analyze the conditions under which rights become effective rather than merely declaratory (Beitz, 2009; Donnelly, 2013; Hafner-Burton, 2013; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Simmons, 2009). Communitarian and natural-law traditions emphasize moral formation, correlative duties, and common goods (Etzioni, 1996; Finnis, 2011; MacIntyre, 2007; Sandel, 1998; Wolterstorff, 2008). African philosophers challenge the assumption that the isolated individual is the natural unit of political morality while resisting versions of community that erase individual dignity (Chemhuru, 2018; Ikenobe, 2018, 2021; Matolino, 2018; Metz, 2007, 2013). Bob (2019) most directly systematizes the offensive uses of rights as tools of mobilization, camouflage, disruption, exclusion, and coalition fracture. Adjacent research addresses rights inflation, legal mobilization, sanctions selectivity, donor dependence, norm polarization, algorithmic moderation, and emergency powers. These bodies of work remain insufficiently integrated.

The term *weaponization* creates a further difficulty. It is often used as a partisan accusation against claims one dislikes. Applied carelessly, it can delegitimize necessary minority protection, allow governments to dismiss international accountability, or mistake the disruption of unjust arrangements for social harm. Rights advocacy may properly unsettle a society that has normalized oppression. Judicial or international intervention may be necessary when domestic remedies have failed. A defensible theory must therefore identify positive, cumulative indicators of strategic abuse rather than infer weaponization from novelty, controversy, minority status, religious disagreement, or social disruption alone.

This article addresses four research questions:

1. Under what cumulative conditions does strategic rights advocacy become coercive human-rights weaponization?
2. Through which legal, financial, diplomatic, educational, professional, and technological mechanisms is rights instrumentalization institutionalized?
3. What consequences follow for competing rights, social trust, institutional legitimacy, and common citizenship?
4. Which procedural and normative safeguards can preserve strong rights protection while reducing selective, insulated, and disproportionate enforcement?

The article makes four contributions. First, it offers a bounded definition that separates ordinary strategic advocacy from weaponization through four cumulative diagnostic conditions. Second, it connects discursive framing to institutional adoption, coercive enforcement, and recursive backlash in the RIIF Framework. Third, it places African relational philosophy and biblical theological anthropology in disciplined conversation with liberal, critical, natural-law, and institutional traditions. Fourth, it provides a transparent, though explicitly bounded, review trail and a diagnostic matrix that can guide comparative empirical research.

The argument is symmetrical. States may weaponize sovereignty, public order, family, religion, or the common good, just as activists, courts, donors, corporations, universities, or platforms may weaponize rights. The analysis rejects both rights absolutism, in which invoking a right ends political reasoning, and sovereignty absolutism, in which rulers conceal abuse behind culture or national independence. The relevant standard is whether a claim is well grounded, consistently applied, procedurally legitimate, proportionate, reciprocal, contestable, and accountable for its foreseeable human consequences.

2. Human Rights Between Moral Protection and Political Power

2.1 The post-war settlement and its internal balance

The modern international rights architecture emerged from war, genocide, totalitarianism, colonial domination, and the experience of legal systems turned against the persons they were meant to protect. Its later global expansion has been interpreted both as a moral achievement and as a historically contingent political project whose authority may be fragile (Hopgood, 2013; Moyn, 2010). The drafting history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) reflects deliberate engagement with dignity, liberty, social provision, family, conscience, and community rather than a single philosophical tradition (Glendon, 2001; Morsink, 1999). The UDHR established a

broad moral grammar of equality, participation, social security, work, education, family, conscience, and public order (United Nations, 1948). Yet the UDHR did not construct a world of atomized claimants. Article 29 states that everyone has duties to the community in which the free and full development of personality is possible. Rights may be limited by law for the rights of others and the just requirements of morality, public order, and general welfare in a democratic society. This architecture rejects both totalitarian collectivism and unbounded individualism.

The two 1966 covenants institutionalized civil and political rights alongside economic, social, and cultural rights (United Nations, 1966a, 1966b). Their coexistence matters. Freedom of expression without material survival can be formal rather than effective, while state provision without speech, conscience, association, and due process can become paternal domination. The Vienna Declaration later reaffirmed the universality, indivisibility, interdependence, and interrelatedness of all human rights (United Nations, 1993). These instruments do not remove conflicts among goods. They establish a legal and moral discipline for balancing them through legality, necessity, proportionality, non-discrimination, and accountability.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights offers an especially important corrective to accounts that equate universality with Western individualism. It recognizes civil, political, economic, social, cultural, developmental, environmental, and peoples' rights while expressly articulating duties to family, society, the state, legally recognized communities, and the international community (African Union, 1981). Articles 27 to 29 require respect for others, solidarity, family cohesion, national independence, and social contribution. The Charter's limitations and "clawback" formulations have rightly attracted criticism because vague appeals to law or morality can facilitate state abuse. Nevertheless, its integration of persons, peoples, duties, and community exposes a suppressed premise of all rights systems: the beneficiary of a right is sustained by relationships and institutions that also make claims upon that person.

2.2 Rights as social and institutional achievements

Rights do not enforce themselves. They depend on authoritative interpretation, administrative capacity, civic norms, and material resources. Hohfeld's (1917) analysis clarifies that claim-rights correlate with duties, liberties with the absence of duties, powers with liabilities, and immunities with disabilities. Public rhetoric often collapses these distinct legal relations into a single morally elevated word. A preference may be redescribed as a liberty, then as a positive claim on others, and finally as an immunity from criticism, without the transitions being defended. The

distinction matters because different incidents of rights generate different obligations, institutional competencies, and limits.

Dworkin's (1977) metaphor of rights as trumps expresses the priority of basic protections over utilitarian sacrifice. Yet trumps exist within a game whose rules determine what counts as a right, how conflicts are resolved, and which institution may play the card. Even strong rights are not unlimited. Expression may be restricted to protect reputation or public safety under exacting conditions. Religion protects belief absolutely in its internal dimension but allows proportionate limits on external conduct. Property is protected while taxation and regulation remain possible. Rights adjudication is therefore not the mechanical application of absolute claims but reasoned judgment among persons who possess equal dignity and often conflicting interests.

Rights are also political and cultural achievements. The world-cultural expansion of rights reflects the increasing sacralization of the individual, not only strategic state action (Elliott, 2007). Social movements translate suffering into public categories, mobilize allies, and secure institutional recognition (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Simmons, 2009). This translation can reveal previously ignored harm. It can also simplify complex relationships, displace material analysis, or create incentives for actors to frame every grievance as a right because ordinary policy claims receive less attention. Clément (2018) argues that universal rights framing may obscure structural questions better addressed through social justice. Theilen (2021), however, warns that accusations of "inflation" can function as gatekeeping devices that entrench existing liberal priorities and discredit transformative claims. The relevant question is therefore not whether rights have expanded, but whether a proposed right is coherently grounded, institutionally feasible, reciprocally structured, and subjected to the same scrutiny as established rights.

2.3 The strategic turn

Bob's (2019) account shifts attention from the possession of rights to their use in conflict. Rights can mobilize supporters, protect actors from attack, mask controversial motives, destabilize institutions, restrict subordinate actors, and divide coalitions. Regilme (2020) interprets this as a legal-realist account in which rights discourse gains force through interaction with material resources and political organization. Moghaddam et al. (2025) similarly describe a staged process in which claims are initiated, expanded, normalized, strategically adopted, revised, and met by backlash and counter-rights. These works do not prove that rights are merely rhetorical weapons. They demonstrate that

moral language operates within conflicts and can be used offensively as well as defensively.

Strategic use is not intrinsically illegitimate. Almost all advocacy is strategic in the minimal sense that actors select language and institutions likely to advance a cause. Weaponization requires more. It arises when the authority of rights is used to suppress the conditions of reciprocal justification: when a contested claim is treated as self-validating, adverse evidence is reclassified as hostility, institutions are insulated from accountability, and coercive burdens are imposed asymmetrically. The decisive shift is from persuasion within a shared legal order to the exploitation of rights language to place one party beyond ordinary standards of proof, consistency, and answerability.

2.4 Positioning the proposed construct

The proposed construct is narrower than several adjacent concepts. *Rights inflation* concerns the proliferation or expansion of rights claims and may occur without selective or coercive enforcement (Clément, 2018; Farahat & Leijten, 2022; Theilen, 2021). *Legal mobilization* and *strategic litigation* describe purposive uses of law, many of which are legitimate and necessary (Buckel et al., 2024; Cebulak et al., 2024; Matthews, 2023). *Politicization* indicates that rights interpretation is connected to political conflict, but does not establish abuse. *Appropriation* describes the recoding of a rights tradition from within, including the selective elevation of some rights and narrowing of others (Huckerby & Knuckey, 2023). *Securitization* concerns the construction of existential threats that justify exceptional measures. Human-rights weaponization, as defined here, refers only to a cumulative pattern in which strategic translation is joined to moral foreclosure, institutional insulation, and asymmetric coercion.

This distinction advances Bob's (2019) account in three respects. It specifies threshold conditions, links rhetorical tactics to organizational and infrastructural power, and makes the concept falsifiable at the case level. It also avoids treating all strategic action as abusive. Advocacy is ordinarily strategic because actors frame grievances, select venues, mobilize resources, and seek favorable rules. The proposed construct is reserved for cases in which the moral authority of rights is used to evade reciprocal justification or to impose disproportionate, weakly reviewable burdens.

3. Conceptual Clarifications and Boundary Conditions

3.1 Definition

This study defines *human-rights weaponization* as a proposed diagnostic construct describing the strategic

construction, selective interpretation, asymmetric prioritization, or coercive deployment of a rights claim by state or non-state actors to obtain political legitimacy, institutional authority, economic advantage, cultural dominance, technological control, geopolitical leverage, or immunity from criticism in ways that exceed or contradict the impartial protection of human dignity.

The definition is intentionally demanding. *Strategic* includes purposive action and predictable institutional incentives; it does not require proof of a centralized conspiracy. *Selective* refers to patterned inconsistency across comparable cases, allies, populations, or viewpoints. *Coercive* includes legal punishment, but may also include funding withdrawal, professional exclusion, administrative denial, reputational blacklisting, payment or hosting restrictions, and algorithmic invisibility when these measures materially foreclose participation. *Contradicting impartial protection* means that a deployment suppresses competing rights, evades proportionate balancing, or produces harms that its own justificatory principles should condemn.

3.2 Four cumulative diagnostic conditions

Strategic rights translation occurs when a grievance, preference, identity claim, institutional interest, or policy objective is reformulated as a presumptively overriding right. Translation may be justified when a fundamental human interest and identifiable harm are at stake. Risk rises when the label substitutes for an account of the claimant, duty-bearer, severity of harm, feasibility, competing rights, and institutional competence.

Moral foreclosure occurs when rights language terminates rather than structures deliberation. Critics are classified as hateful, irrational, dangerous, or beyond legitimate participation before their evidence and arguments are considered. Moral condemnation remains warranted for dehumanization, incitement, or demonstrable abuse, but categorical exclusion should itself satisfy transparent and reviewable standards.

Institutional insulation exists when courts, agencies, donors, corporations, universities, professional associations, or platforms exercise norm-making power without adequate transparency, representation, reasoning, appeal, or correction. Expertise and independence are often necessary. Insulation becomes a weaponizing condition when independence is converted into practical immunity from reciprocal public justification.

Asymmetric coercion exists when one party receives enforceable claims while another bears duties, stigma, or material penalties without equivalent protection or meaningful remedy. Not every asymmetry is unjust.

Protective law may properly differentiate where vulnerability and harm are evidenced. The relevant questions are whether the distinction is legally grounded, evidence-based, proportionate, consistently applied, and open to review.

The four conditions are proposed as cumulative diagnostic requirements. They are not yet validated as necessary and sufficient causal conditions. A case should not be classified as weaponization merely because one indicator is present.

3.3 Exclusions and falsifiers

The construct excludes ordinary advocacy, good-faith disagreement, civil disobedience, legitimate strategic litigation, proportionate humanitarian action, judicial protection against majoritarian abuse, and evidence-based emergency regulation. Law can reproduce power and contest it; its strategic use does not resolve its legitimacy (Buckel et al., 2024; Cebulak et al., 2024; Matthews, 2023). International action is not weaponization merely because it

constrains sovereignty. Genocide, torture, slavery, and crimes against humanity create obligations beyond borders.

The construct also excludes claims that merely offend inherited norms. Tradition acquires no moral immunity from age, and social discomfort is not evidence of weaponization. Harmful outcomes alone are also insufficient because policies can fail despite legitimate intentions and fair procedures. Conversely, beneficial outcomes do not cure manipulative procedures. Diagnosis requires convergent evidence concerning grounding, purpose, process, consistency, coercion, reviewability, and effect.

A weaponization allegation is weakened or falsified where the disputed measure is consistently applied across allies and opponents; grounded in documented, serious, and generalizable harm; adopted through transparent and inclusive procedures; balanced against competing rights; enforced proportionately; open to independent appeal; and revised when evidence changes.

Table 1. *Conceptual Distinctions Necessary for Diagnosing Human-Rights Weaponization*

Concept	Core meaning	Correlative question	Principal misuse risk
Human dignity	Inherent worth that forbids treating persons merely as instruments	What is owed to every person?	Invoked abstractly while concrete persons bear hidden costs
Moral right	Justified claim grounded in a fundamental human interest or status	Why should others recognize the claim?	Asserted without specifying duties, limits, or conflicts
Legal right	Claim, liberty, power, or immunity recognized by law	Which institution defines and enforces it?	Legal recognition mistaken for moral conclusiveness
Interest	Condition contributing to welfare or agency	How weighty, generalizable, and urgent is the interest?	Every interest redescribed as a fundamental right
Preference	Desired choice or state of affairs	Why should others bear duties for it?	Autonomy converted into unlimited entitlement
Duty	Moral or legal obligation toward another person or community	Who owes what to whom, and why?	Burdens imposed selectively on weaker actors
Common good	Social conditions enabling persons and communities to flourish	Which shared conditions require protection?	Invoked by authorities to erase dissent or minority rights
Instrumentalization	Strategic use of rights language or institutions	What objective is rights framing serving?	All purposive advocacy treated as suspect
Weaponization	Cumulative strategic, foreclosing, insulated, and coercive use of rights	Is rights authority protecting dignity or acquiring unaccountable power?	Used as a partisan accusation without convergent evidence

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

4. Normative Foundations: Liberal, African Relational, and Biblical Perspectives

4.1 Liberal achievements and the limits of possessive individualism

Liberal rights traditions made an indispensable contribution by limiting arbitrary authority and recognizing persons as bearers of claims not reducible to social rank. Negative liberties protect conscience, expression, association, bodily integrity, and due process. Egalitarian

and capabilities approaches rightly insist that formal liberty is inadequate where poverty, disability, violence, or exclusion makes agency impossible (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 2004; Shue, 1980). Any credible critique of rights weaponization must preserve these achievements.

Human-rights theories nevertheless differ over grounding and institutional purpose. Interest, agency, political, and practical conceptions do not identify exactly the same rights or duty-bearers (Beitz, 2009; Donnelly, 2013; Griffin, 2008; Ignatieff, 2001). The risk of possessive individualism arises when autonomy is interpreted as self-creation rather than responsible agency, and institutions are judged primarily by

whether they validate individual choice. Sandel's (1998) critique of the "unencumbered self" highlights that language, moral formation, trust, and agency are socially inherited. Even dissent presupposes communities capable of understanding speech and institutions willing to restrain retaliation.

Natural-law approaches ground rights in goods intrinsic to human flourishing and duties not to attack those goods (Finnis, 2011). This avoids reducing rights to state grants or subjective preference, but natural-law reasoning can itself be abused when a dominant institution treats contested moral conclusions as self-authenticating. Its relevant contribution is not a shortcut to certainty. It is the demand that rights claims identify the human goods at stake and remain limited by the equal good and dignity of others.

4.2 African relational correction without communal tyranny

African communitarian thought challenges the fiction that persons become human independently of community. Mbiti's (1969) relational account, Menkiti's (1984) theory of personhood, Gyekye's (1997) moderate communitarianism, and Wiredu's (1996) work on consensus emphasize social formation, reciprocity, and moral membership. The tradition is internally diverse. Radical communitarian readings can subordinate individuals to collective judgment, while compatibilist approaches argue that communal well-being requires robust protection of persons (Chemhuru, 2018; Ikuenobe, 2018; Matolino, 2018).

Ikuenobe (2021) interprets the priority of duties not as the negation of rights but as a social means through which dignity becomes substantive. Metz (2007, 2013) grounds morality in identity and solidarity, providing a basis for individual and group rights. This relational account corrects a purely possessive vocabulary: a claim-right is sustained by another's duty, and the capacity to claim depends on communities that educate, protect, and recognize persons. Duties are therefore not concessions extracted from rights-holders. They are constitutive of the social world in which enforceable rights become possible.

The African Charter embodies this synthesis by integrating individual, peoples', social, environmental, and developmental rights with duties to family and community (African Union, 1981). It also illustrates the danger of vague limitation clauses. States can invoke morality, order, sovereignty, or communal values to silence opposition. A relational theory must therefore be bilateral: persons owe responsibilities within communities, while communities

and states owe enforceable duties to persons. Neither the individual nor the state is morally absolute.

4.3 Biblical theological anthropology as an explicit normative lens

The biblical component of this study is an openly stated normative lens, not empirical evidence that independently proves the review's social-scientific claims. It is included because the target journal welcomes Scripture-grounded analysis and because biblical anthropology supplies criteria by which power, dignity, duty, and conscience can be judged.

A biblical account begins neither with the autonomous self nor the sovereign state, but with the person created in God's image. Genesis 1:26–27 grounds dignity in divine creation rather than ability, status, nationality, productivity, political recognition, or group membership. Dignity is therefore not granted by rulers, majorities, experts, or markets. Because it is shared, no person may claim freedom in a form that treats another image-bearer as disposable.

Scripture joins freedom to responsibility toward God and neighbor. Matthew 22:37–40 places love and duty at the center of moral life. Isaiah 10:1–2 condemns laws that institutionalize exploitation. Romans 13:1–7 presents civil authority as ministerial and ordered toward good, while Acts 5:29 establishes a limit when human command claims divine ultimacy. These texts support five safeguards: dignity precedes political recognition; freedom is ordered toward truth and neighbor-love; duties belong to personhood; institutional authority is bounded stewardship; and conscience cannot be wholly absorbed by earthly power.

This lens challenges statist repression and rights absolutism together. It also prevents the common good from becoming an idol of collective power, because no community can be made just through the deliberate degradation of persons made in God's image.

4.4 Relational synthesis

A sustainable rights order requires three simultaneous affirmations: persons possess inviolable worth; persons are formed and sustained through relationships of dependence and responsibility; and institutions exercise limited, reviewable authority. Liberalism protects the first, communitarianism illuminates the second, and constitutionalism disciplines the third. African relational philosophy and biblical anthropology deepen the synthesis by locating dignity within accountable belonging rather than solitary will.

Table 2. *Competing Traditions and Their Contributions to a Sustainable Rights Order*

Tradition	Primary moral unit	Major contribution	Characteristic danger when absolutized
Classical liberalism	Rights-bearing individual	Protection against arbitrary power, conscience, and due process	Atomism and neglect of social preconditions
Egalitarian and capabilities approaches	Person whose agency requires material capability	Connects liberty with health, education, and substantive opportunity	Expansive expert or state discretion without adequate limits
Natural law	Person ordered toward objective human goods	Grounds rights beyond state will and subjective preference	Contested moral claims asserted without public justification
Communitarianism	Socially embedded person	Recovers duty, tradition, civic virtue, and common purpose	Collective conformity and suppression of minorities
African relational ethics	Person-in-community; peoples as moral subjects	Integrates dignity, solidarity, duties, and peoples' rights	Romanticization of community or state appropriation of tradition
Critical and postcolonial theory	Historically situated subjects within power structures	Exposes hierarchy, selectivity, and universalized particularism	Suspicion can dissolve stable normative standards
Biblical theological anthropology	Image-bearer under God and responsible to neighbor	Inviolable dignity, bounded authority, duty, conscience, and justice	Sectarian imposition if theological claims are coerced rather than reasoned

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

5. Methodology

5.1 Review design and epistemic status

The study used a bounded critical integrative review, comparative documentary synthesis, and conceptual framework-development design. An integrative approach was appropriate because the research problem spans legal philosophy, international relations, sociology, political psychology, development studies, digital governance, public-health law, African philosophy, and theology. The corpus included heterogeneous empirical studies, doctrinal analyses, normative arguments, scholarly books, and authoritative legal instruments. A pooled effect-size synthesis would therefore have been methodologically inappropriate.

The selection process was documented with a PRISMA 2020-informed flow, while search reporting drew on PRISMA-S and the assembling, arranging, and assessing logic of SPAR-4-SLR (Page et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The label *PRISMA-informed* is deliberate. The discovery search was relevance-ranked and truncated to the first ten records per query; it was not an exhaustive search of multiple bibliographic databases. The study should therefore be read as a transparent, structured integrative review rather than a comprehensive systematic review.

The unit of analysis was a scholarly work or authoritative legal-policy instrument contributing evidence or argument

to at least one of five domains: rights as strategic resources; institutional mechanisms of mobilization and enforcement; selectivity and asymmetry; consequences for trust, pluralism, democracy, or social cohesion; and relational alternatives joining rights with duties and accountable authority.

5.2 Search date, information sources, and retrieval boundaries

All structured searches were executed on 18 July 2026 through the Consensus academic discovery interface. Consensus was used as a cross-disciplinary discovery layer rather than treated as a stable bibliographic database. Ten query clusters captured terminology used across adjacent fields. The first ten relevance-ranked records returned by each query were exported, producing 100 records. Forty additional records were identified through backward and forward citation chasing, targeted retrieval of seminal works, publisher pages, and official repositories maintained by the United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, African Union, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and related bodies.

The ranked top-ten rule created a bounded and transparent corpus but also an important limitation. Search results may change as the platform's index and ranking model change, and potentially relevant records below the tenth rank were not screened. The method provides query-level reproducibility, not a permanently identical retrieval set. No claim of exhaustive coverage is made.

Table 3. *Structured Search Strategy and Retrieval Yield*

Search cluster	Exact search string	Records exported
Core instrumentalization	"human rights weaponization instrumentalization politicization"	10
Rights proliferation	"rights inflation human rights proliferation humanrightization"	10

Search cluster	Exact search string	Records exported
Lawfare	"lawfare strategic litigation human rights judicialization politics"	10
Geopolitical coercion	"human rights sanctions selectivity geopolitics effectiveness democracy"	10
African relational thought	"human rights duties common good African Charter communitarianism"	10
Social fragmentation	"human rights social cohesion polarization identity politics institutional trust"	10
Donor and NGO power	"NGO donor conditionality human rights policy transnational advocacy accountability"	10
Digital governance	"platform governance content moderation freedom of expression human rights deplatforming"	10
Emergency governance	"public health emergency powers human rights proportionality COVID restrictions review"	10
Competing rights	"conflicting human rights freedom religion conscience anti discrimination family parental rights"	10
Total discovery-interface records		100

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

The principal publication window was 1990 to 18 July 2026. Pre-1990 works were eligible only when foundational to legal relations, rights history, African personhood, natural law, or international instruments. Searches were limited to English because reliable multilingual screening capacity was unavailable. No geographical restriction was imposed, and African and Global South scholarship was deliberately sought.

5.3 Eligibility and exclusion criteria

Sources were eligible when they met at least one substantive criterion and all minimum quality criteria. Substantive eligibility required direct engagement with rights instrumentalization or appropriation; rights proliferation; lawfare or strategic legal mobilization; sanctions and geopolitical selectivity; donor, NGO, corporate, or platform accountability; conflicts involving expression, religion, family, identity, or public health; social trust and polarization; African rights-duty philosophy; or authoritative standards governing limitations, duties, and institutional responsibility.

Minimum quality criteria were identifiable authorship or institutional authority, traceable publication data, sufficient analytical substance, and direct relevance to a research question. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books from established presses, official legal instruments, and methodologically transparent institutional documents. Sources were excluded when keyword overlap

was incidental, metadata could not be verified, claims depended on unsupported factual allegations, or the item was a duplicate, derivative book notice, or peripheral commentary without independent analysis.

5.4 Screening and PRISMA-informed flow

The combined process identified 140 records. Thirteen duplicates were removed, leaving 127 titles and abstracts for screening. Forty-four records were excluded for lack of direct relevance or analytical substance. Eighty-three reports were sought; two could not be retrieved in full text or through an authoritative publisher record. Eighty-one reports were assessed, and thirteen were excluded: five for peripheral relevance, three for insufficient analytical substance, three because they duplicated fuller treatments or were book reviews without independent analysis, and two because metadata could not be adequately verified. Sixty-eight sources entered the coded synthesis, comprising 61 scholarly works and seven authoritative legal or policy instruments.

Screening was conducted by one reviewer in two passes. The first applied the stated eligibility criteria. The second re-examined all included items and a sample of exclusions against the four diagnostic conditions. Single-reviewer screening increases the risk of selection and interpretive bias; no inter-rater reliability statistic is reported. No machine-learning classifier made inclusion decisions.

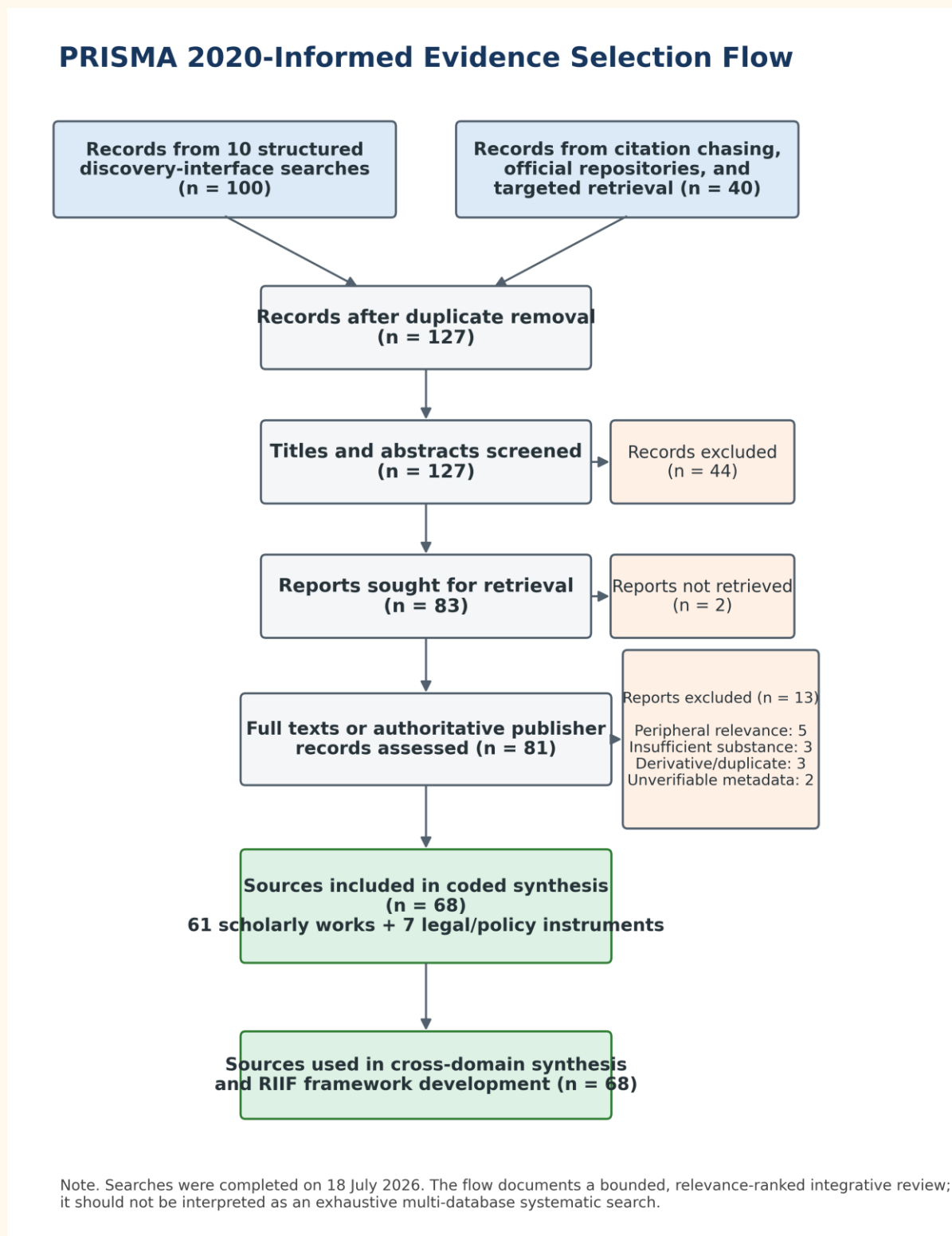
Figure 1. PRISMA 2020-Informed Evidence Selection Flow

Figure 1 reconciles every numerical transition. The 68-source analytic corpus is distinct from 31 methodological, foundational, contextual, and theological references used to

report or frame the study but not coded as evidence in the synthesis.

5.5 Data extraction, coding, and reflexivity

Each included source was coded for bibliographic data, disciplinary location, region, evidence type, principal actor, rights domain, claimed beneficiary, duty-bearer, institutional mechanism, enforcement instrument, competing rights, accountability provisions, reported effects, alternative explanations, and relevance to the emerging framework. Coding combined deductive categories from the research questions with inductive categories identified during comparison. Deductive codes included framing, legal mobilization, securitization, selective enforcement, reciprocity, proportionality, subsidiarity, polarization, and trust. Inductive codes included moral foreclosure, evidentiary insulation, representational substitution, rights laundering through professional standards, infrastructural exclusion, and recursive escalation.

The review was designed to reduce ideological confirmation bias by including sources defending rights expansion and criticizing anti-inflation discourse, as well as sources documenting appropriation by progressive, conservative, state, commercial, and religious actors. The

author's Christian commitments and institutional affiliations create a recognizable interpretive standpoint. They are disclosed rather than presented as neutral, and theological claims are separated from empirical claims. The diagnostic framework was stress-tested against counterexamples, risks of authoritarian misuse, and alternative explanations such as institutional incompetence, resource scarcity, decentralized implementation, or sincere error.

5.6 Source-class-specific critical appraisal

Because the corpus was heterogeneous, one numerical risk-of-bias instrument would have produced false comparability. Appraisal therefore used source-class-specific criteria shown in Table 4. Legal instruments were treated as authoritative evidence of norms, not as evidence that those norms were implemented or effective. Empirical studies carried greater weight for causal or associative claims when design, sampling, data, period, and limitations were transparent. Normative and doctrinal works were weighted for conceptual consistency, authority, traceability, and engagement with counterarguments. Books and theoretical syntheses were used primarily for conceptual development rather than effect estimation.

Table 4. *Source-Class-Specific Appraisal Criteria*

Source class	Primary appraisal questions	Permissible evidentiary use	Principal limitation
Quantitative empirical study	Are data, measures, sampling, model, period, and uncertainty transparent?	Association or causal inference proportionate to design	Measurement error, omitted variables, external validity
Qualitative or case study	Are case selection, data sources, analytic procedure, and rival explanations explicit?	Mechanism tracing and contextual explanation	Transferability and researcher interpretation
Doctrinal legal analysis	Are authorities current, correctly interpreted, and doctrinal conflicts addressed?	Content and development of legal standards	Does not establish social effects by itself
Normative or philosophical work	Are premises explicit, concepts coherent, and counterarguments engaged?	Conceptual grounding and normative evaluation	Conclusions depend on contestable premises
Scholarly book or synthesis	Is the argument traceable, evidence-rich, and recognized in the field?	Genealogy, theory integration, broad context	Selectivity and limited replicability
Official legal or policy instrument	Is the issuing body authoritative and the document authentic and current?	Authoritative statement of a norm or policy	Formal adoption does not prove implementation or benefit

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

5.7 Synthesis and framework development

Synthesis proceeded in four stages. First, the review mapped how disciplines conceptualized strategic uses of rights. Second, it compared mechanisms across domains to identify recurring sequences. Third, it separated legitimate analogues from high-risk manifestations so that the framework would not condemn strategic action as such. Fourth, it constructed the RIIF Framework and tested it against counterexamples, falsifiers, and authoritarian appropriation. The resulting framework is explanatory and diagnostic, not a validated predictive model.

6. The Architecture of Human-Rights

Weaponization

6.1 Actors, incentives, and distributed power

Human-rights instrumentalization can involve governments, courts, international organizations, NGOs, donors, corporations, universities, professional associations, media organizations, religious bodies, and technology platforms. Their purposes differ. Governments may seek legitimacy, regime security, or foreign-policy leverage. Courts may protect constitutional order while

expanding jurisdiction. NGOs may protect vulnerable people while responding to funding and visibility incentives. Corporations may adopt rights frameworks to reduce legal risk, satisfy investors, discipline workforces, or exercise private regulatory authority. Platforms may respond to genuine harms while consolidating control over speech infrastructure.

Convergence among these actors does not establish conspiracy or centralized command. International organizations develop bureaucratic cultures and pathologies that may operate independently of a single directing will (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). Power also operates structurally, institutionally, and productively, not only through direct compulsion (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Advocacy networks circulate norms through information, agenda selection, symbolic politics, leverage, and accountability strategies (Carpenter, 2007; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Similar outcomes may therefore arise from resource dependence, professional socialization, reputational incentives, and institutional imitation.

Responsible analysis must distinguish coordination from convergence. Claims of hidden coordination require evidence of agreement, communication, concealment, or organized action. In the absence of such evidence, terms such as diffusion, alignment, capture, dependency, and institutional isomorphism are more accurate. The absence of central command does not make a system harmless, but similarity alone does not prove collusion.

6.2 Strategic rights translation

The first mechanism is translation. A grievance is recoded as a rights violation, changing its moral status and institutional destination. Housing scarcity may be translated into a right to housing; exclusion into equality; environmental degradation into health, property, or cultural rights; and digital access into participation or communication rights. Translation can reveal harms that ordinary policy language obscures. It also identifies claimants, duty-bearers, and potential remedies.

Risk arises when the label precedes the demonstration of fundamentality and substitutes for an account of severity, universality, feasibility, competing rights, and costs. Alston (1984) called for quality control in recognizing new rights. Farahat and Leijten (2022) show that concerns about overreach include proliferation, judicialization, and indeterminacy. Theilen (2021) correctly warns that gatekeeping can entrench existing hierarchies. These concerns are reconciled by an open justificatory test rather than a closed canon: a proposed right should be examined for its relation to dignity, documented harm,

generalizability, correlative duties, institutional feasibility, competing rights, and available remedies.

6.3 Moral foreclosure and depoliticization

Rights acquire force through naturalization, absolutization, universalization, and depoliticization (Bob, 2019). Naturalization presents a claim as inherent rather than interpretive. Absolutization represents it as overriding. Universalization detaches it from historical and cultural context. Depoliticization turns a contestable allocation of goods and burdens into technical compliance.

These operations are not intrinsically illegitimate. Genuine rights do possess strong moral force, and technical expertise is necessary in complex domains. The danger is that interpretive choices disappear. Once an issue is classified solely as compliance, the question shifts from "What arrangement best protects all affected persons?" to "Why are opponents resisting human rights?" Evidence against a preferred implementation may then be reclassified as hostility to the underlying right.

Moral foreclosure is therefore an institutional practice, not merely harsh rhetoric. It appears when motive attribution substitutes for argument, professional vocabulary becomes a barrier to public scrutiny, or authorities define disagreement itself as harm. The corrective is not moral neutrality. It is a reason-giving discipline that distinguishes incitement and dehumanization from good-faith disagreement and requires institutions to state what evidence could change their judgment.

6.4 Institutional adoption and insulation

A translated claim becomes durable when embedded in statutes, judicial doctrine, funding conditions, accreditation, professional codes, corporate policies, or algorithmic rules. Institutionalization can provide the stability necessary for protection. It can also transfer authority away from affected communities and make a contested interpretation difficult to revise.

Insulation is not the same as independence. Courts, regulators, research bodies, and professional organizations require protection from immediate political pressure. The risk arises when independence is joined to opaque rulemaking, narrow representation, weak disclosure, inaccessible appeals, or self-review. An institution becomes both norm-maker and adjudicator while lacking a credible mechanism for correction.

Appropriation may also occur from within a rights tradition. Huckerby and Knuckey (2023) show how actors can claim fidelity to rights while selectively elevating some sources or interests and narrowing others. Institutional adoption therefore requires attention not only to whether

rights language is present, but to which rights are prioritized, which are displaced, and who controls interpretation.

6.5 Asymmetric coercion and burden transfer

Coercion ranges from criminal punishment to funding withdrawal, licensing loss, professional discipline, reputational exclusion, payment restrictions, and infrastructural denial. Some coercion is necessary for rights to be meaningful. Laws against violence, discrimination, and arbitrary detention cannot depend entirely on voluntary compliance.

Weaponization risk arises when coercion is weakly connected to documented harm, broad relative to its objective, uneven across comparable actors, or difficult to appeal. Burdens may be transferred to persons who did not cause the alleged violation, as when broad sanctions harm civilians, donor conditions reshape services unrelated to a core project, or platform bans extend across payment and hosting infrastructure. Asymmetry also appears when one group's interests are treated as rights while another group's interests are treated only as prejudice, inconvenience, or administrative cost.

Proportionality supplies a structured response. Institutions should identify a legitimate aim, rational connection, necessity, less restrictive alternatives, distributional effects, and review conditions. Proportionality does not remove judgment, but it requires assumptions and trade-offs to be visible.

6.6 Feedback and recursive enforcement

Institutional enforcement can generate a feedback loop. Resistance is interpreted as evidence that stronger intervention is necessary, while stronger intervention is interpreted as proof that institutions are captured. Moghaddam et al. (2025) describe cycles of rights expansion, strategic adoption, backlash, and counter-rights. The RIIF Framework extends this insight by locating the feedback loop after institutional adoption and coercion.

The process is not deterministic. Transparent reasons, independent appeal, acknowledgment of uncertainty, and visible correction can interrupt escalation. Where institutions treat every challenge as confirmation of their original premise, however, the framework becomes self-sealing and increasingly difficult to falsify.

Table 5. *Recurrent Mechanisms of Human-Rights Weaponization*

Mechanism	Operation	Legitimate analogue	Higher-risk indicator
Rights translation	Reframes a grievance as a fundamental claim	Naming previously ignored harm	Label substitutes for proof of fundamentality, duties, and limits
Moral absolutization	Elevates a claim above ordinary trade-offs	Strong protection of basic or non-derogable rights	Critics excluded before evidence is considered
Depoliticization	Recasts a contestable choice as technical compliance	Expert implementation of settled standards	Interpretive choices and burden allocation are concealed
Selective universality	Applies a universal norm unevenly	Prioritization under genuinely limited capacity	Stable exemptions for allies or powerful actors
Legal instrumentalism	Uses legal process for strategic effect	Public-interest and constitutional litigation	Exhaustion, incapacitation, or one-sided prosecution
Securitization	Frames an issue as an existential emergency	Temporary response to a genuine threat	Indefinite power, vague thresholds, and weak review
Donor conditionality	Links resources to institutional reform	Fiduciary and anti-abuse safeguards	Ideological conformity unrelated to core assistance
Professional discipline	Enforces standards through licensing or employment	Competence and ethical accountability	Contested ideology treated as a competence requirement
Platform and AI governance	Regulates visibility, access, and classification	Protection from serious online or administrative harm	Opaque, inconsistent, or unappealable exclusion
Reputational coercion	Uses stigma to alter conduct	Evidence-based public criticism	Guilt by association and denial of procedural response
Rights appropriation	Redefines a rights tradition from within	Legitimate interpretation and development	Selective elevation of some rights to disable others

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

7. Comparative Manifestations Across Institutional Domains

The purpose of cross-domain comparison is not to imply that sanctions, family disputes, litigation, platform moderation, and public-health regulation are morally equivalent. They differ in law, scale, actors, and consequences. Comparison is useful because similar institutional mechanisms recur: selective translation, authority transfer, asymmetric burden distribution, weak appeal, and recursive escalation.

7.1 Geopolitics, sanctions, and selective universality

Human-rights foreign policy is vulnerable to selectivity because states possess security, economic, and alliance interests. Nielsen (2013) found that aid sanctions were more likely when repressive states lacked close political ties to donors and when violations were visible or costly to the donor. Attia and Grauvogel (2023) showed that trafficking rankings and subsequent sanctions waivers were shaped by United States political and economic interests. Crawford and Kacarska (2019) found that political conditionality persisted while becoming more closely connected to Western security priorities.

Sanctions may be justified against perpetrators of grave abuse, but their distributive effects complicate the moral claim. Peksen (2009) found that economic sanctions worsened physical-integrity rights in targeted states, and Peez (2025) reports persistent negative effects on democracy and human rights in the post-1990 period despite the turn toward targeted measures. The evidence does not establish that sanctions are always illegitimate. It shows that a measure presented as rights protection can transfer costs to civilians, strengthen repression, or undermine the rights it invokes.

Weaponization risk rises when comparable violations receive systematically different treatment because of alliance structures; humanitarian language obscures strategic objectives; benchmarks, humanitarian safeguards, or review are absent; and those imposing harm are not accountable to affected populations. The counter-risk is impunity. A defensible response requires consistent criteria, narrow targeting, independently monitored humanitarian exemptions, transparent objectives, and termination conditions.

7.2 Donor conditionality, NGOs, development, and material displacement

NGOs and transnational networks can supply information, legal support, services, and access that

vulnerable communities could not otherwise obtain. They can also exercise representational power without a democratic mandate. Upward accountability to donors often exceeds downward accountability to beneficiaries (Ebrahim, 2003). Donor-driven managerialization may marginalize locally generated agendas (Girei, 2023), although donor influence can also improve financial integrity and beneficiary accountability (Uddin & Belal, 2019).

The political economy of advocacy matters. Funding competition can reward internationally legible grievances and short-term measurable outputs (Cooley & Ron, 2002). Democracy assistance may also be professionalized in ways that preserve donor access while avoiding direct confrontation with entrenched authoritarian power (Bush, 2015). Organizations may become carriers of external policy categories while sincerely believing that they represent local needs (Wallace, 2004). Merry's (2006) account of vernacularization shows that translation is neither simple imposition nor pure local ownership; global norms are negotiated through intermediaries whose power and incentives require scrutiny.

Risk rises where funding relationships are concealed, organizations claim to represent populations without participatory evidence, assistance is conditioned on ideological conformity unrelated to the service, or symbolic compliance displaces food, health, work, housing, education, debt, extraction, and other material concerns. Moyn (2018) and Clément (2018) warn that rights language can coexist with, or divert attention from, distributive inequality. The corrective is not withdrawal from rights-based development but transparent funding, plural consultation, beneficiary appeal, locally determined priorities, and explicit distributional analysis.

7.3 Courts, lawfare, and strategic legal mobilization

Legal mobilization is often indispensable when ordinary politics excludes vulnerable groups. The term *lawfare* should therefore be reserved for abusive or coercively strategic uses of legal process rather than applied to all litigation with political consequences. Matthews (2023) distinguishes legal mobilization from instrumentalism that sustains undemocratic power. Buckel et al. (2024) emphasize both the emancipatory possibilities and structural selectivities of juridical fields, while Cebulak et al. (2024) ask which actors strategic litigation ultimately empowers.

Weaponization risk rises when litigation is designed primarily to exhaust, stigmatize, or incapacitate an opponent; when courts construct broad social rules on thin evidence; when similarly situated litigants receive unequal

treatment; or when contested moral judgments are concealed behind technical doctrine. Tiemessen (2016) uses International Criminal Court interventions to demonstrate the dual character of judicial action: international justice may provide accountability, while referrals may also remove political rivals and shield governing allies.

Judicial review remains necessary because majorities and executives can violate rights. Its legitimacy depends on standing rules, reasoned consistency, transparent evidence, proportionate remedies, attention to institutional competence, and dialogue with representative bodies. Smet (2017) shows that conflicts between rights cannot be resolved by treating one claim as definitionally non-existent; they require structured comparison and justification.

7.4 Digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and infrastructural exclusion

Digital platforms define prohibited categories, rank visibility, adjudicate appeals, and control infrastructures necessary for participation. Klonick (2018) describes major platforms as private governors whose speech systems borrow legal forms without full public-law accountability. Gorwa (2019) maps governance among states, companies, and civil society, while Gorwa et al. (2020) show that automated moderation can increase opacity, reproduce unfairness, and conceal political choices behind technical systems. Douek (2021) accordingly argues for systems-oriented governance that evaluates moderation through proportionality, institutional design, and probabilistic error rather than treating individual posts as isolated constitutional trumps. van Dijck et al. (2023) distinguish individual deplatforming from deplatformization, in which hosting, payment, discovery, advertising, and other services are jointly withdrawn.

Moderation is necessary to address incitement, exploitation, harassment, and coordinated manipulation. Yet algorithmic systems often fail to interpret context, satire, quotation, documentation, theology, and minority dialects. Banchik (2021) found that removal of violent content can erase evidence needed by human-rights investigators. At scale, repeated classification errors become structural allocations of visibility.

Artificial intelligence extends the same problem into welfare, credit, education, employment, policing, health, and migration. Institutions define fairness or risk, historical data encode prior choices, and probabilistic classifications are treated as neutral. The United Nations Guiding Principles establish a corporate responsibility to respect human rights and provide remediation, but their implementation depends on governance mechanisms that

make affected persons able to contest corporate decisions (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011). Raji et al. (2020) propose end-to-end auditing to close accountability gaps. High-impact systems require notice, intelligible explanation, human review, data minimization, independent audit, contestability, and remedy. Trade secrecy and technical complexity should not insulate decisions that allocate basic opportunities.

Weaponization risk is greatest where rules are vague but penalties severe; comparable speech or conduct is treated differently by viewpoint or identity; state requests and private enforcement merge without disclosure; or an institution controls classification, adjudication, infrastructure, and appeal. The alternative is not unmoderated chaos, but constitutionalized and accountable governance (De Gregorio, 2020; Oliva, 2020).

7.5 Identity, family, education, religion, and conscience

Identity categories can reveal patterned injustice that individualistic law fails to detect. Racial segregation, caste, ethnic persecution, and sex-based exclusion cannot be reduced to isolated encounters. The danger arises when descriptive categories become total identities and political standing depends on permanent classes of innocence and guilt. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) caution that identity is often used so broadly that it obscures how groups are constructed. Noor et al. (2012) show how competitive victimhood makes recognition appear scarce and reconciliation morally suspect.

The family intensifies rights conflict because it combines intimacy, dependency, authority, identity, and state responsibility. Adults possess rights to conscience, privacy, association, and bodily integrity. Children possess independent rights to protection and development. Parents carry primary fiduciary responsibilities, while the state has a limited protective role. Religious freedom, protection against religious discrimination, equality, family life, parental direction, professional duties, and child safety are distinct interests that cannot be collapsed into a single slogan (Khaitan & Norton, 2019).

Education is also a form of epistemic governance. Human-rights education can teach dignity and protection against abuse. It can become ideological discipline where contested anthropologies are embedded as settled requirements and good-faith dissent is punished through accreditation, employment, or licensing. Academic freedom does not oblige institutions to platform fraud or harassment. It requires viewpoint-neutral standards, evidence-responsive correction, and protection for responsible inquiry.

Weaponization risk rises when inherited or collective guilt replaces individual responsibility; internal diversity is suppressed by self-appointed representatives; one party is described as possessing rights while another is treated only as an obstacle; or participation requires compelled affirmation rather than lawful conduct. The corrective is context-sensitive balancing that identifies the right, claimant, duty-bearer, severity and probability of harm, third-party effects, available accommodation, and least restrictive effective means.

7.6 Public health, emergency power, and reciprocal duties

Public-health emergencies create real conflicts among life, health-system capacity, movement, work, education, worship, privacy, and economic survival. Both action and inaction distribute risk. During COVID-19, governments used closures, movement restrictions, digital surveillance, and criminal penalties. Sun et al. (2022) reviewed 51 emergency orders from 39 countries and found that approximately half included criminal sanctions for lockdown violations, while few fully satisfied legality,

proportionality, non-discrimination, limited-duration, and review requirements derived from the Siracusa Principles.

International law permits limitations and, under strict conditions, derogations during public emergencies (Lebret, 2020; United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1984). Human-rights analysis should guide rather than simply obstruct effective public health (Forman & Kohler, 2020). Weaponization risk rises when emergency declarations suspend ordinary scrutiny; scientific uncertainty is represented as unanimity; measures persist after the factual basis changes; costs are shifted disproportionately to vulnerable populations; or dissenting expertise is suppressed rather than assessed.

The opposite abuse is also possible. Individual liberty can be invoked to deny duties not to expose others to grave and preventable harm. A relational framework therefore asks whether measures are lawful, necessary, evidence-based, proportionate, time-limited, non-discriminatory, and subject to legislative and judicial review. Mello and Gostin (2023) argue for emergency laws that preserve adequate public-health authority while strengthening substantive standards, public input, and checks.

Table 6. *Comparative Manifestations, Benefits, Risks, and Safeguards*

Domain	Legitimate rights function	Principal weaponization risk	Required safeguard
Geopolitics and sanctions	Accountability for grave violations	Selective coercion and civilian harm	Consistent criteria, humanitarian assessment, and reviewable benchmarks
Courts and strategic litigation	Remedy where ordinary politics fails	One-sided prosecution, exhaustion, or democratic displacement	Standing, reason-giving, proportional remedies, and institutional dialogue
NGOs and development	Voice, service, monitoring, and victim support	Donor agenda substitution and weak beneficiary accountability	Funding disclosure, participatory mandate, and downward accountability
Identity and equality	Recognition of patterned exclusion	Permanent victim-oppressor classes and collective guilt	Equal citizenship, individual responsibility, and internal pluralism
Family, religion, and conscience	Protection of privacy, belief, children, and association	Erasure of competing rights or compelled affirmation	Accommodation, child-safety threshold, and least restrictive means
Education and professions	Rights literacy and protection from exclusion	Curriculum capture and ideological conformity as competence	Academic freedom, transparent standards, and fair appeal
Digital platforms and AI	Protection from abuse and scalable administration	Opaque exclusion and unappealable classification	Notice, explanation, independent audit, human review, and remedy
Public health	Protection of life and health-system capacity	Indefinite emergency power and punitive overreach	Legality, necessity, proportionality, sunset, and review
Material development	Conditions of dignity and substantive agency	Symbolic compliance displacing basic needs	Distributional assessment and locally determined priorities

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

8. Societal Consequences and Causal Pathways

8.1 Polarization and the loss of common citizenship

Rights weaponization can transform political disagreement into moral antagonism. Once a policy is framed as an absolute right, opponents may be redescribed

not as mistaken citizens but as violators. Compromise then appears complicit. Symons and Altman (2015) describe international norm polarization in which states organize around rival moral positions and socialization pressures harden each camp.

The broader polarization literature supports a cautious pathway rather than a simple causal claim. Affective polarization converts policy disagreement into social

aversion (Iyengar et al., 2019). Pernicious polarization can divide society into mutually distrustful blocs and weaken democratic restraint (McCoy et al., 2018). Lee (2022) found that perceived polarization reduces interpersonal trust and willingness to cooperate, while Jost et al. (2022) identify motivational and communication mechanisms that intensify division. Rights discourse is not itself the cause. Risk increases when moral absolutization fixes identity boundaries and turns disagreement into an existential struggle.

8.2 Institutional distrust and recursive escalation

Selective enforcement damages the universality on which rights legitimacy depends. Where sanctions target adversaries but exempt allies, or platforms apply safety rules unevenly, citizens may infer that rights are merely the vocabulary of power. That inference can be exaggerated, but it is not irrational when patterns are documented. Trust is difficult to restore once institutions appear unable to admit error or apply their own principles consistently (Vallier, 2020).

Distrust can become recursive. Institutions answer resistance with stronger compliance mechanisms. Resisters interpret stronger enforcement as further evidence of capture. Each side treats the other's reaction as confirmation of its original diagnosis. Admitting error becomes difficult because correction is perceived as weakening the moral project. This feedback pathway is central to the RIIF Framework.

8.3 Intermediary institutions and authority displacement

Families, congregations, professional associations, local communities, and civil organizations mediate between the person and the state. Rights claims can protect members from abuse within these institutions. They can also hollow out intermediary authority when every disagreement is transferred upward to courts, regulators, donors, or experts. The alternative is accountable pluralism, not romanticization of local institutions or administrative centralization.

A resilient order permits diverse institutions to govern internal missions within limits defined by bodily integrity, due process, child protection, and equal legal status. It also provides meaningful exit and remedy. Central intervention is warranted where serious harm or exclusion from essential public goods is demonstrated, but uniformity should not erase every distinctive moral community.

8.4 Authoritarian backlash

A grave consequence of selective or insulated rights enforcement is the discrediting of legitimate rights.

Populations that experience rights language as foreign imposition, partisan discipline, or elite contempt may support leaders promising order and sovereignty. Such leaders can exploit genuine inconsistencies to attack independent courts, journalists, minorities, and civil society. Weaponized rights and authoritarian anti-rights politics can therefore reinforce one another.

The framework must remain reflexive. A government that translates public order into unlimited authority, forecloses dissent as treason, insulates its institutions, and coerces opponents asymmetrically meets the same diagnostic conditions. Anti-weaponization rhetoric cannot exempt sovereignty, religion, family, or tradition from scrutiny.

9. Rights Instrumentalization and Institutional Fragmentation (RIIF) Framework

The review supports a seven-stage process model shown in Figure 2. The sequence is neither inevitable nor strictly linear. Cases may enter at different points, reverse course, or produce benefits without reaching coercive weaponization. The model is intended to organize inquiry into how a grievance acquires durable institutional force.

Stage 1: Grievance or contested claim. A documented harm, perceived injury, institutional interest, or political objective becomes salient. The claim may be fully justified, partly justified, exaggerated, or strategically selected.

Stage 2: Rights translation. Advocates connect the claim to dignity, equality, liberty, safety, identity, or another rights category. Translation identifies duty-bearers and moves the issue toward courts, commissions, donors, professional bodies, or platforms.

Stage 3: Moral foreclosure. The claim is treated as presumptively overriding. Opponents' reasons receive less scrutiny than presumed motives, and balancing is replaced by classification of violators.

Stage 4: Institutional adoption. The claim is incorporated into law, policy, funding conditions, curricula, licensing, corporate standards, or algorithmic rules. Adoption may provide necessary protection, but it also distances the norm from affected communities.

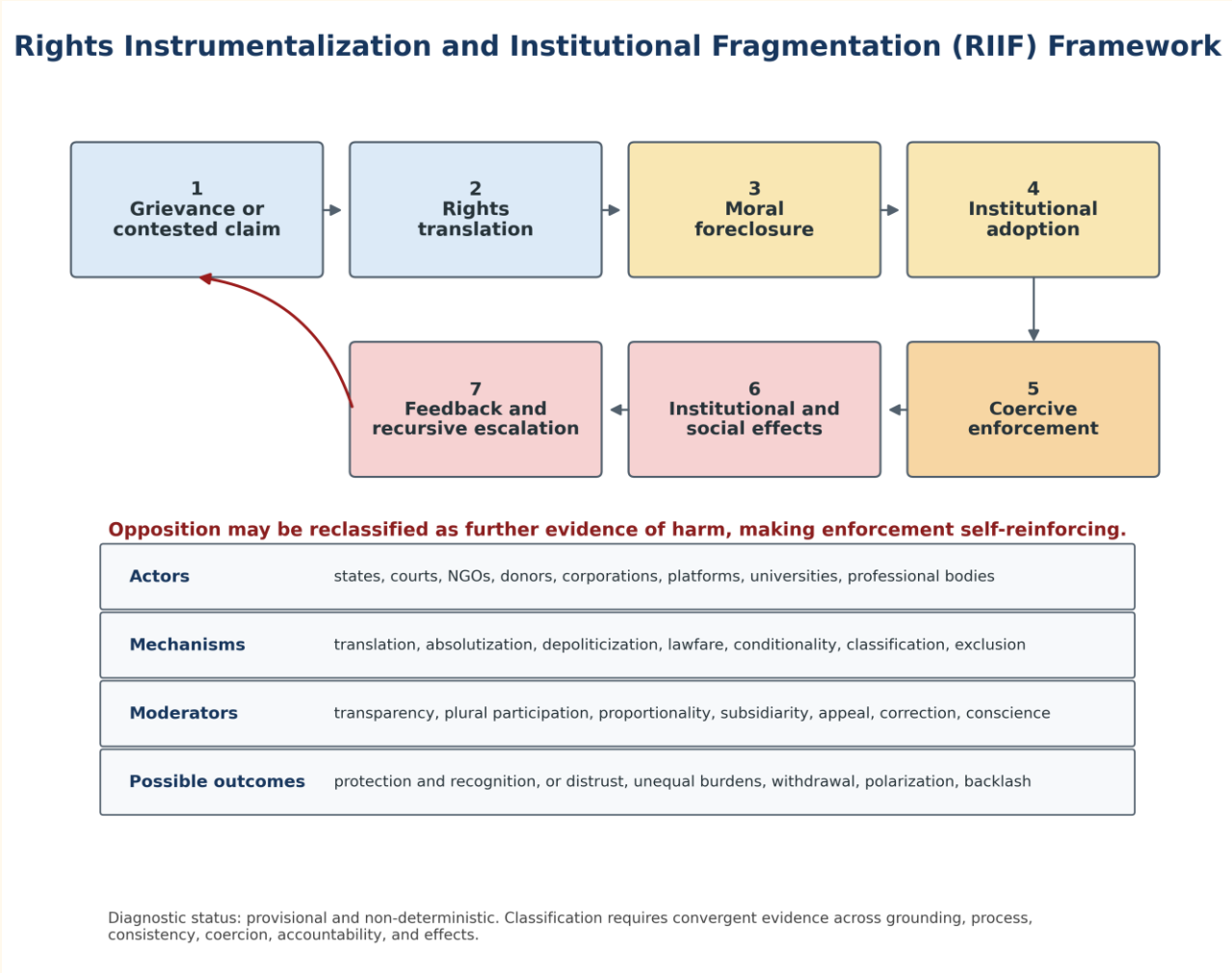
Stage 5: Coercive enforcement. Legal, financial, reputational, professional, or infrastructural penalties secure compliance. Risk is highest when the enforcing body also defines the categories and controls appeal.

Stage 6: Institutional and social effects. Benefits may include protection and recognition. High-risk configurations may generate unequal burden distribution, distrust, institutional withdrawal, family conflict, cultural alienation, or polarization.

Stage 7: Feedback and recursive escalation. Resistance is interpreted as evidence of entrenched oppression, while enforcement is interpreted as evidence of capture. Both

sides harden, and the original dispute becomes a struggle over institutional legitimacy.

Figure 2. Rights Instrumentalization and Institutional Fragmentation (RIIF) Framework



9.1 Scope conditions and moderators

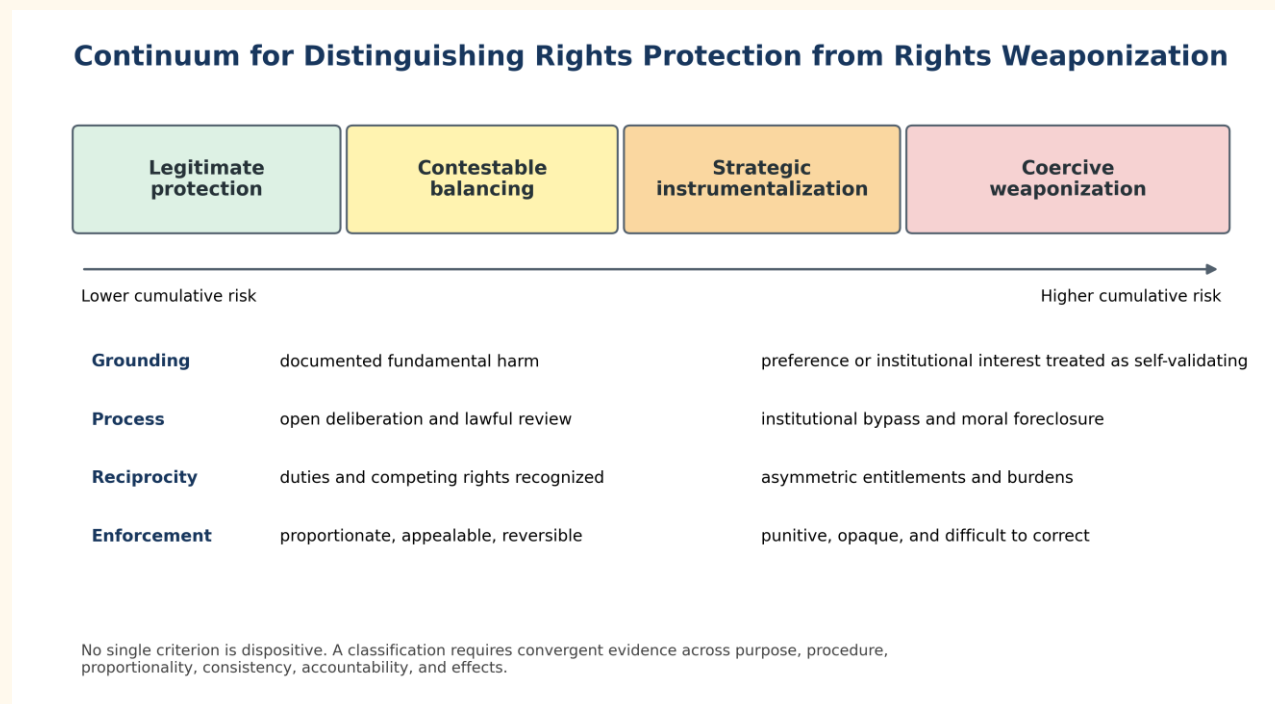
The process is more likely to fragment institutions where rights language carries high moral prestige; norm-making authority is concentrated; political polarization is already elevated; advocacy funding or professional incentives reward categorical claims; and affected communities lack credible participation or appeal. Fragmentation is less likely where institutions explain decisions, acknowledge uncertainty, accommodate reasonable pluralism, apply rules consistently, and correct errors without treating correction as surrender.

Moderators include judicial restraint, legislative scrutiny, viewpoint diversity, local participation, beneficiary accountability, funding transparency, independent media,

conscience protections, separation of powers, and accessible remedy. Subsidiarity is especially important. Decisions should be made at the lowest competent level consistent with protection from serious harm. Subsidiarity is not local immunity; higher institutions retain a duty to intervene when lower institutions are unable or unwilling to protect fundamental rights.

9.2 Diagnostic continuum

Figure 3 places cases on a continuum from legitimate protection through contestable balancing and strategic instrumentalization to coercive weaponization. The categories describe configurations, not permanent identities of actors. A single institution may occupy different positions in different cases.

Figure 3. Continuum for Distinguishing Rights Protection from Rights Weaponization**Table 7.** Human-Rights Weaponization Diagnostic Matrix

Dimension	Lower-risk indicator	Higher-risk indicator	Evidence required
Dignity grounding	Clear fundamental interest and documented harm	Preference or institutional interest treated as self-validating	Legal, philosophical, and empirical justification
Conceptual clarity	Right, claimant, duty-bearer, and limit specified	Category expands ambiguously during enforcement	Definitions and interpretive record
Consistency	Comparable cases treated similarly	Allies, groups, or viewpoints receive systematic exemptions	Comparative case evidence
Reciprocity	Rights and corresponding duties articulated	Entitlements for one side, duties only for another	Distribution of legal obligations
Competing rights	Conflicts acknowledged and balanced	Rival rights dismissed as prejudice or obstruction	Proportionality reasoning
Democratic legitimacy	Meaningful participation and public reasons	Major change through insulated administrative channels	Legislative and consultation record
Institutional accountability	Independent review, appeal, and correction	Enforcer defines, judges, and immunizes its own rules	Governance and appeal data
Evidentiary transparency	Claims and uncertainty openly documented	Selective evidence or protected assumptions	Data, methods, and disclosure
Proportionality	Least restrictive effective measure	Broad penalties unrelated to demonstrated harm	Alternatives and impact assessment
Treatment of dissent	Good-faith disagreement remains legitimate	Dissent automatically classified as harm	Speech and disciplinary policies
Funding transparency	Sponsors and interests disclosed	Hidden conditionality or conflicts of interest	Funding and governance records
Burden distribution	Costs identified and mitigated	Costs shifted to weak or unrelated populations	Distributional analysis
Vulnerable groups	Protection assessed across all affected groups	One protected category renders others invisible	Multi-group impact analysis

Dimension	Lower-risk indicator	Higher-risk indicator	Evidence required
Family and community effects	Intermediary institutions consulted and protected where possible	Central rule displaces local responsibility without necessity	Family and community impact assessment
Social trust	Institution communicates reasons and corrects errors	Compliance relies on stigma and fear	Trust and legitimacy indicators
Sovereignty and self-government	External action supplements failed protection	External actors substitute priorities without accountability	Necessity and local-participation evidence
Reversibility	Sunset, review, and amendment mechanisms exist	Norm becomes permanent before evidence matures	Review clauses and implementation history
Access to remedy	Affordable, timely, independent appeal	No meaningful route to challenge classification	Procedural data
Coordination claims	Direct evidence distinguishes coordination from diffusion	Similarity treated as proof of conspiracy	Documentary or network evidence
Common-good compatibility	Protection strengthens just social cooperation	Claim weakens institutions required for rights themselves	Long-term institutional assessment

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

The matrix is cumulative. No single higher-risk indicator establishes weaponization. A robust classification requires convergent evidence across grounding, procedure, consistency, coercion, accountability, and effects.

10. Counterarguments and Alternative Explanations

10.1 “Weaponization” may be a vocabulary for resisting equality

The strongest objection is that dominant groups often redescribe loss of privilege as social destruction. Historical advances against slavery, racial segregation, sex discrimination, and religious persecution were condemned as threats to order. Claims of family, tradition, morality, or common good can therefore conceal hierarchy. Theilen's (2021) critique of anti-inflation discourse is pertinent: gatekeepers may define established rights as proper and transformative claims as excessive.

This objection is valid and requires a stringent boundary. The framework does not classify novelty, minority status, controversy, or disruption as weaponization. It asks whether claims are grounded in dignity and harm, whether all affected persons are heard, and whether enforcement is consistent and proportionate. Where an established practice subjects a group to violence, exclusion from equal legal status, or denial of due process, rights intervention may be necessary even when socially disruptive.

10.2 The common good can legitimize authoritarianism

States routinely invoke unity, morality, public order, security, and culture to suppress opposition. The African Charter's duty and limitation clauses illustrate the risk. A common-good framework can become a blank cheque if the state defines the good, controls evidence, and denies appeal.

For this reason, the proposed alternative treats the common good as the ensemble of social conditions enabling persons and communities to flourish, not as the preference of rulers or a numerical majority. It is constrained by inviolable dignity, legality, non-derogable rights, public reason, separation of powers, and conscience. State use of common-good language must itself pass the diagnostic matrix.

10.3 Judicial and international intervention may be indispensable

Domestic institutions can be captured. Majorities may exclude minorities, and governments may commit crimes that only external action can restrain. Criticism of judicialization and international pressure can therefore strengthen impunity.

The framework accepts this. Subsidiarity is not absolute localism. Higher-level intervention is justified when lower institutions cannot or will not protect fundamental rights, provided intervention is lawful, necessary, proportionate, evidence-based, and accountable. The criticism concerns selective or self-interested intervention, not the principle of accountability beyond the state.

10.4 Social cohesion may preserve injustice

Cohesion is not inherently good. A society may be cohesive around domination, exclusion, or silence. Human-rights advocacy can reduce short-term harmony because victims are finally able to speak. Trust may decline when concealed abuse becomes visible, and that decline can be a stage in moral repair.

The study therefore treats cohesion as qualified by justice. The relevant outcome is not the absence of conflict but the capacity to disagree within institutions perceived as fair. Manufactured unanimity is not cohesion. Neither is a permanent moral war in which citizens lose common status.

10.5 Strategic use does not equal abuse

Advocates necessarily frame claims, select venues, and mobilize allies. Calling this strategic does not make it illegitimate. The review agrees. Weaponization requires convergent evidence of all four proposed diagnostic conditions and supporting case evidence. Strategy becomes abusive when it exploits moral authority to evade reciprocal justification or impose unaccountable coercion.

10.6 Alternative explanations

Several apparent cases of weaponization may instead reflect institutional incompetence, resource scarcity, legal ambiguity, rapidly evolving evidence, decentralized implementation, or ordinary political disagreement. Platform inconsistency can result from scale and language limitations rather than partisan intent. Sanctions can produce harm despite sincere protective aims. NGO agendas can converge because problems are genuinely shared. The framework therefore separates motive from mechanism and outcome. A finding can rest on predictable institutional effects even where malicious intent is absent, but claims about deliberate concealment require direct evidence.

11. Toward Socially Sustainable Human Rights

The answer to weaponization is not weaker protection for human beings. It is a more coherent rights order. Socially sustainable human rights must preserve persons against domination while recognizing that persons flourish through obligations, institutions, and shared goods. Eight principles follow from the synthesis.

First, **dignity must precede identity and utility**. No person's worth depends on political recognition, productivity, citizenship, health, age, belief, or group status. This principle protects marginalized persons but also prevents institutions from treating dissenters as disposable obstacles.

Second, **rights and duties must be articulated together**. A right to expression entails duties not to incite direct violence or defame; a right to health entails professional, state, and civic responsibilities; parental rights entail fiduciary duties to children; property rights entail duties shaped by law and the needs of others. Correlativity does not mean that every victim must perform before receiving protection. It means that a legal order cannot remain coherent if it multiplies claims while hiding who bears the obligations.

Third, **rights conflicts must be acknowledged rather than rhetorically erased**. Courts and institutions should identify each affected right, explain the relative gravity of harms, test alternatives, and justify the chosen balance. No group should be described as possessing rights while another possesses only prejudices or administrative burdens.

Fourth, **proportionality must govern restriction and enforcement**. Measures should pursue a legitimate aim, be rationally connected to that aim, impair competing rights as little as reasonably possible, and produce benefits proportionate to costs. This structure is not mathematically neutral, but it forces institutions to disclose assumptions and alternatives.

Fifth, **conscience and institutional pluralism require substantive protection**. A diverse society cannot survive if participation in employment, education, finance, or public life depends on affirming every official moral claim. Accommodation should be denied where it imposes serious and demonstrable harm, not merely because difference is uncomfortable.

Sixth, **subsidiarity should distribute authority**. Families, local communities, professional bodies, legislatures, courts, and international institutions have different competencies. Higher institutions should intervene where lower ones fail to protect dignity, but should not absorb responsibilities that can be exercised justly at a more proximate level.

Seventh, **material and symbolic rights must be integrated**. Recognition without food, safety, health, work, education, and stable social relationships is incomplete. Conversely, provision without liberty and accountability can become domination. Impact assessments should make visible which needs receive resources and which remain rhetorically affirmed but materially neglected.

Eighth, **all rights-governing institutions must be contestable**. Transparency, reasons, appeal, correction, and periodic review are not administrative luxuries. They are the institutional expression of equal dignity. An authority that cannot explain or revise its decisions risks converting protection into rule by classification.

12. Policy and Institutional Recommendations

The recommendations in Table 8 translate these principles into procedures. They are intended as safeguards, not universal formulas. Institutional context determines implementation.

Table 8. *Policy Reforms, Benefits, Risks, and Safeguards*

Reform	Responsible actors	Expected benefit	Foreseeable risk	Safeguard
Rights-and-duties impact assessment	Legislatures, courts, commissions	Makes duty-bearers and displaced obligations visible	Bureaucratic formalism	Publish assumptions, evidence, and dissenting views
Competing-rights statement	Courts, regulators, universities	Prevents one-sided framing	False equivalence between unequal harms	Weight claims by severity, evidence, and legal status
Proportionality and least-restrictive-means review	All coercive institutions	Limits unnecessary interference	Judicial overreach	Transparent standard and institutional deference where justified
Advocacy-funding disclosure	NGOs, foundations, policy bodies	Reveals conflicts and dependencies	Harassment of legitimate donors	Thresholds, privacy protection, viewpoint-neutral rules
Downward accountability mechanisms	NGOs and development agencies	Strengthens beneficiary voice	Local elite capture	Diverse participation and independent complaint channels
Conscience and accommodation procedure	Employers, schools, professional bodies	Preserves plural participation	Accommodation used to deny essential services	Serious-harm threshold and alternative-service planning
Emergency sunset clauses	Executives and legislatures	Prevents normalization of exceptional power	Premature expiry during genuine danger	Renewable only through evidence and legislative vote
Algorithmic notice and appeal	Platforms and public agencies	Makes automated governance contestable	Strategic gaming of systems	Tiered disclosure and independent audit
Sanctions human-impact assessment	States and international bodies	Reduces civilian harm and rights contradiction	Manipulated impact reporting	Independent monitoring and humanitarian triggers
Family and community impact assessment	Legislatures and courts	Identifies effects on caregiving and social capital	Romanticization of family authority	Explicit child-safety and individual-rights safeguards
Periodic review of newly recognized rights	Legislatures, courts, commissions	Tests implementation and unintended consequences	Politicized rollback	High evidentiary threshold and protection of vested remedies
Viewpoint-diverse advisory panels	Universities, commissions, platforms	Reduces epistemic closure	Tokenism or obstruction	Competence criteria, disclosure, and reasoned minority reports

Note. Author's synthesis from the reviewed literature and instruments.

Three recommendations warrant emphasis. First, every major rights measure should contain a **competing-rights statement**. Institutions should identify not only the intended beneficiary but also the persons who acquire duties, lose discretion, or face collateral harm. Second, rights claims introduced through administrative or private governance should receive **periodic democratic or independent review**. Norms should not become irreversible merely because they were first encoded in professional standards. Third, sanctions and donor conditions should undergo **human-impact and local-legitimacy assessment**, including credible participation by affected populations.

13. Discussion

This review shows that human-rights weaponization is not a single ideology, institution, or policy. It is a high-risk configuration through which the moral authority of rights is converted into weakly accountable leverage. The configuration can be produced by progressive or conservative movements, democratic or authoritarian governments, religious or secular institutions, and domestic or transnational actors. This symmetry is theoretically important because partisan explanations cannot account for the similar tactics used by rival groups.

The RIIF Framework extends Bob's (2019) rights-as-weapons account by specifying cumulative diagnostic conditions, connecting rhetorical operations to institutional and infrastructural power, and modeling recursive effects on trust and legitimacy. It also refines rights-inflation debates. Numerical proliferation is not the decisive problem. A broad catalogue may remain legitimate where claims are coherently grounded, duties are explicit, conflicts are acknowledged, and enforcement is accountable. Conversely, an established right can be weaponized through selective implementation. The relevant question is therefore not simply how many rights exist, but how claims are justified, related, institutionalized, and enforced.

The review also contributes to legal-mobilization scholarship by distinguishing strategy from abuse. Strategic venue selection, framing, and coalition building are ordinary features of advocacy. Weaponization begins when rights authority is used to disable reciprocal justification through moral foreclosure, insulation, and asymmetric coercion. This distinction protects legitimate public-interest litigation while preserving a vocabulary for examining exhaustion tactics, one-sided prosecution, and democratic displacement.

African political philosophy is not merely a cultural supplement to this analysis. Its emphasis on personhood, solidarity, duty, and peoples' rights challenges the metaphysical individualism that often structures rights discourse. African experience simultaneously warns against allowing community or sovereignty to erase persons. The relational model developed here therefore rejects both atomism and collectivism.

For scholarship on stigmatized knowledge and suppressed discourse, the analysis supplies an evidentiary discipline. Claims of suppression should distinguish direct censorship, funding dependence, agenda setting, algorithmic exclusion, professional sanction, reputational pressure, and ordinary scholarly rejection. They should distinguish coordination from convergence and institutional error from deliberate concealment. A field committed to exposing power becomes more credible when it subjects counter-establishment claims to the same standards it applies to official narratives.

The framework remains provisional. Its contribution is conceptual clarification and mechanism integration, not empirical validation. The eight propositions below are therefore research propositions rather than confirmed causal laws.

14. Limitations and Future Research

The study has seven limitations. First, the search was restricted to English and may underrepresent scholarship in other languages. Second, discovery relied on one cross-disciplinary interface supplemented by citation chasing and official repositories rather than direct searches of Scopus, Web of Science, HeinOnline, PsycINFO, and regional indexes. Third, only the first ten relevance-ranked records per query were exported. This improves procedural clarity but reduces recall and makes the retrieved set sensitive to platform ranking changes. Fourth, the protocol was not prospectively registered or publicly deposited. Fifth, screening, extraction, and coding were conducted by one reviewer, creating selection and interpretive bias. Sixth, the mixed corpus supports conceptual synthesis but not pooled causal estimates. Seventh, the RIIF Framework and diagnostic matrix have not been independently validated across cases.

A further reproducibility limitation must be stated precisely. The query strings, date, counts, criteria, and included corpus are reported, but the original record-level exclusion log was not archived as a public supplement. The selection arithmetic can be audited, and the included corpus can be identified, but an external reviewer cannot reconstruct every exclusion decision from the manuscript alone. Future versions should deposit a timestamped export,

deduplication log, extraction sheet, and exclusion register in a public repository.

Future research should apply the matrix to matched cases in which comparable violations receive different geopolitical responses. Cross-language studies could examine platform enforcement, donor conditions, or professional discipline. Longitudinal analyses could test whether moral foreclosure and weak appeal predict distrust or backlash. Network analysis could distinguish coordination from institutional diffusion. Experiments could test whether rights framing increases support while reducing willingness to compromise. Comparative African research should further develop relational rights theory without romanticizing community or reproducing paternalism.

15. Conclusion

Human rights are among the most important moral and legal achievements of the modern era. Their authority protects persons precisely when political power, social convention, or market interest would otherwise disregard them. The same authority can be appropriated. Weaponization does not begin whenever a claim challenges tradition or disturbs social peace. It becomes plausible when strategic rights translation is joined to moral foreclosure, institutional insulation, and asymmetric coercion.

Rights presuppose duties, trust, material provision, moral formation, legitimate authority, and institutions capable of correction. A society cannot be sustained by entitlement language alone. It also cannot be sustained by suppressing rights in the name of order, sovereignty, religion, family, or community. The durable alternative is a relational order in which dignity is inviolable, duties are reciprocal, authority is bounded, conscience is protected, conflicts are openly reasoned, and coercion is proportionate and reviewable.

The RIIF Framework offers a disciplined vocabulary for examining strategic abuse without making suppression proof of truth or furnishing authoritarian governments with an excuse to evade scrutiny. The strongest critique of human-rights instrumentalization is therefore not anti-rights. It is a demand that rights institutions remain faithful to the human beings they claim to protect.

Research Propositions

Proposition 1. The risk of coercive rights weaponization increases when strategic rights translation, moral foreclosure, institutional insulation, and asymmetric coercion occur together rather than independently.

Proposition 2. Rights-governing institutions with high authority but weak transparency, representation, appeal, and

correction will exhibit lower perceived legitimacy across ideological groups.

Proposition 3. Persistent selective enforcement across comparable cases will reduce perceived universality and increase support for anti-rights or sovereignty-centered political actors.

Proposition 4. Rights regimes that expand enforceable claims without making duty-bearers and burden distribution explicit will generate greater intergroup resentment than regimes that articulate reciprocity.

Proposition 5. Donor dependence will predict agenda alignment with funders most strongly where local financing is weak and downward accountability is absent.

Proposition 6. Concentrated platform or infrastructural control will magnify the social effects of rights-based moderation when speech, payment, hosting, discovery, and identity services can be jointly withdrawn.

Proposition 7. Proportionality review, reason-giving, independent appeal, conscience accommodation, and subsidiarity will moderate the relationship between contested rights enforcement and polarization.

Proposition 8. Rights weaponization and authoritarian backlash will form a reciprocal escalation process in which each supplies political justification for the other.

Declarations

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Ethics statement: The study analyzed published scholarship and publicly available legal and policy documents. It involved no human participants, intervention, private personal data, or identifiable confidential information. Formal human-participant ethical approval was therefore not required.

Data availability: The query strings, search date, eligibility criteria, selection counts, extraction fields, and included analytic corpus are reported in the manuscript and appendices. The original record-level exclusion log was not deposited and is acknowledged as a reproducibility limitation. No new quantitative dataset was generated.

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Methodological Appendix A. Reproducibility Record

A1. Review question

Under what cumulative conditions, through which institutional mechanisms, and with what social consequences does rights advocacy move from legitimate protection to coercive human-rights weaponization?

A2. Search execution

All ten search strings in Table 3 were executed through the Consensus academic discovery interface on 18 July 2026. The first ten relevance-ranked records from each query were exported, producing 100 discovery-interface records. Forty additional records were identified through backward and forward citation chasing, official treaty and

policy repositories, publisher records, and targeted retrieval of seminal works.

A3. Search constraints

The search was bounded rather than exhaustive. The interface's ranking algorithm and index may change over time; records below rank ten were not screened. Searches were conducted in English. No direct searches were executed in Scopus, Web of Science, HeinOnline, PsycINFO, or regional databases. These constraints are reported to prevent the PRISMA-informed flow from being mistaken for a comprehensive systematic-review claim.

A4. Inclusion criteria

1. English-language scholarly source or authoritative institutional instrument.
2. Traceable authorship or institutional responsibility, title, date, and publication venue.
3. Direct contribution to at least one review domain.
4. Sufficient empirical, doctrinal, theoretical, or policy substance.
5. Publication from 1990 to 18 July 2026, unless a pre-1990 source was foundational.

A5. Exclusion criteria

1. Keyword coincidence without substantive relevance.
2. Unverifiable metadata or unsupported factual allegations.
3. Duplicate edition, abstract, review notice, or derivative treatment where a fuller source was included.
4. Commentary without an identifiable analytical or documentary basis.
5. Source whose principal subject did not concern rights, duties, institutional power, enforcement, or social consequences.

A6. Extraction fields

Bibliographic information; discipline; region; source class; rights domain; actor; claimed beneficiary; duty-bearer; mechanism; enforcement instrument; competing rights; accountability process; evidence type; reported outcomes; alternative explanation; quality-appraisal notes; and framework relevance.

A7. PRISMA reconciliation

Records identified: 140. Duplicates removed: 13. Records screened: 127. Records excluded at title and abstract: 44. Reports sought: 83. Reports not retrieved: 2. Reports assessed: 81. Reports excluded after assessment: 13. Sources included in the coded synthesis: 68, comprising 61 scholarly works and seven legal or policy instruments. Thirty-one additional references were used for methods,

historical context, normative grounding, or theological framing.

A8. Protocol and audit trail

The protocol was established before final screening but was not registered or publicly deposited. PROSPERO was not an appropriate registry because the review did not evaluate a health intervention, but an open repository could still have been used. Screening and coding were conducted by one reviewer. The query strings, counts, criteria, and included corpus are reported; the original record-level exclusion log was not retained as a public supplement. This limits complete independent reconstruction and is disclosed rather than concealed.

Methodological Appendix B. Coded Analytic Corpus

B1. Scholarly sources included in the coded synthesis (n = 61)

Alston (1984); Attia and Grauvogel (2023); Banchik (2021); Barnett and Duvall (2005); Barnett and Finnemore (1999); Bob (2019); Brown (2004); Brubaker and Cooper (2000); Buckel et al. (2024); Bush (2015); Carpenter (2007); Cebulak et al. (2024); Chemhuru (2018); Clément (2018); Cooley and Ron (2002); Crawford and Kacarska (2019); De Gregorio (2020); Douek (2021); Ebrahim (2003); Elliott (2007); Farahat and Leijten (2022); Forman and Kohler (2020); Girei (2023); Gorwa (2019); Gorwa et al. (2020); Hafner-Burton (2013); Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005); Huckerby and Knuckey (2023); Ikuenobe (2018, 2021); Iyengar et al. (2019); Jost et al. (2022); Kennedy (2002); Khaitan and Norton (2019); Klonick (2018); Lebet (2020); Lee (2022); Matolino (2018); Matthews (2023); McCoy et al. (2018); Merry (2006); Metz (2007, 2013); Moghaddam et al. (2025); Moyn (2018); Mutua (2001, 2002); Nielsen (2013); Noor et al. (2012); Oliva (2020); Peez (2025); Peksen (2009); Raji et al. (2020); Regilme (2020); Sun et al. (2022); Symons and Altman (2015); Theilen (2021); Tiemessen (2016); Uddin and Belal (2019); van Dijck et al. (2023); and Wallace (2004).

B2. Authoritative legal and policy instruments included in the coded synthesis (n = 7)

African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Union, 1981); Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966a); International

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1966b); Siracusa Principles (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1984); Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (United Nations, 1993); and Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011).

B3. Classification rule

Membership in the analytic corpus indicates that a source was coded for mechanisms, actors, competing rights, accountability, or outcomes. Other references in the article supplied methodological guidance, historical background, philosophical grounding, or theological interpretation but were not counted among the 68 coded sources.