

UNHRC

United Nations Human Rights Council Political Kidnappings

Overview

With the rise of human rights concerns, the issue of political kidnapping emerges as a pressing challenge. Political kidnapping, defined as the arbitrary detention and abduction of individuals driven by political motivations, not only violates fundamental human rights but also poses a direct threat to international law.¹ Recognizing the severity of this issue, the UNHRC has created counter-initiatives including programs to protect the rights of affected communities, emphasizing its commitment to fostering a collective and accountable response.

The United Nations Human Rights Council

Established in 2006, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) serves as a vital forum for addressing global human rights concerns. Composed of 47 member states, the UNHRC is committed to promoting and protecting human rights worldwide. In the context of the pressing issue of political kidnapping, the UNHRC recognizes the connection between the topic and human rights violations. The committee has endorsed initiatives such as a program safeguarding the rights of affected communities while also calling on member states to collaborate on policy frameworks and ensure accountability.² Through these efforts, the UNHRC seeks to address the challenges presented by political kidnapping while upholding and protecting human rights on a global scale.

Human Rights Violations and Rule of Law

The arbitrary detention and abduction of individuals based on political motivations undermine basic rights such as the right to life, liberty, and security. The lack of accountability for perpetrators further erodes the foundations of justice, creating an environment where human

¹ Cassidy, W. L. "Political Kidnapping- An Introductory Overview." U.S. Department of Justice, 1978, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/political-kidnapping-introductory-overview>.

² "Welcome to the Humans Rights Council." United Nations Human Rights Council, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/about-council>.

rights abuses can occur. Addressing this issue requires an effort to uphold international human rights standards and ensure that the rule of law prevails.

Political kidnappings, different from “enforced disappearances” are often done by terrorist groups, or protest groups as part of a political statement. Enforced disappearances are when someone vanishes due to government concerns or actions. On December 18th, 1992, The General Assembly adopted a resolution called Resolution 47/133 “Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance”.³

Political kidnapping has a long history, beginning with Richard the Lion-Hearted in 1192 and held for a 15M\$ ransom, with a more recent example being Adolf Eichmann’s kidnapping in Argentina in 1960 to stand trial in Israel for his war crimes during the Holocaust. Richard E. Pearson, a professor from the University of Hawaii, notes that the majority of political kidnappings come from groups under the category of “Urban Guerilla groups”. This means that guerilla groups fight governments using terrorism in urban environments. This includes modern Latin America as the primary case.⁴

Case Study: Political Kidnappings and Terrorism in Latin America

Political kidnappings and terrorism have emerged as pressing challenges in Latin America, characterized by a wave of incidents over the past two years. Unlike traditional forms of terrorism, these acts often aim to secure the release of imprisoned radicals, with guerrilla groups employing kidnapping as a successful tactic. While there is no clear evidence of an internationally coordinated conspiracy, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay have witnessed a surge in such activities.

The trend is exemplified by a series of incidents over the past four years, including assassinations and kidnappings of politicians and diplomats. The success of these tactics is evident in the release of political prisoners and the concessions made by governments in response to terrorists' demands. Brazil, with its vastness and internal complexities, faces a unique situation. The government employs a different approach, involving anti-terrorist activities and

³ “Declaration on the protection of all persons from enforced disappearance.” OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-protection-all-persons-enforced-disappearance>.

⁴ Peterson, Richard E. “Political Kidnapping: A New Risk in International Business.” *Interfaces*, 1978, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25059592>.

unofficial anti-revolutionary groups known as "death squadrons," operating outside formal records.

The ideological diversity of extremist movements in Brazil adds to the complexity, with groups drawing inspiration from sources like Catholicism and Castroism. The government contends that Brazil is threatened with internal warfare, reflecting the disturbance caused by the struggle for economic modernization and political identity. As military regimes address the "revolution of rising expectations," the rise of terrorism becomes intertwined with broader challenges of achieving stability and progress. The impact on individual liberties and civil rights raises concerns about the potential long-term consequences of counterinsurgency measures. Other areas where political kidnapping is common are Colombia and Venezuela where conflicts are more recent.⁵

Kidnapping for Ransom and Social Learning Theory

Today, political kidnappings are often carried out to extract concessions from governments, gain publicity, or secure the release of imprisoned people. The use of hostages, especially diplomats or symbolic political figures, provides terrorists with leverage in negotiations. This phenomenon is exemplified by events like the 1972 Munich Olympics kidnapping by the Black September group and the 1979 storming of the United States Embassy in Tehran, Iran.

Some nations, including the United States, have adopted a strict policy of refusing any concessions to terrorists, such as ransom payments or prisoner exchanges. However, recent incidents, such as those involving the Islamic State, reveal that not all countries share this approach.

While kidnapping for ransom is relatively rare in the United States, it has become a prevalent strategy for Latin American terrorists and organized crime syndicates to fund their criminal enterprises. The effectiveness of kidnapping in raising funds ensures its persistence, particularly along the nation's Southwestern border, where the rewards often outweigh the risks.

⁵ Means, John. "Latin American Report: Political Kidnappings and Terrorism." EBSCOhost, *The North American Review*, December 1970, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&pAuthType=ip.url.uid&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.25117137&site=eds-live&scope=site.

An important case to mention due to its complexity is Nigeria's issue with kidnapping for ransom. A group that is very active in Nigerian political kidnappings is Boko Haram, as they send task forces specifically for this purpose.⁶ Many politicians and politically elite individuals have been subject to kidnapping in Nigeria. Specifically, in January 2007, the Anambra state commissioner for women's affairs and her son were abducted and kidnapped and demanded N50 Million in ransom. Another situation was in April 2008, when his Royal Highness Patrick Mbamalu Okeke, a traditional ruler in the local government of Anambra was kidnapped. The final example is in October 2009 when Simon Soludo, the father of former governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, and an active political candidate, was captured. Ransom was demanded, but it was excused as ransom to cover "political expenses" from the political party that the son was involved in.⁷ It is very common in Nigeria that these officials are captured and millions of dollars of ransom are demanded for their release.

Many Nigerian governments are concerned about this common occurrence, yet often pay ransoms, allowing criminal groups to succeed in their missions.⁸ Since these governments are continuously paying for ransoms, it has become an "efficient" way of earning income for criminals in the country. If it is successful, it becomes part of the Social Learning Theory, as others view the criminal actions as successful, and learn by imitation. In Nigeria, paying for ransom is illegal, yet the government does not have enough power to properly enforce this law. This ongoing pattern of political kidnappings continues, as the government does not address its security issues.

Detaining for Political Benefit Involving Non-Monetary Incentives

There are other instances under the umbrella of political kidnapping that do not have monetary incentives. In these situations, the motives for political kidnapping come from government instability, a need for something from the opposing country in return, or the "an eye for an eye" concept. These cases generally touch on political detainment and criminal offence rather than kidnapping.

⁶ Fromiti, "Organized Crime Module 16 Key Issues: Kidnapping for Ransom and Terrorism." UNODC, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-16/key-issues/kidnapping-for-ransom-and-terrorism.html>.

⁷ J.G. Eagle et al. "Does Theory Matter: Constructing an Integrated Theoretical Framework to Describe Kidnapping for Ransom in Nigeria." *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, February 24, 2018, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1359178917303506>.

⁸ "Factbox: The violence and insecurity affecting Nigeria." Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/nigeria-security-kidnappings-violence-idINKBN28P2DQ>.

One very important case under this umbrella is the case of the “Two Michael’s” who are Canadians who were detained in China. The Chinese government refused to release the two diplomats after Canada had arrested a Chinese man in Vancouver for promoting ties with Iran after the United States had restricted Iranian deals. The two Michaels were released after Meng Wanzhou was removed from house arrest.⁹ What differs between these cases and the previous ones about Latin America and Nigeria is that in this context, governments are responsible for the detaining of political representatives, rather than rebel groups.

Another case involves Brittney Griner, an American basketball player who was detained in Russia for drug use. This deal became a prisoner exchange, as the United States was required to release Viktor Bout, a Russian arms dealer.¹⁰ This political situation allowed Russia to negotiate terms with the United States, as Griner was heavily sought after by the American government.

Governments, such as the Turkish government, are very precise about acceptable and non-acceptable ties with Turkish organizations. Pastor Andrew Brunson, a Turkish resident for 20 years but American-born, was detained in Turkey for being connected with political groups not accepted by the government, such as the PKK and the Gunelist movement. There were also charges of espionage since Brunson was American. Brunson was released after making a deal between the Turkish and American governments, but continues to be a statement of power and rigidity for the Turkish government.¹¹

Conclusion

Political kidnapping is a complicated issue that varies between countries and specific situations and must thus be handled with both urgency and precision. While UNHRC works with its member states to resolve particular conflicts, each individual nation must ensure the safety of its politicians and citizens. Delegates are urged to find ways in which their country is either being affected by or perpetrating political kidnappings and work to end their threat.

⁹ Nick Taylor-Vaisey and Jason Markusoff. “China Kidnapped Two Canadians. What Will It Take to Free Them?,” Macleans.ca, March 20, 2020,

<https://macleans.ca/politics/china-kidnapped-two-canadians-what-will-it-take-to-free-them/>.

¹⁰ Paul Kirby. “Brittney Griner: Russia Frees US Basketball Star in Swap with Arms Dealer Viktor Bout.” BBC News, December 9, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63905112>.

¹¹ “Andrew Brunson: Turkey Releases US Pastor after Two Years.” BBC News, October 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45841276>.

Questions to Consider

1. How does your country perceive the threat of political kidnapping and what measures has it implemented domestically to address this issue?
2. In what ways can international cooperation be enhanced to prevent and respond to political kidnapping incidents?
3. How should the UNRC balance the need for preventive measures with respect for national sovereignty?
4. If political kidnapping does occur, what strategies can your country use in order to negotiate?
5. What role can the UNRC play in promoting human rights and protecting individuals at risk of political kidnapping?

Useful Delegate Resources

[OHCHR Website](#)

[UNODC](#)

[International Convention Protection on all Persons Enforced Disappearance](#)

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