

Chapter 9: Fostering Good Governance and Human Rights in an Expanded BRICS: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The expansion of the BRICS adds to the diversity of economic and political systems amongst its members. With new and existing membership, ranging from liberal constitutional democracies to outright authoritarian regimes, the BRICS bloc will face a myriad of challenges in policy formulation and implementation. While diversity is often desirable, it is crucial for the bloc to establish normative principles for good governance, democracy and human rights and foster mutual respect and shared values among member states. It is argued in this paper that as BRICS positions itself as an alternative to Western-led global institutions, a principle-based approach to its relations can bolster its moral authority in international affairs. A significant number of countries that have recently joined BRICS face significant challenges including repression, corruption and political and economic instability. This paper theorizes that a shared commitment to human rights and good governance enhances economic development, peace and security leading to more equitable and inclusive growth in member states. Relying on liberal theories of international relations and international law, the paper will firstly discuss the imperative for setting international human rights norms, tailored context specific for BRICS countries, in enhancing cooperation within the bloc. The paper will then attempt to provide technical assistance by drawing from best practices to facilitate human rights-based cooperation and among member states. It will be shown that an expanded BRICS has potential to reinforce good governance, human rights and democracy.

Keywords: Good governance, human rights, BRICS+, liberal institutionalism, democratic peace theory

Introduction and Background

At its inception in 2009, BRICS was made up of four countries, that is Brazil, Russia, India, and China. South Africa joined the group at the 2011 Summit in China. Since then, BRICS has been a force to reckon within global affairs as it represents the world's biggest emerging markets. BRICS therefore remains 'a core of south-south cooperation, promoting the interests of a group of developing countries in global governance for a more balanced global architecture' (Kirton & Larionova 2022:8). After the joining of South Africa in 2011, BRICS became a 'transregional governance mechanism with a comprehensive political, security, economic and social agenda' (Kirton & Larionova 2022). BRICS is a diverse group with marked differences in the sizes of the members' economies, governance systems, and cultures (Lipton 2017). This diversity poses a significant challenge to the harmonization of policies particularly in the area of human rights. Scholars have always seen its ideological and political heterogeneity as posing a risk to the capability to achieve its objective of establishing a collective world order. History has shown that due to its diversity, BRICS has failed to craft a cohesive foreign policy, especially on the Libyan issue in 2011 when national and diplomatic interests took priority over a common position (Gilbert 2019). Daniel and Virk (2014: 21) observe that 'South Africa voted for UN Security Council Resolution 1973, authorising Anglo-French-led intervention in Libya, while Brazil, Russia, India, and China all abstained'. So far, the BRICS, has only registered cohesion in its anti-West stance. The expansion of BRICS on 1 January 2024 to include five more countries has made it even more diverse. At its 15th Summit in Johannesburg in August 2023, BRICS invited six more countries to join its ranks (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). Argentina subsequently declined (Steenhagen 2024). On the global affairs front, commentators have posited that the heterogeneity of the BRICS is likely going to limit the group's influence in world trade and the international monetary system (Afota *et al.* 2024). It has been argued that:

At this stage, the expansion mainly serves to underline the alliance's attractiveness for emerging and developing countries, which see it as a

forum for expression for the ‘Global South’, and helps to establish the enlarged bloc (BRICS+) as a major force in global economic governance (Afota *et al.* 2024).

The expansion of BRICS has essentially shifted its goal from just strengthening the voices of emerging economies and participation in international affairs towards ‘global politics and strengthening alliances to combat Western imperialism and dominance, focusing on the right to development’ (Fairplanet 2023). This article posits that the expansion of BRICS and its involvement in global affairs is a welcome development, however, the bloc also needs to focus on the issues of rule of law, democracy, and human rights, or else it will devolve into a dictators’ club. Critics of the expanded BRICS have already labeled it an ‘international repressive alliance’ (CIVICUS 2023). Justification for this lies in China and Russia’s human rights record. The United Nations Human Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2022) has previously reported that there are possible crimes against humanity committed by China in Xinjiang region where religious minorities, Uyghurs, and Kazakhs suffer arbitrary detentions, arrests, and torture. The International Criminal Court also has a pending warrant of arrest for Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin, for committing war crimes in Ukraine. Amnesty International implored South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa to speak against atrocities that were being committed by Russia:

President Ramaphosa cannot say BRICS wants to contribute to a better world when South Africa is silent on human rights atrocities being perpetrated by its members. The Russian government is not only violating international humanitarian and human rights law in its war of aggression against Ukraine, but its crackdown on people in Russia who are speaking out about the invasion goes against the rights to freedom of expression and assembly which South Africa and its Constitution prides itself on (Amnesty International 2022).

It is also reported that the human rights situation in India has deteriorated, and South Africa’s socio-economic landscape remains largely unequal. The newcomers’ human rights record also paints a bleak picture- war crimes in Ethiopia and wanton violation of religious minority rights in Saudi Arabia. CIVICUS Monitor reports that the civic space in 6 of the 11 BRICS+ countries is shut down. The 15th BRICS SUMMIT Declaration adopted at the August

2023 Summit in Johannesburg expressed the members' commitment to 'enhancing and improving global governance by promoting a more agile, effective, efficient, representative, democratic and accountable international and multilateral system' (BRICS 2023: 2). More expressly, the Member states affirmed their commitment to 'ensuring the promotion and protection of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all with the aim to build a brighter shared future for the international community based on mutually beneficial cooperation' (BRICS 2023: 2). This article avers that for the commitments to be achieved, the BRICS+ group will need to first align member states' legal and ideological perspectives to avoid a discordant approach. While writing for *Business Day*, Mia Swart notes that:

While few countries have squeaky clean human rights records, the scale and extent of human rights violations in China, Russia and India are staggering. Whatever membership criteria get decided on they are sure not to include human rights, democracy or the rule of law, since if compliance were to become a criterion, most of the current BRICS members would have to be suspended (*Business Day* August 2023).

While the BRICS+ makes commitments to human rights, pessimists argue that these countries' human rights track records render these commitments palpably insincere. An argument has been made that the leaders of the majority of BRICS+ countries cannot promote democratic governance of international institutions, while they do not support democracy at home. This significantly blights the BRICS+ group's commitment to its values and assertions.

Theoretical Framework

This paper examines the intricate relationship between the expansion of BRICS, the promotion of good governance, and the protection of human rights. To this end, the paper draws upon liberal theories of international relations and international law, particularly liberal institutionalism and democratic peace theory.

i) Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism posits that international institutions can play a pivotal role in fostering cooperation among states, even in the face of divergent interests (Acharya & Buzan 2019; Keohane & Martin 1995; Keohane 2005). By examining BRICS+ through the lens of liberal institutionalism, the paper seeks

to investigate how the bloc can establish norms, facilitate cooperation, and potentially create mechanisms for monitoring and encouraging compliance with human rights and good governance standards among its members. The tenets of liberal institutionalism suggest that clear norms, effective monitoring mechanisms, and opportunities for dialogue are crucial for successful cooperation within international institutions (Ruggie 1993; Hale & Held 2017). As such, this study utilizes these tenets to assess the effectiveness of different institutional designs within BRICS for achieving its human rights and good governance goals. It also explores factors that might promote or hinder cooperation within BRICS on these issues, such as power dynamics, the level of institutionalization, and the presence of shared interests.

ii) Democratic Peace Theory

Democratic peace theory suggests that democratic states are less likely to engage in conflict with each other and tend to uphold better human rights records (Russett 1993; Gartzke 2007; Mousseau 2013; Hellmann 2020). While not all BRICS members are democracies, the theory remains relevant due to the increasing diversity of political systems within the group. The presence of democratic states like South Africa, Brazil, and India alongside less democratic ones creates a dynamic that can be analyzed to understand the potential for BRICS+ to promote human rights and good governance. The theory is crucial in exploring two key aspects of BRICS+,

- (i) the potential influence of democratic members on the BRICS agenda, particularly in advocating for human rights and good governance; and
- (ii) the potential for BRICS+ to become a platform for promoting democratic values and practices, even among non-democratic members, thus contributing to a gradual shift towards greater respect for human rights and good governance across the bloc.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design. It relies on secondary data in the form of published and unpublished literature sources on the study phenomenon. The study delves into the complexities of the BRICS+ bloc, particularly in the area of governance and human rights. To succinctly explain

the disjuncture between members' human rights posture, a comparative analysis is adopted. In so doing, the study makes reference to South Africa, Russia, China, Brazil, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, among others. This allows for an in-depth exploration of the human rights discord within the bloc within a real-world context. This has facilitated a nuanced understanding of the interplay between individual countries' human rights agenda and the bloc's indifferent approach.

The Evolution of the BRICS

At its inception in 2009, the BRIC, was characterized and defined by the economic power that the four nations of Brazil, Russia, India and China wielded as the major emerging markets. These four nations sought to challenge the post-Cold War trends that were characterized by inequality, polarization, hegemonic and discriminatory world order (Patnaik 2022). The group was dedicated to the interests and cooperation of its member states to enhance global governance. It morphed into a major international organization with annual summits to develop and implement its policies and interests. According to Rivers (2015: 578), 'the cooperation of these states in formalized summits has proven to be beneficial in the promotion of common interests and objectives'. One such example is that the 2014 summit culminated in the BRICS New Development Bank with the purpose of 'mobilizing resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging developing economies' (Rivers 2015: 578). The New Development Bank (NDB) was created as an alternative to the dominant Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Dixon 2015). The main focus of the NDB was to fund infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other developing countries. In addition to the NDB, BRICS also established the Contingent Reserve Agreement (CRA), a framework that enables the provision of liquidity support to members in case of financial difficulty. What is strikingly different between the BRICS institution and other Western-led institutions is that of political identity. Western-led institutions' members' identities converge on the ideals of liberal democracy while BRICS membership has no political identity. Their only mutual identity is that of being developing countries or emerging markets. As such, this lack of political identity casts a huge shadow on the group's prospects of success. Rivers (2015: 578) notes that 'questions regarding the capability of five countries with fundamentally different political identities to merge into what appears to be an increasingly important political group have developed'.

BRICS+ Members and Human Rights

China is considered the most significant actor within the BRICS+ (Beeson & Zeng 2018). China continues to adhere to its policy of non-intervention in its engagements with other states. China's non-intervention policy means that it is willing to engage in business with any state without being involved in the internal affairs of that particular country. Such a stance has received significant criticism as it demonstrates China's willingness to conduct business with even rogue states/ regimes complicit in human rights abuses (Mumuni 2017). China maintains that national governments should focus on and respond to domestic socio-political and/or economic issues. This adherence to the policy of non-intervention has crippled Beijing's ability to engage in international interventions meaningfully. However, this article argues that advancing a non-interventionist stance in the face of human rights violations can be detrimental to international peace and good governance.

Unlike China which has formulated and maintained the policy of non-intervention in which it is reluctant to intervene in the affairs of other nations, Russia on the other hand has a much more aggressive stance. Russia's approach to human rights is largely influenced by its more authoritarian political structure, internally. Autocrats' behaviour at the international level reflects their governing methods at home, where, in the absence of a genuine popular mandate, they rely on a crude combination of corruption and force to maintain control (Freedom House 2023). Russia's aggressive foreign policy is characterized by violations of international law and the principle of sovereignty, as seen by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in a bid to scuttle that country's hard-won democratic progress. Russia's approach largely resists any external critics of its internal and foreign engagements.

The political systems of the BRICS+ nations are different from each other. The majority of the member states have been characterised as undemocratic. China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran have been characterised as outrightly authoritarian regimes while Egypt and Ethiopia are more inclined to authoritarianism than democracy, and India demonstrates fascist tendencies under the current regime (Ullah *et al.* 2024). This is quite alarming as only two out of ten nations are considered democratic. The implication is that most of the BRICS nations are authoritarian regimes with no space for civil societies. Such an environment is characterised by gross human rights violations. As Annor (2023:1) argues, 'we do see a group of countries that certainly have a democracy problem, and this is strengthening non-democratic trends in the BRICS, and a

human rights problem’.

Essentially, only two members, South Africa and Brazil are faced with the mammoth task of advocating for human rights and democracy within BRICS+. This is a huge task considering that decisions within BRICS are made by consensus. Therefore, it is likely to be difficult to charter a democratic course within BRICS that is based on respect for human rights and dignity.

Human Rights Abuses and Repressive Regimes

Russia’s perspective on human rights is heavily influenced by its focus on state sovereignty and non-intervention. Russia often views human rights through the lens of protecting national sovereignty and resisting external pressures, particularly from Western countries. Such a perspective can sometimes lead to resistance against international human rights norms perceived as infringing on state sovereignty (Staniste 2015).

Recent reports of human rights violations in Russia have painted a gloomy image of the country’s human rights situation. For instance, there has been reported crackdown on civil society, systematic persecution of human rights defenders, and widespread restrictions on freedom of expression. In April 2022, Russian authorities revoked the registration of 15 foreign NGOs and foundations, forcing them to shut their offices in Russia, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (Human Rights Watch 2023). While this crackdown on civil society groups received international scrutiny and widespread condemnation, the BRICS partners turned a blind eye. Russia’s human rights record has faced significant international scrutiny in recent years. The government has enacted a series of restrictive laws that severely limit freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Independent media outlets and civil society organizations critical of the government have faced increasing pressure, including closures, harassment, and criminal prosecutions.

The crackdown on political opposition has intensified, with prominent figures like Alexei Navalny facing imprisonment and targeted attacks (Amnesty International 2023b). The arbitrary detention and prosecution of peaceful protesters demonstrate a disregard for basic civil liberties. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has further exacerbated concerns about human rights abuses, with reports of war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law.

China’s approach to human rights in BRICS is heavily shaped by its one-party system, which prioritizes state control and stability over individual freedoms. China often promotes a narrative which emphasizes economic and

social rights over political rights. This perspective aligns with its broader international strategy of resisting Western-dominated human rights discourses (Boer 2020). The Chinese government promotes a vision of human rights that prioritizes economic development and social stability, often framing these as prerequisites for the enjoyment of individual rights (Subedi 2015).

However, reports indicate that Chinese authorities continue to suppress opposition and any dissenting voices, it continues to restrict media freedom, and there continues to be widespread persecution of human rights defenders. According to the Freedom House Report, the Communist Party regime in China has remained one of the world's worst abusers of political rights and civil liberties, and those who criticise the party receive severe penalties (Freedom House 2015). Authorities continue to harass, detain, and persecute human rights defenders. For example, a human rights lawyer, Tang Jitian, was forcibly disappeared by authorities in Jilin Province in December 2021. Authorities had previously stopped him from leaving the country to visit his daughter, who was getting medical treatment in Japan (Human Rights Watch 2023). The authorities also continue to curtail freedom of expression as reports of people being harassed, detained, and prosecuted for their online posts and private chat messages critical of the government are common. For instance, in May 2022, a court in Hainan province sentenced former journalist Luo Changping to seven months in prison for a Weibo post that questioned China's justification for its involvement in the Korean War (Human Rights Watch 2023). This highlights a situation where those in power are violating human rights without impunity. As a result, Freedom House has ranked China near the absolute bottom in terms of overall political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2023). This presents a challenge to the BRICS bloc in seeking to advance a human rights agenda.

India's perspective on human rights is influenced by its democratic values. According to Varela & Delgado (2019) within BRICS, India supports human rights but with a strong emphasis on development and poverty alleviation, sometimes leading to a prioritization of economic growth over strict human rights standards. India's stance on human rights emphasises economic growth and alleviating poverty as fundamental pillars to improving human rights. India has a considerably strong commitment to upholding democratic principles and fundamental freedoms. India also shares concerns about external interference in its domestic affairs, often advocating for a balanced approach that respects sovereignty while promoting development (Hieronymi & Karimov 2023). However, India's own challenges with human rights, including concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression, discrimination against minorities,

and the situation in Kashmir, raise questions about its ability to champion human rights within BRICS consistently and the international community at large. Democratic rights in India remain under pressure, particularly for marginalised groups, with authorities in Uttar Pradesh responding to Muslim-led protests by demolishing the property of Muslim citizens (Freedom House 2023).

Brazil generally takes a more progressive stance on human rights rooted in its democratic framework. Brazil's participation in BRICS reflects a balance between promoting human rights and engaging in South-South cooperation that sometimes prioritizes economic development over strict adherence to human rights standards (Pomeroy *et al.* 2016).

The newly added members of the BRICS+ bloc have also added to the discord. These countries are also grappling with human rights issues in their countries. Ethiopia is ranked amongst the Not Free category as it lacks many aspects of the rule of law that might protect its citizens' fundamental human rights (Freedom House 2023). This worst ranking is mostly attributed to the ongoing civil conflict centred on the northern Tigray region, which has resulted in, among other abuses, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes based on their ethnicity.

The latest inclusion of Iran in the expanded sparked controversy as Iran is largely considered to be the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism is currently engaged in a number of regional conflicts via its proxies and a decade long war against fellow BRICS member and regional rival Saudi Arabia in the Yemen (Ross 2024). On the domestic scene, Iran has had a fair of human rights violations which have tainted its international human rights record. A case in point would be its removal from the UN Commission on the Status of Women and prevention from serving the rest of its four-year term as a result of a resolution introduced by the United States and supported by 28 other countries (Freedom House 2023). This removal was in response to the Iranian government's campaign to suppress the rights of women and girls by using force against protesters which in essence undermined the UN's mission to promote gender equality. The question then arises as to how Iran can be able to advance the progressive promotion of human rights within BRICS, given such a tainted history. This raises the need for a human rights framework within BRICS which will lead to the adherence to human rights principles by all member states.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia has also attracted criticism for its poor human rights record and extrajudicial killings (Ross 2024). There are widespread

reports of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia which further tarnishes the image of BRICS. A case in point would be how ordinary people are less free to express their views to others, whether online or offline, due to restricted freedom of expression. For example:

In August 2022, a terrorism court in Saudi Arabia sentenced Nourah bint Saeed al-Qahtani to 45 years in prison merely for social media posts, just weeks after handing a 34-year sentence to another woman, Salma al-Shehab, for sharing posts by a Saudi dissident (Freedom House 2023).

It is difficult to understand how a repressive government like that of Saudi Arabia can be associated with the other more democratic governments within the BRICS.

Lack of a Coherent Human Rights and Governance Position within BRICS

It is evident that BRICS+ does not have a coherent joint position on human rights and good governance. This is not surprising given the nature of the bloc which has mostly sought to provide an alternative order. There seems to be convergence on the economic front and a discord on the political and human rights front. This discord presents a major stumbling bloc to future collaboration and cooperation of BRICS nations especially on the promotion of human rights and good governance. It has been argued that while there has been increased cooperation and interaction within the expanded BRICS+, the avenues for future cooperation are limited by fundamental differences among the BRICS+ states (Glosny 2010). Thus far there has not been any significant initiative or advancement that has prioritised issues of human rights and the member states of the BRICS+ club have tip-toed on the issues when any of their members have been confronted with allegations of human rights violations.

A look at the responses and actions by the BRICS nations in response to the Russia/Ukraine conflict is evidence of this discord and the lack of appetite by the member states to stand against human rights violations. For instance, Brazil sent mixed messages as the Brazilian administration concerning the war in Ukraine was not inconsistent. According to the Human Rights Watch Report:

A few days before Russia's full-scale invasion, then President Bolso-

naro said, in Moscow, that Brazil stood ‘in solidarity with Russia’. Over the following months, Brazil voted for a UN resolution establishing a commission to investigate war crimes in Ukraine but abstained on one suspending Russia’s membership on the UN Human Rights Council and opposed a World Trade Organization declaration on the war’s devastating impact on Ukraine’s ability to export and import (Human Rights Watch 2023).

On the other hand, India also abstained during votes on resolutions at the United Nations related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including a UN General Assembly resolution adopted in March censuring Russia for its military actions and calling on Moscow to withdraw its troops unconditionally (Human Rights Watch 2023). Similarly, South Africa, though a human rights defender, globally, it also maintained a neutral stance choosing instead to abstain from a UNGA vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Therefore, the BRICS nations need a human rights framework with a shared commitment to human rights and good governance to enhance economic development, peace, and security, leading to more equitable and inclusive growth in member states. Regrettably, South Africa, with its human rights reputation, has never adopted an agenda to influence fellow BRICS countries’ human rights.

Opportunity for Corporation and Knowledge Sharing

Despite the numerous challenges facing the BRICS+, the bloc boasts of significant opportunities to bolster cooperation and the sharing of knowledge amongst the member states. The knowledge sharing can be in the form of shared best practices between the members. For instance, countries with a record of good governance and human rights promotion within the bloc, such as South Africa and Brazil, can be at the forefront of championing these values and practices that are advanced by all member states in the bloc. Liberal institutionalism emphasizes the potential for international institutions to foster cooperation and peace. Therefore, within BRICS+, South Africa and Brazil, with their democratic institutions, can play a crucial role in promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance. This aligns with Democratic Peace Theory, which suggests that democracies are less likely to engage in conflict with each other. Thus, these nations could spearhead peaceful and cooperative engagements, enhancing the overall functionality of BRICS+ (Stojković & Milosavljević 2023). Their roles in fostering cooperation in

economic development and governance could pave the way for addressing human rights concerns within the bloc, potentially leading to future collaborations on governance and democratic reforms (Nuruzzaman 2020). Establishing a balance between economic development and the preservation of democratic principles within the BRICS+ framework as it evolves as a major global institution is necessary. By leveraging their democratic frameworks, South Africa and Brazil can advocate for better governance and civil liberties within BRICS, enhancing their position as a global leader in both economic and human rights matters (Duggan *et al.* 2021).

Building a Human Rights Agenda within the BRICS+

While the political systems within BRICS+ differ significantly, there is potential to build a human rights agenda by focusing on economic and social rights, which is prioritised by some states within the bloc. The liberal institutionalism perspective suggests that cooperation through international institutions fosters peace and prosperity, and BRICS+ could adopt this approach by prioritising economic development as a foundation for advancing the human rights agenda. India's long-standing focus on development and poverty alleviation aligns its human rights agenda with broader international standards by emphasizing economic and social rights, which are crucial for alleviating poverty and improving livelihoods. This approach aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), and reflects the liberal institutionalist idea that states can cooperate to achieve mutual benefits, even with differing political systems (Vyas-Doorgapersad 2021). Building a shared framework for human rights within BRICS+ could strengthen the bloc's ability to address violations against human rights and advance the promotion of civil liberties. A human rights framework could be rooted in shared economic interests, incentivizing member states to adhere to human rights principles as a means to bolster economic growth and cooperation (Singh 2019).

As a new member in the bloc, Saudi Arabia, for example, has faced significant criticism for its poor human rights record, including restrictions on freedom of expression and reports of extrajudicial killings. Addressing these issues within the BRICS+ framework presents a challenge, as some members prioritize sovereignty and non-interference. However, the bloc can promote gradual improvement in these areas by integrating human rights into BRICS+ economic and development agendas. As such, the member states could thus benefit from aligning with the economic growth and governance reforms

advocated by BRICS+, which emphasize development as a pathway to improved human rights. The shared focus on economic development has the potential to create a platform for BRICS+ to integrate governance reforms that address human rights issues, making development and human rights complementary goals (Panova 2021). Developing such a framework would require overcoming the bloc's political heterogeneity, but focusing on economic cooperation and governance reforms could pave the way for addressing broader human rights concerns. As BRICS+ continues to grow and diversify, it has the potential to evolve into a platform where all member states (whether democratic or non-democratic) can find common ground on issues such as human rights, without sacrificing their sovereignty or economic interests. The establishment of governance frameworks that integrate human rights into economic policies would reinforce the role of BRICS+ as a global leader in promoting sustainable and equitable development (Duggan *et al.* 2021).

Expanding Civic Space and Civil Society Engagement

Expanding civic space and engaging civil society within BRICS+ presents a crucial opportunity for enhancing good governance and promoting human rights. As BRICS+, evolves and transforms into a formidable institution, it has a unique opportunity to integrate civil society into governance structures. The liberal institutionalist perspective emphasizes cooperation through international institutions and recognizes the vital role of non-state actors, such as civil society organizations (CSOs), in policymaking processes. Hence, including civil society can foster greater accountability, transparency, and public participation, which are critical for improving good governance within the BRICS+ bloc. Studies have indicated that democratic civic institutions in countries with higher levels of socio-economic development exhibit greater political activity and effectiveness in holding governments accountable (Gryshchenko *et al.* 2021). While many BRICS+ members, particularly the less democratic states, restrict civil liberties, the democratic countries within the bloc, are well-positioned to lead efforts to promote civic engagement and expand the space for civil discourse. This suggests that the democratic members of BRICS+ can effectively advocate for including civil society in decision-making processes, thus promoting governance reforms that align with democratic principles (Papa, Han & Anon 2023).

Promoting civic engagement and expanding space for civil discourse could help BRICS+ develop a more inclusive human rights agenda. Civil

society organizations, particularly in South Africa and Brazil, have been effective in advocating for human rights and good governance. Their participation in BRICS+ processes can help address systemic human rights concerns across the bloc. By involving these organizations, BRICS+ can harness the strength of democratic governance to ensure that civil society plays a vital role in policy formulation and implementation. This is essential for building trust and legitimacy in governance, particularly in a politically diverse bloc like BRICS+ (Duggan, Ladines Azalia & Rewizorski 2021). This expansion of the civic space in BRICS+ aligns with the goals of liberal institutionalism, which emphasizes the importance of including diverse stakeholders in international governance processes. Institutions that integrate civil society are better positioned to respond to complex global challenges, such as human rights violations and bad governance. These organisations are crucial in advocating for marginalized groups, holding governments accountable, and contributing to good governance (Scholte 2020).

Conclusion

BRICS member states have diverse political systems and human rights records. Reaching a consensus on human rights standards and implementation could be challenging. Some BRICS+ members have been criticised for restricting civil and political liberties. There are concerns that the bloc could prioritise state sovereignty and economic development over individual rights and freedoms. This discord amongst the BRICS+ member states pose a serious threat to its very own existence. There is a need for the bloc to develop a framework for human rights and demonstrate a shared commitment towards protection of the rights of the people.

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