



Toward an American Coalition for Human Rights

Bayard Rustin

On October 6 of last year representatives of many organizations concerned with human rights met in New York to determine whether a national coalition on human rights should be formed. In his opening remarks Bayard Rustin, president of the Coalition on Civil Rights, set forth what he considered a suitable basis for the proposed coalition. The substance of his address follows.—Ed.

Should we form an American coalition for human rights? If so, what would be its purpose, its structure, and its functions?

I would like to suggest a moral philosophy as a basis for such a coalition.

I believe we must oppose suppression of human rights anywhere, *whatever the ideology of the oppressor*. We must, in my view, oppose dictatorships of *both the Right and the Left*—unequivocally and without qualification.

In addition I would like to propose that such a coalition stress the importance of social and economic well-being for all peoples. We must, in my view, look to the development of human well-being that embodies the *full range* of human rights and aspirations. This means stretching the definition of human rights beyond civil and political to include all matters that affect human welfare.

It is my hope that this coalition will be concerned whenever governments, including our own, restrict the rights of people for advocating or exercising:

Freedom of speech and of the press;

Freedom of assembly and association, including the right to form free trade unions;

An independent judiciary;

Freedom of artistic and intellectual expression;

Religious liberty and freedom of movement.

We must also begin to lay a groundwork for education about minimum social and economic standards. This

will be a task for the coalition. It is also my hope that our coalition would oppose violations of human rights whether they take place in Chile *or* Cuba—that is, in dictatorships of the Right *or* the Left; in South Africa *or* Uganda—that is, in dictatorships that are white *or* black; in South Korea or Vietnam—that is, in dictatorships that are authoritarian *or* totalitarian. For this coalition to be successful and morally consistent it must oppose dictatorships of every kind.

Let us not forget that if we lived in a dictatorship we could be amongst the first to be jailed, or interned on some island prison, or sent to the Gulag Archipelago. We are the counterparts of the human rights advocates who are chemically lobotomized in Soviet mental institutions or trapped in the brutalized serfdom of the apartheid system that tyrannizes the vast majority of South Africans. And we in America can provide moral sustenance to those who suffer these afflictions because of their beliefs in elected governments and an open society.

Just two days ago Andrei Sakharov, one of the true heroes of our time, said: "We are going through a period of history in which decisive support of the principles of freedom of conscience, an open society, and the rights of man, have become an absolute necessity." I hope that we can provide such support and help develop it elsewhere. We can also provide economic sustenance, both to relieve human suffering and to sustain democracy wherever it exists. The people of India have shown



recently that even the most poverty-stricken demand both bread and freedom. And as we celebrate the bloodless democratic restoration in that ancient land we must not forget that the people of India need our bread and our support of their economic and social development. Yet I have not detected a commitment in our nation to greater assistance anywhere near the scale that I believe is required to reinforce political democracy in India with the solid foundation of economic development.

Although our government must do more in this area, our president, Jimmy Carter, deserves great credit for eloquently expressing the concern that Americans have for human rights. Indeed, our president has raised the spirit of this country and given renewed hope to millions throughout the world who suffer political oppression.

A decade and a half ago hundreds of thousands of Americans were active in the civil rights movement. We marched together in Washington in 1963 and in Selma in 1965. We protested together. We lobbied together. We have friends who lost their lives in that struggle. And we accomplished a revolution in American society. We learned what can be done when people join together to work for democratic change.

It is my hope that the proposed coalition will be formed and that we all will enlist in this struggle for human rights. Yet we should remember, as we enter this arena, that we are really the second or third wave in a battle long led by others whose significant contribution has recently begun to be appreciated. I speak, of course, of the major human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, the International League for Human Rights, the International Commission of Jurists, Freedom House, the International Rescue Committee, and the human rights efforts sponsored by some of our nation's principal religious and trade union organizations.

May I also add that many of us are deeply concerned about the campaign launched by some of the worst oppressors in the world to remove United Nations consultative status from such principal human rights organizations as the International League for Human Rights. I hope I speak for all of us when I urge us not to fail to bring to public attention this despicable effort launched by such champions of police-state terrorism as Argentina, Chile, and the Soviet Union. We should watch this situation carefully. If the professional human rights organizations request our assistance, I hope many of us will communicate to the Carter administration our concern at this expulsion effort and our strong support of what we hope will be a determined effort by President Carter to organize multilateral backing for protecting the present United Nations status of the independent human rights consultative organizations.

With respect to the function and structure of the coalition we propose, we have in mind the model developed by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. The Leadership Conference is a broad coalition of over 150 organizations. At its core are the major black organizations, and surrounding them are the labor,

religious, liberal, professional, service, and youth organizations that make up that body. It has been our experience in the Leadership Conference that all benefited from this kind of arrangement. The civil rights groups have been strengthened by having immediate access to a permanent coalition of organizations that might otherwise not be involved in an ongoing way in the civil rights cause. Equally, the noncivil rights organizations benefit by having a means of informing themselves about civil rights issues and of participating effectively in this field.

Yet in the Leadership Conference we do not pretend to have unity on every issue, and we issue statements or take actions only where there is a consensus. When the Leadership Conference does act, however, its effectiveness is far, far greater than any single organization could ever hope to achieve acting alone.

We hope that the human rights coalition proposed today could serve similar purposes. For those organizations that are relatively new to the human rights field the proposed coalition could provide valuable, reliable information and a means of becoming active. For those organizations with extensive human rights traditions and programs the coalition can provide a national framework for cooperation. For professional human rights organizations it can help increase their influence by expanding the number of leaders who receive their materials, endorse their statements, and promote their appeals. There are profound differences in how many people here approach the problem and meaning of social and economic rights. The coalition could stimulate research to help define and clarify this area.

Some may say that we should not presume to concern ourselves with conditions in other countries that have different histories from our own, different cultures, different levels of social and economic development, different forms of government, and different political ideologies. The expression of such concern, some maintain, constitutes interference in the internal affairs of other countries. I am reminded of the criticism that eight Alabama clergymen leveled against the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for "interfering" in the internal affairs of Birmingham. I was deeply moved by Martin's reply, when he illuminated John Donne's "no man is an island." In Martin's famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" he said:

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here.... Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all directly.

That, I pray, is our common belief. Now let us move forward.