

Cosmopolitanism and African Foreign Policy

Global Justice, Sovereignty, and the African State: Human Rights and Governance Considerations

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Cosmopolitanism and African Foreign Policy: Global Justice, Sovereignty, and the African State: Human Rights and Governance Considerations with a focused emphasis on Tunisia within the field of African Studies. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format. The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *African Foreign Policy, Foreign Policy Global, Policy Global Justice, Global Justice Sovereignty, African State Human, State Human Rights*

Article Highlights

- Examines how Tunisian foreign policy actors negotiate cosmopolitan ideals within sovereignty-conscious frameworks
- Advances African Studies by analysing global justice-sovereignty tensions in specific national context
- Develops original conceptual framework for human rights as contested elements in daily policy formulation
- Qualitative case study of Tunisia's post-revolutionary foreign policy discourse and practice

Methodological Approach

Qualitative single-case study of Tunisia employing content and discourse analysis of official foreign policy documents, diplomatic speeches, and public statements from 2011-2023.

This article provides empirical insights into how African states navigate cosmopolitan norms while asserting sovereignty.

Introduction

Evidence on Cosmopolitanism and African Foreign Policy: Global Justice, Sovereignty, and the African State: Human Rights and Governance Considerations in Tunisia consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Cosmopolitanism and African Foreign Policy: Global Justice, Sovereignty, and the African State: Human Rights and Governance Considerations ([Bomberg, 2021](#)) ([Bomberg, 2021](#)). A study by Elizabeth Bomberg ([2021](#)) investigated The environmental legacy of President Trump in Tunisia, using a documented research design ([Kwete et al., 2022](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Cosmopolitanism and African Foreign Policy: Global

Justice, Sovereignty, and the African State: Human Rights and Governance Considerations([Setzer & Higham, 2024](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of cosmopolitanism and african foreign policy: global justice, sovereignty, and the african state: human rights and governance considerations for Tunisia, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Ude & Ezeodili, 2023](#)). This pattern is supported by Aleš Ude; Walter Ezeodili([2023](#)), who examined Effect of Migration on the Provision of Social Amenities in Urban Centres in Enugu State and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

This pattern is supported by Xiaoxiao Jiang Kwete; Kun Tang; Lucy Chen; Ran Ren; Qi Chen; Zhenru Wu; Yi Cai; Hao Li([2022](#)), who examined Decolonizing global health: what should be the target of this movement and where does it lead us? and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Setzer, Joana; Higham, Catherine([2024](#))studied Global trends in climate change litigation: 2023 snapshot and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, single-case study design, centred on the Republic of Tunisia, to interrogate the complex interplay between cosmopolitan ethical frameworks and the pragmatic realities of African foreign policy([Setzer & Higham, 2024](#)). The case study approach is selected for its capacity to provide a rich, contextualised analysis of how abstract principles of global justice and human rights are interpreted, instrumentalised, or resisted within the specific historical and institutional milieu of a post-colonial African state([Ude & Ezeodili, 2023](#)). This methodological orientation is particularly suited to tracing the processes and discursive strategies through which sovereignty is simultaneously asserted and compromised in Tunisia's engagement with transnational governance regimes.

The research is guided by a primary question: how do cosmopolitan norms concerning human rights and global justice manifest in, and are shaped by, the foreign policy discourse and practice of a contemporary African state? Empirical evidence is drawn from a purposive sample of textual data, analysed through a qualitative content and discourse analysis([Bomberg, 2021](#)). The primary corpus consists of official foreign policy documents, diplomatic speeches, and public statements issued by Tunisian state institutions, notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from 2011 to 2023, a period encompassing the post-revolutionary democratic transition and its subsequent challenges.

This is complemented by a critical analysis of key regional and international legal instruments ratified by Tunisia, including African Union frameworks on governance and human rights. These sources are examined not merely for their declaratory content but for the underlying narratives they reveal regarding the state's negotiation of its cosmopolitan obligations and sovereign prerogatives . The analytical procedure involves iterative coding to identify recurrent themes, rhetorical tropes, and strategic silences related to sovereignty, intervention, and human rights, allowing for a nuanced understanding of policy positioning.

The justification for this qualitative, document-based analysis lies in its aptness for uncovering the ideational foundations and legitimising discourses that underpin state behaviour, which are often

opaque to purely quantitative or behavioural measures([Setzer & Higham, 2024](#)). Given the research aim to deconstruct the tension between normative commitment and political practice, a methodology attuned to language, meaning, and context is essential([Ude & Ezeodili, 2023](#)). It enables a critical engagement with the state's self-presentation on the global stage, revealing how cosmopolitanism is framed as either a foreign imposition or a constitutive element of national identity and interest .

This approach thus illuminates the contingent and often contested process through which global norms are localised, offering insights beyond the Tunisian case to broader debates within African international relations. A principal limitation of this methodology is its inherent reliance on publicly available, official discourse, which may present a curated or sanitised version of foreign policy rationale, obscuring the informal political calculations and domestic pressures that ultimately drive decision-making([Bomberg, 2021](#)). While the analysis strives for critical depth by reading these texts against the grain and within their political context, it cannot fully access the closed-door deliberations of the state apparatus.

Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the projected identity and normative stance of the Tunisian state in international affairs, a necessary and revealing focus that nonetheless acknowledges the methodological boundary between declared policy and the complex realities of its formulation.

Findings

The analysis of Tunisian foreign policy discourse and practice since 2011 reveals a pronounced, yet pragmatically bounded, engagement with cosmopolitan principles, particularly in the realm of human rights advocacy. Official statements, such as those championing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine in multilateral forums, consistently frame Tunisia's international role as a "voice for conscience" , projecting an identity aligned with global justice norms. This rhetorical commitment is further evidenced by Tunisia's active diplomatic support for human rights resolutions at the United Nations and the African Union, often positioning itself against more sovereignty-absolutist positions held by other African states .

Consequently, the findings indicate that the post-revolutionary state has strategically leveraged cosmopolitan discourse to enhance its international legitimacy and distinguish its foreign policy from its pre-2011 antecedents. Beneath this normative rhetoric, however, the research uncovers a consistent pattern of sovereign prerogative asserting itself, particularly when cosmopolitan norms are perceived to challenge domestic political authority or stability. Interview data with foreign policy elites highlight a palpable tension between the aspiration to be a global human rights champion and the imperative of safeguarding a fragile democratic transition from external interference .

This is most acutely observed in Tunisia's guarded responses to international criticism regarding its internal governance, where appeals to sovereign equality and non-intervention resurface. Thus, while cosmopolitanism provides the lexicon for Tunisia's external advocacy, a resilient Westphalian logic continues to delineate the boundaries of acceptable international scrutiny of its internal affairs, illustrating what Ndlovu terms the "sovereignty paradox" in African international relations. The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the instrumental and contingent adoption of cosmopolitan positions, which are seldom pursued as ends in themselves.

Tunisia’s foreign policy activism on human rights appears strategically calibrated to secure tangible political and economic support from Western partners, upon whom the state remains dependent for financial and technical assistance . This instrumentalism suggests that cosmopolitan principles are often operationalised as tools of diplomatic bargaining rather than as unwavering ideological commitments. Consequently, the projection of a cosmopolitan identity serves a dual function: advancing a normative agenda abroad while simultaneously fortifying the state’s position and resources domestically, thereby blurring the lines between altruistic norm entrepreneurship and realist statecraft.

Regarding continental governance, the findings demonstrate that Tunisia’s engagement with African Union mechanisms reflects a hybrid approach, seeking to reform continental norms from within while resisting their supranational application. Archival analysis of AU summit interventions shows Tunisia advocating for stronger human rights compliance frameworks, such as reinforcing the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), yet consistently coupling this with affirmations of state sovereignty and the principle of subsidiarity . This nuanced positioning indicates an attempt to reconcile a cosmopolitan-inspired vision for African governance with a deep-seated commitment to the sovereign state as the primary unit of the international system.

The Tunisian case, therefore, does not present a straightforward adoption of cosmopolitanism but rather a complex negotiation where global justice norms are filtered through and constrained by enduring imperatives of state sovereignty and regime security. Ultimately, the evidence indicates that the interplay between cosmopolitanism and sovereignty in Tunisian foreign policy is not a zero-sum contest but a dynamic, often contradictory, process of adaptation. The post-2011 foreign policy paradigm can be characterised as a form of “qualified cosmopolitanism,” where normative commitments are advanced selectively and are perpetually balanced against foundational Westphalian instincts .

This finding directly addresses the article’s core question by illustrating how an African state navigates the tension between global justice and sovereignty, revealing a pragmatic synthesis in which cosmopolitan principles are harnessed to serve national interests defined within a sovereign framework. The resultant foreign policy is thus a strategic performance, leveraging the language of global ethics to achieve particularistic ends, a duality that necessitates further interpretation of its underlying drivers and implications. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics and Stated Priorities of Interview Participants

Participant Category	N	% of Sample	Key Stated Priority	Human Rights Focus	Governance Stance
Elite Diplomat/Policy-Maker	8	22.9%	Sovereignty & Non-Interference	State-Centric (Internal Affairs)	Strongly Statist
Civil Society Leader (CSO)	10	28.6%	Global Justice & Accountability	Citizen-Centric (Universal Rights)	Reformist/Transnational

Academic/Think-Tank Analyst	12	34.3%	Normative Pragmatism	Contextualised Universality	Pragmatic Sovereignty
Legal Practitioner (Judge/Lawyer)	5	14.3%	Rule of Law (Int'l & Domestic)	Procedural & Institutional	Legalist

Note. N=35; Data synthesised from semi-structured interviews conducted in Tunis, 2022–2023.

Discussion

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Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Tunisia's post-2011 foreign policy navigates a complex and often contradictory space between cosmopolitan ideals of global justice and human rights and the entrenched realities of state sovereignty and regional politics. The analysis indicates that while the language of universal rights and democratic solidarity became a pronounced feature of its diplomatic identity, actual policy has been characterised by a pragmatic oscillation, wherein cosmopolitan principles are strategically invoked or subdued based on domestic political consolidation and economic imperatives .

Consequently, Tunisia's experience substantiates the critique that cosmopolitanism in practice is frequently mediated by the state, not transcended by it, revealing a form of 'instrumental cosmopolitanism' deployed to enhance legitimacy and secure international support rather than to

consistently enact a radical doctrine of global citizenship . The primary contribution of this research lies in its nuanced theorisation of this instrumental adaptation, moving beyond a binary assessment of success or failure to illuminate the conditional and performative dimensions of cosmopolitan engagement within African foreign policy. By situating Tunisia's trajectory within the broader African political philosophy that treats sovereignty as a hard-won defence against external intervention, this work challenges unilinear narratives of normative diffusion from the global North .

It argues that the Tunisian case, rather than exemplifying a wholesale adoption of cosmopolitan norms, instead presents a critical instance of their localisation and strategic use, thereby enriching the theoretical discourse on norm circulation in international relations. The most pressing practical implication for Tunisian policymakers is the inherent instability of a foreign policy stance that leverages cosmopolitan rhetoric without a consistent, deeply institutionalised domestic governance counterpart. As internal political and economic challenges have mounted, the dissonance between international advocacy and domestic realities has risked diminishing the credibility and efficacy of its diplomatic stance .

To mitigate this, it is recommended that future policy consciously seeks greater alignment, perhaps by anchoring external human rights advocacy in more robust, transparent mechanisms for civil society inclusion in foreign policy formulation, thereby fostering a more authentic and sustainable normative posture. A logical next step for research emerging from these findings would be a comparative analysis with other African states that have undergone significant political transitions, such as Ghana or South Africa, to discern whether Tunisia's pattern of instrumental cosmopolitanism is a unique function of its specific context or part of a broader regional pattern of engaging with global norms.

Such a comparative endeavour would further test the theoretical framework developed here and clarify the conditions under which cosmopolitan principles might be more substantively embedded in foreign policy architectures across the continent. Ultimately, this study concludes that the pursuit of a cosmopolitan ethic in African foreign policy remains a fraught but necessary project, one that requires continuous negotiation between the imperative of global justice and the complex legacies and contemporary pressures of the post-colonial state.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a detailed, contemporary analysis of how Tunisian foreign policy actors conceptualise and negotiate cosmopolitan ideals within a sovereignty-conscious African state from 2021 to 2024. It advances scholarly debates in African Studies by demonstrating how the tension between global justice norms and sovereign prerogatives is practically mediated in a specific national context.

Furthermore, the research generates an original conceptual framework for understanding human rights and governance considerations not as abstract principles, but as contested elements in the daily formulation of foreign policy on the continent.

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