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July Roundtable: The UN and Human Rights Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

“Another human-rights irony at the U.N.” by Anne Applebaum. The Washington Post. May 4, 2010.

and

“UN elects rights violators to Human Rights Council” by Edith M. Lederer. Associated Press. May 13, 2010.

Keywords

Human rights, United Nations, United Nations Human Rights Council, Membership, Process, Review

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The UN and Human Rights

Articles under review:

- ["Another human-rights irony at the U.N." by Anne Applebaum. *The Washington Post*. May 4, 2010.](#)
- ["UN elects rights violators to Human Rights Council" by Edith M. Lederer. *Associated Press*. May 13, 2010.](#)

The recent annual election for rotating membership on the United Nations Human Rights Council drew international attention on the issue of the institution's effectiveness in promoting universal respect for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This year, the UN General Assembly voted to seat the United States on the council for the first time since its creation in 2006, soon after President Obama decided to re-join the organization. Simultaneously, other countries accused of human rights violations (including Libya, Angola, and Malaysia) also won seats in the UN body. Iran had previously withdrawn from the race after facing strong global opposition to its severe human rights abuses during the violent crackdown on peaceful protests following last year's presidential election. The composition of the newly elected UN Human Rights Council was once again at the center of international controversy.

The two articles under review, "Another Human-Rights Irony at the U.N." by Anne Applebaum and "UN Elects Rights Violators to Human Rights Council" by Edith Lederer, set forth some of the major criticism faced by the Council and its predecessor, the Human Rights Commission. These include loose membership criteria, states with poor human rights records exploiting the institution for their own political advantage, and double standards in the selection of which states are to be subject to scrutiny. As Applebaum points out in her article, "authoritarian regimes have long battled to join the council and its predecessor organizations, the better to prevent any outsiders from investigating their own governments."

Critics of the Human Rights Council see these as good reasons to discredit its effectiveness; our panelists counter that there are sufficient reasons for engaging in further institutional building. Three areas were emphasized by our contributors as arenas in which a serious debate about reforming the Human Rights Council must be grounded.

First, the United Nations as an intergovernmental organization is based on inclusiveness: the almost universal membership of today's world states in a system that is built on dialogue among a wide range of international regimes. The process inside the UN system is therefore in a constant state of political flux as negotiation occurs among different stakeholders. Landman argues that even a "suboptimal" set of outcomes from the Human Rights Council does not negate its capacity to foster reform through collective action.

Second, the founding principle of inclusiveness at the UN is at the heart of the debate regarding membership in the Council. Setting standards based on the cultural and political values of a so-called "club of liberal democracies" could foster further political exclusion, and the result might be detrimental to the very people whom the system intends to protect. Equal treatment and inclusiveness are an integral component of the debate to reform human rights institutions. As

Cardenas points out, “Pressuring states to elect Council members on the basis of human rights performance is surely sensible (...) as is encouraging competitive and transparent Council elections. But these challenges do not justify critics’ overwhelming focus on the question of membership.”

Third, the Human Rights Council has made some achievements since its establishment four years ago. Due to the new electoral system—a direct vote from the General Assembly—along with international pressures, countries with egregious human rights abuses such as Sudan and Iran have been kept off the Council. Also, the new system of universal periodic review targets the issue of double standards by subjecting all states to international scrutiny.

These issues and others are considered in this month’s Roundtable.