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SELECTIVE ENFORCEMENT  
AND INTERNATIONAL  
CRIMINAL LAW

The International Criminal Court  
and Africa

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Portland, OR 97213  
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## Selective Enforcement and International Criminal Law

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Cover illustration: Francisco DE GOYA (1746–1828), Etching, Plate 21 from ‘Los desastres de la guerra’

ISBN 978-1-78068-387-4  
D/2017/7849/33  
NUR 828

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

*To my parents Veronica and Garikai Nyawo*



## PREFACE

A major controversy that has arisen during the International Criminal Court's first decade has been the issue of selective enforcement of international criminal law. This has been prompted by the Court failing to open investigations or prosecutions outside Africa. This book assesses the claims of this nature made against the Court – primarily by some African leaders and ruling elites – and how the criticism has impacted on the role of the Court as a mechanism for promoting the international rule of law. The assumption is that if the claims that the Court, based in The Hague, the Netherlands, focuses selectively on Africa are valid, then the Court's role as an effective mechanism for promoting the international rule of law could be called into question.

The book analyses three key components of the Court's legal framework – the mechanisms that trigger the Court's jurisdiction, admissibility rules and the independence of the Office of the Prosecutor – in order to establish how the Court became engaged in Africa and its problems. It argues that the Court's broad, yet not universal, jurisdiction means that it is expected to intervene in other regions apart from Africa. However, when African politicians and members of the ruling elite claim that the Court is selectively focusing on Africa, they mean that it is targeting sitting heads of state and other government officials, to the exclusion of their political rivals or ordinary citizens.

The underlying theme that emerges from this analysis is that the Court is a victim of *realpolitik* both at the global and state levels. At the global level, powerful states, particularly the permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, seek to utilise the Court to further their own interests against those states that they consider to be against their own hegemonic interests. At the state level, the ruling elites tend to be comfortable with the Court as long as it targets their political competitors, but are willing to mobilise state apparatus to frustrate the Court if they become the focus of the Court's interventions. Still, since there is no contestation on the principle of ending impunity for atrocity crimes which the Court stands for, perhaps African states have to first play their primary role through their domestic jurisdictions and deny the 'politicised Court' any room for intervention. In other words, if African states could demonstrate that they are willing and capable of addressing the impunity gaps within their boundaries, there would be no need for the Court or the UN Security Council's intervention. If African states could act proactively, they could actually boost their own empirical sovereignty.

Key findings of the research include that the timing of African leaders' criticisms of the Court usually corresponds with the Court's decisions to investigate/issue warrants of arrests or summons to the aforementioned leaders. However, the fact that African states that have referred situations in their own territories to the Court have not challenged the admissibility of the cases suggests that they agree that the Court is the best and most effective forum for delivering justice. The role of the UN Security Council in referring situations to the Court, and in not acting on the African Union's requests for deferrals of proceedings in Darfur and Kenya, has been the main source of African leaders' dissatisfaction with the Court. This book links African leaders' early support for the Court to their distrust of the UN Security Council's handling of African issues, especially with regard to the Lockerbie crisis in Libya and the situation in Rwanda before and during the genocide against the Tutsi.

The book argues that the political dynamics that led to the establishment of the Court – especially the early opposition of the US to the Court and the emergence of the European Union (EU) as the political and financial supporter of the Court – complicated the Prosecutor's ability to use his powers to initiate investigations in areas where he was likely to confront either the US or national interests within the EU. Although the codification process of the substantive and procedural law of the Court was heavily influenced by the legal positivism philosophy of international law, which was necessary if the Court was to gain universal acceptance, the evidence in this book suggests that politics (at both the global and domestic levels) played a crucial role in the application of the international criminal law by the Court. In this regard, the findings in this book are oriented towards the assertion made by critical legal studies that the application of law is not neutral, but follows the political structure of any given society.

Practically speaking, the Court and the proponents of international criminal law need to acknowledge that politics is the Achilles' heel for effective enforcement of international criminal justice and should begin to work within such a reality to devise mechanisms to engage politics in a positive and constructive manner. This could include encouraging domestic prosecutions and the Prosecutor should be free to exercise his power to push back on UN Security Council referrals unless certain guarantees are given, including sustained political and financial support throughout the proceedings.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing and completing this book would not have been possible without the guidance, support and encouragement I received from various people, most of whom I will not be able to mention by name. I would, however, like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor William Schabas who accompanied me throughout the research that led to the material used to write this book. His attention to detail and knowledge of the subject matter was crucial in refining not only the research process but also my ideas and views. I am also indebted to the academic staff with whom I worked closely at the Irish Centre for Human Rights (Republic of Ireland) and Middlesex University (UK); Professors Vinodh Jaichard and Ray Murphy, and Dr Shane Darcy and Dr Nadia Bernaz for their support and encouragement and informative discussions that we had at different stages of my research and writing process. I owe the confidence and desire to write this book to the first opportunity presented to me by Professor Vincent Nmehielle (University of the Witwatersrand) who agreed to publish a chapter I had written in his publication on *Africa and The Future of International Criminal Justice*. During the process of researching and writing this book I also drew inspiration from Professor Charles Jalloh (Florida International University), Professor Setondji Ronald Adjovi (Arcadia University) and Professor Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker (Khartoum University), who have always been available to listen to my views and provide feedback. A special mention is reserved for Professor Reolof Haveman, who believed in the publication of my research by encouraging me to submit the first draft manuscript to the publishers; since that moment of encouragement he has been a provider of consistent support in order to see this book completed and published.

Dr Aimie Muyoboke Karimunda (Rwanda), Dr Godfrey Mupanga (Zimbabwe), Dr Everest Benyera (South Africa), Dr Josepha Close (Belgium), Dr Giulia Pecorella and Dr Alphonse Muleefu, all of whom started as my fellow colleagues and peers, provided me with much needed support throughout the process. They provided companionship that made the journey towards publication manageable.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Mara, and our three children Garikai, Sigona and Pepukai, for providing the moral support and space that I needed to focus on this publication.



# CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i> .....	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	ix
<b>Chapter 1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1. Statutory Rules and the Court's Engagement or Selection of Situations or Defendants .....	18
1.2. Selective Enforcement in International Criminal Law .....	23
1.2.1. Book Hypothesis .....	26
1.2.2. Book Outline .....	29
<b>Chapter 2. The Establishment of the International Criminal Court, and Africa's Role and Early Support</b> .....	<b>33</b>
2.1. Attempting to Understand Africa's Early Enthusiasm and Support for the Court .....	35
2.1.1. Rationalism Theory and Africa's Early Support for the Court .....	36
2.1.2. Constructivist Theory and Africa's Early Support of the Court ..	40
2.2. Role of the African Civil Society/NGOs in Promoting the Rome Statute and Cooperation with the Court in the Continent .....	45
2.2.1. Civil Societies/NGOs Arm-twisting the African Governments into Cooperating with the Court .....	47
2.3. The Court in the Global Governance System .....	51
2.4. The Seat of the Court .....	55
<b>Chapter 3. The Office of the Prosecutor and the Politics of Selecting Targets for Prosecution</b> .....	<b>57</b>
3.1. The US's Paranoia over the Politicisation of the Court and its Possible Impact on the Prosecutorial Strategy .....	60
3.2. The EU, the Provision of Political Leadership and Financial Stability to the Court, and the Iraq Problem .....	65
3.2.1. Minding the Bright Red Thread of Politics in Iraq .....	70

3.3.	Challenges and Prospects of the Office of the Prosecutor . . . . .	77
3.3.1.	Appearance and Reality: Politics and the Limits of Prosecutorial Discretion in the Rome Statute . . . . .	78
3.3.2.	Politics: A Double-edged Sword for the Prosecutor . . . . .	84
3.4.	<i>Proprio Motu</i> Powers in Action and the Prosecutor's Fears Confirmed . . .	89
3.5.	The AU Strikes Back at the Prosecutor . . . . .	93

**Chapter 4. State Party Referrals, UN Security Council Referrals  
and the Selection of Situations . . . . . 97**

4.1.	Outlining the Referral System in International Human Rights . . . . .	97
4.2.	Negotiating the Triggering Mechanisms into the Rome Statute . . . . .	101
4.3.	The UN Security Council Referral . . . . .	101
4.4.	State Party Referral . . . . .	106
4.5.	The Analysis: Links Between Referral Mechanisms and Selection of Situations by the Court – Darfur and Libya . . . . .	108
4.5.1.	Libya and Security Council Resolution 1970 . . . . .	113
4.5.2.	States Parties Referrals and Selective Enforcement . . . . .	120

**Chapter 5. Assessing Selective Enforcement from  
an Admissibility Perspective . . . . . 133**

5.1.	The Legal Basis for Admissibility in the Rome Statute . . . . .	135
5.2.	Three Stages of Admissibility Assessment under the Rome Statute . . . . .	137
5.3.	Statutory Factors that Regulate the Court's Decision to Intervene in a Given Situation . . . . .	140
5.3.1.	Unwillingness . . . . .	147
5.3.2.	Inability . . . . .	153
5.4.	Admissibility put into Practice by the Office of the Prosecutor and the Chambers . . . . .	155
5.5.	Crimes within the Jurisdiction of the Court . . . . .	156
5.6.	Admissibility in the Context of Self-Referral . . . . .	162
5.7.	The Admissibility of Situations Referred by the UN Security Council . .	171
5.8.	The Admissibility of Situations Opened by the Prosecutor under Article 15 Powers . . . . .	178
5.9.	Gravity . . . . .	182

**Chapter 6. The AU and African States' Shift from Cooperation  
to Non-Cooperation with the Court . . . . . 187**

6.1.	An Uneasy Encounter Between the AU and the Court in Darfur . . . . .	194
6.2.	The Jilted Lover's Response: Africa's Deteriorating Relationship with the Court – the Aftermath of 4 March 2009 . . . . .	204

<b>Chapter 7. African States’ Reaction to the AU’s Call for Non-Cooperation with the Court</b> . . . . .	221
7.1. Kenya Caught Between its Rome Statute Obligations and the AU’s Non-Cooperation Resolution . . . . .	223
7.2. Malawi: Keeping up with its Rome Statute Obligations under Changing Leadership. . . . .	227
7.3. Nigeria and Closing the Impunity Gap. . . . .	231
7.4. South Africa: Caught between the Desire to Show its True Pan-Africanism Credentials and its Position as an Upholder of International Law Obligations. . . . .	235
7.5. An Attempt to Amend Article 16: The Push for a Power Shift from the UN Security Council to the UN General Assembly . . . . .	243
7.6. The AU’s Proposed Alternative Juridical Mechanisms to Curb the Court’s Intervention: The Proposal for a Hybrid Court for Darfur. . . . .	245
7.7. Conferring International Criminal Jurisdiction onto the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights . . . . .	247
<b>Chapter 8. Africa and the International Criminal Court: The Lessons and Prospects.</b> . . . .	251
8.1. Lessons Learnt . . . . .	253
8.1.1. African Situations are Poisoned Chalice and not Soft Landing for the New Court . . . . .	253
8.1.2. The Court’s Internal Control Mechanisms Should be a Source of Confidence for the States . . . . .	256
8.1.3. The Court’s Contribution Towards Promoting the International Rule of Law. . . . .	258
8.1.4. African States Parties Taking the Lead in the Fine-Tuning of the Rome Statute System . . . . .	261
8.1.5. The Pitfalls of Limited Promotion of Institutions Rooted in Progressive African Values, History and Philosophy. . . . .	265
8.2. Prospects . . . . .	268
8.2.1. The Court’s Fortunes are Likely to Depend on the Political and Economic Situation in the EU . . . . .	268
8.2.2. The Regionalisation of the Court for Visibility and Efficiency. . . . .	269
8.2.3. The Office of the Prosecutor Likely to Concentrate on Suspects Lacking Protection from and Control of State Institutions. . . . .	269
8.2.4. International Court of Justice Intervention to Settle Head of State of Immunity in the Context of the Rome Statute . . . . .	270
<i>Bibliography</i> . . . . .	271
<i>Index</i> . . . . .	283



*'Before considering double standards on the international level you should  
confront double standards at home'*

Navanetham Pillay,  
former United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights  
and Judge of the International Criminal Court, 2015

