



The UN's Human Rights Council Grows More Odious

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With freedom and democracy in retreat now for more than a decade around the world, the United Nations General Assembly is poised to take a step in coming days that, if anything, will make the problem worse.

In a vote scheduled for Tuesday, the General Assembly is expected to fill 15 openings on the UN's 47-member Human Rights Council by approving new three-year terms for such leading human rights abusers as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Cuba—most of which will be returning members. Joining them will be such problematic countries as Bolivia, Cote d'Ivoire, Nepal, Malawi and Senegal. Rounding out the new 15 will be the only two countries that, while surely not perfect, unhesitatingly deserve membership—Britain and France.

"Electing these dictatorships as UN judges on human rights," said Hillel Neuer, executive director of UN Watch, a Geneva-based watchdog group, "is like making a gang of arsonists into the fire brigade."

To be clear, the new autocratic members will not be tarnishing an otherwise-effective, well-functioning body. Instead, they will be joining what is already an institution that does little to improve human rights around the world, choosing instead to focus overwhelming attention on Israel. Consequently, most of the new members will likely just take a bad situation and make it worse.

Created in 2006, the Human Rights Council has merely picked up where its justifiably maligned predecessor, the Human Rights Commission, left off. It has made Israel its only permanent agenda item, meaning that it discusses the Jewish state at each of its three meetings a year. It has focused its investigations and resolutions overwhelmingly on Israel while ignoring far more egregious problems elsewhere. And it has created a "blacklist" of companies that do business with companies in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights.

Tuesday's vote for the problematic slate of new council members reflects three realities about the United Nations.

First, while the UN resolution that created the council called on member-nations to elect council members based on their "contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights and their voluntary pledges and commitments made thereto," most of the General Assembly ignores that mandate.

Second, under UN rules, specific numbers of council seats are reserved for specific regions—13 for "African States," 13 for "Asia-Pacific States" and so on. In certain regions, even the best-intentioned General Assembly membership might be hard-pressed to fill all of the seats with deserving members.

Third, with freedom and democracy in retreat around the world, the General Assembly has fewer UN member nations that respect human rights from which to choose. In its latest annual survey of political rights and civil liberties (for 2019), the nonprofit Freedom House reported that freedom has now declined for 14 straight years.

So, before long, we'll have a Human Rights Council that includes China, which limits free expression and has sent more than a million Muslim Uyghurs to detention centers, where some are tortured or killed; Russia, which limits free expression, restricts free media, suppresses dissent, discriminates against minorities and conducts torture at detention centers; Saudi Arabia, which commits arbitrary killings, limits free expression, conducts torture and engages in violence against women, human trafficking and child labor; and Cuba, which limits free expression, abuses political dissidents and prisoners, restricts worker rights and bans labor unions.

These autocracies and the other problematic new members will join a council that already includes Venezuela, Sudan, Namibia, Somalia, Cameroon, Afghanistan and Bahrain—all of which are, according to Freedom House's latest rankings, "not free."

The council's coming membership changes provide a timely backdrop for a possible change in direction from Washington.

Each of the past few administrations has faced the question of how best to approach the council—whether to dismiss it as irredeemably corrupt and refuse to participate, or to try to reform it from within.

Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump chose to dismiss the council and refused a U.S. seat on it while, in between, President Barack Obama expressed hopes for reform and put America back on it.

If Joe Biden defeats Trump next month, we'll likely see another change in direction; the 2020 Democratic platform, which Biden presumably approved, calls for America to "rejoin and reform" the council.

Frankly, neither approach has worked particularly well, for the council remains what it has been from the start—an odious, hypocritical and, in the end, all-too-embarrassing successor to its notorious predecessor. Whether a future U.S. reform effort will work any better is very much an open question.

Lawrence J. Haas, a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, is the author of, most recently, Harry and Arthur: Truman, Vandenberg, and the Partnership That Created the Free World.