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All Politics Are Suboptimal

Todd Landman
University of Essex

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All Politics Are Suboptimal

Abstract

Despite its intentions and founding principles, the United Nations is fundamentally a political organization and therefore subject to the machinations of states as they seek to maximize their self interest, protect their reputations, and advance their power. The UN Security Council itself is a product of World War II and reflects a settlement from the end of the war that many perceive as highly inappropriate to the balance of power and global realities of the world today.

Keywords

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

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All Politics are Suboptimal

by Todd Landman

Despite its intentions and founding principles, the United Nations is fundamentally a political organization and therefore subject to the machinations of states as they seek to maximize their self interest, protect their reputations, and advance their power. The UN Security Council itself is a product of World War II and reflects a settlement from the end of the war that many perceive as highly inappropriate to the balance of power and global realities of the world today. Wrapped around the political construction of the UN is a social construction of ideals and norms that have sought to transcend state interest and promote human dignity through development, security, and human rights. For some, the social construction is merely a veneer that masks state interest and is used like any other tool of statecraft. For others, it is real and powerful in both shaping and reflecting the agenda of the “international community.” The UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the various UN treaties on human rights, and the Millennium Development Goals provide a particular moral compass for state action that is ultimately centred on the promotion and protection of human dignity. But the route to that protection is fraught with political difficulties.

For more than sixty years, the UN has sought to promote and protect human rights in the world through a series of weak institutions with very little capacity for enforcement of these ideals. There is not a moral litmus test to be a UN member, and thus any formal body that the UN creates will be a significant entry point for states to pursue their own interests. These states include those that have a good record of protecting human rights and those that do not. The reform of the Commission has meant that there are qualifications for entry into the Council, but the proposed slate of candidate countries and the absence of real competition, as the piece by Lederer notes, has resulted in electing to the Council a set of “unqualified” states, such as Libya, Angola, and Malaysia.

In playing its own game with the UN, the United States under the Bush administration chose not to support the creation of the Council, sending a strong signal that it was not a serious institution for human rights. Of course, there is the irony that that very signal was sent by a state that had circumvented the Geneva Conventions in its detention of “enemy combatants” in Guantanamo as part of its larger effort in the “War on Terror.” The Obama administration has decided to play the game differently, preferring to be in the “tent” seeking reform of the institution, rather than outside the tent condemning it. And by being in the tent, the US has been able to forge a coalition that, through the extension of inducements and pressure, has been able to block the candidacy of Iran for the Council. The intersection of realism and idealism in the Iran example is telling: the US and other Western powers block a country that is a serial violator of human rights, but has also been accused of developing nuclear weapons capacity.

I believe that Applebaum draws a fallacious conclusion in her Washington Post editorial in using the example of Iran having become a member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women as an indication that nothing has changed with respect to state manipulation of the UN. In contrast, I would argue that the US and other countries worried about the human rights practices of particular countries should continue to work as they did to block Iran (and other human rights violators) from the Council and other UN institutions. The inherently political nature of the UN

means that many of the observed outcomes of its internal procedures will be suboptimal. But to dismiss the entire institution as meaningless or irrelevant misses an important opportunity for rights-protective regimes to use their collective power to reform from within. If the Council membership can be contested through “behind-the-scenes” efforts, then membership of other bodies can be contested as well, where the incremental advance of standards, however they are achieved, can be secured. A pragmatic approach to reforming the UN can draw on state power in ways that promote the founding ideals of the institution.

Todd Landman is Professor of Government and Director of the Institute for Democracy and Conflict Resolution at the University of Essex. His most recent publications include Measuring Human Rights (Routledge 2009), Human Rights, Volumes I-IV (Sage 2009), and the Handbook of Comparative Politics (Sage 2008). He carries out numerous international consultancies in the area of development, democracy, and human rights. www.todd-landman.com