

Can Responsibility to Protect Survive Libya and Syria? Martha Hall Findlay iPolitics 18 November 2011

(...) Thanks in large part to Canadian efforts, R2P was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2005 and endorsed by the Security Council a year later. Importantly, though, international support for R2P was (and is) qualified by worry that it could be abused for political purposes. This is why events in Libya and elsewhere may put R2P in danger.

In the Security Council vote, UNSCR 1973 was passed with 10 in favour and 5 abstentions. Although the commentary by those in support focused on the “measures to protect civilians under threat of attack”, it was clear almost immediately that international action in Libya was no longer about protecting innocent, unarmed civilians peacefully protesting. Rightly or wrongly, this was regime change, and supporting an armed insurgency to achieve it. That’s not R2P.

The commentary by the abstaining members of the UN Security Council suggests significant worry about the potential abuse of military force for just this kind of political purpose and this is why R2P is now at risk because of Libya. Those already hesitant to support R2P will point to Libya and say it was only used to overthrow Gadhafi.

Why is R2P also at risk because of Syria? Because of the lack of action by the UN in what appear to be very similar circumstances. Similar crackdowns by the Syrian government against protesters in Syria have not elicited anywhere close to the same level of international condemnation or action. Indeed, there have been far more examples of peaceful, unarmed civilians being killed by government forces in Syria than in Libya, arguably making a stronger case for R2P. Yet R2P was not invoked and not even contemplated.

Why? Is R2P just another nice-sounding concept that will be used only when politically expedient to do so? Those who supported UNSCR 1973 seemed keen to overthrow Gadhafi, but apparently not Bashar al-Assad.

Because of Libya and Syria, it may be that much harder to rally international support the next time R2P is truly needed. (...)

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