The Margin of Appreciation in International Human Rights Law

Deference and Proportionality

ANDREW LEGG
## Table of Contents

*Table of Cases*  
Table of Treaties and Legislation  
List of Abbreviations  

1. Introduction  
   1. The margin of appreciation in the ECtHR, IACtHR, and the UN HRC  
   2. Book structure  
   3. Approach  

### PART I—THEORY: CONCEPTUALIZING AND JUSTIFYING THE MARGIN OF APPRECIATION  

2. Deference: Reasoning Differently on the Basis of External Factors  
   1. Introduction  
   2. Assigning weight differently on the basis of external factors  
   3. Deference on the basis of external factors  
   4. Types of reason for deference  
      a. Relationships and comity  
      b. Epistemic limitations and expertise  
   5. Cases that demonstrate this approach in practice  
      a. European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)  
      b. Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR)  
      c. United Nations Human Rights Committee (UN HRC)  
   6. Conclusion  

3. Different Approaches to Deference in International Human Rights Law  
   1. Introduction  
   2. The margin of appreciation and relativism about human rights  
      a. The meaning of universality in moral discourse  
      b. Moral universality and the margin of appreciation  
      c. Legal rights that implement moral rights  
      d. Legal orders and comparisons  
      e. The margin of appreciation and relativism in practice  
   f. Summary  
   3. Critiques of deference  
      a. The 'one right answer' thesis  
      b. Harmonization and integration  

---

### Contents page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Cases</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Treaties and Legislation</td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>xxiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The margin of appreciation in the ECtHR, IACtHR, and the UN HRC</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Book structure</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Approach</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART I—THEORY: CONCEPTUALIZING AND JUSTIFYING THE MARGIN OF APPRECIATION</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Deference: Reasoning Differently on the Basis of External Factors</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Assigning weight differently on the basis of external factors</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Deference on the basis of external factors</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Types of reason for deference</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Relationships and comity</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Epistemic limitations and expertise</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cases that demonstrate this approach in practice</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. United Nations Human Rights Committee (UN HRC)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conclusion</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Different Approaches to Deference in International Human Rights Law</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The margin of appreciation and relativism about human rights</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The meaning of universality in moral discourse</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Moral universality and the margin of appreciation</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Legal rights that implement moral rights</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Legal orders and comparisons</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. The margin of appreciation and relativism in practice</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Summary</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Critiques of deference</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. The 'one right answer' thesis</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Harmonization and integration</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART II— PRACTICE: FACTORS AFFECTING THE MARGIN OF APPRECIATION

4. Democracy and Participation
   1. Introduction
   2. Theories of judicial review and the justification of the margin of appreciation for democratic reasons
   3. The contribution of the Tribunals to theories of democracy in international law
   4. Democratic legitimacy as an external factor for the margin of appreciation in practice
      a. European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)
      b. Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR)
      c. United Nations Human Rights Committee (UN HRC)
      d. Giving state legislatures time to change the law
   5. Cases in which democratic legitimacy is a factor in favour of granting the state a margin of appreciation
      a. Conflicting private rights: testing the choice of the legislature
      b. Conflicting personal–public freedoms: questions of moral or political controversy
   6. Cases in which democratic legitimacy issues heighten scrutiny
      a. Democratic rights: the example of electoral participation
      b. Minorities and vulnerable groups
      c. A lack of societal/parliamentary debate
      d. The application of legal formulae where the provisions are too broad-brush
      e. Other rule of law concerns
   7. Conclusion

5. Treaty Interpretation, Current State Practice, and Other International Law Influences on the Practice of Deferece
   1. Introduction
   2. State consent and the legality of international agreements
   3. Treaty interpretation: Article 31 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT) and the special status of human rights treaties
### Contents

a. Original intent or ‘evolutive’ interpretation 108  
b. Treaty provisions with autonomous meanings 110  
c. Summary 112  

4. Other approaches to the role of current state practice 113  

5. Current state practice as an external factor affecting the margin of appreciation in practice 116  
   a. Lack of consensus increases deference 116  
   b. Current state practice in the applicant’s favour heightens scrutiny 120  
   c. Current state practice in the state’s favour increases deference 124  
   d. Current state practice is not calculated with precision 127  

6. Deference to international norms, institutions, and organizations 130  
   a. Decisions of other international human rights tribunals 131  
   b. The European Court of Justice (ECJ) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) 135  
   c. Resolutions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 137  
   d. Other international law norms 141  

7. Conclusion 143  

### 6. Expertise and Competence 145  

1. Introduction 145  

2. Epistemology, expertise, and judicial responsibility 146  

3. Expertise as a factor for the margin of appreciation in practice 148  
   a. European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) 148  
   b. Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) 150  
   c. United Nations Human Rights Committee (UN HRC) 152  

4. Types of expertise where there are commonly stronger grounds for a margin of appreciation 153  
   a. National security 153  
   b. Child protection 159  
   c. Health care 162  
   d. Education 163  
   e. Policing and civil service 164  
   f. Economic matters 164  

5. Heightened scrutiny where the Tribunals have expertise 167  
   a. Legal procedures 167  
   b. Reasonable time 171  
   c. Legal interpretation 172  

6. Conclusion: expertise and subsidiarity 174  

### PART III—THE STRUCTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ADJUDICATION: THE MARGIN OF APPRECIATION AND PROPORTIONALITY 175  

7. Proportionality: Determining Rights 177  

1. Introduction 177  

2. The origins of proportionality 178
3. Theories of rights: balancing, trumps, and human rights determinations 181
   a. Interest-based theories 182
   b. Rights as trumps (reason-blocking theories) 189

4. The margin of appreciation and proportionality in human rights adjudication 192
   a. The conceptual connection between the margin of appreciation and proportionality 194
   b. Cases that demonstrate the connection between the margin of appreciation and proportionality 196

5. Conclusion: the structure of decision-making in human rights law 198

8. Nature of the Right and Type of Case 200
   1. Introduction 200
   2. How the 'nature of the right' or 'type of case' may affect the margin of appreciation or proportionality 201
   3. The nature of the right 204
      a. Absolute rights: life and freedom from torture 204
      b. Strong rights: fair trial, liberty, and derogations 210
      c. Qualified rights: privacy, and freedoms of religion, association, speech, and non-discrimination 211
      d. Weak rights: property, education, and free elections 215
   4. Types of case 216
   5. Conclusion 217

9. Concluding Remarks 219

Bibliography 226
Index 231