**With New Members, the UN Human Rights Council Goes from Bad to Worse**

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The October 12 elections for seats on the UN Human Rights Council ushered in several new members with abysmal records on democracy and fundamental human rights. At the same time, even some of the democratic countries on the council are experiencing government-driven backsliding that casts doubt on their commitment to the norms and values the council is meant to uphold.

According to Freedom in the World, Freedom House’s annual global analysis of political rights and civil liberties, the 46 new and returning council members include 22 countries rated Free, 10 Partly Free countries, and 14 that are considered Not Free. This mixture broadly resembles that at the global level, but the council has a somewhat smaller share of Partly Free countries and a thicker slice of Not Free countries than the world as a whole.

Indeed, the proportion of Not Free members, 30 percent, is the highest since the council was established to replace the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2006. Undemocratic regimes are represented in many multilateral institutions, but their strong presence on the Human Rights Council is in direct conflict with its mission.

Foxes in the henhouse

It is deeply troubling that a body whose mandate is to advance human rights worldwide would count among its members Saudi Arabia, China, Egypt, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cuba, Bahrain, Eritrea, and Somalia. Some of these states are leading authoritarian regimes that have set out to eviscerate political opposition and crush all dissent at home while subverting democracy beyond their borders, including by taking aim at multilateral institutions. All eight feature systematic violations of fundamental rights whose perpetrators enjoy domestic impunity and far too little international accountability.

The Chinese government’s application of “sharp power” is a growing threat to democracy worldwide, but the regime has also detained more than a million members of Muslim minorities in so-called “reeducation camps” in the Xinjiang region, where they face torture and other brutal treatment. The Saudi authorities imprison democracy advocates and will resort to premeditated murder to silence overseas critics. They have also sought to spread their extremist brand of Islam and waged a cruel, reckless war in Yemen that has killed thousands of innocent civilians and placed millions at risk of starvation. Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has presided over the arbitrary incarceration of tens of thousands of political opponents who dared to challenge his iron-fisted rule.

The presence of these regimes on the Human Rights Council undermines its credibility and effectiveness, in part by making it far harder to pass meaningful resolutions in response to egregious human rights abuses, particularly those committed by politically influential countries. Human rights defenders from around the world still look to the council for support and solidarity, and many human rights and democracy organizations have a permanent presence at its home in Geneva. At a time when democracy and fundamental freedoms are under siege globally, the responsibility to scrutinize and address systemic abuses should not be left in the hands of governments known for pummeling democratic institutions in their pursuit of unchecked power.

Tainted democracies

Sadly, the story of the council’s composition is not altogether inspiring on the other end of the spectrum, as some of the member states rated Free, such as Hungary and India, have serious shortcomings, a reminder of the global trend of democratic regression. The government of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has consolidated power since 2010, undermined almost all institutional checks on its authority, and presided over widespread corruption that has enriched those with close ties to the leadership. India, the world’s largest democracy, is ruled by a right-wing nationalist government that has emboldened Hindu extremists to prey upon minority groups and failed to tackle chronic rule of law deficiencies. The country also has a surprisingly poor record in multilateral forums such as the UN NGO Committee, where the government routinely votes against accrediting democracy and human rights organizations.

Another Free member state, Brazil, is contending with major corruption scandals, rampant crime and indiscriminate use of force by police, and growing threats to vulnerable minorities. Even Tunisia, the great hope that emerged from the decimation of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, has experienced serious setbacks to its democratic progress. While virtually every democracy has some areas of weakness that could and should be remedied, the problems plaguing these Human Rights Council members could significantly impair their ability to contribute to its work.

Meanwhile, the middle tier of the council’s membership, made up of Partly Free countries, includes several states that have been host to outrageous human rights violations. There is no better example than the Philippines, where President Rodrigo Duterte’s flawed war on drugs has led to thousands of extrajudicial killings. After the country secured a second term on the Human Rights Council, Duterte quickly claimed that it amounted to an endorsement of his administration. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mexico, and Ukraine have poor or spotty human rights records due to the actions of both state authorities and powerful nonstate actors. The precise problems in these countries may vary, but all suffer from weak or coopted institutions that offer an insufficient check on executive authority and pervasive corruption.

Pulling up the ladder

Like many of its Free counterparts around the world, the United States has suffered from an erosion of its democratic institutions in recent years, and the current administration has expressed little solidarity with human rights defenders under threat globally. Nevertheless, the US decision to withdraw from the Human Rights Council in June was a major setback that will make positive action in support of human rights that much harder. When democracies, however flawed, abandon the field, far more repressive states move in to exploit the vacuum.

Ultimately, the emergence of a robust Human Rights Council that lives up to its ample potential depends on the participation of credible and dedicated members. Only through committed and collective action will meaningful human rights progress be achieved and the legitimacy of international institutions be strengthened. Former UN secretary general Kofi Annan recognized the need for collective action in his keynote address to the inaugural Community of Democracies ministerial meeting in Warsaw in 2000, declaring that “nations in which democracy is already well established will need to be vigilant in preserving that achievement, and to work together to help those where democracy is still new or emerging.”